



**Jeremy Lelek**

# **biblical counseling basics**

Roots, Beliefs, & Future

“Blessed are the peacemakers’ (Mt. 5:9). One way to make peace is by listening to others. This book uniquely demonstrates the biblical virtue of peacemaking by its author’s willingness to listen to and value those inside and outside the biblical counseling movement—even those with whom he disagrees. What a gift to us all! May it have wide influence among biblical counselors, supporters (like me), and those Christian counselors who themselves have listened too little to biblical counselors.”

**Eric L. Johnson**, Senior Research Professor, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Jeremy Lelek has given a gift to the church and, frankly, a gift to me. As I read *Biblical Counseling Basics*, I found myself saying, ‘Oh, now I understand.’ I understood why some counseling (mine included) didn’t work and why some counseling (mine included) did. It wasn’t true or false because it worked or didn’t work . . . it worked or didn’t work because the basics were either true or false, biblical or pagan, from God or from the dark side. This book is so very important, and every Christian needs to read it. You will not only say, ‘Oh, now I understand,’ you will rise up and call Jeremy Lelek blessed for having written it.”

**Steve Brown**, Distinguished author, Christian broadcaster, and visiting professor of Practical Theology at Knox Theological Seminary and Westminster Theological Seminary

“Bringing together the historical narrative of the biblical counseling movement and the eternal truths of Scripture that are preeminently relevant to the emotional, mental, and relational struggles of our day, *Biblical Counseling Basics* is a resource that will encourage and equip believers in their ongoing development as biblical counselors. If you desire to learn the foundations of this craft, and how to practically apply Scripture to the maladies of the soul, I highly recommend this book.”

**Elyse Fitzpatrick**, Author of *Counsel from the Cross*

“Here is a clarion call to grasping the rich history of biblical counseling with its solid commitment to the sufficiency of Scripture; healthy interaction with secular thought, using the Scripture as the measure of all knowledge; advocacy of surgical accuracy in the use of Scripture and acute avoidance of proof texting; the centrality of theology proper as the context for counseling; and thoughtful challenge regarding law and ethics.”

**Howard A. Eyrich**, Director of DMin in Biblical Counseling, Birmingham Theological Seminary; Fellow, Association of Certified Biblical Counselors

“Biblical counseling needs more scholars, teachers, leaders, and practitioners like Jeremy Lelek, nuanced in their approach and willing to embrace the complexities of the human psyche. I commend *Biblical Counseling Basics* to anyone desiring a practical primer on how the Scriptures relate to the care of souls.”

**Greg Wilson**, Lead Counselor at Soul Care Associates; care deacon at The Village Church, Flower Mound, TX

“*Biblical Counseling Basics* is an important book in the field of Christian counseling. Lelek provides a much-needed balance to the negative and often uninformed debates that permeate the field. He examines biblical, historical, and contemporary perspectives; identifies the foundational counseling principles; and emphasizes the importance of a transformed heart, not just external behavioral changes. His view is uncompromising in acknowledging the authority and role of Scripture in counseling. In the process, he uncovers the nuanced variety of views in biblical counseling, as he follows the biblical mandate to seek unity in Christ within the fellowship of the saints (1 Cor. 1:10, Eph. 4:3).”

**Ian F. Jones**, Professor of Psychology & Counseling, Chairman of the Division of Church & Community Ministries, and Baptist Community Ministries’ Chair of Pastoral Counseling, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

“If you’re a Christian entering the world of counseling, it may seem like you’re traveling in a small boat into a vast ocean. The philosophical currents are strong. The history is deep. The possible directions of travel are endless. What are the dangers? How do you navigate the relentless ideological waves? Whose words do you trust? How does God fit, or you fit, or Scripture fit? Where do you begin? *Biblical Counseling Basics* tackles these kinds of questions. Jeremy Lelek gives you a good place to begin. He maps some relevant history, helps you gather bearings in the present debates, and invites you to set a course into ministry that takes God, Scripture, and theology seriously when it comes to the wise care of human souls.”

**John Henderson**, Associate Pastor, Del Ray Baptist Church, Alexandria, VA; author of *Equipped to Counsel*

“*Biblical Counseling Basics* is a thorough, accessible, practical resource that will be at home in the hands of licensed practitioners, pastors, and

everyday disciple-makers. If you are called to walk wisely and biblically alongside people as they navigate the precarious terrain of the heart, this Christ-centered work will bless you and help you.”

**Chris Freeland**, Senior Pastor, McKinney Church, Fort Worth, TX

“Lelek’s book does what no other biblical counseling book does. It gives you a helpful history, it defines what it really means to counsel biblically, and it offers guidance for the future of soul care. If you have been called to care for people, this book should be in your library.”

**Paul David Tripp**, President of Paul Tripp Ministries; author of *New Morning Mercies*

“This is more than biblical counseling basics. It is a wise telling of the history of biblical counseling, a useable systematic theology for counselors, and a thoughtful welcome to those who don’t quite know what to make of it all. Thank you, Jeremy, for moving us ahead.”

**Ed Welch**, Faculty member at CCEF; bestselling author of *Side by Side: Walking with Others in Wisdom and Love*

“When an accident left me a quadriplegic, I collapsed emotionally. I vaguely knew that the Bible probably contained answers, but I had no idea where to look. Thankfully, I was introduced to a biblical counselor who made all the difference. He wasn’t a trained professional; he simply loved Jesus and wanted to make him a reality in my life. Friend, you have the same counseling potential. It’s why I love *Biblical Counseling Basics*. Want to help wounded people find life-giving hope? This book is for you!”

**Joni Eareckson Tada**, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

“*Biblical Counseling Basics* is an excellent primer for distinctly Christian counseling, as it clearly explicates the necessity and relevance of Scripture in the care of souls. Written in a narrative style, within the framework of a robust evangelical theology, it challenges readers to love struggling people with the mercy and grace of God in Christ.”

**Sam R. Williams**, Professor of Counseling, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary



# BIBLICAL COUNSELING BASICS

ROOTS, BELIEFS, AND FUTURE

JEREMY LELEK



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To a few amazing scholars in Christian soul care and my cherished brothers and sisters in Christ:

Thank you for your unending work in the body of Christ, and especially for taking time from your inconceivably busy schedules to participate in a long, arduous, time-consuming PhD dissertation. I am forever grateful!

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been. In all sincerity, had the Lord not brought you into my life in 1999, I would not be a biblical counselor today. You opened my eyes to a whole new world with a convincing articulation of truth and took me under your wing to train me in the ways of his magnificent Word. For that, my friend, I dedicate this book to you. May the God of our salvation bless you greatly for all you have done in and for his kingdom. Love you, friend!

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is a cursory outline of the basic tenets of biblical counseling as well as an attempt to offer case wisdom in applying abstract theological ideas to humanity's tangible here and now struggles. It is drawn from my work during completion of my PhD study at Regent University as well as twenty years of counseling experience in private practice. While current social norms tend to place counseling exclusively under the headings of particular professional disciplines (i.e., psychologist, Licensed Professional Counselor, Licensed Social Worker, et cetera), biblical counseling enters the conversation with assumptions that do not limit the practice of counseling in such a way. Instead, biblical counseling builds upon Scripture's teaching that as believers in Jesus Christ, we are all called to counsel. As such, this book is written for any Christian who seeks a deeper understanding on how the Bible applies to the often complicated mental struggles we unfortunately witness among ourselves, our friends, and our families.

You may be among the skilled professionals cited above (as am I). While you have expertise in particular areas of mental health, maybe you have never read a book that connects the worlds of theology and psychology. If that is the case, this book is for you. Perhaps you are a pastor seeking to increase your knowledge base in practical theology—the art of applying theology to actual lived experiences. This book will serve that objective well. You may be a student or a lay counselor hoping to frame a counseling approach that squares with the teachings of the Bible. This book is a starting point. Wherever you find yourself on this spectrum, my prayer is that you will be drawn closer to God as you read through each and every page.



## Part One

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# **Roots: History and Context**

## CHAPTER ONE

• • • •

# BATTLE LINES: THE ORIGIN AND DECLINE OF BIBLICAL CARE

Biblical psychology is no science of yesterday. It is one of the oldest sciences in the church. —Franz Delitzsch<sup>1</sup>

For psychology is now again the path to the fundamental problems.  
—Friedrich Nietzsche<sup>2</sup>

The book you are reading attempts to unpack the single question, What is biblical counseling? The answer is multifaceted. Biblical counseling is a model of care that brings Scripture to bear on the multitude of struggles that plague the human soul, while simultaneously offering scriptural, gospel-saturated insight on how human beings can flourish. Biblical counseling aims to glorify God, esteem the Bible, celebrate science, and prioritize Jesus's commands to love God and neighbor. It offers divine understanding to important life issues while bringing clarity to the believer about the nature of human psychology (i.e., "the study of the soul").<sup>3</sup> Biblical counseling comprises a theological system that informs basic questions such as Who are we?, What motivates us?, What actually brings about genuine transformation?, and How can we maintain lasting change to the glory of God? Certainly, biblical counseling answers many more questions, but these are central and worth considering in the pages that follow.

Biblical counseling also affirms that its source, the Bible, has been revealed by an omniscient God who designed every soul that exists. As such, failing to bring the wisdom of this God to the forefront of the counseling process is considered a failure to provide the deepest counsel available to those in need. While science may be helpful in psychology's ongoing development to treat the maladies of the mind, for people to know themselves most accurately, they must comprehend more than empirical data or theoretical assumption. They need God's perspective on life issues such as sin, suffering, and the ongoing process of human transformation.

To that end, followers of Jesus who want to broaden their understanding of biblical counseling need to do so with a spirit that seeks humility from God. Biblical counselors are continually engaging the Bible for guidance and wisdom. As a result, they daily enter into a divine narrative that provides occasion for rich, personal reflection as it pertains to God's activity in their own lives. Their interaction with God's Word is far from a futile practice of mere data gathering. Knowing the right answers from the Bible is not the be all and end all of providing authentic biblical care. While biblical knowledge is an imperative aspect of this craft, mere knowledge is a doorway to self-centered pride. When people seek counseling, they are seldom searching for facts. They may be searching for answers, but the manner in which such answers are given will drastically shape the counselee's experience. Quoting a Bible verse to a person in the throes of depression falls short of genuine biblical care. In order to offer more, biblical counselors will first need to consider how the piercing truths of God's Word are relevant to their own hearts. Studying biblical counseling should itself change the counselor. When engaging penetrating truth, such ongoing personal transformation is actually essential to becoming an authentic biblical counselor.

How will this book deepen readers' understanding of biblical counseling? Section one will offer a brief history of Christian soul care within the church as well as various circumstances that led many pastors to abandon the role as counselor and instead defer to the secular practitioner when counseling was needed. Thankfully, history does not stop there. Biblical counseling experienced a resurgence where men such as Jay Adams (the father of the modern biblical

counseling movement), David Powlison, Ed Welch, and Paul Tripp (second generation pioneers in the movement) began to articulate a model of care that was comprehensive in scope and accessible to anyone belonging to the body of Christ.

Section two will cover the central theological tenets of biblical counseling. These tenets provide a general foundation upon which Christians can build. Section two addresses the use of Scripture in counseling, God's role in the counseling process, a basic biblical understanding of human nature, a general discussion about the process of change, an explanation on the role of the church in biblical counseling, and an overview of basic counseling methods.

The final section will take a look at areas within biblical counseling where the movement is still growing and maturing. Leaders within biblical counseling acknowledge that the movement is still quite young, and some aspects of development are still in process. This section will provide insight as to where biblical counseling can be further developed. Personal recommendations for the movement's future are also offered.

## **In the Beginning . . .**

I want to begin with a very countercultural assertion—counselors are desperate for the divine. This statement might seem a bit confusing, given the current culture where much of counseling's foundation, modern secular psychology, has historically assumed an innate autonomy from faith and spirituality. The present and prevailing trend of mental health care has boldly continued down this path by further enmeshing itself with a myopic materialist philosophy that ascribes to the notion that humans are exclusively biological beings. In such a spiritually emaciated context, people of faith should address the basic question, Where did the practice of counseling others actually originate? Otherwise, the study of counseling becomes constricted by a modernist fallacy, and the assertion that spirituality is a valuable element of a healthy psychological makeup is sadly lost.

Typically, when authors attempt to locate psychology's origin, they will initiate their analysis by highlighting the great Western

philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates. Next, they usually move from the archaic hypotheses of the classical philosophers to thinkers such as Descartes who coined the phrase, “I think therefore I am,”<sup>4</sup> to philosophers such as Hume, Comte, and Locke who represent the era of rationalism. Readers are then typically introduced to the pioneering talk therapies driven by staunch modernists—men such as Sigmund Freud, Carl Rogers, Fritz Perls, and Albert Ellis. There are a plethora of such books that have sought to chronicle the history of counseling and psychology, and each of them fails to consider the influence of the sacred.

Operating on the premise that people need the divine in order to offer authentic counsel, this study will initiate the discussion at a point in history that far predates Freud or the renowned philosophers of the West. The survey of counseling that you are about to read begins with a poignant thought by Dr. John Henderson:

Godly or “biblical” counsel began in the Garden of Eden. God created Adam and then God counseled Adam concerning the blessed course of life and the cursed one, “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely, but from the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.” The counsel of God was truthful, His Word for human life and loving. His counsel revealed Himself to Adam and maintained a right relationship with Adam.<sup>5</sup>

If the biblical account of the creation expresses actual, historical data, then the believer’s analysis of counseling’s origin will be vastly different from secular sources in that it will inevitably begin at the Garden of Eden. The founder of the biblical counseling movement, Jay Adams, emphasized this many years ago, “From the beginning, human change depended upon counseling. Man was created as a being whose very existence is derived from and dependent upon a Creator whom he must acknowledge as such and from whom he must obtain wisdom and knowledge through revelation.”<sup>6</sup>

Adams asserts that counseling has been part of the human experience dating back to the very first man and woman, and therefore, this practice has always been intricately connected to God. Can you imagine what it must have been like for Adam and Eve as they were privileged to sit under the infinite wisdom of the One to whom Scripture refers as the Wonderful Counselor (Isaiah 9:6; John 15:26)?

Since the Bible reveals that counseling finds its birthplace in the person and activity of God, it is not a recent, secular novelty. Rather, rightly understood, counseling is an eternal gift graciously transferred to humanity in order that humanity might gain knowledge of the supreme fullness of life, namely God. The wisest of his day, King Solomon, declared that knowledge begins with “the fear of the Lord” (Proverbs 1:7). Within the context of humanity’s interpersonal relationship with God, his precious counsel is given in the form of Scripture. Once received through the active work of the Holy Spirit, the Lord’s counsel is shared with others in the form of “one another” ministry—counseling. This brand of counseling is particular among all others since it possesses a unique conceptual framework of human psychology. It is a framework that positions the modern human-centered versions of counseling as antithetical to God’s original (Mark 12:30–31).

If counseling has always been part of God’s interaction with humankind, it should, therefore, be considered a critical aspect of the Christian life today. This rich heritage has been well documented by many thoughtful saints. It is a history that has unfortunately remained unspoken in psychology’s modern classroom, at times even among those institutions that bear the name “Christian.” As professionals, pastors, parishioners, or students, we are all wise to take up the mantle left before us and recapture the treasures of Scripture that powerfully equip us in our ongoing development as competent counselors—wise physicians of the soul.

Before defining and unpacking the construct of biblical counseling, however, I would like to engender a genuine appreciation for this rich heritage as well as gain perspective on how the church surrendered the turf of soul care to the discipline of psychology by offering a brief overview. I believe that knowing history will shed

light on current trends within the field as well as embolden counselors to walk in their divine call to counsel from the Word of God.

## **The Bible: A Treasure of Case Studies**

In the creation story, Adam and Eve ultimately rejected the counsel of God (Genesis 3). Their rebellion brought forth the fall of creation and separated humanity from its Creator. For the first time in the biblical narrative, corrective counsel was required since people now operate from a sinful heart destined to wander from the Lord's wisdom and knowledge (Romans 7:7–25).

One of the most prominent examples of God's counsel is represented in the Ten Commandments. God speaking to Moses through these commands sets a familiar cadence throughout the entire Old Testament (Exodus 20) calling people to obedience. For example, God spoke to Nathan who then confronted David with his sin (2 Samuel 12). God warned Isaiah of the dangers of rebellion (Isaiah 1) and encouraged him with the coming hope of a Redeemer (Isaiah 8—9). He anointed Jeremiah to speak about the certain calamities associated with falling away from God. He called a stubborn Jonah to go to Nineveh where Jonah finally, yet reluctantly, spoke God's words to the people, and God transformed their hearts. Throughout the Psalms and Proverbs, God speaks words of wisdom and comfort to those subject to folly and pain. The Old Testament sets an undeniable precedent where God repeatedly spoke to his people who then spoke God's words to others. The rhythm of Scripture is guided by the continual drumbeat of "God said."

The New Testament continues this familiar rhythm beginning with the Gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John provide historical accounts of Jesus's life, and his actual words of counsel. Jesus introduces himself as the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). As part of his vast counsel in the New Testament, Jesus invites every professing believer to share in the call to counsel. This call is also known as the Great Commission: "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of

the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18–20).

While at first glance it may seem odd to refer to counseling as a form of discipleship, this is precisely the function of biblical counseling. It is the art of bringing God’s Word to bear on the intricate issues of the soul or the complicated struggles that often arise in relationships. It is a means to help others flourish in their walk with God. Such discipleship (or counseling) typically occurs along a continuum. Biblical counseling may look like one follower of Jesus applying a passage of Scripture to the struggles of another over a cup of coffee. It may look like the more skilled or trained follower of Jesus (i.e., a trained biblical counselor) offering in-depth biblical guidance and utilizing specific methods drawn from a formal biblical counseling model. Both of these scenarios fall within biblical counseling. All Christians dating back to the earliest prophets of Scripture, in varying contexts, have been personally invited to take part in the symphony of voices echoing the counsel of God. We are all called to counsel.

Jesus calls people to follow his lead. He was the most brilliant counselor to ever grace the earth. He brought profound insight into the human experience, and his counsel was iconoclastic to the religious assumptions of his day. Unlike others in his culture, Jesus frequently emphasized that the location of human struggle and the target for human change was not found in religious ritual, but it was centered within the human heart—the seat of human thinking, feeling, desiring, and doing. For example, he taught (i.e., counseled) that adultery was not a mere external act. He said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27–28).

An initial reading of this verse may not seem to fit with the modern construct of counseling. It lacks much therapeutic fluff. Yet biblical counsel often incorporates direct teaching as a useful methodology. In this case, people widely believed that individuals were only guilty of adultery if they actually participated in the physical act. Jesus, on the other hand, pointed out that adultery is simply an outward expression



of an inward problem—lust. He focused people’s attention upon the real focal point—where the core issue resided. Biblical counseling aims to do the same. Rather than engage excessively in behavioral modification (although behavior is important), biblical counsel will always take time to consider the heart issues at play.

However, it would not represent Jesus’s counsel accurately to claim that he focused exclusively on the internal heart. Jesus also (and often) called people to action. Consider his counsel regarding interpersonal conflict, “Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him” (Luke 17:3–4). Jesus counseled his disciples, instructing them on relational upheaval. Whereas many relationships crumble because people avoid conflict and attempt to sweep issues under the rug, Jesus’s counsel provided a divine restorative model. Jesus instructed his disciples on practical steps to take when sinned against that would provide the opportunity for reconciliation.<sup>7</sup>

Whether he was teaching the famous Sermon on the Mount, explaining the myriad of parables, summarizing every command in Scripture to only two (love God and love your neighbor) or living his life by loving the Father and caring for others, Jesus unquestionably epitomized the name “Wonderful Counselor” (Isaiah 9:6). Repeatedly within the Gospels, Jesus provided wisdom and instructive care to those around him (especially his disciples).

Jesus’s beloved disciples and apostles build upon his pattern throughout the New Testament. Drawing from Jesus’s relational wisdom, Paul offers similar and striking counsel. He wrote:

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ To the contrary, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:18–21)

Paul's wisdom was taken from the instruction of God in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 32:35) and mirrors Jesus's counsel in the New Testament (Luke 6:27–29). Paul serves as a steady guide on how to relate to others when confronted with hurtful, even evil, actions or words. His counsel points people to image how Jesus, when sinned against, did not retaliate, but he entrusted himself to the just judge of the universe (1 Peter 2:23–24).

Jesus's apostles in the New Testament offered an abundance of counsel to people of their day. Peter urged those suffering under unfair leadership to continue to do good (1 Peter 2–3). James tackled the candid question often relevant to marriage and friendships, *Why are you fighting?* (James 4:1–8). He diagnoses the root of the problem (coveting) and prescribes steps toward change (seek humility, submit to God, resist the devil, and enter into passionate repentance). The writer of Hebrews provides counsel that brings divine context to the purposes of suffering, yet honestly admits this process is often quite painful (Hebrews 12:7–14). While the apostles offered much of this counsel through epistles, it was nonetheless counseling. Their written record (the New Testament) will inform anyone seeking to practice biblical counseling today. In one way, when counselors draw from Scripture it is as though counselees are also receiving the counsel directly from Paul, Peter, James, and the author of Hebrews who all received their wisdom directly from God.

It is undeniable, God spoke to his people, his people spoke what they were given, and lives, hearts, and cultures were transformed. This counsel is still alive today in the form of the Bible, and it is because God has spoken and this revelation has been recorded on the pages of Scripture that biblical counselors are privileged to provide eternal truth relevant to the most complex mental, emotional, or relational struggles of the day.

## **The Early Church Fathers and Reformers**

The early church certainly understood the invitation of Jesus and imitated the authors of Scripture in the call to provide godly counsel. Dr. Eric Johnson offers a chronology of “soul care” rooted in

both the Old and New Testaments that ultimately shaped many first-century authors.<sup>8</sup> Johnson notes early Christian scholars, such as Clement of Rome (c. AD 96), and credits them with the ministry of early soul care since their scholarship and work “contributed to a notable reformation of individuals’ thinking and behavior that led to a growing sub-community distinguished by a certain way of life shaped by Scripture.”<sup>9</sup> Historian Morton Hunt concurs with such life-shaping influence, noting that when Augustine introduced his version of biblical soul-care, his ideas dominated the arena of psychology for eight centuries.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to Augustine, history also points to other early church fathers, such as Thomas Aquinas and John Cassian, designating them as deeply thoughtful men who sought a comprehensive understanding of the human soul. Dr. Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung notes, “The ancients and medievals sought this sort of self-knowledge as part of the ethical life, as is clear from the inscription at Delphi, ‘Know Thyself,’ and the mission of Aquinas’s Dominican order, namely, ‘the care of souls.’”<sup>11</sup>

She quotes Cassian at length, emphasizing the significance he placed on self-knowledge and human well-being, “Looking at [their struggles] as in a mirror and having been taught the causes of and remedies for the vices by which they are troubled, they will also learn about future contests before they occur, and they will be instructed as to how they should watch out for them, meet them, and fight against them.”<sup>12</sup> Cassian, here, is describing what people today would call counseling. As sufferers contemplated their own struggles (as though looking in a mirror), it was commonplace for them to receive biblical insight concerning the etiology (or cause) of their issues as well as receive prescriptive and preventative methods to guide them. Continuing with Cassian:

As is the case with the most skilled physicians, who not only heal present ills but also confront future ones with shrewd expertise and forestall them with prescriptions and salutary potions, so also these true physicians of the souls destroy, with a spiritual conference as with some heavenly medicine, maladies of the heart just as they are about to emerge, not

allowing them to groin in the minds of young men but disclosing to them both the causes of the passions that threaten them and the means of acquiring health.<sup>13</sup>

The people of Cassian's day sought counsel from their spiritual leaders who both diagnosed the causes of their mental, emotional, and spiritual ills as well as prescribed biblical means toward "acquiring health."

Both Aquinas and Cassian model a mindset that was dominant in their day—a mindset shaped by Jesus and the authors of Scripture. Soul care was not splintered away from the church toward a skilled, secular practitioner, but it was a craft embedded in the DNA of the Christian life.

Following in the church fathers' footsteps, men of the Reformation, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin were major contributors to developing philosophies and theologies of human nature, human motivation, and personality development.<sup>14</sup> Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and Luther's *The Bondage of the Will* contain some of the most fascinating and comprehensive theologies of human nature ever postulated. These books rival the depth and breadth of any personality theory developed by modern psychology.

Luther's and Calvin's conceptual framework, however, included the impact of sin and depravity on the human estate, the subjection of the will to evil passions and desires (and even the devil), the essential need for grace to awaken and free the one enslaved by sin, and the sovereign power of God actively at work in every aspect of the human experience. Luther, Calvin, and others of their day tackled with a distinctively theological framework the very questions in which psychology would become immersed centuries later.

## A Puritan "Psychology"

Continuing in the Reformers' tradition, another group of Christians were deeply invested in understanding human nature from a theological vantage. They were known as the Puritans. While the Puritans were far from a perfect people, it is also unfair to characterize them

exclusively as “witch-hunting lunatics.” That is a profoundly skewed caricature of saints who brought many grace-filled goods to the suffering souls of their day.

Leaders within this tradition developed highly “sophisticated diagnostic casebooks containing scores and even hundreds of different personal problems and spiritual conditions.”<sup>15</sup> These casebooks had as their basis a rich theology derived from the pages of Scripture.<sup>16</sup> Such casebooks were possible because the Puritans, who consisted of some of the most brilliant thinkers, philosophers, and theologians of their time, esteemed the Bible as relevant to the soul issues of their day. They held a genuine belief that God’s revelation in Scripture contained the keys to address humankind’s mental and emotional maladies.

One such theologian was Jonathan Edwards, a renowned Puritan who briefly served as the president of Princeton University prior to his untimely death. In his treatise on the human will, he (as Luther and Calvin before him) outlined a very elaborate and rigorous theology of motivation. The difference between Edwards and secular theorists, however, is that his ideas were derived from a comprehensive understanding and application of biblical doctrine. Analyzing the nature of volition, Edwards once wrote, “The choice of the mind never departs from that which, at that time, and with respect to the direct and immediate objects of that decision of the mind, appears most agreeable and pleasing, all things considered.”<sup>17</sup>

Edwards echoed the sentiments of Peter, Paul, and James in that he placed the crux of human activity in one’s longings—the affections (Romans 8:5–8; Ephesians 4:22–24; James 1:13–16). In Edwards’s view, it was under the influence of such desires that the human will was constantly subjected and within which the heart was perpetually at war. It was an idea Jesus put forth centuries before Edwards when he taught, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). Fundamentally, according to Edwards, a biblical view of motivation is centered in the idea that the heart is captured and ruled by what it desires most in a given moment. On this subject, he artfully elaborates:

The Author of the human nature has not only given affections to men, but has made them very much the spring of men's actions. . . . Such is man's nature that he is very inactive, any otherwise than he is influenced by some affection, either love or hatred, desire, hope, fear, or some other. These affections we see to be the springs that set men a-going, in all the affairs of life, and engage them in all their pursuits: these are the things that put men forward, and carry them along, in all their worldly business; and especially are men excited and animated by these in all affairs wherein they are earnestly engaged, and which they pursue with vigour. We see the world of mankind to be exceeding busy and active; and the affections of men are the springs of the motion.<sup>18</sup>

For Edwards, human motivation was not driven by unmet emotional needs but by humanity's inner springs of motion, what he calls the affections. Edwards's conceptual framework of the human will is nothing less than brilliant.

The English Puritan John Owen discussed the imperative nature of God's activity in the process of healing and change:

Now, self-healers or men that speak peace to themselves do commonly make haste; they will not tarry; they do not hearken what God speaks, but on they will go to be healed [Isa. 28:16] . . . Which is worst of all, it amends not the life, it heals not the evil, it cures not the distemper. When God speaks peace, it guides and keeps the soul that it "turn not again to folly" [Ps. 85:8]. When we speak it ourselves, the heart is not taken off the evil; nay, it is the readiest course in the world to bring a soul into a trade of backsliding . . . In God's speaking peace there comes along so much sweetness, and such a discovery of his love, as is a strong obligation on the soul no more to deal perversely [Luke 22:32].<sup>19</sup>

Owen understood the arduous nature of change, and he exposed motives for change that can actually impede the process. As he stated,

the “self-healer” has an agenda, and that agenda is typically egocentric. It is not centered in the glory of God nor a genuine desire to reflect Christ—two imperative aims of biblical care. Instead, Owen conceptualized the process of inner healing aimed at acquiring peace and relief for their own sakes as counterproductive to spiritual flourishing. Contrary to such hedonistic methods, in order for genuine transformation to occur in one’s psychological and spiritual states, he believed God’s activity, through his Spirit, was essential. Owen’s views judiciously articulate the tenets of Scripture (Ephesians 2).

Contained within his body of work, Owen continually spoke the language of counseling, though he might not have used modern psychological lingo. Referencing his style, Kelly Kapic notes, “Using classic faculty-psychology categories of the mind, the will, and the affections, Owen consistently attempts to present a holistic perspective of the human person, and this informs his view of sin and sanctification.”<sup>20</sup>

Both Owen and Edwards were men of deep faith and conviction. In their attempts to conceptualize humankind, they formulated detailed logical systems of understanding that were shaped by biblical doctrine. Their works within the realm of soul care remain highly regarded among theologians and scholars today as some of the most brilliant in Christendom. In his introduction to Owen’s treatise on the Holy Spirit, Sinclair Ferguson reminds us, “The Puritans were pastors and physicians of the soul. But they understood that the basic counseling sessions of every Christian’s life should take place in the context of the exposition of the Scripture.”<sup>21</sup>

These examples are two of hundreds worth considering from the Puritans. Their work in soul care is quite voluminous, and their expertise striking. J. I. Packer points out “that behind the studied simplicity of the Puritan practical books lies the care and competence of brilliant and deeply learned theologians.”<sup>22</sup> Johnson adds, “While our era far outstrips theirs in terms of an understanding of the created mechanics of human development and soul change, ours is dwarfed by theirs with regard to the more important expertise of applying the Bible to the greatest needs of the soul.”<sup>23</sup>

## Biblical Psychology's Deep Roots in Church History

The rich heritage of soul care within the body of Christ reveals that such practices were not anomalies. They were common ministerial duties for which the people of God felt they were responsible. Throughout history, many published, scholarly contributions have sought to formulate a rich psychology rooted in the Bible's teachings. Many far predate Wundt (recognized as the father of psychology) or Freud. To further illustrate this heritage, consider just a few titles that were published from as early as the mid-1500s through the late nineteenth century (listed in chronological order):<sup>24</sup>

- 1538: Bucer, M. *Von der Waren Seelsorge und Dem Rechten Hirtendienst (Concerning the True Care of Souls and Genuine Pastoral Ministry)*
- 1692: Burnet, G. *A Discourse of the Pastoral Care*
- 1769: Roos, M. F. *Fundamenta Psychologiæ Ex Sacra Scriptura Collecta* (tr. *Outlines of Psychology Drawn from the Holy Scriptures*).
- 1799: Gerard, A. (1799). *The Pastoral Care*
- 1843: Beck, J. T. *Outlines of Biblical Psychology*
- 1853: Rauch, F. A. *Psychology; or, A View of the Human Soul; Including Anthropology*
- 1855: Delitzsch, F. *A System of Biblical Psychology*
- 1871: Gall, J. *Primeval Man Unveiled: Or, the Anthropology of the Bible*.
- 1873: Forster, J. L. *Biblical Psychology: In Four Parts*
- 1874: Sutherland, G. *Christian Psychology: A New Exhibition of the Capacities and Faculties of the Human Spirit, Investigated and Illustrated from the Christian Standpoint*

These authors illustrate the long and consistent stream of history in which Christians now operate as believers participating in the modern current of biblical soul care. Christians have worked on this turf for a very long time, and we should not shy away from a confident, biblical approach to one-another care even as we may experience the resistance, even ridicule, from the post-Christian culture in which we have been called to serve.<sup>25</sup>



## **A Changing Tide—The Decline of Biblical Soul Care**

People operating as Christian counselors find themselves in a stream of history that flows back to the first two people on earth. From the Bible to at least the time of the Puritans, counseling and soul care held a prominent position within the prescribed functionality of the body of Christ. And while this emphasis remained for centuries, this tradition eventually gave way to the emergence of modernism with its emphasis on logical positivism and empiricism—the idea that facts are valid so long as they can be proven through scientific study. From these two paradigms emerged a scientific age wherein truth was ultimately determined by the rigors of applying scientific methodology. As a result, if a truth claim, construct, process, or phenomenon could not be measured and verified by a very specific research process, the scientific method, it was not considered viable. If a microscope or mathematical formula could not measure it, then one could not assume it was universally true for all people at all times.

Modernism ultimately gave birth to what is known today as the science of psychology.<sup>26</sup> The implication of this change meant that the spiritual became subservient to the scientific and reshaped a profoundly new orthodoxy for understanding the human soul. Gone were the days of interpreting the psychology of humankind through the lens of the Bible. Men like Aquinas, Augustine, Luther, Edwards, and Owen were often redefined from being valued contributors to the understanding of people to neurotic individuals in need of therapeutic analysis by the new practitioners of the day.<sup>27</sup>

Since logical positivism does not acknowledge variables that fail the test of empirical validation, the psychology it produced by and large dismissed the validity of the spiritual; this dimension could not literally be measured. Exceptions to this rule were rare but included occasional theorists such as William James and Carl Jung. Both had an interest in the supernatural, mysticism, and the occult, but denied any form of true Christian orthodoxy.

In America, researchers like G. Stanley Hall went to great lengths to disprove the spiritual as a valid aspect of psychological science.<sup>28</sup> Within this modernist context, individuals such as Sigmund Freud and Carl Rogers began to rise in prominence as the new authoritative

voices regarding human nature and the mind.<sup>29</sup> These were men who basically relegated spiritual interests to the category of neurosis, emphasizing instead theoretical ideas that were completely influenced by Darwinian evolution and humanistic philosophy.

### **Boisen, Rising Empiricism, and a Church Virtually Muted**

While Modernism was rising in the West, the overall influence of the church on issues pertaining to psychology radically declined. The conservative wing of the church was distracted from participating in what had become accepted as an exclusively scientific endeavor.<sup>30</sup> John Bettler recalls, “While evangelicals spent the first half of the twentieth century defending the faith and struggling to save their seminaries and churches from liberal takeover, those same liberals were free to define and develop pastoral counseling as they wished without input or opposition from those upholding full biblical authority.”<sup>31</sup> Powlison wrote that during this time conservatives “virtually ignored counseling.”<sup>32</sup>

The vacuum created by the silence of conservative evangelical thinkers was not left vacuous for long, however. The liberal factions within the church poured themselves into addressing humanity’s mental health needs. To a large degree, they were prompted toward greater action by the convicting call of a man named Anton Boisen. Boisen was one of the first to challenge Christian seminaries by admonishing them to offer clinical training for seminary students in the realm of mental health.<sup>33</sup> He had suffered several mental breakdowns and was unable to find help within the church for his ailing soul.<sup>34</sup> In 1936, he scorned the church’s disinterest in such affairs:

It seems truly an astounding situation that a group of sufferers larger than that to be found in all other hospitals put together, a group whose difficulties seem to lie for the most part in the realm of character rather than in that of organic disease, should be so neglected by the church. Notwithstanding the fact that the church has always been interested in the care of the sick and that the Protestant

churches of America have been supporting 380 or more hospitals, they are giving scarcely any attention to the maladies of the mind.<sup>35</sup>

Within the void caused by this scarce attention, Boisen posited a new emphasis within the body of Christ wherein pastors could receive practical training in effectively treating what he referred to as “the maladies of the mind.” But, for Boisen, this new emphasis would require a blending of psychology and theology—a synthesis that would demand a “giving up of dogmatism and the beginning of that humility which is a precondition of entrance into the Kingdom of heaven.”<sup>36</sup> He ultimately contended, “Even though the conservative attitude might succeed in holding the lines a little longer, it offers no solution.”<sup>37</sup> Sadly, his prophetic words proved glaringly true in the years that immediately followed.

Influenced by the call of Boisen, The Council for Clinical Pastoral Training (CCPT) was eventually formed, and a new liberal era was born in the field of Christian ministry.<sup>38</sup> This liberal leaning was not necessarily the intent of Boisen, but much of his work initiated a synthesis of the secular field of psychology with a majority liberal religious consensus—both shifting momentum away from orthodox Christian doctrine. Carter and Narramore observed that

In reacting to what they thought were negative emphases on hell, depravity, personal salvation, and the inerrancy of Scripture, the liberal wing of the church began to focus more on human potential and social action. Under the influence of German liberalism, they rebelled against a “pessimistic” view of the human being and began to hold out hope that through increased human effort workable solutions to humanity’s dilemma would be found.<sup>39</sup>

Adding to the liberal influences, supervisors responsible for training clergy within the CCPT largely began to adopt the models of Freudian and later Rogerian psychology as their primary guides for conceptualizing people and their problems.<sup>40</sup> This was a significant

shift toward a liberal and secular way of thinking, given that Freud believed religion offers nothing more than foolish illusions<sup>41</sup> and Rogers was a devout humanist. Rogers once wrote, “Experience is, for me, the highest authority . . . Neither the Bible nor the prophets—neither Freud nor research—neither the revelations of God nor man—can take precedence over my own direct experience.”<sup>42</sup>

These worldviews were primary among practitioners overseeing seminary students in clinical settings. Inevitably, these same students acquired positions within local churches, and secular ideas embraced by Freud, Rogers, and others eventually seeped into the fabric of the church under the banner of pastoral counseling. Before long, many of these pastors reinterpreted sin as sickness.<sup>43</sup>

E. T. Charry noted, “Liberal churches were psychologized with the creation of the field of pastoral counseling, and soon theological education followed by providing clinical, pastoral education.”<sup>44</sup> B. Narramore highlighted that during the infancy of pastoral counseling, an “approach that gave much attention to specific biblical teaching seemed somehow suspect and unscientific. In the minds of the intellectual liberals, any strong reliance on scriptural teaching smacked of authoritarianism and the fundamentalist mentality.”<sup>45</sup> With such a stigma attached to scriptural teaching in the realm of counseling, from the 1920s to the 1970s, the discipline of pastoral counseling was almost exclusively shaped by secular thought influenced by the likes of Freud’s dynamic needs theory and the client-centered therapy of Carl Rogers (himself a former seminary student).<sup>46</sup>

A major shift had taken place in the culture. The psychiatric clinician replaced the church, an entity once considered the very epicenter of soul care. The expertise of psychoanalysis and psychology supplanted the cherished value of theology regarding the human estate. Reflecting on this seismic historical shift, David Powlison soberly concluded, “The church of Christ lost her heartland, the understanding and cure of souls.”<sup>47</sup> This was a scarring development indeed. Thankfully, however, as the church was relenting to the intimidation of the establishments of psychology and psychiatry, the Lord was raising up an influential voice to confront this tragic and disturbing trend.

## **O. Hobart Mowrer, a Surprising Ally and a New Call to Action**

Psychology made significant progress in convincing pastors to relinquish their roles as counselors. However, not all pastors were content with doing so. For pastors who maintained the practice of counseling as part of their ministry duties, psychologists had convinced seminaries (where these men were receiving their pastoral training) that the best context for such training would be the psychiatric hospital. While this may have been appealing initially, given how modernism and materialist ideals were surging, this arrangement did not bode well for pastors who wanted to practice counseling from the foundation of orthodox Christian teaching.

A misconception was embraced—that biblical teaching was for the church, for preaching, or for prayer. However, when it came to real mental issues, something far more advanced than the Bible was deemed essential. A false-dichotomy was born wherein psychology was presumed to be the antidote for the soul (psyche) while theology was considered to be food for the spirit—a very different perspective than church history suggests. This created an unnecessary and more importantly, an unbiblical division in which the student of Scripture was made dependent on the secular psychological scholar. Embracing this idea forced pastors into environments where advanced therapeutic skill could only be found in the practitioner of psychology who likely opposed the very God in which these pastors professed faith and allegiance—the very God in whom their call was rooted. A crisis was beginning to develop, and for a while, no real opposition was offered. That is, until a man named O. Hobart Mowrer asserted his voice into the conversation.

Mowrer was one of the first ardent critics of the liberal movement evolving in pastoral counseling. He was deeply concerned about the development of a psychological discipline overrun by what became known as the medical model. In his view, this model was decimating the idea of personal responsibility. As the former president of the American Psychological Association (1954), Mowrer contended that the religious community had made a strategic mistake by embracing exclusively medical explanations of human dysfunction. In 1961, he

wrote, "At the very time that psychologists are becoming distrustful of the sickness approach to personality disturbance and are beginning to look with more benign interest and respect toward certain moral and religious precepts, religionists themselves are being caught up in and bedazzled by the same preposterous system of thought as that from which we psychologists are just recovering."<sup>48</sup>

Mowrer further articulated,

The present situation is, I believe, a very serious one and far from what Dr. Boisen originally intended. During the clinical internship and the propaedeutic seminary courses, students are typically schooled in the view that psychopathology is only indirectly a religious concern. They are deeply indoctrinated with the view that neurosis and psychosis arise from too much "morality," rather than too little, and that the minister must carefully recognize his "limitations" in dealing with such problems. The total impact of this experience has, it seems, not been a good one.<sup>49</sup>

It is from such concern that Mowrer penned his oft-repeated questions, "Has evangelical religion sold its birthright for a mess of psychological pottage? In attempting to rectify their disastrous early neglect of psychopathology, have the churches and seminaries assimilated a viewpoint and value system more destructive and deadly than the evil they were attempting to eliminate?"<sup>50</sup>

For Mowrer, a return to the constructs of sin and responsibility were essential to developing a truly effective therapeutic model. For some who came after him, the construct of sin was critical to psychology if society was expected to maintain a sense of moral obligation.<sup>51</sup> Others cited the inherent dangers of adopting a model of mental care dominated by a medical system that ascribed to a mythical and illogical idea of mental illness.<sup>52</sup> Still, some dismissed psychoanalysis and the medical model altogether, replacing it with ideas that emphasized personal freedom and responsibility.<sup>53</sup>

From the mid to early years of the twentieth century until the 1950s, there was no substantial evidence that the conservative

evangelical community as a whole actively engaged in the emerging debates surrounding psychology and Christianity.<sup>54</sup> However, in 1956 the silence among evangelicals was broken. The Christian Association for Psychological Studies (CAPS) was formed, serving as a significant catalyst in the development of what came to be known as Christian psychology.<sup>55</sup> It also marked the beginning of a new practice within psychology that would eventually be known as integration.<sup>56</sup>

Influential contributions to these new approaches to Christian care were found in the works of men like Clyde M. Narramore,<sup>57</sup> John Carter, Bruce Narramore,<sup>58</sup> Gary Collins,<sup>59</sup> and Larry Crabb.<sup>60</sup> Later, Minirth and Meier<sup>61</sup> also contributed extensively to the growing body of literature analyzing what these practitioners believed was a proper interrelation between psychological science and orthodox Christian teaching. With these new Christian professionals, the presuppositions of the secular models would finally be scrutinized. A notable distinction among most of these men and the individuals involved in Boisen's CCPT years earlier was that they tended to approach the topics of psychology and theology from a more conservative orthodoxy within evangelicalism. For most of them, the authority of the Bible within their respective spheres of expertise remained a high priority, at least in theory.

## Counseling Considerations

1. Have you ever considered the idea that counseling originated in the Garden of Eden when God spoke to Adam and Eve regarding the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil? What does this reality reveal about God and his relationship to his people?
2. What are some differences that you believe arise between the way the church fathers, the Reformers, and the Puritans viewed humanity and the process of change compared to men such as Sigmund Freud and Abraham Maslow?<sup>62</sup> Is this relevant to you as a biblical counselor? Why?
3. What are your thoughts about the church handing over the work of counseling to the secular professional? Is this still a concern for today? Why?

## Resources For Further Reading

- ~ *The Confessions of St. Augustine*
- ~ Edwards, Jonathan. *The Freedom of the Will*. Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1996.
- ~ Luther, Martin. *The Bondage of the Will*. Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 2003.
- ~ Mowrer, O. Hobart. *The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion*. New York: Litton Educational Publishing, 1961.