

From the Editor's Desk

Vive la Différence!



by DAVID POWLISON

One of the most common questions posed to biblical counselors is this one: How does biblical counseling differ from other approaches to counseling problems? It is an excellent question. It is an excellent question because the differences between counseling approaches matter. The differences impact the shape of our care and the goals of our care. The differences impact the person you seek to help.

So let's consider the question anew.

First consider the wide range of approaches. Countless voices offer to solve our problems in life, offer to change what goes wrong with us. *What* can help? Should you...

Explore how you feel about your family upbringing?

Do what God commands no matter how you feel?

Follow your feelings?

Have a season of prayer and fasting?

Take Prozac?

Find a trustworthy person to whom you can open your heart?

Carpe diem, and take control of your life?

Cast out a demon that inserted itself into the operating system of your soul?

Insert positive scriptural affirmations into the flow of negative self-talk?

Claim your new identity in Christ?

Identify and explore traumas?

Get into an exercise program and cut caffeine?

Sit under good preaching and have regular quiet times?

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

Many of these contain a wholesome grain of truth. Some of this counsel is thin stuff at best. Some counsel is even unhealthy. And none says enough. So how do you sort through it all, winnow out good wheat from empty chaff? How do you know where to begin? How do you come to a unifying vision for the whole?

Or come at the question from a different angle. *Who* can help you? Do you need ten sessions with a psychotherapist? A retreat with a spiritual director? A visit to a medical doctor? An encounter with an exorcist? An exercise plan from a personal trainer? A spot in a weekly support group? A chat with your pastor? A few good friends?

Our quest to find help is further complicated because all of the activities and persons just named appear in any number of variations, permutations, and combinations. And, as if all that weren't complicated enough, the counseling field is restless, fluid, volatile. Fads, fashions, and factions come and go, both in the church and in the surrounding culture. Theories and therapies shift, mutate, combine, innovate, and reinvent themselves. There's always a new best-seller, always the newest sure-fire cure that transcends the limitations of all that came before.

Then there's the question, what is "biblical counseling"? What is the sum of wisdom? Most of the answers and persons just described can claim to be about the business of Christian care and counseling. No one who names the name of Christ would ever want to be doing "unbiblical counseling."

So how do we reasonably answer such a significant, complicated question? How do we develop the true wisdom that can offer faithful counsel worthy of our Lord?

Rather than attempting to catalogue the strengths and weaknesses of all the players, I think we are best served by developing *basic skills in discernment*. The following four questions intend to orient you, to help you to fairly and accurately test any of the mixed multitude of counseling approaches. As you learn how to engage any proposed cure of souls discerningly, you become able to size up the strengths and weaknesses of whatever particular approaches to counseling become popular in your circles.

First, how is God portrayed? Is the God who reveals himself in Scripture, in history, and in human hearts central to understanding all that is most significant in the human condition? How central are the complexities of suffering, hardships, and loss? How central are the complexities of the good that is in people and the innumerable blessings of this life? How central are the complexities of sinfulness? What is the role and significance of Jesus Christ in relation to all these complexities? Christian faith vividly describes what is wrong *with* us, what

is wrong all *around* us, what is good *in* us, and what is good all *around* us. And in all these things, the organizing center of true knowledge, understanding, and wisdom is cast in relational terms. God takes us to heart and moves toward us; we take him to heart and move toward him. For example,

As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought
for me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my
God! (Ps 40:17)

Is that view of God and man integral to the counsel? Defective counseling models never get Christ right. They either ignore, distort, or misrepresent the One with whom we have to do. So they get us wrong, too. But the Searcher of all hearts, the one before whom every knee will bow, the Savior of sinners, the Refuge for sufferers, the Giver of every good gift—he insists on getting his due. Biblical wisdom considers all human phenomena with this God in view.

Second, how is human nature interpreted? What view of human motivation defines the essential “Why do you do what you do?” In particular, are human beings understood as actively, incessantly God-relational? No counseling model whose genes contain secular DNA ever gets motivation theory straight. Is it clear that every heart (at every moment, in every circumstance) is either actively serving lies and lusts or is actively loving the Lord God of truth? Every person is either turning to or away from a passel of impostor gods. Is it clear how every action, reaction, thought, and emotion reveals God-relational motives? Every person is either turning to or away from the God and Father of Jesus Christ. If you don’t get the heart right, you won’t get the goals of counseling right. You can’t understand what’s wrong. You won’t understand what a human being ought to become. You can’t rightly define success in life or in counseling.

Defective counseling models always get the heart wrong. They assume, theorize, and assert counterfeit interpretations of what makes us tick. Biblical wisdom considers all human phenomena while keeping in view, “Who or what are you now loving, trusting, serving, and fearing?”

Third, how are circumstances weighed? Is the stage on which we live—what surrounds us, comes at us, influences us, hurts us, limits us—given decisive and deterministic final say? Or is it rightly seen, not as deterministic, but as the significant context in which we live out our lives before God? Furthermore, is any one strand of our total circumstance singled out for particular emphasis, as if it offers the unique explanatory key? Past, present, or future? Physical body, social experience, or demonic agent?

Defective counseling models never get the world we live in right. They usu-

ally give deterministic authority to one piece of our overall life situation. Our culture is currently obsessed with biological causation—i.e., your problems root in your body. The loudest voice that competes with that obsession asserts the significant role of social causation—i.e., what other people do and say influences you. In some Christian circles, demonic causation is granted decisive authority—i.e., someone who is not you controls you. Here, then, are three ways to diagnose the same sample problem:

- Biological: “You suffer from an eating disorder because you suffer from a genetically-wired, obsessive-compulsive disorder.”
- Social: “You have an eating disorder because your needs for love and self-esteem were not met by your parents and friends.”
- Demonic: “You are enslaved to food obsessions because a demon of addiction has gained a stronghold in your soul.”

But none of these factors is decisive. It may be true that you have been born with certain inborn tendencies, not others; your parents may well have been unloving; Satan does prowl. But only rightly-balanced Christian faith notes how the active human heart operates with respect to all the varied influences. Biblical wisdom considers every part of our circumstances significant, but it gives final decisive authority to the physically-embodied, socially-embedded, spiritually-embattled *person*. And, because fallen persons skew toward wrong in some fundamental way, the saving grace of God alone breaks our core compulsion.

Fourth, how are the goals and the activities of counseling conceived? Is counseling about the cure of souls—reworking sinful humanity by the grace of Christ into the image of Christ amid the trials of life? Does counseling comfort the disturbed *and* disturb the comfortable? Does it go about the transformation of our sins and the consolation of our sorrows? Is the fruitful flourishing that all counseling intends to bring to pass essentially understood as pastoral, redemptive, and God-relational? Does a fruitful life *depend* on a connection to the activities of the Vine, the Vinedresser, and the Lifegiver?

Defective counseling models always get counseling methods and goals wrong. The counselor might act as archeologist who explores your past and your interior to give insight. Or the counselor might act as mechanic who alters what’s not working satisfactorily in your cognitions or behaviors. Or as coach who formulates a game plan for successful living and cheers you on. Or as friend who accepts you just as you are. Or as parent who meets your psychological need for love. Or as philosopher who offers a believable interpretation of your life without any God. Or as doctor who prescribes medicine to make you feel better. Biblical

wisdom considers counseling to be a ministry of the saving power of the grace and truth of Jesus Christ. Enduringly valid insights, alterations, encouragements, and ways of living arise within a person's relationship with him.

All counseling approaches, even ones that call themselves Christian or biblical, must be thoughtfully evaluated. These four simple questions build discernment... and so much discernment is needed! I think you will find that as you learn to think well within these truths, fine things will happen. You will grow wiser as a biblical counselor worthy of the name: a thoughtful and helpful shepherd of sheep and curer of souls. You will also find that you grow more insightful about whatever worldly wisdoms cry out for your ear, your vote, your loyalty, your ministry, your people. If any of us lacks wisdom—and we do lack—let us ask God for ourselves and for each other. He gives wisdom generously and he does not reproach us for needing him, because he made us to need him.

* * *

We begin this issue with my article “I’ll Never Get Over It.” This is written for strugglers. Perhaps you, or someone you know, has suffered grievous wrongs. Is the goal simply to “get over it”? Not really. You will be marked and changed forever by what you experienced—Jesus still has scars. We look in particular depth at two stories of deeply aggrieved persons who moved forward constructively. I close by offering a series of questions for you to work through as you seek to bring redemptive good out of experiences of terrible wrong.

Pastor Andrew Rogers walks us through verse by verse in “Psalm 32 and the Surprising Joy of Repentance.” He encourages us to learn from David’s experience of running from God, then facing what he had done, and finding the grace of God. This sermon is for all who struggle honestly with sin. Read it and take it to heart.

Winston Smith offers a thoughtful essay review of the Biblical Counseling Coalition’s multi-authored book *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling*. Smith assesses trends within the biblical counseling movement and evaluates the strengths and weakness of current thought and practice. He offers both praise for areas of growth and suggestions for future development.

In our Counselor’s Toolbox, Lauren Whitman provides us with helpful guidance on how to conduct that often-challenging first counseling session. Newer counselors will be eager to have a tool to help them approach these initial conversations with people they don’t know. But even veterans will benefit from a review of things to keep in mind as they meet with those they counsel for the first time.

Read this and find a new way (or two!) to bless those who come to you for help.

Given the information age in which we live, I suspect that many of you will be able to relate to our first *Lives in Process* article “Need to Know.” With candor and wit, Matt Mitchell invites us into the dynamics of his information addiction. His story just may help you understand some of the dynamics at play in your own life—and in the lives of others to whom you minister.

A woman honestly reckons with the selfish motives that are present in her relationships in our second *Lives in Process* piece. In “Manipulative Obsession or Love from a Pure Heart?,” we are privileged to walk with this Christian woman who takes on her struggle with same-sex attraction in a surprising way. She discovers her plight is not a “painful warfare against love.” It is a “victorious battle for true love.”

Finally, reviewer Mike Emlet takes a keen look at Kevin DeYoung’s recent book, *Crazy Busy*. With wisdom and insight, DeYoung has taken on a common struggle for American Christians: we are all too busy. Expressing appreciation for DeYoung’s work, Emlet carries the conversation forward by identifying areas that warrant additional discussion, including questions about how to implement practical changes in how we live.