The Reformation was a turning point in church history. Two great teachings of the Reformation are *Sola Scriptura* and the Priesthood of all believers. *Sola Scriptura* means by Scripture alone. The Priesthood of all believers means that believers, guided by the Word and empowered by the Holy Spirit, are equipped and called to counsel one another in the Body of Christ.

In his book *Competent to Counsel*, Jay Adams describes his own struggle over the issue of Christians using the psychological theories and therapies of the world. After having been acutely exposed to the psychological process during a summer fellowship under O. Herbert Mowrer's leadership, Adams concluded that Christians have something superior to psychological counseling theories and therapies. The body of Christ has what they need in the Scriptures. Pastors do not have to be intimidated by psychological counseling theories and therapies. As a pastor himself, he contends that pastors were already competent to counsel, if they knew the Bible they had more to offer people than psychologists did. Out of his struggles, Adams developed genuine biblical counseling — what he calls Nouthetic Counseling, which consists of confronting a believer with the Word of God for the purpose of change.

Adams expressed his concern about the usual practice of pastoral counseling when he wrote:

> Sadly, it is not only liberal pastors who give non-scriptural counsel these days. Some men, who preach the Bible in their pulpits, change their tune when they enter the counseling room. They may have been taught in seminary to counsel psychologically (i.e., according to worldly wisdom and ways) rather than scripturally. They may mix the two. Be alert; not all Christian counselors do Christian counseling.

Adams worked hard to encourage pastors to use the Bible and to provide biblical counseling information instead of the psychological opinions of men. In 1981 he wrote: “Over the past 12 years I have worked assiduously to produce a body of literature in a field that, prior to that time, virtually did not exist: the field of biblical counseling.”

Adams worked to develop a theology of counseling from Scripture, rather than a psychology of counseling from the secular systems. Nouthetic counseling or authentic biblical counseling rests heavily on the reformed doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* and the priesthood of all believers. It is a call forward to confidence in the efficacy of Scriptures and the knowledge that:

> “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

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4 The New American Standard Bible is used throughout this paper unless otherwise noted.
Biblical counseling is also a call to believers to use the Word empowered by the Spirit to minister to one another. We who are Christians are competent to counsel by the grace of God; we can care for souls. Biblical counseling depends upon all of the “alones” of the Reformation: *Sola Scriptura* (By Scripture alone); *Sola Gratia* (By grace alone); *Solo Christus* (By Christ alone); *Sola Fide* (By faith alone); *Soli Deo Gloria* (Glory to God alone).

These principles apply to all aspects of salvation, including justification, sanctification, and glorification. Believers are to continue their walk with the Lord on the same basis as their initial salvation by Scripture alone, by grace alone, by Christ alone, by faith alone, and to the glory of God alone. All these apply within the individual life of the believer and within the Body of Christ, in which we have the fellowship and the priesthood of all believers.

Mutual care and counsel within the Body of Christ, performed by the priesthood of all believers also depends upon these same principles. We want to emphasize this because of the tenacious tendency to use other means for living the Christian life and solving problems of living.

Psychological counseling violates these biblical principles. Theories and methodologies underlying psychotherapy have come from the wisdom of men and cannot be integrated with Scripture without doing violence to the Word of God. Psychological counseling depends on the works of the flesh rather than the grace of God, even when practiced by Christians. Thereby the flesh is strengthened and spiritual growth may be retarded or stagnated. Psychological counseling is not by Christ alone, even if the counselor is a Christian, because the models and methods are unsanctified human means and depend upon unsanctified human effort. Psychological counseling depends on a faith other than faith in the Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. Psychological counseling depends on faith in the counselor and the counseling process. Finally, psychological counseling cannot be done *Soli Deo Gloria*, because the psychology together with the counselor and the so-called counselee get the credit. Even when some credit is given to God because of a “counselor” or “counselee” being a Christian, the glory is not given to God alone.

For forty years, biblical counseling movement has been questioning the use of psychological counseling (psychotherapy and its underlying psychologies) and urging Christians to return to the Bible. This movement used both biblical and research documentation to reveal psychology’s intrinsic conflict with Scripture and its inherent weaknesses regarding usefulness. Nevertheless, multitudes of Christians view psychology with respect and awe. Even though secular psychological researchers are demonstrating less and less confidence in psychological counseling, more and more Christians are pursuing it either as therapists themselves or as clients seeking treatment. What is often referred to as “Christian psychology” or “Christian counseling” ends up being secular psychology adapted for the Christian market. Christians who are not directly involved in counseling look to what psychologists say about how to live, how to relate to others, and how to meet the challenges of life.

**A Brief History of Biblical Counseling from Pentecost Onward**

In view of how many Christians have placed their faith in psychology, one often asks: “What did the church do for almost 2000 years without the psychological counseling movement?” The very first Christians counseled those suffering from problems of living. They preached the Gospel, taught new believers, and counseled. Rather than basing their counseling ministry on psychological theories, they based their ministry on what Jesus had taught them and also on the Scriptures available at that time. Rather than seeking a
psychological methodology, they relied on revealed truth. They believed Jesus' words when He said, “If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (John 8: 31, 32). They counted on Christ working in and through them as He had clearly explained in His analogy of the vine and the branches (John 15). They relied on the work of the Holy Spirit. They understood the centrality of the spiritual life, of Christ in them. When they drifted into following the ways of men, the Apostle Paul wrote to them and urged them not to follow the wisdom of men, but to rely on the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:2-5; Colossians 2:6-10).

The spiritual ministry of counseling one another in the Body of Christ later became known as the “cure of souls” or the “care of souls.” Such care depended upon the Word of God to understand the condition of man and minister relief for troubled minds. The “cure of souls” ministered to all mental, emotional, and spiritual disturbances. It involved prayer and often consisted of giving godly wisdom, instruction, and encouragement (including practical helps which often speak louder than words) to assist believers with their beliefs, emotions, thoughts, values, attitudes, relationships, and behavior. In his book A History of the Cure of Souls, John T. McNeill describes it as “the sustaining and curative treatment of persons in those matters that reach beyond the requirements of the animal life.”

Prior to the twentieth century, churches provided such personal ministry to those in need and some still do.

A clearer translation of cura animarum, is “the care of souls” which was the original designation in the early church. McNeill says: The primary sense of cura is “care,” and it is readily applied either to the tasks involved in the care of a person or thing, or to the mental experience of carefulness or solicitude concerning its object. Although the phrase “cure of souls” has been the preferred translation in the past, because of its emphasis on curing sinful souls, Scripture deals with the full range of Christian experience. Caring of souls, which is all-encompassing from salvation through sanctification and from ministry to the suffering soul to ministry to one another in the normal Christian life. Caring for souls involves both the “cure” from sin and death and the ongoing mutual care in the Body of Christ throughout the process of sanctification. Biblical counseling is now a new term for the care of souls.

Biblical counseling or the care of souls is one of the oldest ministries of the church. Christ paid the price for sin through His own substitutionary death. Then He rose again to give new life to every believer. His death canceled the debt of sin. That is the initial cure for sin and hell-bound death. Christ's life in every believer provides the ongoing care, not only for each individual believer but for the entire Body of Christ. Jesus Christ ministers directly to each believer and also indirectly through believers to one another. This is the outworking of the care of souls who “in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:22).

The first description of the church with members counseling one another is found in Acts:

So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in

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6 Ibid.
common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:41-47).

They learned and “devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching.” They lived according to the truth they were learning. Their fellowship was based on sound doctrine and their new relationship in Christ, and its hallmark was love. Their love was not limited to words and feelings but was lived out in practical ways through such sharing of possessions and goods that no one was lacking. They continued “daily with one accord in the temple,” broke bread together, praised God together and prayed together. The mutual counsel was active from the inception of the church. Jesus’ words to His disciples to love one another as He loved them established the essence of counseling. Jesus loved to the point of giving His life, and He calls believers to give themselves to each other. Counseling is not limited to words, as important as they are in teaching doctrine; counseling includes practical acts of love, which are expressions of true faith and doctrine (Galatians 5:6).

James, the leader of the first Christian church in Jerusalem, wrote, “Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed” (James 5:16). Biblical doctrines of confession, repentance, forgiveness, exhortation, encouragement, and comfort were taught and practiced in the early church. Doctrines of the believer’s position in Christ and Christ in the believer, and of the active work of the Holy Spirit were taught and followed. These spiritual ways of living the normal Christian life were also the believer’s means to mental, emotional, and spiritual healing through the centuries. The cure and care of souls was the application of Scripture to the life of the believer through the ministries given to the church through the Holy Spirit.

God nurtures people who have been harmed and forgives those who have sinned and repented. The care of souls begins with a person’s relationship with God through salvation by grace through faith, continues the process of sanctification, and results in changed attitudes, thoughts, emotions, motives, and behavior. However, the world systems of “science falsely so-called” (1 Timothy 6:20) have undermined this ministry of the care of souls and intimidated Christians by deceiving them into believing they are not qualified or able to help one another in the serious issues of life. Even pastors, who have been ordained to care for the sheep, have been deceived into thinking that one must attain the requirements, degrees, and licenses to practice psychology before they are qualified to counsel, even though the care of souls is the exclusive ministry of the church, according to the calling of God and the gift of grace.

The concern of biblical counseling movement continues to be this: that the cure of minds (the psychological way) has displaced the care of souls (the spiritual way). However, additional concerns have arisen. Various attempts to move the church back to a biblical means of caring for souls created a pseudo-biblical counseling movement that in numerous ways reflects the psychological way. Many who call themselves “Christian counselors” are outright integrationists, who attempt to use both the Bible and psychological counseling theories and techniques. Still others who call themselves “biblical counselors” may be using more Bible than psychology, but they have allowed certain psychological theories and techniques to color their view of Scripture. Others who call themselves “biblical counselors” may eschew psychology, but nevertheless copy some of the practices of psychological counseling, such as charging a fee and establishing
community counseling centers separated from churches (or in the church, but separated from other ministries in the church). Some “biblical counselors” even believe in and use psychological tests and thereby label Christians according to the bankrupt and useless wisdom of men.\(^7\)

Here, I hope to encourage Christians to counsel believers in the church on the basis of what the Bible teaches about counseling ministry and the efficacy of mutual care. Today the greatest obstacle to counseling ministry among the majority of churches is psychological counseling (and all it pretends to be). The primary reason most churches do not minister personally to the soul struggling with problems of living is because of fear—that individuals who are not formally trained are not able to handle the problems of others, and fear that criticism might be directed at the church for even trying. This is an example of Proverbs 29:25, “The fear of man brings a snare, But he who trusts in the Lord will be exalted.” Since that fear is so universal, we have been compelled to speak out against psychological counseling, along with its underlying theories about who man is and how he changes.

I contend that the ordinary believer, who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit and has found the Lord and His Word sufficient in his life, is equipped to counsel a fellow believer who is struggling with personal issues of the soul. The high calling of being a counselor is also a common calling for all believers. Any person who can be used by the Holy Spirit to lead another to salvation or along the way of sanctification is competent to be used by God to give wise counsel without needing specialized counseling training. The care of souls is inherent in Christ’s command to love one another (John 15:12).

**Fundamental Issues in Counseling**

God desires to transform believers into the image of Christ. Lack of biblical change is an indication of spiritual stagnation, and being transformed into the image of Christ is a sign of spiritual vitality. Life’s experiences can motivate people to change in different directions. The counseling ministry relies on the Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. Such inner, spiritual change involves the work of God and the response of the individual.

Biblical counseling ministry cannot rely on human effort or ingenuity, because it is really the work of God. God’s love enables a believer to live in relationship to Him, to overcome sin and its consequences, and to be transformed into the image of Christ. God’s love engenders trust, which leads to obedience to His Word. His love includes both mercy and truth, both grace and justice. For counseling to be truly biblical, love must be its hallmark, its means, and its direction because “God is love.”

Biblical counseling cannot be reduced to formulas. Those who counsel by formulas will fail, or they will succeed for reasons other than the formulas used. Any formulized counseling will fall short of what true mutual care in the Body of Christ is — a creative, spiritual process involving a person who needs help and another person who will come alongside as God’s instrument of mercy and truth.

The Bible covers every generality and each person is unique. Therefore, the primary work is that of the Holy Spirit within the individual, which according to God’s Word is living, effectual and applicable to every individual, every situation, and every struggle. The

Scriptures and the Holy Spirit provide an infinite number of possible applications of truth for ministering in love to each person in each situation. In counseling, God’s Word is ministered by the Holy Spirit through one who has been transformed by the Cross of Christ to another who by God’s grace receives and obeys.

As you read books or articles about authentic biblical counseling, you may discover that you are already ministering spiritual care to fellow believers, or you may find that the person who listens to you and prays for you is practicing biblical counseling, without having identified it as such. On the other hand, you may notice how easily people direct those struggling with life’s problems to professional counseling or to counseling “experts,” when what they need is the care of souls operating within their own church.

The Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit provide power for counseling as people seek to overcome problems of living. The care of souls or biblical counseling needs to be restored in churches immediately before more Christians are sent out to an alien world for psychological help or to fee-for-service “Christian counselors.” If they are not already doing so, pastors and others who have this call of God on their hearts can and should begin to counsel others — not next month or next year, but immediately. The ministry of mutual counsel, given to edify the church and to glorify God, is a calling of God on the life of every believer.

As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:10-11).

Unless believers counsel one another according to the Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, believers are doing a great injustice to fellow believers at least and great harm at worst. Struggles of the soul and problems of living must be dealt with as spiritual problems with spiritual solutions.

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