

*From the Editor's Desk*

## Getting Oriented



by DAVID POWLISON

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There's a big difference between knowing something by rote and actually understanding how it works. You think more insightfully and creatively when you understand something. Likewise, there's a big difference between doing something by rote and being oriented. You make skillful decisions when you're oriented. For example, a GPS offers rote guidance to get from point A to point B. So when you lose the signal in a strange neighborhood, you have no idea where you are (you are *disoriented!*). But when you are driving in your own neighborhood, and a road is closed, you have a half-dozen different ways to get from where you are to wherever you need to go. You're oriented. You understand.

It's the same with how Scripture works in our lives. Merely having Psalm 23 memorized won't persuade you that someone strong and caring is watching out for you. If you're to find any help in dark, vulnerable times, you need to understand what Psalm 23 means. And saying the Lord's prayer by rote will never convince you that God actually is your Father, or that he will provide what you need to live in his will today. But when you become oriented, then you mean the words you say. You understand how Jesus' teaching captures what you most need today—strength for today, mercy for

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your sins, protection from what afflicts you.

And it's the same with this ministry we call "biblical counseling." A rote description is a lifeless caricature. But how does the love of Christ bid to reshape the core loyalties of every human heart? And how do God's wisdom and will get expressed in your reactions and choices today? These are dramatic, life-and-death questions. You must get to "know the neighborhood." As you get a feel for how the ways of God intersect our troubles and struggles, you come to understand how God understands people—how he understands you. You become oriented to how Scripture maps onto life-lived—how the Word of God is relevant. Then you understand biblical counseling by heart, not by rote. You understand it from within your own deepest needs and truest joys. And as you grow, you develop an instinct and practiced eye for how God's redeeming love touches the troubling details of all human experience. You get a feel for where people get stuck. For where you get stuck. You get a feel for how truth works to set a person free. For how the Way, the Truth, and the Life works to set you free.

This article aims to orient you to biblical counseling. We will consider three basic perspectives on biblical counseling. First, WHY seek to counsel people according to the purposes of Jesus Christ? This probes the essential logic of biblical counseling. Second, HOW do we help people? This calls for understanding what kinds of help people really need. Third, WHERE are the natural settings for seeking and finding help? This illumines how counseling can happen anywhere that people talk about things that matter. Of course, these three perspectives don't answer every question or teach every skill. But they orient you.

I am writing for four kinds of readers.

- Are you simply curious to find out what biblical counseling is all about? These three points are a starting place for understanding.
- Do you want to become a wiser counselor? These three points help you to build on solid foundations and protect you from drifting off course.
- Are you a seasoned counselor who is committed to teach others? These three points help you to help others become oriented.
- Have you had a bad experience with biblical counseling, or been taught an unsavory caricature? These three points help you get

beyond the label and the human failures, and get to the rich reality to which Christ our Savior calls us.

Whatever questions you are bringing, I hope that you find both food for thought and a trajectory for action.

***First, why seek to counsel according to the purposes of Jesus?*** The word *counseling* does not appear in the Bible. When you combine that with the fact that churches often outsource counseling, it becomes easy to draw the conclusion that the Bible is not really that interested in counseling. I have often heard the argument that “The Bible is not a textbook on counseling.” What do you make of that? Does the body of Christ have any mandate to do counseling?

For starters, and only half in jest, I like to point out that the words *sermon*, *pastoral prayer*, *evangelism*, *quiet time*, *discipleship*, *prayer meeting*, *hymn book*, *worship music*, *theology*, and *church planting* also do not appear in the Bible. The Bible is not a textbook on any of these matters. Or, to say it the other way, the Bible is about counseling in exactly the same way that it is about all these other things. Scripture shapes, informs, and continually corrects all the ways we apply our faith. We personalize Christ’s transforming purposes to particular people through candid, constructive conversations. Whether we call it “pastoral care,” or “biblical counseling,” or “the care and cure of souls,” or “wise words,” it often takes personal interaction to connect the dots from Scripture to our daily struggles and troubles.

The Great Commission is a good place to frame what biblical counseling is about. In the last three verses of Matthew, Jesus gives the essential mandate for all ministry. He sets his followers about the work of helping other followers grow up in faith, wisdom, and love. He doesn’t specify how to make disciples. Does preaching play a part? Worship? Learning to serve others? Honest conversations about what troubles us? All of the above, and more. To follow Jesus means dealing with all the common problems of life, and these are the things honest conversations are about:

- anxiety and trust
- anger and forgiveness
- addictions and self-control
- suffering and meaning

- confusion and clarity
- despair and hope
- broken relationships and peacemaking
- presumption and humility
- unbelief and faith
- isolation and community.

These are all “counseling issues.” Ministry aims at encouraging faith and love to predominate over the Pandora’s box of human problems. This form of counseling is not just for those who obviously need counseling. It is for all of us, including those who don’t think they need counseling. “Making disciples” means remaking human beings in the face of the innumerable sins and sorrows that plague human life.

Jesus describes the process of remaking people into his image as having two phases. Meaningful conversations—“counseling”—permeate both. The first phase is “baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” This describes union with God and his purposes, the most radical change imaginable. We are joined by faith to the three persons of the Trinity, joined to God’s promises of steadfast love, forgiveness, and transforming power. We are joined to our brothers and sisters. Does this first phase of the Great Commission have anything to do with counseling? Typically, the door to faith opens through candid conversations about life’s meaning, troubles, and struggles. And in principle, coming into the community of faith opens the door for meaningful conversations about the very sins and sorrows that we are being saved from.

The second phase of the Great Commission also involves counseling conversations: “teaching them to obey all I have commanded.” How do you come to connect the dots from Scripture to your life? How do you learn the trust, love, wisdom, and hope that Jesus commands? How do you learn to know and follow Jesus? Honest, meaningful interaction about things that matter is one key part of the process. No man is an island. And we are not just nameless faces in a crowd. God intends that “speaking truth in love, we grow up into him who is the Head, even Christ.”

Counseling is the *interpersonal* part of the discipling ministry of Christ. It works in concert with the public and private ministry of the Word. The

*public* means of grace meet people in crowds through preaching, teaching, sacraments/ordinances, worship, and fellowship. The Holy Spirit acts in each person's heart to personalize the publicly proclaimed truth of the Lord. In the *private* ministry of the Word, the Holy Spirit works within your prayer life, study of Scripture, personal application, and the meditations of your heart. And then in *interpersonal* ministry of the Word, the Holy Spirit uses us in each other's life. You and I bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2). You and I encourage each other daily in the struggle with sin (Heb 3:12–14). You and I comfort each other in the particular afflictions either of us faces (2 Cor 1:4).

The Great Commission to make disciples of Jesus—this is the foundational purpose and agenda of wise counseling.

***Second, how do we help people?*** Thoughtful prayer is a good place to begin doing biblical counseling. I'm often asked, "Where should we start in bringing biblical counseling into our church?" I like to come at it from an unusual angle: "Build directly on something that already happens in your church—prayer. Change the way you make prayer requests. Change the way you pray with and for each other." Why does this matter? Prayer and counseling walk the same terrain of human experience: our afflictions, our sins, God's intervening mercies. When a prayer request deals with matters of consequence, when we learn to pray with each other about the actual struggles of our souls, when prayer aligns with God's deepest purposes, then we are simultaneously making a huge start at becoming alert, effective counselors.

Notice how the Lord teaches us to pray. The Bible rarely focuses on health, finances, travel mercies, doing well on a test, finding a job, or the salvation of unsaved relatives. These are legitimate things to pray for, because God cares for all of life. But he never intends that these topics dominate our prayer requests. They miss the real action of God's dealings with his beloved people. They skirt our real problems, and God's front-and-center concerns.

Notice the central concerns in the Psalms, in the Lord's Prayer, in the letters of Paul. Biblical prayers ask God to show himself so we will know him. They name our troubles and seek refuge in him. They name our sins and seek mercy from him. They ask for the clarity of mind and strength of purpose to love others. They name our holy desires and commitments.

They name our God, remember his promises, seek his will. When someone asks you, “How may I pray for you?” imagine the impact of responding in a manner such as this:

I’ve had a lot on my mind lately, and have been inattentive and irritable to those nearest and dearest to me. Please pray for me, that I will awaken and turn from my preoccupation with work and other pressures. God promises to help me pay attention to him. Ask him to open my eyes and help me remember him, rather than stressing. Ask him to help me to take my family and other people to heart.

This kind of prayer gets things that matter on the table—things that matter both immediately and eternally. It so happens that these are the daily versions of the issues that serious counseling deals with.

When people start to identify where they really need God’s help, they are entering the realm where both prayer and counseling live. We step into reality. If you are praying for matters with personal consequences, then you will have conversations of consequence. Of course, there are many other facets of counseling wisdom. But prayer requests are a surprising door into the world of caring practically and pointedly for each other.

***Third, where are the natural settings for seeking and finding help?***

The friendships and families found in local churches are a good place to begin incorporating biblical counseling.

Can a local church become the natural home for counseling ministries? Of course. In principle, face-to-face ministry is a characteristic of the community of faith. Counseling can, should, and will thrive in local churches. Here are five of the numerous advantages to counseling becoming localized.

First, a good pastor, friend, elder, small group leader, mentor, or parent has many advantages over office-bound counselors. In your own church, *you know people and have natural access into their lives*. You see people in action. Perhaps you know their parents and friends. You see how they treat their kids. You know how they handle themselves in a group. You hear how they handle stress. You often know history and back-story. You aren’t limited to hearing only one side of a story. In addition to a wider knowledge base, you relate at multiple levels. You can invite people to your home, and

invite yourself into their homes. You can initiate the relationship, and express your concern. You hear the same sermons and songs on Sunday morning and can talk about them together.

In contrast, office-bound counseling is structurally passive, always on the receiving end of inquiry or referral. It's not wrong to counsel in an office, but it's not the starting place for thinking clearly about what counseling is and could be. There is an active, outreaching quality to counseling ministry when we conceptualize it in the daily life of a community.

Here is a second advantage. It is a premise of biblical counseling that *people are not just "problems."* A human being is not defined by a diagnosis or a label. We have a new identity—in Christ, child of the Father. We come with gifts and callings—from God himself. All of us are given a role to play in Christ's church, regardless of physical or mental abilities, or education, or age, or any of the other human differences. Most people have helping gifts. The call to serve others brings dignity, purpose, belonging, identity, and participation. For example, a woman coming out of drug addiction and poverty was moved to tears of gladness by the simple fact that she was personally invited to help another family in need. She contributed five meaningful dollars and a Saturday morning to helping them. Instead of being seen as just a "needy, troubled" person, she could give to someone else. That meant the world to her, and meant a lot to the family she helped.

Here is a third advantage. *Anyone can help anyone else.* God delights in apparent role-reversals. Counseling in a church context is far richer than "designated expert" meets with "needy client." I'll never forget a story that my pastor told about his sister-in-law. She was a mentally disabled adult who lived with him and his wife. As a result, "Aunt Barbara" was a natural part of our church body. One day while driving to church, our pastor was grumbling about the rainy weather. Aunt Barbara, in her simple five-year-old way, said to him, "But Jack, the sun is always shining. It's just behind the clouds." God used that like a lightning bolt. God is always shining, no matter what his providence displays on the surface. Out of the mouth of a woman with a child's mental life came words of faith and wisdom that blessed the pastor of a church of 800 people. That's the body of Christ!

Here is a fourth advantage. You have *freedom to be completely open about Christ*. The life-rearranging significance of God's gift of himself in Word and in Person is not off limits. You can participate together in his gifts of Scripture, worship, prayer, sacraments, and bearing one another's burdens. The means of grace come naturally in a church context. It comes naturally to talk about knowing the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent—which is the hope of life in a world of death. The counseling implications could not be deeper.

Here is a fifth advantage. Christian fellowship makes it *natural for people to talk about the Big Questions*, as well as the practicalities of problem-solving. You can ask pointed existential questions.

- “What are you living for?”
- “Where are you looking to find your identity?”
- “In stressful situations, when you are tempted to anxiety or irritation, who are you trusting?”
- “Whose kingdom are you actually serving?”
- “There is a tension between the good and the bad in each of us. How do you deal with your inner contradictions?”
- “Are you spending your life longing for things that will finally end up disappointing you, that will leave you with nothing but regrets and losses?”

You can help a person face the reality that God comprehensively assesses our lives. You can help a person ask the questions of meaning and mortality. You can help a person understand the significance of Jesus Christ. The church is uniquely equipped to ask, to talk about, and to offer real answers to the biggest, deepest questions.

Local churches flourish as they become places where wise counseling flourishes.

We've looked at three good ways to be oriented to what counseling ministry is about. Envision counseling in terms of Jesus' master purpose to remake us in his image amid all our human struggles. And link counseling to how you pray, so that both operate within the real-world problems that call directly for mercies from God. And locate counseling within the relationships that characterize a community learning to interact about the things that matter. These are good ways to get a feel for what is decisive and

distinctive about how our Christian faith comes at counseling problems. They set a trajectory for you to walk out for the rest of your life.

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You've just read the foundational why, how, and where of counseling ministry. Share it with someone! We will build on that foundation as we move into the rest of this issue. Biblical wisdom is wide and deep, and touches on many different issues. I trust you will find both clear thinking and thoughtful practice.

Here is a glimpse of what is ahead.

We've all been jealous at some point in our lives. It usually reflects our self-serving agenda and the belief that we deserve to have desired people and possessions. It can get ugly. But not all jealousy is bad. Jealousy originates in God and reflects his loving, protective zeal for us. Ed Welch's article, "Who Can Stand before Jealousy?" shows how powerful and destructive human jealousy is, and gives a vision for how to imitate God's good jealousy.

Next, Robyn Huck describes the role of the helper in part 2 of her series on submission. She reminds us that the Christian life is fundamentally an act of submission to God—whether you are in the role of head or helper. Through biblical stories, analogous illustrations, and a case study, "Submission and the Active Role of Helper" shows us what an engaged helper looks like and how the role contributes to God's kingdom.

Brad Hambrick's article "Getting to Know the Experience of Same-Sex Attraction" encourages Christ's people to pursue friendships with those who identify themselves as same-sex attracted (SSA). In the absence of relationship, God's call to love our neighbor is neglected. Hambrick seeks to remedy this estrangement by helping the reader to understand aspects of the SSA experience. Relationships will come more naturally as we grow in understanding and empathy.

As Christians, it can be hard to know what to think about the diagnoses the mental health world uses to describe troubled people. Are they useless because they are based on a secular view of mankind? Or are they helpful because they offer researched and detailed descriptions of common problems? Mike Emler's "What's in a Name? Understanding Psychiatric

Diagnoses” offers a biblically informed perspective for our ministry that helps us to be neither “too cold” nor “too warm” toward these classifications.

In our Counselor’s Toolbox, we offer two “More Than a Proof Text” articles. Both speak to people who feel unworthy of God’s attention and care. Lauren Whitman’s “Jesus invites you to follow him—how will you respond?” describes Jesus’ encounter with Levi, a reviled tax collector. She shows how you can use this gospel story in counseling to help people think through Jesus’ pursuit of unlikely people and his call to discipleship. In our second piece, “You feel ashamed—but Christ is the lifter of your head,” Kristin Silva uses Psalm 3 to minister to a person whose shame is so heavy that it is visible in her physical demeanor. This true story has a powerful ending.

This issue includes two book reviews. The first interacts critically with *Daring Greatly* by Brené Brown, a popular speaker and author on the topic of shame. Myriam Hertzog’s review acknowledges that Brown taps into real issues. But Brown’s explanations and goals are shallow when compared to the riches Scripture offers.

Biblical counseling is what we do at CCEF, and our second review is of a book that covers the history of the movement. Reviewer Sam Williams provides a keen summary of Cameron Fraser’s *Developments in Biblical Counseling*. The book will be of interest to those committed to the practice and growth of the movement.

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