

# What is Biblical Counseling?

Paul Tautges, *Delight in the Word*

I am thrilled to be a witness of the rediscovery of biblical counseling. “Now in order to rediscover something, it must have been lost,”<sup>[i]</sup> says David Powlison. Unfortunately, that is true. Powlison explains,

“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...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.”<sup>[ii]</sup>

As a result, Christians sprinkled man-centered psychology with a few Bible verses and called it “Christian Psychology.” The outcome has been confusion, hopelessness, and abandonment of the faith. John MacArthur is right when he says Christian psychology “has diminished the Church’s confidence in Scripture, prayer, fellowship, and preaching as means through which the Spirit of God works to change lives.”<sup>[iii]</sup> It is saddening to think that God’s Church could lose something so basic and essential as the skill and conviction to use Scripture to help people work through their problems. Yet that is where the American church is. Those who embrace psychology as the answer are in the majority by far. There is no reason to pretend they are not. But to know that God is, in our lifetime, calling His people back to His Word as a working manual for life is exciting to say the least. This is what is referred to as biblical counseling. Biblical counseling is built on the premise that God’s *divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness* (2 Pet. 1:3). This was the conviction of the early Christians. They had the godly audacity to believe that man can become complete in Christ without the help of psychologists, psychiatrists, or mood-altering drugs. They believed this because of three basic presuppositions that grew out of their study of the Scriptures.

## **God’s Word is sufficient to deal with every problem man faces.**

In our day, pastors are intimidated by the mental health “professionals,” but the early Christians believed that there is nothing man experiences that God does not directly or indirectly address in His Word. They believed the Scriptures are sufficient to teach us doctrine—truth with a capital T. They believed the Word confronts us when we get off the right path and shows us how to get back on. And they believed the Scriptures train us to live godly lives so that we can mature and become equipped to serve God.

*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).*

### **Man is responsible for his own actions.**

In our day, blame shifting has almost become a virtue, but the early Christians had the courage to lay fault at the right doorstep. We read of people like the 56-year old man who is presently suing four major fast food chains because of health problems caused by his obesity. Of course, *he* is not responsible for putting his hand to his mouth. It is the restaurants' fault! In our world this man is consoled. In biblical times he would have received a sermon on gluttony. How refreshing it is when the light of Truth pierces so sharply through the thick cloud of man's deception.

*Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.*

### **The Holy Spirit is the "Agent of Change."**

In our day, men pay good money to be told they are hopelessly victimized by their past or their DNA, but the early Christians freely dispensed the hope found in the Gospel and were confident of the life-changing power of the Holy Spirit. As we take our eyes off ourselves and put them on Christ we are changed into His image by the Spirit of God.

*But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18).*

These core beliefs naturally led the early Christians to practice what is referred to as nouthetic counseling. The nouthetic approach to counseling grows out of two NT words: *noutheses* and *noutheteo*. The words mean to warn, to admonish, or to exhort. They always imply an aspect of confrontation so as to effect change. Jay Adams says this approach to helping people contains three basic elements. [iv] First, it presupposes a need for change; that there is something in the life that God wants changed. Second, problems are solved by verbal means; that is, the stress is placed on 'What'—what is wrong? And what needs to be done about it? The Word spoken in encouragement, admonishment, or rebuke renews the mind, which leads to transformation of life. Third, the purpose for counseling is always that the counselee benefit by seeking to change that in his life which hurts him.

When this kind of ministry is examined in the New Testament, three principles become obvious.

**Pastors are required to counsel and equip others to be counselors.**

Pastoral ministry involves constant admonition. No matter how hard we may try, pastors cannot get out of counseling people. The Ephesian elders were told to remember *that night and day for a period of three years* [Paul] *did not cease to admonish each one with tears* (Acts 20:31). Those were not tears of joy, but grief, anguish, and concern. Paul's corrective letters to the Corinthians were motivated by his love and concern for them (1 Cor. 4:14). He accepted confrontation and teaching as steps in the process of presenting people to God as *complete* in Christ (Col. 1:28) and referred to this kind of ministry as intense *labor* (1 Thess. 5:12). A pastor's responsibility to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:12) includes the task of training fellow believers to counsel biblically.

**Every believer is expected to be a counselor.**

The ministry of counseling is not only for pastors. In fact, every believer is expected to be involved to some degree. The Apostle Paul was confident that well-taught believers are *able to counsel one another* (Rom. 15:14). A growing Christian with a love for and a working knowledge of the Scriptures is a far more competent counselor than a trained psychologist with three degrees hanging on his wall and several initials behind his name. Effective counseling is the product of being richly indwelt with the Word of God (Col. 3:16) not the theories of Sigmund Freud or Carl Jung. Far from giving pat answers like, "take two Bible verses and call me in the morning," biblical counseling requires wisdom and compassion from God because real people have real needs (1 Thess. 5:14).

**The local church is the intended and ideal place for counseling.**

God also provides the ideal environment where lives can be changed. It is not an accident that the commands to counsel one another are found in letters to local churches. The apostles always assumed that every believer would be a faithful member of a local body of Christ. The NT never even entertains the idea of a Christian not being accountable to a group of fellow believers. The book of Hebrews, written to a local body of Jewish believers, stresses the immense value of this relationship, *let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near* (Heb. 10:24-25).

Your local church is the ideal place for developing a counseling ministry. Please prayerfully consider being trained for this vital ministry (see our "Links" page for biblically sound resources).

Delighting in the WORD,

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(This article is taken from the book, Delight in the WORD, a collection of essays providing food for biblical counselors and homework for their counselees.)

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[i] John MacArthur & Wayne Mack, eds., *Introduction to Biblical Counseling* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1994), p. 44.

[ii] *Introduction*, p. 45.

[iii] *Introduction*, p. 4.

[iv] Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), pp. 44,45,49,50.