

The Future of Biblical Counseling: Dreaming a Dozen Dreams

by
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Introduction: What Makes Biblical Counseling Biblical?

As I speak around the country on biblical counseling and spiritual formation, I'm frequently asked the question. "When you say 'biblical counseling,' you don't mean _____ do you?" Various people fill in that blank with different labels—all *negative* to them. What a shame that placing the word "biblical" in front of "counseling" causes so many in the church to recoil in fear. Something has gone terribly wrong.

But there's good news—the tide is turning. Warped caricatures of biblical counseling are being replaced by scripturally and historically accurate portraits of counseling that are truly biblical—and attractive (Titus 2:10). While no one can provide *the* final, authoritative definition of biblical counseling, I offer for your consideration this summary understanding.

*Christ-centered, comprehensive, compassionate, and culturally-informed biblical counseling depends upon the **Holy Spirit** to relate **God's inspired truth** about **people, problems, and solutions** to human **suffering** (through the Christian soul care arts of **sustaining and healing**) and **sin** (through the Christian spiritual direction arts of **reconciling and guiding**) to empower people to **exalt and enjoy God** and to **love others** (Matthew 22:35-40) by cultivating **conformity** to Christ and **communion** with Christ and the Body of Christ.*

Given this working definition, envision with me the nature and shape of the future of biblical counseling—twelve dreams of one possible future for biblical counseling as practiced by lay spiritual friends, pastors, and professional Christian counselors.

Dream Number One: Biblical Counseling Will Be Scriptural

Biblical counseling will cling tenaciously to the supremacy, sufficiency, and profundity (depth of wisdom) of the Scriptures. God has provided us with all that we need for godly living (2 Peter

1:3). The Scriptures, rightly interpreted and carefully applied, offer us all-encompassing insight for life.

The Bible provides us with the interpretive categories for making sense of life experiences from God's perspective. By building our counseling models on Christ's gospel of grace, we obtain wisdom for bringing people healing hope, the stimulus for change (God's glory), and the understanding of human motivation that energizes these God-honoring changes.

Dream Number Two: Biblical Counseling Will Be Theological

Too often, current models of biblical counseling start and end at the Fall—focusing almost exclusively on human depravity. As a result, they often counsel Christians as if they are still unsaved—apart from the justifying, redeeming, regenerating, and reconciling work of Christ.

Biblical counseling will unite Creation, Fall, and Redemption. In studying a biblical theology of *Creation*, biblical counseling will examine *people*—God's original design for the soul (anthropology). In probing the *Fall*, biblical counseling will examine *problems*—how sin brought personal depravity and suffering (hamartiology). In investigating the Bible's teaching on *Redemption*, biblical counseling will examine *solutions*—the gospel of Christ's grace which offers eternal salvation and provides us with daily victory in our ongoing battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil (soteriology).

Creation, Fall, and Redemption also have *psychological* correlates. Creation is biblical psychology—the biblical study of the soul. The Fall is biblical psychopathology—the biblical study of the sickness of sin. Redemption is biblical psychotherapy—the biblical study of God's healing of the soul through Christ.

In the minds of some, the use of these psychological terms is invalid. How sad that we have allowed the world to steal these solidly biblical/theological/historical terms. It is time that we

took back our heritage and redefined these terms. Franz Delitzsch, writing in 1861 (before the advent of modern secular psychology), noted that “biblical psychology is no science of yesterday. It is one of the oldest sciences of the church.”¹

Psychology is native to our faith. Not secular psychology, but biblical psychology—understanding and ministering to the soul designed by God, disordered by sin, and redeemed by grace.²

Dream Number Three: Biblical Counseling Will Be Historical

The future of biblical counseling is the past. During the last twenty years we have witnessed the Christian community returning to its proper respect for that “great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1-3). History, Chesterton reminded us, is “the democracy of the dead.”³

I vividly and sadly recall the “counseling wars” that occurred while I was in seminary—wars pitting competing modern counseling “camps” against each other. I also recall thinking, “Surely the Church has always helped hurting and hardened people.” That sentence sent me on a quarter-century search for the legacy of Christian soul care and spiritual direction. Simultaneous to that, God’s Spirit was moving many others along the same path.

Biblical counselors of the future will return to the ancient paths (Jeremiah 6:16). They will seek and apply the ancient legacy and consensual wisdom for living found in the writings of great historic Christian soul physicians.

Dream Number Four: Biblical Counseling Will Be Positive

The modern history of biblical counseling has all too often become enmeshed with negativity, biting criticism, territory-protecting, camp-building, and “againstness.” Biblical counseling has often defined itself by being anti-this or anti-that. That’s not biblical counseling; that’s “Corinthian counseling” (1 Corinthians 1:10-17), a carnal caricature of the truth.

In the future, biblical counseling will be known as “Berean counseling” (Acts 17:11). Biblical counselors will have a *critical mind minus the critical spirit*. They will seek to focus positively on rightly understanding the Word (2 Timothy 2:15), on searching the Scriptures to evaluate human theory with discernment, and on graciously interacting with those with whom they disagree, while emphasizing the affirmative attitude that all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16).

Dream Number Five: Biblical Counseling Will Be Relational

In the future, the Trinitarian roots of our faith will blossom as biblical counselors will be known by their fruit—the fruit of compassion and passion. As the God of the Bible is the eternal Community of intimate Oneness, so biblical counselors will eschews aloofness in favor of what one African American friend describes as “real and raw counseling.”

While techniques, skills, and tools of competency will not be ignored, soul-to-soul relating will be emphasized. When put into practice, those skills will highlight neither directive nor non-directive counseling. Rather, they will birth collaborative counseling where the counselor, the counselee, and the Divine Counselor form a trialogical relationship.

Dream Number Six: Biblical Counseling Will Be Relevant

The pejorative stereotype of biblical counseling as “take two verses and call me in the morning” will be replaced with the constructive identity of “the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). When people think of the biblical counselor, they will think of “Jesus with skin on” and be filled with words of hope like, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

It is not enough to promote the sufficiency of the Word if we do not also minister in such a way that demonstrates the relevancy of God’s Word. Problems in living that most people label

only as psychological disorders curable only by psychological methodologies will be seen as spiritual, relational, mental, volitional, and emotional issues addressed in the Book of Life by the Author of Life so that we can live the abundant life (John 10:10).

Dream Number Seven: Biblical Counseling Will Be Transformative

Biblical counseling applies the principles of *progressive sanctification* to the daily lives of believers. It does so *through spiritual formation* which cultivates *communion with Christ* and *conformity to Christ* through the practice of the biblical/historical individual and corporate spiritual disciplines. Historically these two fields of biblical counseling and spiritual formation were one. It is our dream that they once again become synonymous—hence our BCSF Network name and mission.

Such transformative biblical counseling will highlight *God's role and our responsibility* in spiritual growth through its emphasis on the cultivation of the disciplines that connect us to Christ's resurrection power. It will underscore *the inner life* through its emphasis on forming the character of Christ in us—our inner life increasingly mirroring the inner life of Christ. It will accentuate the *Body of Christ* by encouraging the corporate spiritual disciplines and by equipping believers in the individual spiritual disciplines.

Transformative biblical counseling will require the development of a comprehensive biblical theology of the spiritual life that provides the basis for a relevant biblical methodology for spiritual growth. Biblical counseling and spiritual formation will offer a theological and practical approach to sanctification that is effective in the “real” world where people hope, dream, stumble, fall, and live everyday.

Dream Number Eight: Biblical Counseling Will Be Comprehensive in Theory

Biblical counseling will focus on the full range of human nature created in the image of God (*imago Dei*). A holistic biblical understanding of the *imago Dei* includes seeing human beings as relational beings who desire (our spiritual, social, and self-aware capacities), rational beings who think, volitional beings who choose, emotional beings who experience, and physical beings who act. Biblical counseling models of change will focus on each of these areas, seeing the human personality as holistically united.

It will not deny the interplay or the complexity of our mind/brain and body/soul connection. Such biblical counseling will take seriously the role of the brain (in a fallen world in an unglorified body) and its impact on healthy human functioning.

Dream Number Nine: Biblical Counseling Will Be Comprehensive in Methodology

In Christian counseling today, there seems to be a great divide between models that focus on suffering and those that focus on sinning. Biblical counseling will *treat both suffering and sin* by recognizing that God's Word is profitable for dealing with the evils we have suffered (soul care) as well as with the sins we have committed (spiritual direction). True biblical counseling offers comfort for the hurting as well as confrontation for the hardened. It provides sustaining and healing for those battered by life as well as reconciling and guiding for those ensnared by Satan.

Sustaining and healing (soul care for suffering) are classic terms in the history of Christian pastoral care.⁴ Through sustaining and healing, biblical counselors will offer *parakaletic* care (called alongside to comfort—like the Holy Spirit our Divine Comforter, John 14:15-31; 2 Corinthians 1:3-11).⁵

Reconciling and guiding (spiritual direction for sin and sanctification) are equally historic terms.⁶ Through reconciling and guiding, God will use biblical counselors to empower repentant and forgiven believers to apply principles of growth in grace.

Dream Number Ten: Biblical Counseling Will Be Comprehensive in Equipping

Many training models for biblical counseling tend to focus either on content (biblical truth), competence (relational skillfulness/counseling techniques), character (the counselor's spiritual formation), *or* on community (connecting as the Body of Christ). Future equipping in biblical counseling will make no division between content, competence, character, *and* community.

Scriptural insight, learned in the context of intimate Christian community, and applied to the spiritual character development of the counselor-in-training will result in the relational competency necessary to interact soul-to-soul and deeply impact others for Christ. This holistic, four-fold model, applied in lay, pastoral, and professional Christian counseling training, will produce maturing wounded healers.

Dream Number Eleven: Biblical Counseling Will Be Universal

The Apostle Paul insists that all mature, equipped believers are competent to counsel (Romans 15:14). Therefore, biblical counseling is universal—it is what lay people do as spiritual friends, what pastors do as soul physicians, and what professional Christian counselors do as caregivers.

Put another way, *biblical counseling and Christian counseling are synonymous*. That thought is sure to surprise some and raise objections from others. However, biblical counseling is a mindset, a perspective, a worldview, a way of looking at life that informs how we understand people, problems, and solutions. It is universal in that it shapes our view of the universe based upon the view of the universe revealed by the Creator of the universe.

Sometimes we fail to grasp that all counselors counsel out of some worldview. *The Bible provides the worldview out of which Christian counselors minister.* It doesn't imply an endless stream of Bible quotes thrown at a counselee or parishioner like a lucky charm from our toolbox of canned verses. Instead, it results in unique, person-specific, situation-specific, naturally-flowing spiritual conversations and appropriate, relevant, shared scriptural explorations built from a comprehensive worldview.

Dream Number Twelve: Biblical Counseling Will Be Intercultural

The fact that biblical counseling is universal in no way excludes the truth that biblical counseling should be and will be intercultural—integrating into its universal worldview the *unique Christian perspectives* of both genders, all races, and all nationalities (Revelation 5:9).

The day of exclusive theory-building by white males (I am one) and of history-making by dead white males, thankfully, is over. Historical and contemporary insights and practices derived from Christian women and men from all people groups must be integrated into our biblical counseling worldview. Otherwise, it is hypocritical to call it a *worldview*.

Conclusion: Daring to Dream

I dream of the day when I speak on biblical counseling and someone says, “When you say ‘biblical counseling,’ do you mean lay, pastoral, and professional Christian counseling that is scriptural, theological, historical, positive, relational, relevant, transformative, comprehensive in theory, comprehensive in methodology, comprehensive in equipping, universal, and intercultural?” Together, let's make that dream a reality so that when we place “biblical” in front of “counseling,” pastors, seminary students, professional Christian counselors, and lay spiritual friends respond with joyful anticipation.

¹Franz Delitzsch, *A System of Biblical Psychology*. Second edition. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1861, p. 3.

²See Eric Johnson, "Christ: The Lord of Psychology," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 25(1), 1997, pp. 11-27. See also, Robert Kellemen, *Soul Physicians: A Theology of Soul Care and Spiritual Direction*. Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 2007, pp. 131-141.

³G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2004, p. 3.

⁴William Clebsch and Charles Jaekle. *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective*. New York: Harper & Row, 1964, p. 8.

⁵See Tim Clinton and George Ohlschlager, *Competent Christian Counseling: Foundations and Practice of Compassionate Soul Care*. Colorado Springs, Waterbrook, 2002, pp. 54-61. See also, Robert Kellemen, *Spiritual Friends: A Methodology of Soul Care and Spiritual Direction*. Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 2007, pp. 39-57.

⁶William Clebsch & Charles Jaekle. *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective*. New York: Harper & Row, 1964, p. 9.

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