

*Resources*

# A Coalescing of Various Biblical Counseling Ministries



by DAVID POWLISON

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The founding of the Biblical Counseling Coalition in 2011 is a marker of how counseling ministries are flourishing within the church of Jesus Christ. The coalition brought together leaders from many ministries, initially from the United States, and more recently from around the world. We at the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation were among the founders. We are committed to the purposes and the vision that this coalition seeks to embody.

The Biblical Counseling Coalition (BCC) comes together to pursue three purposes. The first is simple fellowship between ministries. We need each other. We need to know each other. The gospel of Jesus Christ generates both healthy unity and healthy diversity. On a foundation of common core commitments, other Christians open our eyes to different emphases, insights, problems, skills, experiences, personalities, questions, and concerns. Different ministry settings and demographics change the way that biblical wisdom lands. Same core commitments—different applications. Such normal differences prove fruitful when each of us recognizes, “Not everyone is just like me, and not everyone ministers in the same context I do. I can learn from you.” When we operate in isolation, we tend to lapse into tunnel vision. But knowing people in other ministries generates friendships and helps us to represent others fairly. BCC members nurture such fellowship at an annual retreat.

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The second purpose of the BCC is to serve each of the member ministries by providing a clearinghouse of information about events and resources. The BCC website<sup>1</sup> links to the other member ministries and to various conferences and training opportunities. It posts blogs, book reviews, and interviews. It increases awareness of developments in the body of Christ worldwide.

The third purpose is to articulate a clear and winsome standard of biblical counseling beliefs and best practices. To achieve that, many people worked collaboratively on a Confessional Statement. It expresses in a fresh and positive way the core convictions that bring us together. It has served as a prototype for biblical counseling movements that are springing up in countries around the world.

The rest of this article presents that Confessional Statement. I will introduce it by highlighting three aspects of the unifying vision that has brought various ministries into the coalition.

First, coalition members share a practical theological vision. God teaches us to see human beings the way he sees us, and his Scripture aligns our gaze. The gaze that otherwise controls the counseling field explicitly and implicitly represses God and has a corresponding preoccupation with the autonomous self. But the organizing principle of true wisdom is to fear the Lord (Prov 9:10). The true understanding of human beings as dependent on him is a direct correlate. Scripture changes how we understand people, and then changes how we go forward. Jesus Christ is wisdom embodied (1 Cor 1:30). He is an all-wise judge of each human being he encounters, and a most merciful redeemer. The Gospels demonstrate how he engages people, and the intentions that shape his interventions. Awareness of his purposes fundamentally changes how counseling proceeds. Scripture calls us to walk in his ways: “Speaking truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph 4:15). Biblical wisdom consciously embraces God’s self-revelation and point of view, and thus pursues his intentions.

Second, coalition members share a positive social vision. We want to encourage those who share a commitment to biblical counseling. We want to constructively engage those who don’t (yet) agree with biblical counseling. The Lord calls us to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the

<sup>1</sup> [biblicalcounselingcoalition.org](http://biblicalcounselingcoalition.org)

bond of peace” (Eph 4:3). He calls us to encourage each other in practical wisdom, fidelity, and love. The wider counseling field is rife with conflicting views and factions, and none of us is immune to sectarian tendencies. Christ calls us to treat others with respect, fairness, and patience—both those with whom we basically agree, as well as those with whom we candidly disagree. Even in controversy, “the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness” (2 Tim 2:24–25). Biblical wisdom consciously pursues God’s peace-making purposes.

Third, coalition members share a vision for how hard the counseling task is, and for our need to always grow in practical wisdom. The gospel generates both the humility of firm convictions and the humility of a willingness to learn. It is not easy to understand people and problems, and not easy to help. God calls us to be life-long learners, walking in the right path on a trajectory of growth. He calls us away from triumphalism and the delusion that we have arrived. Psalm 119 repeatedly cries out, “Teach me. Make me understand. Make me alive.” Wisdom is a gift both from God and from others; wisdom is something you already have and something you still need to pursue (Prov 2:1–6; 9:8b–9; James 1:5). If it were easy to understand and help people, the church would have articulated wise counseling ministry a century ago when the first secular psychotherapies proposed alternatives to the Christian cure of souls. But good practical theology takes time to develop. It is slow food, not fast food. Human beings always elude easy understanding: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer 17:9). No formula, no pat answer, and no quick fix can explain and remedy our complex sins and sorrows. Biblical wisdom consciously embodies the humility of life-long learning.

The BCC Confessional Statement serves as a point of reference. It can help to anchor you, your church, and your ministry in a biblical vision for counseling. I even hope it inspires you! It is the fruit of a great deal of thoughtful reflection and interaction regarding Scripture, and people, and the pastoral counseling process. It’s not perfect, of course. By definition, it is a work in progress. (See the preceding paragraph!) But I think that this confession has walked a good distance down a good road. I trust that you

will find that it is significantly faithful to Psalm 1. It walks in the Lord's good counsel; it stands firmly on his path of faith and love; it assesses all things from a seat of receptivity and humility.

If you are already committed to the theological vision shared by BCC members, I hope that you will be stretched by the depth and breadth of what this statement proposes. And I hope that you also grasp how the social vision and the vision for life-long learning are also integral parts of God's call to us. If you are not yet committed to biblical counseling, I hope that you find all three elements of this vision resonating with the deepest instincts of your heart.

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## **The Confessional Statement of the Biblical Counseling Coalition<sup>2</sup>**

### **Preamble: Changing Lives with Christ's Changeless Truth**

We are a fellowship of Christians convinced that personal ministry centered on Jesus Christ and conformed fully to Scripture offers real hope and loving help to a fallen and broken world. We are committed to promoting excellence and unity in biblical counseling that glorifies God by practicing effective discipleship and compassionate outreach.

We are dedicated to a theology and practice of the personal ministry of the Word; variously known as biblical counseling, personal discipleship, one another ministry, pastoral counseling, the priesthood of all believers, every member ministry, and soul care. We seek to promote the strengthening of such ministries in churches, educational institutions, and para-church organizations.

We desire to unite and advance the biblical counseling movement in Christ-centered cooperation by focusing on a positive presentation and proper understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture in progressive sanctification. Our goal is to cultivate collegial relationships and provide relevant biblical resources that equip the Body of Christ to change lives with Christ's changeless truth. We seek to interact in a way that is winsome and wise, pursuing the

<sup>2</sup> "Confessional Statement," Biblical Counseling Coalition, accessed April 16, 2018, [biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/confessional-statement/](http://biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/confessional-statement/).

unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

We confess that we have not “arrived.” We comfort and counsel others only as we humbly receive ongoing comfort and counsel from Christ and the Body of Christ. We readily admit that we struggle to apply consistently all that we say we believe. We who counsel live in process, just like those we counsel, so we want to learn and grow in Christ’s wisdom and grace.

### **Introduction: In Christ Alone**

All Christian ministry arises from and is anchored in God’s self-revelation in the Word—the written Word (Scripture) and the living Word (Christ). This is true both for the personal ministry of the Word (conversational ministry which our culture calls “counseling”), and for the pulpit ministry of the Word (public preaching and teaching). In light of this core conviction about Christ-centered, Word-based ministry, we affirm the following central commitments as biblical counselors.

#### **1. Biblical Counseling Is Centered on Christ**

We believe that wise counseling centers on Christ and His cross and resurrection where God reveals the depths of sin and the heights of grace. Wise counseling gets to the heart of personal and interpersonal problems by bringing to bear the truth, mercy, and power of Christ’s gospel of grace. There is no true “mental health” and there are no truly healthy relationships without understanding the desperate condition we were in without the cross, and without experiencing the joy of deliverance from that condition through Christ’s death and resurrection on our behalf.

We point people to a person, Jesus our Redeemer, and not a program. People need a real and personal relationship with Jesus Christ, not a system of self-salvation, self-management, or self-actualization. Authentic biblical counseling guides people to a dynamic relationship with Christ the Redeemer. Biblical counselors desire to lead struggling, hurting, and confused people to the hope, resources, strength, and life that are only available in Christ. Biblical counseling is not one of many viable systems of change; rather it places its trust in the transformative power of the Redeemer, Jesus Christ, as the only

hope to change people's hearts.

## **2. Biblical Counseling Is Rooted in Scripture**

We believe that the Bible is authoritative, sufficient, profound, and relevant. No other source of knowledge is authoritative to equip us for the task of counseling focused on heart change. The Scriptures, rightly interpreted and carefully applied, offer us all-encompassing wisdom for understanding who we are, the problems we face, how people change, and God's provision for that change in the Gospel. The wisdom given by God in His Word is distinctive and robust—comprehensively addressing the sin and suffering of all people in all situations. A system of faith and practice for wise counseling is not a mere collection of proof-texts from the Bible, but a wise application of God's all-embracing truth to our complex lives.

The Bible actively drives our theory and practice as we interpret it accurately and apply it relevantly so that our conceptual framework and practical methods emerge from the Bible. When we say that Scripture is comprehensive and all-encompassing in wisdom, we mean that the Bible makes sense of all things, not that it contains all the information we could ever know about all topics. God's common grace brings many good things to human life, but it cannot cure the soul. We affirm that numerous sources contribute to our knowledge of people, but none can constitute a comprehensive system of counseling principles and practices.

## **3. Biblical Counseling Is Grounded in Theology**

We believe that biblical counseling is fundamentally a practical theological discipline because every aspect of life is related to God. God intends that we care for one another in ways that relate human struggles to His person, purposes, and promises. Wise counseling arises from a theological way of looking at life—a mindset, a worldview—that informs how we understand people, problems, and solutions. Thus the best biblical counselors are wise, balanced, caring, experienced pastoral theologians. The ideas, goals, and practices of biblical counseling should cohere with the historic creeds, confessions, and other wise writings that express the church's consensual wisdom for living.

Biblical counselors work to relate the Scriptures relevantly to the life of the counselee. All wise ministry understands particular texts and a person's unique life experience within the context of the Bible's larger storyline: God's creation; our fall into sin; His great redemptive plan; and the consummation of all things at the revelation of Christ. Thus as soul physicians and spiritual friends we engage in person-specific, naturally-flowing conversations growing out of a comprehensive biblical theology.

#### **4. Biblical Counseling Is Dependent Upon the Holy Spirit**

We believe that genuine change of heart and lifestyle depends totally upon the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Biblical counselors know that it is impossible to speak wisely and lovingly to bring about true and lasting change apart from the decisive, compassionate, and convicting work of the Spirit in the counselor and the counselee. We acknowledge the Holy Spirit as the One who reveals the Word and energizes its application in everyday life.

Wise counselors serve in the strength which God supplies so that in everything God receives the glory. Biblical counselors affirm the absolute necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit to inform, guide, and empower the counselor, the counselee, and the counseling relationship.

#### **5. Biblical Counseling Is Focused on Sanctification**

We believe that wise counseling should be transformative, change-oriented, and grounded in the biblical doctrine of sanctification. The aim of wise counseling is intentional and intensive discipleship—growing spiritually mature persons who increasingly reflect Christ by enjoying and exalting God and by ministering to others. The goal of biblical counseling is spiritual, personal, and interpersonal maturity evidenced by relationships, desires, thoughts, motives, actions, and emotions increasingly resembling Christ.

Wise counseling seeks to maintain the biblical balance between God's role and human responsibility. God's strength and mercy call for our response of faith and obedience. A comprehensive theology of the spiritual life provides the basis for applying relevant biblical methods of spiritual growth. Biblical counseling helps believers to grasp our new identity in Christ and to apply the principles of progressive sanctification by cultivating communion with Christ

and the Body of Christ. The lifelong change process begins at regeneration and continues until we see Christ face-to-face.

## **6. Biblical Counseling Is Embedded in the Church**

We believe that we best reflect the Triune God as we live and grow in community. Sanctification is not a self-improvement project, but a process of learning to love and serve God and others. Wise counseling embeds personal change within God's community—the church—with all its rich resources of corporate and interpersonal means of grace. We believe that the church should be both the center and the sender of gospel-centered counseling.

By example and exhortation the New Testament commends the personal, face-to-face, one-another ministry of the Word—those activities which our culture calls “counseling.” God calls us to mutual wise counseling just as He calls us to public ministries of the Word in preaching, teaching, and observing the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. God desires His people to love and serve each other by speaking His truth in love to each other. The primary and fullest expression of counseling ministry is meant to occur in local church communities where pastors effectively shepherd souls while equipping and overseeing diverse forms of every-member ministry. Other likeminded counseling institutions and organizations are beneficial insofar as they seek to serve alongside of and lead persons to the church and seek to encourage the church to counsel biblically.

## **7. Biblical Counseling Is Founded in Love**

We believe that Christ's incarnation is not just the basis for care, but also the model for how we care. We seek to enter into a person's story, listening well, expressing thoughtful love, and engaging the person with compassion. The wise and loving personal ministry of the Word takes many appropriate forms, from caring comfort to loving rebuke, from careful listening to relevant scriptural exploration, all while building trusting, authentic relationships.

Wise counseling takes into account all that people are experiencing (desires, fears, attitudes, thoughts, goals, actions, words, emotions, struggles, and situational pressure) as the context for understanding how God's truths relate to life. Such awareness not only shapes the content of counseling,

but also shapes the way biblical counselors speak the truth in love so that everything said is “constructive, according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.”

### **8. Biblical Counseling Is Attentive to Issues of the Heart**

We believe that human behavior is inextricably tied to deeper thoughts, intentions, and affections of the heart, either sinful or redeemed. We emphasize the primacy of the heart and target the inner person because all human acts arise from a worship core, either disordered or rightly ordered in relation to God. The Word of God alone reveals and penetrates our heart (desires, beliefs, and motives) and behavior (relationships, words, and actions), rightly weighing who we are and what we do before the eyes of God. Wise counseling seeks to address both the inward and outward aspects of human life to bring thorough and lasting change into the image of Christ.

The Bible is clear that human behavior is not mechanical, but grows out of a heart that desires, longs, thinks, chooses, feels, and is oriented towards or against Jesus Christ. Biblical counselors work to see struggling people experience change at all levels: to love God heart, soul, mind, and strength; and to love one's neighbor as oneself. Wise counsel appropriately focuses on both the vertical and the horizontal dimensions, both the inner and the outer person, both behavior and issues of the heart.

### **9. Biblical Counseling Is Comprehensive in Understanding**

We believe that biblical counseling should focus on the full range of human nature created in the image of God. A comprehensive biblical understanding perceives human beings as relational, rational, volitional, emotional, and physical. Wise counseling takes the whole person seriously in his or her whole life context.

We recognize that people are physically-embodied by God's design and that a variety of bodily influences impact moral response. Appreciating the complexity and mystery of the interface between body and soul, we seek to remain sensitive to physiological factors and organic issues that affect the person's life. We recognize also that people are socially-embedded by God's

design and that a variety of historical, social, cultural, and family factors may impact moral response. Appreciating the complexity and mystery of the interface between persons and their social environment, we seek to remain sensitive to social factors, as the context within which God calls a person to faith and obedience. While wise counseling does not view these factors as determinative, it does address the influence they may have on how people relate, think, choose, and feel.

### **10. Biblical Counseling Is Thorough in Care**

We believe that God's Word is profitable for dealing thoroughly with the evils we suffer as well as with the sins we commit. Since struggling persons always experience some combination of besetting sin and personal suffering, wise counseling seeks to discern both the differences and interconnections between sin and suffering, and to minister appropriately to each.

Biblical counseling addresses suffering and engages sufferers in many compassionate ways, including by offering God's encouragement, comfort, and hope for the hurting. It addresses sin and engages sinners by speaking Christ's truth in love in numerous caring ways, including by offering God's confrontation of sins and by presenting God's gracious forgiveness in Christ.

### **11. Biblical Counseling Is Relevant in Methodology**

We believe that commitment to the sufficiency of God's Word results in ministry that demonstrates the relevancy of God's Word. The Bible calls us to use wise methods that minister in relevant ways to the specific counseling problems of specific people. While a Christ-centered conceptual framework is essential, embodying relational competency in the practical issues of the counseling process is critical as well.

The Bible has conceptual authority for counseling as well as authority with regard to counseling methodology. Within the Bible's general methodological guidelines there is room for methodological diversity.

### **12. Biblical Counseling Is Missional in Orientation**

We believe that Christianity is missionary-minded by its very nature. Therefore, biblical counseling should be a powerful evangelistic and apologetic

force in our world. We want to bring the good news of Jesus and His Word to the world that God created and only God can redeem. We seek to speak in relevant ways to Christians and non-Christians, to draw them to the Savior and the distinctive wisdom that comes only from His Word.

Our desire for the spreading of truth and the fame of Jesus Christ includes a passion that other practitioners of counseling apprehend and embrace the beauty of an approach that is uniquely Christ-centered and Word-based. Biblical counselors aim to present Christ's changeless truth to our changing world with a positive, proactive spirit. We want to engage the broad spectrum of Christian counseling by affirming the good in other approaches, by graciously and respectfully interacting with people when we differ, and by pointing people forward to better ways so that we can all become more Christ-centered, Scripture-saturated, people-loving counselors.

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