

Counseling FAQs

Frequently Asked Questions About Biblical Counseling

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The purpose of this book is to help both pastors and lay people become familiar with the principles of biblical counseling and to apply them in the life of the Church. Because the concept of integration has held sway for so many decades and the psychological model for counseling has been virtually unchallenged in the Church, Christians have raised many questions regarding the entire concept of biblical counseling. Jay Adams, in his book *What About Nouthetic Counseling* (Baker, 1976), dealt with many questions about this subject, but there have been additional and more pointed questions posed of biblical counseling since then. The questions presented here represent a sample of questions that are most frequently asked. The answers to these questions have been prepared by various members of the staff and faculty of The Master's College, Grace Community Church, and others who contributed to this book.

Is there any difference between biblical counseling and Christian psychology or Christian counseling?

At a superficial glance, it would appear that a biblical counselor and a psychotherapist who is a Christian do many of the same things. Both converse with people; both care about people; both get to know people; both are interested in motivation, thoughts, emotions, and behavior; both explore the various pressures in a person's situation; both give feedback; perhaps both talk about Jesus or a passage of Scripture. So how do they differ?

To understand how Christianized psychotherapy differs from biblical counseling it is necessary to look closely at what each practices and teaches. Here are some of the distinctives of each.

Perspective of the Bible and its contribution to counseling.

Most Christian psychologists view the Bible as an inspirational resource, but their basic system of counseling, both theory and methods, is transferred unaltered from secular psychology. Most are frankly and self-consciously eclectic, picking and choosing theories and techniques according to personal preference. In contrast, biblical counselors follow the Bible's view of itself as the source of a comprehensive and detailed approach to understanding and counseling people (2 Tim. 3:15-17; 2 Pet. 1:4).

Some Christian psychotherapists use few Scriptures; others use many. But frequency of citation is much less important than the way passages are used – or misused – and in the vast majority of cases the passages cited are completely misused. There is a dearth of

contextualized exegesis (a critical interpretation of a text) and an abundance of eisegesis (interpreting a text by reading one's own ideas into it). Biblical counseling is committed to letting God speak for Himself through His Word, and to handling the Word of Truth rightly (2 Tim. 2:15).

Perspective of God.

There are many aspects of God that Christian psychologists routinely ignore. In particular, His sovereignty, holiness, justice, kingly authority, and power are virtually unmentioned. The fatherly love of God is the great theme of these psychotherapists, but detached from the entirety of who God is, this love becomes the unconditional positive regard of a great therapist in the sky, indistinguishable from classic liberal theology. Biblical counseling follows the Bible and seeks to minister the love of the true and living God, whose love deals with sin and produces obedience (1 John).

Perspective of human nature and motivation.

Almost every Christian psychologist espouses some variety of need theory. Needs for self-esteem, for love and acceptance, and for significance tend to dominate. If these needs are met, it is believed that people will be happy, kind and moral; if not met, people will be miserable, hateful, and immoral. Christian psychologists borrow their motivation theory directly from humanistic psychology. Scripture flatly opposes such need theories because it teaches that sinful human motivation roots in various cravings and lusts (Gal. 5:16-24, Eph. 2:3; James 1:14-16; 3:13-4:12). Scripture teaches that God changes our desires and that godly motivation is rooted in the desire for God and godliness. If people crave self-esteem, love, and significance, they will be happy if they get it and miserable if they don't, but they will remain self-centered in either case. On the other hand, if people desire God (Ps. 42:1f; 73:25), God's kingdom (Matt. 6:9-13; 6:33; 13:45f), godly wisdom (Prov. 3:15; 2 Tim 2:22), and resurrection glory (Rom 8:18-25), they will be satisfied, joyous, obedient, and profitable servants of God.

Perspective of the gospel.

For most Christian psychologists, Jesus Christ is the meter of built-in psychic needs and the healer of psychic wounds. The love of God at the cross simply portrays how valuable one is to God in order to boost self-esteem and to meet the need to be loved. But in the Bible, Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God crucified in the place of sinners. The love of God actually demolishes self-esteem and the lust for self-esteem. It produces, instead, a great and grateful esteem for the Son of God, who loved us and gave His life for us – the Lamb of God who alone is worthy. The love of God does not meet our lust to be loved as we are. It demolishes that deluded craving in order to love us despite who we are and to teach us to love God and neighbor (1 John 4:7-5:3).

Perspective of counseling.

Christian psychologists tend to view counseling the same way secular psychologists view it: as a professional activity without any necessary connection to the Church of Jesus Christ. A client with a felt-need engages a professional for help in attaining goals of personal adjustment, emotional happiness, stability, self-fulfillment, and the like. But biblical counselors follow the Bible and view counseling as a pastoral activity. Their counseling aims at progressive sanctification and must communicate the true contents of Scripture. Biblical counseling connects logically and structurally to worship, discipleship, preaching, pastoral oversight, use of gifts, church discipline, and other aspects of life in the body of Christ.

(David Powlison)

I have heard that those who practice biblical counseling are unsympathetic, mean-spirited, and callous. Is this true?

Biblical counselors are certainly none of these things. In truth, they are just the opposite. Biblical counselors want to come alongside counselees in concern and love as they address the problems. They want to help individuals find biblical solutions; they encourage change for God's glory primarily but also for the counselee's own benefit.

The apostle Paul serves as a good model for biblical counselors. He reminded the elders of the church at Ephesus (Acts 20:20) how he had not held back anything in his teaching that was profitable for them. He had even gone house to house in order to minister to them. Then in verse 31 he shows the spirit of humility in his heart as he says, "Night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish (noutheteo) each one with tears." Even though Paul had to admonish these people and tell them the truth, he was not unsympathetic, mean-spirited, or callous with them.

Another passage illustrating Paul's compassion is 1 Thessalonians 2:7-9. There he makes the point with his readers that he was gentle with them (v.7), and that he had imparted not only truth to them but his own life (v. 8). Paul was known for speaking the truth, but speaking it in love (Eph. 4:15, 29). And that is what a biblical counselor does. The counselor establishes involvement in the life of the counselee and gives hope that the person's problem can be overcome. Many counselees have never experienced this type of caring confrontation. They have never experienced true concern and compassion – traits that are essential prerequisites of a nouthetic counselor.

(Carey Hardy)

Do secular disciplines have absolutely nothing to offer to biblical counseling methodology?

Let us clarify first what we mean by counseling methodology. A counseling methodology is a system of theoretical commitments, principles, goals, and appropriate methods. It is a set of interconnected things; it is not a collection of random and eclectic bits of observation or

technique. A counseling methodology is an organized, committed way of understanding and tackling people's problems.

Do secular disciplines have anything to offer to the methodology of biblical counseling? The answer is a flat no. Scriptures provide the system for biblical counseling. Other disciplines – history, anthropology, literature, sociology, psychology, biology, business, political science – may be useful in a variety of secondary ways to the pastor and the biblical counselor, but such disciplines can never provide a system of understanding and counseling people.

Secular disciplines may serve us well as they describe people; they may challenge us by how they seek to explain, guide, and change people; but they seriously mislead us when we take them at face value because they are secular. They explain people, define what people ought to be like, and try to solve people's problems without considering God and man's relationship to God. Secular disciplines have made a systematic commitment to being wrong.

This is not to deny that secular people are often brilliant observers of other human beings. They are often ingenious critics and theoreticians. But they also distort what they see and mislead by what they teach and do, because from God's point of view the wisdom of the world has fundamental folly written through it. They will not acknowledge that God has created human beings as God-related and God-accountable creatures. The mind-set of secularity is like a power saw with a set that deviates from the right angle. It may be a powerful saw, and it may cut a lot of wood, but every board comes out crooked. Given this built-in distortion, how might secular observations, ideas, and practices be useful to Christians? They should play no role in our model of counseling. But, radically reinterpreted, they can play an illustrative role, providing examples and details that illustrate the biblical model and fill out our knowledge. They can also play a provocative role, challenging us to develop our model in areas we have not thought about or have neglected or misconstrued. Jay Adams stated this succinctly in *Competent to Counsel*, where he explains that psychology can be a "useful adjunct" to biblical counseling in two ways: (1) "for the purposes of illustrating, filling in generalizations with specifics"; and (2) "challenging wrong human interpretations of Scripture, thereby forcing the student to restudy the Scriptures".¹

What do secular disciplines have to offer biblical counselors? God is the expert when it comes to people, and He has spoken and acted to change us and to equip us to help others change. Secularists have a twisted and blinkered perceptiveness that can only be useful to biblical counselors as it is radically reinterpreted according to the counseling methodology revealed in Scripture. (Chapters 11-17 of this book present a biblical methodology for helping people.)

(David Powlison)

Isn't biblical counseling overly simplistic?

If overly simplistic means that biblical counseling does not seem to be as sophisticated as say, psychology or psychiatry, with its intricate terms and methods, then yes, it is more simple. But note that it is not simplistic.

It has been well stated, “Simple language no more indicates simplistic thinking than complex language indicates profundity of thought.” In its essence, biblical counseling is simple in that it seeks to find the answers to the problems of sin from the pages of Scripture. It does not seek to find those answers anywhere else except in God’s Word, for nowhere else is there a remedy for this desperately needed cure. Lest we be criticized unnecessarily at this point, let us clarify that the difficulties of this life are, admittedly, enormous – but they are not impossible to understand and they can provide impetus for growth. To simply assert that the problems of life and sin are simple and then to move on to something else is to miss the point entirely. God’s Word has the simple yet profound truths that change people into the very image of Jesus Christ. Those whose commitment is to Scripture and its sufficiency will base their counseling efforts on the foundation of that standard.

Peter’s commitment was spelled out in these terms: “His divine power has granted to use everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him [through Scripture] who called us by His own glory and excellence” (2 Pet. 1:3). Biblical counseling, then, provides the only sure and superior basis for helping people, and because this is so, it cannot inherently be called simplistic. If so, it would impugn the character of God Himself, as though He were simplistic. The truth is, in the final analysis, biblical counselors are actually the ones who go deep into the region of the soul – into all arenas of mankind’s being – whereas others do not go deep enough! Only the man or woman who is equipped with God’s tools (His Word and Spirit) can traverse the murky waters of the human heart. Proverbs 20:5 declares: “A plan in the heart of a man is like deep water, but a man of understanding draws it out.” Biblical counselors, not those who pretend to deal with the deep issues, are the ones who can truly draw out the real issues of life.

Counselors who are committed to Scripture alone do not need to bend to the pressure of those who would want them to somehow see complex and intricate issues in every counseling situation. Of course, some situations are going to be more difficult than others, but it cannot be charged that biblical counseling is overly simplistic. Jay Adams deftly counters this charge by stating, “I consider both clarity and simplicity virtues, not vices. In my opinion, whatever darkens understanding is a detriment; whatever lightens it deserves praise. . . . I look on clarity as a sacred obligation of a Christian minister, whether he speaks from the pulpit or whether he writes with his pen. Obscurity is the father of heresy and ambiguity is the mother of all error. Clarity bears a close relationship to truth.”

Since the Bible is not a textbook on psychology, don’t we need to supplement it with other disciplines to understand and help people with deep psychological needs?

At first glance, this seems like a reasonable question. The scientific disciplines have shown us truth that goes beyond the truth of Scripture. All of us have benefited from medical

knowledge that is, after all, extrabiblical. Appendectomies, for example, have saved countless lives in the past hundred years of so. Smallpox vaccinations have virtually wiped out the disease. If we limited ourselves in medicine to the remedies specifically revealed in Scripture, we would be at a tremendous disadvantage in the treatment of diseases.

Certainly, Scripture does not claim to be a thorough textbook on medicine, or physics, or any of the sciences.³ But psychology differs from these in two important regards. First, psychology is not a true science (see discussion on pages 8-20). It does not deal with objective, measurable data that can be subjected to reliable tests and confirmed by the scientific method. It is a pseudo-science, and most of its cardinal doctrines are mere speculations, not reliable truth.

Second, and most significant, psychology, unlike medicine and physics, deals with matters that are fundamentally spiritual. In fact, the word psychology literally means, “study of the soul.” What are deep psychological needs if they are not the spiritual issues the gospel is concerned with? And Scripture certainly does claim absolute sufficiency in addressing those needs: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; *that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work*” (2 Tim. 3:16-17, emphasis added). “The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul” (Ps. 19:7). Scripture itself promises believers the most comprehensive spiritual resources: “everything pertaining to life and godliness” (2 Pet. 1:3).

Is the problem depression? Scripture contains the only reliable remedy. Is the problem guilt? What can psychology offer that goes beyond the perfect solution Scripture suggests – “The blood of Christ. . . [that cleanses] your conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb. 9:14)? Every so-called psychological need that is not traceable to physical causes is, in reality, a spiritual problem, and Scripture does indeed claim to be the only sufficient guide in handling spiritual problems. To attempt to add psychological theory to the unfailing testimony of God’s Word is to adulterate God’s truth with human opinion.

(John MacArthur Jr.)

Is biblical counseling really necessary? Isn’t discipleship sufficient?

Christian discipleship is the process of passing the truths of God’s Word that one has learned and applied on to another believer (2 Tim. 2:2). It takes time. It may involve the investment of years of teaching, training, encouraging, and rebuking. The goal during this process is to help the disciple grow to maturity in Christ, to walk consistently according to God’s Word. The disciple equips the individual so that ultimately that person in turn begins to build biblical principles into the lives of others (again, 2 Tim. 2:2). The person who imparts truth about God to someone else will also sharpen and mature through the discipleship process.

From this perspective, it should be apparent that biblical counseling is actually a part of discipleship. It is not the distinct entity the world and many Christians make it. In fact, much of what one would say about discipleship could be said equally about counseling. In

counseling, though, the discipleship process has progressed to more specific application of biblical principles, to more specific problems in the life of a believer. Perhaps the individual requires more structure and accountability than a normal discipling relationship might provide. This is especially true if the issues being dealt with are ingrained habits in the counselee's life.

Normally, in a counseling relationship specific problems are dealt with over a much shorter period of time than in a discipling relationship. It is not necessary to counsel an individual for years. In many cases, people who are saved need only a few weeks to understand the biblical principles involved to change their thinking concerning the issue and, thus, to change their behavior or responses to their circumstances.

There are instances in the discipling process when specific problems are identified, and in the course of addressing those issues the disciple counsels the individual. It is also true that in the process of biblical counseling a person may be able to resolve the issue that necessitated the counseling but will want to continue in a discipling relationship with a mature believer for help with further spiritual growth. Thus, discipling at times necessitates counseling, and counseling at times functions as a concentrated form of discipleship.

(Carey Hardy)

How do God's grace and the gospel fit into biblical counseling?

The Bible speaks of God's grace in the good news of Jesus Christ. When Jesus opened the minds of His disciples to understand the Scriptures, He explained to them the things concerning Himself. The Bible is about Jesus Christ the Savior and Lord; therefore, biblical counseling is about Jesus Christ the Savior and Lord. When Jesus opened the minds of His disciples to understand the Scriptures, He spoke of repentance, the forgiveness of sins, and making disciples. The Bible is about making sinners into children of the Father; therefore, biblical counseling is about making sinners into children of the Father. When Jesus opened the minds of His disciples to understand the Scriptures, He taught them to minister like their gracious Master; therefore, biblical counseling carries a gracious message. Biblical counselors embody a gracious method: loving candor, humility, prayerful dependency, wisdom, gentleness, boldness, kindness, persistence, courage, authority flexibility, self-sacrifice, and patience. The Bible is about equipping counselors to minister the whole counsel of God. Therefore biblical counseling is about equipping counselors to minister the whole counsel of God.

What then is the place of God's grace and gospel in biblical counseling? That is rather like asking, "What is the place of water and oxygen in human physiology"? The gospel is the fundamental material of biblical counseling. Every part of biblical counseling is made of gospel and grace; from understanding people and their problems to solving those problems.

Why do people wonder whether grace is central to biblical counseling? There are three possible reasons. First, many people think that the purpose of the Bible is to get people saved and tell them what to do. From that perspective, all the counselor can say to people is, "Here is how to accept the gospel and God's forgiving grace so you will go to heaven. Now, until then, do this. Do not do that. Shape up. Just say, 'no.' Be a good person." Such moralizing, however, is antibiblical. The Bible does not tack willpower and self-effort onto grace. The gospel and grace of God are not only about forgiveness for the guilt of sin but about God's power to change believers progressively throughout their lives. The indwelling Spirit intends to change people in the practical details of life. God's self-revelation becomes the environment we live in; God's promises become the food we live on; God's commands become the life we live out. Can anyone doubt that biblical counseling worthy of the name is a ministry of God's own power in the gospel, changing people both inwardly and outwardly?

Here is a second reason people ask about the place of grace in biblical counseling. Biblical counselors aim for practical obedience. Many people think that emphasizing obedience to God's commands means ignoring or contradicting the free grace of the gospel. But free grace is effective grace. It is no treat to be forgiven adultery and yet remain adulterous. It is no glory to God to forgive anger and yet leave people given to angry outbursts. It is no honor to the gospel if anxiety can be forgiven yet people who are nervous wrecks continue to live in unbelief. It is no advance for God's kingdom to forgive self-centered people, if they do not learn in some measure how to consider the interests of others. It is no happiness for a grumbler to be forgiven, if that person remains utterly self-absorbed, demanding, and pessimistic. It does no good to either the world or the Church if forgiven war makers do not learn how to become practical peacemakers. God is in the business of making disciples through the grace of the gospel. The Spirit will produce His desires and His fruit, and biblical counseling is a servant of such practical and sweet-tasting changes.

The third reason people ask about the place of grace in biblical counseling is that would-be biblical counselors sometimes fall short of being biblical. What biblical counselor is not aware of failures in pastoral wisdom when seeking to minister the counsel of God? The solution to this dilemma is short and succinct: biblical counselors need to become more biblical. They need to ask God to reveal their shortcomings; they need to repent of folly; they need to seek the god who gives wisdom without reproaching; and they need to humbly learn from more skilled and mature biblical counselors. Biblical counseling is the ministry of God's grace to individuals, just as biblical preaching is the ministry of God's grace to the multitudes.

(David Powlison)

Why do biblical counselors refuse to use information from science and psychology?

First of all, biblical counselors are primarily concerned with the problem of sin and how people can change and grown (sanctification) for God's glory. Science (in general), as we know it, does not concern itself with either the problem of sin or God, so there is no reason

for biblical counselors to use science for the purpose of man's sanctification to the glory of God. The question of the use of psychology in counseling is a bit different. It must be said up front that psychology, as such, is not science per se. While psychologists would want people to assume that it is, psychology is the study of human behavior, not the science of human behavior. Human behavior cannot be scientifically studied, as though someone with a white coat could take a person's attitude and analyze it in a test tube. Even if, somehow, all of the issues of the human heart could be empirically quantified and verified, no psychologist or scientist could provide the proper interpretations or solutions of problems apart from the revealed Word of God and its direct application to the human heart.

It must be stated as clearly as possible that biblical counselors do not object to psychology or to psychologists as such. There are some in the general field of psychology who are performing important tasks, say, in the area of studying sleep patterns of individuals and what profit can be gained from such study. The objection biblical counselors have to psychologists (and even psychiatrists for that matter) is when they attempt to give nonbiblical (and in many cases, patently unbiblical) solutions to people's sin problems. As one of the leaders in the biblical counseling movement, Jay Adams has rightly observed, "When psychologists attempt to change men, although they have no warrant from God to do so, no standard by which to determine what are proper or deviant attitudes or behavior, no concept of what man should look like, and no power by which to achieve the inner change of heart and thought that are so necessary, I cannot help but be concerned"

(S. Lance Quinn)

Is it true that biblical counseling de-emphasizes graduate studies and overly emphasizes training in biblical discipleship?

In most professions today a graduate education is either required or highly recommended. If one were to pursue state licensure in any of the helping professions, such as psychology or marriage and family counseling, a graduate education would be required. Normally, this would require at least one year beyond the B. A. plus numerous hours of supervised internship. This is the normal approach for most Christian psychology programs.

But biblical counseling does not follow this conventional educational track, and because of that is perceived by some as less academically rigorous and, therefore, lacking in substantive content. The question must be asked, however, "What does one study in a Christian psychology curriculum?" If we looked in the catalogue of any Christian college in America, we would readily see that the courses taught at both the undergraduate and graduate levels primarily consist of theory and applied classes in psychology. Typically, students who pursue this curriculum complete a core of lower-division Bible courses along with courses in their major of counseling or psychology, which are taught largely by instructors who have a minimum academic background in biblical studies. But how can instructors who lack theological education properly integrate psychology and the Bible? And how can they possibly use the Bible as the infallible reference point for psychology?

Since biblical counselors believe the Bible is sufficient for dealing with all matters of faith and practice, students who desire to pursue a biblical counseling ministry are encouraged to continue their education at the graduate level in a graduate program that is theologically based and offers courses in biblical counseling ministry and technique. At the heart and soul of biblical counseling are the knowledge and application of God's Word. This must be the foundation of any biblical counseling education at both the undergraduate and graduate level.

All who are committed to the biblical counseling movement must strenuously pursue academic excellence in counselor training. This demands a high level of formal education, which should take place in colleges and seminaries that hold to a high view of Scripture. Faculty at these institutions should be highly skilled in understanding and applying theology, biblical content, and practical theology. Based on this foundation, practical courses in biblical counseling should be taught by faculty who have both biblical and theological skill coupled with practical experience in biblical counseling. The third part of this academic preparation should be an internship in a local church under the guidance of both faculty and pastors. We must produce men and women who, because of their understanding of Scripture and what it reveals about the human condition, are qualified by academic training and commitment to Christ and His Word to counsel others.

(John P. Stead)

Does biblical counseling deny the existence of mental or emotional illness and the healing that is necessary in these areas?

The concept of mental illness is a theory based upon a medical model of illness. In the medical model and organic illness is the cause of various symptoms in the body. The body is sick because something from without has affected it. Thus, a person has the flu because of a flu virus. It is not that person's fault that he or she has the flu. That person cannot be held responsible for the inability to work since the illness is the result of something that affected the body.

This same logic is used in dealing with behavior that is difficult to explain. When a person has bizarre behavior and no organic cause for the behavior is found by laboratory studies, nonbelievers have theorized that the person is mentally sick. Just as the body gets sick, they conclude the mind is sick. Since the mind is sick, the person cannot control the behavior and thus is not responsible for any actions. Any time a person functions in an abnormal (irresponsible) way, that person is considered mentally or emotionally ill – with a mind and emotions that are believed to be sick.

The difficulty with this theory is that it cannot be proved. There are tests that measure thinking, but these cannot prove that the mind is sick. Even though the mind uses the brain, the mind is not the brain. Tumors, severe injuries, strokes, etc. can damage part of the brain and may affect how the person thinks and acts, but these are not mental illnesses, they are organic illnesses that can be proved in the laboratory. They can cause the brain to be sick

but not the mind. While parts of the brain that are damaged may not be available to the mind, the mind is not sick. There is brain damage, not mental illness. The concept of the mind being sick is a theory with no scientific proof.

Psychiatry uses disease labels to describe different groups of symptoms. When an organic illness is found, it is given a label that describes the problem in the body. For example, it may be found through a medical examination that a person with the diagnosis of depression has an underactive thyroid. In this case, the diagnosis is changed from depression to hypothyroidism. If mental illness had an organic basis the term mental illness would be substituted by the name of the physical disease in the body. One argument for the existence of an organic basis for behavior problems is based on the improvement some people achieve through medications. Yet this logic is unscientific. Two concurrent events do not automatically mean one caused the other. For example, 100 percent of the people who ate carrots in 1825 are now dead. If we followed that argument's reasoning, we would conclude that carrots are dangerous food – obviously an illogical conclusion. Yet it is also illogical to conclude that because medications improve a person's feelings, the person has an organic illness.

The biblical counselor is accused of denying reality. Yet who is to say this is reality? Even though the majority of people in our society accept the theory of mental illness as a fact, that still does not make it a fact. Such reasoning is not scientific but philosophical. This is the same logic that says believers deny the existence of Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. Many people believe they exist, so does that make them real? Since mental illness is a theory and not a fact, biblical counselors do not deny the existence of something that has been proven to exist by empirical data gained in the laboratory. There is no need to deny the existence of something that does not exist.

The behavior and thinking characterized as mental illness totally ignores what the Bible teaches. When people's problems are not handled biblically, the results are confused thinking and bad feelings. These add to the problems that must be handled. When people live by their feelings, their behavior is affected. Attempts are made to improve the feelings and through this to improve the behavior. The problem is not the feelings or emotions but the thinking and actions. When the bible is not used to deal with problems, thoughts, and feelings, the result will be confused thoughts and actions. This continues until the thinking and behavior are bizarre. The emotions do not need to be healed since they are not sick; they are the natural result of unbiblical thinking.

The question also implies that the failure to accept mental illness as a reality is cruel since this means that healing is not available, thus the biblical position is cruel. In reality, however, the opposite is true. Those who label the behavior as illness are cruel since they remove the hope and victory available through the application of biblical principles. When the medical model argues that the person is sick, can it guarantee that a cure is even possible? How is healing to be defined? What happens if it does not occur?

Since, in reality, there is no mental illness, to offer healing is to encourage a fraudulent and futile hope. In essence this removes true hope and that is the truly cruel action. Biblical counselors can offer something superior to healing – they can offer victory in the midst of difficult circumstances, rather than improved feelings or attempts to change the circumstances. This is biblical and far superior to a healing that cannot be defined or measured. Biblical counseling is loving because it produces the victory God has promised.

(Robert Smith, M.D.)

Why does biblical counseling hold to a dichotomous rather than a trichotomous view of mankind?

Dichotomy teaches that people are composed of two distinct elements, body and soul. The body represents everything material, while the soul represents everything immaterial. In this case, the terms soul and spirit are understood as viewing the immaterial aspect of human nature from different vantage points. That is, the numerical essence of soul and spirit is one. Evidence for dichotomy can be found in Scripture's interchangeable usage of the terms *soul* (*nephesh* in the OT and *psyche* in the NT) and *spirit* (*ruah* in the OT and *pneuma* in the NT). For instance, compare Genesis 35:18 and 31:5, as well as John 12:27 and 13:21. Another line of argument is the importance of the soul as it is used in various contexts to represent the totality of the immaterial aspect of mankind. For example, see Mark 12:30; Luke 1:46; Hebrews 1:18-19; and James 1:21. Finally, Scripture uses body and soul together as a representation for the whole person, such as in Matthew 10:28 and 16:26.

In evaluating dichotomy, the strongest defense is the argument from creation. Genesis 2:7 records that man became a living soul. The term is inclusive of everything that constitutes a living, breathing being. It would be more accurate then, to say that man has a spirit as advocated by trichotomists. Trichotomy says that humans are composed of three distinct elements: body, soul, and spirit. The soul includes the principle of animation and the faculties of human nature, such as mind, heart, and will. The spirit, on the other hand, is the spiritual capacity to relate to God. This is what is reborn in salvation. Evidence for the position is found in some Scripture passages that point to a distinctive function for each, soul and spirit, such as Matthew 16:26 (what will a man give for his soul, not his spirit) and Romans 8:16 (the Holy Spirit testifies to our spirit, not our soul). Furthermore, the terms are distinguished from one another in 1 Thessalonians 5:23. More importantly, Hebrews 4:12 indicates that soul and spirit are capable of being divided by the Word of God and, therefore, should be understood as comprising different entities.

By way of evaluation, a trichotomy view best explains how an individual can be physically alive and yet spiritually dead. Accordingly, many gospel presentations are built on a trichotomist view of mankind. But this advantage is offset by the lack of biblical support for the position. Concerning 1 Thessalonians 5:23, it must be observed, first of all, that Paul is engaged in prayer. He is not delivering a discourse on the human constitution. Secondly, the "and" connecting soul and spirit could be understood as an exegetical kai rather than

a simple connective, so that the terms in question would represent different ways of referring to the same immaterial aspect of man. Third, the verb “be preserved” and the modifying adjective “entire” are both singular. Even though a singular verb can modify plural neuter subjects in Greek grammar, the Rule of concord suggests that “when a collective subject is taken in mass, the verb is singular.”⁵ Finally, the word “whole” is holoteleis rather than holomereis, meaning that it has no reference to parts. Thus, the lexical, contextual, and grammatical indicators significantly undercut the trichotomist interpretation of the verse. The case made for Hebrews 4:12 is equally problematic. The passage is not teaching division of the soul from the spirit, because the preposition, either ek, apo, or kata, is absent. Also, there is no verb to indicate a division between two things. The objects of the participle are a series of genitives, such as “dividing of soul and of spirit.” In other words, what is being affirmed is the ability of the Word of God to divide the soul from itself and the spirit from itself. Further support for this understanding of the verse is found in the reference, “of both joints and marrow.” This does not mean a separation of the joints from the marrow, since they are unrelated. Rather, the division is of the bones in the joint from one another and the marrow of the bone from the surface of the bone. Consequently, Hebrews 4:12 cannot be used exegetically to defend trichotomy.

The dichotomist has a better way of relating soul and spirit to one another consistent with biblical interpretation. The soul animates the body and is the center of consciousness and personality, including the intellect, affections, and will. The spirit refers to the same immaterial faculties in relation to God. A spiritually dead person is one in whom the capacities of the soul are not rightly related to God. In regeneration, the Spirit reorients the faculties of the soul in a Godward direction so that the soul is made spiritually alive.

(Ken L. Sarles)

Why are those involved in biblical counseling so critical and condemnatory of other believers who hold differing views?

It would be grossly unfair to characterize the entire biblical counseling movement as critical and condemnatory. Having read much of the literature of the movement, I have been impressed with the balanced, thoughtful, proactive, biblical reasoning employed by men such as Jay Adams, Richard Ganz, Wayne Mack, and others.

The error that the biblical counseling movement seeks to address, however, is extremely serious, dealing with the integrity and authority of the Scriptures. Much is at stake. Those who are committed to biblical counseling understand that to dilute Scripture with foolish worldly wisdom (cf. 1 Cor. 1:20; 3:19) is to forfeit the power and blessing of God in counseling ministries.

Is it inherently unkind or condemnatory to say someone else’s view is errant? Not if one has biblical authority for saying so. In fact, to remain silent and allow error to go unexposed and uncorrected is an abdication of the elder’s role (Titus 1:9). The apostle Paul publicly

called Peter a hypocrite for compromising biblical principles (Gal. 2:11-15). Peter had been publicly hypocritical; it was right that he be rebuked publicly (cf. 1 Tim. 5:20).

To disagree with or critique someone's published views does not constitute a personal attack. If the church cannot tolerate polemic dialogue between opposing views – especially if Christian leaders cannot be held accountable for whether their teaching is biblical – then error will have free reign.

(John MacArthur Jr.)

What can biblical counseling offer non-Christians who come for counseling?

First, biblical counseling recognizes that believers and nonbelievers cannot be counseled the same way. We cannot use Scriptures to counsel a nonbeliever who has not been bound to its authority. Indeed, counselees cannot and will not respond to truth if their blinded spiritual eyes are not opened by God. As Paul says, “But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no man” (1 Cor. 2:14-15). So, in order for people to change, they must have submitted their will to the will of God. The only change that can come to a nonbeliever is a superficial change that never changes the heart. And that is precisely what biblical counseling speaks to – changing the heart in order to respond to God.

Then what can biblical counseling offer to the unregenerate person? We can communicate the truth that no one can change to any significant degree without embracing Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. That is where true change must begin. Biblical counseling can offer the gospel – the answer to the most profound human need. This is the goal and basis of any counseling with nonbelievers. If the person refuses to acknowledge a need for Christ's saving work, there is really no other way to help that person.

(S. Lance Quinn)

What theological commitments are basic to the nouthetic method of biblical counseling?

The question can be answered in two parts: first, what theological commitments are involved, and second, what theological issues are not involved.

Generally speaking, the biblical counselor seeks to affirm the fundamental doctrines of the faith in the tradition of the Protestant Reformation. Specifically, three doctrinal commitments are foundational to biblical counseling. The first commitment is to the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. This truth, more than any other, distinguishes biblical counseling from all other counseling approaches. The Word of God, used by the Spirit of God, is sufficient to solve all the spiritual, psychological, and relational problems of the child of God (2 Tim 3:16-17). No other branch of knowledge is to be integrated with the Bible – it stands alone and speaks with absolute and final authority.

The second commitment is to the person and will of God, who is both the author and the subject of Scripture. Every counseling problem can ultimately be traced to wrong thinking about the character and will of God (Isa. 55:8-9). Therefore, all heartaches, tragedies, trials, and sufferings are to be placed in proper relationship to His glorious, majestic person. Since He alone is God, and there is no one else besides Him, difficulties of whatever sort must be related to His sovereign plan (Rom. 8:28-30).

The third commitment involves the doctrine of sin, a distinctive of biblical counseling. Only the nouthetic method gives due regard to the radically defective nature of mankind. The most fundamental dilemma is not that people are in pain, or that they lack self-esteem, or that they come from a dysfunctional family; rather, the root problem is that they are fallen (Gen. 3) and are rebellious against God (Rom. 5:10). They worship and serve the creature instead of the creator (Rom. 1:25).

Though the nouthetic approach is nonintegrationist, that does not eliminate all theological or denominational diversity among those who use the approach. For instance, there are no ecclesiological or eschatological implications in biblical counseling. A biblical counselor could be dispensational, covenantal, or neither. The counselor could be an Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Baptist, or Congregationalist regarding form of church government and could be premillennial, postmillennial, or amillennial concerning the prophetic future. Biblical counseling is nonsectarian and interdenominational. It is not tied to any one individual, church, or organization. Aside from the theological principles that are foundational to nouthetic practice, this method of counseling does not align one with any particular theological camp. As a result, wherever the fundamentals of the faith are affirmed, biblical counseling can be utilized regardless of the church structure or eschatological position.

(Ken L. Sarles)

How can biblical counselors classify drug and alcohol addictions simply as sin when medical science has proven they are diseases?

The idea that addictions are diseases has become so pervasive it seems foolish to speak against it. However, the idea that medical science has proven addictions to be actual organic diseases is entirely without foundation. The medical and scientific communities remain greatly divided over the issue of the disease versus the nondisease models.⁶ The California supreme court, in its famous Sundance Case (Sundance versus The City of Los Angeles, 43 Cal 3rd 1101), sided with the disease model and in so doing legally removed personal responsibility for drunkenness and set in motion governmental and private treatment programs. In fact, what Dr. William Playfair has called the “Recovery Industry” has been so effective in spreading the idea that addiction is a medical disease that a 1990 survey showed 87 percent of Americans holding this view.

On the other hand, the Bible declares that drunkenness – the nonmedical, nonprescribed introduction of chemicals into the body for the purpose of gaining pleasure or altering perceptions of reality in order to cope with or escape from the trials and struggles of life –

is sin (Gal. 5:17-21; Eph. 5:18; 1 Pet. 4:3-5). These chemicals are alcohol or drugs of various types. The ingestion of these substances is a personal choice completely within the control of the individual. To postulate otherwise is to suggest a genetic predisposition to addiction or to suggest that as the substance-abuse continues a person gradually loses the ability to choose not to continue in this pattern of life.

The genetic answer is currently the most popular idea, even in Christian circles. In this model a person is born an alcoholic or addict in the same manner as a person might be born with brown or blue eyes. The thing that triggers the pattern of alcoholism or drug addiction is the first drink or first pill. These individuals have no options, they are victims of their genetic makeup. This concept, besides being unbiblical, is also not even agreed upon in the medical community.⁷ The other model, which says that a person gradually loses the ability to refrain from abusing these substances, is simply a modification of the disease model, and again, it has no unity of opinion among medical professionals.

When a person is brought under the control of a substance, breaking that bondage is not easy. That is why Paul warns so strongly about being mastered by anything apart from the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:12). The only effective treatment with substance abuse is to recognize that it is sinful behavior, repent of it, and cease doing it. This may not be pleasant. It is well known that the physical withdrawal symptoms of longstanding habits are often uncomfortable. Some extreme cases, such as in the case of heroin addiction, may even require medical supervision. However, the biblical way to deal with these sins is clear: repent and cease the sinful activity. The problem of substance abuse and addiction is not – popular opinion notwithstanding – an undefined disease, genetics, environment, or any other exterior force; it is the willful and sinful choice of a fallen individual.

(Dennis M. Swanson)

Is it true that the foundation of biblical counseling is rooted in legalism?

Legalism is a term that is frequently tossed around without much thought to its meaning. Essentially, legalism means to attain spirituality by means of what one does or does not do. In legalism someone establishes an external standard of spirituality and then judges everyone by that standard. Since the individual has established the standard, normally that person always achieves it. The Apostle Paul denounced this activity in 2 Corinthians 10:12 where he railed against those “who measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves.”

Biblical counseling has been caricatured by its critics as being legalistic, and it must be granted that occasionally, on the part of some, that charge has been true. But biblical counseling is not rooted in legalism. It is narrow in its accepted source of authority – God’s revealed truth in His Word – and there is no tolerance for the integration of secular psychological concepts or practices in the area of counseling. But biblical counselors do not set themselves up as the standard for life and godliness. Rather, they point people to the Scriptures so that they may see God more clearly and realize that He has provided for them

“every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3). The biblical counselor is like Paul, who admitted, “Bretheren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal . . .” (Phil. 3:13). The biblical counselor also points the counselee in the direction that Paul took when he said, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13).

To call biblical counseling legalistic is to deny the truth. Biblical counseling seeks to honor God in all things, to come alongside brothers and sisters in Christ with admonition, counsel, and rebuke when necessary, to demonstrate to non-Christians that their problems are pale compared to their need for salvation in Christ, and to declare to all the omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent God who alone is able to save then empower to serve Him in this world.

(Dennis M. Swanson)

Do you ever refer people to psychologists or psychiatrists for help?

I never make such referrals for counseling unless the person bearing the title is committed to biblical counseling – as such, the professional title is incidental. Many biblical counselors happen to have degrees in psychology, psychiatry, neurology, general medicine, nursing, education, or social work. They studied secular counseling theories and methods that they have rejected in favor of biblical theory and practice.

Would I ever refer to a psychiatrist or psychologist for other reasons? A psychiatrists’ medical training could help in determining whether neurological or other organic problems contribute to a person’s problems in living, and a psychologist might help by intelligence testing. But, unfortunately, psychiatrists and psychologists too often adopt the role of a psychotherapist. They trespass into the domain of the Spirit, the Word, and ministry because they counsel people in unbiblical ways. A letter from a leading Christian organization contained the following statement:

Psychologists do far more than engage in the practice of psychotherapy. To whom would you take a six-year-old boy to determine whether he were emotionally and physically ready to enter the first grade? . . . To whom would you turn if your wife became schizophrenic and ran screaming down the street? Would your pastor be able to deal with that situation? What if you wished to make a career change in mid-life, and wanted an objective evaluation of your strengths and interests? Whom could you ask to help you? To whom would you go to seek help with an adolescent who was extremely rebellious and resentful of his father? In each of these instances, and in a hundred others, you would look for a psychologist whose first love and highest commitment is to Jesus Christ and to the Word of God. And how silly to say, “There is no such thing.”⁸

Let me interact with this statement sentence by sentence.

“Psychologists do far more than engage in the practice of psychotherapy.” Indeed they do. Of course, psychotherapy is the money-making staple for most Christian psychologists. But such counseling practice is legitimated by a great deal of popular writing and speaking. In fact, psychologists’ biggest influence in the Christian church at this time is not through psychotherapy, but through scores of best-selling books, conferences, video tapes, and radio shows. The statement stresses the service roles that psychologists have assumed. But (at least in this quote) it does not mention their biggest role: teachers about human nature, about problems and solutions. In an ominous development for the Church, psychologists have gained three kinds of authority: (1) the right to interpret human beings and their problems; (2) the right to work with people experiencing problems in living; and (3) the right to endeavor to solve people’s problems.

The dilemma is this: Christian psychologists’ interpretations of people are systematically twisted by error. What do they teach? Diverse as they are in the details, popular Christian psychologists are united in teaching that mankind’s fundamental problem stems from some lack, emptiness, unmet need, woundedness, or trauma (e.g. “low self-esteem,” “deep yearnings for relationship,” “love hunger,” “search for significance”). In contrast, the Bible teaches that our fundamental problem stems from the active desires, thoughts, and intentions of the heart. Are we basically sinful, or do we simply react sinfully to the failings of primary care givers to meet our needs?

The excerpt cited appeals to the de facto institutionalization of psychology within contemporary secular and Christian culture, as if this establishes psychologists’ legitimacy. The authority is made to appear self-evident – because people go to psychologists, psychologists are needed. However, each of the examples cited above proves dubious upon inspection.

“To whom would you take a six-year-old boy to determine whether he were emotionally and physically ready to enter the first grade?” Take him to a medical doctor for the physical questions. Take him to the principal and kindergarten and first-grade teachers for the other questions. They have dealt with hundreds of kids over the years. Other parents are also a resource. Experienced people can give you good advice to weigh into your determination of your child’s readiness.

“To whom would you turn if your wife became schizophrenic and ran screaming down the street? Would your pastor be able to deal with that situation?” If your wife’s behavior and thinking became bizarre, between a medical doctor, the police, and your pastor (or otherwise pastoral counselor) you should be able to do what can be done humanly. Psychologists’ success with so-called schizophrenics is not noteworthy.

“What if you wished to make a career change in mid-life and wanted an objective evaluation of your strengths and interests? Whom could you ask to help you?” A career counselor could provide interest and aptitude testing, and a knowledge of the job market. Any pastoral counselor worthy of the name could help you think through your motives for considering a change, as well as help you with other aspects of the decision-making process. People who

know you well and people in your current and contemplated careers could also offer practical advice.

“To whom would you go to seek help with an adolescent who was extremely rebellious and resentful of his father?” This is bread-and-butter biblical counseling. Bring both the adolescent and the parents into counseling. Find out why the young person is resentful and rebellious, and whether this is due to provocation from the father. Help them both to make necessary changes.

“In each of these instances, and in a hundred others, you would look for a psychologist whose first love and highest commitment is to Jesus Christ and to the Word of God. And how silly to say, ‘There is no such thing.’” I honestly cannot think of any instances, except perhaps intelligence testing from a school psychologist, where the title psychologist would be significant. Biblically wise people from many walks of life might prove helpful in these instances. My biggest problem with the “psychologists whose first love and highest commitment is to Jesus Christ and to the Word of God” is that most of the ones I have met and read deviate markedly from that professed commitment in both their theory and practice. Verbal commitment to the Word of God coexists with deviant teachings from enemies of God.

Christians who are psychologists almost have to deviate in order to define themselves as legitimate professionals with some unique expertise. After all, the territory they are claiming is not theirs by some natural right. It is the territory of parents, pastors, teachers, doctors, friends, and a host of practical advisors who make no pretense to being psychologists. It is the territory of life’s problems. And wisdom in that territory lies open on the pages of Scripture. Though hard won through experience in applying truth to life, such wisdom is available to all who seek it.

(David Powlison)