

Counsel the Word

by David Powlison

"O Lord, Thou didst strike my heart with Thy Word and I loved Thee."

So Augustine expressed the experience of every true believer.¹ The Word of God is living and active: it strikes home, convicting you of sin and convincing you of the grace of God in Christ Jesus. This Word effectively elicits your love; powerfully renews your mind; wisely guides, guards and shepherds your walk.

Why is the Word so powerful? It is powerful because it is "Thy Word, O Lord." The Word is not a noble human philosophy. It is not a magic incantation. The Word is what God says: about Himself, about you, about the world you live in, about His will. The Word reveals the Person who speaks it, a Person who tells you what you need in order to repent and learn to trust, love and obey Him. The Word received changes you; good soil bears good fruit. The Word rejected or ignored also changes you; the heart becomes increasingly hard, blind and deaf.

The Journal of Biblical Counseling is dedicated to apply the Word of God to counseling. Does that strike you as an unusual self-definition? If I said it was a journal dedicated to "apply the Word of God to preaching," you would wrinkle your brow and give me a quizzical look: "What do you mean? Preaching is *about* the Word of God applied to human life. The alternatives to preaching the Word are false religion and human invention! What do you mean, 'apply the Word of God to preaching'?"

But the counseling field has been divorced from the Word. In the minds of most people counseling is a *fundamentally* different matter from preaching. The truths and methods employed in counseling are rarely conceived of as the ministry of the Word

tailored to individuals.

Millions of Bible-believers easily say "preach the Word." They would rise up in arms at the preaching of anything else. Believers agree that God's revealed truth should control the pulpit. The Word is true and sufficient for addressing crowds.

But it is not a ready part of our vocabulary to say "counsel the Word." Millions of Bible believers lay down their discernment in the face of unbiblical counsel. The Word is only one resource among many possible resources in the self-help book or in the counseling office or around the kitchen table. The Word tends to play a distinctly secondary role, appended to an alien message, or even no role at all. The Word is not true enough, or doesn't have enough truth, for addressing individuals.

Counsel the Word. Isn't counseling *about* the Word of God applied to human life? Aren't the alternatives to counseling the Word false religion and human invention? Jay Adams said it well: "The ministry of the Word to believers in counseling can be dispensed with no more readily than the ministry of the Word in preaching."²

The goal of the *Journal* is to encourage and enable believers to "counsel the Word," to apply the Bible wisely to problems in living. What are the obstacles? I will highlight two influential groups of people who undermine this goal.

First, *many people, Christians included, counsel a message that comes from frankly unbiblical sources.* Modern medicine and modern psychologies endlessly generate new variations on old errors. Medical researchers chase the pot of gold at the foot of the rainbow: theories claiming to have discovered an amoral, biological basis for human behavior parade one after the other. Psychotherapists never lack for troubled and gullible clients: the neurotic became the low self-esteem sufferer became the codependent. Many Christians who counsel seize on

¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, X:8.

² Jay Adams, "Counseling and the Sovereignty of God," in this issue of *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, pages 4-9.

each latest theory that contradicts the Word and bend Bible verses to support that theory.

Second, *Christian people often misinterpret, misuse and misapply the Bible*. Some use the Word as magic: "Take two verses and see me in the morning. Repeat this verse over and over to yourself." Some teach repentance and faith in a way contrary to the Word's teaching: "The secret of the Christian life is an experience of total brokenness and total yieldedness." Some teach obedience contrary to the Word's teaching: "Just say 'No' and do what's right with more willpower." Some teach about Satan contrary to the Word's teaching: "You're in bondage because of inhabiting demons of fear, anger and addiction." But the Bible's approach to changing human lives is neither superstitious nor pietistic nor moralistic nor demonistic.

Either way, the wrong message and the wrong methods control "Christian" counseling. Group #1 proclaims the evident superficiality of Group #2 as a rationale for turning to the "depths" of psychology and away from a Bible that seems shallow, shoddy, generally irrelevant and even bizarre. Group #2 trumpets the evident secularism of Group #1 as a rationale for misuses of the Bible.

Meanwhile, there *is* a better way. The Word of God is not silent but calls out for people to listen:

Wisdom cries aloud in the street;
in the markets she raises her voice.
On the top of the walls she cries out;
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
"How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?
Give heed to my reproof;
Behold, I will pour out my thoughts to you;
I will make my words known to you.

(Proverbs 1:20–23)

If the writers for *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* do their job, Lady Wisdom's cry will be heard. Those who scoff at the Word will be challenged. The simple, who misuse the Word and are gullible to Dame Folly's persuasions, will be edified. Those who love the Word and already use it wisely will grow wiser still. Proverbs 9!

Counseling the Word is the work of a lifetime. Applying the Word wisely to real human life is work: hard, prayerful, observant, thoughtful work. The first few verses of Proverbs 2 say you need to listen hard; you need to cry out for help; you need to search and dig.

The Journal of Biblical Counseling is dedicated to the task of counseling the Word. What will that look like? I hope that this issue is a prototype—an experimental, working model—of a journal that will be of real use to you in your ministry over the years to come. This journal

is for pastors. We will maintain continuity with the previous fifteen years as *The Journal of Pastoral Practice*: this is Volume XI, Number 2 for a reason. This journal is for lay people, for *all* who seek to counsel the Word, whether in formal or informal settings. Wisdom is the qualification for counseling. Such wisdom is a matter of character, of truth, and of skill in helping people: "full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and competent to counsel one another."³

The first two articles in this issue set forth a vision of what biblical counselors believe and do not believe. Jay Adams's "Counseling and the Sovereignty of God" was first printed in 1975. Whether you read it now for the first time or reread it, Adams sounds a timely call (except for lamenting that gasoline had hit 54¢ per gallon!) John MacArthur's "Biblical Counseling and Our Sufficiency in Christ" shows the Word of God speaking about itself as he expounds Psalm 19:7–9.

Overall, articles that implement the vision will weigh more heavily in future issues. The next two articles directly address grassroots counseling issues. Elyse Fitzpatrick's "Helping Bulimics" is the second in her series on eating problems.⁴ Paul Tripp's "Homework and Biblical Counseling" is the first of a two-part series on a crucial aspect of counseling methodology.

The Journal of Biblical Counseling will regularly feature a preaching section. Counseling is the private ministry of God's truth to human need, but *biblical* counseling occurs in continuity with the public ministry of God's truth. Jay Adams teaches from a sermon, "Believe Just Now," by Horatius Bonar. I have appended a homework assignment for readers/hearers.

Biblical counseling draws on information from numerous abutting disciplines. James Halla has written his article, "Rheumatism," to help medical laymen counsel rheumatism sufferers in a more informed way.

Lastly, this issue contains three book reviews. Reviews will alert you to the old and the new, the good and the bad. You will find reviews of *The Collected Works of John Bunyan*, Jay Adams's *A Consumer's Guide to Preaching*, and Neil Warren's *Make Anger Your Ally*.

"O Lord, Thou didst strike my heart with Thy Word and I loved Thee." Listen to the Lord who speaks. Love Him and what He says.

Counsel the Word.

³ Romans 15:14.

⁴"Helping Overeaters" appeared in XI:1 (Fall 1992), pages 51–56.