



Authority and Application: A Pastoral Introduction to Biblical Counseling

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by Reagan Marsh

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-Introduction-

My hand shot up as the professor scrawled names and dates on the chalkboard that chilly Mississippi afternoon. After speaking at length of Watson's (1878-1958) behaviorism, Skinner's (1904-90) operant conditioning, Freud's (1856-1939) personality theory, and Rogers' (1902-87) autonomous nondirectionalism, he began applying these concepts to the care of souls in the congregation. But my notes only increased my confusion; a nagging question kept surfacing as he addressed man's inner conflicts, compulsions, drives, and behaviors. "Sir, this is fascinating material, and probably very useful to pastors. But may I ask: where does the Bible fit into this approach of helping people?" Ours was a Christian college, the class that day largely seated young ministers like me, and our instructor was also on staff at a prominent local church.

He immediately replied, "Young man, your Bible is for the pulpit and doctrine; but nobody ever helped anyone with-

anything of consequence from the Bible. You must master psychology if you want to do your church any good. If you master it, it will shape your preaching and doctrine so that you benefit people, not burden them with useless theological arguments.” Chastened, I picked up my pencil again.

Ours is a therapeutic age. Christian Smith names moralistic therapeutic deism as the default American religious worldview – the concept that God basically just wants people to be good and to feel okay, and he helps us out when we get down.² This mindset ascended through the proliferation of Christian self-help gurus and books regurgitating some variation of Harry Emerson Fosdick’s (1878-1969) dictum that preaching merely provided therapy on a group level.³ The most popular church growth experts advise clergymen to be intentional in employing psychological categories and strategies in their talks (no more preaching!) while adopting recovery language. The need of the modern hour, the argument goes, is not theology, but therapy; neither creed nor exegesis, but rehabilitation and treatment. If the Bible is employed, it must be only sparingly referenced, minimally explained, tolerantly applied, and quickly moved past.

The reason, per the explanation, is that man has wounded himself and needs help in the healing process. In his perpetual

lust for autonomy, he wishes to feel himself whole, emotionally and relationally healthy – but on his own terms. His struggle to set things right (or even get them right in the first place) reflects his true ruin and brokenness by sin, according to Scripture; but this inconvenient perspective he sets aside. He exudes confidence that by carefully observing his world and properly applying what he learns, healing will happen, guilt will dissipate, and all that has shattered will mend. His assurance lies in his powers of observation and ability to assimilate his findings into a coherent answer to life’s problems; and this process he terms counseling or therapy. He coordinates with other practitioners to classify, codify, and cogitate on insights and discoveries, and to canonize conclusions which then control his counsel. His light is his own learning, and whatever light he may offer others is drawn strictly from “the light of nature,”⁴ or general revelation.

-I-

A Different Authority

With significant contrast, biblical counseling defines itself as helping people find God’s answers to life’s problems in God’s word. The conversation shifts dramatically here because the Bible constitutes a fundamentally different basis of authority: what God has said, not what man has seen. While

secularists rely on their reason, knowledge, and observations, and integrationists attempt to blend solutions drawn from wells of both human and divine wisdom, the Bible declares that God has hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge in Christ alone (Colossians 2:3), that he makes them known solely by his Spirit's grace (1 Corinthians 2:10), and that he has preserved them forever in his written word (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

God is the sole authority in his world over his sinful, finite creatures, and his word exposes the inadequacy and insufficiency of human wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:20-25). Man, the Bible explains, is not wounded, but dead in his sins. He is not basically good, but wickedly depraved (Isaiah 1:6; Jeremiah 17:9); not objectively evaluating, but actively rebelling against God (Romans 3:23); not pliable before compelling contrasting evidence, but stiff-necked and hardhearted (Romans 8:5-8). Small wonder, then, when "the way of the transgressor is hard" (Proverbs 13:15). Authority in God's world is not rooted in autonomous analysis or groupthink conclusions, but in God's revealed will as recorded in his inspired word. Therefore biblical counseling begins and ends here: "what saith the Scriptures?" (Romans 4:3) "To the law and the testimony! If they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isaiah 8:20).

One couple I counseled previously saw a secular marriage therapist who had been divorced three times. It was unsurprising when the husband mentioned many sessions essentially berating and blaming the wife. A second family sought help from a psychologist twenty years younger than them. He had never married, and spent most of their time speculating and giving abstractions about relational theory, rather than concretely and coherently addressing their issues. Yet a third husband and wife's Christian integrationist counselor attempted to address their conflicts strictly from the categories of their families of origin, and she mocked or dismissed their questions about the sinfulness of communication and behavior patterns they had developed. Anecdotal accounts may easily be multiplied or contested, but they beg the question: on what authority will the counsel be based? Which canon will be consulted? Who has the final say? How are problems addressed, change assisted, and accountability achieved?

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A Sufficient Authority

The consequence of a different authority is that it possesses a different character. Scripture declares that man's wisdom pales compared to God's wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:20). While men may learn much of the natural world by common grace, God

alone can teach us of spiritual matters; and he does so by his word. In other words, the Bible alone is able to explain rightly how man finds himself in the awful mess of this world, how to understand the mess he has made of his own soul, how those parallel realities continually infect his every situation and relationship, and what God has done to rectify the whole situation. Theologians refer to this as the “sufficiency” of Scripture, meaning that God has given to us “everything needful for life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3; 2 Timothy 3:16-17) in giving his Son and his word.⁵ As William Perkins (1558-1602) wrote, “The body of Scripture is a doctrine sufficient to live well.”⁶

Affirming Scripture’s authority and sufficiency in no way denies common grace; it is still real grace, and may provide helpful insights when employed as an organizing tool.⁷ The Lord’s mercy is over all his works (Psalm 145:9). For example, the DSM’s⁸ observations of common behavioral patterns or responses to varied stressors and situations can prove useful as biblical counselors categorize specific presenting issues or determine points requiring medical attention, particularly when one is unfamiliar or inexperienced with a particular presenting issue. Utilizing practicalities constitutes neither pragmatism nor syncretism; they represent applying godly-wisdom to the care of souls. Biblical counselors neither dabble as doctors nor treat as therapists; they engage people’s prob-

lems at the heart and life level with the written word of God, and trust his wise providence in the physician's care for the body.

This being said, counseling students should note and consider carefully that psychology, psychiatry, and the DSM frequently apply "disorder" nomenclature to what Scripture flatly calls sin. Biblical counselors are not anti-medicine or anti-medical, but we object when the diagnosis is preferred to the Decalogue. For example, a man comes to you carrying the psychologist's conclusion of kleptomania. The biblical counselor notes that he has practiced envy, deceit, theft, belittling and using others, despising God's image and their labor, and idolatrous self-worship to the point that he is now both habituated to and known for his ongoing disregard for the first, third, fifth, eighth, ninth, and tenth commandments.⁹ Applying God's word to the diagnosis shifts the conversation entirely; now the discussion has moved to the nature of handling besetting sins, repentance, restitution, and living to please God rather than self (2 Corinthians 5:9). Suddenly, the Bible speaks very plainly to this "disorder" – and multiple others.

The question must be asked at this point: did God only allow “real” answers for life’s problems to arise when Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) and William James (1842-1910) began to formalize psychology as a discipline in the late nineteenth century? If so, what does that say about his providential care for the wellbeing of men’s souls? Did he really leave his people without wisdom, hope, or help until the last 130 years? Are modern problems actually so much more significant than the ancient concerns?

The logical answer to these questions is a resounding no! God cares for his people, and has always done so tangibly and practically by giving them his word. It is ultimately Scripture which shines light into darkness and makes wise men from the simple (Psalm 119:130). It is God’s word which brings healing for the soul’s troubles (Psalm 107:20) and peace to conflicted situations. God’s word evaluates the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Jeremiah 17:9; Hebrews 4:12), diagnoses sinful patterns (Psalm 119:9), and offers true hope for godly change (Isaiah 55:10-11). Since creation, God has never left his people unaided or dependent upon their own strength and wisdom. His Spirit applies his word, which is sufficient for everything life in his world requires. As John Murray (1898-1975) emphasized, “Our dependence upon Scripture is total.”¹⁰ Biblical counselors remember this core conviction at all times.

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A Theological Authority

As we realize that God's word has always guided God's people under all his providences, we discover that every problem faced in counseling is ultimately theological in nature. It may be a point of theodicy or discernment, of dying to self or preferring others, of obeying God's moral law or leading the processes of forgiveness and reconciliation – but it is theological. Every situation anyone faces is one brought about by God's sovereignly ordained plan for their lives (Psalm 139:16; Hebrews 12:1). "There is nothing new under the sun," Solomon wrote (Ecclesiastes 1:9), and the biblical counselor operates from that foundational reality.

In incurable medical conditions, we call the sufferer to rest in God's sovereignty and trust his wise providence (Ephesians 1:11). In the loss of a child, we remind of God's nearness (Psalm 38:12) and the Spirit's merciful comfort (John 14:26-27; 2 Corinthians 1:3-6). In struggles of habitual sin, we at times confront them with the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14) and disciple them in the Christian's work of daily battle against indwelling sin (Romans 7; Ephesians 4:22-24). In marital conflict, we instruct them regarding the roles in and nature of Christian

marriage(Ephesians 5:22-33), help them exercise biblical love as husband and wife (Ephesians 5:25-26; 1 Corinthians 13) and encourage them concerning the powerful grace of a humble Christian witness therein (1 Corinthians 7:10-16; 1 Peter 3:1-7).

The struggles, sorrows, and sins marking life in a fallen world make plain that the business of life is ultimately a right dealing with God. Our responses reflect our heart's state before God and reveal our operative view of God. We now see that common, everyday concerns are actually profoundly theological issues. Biblical counseling is therefore theology at work for the soul's good: biblically faithful, exegetically sound, expositionally plain, personally accountable, ecclesiastically rooted, and at every point practically and pointedly applied, with the goal that the Christian may be "mature and complete, lacking nothing" (James 1:4). No aspect of faithful Scriptural counsel should constitute bare or abstract theologizing; rather, it ought to embody vigorous yet tender explanation and application of the truth of God's word to specific situations in specific ways.

In his classic book *The Reformed Pastor*, Richard Baxter (1615-1691) spoke repeatedly of the pastor's duty of bringing the Scriptures to bear on the person sitting in front of him. He was addressing an elder's practice of regular home visitation and catechesis,

but his point directly applies here: “We shall have the best opportunity to impress the truth upon their hearts, when we can speak to each individual’s particular necessity [=his troubles/problems], and say to the sinner, “Thou art the man,” and plainly mention his particular case; and set home the truth with familiar importunity.”¹¹ “I have found by experience, that some ignorant persons, who have been so long unprofitable hearers, have got more knowledge and remorse of conscience in half an hour’s close discourse, than they did from ten years [hearing] public preaching.”¹²

The biblical counselor gently encourages, corrects, instructs, and guides from God’s word, prayerfully striving “to present every man complete in Christ” (Colossians 1:28). Because the work of biblical counseling is inescapably theological, we labor to explain Bible texts so that the counselee understands, believes, and obeys them as “his very life” (Deuteronomy 32:47).

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Biblical Counseling or Therapy?

Broadly conceived, both biblical counseling and therapy have similar aims: both desire to help the struggler, offer encouragement where possible, and find workable solutions so he may move forward with his life. But considered at a closer-

level – particularly given the differing foundational authority recognized by each approach – significant disparity is naturally expected in their respective views and methods. Biblical counseling helps people find God’s answers to life’s problems in God’s word. As such, its theological and directive nature contrasts sharply with therapeutic approaches in at least four key ways.¹³

First, therapeutic approaches generally view themselves as an ongoing support mechanism to help the struggler cope, and thus condition him early to depend on the therapist and the treatment. Biblical counseling, while recognizing some overlap in the NT’s command to “bear one another’s burdens” (Galatians 6:1-2), notes that the NT also requires “restoration” of the one being supported in this manner (Galatians 6:1). The sense of that “restoration” is to mend or repair what has been broken by sin,¹⁴ and bring him back into the normal life of the Christian: loving Christ, serving others, walking in godliness, participating in the public and private means of grace, and being strengthened in the communion of the saints. The critical work of initial support must lead to the commanded work of strengthening ongoing sanctification. For the biblical counselor, it becomes a question of what answer is given: openended, indefinite support which ultimately attaches thecounselee to the counselor,¹⁵ or solution-oriented, restorative

work of helping the counselee to pursue and mature in Christ.

Second, therapies tend to favor the diagnosis over discipleship. While rarely articulated as such, diagnosis labels are typically *treated* as definitive, and often become fairly permanent descriptors. The thinking goes, one may adjust to and deal with the disorder, but probably will not get past it: “I have ADD, PTSD, or OCD.” The label makes its way into the schoolboy’s IEP, the employee’s HR file, the background check; it comes to be a defining category, the constant which colors all of life. Biblical counseling – while certainly recognizing the reality of organic issues, and promptly ensuring appropriate medical care – also realizes the pull of besetting sin, or the struggles in deeply-engrained, longstanding patterns of ungodliness which often get justified due to the diagnosis. It therefore points the Christian to how the NT characterizes his identity as a “new creation” in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17), while calling the counselee to grow in the Lord (2 Peter 3:18). Jesus characterized discipleship as denying oneself, taking up the cross daily, and following him (Matthew 16:24; Luke 9:23) and being taught or trained to observe increasingly all that he required (Matthew 28:19). It becomes an issue of whether Scripture’s counsel or the therapist’s label will be chief in the struggler’s life.

Third is the question of an anthropocentric or a theocentric emphasis. Interpersonal work is necessarily people-focused to some degree; the presenting problem causes pain or conflict which must be addressed, so needful questions are asked, emotional difficulties acknowledged, complications and circumstances accounted for, and data assessed in order to move toward a solution. While again we find cases of common ground here for therapy and biblical counseling, the weight of emphasis is our present consideration. Therapy tends to focus almost exclusively on the person as wounded, victimized, wronged, and thus validated in their feelings, and attempts to restore self-esteem, empowerment, and courage through various means. Talk therapy, CBT, and venting emotions in a safe space are often key components of such an approach.

Biblical counseling agrees that there are often instances of severe sin against individuals which have deeply influenced their lives and frequently resulted in great pain, hardship, and suffering. These symptoms and more may present in varying degrees across a spectrum of circumstances. But while the sufferer receives support and Christian sympathy, he is also encouraged to consider Christ himself (Hebrews 12:1-3). He is directed to Scripture's specific counsel in his circumstances (Psalm 119:24), and God's promises in the covenant of grace for his soul's peace with God. He is asked to view his trou-

bles in light of eternity (2 Corinthians 4:17-18) and reminded that he is in the hands of the Eternal One (Deuteronomy 33:27). He is pointed to the benefits of the gospel (Psalm 103) and encouraged in his duties to God and man (Matthew 22:36-40).¹⁶ No moralistic niceties will do here (Jeremiah 6:14, 8:11); he receives specific counsel on matters of self-control, repentance, mortification, obedience, renewing the mind, and faith as critical applications of the theological truth and practical direction God provides in the Bible precisely for his difficulties.

Fourth, therapists often position themselves as the professionals, as contrasted with the biblical counselor who is typically a normal pastor. At first, it seems a clear instance of *nolo contendere*;¹⁷ but upon further review, the divergence becomes clearer. One answers to the guild for maintaining professionalism, standardized care, and approved methodology; the other will account to the Judge of all the earth for his care of your soul (Hebrews 13:17; Romans 15:14). One gives careful consideration to proper billing codes for the insurance company and board-certified expertise in a discipline; the other is given to the Scriptures, their specific application to your life, the holistic ministry of the elders for your upbuilding, the regular means of grace for your blessing, the backing of church discipline for your good, and the labor of weeping,¹⁸ fasting, and intercessory prayer for your spiritual wellbeing (Acts 20:31). The one adorns

itself with all the gathered wisdom of common grace; the other submits itself finally to the wisdom of the Cross (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). It is the pastor, as Jay Adams stressed, who is God's professional¹⁹ – bringing God's perspective from God's word to bear on God's people in the ministry of biblical counseling.

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Who, Me?

While the academy often teaches prospective ministers simply to “refer and defer” to the professionals, the Scriptures are plain that the care of souls is entrusted to the church (Matthew 18:15-20; Galatians 6:1-2; Ephesians 4:12, Colossians 3:16, *et al.*)²⁰ Pastors and elders certainly lead the way, as those given gifts for the oversight of souls²¹ and the handling of the word (Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 3:2), both publicly and privately (Acts 20:20). Given that reality, it is both stunning and significant to note that Paul could write to a church he'd never visited that he was confident of their ability and competence to counsel²² one another (Romans 15:14)! In the context of Romans 15, the people he addresses are normal Christians simply striving for faithfulness to God. How could this be? Only because the word of God is powerful and effective, sufficient and authoritative, light amidst darkness and clarity in confusion. Any Christian who depends on the

Spirit, knows his Bible, and aims to live according to it will lack no wisdom for helping others from the word of God. Much like Peter and John, an ordinary, untrained man who has been with Jesus (Acts 4:13) can become a highly useful tool in God's hands.

The saints comprehend Christ together (Ephesians 3:18), are taught in Christ concerning godliness (Ephesians 4:21), and receive comfort from his Spirit for ministering that very comfort to others in their troubles (2 Corinthians 1:3-6). They depend on him as their very life (Colossians 3:4), kill sin and pursue obedience (Colossians 3:1-15), discipline themselves for godliness (1 Timothy 4:7-8), and teach and admonish²³ one another in all wisdom from God's word dwelling within them (Colossians 3:16). This is the fruit of the people of God meditating in the law of God day and night (Psalm 1:2), and it doing its work in them (Isaiah 55:10-11; 1 Thessalonians 2:13). This is the work of biblical counseling: normal Christians helping others find God's answers to life's problems in his word.

Who, me? Yes, you. Depending on his word, not your own wisdom (Proverbs 3:5), you are called to this work. It may involve pursuing some formalized training,²⁴ or the Lord may lead you to a point of simply aiming to know Scripture as best you can in order to provide biblical guidance. Whether at a coffee shop or in a counseling room, applying God's word to

people's lives is an assignment for every faithful Christian.

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Six Steps of Biblical Counseling

Though there is a spectrum of practice among biblical counselors, and certain points or sessions in the counseling process may require greater emphasis on particular areas than others, biblical counselors generally agree on six main steps of the work.²⁵

I. Investigation: Gather Data

Scripture explains that if one speaks to a matter before having all the facts in-hand, it is foolish and shameful (Proverbs 18:13). The point of biblical counseling is to glorify God in all things. Thus, as he is the God of truth (John 14:6; Revelation 19:11), we begin with listening and verifying our understanding. Doing this well requires taking good notes, preparing searching questions (Proverbs 21:5), not jumping to conclusions (Proverbs 18:13; Proverbs 14:15), conscientiously listening, clarifying, and discerning (Proverbs 20:5; James 1:19), and ensuring profitable communication with all involved parties whenever possible (Proverbs 18:17). Nonverbal communication such as bodylanguage should

be observed carefully, as well as how something is said in its tone, manner, volume, or emphasis (often referred to as “halo data”).²⁶

2. Interpretation: Grasp Problems

Here the biblical counselor purposes to discern the problems and patterns in a manner which is decent and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40), so he places the data under Scripture’s light for evaluation. Because renewal of the counselee’s mind by the word of God (Romans 12:2) is his aim, he works to understand the problems concretely, continues to clarify uncertainties, and categorizes the issues. A jumbled, tangled pile of information has just been dumped out on the desk, so to speak; the focus of this process is to organize it so that the relationships between issues are properly realized, and troubles may be addressed in a biblical, logical, and effective manner.

It is of critical importance that the spiritual condition of the counselee be discerned and evaluated accurately (1 Corinthians 3:1), that biblical categories and nomenclature be applied (Psalm 19:7-11), and that the issues be weighed and prioritized in accordance with Scripture’s view of them. The counselor will sort through presenting problems (frequently emotional in nature), performance problems (which tend to be factual), preconditioning problems (usually pat-

terns of behavior which have developed into habits, often life-dominating), and heartlevel problems (exposing what he craves), while making decisions as to where best to begin.

3. Involvement: Gain Traction

At this point, the counselee must buy-in and commit to the biblical process of intensive, focused discipleship and receiving specific help with sanctification, because the hard work of godly change and growth lies before them (1 Corinthians 10:31; 2 Cor 5:9). Without manipulation or salesmanship, the biblical counselor must demonstrate genuine concern and love for him (Colossians 3:14). Relationally-driven service expresses such love through prayer (Ephesians 1:15-17), pursuit (Matthew 18:15-16), sacrificially sharing your own life (1 Thessalonians 2:8; 1 John 3:16), bearing with his struggles, sorrows, and sins (Ephesians 4:1-3; Romans 14:1-4), and being quick to extend and encourage forgiveness (Colossians 3:12-13). In other words, building involvement is a matter of showing your commitment to him and his wellbeing, such that he recognizes and responds to God's care for him through yours.

4. Inspire: Give Hope

By now, many counselees express doubts: “I hear you saying that I can change, that I can glorify God here amidst all this mess; but I’m just not seeing it as possible.” His discouragement reveals itself. He needs to be given the hope which cannot disappoint (Romans 5:1-5), rooted in God’s past grace toward him (Romans 8:1-4; Ephesians 1:3-14), present grace in him (Joshua 4:1-7), and future grace for him (Romans 8:28; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18). Sustaining hope is not simply a future promise, though those promises are precious, life-giving, and should be brought into counseling frequently (2 Corinthians 4:16-18; 1 Peter 4:19). Nor is it strictly focused on the past work of Christ at the Cross, though he must be directed there over and over.

His hope often wavers because God’s grace goes unnoticed “right now.” The biblical counselor will point out evidences of God’s grace and have him write them down. He should rehearse gains made in his knowledge of God’s word, progress in obedience, growth in godliness, or improved relationships; these proofs of God’s help often become powerful motivators and encouragements. God not only will finally work out all things for the good of those he has called in his love, he actively does so now (Romans 8:28). Christ’s people are never abandoned or forsak-

en (Hebrews 13:6), and always have their God near (Psalm 34:18) as a refuge, strength, and present help in trouble (Psalm 46:1-2).

5. Instruct: God's Word

In this dimension of the process, biblical counseling distances itself from most integrationist and nearly all secularist approaches in that it is didactic and directive. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 speaks not only of the nature of all Scripture as God-breathed, but its usefulness for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. Consider the ministry of counseling the word, then: it directs and instructs. Scripture teaches us how God would have life to go, reproveth us when we wander from his word and will, corrects us by showing us plainly where we went astray, and trains us in godliness going forward. The counselor's demonstrable submission to the Bible's plain sense reaches a point of critical importance here; the counselee needs to see faithful handling of the word in order to reproduce it in his own life.

A clear distinction must be made in this stage between the counselor's suggestion and the Bible's command. Scripture is his need, not self-reliance or self-wisdom; it points him to his Saviour, and the Spirit who works holiness in him by that word.

He needs instruction in mortification, vivification, and sanctification; he needs to learn godly communication; he needs to hear both the imperatives of the law and the indicatives of the gospel; he needs the gracious accountability of loving application, and the safeguard of church discipline when necessary.

6. Implement: Give Homework

Philippians 2:12-13 aims at a holy fear working itself out in grateful obedience to God. Homework for schoolchildren helps them improve their grasp of concepts and implement them in various contexts; so too for counselees. Homework is the process where he will learn to exercise practical obedience, faith, and dependence on the Lord by his word and Spirit. Randy Patten, the first president of NANC/ACBC, often remarked to his classes, “People don’t change in fuzzy-land.” Thus, homework assignments must be concrete, practically oriented, and personally appropriate to the counselee to help bring about godly change and growth. The Bible is directive; so too is biblical counsel.

He will have behaviors to start or stop, actions to avoid, specific points and places of temptation to flee. Assigned Bible readings, Bible meditation, and Bible memorization should carry significant weight in his exercises. He may read and explain a

chapter in a book, download a lecture or sermon to take notes on, study and write an application response to a booklet or pamphlet, have a specific conversation with particular guidelines, or keep a bullet-point journal of his time, conversations, upsets, fears, or temptation and obedience. Church attendance and notes on how the sermon's teaching applies to his situation are vital aspects of weekly homework (Romans 10:17; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; Hebrews 10:24-25). Weekly homework forms much of the structure of the next counseling session. Assignments may vary as widely as the counselee's circumstances, but they should be always directive in nature, demonstrably Scripturally-rooted, and carefully reinforce the instruction, comfort, and counsel given from God's word.

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Additional Resources for Biblical Counselors

In the early days of the "biblical counseling movement," shelves of books written by Jay Adams dwarfed the combined output of other biblical counselors.²⁷ Such is no longer the case; the amount of biblical counseling literature has exploded over the last 40 years. That being said, Adams is an excellent place to begin. His *Competent to Counsel, A Theology of Christian Counseling, The Christian Counselor's Manual, and How to Help People Change* should be required reading for every Christian pastor, seminarian, elder, deacon, and teacher. Stuart Scott and

Heath Lambert edited *Counseling the Hard Cases*, a valuable work documenting specific work with “problem people.” It is worthy of regular consultation. John MacArthur’s *Counseling: How to Counsel Biblically* is the most biblically robust modern introductory volume, and *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling* by MacDonald, Kellemen, and Viars will also reward your time and attention.

Other contemporary writers whose faithful, practical work will prove instructive for you and helpful for your counsees include Wayne Mack, Elyse Fitzpatrick, David Powlison, Ed Welch, Jeremy Pierre, Paul Tripp, Ken Sande, Stuart Scott, Martha Peace, Jerry Bridges, Paul Tautges, Deepak Reju, and Jim Newheiser. Adams also wrote an insightful book entitled *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, and Self-Image*²⁸ and an outstanding series of short brochures entitled *What Do You Do When*²⁹ addressing the six most common problems people face with the Bible’s wisdom; they should be acquired, studied, and used.

But be warned: do not commit the serious error of consulting only modern books! We considered earlier that God has never left his people without his help by his word, and nobody knew that better than the Puritans.³⁰ Modern folk often consider them solely through the lens of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s (1804-64) scandalous caricature in *The Scarlet Letter*, or through misread-

ing – sometimes seemingly intentionally³¹ – Jonathan Edwards’s (1703-58) famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*; but there are more speeds on this bike. And very broadly stated, the Puritans might fall into two camps. First could be the “culture warriors” who emphasized the here and now, rebuked kings, and went to war, and are rightly critiqued at times for being too much at home in this world; representative examples of this first camp were men such as John Winthrop (1587/88-1649), Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), Samuel Rutherford (c. 1600-61), and John Witherspoon (1723-94). These men are often contrasted with the “pietists” who emphasized personal conversion and holiness, exemplified by John Flavel (1627-91), Thomas Goodwin (1600-80), William Perkins (1558-1602), Thomas Manton (1620-77), William Gurnall (1616-79), and Thomas Watson (1620-86). While positioning the “culture warriors” vs. the “pietists” is indeed an extremely broad understanding in terms of the *content* of their writing, in terms of their respective *emphases* it is not far offbase.

But their work is both valuable and accessible for biblical counselors to read, particularly those writings from the more “pietistic” camp. Robert Bolton (1572-1631) wrote *A Treatise on Comforting Afflicted Consciences*, an overview volume on biblical counseling (they termed it “casuistry” or dealing with “cases of conscience”).³² Timothy Rogers (1658-1728) penned *Trouble of Mind and the Disease of Melancholy*, a manual on walking

with Christ through depression. William Bates (1625-99) wrote on *Divine Meditation*. Classic works by Jeremiah Burroughs (1599-1646) include his *A Treatise of Earthly-Mindedness* and *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (along with its “part two,” *Contentment, Prosperity, and God’s Glory*, addressing how to live when life is terrific); Watson covered this subject as well in *The Art of Divine Contentment* and added *The Doctrine of Repentance*, a treatment of the grace of godly sorrow (2 Corinthians 7:8-10) with specific biblical tests of whether repentance is genuine or false. John Owen (1616-83) left a trilogy on killing sin biblically which is breathtakingly practical and comprehensive, yet shockingly contemporary.³³ Richard Sibbes (1577-1635) wrote *The Bruised Reed*, a lovely exposition of Isaiah 42:3. Samuel Rutherford’s (c. 1600-61) collected *Letters* are literally a compilation of his mail, but it has rich, godly, wise counsel for a variety of situations; so too with John Newton’s (1725-1807) letters in his 4-volume *Works*. Hercules Collins (c. 1646-1702) provided wise admonitions for understanding and living under God’s immutable will in his *Mountains of Brass, or The Decrees of God* and on preparing for eternity in his *Counsel for the Living Occasioned from the Dead*. Richard Baxter (1615-91) – unsound on justification, unmatched on pastoral theology – left his massive *Christian Directory*, providing biblical direction for almost any biblical counseling situation imaginable. Their work is valuable because, as they commonly affirmed, all the Bible’s doctrine was

for life, and no doctrine was understood rightly which was not applied practically to the understanding and practiced consistently in the life.³⁴

Hundreds of their other books and sermons, rich in counsel from God's word, remain for our benefit today. Consider a few selections drawn from the writing of one representative Puritan as an example of how widely their focus and effectiveness ranged. John Flavel (1627-91) lost his parents at an early age, buried three wives, lost his pulpit in the Great Ejection of 1662, and suffered heavy persecution for his ministry.³⁵ He wrote *A Token for Mourners* (on sorrow); *Preparation for Suffering* (on the Christian's attitude toward pain and loss); *The Balm of the Covenant Applied to the Bleeding Wounds of Afflicted Saints: 2 Samuel 23:5* (addressing the mercy of God for the pains of life); *A Practical Treatise on Fear: Its Varieties, Uses, Causes, Effects, and Remedies* (how the Christian should view and deal with fear); *The Touchstone of Sincerity, or The Signs of Grace and the Symptoms of Hypocrisy* (what it is to be saved); *The Mystery of Providence* (an exposition of Psalm 57:2, dealing with when life has not gone as hoped), and many more such works.³⁶ Most of these titles began as sermons preached to his congregation in a season where the counsel of God's word was critical for survival! To read the Puritans is to learn how to grasp, teach, apply, and counsel the Bible from men

who were masters of the Bible; and we have much to learn.³⁷

-Conclusion-

Biblical counseling is the work of helping people find God's answers to life's problems in God's word. It has specific convictions and practices drawn from the word of God to lead people to deal with the Lord on his own terms. And it devotes itself to this process of change because God's word lays it out for us as possible, practical, profitable – and purchased for us in Christ's death for sinners.

I will never have that moment in my professor's classroom back again, but by God's grace, I will help people from God's word – because it alone is sufficient for life and godliness through knowing Jesus Christ. The Bible does have the answers we need; and the One whose wisdom they are speaks therein.

Brethren, let us counsel the word.

References

- ¹An earlier version of this now-revised essay originally appeared in *Theolog* (Vol. 1, No. 1, 2021), the journal of The Log College and Seminary (formerly The North American Reformed Seminary), and appears here by permission.
- ²As cited by Albert Mohler in “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism—The New American Religion.” Posted online at <https://www.christianpost.com/news/moralistictherapeutic-deism-the-new-american-religion.html>, 4/18/05.
- ³“Preaching can be personal consultation on a group scale.” Fosdick, “Personal Counseling and Preaching,” in *Pastoral Psychology* 3.2 (1952), p. 12.
- ⁴Collins, William (d. 1702), ed. *The Baptist Catechism* (1693/95), Q&A 3.
- ⁵See Lambert, Mack, Bookman, and Powlison’s *Sufficiency: Historic Essays on the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, 2016), an excellent treatment of this subject.
- ⁶Perkins, William. *A Golden Chain, or, The Description of Theology*, in *The Works of William Perkins* (RHB, 2018), VI:11.
- ⁷For helpful discussion and evaluation, see David Powlison’s *Competent to Counsel? The History of a Conservative Protestant Biblical Counseling Movement* (New Growth, 2008), pp. 256-297.
- ⁸*The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* is the defining volume for the psychological and psychiatric industries. It carefully describes various presenting troubles, categorizes them helpfully, offers comparisons to similar maladies, notes proper coding for billing, and provides points for further research. Currently in its fifth edition, it is revised and updated regularly.
- ⁹James’s reflection (James 2:10) that sinning at one point makes a man guilty of breaking the entire law becomes explicitly clear in this example.
- ¹⁰Murray, John. “The Finality and Sufficiency of Scripture,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Banner of Truth, 1976), 1:20.
- ¹¹Baxter, Richard. *The Reformed Pastor* (Banner of Truth, 1974), p. 175.
- ¹²*Ibid*, 196.
- ¹³Please note: I paint this contrast with broad strokes to help point out the distinc-

tions more clearly, not at all to polarize, slander, or vilify. The differences were not so readily apparent to me until placed in this light through an extended series of conversations with several mentors over a decade ago. Nothing in this article is intended as a jab at godly Christian psychologists or psychiatrists; it is rather a plea to the godly to consider our theological heritage and the overwhelmingly robust fullness of the Bible to address the needs and cares of the soul.

¹⁴ Longnecker, Richard. *Word Biblical Commentary: Galatians* (Word, 1990), p. 273; and William Henriksen's *NT Commentary: Galatians and Ephesians* (Baker, 1968), p. 232. R. Schippers observes that *katartizo* has "not so much a qualitative meaning as a functional one...standard, hortatory use of *artios* and its derivatives arises from the fact that all imperatives are founded on the one indicative, i.e. the firm promise of salvation. The life of the saints is to correspond to the grace given, and this itself is the standard to which they are to aspire. It is on this ground that in Galatians 6:1 and 2 Corinthians 13:11 *katartizo* can mean to restore." *NIDNTT* (Zondervan, 1971), III:350. So too G. Delling, in *TDNT* (Eerdmans, 2006), I:476.

¹⁵ Calvin's famous principle comes to mind here as also constituting the task of the faithful biblical counselor: "A good pastor attaches the sheep to the Great Shepherd, not to himself." Quoted in Michael Horton, *Calvin on the Christian Life: Glorifying and Enjoying God Forever* (Crossway, 2014), pp. 193-195.

¹⁶ As *The Baptist Catechism* (Q&A 47) puts it, "The sum of the Ten Commandments is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."

¹⁷ Latin: "no contest."

¹⁸ Piper, John. *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry* (B&H, 2002), p. 2.

¹⁹ Adams, Jay. *What About Nouthetic Counseling?* (Baker, 1977), p. 45: "By making pastors fully aware of the property given to them in a clear deed from God, I have been trying to persuade pastors to so utilize and cultivate their own backyards that such encroachments [that is, from psychology/psychiatry] would become unnecessary and, indeed, highly embarrassing to those who make them. This approach I believe is succeeding. The self-styled 'professionals' (I say *self-styled* because I believe that the Bible teaches that God has called the pastor to be the professional counselor) have felt the impact of thousands of pastors who have themselves begun to take seriously the work to which God called them and for which they are well equipped by their knowledge of the Scriptures." Cf. his *Competent to Counsel* (Zondervan, 1970), pp. 42-43.

²⁰ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, pp. 41-42.

²¹ NT verbiage for the shepherds speaks to this plainly. See James Stizinger's excel-

lent essay “Pastoral Ministry in History,” esp. p. 30, in John MacArthur’s *Pastoral Ministry: How to Shepherd Biblically* (Nelson, 2005).

²² “Paul recognized that any Christian may engage in the work of nouthetic counseling, so long as he possesses the qualities of goodness and knowledge.” Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, p. 60. Note, however, his careful qualification (p. 268): “Every counselor will encounter difficult cases and special problems which go beyond his present competency and which therefore indicate the need for referral to some other Christian counselor.” The wise biblical counselor will know his limits and bring in additional help as needed.

²³ Gk. *nouthetountes*, “counsel.” This is the same word (*nouthetein*) Paul uses in Romans 15:14.

²⁴ Faithful and accessible training (both initial foundational training, as well as specializations) may also be found at <https://ibcd.org> and <https://biblicalcounseling.com>. The Biblical Counseling Coalition website is also highly useful: biblicalcounselingcoalition.org.

²⁵ Patten, Randy. “Key Elements in the Process of Counseling,” in *The NANC Fundamentals Conference Notebook* (Sherwood Baptist Church, 2011), pp. 1-8.

²⁶ Adams, Jay. *The Christian Counselor’s Manual* (Baker, 1975), pp. 257-259; Wayne Mack, “Taking Counselee Inventory: Gathering Data” in John MacArthur, ed. *Counseling: How to Counsel Biblically* (Nelson, 2005), pp. 144-145.

²⁷ Powlison, David. *Competent to Counsel? The History of a Conservative Protestant Biblical Counseling Movement* (New Growth, 2008), pp. 116-117. For post-Adamsian development and refinement, see Heath Lambert, *The Biblical Counseling Movement After Adams* (Crossway, 2011).

²⁸ Adams, Jay. *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, and Self-Image* (Harvest House, 1986). Chapel Library publishes chapters 6, 7, and 10 as free booklets or downloads in their “Reformation Today” series, available here: <https://www.chapellibrary.org/book/bvos/biblical-view-of-selfesteem-theadamsjay>.

²⁹ Adams, Jay. *What Do You Do When: Your Marriage Goes Sour, You Know That You’re Hooked, You Worry All the Time, Fear Overcomes You, You Become Depressed, Anger Gets the Upper Hand* (P&R, 1975).

³⁰ I generally favor J.I. Packer’s (1926-2020) dating of English Puritanism as 1550-1700 in *A Quest for Godliness* (Crossway, 1990), p. 11; but here I use the term very broadly to include American, Dutch, French, Scottish, and Swiss expressions of Post-Reformation, Reformed, confessional, Puritan-minded/influenced piety

across Protestant denominational lines from the 16th century into the early-to-mid 18th century. The best basic introductory volumes to the Puritans are Packer's *A Quest for Godliness*, Leland Ryken's *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as they Really Were* (Zondervan, 1990), Erroll Hulse's *Introduction to the Puritans* (Chapel Library, 1996), and John Spurr's *English Puritanism 1603-1689* (Red Globe, 1998).

³¹ William Haller and Perry Miller, here's looking at you.

³² "The effectiveness of his [William Perkins's] preaching was due in large part to his penchant for casuistry – the art of dealing with 'cases of conscience' through self-examination and scriptural application. Each of his sermons 'seemed all law and all gospel, all cordials and all corrosives, as the different necessities of the people apprehended it.'" Ballitch, Andrew, and J. Stephen Yuille, eds. *The Wholesome Doctrine of the Gospel: Faith and Love in the Writings of William Perkins* (RHB, 2020), p. xviii.

³³ Republished in one volume by Taylor and Kapic (Crossway, 2006) as *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, Owen's three short works include *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, *Of Temptation: The Nature and Power of It*, and *Indwelling Sin*.

³⁴ So Petrus van Mastricht (1630-1706), Jonathan Edwards's favorite theologian: "Christian theology is best defined as the doctrine of living for God through Christ...Christian theology unites theory with practice, and is 'a knowledge of truth that is according to godliness,' Titus 1:1...Indeed, the study of theology, to the extent that it is true theology, is not sufficient, unless...it is earnestly devoted to practical theology and to practice." (*Theoretical-Practical Theology* [RHB, 2019], I:66, 79, 95). William Ames (1576-1633) agreed: "Theology is the doctrine or teaching [*doctrina*] of living to God" (*The Marrow of Theology* [Baker, 1997], p. 77). So did William Perkins (*Works* [RHB, 2018], VI:11): "Theology is the science of living blessedly forever....The body of Scripture is a doctrine sufficient to live well." (*Works*, VI:11). For what this looked like, see Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*, pp. 841-977, and Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, pp. 107-24, 191-218, 233-76.

³⁵ Flavel's life and theology is comprehensively covered in Brian Cosby's engaging books *John Flavel: Puritan Life and Thought in Stuart England* (Lexington, 2013) and *Suffering & Sovereignty: John Flavel and the Puritans on Afflictive Providence* (RHB, 2012). See also J. Stephen Yuille's *The Inner Sanctum of Puritan Piety: John Flavel's Doctrine of Mystical Union with Christ* (RHB, 2007; informative, though perhaps emphasizing-Calvin a bit more than Flavel?) and Adam Embry's *Keeper of the Great Seal of Heaven: Sealing of the Spirit in the Life and Thought of John Flavel* (RHB, 2011).

³⁶ *The Works of John Flavel* are published in 6 volumes by the Banner of Truth.

³⁷ Consult Mark Deckard's *Helpful Truth in Past Places: The Puritan Practice of Biblical Counseling* (Mentor, 2010) for a guided tour of representative selections of Puritan biblical counsel. J.I. Packer's "The Practical Writings of the English Puritans" in *A Quest for Godliness* (Crossway, 1990), pp. 49-80, provides a solid and stimulating overview, as does Mark Jones and Joel Beeke's "Puritan Casuistry" in *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (RHB, 2012), pp. 927-946. James La Belle has also authored three valuable volumes with Beeke through Reformation Heritage, which compile and synthesize Puritan biblical counsel on Christian living in more topical fashion: *Living by God's Promises* (2010), *Living Zealously* (2012), and *Living in a Godly Marriage* (2016). Another useful topical resource is David Herding's MAR thesis *Counseling the Depressed Person: The Puritan Alternative to Secular Psychology* (RTS-Charlotte, 2010). Tim Keller's 2010 essay *Puritan Resources for Biblical Counseling* is notable, and Erroll Hulse's (1931-2017) article *The Puritans and Counselling Troubled Souls* (*Foundations* #8 [May 1982], pp. 6-28) is worthy of being written in gold. Interested viewers should also consult the bonus DVD teaching sessions on the documentary *Puritan: All of Life to the Glory of God* (Media Gratiae, 2020), as it contains helpful summaries of the counsel given from several writers and works mentioned above.



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