

WE AFFIRM BIBLICAL COUNSELING

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We're continuing our series on the defining distinctives of our church. As we consider practical issues that can define a church beyond the statement of faith, we come to a new question. How should our church *counsel* people?

This question threatens to generate as much emotion as the issue of spiritual gifts. That's because, while there exist numerous counseling philosophies within the body of Christ, all seem to split counseling into two categories—a *spiritual* kind that a church offers and a *soulish* kind that only a trained, state-certified psychologist should provide. Because many have experienced practical benefits to therapy outside of the church, they believe it's necessary.

Yet, there are some problems with this mindset. The first is that is the foundational atheistic and humanistic presuppositions of psychology. They undergird a host of schools ranging from Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, B. F. Skinner, Albert Ellis, Carl Rogers, Nathan Ackerman, etc. Well-meaning believers who, not wanting to give advice divorced from theological considerations, attempt to redeem the system with Scripture, but that results in a pseudo-spiritual therapy. As such, we can't recommend mere Christian counseling any more than secular psychology.

The low view of Scripture is an even greater problem. The assumption is a pastor and Bible aren't enough for the problems you face, so you need to seek the experts initiated into the greater psychological field, an almost gnostic idea. We shouldn't be foolish and say there's *never* a time to seek such experts or that they have *nothing* of benefit for us, but we also can't foolishly assume the issues in your life are beyond the copies of God's Word in your laps.

That leads us to a third problem with splitting counseling into matters of faith and life—the Bible makes no such distinction. To the contrary, we find in the Word of God sufficiency for “everything pertaining to life and godliness” (2 Pt 1:2-3). With biblical discipleship, Christians can grow in the areas of his marriage, thoughts, habits, etc. As such, while an issue might rightly fall into a category in the psychologist's DSM-V, the Christian should feel confident to think of the issue in *biblical* categories and seek out the solutions God establishes in His Word.

We believe in counseling, but we believe God calls us biblical or *nouthetic counseling* (which we will define shortly). Indeed, it's a vital part to the ministry Scripture describes here. It's a proper application of His Word leading us to maturity in Christ alone, the kind of state that seems to escape us when we harbor sin and unbiblical attitudes. It brings Christian maturity through the proclamation of Christ (v. 28) and through the sanctification of the Holy Spirit (v. 29). Let's start with the first verse.

CHRISTIAN MATURITY COMES THROUGH THE PROCLAMATION OF CHRIST (V. 28)

We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.

These first three words sum up all Christian ministry – “We proclaim Him.” As you might imagine, the word “proclaim” carries the idea of conveying a message, “to make known in public, with implication of broad dissemination, *proclaim, announce*.”¹ As such, the word is a synonym for preaching, and the preaching of Jesus Christ can preemptively cure much of the need for counseling. That’s because He alone is the Great Physician (Mk 2:17).

My thinking when I first went to Bible college wasn’t entirely biblical, and I reacted negatively when a professor referred to preaching as preventative maintenance. He said that, just as changing the oil and rotating the tires keeps your car running smoothly, those listening to sermons every week shouldn’t have problems requiring counseling. It struck me as simplistic, but I’ve come to recognize a certain wisdom in it, even if it doesn’t always work that way. If the preaching is biblically proclaiming Christ (a central caveat), then by nature, it will provide preventative counseling – it creates the theological framework for life, provides the biblical vocabulary through which we understand and converse about the practical realities, and gives us source of all grace and goodness.

We must start with the Bible, the source of “life and godliness.” As Psalm 119:24 says, “Your testimonies also are my delight; they are my counselors.” We learn of Christ there, the only one who can change us. The hope for the imperiled Christian, then, **ultimately comes not from the preacher but from the Christ of Scripture.**

This proclamation is for “every man” or everyone in the church – repeated three times here – leading *all* believers to being “complete,” “perfect,” or “mature” in Christ. Perhaps false teachers promoted a secret knowledge, and today, we too often look to crutches for completeness like psychotropic drugs. While there are times for medical intervention, Scripture gives us hope that everyone of us can grow into maturity through knowing Christ.

This simply describes Christian sanctification. Paul uses two important participles to describe the proclamation of Christ in ministry: admonishing and teaching. Let’s consider the first word.

WE PROCLAIM CHRIST BY ADMONISHING EVERYONE

This is a key term in our discussion; the Greek word there is νοουθετέω (*noutheteō*) – coming from the words νοῦς and τίθημι, together forming the barest meaning of “to put into mind.” *Noutheteō* means “to counsel about avoidance or cessation of an improper course of conduct, *admonish, warn, instruct*.”² We need this because the fall of Genesis 3 corrupts every part of our hearts and minds; “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer 17:9). Because of sin, Christians need to hear that their personal truths are morally compromised, that the “way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel” (Pv 12:15).

The nouthetic process confronts what sin corrupts, which is why the kind of counseling we’re discussing today is called **nouthetic counseling**. Paul was constantly involved in the nouthetic process, admonishing church members “day and night for a period of three years... with tears” (Acts 20:31). This means warning Christians that neglecting the voice of the Lord’s wisdom invites calamity, dread, distress, and anguish (Pv 1:25-27) – all issues that would

¹ William Arndt et al., [A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 515.

² William Arndt et al., [A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 679.

normally drive them counseling! Nouthetic counseling lovingly challenges someone's thoughts, desires, or behaviors with Scripture, calling them to change in Christ.

First, Christians must know when their thoughts stand against Christ. The principles of this world can be a trap and contrary to Christ (Col 2:8). There are other counsels out there, and Scripture warns that those of the wicked are deceitful (Pv 12:5). Because we as sinners sometimes have itching ears and gather teachers to suit our desires (cf. 2 Tm 4:3), we all need confrontation when our thinking has gone awry.

Second, Christians must know when their desires stand against Christ. Some of the wrong thinking out there says that certain desires are immutable, like same-sex attraction; but the same argument wouldn't apply to other desires (violence, self-harm, etc.). Some desires are evil (Col 3:5), and some passions are degrading (Rm 1:26). A desire for food obviously isn't sinful (cf. Mt 4:3), but a desire for an excess of food can be (cf. Pv 23:21). When any desire stands against Christ, it must be crucified (cf. Lk 9:23).

Third, Christians must know when their behaviors stand against Christ. Of course, we could think of clear violations of the second table of the law as behaviors against Christ—murder, theft, false witness. We can add to that affected behavior, such as effeminacy in males (cf. 1 Cor 6:9). Even though some know God, “by their deeds they deny Him” (Ti 1:16), and God commands us to admonish or *noutheteō* the unruly (1 Th 5:14).

The nouthetic process involves the whole church. Paul commends the Romans for learning it—“I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another” (Rm 15:14). That's because, as we learned a few weeks ago, the whole church should be involved in church discipline. While parachurch ministries are helpful, they can't substitute a pastor and church unwilling to bear one another's burdens and restoring fallen brothers and sisters in Christ. Therefore, counseling should be part of the local church.

Thinking about counseling in this way demystifies the process—we're simply talking about discipleship! We're calling people walk in obedience to Christ. Of course, that means knowing what the Bible commands.

WE PROCLAIM CHRIST BY TEACHING EVERYONE

To properly admonishment everyone's unbiblical desires, feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, we must learn what Scripture says. The Christ we proclaim commanded, “Go therefore and make disciples [or learners] of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Mt 28:19–20). We should learn like the wise man, who “will hear and increase in learning, and a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel” (Pv 1:5). As we learn, we can avoid conformity to this world and have minds renewed to the will of God (Rm 12:2).

Through learning the Word, we can identify the source of our guilt, our need for repentance, the forgiveness we can find in Christ, the replacement thoughts and deeds we need, and the grace to prevent a return to sin. His Word is “profitable for teaching... so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Tm 3:16–17). Christians learn to find the healing they need through the Great Physician.

The Bible teaches that our sins can have physical results – “God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption...” (Gal 6:7-8). In Psalm 32:1-5 and 38:1-8, David reveals the devastating emotional and physical effects of his unconfessed sin (see also Jn 5:15-16; 1 Cor 11:30). Physical effects from sin can also linger in believers – a drunkard may stop his drinking but still suffer from cirrhosis, a fornicator who comes to Christ may suffer the effects of an STD for the rest of his life, and an anxious person may give herself ulcers and lingering digestive issues. God gives hope through His Word for enduring such situations (1 Cor 10:13), promising the one who stops sowing to the flesh and begins sowing to the Spirit “will from the Spirit reap eternal life” (Gal 6:8). Kids, this is why learning the Bible now is preventative medicine – following it warns you from the physical effects of sin when you’re older.

Of course, none of this means that there aren’t certain deformities or sicknesses that can cause our issues, at times requiring a medical diagnose and pharmaceutical remedy; biblical counseling sees the doctor as part of the process. Someone suffering from symptoms of anxiety may have an overactive thyroid, but while following doctor’s orders, he should also learn of and trust the sovereignty of God in his life. Considering that one of authors of New Testament Scripture is Luke the physician, and sickness is a consequence of the fall, biblical counseling isn’t anti-medicine.

Indeed, studying Scripture reveals another reality: sometimes, there’s no apparent cause of our troubles, and we have to trust God has some purpose in it. Jesus was asked this very question, and He explained that personal sin isn’t the only factor in illness – it may be for the glory of God (Jn 9:1-4). In Paul’s case, God gave him a thorn in the flesh to keep him humble and dependent upon grace (2 Cor 12:7-9). We don’t always know why a person has troubles and knowing Scripture will keep us from giving the legalistic kind of counsel Job’s friends gave him.

To review, both the teaching and admonishing occurring within the local church should be biblical, pointing us to hope found in Christ, with the goal of seeing everyone mature in Him. The whole person should be conformed to Christ, including behavior, thoughts, and desires. This is a goal we want to see God work in ourselves, as Paul models.

CHRISTIAN MATURITY COMES THROUGH THE SANCTIFICATION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT (V. 29)

For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.

God’s wants us to be “conformed to the image of His Son” (Rm 8:29). He calls those who know Him to imitate the perfect walk of Christ (1 John 2:6). As we encounter parts of ourselves that seem unredeemed, it’s comforting to read Paul here confessing *he’s* still growing. Let’s consider his example.

CHRISTIANS WANTING MATURITY IN CHRIST MUST LABOR

Paul uses a word that is not always popular – “labor.” The Greek term means “to exert oneself physically, mentally, or spiritually, *work hard, toil, strive, struggle.*”³ He adds to that the next word – striving – the Greek of which is ἀγωνίζομαι (*agonizomai* – meaning, of course, to *agonize*). The idea is that he fights like an athlete to improve. He recognizes that he hasn’t “arrived” and responds by pressing forward (Phil 3:12-14). We respond with a rebellious attitude when we see what God wants but decide that, He’ll just have to change us if wants us to live differently.

Even so, other Christians may feel as though they are already agonizing against their sin in their Christian life. They *want* to live differently, but they understand Paul’s struggle in Romans 7. If that’s you, hear what comes next:

CHRISTIANS WANTING MATURITY IN CHRIST CAN’T LABOR

The fact of the matter is that we can’t produce godliness in the flesh. Those keeping their nose to the grindstone may simulate it. Men may always avert their eyes, but their hearts are still filled with lust. Women may speak softly, but they may be filled with bitter gall. We may be able to get a young person to stop engaging in some destructive behavior, but they may only trade one addiction for another. Eventually, people experience the end of their efforts.

Paul doesn’t say here that he’s striving according to his own ability – he’s striving according to the power of God. When the grace of the Holy Spirit works in a believer, he no longer is a slave to sin (Rm 6:12-14). To personally labor but empowered by God reveals an important duality in the Christian life, and the same tension exists in Philippians 2:11-12. Because true change can’t occur without God, we can’t just moralize the Bible. It’s only His grace that gives us the ability to labor (1 Cor 15:10, 58), giving Christians the ability to press forward in faith in Christ.

CONCLUSION

We proclaim Christ, the only means of hope for change. A good passage to sum up our message today is 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. There, we read a list of sins that will keep us from heaven – “Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.” Usually, we think of issues like these only in terms of socially impacts and seek moral change from counselors. Yet, do we consider the greater danger to our souls this text reveals?

Yet, we do we read next? “Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” We proclaim Christ because only He provides the cleansing and sanctification we desperately seek, but also our needed justification before a Holy God. Find in Him the Great Physician you need.

³ William Arndt et al., [*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 558.