

Biblical Counseling

by Michael Rudolph

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Last Shabbat Doug spoke to you about mentoring and introduced you to our congregation's new mentoring service that is coordinated by Doug and Nita. He explained that our mentoring ministry is "people helping people" – short term help for a variety of life's problems, where the helpers are the members of Ohev themselves. The theory of all this is that, in a congregation of our size, there is much knowledge, talent, and wisdom among the members that can be harnessed in helping other members. As I said, it's essentially "people helping people" and, most often, special training is not needed by the mentor, although many of our members are highly educated and have special expertise in a wide variety of areas. It is part of Ohev's overall plan for discipling its members.

Although this pulpit is not talk radio, I should like, nevertheless, to employ the fairness doctrine that congress is currently debating, in order to tell you of another ministry that is about to make its appearance in Ohev. It too is part of our discipleship plan, and is like mentoring in some ways; it is called Biblical Counseling.

If you've read your weekly bulletin (I am confident that, like the noble Bereans, you pore over your Ohev bulletin day and night in order to establish its truth) – anyway, if you have given your bulletins even a passing glance, you have seen my invitation to interested Ohev members, offering training in Biblical Counseling. Biblical Counseling is a much more intense form of mentoring that does require the counselor to be educated, trained, and – ideally – certified. Like its secular counterpart psychological counseling, it is a healing ministry that requires calling, commitment to lengthy study, and the emotional ability to help others who may be going through serious and painful challenges in their lives. Unlike psychological counseling, however, it does not employ the theories and therapies of men who, for the most part have rejected God. Instead, it employs the healing truths of Scripture, and it claims, as its founder, God Himself.

The goal of all counseling, whether biblical or secular, is to help the counselee to change himself or herself in such a way that something about his life improves. Counseling does not directly seek change in any thing, or any one, other than in the counselee himself; it does not try to change his spouse, nor his children, nor his parents, nor his boss, nor his finances. The only change sought is in his own behavior and his reactions to his circumstances.

The underlying assumption of all counseling is that change is possible, and each kind of counseling has its own theories for why that is so, and its own methods for achieving it. Freudian counseling, for example, assumes a subconscious, an ego and an id, and supposes that certain influences or occurrences in a persons past are causing his current distress. Freudian therapy therefore seeks to probe back in time as the means of changing a person's current feelings and responses to life's circumstances; this process is known as psychoanalysis and its author was Dr. Sigmund Freud, an atheist. Skinnerian theory is, perhaps, the most radically opposite to Freudian theory. Burrhus Frederic Skinner, also an atheist, didn't care one iota about a person's past. His supposition was that any animal's or person's behavior could be modified through operant conditioning – that is, through positive and negative reinforcement – and he

demonstrated his theory using rats in a special cage that introduced food pellets when the rats tapped a bar. The assumption of Skinnerian change is that reinforcing stimuli can be devised for people as well, and that, like rats, operant conditioning can be used to modify human behavior.

Now although quite opposite in their theories and practices, there are two marked similarities between Freud and Skinner. First, they were both atheists. And second, although they both sought to achieve change, neither had a standard for what kinds of behaviors ought to be changed, nor did either have a standard for what substitute behaviors were acceptable. One presumes, therefore, that the patient's own perception of difficulty would have been sufficient reason for him to undergo therapy, and one also presumes that any result satisfactory to the patient would have been considered a success.

In stark contrast, Biblical Counseling is a therapy authored by God Himself. Underlying its claim of validity is not mere theory, but biblical truth. And, unlike secular therapies, Biblical Counseling has a specific criterion of which of our behaviors ought to change; they are those behaviors God calls sin. And, unlike secular therapies, it has a standard for what our behaviors ought to change to; they are those that conform to God's law that God calls obedience and righteousness.

Let me illustrate what I mean with an extreme example, but one that actually occurred. Some years ago there was a newspaper account of a New York psychologist who claimed a therapy that cured the marijuana habit with a 100% rate of success. His method was to have his marijuana-addicted patients engage in daily sex orgies and, after one or two of these so-called treatments, they felt so good that they stopped smoking marijuana and, in fact, managed to stay drug free so long as the orgies continued. Now this was touted as a great success in behavior modification because the patient achieved what he or she came for. He came wanting to give up marijuana and left having discovered a way to stay marijuana-free. By biblical standards though, it was not a success. By biblical standards, the patient came in with one sin and left with another; he had gained nothing. Bizarre as this story is, it is the logical result of a therapy that has no standard for what constitutes acceptable change.

Biblical Counseling – God's way of counseling is different as night and day. It is based on the truth that sinful behavior hurts us, so, if we turn away from sin and toward righteous conduct, our lives will improve, and we will be strong and faithful over comers of life's adversities; in short, we will achieve *shalom*. Scripture teaches:

"I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

And Scripture goes on to tell us the specifics of those blessings and cursings – a long list of them. And it also tells us what it means to choose life because it gives us God's statutes and judgment which are the standards to which we must conform our conduct, and it tells us of God's plan of redemption through faith in Messiah Yeshua in the New Covenant. And Scripture also assures us that God has given us the power to obey through knowing Him because He has given us his Spirit that indwells all who will receive Him:

"Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah -- ³² "not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. ³³ "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. ³⁴ "No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

All methods of secular counseling are based on men's theories, and they all claim some successes that I do not doubt. Biblical Counseling, however, is based on God's promises, and its success rate is 100% for those who are willing to obey God. All forms of secular counseling have a method and so does Biblical Counseling. A Freudian analyst may put you on a couch for 12 years and a Rogerian therapist will draw you out but never direct you, because his operative theory is that the client knows better than the therapist. People tend to like these kinds of therapies because they are non-directive and non-confrontative and, in that way, they are easy to endure if you can afford the therapist's hourly fee. There is a song we used to sing for fun; it goes this way:

"Oh Doctor Freud! Oh Doctor Freud!
How I wish that you were otherwise employed.
For my set of circumstances sure enhances the finances
Of the followers of Dr. Sigmund Freud!"

Cost aside, Biblical Counseling is very different from most secular therapies because it is based on confrontation – confrontation of sin. And it is highly directive, and assumes that the counselor does know better – that he or she knows the Scriptures, is able to identify sin in the counselee's life, and is willing to direct the counselee to give up his sin and replacing it with righteous conduct. It is probably the most uncomfortable form of counseling of all, because it is bold, it is direct, it is authoritative, and it demands change – not twelve years from now, but three weeks from now. And it works because it is based on God's promises.

It is quite amazing. When I was studying psychology, my professors who were frequently messed up themselves could never give assurances that any of the techniques they taught would actually work. After I began to learn and apply Biblical Counseling, however, I became so sure of its efficacy that I would promise the counselee success so long as he was willing to turn his life over to God. And I can testify to this day, that the only times there was not success was when the counselee didn't.

Let me now tell you a little about the mechanics of Biblical Counseling. First of all, it is based on the counselee's willingness to do things God's way rather than man's way. Permit me to read from one of our textbooks entitled "Self Confrontation" where a comparison is given:

< Read from “Self-Confrontation”, pages 75-76> ¹

So we see from this that we have to compare our ways to God’s ways and when we find them not in agreement, we have to give up on our own and adopt God’s.

Now the actual process of biblical change is based upon Ephesians 4:17-32, but I will explain it by reading just verses 22 through 24:

“that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.”

So there are three steps to biblical change:

1. Put off the conduct of the old man. That’s our conduct that seemed acceptable before we knew God’s standard.
2. Be renewed in the spirit of our minds. That process starts with our becoming born again of the spirit, but continues in that our mind then has to catch up with our new spirit. In short, we have to start thinking differently.
3. Put on the new man. That means, taking on the character and behavior of the person God wants us to be, and that he empowers us to be, through His Holy Spirit.

Saying it another way, stop your sinful conduct, get your mind thinking God’s way, and replace your former conduct with redeeming godly conduct. Notice that it is not good enough to just stop doing something that is wrong. You can’t leave a vacuum. You have to replace it with new conduct which is right. A really good example of this is Ephesians 4:28:

“Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.”

So a biblical counselor who is helping a person out of a life of compulsive stealing would not only direct him to stop stealing but would give him specific directions to do substantial charitable work among the poor, giving both of himself and of his possessions. In other words, he would replace his wrongful and selfish conduct with charitable and sacrificial conduct – the exact opposite. Unless that last step of replacement is done, the person’s conduct may change but the inner person has not. A noted Biblical Counselor is famous for posing the rhetorical question: “What do you call a person who has stopped stealing because he is afraid of getting caught?” His answer is: “You call him a thief who is not stealing.”

There is so much more that I can tell you, but my time is about up. Beginning in the Fall, Ohev will begin to run classes in Biblical Counseling that will be assisted by the Biblical Counseling

¹ John C. Broger, Developer, “Self-Confrontation: A Manual for In-Depth Discipleship” (Palm Desert, Calif.: Biblical Counseling Foundation, 1977).

Institute currently operating only in Washington D.C. The program will be intense, and will require about two years to finish and achieve local certification. It will involve classroom attendance, home study, counseling under supervision, and finally internship. It will also lead the student in self-confrontation, the title of the first text book, so that the logs in his own eye can be removed before he tries to remove the splinters from anyone else's eyes. Although an undergraduate degree is not required for admission to the program, the level of study will be graduate level so significant commitment and a calling to this ministry is required. If we can get a number of our members trained to counsel biblically, we will not only be in a position to help our brothers and sisters in Ohev, but we will be able to reach out to the community around us and help relieve suffering using the Word of God. By the way, age is no factor. We will accept youths into the program if we believe God has called them, and they can put in the time without jeopardizing their other studies.

Please pray about whether God would call you to be a Biblical Counselor.