



Counseling and Psychotherapy

Elder Position Paper

The psychologizing of contemporary Christianity was one of the most damaging phenomena to the Church of the twentieth century. As the young pseudo-scientific discipline of psychology began to mature, pastors were trained to think psychologically about many of the problems that people face. Specifically, they began to believe that when Christians face moderate to severe life issues (such as anxiety, depression, or substance abuse) they should be referred to professional counselors or psychologists. The predominant worldview out of which the psychotherapies arose is naturalism. A biblical understanding of the spiritual nature of people was categorically denied, leaving a medical model of pathology as the predominant worldview in addressing counseling issues. The irony is that the Greek etymology of the word *psychology* speaks to the inherently pastoral work that therapists do: *psychē* means *soul*, and *logos* means *word*. *Psychology* is literally *soul talk*. Countless Christians have been referred outside the communion of saints and placed under the spiritual care of both non-Christian and unbiblical Christian counselors to address some of the most profound issues of the heart. In this way, many believers have been taken “captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ” (Col 2:8).

Hundreds of counseling theories and philosophies exist, but only one begins with the triune God, the Bible, and the Gospel as the foundation and substance of how to solve problems; this counseling approach is *biblical counseling*, to which Sun Valley Church is committed. Biblical counseling seeks to frame all life problems and solutions in the grand story of what God has done to save sinners like us through His Son, Jesus Christ. Biblical counseling rests on the sufficiency of the Bible for making sense of our struggles, and how we can grow in godliness through them. In biblical counseling, counselors and counsees seek to address concerns by looking to the Bible and seeking God for the Holy Spirit’s ministry in working through the challenges counsees face. Central to the biblical counseling process is the faithful interpretation and application of the Bible. Apart from this, whatever counseling happens

cannot be considered biblical because only God's Truth ministered in God's way can be considered biblical. The goal of all biblical counseling is the glory of God as well as counselees' good (biblically defined), and is dependent on the Holy Spirit.

Biblical counseling grows out of the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture to address the issues of life. It recognizes that the root of all life struggles is either personal sin, the sins of others, or the effects of sin in a broken world, and thus biblical counselors focus on drawing out matters of the heart, from which behavior, words, thoughts, and attitudes come (2 Pe 1:3-4; 2 Tim 3:16-17; Pr 4:23-27; Mt 12:33-37). Concurrently, biblical counseling does not ignore the complex effects of sin in a fallen world, including an understanding of persons as physical-spiritual people who experience problems in both their bodies and their souls. Therefore, biblical counselors ask questions about counselees' physical health and habits and factor these into counseling plans. Because biblical counseling must inherently take place under the authority and context of the local church rather than the healthcare system, biblical counselors must neither prescribe medication nor give medical advice (including advice about psychiatric medication). Rather, they should recommend that counselees contact their primary care physicians for all medical concerns.

The people of God are commanded to disciple one another, and all of life is part of the discipleship process of growing in Christlikeness. For this reason, it should be the ambition of local church leadership that their congregations become competent to counsel one another from the Scriptures. Boiled down to its most basic definition, biblical counseling could be considered a form of specific discipleship that focuses on applying the Word of God—in dependence on the Spirit of God—to a particular life struggle that one (or more) of God's children is having. This is Paul's vision in writing to the Church in Rome: "I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct [**νοουθετέω** (*noutheteō*): admonish, instruct, counsel] one another" (15:14)]. Biblical counseling with an unbeliever is evangelistic in nature, as only through reconciliation with God is a sinner made whole and is lasting heart change realized.¹

¹ Helpful resources on a biblical view of counseling and therapy include: John MacArthur and The Master's College Faculty, *Counseling: How to Counsel Biblically* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005); Heath Lambert, *The Gospel and Mental Illness* (Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, 2014); Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970); Ed Welch, *Blame It On the Brain? Distinguishing Chemical Imbalances, Brain Disorders, and Disobedience* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998, 2011); and *Counseling the Hard Cases: True Stories Illustrating the Sufficiency of God's Resources in Scripture*, ed. by Stuart Scott and Heath Lambert (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2012).