

Toward a Definition of the Essence of Biblical Counseling

December 12, 2001

This paper was presented to the people of Bethlehem Baptist Church on Wednesday, December 12 in an effort to advance our unifying discussion of what Biblical Counseling means and what we are looking for in an Associate Pastor for Counseling. It is not intended to say everything that needs to be said in defining Biblical Counseling, but rather to establish some of what is essential to the way we hope counseling will be done at Bethlehem.

God-centered, Christ-exalting, cross-cherishing, Spirit-dependent, Bible-saturated, emotionally-in-touch, culturally-informed use of language to help people become God-centered, Christ-exalting, joyfully self-forgetting lovers of people who spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples.

Use of language (1 Thessalonians 4:13, 18; 5:11; Hebrews 3:13; Romans 15:14): Almost all counseling is talk. There is, of course, essential and heart-engaged listening and understanding; but counseling proper is speech. It is remarkable that people will pay \$95 an hour for talk. But that is the power of speech, and God has designed it to be so. Therefore, the major issues surrounding counseling are about the worldviews that inform the talk.

God-centered (1 Corinthians 10:31; Acts 17:28): A God-centered person treats God as central to all of life's concerns, from the most simple and mundane to the most weighty and personal. God-centered language is speech that does not marginalize God or treat him as irrelevant or unnecessary. It makes explicit that all issues that matter are related importantly to God. All counseling issues are related to God at crucial levels, and counseling that tries to lead toward healing without dealing with God explicitly is defective.

Christ-exalting (John 16:14; 17:5): Christ-exalting counseling is explicitly Christian and not merely theistic. All counseling issues involve the exaltation or the denigration of Jesus Christ. Either our attitudes and feelings and behaviors are making much or making little of Christ. We were created to make much of Christ. There is no true success in counseling if a person becomes socially functional without conscious dependence on and delight in Jesus Christ. This is the means and goal of all health.

Cross-cherishing (Galatians 6:14): It is not enough to say that our counseling honors Christ. Some non-Christian systems, even Muslims, [1] say this. Biblical Counseling must go to the heart of our problems and the heart of God's solution, which always means going to the cross where the depths of sin and the heights of grace are revealed. There is no true exalting of Christ or honoring of God that does not cherish the cross. The decisive severing of pride and despair is the cross of Christ. It is the ground of humility and hope. There is no true mental health without understanding the desperate condition we were in without the cross, and without feeling the joy of deliverance from that condition through the death of Christ on our behalf.

Spirit-dependent (Romans 8:6, 14; Galatians 3:5; 5:22-23; 1 Peter 4:11): Spirit-dependent counseling knows and feels that it is helpless to speak wisely and lovingly and to bring about true wholeness apart from the decisive work of the Holy Spirit in the counselor and the counselee. This implies a significant, explicit presence of prayer in the process of counseling. Counseling serves in the strength which God supplies so that in everything God will get the glory.

Bible-saturated (Matthew 4:4; Romans 15:4; Hebrews 4:12): Bible-saturated counseling does not treat the Word of God as an assumed foundation which never gets mentioned or discussed or quoted. "Foundations" are in the basement holding up the house, but they seldom get talked

about, and they are usually not attractive. That is not an adequate metaphor for the role of Scripture in counseling. The Bible has power and is the very truth and word of God. Even saints most familiar with the Scriptures need to hear the Word of God. It has a power to rearrange the mental world and waken the conscience and create hope.

Emotionally-in-touch (Deuteronomy 32:2; Romans 12:15; Hebrews 4:15; 13:3): Biblical Counseling is done by a person who has a healthy awareness of his own emotions and those of others and what is being felt, even if not expressed, by himself and others. Counsel takes into account what people are experiencing and not merely what the Biblical truths are that come to bear on the problem. Good Biblical Counselors feel appropriate feelings and know when their emotions are out-of-sync with the situation. They sense what others are feeling and know how to adjust the way they speak the truth so that it fits the moment.

Culturally-informed (Act 17:23, 28; Proverbs 6:6-8; Job 38-41): Biblical Counseling is aware of the historical, social, cultural, and family factors that shape the sin and righteousness of our lives. Biblical Counseling does not estimate cultural, social, or family factors above spiritual ones relating to the power of sin and grace, but it does know that the *shape* of sin and righteousness is influenced by family, social, cultural, and historical things that may help people distinguish between what is sin and what is not, and what is virtue and what is not. Believing that the root of every emotional and relational problem is sin profoundly affects the conception of how to heal, but it does not lead to simplistic estimations of how easy healing is.

To help people become (1 Thessalonians 3:12; Philippians 1:9): Biblical Counseling is directed at changing people – the way they see and understand and feel God and Christ and sin and right and wrong and the world and other people. Biblical Counseling is about helping people change. It has goals. It is not neutral or disinterested. It has Biblically-shaped aims for people's lives and relationships.

Joyfully self-forgetting lovers of people (Philippians 1:25; 2 Corinthians 1:24; 1 Corinthians 16:14; 1 Timothy 1:5; Galatians 5:6): The aim of all health is God-centered, Christ-exalting love for people. Love is not possible where self-preoccupation holds sway in a person's life. So self-forgetfulness is a part of true mental health. This is not possible to create directly, but only as one is absorbed in something worthy and great. The aim is to be absorbed in God and anything else for God's sake. The truly healthy person is passionate for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples.

[1] For example, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that Muslim Faisal Hammouda said in an interview with Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, "We believe in Jesus, more than you do in fact." (Sean Hamil, "Willow Creek Welcomes Muslim Cleric's Perspective: Pastor, Imam Have Dialogue at Suburban Church, *Chicago Tribune* October 12, 2001)

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