

Biblical Counseling: A Discipline¹

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The training of a generation of future pastors, missionaries, and laborers in Christ's Church, to counsel the flock of God, that they might disciple the nations, is an overwhelmingly awesome calling!

The primary affection that I am experiencing upon receiving this holy calling is: *thankfulness*. I am so thoroughly thankful that Christ, by his Church, has deemed it fitting and acceptable to entrust to me this sacred study. I am simply so very thankful to receive the position of Biblical Counseling Professor from Christ, and it is my sincere hope and prayer that I may faithfully honor Him and be a loyal servant to His dear sheep. Thus, to those of you who have supported me, prayed for me, encouraged me, counseled me, endured with me, and sacrificed so much, that we might be having this conversation tonight, namely, my wife, Melissa, and my children, as well as my parents: thank you.

Biblical Theology and Biblical Counseling

As we consider "Biblical Counseling: A Discipline," our minds should go back to the memorable year of 1894, when the Reverend Geerhardus Vos, of Princeton Theological Seminary, was inaugurated as its Professor of Biblical Theology. At this point, you may be wondering: what do Biblical Theology, and Biblical Counseling have to do with one another. Apart from the fact that they, of course, are both "Biblical," we can at the very least, assume that they both *aim* to be Biblical.

The title of this inaugural address, "Biblical Counseling: A Discipline", is actually an homage to Dr. Vos' Inaugural Address, where he spoke on the *then* new, theological discipline of Biblical Theology.² Of course, Biblical Theology was not new then, in the same way that Biblical Counseling is not new now as a theological discipline — and yet there was and is an element of "newness" to each of them, respectively. At this juncture, if we are not careful, we will begin sounding like the Apostle John, who speaks of an *old* commandment, which is also a *new* commandment — but I digress.

Biblical Counseling, like Biblical Theology in 1894, is relatively new, in the history of Christendom. After all, Biblical Counseling is only about fifty years old as a discipline. She is but now coming into her third generation of practitioners and professors. And here at the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, the one taking up the discipline is quite a young professor —

¹ *The following is an edited text of the inaugural address delivered by Rev. Keith A. Evans, on November 2, 2018, as the first Professor of Biblical Counseling at the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary.*

² Geerhardus Vos, *Inauguration of the Rev. Geerhardus Vos, Ph.D., D.D., as Professor of Biblical Theology* (New York: A. D. F. Randolph, 1894).

some may even say “boyish.” Thus, we have a younger professor taking up the instruction of a rather recent arrival, in the scope of church history, to seminary curricula.

And yet, Biblical Counseling, like Biblical Theology before her, is almost as old as time itself. She is, after all, the discipline of rightly understanding the Biblical text and rightly applying it to the circumstances of life. Perhaps we are beginning to see the line between Biblical Theology and Biblical Counseling is straighter than initially considered. The application of the text is the logical conclusion of rightly dividing the word of truth.

However, let us return to 1894 for one moment.

Quoting from Dr. Vos’s inaugural address, adapting his thoughts for our immediate purpose in this paper :

Biblical [Counseling] being a recent arrival in seminary curriculum and having been entrusted to my special care and keeping, I consider it my duty to introduce to you this theological science ... This is all the more necessary because of the wide divergence of opinion in various quarters concerning the standing of this newest accession to the circle of sacred studies. Some have lauded [Biblical Counseling] to the skies as the ideal of [practical] theology, [holding discipleship to an idealism she cannot possibly bear] and in such extravagant terms as to reflect seriously upon the character of her sisters of greater age and longer standing [namely Preaching]. Others look upon the new-comer with suspicion, or even openly dispute her right to a place in the theological family, [desiring that she be outsourced right out of the church, out of the seminaries, and into the medical fields, where the care of souls allegedly belongs].³

Therefore, it is in the spirit of Dr. Vos that we must ensure that the Theology of Counseling be Biblical — not only in content, but also in methodology.

One final point as we consider the venerable Geerhardus Vos. The afternoon of his inauguration, he spoke against his discipline, stating that Exegetical Theology was primary, and additionally, that Biblical Theology was a handmaiden to Systematic Theology. In like manner, I hope you will hear me tonight speak against my discipline. That Biblical Counseling, as Practical Theology, is secondary to the importance and primacy of preaching. And yet, might I further suggest that Systematic Theology is the handmaiden to Practical Theology, of which Biblical Counseling is a part?

After all, theological claims are fundamentally practical, and if our theology is not applied and does not reach the average churchgoer, what ultimate good is it? Application of the word of God to the experience of life is the *heart* of the theological task. The Scriptures come to us in the form of application. They are truth *applied*. Surely the Scriptures speak about substitutionary atonement, about adoption, about justification, about election, and about the incarnation, and so forth. But Scripture does so in a way that is applied to life, so that the atonement is brought to bear on your marriage in Ephesians; adoption is brought to bear on your prayer life in the midst of enduring affliction in the Book of Romans; justification is brought to bear on your forgiveness of others in Matthew; election is brought to bear on your patience with your fellow believer in Colossians; the incarnation is applied to the lowliness with which we ought to view ourselves in relation to others in Philippians, and so on. Scripture thus comes to us in the form of application. It comes as *counsel* itself, so that we are admonished, rebuked, corrected, encouraged, supported, sustained, and conformed by it into the image of God in Christ.

³ Ibid. The brackets are mine.

At the same time, the application must not be divorced from the source. Why, ultimately, would we desire the formation of character, apart from the character of God? Why would we teach people to be truthful, apart from the One who is Truth? Why instruct people to be loving, separated from the One who is the embodiment of Love? Why counsel people spiritually, devoid of the Spirit? Why seek Christ-likeness in individuals, absent of Christ? Or in other words, how can we possibly commend holiness without the Holy One? Or most foundational yet: how can we promote godliness, apart from God himself?

Cautions For the Discipline of Biblical Counseling

Having glimpsed the importance of this theological discipline, let us turn our attention to the cautions which we must employ when engaged in the work of Biblical Counseling while instructing in the Seminary and engaging in it in pastoral ministry:

The **first caution** under consideration flows from Judges 17:1-13, where we find an Ephraimite, named Micah, an Israelite named in accord with the true and living God, who worships at a household shrine, instead of going to the place of public worship in Ephraim. Public worship at that time occurred in the Tabernacle in Shiloh, in the very region where Micah lived. Thus, we find the man in the text without excuse, with no appeal to significant difficulty in seeking God as God had prescribed. Instead, Micah comes across a Levite, from the Tribe of Judah no less, from the city of origin of Christ Himself.

Now, instead of looking to the true priest, the One from Judah, the One to be born in Bethlehem, Micah looks to a meager approximation of him. Therefore, Micah makes a priest out of one who should be a servant of the True Priest, the True Priest who would point Micah to reliance upon the Living God, a God who is neither fashioned out of silver or represented by images and who does not dwell in houses made by hands.

If, at this point, we are tempted to conclude our passage as a rather obscure and impenetrable Old Testament passage, we find a New Testament parallel in the Book of Acts Chapter 14, where Paul and Barnabas, messengers of Christ, are worshiped instead of Christ Himself.

The universal point to both of these texts for our purpose in this paper is that discipleship, the one-on-one ministry of the word to individuals, could result in people relying upon the servant rather than the Master. In pointing people to the Wonderful Counselor and Mighty God, counselees could come to depend upon the counselor or the counseling in an unhealthy and Biblically-imbalanced way.

If Biblical counseling is ever known as individual therapy, *though I recoil at the phrase*, then let us never lose sight of the much more important and required Group Therapy, of going to the house of God in public worship. And may our ministry to the sheep never produce dependence upon anyone *other than* the True Priest of Bethlehem in Judah, that Great High Priest, not of the Levitical order, but in the order of Melchizedek, Jesus Christ himself.

The **second caution** for consideration is the all-too-common notion that providing wise and formal counsel to people is reserved for the specialist. Such a distortion of Biblically-based counsel is addressed by Acts 20:17-38. Here, Paul, the consummate specialist in communicating and applying the Word of God, is entrusting the very same ministry to the elders of the Ephesian church.

Paul is commending intimate and earnest care for the church of God which Christ obtained with His own blood. Paul places this care upon the elders of the church, this tearful, personal, house-to-house counseling of the flock in which he himself engaged. Notice how Paul puts it, when he says: “remember that for three years I did not cease to *nouthetically* confront everyone with

tears”⁴ (Acts 20:31), and Paul is commending the same to the elders (Acts 20:32). He specifically entrusts the word of God as the means to build up and sanctify the people of God. Then, to bring it all to bear with full weight and responsibility, Paul says: “In everything, I have shown you that by laboring in this way, *we must* support the weak” (Acts 20:35).

Paul, the specialist of the word of God, sees with tears this responsibility of counseling the word of God personally and from house to house, as being given to more than just the specialist. Biblical Counseling is not just conferred upon the counseling specialist alone. Neither is counseling with the Bible given *just* to the pastor, but it is a ministry bestowed on the Church of Jesus Christ as a whole. Perhaps this point is merely a Biblical advertisement that we all need training at RPTS in applying the word to the people of God.

The **third and final caution** for consideration flows from the previous point Paul was making: it is the Word of God he commends to us, as the means in the counseling dynamic of building up, strengthening the weak, and sanctifying the Church. The caution before us, however, is the reverse of the above. Do we want the counseling department at RPTS, the discipleship and counseling in your churches, and the soul-care of Christ’s people, to be based off of the insights and experience of men? Do we believe the mere observations of science and the meager attempts of secular humanism are enough to try and meet the deepest needs of the *soul*? Or might there be more adequate help available to us?

Paul had great confidence in the Word of God, what it was given for, and how it was to be used in the lives of people. Likewise, the Apostle Peter states:

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses to his majesty ... *knowing this first of all*, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:16-21 ESV).⁵

If there is any concern whatsoever about lack of experience and under-qualification of a Biblical Counseling professor, praise the Lord that, “we do not follow cleverly designed” human solutions, nor a man’s personal interpretation of the questions of life like, “who is man, what is his problem, and how do you fix him?” Are we not “eyewitnesses to his majesty” and to the power of Jesus to change lives? Or do we think his hand is slack?

Do we want to counsel in confidence? And upon true authority? On the claim, “Thus saith the Lord?” Or on the ever-changing, shifting opinions of man? Do we want our offer of hope and help, our discipleship and counseling, to be open to everyone’s personal interpretation? Or do we desire the curriculum at RPTS to be based upon the counseling professor’s meager experience, compared to the infinite wisdom of the Most High God? Do we want our promise of holiness and process of growing in greater faithfulness in all circumstances to be based upon the unchanging truth of God?

All of our concerns and reservations aside, I will age; I will finish my doctoral work eventually; I will labor in this field, all by God’s grace. But all of the above is immaterial compared to this one truth. We all have been entrusted with God’s perfect, inspired, inerrant, infallible, unchangeable, authoritative, perspicuous, sufficient, reliable, eternal Word — which grants everything necessary that the man of God may be complete, lacking nothing.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own; emphasis added.

⁵ Emphasis added.

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever" — in the public ministry, or in private counseling and discipleship ministry. *That* Word never returns to God void, but accomplishes its purposes, forever useful in transforming people's lives.

May the Lord bless the application of His Word, in the discipline of Biblical Counseling, and specifically at the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, for decades upon decades to come.

To God only be the glory.