

# Biblical Counseling in Local Churches and Parachurch Ministries



by DAVID POWLISON AND HEATH LAMBERT—

What is the relationship between counseling within a local church and counseling in an outside setting, parachurch or somewhere else? It's an important question. Every person committed to counsel biblically is, by definition, committed to seeing counseling restored as a core ministry of local churches. But the reality is that many biblical counselors practice a significant percentage of their ministry within a parachurch organization. This term, *parachurch*, means “beside the church.” It is counseling done in places such as a counseling center, a school, a chaplaincy, a mission agency, a campus ministry. Is it a contradiction to do counseling “beside the church” instead of solely within the church? Or consider the question from another angle: When biblical counselors say that our goal is to “restore counseling to the church,”<sup>1</sup> what does that mean for parachurch ministries? Are they

<sup>1</sup> This is part of the mission statement for the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF) but others share in this broad goal.

This article is David Powlison's update of an essay he originally co-authored with Heath Lambert. The original appeared in *Biblical Counseling and the Church: God's Care Through God's People*, Bob Kelleman and Kevin Carson, eds., (Zondervan, 2015) pages 349-367

*David Powlison (MDiv, PhD) was the executive director of CCEF and the senior editor of the Journal of Biblical Counseling. He passed away as we were preparing this issue.*

*Heath Lambert (MDiv, PhD) is the senior pastor at First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida. He is the former executive director of the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, and the author of several books on counseling including A Theology of Biblical Counseling*

included or excluded? Valid or invalid?

In this article, we will argue that there is a definable and complementary relationship between local church and parachurch ministries—even to the extent that “the church” includes both local churches and parachurch settings. We will defend that position by covering a wide terrain. We will:

- look at how biblical counseling was born and has grown,
- look at the place of parachurch ministry in Scripture and throughout church history,
- lay out a philosophy for how church and parachurch fruitfully relate,
- sketch how and where people come into maturity as biblical counselors, and
- describe the topography of parachurch ministry roles for men and women committed and trained to counsel biblically, and touch on situations where a Christian counsels entirely outside a Christian context either informally or professionally.

We will now begin with a brief history of the biblical counseling movement.

### **How Biblical Counseling Emerged and Developed**

More than a half century ago, the vision for reestablishing wise, biblical counseling arose within a parachurch context—significantly shaped by a perception of the needs of local church ministry. Jay Adams, an experienced local pastor, was serving as a professor of practical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary (Glenside, Pennsylvania). He was assigned to teach a course on pastoral ministry. Keenly aware of the inadequacies and failures of pastors—including himself—in the area of pastoral counseling, he wrestled with difficult questions and problems such as:

- How can we be faithful to God as we seek to help struggling people?
- What should we teach pastors-to-be about their responsibility for hands-on pastoral care? Should the church’s practice be subordinate to secular models of understanding people and problems?
- What does the Bible say specifically about people’s deepest personal and interpersonal problems?

Adams concluded that Christian faith speaks directly and relevantly to these questions. And so it was at a seminary—a parachurch organization—that biblical counseling was born.

It is not surprising that the next steps of growth also took place in parachurch settings. In 1968, John Bettler, a local pastor, joined with Adams to found the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF) for the dual purpose of doing counseling while training counselors.<sup>2</sup> The mission of the organization was to think biblically about the issues of living

---

## It was at a seminary—a parachurch organization—that biblical counseling was born.

---

in order to equip the church to meet counseling-related needs. At the time, local churches lacked vision and skill for counseling ministry. Pastors had received little, if any, training in the Christian cure of souls. They needed to catch a vision and learn skills somewhere. So building on what was started at Westminster, CCEF and other parachurch ministries<sup>3</sup> stepped in to develop the first initiatives in model-building, in training and education, in offering counseling services, and in developing published resources. From the start, the goal was to serve local churches, to help God’s people grow in grace and wisdom, to help local pastors become more faithful, probing, and effective in their care of souls. And, from the start, the goal was also to serve the universal church, including other parachurch ministries—mission agencies, retreat centers, seminaries, Christian schools, and the like—to

<sup>2</sup> For more on the relationship between Adams and Bettler, their similarities of conviction and their often striking differences of emphasis, see my editorials from volume 32: “Counsel and Counseling: Christ’s Message and Ministry Practice Go Together,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 32:1 (2018), 2-9; “Let’s Celebrate this Golden Anniversary,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 32:2 (2018), 2-7; and “Slow Growth,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 32:3 (2018), 2-11.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to CCEF and Westminster Theological Seminary, first generation parachurch ministries included the Biblical Counseling Foundation (BCF); the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors (NANC; now the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, ACBC); the *Journal of Pastoral Practice* (now the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*); and Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing.

To continue reading this article, visit [ccef.org/jbc](http://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](http://www.ccef.org)

Copyright © 2019 CCEF

All rights reserved.