

A photograph of a man and a woman sitting at a table, looking at a laptop screen. The man is on the right, wearing a white shirt, and the woman is on the left. They appear to be in a meeting or collaborative work environment. The background is slightly blurred, showing a colorful abstract painting on the wall.

HEARING THE CRITICS, ANSWERING THE CRITICS AND TAKING UP LEADERSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

Biblical Counseling is to the secular counseling field today what behaviorism was to the psychodynamic world in the 1940's. We are beginning to draw the attention of the professional community. We are misunderstood. We are characterized. We are maligned. We are marginalized. Even within the evangelical world we have these same responses. We need to hear the critics. We need to learn from the critics. We need to learn how to answer the critics. Whether we like it or not we have couched ourselves as a profession and therefore we are going to have to learn how to be professionals without giving up our humility as being utterly dependent upon the Holy Spirit to use us as instruments in His hands to accomplish His purposes through His word.

I am going to take a brief look at our situation through three lenses: Intramural, Intermodal and Extramural critiques. I will finish with twelve recommendations for us to consider.

INTRAMURAL CRITICS

REJECTIONIST

This is the Martin & Deidre Bobgan brand of critics. It is a total rejection of biblical counseling.

Martin and Deidre cite a quote by David P. Murray, professor of OT and practical theology at Puritan and Reformed Theological Seminary: ["Those in the biblical counseling movement] have inspired and trained many Christians to use the bible to diagnose the roots of problems and to prescribe lasting solutions;" they then critique his observation in these words. "Unfortunately, using 'the Bible to diagnose the roots of problems and to prescribe lasting solutions' in practice is one of the greatest weaknesses of the biblical counseling movement. We have shown this by responding to the literal counseling done by leaders in the movement, such as Jay Adams, David Powlison, Randy Patten, John Street, and others.⁶ A related weakness of the biblical counseling movement is their problem centeredness, which is a direct result of the desire and central focus of the counselors to "diagnose" and "prescribe," which is a reflection of secular psychotherapy, which they hope to replace even while emulating [it]".

While I find their broad stroke criticism rather shallow, there is a word of caution that it strikes for me. We need to be cognizant of our tendency to be problem centered. I observed this with some frequency with newly minted supervisees on their pathway to certification. There is a focus on correcting an issue like communication in a marriage relationship as if doing so is the goal of counseling. Likewise, there is a tendency to ignore the problem and focus on discipleship. The first tendency attempts to fix the communication problem without examining the underlying source of the problem. The second tendency tends to ignore the problem or overshadow the problem by immersing the couple in a discipleship process. Such practice falls into the trap of focusing on what Adams called the presentation problem. Adams was never satisfied that this was nouthetic counseling. The Bobgan critique is shallow. Adams sought to work through the presentation problem (we are not happy) to the performance problem (not communicating) to the preconditioning problem (the dynamics in the lives that produced the problem).

POSITIONALIST

In the Bobgans book, *Stop Counseling! Start Ministering*, they somewhat correctly noted this positioning. They write, “We reveal how the various counseling organizations, including the Association of Biblical Counselors (ABC), the American Association of Christian Counselors (AACC), the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF), the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors (NANC), ...have joined together for mutual endorsements, conferences, and other cooperation in spite of the fact that there are huge differences with respect to practices, with ABC being eclectically oriented, AACC being psychologically oriented, CCEF being psychoanalytically oriented, and NANC being behaviorally oriented [emphasis mine].”

While most folks associated with these various organizations would not agree with the Bobgan nomenclature which they use to characterize these organizations, they do correctly distinguish that there are camps within the movement. We are all aware of these differences. My point for us today is that each group claims to be biblical and offers critiques intramurally regarding the representative position of the other camps. This intramural sparing is not unlike what we experience in our varied denominational or non-denominational relationships. For example, when Al Mohler speaks at our PCA church there is usually some bantering about who will be proved right on the issue of baptism when we get to heaven. However, we agree that we will get there by the grace of God through the finished work of Christ embraced through by faith on the authority of solo scriptura. Yes, there is not a perfect parallel. But it does illustrate that there is a common bond regarding the solo scriptura in the counseling process in the various camps within biblical counseling. And, yes, I am aware that the Bobgan's amalgamate the integrationists in with biblical counselors in the quote above.

I view the various positions within the biblical counseling camp as “iron sharpening iron”. As strongly as we might oppose the position of another, we need each other. I believe I am right. We are sitting here today believing we are right. As a result, we can easily become arrogant or sloppy in our scholarship and our practice.

INTERMODAL (INTEGRATIONIST) CRITICS

I have dubbed the integrationist as intermodal since they have a variety of models of integration for conveying counseling assistance to their clients. Biblical Counselors refer to integrationalism because we observe that they attempt to integrate the discipline of psychology with the discipline of theology. To speak of this approach as attempting to mix oil and water is a bit simplistic since both disciplines are dealing with human cognition, behavior, and emotion. Both disciplines are conducted by flawed human beings on subjects that are flawed human beings. However, integrationalists tend to fit the observation of Dr. Gary Collins 30 or so years ago. He observed that most Christian psychologist tended to have a PhD in psychology and a Sunday School education in the Bible. As a result, there is a tendency to filter the Bible through the lens of psychology rather than psychology through the lens of theology (Bible). The result is not the mixing of purity (oil) with purity (water), but rather distilled natural revelation with distilled special revelation. Francis Schaeffer noted the results when he observed that when we put special revelation on level with natural revelation nature will eat up grace.

September 25, 2014 Dr. Sarah Rainer posted, as a guest on Ed Stezer's Christianity Today blog, a critique titled "Integration of Christianity and Psychology". You can find an excellent response posted by Dr. Jeff Forrey at the Biblical Counseling Coalition blog. I will here respond cryptically recognizing our time limitations.

Rainer: "...not all of secular psychology is wrong. Indeed, there are many helpful and positive aspects of psychology to consider, which is why there is a need for integration."

Response: The phrase does not of necessity lead to her conclusion that "[this] is why there is a need for integration". Integration means that there is equal value on both sides of the equation or that each side of the equation is of such substance that it can be merged with the other substance. In the case of psychology and Christianity this is not the case. One is "it-seems to be true" while the other is TRUTH. Or, one is derived data and the other is disclosed data.

Rainer: "I propose that Christian mental health professionals operate on a middle ground, the bio/psycho/social/spiritual model, which considers both our dignity and depravity as humans."

Response: As biblical counselors we embrace the dignity of counselees because he/she is created in the image of God and we also embrace the depravity of the Adamic nature of all people. This does not necessitate that we raise the bio/psycho/social to the level of authority or to the value of the Scripture. We (I) would propose a different model. (See Illustration 1)

Rainer: "However, the independent use of these secular techniques falls short because they simply produce a "symptom free" individual."

Response: The obvious question here is why not utilize biblical techniques that accomplish both symptom abatement and character change that reduces recurrence of symptoms or other symptoms that crop up to replace the one abated?

Rainer: "Helping a child with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder organize their school supplies, explaining and modeling the appropriate use of time-out to parents, challenging negative thoughts, and teaching diaphragmatic breathing, are some examples of secular techniques that do not challenge Scripture-based psychology. As Christian psychologists, we should teach, provide, preach, and pray, just like Jesus."

Response: There is nothing in this set of interventions that is psychology dependent. I have lay counselors, who have no psychological training, who work with students and families utilizing similar techniques drawn from their knowledge of the Bible and a commonsense application of love. These are techniques that grow out of good theology/anthropology, the teachings of Jesus and the Wisdom literature. In fact, a good argument can be made that these techniques have been plagiarized by psychology from theology.

Rainer: "When research and Christianity contradict each other, we follow the latter."

Response: Yes, biblical counseling could agree. But we would reiterate that research is illustrative and supplemental and not of equal status with Scripture. Scripture is the control center and it frames the argument and not vice versa.

EXTRAMURAL CRITICS

In 19 pages of citations on Google that appear to the inquiry of “Critiques of Biblical Counseling” not even one represented a pure secular piece. The fact of the matter is that we seldom make it on the radar of the secular community, though there are and will be increasing voices discounting the validity of our functioning as counselors. We are seldom considered a discipline by the secularist community. Hence, I will site one secular blog and one blog by a post-evangelical.

Kathryn Joyce slipped into this conference last year as part of her research to write a piece in the Pacific Standard published on September 2, 2014. Her article is titled: The Rise of Biblical Counseling. The byline reads: For millions of Christians, biblical counselors have replaced psychologists. Some think it’s time to reverse course.

Her critique is wide ranging, but this conference became her wiping boy. Nonetheless, her critique illustrates on the one side how little the secularist understands what we advocate and why, and on the other side, the very point of this session, our need to express our thinking with great clarity, our need to anticipate the critiques and preempt them.

Listen to the critique that Joyce offers.

In their attempts to cast aside the many shortcomings and contradictions of psychiatry and psychology, Adams and his followers wound up creating many of their own. How can you decry the ineffectiveness of psychiatry in treating mental disorders, yet contend that effectiveness is beside the point in biblical counseling? How can you stress the moral agency of man, rejecting the determinism of Freud, and yet adhere to the predestination of Calvin? How can you deplore the “utter arrogance of any fallible man who attempts to speak authoritatively,” as Adams did in his book, and yet assure that same man that a grasp of Scripture gives him precisely the tools with which to speak authoritatively?

These are very legitimate questions that we can and should answer. She raises several others. I am not suggesting that we spend all our efforts on polemics and apologetics. I am suggesting that we must think more strategically and anticipatorily. We should recognize the questions raised by our teaching, writing, and practice and we should be answering them preemptively.

The second extramural critique comes from a post-evangelical. For lack of time today I will not walk you through this blog. In surveying the web in preparation for this presentation I was deeply grieved. The impact of sin is so evident in the evangelical church that scholarship and objectivity are so often dissolved in the solution of emotions. A deep hurt in one's personal life, ill handled by someone or some group, becomes the measure by which all individuals associated with a movement or organization are judged.

An example of this kind of thinking was observed in the blog cited above. The individual self-identifies as having a long history of association with movements that openly stress what some would refer to as biblical patriarchy. At some point in this individual's life this teaching became identified as Spiritual Abuse and as a result he or she disassociated from evangelism entirely. However, if you follow the blog even in a cursory fashion it quickly becomes evident that now anyone, including Jay Adams, who holds to a biblical view of male leadership gets identified as cultic and guilty of abuse. With this lens the Apostle Paul would have to be placed in this category. As one writer suggested, "Many evangelical churches with sound and solid biblical doctrine can be considered aberrant or cultic when they practice techniques of manipulation and thought reform." Since we at our church teach a tightly woven biblical worldview from the pulpit, in our Men of the Covenant, Women of the Covenant, and Counselor Training programs I fear that by this definition we would be considered cultic. If I consider the Pastoral Epistles of 1 and 2 Thessalonians and 1 and 2 Timothy, without any commentary, I would have to consider that Paul, Timothy, and the local church of Thessalonica be tagged with the same moniker. All of us at this conference, by this view, would be so identified.

Hence, we know this critique is out there waiting to pounce upon every opportunity to erode the biblical counseling movement. When we speak, write, and counsel, for example, regarding the issue of biblical sex roles, we must be judicious in our word choice and frame our thoughts with a view to the culture—both its bias and its theological ignorance.

TWELVE RECOMMENDATIONS

Allow me to finish by making twelve recommendations—not exhaustive, I am sure, to guide our interaction with our critics.

1. We need to labor at a continual renewal and refreshing of our biblical theology. These critiques are far wider and deeper than counseling methodology. They are distinctly theological.
2. These critiques call us to disciplined clarity. The broad strokes of our earlier historic approach are insufficient to address the sophisticated criticism of today. It was easy to distinguish the error of Freud and contrast ourselves to his philosophy.
3. These criticisms demand that we do not depend upon our passion to carry the day. Reasoned responses, formulated through a theological framework with effectiveness illustrated by good research, is essential. A passionate address without substance to a friendly audience will gain applause, but to the professional world it will yield being discounted. We cannot be satisfied with talking to ourselves.
4. These criticisms call for refined language carefully chosen to say precisely what we desire to say. We must articulate in perspicuous language.
5. We must read and listen carefully to our critics and we must answer with preciseness. We must learn to ask penetrating questions. We do not have to have the answer on the end of our tongue. We must admit when we do not readily have a well thought through formulated answer and then we must take up the challenge to develop the answer.
6. We must take up the offensive. We need to anticipate the next round of challenges, articulate our perceptions, and deliver the answers.
7. We must demonstrate in our writing and our counselor training a Christ-like level of compassion. There should be no cause for someone who comes to us out of a life of sexual and personal abuse or biblically defined deviant lifestyle to ever level a charge that we were cruel or lacking in compassion. Biblical truth in that person's life may call for difficult wrestling with personal responsibility but that must come only after we have formed a bond of love and trust in which such work can be done with love-rooted security.

8. We must do a better job of grasping secular modalities, understanding them and be able to give a credible biblical response to them. Simply retreating into our theological presuppositions without a clear, well-reasoned and knowledgeable grasp of the nuances of the argument, the technique, and the analysis will no longer serve our movement or worse yet, the gospel.
9. We must encourage a cadre of next generation biblical counselors, who are cross trained, practitioner/academics. That means that many of us here need to have an eagle eye out for such promising individuals, mentor them (at the expense of our own success if necessary) as they move through their academic training and their daily practice of ministering to people.
10. These criticisms must motivate us to regular, thorough, theological, prayerful and devotional investigation of the Scriptures seeking the face of God so that the glory of God is reflected in our persona, our practice and our teaching.

There are two more recommendations particularly applicable our intramural scene. I do refer to these as clarity and charity.

11. Clarity: Are we sure we are assessing the Biblical Counseling person or group accurately, including a comprehensive first-hand understanding of the person or group's writing or ministry practice. We easily slip into the journalistic style so common today that takes a sound bite or blog bite and turns it into something quite different than the intended meaning of the author. Are we distinguishing the difference between an exploratory opinion and a serious deviation—in other words, because someone may nuance a view differently than we do, does that come to the level of error?
12. Charity: Are we willing to and engaging in the ministry of speaking the truth in love? We must be we willing to follow the biblical principle articulated in Matthew 18 that we advocate in our counseling practice? We must be willing to interact with the person privately expressing our concern in humility and love before we are willing to go public with our critique even if the self-identified biblical counseling representative has gone public with his/her criticism.

A FINAL ANALYSIS

In final analysis, I am suggesting that we like the Apostle Paul, must write and teach Romans style. We need to present the truth. We need to anticipate the critique. We need to own the objections and critiques and with careful precise language address them. We must learn to frame the argument or set the course of the discussion and provide rationale for what we think, propose and do in language that can be understood by the opponent.

The eight traits of leadership that I developed in the Plenary Session for the 2019 IABC Annual Conference put into practice will enable us to take up this task boldly.

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