



## **What is Biblical Counseling?**

**By Charles Sigler, D.Phil.**

“It is but the more diligent and effectual management of the ministerial work. It is not a new invention, but simply the restoration of the ancient ministerial work.” Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, p. 174.

### **Three Distinctives of Biblical Counseling**

#### **The Starting Point for the Person and the Problem**

Biblical counseling seeks to think God’s thoughts after Him with regard to understanding the counselee, conceptualizing the problem, and envisioning the counselee’s growth. Scripture is thus more than just the context for understanding what we learn about humanity, it both whispers and shouts about who and what we are and what we should do with our life. It is the starting point for our thinking in any and all areas related to counseling change: anthropology; behavior (what we put off and put on); and how we relate to others (love your neighbor as yourself) and God (love the Lord God with your whole heart).

#### **The Counseling Method**

Biblical counseling sees Scripture as a necessary and fundamentally sufficient guide to the method of counseling. It is not an exhaustive manual for counseling technique or theory, but Scripture alone declares what is and is not “good” about a technique or theory; what is and is not “good” about the personality or behavior of a person.

#### **The Counseling Process**

The process of Biblical counseling is *nouthetic*; meaning it seeks to effect personality and behavioral change in the individual for the glory of God. This definition of the counseling process draws upon Jay Adams in chapter 4 of *Competent to Counsel*, “What is Nouthetic Counseling.” The application of the inspired Scriptures for teaching, reproof, correction and training (2 Tim. 3:16) is a nouthetic process of change; and the Holy Spirit is an essential part of the change process. In effect, if change takes place within the individual that dramatically decreases their distress, but ultimately does not lead to a deeper understanding of who God is and what He requires, then Biblical change hasn’t truly

occurred. The person has just become a more effective sinner. This is the basis for the nouthetic fence discussed above.

We should look at two additional concepts—hermeneutics and metaphor, as they apply to Biblical counseling—in order to understand the diversity within Christian, Biblical counseling and the vehemence with which certain Christians challenge views of counseling that are at variance with theirs.

### **Hermeneutics and Biblical Counseling**

Hermeneutics is 1) the study and statement of the principles on which the biblical text is to be understood or 2) the interpretation of the text in such a way that its message comes home to the reader.<sup>1</sup> Given the centrality of Scripture to the distinctives of Biblical counseling, hermeneutics then plays a key role in developing a specific system of Christian, Biblical counseling; and in critiquing the efforts and pronouncements of competing systems of counseling—whether those competing systems are Christian or non-Christian.

### **Crucial Hermeneutical Principles for Biblical Counseling**

There are two hermeneutic principles that are especially important for understanding the variance in what is considered “biblical” in counseling theory and practice.

#### ***Hermeneutical method is a product of worldview***

Worldview is a person’s way of looking at reality; and is shaped by culture, social structure, as well as religious and philosophical assumptions. It is a perspective that emphasizes certain relationships and downplays others. Because humans are sinful, the interpretative framework of any individual or culture will have some distortion of the truth. “Therefore, we cannot assume that what is obvious to us is necessarily true, and certainly not that it is the whole truth.” (Dan McCartney in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic*, p. 107) In Biblical counseling, this means our efforts to determine what is and what is not Biblical within a specific framework of counseling cannot be imputed with the authority reserved for the Scriptures alone. Scripture itself is God-breathed; but not our interpretation of it; even within a system of Biblical counseling. The “obvious Biblical nature” of what we believe is a byproduct of the worldview we bring to the hermeneutic process and therefore potentially wrong.

#### ***Our worldview can only be compatible with the Biblical worldview***

First we must try to determine the worldview of the biblical writers, and then seek to be in harmony with it. The goal is compatibility, not identity of worldview. This means that the basic philosophical and theological outlook is shared. Identity of worldview between modern believers and biblical times is not possible. It would mean that our entire way of looking at reality would have to be the same as that of the original authors and audience. To a person who has seen photographs of galaxies that are thousands of light years away, or understands the basic idea of what happens when someone has a grand mal epileptic seizure, identity with a biblical worldview is not possible. So to look at a modern process of counseling and deny its biblical basis because it has no analogue in activity described in the

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<sup>1</sup> Wood, D. R. W., & Marshall, I. H. (1996). *New Bible dictionary* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.).

Bible as counseling (as the Bobgans do in their critique of Biblical counseling) improperly attempts an identity of worldview. A clear understanding of the presuppositions with which we organize and shape our worldview will help keep our counseling system compatible with a biblical worldview and the biblical worldviews that have historically preceded us.

### **Metaphor as It Structures Our Conceptual Worldview**

Failing to realize the metaphoric structure of all counseling systems (Christian or non-Christian) contributes to a misunderstanding of competing systems of counseling in two ways. The “Biblical” nature of our personal worldview is often presumed, so certain aspects of competing counseling systems appear to be “unbiblical” when they aren’t. Critiques of our (Biblical) counseling system can be perceived as attacks on the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, when they are merely questioning the conceptual structure of the counseling system itself.

### ***Metaphor is more than just a device of the poetic imagination***

“The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.” (Lakoff and Johnson (1981), *Metaphors We Live By*, 5)

Metaphor secures an effect on one level of meaning and asks the reader to transfer that meaning to another level. The word “metaphor” itself implies this. It is based on the Greek words *meta*, meaning “over,” and *pherein*, meaning “to carry.” Metaphor works by a process of indirection; it says one thing and means another. Metaphors are bifocal statements that require you to first look at one half of the comparison and transfer certain meanings to the other half. Psalm 84:11 illustrates this. The psalmist says that “the Lord God is a sun and a shield”, but means God is our ultimate source of life and that He protects us from harm.

### ***How we think; our conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical***

Many of our experiences and activities, as well as our conceptual system of them, are structured by metaphor. When we think about concepts that are abstract or which are not clearly delineated within our experience, we often use ideas we understand in clearer terms to get a grasp on the more difficult or abstract concept. The above discussion of the “fence and field” by Powlinson is an example of this process. This is how metaphors permeate our normal conceptual system and play a central role in how we construct our social reality (Lakoff and Johnson 1981, 115; 147; & 159).

### ***Metaphor describes a relationship, but it does not indicate identical correspondence***

There is a real and logical connection between the two halves of a comparison in metaphor or simile. The two phenomena joined by metaphor share aspects or qualities at some level. Metaphor can be validated on the basis of observation and rational analysis. When God is called “father to the fatherless” in Psalm 68:5, there is a real bond between human fathers and the character of God. Metaphoric comparison is thus discovered, not invented. It either exists in reality or does not exist. It can be validated on the basis of observation and rational analysis. Metaphor is then logical, rather than illogical.

There is also an irreducible quality to conceptual metaphoric correspondence. We must avoid the temptation of too quickly reducing the metaphor to a single direct statement about reality. “Addiction is (literally) disease” reduces the metaphorical relationship between “addiction” and “disease” into a singular concept. “Addiction is (metaphorically) disease” allows for the reality of the perceived relationship without equating the identity of the two halves of the bifocal comparison.

### **Counseling, Psychology and Metaphor**

All counseling should be understood as a largely metaphorical application of knowledge to problems in living. This holds for secular as well as Christian or Biblical counseling systems. Beyond the pure physiological studies demonstrating how certain structural or biochemical differences are associated with mood and behavior changes, one could argue that all personality theories and counseling systems (including psychiatric diagnosis) are fundamentally metaphoric: understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. We comprehend and experience our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in psychoanalytic constructs of id, ego, and super ego; or as extensions of our introvert–extrovert personality typology (one kind of thing in terms of another). This is crucial to understand the nature of psychological and psychotherapeutic theory. Many of the opponents of Biblical counseling err in their critique by failing to recognize the largely metaphorical process of developing systems of counseling, psychology, and personality—especially within their own system.

### **Biblical Counseling and Metaphor**

Biblical counseling seeks to understand and experience our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors through the fundamental metaphors of Scripture. There is a real, logical connection between the inner life as “heart,” “soul,” or “spirit”; or the notion that all sinful, wrongful acts are “idolatry.” Most importantly with Scripture, the rightly applied metaphor goes beyond logical and abstract analysis. It speaks to our experience and intuition. For Christians, the meaning of a Biblical metaphor cannot be fully expressed intellectually, because it speaks to more than just our reason.

Rightly applied Scripture helps us to see clearly what was before simply out of focus. Here we return to the crucial issues of epistemology and anthropology discussed in a previous lecture. To rightly and truly understand the human heart we must use the infallible Scriptures as our guide and rule.

## **Doctrine of Sanctification and Counseling Change**

### **Habituation & Dehabituation**

Attention merely to behavior (good or bad fruit) cannot bring about true change or sanctification. There must be change at the root (heart) level. Sinful roots must be dug out and Godly roots planted. The encouragement of Godly roots produces good fruit. The reinforcement of sinful roots produces bad fruit. So in sanctification and Biblical counseling, we seek to extinguish the bad root and its fruit, while reinforcing the good root and its fruit. This is—in behavioral language—the Pauline put off/put on dynamic, which Jay Adams describes (perhaps unfortunately) as dehabituation (put off) and habituation

(put on). This description of habit-and-heart change as habituation and dehabituation reinforces the view of his critics that nouthetic counseling is crypto-integrationist.

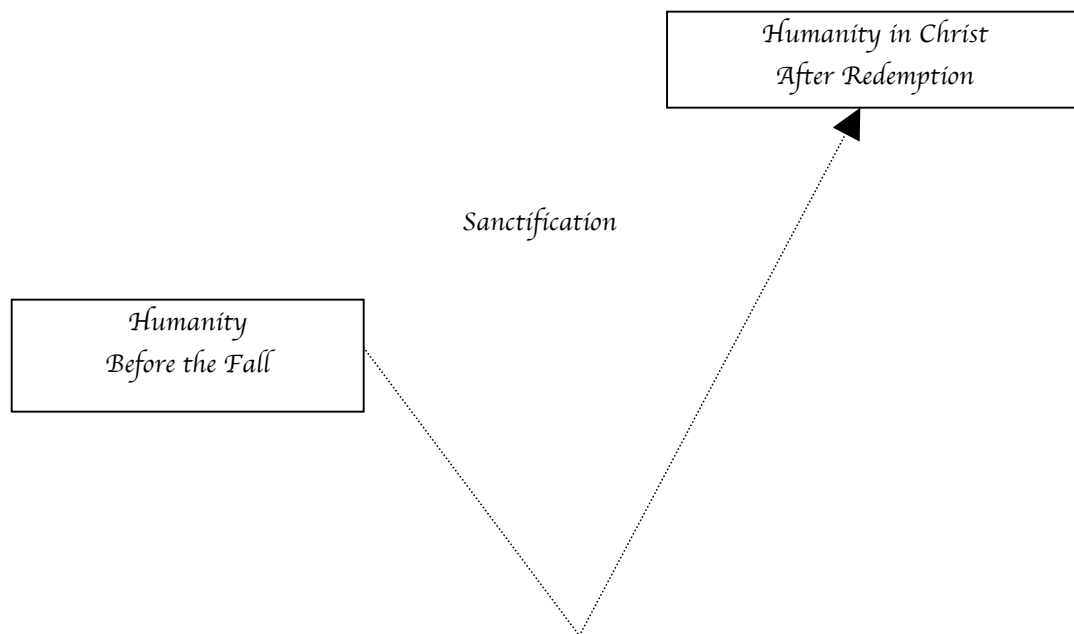
Nevertheless, behavioral and cognitive therapies are examples of the put off/put on dynamic apart from Christ. Operant conditioning, shaping, and behavior modification are all behavioral psychology terms that describe interventions aimed at a secular notion of extinguishing undesired behavior (put off) and reinforcing desired behavior (put on); the dynamic of dehabituation and habituation.

While the put off/put on dynamic of change outside the redemption of Christ can contribute to some amazing changes in behavior, it cannot promote change beyond the limits of human nature. The difference for a Biblical, nouthetic approach is that the put off/put on dynamic bases its change process on the redemptive work of Christ and not upon self-will or reinforcement strategies.

### **Comparison of the Doctrine of Sanctification to the Psychological Theory of Self-Actualization.**

#### ***Sanctification***

Sanctification is becoming what you are already counted to be in Christ.

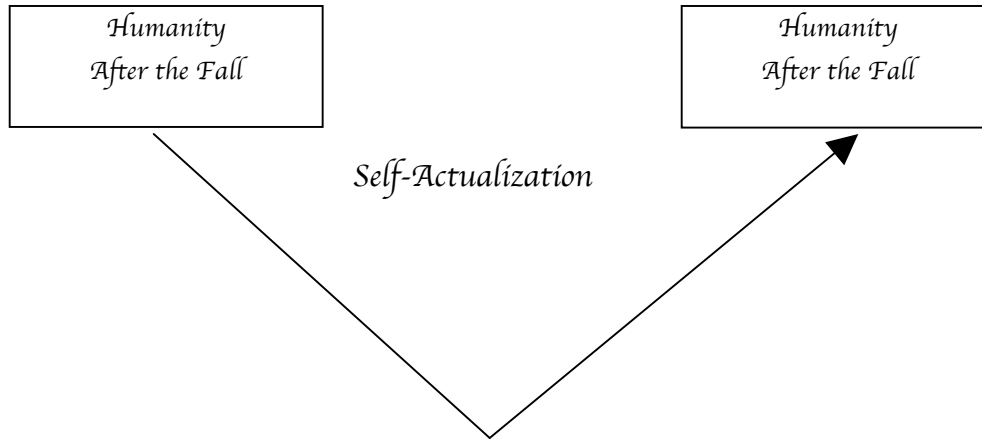


I pray, O God, that I may know You and love You, so that I may rejoice in You. And if I cannot do so fully in this life may I progress gradually until it comes to fullness. Let the knowledge of You grow in me here, and there [in heaven] be made complete; let Your love grow in me here and there be made complete, so that here my joy may be great in hope, and there be complete in reality. . . . Until then let my mind meditate on it, let my tongue speak it, let my heart love it, let my mouth preach it. Let my soul hunger for it, let my flesh thirst for it, my whole being desire it, until I enter into the 'joy of the

Lord' [Matt. 25:21], who is God, Three in One, 'blessed forever. Amen.' [Rom. 1:25] (Anselm, *Proslogion*; 26; p. 103)

### ***Self-actualization***

Self-actualization is becoming what you have the potential to be in yourself; in your human nature alone; after the Fall.



### **Effects of the Fall**

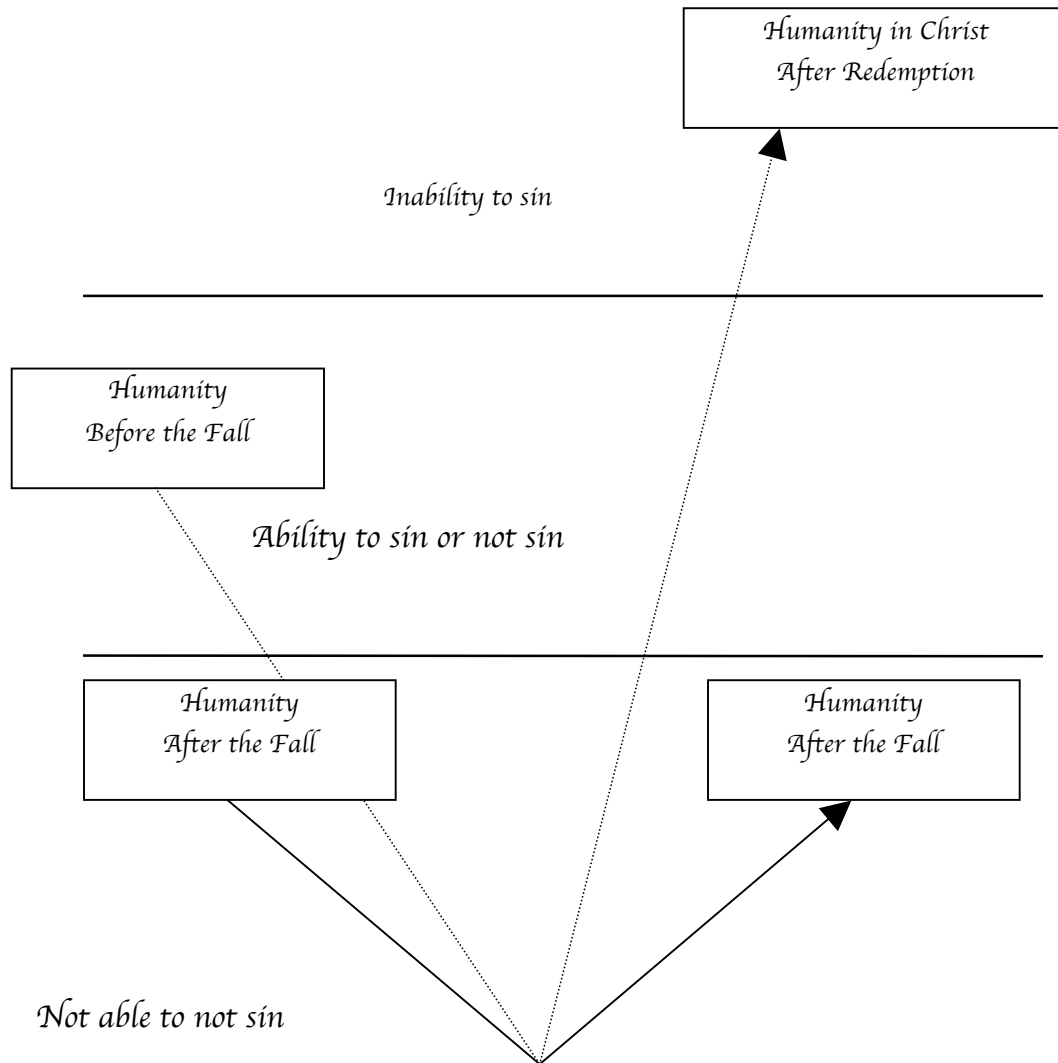
Human beings are both creatures and divine image bearers. As creatures, we are fully dependent upon God: "In him we live and more and have our being" (Acts 17:28). As creatures, we are like other living beings: 98% of human DNA and chimpanzee DNA is identical. As divine image bearers, we are unique among all creatures in that we have a soul; we can exercise a kind of free will that is a reflection of that which is found only in God. Human free will is relative; not absolute. We cannot act entirely without some influence or constraint upon our behavior. Even Adam and Eve before the Fall had a constraint: they were not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Unfettered free will would mean we claim an attribute of God as a human attribute. Only God can be said to have the ability to truly choose between options: to create or not create; to save or not to save. We are "creatures of option" meaning that we can make decisions; set goals; and move towards those goals, so we carry some responsibility for our actions. But our actions are not entirely free of outside influences.

After the Fall we are often ruled by our desires—regardless of whether they originate from the material or immaterial aspects of human nature; our body or soul. We are still "creatures of option," but there was a total loss of the narrow, functional image of God, and a corruption of the broad, structural image of God.

Scripture captures the struggle in the following way:

- "For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members." (Ro. 7:22–23)
- "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day." (2 Co. 4:16)

## Counseling Change for Christians and non-Christians



We can bring about change within the life of a non-Christian that would be an improvement in their circumstances, but it will always fall short of change as a result of the redemptive work of Christ.