

Editorial

Slow Growth



by DAVID POWLISON

Biblical counseling sprouted fifty years ago as an inconspicuous seedling in the vast forest of psychotherapies, psychological theories, and mental health institutions. But what a unique vision and promise! Imagine—relationship with God is *intrinsic* to truly understanding any person’s psyche, problems, and potential. Imagine—Scripture is about the very same all-too-human struggles that all counselors seek to understand and address. Imagine—Jesus Christ actually is the way, the truth, and the life, not only for eternity, but for this life, too.

So traumatic sufferings, identity confusion, broken relationships, anxiety and despair, disordered sexuality, how to find a meaningful life—these and a hundred other derelictions and distresses are the very things the Word of God intends to illumine and redeem. Counseling anyone for “personal and interpersonal problems” means entering someone’s particular tangle of sins and sorrows, graces and felicities, strengths and weaknesses. It means understanding *this* person vis-à-vis God, and dismantling the lies and desires that besiege from outside and well up within. It means coming to terms with unruly experience. So Jesus Christ is no religious add-on. He is intrinsically and pointedly relevant. If Christ is relevant to our actual struggles, then counseling wisdom is in the charter and DNA of Christian ministry. But

David Powlison (MDiv, PhD) is the executive director of CCEF and edits the Journal of Biblical Counseling.

connecting the dots between life and Christ is hard work. It's what thoughtful pastoral theology and loving counseling ministry are meant to do.

That promising vision for how counseling can be an explicitly Christian ministry was a mere seedling in 1968. It grew some in the 1970s. It went through a low period in the 1980s. It has steadily prospered since the early 1990s.

Why has the depth of biblical counseling wisdom and the scope of its influence continued to grow? When ideas and practices express the essence of Christian truth and life, they are intuitively logical to men and women who take Scripture seriously. Thus, biblical counseling is no American fad and export. Vibrant biblical counseling movements have arisen in many countries around the world. It can take root anywhere because it is a straightforward application of Scripture's call to make our words true and helpful. A conversation that is honest, caring, constructive, relevant, and grace-giving is a delight whatever your nationality or tribe, whatever your language or people group. We grow up when we lovingly talk through what is true about ourselves and about God (Eph 4:15, 29). Of course, the form and format of "counseling" looks different in each place. The Spirit and the Word flexibly personalize that message by adapting to every contingency and context. Whether in Montreal or Seoul, New Delhi or Sao Paolo, Christ speaks and enters into what troubles people. As God's children come under his care and counsel, we learn how to care and counsel well with others who struggle.

Five decades ago, biblical counseling sprouted from the formative idea that God has much to do with human troubles and struggles, so he has many things to say. Over that time, this formative notion has grown, blossomed, and borne fruit. In what follows, I will point out a number of significant growth points that emerged in the interactions between the two men who planted that inconspicuous seedling so many years ago.

Jay Adams and John Bettler deserve particular mention as we look back on this growth process. They were the pioneers intellectually and institutionally. Both were pastors. They were friends and colleagues. They were interlocutors and disputants around the common theme that Christian faith should and could illumine all that counseling discovers, assesses, says, and does. That

shared core commitment found expression in two very different personalities, intellectual styles, interests, and priorities. Their dialogue shaped biblical counseling, and shaped the CCEF that they founded.

Adams cast vision in straightforward, simple truths. He was aware of unfinished business, complications, obstacles, hesitations, maybe/maybe nots, hard questions, and nuances. But he put these matters in asides, parentheses, and footnotes. To learn any high-level skill you start simple—whether it's playing the piano, learning a foreign language, understanding Scripture, or counseling wisely. Adams made certain core convictions simple, memorable, and transferable.

Bettler's vision focused on the complexities, the unanswered questions, the difficulty of the task, the reasonable objections raised by critics, and the tendency for simple to harden into simplistic. As you progress in any sphere of knowledge and skill, you realize that the necessary intuitions and skills are not so simple. Bettler pointed out the long road forward into ever-developing wisdom.

Adams laid foundations on which to build. Bettler set trajectories for development. I appreciate both men for very different reasons. If you are wise, you hold fast to basic commitments while listening carefully to your critics and bringing vexing difficulties into focus. If you are wise, you address a proliferation of complexities without ever losing sight of abiding simplicities. Keep your bearings. Keep going forward.

In what follows, I will present eight issues that the two men debated. Biblical counseling began as a rough draft, not a finished product. And given the complexity of Scripture, of people, and of ministry, there will always be a need to refine and further develop wisdom. These eight are not the only issues, but they will give you a fair representation of the trajectories (and the tensions) that have characterized the 50-year development of biblical counseling. For each issue, I will summarize a core conviction formulated by Adams, and then add a summary of complementary points that Bettler raised.

1. Jay Adams affirmed that *by the power of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, a person can change in practical ways*. Adams focused on rapid behavior change and the formation of new habits. On a scale of weeks, significant

To continue reading this article, visit ccef.org/jbc to purchase the individual journal issue or subscribe to the Journal of Biblical 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

Copyright © 2018 CCEF

All rights reserved.