

# 25 Years of Biblical Counseling: An Interview with Jay Adams and John Bettler



Conducted by DAVID POWLISON \_\_\_\_\_

Jay Adams and John Bettler conversed regularly, often weekly, between the mid-1960s and the mid-1990s. That long conversation significantly shaped the development of biblical counseling. In “Slow Growth,” the editorial that opened this issue, I pointed out a number of ways that Bettler set out to develop what Adams had begun. Many current readers of *JBC* are completely unfamiliar with Bettler, and have only a limited or second-hand knowledge of Adams. In this lively interview from 1993,<sup>1</sup> the two men speak for themselves. Both their shared convictions and their differences of emphasis come through clearly. Their interaction also demonstrates the mutual respect and the mutual candor that characterized the relationship. I enjoyed listening in, and I think you will, too! The original article begins below.

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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

<sup>1</sup> This interview was first published in Volume 12:1 of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*.

he edited from 1977 to 1992. John had been the director of CCEF for almost twenty years at the time of this interview. 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 rethinking 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.

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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.

— *John Bettler*

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**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

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*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](http://www.ccef.org)

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