

Counseling

A Valley Bible Church Position Paper www.valleybible.net

Valley Bible Church is committed to equipping believers in Christ for serving Him by living a life that is pleasing to the Lord. In our attempt to lead people toward godly living, we have at times found people seeking professional counseling for their personal problems. Too often the counsel they have received has been opposed to the teaching of God's Word.

The Bible has been given to us by God in order for His people to become what He has designed them to be, fully able to serve Him faithfully (2 Timothy 3:16-17). It is with this in mind that we advocate the following convictions:

God's Word should be the counseling authority of Christians helping people with broken lives.

The basic problem of mankind is sin (Romans 3:9-18; Romans 5:12; Ephesians 2:1-3). This sin problem includes our immaturity, our disobedience, our lack of knowledge and weaknesses (1 Thessalonians 5:14). It also includes the sin problem of others, which may affect us as well.

The solution found to the problem of man is found in God's Word. The Word of God reveals the gospel message of freedom from sin and how we can be set apart from the power of sin (Psalm 119:9-11). Also, the Word of God reveals how we should respond to sin in the lives of others (Matthew 18:15-18; Galatians 6:1-2; Ephesians 4:31-32; 1 Peter 4:8).

God's Word must be the sole authority in ministering to the needs of people because God's word is truth (John 17:17) and man's ideas are inadequate (Isaiah 55:8-9; Proverbs 14:12; 1 Corinthians 1:25; Colossians 2:8-10). Furthermore, God has given us the Scripture for the very purpose of instructing, rebuking, correcting and training us in righteousness (abandoning sinful thinking and behavior). By His Word, God molds us into the kind of people He intends us to be. In this way He equips us to function as He intended us to live (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

God is glorified when we trust Him and respond in obedience. When we ignore God's instructions and seek the solutions of men, not only will it not work, but far more importantly, we have replaced God with man, which is the essence of idolatry.

Counseling is a part of the basic discipling ministry of the local church.

The goal of counseling is the same discipleship: A mature relationship with Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:28-29; 2 Timothy 2:1-2). The means of counseling and discipleship is the same: God's Word (Psalm 1:1-3; 1 Peter 2:13).

God established the local church for the purpose of ministry. Therefore, we should expect that the ministry of God's Word will be best served in the context of the church which God instituted.

There are several important advantages that counseling within the local church provides:

- The local church provides true accountability for the counselor. It is true accountability because God has established the local church for the oversight of souls (cf. 1 Timothy 3:1; Hebrews 13:17). This oversight cannot be replaced biblically by any other organization. The help of any counselor ought to be overseen by the local church.
- The local church provides a much broader exposure to the counselee. In other words, more data about the counselee can be gathered in the context of the local church. More people will know the person and the person will have more opportunities to interact with others in the church. Therefore, the counselee will be less able to misrepresent information about himself or others, willfully or unknowingly.
- The local church incorporates the ministry of the body of Christ. God has established the church so that we can be helped by more than one person. It is far better for a person to have many relationships through which God's truth can be passed and wisdom imparted to life's issues.
- The local church is person-oriented, not just problem-oriented. God desires righteousness in all areas and what we consider to be our problems are always only a part of the areas in our life that need to change. The goal of the Christian life is not just to stop certain behaviors, it is to live a godly life (Titus 2:12).
- The local church does not minister on a fee-for-service basis. Since we do not charge people for any other ministry, we do not charge for counseling either. The biblical pattern is not to charge a fee for any ministry that is performed. This allows our ministry to be open to all, regardless of income. Also, it free us from any issues that often surround money in ministry. Furthermore, people who pay for counseling are tempted to hold the counselor responsible for solving their problems, like the counselor is a doctor or an auto mechanic. However, God is holding each of us accountable for our own life (Galatians 6:5).

God's people can and should be able to counsel effectively.

Effective counselors must be Spirit-filled (Galatians 6:1), be willing to bear others burdens (Galatians 6:2), be committed to the full authority of the Scripture and convey God's Word in a God honoring manner (Acts 20:27,31). With these essentials in place, every believer in Christ should be able to develop the abilities that God has given them to help others in this process.

We recognize that some of God's people will be more useful in the area of counseling. A person becomes more effective as a counselor by knowing the Word of God (Romans 15:14), by personally applying God's Word to life with wisdom (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

and experience in ministry. The knowledge and application of the Scripture is the most essential but as we learn to help others we will become better and better at discerning problems and communicating the truth of God's Word to individual lives in a way that can be received (Proverbs 15:2).

However, while not everyone has matured to the point of being able to address the beliefs that underlie the actions that are causing difficulties in the lives of people, every believer can serve to bring comfort in ministering to the emotions. Many believers also can be useful in addressing behavior issues that are either sinful or unwise. Whether it is ministry to the emotions, to the behavior, or to the beliefs that are the root of the behavior and emotions, all believers can participate in counseling to some degree, regardless of their maturity.

Analogy from 1 Corinthians 6:1-11

God calls us to godliness (Matthew 5:48). He has provided His Spirit and His Word to bring godliness about (1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 3:16-17). Should believers go to the world's ideas to bring spiritual health in their lives? 1 Corinthians 6:1-11 answers this question. Of course not!

1 Corinthians 6:1-11 speaks about a specific issue of conflict between believers in Christ. The Corinthians are being rebuke by Paul for seeking out the world's help for their problems. The reasons Paul gives for his exhortation to seek help from God's people are:

- God's people are competent to counsel (1 Corinthians 6:2).
- The people of the world are not accountable to the church (1 Corinthians 6:4).
- The people of the world should not be considered wiser than God's people (1 Corinthians 6:5).
- Taking our unrighteousness before unbelievers is an embarrassment to Christ (1 Corinthians 6:6).
- The solution is worse than the problem itself. It is worse to seek the help of the world in the courts than it is to be defrauded (1 Corinthians 6:7).
- The world is does not know God. (1 Corinthians 6:9).

This same rebuke falls on those today who turn to the world for help for their problems.

Counseling questions

1. What is the goal of biblical counseling?

The goal of biblical counseling is change in a godly direction. For marriage/family problems, struggles with sin, fear, difficulty to cope with life, etc., the Bible contains both the truth which describes the answer to the problem and the means to change (John 17:17). Our pursuit is the biblical solution of problems. When counseling ends, the counsees have victory over the difficulty and are doers of the Word in that area. They also have a walk with Christ and understanding of the Word which equips them for the rest of life.

2. How does change occur?

We gather information to understand the problem and the underlying issues. We build a Christ-centered relationship of care and trust. We provide basic encouragement from God's Word, outlining the certainty of being able to be equipped and strengthened to change with God's help (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Then we provide the counselee with the truth from Scripture, which addresses the problem. We also supply practical tools, to enable putting the Word into practice in life (Ephesians 4:22-24). As the counselee chooses to obey God's Word, the Lord does His part, strengthening the person to establish new life patterns in subjection to the Word.

3. What hope can a believer have when facing the storms of life?

The Bible is filled with pertinent hope for the Christian during trials. We can know there is a purpose for this day (Psalm 139:16; Ephesians 2:10; John 12:27-28a). The Bible gives us important facts about difficult times (1Corinthians 10:13; Psalm 1:1-3; 2 Corinthians 12:9-10). God has spoken of trust, refuge, confidence, courage, peace and overcoming (Psalm 62:8; John 16:33; Philippians 1:6; Joshua 1:5-9). God is aware of our circumstances and has a good plan for their outcome (Romans 8:28; James 1:2-4; Genesis 50:20). God can also provide all we need to obey Him (2 Corinthians 9:8; Hebrews 4:15-16; Philippians 4:6-7; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Hebrews 2:18). The Bible teaches that hearts which can possess this hope desire to honor God (1 Peter 4:10-11; Philippians 1:20-25; Hebrews 12:1-3; 1 Peter 1:6-9; Galatians 2:20). The Bible says believers can change (Colossians 3:1-4; 1 John 1:9; James 1:25; Galatians 5:16-17; 1 John 5:3-5). This hope, given by the living God to His children through the Word, is essential in counseling.

4. Should our counseling approach be different for a Christian than it is for a non-Christian?

Since our goal is change in the direction of God through the Word, the counsel to the believer is different than the counsel to the unbeliever. The non-Christian is not indwelt by the Holy Spirit and thus is unable to obey or please God (Romans 3:10, 8:6-8). To offer Biblical direction regarding sin would end in failure. Therefore, counsel to the unbeliever is an understanding and reception of the gospel of Christ. A caring relationship is established, information is gathered, but the immediate goal is evangelistic. Many have become Christians through counseling. The new Christian is capable of being a doer of the Word, enabled by the Spirit; then change in the problem areas can occur.

However, all people must be committed to the Lord, yielding themselves fully to Him and turning away from sin. This basic need should be emphasized for everyone, encompassing the saved and the unsaved. Since it can be difficult discern if a person's profession of faith is genuine, we nevertheless have much to discuss in this area without needing to make a determination regarding their faith in Christ.

5. Is there a difference between Biblical counseling and psychology?

While psychology is diverse and includes many schools of thought, foundation of psychology is very different from biblical truth.

In biblical counseling God is the focus. He exists, is active, holy, all-powerful, the creator, the final judge, and the author of salvation. In psychology man is the focus, not God. Our problems are not viewed in the light of God's holiness but in the light of our feelings and how we can have a better life. This is why loving yourself becomes the greatest love. It is difficult to understate this difference.

In biblical counseling we are responsible for our sins and we can be forgiven through Jesus' sacrifice; sin can be overcome by the believer through the Word (Romans 3:10; Romans 3:23-24; 1 John 5:3-5; Romans 6:10-12). In psychology people are seen as basically good, as illustrated by beliefs such as your "inner child" is pure, that you must believe in yourself, and there is no sin because "it's not your fault." This diminished view of sin comes from the idea that man is good, which goes back to the wrong basic view of God.

In biblical counseling, the Holy Spirit, through God's Word, changes the heart (1 Corinthians 10:13; Galatians 5:16-17). God's Word is the tool used to get to the heart level (Hebrews 4:12). When problems are uncovered, the Lord equips us, through the Word, to deal with them (Psalm 119:105). In psychology, the search goes inward since truth is found deep in the soul and self is the basis for hope and is worthy of esteem. There simply is no objective truth standard in psychology.

Psychology is man's attempt to deal with biblical issues. It is a different approach to topics thoroughly addressed in God's Word. As believers we deal with all the issues of life based on our relationship with the One who created us.

6. Should we combine what we learn from psychology with what we learn from the Bible in order improve our counseling?

Through observation, man can learn about the problems that people develop. Psychology has developed a good deal of information to classify the problems of people. But the goal is not to know about the problems but to see victory over the problems.

In this regard, psychology is completely inadequate. It is the world's means of solving what are truly spiritual problems. To advocate the inclusion of psychology with God's Word to bring about godliness implies that God's Word is not sufficient for the task, in contrast to 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

7. How should we deal with problems from our past?

Many counselors in our society regard problems from the past as insurmountable forces. People are considered to be victims and are incapable of avoiding depression, anger, anxiety, substance abuse, obesity, etc. Treatment ranges from self-love to combinations of prescription medications. If 1 Corinthians 10:13, Hebrews 4:15-16, and Romans 6:10-14 are true, the views of those counselors could not be true for the Christian. The Word gives us hope. In Christ is the certainty of all we need to deal with all issues in life, including the past (2 Peter 1:2-3).

The Bible only directs us to reflect on our past to turn us from our sin and to glorify God for what he has brought us through His grace. It is interesting to consider why the Bible does not view our past difficulties as important to our present spiritual growth. Even if we could fully and truly understand how the past affects our present beliefs and behavior, it is truly not essential to bringing about life change. While our past problems may be interesting, the issue at hand is not where we have been but where we need to be.

8. How important is it for someone to counsel with a person who has experienced his or her specific problem? Should a church divide into groups with homogeneous problems for mutual encouragement?

Scripture answers this question in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4. The person equipped to counsel is not the one who has experienced the problem, but one who has experienced the solution. The Bible says God is the focal point in sanctification, not what our specific temptation may be. The one who has been comforted by Him is the one able to help those in any affliction. While receiving assistance from a person who has been through the same problem can bring emotional bonding and help add to insight with the challenge that a problem may bring, this is not essential for overcoming sin.

There are unintended consequences that occur with so-called recovery groups. We need to be overcoming sin in all areas of our life, not just the one that we have identified as our weakness. Also, people tend to consider themselves in light of their labeled sin practice rather than perceiving it to be something that they once were (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Finally, these groups give the false impression that specific sins require specific solutions. In truth, all sin requires the same solution, repentance and faith in God.

9. What is the relationship of counselor and counselee?

The counselor seeks to establish a relationship based on the type of love and compassion of Christ (John 13:34-35; Philippians 1:8). It may involve the restoration of a sinning believer (Galatians 6:1-2), discipleship (Colossians 1:28-29), and/or the teaching of God's Word (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The topics of dialog are personal and are some of the most important things in life. Thus the relationship is deep and has the purpose of God's glory. It is not a cold, professional relationship. At Valley Bible Church we seek to have couples counsel couples and couples or women counsel women.

10. Are some problems really physical?

Yes. Countless physical factors can effect emotions, thoughts, perceptions and actions. These factors can and should be detected by medical doctors. These must taken into account by the counselor.

On the other hand, some problems that are not physical are at times addressed as if they were by the mental health community. When a medical “diagnosis” is based on behavior alone (short attention span, disobedience, disrespect, self-oriented thought/action, etc.) the real spiritual problem can be overlooked.

11. How can a person achieve righteousness when his counselor is also sinful and limited?

Biblical counseling is based on the wisdom of God’s Word, not the counselor. Change is fueled by the Holy Spirit, using the Word at the heart level (Hebrews 4:12), not by the cleverness of a man. When counseling is complete, the counselee has developed a pattern of being led by God and obeying Him. This way of life continues beyond the counseling sessions. Jesus is the Wonderful Counselor (Isaiah 9:6), not us. He works through His body, the church, to bring change to broken lives.

12. What should I look for in a counselor?

Someone with a thorough understanding of the Word (2 Timothy 3:16-17), with a mature relationship with Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 2:2) and with a Christ-like passion for people (Acts 20:31).

Furthermore, an accountability of the counseling ministry to the local church is essential. Too many people are counseling independent of the oversight of a local church. This means more than the counselor attends a church. A Bible-believing church ought to have responsibility for the ministry taking place in counseling.

13. When do we recommend a person consult outside the local church for counseling?

We believe people must receive medical attention for their physical problems and thus will recommend people consult with able physicians when necessary. We are convinced that God, through His Spirit and His Word effectively ministered by mature Christians, will bring about righteousness as long as a person is willing to trust God and His ways.

Often churches will send people with problems to professional counselors, believing that others are better trained for the task and/or have more time to focus on the problems. While training is very helpful, the type of training is far more important. It has become rare for Christian counselors to view the Bible as their sole authority for helping people. Also, counseling licenses and professional affiliations are certainly no substitute for accountability that comes through relationships in a good local church.

If there are people who for some reason do not believe they can receive help from our church we prefer they receive help from another sound, Bible-believing church.

14. Are we opposed to professional counselors?

No. We only desire biblical solutions for spiritual problems. We rejoice when professional counselors serve people with God's truth and we weep when professional counselors fail to serve people with God's truth.

We also recognize that our much of society looks to professional counselors rather than the church for help with their problems. Most churches in fact encourage people to look to professional counselors for this help. Also, government funding is often only provided for professional counselors. The result is many opportunities for people with state-recognized counseling licenses to minister God's Word to the lives of people who would not otherwise be served in such a way.

Finally, we encourage those Christians in sound, Bible-believing churches to seek out the help of their church leadership when they encounter personal difficulties.

Completed: April 2001