

How Biblical is Biblical Counseling?

How would you like to write an article on the weaknesses of your family? That's how I feel in responding to this request to write an article on the weaknesses of biblical counseling. I am a biblical counselor, and biblical counselors are my family. I know and love many of them; I read their books; I listen to their lectures; I value their counsel; and I rejoice at how God is working in them and through them for the benefit of his church.

Like all families, the biblical counseling family has strengths and weaknesses, but how do I identify particular weaknesses without naming particular people on the one hand, or being too general and lumping everyone together on the other hand? Both will result in family uproar, and maybe a homeless orphan too!

So let me first prove my familial love, by highlighting what I value about my biblical counseling family:

(1) I appreciate my family's emphasis on counseling presuppositions. Biblical counselors have exposed the dangerously unbiblical presuppositions behind much secular counseling today (and some Christian), and have re-built biblical counseling on biblical presuppositions resulting in more biblical aims and methods.

(2) I honor my family's courage in boldly re-claiming pastoral care, so much of which has been usurped by secular counseling in our day.

(3) I value my family's emphasis on the power and suitability of God's Word in addressing people's problems. They have inspired and trained many Christians to use the Bible to diagnose the roots of problems and to prescribe lasting solutions.

(4) I admire the way my family has restored the biblical vocabulary of personal sin and personal responsibility, giving huge hope of forgiveness and change.

(5) I'm stunned at the quality of the theological and practical resources my family has provided for the church to address a vast range of life problems.

(6) I welcome my family's stress on the necessity of the Holy Spirit, prayer, and the Christian community to effect long-term transformation.

(7) Above all, I love my family's compassion for people and the multiple hours they invest in repairing broken lives.

It's a great family, and I'd encourage many more to join it. However, we're still quite a young family, and as such we're not perfect. We still have much to learn from one another and from those outside our family. Biblical counselors still need biblical counseling!

Change the Name

So what counsel would I give to my biblical counseling family? I want to give only one piece of very simple yet very radical counsel: let's change our name. Actually, to put it more accurately, let's change the *understanding* of our name, especially of our first name, "biblical." Many of our family's internal squabbles, and some of our confrontations with other families, could be solved by clarifying this meaning.

For some in our family, "biblical" means "Bible only." For them, biblical counseling could be more accurately renamed "Bible counseling." In principle, it means they use only the Bible in counseling people; nothing else is helpful, and anything else is compromise. That, however, is not how "biblical" has historically been understood. In the past it has meant that something is either contained in the Bible or consistent with the Bible. That's based

on the belief that God has revealed truth in two places: in his Word and in his world. We therefore discover God's truth by reading God's Word and by reading God's world through the lens of God's Word.

Take, for example, "biblical preaching." "Biblical" here does not mean we only use the Bible in sermons. Biblical preaching expounds the Bible, but it also draws from non-biblical sources---some of them authored by unbelievers---such as syntactical, grammatical, lexical, and textual guides and commentaries. We often incorporate historical, geographical, sociological, and cultural research. We regularly draw from current scientific findings and the modern media to teach, explain, or illustrate a point. Even the form and communication style of most modern sermons has been derived largely from ancient and modern philosophical and political speech forms.

However, although some of the content and form of biblical preaching is drawn from outside the Bible, we believe that God has provided a Bible that is up to the task of filtering out the false and admitting the truth of God that he has graciously placed in the world. Similarly, "biblical education" does not mean an education that only teaches the Bible. It teaches the Bible, for sure; but it also teaches other subjects like history, geography, science, math, and English, and it does so in a way that is consistent with Scripture.

The unfortunate narrowing of "biblical" in "biblical counseling" results from a limited view of the sufficiency of Scripture; it takes the sufficiency of Scripture to mean that Scripture is all we use in counseling and that to include any other resource introduces unmanageable danger.

Of course, we approach extra-biblical data and research with caution, recognizing that the authors are often unbelievers. And we do not make extra-biblical sources foundational, primary, or authoritative. But neither do we run away from knowledge outside the Bible that God has given to the human race and unintentionally imply that the Bible is insufficient to guide us away from error and towards His truth.

This broader definition of "biblical" is especially important in areas that God has not addressed directly or extensively in his Word. God's Word-based revelation includes truth about spiritual problems such as sin that we could never have discovered any other way. However, we can discover other aspects of humanity by diligent research. In these areas, God invites us to work and struggle towards his perfect and comprehensive knowledge of human beings through thinking, hypothesis, experimentation, logical analysis, peer-review, and so on, along with scriptural exegesis.

Thus, for problems that are not purely spiritual, where other factors contribute (such as genetics, biology, physiology, nutrition, chemistry, sociology, and psychology), we should not expect the Bible to supply the non-spiritual information that can be helpful in dealing with certain problems. Rather, we should expect the Bible to be a sufficient lens to read the information supplied by these disciplines, enabling us to find and use only what is consistent with Scripture.

'Biblical' Benefits

If my biblical counseling family would return to this broader and more biblical sense of "biblical," seven major benefits would follow:

(1) It will restore a more comprehensive understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture. Rather than using a truncated (and un-reformational) view of the sufficiency of Scripture that might legitimate our ignoring of contemporary science, we should use the concept as a divinely provided and effective weapon enabling us to plunder the knowledge that God has made available in his world through his common (or creation) grace.

(2) It will make us more honest. In practice (as evidenced in some writings), even "Bible-only" counselors sometimes use extra-biblical help and resources. However, we should have the integrity to consistently admit that fact in our presuppositions and public statements as well.

(3) It will help avoid misrepresentation of our position. If we spend much of our time creating an unbiblical dualism between the Word and the world, decrying all worldly sources of knowledge in principle, and then in small print, or in vague language, whisper, "Actually there is some helpful information outside the Bible," we shouldn't be surprised or offended when people misunderstand us.

(4) It will help us avoid simplistic diagnosis and prescriptions. If we stick to Bible-only approaches, we will only deal with the spiritual side of problems. That's fine if the problem is purely spiritual, if it's 100 percent related to personal sin. But if the problem is more complex, perhaps involving body issues such as genetics or biology, or social issues such as one's environment or family upbringing, or psychological issues such as child development or habitual thought-patterns, then a simplistic approach will have limited benefits. It's like trying to rebuild a broken down house by employing only a plumber.

(5) It will help us to avoid approaching our counselees as if they were merely souls. They are persons---whole persons in their whole life. Instead of seeing people just as souls with sinful hearts, we will also see them as people with bodies, histories, relations, and suffering.

(6) It will keep us from writing off and misrepresenting other caring professionals just because they do not use only the Bible. Instead we could manifest a more humble appreciation for the contributions of others in the caring process. It will help prevent us from over-reaching, and give us the confidence to involve other professions in our work with people when advisable (e.g., dealing with someone having a psychotic episode).

(7) It will enable us to welcome research that God has graciously provided for us to help care for people in a holistic way.

Overall, correcting this misunderstanding of "biblical counseling" will improve our family's relations with one another, with others outside our family, and above all with God as we honor him in using all the resources he has provided to care for his sinning and suffering creatures.

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Posted on website of *The Gospel Coalition*, October 1, 2012. This article may be found at:
<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/10/01/how-biblical-is-biblical-counseling/>

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