

A Biblical Counseling Approach

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Identify how this approach seeks to rely on the resources of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God and the ministry of the church.
- Assess the benefits and limitations of the central premise to this approach, namely, that true help and change can only occur as the client comes to know, trust and embrace who God really is as depicted in Scripture.
- Formulate a personal response to the three methodological commitments of biblical counseling: gracious care, biblical truth and specific application of God's Word.

It is both a welcomed privilege and a weighty responsibility to represent a biblical counseling approach to Jake's case. I appreciate the opportunity to offer an inside look at a widely misunderstood paradigm to counseling. I will work to represent biblical counseling as a whole while also portraying a detailed process of helping this conflicted young man. In keeping with David Powlison's (2010) important work in *Psychology & Christianity: Five Views*, my basic goal is to clarify how the triune God can work through his Word and his church to bring about change in a life fraught with difficulties.

Of course, as with any approach to counseling, there is a spectrum of emphases and practices among those within the biblical counseling camp. There is room for the individuality of the counselor, for a range of preferred resources and for variations in the application of wisdom. There can be dif-

ferences in the priority of certain aspects of biblical change, as is evident as you read differing leaders in the field. Yet even with diversity, there is a great deal of consistency with respect to the presuppositions, goals, methodology and counseling content among biblical counselors. Most vital to every practitioner is that his or her counseling flow directly out of the Scriptures and into practical life application. There is an operative conviction that God's Word is relevant to all of life and can be practically applied to every heart and every circumstance of difficulty. While this does not imply that Scripture is the only source of information in the counseling process, biblical counselors are consistent in their detailed biblical analysis of information and in their overwhelming focus on special revelation—the Bible—which alone is infallible and authoritative truth. As Powlison (2010) espouses, "This care and cure for the soul systematically differs from how other psychotherapies deal with the same problems for living" (p. 245).

This chapter will reflect my fleshing out of Powlison's perspective of biblical counseling but also will reveal the influence of individuals such as Paul Tripp (2002), Wayne Mack (2005), Jay Adams (1970, 1973), Steve Viars (2011) and others. Assuming the predetermined role of "expert consultant" to Jake's primary counselor, I seek to give an overview of the case and enough specifics to display an inside look at a distinctively biblical counseling process. Given the nature of the biblical counseling model, I would advise that Jake work with someone of the same sex, so throughout this chapter his counselor will be referred to as "he" or "him."

Introductory Issues

Initial impressions of Jake. Jake is a young man in great need. He has a profound spiritual void, and he struggles with multiple past tragedies, life-dominating sins, and both emotional and interpersonal difficulties in his life, all of which need to be addressed. It is also very likely that Jake has some cognitive limitations due to brain trauma, as his status of being medically disabled indicates. All of these realities together have had a profound impact on Jake's goals, beliefs, thinking and choices. They also have a significant effect on his mental and emotional stability, as well as his functionality.

To bring this young man to a place where he can succeed in college and be free to live to the glory of God in his adult life, he will need careful and strategic care through counseling and accountability. While it is possible that

Jake may need these to an extent only available at a biblical counseling residential facility, he may be able to remain on campus under counseling care—fully collaborated with school and church involvement. Examples of biblical counseling facilities are Vision of Hope (www.faithlafayette.org/voh), Twelve Stones Ministry (www.twelvestones.org) and His Steps Ministries (www.hisstepsministries.org). More facts are needed before the best venue for counseling can be determined, and we will unfold this issue as we proceed.

Initial priorities in overseeing Jake's case. Several issues will be foremost in supervising Jake's counseling.

Prayer. Prayer is a crucial element of biblical counseling both in and out of the session. We work hard to help Jake, but we do so knowing that no one's efforts—Jake's or his counselor's—will accomplish much apart from God's power and work (John 15:5; 2 Corinthians 10:3-6; 1 John 4:4).

Consultation with the school counselor. Having expressed my appreciation for the time she has invested and commended her efforts to take seriously Jake's suicidal inferences, I would explain that she will continue to be an integral part of Jake's help and accountability. With the case now under my supervision, we will assume that I have another biblical counselor in mind for Jake. In order to reveal an inside look at Jake's counseling process, I will assume I am the "Fellow" who oversaw this counselor's training and that my input would be welcomed (this refers to a certification through the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors).

Suicidality. The counselor must facilitate an immediate evaluation of Jake's suicidal threat and drug involvement (Allechin, n.d.). This evaluation will serve to abate any dangers, help determine the best venue for counseling and provide additional important data for his primary counselor. For our current purposes we will assume Jake is having the intermittent thought that death would be better than his present circumstances, but no thoughts of actually ending his own life or of any specific way to do so.

Encourage the arranging of Jake's circumstances to facilitate counseling success. His course load and other life circumstances should be optimized for his benefit. We will also assume Jake was eventually clean of drugs and alcohol after his accident, throughout his lengthy stay at the rehabilitation hospital and, for the most part, prior to arriving on campus. He admits to only minimal use since he arrived at school but agrees it is an issue. The school counselor should secure a commitment from Jake to cooperate with

drug screens for as long as he remains on campus. She should ask for a renewed intent not to use while in school, a commitment to meet regularly with the new counselor and a promise to discuss his drug use with that counselor. She should advise him to move in with a roommate on campus or, at the very least, with a suite mate and share a mutual open-door policy. We will assume that Jake agrees to all of the provisions and requirements that were discussed, and thus the school administration is willing to let Jake remain on campus while lessening his course load drastically. Should Jake fail to cooperate with all of this, or evidence a regression in regard to drug use or suicidality, a temporary leave from school and a residential stay in a suitable placement will be recommended.

Instruct the biblical counselor on his preliminary responsibilities. These responsibilities would include coordinating the sharing of appropriate information gathered or observed about Jake, meeting Jake for the first time through his school counselor, and getting signed release forms for acquiring past records. The counselor should also conduct preliminary research into resources possibly needed for Jake, such as a local physician, a local brain injury rehabilitation center (or neuropsychologist for evaluation of cognitive brain functions) and a residential biblical counseling facility.

Key presuppositions going into the counseling room. It is almost axiomatic in counseling circles that the conversations that will occur in Jake's counseling are the result of presuppositions, ideas and principles that guide the counselor's thinking and assessment. All counselors enter the counseling room with certain foundational beliefs about human problems and human "rightness," and both of these are directly related to their beliefs about the nature of God and change. The following are some key guiding beliefs that are pertinent in our biblical approach with Jake.

Character of the counselor. The personal calling of a biblical counselor is to reflect Christ in the counseling room while delivering the private ministry of the Word (Matthew 22:37; John 8:36; 17:17; Ephesians 5:1; 1 John 2:6). Jake's counselor will do everything he can to have the character of Christ, the message of Christ and the methods of Christ. For these reasons Jake's counselor's help will only be as good as his own relationship with the Lord, his biblical knowledge and his integrity toward the Scriptures (Romans 15:14).

Jake's faith. Only as a believer—that is, one who has faith in Christ—can Jake experience the right kind of change and change in the fullest sense

(1 Corinthians 2:14). Jake's counselor will fully embrace that without true faith in Christ, Jake cannot have the right desires, nor the hope of God-glorifying, lasting change through God's power (Ephesians 2:12; Titus 3:3). Biblical counseling is the appropriation of God's truth and God's resources, for true change, for God's glory, from the inside out. However, as long as Jake is at least open to exploring God and the gospel in reference to his life and problems, biblical counseling can continue (John 4:1-42).

Spiritual resources. God has provided the Holy Spirit, the Word of God and the local church as the collaborative, supernatural resources needed for Jake's salvation and his sanctification or life change (John 17:17; Romans 1:16; 6:1-8:39; Galatians 6:1; Ephesians 4:16; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; Hebrews 4:12; 2 Peter 1:3-14). This means that Jake's counselor is convinced that while Jake's heart and life are fraught with issues, he is not beyond the help of God and can change if all three of these crucial, God-given resources are operative in Jake's life. It means that the counselor relies on the fact that God's Spirit works *through* the Word, thus accepting that Scripture must play a central role in Jake's counseling sessions (Psalm 1:1-3; 19:7-11; 119:11, 45, 99, 129, 130, 165). The church is the vital community in and through which Christ has chosen to facilitate this work (Matthew 28:18-20; 1 Corinthians 12:1-31; Ephesians 4:16). In the words of the Christian Counseling Education Foundation's model, floundering people like Jake can "best image the triune God as [they] live and grow in community. Therefore, we embed [Jake's] personal change within God's community—the church, with all its rich resources of corporate and interpersonal means of grace" (Lane & Powlison, 2009).

In sum, a Christian worldview (embracing the purpose of creation and the gospel) along with God's Spirit, his Word personally and specifically applied, and Christ's church are together sufficient to deal with Jake's personal issues, the impact of his circumstances, his suffering and his sins.

The influence of the past. Jake is certainly influenced by his past, yet he need not be determined by, defined by or enslaved to his past (Ezekiel 18:1-32; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Jake's long-standing pattern of poor responses will add an additional challenge. But according to the Scriptures, in Christ he is able and even responsible to be "set free" from the enslaving power of repeated personal sin, from the effects of others' sin against him and from living in light of tragic circumstances rather than in light of

greater truth (John 8:32; Romans 12:21; Titus 2:11-14). Jake's counselor must compassionately, practically and carefully address the real and influencing factors of the past. Nonetheless, Jake's freedom does not really lie in the past, but in his present and future.

Jake as a whole person. Jake possesses both physical and spiritual components that interact and affect one another because Jake is a whole person (1 Kings 18:1-19:21; 2 Corinthians 4:16-18). Jake's counselor will place importance on understanding the interaction of both components and address them both thoroughly and practically. For example, information concerning Jake's brain damage might have a bearing on how homework is assigned and done, and may be helpful in setting proper expectations and repentance plans. But because Jake is a whole person, the counselor also should not be dissuaded from dialoguing with Jake about spiritual principles that apply to his physical situation either (Powlison, 2010; Welch, 1998).

An Assessment of Jake

The assessment process for Jake will begin with the gathering of personal information, move to organizing the data into a biblically informed framework, and end by pinpointing specific categories of issues that need to be addressed with God's truth, personal application and practical assistance. Biblical counseling relies heavily on the comprehensive gathering of information to gain an accurate understanding and to speak with relevance (Proverbs 25:11-13). Proverbs 18:13 teaches, "He who answers before listening—that is his folly and shame" (NIV). There must be careful consideration of all the facts of Jake's life, as well as his personal interaction with those facts, in order to know what is really going on with him.

Determining who Jake is. Jake will be asked to fill out a Personal Data Inventory (sample PDI; Adams, 1973) prior to the first session. This form allows Jake to give very basic information on education, job or school status, any job- or school-related problems, emotional upsets, past counseling, familial relationships, health, spirituality, and personal problems.

In Jake's case, quite a lot of information is known before his new counselor sits down with him. I would encourage the counselor to use this head start and draw from the information what Paul Tripp (2002) calls "entry gates" (p. 126). These are usually experience-based realities such as fear, discouragement, anger, bitterness and hopelessness. They may not be the

mental manner. Even when regular counseling has ceased, there should be some checkups during the next year—some initially done by Jake's counselor and then some by his church shepherds. One of the benefits of involving the local body in Jake's life is that needed encouragement, accountability and opportunities to serve can continue indefinitely.

Wayne Mack (2005) offers insights on how to know when biblical counseling can be drawn to a close. With these in mind, here are ways to recognize when Jake's formal counseling can end:

1. His progress is seen by others as well as by himself;
2. He is able to understand his problems biblically;
3. He is experiencing a significant decrease in the frequency and intensity of certain temptations;
4. He is able to handle failures and difficulty well;
5. He is delighting in his walk with Christ;
6. He sees the importance of involvement with other believers and has established some good Christian relationships;
7. He is well established in his church, serving and ministering to others;
8. He continues to improve even when the times between sessions are lengthened;
9. He has a realistic plan for his future; and
10. His church elders are aware that counseling is ceasing, and there is a particular person in Jake's life for continued discipleship and accountability.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Hopefully, it is apparent from this chapter that Jake's case is appropriate for a biblical counseling model. Issues of the past, of suffering and hopelessness, and of destructive thinking and behavior are all issues stemming from the heart. The basic condition and perspective of the soul, the functions of the heart and God's path to change are what biblical counseling addresses so well. Of course, other resources are also important in Jake's case. Church involvement is paramount since "change is a community project" (Lane & Tripp, 2006, p. 73). Again, it is particularly important to utilize medical and