

What is Biblical Counseling? A Brief Overview

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What is biblical counseling? Let's unpack the phrase one word at a time.

First, biblical counseling is **counseling**. It is a form of ministry that brings specific portions of God's truth to specific individuals (or couples or families) in their specific situations. It is interactive and person-specific in ways that go beyond public preaching or teaching. In this sense, it is simply *personal* ministry, the ministry by one person to another person. We might also call it biblical discipleship, or perhaps, more narrowly, intensive, remedial discipleship, or problem-oriented discipleship. More broadly speaking, it is nothing short of true biblical friendship, as defined by passages like Col 3:16; Prov 20:5, 27:5-6; and Rom 12:15.

As a process of personal ministry, it certainly shares with other types of "counseling" some basic concerns about relational dynamics, data gathering, listening skills, personal warmth and caring, empathy, confidentiality, etc. But it doesn't share the emphases of clinical detachment, avoidance of dual relationships, and other "professionalistic" trappings (even when biblical counseling is done by specially trained professionals). Biblical counseling is the domain of all of God's people, be they pastors and professional counselors, or wise moms, dads, roommates, and neighbors.

Second, biblical counseling is **biblical**. Its main content is God's inerrant, inspired Word, and its focus is on that Bible's main thrust; namely, the life-changing, redeeming work of Jesus Christ. In counseling that is truly biblical, the Bible drives both theory and practice. The concepts and methodology are not merely consistent with the Bible (contra attempts to prooftext the notions of secular psychology); they emerge from the Bible itself. The undergirding truths arise from a biblical view of God and his character and promises; a biblical view of people and their problems, behavior, and motives; a biblical view of how people change and God's provisions for such change; and a biblical view of how and why we help people change.

Four convictions underlie our church's biblical counseling ministry:

1) *We present the Lord Jesus Christ as the crucified, risen Savior who, through his Word and his Spirit, can help us handle our personal and relational problems.* Jesus alone provides the forgiving mercy (through his saving death and resurrection), the practical wisdom (in his Word), and the enabling power (through his Spirit) we need for daily living.

2) *We use the Bible as our main tool to diagnose, explain and solve our problems.* As God's Word, the Bible provides true, thorough, authoritative, and sufficient guidance for every life situation we face, and it is infinitely superior to all human wisdom and the competing counsel of secular and Christian integrationist psychologies.

3) *We reflect the love, concern, and compassion of Jesus our Shepherd and Counselor.* Biblical counseling is a caring process marked by Christlike love.

4) *We address both the inward and outward aspects of our problems to bring thorough and lasting godly change.* Biblical counseling is not shallow, superficial, or simplistic. Scripture alone uncovers and solves our heart (beliefs and motives) and behavior (words and actions) struggles.

In one sense, biblical counseling is simply the consistent application of historic evangelical Christianity to the realm of personal ministry.

In terms of literature in our day, a host of books, journals, and pamphlets reflect the theory and practice of biblical counseling. A useful starter volume is *Psychology & Christianity: Four Views* (IVP 2000), where the Biblical Counseling position is ably presented and defended by David Powlison in contrast to three competing views. Powlison also edits the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* (see www.ccef.org) and has assembled an insightful collection of his essays in *Seeing With New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition Through the Lens of Scripture*. On a more popular level, books by Ed Welch (*Blame It on the Brain?: Distinguishing Chemical Imbalances, Brain Disorders, and Disobedience; When People Are Big and God Is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man; and Addictions—A Banquet in the Grave: Finding Hope in the Power of the Gospel*) and Paul David Tripp (*Age of Opportunity: A Biblical Guide for Parenting Teenagers; War of Words: Getting to the Heart of Your Communication Struggles; and Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change*) will orient you well to how the Bible speaks richly and profoundly to the complexity of our human struggles (not to mention probably change your life in the process of your reading and reflection!).

Institutionally, we might look today at biblical counseling training organizations like the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (www.ccef.org), certifying organizations like the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors (www.nanc.org), and related organizations like Peacemaker Ministries (www.peacemaker.net) whose methods of assisting and equipping Christians and their churches to handle conflict biblically involves biblical counseling. We might look at seminaries like Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (Louisville, KY), Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) or Westminster Theological Seminary West (Escondido, CA), Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (Wake Forest, NC), and the Master's Seminary (Sun Valley, CA).