The Biblical Care of Souls in the Body of Christ

We have been on a journey since writing our first book, *The Psychological Way/The Spiritual Way*.

We have written a number of books along the way, but as we were writing *Against Biblical Counseling: For the Bible*, we found it necessary to tell Moody Press that we could no longer support our book *How to Counsel from Scripture* because we had departed from the biblical counseling movement and were voicing our concerns. While *How to Counsel from Scripture* contains much material we still uphold, some of it supported the biblical counseling movement from which we had departed. Moody Press kindly put the book out of print. This current book, *Competent to Minister: The Biblical Care of Souls*, is a natural result of having departed from the biblical counseling movement and includes many of the biblical reasons why we did. Here we encourage the church to return to its biblical roots.

The Reformation was a turning point in church history. Two great teachings of the Reformation are *Sola Scriptura* and the priesthood of all believers. *Sola Scriptura* means by Scripture alone. The *priesthood of all believers* means that believers, guided by the Word and empowered by the Holy Spirit, are equipped and called to minister to one another in the Body of Christ. This book rests heavily on those two doctrines. It is a call forward to confidence in the efficacy of Scriptures and the knowledge that:

> All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works (2 Timothy 3:16,17).

This book is also a call to believers to use the Word empowered by the Spirit to minister to one another. **You who are Christians are competent to minister by the grace of God; you can care for souls.**

The care of souls depends upon all of the “alones” of the Reformation:

- **Sola Scriptura** by Scripture alone
- **Sola Gratia** by grace alone
- **Solo Christo** by Christ alone
- **Sola Fide** by faith alone
- **Soli Deo Gloria** glory to God alone

These principles apply to all aspects of salvation, including justification, sanctification, and glorification. Believers are to continue their walk with the Lord on the same basis as their initial salvation by Scripture alone, by grace alone, by Christ alone, by faith alone, and to the glory of God alone. All these apply within the individual life of the believer and within the Body of Christ, in which we have the fellowship and the priesthood of all believers.

Mutual care within the Body of Christ, performed by a priesthood of all believers also depends upon these same principles. We want to emphasize this at the very beginning because of the tenacious tendency to use other means for living the Christian life and solving problems of living. Psychological counseling violates these biblical principles. Theories and methodologies underlying psychotherapy have come from the wisdom of men and cannot be integrated with Scripture without doing violence to the Word of God. Psychological counseling depends on the works of the flesh rather than the grace of God, even when practiced by Christians. Thereby the flesh is strengthened and spiritual growth may be retarded or stagnated.
Psychological counseling is not by Christ alone, even if the counselor is a Christian, because the models and methods are unsanctified human means and depend upon unsanctified human effort. Psychological counseling depends on a faith other than faith in the Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. Psychological counseling depends on faith in the counselor and the counseling process. Finally, psychological counseling cannot be *Soli Deo Gloria*, because the psychology together with the counselor and the so-called counselee get the credit. Even when some credit is given to God because of a “counselor” or “counselee” being a Christian, the glory is not glory to God alone.

Much of what is called “biblical counseling” fails to support these solid biblical principles as well. About 25 years ago Dr. Jay Adams wrote a book titled *Competent to Counsel*. His book marked the beginning of what is now known as the biblical counseling movement. While Adams was attempting to encourage pastors to minister biblically, rather than psychologically, he solidified the idea of counseling as a process for Christians. Now, after years of involvement in the biblical counseling movement, we realize it was a mistake for him to call it “counseling” in the first place. What should go on between believers in the mutual care of souls would better be called “ministry,” “personal ministry,” “care of souls”—anything but “counseling.” Why? If the process of mutual care and personal ministry of the Word of God had been called “ministry” rather than “counseling,” many of the unbiblical aspects of the biblical counseling movement (such as charging fees) may never have been incorporated by those who wanted to minister biblically. Can you imagine anyone charging for ministry? Would any Christian even think of charging a fellow believer for extending mutual care in the Body of Christ? But, call it “counseling” with “counselors” and “counselees,” and no one questions the required fee, because that’s exactly what happens in the world. Professional “counselors” charge fees for “counseling” their “counselees.”

The words *counseling* and *counselor* have become powerful symbols that place too much emphasis on the process (methodology) and the person conducting the process (“expert”). Even when Christians use the words *counsel* (verb form), *counselor*, *counselee*, and *counseling*, the terms are bound to meanings, expectations, and procedures of psychotherapy. Because of the psychological baggage of such words, Christians should try to avoid using them in reference to biblical ministry, even when referring to personal ministry involving those seeking wisdom and those attempting to help through listening and speaking. Possible changes are:

- **to counsel**: to minister, evangelize, teach, pastor, disciple, come alongside, advise, give godly wisdom, encourage, admonish, exhort, edify, equip, nurture, assist another to find help in God’s Word
- **counselor**: minister, evangelist, teacher, pastor, fellow believer, elder, sister, brother, biblical care giver
- **counselee**: fellow believer, sister, brother, (or if not a believer, possible convert), person, individual, one seeking help
- **counseling**: ministering, pastoring, evangelizing, teaching, discipling, encouraging, exhorting, admonishing, advising, edifying, equipping, nurturing, coming alongside, giving wisdom, helping another find help in God’s Word

Just attempting to use different words may help believers move away from the ways of the world and towardsbiblically caring for souls. We would continue using the noun *counsel* in reference to godly counsel, because it is a biblical term. We encourage biblical counsel to be given through and under the ministries of the church and through mutual care in the Body of Christ. While the word *counsellor* is in Scripture, the word has been too corrupted by the psychological way to be used in reference to humans. We do continue, however, to use the word *Counselor* in reference to God.

Regardless of the original intent of Adams’ book, the biblical counseling movement has evolved from its beginnings in *Competent to Counsel* to a reflection of the very psychological counseling movement it opposed. We were part of the biblical counseling movement for many years, but finally concluded that an emphasis on biblical counseling is not the solution. In a prior book we itemized our concerns with the biblical counseling movement and enumerated...
the errors of its ways. In this book we give a glimpse of the care of souls and an encouragement that believers ARE competent to minister to one another in the Body of Christ.

For nearly 30 years we have been questioning the use of psychological counseling (psychotherapy and its underlying psychologies) and urging Christians to return to the Bible. We used both biblical and research documentation to reveal psychology’s intrinsic conflict with Scripture and its inherent weaknesses regarding usefulness. Nevertheless, multitudes of Christians view psychology with respect and awe. Even though secular psychological researchers are demonstrating less and less confidence in psychological counseling, more and more Christians are pursuing it either as therapists themselves or as clients seeking treatment. What is often referred to as “Christian psychology” or “Christian counseling” ends up being secular psychology adapted for the Christian market. Christians who are not directly involved in counseling look to what psychologists say about how to live, how to relate to others, and how to meet the challenges of life.

The Care of Souls from Pentecost Onward

In view of how many Christians have placed their faith in psychology, we often ask, “What did the church do for almost 2000 years without the psychological counseling movement?” The very first Christians ministered to those suffering from problems of living. They preached the Gospel, taught new believers, and cared for their souls. Rather than basing their ministry on psychological theories, they based their ministry on what Jesus had taught them and also on the Scriptures available at that time. Rather than seeking a psychological methodology, they relied on revealed truth. They believed Jesus’ words when He said, “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8: 31,32). They counted on Christ working in and through them as He had clearly explained in His analogy of the vine and the branches (John 15). They relied on the work of the Holy Spirit. They understood the centrality of the spiritual life, of Christ in them. When they drifted into following the ways of men, the Apostle Paul wrote to them and urged them not to follow the wisdom of men, but to rely on the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:2-5; Colossians 2:6-10).

The spiritual ministry of caring for one another in the Body of Christ later became known as the “cure of souls” or the “care of souls.” Such care depended upon the Word of God to understand the condition of man and minister relief for troubled minds. The “cure of souls” ministered to all mental, emotional, and spiritual disturbances. It involved prayer and often consisted of giving godly wisdom, instruction, and encouragement (including practical helps which often speak louder than words) to assist believers with their beliefs, emotions, thoughts, values, attitudes, relationships, and behavior. In his book A History of the Cure of Souls, John T. McNeill describes it as “the sustaining and curative treatment of persons in those matters that reach beyond the requirements of the animal life.” Prior to the twentieth century, churches provided such personal ministry to those in need, and some still do.

We have chosen throughout this book to refer to this ministry as the care of souls for two reasons. First, care of souls is a clearer translation of cura animarum, which was the original designation in the early church. McNeill says:

The primary sense of cura is “care,” and it is readily applied either to the tasks involved in the care of a person or thing, or to the mental experience of carefulness or solicitude concerning its object.

Second, although the phrase “cure of souls” has been the preferred translation in the past, because of its emphasis on curing sinful souls, Scripture deals with the full range of Christian experience. We prefer the designation care of souls, which is all-encompassing from salvation through sanctification and from ministry to the suffering soul to ministry to one another in the normal Christian life. Caring for souls involves both the “cure” from sin and death and the ongoing mutual care in the Body of Christ throughout the process of sanctification.

The care of souls is one of the oldest ministries of the church. Christ paid the price for sin through His own substitutionary death. Then He rose again to give new life to every believer. His death canceled the debt of sin. That is the initial cure for sin and hell-bound death. Christ’s
life in every believer provides the ongoing care, not only for each individual believer but for the entire Body of Christ. Jesus Christ ministers directly to each believer and also indirectly through believers to one another. This is the outworking of the care of souls who “are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22).

The first description of the church with members ministering to one another is found in Acts:

Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved (Acts 2:41-47).

They learned and “continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine.” They lived according to the truth they were learning. Their fellowship was based on sound doctrine and their new relationship in Christ, and its hallmark was love. Their love was not limited to words and feelings but was lived out in practical ways through such sharing of possessions and goods that no one was lacking. They continued “daily with one accord in the temple,” broke bread together, praised God together and prayed together. The mutual care was active from the inception of the church. Jesus’ words to His disciples to love one another as He loved them established the essence of the care of souls. Jesus loved to the point of giving His life, and He calls believers to give themselves to each other. The care of souls is not limited to words, as important as they are in teaching doctrine; the care of souls includes practical acts of love, which are expressions of true faith and doctrine (Galatians 5:6).

James, the leader of the first Christian church in Jerusalem, wrote, “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed” (James 5:16). Biblical doctrines of confession, repentance, forgiveness, exhortation, encouragement, and comfort were taught and practiced in the early church. Doctrines of the believer’s position in Christ and Christ in the believer and of the active work of the Holy Spirit were taught and followed. These spiritual ways of living the normal Christian life were also the believer’s means to mental, emotional, and spiritual healing through the centuries. The cure and care of souls was the application of Scripture to the life of the believer through the ministries given to the church through the Holy Spirit.

God nurtures people who have been harmed and forgives those who have sinned and repented. The care of souls begins with a person’s relationship with God through salvation by grace through faith, continues the process of sanctification, and results in changed attitudes, thoughts, emotions, motives, and behavior. However, the world systems of “science falsely so-called” (1 Timothy 6:20) have undermined the care of souls ministry and intimidated Christians by deceiving them into believing they are not qualified or able to help one another in the serious issues of life. Even pastors, who have been ordained to care for the sheep, have been deceived into thinking that one must attain the requirements, degrees, and licenses to practice psychology before they are qualified to counsel, even though the care of souls is the exclusive ministry of the church, according to the calling of God and the gift of grace.

Our concern continues to be this: that the cure of minds (the psychological way) has displaced the care of souls (the spiritual way). However, additional concerns have arisen. Various attempts to move the church back to a biblical means of caring for souls created a biblical counseling movement that in numerous ways reflects the psychological way. Many who call themselves “biblical counselors” are outright integrationists, who attempt to use both the Bible and psychological counseling theories and techniques. Still others who call themselves “biblical counselors” may be using more Bible than psychology, but they have allowed certain psychological theories and techniques to color their view of Scripture. Others who call themselves “biblical counselors” may eschew psychology, but nevertheless copy some of the
practices of psychological counseling, such as charging a fee and establishing community counseling centers separated from churches (or in the church, but separated from other ministries in the church). Some “biblical counselors” even believe in and use psychological tests and thereby label Christians according to the bankrupt and useless wisdom of men. Others who call themselves “biblical counselors” rely on, promote, and even require specialized training for even the most mature believers before they can minister godly counsel.

In this volume we hope to encourage Christians to minister to one another in the Body of Christ on the basis of what the Bible teaches about personal ministry and the efficacy of mutual care. Today the two greatest obstacles to personal ministry are psychological counseling (and all it pretends to be) and the intimidation that comes from the biblical counseling movement, which has set up its own training programs and certificates. The primary reason churches do not minister personally to the soul struggling with problems of living is because of fear—fear that individuals who are not formally trained cannot handle people’s problems and fear that criticism might be directed at the church for even trying. This is an example of Proverbs 29:25, “The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the L ORD shall be safe.” Since that fear is so universal, we have been compelled to speak out against psychological counseling, along with its underlying theories about who man is and how he changes. More recently we have expressed our concern about the biblical counseling movement, which has set up its own formal training and certificates.

We contend that the ordinary believer, who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit and has found the Lord and His Word sufficient in his life, is equipped to minister to a fellow believer who is struggling with personal issues of the soul. The high calling of the care of souls is also a common calling for all believers. As we emphatically state in Against Biblical Counseling: For the Bible:

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.6

The care of souls is inherent in Christ’s command to love one another (John 15:12).

Fundamental Issues in Caring for Souls

This book is for Christians who want to know what the Bible says about ministering the care of souls to one another. God desires to transform believers into the image of Christ. Lack of biblical change is an indication of spiritual stagnation, and being transformed into the image of Christ is a sign of spiritual vitality. Life’s experiences can motivate people to change in different directions. The care of souls ministry relies on the Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. Such inner, spiritual change involves the work of God and the response of the individual.

The care of souls ministry cannot rely on human effort or ingenuity, because it is really the work of God. God’s love enables a believer to live in relationship to Him, to overcome sin and its consequences, and to be transformed into the image of Christ. God’s love engenders trust, which leads to obedience to His Word. His love includes both mercy and truth, both grace and justice. For the care of souls to be truly biblical, love must be its hallmark, its means, and its direction because “God is love.”

The care of souls cannot be reduced to formulas. Those who minister by formulas will fail, or they will succeed for reasons other than the formulas used. Any formulized care of souls will fall short of what true mutual care in the Body of Christ is—a creative, spiritual process involving a person who needs help and another person who will come alongside as God’s instrument of mercy and truth.

What we present in this book is just one small glimpse of what is totally available in Scripture. We cannot say how to minister in each specific situation. The Bible covers every generality and each person is unique. Therefore, the primary work is that of the Holy Spirit within the individual, according to God’s Word, which is living, effectual and applicable to every individual, every situation, and every struggle. The Scriptures and the Holy Spirit provide an infinite number of possible applications of truth to be ministered in love to each
person in each situation. In the care of souls God’s Word is ministered by the Holy Spirit through one who has been transformed by the Cross of Christ to one who by God’s grace receives and obeys.

As we discuss the care of souls, you may discover that you are already ministering spiritual care to fellow believers, or you may find that the person who listens to you and prays for you is practicing the care of souls, without having identified it as such. On the other hand, you may notice how easily people direct those struggling with life’s problems to professional counseling or to biblical counseling “experts,” when what they need is the care of souls operating within their own church.

We pray that as you read this book, you will be encouraged to seek the springs of Living Water for yourself and for others. The Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit provide power for caring for souls as people seek to overcome problems of living. The care of souls needs to be restored in churches immediately before more Christians are sent out to an alien world for psychological help or to fee-for-service “biblical counselors.” If they are not already doing so, pastors and others who have this call of God on their hearts can and should begin personally caring for souls—not next month or next year, but immediately. The ministry of mutual care, given to edify the church and to glorify God, is a calling of God on the life of every believer.

As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen (1 Peter 4:10-11).

Unless we as believers minister to one another according to the Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, we are doing a great injustice to fellow believers at least and a great damage at worst. Struggles of the soul and problems of living must be dealt with as spiritual problems with spiritual solutions.

Notes:

4. Ibid., p. vii.