

I WOULD THAT YE ALL BECAME COUNSELLORS: REFRAMING COUNSELLING THROUGH BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

The Biblical Counselling movement effectively launched in 1970 with Jay Adam's publication of *Competent to Counsel*.¹ The years since have created an impressive amount of literature and activity.² And yet any movement or theological discipline can grow only by recognizing pathways forward. In this paper I suggest that as a branch of practical theology, biblical counselling has sometimes acted as a world to itself and lacks sufficient integration with the other theological disciplines.³ In particular, it lacks a self-conscious conversation about theological prolegomena. One expression of this gap is the failure to adequately integrate biblical theology into our understanding and philosophy of counselling.⁴

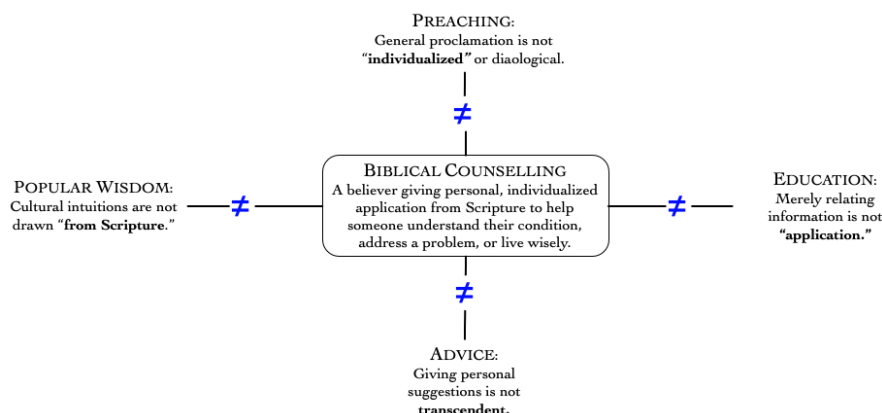
¹ David Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2010), . Heath Lambert, *The Biblical Counseling Movement After Adams* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 35. Maintaining that some form of biblical counselling is nearly a constant across church history (pg. 25), Lambert also recognizes other works, particularly in the Puritan era—Richard Baxter (*The Christian Directory*), John Owen (*The Mortification of Sin*), William Bridge (*A Lifting Up for the Downcast*), Jonathan Edwards (*A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*), and Ichabod Spencer (*A Pastor's Sketches*). Lambert's contention that careful thinking about biblical counselling was effectively lost in the years until Adams fails to recognize the ubiquity of counselling in communities of faithful believers and limits his consideration to the English tradition. Among many others, note Herman Bavinck's *Beginnelsen der Psychologie* (1897) and *Bijbelsche en Religieuze Psychologie* (1920), Hans Asmussen's *Die Seelsorge* (1934).

² Jay Adams founded The National Association of Nouthetic Counsellors (NANC) which later rebranded in 2013 as the Association of Certified Biblical Counsellors (ACBC). The Association of Biblical Counsellors is somewhat broader and more inclusive relative to ACBC. ACBC and ABC each provide pathways for counselling certification. The Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF) was significantly shaped by Jay Adams as well. It has been historically connected with Westminster Seminary and is more educationally focused. CCEF publishes the *Journal of Biblical Counselling*. The Biblical Counselling Coalition (BBC) is a collaborative network across the other counselling agencies. The Institute for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship branched from CCEF and is focused on providing accessible, church-based training. Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement*.

³ I recognize the five fundamental methods of doing theology as exegesis > biblical theology > systematic theology > practical theology. These relate in a logical order moving from exegesis upward while historical theology can exist as an overlay to any of them (for instance, history of interpretations). See Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 347-357. Biblical counselling clearly works as a branch of practical theology. But too much counselling literature has been satisfied with surface exegesis or systematic theology expressed in proof texts. Said differently, it is easy to be satisfied by a list of key verses on anger or master the biblical data on marriage roles without integrating these biblical facts into the broader meta-narrative of Scripture. By ignoring the intermediary step of biblical theology, we have cheapened our exegesis and flattened our systematic theology, leaving the practical implementation in our counselling less effective.

⁴ The closest work is a short form article in the online 9Marks Journal. Michael R. Emlet, "Biblical Theology and Counseling," 9Marks, August 20, 2014, <https://www.9marks.org/article/biblical-theology-and-counseling/>. Biblical counsellors have done more extensive work tracing the topic of counselling through systematic theology such as in Heath Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling: The Doctrinal Foundations of Counseling Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2016) or J. V. Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2026).

I define Biblical Counselling as a believer giving personal, individualized application from Scripture to help someone understand their condition, address a problem, or live wisely.⁵ I define biblical theology as a bridge discipline between exegesis and systematic theology that traces the development of themes or the biblical story with particular attention to the diachronic and progressive nature of Scripture.⁶



⁵ This definition is expansive, and yet it is distinct from preaching (counselling is individualized), apologetics or evangelism (counselling seeks to accomplish more than only conversion) or pastoral theology (any believer can engage in counselling, not only pastors). The definition also leaves open the possibility that a believer can counsel an unbeliever, though this will necessarily begin with evangelism. The functions of counselling may be primarily didactic ("understand" in my definition), confrontational ("address") or encouragement ("live wisely").

Other definitions of biblical counselling include Heath Lambert's broadly descriptive definition—"Counseling is a conversation where one party with questions, problems and trouble seeks assistance from someone they believe has answers, solutions and help." Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 13. Jay Adams defined "Nouthetic counseling" as "counseling that involves face to face confrontation by one person to another, out of loving concern for him, in order to bring about the changes God desires in his life." (Jay E. Adams, "What Is Christian Counseling?," *Institute for Nouthetic Studies*, accessed July 29, 2026, nouthetic.org/what-is-christian-counseling/.) ACBC defines biblical counselling as "the personal discipleship ministry of God's people to others under the oversight of God's church, dependent upon the authority and sufficiency of God's Word through the work of the Holy Spirit." (Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, "Our Mission: A Definition of Biblical Counseling," accessed July 29, 2026, Biblicalcounseling.com/about/our-mission/.) Representing secular counselling, the Oxford English Dictionary defines "counselling" (noun, sense #2) as "support, advice, or guidance provided (esp. by a trained professional) with respect to a particular issue, problem, or difficulty; (now) esp. a form of therapy assisting people to deal effectively with emotional or psychological issues through talking with a professional counsellor." (Accessed July 28, 2016.)

⁶ Thiselton defines biblical theology as "that branch of theological inquiry concerned with tracing themes through the diverse sections of the Bible (such as the wisdom writings or the epistles of Paul) and then with seeking the unifying themes that draw the Bible together." Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd rev. and expanded ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 349. Brian Rosner comments that "the task of biblical theology is to present the teaching of the Bible about God and his relations to the world in a way that lets the biblical texts set the agenda. This goal is achieved by allowing them to serve as the very stuff of inductive study and by reading the books more or less in their historical sequence. In other words, biblical theology subscribes to the primacy of the text; the interpretive interest of biblical theology corresponds as closely as possible to what the text is about." Brian S. Rosner, "Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity and Diversity of Scripture*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 3–11, 5.

How to support or ground this definition is a harder question. Why does “counselling,” a major concern for evangelicals and an entire category of ministry, seems to be absent from the biblical data? Where would we find the ministry of biblical counsellors in the New Testament offices, giftings, or ecclesiology? Is the search for a biblical theology of counselling even justified, or is the quest more like seeking to trace a biblical theology of automobiles—grafting an alien category onto the biblical data rather than letting the categories emerge from Scripture itself as biblical theology aspires to do? The answer has several layers.

First, the category of biblical counselling exists in some part as a response to a broader cultural reality. Since the rise of therapeutic psychology in the 1940s, North Americans have looked to counselling for solutions and wisdom. Based on this, the most cynical understanding might indict biblical counselling as syncretism with contemporary concerns. A more generous understanding sees it as contextualized theology and practice—this is simply how biblical fidelity expresses within our current cultural milieu.⁷

The problem is that biblical counselling has too often defined itself in reaction to these trends. The movement was founded, and necessarily so, as a response to prevailing cultural trends but an attempt to do so in biblical fidelity.⁸ “Counselling” has its own secular meaning and occupies an important cultural role in contemporary North America.⁹ If biblical counselling either defines itself on the one hand as a baptized secular framework or defines itself negatively in reaction on the other, other components of meaning are inadvertently smuggled in. First, we *professionalize* counselling, assuming that bearers of the title “counsellor” must be gurus with

⁷ Explained the trend towards therapy and counselling is a complex question but chronological and geographical correlations are at least a starting clue.

Therapeutic culture rose after World War 2 as returning GIs struggled with trauma. See Leahey, 453-460. In 1948, Henry Chauncey wrote in his diary, “Psychology, the Cinderella of the Social Sciences. [sic] The day when the prince will arrive to take her to the ball is not far off. Unappreciated, despised.” Thomas Hardy Leahey, *A History of Psychology: From Antiquity to Modernity*, 8th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 458. It was also a lagging cultural application of modern psychology that entered discourse as a distinct discipline in the 19th century. Leahey, 192. But on a deeper level, it is also explicable as the secularization of pastoral and soul care. As church and faith retreated from public life, so also psychologists and therapists stepped in to replace pastors.

⁸ In fact, Jay Adams’ rebuke of psychological scientism fit with trends already independently at work in the secular disciplines. Psychology had been presented as a kind of neutral ground and not morally or ethically freighted. This naive understanding of the social sciences began to shift in the early 1980s, forcing the now broad recognition that every approach to human problems rests on an underlying system of beliefs and assumptions. Sigmund Koch, writing in the 1970s and 80s began to argue that psychology was not a unified discipline or even a science. Rather, every theory assumed a philosophical anthropology, answering key questions such as the definition of a human being, rationality, flourishing and experimental ethics. Sigmund Koch, *Psychology in Human Context: Essays in Dissidence and Reconstruction*, ed. David Finkelman and Frank Kessel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Jay Adams’ rebuke to the thesis that psychology is neutral landed at the dawn of this broader trend.

⁹ Though now dated, Rieff argued that therapeutic culture filled the space that societies once reserved for pastoral care and moral frameworks. Carl Trueman helpfully summarizes Rieff and the rise of the modern, psychological man in Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

special, clinical training to understand the human condition.¹⁰ We also *formalize* counselling, assuming that our meetings only qualify when they are labelled as such and that successful counselling must have a recipe-like structure. Finally, we medicalize counselling, expecting that the proper subjects are people with problems and that the goal is to remediate them.

As therapeutic culture has further proliferated and entrenched, biblical counselling has both defined itself in opposition and ridden the cultural wave. And truthfully this is partly justifiable. Contextualization, ought to carry both a biblical repudiation of cultural norms and a courageously superior Christian response. The collateral cost, at least in the popular understanding, is the assumption that biblical counselling is a baptized form of the secular norm.

But the irony is that Christian counselling—or more historically, soul-care—is the original and authentic; secular counselling is the aberrant knock-off. And so, second, biblical counselling should be transparently defined in biblical terms.¹¹ Searching for a biblical theology of counselling based on counselling as culturally defined is quixotic. But believers in the present context rightly sense the need for ministry to be expressed this way. The biblical category that most closely maps to this sanctified instinct is the biblical emphasis on individual believers speaking the word to one another and making personalized application. If this vision is correct, biblical counselling is not at all alien to the text; it has simply been defined too narrowly in the popular understanding as a subset of the much broader biblical category or by adding conceptual barnacles to it.¹²

Finally, the New Testament epistles are the closest match in the search for a biblical pattern that describes the current practice of biblical counselling—enough so that one wonders whether the Old Testament background is even necessary. But Scripture is written as an integrated story, progressively revealed. Far from an argument against a biblical theology of counselling, this only highlights the benefit and the need. Believers are called to speak the truth to one another in love because of the long story of God’s saving work in Christ, spanning all of salvation history.

A Biblical Theology of Counselling

If biblical counselling is more than a contemporary cultural response to a felt need or a successful movement, it should be identifiable across salvation history. In the best biblical

¹⁰ Bob Kelleman and Kevin Carson, eds., *Biblical Counseling and the Church: God’s Care Through God’s People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015).

¹¹ Therapy or secular counselling have further borrowed legitimacy from scientism by presenting themselves as clinical disciplines. Here also, biblical counsellors have been tempted to follow suit. But biblical counsellors ought to continue finding their authority in Scripture and setting their context within the ministry of the local church. Counselling should not be the domain of gurus with special hidden insight into the inner workings of the human brain. Authority stems from God, the Creator of humanity and the One who truly knows every human heart.

¹² These additional expectations might include (1) a defined meeting time and place, (2) a professional with formal training who wears the label “counsellor,” (3) asymmetry of influence with designated counsellors and counselees, (4) medical knowledge or special training for recognized conditions, (5) a formal agenda or schedule for the time. None of these are a problem and all can be quite helpful. But the biblical information allows for a wide variety of approaches including informal conversations between two believers in which each helps the other.

theological fashion, our definition of counselling ought to rise from the biblical data itself. In fact, all believers are called to speak the truth to one another and even to do so evangelistically. This understanding and our working definition of counselling help to identify the biblical passages that describe counselling.¹³

God, the Original Counsellor

It would initially seem that like themes such as evangelism or false religion, counselling did not exist before the Fall. But this is to falsely understand counselling as only a response to the negative. If counselling includes teaching someone how to live wisely, we find that God directed Adam's activity (Adam was placed in the garden "to work and keep it," Gen. 2:15) and God gave instructions to the man defining flourishing (Gen. 1:26, 28–30; 2:15–17).

Of course, the first sin instantly changed the nature of counselling. It is fitting to view Satan's words as false counsel, substituting lies and personal demise for divine truth and actual flourishing.

But God's salvific response was also an expression of counselling. God addresses humanity first with a series of exploratory questions (3:9, 11, 13), then declares the judgment they now face (3:14–19) and includes hope (3:15).¹⁴ This pattern reappears in God's dealings with Cain.¹⁵

It is significant that God approaches sinners before they approach Him. Counselling is not only for the willing. It is also important that God acts as the first counsellor, setting the pattern for what corrective, restorative, and teaching ministry looks like. And fitting our definition of counselling, God does not speak only to a generalized body of people, but He speaks directly to individuals, personalizing His application of truth.

This pattern continues across Genesis as God speaks directly to Adam and Eve (2:15–24; 3:9–19), Cain (4:6–15), Noah (9:1–17), Abraham (12:1–3; 15:1–21; 17:1–21; 22:15–18), Hagar (16:7–14), Sarah (18:9–15), Abimelech (20:3–7), Isaac (26:2–5), and Jacob (28:10–22; 31:24; 35:1–15). The rest of the Torah is dominated by God's direct revelation to Moses (Exod. 3:7–4:23; 33:1–23; Num. 11:10–23; Deut. 9:7–29 and many others) and Aaron (Lev. 10:8–11; Num. 12:4–15; 16:4–18:32). This includes complex, shocking instances such as Moses negotiating directly with God in which it nearly seems ambiguous who is the one giving and the one receiving counsel (Exod 33:1–23; Num. 14:11–25). In other cases, God's counsel to Moses clarifies how His law will be applied in specific situations (Num. 9:6–14; 15:32–36; 27:1–11).

¹³ I earlier defined Biblical Counselling as *a believer giving personal, individualized application from Scripture to help someone understand their condition, address a problem, or live wisely*. Applied as our criterion for identifying relevant passages, we can recognize several key components: (1) Counselling is distinct from preaching because it is interpersonal. (2) Everyone including Satan gives counsel (Gen. 3:1–5 Psalm 1:1), but for counselling to be biblical it must be grounded in truth. (3) Any type of advice is in some sense "counsel," but as an operative definition, I have chosen to only include passages where the counsel somehow involves transcendent questions related to the human experience—generally speaking, one of the three types of help in the definition above.

¹⁴ Satan also apes this approach in the temptation, beginning with a question (3:1); then distorting God's command and offering a false hope (3:4).

¹⁵ Note two initial questions followed by a warning and an admonition (v. 6). After the murder is complete, God approaches again with two questions (v. 9–10), judgment (v. 11–12) and mercy (v. 15).

Moses is able to draw applications, conclusions and give mandates from God's other revelation. In Deuteronomy, Moses seems to speak sometimes by dictation as a mouthpiece and other times as a counsellor guided by wisdom. Similarly, Joshua sometimes acts as a counsellor on God's behalf (Josh. 7:19-21) and in other cases seems to simply make wise applications (Josh. 14:6-15).

By the time of the Judges, Deborah counsels Barak (4:4-10). Joash confronts those protesting Gideon's destruction of the idols (6:25-32). Jephthah receives counsel from His daughter (11:34-40). Naomi and Boaz each counsel Ruth, all as applications of divine values, mandates or wisdom, but not necessarily with an immediate word from God.

Another emerging pattern in these books is the wise counsellor who speaks with prudence, even if not particularly linked to any divine mandates at all. (Notice Joseph's prudence in Gen. 46:31-34, Jethro in Exodus 18:17-23; Joab in 2 Samuel 19:1-8; the wise woman in 2 Sam. 20:15-22 and many others.)

Practically applied to counselling, this theme sets the trajectory that direct divine revelation is not the expected norm. As biblical revelation accumulated across salvation history, God increasingly expected His people to draw prudent, wise conclusions from what he had already revealed. When counselees desperately look for solutions or guidance, the pattern of salvation history anticipates that God has already spoken in His word. The counselee ought not seek for something more. Counsellors ought to limit their authoritative assertions to what God has actually spoken or what follows from it by necessary consequence. And yet as we have seen, there is also biblical support for counselors to carry practical wisdom informed by biblical values and sanctified experience, even where textual support is not as obvious.

Broken Counsellors, Muddled Counsel

But counsel is not always or even often wise. No sooner had sin entered the world, but God acted as the first counsellor. So also Satan. Ever since, God's words have been coopted, distorted, and surrounded by counterfeits, and the ministry of counselling is no exception.

This expresses in mundane ways within Genesis—Sarah's foolish counsel to Abraham (16:1-4) and Rebecca's counsel to Jacob (27:5-17) were each foolish expedients while doubting the clear words of God. The paradigmatic false counsellor and false prophet is Balaam (Num. 22:1-24:25). And the more skillful the false counsellors become, the more difficult it is to distinguish them from the true. Jephthah persuades the Ammonite king by recounting God's protection of Israel (Judges 11:21-28); then denies Him dramatically through his actions. The Danites ask counsel from Micah for their journey (Judges 18:5-6) and the Levite gives counsel to Israel regarding the concubine he murdered by neglect (Judges 20:4-7). Both are a mockery of righteousness and wisdom but find appeal to the hearers precisely for that reason.

The split of the kingdoms presents a standing test for people to decide between the false and the true. Dramatically, the young prophet of 1 Kings 13:11-24 is killed because he listened to the advice of the older prophet. Other occasions bring the challenge into the public arena. Micaiah gives Ahab and Jehoshaphat true but depressing counsel while Ahab chooses his own preferred advice and advisors... and loses his life for it (1 Kings 22:5-28). Much later, Jeremiah faced an almost identical scenario, counselling a depressing message against Haniah's much more hopeful message with similar lethal outcomes (Jer. 28). Proverbs places this antithesis in

sharp relief with the calls of lady wisdom and the prostitute folly (Prov. 6-9). Psalm 1 draws the contrast between blessing and destruction around what counsellors we attend to.¹⁹

Part of the tragedy is not only that perverse counsel exists, but that the true goes unheeded. Jeremiah faced no competing voices when he counselled Zedekiah (Jer. 38:14–39:7), and yet still Zedekiah refused to believe. The prophets could not change hearts and so they were early examples of frustrated counsellors. The hope was far in the future—a “wonderful counsellor” (Isa. 9:6) who would be able to change hearts by the power of the Spirit in the new covenant (Ezek. 11:19; 36:26).

Practically applied to counselling, this pattern leads us to expect a sharp antithesis between true and false counsel (1 Cor 1:18-2:16). The two ought to be strikingly dissimilar. Nor should we expect this antithesis to lie on the surface or be a mere matter of grafting in a bit of biblical content; the differences run deep—to the level of core methods and approaches.

Nor should we be surprised to discover competing explanations of the human experience that accommodate to contemporary cultural assumptions. False counsellors have always been skillful at syncretizing, integrating and accommodating. Counsel that fits too naturally with our sensibilities merits at least a brief, closer inspection.

But finally, this thread also gives hope for those committed to speaking God’s words faithfully, along with a renewed injunction to represent God’s words clearly. Because even if our counsel is not heeded, it is the best option that we can offer counselees in any scenario.

The Mighty Counsellor

Jesus first presents a perfect example of responding wisely to counsel. Already, Isaiah had predicted that the Messiah would have “the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught” (Isa. 50:4). The young Jesus chose to sit in the temple, asking questions while also impressing His counsellors (Luke 2:41–51), leading Luke to conclude that he “increased in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and man” (Lk 2:52). Jesus also demonstrated wisdom’s response in the face of foolish counsel. Eve listened to Satan’s prevarications; Jesus refused and specifically combatted them with the true (Matt 4:1-11).

Jesus not only received but also gave wise counsel. The gospels most often record Jesus applying truth to large groups in preaching. But it also records several personal conversations with Nicodemus (John 3:1-21), the woman at the well (John 4:1-42), Judas (John 13:21-30; Matt. 26:20-25, 47-50), Peter (Luke 22:31-34, 54-62 John 21:15-19) and the men on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35). In each we note

Practically applied to counselling, this pattern mirrors the first data set—God as the original counsellor. We follow His example; we follow Jesus’ example as well. Here also we note Jesus’ use of investigative questions (John 3:10, 12; 21:15-17) but also his profound skill in

¹⁹ Other key examples could include the ten spies against Joshua and Caleb (Num. 13-14) or Jonadab’s advice to Amnon for how to rape Tamar (2 Sam. 13:1-22). An inside-out example appears in Ahithophel’s shrewd but twisted counsel to Absalom, pitted against Hushai’s intentionally faulty counsel that leads to Absalom’s death (2 Sam. 16:20-17:23). Rehoboam listens to the advice of the younger counsellors (1 Kings 12:6-15), leading to the split of the kingdom).

drawing out root issues of His counselees (John 3:10; 4:16; 21:15-17). And yet because Jesus also received counsel, He is the model for both sides of the counselling relationship. As we will see, our own ministry of counselling is an extension and expression of the grace He won on our behalf so that all true counsel is ultimately a gift from His hand.

Christ's Body, Building up One Another in Love

Jesus' physical absence on earth does not mean that His own ministry of counselling has ceased. The Spirit continues to work directly and individually in human hearts as a continuation of Jesus' ministry (Rom. 8:15–17, 26-27). And this further links to the most common metaphor for the church—"Christ's body" (Rom. 12:4–5; 1 Cor. 10:16-17; 12:11–27; Eph. 1:22-23; 2:16; 3:6; 4:4, 12, 16; 5:23, 30; Col. 1:18, 24; 2:19; 3:15). When believers exercise their gifts empowered by the Spirit, they are carrying out God's work of building up the church, acting as an extension of Christ's ministry (1 Cor. 12:11; Eph. 4:16; Col. 1:24; 2:19).

And so the expectation of believers' ministry to one another are very high. Of the extensive "one another" commands, more than half specifically require individual, personal ministry (Rom. 12:10, 16; **15:14**; **2 Cor. 13:11**; Gal. 5:13; Eph. 4:2, 32; **5:19**, 21; **Col. 3:16**; 1 Th. 4:9; **5:11**; 2 Th. 1:3; **Heb. 3:13**; **10:24–25**; **James 5:16**; **1 Pet. 4:8–11**). And just as Christ is the ultimate source of the power for this ministry, He is also the content—"Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ" (Col. 1:28).

Elders and deacons have a distinct ministry for which they are accountable, but the New Testament expectation of individual, verbal ministry for every believer is ubiquitous.

Romans 15:14	"You yourselves are full of goodness... able also to instruct one another."	νουθετέω
Ephesians 4:15–16	"Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him..."	ἀληθεύω
Colossians 3:16	"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom."	διδάσκω, νουθετέω
1 Thessalonians 5:14	"Brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all."	νουθετέω, παραμυθέομαι, ἀντέχομαι
Hebrews 3:12–13	"Exhort one another every day..."	παρακαλέω
Hebrews 10:24–25	"Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another..."	παρακαλέω
1 Peter 3:15	"always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you"	ἀπολογία

Recalling the dramatic Old Testament scenes of foolish kings refusing to listen to wise advice, Matthew 18:17 pictures the intransigent sinner who “refuses to listen even to the church.” The expectation for this weighty action of the church rests not on the apostles, but on the verbal, personalized exhortations of individual believers (c.f. 1 Cor. 5:4).

It follows, then, that believers are commanded to counsel one another. We do so as an extension of Christ’s ministry of counselling; we are His body, and therefore we build up one another as an extension of what He did. Here also, the word is not only declared en masse but personally, and the responsibility to minister Scripture is not reserved for office holders; every healthy believer is required to act as a counsellor.

Let us Go to Hear the Counsel of the Lord

The end of the story is continuous with what came before. Christ is the “mighty counsellor (Isa 9:6) who reigns and counsels in uncontested wisdom (Isa. 11:2-4). His counsel will at last be central as the nations encourage one another to”go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths” (Isa. 2:3). False counsel will be forever abolished (Matt 7:15, 19, 23; 13:41; 2 Pet. 2:1-3; Rev. 22:15). All people will delight to hear Him. And as they once lifted up their voices to admonish one another, they will now sing together in praise (Rev. 5:9–13).

In fact, counselling assumes rebuke and correction to sin only in our present, sin-addled state. The ideal and end of counselling is true human flourishing, the fading memory of struggle in our former, pre-glorified state. The grand conclusion of a biblical theology of counselling is the day when counselling gives way to praise.

Practical Implications for the Discipline of Counseling

Earlier, I asserted that counselling practice would be enriched by a thicker, richer integration into the other theological disciplines. Are there tangible ways that a biblical theology of counselling aids us in practical counselling? Five distinct theological insights arise from a biblical theology and two practical implications follow:

First, a biblical theology of counselling highlights that God’s words must not be held privately. Revelation carries with it an ethical mandate to be communicated and shared. Second, the mandate for communicating God’s words is not restricted to the clergy or a leadership class. All of God’s people must be prepared to speak all of God’s words. In a culture and discipline where people are tempted to search for a guru, careful biblical theology democratizes the Christian responsibility to counsel. Third, counselling is not an occasional event or a response to unusual needs. It is the constant and default state of God’s people. We speak the word of God to each other and to anyone who will hear. Fourth, from the very beginning God’s words have been challenged, twisted, counterfeited, and outright denied. So also, we should not be surprised by counterfeit counselling. For every clear expression of the true word of God, there will be many substitutes. Finally, based on the example of Scripture itself, we seek to understand each situation carefully. Following God’s own example, we ask questions. We willingly recognize that we do not understand everything. But with an attitude of humble confidence, we boldly affirm that God’s words are the best message we can give to any situation and the truth every person most needs, whether we understand all of the implications or not.

These theological realities then shape our practical choices.

First, we call on all believers to become truth-speaking counsellors. Evangelicals affirm the primacy of preaching. But a large number of believers can never fill a pulpit. We challenge ourselves to evangelism, but unbelievers often refuse to engage. And yet counselling as we have defined it is the calling of every believer everywhere and in every conversation.²⁰ Faithful believers have the desire to speak for God. Perhaps they could or should be engaged in the ministry of counselling, rightly defined.

Second, by absorbing assumptions from clinical models, we have too often focussed on the hard cases at the margins—how we should handle a delusional psychotic and so on. This then leads to counselling as a specialist’s discipline, counsellors as gurus, and an over-formalized counselling process. But what if the core of counselling is simpler—helping God’s people learn how to have deeper, richer, and more scripture-filled conversations? A theology of counselling teaches people to intentionally leverage all of their interactions and their words for helping other people towards Christ-likeness. And this can be carried out evangelistically, non-formally, and constantly.

This would lead to a third practical implication. Too much intellectual energy has been exhausted in intramural distinctions about the sufficiency of Scripture, common grace, and natural theology. A stronger answer to integrationism begins with rooting our definition of counselling in the biblical data itself. Enabling God’s people to speak clear biblical truth to one another and the world should be the active centre of faithful counselling.

Conclusion

God, the great counsellor has spoken. He has called all of his people to faithfully proclaim all of His words. Satan and his followers have offered pseudo-counsel – a simulacrum of life, offering worldly wisdom that actually carries within it the poison of sin and death and hell.

Climatically, Jesus enters into this arena of competing counsel and speaks bold, clear truth—truth so clear that the darkness must reject it at all costs, even at the cost of his life. His resurrection is the ultimate proof of the truthfulness of his words, and it becomes the grand testimony that believers in him now proclaim.

²⁰ One of the New Covenant blessings include “sons and daughters... male and female servants” prophesying. I am committed to Scripture’s clear teaching about male roles in church leadership. (Joel Arnold, “1 Timothy 2:11–15—a Rorschach Test?” unpublished manuscript, 2024) And the reasons for the rise of egalitarianism are multiform. But one contributing vulnerability for the church in this egalitarian moment may be that we have not actively sought to open pathways for meaningful women’s ministry. The unpaid bills of Scripture’s expectations may haunt us in ways we have not anticipated.