

25 Years of Biblical Counseling:

An Interview with Jay Adams and John Bettler

Conducted by David Powlison

In June, 1993, I had the opportunity to sit down with Jay Adams and John Bettler to get their reflections on twenty-five years of partnership in biblical counseling. Jay was the founder of biblical counseling, of the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF), and of this journal, which he edited from 1977 to 1992. John has been the director of CCEF for almost twenty years. Let's jump right in on the conversation.

Powlison: Jay and John, you two go back over twenty-five years, to the initial days of nouthetic counseling at Westminster Seminary [Philadelphia, PA] and CCEF. How did you come to know each other?

Adams: I first met John when he was a student at seminary. I was a pastor in New Jersey and had started to teach part-time at Westminster in 1963.

Bettler: Yes, I graduated from Westminster in 1967. Jay came full-time during my last year. He taught me public speaking and preaching.

Adams: Did you take the course in pastoral theology the first year I taught it? That first year it was horrible!

Bettler: No, the year before you came I took that and another counseling course with the man who preceded you, a thoroughgoing Rogerian. Most of the students in the course didn't seem to care about the question, "How do we square this with what we're learning down the hall from Cornelius Van Til about biblical presuppositions?" But you came in and taught us a section on Mowrer right after your summer with him in 1965. That first exposed me to your biblical, presuppositional re-

thinking of counseling.

Powlison: John, I've heard that you were Jay's first trainee in counseling.

Bettler: In 1967 Jay was attending the church I was pastoring. He said, "We've got this thing going on in New Jersey. Why don't you come with us?" He had started a counseling center in northern New Jersey. I began going up with him weekly. I didn't do much. I was eating the crumbs from Jay's table!

Adams: Whoa, that means I was a producer of crumbs! You say I invited you. I remember it a bit differently, that you were curious. You asked me, "What are you doing up there?" So I told you. Maybe it was a little of both.

Bettler: You had been doing counseling for about a year; then I came along as the first trainee.

Adams: It wasn't planned. It was a casual thing.

Bettler: Nothing about the counseling and the counseling center was planned then. It was all by the seat of the pants. Jay would do something on a Monday, make it up in the moment; then he'd teach it on Tuesday in class at Westminster.

Adams: It wasn't quite that bad—more like the next week! I at least gave it a week's thought and study. It was on-the-job learning, on-the-job teaching, on-the-job training. This is vivid in my mind: the first time you came with me to sit in on counseling. We had a couple hours drive each way, and I spent about ten hours counseling with John observing. John was driving me home. I was dead tired. I noticed John started shaking his head, not even saying anything. Finally he popped out with, "You can't talk to people that way." I was too tired to argue, so I just sat there and didn't say anything. Then about five or ten minutes later he said, "Well, maybe *you* can talk to people that way, but I can't." I didn't say a word. But eventually John found out you can talk to people in whatever way helps them. Someone who really

wants help wants a counselor who can be tough with him in the right way.

Bettler: I remember that. And I even remember the woman's face in the case I was referring to. You were sitting behind the desk. A co-counselor was in one corner. I was the trainee in the other corner. Here is this woman in her sixties—and you were talking *loudly*. You were trying to give her encouragement. You were labeling her sin. And when you gave encouragement, you'd get excited and stand up sometimes! It looked overwhelming to me.

Adams: But she responded well.

Bettler: She did. But the only training I'd had up until then was of a Rogerian strain where you didn't say anything direct, and what you said you said nicely and softly. But you guys came on like gangbusters. There was a period of time after that when I thought of confrontation as being loud. That was a down side, that in order to counsel you had to be loud and exuberant. It's not that at all. You have to operate within the context of truth, and who the counselee is, and also within the context of how God in His providence has made you. If you aren't an exuberant person, counseling won't work if you start shouting.

Adams: Also, as you sat in on enough cases over that year, you saw *every* kind of emotion exhibited. The circumstances and the person determined the manner of approach. That woman said, "I haven't got any hope." She needed hope, and I got a little exuberant at how much good God had for her. "Look what the Scripture says here!" About all she'd been hearing from people was, "Yeah, I know, life is tough, then you die."

Powlison: How did CCEF come into existence?

Bettler: When you look how thin the thread was, God was in it in an amazing way. At the beginning several other people had joined Jay to start a Christian counseling center. But it soon became clear that they had a different agenda, a professional agenda, not a pastoral agenda. They defined professional as someone who was trained psychologically, not someone trained theologically. When I'm identified as co-founder, it's a bit inaccurate. I was the pastor of the church in Hatboro. In 1968 Jay moved operations from New Jersey into my church, and we started over. That's when CCEF really launched.

Adams: It quickly became apparent that other pastors besides John might like to get training. At Hatboro we began to invite pastors in. They would observe cases during the day and evening, and during a two-hour supper break we would talk counseling.

Bettler: At first you and I led that supper seminar, one day a week. Eventually George Scipione joined us.

When I went to Chicago, he ran CCEF for a few years, while pastoring nearby.

Adams: Over the next couple of years it started to grow and gradually got a little more formal. But CCEF was small during those years. We had two rooms for counseling, with a little teeny desk that we'd take out of the closet and set up in the entrance way for the secretary. We stored the phone in the desk drawer and plugged it in when we were there to counsel. It was a shoe-string operation, but God began to bless. People kept coming. I was teaching at Westminster, doing CCEF, and writing books that began to pull in a response. It became clear that this biblical counseling was a tiger that was going to grow. I didn't want to hold the tiger by the tail. CCEF then was just a once-a-week training vehicle for Westminster students and a few pastors from the community. It was a one-horse operation.

Bettler: You wheeled it out of the closet one morning a week, then wheeled it back in at night, and it was gone. I came back from Illinois to head CCEF in '74. In the Fall of '75 we moved into the building we have now. A year later Jay moved to Georgia to devote himself to writing.

Powlison: What were your purposes in starting CCEF as a center for distinctively biblical counseling?

Bettler: I've always said you could sum it up in two statements. First, the Bible has to shape everything you do in counseling, both content and method. The Bible is the foundation and authority for counseling. Second, counseling belongs to the Church of Jesus Christ. Counseling is ministerial.

Adams: I agree with those two. A third is that the method for teaching counseling has to involve the element of discipleship. You have to show as well as tell. Teachers need to do counseling. Students need to see counseling in operation. So many people have said to me over the years, "I can read it in the books; but when I see it, then I understand it."

Bettler: I would say that the first two are principles. The third is an important method of operating to teach those principles.

Adams: It is a way of operating, but it's also foundational. So often in the churches and seminaries the guy in the street and the guy in the classroom aren't together. But when you have teachers and theoreticians who are doing the work of counseling, that brings unity. I think this is an emphasis that has been there from the beginning and continues. A well-known Christian counselor once said to me, "I love to teach counseling; I don't like to do counseling." I think you have to love both. You have to love people and seeing people grow.

I want to say something more about your second principle. CCEF had to make a decision from the beginning. Was it going to be a counseling center or an educational center? It has both in its name, but you can't be both *equally*. Early on, the decision was made that we're fundamentally going to use counseling as a means of teaching. Teaching is first because we want to train people to get counseling back into the local churches.

Bettler: I think one way CCEF has expanded on your vision is including the lay person as well as the pastor. Your burden has always been the pastor.

Adams: In my opinion he's the most neglected guy in the whole Christian world. Nobody helps him. All sorts of writers produce and sell books for laymen and have conferences for them. But who cares for the pastors?

Bettler: I agree with emphasizing the pastor. But I think we must focus on both. We've seen over the years that in a good church active lay people do more counseling than the pastor. He needs to be a good counselor himself. But he doesn't need to do it all.

Adams: I have no problem training lay people. I do it in my own congregation right now, teaching two courses. However, I've always thought CCEF ought to be aimed at the pastoral level and let laymen glean what they can from it. You and I don't differ radically. We end up in the same place, whether we come at it from the east or from the west.

Powlison: I've been pretty quiet up till now. Let me jump in and pose a dilemma for you. The issue of how psychology relates to biblical counseling refuses to lie down. You built biblical counseling with an epistemology that was carefully thought out. You applied Van Til's insight into biblical presuppositions in two ways. Point 1: You've both made clear that presuppositionally biblical counseling builds the house of counseling with Scriptural principles rather than building with secular theory and therapy. Point 2: You've both made clear that biblical counselors can learn things from observations made by secular psychologists and can be prodded by their theories and practices. Any secular field is useful if and only if biblical presuppositions reinterpret what secularists see and distort by their presuppositions.

Here's the dilemma. We get flack both coming and going. When biblical counselors critique psychological theory and therapy, when we say even the observations may be selective and distorted, we are described as simplistic psychology-bashers who naively think the Bible contains every fact. Yet when we reinterpret a secular observation, or take a secular word or practice and redefine it to give it biblical

shape, or commend—with appropriate qualifications—a secularist, then we are described as integrationists. Jay, you've often been called a Mowrerian; John, you've been called an Adlerian; I've recently been called a Rogerian.

Adams: No, we're not Rogerian; we're not Mowrerian; we're not Adlerian.

Powlison: But we are seen as too narrow because we've taken Van Til's insight that sin has perverse and pervasive noetic effects and that methods are never neutral. At the same time we're too open—even compromising—because we say biblical truth gives us eyeglasses to learn things from people with whom we basically disagree. It seems we combine vices that are inconsistent with each other.

Adams: Your two points sound great to me.

Bettler: I have no problem with it.

Powlison: Why are you charged with being psychology-bashers and crypto-integrationists at the same time?

Bettler: I think the reason for the problem is that people don't listen carefully or they listen selectively.

Adams: It's unbelievable sometimes. For example, in 1970 I published *Competent to Counsel*, and I explicitly distinguished between the sin of Adam, which is the cause of all our problems, and individual sin. I gave the case of Job and the case of the blind man in John 9. I was as clear as I could make it between things that happen to us and what we do. Yet to this day I get charged with the idea that I think all problems are a matter of personal sin! I go back through my writings sometimes and say, "Look at all the qualifications I use—some, many, a few, often—yet nobody seems to read those." People read right through the qualifications and then call me simplistic.

Bettler: Can I give you a reason why I think that happens?

Adams: Yes, and I think I know what you're going to say.

Bettler: You have a strong, exuberant style; and you argue your case forcefully. You don't give your qualifications the way John Murray did it when he wrote *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*. The weight of your forcefulness is so overwhelming that the qualifications get lost. I also tend to be a bit opinionated, but I'm not as thoughtful ahead of time as you are. When you say things, you have thought through what you want to say. Often I think things through as I'm saying them.

Adams: You're sharper than I am though.

Bettler: We're both opinionated; we both can be loud. I don't think people hear the qualifications because it's not an academic, detached presentation.

Adams: On the other hand you have to remember the setting into which biblical counseling first came. There was nothing biblical out there. There was Clyde Narramore reflecting Freud. There were budding Rogerians. There was all the pagan stuff. To wake people up I had to say something fairly loud and fairly sharp. I've always said in my books that I'm doing bulldozer work, knocking down trees, tearing up ground, and laying foundations. I hope others will come to build on the foundation and do the fine interior work on the building. I've often said things like, "Two or three people ought to write on this subject *right now* because what I've written here is only a small beginning." People don't hear that and then accuse me of thinking I've said the final word on something.

Bettler: You have an image. You're the public image. People hear the image; they don't always hear the man.

Powlison: Jay, is John building on your foundation?

Adams: I don't think John builds on my foundation! We're *both* building counseling on the foundation of biblical epistemology. The commitment to be biblical, not just with lip-service but practice, has always unified us.

Bettler: I think that's right. Now I do think there is a difference between Jay and me in style and emphasis. Jay emphasizes the antithesis between belief and unbelief. I emphasize more the—you don't like the word—recycling of error in the light of truth.

Adams: I think "recycling" gives people the wrong idea. It confuses those who don't listen closely or understand the background epistemology. I know what you mean, and I agree with you. But "recycling" calls up the image of an old tin can. Why turn an old, rusty can into something when you have the pristine truth in Scripture?

Bettler: I don't want to argue for the word. Let's come up with a biblical word instead of "recycle," something that captures the reformed world and life view: the Christian reinterprets everything out there because all life is under God's authority.

Adams: I go back to Van Til's view. Go back, dig deep, examine the presuppositions, attack them. Then reshape the whole business in light of Scriptural truth.

Bettler: I agree. Can we come up with a biblical word for what we mean? How about "reconcile"? Or "redeem"?

Adams: They have too much baggage. I'd like to get a biblical label, but I don't believe biblical labels are always necessary or available. You might have to produce a word that adequately and accurately expresses what a biblical Christian does with secular knowledge.

Powlison: I used "reinterpret" in my statement a few minutes ago.

Bettler: You've used "recast," too. Christians have to reinterpret everything, not just psychology. In almost every counseling session, a biblical counselor has to reinterpret what counselees say. If they were processing life biblically, they usually wouldn't be in counseling.

Powlison: Right. A counselor reinterprets or reframes a counselee's world and experience from God's perspective. I continually have to reinterpret my own life experience in the light of truth. I like "reinterpret" because it highlights the content of the belief or theory or system of explanation. A secular psychologist may observe fifty things about people having anxiety attacks. They may all be true and yet fundamentally wrongheaded because his system of interpretation and the goals of his therapy are wrong. I may learn something from that psychologist about what anxious people think or feel or do, things I never knew before. But I need to radically reinterpret it.

Adams: It's not merely reinterpret. Like "recycle," the word seems to give too much credit to what's there. How can you communicate that you are getting to the fundamental presuppositional level? I like "recast," because it seems to me to package the whole, rather than just the part. But, no, that word still doesn't quite capture the process we're talking about. Maybe the "re" in all these words is the problem.

Bettler: It's clear that "recycle" gives the wrong impression to a lot of people.

Powlison: The positive statement of rich biblical truth is much more fundamental than interacting with psychology. And a fundamental antithesis runs through how biblical epistemology looks at things secularists say about people and then do to them in the name of help.

Adams: I want to make sure we keep those fundamental elements in view. What psychologists see about people might contribute out on the thinner edge of biblical teaching where we have general principles that need to be filled in. The large, central core of fundamental biblical principles is what's most important. It's hard to find one word to express what a biblical counselor should do out on that thinner edge. I applaud you in coming up with the word "recycle," John, but I still think the idea is hard to express in a word.

Bettler: It's your word. You gave it to me in Chicago.

Adams: I don't remember that!

Bettler: You did. I presented the concept. I read some long sentence about the Christian's relationship to the behavioral sciences, that it was one of recognizing the antithesis, and then bringing out the distorted truths

that must be reinterpreted from the Scriptures. I finished my sentence; and you said, "That was great, John. Why don't you use the word 'recycle'?"

Adams: I don't remember that. I must have blocked it out! There has been another difference of emphasis between John and me. I think John has changed recently, but for many years he emphasized more the scholar. He's wanted to create a Harvard of biblical counseling. I was more concerned with the pastor who's the practitioner in the field. He's in the front lines, set loose by the seminary with no tools, no biblical ideas about counseling. He flounders out there. I've not written for the scholar or to try to convince the guys who are integrationists. I've written for pastors. That's true. I've written in pastors' language, the way pastors think. I've worked with thousands of pastors over the years. I think I know pretty much how they think.

Bettler: My emphasis has changed because I think we have a team in place that can influence the seminaries. I think we can reach across the board: the pastors in the field, the pastors-to-be before they reach the field, the scholars, the lay people.

Powlison: Let me switch subjects. Jay and John, I've heard innuendoes in some circles of a division between you two. I know both of you. I know you are both men of strong opinions. I know you don't see eye-to-eye on every issue. You've shown that in this interview. But I've always seen the agreement between you as far-reaching and basic. Are your differences fundamental or are they the intramural iron sharpening iron of comrades in a common cause?

Bettler: I think we've already answered the question. Jay and I differ like crazy sometimes; but we hammer it out. The reason we do is because foundationally there is confidence about each other that the Bible is our authority, that counseling belongs in the church, and that unless you start with the God of the Scriptures you don't understand anything about anything.

Adams: I have never questioned John's integrity on these points. On occasion I have questioned where some of the people were at whom John allowed to speak publicly. Those have been my concerns, and I've raised them with John.

Bettler: Your criticisms of me there have been right. I've let some people speak who still should have been learning. They had right commitments but hadn't yet thought through some things biblically. I've been willing to give a guy a lot of rope and let him learn and grow; sometimes I've given people too much rope.

Adams: Maybe I've fostered a spirit in some people who have come into the movement of jumping too fast on someone before he has a chance to grow. I wouldn't

have put such a person up front as quickly as John. And John likes to throw ideas out and see where they lead. He thinks on his feet, as he said. He doesn't mind saying or having other people say things that may be troublesome to listeners as long as it's still in the formative, theorizing, playing-with-it stage. He's willing to hammer it out in the open. I'm more the sort who wants to get something nailed down clearly before I say beans about it publicly. I don't teach about all the things I'm not yet sure of. But John and I have always had great fun hammering out the tough questions together.

Bettler: I think that shows that Jay is a true academician. He just doesn't have an academic demeanor.

Adams: That's why I don't wear ties.

Bettler: He has researched everything he says thoroughly and thoughtfully before he says it. He comes well-prepared, well-armed. I'm not an academician, even though I have a burden to produce a setting that can produce responsible scholarship in biblical counseling. I'm not an academician; I'm a practitioner. I know if I'm going to push the boundaries back a bit, it has to be in a community. So I have no problem in throwing out ideas. I interact with them as people give me their ideas back. I'm not smart enough to figure it out myself.

Adams: I don't agree with John characterizing himself as not an academic or an independent thinker. He's incisive, and he has contributed things that are extremely helpful. Take his teaching this week on how to understand the influence of the past biblically. He stated things I've said, but much more clearly than I ever said them, sharpening and filling it out much more fully.¹

[Pause] There aren't many people, I would venture, who talk to each other the way we do.

Bettler: You are one of two people that I will say just about anything to. Jay has let me say anything I've wanted to say to him, and our friendship has sustained that over the years.

Adams: John has been the kind of person who keeps you alive. You could die without someone who comes along as iron sharpening iron.

Powlison: With fresh questions.

Adams: Yes, I don't think in questions. John shoves them under my nose. That has been good. But you've softened up a bit lately, John. You're getting old! The next stage after mellow is rotten!

Bettler: I've been learning some things lately.

Adams: I've actually learned a little, too. It doesn't show,

¹Bettler's teaching on the influence of the past will be written up in a forthcoming issue of *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*.

but I have!

Powlison: Last question. By every measure, as a movement, biblical counseling is taking off. In the last three or four years there has been a tremendous groundswell in every biblical counseling ministry I know. NANC meetings have quadrupled in attendance. Enrollments in our courses at CCEF have more than doubled. In the last year subscriptions to *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* have gone from 450 to over a thousand. As you look at the phenomenon, what issues face us as a movement? Where do we need to be sharpened? Where are the pitfalls?

Adams: Let me say something before answering the question. That this thing took off in the first place, and is now taking off in a new and fresh way, is unbelievable to me. I was just thinking back to pushing the little desk in and out of the closet and the telephone in the drawer. There has been no money, power, position or anything else in it. If this movement of God's people was not of God, it would have died long ago. John, what are your comments on David's question?

Bettler: The first thing that comes to mind is legalism. I think there is a potential problem that a particular brand of this thing called biblical counseling could become cultic. I'm not exactly sure what I mean by that.

Adams: I think I understand. That's why I wrote the book, *Insight and Creativity*, because I was afraid of that. I saw people using biblical counseling as a recipe, doing things in a canned and refrigerated way. I was very much concerned about it and wrote the book to say so and address it. I think this is a danger.

Bettler: We have to be very clear about the essentials. What pegs should we put in the ground that would define us as "biblical"? Separate those essentials from the ways we might disagree on matters of application, as Jay was telling us this morning. Jay has been saying for years, "We need a confession of faith in practical theology."

Adams: We need confessional statements in preaching as well as in counseling.

Bettler: We're beginning to do that.

Adams: I'm tickled to death to see this happening. I didn't think it would happen in my lifetime, that anybody would take this burden on.

Bettler: It's going to take a long time. It may not be finished in our lifetime.

Adams: Maybe not as long as you think. The Westminster Confession took on everything in theology. This is a narrow area. It ought not to take quite so long.

Bettler: I think there has to be a breadth to it. This is another interesting thing about the movement, by the way. Biblical counseling hasn't been restricted to a

particular type of theology or church or ecclesiology. It has been very broad.

Adams: Amazing!

Bettler: If we could begin to define those fundamentals so we could hold onto the commonalities and don't get sectarian, that would be great.

Powlison: Any other challenges?

Adams: Yes, here's a challenge. The challenge is that I'm going to get dotty or die real fast. John's going to retire and enjoy himself on an island or in a bait shop in New England. Who's going to lead it? Not too many people exist who have been in on all this. We need theoreticians to push the thinking; we need practical administrators who can pull things together organizationally; most of all we need effective practitioners who really know how to counsel and can teach others.

Powlison: I worry about the sectarian tendency; as you mentioned, the fortress mentality. But I also worry about the opposite danger. The integrationist mentality is so strong in our culture. I see people going off the cliff all the time, wooed by psychology's theories and therapies, and despising Scripture. How can we stand on solid ground and yet make this thing grow outward to capture fresh ground. It's easy to say but hard to pull off.

Bettler: You have to be flexible. This is one advantage of looking back over twenty-five years. The note of authority had to be sounded in 1970 when Jay wrote *Competent to Counsel*. Nobody had authority anywhere. But then we entered a period of time when everybody was talking about biblical authority, and they did some strange things with it. Confrontation, responsibility, authority, behavior and teaching became the totality of a lot of people's counseling model, missing other parts of the biblical model. We had to talk about patience, understanding, love, human motivation, and the counseling relationship to balance things out. But it seems to me we've begun to swing back again. Nobody's talking about authority and responsibility—except non-Christians! This time it's the evangelical Christians, not the old liberals, who are leading the way in this victim, irresponsible, "don't be too harsh" emphasis.

Adams: Back then liberalism was outside the evangelical church. But it has gotten in because the integrationists have brought it in. That's why we need a standard, a confession that will balance things properly. A standard gives you something that can stand firm, as cycles come and go, and the church swings from one extreme to the other.

Powlison: Jay and John, we need to wrap up. Thank you very much for taking the time to let the rest of us sit in on your conversation with each other.