

What Is Biblical Counseling, Anyway?

by Ed Welch

Biblical counseling is "for resolving of their doubts, and for help against their sins, and for direction in duty, and for increase of knowledge and all saving grace."

- Richard Baxter (1656)¹

When do you think this counseling fad will end?"

The seminary professor meant no personal offense by the question, but I have to admit I took it personally. I initially considered attacking *his* expertise, but Hebrew is not exactly a passing fad. So, being somewhat speechless, there was not much to do but consider his question. It was, after all, a good one. The professor was aware both of the popularity of counseling and the increasing criticisms of it. He was familiar with the emerging evidence that most "formal" counseling is no more helpful than talking with a friend. He had read respected articles which suggest that counseling and psychotherapy have promoted our tendency to blame others and embrace our victimhood. And he knew people who seemed to get worse after counseling. Given these observations, perhaps counseling *is* a fad whose days are numbered.

Counseling in general, however, is not the same as *biblical* counseling. What

applies to one does not necessarily apply to the other. The task with my theologian friend was to articulate the heart of biblical counseling in order to distinguish it from secular and other Christian therapies that share the name *counseling*.

To do this I could have given him some back issues of this journal, but I thought it would be worthwhile to use his question as a catalyst for revisiting the question, "What is biblical counseling?"

The readers of *The Journal of Biblical Counseling (JBC)* tend to be most interested in application; that is, how to *do* biblical counseling. Yet every once in a while a description or extended definition can be useful as we consider the distinguishing features of our field. Undoubtedly, if all *JBC* readers submitted their views, we would differ on some specifics, but there would also be some fundamental commonalities. What follows, in the briefest of forms, is one way to answer the question.

My present perspective is that biblical counseling is a hybrid of discipleship and biblical friendship, neither of which can be mistaken for a passing fad. Instead, biblical counseling is as old as human history and will flourish throughout the generations to come. It began with God speaking to His people; it was further established by kings, prophets, priests, and apostles as they applied God's words to particular situations. It has been practiced by wise pastors, friends, brothers, sisters, fathers, and mothers throughout history, and it continues

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¹Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, reprinted (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1860), p. 346.

today with men and women who, having studied what God says in His Word, both receive biblical counsel and offer it to others.

The Content of Biblical Counseling

Biblical counseling is built on a simple, enduring principle: *the triune God has spoken to us through the Scripture*. Furthermore, through biblical history, doctrine, law codes, poetry, and songs, *God has revealed to us everything we NEED to know about Him, about ourselves, and about the world around us* (2 Peter 1:3).

This fundamental promise—"God has spoken"—has been the long-standing confession of the church. Every church attendee would agree. Brows might furrow, however, at the phrase "everything we need." We sense that the Bible talks about many important things, but there are complex life situations where we would like more specific direction, extra information, or novel counseling techniques. Yet the reality is that we have access to everything that Jesus had: "Everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15). God has not held anything back from us. What Jesus knew from His Father, we too can know.

Scripture speaks with great breadth. Given the degree to which God has revealed Himself and ourselves, we can assume that the Bible's counsel speaks with great breadth, addressing the gamut of problems in living. It is certainly able to speak to the common problems we all encounter, such as relationship conflicts, financial pressures, our responses to physical health or illness, parenting questions, and loneliness. But it also speaks to distinctly modern problems such as depression, anxiety, mania, schizophrenia and attention deficit disorder, just to name a few.

Of course, the Bible doesn't speak to each of these problems as would an encyclopedia. It doesn't offer techniques for change that look like they came out of a cookbook. But through prayerful meditation on Scripture and a willingness to receive theological guidance from each other, we find that the biblical teaching on creation, the fall, and redemption provide specific, useful insight into all the issues of life.

Scripture speaks with great depth. The breadth is certainly good news. It is a great comfort to know that there is nothing we encounter on which God's Word is silent. Yet there is more: Scripture speaks with profound depth. In other words, biblical counseling does not simply consist of a counselor finding a few pithy verses in a concordance and telling you to read them each day and pray about your problem (the counsel-

ing equivalent to "take two aspirin and call me in the morning"). Instead it is a partnership between people who are seeking God's wisdom—a wisdom that goes to the heart of the matter. It is a wisdom that can penetrate a person's inmost being (Hebrews 4:12).

For example, consider a husband and wife who can't seem to get out of the cycle of quarreling. Biblical counseling's breadth makes it alert to family influences on one's style of relating, culturally-derived differences in perceptions of marital roles, medical problems that leave emotions somewhat unpredictable or comprehension difficult, and lack of knowledge in how to communicate and resolve conflicts. Insight or skill development in these areas might be helpful—and God's Word is adept at offering such things.

But biblical counseling does not end here. While other forms of help can stay only on the surface, the Bible's counsel is prepared to help this couple get to the heart of conflicts. Its depth is apparent in James 4:1-4. This text indicates that conflicts and quarrels emerge when we love our own desires more than we love God. Even though this couple is probably not aware of it, their constant quarreling is revealing that they are *for* themselves, *against* the other person, and *against* God. In other words, the problem is deeper than an interpersonal quarrel. It is not just people declaring war on each other. Even more, both parties are warring against the God of love, justice, and mercy.

Scripture indicates that all of life is lived before the face of God. Have you found that Scripture assumes that all of life is somehow related to God? In a very real sense, all of life's problems are "religious" or "spiritual," from the way we worship in church, to the way we think about chemical imbalances, to the way we take out the trash. All of life is lived before the face of God.

Biblical counseling attempts to grapple with this central feature of our lives. It is complete only when it establishes this relationship and points us to Him. At some point, the Bible's counsel poses the ultimate questions of life:

Who am I before God?

How am I to live before God?

Who is the triune God?

With regard to marital strife, the answers to these questions lead to the deepest cure.

Who are these people who are incessantly quarreling? They were created by God, they were intended to live for God, and they are presently making a stand against Him.

How does God call them to live? God, by His own

example and through the power of His Spirit, teaches them to love. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3).

Who is this God who speaks? He is the Holy Lord who is opposed to sin. He is the Faithful One who will not forsake His people when His people are faithless. He is the Righteous One who demands purity in His people. He is the Loving Father who rejoices when people confess their sin and turn to Him. He is the Forgiving One who delights in covering sin. He is the sacrificial lamb in whose death we are given the purity of Jesus. He is the Spirit who empowers us to follow Him.

Readied by answers to these questions, those in marital conflicts can confess their prideful stand against God and acknowledge Him as the loving Lord and king. Furthermore, they can do this without fear of condemnation, knowing that the penalty for their rebellion has been paid by Jesus' death. Then they can follow the example of Jesus through faith and obedience, always asking for the Spirit's power to love others.

Marital conflict is only one of hundreds of biblical counseling illustrations that could be recounted. In the annals of those who heard the Bible's counsel you would find the addict freed, the hurting comforted, the despondent encouraged, and so forth. Through them all you would witness wise principles and life-changing words of encouragement.

Even more, *you would hear about the Speaker of these words*, the triune God—the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In Him the addict would come to know the Pardoner and Liberator who breaks the power of sin. The hurt would know the tender care of the Good Shepherd. The despondent would be encouraged by Jesus, who has left us with His Spirit and is coming again. The heart of biblical counseling is not a series of principles or "put-offs and put-ons"; the heart is our triune God who has revealed Himself fully in Jesus.

The Process of Biblical Counseling

The content of biblical counseling consists of the proclamation of Jesus Himself, the gospel, and the implications for living that proceed from the gospel. These are what most of us would say are biblical counseling's distinguishing marks. But these are not all there is to it. There is also a *process* of biblical counseling. In short, the process consists of people, people being taught by the Holy Spirit. God has determined that He will typically minister His life-rearranging message to us *through people*.

In counseling, this points to the relationship

between the counselor and counselee. Although this relationship tends to get less attention than does biblical counseling's content, it is certainly an essential and distinguishing feature. Of course, all counseling systems talk about the relationship between counselee and counselor, and they typically emphasize it more than has biblical counseling. But the counseling relationship in biblical counseling is as unique among the world's systems as is its content.

All God's people are counselors. Today, those who guide others in the process of applying God's Word to life are often called "counselors." They are also called pastors, doctors, parents, and friends, but we are increasingly accustomed to hearing the title counselor. This designation, however, is misleading. It suggests a professional, an expert. It suggests that a person has specific training and special techniques that will alleviate suffering and offer hope. The "counselee," on the other hand, is the passive, needy recipient.

"Biblical counselor," however, is not primarily a professional occupation. Pastors and professional biblical counselors, those who have special training and experience in applying the Scripture to life, may have been uniquely equipped by God to help with certain problems. However, they are not the ones who will meet the majority of the church's counseling needs. Instead, we call a friend on the phone and ask for prayer, we hear a sermon that changes us, we grow in faith when our small group comes over to help with a house project, we talk to a godly older person about parenting while we have a cup of coffee.

The issue is not professional certification. The issue is knowing and growing in Jesus as Lord and redeemer. That is the special qualification for biblical counselors. Our tools are not esoteric techniques and skills; instead, biblical counseling truths are strictly public domain, available to all. As a result, it should break out whenever God's people meet together. You can find it at its best in normal, godly conversation among people who know that they need God's Spirit and the ministry of others if they are going to face another day.

Counselors need other people. Rather than a professional model, Scripture suggests a different perspective, something that looks much more reciprocal. "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17). Biblical counseling is a mutual sharpening where we edify and are edified by each other. The designated counselor needs counseling as much as the beneficiary of that counseling. We all need sharpening. In fact, in light of the ever-present



threat of the world, our own sin, and the Devil, we need each other's sharpening counsel *every day* (Hebrews 3:13).

Counselors love other people. This mutual sharpening is, of course, rooted in love. It can be no other way. Biblical counselors are rooted in the love of Jesus, they are growing in love for Jesus, and they delight in loving others in the name of Jesus. "And this is His command: to believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as He commanded us" (1 John 3:23). Wherever counseling takes place—in an office, a restaurant, or a home—it bears this distinguishing mark. All things are spoken and done in love. Biblical counseling sounds like it is being done

within a family rather than the sterile environment of a doctor's office. Such familial, loving relationships, when paired with the content of Scripture, should make it easily distinguished from what the world refers to as counseling.

Now back to my professor friend. I will initiate a conversation with him about these contours of biblical counseling, but I think I will first tell him about the times he has counseled me, whether it was by asking about and praying for my family or by helping me to understand a particular biblical teaching. After all, he has been an agent of change in my own life. He is a biblical counselor—and such counsel will never go out of style.

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