

Queries & Controversies

Q: *What is the place of the gospel and God's grace in biblical counseling?*

A: The Bible speaks of God's grace in the good news of Jesus Christ. When Jesus opened the minds of His disciples to understand the Scriptures, He explained to them the gracious things concerning Himself. The Bible is *about* Jesus Christ the Savior and Lord; therefore, biblical counseling is *about* Jesus Christ the Savior and Lord.

The Bible speaks to sinful human beings in order to "be of sin the double cure, cleanse me of its guilt and power." Jesus spoke to His disciples about repentance, the forgiveness of sins, and making disciples. The Bible is *about* making sinners into children of the Father; therefore, biblical counseling is *about* making sinners into children of the Father.

The Bible speaks to equip Christians to minister God's truth in God's way as servants of the gospel of grace. Jesus taught His disciples to minister like their gracious Master. Biblical counseling carries a gracious message, and biblical counselors embody a gracious method: loving candor, humility, boldness, prayerful dependency, wisdom, gentleness, authority, kindness, realism, persistence, courage, flexibility, self-sacrifice, shepherdly pursuit, patience. The Bible is *about* equipping counselors to minister the whole counsel of God; therefore, biblical counseling is *about* equipping counselors to minister the whole counsel of God.

What then is the place of God's grace and gospel in biblical counseling? That is rather like asking, "What is the place of water and carbon in human physiology?" The gospel is the fundamental material of biblical counseling. Every part of biblical counseling is made of gospel and grace, from understanding

people and their problems to solving those problems.

Why do people wonder whether grace is central to biblical counseling? There are three possible reasons.

First, many people think that the Bible mainly functions with a rather narrow scope, giving a formula to get people saved and then telling them what to do. Perhaps that is the only way they've seen Scripture used. From that perspective, all a biblical counselor might say to people is, "Here's how to accept the gospel so that you'll go to heaven. Now, until then, do this. Don't do that. Shape up. Just say No. Be a good person." Such moralizing, however, is anti-biblical because the Bible does not tack willpower and self-effort onto grace. Paul settled that question in Galatians! The works and lusts of the flesh are replaced by the fruit and desires of *the Spirit*, God's supreme gift of grace.

The indwelling Spirit works to change us in the practical details of life. God's self-revelation becomes the environment we live in; God's promises become the food we live on; God's commands become the life we live out. Can anyone doubt that biblical counseling worthy of the name is a ministry of God's own power in the gospel, changing people both inwardly and outwardly?

Here is a second reason people ask about the place of grace in biblical counseling. Biblical counselors aim for practical obedience. Many people think that emphasizing obedience to God's commands means ignoring or contradicting the free grace of the gospel. But free grace is effective grace. It is no treat to be forgiven adultery and yet remain adulterous. It is no glory to God to forgive anger and yet leave people prone to angry outbursts. It is no honor to the gospel if anxiety can be forgiven yet people who are nervous wrecks continue to live in unbelief. It is no advance for God's kingdom to forgive self-centered people if they do not learn in some measure how to consider the interests of others. It does no good to either the world or the Church if forgiven war-makers do not learn

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how to become practical peacemakers. God is in the business of making disciples through the grace of the gospel. The Spirit will produce His desires and His fruit, and biblical counseling is a servant of such practical and sweet-tasting changes.

The third reason people ask about the place of grace in biblical counseling is that would-be biblical counselors sometimes fall short of being biblical. Real failings—in doctrine and life, in counsel and manner—contradict what we profess and intend. Aspiration outstrips attainment. What biblical counselor has not failed

in pastoral wisdom while intending to minister the counsel of God? The solution to this problem is short and sweet: biblical counselors need to become more biblical. We need to ask God to reveal our shortcomings; we need to repent of folly; we need to seek the God who gives wisdom without reproaching; we need to humbly learn from those with greater skills and maturity.

The place of grace? Biblical counseling is the ministry of God's grace to individuals, just as biblical preaching is the ministry of God's grace to the multitudes.

—*David Powlison*