

Counseling, Apologetics, and Calling: A Tribute to David Powlison



by WILLIAM EDGAR

Editor's note: David Powlison served as the editor of this journal for the last twenty-seven years. Friends and colleagues submitted many tributes in his honor. This one was written shortly before David's passing on June 7, 2019.

Two images can be seen in the political landscape these days: walls and bridges. David Powlison knows how to erect walls when need be. But he also can build bridges, even to views that are not founded on the same fundamental principles he espouses.

When David was a bit healthier, he used to lecture in my introduction to apologetics classes. The subject was “Our Psychologized Culture.” These were not the usual attacks on the therapeutic turn in the West, though there was plenty of critique. What he did was take us on a journey, a trip that led from the rationalist Enlightenment mentality to the varieties of psychology-infused contemporary outlooks. These lectures were rich and deeply informed by specific movements and specific people, from Freud, to Rogers, to Maslow, and beyond. In this way, David's work interfaces profoundly with my own field of Christian apologetics (the defense and

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commendation of the Christian faith). The more I listened to him the more I realized we are on the same team, and even engaging in a parallel ministry.

Here are a few of the ways that is so.

First, David Powlison's counseling begins and ends with the infinite, personal God of the universe. It is completely at home with what the Bible says, and what the great confessions say about God. In contrast, the counsel offered by our culture is generally indifferent to God. It is always striking to me how, when a terrible incident occurs, such as a school shooting or a downed airplane, the featured experts brought in to comment on television are not ministers, but psychologists. Though some bring helpful analyses, most of them do not connect these tragedies to the deepest issues of life: meaninglessness without God, sin and anger against God and neighbor, and the like. But David's counseling, like apologetics, engages these questions of meaning and morality even in times of senseless suffering.

A second connection is the biblical counselor's focus on the human heart. It is from the heart that the issues of life flow. It is not what goes into the mouth but what comes out of it that corrupts us, Jesus said, because what comes out of the mouth originates in the heart (Matt 15:11,18). To be sure, some kinds of apologetics are so rationally oriented that they don't highlight the heart as the Bible does. But the best apologetic tradition is profoundly aware of the heart. This is why our Lord chastised the rich young ruler for his inability to give away his possessions. Though he was upright, he had an unhealthy attachment to them because of his hardened heart (Mark 10:17–27). Like the best apologists, the skilled counselor knows how to ferret out the misplaced priorities of our hearts, and suggest ways to reorient them toward the way of life.

A third convergence is a love for the Bible. For the apologist, the Bible is the ultimate authority, the final reference point for all questions of meaning and life orientation. For the biblical counselor, the Bible is the source for all wisdom needed to help people. The Scriptures are not a volume of tips. They are a covenant book representing God's will and his grace provided to accomplish it. At the center of the covenant is Jesus Christ, God's beloved Son who gave himself up for his people in atoning love. This should be true in both our disciplines.

Speaking of the Bible brings us to a crucial issue that confronts the

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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

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