ROBERT D. JONES, KRISTIN L. KELLEN, ROB GREEN

THE GOSPEL *FOR* DISORDERED LIVES

AN INTRODUCTION TO CHRIST-CENTERED BIBLICAL COUNSELING

"In graduate school, when others were selling their textbooks to get money for the next round of required reading, there were some I couldn't part with. I had gleaned so much from them that I knew I would want to refer to them long after I completed my course work. Robert Jones, Kristin Kellen, and Rob Green have provided a resource just like that—a guide that will not only equip students as an introduction to biblical counseling but one that will serve them after years of counseling. Although I've been counseling for over three decades, as I read this great book, I found myself thinking, 'Oh, I need to remember that when I meet with Jane,' or 'This would be helpful when I talk to Lila.' Beginner or veteran, you will appreciate this resource."

—**Amy Baker**, adjunct professor, Faith Bible Seminary and director of ministry resources, Faith Church

"The biblical counseling world has profited greatly from rich resources produced over the past decade. In my opinion, however, none is as comprehensively complete and immediately useful as this introduction to biblical counseling by Jones, Kellen, and Green! The work testifies of the authors' years of personal Bible study, extensive case wisdom, and love for Christ and his gospel. As I read every chapter, I commented often to my wife, 'This is amazing!' The biblical-centeredness and immediate helpfulness of every chapter makes this a must-read and reread for biblical counselors and professors of biblical counseling."

—**Jim Berg**, professor of biblical counseling, Bob Jones University Seminary and founder, Freedom That Lasts®

"If you are looking for a comprehensive introduction to biblical counseling, this is it. If you are looking for a quick reference tool to gain an overview of a particular counseling issue coupled with a prolific, dependable source of resources to explore that issue in greater depth, this is it. *The Gospel for Disordered Lives* should undoubtedly appear on the textbook list of evangelical institutions of higher learning as well as biblical counseling training centers."

—**Howard Eyrich**, director of DMin in biblical counseling, Birmingham Theological Seminary

"While not all biblical counselors will agree with every aspect of this book, it does provide the reader with a thorough survey of biblical counseling issues. One critical matter we learn from these seasoned practitioners is that

counseling practice should not be based upon pragmatic reasoning, but flow from theological foundations. Jones, Kellen, and Green have brought their years of counseling ministry to bear in a book that is both thorough and accessible. This is a wonderful introduction to the subject of biblical counseling, but it goes beyond basic material, helping the reader to ask proper questions and to see the breadth of biblical application for the various problems we face in life."

—**T. Dale Johnson Jr.**, associate professor of biblical counseling, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and executive director, Association of Certified Biblical Counselors

"This book fills a long-recognized need for a comprehensive introductory biblical counseling textbook. The authors address counseling theory and methodology and then apply biblical principles to a wide range of important topics. They aspire to be biblical, careful, and balanced. When space does not allow them to deal exhaustively with many of the subjects they raise, they point the reader to specialized resources which address issues in greater depth. This is an important book which will be valuable both in the classroom as a textbook and in the counselor's office as a reference."

—**James R. Newheiser Jr.**, director, Christian counseling program and associate professor of Christian counseling and pastoral theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

"This book is a valuable addition for biblical counseling. It could serve as a primer for those who are new to biblical counseling as well as a reference work to provide initial guidance for common problems, such as anxiety and depression. The authors remind us of the significance of the gospel as they discuss hard issues based on biblical principles with practical applications."

—**Lilly Park**, associate professor of biblical counseling, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

"There is so much trustworthy material here. You can read through it *and* use it as reference. Either way, you will be led in humility and confidence. Humility because we are 'needy' and have faults galore; confidence because 'The Lord is great' and he is pleased to come to the aid of helpers who need him (Psalm 40:16–17)."

—**Edward T. Welch**, counselor and senior faculty, Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation

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Counselees' names in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals.

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INTRODUCTION

We wrote this book because *we* need this book. As counseling practitioners working as a writing team, we found that developing forty chapters pushed us to reconsider what we believe and to think more deeply and carefully about a wide array of topics related to our ministries. What does God say about x, y, and z; and how can we wisely, compassionately, and skillfully deliver God's Word to needy people? We are thrilled to share the fruit of our labor with you.

Moreover, as counseling professors actively training men and women, we wanted a one-stop introductory textbook that we could use in our classrooms to give an overview of the principles and methodology of Christ-centered biblical counseling and provide a basic guide to twenty common problems or situations faced by people we counsel.

Our Title and Intended Audience

Our title, *The Gospel for Disordered Lives*, reminds us that the gospel of Jesus Christ—the heartbeat of the Bible—offers life-changing hope and power to real people with real problems. The reference to "disordered" lives alludes to the language of our secular therapeutic culture, as presented in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the standard reference resource in the mental health

world. Yet we mean something more. Our God is a God of order, and his plan for people involves them living according to his glorious design. Our subtitle, *An Introduction to Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling,* reminds us that Jesus and his Word bring God's life-transforming order to men and women struggling in this fallen, disordered world. We believe that in his Word God speaks more deeply and more powerfully than any mental health professional or other written resource can.

This volume provides an introductory guide to the theory and practice of Christ-centered biblical counseling. We intend this book to serve as a foundational textbook for bachelor- and master's-level students in Christian colleges, universities, seminaries, and graduate schools—although doctoral students will find it useful in the field too. While not aimed at those pursuing state licensing, this book provides a Bible-based perspective that these students can adapt in their broader ministry contexts. Throughout the book we give a positive presentation of biblical counseling and rarely engage opposing views.

Our secondary audience includes all sorts of counseling practitioners—biblical counselors, Christian counselors, pastors, elders, chaplains, men's and women's ministry directors, and small group leaders—all those believers who are actively engaged in helping others handle their personal and relational problems. While this book assumes formal counseling, the principles and steps directly apply to people helping, informal counseling, discipling, and mentoring.

We intend this as an introductory volume, so it has all the strengths and weaknesses that come with trying to be both brief and comprehensive. We realize more could be said within each chapter, yet we resisted the temptation to mention that repeatedly.

Chapter Overview

We begin part 1 (chapters 1–2) with a pair of introductory chapters that define what we mean by Christ-centered biblical counseling and describe who does it and in what setting they do it. It's a ministry of God's Word that is centered on Jesus Christ and is extended to people with various

personal and relational problems. It is carried out by a wide range of believers with various roles in diverse settings.

Part 2 (chapters 3–9) grounds Christ-centered biblical counseling in four foundational doctrines—Scripture, the Trinity, anthropology, and sin—and shows their implications for building our model. We believe our distinct approach to counseling emerges from and consistently reflects historic, evangelical orthodoxy in ways other approaches do not. Part 2 also addresses four topics in applied theology that are often involved in counseling people: guilt, repentance, forgiveness, and fighting Satan. We end this section with a chapter on how to think biblically about alternative counseling approaches.

Part 3 (chapters 10–20) moves into methodological matters, the actual practice of biblical counseling. We begin with an overview of how people change, viewed from the perspective of what God calls the counselee to do (chapter 10). We then consider the role a counselor plays in this ministry (chapter 11). After giving practical guidance on how to prepare for and start a case (chapter 12), chapters 13–15 outline our three-step movement in the counseling process: we enter the counselee's world by forming a welcoming relationship, we understand the person's felt needs and biblically defined real needs, and we offer them Jesus Christ and his provisions for those needs.

The next three chapters highlight three specific skills that have been the hallmark of biblical counseling: how to give counselees God-centered hope (chapter 16), how to use growth assignments to follow the present session and prepare the person for the next (chapter 17), and how to wisely conclude the counseling case (chapter 18). The remaining chapters in part 3 discuss counseling non-Christians (chapter 19) and confidentiality (chapter 20).

Part 4 (chapters 21–36), the largest portion of the book, consists of sixteen common counseling matters all counselors will likely encounter over time. Developing these chapters in particular carried a built-in frustration of not having the space to say much more on each topic, but our joy comes from providing a biblically-driven primer to help you wisely and compassionately counsel sinning and suffering people. Each chapter provides

suggested resources for further study and counseling homework. And since many of our chapters address various forms of suffering, we included an appendix with further recommended resources.

In part 5 (chapters 37–40), we offer four introductory chapters regarding counseling four age groups: children, teenagers, middle-aged adults, and older adults. We describe common developmental or experiential characteristics of each group and typical life pressures and counseling problems specific to each demographic. We end the book with a conclusion that recommends six ways to grow further as a biblical counselor.

Our Process

Each of us is an evangelical, Bible-believing Christian writing from the perspective of historic orthodox Christianity. We believe sound biblical theology must drive everything we write and do in our ministries. Each of us also loves the local church and actively counsels fellow members within it.

Robert Jones, DTh, DMin, serves as a biblical counseling professor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Before that, Bob served in the same role at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, for twelve years and as a lead pastor for nineteen years before that. Kristin Kellen, PhD, EdD, serves as a biblical counseling professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. As part of that role, she regularly counsels those within the seminary environment and outside of it, primarily serving young people and their families. Rob Green, PhD, serves as the pastor of counseling and seminary ministries at Faith Church in Lafayette, Indiana, and as chair of the Master of Arts in Biblical Counseling at Faith Bible Seminary. While all three of us teach biblical counseling courses, Kristin also teaches classes for students who are seeking state-licensure.

Bob convened our team and provided general guidance and final oversight for our submitted manuscript. For citation purposes, Bob wrote chapters 1–2, 6–8, 10, 12–17, 19, 21, 23, 27, 34–35, and 39–40; Kristin wrote chapters 5, 24–26, 28–30, 32–33, and 36–38; and Rob wrote chapters 3–4, 9, 11, 18, 20, 22, and 31. We then carefully read each other's drafts and

provided feedback—often in multiple rounds of edits—to enable us all to make wise revisions. This back-and-forth process challenged, stimulated, and sometimes frustrated us, but brought greater appreciation for each other's insights and passions and produced a superior end product. While individual differences in style, nuance, and emphasis appear throughout, which is the very nature of collaboration, our iron-sharpening-iron interaction led to a more careful, balanced, unified book.

At the recommendation of our publisher, we agreed to use the Christian Standard Bible when quoting God's Word.

With gratitude to our Shepherd, Jesus Christ, and his work in your life and ours,

Robert Jones, Louisville, KY
Kristin Kellen, Wake Forest, NC
Rob Green, Lafayette, IN

PART ONE

AN OVERVIEW OF BIBLICAL COUNSELING

1

What Is Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling?

It's an exciting time to be a biblical counselor or to train to become one. Begun over fifty years ago,[1] the biblical counseling movement continues to grow in both numbers and maturity. Jesus Christ, through his Spirit, his Word, and his church, is changing lives.

Various Christian counselors use differing terms to describe their particular forms of counseling, including the adjective *biblical*. In this book we present an explicitly Christ-centered, Bible-driven approach to counseling. Our approach syncs with that of groups like the Biblical Counseling Coalition,[2] the biblical counseling contributors to several multi-view books

[1] For a starter study on the history of biblical counseling, see David Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2010), and Heath Lambert's subsequent work, *The Biblical Counseling Movement After Adams* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

[2] See the Confessional Statement of the Biblical Counseling Coalition, https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/confessional-statement/, along with their three multi-author volumes: Bob Kellemen and Steve Viars, eds., *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling: Changing Lives with God's Changeless Truth,* 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2021); Bob Kellemen and Jeff Forrey, eds., *Scripture and Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014); and Bob Kellemen and Kevin Carson, eds., *Biblical Counseling and the Church: God's Care through God's People,* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

on psychology[3] and on counseling practice,[4] and our likeminded colleagues who use synonyms like biblical "soul care" or the "care and cure of souls." While we prefer the longer descriptor in our book's title, "Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling," in this chapter and throughout the book we will simply call it biblical counseling.

Let's summarize what we mean by unpacking each term.

Biblical Counseling is Counseling

First, biblical counseling is *counseling*, a personal ministry to help those struggling with personal and relational problems. It helps specific individuals, couples, and families to know Christ better and handle life in God-pleasing ways whatever their situations. Biblical counseling is conversational—interactive and person-specific in ways that go beyond public preaching or teaching. It is personal, the ministry of one person to another person. We might also call it intensive, remedial, or problem-oriented discipleship. More broadly, it is true biblical friendship, wise one-another care, or intentional, helpful conversation.

What do biblical counselors do? They listen (Prov 18:13). They insightfully draw out the purposes of a person's heart (Prov 20:5). They lovingly speak gospel truths to help people grow in Christ (Eph 4:15–16). They wisely instruct and teach (Rom 15:14; Col 3:16). They comfort those who suffer (2 Cor 1:3–4). They restore in gentle, humble ways those overtaken in sin (Gal 6:1–2) and turn back those who are turning away from Christ (Jas 5:19–20).

As a process of personal ministry, biblical counseling shares with secular approaches basic concerns about relational dynamics, interviewing, listening skills, personal warmth and care, empathy, and confidentiality. But it doesn't share their limitations of clinical detachment, dual

[3] See David Powlison, "A Biblical Counseling View," in *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views*, 2nd ed., ed. Eric L. Johnson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 245–73, along with his responses to the four competing views.

[4] See Stuart W. Scott, "A Biblical Counseling Approach," in *Counseling and Christianity: Five Approaches*, 2nd ed., ed. Stephen P. Greggo and Timothy Sisemore (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 157–83, along with his responses to the four competing approaches.

relationship avoidance, state-licensure, nonbiblical diagnoses, and other professional trappings (even when biblical counseling is done by specially trained professionals).[5] Nor is biblical counseling the exclusive domain of professional therapists. It's the domain of all believers: pastors, wise parents, spouses, roommates, neighbors, and spiritual brothers and sisters in our churches. It recognizes variables such as training, passions, experience, opportunity, certification, and calling.

Biblical counselors address the same personal problems other counselors address, such as fear, worry, anxiety, rejection, addictions, grief, pornography, sadness, depression, anger, bitterness, trauma, disease and disability, and eating disorders. We handle the typical span of relational problems, including marriage, parenting, singleness, and all sorts of communication and conflict issues in the work world, church world, and school world. We counsel individuals, couples, and families. Biblical counselors help people of all ages: children, teenagers, young adults, middle-aged adults, and older adults. We deal with severe issues like trauma, hallucinations, and psychotic disorders and work with medical professionals as needed. At the same time, we recognize our ongoing need to develop our personal counseling skills and knowledge of and ability to apply God's Word to various crisis situations.

Biblical Counseling is Biblical

Second, biblical counseling is *biblical*. Its truth source is God's inerrant, inspired Word. In this sense, biblical counseling seeks to do nothing more or less than intentionally, consistently apply historic, orthodox, evangelical Christian truth to the realm of personal ministry and human problems. Let's consider five categories of biblical-theological convictions that undergird biblical counseling.

[5] For a brief summary of what counseling typically entails in the modern mental health system, see David Powlison, *Speaking Truth in Love: Gospel in Community* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2005), 176.

1. The Lord Jesus Christ

Biblical counselors focus on the Bible's central theme: the Lord Jesus Christ and his life-changing, redeeming work for humanity. In that sense, biblical counseling is *Christ-centered*.[6] We present the incarnate, crucified, risen, reigning, and returning Redeemer who through his Word and his Spirit helps people handle their personal and relational problems. Whether the recipients are unbelievers who need to know Christ initially or believers who need to know Christ increasingly, biblical counselors offer Christ to counselees in wise, specific, caring ways.

Jesus alone provides the forgiving mercy (through his saving death and resurrection), practical wisdom (in Scripture), and enabling power (through his Spirit) we need to know and please God in our daily living. Biblical counselors extend to hopeless people our Savior's welcoming words, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28). With the apostle Paul, "We proclaim [Christ], warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ" (Col 1:28), recognizing that "in him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2:3).

As Heb 4:14–16 assures us, Jesus is our high priest; he was tempted as we are, and he empathizes with us in our weaknesses. Though fully divine, he understands us because he is also fully human. Moreover, because Jesus never succumbed to sin means he can empower us to persevere in the face of our daily pressures. The passage ends with this stirring invitation to "approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need." This is the forgiving grace ("mercy") and the enabling grace ("grace to help us") every counselor and counselee deeply need.

Two crucial counseling implications flow from these gospel guarantees. First, the core identity of those who have trusted in Jesus as their Savior is daughters and sons of the living God (Gal 3:26–29), seated with Christ

[6] Unfortunately, today the adjective *Christian* sometimes connotes counseling approaches not consistently biblical in their understanding of Christ and his Word.

eternally (Col 3:1–4), and recipients of a cascade of spiritual blessings he died and rose to secure for us (Eph 1:3–14). Second, what Christ has done, is doing, and will do—what theologians call the indicatives of the faith—moves believers to be and do what he wants us to be and do—what theologians call the imperatives of the faith. Gratitude for God's grace fuels our obedience. We as counselors help counselees "no longer live for themselves, but for the one who died for them and was raised" (2 Cor 5:15) and to "put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience" as those who are "chosen . . . , holy and dearly loved" (Col 3:12) because of Christ.

2. The Bible

Biblical counselors use the Bible as our God-given, Spirit-inspired tool to diagnose, explain, and solve problems. The Bible alone provides God's true, authoritative, and sufficient wisdom for every person in every life situation. So, our first task is not offering a theological summary but letting Scripture speak for itself. What does the Bible say about what the Bible does?

Psalm 1 compares the person who delights in and meditates on God's Word to "a tree planted beside flowing streams that bears its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers" (v. 3). Scripture makes us constant and fruitful in this life and secure in the final judgment (vv. 5–6).

Psalm 19:7–8 guarantees four benefits of the Bible. It renews people's lives, makes them wise, makes their heart glad, and makes their eyes light up. These verses precisely summarize what every counselee craves and what every caring counselor desires to impart. Biblical counselors believe the Bible alone gives people the renewal, wisdom, joy, and light they seek.

Psalm 119 celebrates the impact of Scripture on the human soul; this impact spans the wide range of human emotion—sadness, grief, despair, shame, distress, anger, indignation, anxiety, and distress, as well as comfort, joy, relief, and peace. In these 176 verses God provides formative perspectives on the common disorders that lead people to seek counseling. In fact, the psalmist tells God:

- "Your decrees are my delight and my counselors." (v. 24)

- "If your instruction had not been my delight, I would have died in my affliction." (v. 92)
- "Trouble and distress have overtaken me, but your commands are my delight." (v. 143)
- "Abundant peace belongs to those who love your instruction; nothing makes them stumble." (v. 165)

The counseling implications burst from these pages.

In 2 Tim 3:14–17, Paul declares the whole Bible is God-breathed and is our unique, explicit, God-given ministry tool for making people wise "for salvation" and "for teaching, rebuking, correcting" and "for training in righteousness." It makes us thoroughly "equipped for every good work"—the ministry of the Word God gave Timothy and by extension God gives us.

Therefore, our counsel depends on God's Word, not on "philosophy and empty deceit based on human tradition" (Col 2:8)—that is, the array of "-ologies, -osophies, and -isms" of the therapeutic world. Scripture remains richly superior to all human wisdom and competing systems of secular and Christian integrationist counseling, while also enabling us to reframe and discerningly use valid observations from other sources. The Confessional Statement of the Biblical Counseling Coalition summarizes it:

> We affirm that numerous sources (such as scientific research, organized observations about human behavior, those we counsel, reflection on our own life experience, literature, film, and history) can contribute to our knowledge of people, and many sources can contribute some relief for the troubles of life. However, none can constitute a comprehensive system of counseling principles and practices. When systems of thought and practice claim to prescribe a cure for the human condition, they compete with Christ (Col 2:1–15).[7]

Unlike those who practice other versions of Christian counseling that merely mention Bible verses or themes, biblical counselors believe the

[7] The Confessional Statement of the Biblical Counseling Coalition, https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/confessional-statement/.

Bible actively *drives* our theory and practice. It's not merely our foundation or standard. It's more than a judicial court that makes no policy, passes no legislation, and executes no events. It's more than a referee who merely reacts to rule violations by blowing a whistle; the Bible is an active player who dominates the field and needs no referee. The Bible is more than a filter that inertly traps unwanted pollutants as air or water actively flows through it. While courts, referees, and filters fulfill a function, such metaphors reduce Scripture to having no more than a passive role in producing our counseling principles and practices.

Instead, we rely on the Bible as alive and active in our counseling: "For the word of God is living and effective and sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating as far as the separation of soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12). David Powlison explains:

> The living Christ working in his people through his Word is the engine producing depth of insight, accurate theory, and effective practice. The counseling that Christians do must orient to and take its cues from our own source. . . . The Bible's positive message both *is* counseling and *is about* counseling. In content, method, and institutional locus the Bible overflows with counseling instructions and implications.[8]

When done properly, our core concepts and methods don't merely align with or not contradict Scripture; they *emerge from* Scripture as we interpret it accurately and apply it wisely.[9] The Bible does more than guide, inform, or control our counseling model; it proactively forms it. Scripture *generates* our understanding of God, people, and their situations. Biblical counseling is biblically driven counseling. To paraphrase Charles Haddon Spurgeon, we should unleash the lion of Scripture from his cage.[10]

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[8] David Powlison, "Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies)," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 25, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 11, 14.

[9] This, in turn, demands we hone our exegetical skills, broaden our knowledge of the Bible's books, and deepen our grasp of biblical and systematic theology.

[10] Elliot Ritzema, "Spurgeon's 'Let the Lion out of the Cage' Quote," https://elliotritzema.com/2012/07/31/spurgeons-let-the-lion-out-of-the-cage-quote/.

3. Love, Concern, and Compassion

Biblical counselors reflect the heart of Jesus our Shepherd and his Holy Spirit, our Counselor. Biblical counseling is a caring process of extending Christlike love to struggling sheep. Qualities like compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience thus mark our ministry (Col 3:12). We seek to follow our Master who, "when he saw the crowds, . . . felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt 9:36).

In recent years biblical counselors have paid greater attention to human suffering, recognizing more carefully the powerful influence of past and present hardships on people and seeking to provide the same comfort to sufferers we have received from "the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort" (2 Cor 1:3). Biblical counselors recognize those we counsel have experienced the difficult consequences of sin—Adam's sin and the effects of the fall, their own sin and the hardships reaped, and the sins of others that range from neglect and rejection to mistreatment and assault. We live in a groaning creation, longing for our final redemption (Rom 8:17–39; 2 Cor 4:7–18). We look forward to the new heavens and new earth God guarantees (2 Pet 3:13), pointing our suffering counselees to that day when God will "wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more, because the previous things have passed away" (Rev 21:4).

Meanwhile, as we will see in chapters 13 and 14 and throughout this book, we weep with those who weep, we listen with Christlike empathy, and we counsel with Spirit-given compassion.

4. The Heart

Biblical counselors address not only the outward behavioral aspects but also the inward heart aspects of our counseling cases to bring thorough and lasting Christ-centered change.

Biblical counseling is not shallow, superficial, or simplistic. Scripture alone uncovers and solves our heart (beliefs and motives) and behavior (words and actions) struggles. We recognize from Scripture that all behavior flows from the heart—our beliefs and motives; our cognitive, affective,

and volitional functions; what we love, treasure, live for, hope in, and depend on.[11] The wisdom writer prioritizes the reader's heart:

> My son, pay attention to my words; listen closely to my sayings.
> Don't lose sight of them; keep them within your heart.
> For they are life to those who find them, and health to one's whole body.
> Guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life. (Prov 4:20–23)

While the ensuing verses reference our mouths and lips (speech), our eyes and gaze (focus, goal), and our feet (actions, directions), what is more important than anything—"above all else"—is the condition of our hearts. Why? Because the heart is "the source of life," the wellspring from which flows all our activities. What gives the heart its life are God's words.

Jesus underscores the centrality of the heart in Matt 12:33–34, using a good/bad tree and fruit metaphor and then applying it to our speech: "How can you speak good things when you are evil? For the mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart." Our words come from our hearts. Jesus makes the same point about all our behavior in Matt 15:18–19: "But what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, and this defiles a person. For from the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, slander."

In Gal 5:13–26, the apostle Paul unpacks these heart dynamics, describing the raging civil war within the hearts of believers. Our flesh (our remaining sin) and the Holy Spirit fight within us against each other. Neither is passive; both are active combatants (v. 17). And each yields its respective fruit: "The works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and

[11] For a comprehensive exegetical-theological study of the heart, see A. Craig Troxel, *With All Your Heart: Orienting Your Mind, Desires, and Will toward Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020). For the same perspective applied to counseling, see Jeremy Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life: Connecting Christ to Human Experience* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016).

anything similar. . . . But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (vv. 19–23). Both godliness and ungodliness come from the heart.

So, while we as Christ followers have been freed from our old lives and "have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (v. 24), the remnants of our sinful natures have not yet been eradicated. They continue to plague us. For this reason, Paul exhorts us to "walk by," be "led by," "live by," and "keep in step with" the Spirit (vv. 16, 18, 25). Biblical counselors depend on God's Spirit to empower their ministries and bring change in their counselees. Biblical counseling is a spiritual endeavor.

The apostle Peter describes the internal struggle in 1 Pet 2:11: "Dear friends, I urge you as strangers and exiles to abstain from sinful desires that wage war against the soul." Biblical counselors recognize the active presence of the flesh-versus-Spirit battle within each Christian we counsel.

We could explore many more passages showing the centrality of the heart in biblical change, including Ps 51:10; Prov 4:4; 23:26; Jer 17:5, 7; Ezek 14:5; and Heb 3:12. Together, they make the same point: the Bible powerfully addresses human motivation. Ultimately, everyone is ruled by God or by someone or something other than God. Biblical counseling targets the heart; God wants our hearts.

Consider Anna, Beth, Christine, and Danielle, four Christians who habitually avoid people. They might be described by those who know them as introverts, people-fearers, shy individuals, or loners; some might theorize they have social anxiety disorder. Whatever the label, deep down these four women know their behavior is wrong, as those closest to them remind them. Each seeks to follow the Lord, and each wrestles with her guilt. Their avoidance behavior takes various forms: declining social invitations, coming late to and leaving Sunday worship early to escape conversation, not volunteering for people-ministry opportunities, ignoring cell calls even from those whose names they recognize, and even choosing or rejecting jobs based on office setting.

While their general antisocial behavior is the same, their four individual hearts are not. What particular heart desires drive each of these people-avoiders?

- Anna fears being judged by others and the rejection she believes will inevitably follow. Since she doesn't measure up to others' standards (at least in her mind), she avoids them. Recalling years of critical words from her mom and one searing comment made by her college roommate doesn't help.
- Beth doesn't make time for others. Reaching her self-driven performance goals consumes her hours and her days. She doesn't dislike people; she simply doesn't need them. People are interruptions.
- Christine obsesses over germs. For her, contact with people equals contact with viruses. The safest way to avoid illness is to stay away from others, so she self-prescribes social distancing.
- Danielle knows her tongue can be sharp. Her critical attitude, combined with shaky social skills and low emotional intelligence, have landed her in hot water many times. She has lost friendships and jobs. For her, it's better to avoid people than upset them.

Each person listed needs specific, tailored help for her specific heart problem. No single Bible passage fits all people-avoiders. Heart sins are idiosyncratic. Those who commit them not only need to change their behavior; they need to change their hearts. Biblical counselors understand this.

5. The Goal of Christlikeness

In contrast to secular approaches that help counselees become self-actualized or use generic terms like personal wholeness, mental health, or inner healing, biblical counseling uses biblical categories to seek the same outcome goals God explicitly seeks. We as biblical counselors strive to help counselees

- love the Lord and their neighbors (Matt 22:37–40; 1 Tim 1:5; 1 Pet 1:22),
- be filled with Christ's joy, peace, and hope, and all of God's fullness (Rom 15:13; John 17:13; Jas 1:2; Eph 3:19),
- be sanctified and built up by God's Word (John 17:17; Acts 20:32),

- be strengthened by God's Spirit, showing his fruit (Rom 15:13; Eph 3:16; Gal 5:22–23),
- please God and live for Christ (2 Cor 5:9, 14),
- obey God, live holy; resist and put to death sin and replace it with godly living (Rom 6:16; Eph 4:22–24; Titus 2:11–12; Heb 12:15; 1 Peter),
- be gracious and loving (1 Cor 13:4–7; Col 3:12–14; 4:5–6),
- actively serve others, being devoted to good works (Eph 2:10; Titus 2:14; 3:1, 8, 14), and
- be mature and complete, overflowing with thankfulness (Col 1:28; Heb 5:14–6:1; Jas 1:2–4; Col 2:7).

Perhaps we can best summarize all these outcome goals with one supreme aim: that our counselees become more and more like Jesus Christ, the perfect human (though divine) who thoroughly embodies every biblical ideal. Amid the hardships our believing counselees face in this fallen world, God is working all things—including those hardships—together to make them like Jesus (Rom 8:28–29). In turn, God calls us to labor and pray for this specific result in those we counsel (Gal 4:19; Eph 3:17).

Conclusion

What is biblical counseling? We close with this simple definition: It is the Christlike, caring, person-to-person ministry of God's Word to people struggling with personal and interpersonal problems to help them know and follow Jesus Christ in heart and behavior amid their struggles.