

Is Biblical Counseling Biblical?

“Against biblical counseling? I thought you were **for** biblical counseling!” We can hear the chorus of cries from even our closest allies. And, our adversaries will relish the opportunity to use this book as proof positive that we are extremists. We expect this book to be misquoted and misrepresented before it is even read. We ask you to hear us out. Our concerns cannot be stated briefly.

For years we have recommended against psychotherapies and their underlying psychologies. We have severely criticized those Christians who have psychologized the faith. There is a serious competition between whether believers will use psychological or biblical information or a combination of the two. Psychotherapy is merely professionalized conversation that contains the opinions of men and the very wisdom of men against which the Bible warns. While we make no recommendation about medical conditions, we do say that there is no reason to resort to the opinions of men (psychotherapy) when God has given us His Word, His Son, and His Holy Spirit.

In this book we will be critiquing those who propose biblical counseling as an alternative to psychological counseling. In doing this we realize that many of our closest friends in the faith may become upset. They may believe that psychology has so overtaken the church that to turn our criticism to biblical counseling is to abandon the seemingly insurmountable task of continuing to confront the psychologizers in the church.

Be assured, we will continue to criticize the psychologizers. However, we believe this book is a necessary critique of the growing biblical counseling movement in America, which is spreading to other parts of the world alongside psychological counseling. We begin by asking a very simple question: “Is biblical counseling biblical?” Though the question is simple, the answer needs explanation. This book is an attempt to answer that question. It is an analysis of biblical counseling—what it is, rather than what it pretends or even hopes to be.

Confidence Lost

Too many believers (both pastors and lay people) have lost confidence in their ability to minister—especially in the area of personal care. Why are so many Christians afraid to minister to believers who are experiencing problems? Why do pastors feel inadequate to the task of personal pastoring? Why do they send their people to psychologically trained therapists?

Numerous Christians have been indoctrinated and intimidated by the world of psychotherapy. Psychological experts have convinced them that while pastors and fellow believers may be able to minister spiritually, they are not prepared to minister psychologically.

A number of years ago I (Martin) spoke to a group of students at a large seminary. After hearing my concerns about psychological counseling and my appeal to them to minister according to the Word of God rather than according to the wisdom of men, a number of men said: "I am completing my seminary program soon, but I wouldn't know how to counsel a person with problems."

What had their extensive schooling included, about the Bible and practical theology? Had they not learned how to exegete Scripture? To preach and teach the Word? Had they not been schooled in the Gospel of Jesus Christ for salvation and sanctification? Did they not know that the Lord lives in every believer to make the Word effective in that life? Surely they had learned these basics of pastoring. Yet, those men were truly uncertain. Indeed, they had bought the lie that one must know psychological models and counseling methods in order to minister to people experiencing problems. They had evidently become intimidated by pastoral counseling classes that help pastors learn how to minister to minor problems, how to identify "real" problems, and then how to refer people to professional psychological therapists.

After wrestling with this question of ministering to people with problems, one pastor came to the conclusion that pastors do not have to be intimidated by psychological counseling theories and therapies. He contended that pastors were already competent to counsel. If they knew the Bible they had more to offer people than psychologists did. That person is Dr. Jay Adams, who is regarded as the father of the biblical counseling movement.

For years Adams has begun his talks on counseling with a story to illustrate that pastors already have what they need to counsel. They have studied the Word of God and they can trust the Lord to give the wisdom and understanding that come with knowing that Word. Adams has sought to make pastors aware of the fact that they are already empowered by the Lord. And, he urges them to practice biblical theology instead of psychology.

Intimidation?

Since that time, a growing number of Christians have become convinced that there is a biblical way to minister to problems of living. They have become persuaded that the alternative to psychological counseling is biblical counseling. Leaders in the biblical counseling movement have sought to relieve that intimidation from psychology through providing training in biblical counseling. But, now we have a new intimidation brought on by the biblical counseling movement itself.

Intimidation? How can pastors be intimidated by the idea of biblical counseling? Believers, including pastors, are intimidated by biblical counseling models and methods as well as by psychological models and methods. They can feel just as inadequate if they have not had some specialized training in biblical counseling. In fact, the biblical counseling movement has actually disempowered pastors by making them think they need specialized "training." Thus, what was intended to be a help has become a hindrance.

First, Christians thought they couldn't counsel because they were not trained in psychology. Now many think they can't counsel because they are not trained specifically in biblical counseling. Others have said they feel much more secure counseling fellow believers after having taken a class and having a manual to use. Thus increasing numbers of pastors and lay people are seeking training in biblical counseling, when what they really need is knowledge of the Word, understanding the Word, personal obedience to the Word, and confidence to discard all psychotherapy and to use the whole armor of God.

Recently a pastor called and asked about pursuing a degree in biblical counseling. We asked him why he thought he needed this additional training. He said he did not feel equipped to counsel, that he had not been trained in the methods of counseling. He hoped that such training would give him the ability to minister to his flock.

We asked him if he had any concordances, Bible dictionaries, commentaries, and other Bible helps. He answered, "Yes." We asked him if he believed that pastors who had fewer books on their shelves 100 to 300 years ago were equipped to minister to their flocks, or if God had left them without adequate resources.

We asked this pastor if he knew the Word of God, if he knew how to preach the Gospel and teach the Word concerning the on-going walk of the believer in sanctification. He answered, "Yes." We asked him if those pastors 100 to 300 years ago who were educated in the Word of God, preached the Gospel, and taught the Word concerning the on-going walk of the believer in sanctification had adequate resources to minister. He got the point and said, "Of course."

To every pastor or lay person who says, "I need to be trained to counsel biblically," we ask those same questions. Can you preach, teach, or confront an individual with the Gospel message of salvation and sanctification? Can you be used by the Holy Spirit to convert a sinner or reprove one who is saved? Can you come alongside to encourage righteousness or repentance? Can you give the comfort of the Lord whereby you yourself have been comforted? Can you lead another Christian to the same well of living water from which you drink? Are you willing to think and speak biblically and converse about practical theological matters when needful situations arise?

If your answer is "yes," you don't need biblical counseling programs. If your answer is "no," you still don't need biblical counseling programs. Instead, you need opportunities to learn the Word of God, ponder it, and apply it to your own life. That is practical theology: studying the Bible, thinking about it, and doing it. As believers practice theology in their daily lives they become prepared to minister to one another in the body of Christ. No counseling program can ever prepare a person to minister the counsel of the Lord. Only the Lord can prepare a person—through His Word and then through opportunities (life's circumstances) to practice that Word through loving obedience to Him.

This recent craze to learn certain Bible verses related to certain issues of life is paralytically intimidating to those who desire to minister the Gospel. When pastors and lay people who are spiritually mature and biblically knowledgeable are intimidated into being specially trained in biblical counseling, it is time to call a halt to this recent fad.

The Lord has been faithful to equip His servants to minister the Gospel for salvation and sanctification of believers throughout the centuries. He did all of that without the help of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Alfred Adler and other secular psychological theorists. And, He did all of that without the models and methodologies of the twentieth century biblical counseling movement.

"Wait a minute," you say. "Didn't biblical counseling always exist?"

The Lord's counsel has been around since the creation of Adam. And the Word of God includes much biblical counsel. However, biblical counseling as a system is a twentieth-century phenomenon, which was created as a biblical alternative or replacement to psychological counseling.

In the effort to replace the wisdom of men (psychology) with the wisdom of the Word, those of us who attempted to formulate a model and methodology of biblical counseling inadvertently developed biblical counseling programs that more or less emulate or parallel psychological counseling. The attempt to develop biblical counseling confounded and compounded the problem of personal ministry by being a mirror reflection of psychological counseling with special training and techniques. No wonder the integrationists say psychological and biblical counselors do the same thing.

One of the leaders of a well-known biblical counseling training program described the levels of training to us. He said that even Dr. Jay Adams would have to begin at level one, just like anyone else. It is doubtful that Adams is intimidated by such remarks, but this is an example of what causes even the best-trained and committed pastors and lay persons to seek out biblical counseling programs.

We have fostered a similar mentality ourselves by recommending that people obtain such specialized training. But, we hereby reject anything we have previously written that would cause pastors and mature believers to think they are inadequately prepared to minister to fellow believers who are experiencing problems of living.

Any person who can be used by the Holy Spirit to lead another to salvation or along the way of sanctification is competent to be used by God to give wise counsel without needing specialized biblical counseling training.

Not Recommending Biblical Counseling?

We have taken a huge departure in this book. Some of what we say may come as a shock to many. But, we do not take this step lightly. It is with repentance from our own involvement in the biblical counseling movement that we write this book.

You may wonder how we ever came to this point in our concerns about counseling. Perhaps a little background may help. Since the early sixties, in addition to reading and studying the Bible, we have been extensively reading and studying psychology. We noticed that more and more sermons were becoming tinged with elements of psychology and that more and more Christians were becoming trained and licensed to practice psychological counseling.

Beginning in the late sixties people began coming to us with problems of living. What could we do but minister what we knew from the Word of God? Although times of meeting were arranged and problems were confronted, they were times of prayer, Bible study, and fellowship. All of us sought what Scripture said, for we were all seekers at the foot of the cross. No one was considered a “counselor” and no one was considered a “counselee.” All of us were simply Christians coming together to meet a challenge. As believers we all drank from the same fountain, both the ones who sought help for specific problems and those who came alongside.

While we had to learn to avoid using the psychological notions we knew, we did not attempt to develop any specific theories about personal ministry at that time. We simply came alongside to encourage, remind, pray, exhort, and share God’s faithfulness. Thus, while temporarily sharing burdens, each one of us bore our own burden, our own response to God, and our own responsibility before God (Galatians 6:1-5). After all, God indwells each one through the Holy Spirit and thereby enables each one to obey His Word. When we think back to those days, we realize that pastors trusted us to minister in this way because of our past training in psychology. Yet, all the while, we tried to discard that training in favor of ministering the Word of God and trusting Him to do the work.

As we found the faithfulness of God in personal ministry, we thought “biblical counseling” must be the alternative to psychological counseling. We began to teach others what we had learned. We wanted to expose the emptiness of the world’s ways so that Christians would gain confidence in the Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit in ministering to one another. We finally decided to write a book to reveal the darkness of psychological counseling ideologies in the light of Scripture. We expressed many of our concerns in *The Psychological Way/The Spiritual Way* and tried to encourage readers to turn back to the Lord and His Word and to find confidence there rather than in the wisdom of men.¹

By then we had begun a “counseling ministry” in a church. We were training others as “biblical counselors” so that they, too, could minister to “counselees.” This began what we now see as a compromise with the world. We thought we had to develop some kind of system of “biblical counseling” as an alternative to the ever-growing popularity of “Christian psychology.” After all, there were all those hurting people out there in need of help. We desired to be as biblical as possible, but also as unstructured as possible—to leave God room to work.

By that time we were quite familiar with psychological research as well as with how the Bible could be used in personal ministry. We could identify psychological elements in various individuals’ attempts to integrate psychology and Christianity. However, we did not realize that we, too, were copying elements from the world, such as designating the one who comes alongside as a “counselor” and the person in need as the “counselee.” We were encouraging “biblical counseling” as a specific ministry in the church with certain individuals designated as “biblical counselors.”

No longer were we simply fellow believers seeking God’s will. We were falling into the trappings of psychological counseling. We were falling into the trap of appointments, one right after another, just as in psychological counseling. We were elevating this as a special “ministry” in the church with training classes and requirements for becoming “counselors.” We were inadvertently developing a type of caste system—with those “trained” to counsel near the top. We were doing all of these things, even though we would say at the end of every seminar on biblical counseling: “The ideal church is one with all the biblical counseling anyone would want, but no one would need it.” Our reason for saying that was this: where the Word of God is faithfully preached and the hearers apply that Word to their lives in love and obedience, there is no need for biblical counseling. But, since there is no ideal church, there will continue to be problems of living requiring personal care. At that time we were convinced that the personal care should not be psychology or “Christian psychology,” but, rather, “biblical counseling.”

Through the years we have continued to write books warning about the dangers and antibiblical aspects of various psychoheresies. In each book we attempted to direct readers back to the sufficiency of Christ, the Word of God, and the work of the Holy Spirit. We were initially accused of being negative. So, to counteract that, we encouraged biblical counseling as a replacement for psychological counseling. However, we are now opposed to the biblical counseling movement for the reasons presented in this book. **We are so concerned that we are no longer recommending any biblical counseling centers or biblical counseling training programs.**

Counselee, Counselor, Conversation

Pastoral care has been part of the church for centuries. Pastoral counseling and biblical counseling as conducted today, however, are not the same as personal ministry in the early church. Most pastoral counseling classes in seminaries embrace and teach various psychological theories and therapies. The term *counseling* carries with it the format of a “counselee,” a “counselor,” and professionalized conversation centered on a problem within the framework of whatever doctrines are held by the counselor, be they biblical or psychological or both.

Furthermore there are certain inescapable similarities between psychological and biblical counseling. Counseling causes people to focus on themselves and their problems. Counseling often gives the “counselee” center stage in his own drama with a ready listener. Counseling presupposes that the counselor is some kind of expert.

Perhaps it's easier to talk about oneself and one's problems with a caring person who is right there in flesh and blood than to talk to the Lord. Perhaps it's easier to be comforted by a counselor after fifty minutes of talking about oneself than to study Scripture to see what God has to say. Perhaps it's easier to trust the wisdom of a counselor, who must be some kind of “expert,” than to trust God to give wisdom. Perhaps it's easier to cast the problem at the feet of a counselor than at the feet of Jesus

While a word spoken at the right time and godly counsel can be extremely helpful, does that justify “counseling” over a period of weeks, months and even years? While a word of encouragement may be extremely edifying during a personal trial and words of consolation may bring comfort to the grieving heart, the inner work of the Lord is what brings life and holiness along with encouragement and comfort. There is a very strong possibility, even in the best biblical counseling, that the so-called counselee will focus on self. There is also the possibility that the counselor will stand in the place of God and will attempt to do the work of the Holy Spirit.

Problem-Centered Counseling

One of the biggest problems in biblical counseling is that it often focuses on problems rather than on spiritual sanctification. In attempting to minister to the same issues treated by psychological counseling, biblical counselors too often focus on the personal or relational problem rather than on the individual's relationship to the Lord and the process of sanctification. Biblical counselors too often attempt to solve problems at the surface level, or they attempt to discover something about the inner man through various methods of exploration. The possible dangers are superficiality, legalism, and formulas on the one hand, or attempting to analyze the soul on the other.

Instead of focusing on problems or attempting to expose the heart, a pastor and his congregation should be involved in active sanctification, growing in the fruit of the Spirit, learning to walk according to the Spirit, with Jesus being the primary focus and becoming like Him the goal. While this is surely part of the ministry of individuals who call themselves biblical counselors, too much biblical counseling has become something in addition to sound doctrine and practice. The Bible reveals spiritual issues that underlie behavior. Thus it is entirely unnecessary and unscriptural to use psychological means to gain insight into the inner man or to expose the heart and motivation.

Problem-centered counseling rests on the notion that once problems of living are solved spiritual growth will occur. However, the Bible does not teach that. Instead, the emphasis is on spiritual growth, learning to walk according to the Spirit and growing in the fruit of the Spirit. Rather than problems being the barrier to spiritual growth, spiritual stagnation is the barrier to solving problems. Problem-focused counseling can even serve to postpone spiritual growth. Rather than looking at their problems, believers would do well to look to the Lord and increase their knowledge of Him. “But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Believers need to learn to come to Christ in the time of need, because only there will they find His will and His way in the situation. Every trial is meant to conform us to the image of Christ. Thus every trial must be brought to Him, not to manipulate or to get one’s own way, but to find out what God is doing and wants to do. Yes, there are pastors, teachers, and fellow believers who give wise counsel during times of need. However, one does not have to counsel or be counseled to find wisdom.

Wise counsel should be a natural part of the daily life of the church with believers encouraging, admonishing, exhorting, confronting one another and praying for each other. **All this can be done without a system, center, or ministry of “biblical counseling.”** Though the justifiers of biblical counseling would contend otherwise, all of this was done prior to the beginning of the biblical counseling movement only twenty-five years ago, at least in churches that were preaching and teaching the whole counsel of God.

A 20th Century Phenomenon

If biblical counseling is mandated as an essential addition to Christianity, one must raise this question: **What did the church do without the biblical counseling movement for over nineteen centuries?** While institutions have failed, we trust Jesus’ promise that He would build His church and that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).

Biblical counseling, with its specialized training and similarities to psychological counseling, is not needed. The Gospel is God’s way of salvation and sanctification. God gave ministries to the church, as outlined in His Word, and the very life of Christ indwells the believer. These great and marvelous spiritual realities are God’s ways in contrast to man’s ways.

Believers do not need biblical counseling texts, workbooks, in-take forms, programs, or specialized training. While some materials may be helpful on occasion and while they may organize aspects of doctrine, they can only be seen as supplementary at best. However, such materials can become a crutch that cripples genuine communication. Moreover, they can limit personal ministry to such a superficial level as to strengthen the flesh and postpone the inner work of the Lord.

If counselors dispense individual Bible verses as pills for particular problems and believers do not feed on the whole Word of God, there will be no growth, only a series of quick fixes at best. The Word of God is both God-breathed and living. It is not a list of isolated verses to be removed from their context and arranged according to problems of living. What Christians need is the whole counsel of God in daily feeding, in thinking through, and in walking according to the Spirit.

If a Christian merely feeds on isolated tidbits applicable to specific problems, he will simply go from problem to problem, isolated verse to isolated verse, and may remain an infant in his faith. In commenting on Proverbs 30:5 and 6 (“Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him. Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar.”), Charles Bridges says:

So wisely has God linked together the several parts of his system, that we can receive no portion soundly, except in connection with the whole. The accuracy of any view is more than suspicious, that serves to put a forced construction upon Scripture, to dislocate its connection, or to throw important truths into the shade.²

Unfortunately, many, who call themselves Christians, want something like what the world offers. They want an alternative that is like psychological counseling, but which would still be within the confines of Scripture. Just as the Israelites desired a king because the nations around them had kings, so Christians desire counseling. They think they need something like the remedy offered by the world. Thus we are extending the range of our concern about the psychologizing of the church to include much of what goes on in biblical counseling.

One of our books, *How to Counsel from Scripture*, encourages biblical counseling. While it is always difficult to repent of anything publicly, it is doubly difficult to repent about something already successfully in print. However, we are repenting of any statements in our past writings that are in conflict with this current book. After reading this book, you will see what it is we oppose and, thus, from what we are repenting.

For years we counseled, trained counselors, and wrote articles and books about both psychological and biblical counseling. We are experienced at biblical counseling, having counseled the gamut of problems from “alcoholism to anorexia” and from “anxiety to xenophobia.” Our current response to our past writings and practices will become apparent as you read through the chapters of this book.

Two Major Criticisms

There are two major criticisms in this book. One is directed at biblical counseling practices; the other is directed at the rationale behind biblical counseling. Throughout the world there are those who call themselves “biblical counselors” and refer to what they do as “biblical counseling.” There are also numerous organizations that claim to offer biblical counseling. And, there are some that train biblical counselors. **We will be naming a few individuals and organizations as examples, but the problems extend to the other persons and groups involved in biblical counseling.** The more any practice called biblical counseling resembles psychological counseling, the more we oppose it. However, be assured that, although we are taking a stand against biblical counseling as a distinct entity, we continue to encourage and support biblical counsel as part of, rather than apart from, the biblically ordained ministries of the church.

We are against biblical counseling, but we are for biblical counsel given through the ministries of the church as outlined in Ephesians 4:11-16, Romans 12 and elsewhere in Scripture. Biblical counsel is one part of the biblically ordained ministries of the church. Biblical counseling, apart from the biblically ordained ministries of the church, is too narrow a calling with too high a visibility. Neither the calling nor the visibility is biblically justifiable.

While this may sound like no more than a problem of semantics, the errors of biblical counseling are very serious, and they are so intricately woven into the very fabric of biblical counseling that the cloth itself must be discarded. As we unravel this cloth and reveal the worldly threads that must be discarded, we will find that the true threads from God's Word fit best in their original place to be useful for the ministry to the saints and edification of believers.

We know that many people will not be able to accept all we say. Our message is a multiple one. We continue to be totally opposed to psychological counseling, but we are now speaking out against biblical counseling. However, we are, at the same time, confirming the biblically ordained ministries of the church. Even if one cannot accept the entire message of this book, we hope and pray that the errors of biblical counseling will be acknowledged and repented of, especially by those who call themselves "biblical counselors."

Notes

1. Martin and Deidre Bobgan. *The Psychological Way/The Spiritual Way*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1979.
2. Charles Bridges. *Exposition of the Book of Proverbs*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1846, 1968, p. 593.

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