

Editorial

Let's Celebrate This Golden Anniversary



by DAVID POWLISON

Biblical counseling was a mustard seed in 1968 when CCEF was founded. The mission was (and is) simple. *Put the particular woes and wanderings of actual human beings on the same page with Jesus Christ.* Counseling is our touch point for doing that, because that is where a person's troubles become the focus of an intentional conversation.

What was a mustard seed in 1968 actually has a long and deep history. For starters, that mission is on every page of the Bible! And in all times and places, wise Christian people have loved others by intuitively connecting life's struggles to Christ's mercies. An extensive legacy of hymns, prayers, testimonies, and pastoral care literature connects the dots between life and Christ. But that legacy of wisdom had not been updated. The church didn't see counseling as a normal part of ministry. When intuitive wisdom is not made conscious and intentional, it can slip from view.

And the church was not engaging the fine-grained observations, theories, and practices of the modern psychotherapies. So there are compelling reasons for us as Christians to bring refreshed wisdom to the counseling field. The theories and practices express the universal tendency to not listen to what God says. Romans 1:19–22 vividly describes the human compulsion to repress the knowledge of God. That repression has consequences. Lose sight of God, and

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you can't really understand a person. A case-wise clinician comes to know innumerable facts about the inner workings and tendencies of human beings, and yet a true assessment of those psychological dynamics proves elusive. The great 20th century intellectual project to come up with a true and universal personality theory—an understanding of the human heart—simply failed. All the theoreticians had à priori excluded the key reality. In the final analysis, everything about a human being operates either for God or against him. Every desire and belief is either true or skewed. Every hope or fear is either realistic or illusory. Every attitude of our hearts and every interaction with others comes weighted, either serving the kingdom of God or enslaved to the kingdom of self.

Wisdom also refreshes our understanding of what a human being ought to be like. Here is the true definition of human flourishing: *love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith* (1 Tim 1:5). Theories and therapies are predisposed to never say that those twelve words describe what it means to be fruitfully human. They can never give a definition that presupposes kneeling before the God and Father who has given the inexpressible gift of his beloved Son. Their counseling can never aim for a goal that involves needing life-saving mercies.

But it is a true common grace that secular theories and practices always retain an instinct for the first word in that definition of human flourishing: *love*. Like most thoughtful people and most religions, they value human kindness and certain other aspects of person-to-person goodness. They witness and grieve the pain and misery caused by bad behavior, bad feelings, bad thoughts, and bad experiences. They know that caring for others is better than narcissism, arrogance, manipulation, revenge, and self-righteousness. To be cherished is far better than to be despised. Hope is far better than despair. Safety is far better than danger. Sanity and realism are far better than paranoia and delusion. Treating others well and being treated well is far better than all forms of using, misusing, mistreating, abusing, and betraying. A constructively purposeful life is far better than a pointlessly self-destructive lifestyle. To be part of the solution is far better than being part of the problem. And so forth!

So they do see something of good and evil. Yet they see in a glass darkly. They stumble over the other eleven words in this definition of

human flourishing: *from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.* Why the vast blind spot when it comes to understanding motivation? They systematically misread the heart. They suppress the God-centeredness of a true understanding of psychological health. A “pure heart” means that you are reorienting to the living God. You are resisting the madness in your heart’s instinctual desires and fears. A “good conscience” means you are learning to evaluate all things as they truly are. You are reorienting to God’s own evaluation of himself and you, other people and circumstances, right and wrong, true and false, worthy and worthless. A “sincere faith” means you are placing your fundamental confidence in the mercies of Jesus Christ. You are reorienting away from confidence in yourself, others, money, achievements, and the 10,000 other false gods.

No psychotherapy aims for this fundamental reorientation of heart, conscience, and faith.¹ It’s never the goal of counseling. And wherever formal counseling theory and therapy has touched the life of the church, the secular psychologies defined the terms and set the agenda. Jesus Christ’s particular understanding of our troubled hearts, our troubling behavior, and our troublesome circumstances is essentially irrelevant. His active purposes and mercies on our behalf are effectively neutered. There’s no reason to mention him. He’s in the “religion” category, not the “how you live your life” category.

And so it really matters that we articulate the reality that “Counseling should be systematically biblical.” That was a *radical* idea in 1968! Imagine, Jesus Christ and his Scriptures have comprehensive relevance. Human beings are dependent on the God who made and sustains, who assesses every careless word and impulse, who has come in person to save us from ourselves. This reality has wide-ranging, systematic implications for accurately understanding every human being, and for addressing each person’s deepest problems. It was radical, and it’s still radical. Christ alone illumines what is most deeply wrong and begins the most wonderful making right.

¹ To misread motives also creates blind spots regarding the nature of love and goodness in human relationships. For example, secular views cannot truly understand the dynamics of forgiveness, submission, self-sacrifice, and suffering, and why the various forms of consensual sexual immorality violate love.

And so it also really matters that we cast vision for the reality that “Churches should organize faithful counseling ministries.” That was a very *unusual* take on the cure of souls in 1968. It’s still unusual, but it is becoming less so. Faithful Christian ministry necessarily involves patient, probing counseling practice. As I said earlier, intuitively wise Christians have always reached out to help the weak, encourage the faint-hearted, and admonish the unruly. But what was intuition is increasingly becoming mission.

If Christ’s understanding and help are in fact relevant and life-giving, then it makes sense that we need places where the innumerable implications can be worked out. If Christ is a shepherd who meets people in their innumerable points of need, then of course we make places where strugglers can be helped to know him. If Christ calls us to do counseling as a ministry of speaking truth in love, then it is natural that we nurture places where the innumerable skills can be taught and formed through practice.

“Faith takes a vision, takes a dream into a mission.”² The vision for distinctively *Christian* counseling first became an institutional mission when Jay Adams and John Bettler founded CCEF in 1968. Throughout the past fifty years that vision of Christ’s wisdom has spread to become the mission of countless churches, schools, ministries, and individual lives all over the world.

It’s worth celebrating. Of course, the golden anniversary of a good marriage does not celebrate a fifty year run of shining successes and one long honeymoon! It celebrates the grace of God, slow growth, and persevering grit. The golden anniversary of a ministry vision and mission is no different. It’s about the grace of God—many recoveries of vision and fidelity after stagnating or stumbling. It’s about slow growth—a better feel for people and problems, a better feel for God’s ways and words, a better feel for counseling process and change process. And it’s about grit—an enduring and purposeful obedience.

Our Father has given us a wonderful mission. You and I are privileged to put our own woes and wanderings on the same page with Jesus Christ—and he takes us in hand. Then we get to help other people do the same. Let’s all thank our Father for his steadfast love. He has been faithful; he is

² James Ward’s song “Faith Takes a Vision” is from the album *Faith Takes a Vision*, released by Lamb & Lion Records in 1982.

faithful; he will be faithful. Thank Jesus for his mercies. Thank the Holy Spirit for his persistence, patience, and power. Thank God for the life-saving and life-rearranging truth of his Scripture. Thank him for the faith, vision, and mission of those who went before us. Pray that ministries of caring and counseling will be decidedly and distinctively Christian. Pray for your own church, and for yourself, and for us at CCEF, and for ministries of biblical counseling everywhere.

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The *Journal of Biblical Counseling* needs God's strengthening and protecting hand. Pray for us. Writers and editors aim to put wisdom into words. Do you know how hard that is?! It starts with your own heart, because the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Wisdom is personal, alive to God. You can't write or edit well at arm's length, as if you are just assembling words about a "topic." Wisdom sets a high bar—to simultaneously communicate what is true about people and about God. That's serious business. We deal with the living God; we deal with the fine china of people's lives. We must be honest as well as true, or else "truth" will float 10,000 feet above the ground in realms of theory, not where people live and die. And readers need wisdom just as much, for all the same reasons. May God enable every one of us to take weighty matters to heart ourselves, and may he teach us how to communicate his reality relevantly to others.

Let me now briefly describe the articles in this issue.

We begin by exploring what it means that God's people are described as a holy priesthood (1 Peter 2:5). To most of us, the word *priest* connotes a separate and exclusive caste of religious professionals. But in "The Priority of the Priesthood for Human Identity," Ed Welch shows us how, as believers, we are all priests. We live before a God who comes near and who invites us to come near to him. The priesthood of all believers was a rediscovery of the Reformation. Follow Ed's logic, and you will rediscover it for yourself.

Our next article addresses elemental parenting questions. What do I have to do so my kids will be responsive, happy, constructive, and godly?! Parents are often looking for a list of do's and don'ts that produces a guaranteed

outcome. Julie Lowe gives something better in “Parenting by Faith—Not Formula.” She debunks myths of the “ideal family” and “surefire parenting techniques.” God teaches us to parent the way he parents us—and he is never formulaic.

Mike Emlet’s “Loving Others as Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners” continues his discussion of three foundational categories for understanding ourselves and others. In Part 2, he unpacks the categories of sufferer and sinner. Scripture models taking the time to understand a person’s experience of suffering. And Scripture models winsome ways of identifying sin and calling people to faith and obedience.

It is very hard to love someone whose behavior is irrational, erratic, confused, and confusing. In “Caring for Someone with Schizophrenia,” Todd Stryd affirms the difficulty, and then casts vision for what it means to bring realistic hope, help, and perhaps even a measure of healing.

Ed Welch reflects on how biblical counseling has developed in “50 Years: How CCEF Has Grown—and Seeks to Keep Growing.” He describes a process of growth in our understanding of Scripture, our view of the person, and our understanding of Jesus. He relates specific ways this has affected our counseling methodology, and he anticipates further growth as biblical counseling expands its reach as an endeavor of the worldwide church.

Our final offering is a More Than a Proof Text article that explores the question: What is the deepest truth about who you are? Cecelia Bernhardt describes how a troubled woman with a history of unstable relationships found her way into the love of Christ. This story traces how her “identity in Christ” became a reality, not an abstraction.

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