

A PHILOSOPHY OF BIBLICAL COUNSELING

A Paper

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Why the Need for Counseling?

It's no secret that life is hard. The Bible promises difficulty (John 16:33). The longer we live, the more experience confirms it. We bring some problems upon ourselves by *our own* bad choices (personal sin). Other problems come from *other people's* bad choices (e.g., Adam). We feel the war of demonic activity (Eph. 6:12).¹ We experience daily what it means to live in a fallen, cursed world (Gen. 3:17-18). The net result is that there is no shortage of problems. People who are overcome with such problems often need help. "Depressed persons, lazy persons, fearful persons, persons with life-dominating problems, and those whose lives have been shattered, all usually need help either in scheduling, organizing (or reorganizing) their lives or both."² This is why counseling is important—especially in the Church.

Different Kinds of Counseling Approaches

There is a heated debate over which counseling methodology is the right one to use. There are at least five major views today: (1) the levels-of-explanation view; (2) the integration view; (3) the Christian psychology view; (4) the transformation psychology view; and (6) the biblical counseling (nouthetic) view.³

1. The levels-of-explanation view. This view says a different level of help is available from the different layers of understandings about the world around us. For example, we have some knowledge from physics, chemistry, sociology, psychology and theology. Each is a different method of investigation. And each finds its proper place in helping people with their problems.

¹ Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual: The Practice of Nouthetic Counseling*, The Jay Adams Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub., 1986, 1973), Kindle location 145.

² *Ibid.*, Kindle location 343.

³ Discussed throughout Eric L. Johnson and David G. Myers, eds., *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views*, 2nd ed., Spectrum Multiview Books (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2010).

2. *The integration view.* Those in this camp are “concerned about rejecting the naturalism and secular humanism that has shaped modern psychology and counseling literature.”⁴ Yet, they also “respect the scientific merit of psychology as it is today”⁵ and seek to combine general revelation with special revelation. Popular radio host James Dobson is in this group.

3. *The Christian psychology view.* This view finds a psychology present in the Bible (e.g., the Sermon of the Mount). They also point to a wealth of psychology found in the writings of the giants of the Christian faith (Augustine, Aquinas, Pascal, Kierkegaard).⁶ Since “psychology is native to Christianity”⁷ it should not be rejected but further developed. Neil Anderson and the later writings from Larry Crabb are examples of this view.⁸

4. *The transformational psychology view.* This view is perhaps the most difficult to understand. It emphasizes practice over theory in the field of psychology. It comes from integrationists (see point 2) who felt counselors were putting too much attention on psychological theory. They argued *how* Christian counselors live before their counselees is just as important.⁹ Results happen when we “do psychology in God.”¹⁰

5. *The biblical counseling (nouthetic) view.* This view radically rejects any attempt to Christianity with modern psychiatry and psychotherapy. It rejects all Freudian and humanistic approaches to counseling arguing there can be no compatibility between their foundational worldview and the worldview of Christianity. The emphasis is that sin causes problems, and the focus should be on repenting from sin and developing biblical habits of proper spiritual discipline which alone result in a well-balanced life.

⁴ Ibid., 34.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 155.

⁷ Ibid., 174.

⁸ Ibid., 37.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 200.

The philosophy of biblical counseling presented in this paper is based on the biblical counseling view (view five). It's not possible to argue against all the other views in this short paper. That is done best by Jay Adams in his seminal work *Competent to Counsel*. The major merits of Adams' nouthetic counseling approach will be given here.

What Is (Nouthetic) Biblical Counseling?

Origin of Nouthetic Counseling

Jay Adams (1929 to present) is considered the father of what is called "biblical counseling" today. Adams felt greatly unprepared to counsel after graduating from seminary and pastoring his first church. "Like many other pastors, I learned little about counseling in seminary, so I began with virtually no knowledge of what to do."¹¹ He took additional graduate work in pastoral counseling hoping to "get the real inside dope."¹² But he realized the teacher did not seem to know anything more than the students.¹³ The best advice the teacher had was based on Freudian techniques which simply did not work.

Out of frustration Adams began to simply tell counselees what God required of them from the Bible. A central part of what God requires is that people take responsibility for their mistakes, admit their guilt, confess their sin and build good habits based on biblical standards. Adams noticed that the more he emphasized this in counseling, the better people responded. His belief in the efficacy of the biblical confession-based model was strengthened by his formal training under the psychologist Orval Hobart Mowrer. Amazingly enough, Mowrer, a non-Christian atheist, taught a "Moral Model" of responsibility. Mowrer's view was that

the 'patient's' problems are moral, not medical. He suffers from real guilt, not guilt feelings (false guilt). The basic irregularity is not emotional, but behavioral. He is not a victim of his conscience, but a violator of it. He must stop blaming others and accept

¹¹ Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling*, The Jay Adams Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1986, 1970), x-xi.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

responsibility for his own poor behavior. Problems may be solved, not by ventilation of feelings, but rather by confession of sin.¹⁴

Adams personally witnessed the success of Mowrer's approach in secular institutions. In that day, prominent psychiatrists at the American Psychiatric Association were admitting Freudian psychiatry to be an utter failure that "solved few problems."¹⁵ In contrast, Mowrer's Moral Model proved to be highly successful. Adams saw Mowrer as one who merely stumbled across biblical principles. Adams continued to develop his thoughts and penned them in his seminal book *Competent to Counsel* in 1970. Many others have built from his work over the years and his methodology is now well known in Christian circles.

Why "Nouthetic" Counseling?

The word nouthetic is a transliteration of the English word typically translated "admonish" in the New Testament (e.g., Col. 3:16; Rom. 15:14; Col. 1:28; Acts 20:31; 2 Thess. 3:15; 2 Tim. 3:16; 4:2). Nouthetic counseling deals with influencing the *nous* (mind) through Scripture.¹⁶

Biblical Counseling is Really Discipleship

Biblical counseling is based on three big convictions.¹⁷ First, counseling should be part of the basic discipling ministry of any local church. "Biblical counseling is simply an extension of discipling. There is no sharp distinction between the two."¹⁸ Discipleship is more proactive and teaches general principles for Christian living. Biblical counseling is usually sought when there is a problem, and therefore it is more reactive, and it usually deals with very specific life situations. But the end goal is the same: to help the believer line up their lives more closely to the Word of God. Only when a life is lined-up with the Word will that person thrive. Jesus

¹⁴ Summary of Mowrer from Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1,2.

¹⁶ Ibid., 41-45.

¹⁷ These three principles come from John F. MacArthur, Jr., ed., *MacArthur Pastor's Library on Counseling* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2005), vii.

¹⁸ Ibid., 93.

commanded the church to disciple in the Great Commission: “Go therefore and *make disciples* of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*” (Mt. 28:19-20, emphasis mine). Therefore, biblical counseling should be part of the ministry of every local church.

Basis for Biblical Counseling

Based on the Authority of God’s Word

The second big conviction is that God’s Word should be the supreme authority for faith and conduct. Christians believe the Bible to be special revelation. “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Not only is Scripture “God-breathed” (inspired) but it is infallible (incapable of failing). Jesus said, “For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.” (Mt. 5:18). Since the Bible is from God and cannot fail, it is without any error whatsoever (inerrant). This means that it always tells the truth. Jesus prayed to the Father, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word [viz., the Bible] is truth.” (Jn. 17:17) Since the Bible is inspired, infallible and inerrant it is the supreme instruction book of divine revelation. Those who order their lives around its precepts do find great joy and peace, even during adversity.¹⁹

All of God’s People Can Do It

The third great conviction follows from the first two above. Since biblical counseling is really discipleship (given to all the church) and since it is based on the Word of God, all of God’s people who are spiritually mature and equipped with a proper understanding of God’s Word *can* and *should* counsel people around them who need help. Many Christians are hesitant to counsel because they feel that they are not equipped with tools from psychology. However, this is not

¹⁹ This really has been the witness of the suffering church throughout the ages.

the case. “Secular psychological principles are unnecessary and may even be harmful in trying to understand and help people.”²⁰ The Bible is sufficient for illuminating what should be done with any problem in life. “The Bible is not an encyclopedia of counseling topics that lists every particular counseling problem, but it does contain sufficient revelatory data to establish an effective worldview framework for the diagnosis and remedy of every soul problem.”²¹ Jay Adams makes the assertion that Christian counselors properly trained to use Scripture are more competent to counsel than psychiatrists or anyone else.²²

Depends on Christ and The Holy Spirit

The Christian who attempts to counsel is not alone. We can take comfort in the fact that the Holy Spirit is present and will speak through the Scriptures that we share. The Bible says that the Holy Spirit illuminates the Word and applies it to the hearts of believers (1 Cor. 2:12-14; Jn. 16:14). The Holy Spirit is the source of all sanctification and personality change (Gal. 5:22-23).²³ We also have Christ, who is called “the Good Shepherd” (Jn. 10:14) and “Wonderful Counselor” (Isa. 9:6). Jesus has already promised to speak to his sheep as people read his words recorded in the gospels (Jn. 10:27). This really does take the burden from the worried counselor! The counselor is merely a vessel in the hands of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Nonetheless, here are some helpful tips which can make the counselor a more effective vessel.

How to Practice Biblical Counseling

Accepting Responsibility and Confession

People are prone to blame others for all their problems.²⁴ They tend to want to talk about how they are the victim. Much secular counseling deals with people venting their feels to help

²⁰ Wayne A. Mack, “The Sufficiency of Scripture in Counseling,” *TMSJ* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 63-84, <https://www.tms.edu/m/tmsj9d.pdf>.

²¹ *MacArthur Pastor’s Library on Counseling*, 39.

²² *Competent to Counsel*, 18

²³ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

²⁴ This goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. Adam blamed Eve (Gen. 3:12-13). Eve blamed the devil (Gen. 3:13).

them work through their feelings. But in biblical counseling, a central goal is to try to get the “patient” to stop blaming others for their problems and to accept responsibility for their own poor behavior. Problems are not solved by venting one’s feelings, but by confession of sin.²⁵

Pretending to be Mentally Ill to Avoid Real Problems

Jay Adams includes some examples of people who pretended bizarre behavior to shift attention away from their real issue: sin. He tells one story about a young man who stopped being able to communicate. People thought he was crazy, but it turns out he was flunking college and didn’t want his parents to be upset.²⁶ The strange behavior was a smokescreen. Another lady was diagnosed as a manic depressive. When she was forced to see psychiatrists, she would howl and scream. She was finally brought to a biblical counselor who refused to be distracted by the screaming. It turns out, she was merely deflecting attention away from an adulterous affair.²⁷ Treating “false illnesses” only makes people worse. The person’s social contacts are lost because of their bizarre behavior. This type of person “becomes a very miserable person, externally isolated and alienated from others, and internally torn apart.”²⁸ What they really need is for somebody to address their real issue: sin.

Be Bold and Direct

With the authority of Scripture behind them, the counselor should be bold and direct with their counselee.²⁹ The “patient” needs to be told from Scripture what God requires of them. They need to see how they have failed to live up to God’s standard and that this is precisely the reason their life is off-balance. Once God’s requirements are understood, the counselor should

²⁵ *Competent to Counsel*, xvii.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 31-33.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 29-35.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xiii.

ask for a fresh commitment to be made. What the counselor is doing is leading the counselee through confession and repentance.³⁰

Focus on Behavioral, not Emotional Problems

The focus of biblical counseling is on behavior, not emotions. Many times, people say, “I don’t feel like loving my spouse,” etc. It is not important whether people feel like doing something. If the Bible commands something, it must be done. The feelings will follow. Good feelings usually come from good behavior and practices; bad feelings usually come from bad actions. “If you change behavior, feelings will follow. People feel bad because of bad behavior; feelings flow from actions.”³¹ Therefore the focus should be on behavior, not feelings.

Don’t Minimize a Person’s Guilt

If a client says, “I’ve been a horrible mother,” don’t respond with “No, don’t say that! You’re a fantastic mother.” The person is likely feeling conviction because they suffer from *real guilt*. Real guilt comes from not keeping God’s standard. Counselors should never minimize when there is an admission of guilt or failure. Instead, they should respond with, “That’s a serious matter. Tell me about it. What have you been doing? How have you been failing as a mother?”³² This should lead to a verbal confession of wrongdoing. Guilt is to be directly dealt with, not minimized or avoided.

Break and Replace Old Patterns of Behavior

A person going through sickness, grief, financial loss, death or divorce will often seek counseling to get them through their tough time.³³ Counselors can use these “break down” times to “break up” the structure of the counselee’s life. The goal should be to introduce biblical patterns of healthy living. People tend to get caught in a downward spiral of sinful behavior. A

³⁰ It cannot be assumed that a person who says they are a Christian are really Christians. If the person is not regenerated this is the proper place to start.

³¹ *Competent to Counsel*, 93.

³² *Ibid.*, 140, 141.

³³ *Ibid.*, 170, 171.

smaller sinful action tends to lead to greater sinful actions. Over time these sinful actions become habits which keep a person miserable. The counselor's job is to find what the unhealthy patterns are. A counselee usually comes in for a specific problem. But they must be made to see that their real problem is really a failure to live a biblically wholistic lifestyle.

Total Restructuring

The goal is total restructuring of a person's life based on what the Bible says. Old habits must be broken; new habits must be formed. There must be a "putting off" of the old nature and a "putting on" of the new. The Bible says, "put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." (Eph. 4:22-24) The way of life described in the Bible should become the normal way of life for the counselee. "Only then will there be peace that passes all understanding: peace of conscience, mind, heart and soul."³⁴

People Really Can Change

Many times, a counselee will say that they will not be able to change. They have been living an off-balanced life for so long that talk of total restructuring will seem impossible. The counselee needs to be reminded that God is in the business of changing lives. "God, throughout history, has turned Jacobs into Israels, Simons into Peters and Sauls into Pauls."³⁵ People using the biblical counseling approach report that patterns of behavior built over thirty to forty years can commonly be broken.³⁶ A big part of the counselor's task is to help the counselee see that there is hope for their situation. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, and fresh commitment to turn from sin and yield to Him, there can be much fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

³⁴ Ibid., 165.

³⁵ Ibid., 74, 75.

³⁶ Ibid.

Limitations of Biblical Counseling?

As mentioned at the start of this paper, there are different views about Christian counseling. Here are some of the criticisms against Jay Adams' nouthetic approach.³⁷ First, how would someone counsel Job using the biblical counseling approach where personal problems are said to be the result of the person's sin? The point of Job is precisely that Job did not sin, yet he still had problems. His problems were not brought on by his own personal actions but were external (Satan). Moreover, his three friends tried to counsel him and incorrectly assumed he was to blame. They were rightly called "miserable counselors" (Job 16:2). Second, Adams' nouthetic counseling is based on a transliteration of the word used for "admonish" in the New Testament. However, there may be other times when it is not appropriate to "admonish." For example, Romans 12:15 says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." This suggests that it is sometimes appropriate to sympathize with someone who is suffering and not try to "fix" them. As mentioned at the start, not all pain is caused by personal sin; some is caused by *others*. Finally, Adams' counseling approach is built on the belief that the Bible alone is enough for the counselor. But some feel there is too much emphasis training. For example, there is a book used for training in counseling that has circulated throughout churches in Southern California called *Self-Confrontation: A Manual for In-Depth Discipleship*.³⁸ The book has many fantastic principles, but it is overwhelming—there are 477 pages of dizzying lists, graphs and charts. The occasional counselor like myself can't but help feel inadequate staring at a book like that. Martin & Deidre Bobgan feel the same way.³⁹ In fact, they no longer recommend the book for this reason:

...we have serious problems with much of what is now called 'biblical counseling.' One of the big problems with the biblical counseling movement is the erroneous impression,

³⁷ D. W. Peters and J. D. Carter, "Nouthetic Counseling," ed. David G. Benner and Peter C. Hill, *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology & Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 797-800.

³⁸ John C. Broger, *Self-Confrontation: A Manual for In-Depth Discipleship*, 1991 ed. (Palm Desert, CA: Biblical Counseling Foundation Inc., 2009).

³⁹ Martin Bobgan and Deidre Bobgan, "Confronting the Biblical Counseling Foundation's Self-Confrontation Manual" (a PsychoHeresy Awareness Position Paper, Santa Barbara, CA, 1995).

encouraged by many organizations, that one needs to take a biblical counseling course or complete a biblical counseling program before one can counsel from Scripture and certainly before one can excel in ministering godly counsel. Therefore, many Christians enroll in these programs with the idea that they need such specialized training before they can or even should minister biblical counsel to another believer.⁴⁰

Future Study

There is much that is good with Adams' biblical counseling approach. Yet, it is not without criticism. The *Five Views* book has some great advice: "Many intelligent Christians get stuck here and draw sharp lines between their ('entirely correct') system and the ('entirely false') opposing system(s) and defend their own view at all costs."⁴¹ I agree that "it would be a serious mistake to assume that there is only one correct position among the five such that the others are wholly in error."⁴² A better approach would be to see what could be gleaned from each of the views. Whatever is consistent with Scripture should stay, whatever is not should be rejected.

Jay Adams closes his second book (*The Christian Counselor's Manual*) with this important thought: "...no one can become an adequate counselor by reading books."⁴³ Like preaching, there is much art and technique involved. And this is developed through experience. Becoming a good counselor is clearly something that takes practice, and there is always room for improvement. In preparing for this paper I have read many of the excellent books listed in the bibliography. These books, in particular *The Christian Counselor's Manual* by Adams, contain many helpful charts and pragmatic tips for helping people in counseling sessions. As the need arises I plan to return to these books to see what can be gleaned as I encounter people who have need for counseling. I would also like to investigate the other four views as time allows to see what (if anything) can be gleaned from them. May God bless my attempts to improve in this area for the sake of those who would seek my help.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 1.

⁴¹ *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views*, 308.

⁴² Ibid., 292.

⁴³ *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, 429.

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