

Editorial

Counsel and Counseling: Christ's Message and Ministry Practice Go Together



by DAVID POWLISON

The Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF) was founded 50 years ago with a mission to articulate, develop, practice, teach, and propagate distinctively biblical counseling. When any person's struggles are rightly understood, the mercies of Jesus Christ directly connect. The Savior of the world is specifically relevant to personal, interpersonal, psychological, emotional, and behavioral problems. God meets people in the very places they are weak, confused, wandering, and self-absorbed. The Holy Spirit causes faith, love, and wisdom to flourish in the very places where anxiety, anger, anguish, and addiction consume us. Have mercy upon us, most merciful Father.

As God's children, you and I have a part to play. Wise counseling ministry is one means of his grace. Honest conversations connect real struggles to relevant mercies. In this year of jubilee, we at CCEF are celebrating a counseling mission that we now share with churches and other ministries around the world. The *Journal of Biblical Counseling* aims to further articulate, develop, practice, teach, and propagate it.

But back in 1968 the very idea that *counseling* is in the DNA of Christian ministry was a truth in its infancy. There was a vacuum in the evangelical world. No books communicated a deep and consistently Christian understanding

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of specific personal and interpersonal struggles. No theologians connected the dots between where people actually struggle and how Christ intervenes. No ministry practitioners embodied and called for a distinctively Christian approach to counseling ministry. No schools taught how churches might do this well and wisely.¹

Yet, every Christian intuitively knows that the Bible's *counsel* is true. So, for example, when I say Psalm 23 to myself, lingering over each phrase, every word lands relevantly. My life depends on the watchful mercies of the one who willingly restores my soul—and he is bringing me home. David's life experience inhabited every word of Psalm 23. The Holy Spirit inhabits every word. And when I inhabit every word, I live. Every Christian has an intuitive feel for this. The Bible's counsel—God's message about how reality actually works—is uniquely personal, always relevant, and simply true. We are not reading just one more theory about human nature. We are encountering the person who intends that we need him and know him, trust him and love him. God's counsel reveals himself.

In the light of who he is, you discover who you truly are: a dependent creature, a stray and renegade, a beloved child, a much afflicted human being. You learn that life is a stormy conflict between true and false, good and evil, right and wrong, faith and fear, love and hate, refuge and threat, life and death. You awaken to the everyday, cosmic drama in which you fully participate. You come to know the Giver of life even when you must walk through the valley of the shadow of death. The Bible's *counsel* awakens us, reorients us, and redirects us.

But what about the practice of *counseling*? Should churches and mere Christians step into complex personal and interpersonal problems simply because the Bible contains life-changing *counsel*? Should we get involved with victims of abuse, with volatile marriages, with strugglers overwhelmed by depression or panic, with people in the grip of addictions? Can life-giving counsel inhabit honest, life-rearranging conversations—or is God's merciful

¹ Counseling ministry was known, valued, and practiced by wise Christians in earlier generations. See Thomas Oden's *Pastoral Counsel*, in *Classical Pastoral Care* series, Volume 3. But the idea and skillful practice of distinctively Christian counseling had been lost for over 100 years. See E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization*.

and realistic truth limited to books, sermons, hymns, and prayers?! *Scripture teaches, illustrates, and assumes that we can, should, and will counsel.* Those finding comfort in their particular afflictions can comfort those facing any affliction (2 Cor 1:4). Those finding mercy for their own weaknesses and sins can deal gently and persistently with other ignorant and wayward people (Heb 3:12–13, 4:16–5:3). Those who are wise know how to draw out the deep purposes of the human heart, and then know how to speak words that heal (Prov 20:5, 12:18). Wherever any one of us struggles, Christ’s people get involved in the process by which explicit words of life come to be written on our hearts.

Think with me about this activity that we call “counseling” or “psychotherapy.” It is not as esoteric as it sounds. It essentially means a loving, purposeful, probing, attentive, thoughtful, collaborative, candid, patient, constructive, practical, nourishing conversation. You might want to reread that last sentence, and linger over each word. Such conversations are exceedingly precious. They are also remarkably rare. But they are certainly certainly what God calls us to. We need honest interactions about matters of consequence. We need the kinds of conversation that pursue greater realism, self-knowledge, wisdom, faith, and love. Are such conversations in the repertoire of Christian faith and practice? Of course, and may it be so, Amen and Amen!

But 50 years ago, the very *idea* that such counseling ministry is in the DNA of Christian ministry was almost inconceivable.

The secular world had been developing its own counseling theories, practices, and professions since the early 1900s. Liberal Protestants had been feeding off secular approaches since the 1930s. Evangelicals had been doing the same since the 1950s. But in the 1960s, some Christians began asking, “Doesn’t our faith bring something absolutely distinctive to understanding and helping people? Why are we captive to secular theories, methods, and professions?” Those were the right questions to ask. Who does bring true insight for making sense of complex human beings? Who should bring loving expertise to the hands-on care of woeful souls? Who can bring strength for the in-depth cure of wayward souls? Robust and explicit Christian faith answers these questions. But the “talking cures” for what most ails human beings had been constructed in secular terms and defined as an essentially secular task.

Sigmund Freud was the modern pioneer of the talking cure, and is often viewed as the embodiment of esoteric insights and exotic methods. But Freud actually had a common sense understanding of what he was doing.

The [therapist] plays the part of [an] effective outsider; he makes use of the influence which one human being exercises over another.... The [therapist], in his educative work, makes use of one of the components of love. In this work of after-education, he is probably doing no more than repeat the process which made education of any kind possible in the first instance. Side by side with the exigencies of life, love is the great educator; and it is by the love of those nearest him that the incomplete human being is induced to respect the decrees of necessity.²

That translation of the German original sounds stiff to our ears, but the concept is straightforward. A would-be helper influences a struggler through love, seeking to help that person respond more realistically to life's circumstances. Freud's psychotherapy, like every form of counseling, offers discipleship by "speaking truth in love" according to how various theories defined what is true about people. Freud rightly described his psychotherapy as "secular pastoral work." A key implication of his secular pastorate was that he sought to enrich people from their "own internal sources."³ All secular counseling models do secular pastoral work. And all, by their commitments and biases, seek to help people rely more successfully on themselves. There is no one else to rely on.

In contrast, Scripture communicates a very different understanding of the truth about people—far deeper and more dire than any of the secular analyses. Scripture reveals a far different source of true help—far deeper and more wonderful than any of the secular self-salvation projects. They teach people to rely on themselves, but we enrich people by helping them to rely on the Savior of the world. God's call both to biblical understanding and to

² "Some Character Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic Work," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XIV (1916), 312. I have put "therapist" in brackets where Freud's original has "doctor."

³ *The Question of Lay Analysis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 108–109.

active counseling ministry *is* in our DNA. Honest, searching conversations are part of how we help each other to connect the dots between our unruly, confusing life experience and the God who intervenes with mercies.

If counseling is one of the core Christian ministries and an essential means of grace, how does it fit in with other means of grace? The various facets of ministry—public, private, and interpersonal—naturally complement each other. In the following paragraphs, consider how proclamation, meditation, and conversation reinforce each other.

God speaks to all of us together in *public* ministry of Word and prayer. So we participate in worship. We listen well to faithful preaching and teaching. We humbly receive our Lord's Supper. We intercede together to our Father who gives good gifts. Psalm 23 becomes a proclamation and corporate prayer: "Lord, you are our shepherd. When we walk in dark places, we fear no evil because you are with us!"

God speaks to each of us in *private* ministry of Word and prayer. So each of us reads and reflects on Scripture. You meditate and take truth to heart. You journal your insights, concerns, troubles, sins, prayers, joys, gratitude. You seek the Lord personally. You take thought for how you trust, how you confess, how you live wisely this day. Psalm 23 becomes a meditation and personal prayer: "You, Lord, are my shepherd. Restore me. Lead me. I am walking through a dark valley. I will fear no evil, because you are with me."

God speaks to you (and through you) in *interpersonal* ministries of Word and prayer. You can seek honest friendships. You can ask for help and ask how you can help. You can listen well. You give help. You engage in the give and take of a small group. You seek for yourself or offer someone else a season of counseling. You seek or offer ongoing mentoring. You pay attention to role models of honest faith. You seek to live as a role model of honest faith. You are intentional about life-on-life caring for one another. Psalm 23 becomes a friend's encouragement to you: "The Lord is your shepherd. Though you are walking through this valley of death, don't be afraid. He is with you."⁴

⁴ Here I am discussing only ministries of Word and prayer. Ministries that meet practical needs—hospitality, mercy, practical helping, administration—operate side by side with Word ministries. We see this throughout the life of Jesus, in the early church (Acts 6), and in all times and places (e.g., 1 Peter 4:8–11).

Counseling is one of the core ministries of Christ's people. What a great rediscovery that wise conversations are a necessity, alongside wise preaching, teaching, worship, evangelism, mercy, justice, administration, and personal devotion.

And it is happening. The tide is turning. Fifty years ago, counseling as a core ministry of the church was unthinkable. But we who love biblical counseling are seeing a significant change when we speak in churches and schools. Even ten years ago, the most common question, either asked directly or implied, was this: "Should the church really get involved in people's complex personal, interpersonal, emotional, and psychological problems? Aren't these someone else's responsibility?" Now the most common question is this: "Of course we should get involved. How can we do it better and more faithfully?"

A change is happening before our very eyes. Biblical counseling is taking root and bearing fruit. The Lord's wise counsel and wise counseling ministry are learning to walk hand in hand.

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Once you understand that counseling is one of Christ's core ministries, you are immediately faced with a host of particular questions. For example,

- What specific counseling *methods* help with specific problems?
- What are the theological *foundations* of ministry?
- How do we understand and address particular *problems*?
- How do we engage current hot topics in our *culture*?
- How do we unpack the *relevance* of specific Scriptures?
- What is our *vision* for counseling ministry in the body of Christ?

This issue of *JBC* contains an article from each of these categories. Throughout 2018, we will seek both to reinforce foundations and to develop implications.

Our first article presses into one of the fine-grained details of marriage counseling. Constructive and productive communication is not an easy task, and interpersonal conflict takes many forms. When a spouse withdraws or shuts down, it creates a specific challenge. In "Helping a Spouse Who Withdraws during Conflict," Aaron Sironi and Lauren Whitman describe the problem of withdrawing and how it damages the marital bond. They describe a process of

growth for withdrawers, and illustrate that process through a case study.

Our next article digs into the theological foundations of counseling. How do we understand human complexity? The Bible gives three foundational categories that orient us as we engage a struggler. But counselors have a tendency to focus on only one of the three, either on good things, or bad things, or hard things. Mike Emler's "Loving Others as Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners" keeps us oriented to all three realities. Part 1 of his article lays out the biblical premises and discusses the first category. We are saints who need confirmation of our identity in Christ. Part 2 (in our next issue) will complete the picture.

Alasdair Groves's "Nourishing Your Emotional Life" explores one of the specific goals of counseling. How do you develop a healthy, godly emotional life? How do you help someone else grow theirs? Many counseling approaches are suspicious of emotions, and teach stoic self-control. Other counseling approaches glorify emotions, and teach free expression of feelings. Christian faith has been used to justify both extremes. But Groves pursues the full range of *godly* emotions. The article speaks of six spiritual practices that gradually remake our emotional life in God's image. Some of these may surprise you!

Biblical wisdom calls for us to interact with our culture and to redeem what we are hearing and seeing. The word *brokenness* has become a popular way to describe painful human experiences. Many things are broken in our lives, and Scripture's way of discussing this is uniquely rich—and takes a radical, counterintuitive turn. In "Speaking of Brokenness," I highlight seven interconnected ways that the Bible portrays brokenness.

The question that animates biblical counseling ministry is how to connect honest human struggles with God's mercy and truth. The experience of "burnout" is one of those honest struggles. How does specific Scripture connect? In a More Than a Proof Text article, Brenda Pauken probes the fascinating story of the prophet Elijah and the momentous events in 1 Kings. In his pursuit of Israel's repentance, God called Elijah to many harrowing acts of faithfulness and service. Though the Bible doesn't use the term *burned out*, Elijah did burn out. He became overwhelmed with discouragement, fear, and exhaustion. Pauken unpacks how his story can minister grace to a burned-out person.

Our final article is a resource for you to read and pass on to others. The Biblical Counseling Coalition (BCC) was formed in 2011 with a three-fold purpose: to create fellowship among biblical counselors, to provide a central place for information on events and resources, and to articulate a clear and winsome standard of biblical counseling beliefs and best practices. As part of fulfilling this third goal, the BCC has written a Confessional Statement. That statement is presented here. I hope it will serve as a resource that anchors you, your church, and your ministry in a biblical vision for counseling.

The Journal of Biblical Counseling

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

www.ccef.org

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