Biblical Literacy in Counseling

by

Donn R. Arms and Jay E. Adams

When a so-called “biblical” counselor uses Matthew 22:40\(^2\) to teach there is a third commandment—to love one’s self—the kindest thing you can say is that he is biblically illiterate. The fact, however, is he probably is trying to force the Scripture into conformity to an unscriptural viewpoint. He is attempting to lend divine authority to self-esteem doctrine, a pagan concept that is contrary to God’s Word. Hence, the passage is used to support the false teaching. Such teaching is in direct contradiction to the actual words of Christ in the passage. For one whose conscience has not been altogether seared, he probably recognizes his own duplicity in the matter. He is speaking or writing in bad faith. He is not to be pitied, but is to be called out for his willful distortion of the truth.

On the other hand, one observes a group of counselors whose understanding of biblical passages is so slight they fail to recognize what is happening, see no problem, and actually believe that such a misuse of the passage is valid. Such persons are to be pitied (as, indeed, are his counselees).

It is not to the former, but the latter—those who wish, but honestly don’t know how, to rightly use the Scriptures in counseling—that we address this article.

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2 “. . . On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (emphasis mine).
You must use the Scriptures when you counsel.

You will be in the minority

For the typical reader of this journal, the need to use the Scriptures when counseling will seem to be a somewhat pedestrian observation. “Of course we use the Bible when we do biblical counseling,” you may say. You should know, however, that in the broader universe of evangelical Christians—and more specifically evangelical academia—it is a minority view. To suggest such a thing often sparks heated debate. As troubling as this is, we take heart in that our thesis is growing in favor. We are making progress. In the early ’70s, I (Donn) took a freshman psychology course at a fundamentalist Baptist college in which the professor used the same psychology textbook as in the state university. He tried valiantly to Christianize the material, but we were served up generous doses of Freud, Adler, Skinner, and Rogers and warned that psychological problems were best left to counselors who were better trained than the typical pastor.

During that same time, I (Jay) gave a series of lectures at a prominent conservative theological seminary during which I made this very point: you must use the Scriptures when you counsel. When I attended a faculty meeting during my week on campus, I learned that this simple thesis had caused an animated division among the faculty members.

Today, forty years later, more and more pastors have come to see that the Bible addresses each of the issues with which their church members were struggling—issues that had been given hopeless labels by secular counselors. More and more seminaries are seeing the need to equip pastors and lay leaders in the church to minister the Word to their hurting
people. They are arriving at the conviction that people who are dealing with profound and complex issues of life need to hear an authoritative word from God about their problems.

*Your counselee must hear from God*

Counselees can only hear what God has to say about their problems from the pages of Scripture. Today, there is no other source. The effective biblical counselor must firmly possess the conviction that the Scriptures are both sufficient and adequate to meet the needs of his counselee. Three times in one sentence Paul affirms this truth in 2 Timothy 3:17 when he declares that with the Scriptures the man of God is “adequate” and “thoroughly equipped” for “every good work.” The counselor who goes searching for help anywhere else will find nothing that satisfies. It is shameful to see pastors and Christian counselors crawling under the table of the psychologist hoping to find some useful crumb that has fallen over the edge.

When you counsel, be sure it is the Word that you are ministering to your counselee. Be careful not to let a plethora of other things that can happen in a counseling room replace that ministry. Counselees do not need to hear mere opinions. Counselees will be emotional, weeping, grieving, hopeless, and confused. While your heart will go out to them, you must remember they need the comfort, hope, and wisdom that only the Scriptures have to give. They don’t need a hug, and they don’t need a new friend. Commiserating is not counseling. Counselees need the ministry of the Word of God!

*You must be counseling*
Our thesis that pastors and Christian counselors must use the Scriptures when they counsel assumes that pastors and other Christians are doing counseling. While counseling is only one aspect of the ministry of the Word of God in a local church, it is a vital one. Believers are in possession of the Spirit of God and have the responsibility to “restore” their fellow believer who is caught in some trespass (Galatians 6:1). Paul ministered the Word in the role of a pastor to the Ephesians both “publically and house to house” (Acts 20:20) by “counseling” them both night and day “with tears” (v. 31).

We have heard all the protests and excuses pastors put forward as to why they have decided not to counsel their people.

• “I’m too busy.” Busy doing what? What exactly do you believe a pastor’s responsibilities are? Is not the ministry of the Word to your people at the top of your list?

• “I do all my counseling from the pulpit. People can hear the Word address their problems when I preach.” Oh? Did you cover each one of the thirty different problems your people came burdened with last Sunday? How did your message from Luke 15 about the lost coin help the woman whose son was arrested on a drug charge? How did it minister to the believer who had succumbed to homosexual temptation last night?

• “But there are so many people with so many problems I can’t possibly do all the counseling that needs to be done in my church.” Very true, and you should not try. You should be training and raising up elders and others to help you. If you do not
counsel, you will soon find your preaching become sterile and divorced from the day-to-day problems your people face. And your people will probably conclude rightly that you do not have answers for them—even when you preach.

You must minister the Word by addressing the counselee’s problem

Perhaps it would be good to pause here and give lie to a common canard we hear about nouthetic/biblical counseling as reported by the uninformed, misinformed, or dishonestly malinformed:³ “All you nouthetic guys do is talk about sin. You think every problem grows out of a counselee’s sinful behavior and you are satisfied to identify his sin, condemn him for it, and call on him to repent.”

Now, of course, we believe that all problems, disorder, pain, grief, and sorrow are the result of sin—Adam’s sin. But not every problem a counselee has is the result of his own sinfulness. We have never taught such a thing.

It is true, however, that many counselees will seek help because they have become entangled in some sin and come to disentangle themselves from it (Galatians 6:1). One man may be an adulterer whose wife has discovered his sin. Another may have embezzled money from his company. The counselor will deal with the homosexual, the drunkard, the gossip, the liar, the worrier, the brawler, and any other varieties of sinners whose sins have brought them to the place where they have sought help from the biblical counselor.

However, a second category of counselee exists that pastors frequently encounter: persons who have been sinned against—such as the wife whose husband has committed

³ Yes, this is a real word that means to be maliciously informed by someone with ulterior motives.
adultery, the boss whose employer has embezzled money, the one lied about or gossiped about. Persons in this category need to know how God would have them deal with others who have sinned against them so the wronged individuals might handle their responses as well as do all they can to help the persons who have sinned. Always, the goal is to please God in the situation.

A third category of would-be counselees is populated by individuals who have to deal with difficult circumstances in life and want to know how to respond or make decisions that honor God. These situations include a job loss, a troubling medical diagnosis, the death of a loved one, the influence of a difficult in-law, or a child who has been arrested.

In each case, in every category, counselees need to hear from God. The opinion of their pastors will not do. The advice of a relative will not suffice. Suggestions from a neighbor are not welcome. Only the authoritative voice of God speaking through His Word is sufficient to guide a counselee through these turbulent waters.

While we may marvel that for many this position is a controversial stance these days, the man of God should be aware his people are hearing they should seek out secular “experts” who minimize the ability of the Word to meet their needs and seek to integrate the world’s philosophies with God’s wisdom.

**You must know the Scriptures in order to use the Scriptures**

A subjective list of qualities counselees consider important in a counselor would certainly include gentleness, patience, kindness, compassion, warmth, and wisdom. No biblical
counselor would deny the value of these things. Qualities the typical counselee would not include on his list are important as well—tenacity, focus, frankness, unyieldingness.

Counselors, like preachers, have differing styles, all of which can be effective. Some preachers have a conversational delivery that is warm and appealing to many. Others are animated pulpiteers who hold people’s attention by the force of their personality. Counselors have differing styles as well. The warm, embracing counselor can be as effective as the no nonsense “let’s get this solved” kind of counselor.

The one quality all biblical counselors must possess, regardless of their particular style, is a working knowledge of the Scriptures. All other qualifications pale into insignificance beside this one. In Romans 15:14, Paul tells his readers they are competent to counsel since they are “full of goodness” and “filled with all knowledge.” The word “all” (πας) is best translated “all kinds of.” In verse 4, Paul tells us the source of this knowledge or instruction is the Scriptures.

You must be ready

We frequently compare the preacher’s task to that of the counselor. Both seek to minister the Word in such a way so their people are able to understand how God would have them grow and change. One ministry is more public than the other, and one is (generally) louder. The preacher has a key advantage that the counselor does not. The preacher selects his topic, his text, and sometimes even his audience. He is able to study and prepare ahead of time and seldom are there any surprises during the delivery of his message.
The counselor, however, must be ready for whatever presents itself. He often counsels people he has just met. He does not know much, if anything, about them or about the issues that will arise during the course of counseling sessions. Even during those sessions for which he had prepared an agenda, the counselee will often bring up unforeseen issues that require the counselor to lay aside his prepared agenda and focus on something else. The counselor must know the Scriptures well enough to bring them to bear on whatever matters may arise. In order to do this competently, he must be prepared. He must be like Ezra, the “ready scribe,” who “had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel” (Ezra 7:10).

_How to get this knowledge_

Three important questions arise from our assertion that a working knowledge of the Scriptures is the primary qualification for the biblical counselor. First, how does one acquire this knowledge? Where does one go to find help? What steps must be taken to learn to counsel from the Scriptures? The short answer is to study! We would refer you to Dr. Adams’ book _What to Do on Thursday_ for simple, preliminary guidance in this matter.

Second, where can one go to get this training? The best education one can have for the task of counseling is a theological education. Happily, more and more options are available these days and we would shamelessly point you to our training program at the Institute for Nouthetic Studies and the Biblical Counseling curriculum at Mid-America Baptist Seminary.

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5 www.nouthetic.org
6 www.mabts.edu
Third, how can one know he has had enough training to begin counseling? We urge our students to begin as soon as they have opportunity to counsel! They will find no better laboratory for the study of biblical counseling than the counseling room itself. The early counseling experiences of the new counselor will often seem daunting, but the counselor should take heart. Any counselor who genuinely desires to minister the Word to the best of his ability will be of far more help to his counselee than the best educated and experienced secular psychologist.

The counselor should be honest with his counselee and not “fake it” or shoot from the hip. Often he will have to listen carefully to gather good information from the counselee and then promise he will study the issue carefully during the coming week so he can proceed wisely during the next appointment.

**You must use the Scriptures you know properly**

The *intention* to use the Scriptures in counseling and the *desire* to handle the Word accurately are not enough. Many strange things are done in the counseling room by well-meaning counselors. A number of Christian colleges dishonestly advertise programs in biblical counseling that are in reality attempts to integrate secular psychology with Scripture.

Some attempt to impose our modern DSM-V categories back onto biblical characters and conclude, for instance, that Elijah was depressed, David was bipolar, and Peter was obsessive-compulsive. Others see a demonic presence in every counseling problem. Pagan Greek temperament categories (choleric, sanguine, phlegmatic, melancholic) are discovered in Proverbs 30:11-14. Advocates of the pop psychology fads of right brain-left brain “love
languages,” self-esteem, birth order, repressed memories, and AA dogma all believe they can find support in the pages of Scripture.

If the biblical counselor does not do better than this, he will do harm rather than good for his counselee. The biblical counselor must handle the Scriptures accurately—skillfully! It is serious business to counsel God’s people and only serious students of the Word should engage in it. How, then, can the biblical counselor know he is handling the Scriptures accurately? Let’s examine one often overlooked criteria.

*The Intent of the Writer*

It is absolutely crucial for the counselor to discover the intent of the writer. It is not enough to understand the meaning of words—even in the original. Even though etymology and usage (most significantly the latter) are crucial, they are not the final point one must always have in view. By the author’s *intent* we mean his immediate intent in the sentence or paragraph that he writes, but also its place in the overall content of the section in which it appears. Moreover, the intent of the biblical book as a whole must be taken into account.

Let’s consider an example or two. Counselors (and preachers in general) like to quote verses from Psalm 23 to the survivors who attend a funeral. In particular, they focus on the words, “Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me,” which they intone in piously solemn voices, hoping to bring comfort to mourners. To do so is to misuse David’s words. He was referring to the comfort that a shepherd’s rod and staff provide since the rod gives assurance against the attack of wild animals that lurk in the shadows of valleys and the staff provides him with a means of keeping a sheep from falling over cliffs. They speak of the protection provided by a
shepherd that will keep his sheep from death. Its former use, however, is a common misuse of a well-known passage.

Let’s take another misused passage: Genesis 31:49, “… for he said, The LORD watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another.” This statement was no blessing or benediction as it has often been construed to be. Rather it was an oath taken at the erection of a mound separating Laban and Joseph. It was the witness (Mizpah) made to the truce that was agreed upon, and even the mound was a warning against further treachery. So frequent is the passage quoted in inappropriate contexts that few become concerned about its misuse.

Finally, an example from a familiar counseling context: “Judge not” (Matthew 7:1). Even counselors misuse this passage, as laymen frequently do. The instruction is not a prohibition of all judging. Jesus Himself commanded, “Judge a righteous judgment” (John 7:24). Surely, He did not contradict Himself. In Matthew He was speaking against a condemning attitude that led to judging people unfairly. In John, just the opposite is in view. That He didn’t forbid all judgment is obvious from the Matthew passage itself where He went on to speak of unsaved people as “dogs” and “pigs.” Later in the same chapter, Jesus gave us criteria for determining who is or is not a “false prophet” (vv.18-20). Clearly, He expected us to make judgments, but, as He said in John, they had to be righteous judgments.

It is well to note (as we have been doing) how readily some counselors latch on to any passage that seems to serve their cause, whether or not the intent of its biblical author was the same as theirs. How is he able to select Scripture that truly fits his counseling situation? He
selects *beforehand* those scriptural passages that might seem appropriate to various counseling needs.

In this regard, first, consider the following passage that has to do with how he carries on marriage counseling: “Husbands . . . live with your wives with understanding”\(^7\) . . . so that your prayers will not be hindered” (Peter 3:7). The latter phrase, which sets forth a warning, is one that has often been missed. In the face of some difficulty, when they don’t know what else to say, it is typical of some counselors to retreat, saying, “Well, I guess you’ll have to pray about it.” Prayer is a good thing, of course, and the counselor certainly should pray about his cases. However, to so advise husbands, who might be doing all the wrong things in their marriages, is a different matter. Clearly, until the husband has spent time learning what he can about his wife—her difficulties, thoughts, etc., his prayers will be useless. Instead of prayer, he should advise the husband to take time to understand his wife better so that he may intelligently show love to her. Otherwise, prayer unheard will be prayer unheeded.

What about becoming biblically literate to the point where you are able not only to select passages that are genuinely appropriate to the case at hand, because the writer’s intention was similar to that purpose for which you intend to use them?

I have noted you must select a number of passages with which you are familiar before needing to use them. Any counselor who does not have such a list to which he may turn when in need will fail to counsel well. To help counselors avoid such failure, in the back of *The

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\(^7\) Literally, “In an understanding way.” That is to say, with an understanding of her needs, goals, concerns, etc.
"Christian Counselor’s New Testament and Proverbs," I have included such a list. Were one to familiarize himself with such verses, their author’s intent, and how they might be used in precious counseling sessions, he would not be unprepared when he needs them.

As he prepares ahead of time, the counselor must think through some of the possible circumstances in which his counselees find themselves embroiled. He should also be able to give a short exposition of the verse(s) and how they apply to the situation to which he is applying them. In other words, were a counselee to ask what the Scripture he is referencing has to do with the situation, he would be able to give a convincing reply. More often than not, however, he will want to explain such matters, even if not asked, so as to lay an authoritative basis for his counsel.

When a counselor uses Scripture, he must be sure he does not convey a wrong impression of authority to his counselee. For instance, he must say, “You must not commit adultery,” with all the authority of God, since that is precisely what He requires of us. On the other hand, he will offer advice, according to the circumstances of each case, about how to go about breaking off the illicit relationship. In one case, a phone call is the best means. In another situation, a visit in company with the counselor (or some other approach), would be the wisest way to sever the relationship.

The important issue is to understand your wise suggestions are not authoritative, and should not be given the same weight as the Scriptures that you use. This distinction may be

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best conveyed to counselees by using such “contrasting words as “God says that . . .” (on the one hand) and “I suggest that . . .” (on the other).

It is important to use biblical thinking in how you go about dealing with would-be counselees. If it is known (or discovered in the attempt to counsel) that the individual who applies for counseling is an unbeliever, you may not counsel him. You should be ready to explain to him why you are required to refuse. In Romans 8:8 we read, “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” Since that position is clear, why would a counselor attempt to help a counselee to develop a new lifestyle that is only as displeasing to God as the one he had before counseling? There is no reason for doing so; but every reason for not doing it. What God wants you to do, as we call it when describing it to unbelievers, is pre-counseling. By pre-counseling, I mean evangelism. God calls us to evangelize non-Christians, not to counsel them. Therefore, knowingly, we never counsel unbelievers. If and when they are saved during evangelism, we then begin counseling them.9

Having briefly considered the importance of aligning one’s use of biblical data with the problem(s) that a counselee presents, let’s look at several frequent counseling issues and discuss the process of application of these data in the actual process of dealing with one’s counselee.

*Divorce and remarriage*

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9 Since every unbeliever is wrongly oriented in every area of his life before he is saved, when he comes to faith in Christ, he needs counseling. Counseling, at this early point, will prevent many difficulties later on.
It is the rare Q & A session with counselors when we do not field questions about divorce and remarriage. Divorce and remarriage is a thorny and complex issue for many counselors and counselees—not because the Scriptures are unclear, but because counselors often do not think clearly. This lack of acuity is often because these emotional and hugely consequential issues are complicated by the fact that people have their own individual styles of sinning and are able to entangle themselves in unique webs of circumstances. Frequently the confusion about the biblical data arises from failure to discover the biblical writer’s purpose or intent.

For example, one counselee who is struggling with the issue of divorce will have had Romans 7:2-3 pointed out to her by a friend.

> A married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is alive; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law referring to her husband. That means, then, that she will be called an adulteress if she marries a different man while her husband is living. But if her husband dies; she is free from the law, and if she marries a different man she isn’t an adulteress.

What are we to make of this passage? Is every divorced woman who remarries before her husband dies an adulteress? Is it true that, under any circumstances, no woman may ever divorce her husband, but must wait for him to die to be released from a marriage? Does this passage bear on her specific situation?

Consider Malachi 2:16, where God declares “. . . I hate divorce.” Is doing something God “hates” sin?
Or consider Matthew 5:31-32, “And it was said, “Whoever divorces his wife must give her a written record of the divorce.” But I tell you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual sin, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” Are we to conclude from this that anyone who is married to a divorced woman lives in a state of perpetual adultery?

Each of these unwarranted conclusions is promoted by some who teach counselors and, by such teaching, have brought unnecessary heartache to counselees. In each case, the interpreter would have been well served by beginning his exegetical work with the author’s purpose or intent. In Romans, Paul is teaching about the law and this passage is simply an illustration he uses to make his larger point. It is not a passage about divorce at all. Paul has no intent here of making a point about divorce.

There are translation challenges with the Malachi passage, but God, speaking through His prophet, is condemning His people for their unfaithfulness. The treatment of their wives was just one example in a list of complaints. Again, the intent was not to teach about divorce.

In the Sermon on the Mount our Lord’s purpose was not to instruct about divorce. He used the illustration of their current corrupt divorce practices to demonstrate the hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

The counselor needs a passage where the author intended to instruct about divorce and remarriage. Most of the confusion generated by the neglect of the author’s purpose in these other passages could be cleared up if only he would take his counselee to a passage the Holy Spirit intends for us to use to instruct about divorce and remarriage. Such a passage would be a
huge blessing to both counselor and counselee alike and would certainly be the focus of careful 
exegetical study by anyone who desired to be an effective counselor.

Of course there is such a passage. Paul begins 1 Corinthians 7 by explicitly stating that 
he is about to answer specific questions the Corinthian church had put to him in writing, the 
first of which concerned divorce and remarriage. Now we do not know exactly how the 
question was phrased but, clearly, we understand that his intent was to teach the Corinthians 
about divorce and remarriage. Any understanding of these issues must begin with a clear 
understanding of what Paul teaches there as its foundation. Other passages, even those 
mentioned above, may inform the study of divorce, but only in light of the conclusions reached 
from the passage where it was the author’s intent to teach about the issue.

Worry

Worry is another common counseling issue. It is complicated by the fact that few 
counselees see it as sin against God and consider it a bad habit or character flaw. In this case, 
the biblical data are not difficult, nor obscure. The biblical counselor has a wealth of material to 
choose from—so much that many novice counselors make the mistake of burying counselees in 
references. With all that is available to him, the counselor must choose carefully where to begin 
ministering the Word to his counselee. Does he begin with the Psalms and talk about the help 
and strength God provides to His people? Perhaps a narrative passage such as the story of 
Joseph or even Jonah that teaches the providential guiding hand of God in hard circumstances 
would be better. Maybe a short pithy verse such as 1 Peter 5:7 is in order.
All these passages are certainly helpful, but what is the most effective use of the Scriptures with the worrier? Again, an understanding of the author’s intent is helpful. What passage(s) were written specifically to give guidance to the worrier? The good counselor will quickly identify in his mind one, perhaps two, key passages about worry. While Matthew 6:25-34 is just such a passage, we usually gravitate to Philippians 4:6-9 initially. In this passage Paul not only gives the straightforward command—“Don’t worry about anything”—he explains how! The biblical counselor must have already done his exegetical homework in this passage so he can open and explain it clearly to his counselee, showing him how to apply it concretely to his situation.

**Depression**

Depression is probably the single most debated and misunderstood issue among biblical counselors today. Again, the problem is not that the Scriptures are unclear, but because counselors are inundated with secular theory, pseudo-scientific jargon, and condescending pronouncements from critics about compassion and sympathy. How can we apply biblical truth to behavior that is “biological” in origin? Is depression sin?

The answer depends on how we define depression, but the short answer is no, it is not sin to feel bad. It is sin to allow the fact that one feels bad become one’s reason to shut down and fail to fulfil his responsibilities before God and others.

The Apostle Paul had more earthly cause for discouragement and despair than most. We find lists of hardships Paul endured in both Acts and 2 Corinthians, including his well-known “thorn in the flesh.” Yet, in 2 Corinthians 4, Paul explains why he is able to endure. It is his
purpose here to instruct his readers, through his own testimony, about how to endure when they feel bad. His point is this: “since we have this service to perform as the result of mercy, we don’t give up” (verse 1).

2 Corinthians 4 speaks powerfully to the depressed person. The biblical counselor must not only know to point his counselee to it, but must stand ready to explain it and demonstrate what it means for how his counselee must change in the week to come.

*We are afflicted in all sorts of ways, but not crushed; perplexed, but not given to despair; persecuted, but not deserted; struck down, but not destroyed.* (vs. 8-9)

*As a result, we don’t give up, even though our outer person is decaying, because our inner person is being renewed daily.* (v. 16)

The Bible is not magic. It is not a good luck charm that we carry around so things will go well with us. We do not tell a counselee, “Read your Bible every day and God will bless you.” We don’t give a counselee the assignment to “have devotions every day” as a way to deal with his specific problem. Don’t misunderstand. Everyone should feed on the Word—daily if possible. However, counselees do not come with abstract problems. They have specific questions about concrete situations in their life. They need to hear what the Living God has to say about their problem.

In Isaiah 55:11, God promised His Word would “accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” As counselors, let’s be sure we use each passage of Scripture in the way He purposes. It is the only way we can expect success.