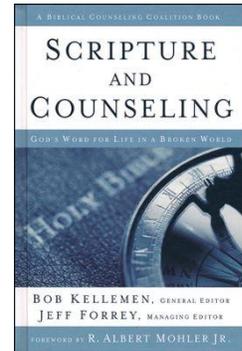


## Layers of Competency

**Note:** This material is an excerpt from Chapter 15 “The Competency of the Biblical Counselor” by Brad Hambrick in the book *Scripture and Counseling* edited by Bob Kellemen and Jeffrey Forrey. This material is reproduced with permission from the publisher, Zondervan. Formatting alterations have been made for the purposes of this project.



“Layers of competency” are not defined by Scripture. Like pastor-to-member ratios, the frequency in which a church takes the Lord’s Supper, whether pastors train in seminaries, and worship styles, the Bible leaves this open for individual churches to decide. The parameters Scripture do provide include:

- Pastor-teachers should be shepherds of the soul through the pulpit ministry of the Word and the personal ministry of the Word, and they should oversee the equipping of the Body to speak the truth in love (Acts 20:25-38; Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12; 5:14; 2 Timothy 2:2; 3:15-17; 4:1-2; 1 Peter 3:1-4).
- Every church member should be involved in caring for other church members (Romans 15:14).
- There are unique gifts and talents that allow some to serve in unique ways (Acts 13:2).
- Those with excellent gifts and personal passion in caring for others should be equipped (Ephesians 4:12), utilized (Exodus 31:1-3), and potentially compensated (1 Timothy 5:18) accordingly.

In this chapter, we will lay out five layers of competence.

1. One-Another Ministry
2. Lay Counselor/ Recovery Group / Mentor
3. Formally Educated, Gaining Experience (Graduate Intern)
4. Trained and Experienced General Practitioner
5. Experienced Specialist

Only the first layers of competence (one-another ministry) is taken directly from Scripture. The subsequent layers seek to honor the Scriptural principles established in the first two sections of this chapter in light of modern certification and education opportunities.

The latter layers will not be agreed upon by everyone inside or outside the biblical counseling movement. Like the reading competency expected of an “average second grader,” there will be debate. But it is hoped that the layers provided can do two things:

1. Start Conversation: Each church or para-church ministry must define what is competent for its setting. An ecclesiastical equivalent of the state licensing boards is unrealistic. If this proposal sparks a conversation in ministries where the definition of competence is unclear or absent, it will have served its purpose.
2. Illustrate a Team Approach: Too often distinctions breed competition and mistrust. If that is the result of this chapter, then it is a colossal failure. As each layer of competence is defined, efforts will be made to illustrate how that layer provides something good which the other layers cannot and how each layer has limitations the others can strengthen.

In order to effectively facilitate these conversations and a team approach, each layer of competence will be examined in the same five areas: (1) Scope of Ministry; (2) Level of Training; (3) Level of Experience; (4) Advantages and Opportunities; and (5) Limitations and Weaknesses.

## **I. One-Another Ministry**

### ***IA. Scope of Ministry***

Every member of a local church bears the responsibility to meaningfully know others, comfort suffering, confront sin, and reinforce other believers' identity in Christ. At this layer of competence we all do counseling every day—we hear people's struggles, make some evaluation, and offer words intended to provide encouragement or guidance.

One-another ministry is done predominantly through informal relationships. The reason the helpee pursues the helper has more to do with trust, respect, and availability than education or experience. The helper usually has background information about the helpee which allows the data gathering process feel like a natural conversation.

The hub of this type of ministry is usually small group life, mutual ministry involvement, or shared life activities. It is natural, appropriate, and beneficial for the helper and helpee to exchange phone numbers, mingle with each other's families, and have other casual social interactions.

Even when other layers of care are needed, one-another ministry is the place where "after care" should occur. As a church strengthens the quality and quantity of one-another care between its members, these relationships are God's design for "preventative care;" circumventing higher layers of care from being over-utilized.

### ***IB. Level of Training***

The regular preaching, teaching, and discipleship ministry of the church provides the training for one-another ministry. Whether effective or ineffective, this is where the content, tone, and culture of one-another ministry will be established for a particular church. A guiding question for every pastor-teacher in the church should be, "What do my people need to know to minister effectively at a one-another level?"

Another question each church needs to ask is, "Who supervises the one-another ministry of our church— recommending resources, debriefing conversations where the helper was uncertain, and overseeing the balance of training provided to the church?" This begins with the senior pastor and elders, but these responsibilities can be shared as a church adds more staff members.

### ***IC. Level of Experience***

The level of experience with one-another ministry will vary widely based upon a number of factors: age, life experience, personal history with sin or suffering struggles, number of years as a Christian, type of education, etc. A primary and irreplaceable asset one-another ministry provides is the longevity of relationship and accessibility. If the individual seeking help wants or is assessed by the church to require help that needs expertise more than longevity, then one-another ministry should likely not be the exclusive form of care provided (if possible). If so, then an imbalance is likely to develop in this helping relationship that makes it unhealthy for the helper.

This reality is potentially what makes it difficult for those who are equipped to provide higher levels of care to do one-another ministry with those who are not natural parts of their relational network. Part of good self-care for those with advanced training-experience in counseling is to protect friendships from becoming helping relationships.<sup>1</sup>

### ***ID. Advantages and Opportunities***

One-another ministry is highly replicable, readily available, and has lasting contact between the people involved. One-another ministry often develops naturally without any artificial pairing. In the absence of formality, the stigma often associated with counseling can be avoided. The lack of formality also alleviates liability concerns for a church that exist with other levels of counseling. One frequent expression of this is counseling-related conferences or book studies (e.g., parenting, depression, grief, etc...) offered during the adult education hours of a church's discipleship ministries.

In the absence of a thriving one-another ministry, several negative consequences occur: (a) counselees often regress or relapse after formal counseling concludes, (b) formal counseling is extended at cost to the counselee or lack of availability of services to others, or (c) struggles are taken on as an identity as a way to keep the individual in a community of support.

### ***IE. Limitations and Weaknesses***

It is often hard for those who do not have pre-existing relationships within a church to connect to one-another ministry in a time of crisis or emotional distress. Either they wait for friendship to develop before sharing their struggle, or their struggle becomes the basis of the relationship.

In one-another care the personal experience and favorite Bible passages and books of the helper can overly influence the advice given. Anecdotal examples of “what worked for me” or “what comes to my mind” can result in a higher rate of well-intended, but ineffective advice than would be received from more experienced helpers.

Those without formal training or experience in biblical counseling will have a wide variety in their comfort level when it comes to talking about emotional or relational struggles. This discomfort can be hurtful to the person seeking help. Those who have sought formal training in biblical counseling typically gain a greater comfort-level with these kinds of conversations.

### ***Important Transition***

A major transition occurs as we move from one-another ministry to other layers of care. This should be understood by churches when/if they add formal biblical counseling elements to their ministry. When counseling moves from organic, helping conversations to more formal expressions, an “artificial pairing” can occur. An artificial pairing occurs when:

- A request for counseling is made by the helpee.
- The church assigns or recommends a helper who would not otherwise be meeting with the helpee.
- The helpee comes to the helper with the expectation that counsel will be provided on the basis of helper’s training, role, or experience.

When a church facilitates a counseling-related artificial pairing it has a responsibility to both the helper and the helpee. To the helper the church should ensure: (1) there is a reasonable opportunity for success on the part of the helper and (2) that the helpee comes with accurate expectations of type of counsel being provided. A church should know the scope of care possible by a given ministry or individual and only refer individuals to that ministry who are a good-fit for what that ministry provides.

To the helpee the church should provide clear information about: (1) the type of care a given ministry provides; (2) the level of training a counselor or ministry leader has completed; (3) the type of curriculum or activity that will be involved in the counseling process; and (4) an estimate of the duration of the helping relationship. This requires clear information on a church’s website, a well-informed receptionist who fields call about counseling inquiries, and quality intake forms.

The question could be raised, “If one-another ministry is counseling, then why treat the next levels of care more stringently?” A parallel with missions is helpful. Every Christian should live missionally by seeking opportunities to share the gospel and advance the cause of Christ. However, almost every church or missions agency screens formal missionary candidates to make sure they are a good fit and properly equipped before sending them to do mid-term or career mission work.

In this sense, the words of Stephen Neil about missions would be applicable to counseling, “When everything is mission, nothing is mission.”<sup>iii</sup> Passing out communion or being a positive influence in a community sports league is different from taking the gospel to an unreached people group.

Similarly, when everything is counseling, nothing is counseling; the word “counseling” loses any meaning as an activity distinct from “doing life together.” The immensely beneficial interaction of a small group to provide an experience of safe relationships is different from someone understanding how to guide another through the traumatic effects of childhood sexual abuse. A friend listening to the chaos of a marital argument is different from guiding a couple through a decision about separation during an ongoing affair when children are “taking sides” in order not to lose contact with the less involved parent.

But that does not in any way downplay that essential nature of one-another ministry. The sexual abuse survivor needs a small group in which to experience healthy relationships while learning how to cultivate them. The couple recovering from adultery needs friends to call when they're discouraged, tempted, or confused. However, without the training and formality of higher levels of competence, these situations could overwhelm the small group and friends to the point that the one-another ministers withdraw.

When counseling does involve an artificial pairing, the counselor should seek to return or involve care from natural pairings as early as possible. An excellent model to allow for this is the advocate system developed by Garret Higbee.<sup>iii</sup> When this is not possible, then part of "graduating" to formal counseling should be a discussion of how to best involve the counselee's one-another relationships to solidify the progress made in counseling.

## **2. Lay Counselor/Recovery Group/Mentor**

### **2A. Scope of Ministry**

In this chapter, I am defining "lay counselors" as people who have completed a designated curriculum of study tailored to serve in a particular ministry. This ministry might include meeting with individuals or couples under the supervision of a pastor, leading a subject-specific recovery group, marital and pre-marital mentoring, or comparable types of ministry.

If the lay counselor is conducting formal biblical counseling (i.e., defined by the utilization of intake forms, scheduled appointments, and note-taking at each session), then the church would need to have policies and protocols in place to protect confidentiality and a policy review that contains a financial policy (if applicable), philosophy of care, confidentiality statement, waiver of liability, and consent to counsel.<sup>iv</sup>

### **2B. Level of Training**

For those serving as formal lay counselors, their church should select the training program that best fits the church's needs and theology. Certifications in biblical counseling are offered by numerous organizations each having their own distinction theory and tone. These certifications are the equivalent of one-to-two masters level counseling courses.

Those leading a group or mentoring based on a curriculum should have clear training in the specific materials being utilized as a part of their ministry. They should have training on how to identify the most common "red flags" that would necessitate the involvement of a more experienced counselor.

### **2C. Level of Experience**

The formal experience of a lay counselor will typically be minimal when they begin; most commonly 50 hours. The number of hours these volunteers can devote to the ministry each week will determine the rate at which their experience grows.

The quality of experience in a lay counseling ministry can be greatly enhanced with the presence of a trained and experience general practitioner (see below) to debrief cases and answer questions with the lay counseling team. Mentors and recovery group leaders may rely heavily upon their personal experience, but their curriculum or training needs to help them differentiate anecdotal factors in their experience from the over-arching principles and key points of assessment vital to seeing success in their subject area.

### **2D. Advantages and Opportunities**

Ministries at this level are still able to serve the church and community free of charge. The cost of training can either be paid by the church or lay counselor rather than passed on to the counselee as a fee or donation. These ministries allow a church to utilize the strengths and experiences in their congregation and can be excellent expressions of 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 as believers share the comfort they have received from God with others.

Outreach to the community can be effective, especially in areas that are under-resourced. When built on biblical principles and when there is a clear process for assimilation into the life of the church, recovery groups and mentoring ministries can be both therapeutically and evangelistically effective.

## **2E. Limitations and Weaknesses**

Each church will be dependent upon the experience of its members to determine what subjects it can address. If the lay leaders for these ministries are not also gifted in leadership or administration, the quality of these ministries can suffer.

When a recovery group ministry grows, it can sometimes create a “church within a church” dynamic. If the level of transparency within the recovery ministry is greater than the level of transparency within the general church culture, those in recovery often begin to feel like they are the ones “really doing church.”

Whenever a church begins a formal biblical counseling ministry, at any level, it needs to consult with its insurance provider. Areas of consultation could include the need for increased liability insurance, coverage for volunteers, and any best practices guidelines to reduce risk.

## **3. Formally Educated, Gaining Experience (Graduate Intern)**

### **3A. Scope of Ministry**

I am defining a counselor at this level as a person who is in process of completing a masters degree with ambitions of becoming proficient as a “general practitioner.” The case load for this individual would be in formal or group counseling settings under the supervision of an experienced counselor competent in the areas they are serving.

This individual, in theory, should be able to manage a greater variety and complexity of counseling case. The ability and awareness to differentiate struggles with similar manifestations (i.e., generalized anxiety, mistrust, or anger outbursts from the effects of post-traumatic stress) should be present. A counselor at this level should also be growing in competence to handle communication with church leaders, medical professionals, and for psychological testing as needed.<sup>y</sup>

### **3B. Level of Training**

The training for this level of counseling goes beyond normal discipleship, a weekend conference, or a certification. At this layer a counselor needs to be involved in a thorough masters level education that covers a full counseling curriculum.

Beginning at this layer of competence, a counselee is seeking out the counselor on the basis of his/her education and growing experience. For this reason, the level of training and quality of supervision should be clearly articulated in the counseling intake forms.

### **3C. Level of Experience**

In this proposal, counselors would remain at the “gaining experience” level until their education is complete and at least 1,000 hours of supervised, case experience is attained. There is no “magic” in this number, but it represents a commitment to be excellent in one’s field.

At this point, the counselor is in a position to assess: (a) when a case is a good fit for their training and experience, (b) whether the counselee is rightly identifying the presenting problem, and (c) how to best assist this person based upon both their struggle and unique life circumstances or resources.

### **3D. Advantages and Opportunities**

In many cases, churches can work with local seminaries or graduate schools to offer these services free of charge. In these cases, the graduate internships can be used to form or strengthen partnerships with other ministries and institutions in the community.

With this type of program a church is gaining another opportunity to invest in people who will be leaders the church, parachurch ministries, or community organizations. These individuals will gain experience somewhere. If church provides a context for this experience, then there is an opportunity to inject a higher view of Scripture and Christian community into their lifelong practices.

Having this type of counseling in a local church can increase the quality of care for its members and community. Offering these types of ministries within a church can counter the stigma that comes with the frequently held assumption, "If I were a good Christian, then I wouldn't have emotional or relational struggles;" which benefits the entire discipleship culture of a church.

### **3E. Limitations and Weaknesses**

This level of counseling begins to lose the accessibility benefits of one-another ministry. This is due to both the nature of formal counseling and logistics of carrying a larger case load. A strong advocate system or other means of connecting counsees to the life of the church should be developed as this type of ministry is launched.

In order for a church to have this type of ministry, it would need to have a staff position devoted to counseling. Otherwise, the liability from lack of oversight and qualified supervision would be greater than the benefit.

Each church would need to decide if it is willing to accept graduate interns from secular programs. Churches will vary on how much they value the purity of philosophy in their program compared to the opportunity to influence Christians who will be leaders in their secular workplace.

## **4. Trained and Experienced General Practitioner**

### **4A. Scope of Ministry**

I am defining "general practitioners" as persons who have both the training and experience to serve a wide variety of counseling concerns. This does not mean they are competent to counsel every issue that may arise; rather, general practitioners readily acknowledge their limitations. Good general practitioners will refer when their training, experience, or setting does not serve a particular counselee's struggle well.

At the latter stages of this layer, the experienced counselor can also serve as a teacher and supervisor for those at previous levels. This may be as a Pastor of Counseling in a local church or as a supervisor in a para-church ministry.

Often those seeking to gain this level of experience will need to serve in a para-church setting. Most churches who hire a Pastor of Counseling are large enough that they expect to hire someone with at least 7-10 years (7,000 to 10,000 hours) of counseling experience. It is often difficult to gain that quantity of experience and support one's family volunteering or interning in a local church. The para-church setting allows counselors to be gainfully employed based upon the service they provide as they gain experience.

### **4B. Level of Training**

These counselors have completed at least a masters degree in counseling and are growing from 1,000 to 10,000 hours of counseling experience. General practitioners are continuing their education through reading, conferences, and counselor consultations in order increase the breadth and depth of their areas of competence.

### **4C. Level of Experience**

At this point in a counselor's development there is a shift in how experience is measured. Rather than tabulating one's total number of hours, a general practitioner begins to gauge how many cases or hours they have worked with particular types of cases (i.e., depression with suicidal ideations, anxiety involving panic attacks, eating disorders, etc.).

In the early stages of gaining experience, the counselor grows both in comfort with the counseling process (i.e., interviewing, assessment, gauging counselee commitment, recognizing ethical dilemmas, determining the pace of counseling, etc...) and

competence with particular struggles. Now the counselor's attention can be focused predominantly upon expanding his/her areas of competence.

#### **4D. Advantages and Opportunities**

In the counseling relationship, a well-trained and experienced counselor should be able to more quickly assess the primary struggle(s), determine which approaches are likely to be most effective, and explain recommendations clearly in light of possible alternatives. These factors increase the trust a counselee has with the counselor, and thereby, counseling effectiveness.

General practitioners have gained a level of expertise which allows their teaching and supervision for less experienced counselors to increase the quality of a church's entire counseling ministry. If desired, a general practitioner can apply to have teaching events approved for CEU credits, which allows the church to impact the level of biblical-awareness among the Christian counselors in their area while educating those counselors on the services offered by their church.

#### **4E. Limitations and Weaknesses**

For this level of experience, there will either be a cost to the church (e.g., a paid staff position) or the counselee (e.g., a fee or donation). For many churches or individuals these costs can prevent access to counseling.

Some churches might envision a Pastor of Counseling serving as a "counselor on a retainer fee." They realize it is not sustainable; a good counselor providing free services will generate a waiting list that would create disgruntledness in the church. A job description would need to be written requiring a primary focus on developing and equipping a multi-layered counseling ministry.

As counseling becomes a profession, counselors frequently experience "compassion fatigue" as they live in other people's crises for 20-30 hours per week. This combined with the clinical categories in which personal struggles are often assessed can result in an emotional disconnect which can decrease the effectiveness of counseling.

### **5. Experienced Specialist**

#### **5A. Scope of Ministry**

I am defining this level as counselors who have one or more areas of specialty in which they are competent to counsel severe cases or are making a unique contribution to the field of biblical counseling. As a supervisor, teacher, and author they are working to advance the ability of the church to minister effectively in these areas.

#### **5B. Level of Training**

A specialist is someone who is advancing the field in their area of expertise. Their own study and observations are becoming the curriculum for less experienced counselors. The critical feedback from peers and students within and outside the biblical counseling movement serves as a refining mechanism for their practice.

Outside of their area of expertise, a specialist should be engaging the same types of continuing education as a general practitioner. This is vital to (a) prevent their area of expertise from unduly defining their work with other subjects and (b) strengthening their work in their area of expertise while continuing to grow in their understanding of neighboring struggles.

#### **5C. Level of Experience**

The number of hours selected to designate someone a "specialist" is less arbitrary than the other designations; although it is impossible to quantify a number of hours that would qualify someone to hold the title of "specialist." Ten-thousand hours of experience has been noted as pivotal in many areas of study, as noted by neurologist Daniel Levitin:

The emerging picture from such studies is that ten thousand hours of practice is required to achieve the level of mastery associated with being a world-class expert—in anything. In study after study, of composers, basketball players, fiction writers, ice skaters, concert pianists, chess players, master criminals, and what have you, this number comes up again and again... No one has yet found a case in which true world-class expertise was accomplished in less time.<sup>vi</sup>

### **5D. Advantages and Opportunities**

There are two major advantages and opportunities that emerge with this level of competence. First, the counselor is able to provide an excellent quality of care for those who would otherwise be prone to counsel their struggle with a more general approach (e.g., counseling religious scrupulosity—a form of OCD—as a general struggle with assurance of salvation).

Second, through writing and teaching the counselor is advancing the ability of the church to minister well in their area of expertise. This advance can be for particular struggles (e.g., addiction, abusive relationships, blended families, etc.) or modes of ministry (e.g., the use of advocates in formal counseling, creating excellent communities of preventive care through one another ministry, faith-based internship opportunities to allow for effective care in under-resourced communities, etc.).

### **5E. Limitations and Weaknesses**

The predominant weakness of any specialist is availability. This is both because of the limited number of hours any individual can counsel per week (twenty-to-thirty hours is a typical maximum case load for counselors) and because of geographic limitations. There will not be a specialist for every issue in every city. If this is true of medicine, then it will be more true for a growing movement like biblical counseling.

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<sup>i</sup>In my own life I am indebted to the counsel of Paul Tripp to be in a small group you do not lead to help me see the importance of this (now emphasized in his *Dangerous Calling* curriculums).

<sup>ii</sup>Stephen Neill, *Creative Tension: The Duff Lectures*, 1958 (London: Edinburgh House, 1959), 81.

<sup>iii</sup>Excellent resource to help churches pair formal care with informal care to allow for this transition is Garrett Higbee, *Uncommon Community* (available at [www.store.harvestbiblechapel.org](http://www.store.harvestbiblechapel.org)).

<sup>iv</sup>Robert Kellemen, *Equipping Counselors for Your Church* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R) provides an excellent and thorough process for developing a lay counseling ministry and legal forms for churches to use.

<sup>vi</sup> Daniel Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 193. See also Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008).