Does the Shoe Fit?

BY DAVID POWLISON

Critics are God’s instruments. I don’t like to be criticized. You don’t like to be criticized. Nobody likes to be criticized. But, critics keep us sane—or, by our reactions, prove us temporarily or permanently insane. Whether a critic’s manner is gracious or malicious, whether the timing is good or bad, whether the intention is constructive or destructive, whether the content is accurate, half-true, or utterly false, in any case the very experience of being criticized reveals you. To what madness are you prone?

Self-satisfaction. I easily stagnate, rigidify, and drift off to sleep. Perhaps yesterday I said a timely word to someone, and by today it has become the final word, and tomorrow it will become the same old axe to grind. You catch the bird on the wing one day, and take it to the taxidermist the next day. You think that you see and ears hear, and give me a non-defensive attitude towards what they say. Self-protection (of the have-an-easy-life variety). To be criticized is not pleasant, so to avoid, duck, and hide can look very inviting. Perhaps yesterday you made a humble and honest attempt to do something constructive in a difficult situation. The problem remained, however, and now you’re taking heat, to boot. Today you want to avoid the whole mess. If you duck out, then tomorrow you’ll live in a teenier, tidier, friendlier, more imaginary world. It’s hard to live in a big, messy, uncontrolled world. Real people and real problems are hard to deal with. But I need to listen consciously to critics, even to invite criticism: “What do you really think? I want to know. What do I do that causes you a problem? What do I say that doesn’t seem quite right?” This will help me live in the world that God controls, the world in which Christ keeps on working to redeem.

Self-protection (of the be-liked-by-others variety). I conform, or compromise, or convert, or act cowardly, or am silenced, or say “Whatever.” Critics want you to agree with them, to see their light, and to jump on their bandwagon. The previous three tendencies describe not listening well enough to critics. This fourth tendency describes listening too well: gullible, adrift, indifferent. The plausibility of a valid criticism or a good question woes you to embrace bad answers. At first I stick my fingers in my ears and won’t listen; then, when I finally start to listen, I put a ring in my nose and follow along. It’s always easier for anyone to see a wrong that exists than to envision the right towards which we ought to aim. Your critics can spot a real problem in you, and then go on to offer a highly defective solution as the answer, citing your shortcomings to make their solution plausible. Just as it’s hard to be committed but not contrary, so it’s hard to be teachable but not too teachable.

Self-satisfaction. Ditto, yes, amen, of course, all of the above.

Us-satisfaction, us-justification, us-protection, and us-exaltation. The previous paragraphs describe not only individual tendencies, but forms of group-think and group-act. We reinforce each other. Just as the experience of being criticized by someone tends to bring out the worst in an individual, so being criticized by “them” brings out the worst in “us.” Even more disastrous, we bring out the worst in us, and never know it. The Bible’s word for this is “factions.” It’s one of the works of the flesh least easy to spot when we’re living inside it. Outsiders not only see our factious ways, they smell them. They see our possible faults and the places they disagree with us; they smell them. They see our possible faults and who then will lay it on the line is a messenger from God for your welfare (whether or not you end up completely agreeing). There is nothing quite like being disagreed with intelligently, lovingly, and openly: “Faithful are the wounds of a friend” (Prov. 27:6). If I only listen to my allies, or to yes-men, clones, devotees, and fellow fanatics, then I might as well inject narcotics into my veins. The people of God are a large work in progress. To engage and to interact with critics is to further the process—in both of our lives.

We ought to offer to others the kind of criticism that is such a pleasure to receive. Whenever we disagree with others our goal ought to be fair-minded, knowledgeable, constructive criticism (tinged with mercy, attentive to perceived strengths as well as perceived failings, openly recepive to reciprocal criticism). We all know this when doing marriage counseling, Jesus’ log-and-speck analysis and His call to clear-seeing helpfulness dig to the roots of every marital conflict. But we often ignore the log-and-speck in other spheres of controversy—or when in the midst of our own marital conflicts! Whether we write, teach, or converse, we often either succeed or

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Self-satisfaction. I easily stagnate, rigidify, and drift off to sleep. Perhaps yesterday I said a timely word to someone, and by today it has become the final word, and tomorrow it will become the same old ax to grind. You catch the bird on the wing one day, and take it to the taxidermist the next day. You think that you solved the problems of the day (or the world) yesterday. Maybe you did. Then today the problems change, but you’d rather rest on your laurels. When someone poses a searching question to me, or directs a criticism at me—and I’m willing to hear and consider—it keeps me from etching in stone my last best insight or last best achievement.

Self-justification. I easily become arrogant, deaf, and self-righteous. In the face of criticism or disagreement, I mobilize the myriad strategies and limitless energies of defensiveness. Call out the National Guard. Mobilize the anti-terrorism task force. Launch pre-emptive or retaliatory strikes. Call the spin-doctor. Do damage control. Launch a new p.r. campaign. Protect the image. Play victim. Spotlight strengths and deflect attention from weaknesses. Shift blame. Yesterday’s faithful obedience (or what I thought was such) becomes today’s prop for the kingdom of self. I forget that I remain a needy recipient of the lifelong process of redemption, that the first beating never goes away, that “wise” and “disciple” both take daily cues from “teachable.” Give me critics who open their mouths about what their eyes see and ears hear, and give me a non-defensive attitude towards what they say.

Self-protection (of the have-an-easy-life variety). To be criticized is not pleasant, so to be protected, shielded from criticism is attractive. Call in the taxidermist. Do damage control. Launch a new p.r. campaign. Protect the image, play victim. Spotlight strengths, deflect attention from weaknesses. Shift blame. Perhaps yesterday you made a humble and honest attempt to do something constructive in a difficult situation. The problem remained, however, and now you’re taking heat, to boot. Today you want to avoid the whole mess. If you duck out, then tomorrow you’ll live in a teener, tidier, friendlier, more imaginary world. It’s hard to live in a big, messy, uncontrollable world. Real people and real problems are hard to deal with. But I need to listen consciously to critics, even to invite criticism: “What do you really think? I want to know. What do I do that causes you a problem? What do I say that doesn’t seem quite right?” This will help me live in the world that God controls, the world in which Christ keeps on working to redeem.

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Self-exaltation. Ditto, yes, amen, of course, all of the above.

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Christ uses critics to guard our souls from self-destructive tendencies. We gain ears to listen to others when we gain ears to listen to Him. That doesn’t mean critics are always right.2

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derail based on the manner in which we deliver the matter. May we do as we would like it done to us.

Critics, like governing authorities, are servants of God to you for good (Rom. 13:4). He who sees into hearts uses critics to help us see things in ourselves: outright failings of faith and practice, distorted emphases, blind spots, areas of neglect, attitudes and actions contradictory to stated commitments, and, yes, strengths and significant contributions. God uses critics to help us. Even if I think that a criticism is misstaken, I shouldn’t leap too quickly to the defense. Is there something I am doing or saying (or not doing and not saying) that makes that particular misinterpretation plausible? Am I too easily misunderstood? Do I leave implicit or understated something that needs to be made explicit? Does my attitude or tone or way of treating people send a mixed message? Do I ride my hobby horses? Am I not answering some important question that this person is asking? Am I not addressing some important problem that this person cares about? In my experience, the answer to these questions is usually Yes.

This is an extremely important reason to pay close attention to criticism. To take one example, you can say, “Jesus loves you,” in such a way that the hearer hears you saying, “I despise you.” Especially when we think we’re proclaiming a Big Truth to others, we often have a hard time hearing how we’re coming across or what we’re missing, the truth that we most need to hear. None of us speaks or writes the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. None of us acts in love, the whole of love, and nothing but love. Self-serving biases make our opinions, feelings, choices, perceptions, and motives glow with rosy light. How plausible we seem to ourselves, and how incomprehensibly depraved others seem.

The Lord uses pungent language to describe us: “Every man’s way is right in his own eyes…A fool delights in airing his own opinions…The hearts of the sons of men are incomprehensibly depraved others seem. Plausible we seem to ourselves, and how our opinions, feelings, choices, perceptions, and motives glow with rosy light. How plausible we seem to ourselves, and how incomprehensibly depraved others seem. (Rom. 13:4)

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We ever so skillfully combine defensive self-vindication and belittling dismissal of the other. My (easily idealized) strong points line up against your (easily demonized) weak points. The only airtight case is the one that the Judge of all the earth presents against all of us. We need to hear critics, to hear our weak points, their strong points, and ways our strong points may be incomplete or exaggerated. Edifying conversation (even in our own heads, as we read what others write) manages both to hold clear convictions and to get out on the table the things that are hard to see and say (my worst, for example, and your best), alongside the things that are easy to see and say (my best! your worst!).

Even if I conclude that a criticism is wrong-headed, ignorant, and malicious, God still uses the encounter. It is no accident that “love your enemies” is the watershed test of what you live for. How do you view, treat, and talk about your worst, most unfair critics? Of course, don’t blow the wind in the storm and compromise. Don’t get intimidated. Don’t be indifferent to true and false, good and evil. Don’t listen to every whisper. Don’t get distracted by trying to appease or to persuade implacable people who breathe animosity and lies. Of course, criticism may reveal more about the critic than the one criticized. But, at the same time, a healthy dose of criticism can be the best medicine imaginable. Will I prove to have the mercy, patience, clarity, humility, and courage to respond rightly? The Lord will use criticism to teach His children exceedingly precious but hard-won things (see scores of Psalms, the apologists on suffering, and the life of Jesus). Or will I instead reveal myself to be malicious, retaliatory, temperamental, defensive, self-righteous, narrow-minded, cowardly, compromising, or factious? “Enemies” play a central role in the economy of redemption. They reveal us for what we are. They are our Lord’s instruments. They either remake us like Him or reveal us as His enemies.

Critics. They can wake you up, or calm you down, or change your attitude. They can get you working on a question you’ve never asked, or push you to communicate better, or help you to understand what you’re up against. They can call you to repentance, or make you more deeply persuaded that you are on the right track, or teach you patience. They can save you from yourself, or open the door to unquenchable joy, or teach you what life is really about. Or all of the above.

I’ve been reading and hearing some recent critiques of biblical counseling. Here’s what others are saying. Think about it with me.

Mark McMinn
Mark McMinn serves as chairman of the psychology department at Wheaton College. In “Prelude to Grace: A Psychology of Sin and a Sin of Psychology,” he said the following:

It is time that we build bridges between biblical counselors and Christian psychologists....I am reminded how often we have misunderstood and malign biblical counselors. How often do we throw in a critical comment about Jay Adams in our writings on integration, even if we have never read Jay Adams closely? And it is unreasonable that we continue, year after year, to associate all biblical counseling with Adam’s work, though the biblical counseling movement has matured and developed a great deal since Adams wrote Competent to Counsel 32 years ago. I
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4Cited in David Myers’s Social Psychology, Boston:
McGraw-Hill, 1999, p. 59. Of course, every person’s story,
the newspaper, history, case experience, literature, and
social science also bear witness (often unwittingly) to the
goodness of God's creation and the specific workings of
general grace and providence: sense of fairness, hatred of
hypocrisy, desire to learn, capacity for love and self-
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3I thank Paul Miller of sejews.net for this felicitous
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biases and assumptions. We all inject preconceptions and
experiences into what we think others say.
recognize areas of disagreement. As a Christian psychologist, I value scientific and psychological ways of knowing more highly than most biblical counselors. But I also stand in admiration of their faithful love for God and for Scripture, and their desire to hold fast to the Christian narrative as the basis of truth and wholeness. Those of us committed to integration have a great deal to learn from our brothers and sisters in biblical counseling. We were trained to tell other stories. Most of us were trained in graduate programs where we did not talk about sin. Many of our professors didn’t even believe in sin. So we learned to tell a cognitive-behavioral story, or an object relations story, a humanistic story, or any number of other stories. These stories are useful, but they can also seem anemic when compared to the Christian story of sin, forgiveness, redemption, and grace.

Interesting, isn’t it? As criticism goes, it’s a softball lobbed down the middle (being 90% an affirming evaluation). It’s about as friendly a disagreement as one could ever receive. But let me pose four sets of questions in response.

First, Mark McMinn does not draw us very close in the adversarial manner. He is not operating in the “my best against your worst” mode. Is he a better man than you in this regard? How do you react to what he says and how he says it? How do you respond to his self-criticism, his humility, and his recommendations: “my worst, my need, juxtaposed with your best”? How should you respond? Is he a brother with whom you could have a fine and mutually edifying conversation, even though you’ll reach some points where your differences may be substantive and significant?

Second, do his words tempt you to a sense of vindicated self-righteousness? Do you think something like, “Finally an integrationist is treating us fairly and ‘fessing up to things we’ve been saying all along.’ I’m glad at least some of those integrationists are finally seeing the light. But he still doesn’t quite get it.” It appalls me that I can even imagine such wickedness crossing my mind. Whose kingdom do we serve? Whose glory? Whose vindication? If “we” are the repository of all wisdom, final wisdom, the last word, then “they” need to come sit at our feet. But if we trust that the Christian story of sin and grace is True, and if we all need to grow in wisdom, then we have things to talk over with each other.

Third, what do you think of McMinn’s criticism of biblical counselors? In effect, “You don’t value the observational and descriptive riches of psychology adequately.” Does that shoe fit or not? I need to think about that one. Do you think that you can learn something helpful from psychologists?

More than 25 years ago, Jay Adams gave his answer to that question: “Yes, we can learn a lot. I certainly have. That answer surprised you, didn’t it? If it did you have been led to believe, no doubt, that nouthetic counselors are obscurantists who see no good in psychology.... I do not object to psychology or to psychologists as such.” Adams went on to state, and elsewhere, that his actual objections were to the modern psychotherapies and personality theories for misleading and misconstruing the very people they tried to help and to explain.

In other words, to use McMinn’s words, Adams objected to counselors “telling other stories” about and to their counselees, stories that were not true. Adams said that this objection “in no way lessens my interest, support, and encouragement of the legitimate work of psychology.”

Do you agree with Adams? With McMinn? With both? With neither? McMinn’s criticism is surely worth hearing, pondering, and talking about (and maybe doing something about, both relationally and conceptually).

Notice that McMinn’s criticism is one of comparative emphasis: “I value this more than you value it.” That is one of those subtle differences that can be hard to hear and weigh, but is worth considering carefully. Maybe McMinn values psychology too much. Maybe I value it too little. Maybe we both value it the same, in theory, but his practice lets in more than he bargained for; or my practice is too sparing, and doesn’t let in things I really ought to learn; or both. Those issues are well worth hammering out, for the welfare of all. We should try on the shoe and see if it fits.

Roger Hurling was one of Adams’s most careful critics a generation ago. He wrote, “Jay Adams acknowledges the existence of divine common grace as contributory to, for example: ‘an element of truth reflected by every false position’; the unearthing of certain ‘nuggets’ of insight by an unbeliever....[But] Adams’ seeming neglect of the biblical dimensions of general revelation and common grace as a developed argument is, I believe, the main root of at least some of his more disputed opinions.”

Notice the kind of criticism Hurling made. It’s a question of emphasis and development. In effect, “You say that you learn from the observational and descriptive aspects of psychology. Do you adequately and fruitfully exemplify in practice that you believe this? Have you modeled and unpacked how the body of Christ ought to interact with the social sciences?”

Good question. Tough question. Perennial question, worth revisiting, rather than drowning out by either anti-psychology or anti-anti-psychology posturing.

Fourth, what do you think about the fact that McMinn considers those “other stories” useful, though anemic? I would describe those other stories as essentially false, as actively competing with the Christian story, not as merely anemic in comparison to the Christian story. I would describe those stories as actively misleading both story-teller and story-believer. I think that these other narratives systematically preclude The Story that actually plays in the theater of the universe and within human hearts: sin and wrath, mercy and redemption. I am fiercer towards those other stories than he is. But, on the other hand, I don’t really know the cash value of “useful” to Mark McMinn.

Maybe as we talk it out, I’ll find out he doesn’t really find the stories themselves useful. Rather he finds the descriptions and portrayals useful, because they force us to think about details of the human condition that we haven’t considered and then sought to address—and so we essentially agree. In any case, should I be as fierce towards Mark McMinn as I am towards those anemic stories? Only to my peril, to the harm of my brother, and to the harm of the body of Christ, God protect us all. Can I, should I, pursue a relationship of mutually charitable candor with him? Yes, and amen. He’s a critic (I want to hear him) and I’m a critic (he wants to hear me), and we can look forward to cordial and constructive conversations.

Tim Clinton and George Ohlschlager

Tim Clinton is president of the burgeoning American Association of Christian Counselors (AACC), and George Ohlschlager serves in multiple leadership roles within the AACC. Clinton and Ohlschlager (C&O) have edited and contributed extensively to Competent Christian Counseling: neighbors. This is an important book to interact with. Major, programmatic books tend to come along every ten to fifteen years, and this is such a book. I think it’s fair to describe Competent Christian Counseling (CCC) as the current “state of the union” message for the mainstream, evangelical psychotherapy movement. It’s a mission statement for what I might describe as “post-integrationist, openly evangelical, professional psychotherapists seeking to redefine themselves as a form of Christian ministry.” CCC sets forth the AACC’s agenda for the coming decade. This book needs careful review, but I am not going to do that here. I want us to consider the specific criticisms CCC makes of biblical counseling, C&O write.

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Maybe as we talk it out, I’ll find out he doesn’t really find the stories themselves useful. Rather he finds the descriptions and portrayals useful, because they force us to think about details of the human condition that we haven’t considered and then sought to address—and so we essentially agree. In any case, should I be as fierce towards Mark McMinn as I am towards these anemic stories? Only to my peril, to the harm of my brother, and to the harm of the body of Christ, God protect us all. Can I, should I, pursue a relationship of mutually charitable candor with him? Yes, and amen. He’s a critic (I want to hear him) and I’m a critic (he wants to hear me), and we can look forward to cordial and constructive conversations.

Tim Clinton and George Ohlschlager

Tim Clinton is president of the burgeoning American Association of Christian Counselors (AACC), and George Ohlschlager serves in multiple leadership roles within the AACC. Clinton and Ohlschlager (C&O) have edited and contributed extensively to Competent Christian Counseling:10 This is an important book to interact with. Major, programmatic books tend to come along every ten to fifteen years, and this is such a book. I think it’s fair to describe Competent Christian Counseling (CCC) as the current “state of the union” message for the mainstream, evangelical psychotherapy movement. It’s a mission statement for what I might describe as “post-integrationist, openly evangelical, professional psychotherapists seeking to redefine themselves as a form of Christian ministry.” CCC sets forth the AACCs agenda for the coming decade. This book needs careful review, but I am not going to do that here. I want us to consider the specific criticisms CCC makes of biblical counseling, C&O write.

At a time when the church was widely embracing psychology—and sometimes doing so without thought—[this] movement called attention back to the Word of God and challenged counselors to think theologically. The primary criticisms of

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7Keynote address at the Christian Association for Psychological Studies (CAPS), Chicago, April 11, 2002.


the nouthetic approach, however, are that it is narrowly conceived and too focused on a confrontational style of dealing with sin and behavioral change to the exclusion of tender soul care and sensitivity to life's grief. Nouthetic process tends to be weak on understanding the complexity of human motivation, and it struggles to develop an adequate theory of suffering and emotion. (p. 46)

Are nouthetic counselors too exclusively focused on sin to be tender and helpful to clients who are broken and suffering, too engaged in biblical behavior modification to be able to help someone walk through the “dark night of soul” transformation, and too resistant to learning and becoming skilled in clinical knowledge and patterns to be widely helpful to many people?

After more than thirty years of development as a profession, is biblical counseling still just preaching to the choir, in danger of influencing no one outside their narrow clique and possibly stagnating in a tepid backwater while the rest of Christian counseling flows on to twenty-first century maturity? (p. 703) The following are important questions.

Third, does your counseling so focus on changing behaviors that it skates over motivational complexities and a carefully intentional renewal of the human heart? Do you probe, draw forth, and renew the patterns of desire, fear, love, belief, conscience, and story from which behavioral choices emerge? Do you deal with how the vertical dimension specifically plays out within and through every behavior, attitude, and emotion? Do you work as well with the imagination-kindling aspects of Truth and love as you do with the doctrinal propositions and the ethical injunctions? What is the significance of metaphor, story, poetic repetition, understatement, humor, self-disclosure, modeling, acts of love, and other motivating aspects of ministry?

Fourth, does your counseling so focus on behavior and on consciously stated beliefs that emotions are only the “carcass of the train”? Can you be fairly characterized as a Christianized cognitive-behavioral counselor? Do you work as well with the emotion-evoking aspects of Truth as you do with the doctrinal propositions and the ethical injunctions? What is the significance of the evocative aspects of ministry? Do you work out the godly forms of gladness, sorrow, fear, love, hope, gratitude, anxious concern, peaceful trust, and anger that are so important to Jesus Christ? Doctrinal true-false and ethical right-wrong are extremely significant. My questions are about balance and emphasis, not counterposing one thing instead of another. There are many significant polarities in Scripture, including the emotionally-charged categories of admirable-despicable, beautiful-horrifying, delightful-disgusting, blessed-cursed, and trustworthy-threatening, desirable-shameful.

In each of these four categories, I’ve been proposing a nouthetic-oriented resolution. I’m not assuming their answers, but I’m trying to hear their perceptions and even to intensify their questions. They raise important concerns. Ask these questions even more deeply, more biblically, more personally. Such questions must stop us, get under our skin, wriggle in behind our habits, assumptions, and professional good intentions. We must inquire into the living realities of how we live, think, relate, and counsel.

Fifth, does what you do in counseling operate plausibly only with a certain population, with the kind of people that you are most familiar with? Are you relatively (even stubbornly) ignorant of the problems of other populations? Is your range narrow in knowledge, in skills or in target audiences? How do you do with really messed-up people? With people whose upbringing was a family-sized Auschwitz? With people whose inner world is pERVERse beyond words? With non-Christians? With desperately poor people? With crisis pregnancies? With demented people? With people in third-world cultures? What C&O call “clinical knowledge,” I’d call “becoming case-wise.” Does your practice of biblical counseling embody a breadth of understanding, skill, and institutional options that can be “widely helpful to many people”? I believe that only a biblical counseling vision will be able to reach every nation, tribe, tongue, and people—and every individual within every group. But how close does attainment come to vision?

Sixth, do you only preach to the choir? Do you have a clique mentality (my best, against your worst), that isolates you? Do you operate with the self-righteous and “paranoid” instincts of the factious? Hear me rightly, I’m not for a millennium suggesting there aren’t huge issues at stake. I think that there are significant problems with the CCC vision and mission. But how do we get into the marketplace of ideas? We might be right-as-rain on an issue, and wrong-as-wrong-can-be in attitude. Old wisdom put the call this way: suaviter in modo, fortiter in re (“gentle in manner, strong in substance”). If our sphere of influence is narrow, whose fault is that? Blaming others for marginalizing us violates the core principles of biblical ministry. Redemptive ministry gets out of the choir and into the marketplace.

Notice how CCC’s “criticisms of the nouthetic approach” can be fruitfully rephrased into questions addressed to each of us. In terms of our “counseling faith and practice,” I think these criticisms are all fundamentally untrue, and I imagine that most readers of The Journal of Biblical Counseling would find them inaccurate. They sound like a caricature. I can point to a chapter in book A or to an article B in this very journal ten years ago, or to counseling with person C this morning, or to what I taught last week in class D that was the exact opposite of everything the criticism supposes. I’m thus tempted to think the critics ignorant (Don’t they read us?) or tendentious (By making us look bad, they make themselves look good). It could be. But, just maybe, is it possible that the books, articles, conversations, and public talks have made it too easy to think such criticisms

11 At the rate of “encourage one another daily,” that walks the relationship out for about nine months. I’m not suggesting that “seasons” of intentional counseling might not be relatively short-term most of the time, but our model and manner ought to be consistent with lifelong relationships. In 1970, when years-long psychotherapy was the norm, it was radical that biblical counseling aimed for a 6-12 week strategic intervention. In the 2000s, when 6-12 week, strategic counseling is the norm, it is radical that biblical counseling is oriented to a lifelong discipleship and change process (that may sometimes take the form of a short series of meetings).

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The following six multi-pronged criticism than McMin’s. Do any or all of the shoes fit? I hear C&O raising six important challenges. They doubt the quality of relationships, the sensitivity to human suffering, the depth and subtlety of insight into motives, the view of emotions, the narrowness of range compared to the breadth of human need, and the sectarian isolationism. Let me summarize and paraphrase each of the leading concerns into direct questions to readers.

First, are you oriented to the choir? Does your counseling so focus on behavior and on consciously stated beliefs that emotions are only the "caboose of the train"?

Second, do you so emphasize the need, and the sectarian isolationism. Let me approach counseling conceived of a 250th meaningful conversation? These are essential questions to pose to yourself—or to have others pose to us, as CCC does.

Third, do your counseling so focus on changing behaviors that it skates over motivational complexities and a carefully intentional renewal of the human heart? Do you try to hear their perceptions and even to intensify their questions. They raise important questions. Ask these questions even more deeply, more biblically, more personally. Such questions must stop us, get under our skin, deeply, more biblically, more personally. Such questions must stop us, get under our skin, deeply, more biblically, more personally. Such questions must stop us, get under our skin, deeply, more biblically, more personally.

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In each of these four categories, I’ve been proposing rather harsh critiques of the nouthetic approach. I’m not assuming their answers, but I’m trying to hear their perceptions and even to intensify their questions. They raise important concerns. Ask these questions even more deeply, more biblically, more personally. Such questions must stop us, get under our skin, wriggle in behind our habits, assumptions, and professed good intentions. We must inquire into the living realities of how we live, think, relate, and counsel.

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E or speaker F? Negative impressions can be created or reinforced, and lots of good truth can be turned dark and repellent by one act of contemp—or even by a wonderful half truth that lacked its other half. Or did a critic counsel person G (apparently successfully?) in the aftermath of G’s disastrous and damaging meeting with biblical counselor H! I’ve known many people opposed to (or suspicious of) “biblical counseling” who cite a negative experience as their reason. I’ve also known many people who are now committed to biblical counseling despite a negative experience with a “biblical counselor.” Life in the kingdom is much more complex than just lining up one abstract model against another abstract model. Everyone has a story. The last chapter might have contained a bad experience, but the next chapter in each story could prove to be a turning point. Did you ever fulfill the caricature? Does the uncomfortable shoe fit too well? Was I that counselor or author? Were you? How will the next chapter of Christ’s redemption unfold?

James Beck

James Beck is a clinical psychologist and chairman of the counseling department at Denver Seminary. He recently reviewed *Psychology & Christianity: Four Views* to which I contributed “The Biblical Counseling View” along with three short response articles. Most of his criticisms were not of what I’d written, per se, but of the biblical counseling movement.

Many of the old conceptual problems attendant to Adams and his thought remain. Their insistence that only the Bible should be used in our ministration to the emotionally troubled is as rigid as ever. Their unrelenting dismissal of scientific, clinical, and counseling psychology is astounding. And their ever-improving capacity to reduce any and all human suffering to some form of idolatry or self-worship is amazing. This reductionism, in the name of faithfulness to the biblical record, winds up insulting the richness of scriptural thought and the complexity which the authors of the Bible ascribed to the human experience.

This kind of criticism is hard to listen to because of its sturdiness and the oddity of the charges. To be called rigid, unrelentingly dismissive, astounding, amazing (these last two not as compliments!), reductionistic, and insulting to Scripture—all within the space of four sentences—why that is...well, I don’t know what it is, astounding, maybe, or dismissive, reductionistic, and insulting. In any case, it certainly does grab one’s attention. It’s easy to get one’s back up.

Verbal intemperance obviously makes a critic harder to hear, harder to take, and harder to take seriously. But what about his specific charges against us: biblical anti-science and a moralizing reductionism of the human condition? The first charge is a remote cousin to McMinn’s assertion, “I value scientific and psychological ways of knowing more highly than most biblical counselors.” It seems like a distant cousin to Clinton and Ohlschlager’s concern that biblical counseling was “too narrowly conceived” (elsewhere in their discussion they had said, “Nouthetic counselors use the Bible almost always, if not exclusively, as their resource,” pp. 440). I don’t agree with C&O’s characterization or Beck’s caricature, but how does biblical counseling’s view of Scripture operate with regard to extra-biblical information? How do we relate to the concrete details of the world that needs redemptive counseling, to the facts more numerous than the grains of sand?

Let me attempt a simple answer. I think that God intends Scripture to serve as the orienting and reorienting wellspring of all wisdom (“the Faith’s psychology,” we might call it). Belief in the necessity and authority of Scripture does not arise because of closed-mindedness, but because other explanations and models express the disoriented gaze and intentions of interpreters, model-builders, and would-be redeemers (“the psychological faiths”). Scripture gives a vista, not a straight jacket. Other systems (“philosophies” in the Colossians 2:8 sense) give distorted lenses and compasses skewed away from North. They don’t give us straight facts or a good sense of direction. God intends to teach us how to rightly understand and properly use anything in the whole world (without being misconverted). Everything is fair game: from your own life story to today’s weather; from something a counselor said yesterday to the facts of a research study of 282,000 washers; from a guru’s comment (Jay Adams favorably quoted Swami Akhilananda in *The Christian Counselor’s Manual*) to war in the Middle East; from a hymn to Zeus (Acts 17:28) to observations of behaviors that never appear in Scripture. For example, no one in history could have discussed the phenomena labeled “bulimia” or “muscle dysmorphia” until recent years. There’s no Bible-proof-text that describes cycles of gluttony and vomiting, or an obsession with musculature, mirrors, diet, and lifting weights. But I think it fair to say that the whole Bible is about bulimia and muscle dysmorphia. That statement takes some unpacking to show how it works. Rightly understood, Scripture intends to teach us how to rightly understand people trapped in such contemporary hells. You can learn the particular facts firsthand: get to know such people in the midst of all their confusion, anguish, and bondage. You can also learn secondhand: read a book or article. But here’s the rub. In both cases, though you’ll learn lots of facts, you’ll need to radically reinterpret everything you hear or read. Neither the “muscle dysmorphic” himself nor The Adonis Complex will tell it to you straight. Both the struggle and the book actively misunderstand the very facts they so vividly narrate and describe. Ministry of Christ—practical theology—is all about changing people’s interpretation of life and their life-direction. Biblical counseling is in the business of reinterpreting and redirecting. Neither the bodybuilder nor the concerned psychiatrist will orient your compass or guide you in the right direction. But Scripture intends to teach you how to wisely address and truly help such people. The Judge evaluates truly and the Redeemer invades mercifully. The Bible reveals the gaze and intentions of this God: Hebrews 4:12-16 puts it all in a nutshell. All this is a far cry both from bibliocentric anti-science and from syncretistic integrationism.

The way that C&O (and McMinn, and Hurding) posed the question about our view of Scripture makes them hearable and helpful. I hope we can answer their questions. I hope we can grow up if we’ve misspoken in the heat of controversy, or if we’ve not lived up to what we believe. The way James Beck puts it has the ring of his own prejudices. I hope we can replace the caricature with an accurate photograph. He did not evaluate what was actually written in my articles or what has been written over the past 30 years. It is significant that he shifted to a presumed “they,” rather than dealing with what has been written. “They” protects and projects a stereotype rather than conversing about or with real people. In the *Four Views* book, I openly criticized biblicicism and distanced biblical counseling’s epistemology from the notion that the Bible was intended or was to be treated as an exhaustive encyclopedia containing all truth. I gave specific and generic examples of the positive contributions of psychology and psychologists (qualified by the nuances and cautions that a biblical gaze teaches us). That was, in fact, one of the central purposes of those articles. I might be wrong in my view of the issues in question, and Beck might be right, but
justified? Even more basic, are we simply not known personally, heard and seen in person, so that false impressions can be corrected? Misapprehensions flourish when people don’t know each other.

There is a darker possibility. Did the critics have a negative experience with author E or speaker F? Negative impressions can be created or reinforced, and lots of good truth can be turned dark and repellent by one act of contempt—or even by a wonderful half truth that lacked its other half. Or did a critic counsel person G (apparently successfully?) in the aftermath of G’s disastrous and damaging meeting with biblical counselor H? I’ve known many people opposed to (or suspicious of) “biblical counseling” who cite a negative experience as their reason. I’ve also known many people who are now committed to biblical counseling despite a negative experience with a “biblical counselor.” Life in the kingdom is much more complex than just lining up one abstract model against another abstract model. Everyone has a story. The last chapter might have contained a bad experience, but the next chapter in each story could prove to be a turning point. Did you ever fulfill the caricature? Does the uncomfortable shoe fit too well? Was I that counselor or author? Were you? How will the next chapter of Christ’s redemption unfold?

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Do those you criticize receive unfair treatment from you? That's the shoe I want each of us to try on.

- the key chapters in your own growing self-knowledge and wisdom (e.g., “I never saw so clearly how tedious ignorance can be; for your name’s sake, O Lord, pardon my iniquity, for it is great (Ps. 25:11); I will go talk over these things with that person whom I’ve treated with disrespect”);
- the myriad stories of all literature and film (e.g., Alan Paton’s Cry, the Beloved Country, most try on. The son’s story of beauty, injustice, violence, sorrow, infinite patience, pointed self-examination and exhortation, generosity and humility, the eruptions of indwelling sin, and the transaction of mercy);
- the myriad stories of case-wise pastoral counseling (“He blames his wife for what he will not admit in himself, but the fear of the Lord is teaching him to own his reactions”; “That husband and wife minimize their own sins and cast their spouse’s sins, whether real or perceived, in a lurid light. He lives for power and she lives for love, but Jesus can forgive and change these lusts, teaching them to love from a pure heart”).

None of these descriptive sources will rightly orient you on its own. Your critics won’t rightly orient you, either, unless they’ve been rightly reoriented. You can read a thousand books, live your life for eighty years, talk with a thousand counselors, read the newspaper every day, and get hit upside the head weekly. But you need the inworking Word and Spirit to make impulses and habits in your own giving and receiving criticism. And I hope that you have caught a vision for the mission of Jesus Christ, and your part in it. Peacemakers are blessed because they will be called the sons of God. The Son of God is a peacemaker who takes fractious and factious people—like you and me—and turns us around 180°.

I’d like to close by giving a new spin to the phrase, “Let’s agree to disagree.” Most often, people use this as a polite way to end the conversation, “Good-bye, and don’t bother me. We’re not going to talk about this anymore, but we’ll try to be nice if we happen to see each other again. You’re not going to change my mind, and I’m not going to change yours, so let’s forget it. Let’s just agree to disagree.” Such an attitude has nothing to do with Jesus’ purposes in our midst.

How about giving it the opposite meaning? Let’s agree...to disagree. Let’s commit to starting candid, constructive conversations, and let’s keep them going. I need your questions and criticisms, and you need mine. This has something to do with all that talk in the Bible about “one another,” and “different gifts distributed by the Spirit,” and “growing up,” and the “body of Christ,” and “every nation, tribe, tongue, and people,” and “the sons of Issachar understood the times,” and “speaking the truth in love we grow up into Him.” The Lord’s sovereign eye is on every impulse of every
he savaged a view that I don’t hold (and neither does Jay Adams).

James Beck’s second charge is a distant cousin to C & O’s concern that biblical counseling has inadequate views of suffering, motivation, and emotion. Those are good questions to take to heart, as I’ve sought to do in the previous section. But I cannot figure out where he came up with the idea that biblical counselors reduce all human suffering to some form of sin. As in the previous paragraphs, I protest. I hope I can do so fairly and reasonably. The notion that “human suffering = personal sin” is simply absurd at every level: biblically, existentially, socially, psychologically, literally, pastorally, politically. I can’t think of a human being in the history of the world (let alone someone committed to counsel biblically) who held or could hold such a view. Imagine a woman who was beaten by a violent abuser, and felt the pain and terror of that terrible experience. Does such suffering “reduce to” the victim’s vengeful fantasies, or her overly compliant behaviors, or her generalized avoidance of all human interaction, or her drinking heavily to drown the hurt and sorrow? Suffering and sin are two different things, whose intimate relationship is discussed on almost every page of the Bible (and in almost every article in this journal over many years).

To believe that suffering reduces to sin would be like treating the demeaning and killing effects of AIDS as the same thing as injecting heroin or being sexually immoral (or, even with contracting such a disease from something that has nothing to do with personal sin, e.g., a blood transfusion). Such a belief would be astounding, amazing, and insulting to sufferers, producing a kind of sin that has nothing to do with personal sin. As in the previous paragraphs, I feel the pain and terror of that terrible experience. Does such suffering “reduce to” the view that I don’t hold? Have I ever fabricated a straw man in order to burn it at the stake? Have you? I don’t want to treat other people this way. But I think it fitting to add that I like Beck’s phrase, “the richness of scriptural thought and the complexity which the authors of the Bible ascribed to the human experience.” That’s a great way to put things, and I think he means it, and I mean it, too. That’s exactly what this journal aspires to. It’s exactly what wise practical theology and personal ministry are about. It’s the goal of biblical counseling worthy of the label. I’m sure our gaze far exceeds our accomplishments (we always need criticizing, both self-criticism and from outside). But if we do our job well, I hope that James Beck might come to appreciate what we’re doing, and won’t treat brothers in Christ unfairly.

Do those you criticize receive unfair treatment from you? That’s the shoe I want each of us to try on. Pride and divisiveness yield to humility under the mercy of Christ. Constructive words and peaceable actions can occur in real life, real time, real conflicts. Any number of descriptive sources might aid us in putting diverse flesh onto this orienting truth about our self-deception, our self-righteousness, and the character of mercy. All of life is grist for the log-speck- & humility dynamics:

- the patterns described in psychological research and the myriad stories of clinical experience (e.g., “self-serving bias,” “negative stereotyping,” “attribute error”); “He’s projecting onto his wife the anger he won’t admit”; “That husband and wife each think it’s all the other person’s fault, as he pursues power and she pursues love”;
- the myriad stories of all human history and biography (e.g., Victor Klemperer’s I Will Bear Witness, portraying Nazi attitudes towards Jews, the reactions of victims, and the “rebellious kindness” of some honorable Aryan Germans);
- the myriad stories in the morning newspaper and evening newscast (e.g., Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, or a racist incident, or a mass murder by a disgruntled former employee, or a gesture of mercy by the parents of a murdered child);
- the key chapters in your own growing self-knowledge and wisdom (e.g., “I never saw so clearly how factious I can be; for Your name’s sake, O Lord, pardon my iniquity, for it is great (Ps. 25:11); I will go talk over these things with that person whom I’ve treated with disrespect”);
- the myriad stories of all literature and film (e.g., Alan Paton’s Cry, the Beloved Country; the story of beauty, injustice, violence, sorrow, infinite patience, point in self-examination and exhortation, generosity and humility, the eruptions of indwelling sin, and the transaction of mercy);
- the myriad stories of case-wise pastoral counseling (“He blames his wife for what he will not admit in himself, but the fear of the Lord is teaching him to own his reactions”); “That husband and wife minimize their own sins and cast their spouse’s sins, whether real or perceived, in a lurid light. He lives for power and she lives for love, but Jesus can forgive and change these lusts, teaching them to love from a pure heart”.

None of these descriptive sources will rightly orient you on its own. Your critics won’t rightly orient you, either, unless they’ve been rightly reoriented. You can read a thousand books, live your life for eighty years, talk to a thousand counselors, read the newspaper every day, and get hit upside the head weekly. But you need the inworking Word and Spirit to make true sense of what’s happening and to get a true sense of direction. These, and a hundred more particulars, can make you case-wise as they find both interpretation and resolution in Christ. He not only rightly interprets what is wrong, but He died for what is wrong with us. It is His pleasure to draw people to Himself and make us over.

“Let’s Agree to Disagree.”

I hope that all this has made you think. Have you let your critics into the room? I hope that you’ve been able to identify any unseemly impulses and habits in your own giving and receiving criticism. And I hope that you have caught a vision for the mission of Jesus Christ, and your part in it. Peacemakers are blessed because they will be called the sons of God. The Son of God is a peacemaker who takes fractious and factious people—like you and me—and turns us around 180°.

I’d like to close by giving a new spin to the phrase, “Let’s agree to disagree.” Most often, people use this as a polite way to end the conversation, “Good-bye, and don’t bother me. We’re not going to talk about this anymore, but we’ll try to be nice if we happen to see each other again. You’re not going to change my mind, and I’m not going to change yours, so let’s forget it. Let’s just agree to disagree.” Such an attitude has nothing to do with Jesus’ purposes in our midst.

How about giving it the opposite meaning? Let’s agree...to disagree. Let’s commit to starting candid, constructive conversations, and let’s keep them going. I need your questions and criticisms, and you need mine. This has something to do with all that talk in the Bible about “one another,” and “different gifts distributed by the Spirit,” and “growing up,” and the “body of Christ,” and “every nation, tribe, tongue, and people,” and “the sons of Issachar understood the times,” and “spreading the truth in love we grow up into Him.” The Lord’s sovereign eye is on every impulse of every
heart: “Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.” He is interested in every human interaction: “You will be judged for every careless word out of your mouth.” Every word comes motive-loaded. Every word counts. Every word matters. Let’s agree to disagree the right way.

We may not convince each other. You probably won’t become my clone at the end of the long conversation, and I probably won’t become yours. But we both might come out changed for the better, in ways that make each of us—and us—more faithful to Christ. The body of Christ will come out better.

Let’s agree to disagree. That doesn’t mean “See you later (but I hope not).” And it certainly doesn’t mean being agreeable. Let’s agree to disagree. We shouldn’t just smooth over real, significant, substantial, life-and-death, wisdom-or-folly, I-care-about-what’s-at-stake differences. Remember, the Lord of all seems to take particular delight in the messiness, change, variety, and volatility of human history. (The kind of world He chooses to run is not a nice, tidy, “let’s all just get along” world.) The God of peace acts and speaks as a polemicist and controversialist. He’s always “fussing” about what He sees going on. Jesus Christ is the trouble-making peacekeeper, the grace-giving rebuker, the constructive voice and hands who tears out old wiring and remolds His house. The Teacher teaches His disciples to become the same.

And this surely doesn’t mean being disagreeable, either. Let’s agree to disagree. Surlly mistreatment of each other, dismissive caricatures, the sneer, name-calling—these aren’t pretty sights. What John Frame says about how we defend Christianity also applies to how we defend what we think Christianity means in the counseling arena: “To defend the Christian faith with a quarrelsome spirit is to defend Christianity plus quarrelsomeness—a

self-destructive hybrid.”15 If we’re willing to listen, to hear criticism as well as to give it, that goes a long way towards overcoming the disagreeable tendencies that lurk in us all.

Let’s agree to disagree, and let’s agree that we will disagree well.

Theological conceptions profoundly affect practical counseling methodology. In “How Theology Shapes Ministry: Jay Adams’s View of the Flesh and an Alternative,” Ed Welch raises questions about one component of Adams’s counseling model. Adams’s distinctive characterization of the battle with indwelling sin—his assertion that “flesh” means neuro-physiological programming that must be reprogrammed—significantly shapes his portrayal of how a person changes and how the counseling process unfolds.

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“Modern Idolatry: Understanding and Overcoming the Attraction of Your Broken Cisterns” is a practical look at how misaligned worship generates the specific problems in living that all counselors deal with. Lou Going looks at a woman who misuses food, at a couple whose marriage is unraveling, at a man depressed after breaking up with his girlfriend, and at a pastor experiencing burnout. The love of Christ realigns worship to enable practical changes in lifestyle; those who cling to their interior falsehoods do not change outwardly.

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Steve Viars’s “The Discipleship River” captures his church’s vision for integrating evangelism, discipleship, and counseling in our Let Me Draw a Picture section. He addresses two common concerns: (1) does counseling distract a church from its evangelistic mission? and (2) do counseling problems require a different source of truth and a different set of methods than other aspects of ministry?

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Bulk rates (shipped to 1 address):
4-9 copies of an issue: $7/copy
10-25 copies: $6/copy
26+ copies: $5/copy.

15And it’s worth reminding ourselves that everything written is a “word out of the mouth” that “overflow flows from the heart.” So the Lord is the final audience of One for every written word, as well as for every planned talk and casual remark.

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