
IN SEARCH OF EFFECTIVE BIBLICAL COUNSELING

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Current Confusion about Christian Counseling

Lam, an 18-year-old young man in Hong Kong, got involved with a group of ungodly friends, and became rebellious against his family and God. Believing only God can change Lam, his Christian family members turned to their pastor for help.

The pastor stated he did not know what to do, and suggested they find help from a Christian counseling center.

But the family members were told by a counselor that the center would use only secular psychological theories to counsel Lam's problem behavior. The center believed Lam's spiritual issue belongs to the church's sphere of ministry.

There is a universal confusion about "Christian counseling" in today's church. Many evangelical churches and seminaries are ignorant of the fact that, even though many counselors or psychologists call themselves "Christian" or "biblical".

In reality, they use secular psychological theories of human behavior -- rather than God's Word -- to help people change and handle problems in life. Some may try to "integrate" psychotherapy and the Bible.

However, the Word of God is usually compromised in this process. Scripture is no longer respected as the authority, but is used only as an ornament in the counseling process.

It is dangerous to refer someone to non-genuine biblical counseling, or to teach God's people non-genuine biblical counseling, because this will make the counseled more ungodly rather than experience real biblical change.

Look at the following example:

Margaret, a 16-year-old professing Christian, was sexually abused by a relative. Her church leaders turned to a licensed "Christian" psychologist for help and arranged Margaret to be counseled by this psychologist.

Margaret was counseled to hate her offender, because her whole life had been ruined and she would be living in the shadow of the abuse forever.

After seeing this psychologist, Margaret became more self-righteous and pitiful towards herself, and more angry and bitter towards others, including her own family.

Do you agree:

- x With the psychologist that Margaret has the right to hate her offender (read Matt. 18:21-35)?
- x That our almighty God is not able to bring healing to Margaret (read Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 10:1; Psalm 103:3)?
- x That Margaret can never experience freedom promised by God, and she must live with the shadow of the abuse for the rest of her life (Psalm 116:16; Luke 4:18)?

So, how do we know if a counselor/minister is offering genuine biblical counseling? Moreover, how can a church/seminary develop a genuine biblical counseling training program for God's servants?

To answer these questions, we need to know the essential characteristics of genuine biblical counseling.

Six Essential Characteristics of Genuine Biblical Counseling:

1. A High View of Scripture

Genuine biblical counseling must believe that Scripture is the authority in counseling. The Bible is God's inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word to man.

This foundational premise of counseling is firmly established in the Bible (e.g., Mark 13:31; Psalm 119:89, 97-100; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Sam. 22:31).

Beyond this, genuine biblical counseling must believe that Scripture is sufficient in counseling. The Bible is, in and of itself, a sufficiently adequate source-book on the human mind.

It represents and contains all truth necessary for the proper development, correction, and maintenance of a healthy human mind. In other words, the Bible is sufficient for both salvation and sanctification.

The sufficiency of Scripture is clearly taught in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and Psalm 19. As such, a methodology for counseling and helping people change can be developed from the Bible, and should only be developed from the Bible.

2. Absolute Sovereignty of God

Genuine biblical counseling must uphold the absolute sovereign power of God. God created all things, governs all things, and knows all things, and “known unto God are all His works, from the beginning of the world” (Acts 15:18).

Genuine biblical counseling echoes the classic affirmation that “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth” (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*).

It is a fatal error to say that a perfect, omnipotent, sovereign, and totally self-conscious God can deliver us from hell, but is powerless to heal, restore or transform lives in the meantime.

Either God is absolutely sovereign, or He is not God. If He is absolutely sovereign, then He is God, and His absolute capacity to change people cannot be denied.

3. Redemption-Oriented

Genuine biblical counseling must seek to restore the relationship between men and God, help people find newness of life in Christ by receiving Him as their Savior.

It must set people free from the bondage of sin and suffering, and to experience, worship and serve the living God (Isa. 61:1-6).

Jay Adams, in his ground-breaking book *Competent to Counsel*, stated, “What God has done for sinful man in Christ conditions what the counselor does.

Counseling should follow and reflect God's order in redemption: grace, then faith; gospel, then sanctification.

Counseling must be redemptive; consequently, a proper concept of *nouthetic* counseling must have deeply embedded in it the premise that man cannot be helped in any fundamental sense apart from the gospel of Jesus Christ" (pp.67-68).

In practical terms, this means that if the counseled is not a Christian, the biblical counselor must first lead the person to surrender his/her life to Jesus Christ.

If the counseled is a Christian, the biblical counselor needs to help the person to truly know God and experience the freedom and abundant life promised by God.

4. Exaltation of Jesus Christ

Genuine biblical counseling must believe that Jesus is "the way, and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). Jesus is the answer to all problems encountered by the counseleds:

"His divine power has given us *everything* we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness" (2 Pet. 1:3).

Because of this, only Jesus can heal, deliver, strengthen, and transform the counseled (Heb. 2:17-18; 4:14-16).

The ultimate goal of genuine biblical counseling is to guide the counseled to have an abundant life in Christ through a complete trust in His work on the cross for us.

More than that, genuine biblical counseling seeks to help the counseled to have...

"a full concentration of the thoughts and affections on Christ; a complete surrender of the whole being to Him; a constant looking to Him for grace....Such is the 'exchanged life', the abiding, fruitful life, the life that is Christ." (Edman, 1960, p. 22).

Galatians 2:20 should be a reality for the counseled: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.

The life I live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

5. Church Accountability

Genuine biblical counseling must believe that counseling is a form of evangelism and discipleship, and that it rightly belongs to the church of Jesus Christ.

Counseling must be conducted under the authority of the church, and be accountable to the church. Genuine biblical counseling seeks to point every counseled to Jesus Christ.

It is a free gospel ministry rather than a professional service, and thereby does not ask payment for service (Isa. 55:1-2; Matt. 10:8).

The counselor/minister can rely on God’s providence, and He will incline His people to financially support the ministry (Phil. 4:15-19; 1 Cor. 9:7-11).

6. Bible-Defined Competence

Genuine biblical counseling must firmly believe that it is not the counselor’s professional knowledge that gives understanding, and changes a person, but the power and work of God (Psalm 7:9; Luke 16:14-15; Jer. 31:33).

Therefore, genuine biblical counseling believes that a competent counselor does not rely on professional degrees, professional certification, or governmental licensing. In fact, secular licensing often impairs the counselor’s effectiveness in following biblical principles in counseling.

In his book, *Why Christians Can’t Trust Psychology*, Ed Bulkley stated:

“There are only a few essential qualifications for a competent counselor:

One must have an extensive knowledge of the Scriptures (Rom 15:14), a good measure of divine wisdom (experience and common sense under the illumination of the Holy Spirit) (Col. 3:16), goodness (consistent, righteous lifestyle with a humble attitude) (1 Pet. 5:5), an ability to relate to others (Col. 4:6), an ability to

communicate (Tit. 2:8), and a genuine desire to help others (1 Thess. 5:14)” (p. 79).

Whether someone is competent to counsel or not must be defined by God’s standard, not man’s standards.

A Living Testimony

Joan was filled with anger, self-pity and bitterness when we first met her. She has been mistreated by her husband and his family members for years. She felt hopeless about her marriage as well as her life.

With empathetic understanding of her situation, we led her to read Jeremiah 17:5-10. Through the Scriptures, we helped her to understand that we are all sinners living in the fallen world.

Her behavior was not determined by her situation, but by her own heart’s response to the situation. Trusting self and man’s methods could not set her free from the bondage of sin. The only way for her to experience true freedom was by entrusting herself to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross and His resurrection, we helped Joan to understand the supreme sovereignty, wisdom, love and power of God in her life (e.g., 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; 15; Romans 5:8; 8:28-39; 11:33-36).

We then showed Joan God’s promises of joy and blessings by abiding in Christ (John 15:1-11, Jeremiah 17:8). Joan finally chose to surrender her life to Jesus Christ.

Since then Joan became a new person, even though her difficult situation had not changed. She once told us that her sense of freedom in Christ was so real that she could hardly control herself to not scream for joy and run in the street!

Conclusion

The current crisis in today’s evangelical churches is that many Christians are full of the knowledge of Scripture, but few have the conviction that...

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be *thoroughly* equipped for *every* good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

As a result, the common view is that Christian psychologists are the “experts,” or the most qualified to offer solutions to life problems such as anxiety, marital and parenting problems, depression, family conflict, interpersonal problems, and courtship.

Sadly, psychologized counseling only leads to a psychologized gospel, and the hallmark of a psychologized gospel is the advocating of “self.”

Look at the following popular terms used in pulpits and top-selling Christian books to explain life problems and offer solutions: self-esteem, self-pity, self-love, self-confidence, my inner needs, self-acceptance, self-control, self-help.

The consequence is so fatal, that more and more “self-centered Christians” are now found in the Christian church.

There is an urgent need for the spiritual awakening of evangelical churches to return to God, to truly acknowledge the authority and sufficiency of His Word, and believe the power of His Spirit in changing lives.

There is also an urgent challenge to evangelical seminaries to equip ministers to be biblical counselors, people who are capable of solving their life problems with the Scripture, and able to counsel others by applying God’s Word to human problems.

Authors’ note:

If you have any question or need to know more about biblical counseling, you can contact us at:

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