

Editorial

Slow Growth



by DAVID POWLISON

Biblical counseling sprouted fifty years ago as an inconspicuous seedling in the vast forest of psychotherapies, psychological theories, and mental health institutions. But what a unique vision and promise! Imagine—relationship with God is *intrinsic* to truly understanding any person’s psyche, problems, and potential. Imagine—Scripture is about the very same all-too-human struggles that all counselors seek to understand and address. Imagine—Jesus Christ actually is the way, the truth, and the life, not only for eternity, but for this life, too.

So traumatic sufferings, identity confusion, broken relationships, anxiety and despair, disordered sexuality, how to find a meaningful life—these and a hundred other derelictions and distresses are the very things the Word of God intends to illumine and redeem. Counseling anyone for “personal and interpersonal problems” means entering someone’s particular tangle of sins and sorrows, graces and felicities, strengths and weaknesses. It means understanding *this* person vis-à-vis God, and dismantling the lies and desires that besiege from outside and well up within. It means coming to terms with unruly experience. So Jesus Christ is no religious add-on. He is intrinsically and pointedly relevant. If Christ is relevant to our actual struggles, then counseling wisdom is in the charter and DNA of Christian ministry. But

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connecting the dots between life and Christ is hard work. It's what thoughtful pastoral theology and loving counseling ministry are meant to do.

That promising vision for how counseling can be an explicitly Christian ministry was a mere seedling in 1968. It grew some in the 1970s. It went through a low period in the 1980s. It has steadily prospered since the early 1990s.

Why has the depth of biblical counseling wisdom and the scope of its influence continued to grow? When ideas and practices express the essence of Christian truth and life, they are intuitively logical to men and women who take Scripture seriously. Thus, biblical counseling is no American fad and export. Vibrant biblical counseling movements have arisen in many countries around the world. It can take root anywhere because it is a straightforward application of Scripture's call to make our words true and helpful. A conversation that is honest, caring, constructive, relevant, and grace-giving is a delight whatever your nationality or tribe, whatever your language or people group. We grow up when we lovingly talk through what is true about ourselves and about God (Eph 4:15, 29). Of course, the form and format of "counseling" looks different in each place. The Spirit and the Word flexibly personalize that message by adapting to every contingency and context. Whether in Montreal or Seoul, New Delhi or Sao Paolo, Christ speaks and enters into what troubles people. As God's children come under his care and counsel, we learn how to care and counsel well with others who struggle.

Five decades ago, biblical counseling sprouted from the formative idea that God has much to do with human troubles and struggles, so he has many things to say. Over that time, this formative notion has grown, blossomed, and borne fruit. In what follows, I will point out a number of significant growth points that emerged in the interactions between the two men who planted that inconspicuous seedling so many years ago.

Jay Adams and John Bettler deserve particular mention as we look back on this growth process. They were the pioneers intellectually and institutionally. Both were pastors. They were friends and colleagues. They were interlocutors and disputants around the common theme that Christian faith should and could illumine all that counseling discovers, assesses, says, and does. That

shared core commitment found expression in two very different personalities, intellectual styles, interests, and priorities. Their dialogue shaped biblical counseling, and shaped the CCEF that they founded.

Adams cast vision in straightforward, simple truths. He was aware of unfinished business, complications, obstacles, hesitations, maybe/maybe nots, hard questions, and nuances. But he put these matters in asides, parentheses, and footnotes. To learn any high-level skill you start simple—whether it's playing the piano, learning a foreign language, understanding Scripture, or counseling wisely. Adams made certain core convictions simple, memorable, and transferable.

Bettler's vision focused on the complexities, the unanswered questions, the difficulty of the task, the reasonable objections raised by critics, and the tendency for simple to harden into simplistic. As you progress in any sphere of knowledge and skill, you realize that the necessary intuitions and skills are not so simple. Bettler pointed out the long road forward into ever-developing wisdom.

Adams laid foundations on which to build. Bettler set trajectories for development. I appreciate both men for very different reasons. If you are wise, you hold fast to basic commitments while listening carefully to your critics and bringing vexing difficulties into focus. If you are wise, you address a proliferation of complexities without ever losing sight of abiding simplicities. Keep your bearings. Keep going forward.

In what follows, I will present eight issues that the two men debated. Biblical counseling began as a rough draft, not a finished product. And given the complexity of Scripture, of people, and of ministry, there will always be a need to refine and further develop wisdom. These eight are not the only issues, but they will give you a fair representation of the trajectories (and the tensions) that have characterized the 50-year development of biblical counseling. For each issue, I will summarize a core conviction formulated by Adams, and then add a summary of complementary points that Bettler raised.

1. Jay Adams affirmed that *by the power of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, a person can change in practical ways*. Adams focused on rapid behavior change and the formation of new habits. On a scale of weeks, significant

changes can occur. John Bettler agreed. The Word and Spirit intend to change what we say, what we do, how we treat people, how we handle our money, how we direct our sexuality, how we express our emotions. And Bettler added, *the human heart and human experience are complex*. The Spirit and the Word recognize that we are a tangled web, individually and together. We are dark even to ourselves, hard to understand, slow to change. Every one of us has stubborn inconsistencies and blind spots.

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick.

Who can understand it? (Jer 17:9)

The only one who does thoroughly understand us is God. Sometimes he helps us to change rapidly. But he usually intervenes slowly—to transform how a person thinks, loves, fears, wants, and trusts on a scale of years and decades, over a lifetime. So, yes, as Adams argued, biblical counseling must deal with behavioral habits that can be seen and where immediate action can be taken. And yes, as Bettler noted, biblical wisdom also patiently explores and addresses what cannot be seen. A counselor probes the internal dynamics of desire and fear, the sense of identity, and distortions in self-image. A counselor seeks to understand and illumine the operation of motives to which a person may be blind. The reorientation of our hearts is a slow road. We will only be made wholly right when we see Jesus face to face. Today's accessible behaviors matter, and the deep waters of the inner person also matter. Complexities do not erase simplicities, and vice versa. The ability to attend to both is much to be desired, and calls for humility, patience, and an abiding awareness of need for greater wisdom and skill.

2. Adams affirmed that *Scripture is authoritative and sufficient for counseling*. The Bible teaches and illustrates the Lord's coherent understanding of people and situations. The Bible teaches and illustrates how the ministries of Christ and his various servants engage people in situations. When you accurately understand both Scripture and a person, then you see how Scripture speaks to the very things that this person struggles with. Adams focused on specific Bible texts as the centerpiece of authoritative interventions. Bettler agreed. Then he added, *the care and concern of an understanding friend also makes a very significant difference*. The counseling conversation is a joint

endeavor, involving humility and collaboration between two parties. A clear understanding of Scripture's relevance to a person's struggle is often not easy to attain. There is a difference between expository proclamation and a good, nourishing conversation. There is a difference between being able to clearly state a Christian doctrine and having a feel for how that truth becomes embodied and personalized. Biblical ministry—as portrayed in the Bible itself—contains many personal and relational ingredients that work hand in hand with appropriately bringing a specific Scripture passage to bear.

3. Adams taught that *a person can always start somewhere and take the next step in the right direction*. Bettler agreed. There is always something on the table each day, each week. And he added, *there are so many places a person could start*. It takes wisdom, and it's not always easy to figure out where the next step should go. Both strugglers and helpers frequently make missteps as we seek to find our way forward. The narrow path often meanders, encounters stubborn and unexpected obstacles, and takes surprising turns.

4. Adams affirmed that *by instruction and reproof, a counselor can guide a sinner to make necessary changes in behavior and to develop new habits*. His model of ministry is brisk, matter of fact, didactic, authoritative. The metaphors of coach, exhorter, and disciplinarian predominate in his descriptions of the counselor. Bettler agreed. Teaching, challenging, and holding accountable are wise forms of ministry. Then he added, *a counselor identifies with another's struggles, listens attentively, draws out unexpected fears and vulnerabilities, affirms what's good, and encourages in what is difficult*. Metaphors of brother and sister, friend, servant, and comforter describe further aspects of how Christ and the Spirit help us—and how we help each other. Gentleness, apt self-disclosure, patience, humility, advocating, protecting, and sympathetic understanding are key elements that make clarity about moral standards winsome. A counselor works collaboratively with a struggler, and since every counselor is a fellow struggler, the learning of wisdom goes both ways.

5. Adams affirmed that *sin is the core human problem, and people often make excuses for themselves because of what happened to them*. People tend to

evade personal responsibility by blame-shifting and self-justification. Most secular counseling models reinforce a sense of personal blamelessness by crediting personal history and biology as the final cause of personal problems. But Scripture identifies our sinfulness as what is most wrong with us. Bettler agreed, and added, *people are sufferers as well as sinners, and life can be hard, heartbreaking, overwhelming*. Afflictions of various sorts appear everywhere in Scripture. The psalms give candid voice to misery, alongside voicing guilt over sin and joy in God's mercies. Most people who seek help from a pastor, friend, or counselor feel anxious, discouraged, frustrated, hopeless, confused, and overwhelmed in the face of what is happening to them. The courage to face hard things grows slowly in people who suffer greatly. Paying careful attention to what a person has experienced and is now facing does not need to lead to blame-shifting and self-righteousness. Comforting the fainthearted and holding on to the weak are modes of ministry as much as admonishing the unruly.

6. Adams extolled *Proverbs 10–31, Ephesians 4–6, James, and Psalm 119 because they give practical bite-sized truths about how to behave in ways that please the Lord*. God's commandments and moral standards are crucial to the changed lifestyle that counseling nurtures. Love and wisdom are lived-out realities. Bettler agreed, then added further riches. He pointed out that *the entirety of Proverbs, Ephesians, James, and the Psalms also reveal God's generosity and trustworthiness, and our responsive relationship with him*. The Lord promises mercy, strength, and help. Christ communicates who he is and his purposes. From many angles, our Father states and restates his love for us in Christ. People need to hear that because it is by promises that we change (2 Pet 1:4). God sympathetically describes and illumines the varied challenges of tough circumstances. He invites our faith. Because he is merciful and patient, we learn to relate our needs and joys honestly to him.

7. Adams affirmed that *every pastor should do at least some counseling* as part of his overall ministry of shepherding God's flock. He had the instincts of a small church pastor, and helped innumerable pastors catch a vision for pursuing God's calling in an area of ministry that they had neglected or done

poorly. His highly structured model was best suited to the church office. Bettler agreed. Local church pastors are crucial not only for the counseling they themselves do, but also for casting vision and equipping others. Then Bettler added that *every Christian can grow in becoming more able to speak timely, constructive words that give grace to others*. Wise words are a crucial element in loving each other well. Not only should informal counseling characterize normal relationships in the church, but there is also *a significant place for the ministries of men and women who specialize in counseling*. Well-trained, experienced, and skillful counselors have a role to play in local churches and in all sorts of parachurch ministry contexts.

8. Adams asserted that Christians must *reject secular psychology because the premise of secularity suppresses the knowledge of God*. There is a chasm between how Scripture explains people and how secular theories seek to explain people. Bettler agreed. Then he added, *by common grace, secular people are often knowledgeable and skillful in ways that challenge us*. They observe things about people and have case knowledge that we may lack. They push us with hard questions that we need to hear and consider. They may demonstrate forms of skillful love that challenge our clumsiness. We reject their premises, but need to reinterpret what they get right in light of Christian presuppositions. Bettler used to say, “You can talk over a fence. You can only shout across a canyon.” Those with whom we disagree ought to be treated fairly and engaged as human beings, rather than simply labeled and criticized. In the clash between incompatible world views, we become persuasive when a willingness to listen and an irenic kindness adorn the points we seek to make in talking with people who disagree with us.

These eight items are only a sample of the many issues that Adams and Bettler discussed and debated from the late 60s into the early 90s. I trust that these give you a feel for their different emphases, and for the ways they significantly differed within a core of common convictions. As I reflect on this list, one primary difference sums up all the rest. Point by point, the consistent characteristic of Adams’s model is its moral strenuousness. The consistent characteristic of Bettler’s counterpoint is that faith and love flourish as part

of a much larger picture. I think that the biblical themes that Adams rightly identified acquire beauty, depth, gentleness, and grace when counterbalanced by the biblical themes that Bettler rightly identified. The Bible abounds in complementary truths that must be held together, and the greater part of wisdom is understanding the relationships between complementary truths.

A good friend of both described Bettler and Adams as “the yin and yang of biblical counseling—and it’s clear who’s the yang!”¹ Adams was the larger-than-life public face; Bettler was “the hidden force.”² Adams was the prolific writer who spoke everywhere; Bettler was unwillingly coaxed into print in only a handful of *Journal of Biblical Counseling* articles. So Adams’s side of the dialogue has dominated the public perception (and widespread caricatures) of biblical counseling. Bettler’s balancing side of the dialogue has been the subtext. But it has gradually and increasingly influenced the reality of what biblical counseling has become for countless men and women worldwide.

Here’s one final metaphor that I find helpful in making sense of my mentors. Jay Adams played trumpet, sounding reveille, and calling for commitment to the Word of God. John Bettler played cello, bringing out the resonances, and inviting ongoing reflection on the scope and depth of biblical wisdom. God uses all the instruments in his orchestra, each in their own time, place, and way. The biblical counseling movement will continue to mature as we hear from the various voices that pursue fidelity to our God and his Word. The music of grace and wisdom expresses various melodies, harmonies, and counterpoints. God uses his whole counsel to wake up his church to her mission and equip her with every good thing she needs to go forward in love.

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As we finish out our 50th year of ministry, we are happy to offer some of the fruit of that slow, maturing growth. I am delighted that all of the Featured Articles in this issue are written by the up-and-coming generation of biblical

¹ George Scipione, in *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context*, (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2010), 201. Scipione served as CCEF’s director in the early 1970s.

² Adams dedicated his book on lay counseling, *Ready to Restore*, to Bettler using this phrase.

counselors at CCEF.

First, we have a collaborative effort from Aaron Sironi and Lauren Whitman. This is the second in their series of articles on marriage counseling. In “Helping a Spouse Who Moves Against during Marital Conflict,” the authors lay out how to think biblically about this pattern, where one spouse is antagonistic in times of disagreement. Working through a case study, they demonstrate practical ways to help a couple identify and take responsibility for their specific conflict patterns, and cultivate new ways of interacting when conflict arises.

In “Treasuring Others,” Alasdair Groves calls our attention to Jesus’ command for us to lay up treasure in heaven. What exactly did Jesus mean by this instruction? How does it impact how we live and how we view the people we counsel? Groves answers this and other provocative questions in this important essay. See how taking this command to heart can breathe new life into your personal relationships and pastoral ministry.

Julie Lowe is committed to counseling children and their parents by making biblical principles accessible and relevant to a child’s heart. In “Helping Your Anxious Child,” she identifies a key problem. We tend to placate and reassure our kids when they are anxious, but this has a limited effect and can even be problematic. Her goal is for parents to teach their kids to specifically depend on God when they are anxious, and she advises how to get kids started on this path.

Speaking of stress and anxiety, what about adults? How do we help them? Is it OK to teach breathing techniques as part of helping people calm their bodies when they experience extreme stress? In his article, “‘Take a Deep Breath’—How Counseling Ministry Addresses the Body,” Todd Stryd explores the place that breathing techniques can have in a Christian’s care and ministry. He shows how and why a counselor might make a breathing exercise part of biblical counseling with a distressed person.

Next comes a book review of *Diehard Sins* by Rush Witt. This book is about the kind of fight we are in with sin, and about the long haul, and about God’s grace. It specifically addresses how “little” sins such as gossip and laziness infiltrate your soul and are often the hardest to shake. And, most importantly, in the face of these stubborn sins, it’s about the hands-on mercies

of Jesus and how he helps us run the race with joy and hope. In the second half of the review, I reflect on one of the book's case studies, a woman who is beaten down by self-condemnation and guilt. It's a common problem, and Witt's pithy discussion prompted me to do more thinking about how God's varied commands actually work.

We round out this issue with a reprint from 1993: "25 Years of Biblical Counseling: An Interview with Jay Adams and John Bettler." The editorial you just read, "Slow Growth," portrayed how fifty years of growth has been significantly shaped by the dialogue between Jay Adams and John Bettler. This interview from the midpoint of those years gives you a glimpse into their actual conversation. It gives a feel for their personalities, their relationship, and the substance of their interactions. I think you will enjoy listening in!

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