

# Rediscovering Biblical Counseling

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Ever since apostolic times, counseling has occurred in the church as a natural function of corporate spiritual life. After all, the New Testament itself *commands* believers to “admonish one another” (Rom. 15:14); “encourage one another” (Heb. 3:13, KJV); “comfort one another with these words” (1 Thess. 4:18); “encourage one another, and build up one another” (1 Thess. 5:11); “confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed” (James 5:16).

The apostle Paul wrote, “We who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves” (Rom. 15:1). And, “Even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:1–2).

All those instructions apply to rank-and-file church members, not only to some priestly caste of experts. Counseling, particularly counseling that skillfully employs and applies God’s Word, is a necessary duty of Christian life and fellowship. It is also the expected result of true spiritual maturity: “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16).

In recent years, however, there has been a strong and very influential movement within the church attempting to replace biblical counseling in the church body with “Christian psychology”—techniques and wisdom gleaned from secular therapies and dispensed primarily by paid professionals. Those who have championed this movement often *sound* vaguely biblical. That is, they quote Scripture and often blend theological ideas with the teachings of Freud, Rogers, Jung, or whatever school of secular psychology they follow. But the movement itself is certainly *not* taking the church in a biblical direction. It has conditioned Christians to think of counseling as something best left to trained experts. It has opened the door to a whole range of

extrabiblical theories and therapies. Indeed, it has left many with the feeling that God's Word is incomplete, insufficient, unsophisticated, and unable to offer help for people's deepest emotional and spiritual problems. It has directed millions of Christians seeking spiritual help away from their pastors and fellow believers and into psychological clinics. It has given many the impression that adapting secular methods such as twelve-step recovery plans can be more helpful than spiritual means in weaning people from their sins. In short, it has diminished the church's confidence in Scripture, prayer, fellowship, and preaching as means through which the Spirit of God works to change lives.

If the presuppositions behind this movement were sound, we might expect that Christians today would be the most well-adjusted and mentally healthy generation who ever lived. After all, they have the benefit of several generations of psychological expertise, applied by men and women who claim to be able to synthesize such knowledge with Scripture and make it "Christian."

But, clearly, that is not the case. Record numbers of people are seeking psychological treatment. More Christians than ever before are lining up at the doors of clinics and professional counselors. Christian psychologists offering live counsel are now heard daily on thousands of Christian radio stations around the country. In the past decade and a half, Christian psychology has become a billion-dollar industry. Millions of evangelical Christians, it seems, are addicted to therapy.

In contrast to those trends, however, another movement has been gaining strength among evangelicals. Clear voices are beginning to call the church back to the Scriptures as a sufficient help for people's spiritual problems. A groundswell of support has been building for a return to biblical counseling in the church. Every week I hear from pastors and church leaders who are rediscovering the importance of biblical counseling. They are realizing what they have actually always believed: that Scripture is superior to human wisdom (1 Cor. 3:19); that the Word of God is a more effective discernor of the human heart than any earthly means (Heb. 4:12); that the Spirit of God is the only effective agent of recovery and regeneration (Eph. 5:18-19); and that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in Christ Himself (Col. 2:3).

Those truths are so basic to Christian belief that it is astonishing to think they would ever come under fire from within the church itself. But of course that is precisely what has happened over and over in church history. And it is happening even now as psychology is being peddled in the church as a necessary, and even superior, solution to spiritual problems.

I was first thrust into the forefront of the battle between psychology and the Bible in 1980, when our church was hit with the first ever

were negligent because we tried to help a suicidal young member of our church by giving him biblical truth. It was the first such case ever heard in the American court system. The secular media had a field day as the case dragged on for years. Some national news sources even alleged that our church had encouraged the young man to kill himself, teaching him that suicide was a sure way to heaven. Of course, that was not true. We showed him from Scripture that suicide is wrong. We urged him to let the Word of God lead him to intimate knowledge and appropriation of the resources available in the One who wanted to heal his troubled mind. Tragically, he refused our counsel and took his own life.

The case raised the question of whether churches should have the legal right to counsel troubled people using only the Bible. The plaintiffs argued that giving a depressed or suicidal person advice from Scripture is a simplistic and irresponsible approach to counseling. They brought forward several "experts" who testified that spiritual counsel is not appropriate for people who have *real* problems. Victims of chronic depression, suicidal tendencies, and similar emotional and mental problems should be referred to a psychological expert, they claimed. Pastors and church counselors should be *required* to refer such people to mental-health professionals, the lawsuit contended. Their basic charge was that attempting to counsel troubled people from the Bible amounts to recklessness and negligence for which church counselors must be held morally and legally culpable. Had they won the case, *any* church that practiced biblical counseling would be taking a huge liability risk.

The facts of the case that came out in court received little or no coverage on the network news. Testimony showed that this young man *was* under the care of professional psychiatrists. In addition to the biblical direction he received from our pastoral staff, he had sought psychiatric treatment. Moreover, our staff had seen to it that he was examined by several medical doctors, to rule out organic or chemical causes for his depression. He was receiving every kind of therapy available, but he chose to end his life anyway. We did all we could to help him; he rejected our counsel and turned his back on his spiritual sufficiency in Christ.

Three different courts actually heard evidence in the case, and all three ruled in favor of the church. Twice those rulings were overturned on appeal because of technicalities, but every court that actually tried the case agreed in the verdict absolving the church from any blame. Eventually, the case was appealed to the United States Supreme Court. The High Court refused to hear the case, thereby letting stand the California State Supreme Court's ruling that finally vindicated the church.

All three times the case was heard and a ruling was given, the judges also expressed the opinion that the church had *not* failed in its responsibility

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their legal and moral obligations in how we had attempted to help this young man who had sought our counsel. But even more important, the court affirmed every church's constitutional right to counsel from the Bible. The case established a legal precedent upholding an important first-amendment right of freedom of religion. The court's ruling means that secular courts have no right to encroach on the area of counseling in the church.

### PSYCHOLOGIZING THE CHURCH

That clergy malpractice trial thrust me into the midst of the debate about psychology and biblical counseling. Before that, I had noticed that Christian psychologists, once unheard of, were becoming more and more common, more and more outspoken. Unfortunately, I had paid little attention to the trend and was not listening closely to how they were marketing psychology in the church.

But during the trial itself, a surprising number of the "experts" who were called to argue against biblical counseling were professional Christian counselors. I was startled and dismayed during the trial to hear men who identified themselves as evangelicals testifying that the Bible alone does not contain sufficient help to meet people's deepest personal and emotional needs. These people were actually arguing before a secular court that God's Word is not an adequate resource for dealing with people's spiritual problems! What is truly appalling is the number of evangelicals who are willing to accept the word of such professionals.

There is no denying that psychology has made incredible inroads into evangelical culture over the past twenty-five years. The influence of psychology is reflected in the kind of sermons that are preached from evangelical pulpits, in the kind of counseling that is being offered over the radio and on television, in the proliferation of psychologists who cater primarily to evangelical Christians, and in the books that are being offered by many evangelical publishers.<sup>2</sup>

Over the past decades a host of evangelical psychological clinics have sprung up. Though almost all of them claim to offer biblical counsel, they merely dispense secular psychology disguised in spiritual terminology. This can be seen clearly in the literature spawned by the movement. As James Adams observed, "Nearly all recent counseling books for ministers, even conservative ones, are written from the Freudian perspective in the sense that they rest largely upon the presuppositions of the Freudian ethic of non-responsibility."<sup>3</sup>

The rise of counseling clinics poses another problem for the church. The trend has removed the counseling ministry from its proper arena in the church body and conditioned most Christians to think of themselves as

afraid of possible malpractice litigation, are perfectly willing to let “professionals” take over what used to be seen as a vital pastoral responsibility.<sup>4</sup> Too many have bought the lie that a crucial realm of spiritual wisdom exists outside Scripture, and that some idea or technique from that extrabiblical realm holds the real key to helping people with their deep problems.

### WHAT IS WRONG WITH PSYCHOLOGY?

The word *psychology* literally means “the study of the soul.” True soul-study cannot be done by unbelievers. After all, only Christians have the resources for comprehending the nature of the human soul and understanding how it can be transformed. The secular discipline of psychology is based on godless assumptions and evolutionary foundations and is capable of dealing with people only superficially and only on the temporal level. Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychology, was an unbelieving humanist who devised psychology as a substitute for religion.

Before Freud, the study of the soul was thought of as a spiritual discipline. In other words, it was inherently associated with religion. Freud’s chief contribution was to define the human soul and the study of human behavior in wholly secular terms. He utterly divorced anthropology (the study of human beings) from the spiritual realm and thus made way for atheistic, humanistic, and rationalistic theories about human behavior.

Those fundamentally antibiblical theories became the basis of all modern psychology. Of course, today’s psychologists use hundreds of counseling models and techniques based on a myriad of conflicting theories, so it is impossible to speak of psychotherapy as if it were a unified and consistent science.<sup>5</sup> But the basis of modern psychology can be summarized in several commonly held ideas that have their roots in early Freudian humanism. These are the very same ideas many Christians are zealously attempting to synthesize with biblical truth:

- Human nature is basically good.
- People have the answers to their problems inside them.
- The key to understanding and correcting a person’s attitudes and actions lies somewhere in that person’s past.
- Individuals’ problems are the result of what someone else has done to them.
- Human problems can be purely psychological in nature, unrelated to any spiritual or physical condition.
- Deep-seated problems can be solved only by professional counselors using therapy.
- Scripture, prayer, and the Holy Spirit are inadequate and simplistic resources for solving certain types of problems.

Those and other similar godless theories have filtered down into the church from the assorted stuff in the psychological tank and are having a profound and disturbing effect on its approach to helping people. Many sincere Christians are seriously off track in their understanding of what counseling is and what it is supposed to accomplish.

Some basic reminders might be helpful. For example, Scripture is the only reliable manual for true soul-study. It is so comprehensive in the diagnosis and treatment of every spiritual matter that, energized by the Holy Spirit in the believer, it leads to making one like Jesus Christ. This is the process of biblical sanctification. It is the goal of biblical counseling.

The Puritans, by the way, referred to the counseling ministry as "soul work." They spoke of the minister's responsibility as "the cure of souls." They understood that the only reliable help for the human soul is the infallible truth of Scripture applied by the Spirit of God. They knew that the only genuine, effective, or permanent cure for the soul's maladies is the transformation wrought by God's grace in the heart of a believer.

#### ARE PSYCHOLOGICAL TECHNIQUES EVER ADVISABLE?

Does that mean the modern behavioral sciences offer nothing of value in treating emotional or behavioral problems? Do not medication, shock therapy, group therapy, and other techniques help in some cases? Are not some soul-sicknesses actually medical problems that should be treated by skilled psychiatrists?

Certainly, it is reasonable for people to seek medical help for medical problems. We would send someone to the doctor for a broken leg, dysfunctional kidney, tooth cavity, or other physical malady. And it is true that certain kinds of depression actually have physical causes requiring medical treatment. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, best known for his powerful expository preaching ministry, was actually trained as a physician. He pointed out that depression and certain mental illnesses often have causes that are physical rather than spiritual. Pernicious anemia, arteriosclerosis, porphyria, and even gout are all examples Lloyd-Jones suggested of physical diseases that can cause dementia or produce depression.<sup>6</sup> It is entirely appropriate, even advisable, for the counselor to advise the counselee suffering from such symptoms to seek medical advice or get a thorough physical examination to rule out such causes.

It is also sensible for someone who is alcoholic, drug addicted, learning disabled, traumatized by rape, incest, or severe battering, to seek help in trying to cope with their trauma. Some kinds of therapy or medical treatment can serve to lessen trauma or dependency. In extreme situations medication might be needed to stabilize an otherwise dangerous person.

that pastors, biblical scholars, teachers of Scripture, and caring believers using the Word of God have been made to feel they are not qualified to counsel people.

That very opinion is often at the heart of the message conveyed in some of the most widely read textbooks on Christian counseling. One best-seller claims that Christian counselors who believe the Bible is a sufficient guide for counseling are frequently guilty of "a nonthinking and simplistic understanding of life and its problems."<sup>9</sup> Thus those who attempt to limit their counsel to the questions Scripture answers are disdained as naive, superficial, and altogether inadequate counselors.

The literature of Christian psychology commonly belittles Bible reading and prayer as pat answers or incomplete solutions for someone struggling with depression or anxiety. Scripture, the Holy Spirit, Christ, prayer, and grace—these are the traditional solutions Christian counselors have pointed people to. But Christian psychology now tells us that none of them *really* offers the cure for people's woes.

In fact, many would have us believe that secular psychology can help people *more* effectively than the counselor armed only with spiritual weapons. The same popular Christian bestseller I quoted above claims the church "promote superficial adjustments while psychotherapists, with or without biblical foundations, . . . do a better job than the church of restoring troubled people to more effective functioning."<sup>10</sup> Later, that same author adds, "Secularists sometimes seem to have a corner on honestly facing the disturbing complexity of life while Christians recite clichés that push away real questions of the heart. As a result, nonbelievers often help people with emotional problems more effectively than Christians [do]."<sup>11</sup>

#### HOW SCIENTIFIC ARE THE BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES?

As we noted earlier, psychology is not a uniform body of scientific knowledge like thermodynamics or organic chemistry. When we speak of psychology, we refer to a complex menagerie of ideas and theories, many of which are contradictory. Psychology has not even proved capable of dealing effectively with the human mind and with mental and emotional processes. Thus it can hardly be regarded as a science. Karl Kraus, a Viennese journalist, made this perceptive comment: "Despite its deceptive terminology, psychoanalysis is not a science but a religion—the faith of a generation incapable of any other."<sup>12</sup>

Most advocates of psychology simply assume that psychology is a true science.<sup>13</sup> But it is not. It is a pseudo-science, the most recent of several human inventions designed to explain, diagnose, and treat behavioral problems without dealing with moral and spiritual issues. Little more than a century ago debate was raging over a different kind of behavioral science

called phrenology. Phrenology held that personality characteristics were determined by the shape of someone's skull. You have probably seen old phrenologists' diagrams; they were maps of the head with specific areas labeled, showing which zone of the brain determined a particular emotion or characteristic. A phrenologist would feel people's skulls, diagnosing their problems by the location of bumps on their head.

If you think behavioral science has advanced greatly since then, ask yourself how reasonable it is to surround an adult in the fetal position with pillows so he can get back in touch with his prenatal anxieties. Or consider the type of treatment suggested by those who advocate primal scream therapy, a methodology that teaches people to let out their frustrations by screaming mindlessly at the top of their lungs.<sup>14</sup> Combine that idea with group therapy and imagine the result! Group members hold hands and shriek at each other to work out their problems. Believe it or not, some psychologists are already using precisely that form of therapy, and arguing that it is the most dramatically effective treatment psychology has yet discovered!<sup>15</sup> Given the choice, I believe I would opt for a phrenologist poking around on my head!

Jay Adams quoted a paper written for a Harvard symposium more than twenty-five years ago. The author of the paper raised the question, "Where will psychoanalysis be even 25 years from now?" His bold prediction was: "It will take its place along with phrenology and mesmerism."<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, the prediction proved overly optimistic. And strangely enough, psychology seems to owe its survival to an unholy alliance between the church and popular culture.

At about the same time the church was becoming infatuated with behavioral science, those who knew psychology best were beginning to voice aloud the question of whether it was a science at all. Eleven years ago, *Time* magazine ran a cover story called "Psychiatry on the Couch." It said this:

On every front, psychiatry seems to be on the defensive. . . . Many psychiatrists want to abandon treatment of ordinary, everyday neurotics ("the worried well") to psychologists and the amateur Pop therapists. After all, does it take a hard-won M.D. degree . . . to chat sympathetically and tell a patient you're-much-too-hard-on-yourself? And if psychiatry is a medical treatment, why can its practitioners not provide measurable scientific results like those obtained by other doctors?

Psychiatrists themselves acknowledge that their profession often smacks of modern alchemy full of jargon, obfuscation and mystification, but precious little real knowledge. . . .

As always, psychiatrists are their own severest critics. Thomas Szasz, long the most outspoken gadfly of his profession, insists that there is really no such thing as mental illness, only normal problems of

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living. E. Fuller Torrey, another antipsychiatry psychiatrist, is willing to concede that there are a few brain diseases, like schizophrenia, but says they can be treated with only a handful of drugs that could be administered by general practitioners or internists. . . . By contrast, the Scottish psychiatrist and poet R. D. Laing is sure that schizophrenia is real and that it is good for you. Explains Laing: it is a kind of psychedelic epiphany, far superior to normal experience.

Even mainline practitioners are uncertain that psychiatry can tell the insane from the sane.<sup>17</sup>

The article went on to chronicle the failures of psychiatry, noting that “of all patients, one-third are eventually ‘cured,’ one-third are helped somewhat, and one-third are not helped at all.”<sup>18</sup> But as the article further stated,

The trouble is that most therapies, including some outlandish ones, also claim some improvement for two-thirds of their patients. Critics argue that many patients go into analysis after a traumatic experience, such as divorce or a loved one’s death, and are bound to do better anyway when the shock wears off. One study shows improvement for people merely on a waiting list for psychoanalytic treatment; presumably the simple decision to seek treatment is helpful.<sup>19</sup>

The article concludes with a pessimistic forecast by Ross Baldessarini, a psychiatrist and biochemist at the Mailman Research Center. He told *Time*, “We are not going to find the causes and cures of mental illness in the foreseeable future.”<sup>20</sup>

Several years later, a conference in Phoenix, Arizona, brought together the world’s leading experts on psychotherapy for what was billed as the largest meeting ever on the subject. The conference, called “The Evolution of Psychotherapy,” drew seven thousand mental-health experts from all over the world. It was the largest such gathering in history, billed by its organizer as the Woodstock of psychotherapy. Out of it came several stunning revelations.

*The Los Angeles Times*, for example, quoted Laing, who “said that he couldn’t think of any fundamental insight into human relations that has resulted from a century of psychotherapy. ‘I don’t think we’ve gone beyond Socrates, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, or even Flaubert by the age of 15.’”<sup>21</sup> Laing added,

“I don’t think psychiatry is a science at all. It’s not like chemistry or physics where we build up a body of knowledge and progress.”

He said that in his current personal struggle with depression, humming a favorite tune to himself (he favors one called “Keep Right On to the End of the Road”) sometimes is of greater help than anything psychotherapy offers.<sup>22</sup>

*Time* magazine, reporting on the conference, noted that in a panel discussion on schizophrenia, three out of four experts said there is no such disease.<sup>23</sup>

R. D. Laing, the favorite shrink of student rebels in the '60s, retains his romantic opinion of schizophrenics as brave victims who are defying a cruel culture. He suggested that many people are diagnosed as schizophrenic simply because they sleep during the day and stay awake at night. Schizophrenia did not exist until the word was invented, he said. . . . At a later panel, a woman in the audience asked Laing how he would deal with schizophrenics. Laing bobbed and weaved for 27 minutes and finally offered the only treatment possible for people he does not view as sick: "I treat them exactly the same way I treat anybody else. I conduct myself by the ordinary rules of courtesy and politeness."<sup>24</sup>

One truth came out clearly in the conference: among therapists there is little agreement. There is no unified science of psychotherapy, only a cacophony of clashing theories and therapies. Dr. Joseph Wolpe, a leading pioneer of behavioral therapy, characterized the Phoenix conference as "a babel of conflicting voices."<sup>25</sup>

And indeed it was. One specialist, Jay Haley, described what he called his "shaggy dog" technique. Evidently he means it is like a fluffy animal that appears to be fat until it gets wet; there seems to be more substance than really exists. This is his approach to therapy:

Get the patient to make an absolute commitment to change, then guarantee a cure but do not tell the patient what it is for several weeks. "Once you postpone, you never lose them as patients," he said. "They have to find out what the cure is." One bulimic who ate in binges and threw up five to 25 times a day was told she would be cured if she gave the therapist a penny the first time she vomited and doubled the sum each time she threw up. Says Haley: "They quickly figure out that it doubles so fast that they can owe the therapist hundreds of thousands of dollars in a few days, so they stop."<sup>26</sup>

Jeffrey Zeig, organizer of the conference, said there may be as many as a hundred different theories in the United States alone. Most of them, he said, are "doomed to fizzle."<sup>27</sup>

Not only do psychologists sell supposed cures for a high price, but they also invent diseases for which the cures are needed. Their marketing strategy has been effective. Invent problems or difficulties, harp on them until people think they are hopelessly afflicted, then peddle a remedy. Some of the supposed problems of our culture are pathetically trite: self-image, looks, co-dependency, emotional abuse, mid-life crisis, and unfulfilled expectations.

Today's "infirmities" were once seen more accurately as the pains of selfishness. Egocentricity has become a major market strategy for psychologists. By fostering people's natural tendency toward self-indulgent psychology has sold itself to an eager public. And the church has unwittingly jumped on the bandwagon.

Psychology is no more a science than the atheistic evolutionary theory upon which it is based. Like theistic evolution, "Christian psychology" is an attempt to harmonize two inherently contradictory systems of thought. Modern psychology and the Bible cannot be blended without serious compromise to or utter abandonment of the principle of Scripture's sufficiency.

Though it has become a lucrative business, psychotherapy cannot solve anyone's spiritual problems. At best it can occasionally use humanistic methods to superficially modify behavior. It succeeds or fails for Christians and non-Christians equally because it is only a temporal adjustment, a sort of non-chiropractic. It cannot change the human heart, and even the experts admit this.

#### THE FAILURE OF CHRISTIAN PSYCHOLOGY

Meanwhile, however, the attitude within the church is more accepting of psychotherapy than ever. If the Christian media serve as a barometer for the whole church, a dramatic shift is taking place. Christian radio, for example, once a bastion of Bible teaching and Christian music, is overrun by talk shows, pop psychology, and phone-in psychotherapy. Preaching the Bible is passé. Psychologists and radio counselors are the new heroes of evangelicalism. And Christian radio is the major advertising tool for the selling of psychology, which is pulling in money by the billions.

The church is thereby ingesting heavy doses of dogma from psychology, adopting secular wisdom, and attempting to sanctify it by calling it Christian. Evangelicalism's most fundamental values are thus being undermined. "Mental and emotional health" is the new buzzword. It is not a biblical concept, though many seem to equate it with spiritual wholeness. Sin is called sickness, so people think it requires therapy, not repentance. Habitual sin is called addictive or compulsive behavior, and many surmise its solution is medical care rather than moral correction.<sup>26</sup>

Human therapies are embraced most eagerly by the spiritually immature—those who are shallow or ignorant of biblical truth and who are unwilling to accept the path of suffering that leads to spiritual maturity and communion with God. The unfortunate effect is that these people remain immature, held back by a self-imposed dependence on some pseudo-Christian method or psycho-quackery that actually stifles real growth.

The more secular psychology influences the church, the further people move from a biblical perspective on problems and solutions. One-by-one, therapists are replacing the Bible, God's chief means of sanctifying

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(John 15:3; 1 Cor. 1:21; Heb. 4:12). The counsel these professionals dispense is often spiritually disastrous. Not long ago, I listened aghast as a Christian psychologist on live radio counseled a caller to express anger at his therapist by making an obscene gesture at him. "Go ahead!" he told the caller. "It's an honest expression of your feelings. Don't try to keep your anger inside."

"What about my friends?" the caller asked. "Should I react that way to all of them when I'm angry?"

"Why, sure!" this counselor said. "You can do it to anyone, whenever you feel like it. Except those who you think won't understand—they won't be good therapists for you." That is a paraphrase. I have a tape of the entire broadcast, and what the counselor actually suggested was much more explicit, even to the point of being inappropriate to print.

That same week, I heard another popular Christian broadcast that offers live counseling to callers nationwide. A woman called and said she had had a problem with compulsive fornication for years. She said she went to bed with "anyone and everyone" and felt powerless to change her behavior.

The counselor suggested that her conduct was her way of striking back, a result of wounds inflicted by her passive father and overbearing mother. "There's no simple road to recovery," this radio therapist told her. "Your problem won't go away immediately—it's an addiction, and these things require extended counseling. You will need years of therapy to overcome your need for illicit sex." The suggestion was then made for the caller to find a church that would be tolerant while she worked her way out of the "painful wounds" that were "making" her fornicate.

What kind of advice is that? First, the counselor in effect gave that woman permission to defer obedience to a clear command of Scripture: "Flee immorality" (1 Cor. 6:18; see also 1 Thess. 4:3). Second, he blamed her parents and justified her vengeance toward them. Third, he seemed to be suggesting she could taper off gradually from her sin, under therapy, of course.

Furthermore, he gave his nationwide audience the clear message that he has no real confidence in the Holy Spirit's power to immediately transform a person's heart and behavior. Worse, he encouraged churches to tolerate a person's sexual sin until therapy begins to work.

Contrast both of those radio counselors' advice with the profound simplicity of Galatians 5:16: "Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh." Do we really think years of therapy can bring people to the point where they walk by the Spirit? Certainly not if the therapist is someone who recommends obscene gestures, delayed repentance, and churches tolerant of chronic immorality! There is no biblical justification for such counsel; in fact, it flatly contradicts God's Word. The apostle Paul told the Corinthian church to turn an adulterer over to Satan, putting him out of the church (1 Corinthians 5).

I thank God for men and women in the church who depend on the Bible when counseling others. I am grateful for godly counselors who urge troubled people to pray and who point them to Scripture, to God, and to the fullness of His resources for every need.

I have no quarrel with those who use either common sense or social sciences as a helpful observer's platform to look on human conduct and develop tools to assist people in getting some external controls in their behavior. That may be useful as a first step for getting to the real spiritual cure. But a wise counselor realizes that all behavioral therapy stops on the surface, far short of actual solutions to the real needs of the soul, which are resolved only in Christ.

On the other hand, I have no tolerance for those who exalt psychology above Scripture, intercession, and the perfect sufficiency of our God. And I have no encouragement for people who wish to mix psychology with the divine resources and sell the mixture as a spiritual elixir. Their methodology amounts to a tacit admission that what God has given us in Christ is not really adequate to meet our deepest needs and salve our troubled lives.

God Himself does not think very highly of counselors who claim to represent Him but rely instead on human wisdom. Job 12:17–20 says:

He makes counselors walk barefoot [a sign of humiliation],  
And makes fools of judges.  
He loosens the bond of kings,  
And binds their loins with a girdle.  
He makes priests walk barefoot,  
And overthrows the secure ones.  
He deprives the trusted ones of speech,  
And takes away the discernment of the elders.

God's wisdom is so vastly superior to man's that the greatest human counselors are made into a spectacle. Verses 24–25 add,

He deprives of intelligence the chiefs of the earth's people,  
And makes them wander in a pathless waste.  
They grope in darkness with no light,  
And He makes them stagger like a drunken man.

If anyone had to endure the folly of well-intentioned human counselors it was Job. Their irrelevant, useless advice was as much a grief to him as the satanic afflictions he suffered.

The depth to which sanctified psychotherapy can sink is really quite profound. A local newspaper recently featured an article about a thirty-four-bed clinic that has opened up in Southern California to treat "Christian sex addicts."<sup>29</sup> (The reason for beds in this kind of clinic escapes me.) According

to the article, the clinic is affiliated with a large and well-known Protestant church in the area. Its staff comprises specialists described as “real pioneers in the area [of sexual addictions]. These are all legitimate, licensed psychotherapists who happen to have a strong Christian orientation to therapy,” according to the center’s director.<sup>30</sup>

Does their “Christian” orientation happen to be solid enough to allow these psychotherapists to admit that lasciviousness is sin? Evidently not. Several were interviewed for the article. They consistently used the terms *illness, problem, conflict, and compulsive behavior, treatment, and therapy*. Words with moral overtones were carefully avoided. Sin and repentance were never mentioned.

Worse, these so-called experts scoffed at the power of God’s Word to transform a heart and break the bondage of sexual sin. The article quoted the center’s program director, who explained why he believes his treatment center specifically for Christians is so crucial: “There are some groups of Christians who believe the Bible is all you need.”<sup>31</sup>

That statement is the echo of neo-gnosticism. Belittling those who believe the Bible is sufficient, these latter-day “clouds without water” (Jude 12) insist that they are privy to a higher, more sophisticated secret knowledge that holds the real answer to what troubles the human soul. Do not be intimidated by their false claims. No higher knowledge, no hidden truth, nothing besides the all-sufficient resources that we find in Christ exists that can change the human heart.

The church must recover her confidence in the spiritual resources God provides. We must return to the conviction that Scripture alone is “inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). I am convinced that far more is at stake than the average Christian realizes. If evangelicals do not rediscover biblical counseling and reinstate God’s Word to its rightful place as the supreme discernor and mender of the thoughts and intents of the heart (see Heb. 4:12), we will lose our testimony to the world, and the church itself will die. These matters are that critical.

# Biblical Counseling in Recent Times

*David Powlison*

Happily, in the past thirty-five years the church of Jesus Christ has rediscovered biblical counseling. Now in order to rediscover something, it must have been lost. How was biblical counseling lost in the church? In order to understand how this happened we need to turn back the pages of history.

English-speaking believers have a long history of case-wise pastoral care. Many of the greatest Protestant writings are marked by an ability to bring Scripture to bear sensitively on varied "cases"; Thomas Brooks' *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices*, Richard Baxter's *A Christian Directory*, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and Jonathan Edwards' *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* all stand out. Each of these pastoral writers had God's burning concern for doctrinal correctness, moral uprightness, a disciplined devotional life, and Christian service. But these pastors also possessed a rich measure of the Shepherd's discerning love: not only did they know people intimately, but they had a feel for the road of progressive sanctification.<sup>1</sup>

Edwards' classic is almost 250 years old, the others more than 300 years old; so, identifiable biblical counseling could be found well into the 1800s. Jay Adams cited Ichabod Spencer as "a sample of one sort of pastoral counseling that was done by a Presbyterian preacher prior to the near capitulation of the Christian ministry to psychiatry. In his *Sketches*, Spencer discussed a large variety of problems and how he handled them."<sup>2</sup> Spencer wrote in the 1850s, but the well of biblical counseling wisdom that had been trickling for years gradually went dry in subsequent decades.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, American Christians basically lost the use of truths and skills they formerly possessed. That is, practical wisdom in the cure of souls waned, even while the conservative church, by definition, retained its grasp upon orthodox doctrine, biblical moral absolutes, the spiritual disciplines, and the missionary calling. The church lost that crucial component of pastoral skill that can be called *case-wisdom*: wisdom that knows people, knows how people change, and knows how to help people change. A shepherd's skill is an *applied* art and science; it

is a form of love that abounds in knowledge and discernment in working with people. Yet this ability to apply truth to specific "cases" atrophied. In fact, by the early twentieth century, liberal theology and secular psychology were ascendant in the counseling domain.<sup>3</sup> Only dim echoes and shadows of former wisdom could be heard and seen among conservative Christians.<sup>4</sup>

Instead, secular psychologies claimed the turf of counseling expertise and of insight into human nature. Conservative Christians may have retained parts of Jonathan Edwards' formal theology, but psychologist William James was heir to Edwards' style of careful observation and reflection.<sup>5</sup> The Christians took the Bible, and the psychologists took people; not a happy situation for needy people in either camp! The growing edge of pastoral care occurred not among ministers of the gospel of Jesus but among ministers of a secular or liberal gospel. Freud's psychoanalysis and other nascent psychotherapies were adapted to shepherd a people without the Shepherd: the mental hygiene movement, Harry Emerson Fosdick's pulpit, and Carl Rogers' therapeutic gospel of self are landmarks in the first half of the twentieth century.

The psychologies not only claimed the turf of counseling; they made good their claim. Sociologist Philip Rieff accurately titled his book on twentieth-century America *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* and noted astutely, "Religious man was born to be saved; psychological man is born to be pleased. . . . If the therapeutic is to win out, then surely the psychotherapist will be his secular spiritual guide."<sup>6</sup> Rieff nostalgically mourned the death of Christian culture, but he was a modern man making do, not a prophet calling people back to the living God.<sup>7</sup> The goals, the truths, the methods, even the possibility of biblical counseling vanished in the psychological revolution. In fact, biblical counseling not only disappeared, it became unthinkable.

By the mid-1960s when biblical counseling was rediscovered, it emerged as an alien discipline in the midst of three psychologized communities. The cultural setting of the activity called counseling or psychotherapy could be likened to three nested circles whose differences, even sharp differences, occurred within a fundamental consensus. The huge and dominating outer circle was secular psychology. Within this circle the pioneering theory-builders, the university graduate and undergraduate programs, the credentials, the mental health system, the journals, and the books set the intellectual and methodological pace. The middle circle consisted of liberal pastoral theology, which defined the field of pastoral counseling, even in conservative seminaries. The smallest circle contained professing believers who were psychologists and therapists.

The larger circle dominated the intellectual agenda and therapeutic methods of the two lesser circles. Thus, religious counselors joined clinical psychologists, social workers, guidance counselors, and psychiatric nurses

in a vast army of practitioners within the “enlisted” ranks of the cure-of-souls professions. The “officers” were the psychiatrists and personality theorists who provided cognitive content and philosophical rationale for the mental health endeavor. Anyone who wanted to talk about counseling, or read counseling, or join an association of counselors, or go to school in counseling, or do counseling, did it somewhere within the big circle. Biblical counseling emerged as a stranger in a foreign land.

Secular psychology dominated counseling, defining discourse about people and their problems. The social, behavioral, and medical sciences attained enormous social power, intellectual prestige, and self-confidence. As a result, the entire practice of counseling in the twentieth century became encircled by and permeated with secular versions of how to understand and help people. Various forms of psychotherapy—secular pastoral work—overwhelmed the biblical cure of souls; various theoretical psychologies—secular theologies—overwhelmed biblical understandings of human nature and functioning; various therapeutic institutions—secular church communities—overwhelmed the church as the primary location for helping people with their troubles.

The most perceptive psychologists recognized and frankly stated what they were doing. Even Freud, contrary to most of his disciples, denied that the psychoanalyst’s role was a distinctly medical role. He stated that the psychoanalyst was a “secular pastoral worker” and need not be a doctor.<sup>8</sup> For example, Freud’s noted disciple Erik Erikson had his professional training in art! Carl Jung commented in similar fashion, “Patients force the psychotherapist into the role of a priest, and expect and demand of him that he shall free them from their distress. That is why we psychotherapists must occupy ourselves with problems which, strictly speaking, belong to the theologian.”<sup>9</sup> B. F. Skinner’s *Walden Two* consciously and specifically offered substitutes for the truths, techniques, and institutions of the Christian faith. In fact, behavioral psychologists are the priest-equivalents in Skinner’s heaven on earth.<sup>10</sup> The big circle of secular psychology posited a secular universe. The leading psychologists and psychiatrists were secular people who wanted to help secular people. It is no surprise that they offered a substitute religion, because the problems they dealt with were fundamentally religious.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, the liberal churches were wedded to this psychotherapeutic revolution from its beginning; thus the development of the second circle, liberal pastoral theology. In their abandonment of biblical truth and authority, leaders within these churches looked to the social sciences to provide authority and efficacy. Harry Emerson Fosdick, whose theological liberalism was one trip wire for the fundamentalist-modernist splits of the 1920s, was, not by coincidence, simultaneously a leader in the mental hygiene movement. Using his pulpit to expound a new psychotherapeutic version of Chris-

tianity, his psychologism was the flip side of his unbelief in the "fundamentals." The very idea of pastoral counseling was defined by liberal theology's integration of secular psychologists, especially Carl Rogers and Alfred Adler, from World War I into the 1960s.

In general, conservative Christians simply did not talk or write about counseling.<sup>12</sup> And when they did begin to think about and practice counseling, they adopted the powerful paradigms of the encircling secular psychologies and liberal pastoral theologies. The presuppositions for both practice and thought were neither exposed by nor subjected to biblical analysis. There was no attempt to build a biblical practical theology of counseling from the ground up. The big circle of secular psychology and psychotherapy was always the dominant partner in the discussions. Meanwhile, the middle-sized circle, an implicitly or explicitly liberal theology, was always tugging at evangelical thought and practice. Fuller Theological Seminary's Graduate School of Psychology (founded in 1965) exemplified the hold secular and liberalizing paradigms had on professing Bible-believers.<sup>13</sup>

#### THE REDISCOVERY OF BIBLICAL COUNSELING

Godly people, wise and experienced in living the Word, have applied God's Word to the problems of life in all times and places. In this sense, wherever wise Christians have sought to encourage and admonish one another, biblical counseling has occurred. Although truths that are not systematized are jeopardized, it is to God's praise that informal wisdom has always operated. God has always enabled wise pastors to approach their people with love and patience, and to open their Bibles to the right places to "comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable." In spite of the fact that the systematic approaches to counseling recorded in books and taught in classrooms during the twentieth century have not been biblically based, there has been a rediscovery of biblical counseling. From the human point of view, that rediscovery is linked primarily to the life and efforts of one man: Jay E. Adams. He began to see, discuss, and do counseling in ways that he and others had not been seeing, discussing, or doing previously.

Jay Adams (born 1929) grew up in Baltimore, the only child of a policeman and a secretary. Converted to Christ in high school, he obtained a Bachelor of Divinity from Reformed Episcopal Seminary (Philadelphia) and a Bachelor of Arts in classics from Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore) in 1952. Adams served as an area director of Youth for Christ in the early 1950s, was ordained in 1952, and over the next thirteen years pastored several Presbyterian congregations. He also received a Masters in Sacred Theology from Temple University (Philadelphia) in 1958 and a Ph.D. in speech from the University of Missouri in 1969. Bible, theology, Greek, and preaching formed the heart of his education. But as a pastor, the problems

of people's lives continually troubled and weighed on him. "It bothered Jay so much during those years that he never could help people with their problems. He'd say, 'Psychology is just as bad as the liberals. It isn't right and doesn't work. But how do you really help people?'"<sup>14</sup>

Adams continually sought to upgrade his counseling skills. He read voraciously from all three circles of counseling: the leading twentieth-century psychologists, the standard works in pastoral counseling (which mediated Carl Rogers through liberal or neo-orthodox theology), and Clyde Narramore and other evangelicals who had begun to publish from either a Freudian or an eclectic point of view. While at Temple, he took two courses in counseling with a psychiatrist of Freudian bent.<sup>15</sup> Adams was disappointed and frustrated with this training. Indeed, he felt it was full of theory-driven speculations, was ineffective in practice, and was contrary to basic biblical truths. The approaches offered did not make sense of people, they did not help people, and they were overtly unbiblical. He had no coherent alternative, but muddled along doing what little he could in pastoral counseling situations. Workshops for pastors, which were regularly sponsored by mental health agencies, reiterated the litany that the pastor should not attempt much but should "defer and refer" to secular mental health experts. The bottom line message to pastors was, "Leave things to the professionals. There is little you can do besides provide an accepting atmosphere for people. Troubled people are not violators of conscience but morally neutral victims of an accusing conscience. They need professional help. Pastors shouldn't do more than refer."<sup>16</sup> Such propaganda was intimidating to thousands of conservative pastors.

In 1963, Adams was invited to teach practical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary. His responsibilities focused on preaching, but included a course in pastoral theology that contained a segment on pastoral counseling. This course raised the stakes. What should he teach? Adams happened to hear of psychologist O. Hobart Mowrer and went to hear him speak. That speech, Mowrer's book *The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion*, (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1961), and a six-week intensive course with Mowrer that summer had a catalytic effect on Adams. Mowrer "cleared the field of rubble for me. He destroyed Freud, which was the reigning system, and he shook up faith in mental health professionals. His positive system was completely unbiblical, but he gave me the confidence to go forward."<sup>17</sup> Mowrer shook loose the death grip of secular propaganda. This freed Adams to challenge the reigning psychological orthodoxy and to follow his nose biblically. As a result, Adams did intensive Bible study about the conscience, guilt, anthropology, and change. He described the next two years as "night and day, counseling and studying: studying people, studying counseling books, studying the Bible."<sup>18</sup>

Adams' first rough outline of biblical counseling began to emerge dur-

ing that small segment of the pastoral theology course. At first it was little more than "sin is the problem, the Bible has the answers," incorporating a few case studies. Problems were addressed on an *ad hoc* basis as they arose in counseling or from a study of Scripture. But by 1967 Adams' thinking about counseling had jelled into a system, and he expanded the counseling segment of the theology course into a counseling course. Then when he published his first book in 1970, Adams' personal rediscovery of biblical counseling initiated a widespread rediscovery for the entire church.

Adams has written prolifically to create and develop a system of biblical counseling. He considers four of his books to be basic texts. *Competent to Counsel*, his first book, dropped a bombshell on the conservative Christian world. It was both polemical and positive. The polemics attacked the preeminence of pagan psychology and psychiatry in the field of counseling, and the positive methods set forth an ideal of "nouthetic confrontation."<sup>19</sup> Adams saw the Bible's way of counseling as radically dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit to apply the Word of God to people's lives: the promises encourage and empower, the commands convict and guide, and the stories make application. The Bible calls for human counselors to be frank, loving, humble about their own failings, and change-oriented. They are to be servants of the Holy Spirit's agenda, not autonomous professionals or gurus. In Adams' shorthand, nouthetic counseling is confrontation that is done out of concern for the purposes of changing something God wants to change.<sup>20</sup> That something can involve attitudes, beliefs, behavior, motives, decisions, and so forth.

Adams' second book, *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, fine-tuned the philosophy of biblical counseling and provided counseling methods, including a discussion on how to understand and solve particular problems. A third book, *Lectures on Counseling*, brought together a number of essays on foundational topics, and a fourth book, *More Than Redemption* (republished as *A Theology of Christian Counseling*), expanded the systematic base of biblical counseling.

Throughout his prolific written works, Adams challenged biblical counselors not to fall prey to rigid ways of thinking or to mechanical techniques. He insisted that counselors must do justice both to the fundamental commonalities and to the diverse particulars of counseling situations and life situations.

"*Insight* into the inner workings of sinful human beings, into their outer circumstances and problems, and into the correct meaning and applicability of appropriate Bible passages is absolutely essential to counseling. Likewise, the importance of *creativity* cannot be minimized. It is creativity that particularizes the common, fitting together the usual and the unusual in each situation. Without it, people are crammed into

molds they don't fit; rather, the truth must be adapted and applied (but not accommodated) to each person as he is."<sup>21</sup>

Not only did Adams write abundant resources for the development of biblical counseling, but he also pioneered settings where biblical counseling was the *modus operandi* and agenda. As noted above, his first rudimentary courses in biblical counseling took place at Westminster Theological Seminary in the mid-1960s. Though Adams left Westminster in 1976 to devote himself to research and writing, the program continued to develop under the leadership of Adams' colleague, John Bettler. A residential Doctor of Ministry in Counseling was begun in 1980 with a dozen courses offered in biblical counseling. When the residential program was replaced by a modular program, most of the courses migrated into the regular Westminster curriculum as electives. A Master of Arts and Religion with a counseling major was begun in 1984.<sup>22</sup>

Adams was concerned for pastors, even more than for students who might one day become pastors. He felt pastors needed a site where counseling was taking place, where they could learn to counsel and then return to their congregations and communities. Thus in 1967, Adams and several associates made plans to develop a counseling center that would offer both counseling and a place for pastors to observe and train. These plans crystallized in 1968 when Adams and John Bettler began the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF) in Hatboro, Pennsylvania. Counseling was offered to needy people, and education was offered to would-be helpers of needy people. During the first course, trainees sat in on counseling sessions during the day and evening and then discussed cases over supper. In 1974, John Bettler became CCEF's director and first full-time employee. As CCEF continued to grow, counseling sites were opened in San Diego, California, and at several places in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. The CCEF faculty currently teaches courses at Westminster Theological Seminary and Biblical Theological Seminary.<sup>23</sup>

As biblical-nouthetic counseling gained adherents, the need for a professional association became evident. Concerns for the growing group of practitioners included certification for biblical counselors, accountability for standards of biblical commitment and ethics, fellowship and interaction among biblical counselors, ongoing in-service training, and protection from lawsuits. To meet these and other needs, Adams joined with several men to found the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors (NANC) in 1976. Today, NANC publishes a quarterly newsletter, *The Biblical Counselor*, and coordinates a large annual conference.<sup>24</sup>

Adams also wanted a forum where ideas could be shared and discussed, and where writers could try their wings. So in 1977 he founded *The Journal of Pastoral Practice*, published through CCEF. As JPP's editor for the

next fifteen years, his purpose was to develop a journal that would adhere to scholarly standards but would be "intensely practical" and would meet "the needs of men serving in the pastoral ministry."<sup>25</sup> This journal embodied a unique vision in at least three respects. First, counseling was not isolated from the rest of pastoral practice: preaching, Christian education, missions, worship, and evangelism. The mere act of embedding private ministry in the context of a comprehensive vision counteracts the common vision of counseling as discrete from the rest of the ministry of the Word of God. Second, the counseling articles (and counseling articles always constituted the bulk of the journal's contents) took a distinctively biblical point of view. Third, the journal sought to be practical. It sought to address and influence practice, not simply theology or theory. In 1992 the name of the journal was changed to *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*. The concern to meet the needs of pastors has continued but has broadened to include the needs of trained laypeople who seek to counsel biblically.<sup>26</sup>

Jay Adams, his writings, and the institutions he founded have led to a proliferation of biblical counseling ministries and training centers both in the United States and abroad. For example, a growing ministry for training laypeople grew out of lectures Adams gave in Washington, D.C. (1973) when John Broger, a Christian layman active in ministry in the Pentagon, had a deep concern that discipleship address and solve the counseling issues in people's lives. He took Adams's materials and in 1974 founded the Biblical Counseling Foundation (BCF), which continues to grow as a ministry that trains laypeople and pastors in discipleship methods largely flavored by biblical counseling.<sup>27</sup>

Various local churches have founded biblical counseling ministries, taking many different forms: formal or informal, pastor or lay, focusing on congregational needs or reaching out to the community. Particularly noteworthy is Faith Baptist Church in Lafayette, Indiana. This church has founded a thriving counseling center and built church life around the concepts of progressive sanctification and mutual counsel that are at the heart of biblical counseling. Faith Baptist Counseling Ministries (FBCM) was started in 1977 by Rev. Bill Goode and Dr. Bob Smith. It has grown to offer training throughout the Midwest. Randy Patton is the executive director of NANC, and FBCM has served as the location for the NANC offices. Faith Baptist Church has hosted the NANC national conference several times in recent years.<sup>28</sup>

The biblical counseling agenda has also become established in The Master's College ([www.masters.edu](http://www.masters.edu)) and The Master's Seminary ([www.tms.edu](http://www.tms.edu)) in California. In the late 1980s, John MacArthur and his co-laborers turned their attention closely to the issues of biblical counseling and secular psychology. They restructured the curriculum at both undergraduate and seminary levels to reflect a commitment to use biblical truth to explain people's

needs and to offer them help. Two of Jay Adams' longstanding associates, Bob Smith (from FBCM) and Wayne Mack (from CCEF) have been instrumental in designing and building the program.<sup>29</sup>

The notion of doing distinctively biblical counseling has also been planted in a number of countries around the world. Whenever and wherever Christians counsel wisely in obedience to the Scriptures, biblical counseling happens, whether it is so titled or not. But it is a great advantage to identify self-consciously what one aims to do and to rally like-minded believers to the cause. For this reason, there are nascent biblical counseling movements in Germany, Switzerland, Great Britain, and South Africa, taking the form of associations and/or counseling and training centers.

### QUESTIONS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

One of the results of tracing the rediscovery of biblical counseling has been the challenge to think towards the future. Church history bears testimony to the uncertain fortunes of ministries and movements. Some thrive. Some miscarry early on. Some grow, then collapse. Some prosper awhile and then stagnate. Some go soft and drift into compromise. Some go the other way, becoming sectarian and self-righteous. Some are renewed when things look bleak. Some go off the tracks into error or irrelevancy. How can biblical counseling continue to grow in wisdom and stature as it faces the challenges of the future? Without doubt, the biblical counseling movement faces three fundamental tasks at the beginning of the twenty-first century: (1) the task of defining, (2) the task of edifying, and (3) the task of evangelizing.

#### *The Task of Defining*

How will biblical counseling be defined? A creedal circle needs to be drawn delineating the boundaries of a biblical counseling confession of faith and practice. What commitments and practices mark one as a biblical counselor? What commitments and practices mark one as some other sort of counselor? Why does this next decade demand creedal development? Defining the boundaries is important for three reasons.

First, through the first twenty-five years of development, Jay Adams' personal influence and his network of friendships provided a rough guide to the definition of biblical counseling. But the movement is growing rapidly, and the next generation will not necessarily know Jay Adams personally. The content of an allegiance to the biblical counseling vision and cause must be more precisely defined. Creedal definition and consolidation is a necessary phase of any healthy movement of reformation in the church.

Second, the integration movement of Christian psychotherapists increasingly employs the adjective "biblical" and calls for theological renewal within their point of view. While we applaud any genuine increase of biblical con-

sciousness and practice among integrationists, it remains to be seen whether the increase in Bible talk, God talk, and Jesus talk represents a substantive shift. In the meantime, the higher degree of verbal similarity between integrationist and biblical counseling has the potential to confuse many. Defining core biblical commitments will help weed out the theories and practices that claim to be biblical but deviate substantively from the Bible's teachings about people, about change, and about ministry.

Third, the biblical counseling movement from the beginning has pulled together an otherwise diverse group of Christians. We have never been monolithic, but have embraced Bible-believers of many shades: reformed, fundamentalist, and evangelical. The founders and developers of biblical counseling have held diverse opinions on many specific counseling issues, as well as wider theological issues. What has held the movement together has been the judgment that these differences were secondary differences of application or emphasis, not matters of core commitment. Nailing down the primary areas of agreement becomes increasingly important as the movement expands. One way to phrase the boundary question is, "What is the size of the teapot within which there are allowable tempests?" Defining primary areas of agreement creates the freedom for the iron-sharpening-iron discussion of differences. The alternatives are either fragmentation or drift.

What are the common commitments? What are the rudiments of biblical counseling? Every reader of the Scriptures and of Adams's efforts to systematize the Scriptures would generate a slightly different list. Here we will highlight seven core elements that Adams rediscovered, articulated, and defended.

*1. God is at the center of counseling.* God is sovereign, active, speaking, merciful, commanding, and powerful. The Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, is the central focus of counseling and the exemplar of the Wonderful Counselor. The Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit are foundational to all significant and lasting life change. The Word of God is about counseling, giving both understanding of people and methods of ministering to people. The Bible is authoritative, relevant, and comprehensively sufficient for counseling. God has spoken truly to every basic issue of human nature and to the problems in living. His Word establishes the goal of counseling, how people can change, the role of the counselor, counseling methods, and so forth. Christians have the only authoritative source for counseling wisdom: the Holy Spirit speaking through the Word of God. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and wisdom is the only worthy goal of counseling.

*2. Commitment to God has epistemological consequences.* First, other sources of knowledge must be submitted to the authority of Scripture. The sciences, personal experience, literature, and so forth may be useful, but may not play a constitutive role in counseling. Second, there is a conflict of

counsel built into human life. Genesis 3, Psalm 1, and Jeremiah 23 are paradigmatic. Counsel that contradicts God's counsel has existed since the garden of Eden, challenging God's counsel and building from other presuppositions and towards other goals. Such false counsel must be noted and opposed. Specifically, in our time and place, secular psychology has intruded into the domain of biblical truth and practice. Secular theories and therapies substitute for biblical wisdom and deceive people both inside and outside the church. The false claimants to authority must be exposed and opposed.

3. *Sin, in all its dimensions* (for example, both motive and behavior; both the sins we do and the sins done against us; both the consequences of personal sin and the consequences of Adam's sin) *is the primary problem counselors must deal with*. Sin includes wrong behavior, distorted thinking, an orientation to follow personal desires, and bad attitudes. Sin is habitual and deceptive, and much of the difficulty of counseling consists in bringing specific sin to awareness and breaking its hold. The problems in living that necessitate counseling are not matters of unmet psychological needs, indwelling demons of sin, poor socialization, inborn temperament, genetic predisposition, or anything else that removes attention from the responsible human being. The problem in believers is remnant sin; the problem in unbelievers is reigning sin. Sin is the problem.

4. *The gospel of Jesus Christ is the answer*. Forgiveness for sin and power to change into Christ's image are the greatest needs of mankind. The orthodox gospel of Jesus Christ is the answer to the problem. Christ deals with sin: the guilt, the power, the deception, and the misery of sin. He was crucified for sinners, He reigns over hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit, and He will return to complete the redemption of His people from their sins and sufferings. These core truths must infuse the counseling process.

5. *The biblical change process which counseling must aim at is progressive sanctification*. While there are many ways of changing people, biblical counseling aims for nothing less than transformation into the image of Jesus Christ amid the rough and tumble of daily life. Change is not instantaneous, but progresses throughout life. This progressive view of sanctification has many implications. For example, the process of change is only metaphorically, not actually, healing. The metaphor is meant to capture the process of sanctification: ongoing repentance, renewal of mind unto biblical truth, and obedience in the power of the Spirit.

6. *The situational difficulties people face are not the random cause of problems in living*. These difficulties operate within the sovereign design of God. They are the context in which hearts are revealed, and faith and obedience are purified through the battle between the Spirit and the flesh. Influential aspects of one's life situation do not cause sin. Heredity, temperament, personality, culture, oppression and evil, bereavement, handicaps,

old age, Satan, physical illness, and so forth are significant for counseling, but are not ultimately causative of sin.

7. *Counseling is fundamentally a pastoral activity and must be church-based.* It must be regulated under the authority of God's appointed undershepherds. Counseling is connected both structurally and in content to other aspects of the pastoral task: teaching, preaching, prayer, church discipline, use of gifts, missions, worship, and so forth. Counseling is the private ministry of the Word of God, tailored specifically to the individuals involved. The differences between preaching and counseling are not conceptual but only methodological. The same truths are applied in diverse ways.

These seven commitments have unified the biblical counseling movement. They have provided a framework within which many secondary differences of Bible interpretation, of theological commitment, of setting for counseling, of personality have been able to exist constructively rather than destructively. But there are numerous other issues that demand clear biblical thinking and firm commitment: the place of the past, the place of feelings, the biblical view of human motivation, the relationship of biblical truth to secular psychology, the place of suffering, how to apply various aspects of biblical truth and methods of biblical ministry to different kinds of problems, etc. Will biblical counselors draw the boundaries in the right places? Or will the lines be drawn too narrowly, creating a sectarian party spirit? Or will the lines be drawn too widely, inviting compromise and drift? Only within properly drawn creedal boundaries can energies for edification and evangelization be guided and released.

#### *The Task of Edifying*

How will biblical counselors develop greater skill in the cure of souls? How will we become wiser practitioners, thinkers, apologists, and Christian men and women? The task of edifying biblical counselors demands advances that are both exegetically sound and case-trying. It demands that we think well about many issues. One of the often ignored aspects of Jay Adams' work has been his repeated observation that his work is a starting place, and that much work remains to be done to build on the foundation.

Biblical counseling has been rediscovered. But perhaps it is more accurate to say that the *idea* of biblical counseling and the *call* to do biblical counseling have been rediscovered. This has brought into focus many fresh discoveries and new insights into the cure of souls. For example, the concern to specify counseling methodology (such as techniques of asking questions, building relationships, setting goals, speaking the truth, and using homework) has produced helpful developments. And the concern to translate general biblical truths into a specific renewal of both inward and outward life (Rom. 13:12-14), tailor-made both to the counselee and the life situation,

is refreshingly new. Will biblical counseling continue to develop intellectually and practically?<sup>30</sup> Or will we stagnate and turn yesterday's breakthroughs into tomorrow's formulaic-truisms and techniques?

*The Task of Evangelizing*

How will biblical counselors propagate the cause of biblical counseling? The task of persuasion must be undertaken with three distinct groups of people: (1) the great bulk of the believing church, both in the United States and internationally; (2) the integrationist community here in the United States and abroad; and (3) the members of the secular psychological culture. Many people remain ignorant of the existence of biblical counseling, while others dismiss it on the basis of a caricature that bears no resemblance to anything the Bible teaches or anything wise counselors think and do. Biblical counseling needs evangelists and apologists with sensitivities and passions for each of these communities. We have answers people need; answers that are better than those they already have. Biblical counselors must think well, pray pointedly, and discuss actively to develop energetic and creative apologetic and evangelistic efforts to help people find these answers.

# Why Biblical Counseling and Not Psychology?

*John Street*

Biblically informed Christians ought to be sanctified skeptics. They should direct a justified cynicism toward any discipline or epistemological scheme that seeks obligatory authority as it relates to counseling of personal problems. A natural antagonism has always existed between biblical counselors and therapeutic practitioners because psychotherapeutic theories have aggressively encroached upon the jurisdiction of soul-care.<sup>1</sup> Christians are fully warranted in casting a wary eye in psychology's direction for its Enlightenment-inspired dismissal of the Bible's veracity and its *carte blanche* rejection of the jurisdictional authority which Scripture claims in the matters of the soul.

For the Christian counselor, the Word of God must be more than an interpretative grid for the acceptance or denial of psychological truth claims; it is the operative domain from which the counselor derives his/her functional and final authority,<sup>2</sup> being accepted as the determinative authority in anthropology. Scripture serves as the only reliable resource for the Christian counselor's diagnostic terminology and remedy. The Word of God possesses the exclusive theoretical framework from which soul-problems can be properly interpreted and resolved.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, it claims exclusive authority in defining the significance of and purpose for the life of man.<sup>4</sup> When placed in juxtaposition with the counsel of man, the comprehensive superiority of the Word is unmistakable. God's purposes in the life of man will prevail. The psalmist stated:

The LORD nullifies the counsel of the nations;  
He frustrates the plans of the peoples.  
The counsel of the LORD stands forever,  
The plans of His heart from generation to generation.  
(Ps. 33:10-11)

## THEOLOGY AND PSYCHOLOGY

The historical distrust and innate hostility between psychology and theology exist because each calls into question the legitimacy of the other's