



**Discussing a Dozen Dreams (Part II of V):
Biblical Counseling Will Be Historical & Positive**

*An Extended Conversation with Robert W. Kellemen, Ph.D.
By Bradley Charles Hambrick*

Learning from History not Repeating It

**Dream Number Three:
Biblical Counseling Will Be Historical**

The future of Biblical Counseling is the past. During the last 20 years, we have witnessed the Christian community returning to its proper respect for that “great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1-3). History, Chesterton reminded us, is “the democracy of the dead.”³

I vividly and sadly recall the “counseling wars” that occurred while I was in seminary—wars pitting competing modern counseling “camps” against each other. I also recall thinking, “Surely the Church has always helped hurting and hardened people.” That sentence sent me on a quarter-century search for the legacy of Christian soul care and spiritual direction. Simultaneous to that, God’s Spirit was moving many others along the same path.

Biblical counselors of the future will return to the ancient paths (Jeremiah 6:16). They will seek and apply the ancient legacy and consensual wisdom for living found in the writings of great historic Christian soul physicians.

BCH: In dream number three (*Biblical Counseling Will Be Historical*), you explain that you experienced the “counseling wars” as a student. What are the enduring positive and negative impacts those debates had upon you? If you had the pen to rewrite history and could make one or two revisions to how the major parties represented the Christ of counseling, what would you change? As it is frequently and rightly said, “Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” What are the expressions that those key changes would look like in the present Evangelical Christian counseling climate?

RWK: Honestly, Brad, I think the personal impact of those counseling wars led to positive results for me. As I noted in dream number three, it sent me on a quarter-century search of the Scriptures and Church history to see what the Bible and godly believers say about Biblical Counseling. The entire model of Biblical Counseling theory/theology that I write about in *Soul Physicians* is a result of my response to those “wars.” And the entire model of Biblical Counseling practice/methodology that I write about in *Spiritual Friends* came directly from that study. It is a case of God intending for good what could have ended up quite bad.



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If I could rewrite history as to how people responded during and since those counseling wars, it would relate to a subsequent question we will address and illustrate concerning being a Berean versus being a Corinthians. Bereans are committed to speaking the truth in love. Corinthians are committed to winning debates motivated by a less-than-mature competitive, divisive spirit. I am all for people standing up for their understanding of truth. However, we all need to do it with humility, charity, and accuracy. And it sure wouldn't hurt if we stopped and listened to each other.

I think the dialogue you and I are having right now is a great expression of those key changes as far as Evangelical Christian/Biblical Counseling. I think this cooperative conversation between the ABC and the BCSFN (represented by the two of us), is, hopefully, God-honoring and bridge-building. I have sensed from you the utmost respect and I trust you sense the same from me. I want to learn from you, other ABC members, brothers and sisters in the NANC, in the CCEF, the AACC, etc. I certainly have not cornered the market on truth. I guess that is one thing I have taken from my study of Church history. We are not alone. Others have gone before us and others stand beside us and I want to hear their voices and learn from their wisdom.

BCH: Both to you personally and to our readers, I would like to testify that our conversations have been enlightening, challenging, and enjoyable. It has been a humbling experience to formulate questions that allow you to flesh out implications of your dreams and explore areas where differences may exist. Throughout it all (in and out of print) your heart and words have been commendable. In the upcoming ABC conference ("A Quest for More"; May 14-16, 2009; Fort Worth, TX) efforts will be made to cultivate some of that "listening" in an inter-organization symposium featuring Jeremy Leleck (ABC), David Powlison (CCEF), Steve Viars (Faith Counseling Ministries), Eric Johnson (SCP), and yourself (BCSFN). What do you believe is the significance of these types of forums and what are the types of things Evangelical Christian counseling can gain from them?

RWK: Brad, your questions have been stimulating and stretching. I appreciate that and I appreciate the collegial way we have been working together to learn from each other. Our dialogue, the symposium in Texas, and other such interactions have the potential to model the Berean attitude in action. Of course, because we are human, finite, not-yet-glorified, they have the potential to demonstrate the sins of the flesh and expose idols of the heart. So these sorts of gatherings encourage all of us to be Spirit-dependent.

As far as what we can gain—we can gain a more **comprehensive** insight into Biblical Counseling. No one person and no one "group" or "movement" will have the same "slant" on the truth. This is something I have learned in the research and writing of *Beyond the Suffering: Embracing the Legacy of African American Soul Care and Spiritual Direction*. Our African American brothers and sisters practice Biblical Counseling, and they do so with some unique nuances that we can all learn from. For instance, in their Spirituals, they move back and forth repeatedly between empathy for hurt and encouragement through hope. I have found that at times Caucasian counselors are far too linear. We tend to think, "I've done the empathy part; now I can move on to 'stage two.'" That's just one example. And it applies to folks from the SCP, CCEF, Faith Counseling Ministries, BCSFN, NANC, ABC, AACC, etc. We all can become more spiritually aware and skillful Biblical counselors if we will listen and learn from one another.



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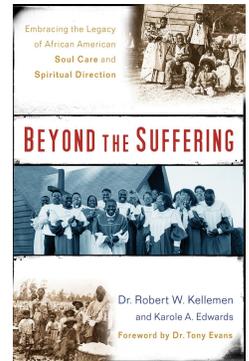
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Other Members of the Family Tree

BCH: Also related to dream number three (*Biblical Counseling Will Be Historical*), we know that the modern Biblical Counseling movement often traces its heritage to the Puritans as a collection of Christians who took seriously the calling to be “physicians of the soul.” In your extensive study of the history of Christian soul care, what other traditions of excellence are there in Christian care of souls? What was unique in how these other traditions met the suffering and sin of their generation and culture with the Gospel of Christ and the Word of God? In later dreams we will explore your dream that Biblical Counseling will be multi-cultural. Could you foreshadow how studying the church’s pastoral care across many historical periods gives you a unique vision for how and why this is so important?

RWK: Brad, you certainly are correct about the Puritans and their work as soul physicians. I quote them consistently in *Soul Physicians*. Three other works of mine begin to answer your question about “who else” has done the work of soul physician.

In *Beyond the Suffering*, which I just mentioned, we find 100s of powerful examples of African American believers who were spiritual friends, soul care-givers, spiritual directors, pastoral counselors, and soul physicians. The Reverend Richard Allen, the founding father of the African American independent church, is a great example. Listen to his skillful soul physician’s words to his enslaved brothers and sisters.



“Feeling an engagement of mind for your welfare, I address you with an affectionate sympathy, having been a slave, and as desirous of freedom as any of you; yet the bands of bondage were so strong that no way appeared for my release; yet at times a hope arose in my heart that a way would open for it; and when my mind was mercifully visited with the feeling of the love of God, that he would make way for my enlargement; and then these hopes increased, and a confidence arose as a patient waiting was necessary, I was sometimes favored with it, at other times I was very impatient. Then the prospect of liberty almost vanquished away, and I was in darkness and perplexity.”ⁱⁱ

In *Spiritual Care in Historical Perspective*, I examined Martin Luther’s pastoral counseling. He represents scores of Reformers who demonstrate a tremendous commitment to and modeling of Biblical Counseling. It was while studying Luther that I “sovereignly stumbled” upon the four-fold approach of sustaining, healing, reconciling, and guiding (which we will talk more about in a later dream).

And in *Sacred Friendships: Listening to the Voices of Women Soul Care-Givers and Spiritual Directors*, my co-author and I present fifty-two women from Church history who model amazing insight and skillfulness in Biblical Counseling. In fact, as one example, Susanna Wesley outlines sustaining, healing, reconciling, and guiding when she summarizes all Biblical personal ministry with these words.

“We are to be instructed, because we are ignorant [guiding]; and healed, because we are sick [healing]; and disciplined, because so apt to wander and go astray [reconciling]; and succored and supported, because we are so often tempted [sustaining].”ⁱⁱⁱ



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Susanna Wesley and uncountable Christian women like her followed a spiritual compass. Instead of N-S-E-W, their soul care and spiritual direction compass points read S-H-R-G: Sustaining, Healing, Reconciling, and Guiding.

From the Puritans, from the Reformers, from our African American brothers and sisters in Christ, from godly women throughout Church history we learn that we must combine *Scripture*, *soul*, and *society*. We take God's Word (Scripture), relate it lovingly and wisely to image bearers (soul), understanding the times, our culture, and relating Christ's changeless truth to our changing times (society).

BCH: It is always encouraging to read a book from another era of Church history with modern relevance. There is a testimony to the timelessness of the Christian faith when we read something centuries old and realize, "Minus the technology, he/she really gets me!" If you were going to recommend books from Church history that pastors should recommend that lay people should be reading to best equip them to fulfill the "one another" commands of the New Testament, what works would top your list?

RWK: Obviously, I am a tad biased toward my three works that I just mentioned. They are somewhat unique in that they do not simply study Church history, they do not simply examine Biblical Counseling, instead, they probe the history of Biblical Counseling throughout Church history.

But there certainly are many other valuable books on the topic. Perhaps the best advice I can give is to encourage your readers to consider four "overview" books on the history of pastoral care. Reading these will provide 100s of follow-up resources. So I recommend, William Clebsch and Charles Jaekle, *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective* (New York: Harper, 1964); John McNeil, *A History of the Cure of Souls* (New York: Harper, 1951); Thomas Oden, *Classical Pastoral Care: Volume Three: Pastoral Counsel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987); and E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983).

What's in the Name We Bear?

Dream Number Four: Biblical Counseling Will Be Positive

The modern history of Biblical Counseling has all too often become enmeshed with negativity, biting criticism, territory-protecting, camp-building, and "againstness." Biblical Counseling has often defined itself by being anti-this or anti-that. That's not Biblical Counseling; that's "Corinthian counseling" (1 Corinthians 1:10-17), a carnal caricature of the truth.

In the future, Biblical Counseling will be known as "Berean counseling" (Acts 17:11). Biblical counselors will have a *critical mind minus the critical spirit*. They will seek to focus positively on rightly understanding the Word (2 Timothy 2:15), on searching the Scriptures to evaluate human theory with discernment, and on graciously interacting with those with whom they disagree, while emphasizing the affirmative attitude that all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16).



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BCH: With dream number four (*Biblical Counseling Will Be Positive*), I think we must recognize the temptation inherent in the name we choose to bear. If we call our selves “Biblical counselors,” it stands to reason that we think all differing counselors are “unbiblical counselors.” This would lend itself to the camp-building againstness you assess in Biblical Counseling’s history. Can you give some testimonies from your own counseling heritage where you have struggled to have a “critical mind minus the critical spirit”? In your opinion, how does Biblical Counseling maintain its distinctiveness and resist losing any territory gained in the “counseling wars” without being harsh, defensive, or separatistic?

RWK: First, Brad, not everyone sees the label “Biblical Counseling” as meaning it is the *one and only model*. I just spoke at a major Christian counseling conference where several speakers used the term “Biblical Counseling” simply to describe one model, one approach, among many possible models. I think that is an important clarification simply from the perspective of how “people in other ‘camps’” view Biblical Counseling.

But back to your excellent point and question, if we take “Biblical Counseling” to mean that *my* or *our* version of truth is *the* right one, then we have problems. I often challenge people to understand that while Scripture is inerrant and inspired, my *interpretation* of Scripture is neither inerrant nor inspired. My students at Capital Bible Seminary hear me all the time say, “This is my current best attempt to understand and explain this topic.” That doesn’t mean that I lack confidence in God’s Word. It doesn’t even mean that I lack confidence in my ability to discern Biblical Counseling principles. I hope it models humility.

If I am to be really honest in answering your question about where *I* struggle to have a critical mind minus a critical spirit, it is with those who seem to me to come across as a tad arrogant, a tad Pharisaical. I guess I get judgmental in judging judgmental people! Of course, I’d like to think I am like Jesus as He confronted those nasty Pharisees. However, He did it with a sinless heart and pure, loving motives.

Your last question in this section is vital, Brad. Let me repeat it. *In your opinion, how does Biblical Counseling maintain its distinctiveness and resist losing any territory gained in the “counseling wars” without being harsh, defensive, or separatistic?*

First, we might be wise to replace the imagery of “territory” and “counseling wars.” Though I know it is not the intent, it could further the competitive spirit that I think relates more to the flesh than to God’s Spirit.

Second, no one needs to apologize for believing in the relevancy, sufficiency, and profundity (profound depth of insight and wisdom for living) of the Bible for suffering, sin, and sanctification. That’s the distinctive mark of Biblical Counseling. We truly believe that the Creator of life has given us words of life for how to live this life and how to enter the next life through grace by faith.

Third, we need to disavow the false caricatures of Biblical Counseling such as “take two verses and call me in the morning,” and “beat them over the head with the Bible.” Instead, we need to develop truly **comprehensive** approaches to applying God’s truth to the specific and significant life issues people face. That’s what I mean by being positive. Let’s expend the bulk of our energy in the positive development of



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relevant models of Biblical Counseling that help people with their real and raw problems so that they glorify God and minister to others.

Fourth, there really is no need to be harsh, defensive, or separatistic. I think that mindset flows out of a spirit that God's gifts, grace, and truth are limited. It's an unbiblical belief that we are in a competition to capture a limited supply of insight. Hebrews 11:6 reminds us that God abundantly rewards those who diligently seek Him. God is a Rewarder, not a Hoarder. I don't see myself as racing against anyone else to corner the market on God's truth. I see myself, and I think we should all see ourselves, as running together in a relay race of truth, learning from each other, being encouraged and empowered by each other. We need to apply Ephesians 3:18, which teaches us that it is together with all the saints that we have the combined, united power to grasp God's grace and truth.

BCH: I greatly appreciate your point that we are not competing in a market of limited supply when it comes to Biblical truth. Competition may do wonders for athletic performance, but can sap the corporate vitality of the Body of Christ. I am also duly instructed regarding the competitive implications of my language of "losing territory." As much as the instruction, I appreciate the tone in which you presented it. However, there is a question that lingers. When the accepted usages of a word become broader, that word's ability to make effective distinctions becomes more limited. In a day when the term "Biblical Counseling" is used by so many people, how should we protect the integrity of the word? I applaud and yearn to see more open discussion amongst all those who earnestly seek to honor Scripture in their theory and practice. The more people who genuinely want to be a part of that conversation the happier I am (whether I agree with every voice in the room or not). When it comes to recommending books, referring to counselors, pursuing education, screening articles, or booking speakers should we strive to quantitatively define "Biblical Counseling" in the public domain?

RWK: You make a very important point, Brad. It does seem that everyone of late wants to claim the mantle or label of "Biblical counselor." As charitable as you and I have tried to be in these conversations, I think we both agree that words matter. I don't think either of us has bought into the post-modern concept that words have no meaning except the meaning given by the *individual*.

Frankly, that's why I wrote the original article on *The Future of Biblical Counseling*. That's why I tried specifically to outline twelve "seed thoughts" on what makes Biblical Counseling Biblical. While I have not cornered the market on defining Biblical Counseling, I think we all need to work hard to offer specific theological and historical insights that assist in developing comprehensive definitions of Biblical Counseling. When someone claims to be doing "Biblical Counseling," I think that person needs to be able to communicate his or her definition and needs to be able to support that definition from the Bible and Church history.

Two Churches of Biblical Counseling

BCH: In your dream four (*Biblical Counseling will be Positive*), you contrast "Corinthians counseling" versus "Berean counseling." Would you mind taking an issue on which you believe Biblical counseling should stand for a difficult or unpopular truth and demonstrating how each of these two approaches (Corinthian counseling vs. Berean counseling) would address the issue differently in content or tone?



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RWK: I'll give you a very personal example. Obviously, as director of the Biblical Counseling and Spiritual Formation Network (BCSFN), I think the end goal of Biblical Counseling is forming Christ in each of us so that God is glorified. That's exactly what Paul says in Galatians 4:19. "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you."

So, naturally I use the language of "Biblical Counseling" *and* I use the language of "spiritual formation." I have seen people relate to my writings and ministry in what I think is a Berean way, and in what I think is a Corinthian way.

One web site critiqued me simply on the basis of the title of my book *Soul Physicians*. I was accused of being influenced by "mysticism" (which the site never defined) *only* because of the title of my book. So, I contacted the person directly, as I think the Scriptures say I should. I asked if he ever opened my book. He admitted that he had not. I asked if he was willing to engage me in specific dialogue about the contents of *Soul Physicians*. He agreed. We sent numerous emails back and forth. The exchange was, I think, a great example of mutual speaking of the truth in love. We learned from each other. The person eventually took his critique of my work off his site. He asked others who had copied from his site to take it off their sites. Once this person engaged me as a Berean, he became convinced that, while he might not agree with every word I write, he certainly did not see anything "unbiblical" or "mystical" in anything I wrote.

On the other hand, another site did basically the same thing. The two site administrators took issue with the titles of my books *Soul Physicians* and *Spiritual Friends*. They admitted to me they never read either book. Instead, they looked at the bibliography to see what sources I cited. They never read where I critiqued those sources. They simply assumed that I supported every word from every book cited in an academic bibliography. When I tried to engage them in a Berean conversation they simply told me I was too deceived to converse with them and they suggested I purchase their books to "undeceive" myself. Maybe this is getting too honest for you and your readers. But to me, it seems to illustrate the Corinthians' mindset.

So, how should a Berean Biblical counselor address the issue of spiritual formation? We do need to be careful. Just because someone in Church history practiced a "spiritual discipline" or held to a "spiritual theology" does not mean that we should accept it as Biblical. We have to test it. Both in history and in life today, there is much that claims to be "spiritual," that under loving examination of the Word does not hold up.

However, we have to avoid things such as "guilt by false association," "labeling," not defining terms, quoting out of context, and we have to allow people to define their own terms. If someone uses a term like "spiritual disciplines" and defines it very carefully and Biblically (as best he or she can), we should not lump that use of the term with some off-the-wall, mystical use.

And, when all is said and done, if we disagree, we can do it agreeably and charitably. To me, that means at least a couple of things. For one, if we really want to protect the Body of Christ, then shouldn't we contact a person we think is unbiblical? Additionally, rather than just saying, "That is wrong," shouldn't we say, "Here is what I think would be a more Biblical way of approaching this issue."



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BCH: I appreciate how open and candid you have been in our conversations. Would you be willing to provide an example of a spiritual discipline (or other aspect of spiritual formation) that upon first examination you believed held significant value, but then after deliberation with a fellow believer began to see potential dangers? As you went through this conversation, what were the aspects of the “Berean Counsel” (beyond the content) that were most edifying? How have you seen that experience, and others like them, shape your approach to doing and teaching counseling?

RWK: Brad, I’m not sure I can think of any specific “turns” or “changes” like that. However, in my reading in Church history, there have certainly been many occasions when I have read things and come to the conclusion, based upon my understanding of Scriptures, that a given historical practice or way of thinking about the spiritual life was unbiblical.

In the book I just wrote on the history of women’s soul care (*Sacred Friendships*, referenced earlier), there were a number of women that I would indeed define as “mystical” in an *unbiblical* sense of that word. If by “mysticism” someone means a commitment to the inspired Word of God and an openness to the illumination of the Holy Spirit to understand God’s Word with the mind and to apply God’s Word in the heart, then I have no problem with that concept (though I prefer to stay away from the label “mysticism” because it does have a good deal of baggage and misunderstanding).

However, some of the women I studied practiced a “mysticism” that seems to me to lack a commitment to the priority of the written, revealed Canon of Scripture. They seemed to place an emphasis not upon the Spirit illuminating their understanding and application of Scripture, but rather upon the Spirit revealing new “revelation” to them. Rather than “balancing” head and heart and rather than “integrating” truth and love/life/relationship, they seemed to place almost all the emphasis on heart, love, relationship, but they tended to divorce those “inner life issues” from Biblical truth. I have major problems with that. So, even when studying Church history and the historical practice of the spiritual disciplines, we *must* be Bereans—positive Bereans who maintain a critical mind minus a critical spirit.

ⁱRobert Kellemen and Karole Edwards, *Beyond the Suffering: Embracing the Legacy of African American Soul Care and Spiritual Direction*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007, 181.

ⁱⁱRobert Kellemen and Susan Ellis, *Sacred Friendships: Listening to the Voices of Women Soul Care-Givers and Spiritual Directors*. Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, Forthcoming, 18, originally from: Clark, *Memoirs of the Wesley Family*, 398.