

## What Distinguishes Biblical Counseling from other Methods?

by David Powlison

What are the differences between biblical counseling and various other approaches to counseling that are popular in the church?

Let's take the second half of our question first. What counseling models are popular in the church? It's immediately obvious that churches provide homes to countless approaches to the problems in living; more approaches than grains of sand on the seashore, to re-appropriate a biblical metaphor. How will you solve your problems and change what's wrong? Should you explore how you feel about your family upbringing? Do what God commands no matter how you feel? Follow your feelings? Act on faith, not feelings? Get in touch with your feelings? Get your needs met? Should you take Prozac? Take a vacation? Take control of your life and responsibility for your choices? Should you cast out the demon that inserted itself into the operating system of your soul? Insert positive affirmations into the flow of your negative self-talk? Should you claim your new identity in Christ? Take a season of prayer and fasting? Take a stand on the promises? Get an accountability partner? Get into an exercise program and cut your caffeine intake to get those endorphins flowing? Get a life? Just suck it up and quit being so self-centered?

Or come at the question from a different angle. Who can help you? Do you need ten sessions with a psychotherapist? A retreat with a spiritual director? A visit to a medical doctor? An encounter with an exorcist? To hire a personal trainer? To join a weekly support group? To sit under solid preaching and have a better quiet time? To find a few good friends?

All this is further complicated because all of the activities and persons just named appear in any number of variations, permutations, and combinations. And, as if all that weren't complicated enough, the counseling field is restless, fluid, volatile. Fads, fashions, and factions come and go. Theories and therapies shift, mutate, combine, innovate, and reinvent themselves. There's always the next best-seller and the newest sure-fire cure that transcends the limitations of all that came before.

Then there's the first half of our question. Just what is biblical counseling, anyway? When they put on church clothes, most of the answers and persons just described claim to be about the business of biblical or Christian counseling. After all, no one naming the name of Christ would ever claim to be doing unbiblical counseling?!

So how do we reasonably answer such a vast question?! How do we develop the true wisdom that can offer biblical counseling worthy of the name?

### ***Developing Discernment***

Rather than attempting to catalogue all the players, I think we are best served by developing basic skills in discernment. The following four questions enable you to fairly and accurately test any of the mixed multitude of counseling approaches. If you know how to engage any model discerningly, you will be able to size up the strengths and weaknesses of those particular approaches to counseling that become popular in your church circles.

**First**, how is God portrayed? Is the God revealed in Scripture central to how we are to understand and address the sins and sufferings of the human condition? Is He central in how to understand the good, the potentialities, and the blessings which counseling aims to bring to pass? In particular, what role and significance are given to Jesus Christ? Defective counseling models never get Christ right. They either completely ignore, wildly distort, or subtly misrepresent Him *with whom we have to do*<sup>1</sup>. But the Searcher of all hearts, the one before whom every knee must bow, the only Savior of sinners and Refuge for

sufferers insists on getting His due. Biblical wisdom considers all human phenomena with this God in view.

**Second**, how is human nature interpreted? What view of human motivation defines the essential, *Why do you do what you do??* In particular, are human beings understood as actively, incessantly God-relational? No counseling model whose genes contain secular DNA ever gets motivation theory straight. Is it clear that every heart (at every moment, in every circumstance) either serves lies and lusts of the flesh or loves the Lord God? Is it clear how every action, reaction, thought, and emotion reveals these God-relational motives? If you don't get the heart right, you won't get the goals of counseling right; you can't understand what a human being ought to become; you can't rightly define success. Defective counseling models always get the heart wrong. They theorize and assert counterfeit interpretations of what makes us tick. For example, unmet needs, conflicting instincts, conditioned drives, genetic wiring, biochemistry, failure of will-power, bad habits, corrigible ignorance? none of these get at what's really going on. Biblical wisdom considers all human phenomena while keeping in view, Who are you now loving, trusting, serving, and fearing.

**Third**, how are circumstances weighed? Is the stage on which we live ? what surrounds us, comes at us, influences us? given decisive and deterministic final say? Or is it rightly seen as God-arranged context, not cause? Furthermore, is any one strand of our total circumstance singled out for particular emphasis, as if it offers a unique explanatory key? Past, present, or future? Social experience, physical body, or demonic agent? Defective counseling models never get the world we live in right. Most approaches give a deterministic weight to one piece of our overall life situation. For example, You have an eating disorder because your needs for love and self-esteem were not met by your parents; is equivalent to; You are in slavery to food obsessions because a demon of addiction has gained a stronghold?; is equivalent to; You suffer from an eating disorder because you have a genetically-wired obsessive-compulsive disorder. It may be true that your parents were unloving; Satan does prowl; and you might have been born with certain tendencies, not others. But none of these is decisive. Biblical wisdom considers every part of our circumstances significant, but it gives final cause to the heart.

**Fourth**, how are the goals and activities of counseling conceived? Is it the cure of souls, the restoration of sinful humanity to the image of Christ by the grace of Christ? Is it comforting the disturbed and disturbing the comfortable? Is it the transformation of our sins and the consolation of our sorrows? Is counseling essentially pastoral? Defective counseling models always get counseling wrong. The counselor acts as archeologist who explores your past and your interior to give insight; as mechanic who alters what's not working satisfactorily in your cognitions or behaviors; as coach who formulates a game plan for successful living and cheers you on; as friend who accepts you just as you are; as parent who meets your psychological need for love; as philosopher who offers a believable interpretation of life without any God; as doctor who prescribes medicine to make you feel better; and so forth. Biblical wisdom considers counseling to be a ministry of the saving power of the grace and truth of Jesus Christ. Valid insights, alterations, encouragements, and so on arise within that relationship.

Four simple questions to build discernment? so much discernment needed! But I think you will find that as you learn to think well within these truths, fine things will happen. You will grow wiser as a biblical counselor worthy of the name: a wise shepherd of sheep and curer of souls. You will also find that you grow more insightful into whatever worldly wisdoms cry out for your ear, your vote, your loyalty, your ministry, your people.

Found at <http://www.christiancounseling.com/en/articles/printview.asp?51>

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<sup>i</sup> Heb 4:13 And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. NASU