

Does the Shoe Fit?



BY DAVID POWLISON

Critics are God's instruments. I don't like to be criticized. You don't like to be criticized. Nobody likes to be criticized. But, critics keep us sane—or, by our reactions, prove us temporarily or permanently insane. Whether a critic's manner is gracious or malicious, whether the timing is good or bad, whether the intention is constructive or destructive, whether the content is accurate, half-true, or utterly false, in any case the very experience of being criticized reveals you. To what madnesses are you prone?

Self-satisfaction. I easily stagnate, rigidify, and drift off to sleep. Perhaps yesterday I said a timely word to someone, and by today it has become the final word, and tomorrow it will become the same old axe to grind. You catch the bird on the wing one day, and take it to the taxidermist the next day. You think that you solved the problems of the day (or the world) yesterday. Maybe you did. Then today the problems change, but you'd rather rest on your laurels. When someone poses a searching question to me, or directs a criticism at me—and I'm willing to hear and consider—it keeps me from etching in stone my last best insight or last best achievement.

Self-justification. I easily become arrogant, deaf, and self-righteous. In the face of criticism or disagreement, I mobilize the myriad strategies and limitless energies of defensiveness. Call out the National Guard. Mobilize the anti-

terrorism task force. Launch pre-emptive or retaliatory strikes. Call the spin-doctor. Do damage control. Launch a new p.r. campaign. Protect the image. Play victim. Spotlight strengths and deflect attention from weaknesses. Shift blame. Yesterday's faithful obedience (or what I thought was such) becomes today's prop for the kingdom of self. I forget that I remain a needy recipient of the lifelong process of redemption, that the first beatitude never goes away, that "wise" and "disciple" both take daily cues from "teachable." Give me critics who open their mouths about what their eyes see and ears hear, and give me a non-defensive attitude towards what they say.

Self-protection (of the have-an-easy-life variety). To be criticized is not pleasant, so to avoid, duck, and hide can look very inviting. Perhaps yesterday you made a humble and honest attempt to do something constructive in a difficult situation. The problem remained, however, and now you're taking heat, to boot. Today you want to avoid the whole mess. If you duck out, then tomorrow you'll live in a teenier, tidier, friendlier, more imaginary world. It's hard to live in a big, messy, uncontrollable world. Real people and real problems are hard to deal with. But I need to listen consciously to critics, even to invite criticism: "What do you *really* think? I want to know. What do I do that causes you a problem? What do I say that doesn't seem quite right?" This will help me live in the world

that God controls, the world in which Christ keeps on working to redeem.

Self-protection (of the be-liked-by-others variety). I conform, or compromise, or convert, or act cowardly, or am silenced, or say “Whatever.” Critics want you to agree with them, to see their light, and to jump on their bandwagon. The previous three tendencies describe not listening well enough to critics. This fourth tendency describes listening too well: gullible, adrift, indifferent. The plausibility of a valid criticism or a good question woos you to embrace bad answers. At first I stick my fingers in my ears and won’t listen; then, when I finally start to listen, I put a ring in my nose and follow along. It’s always easier for anyone to see a wrong that exists than to envision the right towards which we ought to aim. Your critics can spot a real problem in you, and then go on to offer a highly defective solution as the answer, citing your shortcomings to make their solution plausible. Just as it’s hard to be committed but not contrary, so it’s hard to be teachable but not too teachable.

Self-exaltation. Ditto, yes, amen, of course, all of the above.

Us-satisfaction, us-justification, us-protection, and us-exaltation. The previous paragraphs describe not only individual tendencies, but forms of group-think and group-act. We reinforce each other. Just as the experience of being criticized by someone tends to bring out the worst in an individual, so being criticized by “them” brings out the worst in “us.” Even more disastrous, *we* bring out the worst in us, and never know it. The Bible’s word for this is “factions.” It’s one of the works of the flesh least easy to spot when we’re living inside it.

Outsiders not only see our factious ways, they smell them. They see our possible faults and the places they disagree with us; they smell our obviously faulty ways of reacting to having our possible faults discussed.

Christ uses critics to guard our souls from self-destructive tendencies. We gain ears to listen to others when we gain ears to listen to Him. That doesn’t mean critics are always right.¹

¹When, why, and how to take a stand is another topic, beyond the central thrust of this article (though *how* you hear criticism is one part of how you take a stand constructively).

But they’re usually partially right. That’s worth repeating: critics are usually partially right. Others usually see *something* about me that it would help me to see about myself. Will I consider what they say? Am I teachable? Are you? Are we? We need to hear and ponder the points others make. You may not agree with their interpretation and conclusions (which may be hostile, dismissive, grotesque, or plain wrong). But, in general, you ought to think hard whenever a person says, “I hear you saying..., and I see you doing..., and I think it’s wrong because....” The better the criticism, the more you’d better listen.² If we don’t listen, we show ourselves incorrigible fools (Prov. 9:7-9).

Fair-minded criticism is one of life’s best pleasures, an acquired taste well worth the acquiring. Someone who will take you seriously, understand you accurately, treat you charitably, and who then will lay it on the line is a messenger from God for your welfare (whether or not you end up completely agreeing). There is nothing quite like being disagreed with intelligently, lovingly, and openly: “Faithful are the wounds of a friend” (Prov. 27:6). If I only listen to my allies, or to yes-men, clones, devotees, and fellow factionaries, then I might as well inject narcotics into my veins. The people of God are a large work in progress. To engage and to interact with critics is to further the process—in both of our lives.

We ought to offer to others the kind of criticism that is such a pleasure to receive. Whenever we disagree with others our goal ought to be fair-minded, knowledgeable, constructive criticism (tinged with mercy, attentive to perceived strengths as well as perceived failings, openly receptive to reciprocal criticism). We all know this when doing marriage counseling. Jesus’ log-and-speck analysis and His call to clear-seeing helpfulness dig to the roots of every marital conflict. But we often ignore the log-and-speck in other spheres of controversy—or when in the midst of our own marital conflicts! Whether we write, teach, or converse, we often either succeed or

²Of course, in some situations, you need to ignore particular critics/criticism, and not get sidetracked into fruitless controversy. But that should be a decision you arrive at eventually, not a matter of knee-jerk reaction or policy.

derail based on the manner in which we deliver the matter. May we do as we would like it done to us.

Critics, like governing authorities, are servants of God to you for good (Rom. 13:4). He who sees into hearts uses critics to help us see things in ourselves: outright failings of faith and practice, distorted emphases, blind spots, areas of neglect, attitudes and actions contradictory to stated commitments, and, yes, strengths and significant contributions. God uses critics to help us. Even if I think that a criticism is mistaken, I shouldn't leap too quickly to the defense. Is there something I am doing or saying (or not doing and not saying) that makes that particular misinterpretation plausible? Am I too easily misunderstood? Do I leave implicit or understated something that needs to be made explicit? Does my attitude or tone or way of treating people send a mixed message? Do I ride my hobby horses? Am I not answering some important question that this person is asking? Am I not addressing some important problem that this person cares about? In my experience, the answer to these questions is usually Yes.

This is an extremely important reason to pay close attention to criticism. To take one example, you can say, "Jesus loves you," in a such way that the hearer *hears* you saying, "I despise you." Especially when we think we're proclaiming a Big Truth to others, we often have a hard time hearing how we're coming across or what we're missing, the truth that we most need to hear.³ None of us speaks or writes the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. None of us acts in love, the whole of love, and nothing but love. Self-serving biases make our opinions, feelings, choices, perceptions, and motives glow with rosy light. How plausible we seem to ourselves, and how incomprehensibly depraved others seem.

The Lord uses pungent language to describe us: "Every man's way is right in his own eyes....A fool delights in airing his own opinions....The hearts of the sons of men are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live." This is what the Lord says He sees in

³Of course, hearers often mis-hear because of their own biases and assumptions. We all inject preconceptions and experiences into what we think others say.

us. Every person's life story bears profuse witness to our foolish tendencies, often unwittingly, even when we know better or ought to know better. The daily newspaper and every history book bear detailed witness (often unwittingly). What the Lord says He sees is what's playing in the theater of reality. The daily case experience of every counselor and psychotherapist bears witness (often unwittingly). All honest literature and film—all attempts to tell the truth—bear witness (often unwittingly). Even attempts to lie—to manipulate and pander by false advertising, propaganda, *Pollyanna*, pornography, or romance—bear unwitting witness. Human hearts work the way God says they work. All social science research, as it works hard to describe real people, bears witness (often unwittingly). So, for example, when 829,000 high-school seniors were surveyed on how they assessed their ability to get along with other people, "Zero percent rated themselves below average, 60 percent rated themselves in the top 10 percent, and 25 percent saw themselves among the top 1 percent!"⁴ I suppose that if chiefs among sinners—Paul, Peter, David, and Moses—were surveyed (on their sane days), that zero percent category might have nudged up to 0.00005 percent. How would you rate your ability to get along with others? "Above average" people particularly need a few good critics!

We know this when we counsel others, and also in those sane moments when we look in the mirror with biblical eyes. Jesus mercifully helps us see the blinding log in the eye that sees the blinding specks in other eyes. Most disputes

⁴Cited in David Myers's *Social Psychology*, Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1999, p. 59. Of course, every person's story, the newspaper, history, case experience, literature, and social science also bear witness (often unwitting) to the goodness of God's creation and the specific workings of common grace and providence: sense of fairness, hatred of hypocrisy, desire to learn, capacity for love and self-sacrifice, generosity, concern for the needy, appreciation of beauty. Parents protect and provide for children in a thousand ways children will never realize. Firemen rush into the World Trade Center. People feel a burst of joy at a field of daffodils bobbing in the wind. Jean Valjean finds and gives tangible mercy in *Les Misérables*. Social sciences study altruistic and prosocial behavior: "We come, it seems, hard-wired for empathy" (*Ibid.*, p. 478). And some stories and sources bear witness to redemption and special grace, where everything becomes more witting: to come to know God is to know the hard-wirer by name.

take the form “My best against your worst.”⁵ We tend to act as if our strong points and our grievances give us an airtight case. And that’s the problem. Left to our own devices, we are corrupt judges and bigots, obstinately devoted to ourselves. Husbands and wives, parents and children, factions in a church, theological

teach His children exceedingly precious but hard-won things (see scores of Psalms, the apostles on suffering, and the life of Jesus). Or will I instead reveal myself to be malicious, retaliatory, temperamental, defensive, self-righteous, narrow-minded, cowardly, compromising, or factious? “Enemies” play a central

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debaters, Palestinians and Israelis all do this. We ever so skillfully combine defensive self-vindication and belittling dismissal of the other. My (easily idealized) strong points line up against your (easily demonized) weak points. The only airtight case is the one that the Judge of all the earth presents against all of us. We need to hear critics, to hear our weak points, their strong points, and ways our strong points may be incomplete or exaggerated. Edifying conversation (even in our own heads, as we read what others write) manages both to hold clear convictions and to get out on the table the things that are hard to see and say (my worst, for example, and your best), alongside the things that are easy to see and say (my best! your worst!).

Even if I conclude that a critic is wrong-headed, ignorant, and malicious, God still uses the encounter. It is no accident that “love your enemies” is *the* watershed test of what you live for. How do you view, treat, and talk about your worst, most unfair critics? Of course, don’t blow in the wind and compromise. Don’t get intimidated. Don’t be indifferent to true and false, good and evil. Don’t listen to every whisper. Don’t get distracted by trying to appease or to persuade implacable people who breathe animosity and lies. Of course, criticism may reveal more about the critic than the one criticized. But, at the same time, a healthy dose of criticism can be the best medicine imaginable. Will I prove to have the mercy, patience, clarity, humility, and courage to respond rightly? The Lord will use criticism to

role in the economy of redemption. They reveal us for what we are. They are our Lord’s instruments. They either remake us like Him or reveal us as His enemies.

Critics. They can wake you up, or calm you down, or change your attitude. They can get you working on a question you’ve never asked, or push you to communicate better, or help you to understand what you’re up against. They can call you to repentance, or make you more deeply persuaded that you are on the right track, or teach you patience. They can save you from yourself, or open the door to unquenchable joy, or teach you what life is really about. Or all of the above.

I’ve been reading and hearing some recent critics of biblical counseling. Here’s what others are saying. Think about it with me.

Mark McMinn

Mark McMinn serves as chairman of the psychology department at Wheaton College. In “Prelude to Grace: A Psychology of Sin and a Sin of Psychology,” he said the following:

It is time that we build bridges between biblical counselors and Christian psychologists....I am reminded how often we have misunderstood and maligned biblical counselors. How often do we throw in a critical comment about Jay Adams in our writings on integration, even if we have never read Jay Adams closely? And it is unreasonable that we continue, year after year, to associate all biblical counseling with Adams’s work, though the biblical counseling movement has matured and developed a great deal since Adams wrote *Competent to Counsel* 32 years ago. I

⁵I thank Paul Miller of seeJesus.net for this felicitous phrasing.

recognize areas of disagreement. As a Christian psychologist, I value scientific and psychological ways of knowing more highly than most biblical counselors. But I also stand in admiration of their faithful love for God and for Scripture, and their desire to hold fast to the Christian narrative as the basis of truth and wholeness. Those of us committed to integration have a great deal to learn from our brothers and sisters in biblical counseling. We were trained to tell other stories. Most of us were trained in graduate programs where we did not talk about sin. Many of our professors didn't even believe in sin. So we learned to tell a cognitive-behavioral story, or an object relations story, a humanistic story, or any number of other stories. These stories are useful, but they can also seem anemic when compared to the Christian story of sin, forgiveness, redemption, and grace.⁶

Interesting, isn't it? As criticism goes, it's a softball lobbed down the middle (being 90% an affirming evaluation). It's about as friendly a disagreement as one could ever receive. But let me pose four sets of questions in response.

First, Mark McMinn does not draw us-versus-them lines in the sand in the adversarial manner. He is not operating in the "my best against your worst" mode. Is he a better man than you in this regard? How do you react to what he says and how he says it? How do you respond to his self-criticism, his humility, and his commendations: "my worst, my need, juxtaposed with your best"? How should you respond? Is he a brother with whom you could have a fine and mutually edifying conversation, even though you'll reach some points where your differences may be substantive and significant?

Second, do his words tempt you to a sense of vindicated self-righteousness? Do you think something like, "Finally an integrationist is treating us fairly and 'fessing up to things we've been saying all along. I'm glad at least some of those integrationists are finally seeing the light. But he still doesn't quite get it." It appalls me that I can even imagine such wickedness

crossing my mind. Whose kingdom do we serve? Whose glory? Whose vindication? If "we" are the repository of all wisdom, final wisdom, the last word, then "they" need to come sit at our feet. But if we trust that the Christian story of sin and grace is True, and if we all need to grow in wisdom, then we have things to talk over with each other.

Third, what do you think of McMinn's criticism of biblical counselors? In effect, "You don't value the observational and descriptive riches of psychology adequately." Does that shoe fit or not? I need to think about that one. Do you think that you can learn something helpful from psychologists?

More than 25 years ago, Jay Adams gave his answer to that question: "Yes, we can learn a lot; I certainly have. That answer surprised you, didn't it? If it did you have been led to believe, no doubt, that nouthetic counselors are obscurantists who see no good in psychology.... I do not object to psychology or to psychologists as such." Adams went on to state, there and elsewhere, that his actual objections were to the modern psychotherapies and personality theories for misleading and misconstruing the very people they tried to help and to explain.⁷ In other words, to use McMinn's words, Adams objected to counselors "telling other stories" about and to their counselees, stories that were not true. Adams said that this objection "in no way lessens my interest, support, and encouragement of the legitimate work of psychology."⁸ Do you agree with Adams? With McMinn? With both? With neither? McMinn's criticism is surely worth hearing, pondering, and talking about (and maybe doing something about, both relationally and conceptually).

Notice that McMinn's criticism is one of comparative emphasis: "I value this *more* than you value it." That is one of those subtle

⁷I think it is fair to add (though Adams never discussed this at length) that he used psychological research cautiously and quite sparingly. Because dubious or false theoretical assumptions mar experimental design, reporting of data, and interpretation of findings, even observations and descriptions are not neutral and unproblematic.

⁸This and the previous quotation are from Jay Adams, *What About Nouthetic Counseling?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), p. 31.

⁶Keynote address at the Christian Association for Psychological Studies (CAPS), Chicago, April 11, 2002.

differences that can be hard to hear and weigh, but is worth considering carefully. Maybe McMinn values psychology too much. Maybe I value it too little. Maybe we both value it the same, in theory, but his practice lets in more than he bargained for; or my practice is too sparing, and doesn't let in things I really ought to learn; or both. Those issues are well worth hammering out, for the welfare of us all. We should try on the shoe and see if it fits.

Roger Hurding was one of Adams's most careful critics a generation ago. He wrote, "Jay Adams acknowledges the existence of divine common grace as contributory to, for example: 'an element of truth reflected by every false position'; the unearthing of certain 'nuggets' of insight by an unbeliever....[But] Adams' seeming neglect of the biblical dimensions of general revelation and common grace as a *developed argument* is, I believe, the main root of at least some of his more disputed opinions."⁹ Notice the *kind* of criticism Hurding made. It's a question of emphasis and development. In effect, "You say that you learn from the observational and descriptive aspects of psychology. Do you adequately and fruitfully exemplify in practice that you believe this? Have you modeled and unpacked *how* the body of Christ ought to interact with the social sciences?" Good question. Tough question. Perennial question, worth revisiting, rather than drowning out by either anti-psychology or anti-anti-psychology posturing.

Fourth, what do you think about the fact that McMinn considers those "other stories" *useful*, though anemic? I would describe those other stories as essentially false, as actively competing with the Christian story, not as merely anemic in comparison to the Christian story. I would describe those stories as actively misleading both story-teller and story-believer. I think that these other narratives systematically preclude The Story that actually plays in the theater of the universe and within human hearts: sin and wrath, mercy and redemption. I am fiercer towards those other stories than he is. But, on the other hand, I don't really know the cash value of "useful" to Mark McMinn.

Maybe as we talk it out, I'll find out he doesn't *really* find the stories themselves useful. Rather he finds the descriptions and portrayals useful, because they force us to think about details of the human condition that we haven't considered and then sought to address—and so we essentially agree. In any case, should I be as fierce towards Mark McMinn as I am towards those anemic stories? Only to my peril, to the harm of my brother, and to the harm of the body of Christ, God protect us all. Can I, should I, pursue a relationship of mutually charitable candor with him? Yes, and amen. He's a critic (I want to hear him) and I'm a critic (he wants to hear me), and we can look forward to cordial and constructive conversations.

Tim Clinton and George Ohlschlager

Tim Clinton is president of the burgeoning American Association of Christian Counselors (AACC), and George Ohlschlager serves in multiple leadership roles within the AACC. Clinton and Ohlschlager (C&O) have edited and contributed extensively to *Competent Christian Counseling*.¹⁰ This is an important book to interact with. Major, programmatic books tend to come along every ten to fifteen years, and this is such a book. I think it's fair to describe *Competent Christian Counseling (CCC)* as the current "state of the union" message for the mainstream, evangelical psychotherapy movement. It's a mission statement for what I might describe as "post-integrationist, openly evangelical, professional psychotherapists seeking to redefine themselves as a form of Christian ministry." CCC sets forth the AACC's agenda for the coming decade. This book needs careful review, but I am not going to do that here. I want us to consider the specific criticisms CCC makes of biblical counseling. C&O write,

At a time when the church was widely embracing psychology—and sometimes doing so without thought—[this] movement called attention back to the Word of God and challenged counselors to think theologically. The primary criticisms of

⁹Roger Hurding, *The Tree of Healing* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), p. 285. The emphasis is his.

¹⁰Timothy Clinton and George Ohlschlager, executive editors, *Competent Christian Counseling* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2002).

the nouthetic approach, however, are that it is narrowly conceived and too focused on a confrontational style of dealing with sin and behavioral change to the exclusion of tender soul care and sensitivity to life's grief. Nouthetic process tends to be weak on understanding the complexity of human motivation, and it struggles to develop an adequate theory of suffering and emotion. (p. 46)

Are nouthetic counselors too exclusively focused on sin to be tender and helpful to clients who are broken and suffering, too engaged in biblical behavior modification to be able to help someone walk through the "dark night of soul" transformation, and too resistant to learning and becoming skilled in clinical knowledge and patterns to be widely helpful to many people?

After more than thirty years of development as a profession, is biblical counseling still just preaching to the choir, in danger of influencing no one outside their narrow clique and possibly stagnating in a tepid backwater while the rest of Christian counseling flows on to twenty-first century maturity? (p. 703)

That's a more sweeping and multi-pronged criticism than McMinn's. Do any or all of the shoes fit? I hear C&O raising six important challenges. They doubt the quality of relationships, the sensitivity to human suffering, the depth and subtlety of insight into motives, the view of emotions, the narrowness of range compared to the breadth of human need, and the sectarian isolationism. Let me summarize and paraphrase each of the leading concerns into direct questions to readers.

First, *are* you so oriented towards identifying, confronting, and changing behavioral sins that you fail to establish and sustain tender and patient human *relationships*? It's worth camping out on that question. Do your counseling agenda and practice exhibit a moral strenuousness (or worse, a moralistic aggressiveness and impatience) that actually works against many of the characteristics of genuine love? Do those you counsel perceive you as brisk (even brusque) and matter-of-fact (even clumsy) with the fine china of their lives? Do

you treat your counselees differently from how you treat your best friends? Do others perceive you as embodying tender care for their well-being? Do others know you love them? Do people feel that you are for them, and that you are in it for the long haul? Do you elicit trust and promote openness? To put this question a different way, do you have a vision, rationale, and *modus operandi* for the times you might have a 25th counseling session with someone? Can your approach to counseling conceive of a 250th meaningful conversation?¹¹ These are essential questions to pose to yourself—or to have others pose to us, as CCC does.

Second, *do* you so emphasize behavioral sin that you fail to be attentive to heartache and pain? Does the way you look at people and their problems-in-living gravitate to one part of the human condition, but neglect other parts? Do you in fact weep with those who weep? Does your counseling help some people to weep, giving voice to their sorrows, perplexities, and uncertainties, when they have confused the Christian ideal with the Stoic ideal? Do you strike the Psalms' balance between suffering and sin and joy? Do you strike the Gospels' balance between meeting people in their hardships and calling them to change? These are very important questions.

Third, *does* your counseling so focus on changing behaviors that it skates over motivational complexities and a carefully intentional renewal of the human heart? Do you probe, draw forth, and renew the patterns of desire, fear, love, belief, conscience, and story from which behavioral choices emerge? Do you deal with how the vertical dimension specifically plays out within and through every behavior, attitude, and emotion? Do you work as well with the imagination-kindling aspects of

¹¹At the rate of "encourage one another daily," that walks the relationship out for about nine months! I'm not suggesting that "seasons" of intentional counseling might not be relatively short-term most of the time, but our model and manner ought to be consistent with lifelong relationships. In 1970, when years-long psychotherapy was the norm, it was radical that biblical counseling aimed for a 6-12 week strategic intervention. In the 2000s, when 6-12 week, strategic counseling is the norm, it is radical that biblical counseling is oriented to a lifelong discipleship and change process (that may sometimes take the form of a short series of meetings).

Truth and love as you do with the doctrinal propositions and the ethical injunctions? What is the significance of metaphor, story, poetic repetition, understatement, humor, self-disclosure, modeling, acts of love, and other motivating aspects of ministry?

Fourth, *does* your counseling so focus on behavior and on consciously stated beliefs that emotions are only the “caboose of the train”? Can you be fairly characterized as a Christianized cognitive-behavioral counselor? Do you work as well with the emotion-evoking aspects of Truth as you do with the doctrinal propositions and the ethical injunctions? What is the significance of the evocative aspects of ministry? Do you work out the godly forms of gladness, sorrow, fear, love, hope, gratitude, anxious concern, peaceful trust, and anger that are so important to Jesus Christ? Doctrinal true-false and ethical right-wrong are extremely significant. My questions are about balance and emphasis, not counterposing one thing instead of another. There are *many* significant polarities in Scripture, including the emotively-charged categories of admirable-despicable, beautiful-horrifying, delightful-disgusting, blessed-cursed, and trustworthy-threatening, desirable-shameful.

In each of these four categories, I’ve been posing my versions of the criticisms that C&O proposed. I’m not assuming their answers, but I’m trying to hear their perceptions and even to intensify their questions. They raise important concerns. Ask these questions even more deeply, more biblically, more personally. Such questions must stop us, get under our skin, wriggle in behind our habits, assumptions, and professed good intentions. We must inquire into the living realities of how we live, think, relate, and counsel.

Fifth, *does* what you do in counseling operate plausibly only with a certain population, with the kind of people that you are most familiar with? Are you relatively (even stubbornly) ignorant of the problems of other populations? Is your range narrow in knowledge, in skills or in target audiences? How do you do with *really* messed-up people? With people whose upbringing was a family-sized Auschwitz? With people whose inner world is perverse beyond words? With non-Christians? With desperately poor people? With crisis

pregnancies? With demented people? With people in third-world cultures? What C&O call “clinical knowledge,” I’d call “becoming case-wise.” Does your practice of biblical counseling embody a breadth of understanding, skill, and institutional options that can be “widely helpful to many people”? I believe that only a biblical counseling vision will be able to reach every nation, tribe, tongue, and people—and every individual within every group. But how close does attainment come to vision?

Sixth, *do* you only preach to the choir? Do you have a clique mentality (my best, against your worst), that isolates you? Do you operate with the self-righteous and “paranoid” instincts of the factionary? Hear me rightly, I’m not for a millisecond suggesting there aren’t huge issues at stake. I think that there are significant problems with the CCC vision and mission. But how do we get into the marketplace of ideas? We might be right-as-rain on an issue, and wrong-as-wrong-can-be in attitude. Old wisdom put the call this way: *suaviter in modo, fortiter in re* (“gentle in manner, strong in substance”).¹² If our sphere of influence is narrow, whose fault is that? Blaming others for marginalizing us violates the core principles of biblical ministry. Redemptive ministry gets out of the choir and into the marketplace.

Notice how CCC’s “criticisms of the nouthetic approach” can be fruitfully rephrased into questions addressed to each of us. In terms of our “counseling faith and practice,” I *think* these criticisms are all fundamentally untrue, and I imagine that most readers of *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* would find them inaccurate. They sound like a caricature. I can point to a chapter in book A or to article B in this very journal ten years ago, or to counseling with person C this morning, or to what I taught last week in class D that was the exact opposite of everything the criticism supposes. I’m thus tempted to think the critics ignorant (Don’t they read us?) or tendentious (By making us look bad, they make themselves look good). It could be. But, just maybe, is it possible that the books, articles, conversations, and public talks have made it too easy to think such criticisms

¹²Cited in John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1995), p. 331.

justified? Even more basic, are we simply not known personally, heard and seen in person, so that false impressions can be corrected? Misapprehensions flourish when people don't know each other.

There is a darker possibility. Did the critics have a negative experience with author

remain. Their insistence that only the Bible should be used in our ministration to the emotionally troubled is as rigid as ever. Their unrelenting dismissal of scientific, clinical, and counseling psychology is astounding. And their ever-improving capacity to reduce any and all human

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E or speaker F? Negative impressions can be created or reinforced, and lots of good truth can be turned dark and repellent by one act of contempt—or even by a wonderful half truth that lacked its other half. Or did a critic counsel person G (apparently successfully?) in the aftermath of G's disastrous and damaging meeting with biblical counselor H? I've known many people opposed to (or suspicious of) "biblical counseling" who cite a negative experience as their reason. I've also known many people who are now committed to biblical counseling *despite* a negative experience with a "biblical counselor." Life in the kingdom is much more complex than just lining up one abstract model against another abstract model. Everyone has a story. The last chapter might have contained a bad experience, but the *next* chapter in each story could prove to be a turning point. Did you ever fulfill the caricature? Does the uncomfortable shoe fit too well? Was I that counselor or author? Were you? How will the next chapter of Christ's redemption unfold?

James Beck

James Beck is a clinical psychologist and chairman of the counseling department at Denver Seminary. He recently reviewed *Psychology & Christianity: Four Views* to which I contributed "The Biblical Counseling View" along with three short response articles. Most of his criticisms were not of what I'd written, per se, but of the biblical counseling movement.

Many of the old conceptual problems attendant to Adams and his thought

suffering to some form of idolatry or self-worship is amazing. This reductionism, in the name of faithfulness to the biblical record, winds up insulting the richness of scriptural thought and the complexity which the authors of the Bible ascribed to the human experience.¹³

This kind of criticism is hard to listen to because of its stridency and the oddity of the charges. To be called rigid, unrelentingly dismissive, astounding, amazing (these last two not as compliments!), reductionistic, and insulting to Scripture—all within the space of four sentences—why that is...well, I don't know what it is, astounding, maybe, or dismissive, reductionistic, and insulting. In any case, it certainly does grab one's attention. It's easy to get one's back up.

Verbal intemperance obviously makes a critic harder to hear, harder to take, and harder to take seriously. But what about his specific charges against us: biblicistic anti-science and a moralizing reductionism of the human condition? The first charge is a remote cousin to McMinn's assertion, "I value scientific and psychological ways of knowing more highly than most biblical counselors." It seems like a distant cousin to Clinton and Ohlschlager's concern that biblical counseling was "too narrowly conceived" (elsewhere in their discussion they had said, "Nouthetic counselors use the Bible almost always, if not exclusively,

¹³James Beck, "Review of Psychology & Theology: Four Views" (*Denver Journal*, 4, 2001; also posted on the Denver Seminary website).

as their resource,” pp. 44f). I don’t agree with C&O’s characterization or Beck’s caricature, but how does biblical counseling’s view of Scripture operate with regard to extra-biblical information? How do we relate to the concrete details of the world that needs redemptive counseling, to the facts more numerous than the grains of sand?

Let me attempt a simple answer. I think that God intends Scripture to serve as the *orienting* and *reorienting* wellspring of all wisdom (“the Faith’s psychology,” we might call it). Belief in the necessity and authority of Scripture does not arise because of closed-mindedness, but because other explanations and models express the *disoriented* gaze and intentions of interpreters, model-builders, and would-be redeemers (“the psychological faiths”). Scripture gives a vista, not a straight jacket. Other systems (“philosophies” in the Colossians 2:8 sense) give distorted lenses and compasses skewed away from North. They don’t give us straight facts or a good sense of direction. God intends to teach us how to rightly understand and properly use anything in the whole world (without being misconverted). Everything is fair game: from your own life story to today’s weather; from something a counselee said yesterday to a research study of 829,000 students; from a guru’s comment (Jay Adams favorably quoted Swami Akhilananda in *The Christian Counselor’s Manual*) to war in the Middle East; from a hymn to Zeus (Acts 17:28) to observations of behaviors that never appear in Scripture.

For example, no one in history *could* have discussed the phenomena labeled “bulimia” or “muscle dysmorphia” until recent years. There’s no Bible proof-text that describes cycles of gluttony and vomiting, or an obsession with musculature, mirrors, diet, and lifting weights. But I think it fair to say that *the whole Bible is about bulimia and muscle dysmorphia*. That statement takes some unpacking to show how it works. Rightly understood, Scripture intends to teach us how to rightly understand people trapped in such contemporary hells. You can learn the particular facts firsthand: get to know such people in the midst of all their confusion, anguish, and bondage. You can also learn secondhand: read a book or article. But here’s the rub. In both cases, though you’ll learn lots

of facts, you’ll need to radically reinterpret *everything* you hear or read. Neither the “muscle dysmorphic” himself nor *The Adonis Complex*¹⁴ will tell it to you straight. Both the struggler and the book actively misunderstand the very facts they so vividly narrate and describe. Ministry of Christ—practical theology—is all about changing people’s interpretation of life and their life-direction. Biblical counseling is in the business of reinterpreting and redirecting. Neither the bodybuilder nor the concerned psychiatrist will orient your compass or guide you in the right direction. But Scripture intends to teach you how to wisely address and truly help such people. The Judge evaluates truly and the Redeemer invades mercifully. The Bible reveals the gaze and intentions of this God: Hebrews 4:12-16 puts it all in a nutshell. All this is a far cry both from biblicistic anti-science and from syncretistic integrationism.

The way that C&O (and McMinn, and Hurding) posed the question about our view of Scripture makes them hearable and helpful. I hope we can answer their questions. I hope we can grow up if we’ve misspoken in the heat of controversy, or if we’ve not lived up to what we believe. The way James Beck puts it has the ring of his own prejudices. I hope we can replace the caricature with an accurate photograph. He did not evaluate what was actually written in my articles or what has been written over the past 30 years. It is significant that he shifted to a presumed “they,” rather than dealing with what has been written. “They” protects and projects a stereotype rather than conversing about or with real people. In the *Four Views* book, I openly criticized biblicism and distanced biblical counseling’s epistemology from the notion that the Bible was intended or was to be treated as an exhaustive encyclopedia containing all truth. I gave specific and generic examples of the positive contributions of psychology and psychologists (qualified by the nuances and cautions that a biblical gaze teaches us). That was, in fact, one of the central purposes of those articles. I might be wrong in my view of the issues in question, and Beck might be right, but

¹⁴Harrison Pope, et al., *The Adonis Complex* (New York: Free Press, 2000).

he savaged a view that I don't hold (and neither does Jay Adams).

James Beck's second charge is a distant cousin to C&O's concern that biblical counseling has inadequate views of suffering, motivation, and emotion. Those are good questions to take to heart, as I've sought to do in the previous section. But I cannot figure out where he came up with the idea that biblical counselors reduce all human suffering to some form of sin. As in the previous paragraphs, I protest. I hope I can do so fairly and reasonably. The notion that "human suffering=personal sin" is simply absurd at every level: biblically, existentially, socially, psychologically, literarily, pastorally, politically. I can't think of a human being in the history of the world (let alone someone committed to counsel *biblically*) who held or could hold such a view. Imagine a woman who was beaten by a violent abuser, and felt the pain and terror of that terrible experience. Does such suffering "reduce to" the victim's vengeful fantasies, or her overly compliant behaviors, or her generalized avoidance of all human interaction, or her drinking heavily to drown the hurt and sorrow? Suffering and sin are two different things, whose intricate relationship is discussed on almost every page of the Bible (and in almost every article in this journal over many years).

To believe that suffering reduces to sin would be like treating the dementing and killing effects of AIDS as the same thing as injecting heroin or being sexually immoral (or, even with contracting such a disease from something that has nothing to do with personal sin, e.g., a blood transfusion). Such a belief would be astounding, amazing, and insulting to Scripture (and insulting to sufferers, psychologists, novelists, historians, and the rest of humanity). Suffering never reduces to sin. Jesus did persistently probe and challenge His hearers' motivational disorientations and lifestyles. That exposure of sin and invitation to faith lies at the center of how the Gospels portray His sermons and conversations. Those Gospels also portray Jesus' experience of suffering (with no sin at all). The interior and verbalized dynamics of His experience of suffering are detailed in many psalms. Jesus' entire life poured out mercy to deliver sufferers

from death, oppression, violation, hunger, poverty, and all the other afflictions that sinners inherit. Beck seems to have cobbled a shoe to throw at us, not described a shoe that actually fits.

Does his shoe fit in *any* way? At the end of reading his review, I think the main thing I gain from it is a negative role model. It's an example of what not to do. Have I ever fabricated a straw man in order to burn it at the stake? Have you? I don't want to treat other people this way. But I think it fitting to add that I *like* Beck's phrase, "the richness of scriptural thought and the complexity which the authors of the Bible ascribed to the human experience." That's a great way to put things, and I think he means it, and I mean it, too. That's *exactly* what this journal aspires to. It's exactly what wise practical theology and personal ministry are about. It's the goal of biblical counseling worthy of the label. I'm sure our gaze far exceeds our accomplishments (we always need criticizing, both self-criticism and from outside). But if we do our job well, I hope that James Beck might come to appreciate what we're doing, and won't treat brothers in Christ unfairly.

Do those you criticize receive unfair treatment from you? That's the shoe I want each of us to try on. The descriptive, interpretive, and prescriptive language of Scripture leads us in this good way: "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, and do not see the log that is in your own eye? Take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." Pride and divisiveness yield to humility under the mercy of Christ. Constructive words and peaceable actions can occur in real life, real time, real conflicts. Any number of descriptive sources might aid us in putting diverse flesh onto this orienting truth about our self-deception, our self-righteousness, and the character of mercy. All of life is grist for the log-speck-&-humility dynamics:

- the patterns described in psychological research and the myriad stories of clinical experience (e.g., "self-serving bias," "negative stereotyping," "attribution error"; "He's projecting onto his wife the anger he won't admit"; "That husband and wife each think it's all the other person's fault, as he pursues

- power and she pursues love”);
- the myriad stories of all human history and biography (e.g., Victor Klemperer’s *I Will Bear Witness*, portraying Nazi attitudes towards Jews, the reactions of victims, and the “rebellious kindness” of some honorable Aryan Germans);
- the myriad stories in the morning newspaper and evening newscast (e.g., Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, or a racist incident, or a mass murder by a disgruntled former employee, or a gesture of mercy by the parents of a murdered child);

true sense of what’s happening and to get a true sense of direction. These, and a hundred more particulars, can make you case-wise as they find both interpretation and resolution in Christ. He not only rightly interprets what is wrong, but He died for what is wrong with us. It is His pleasure to draw people to Himself and make us over.

“Let’s Agree to Disagree.”

I hope that all this has made you think. Have you let your critics into the room? I hope that you’ve been able to identify any unseemly

Do those you criticize receive unfair treatment from you? That’s the shoe I want each of us to try on.

- the key chapters in your own growing self-knowledge and wisdom (e.g., “I never saw so clearly how factious I can be; for Your name’s sake, O Lord, pardon my iniquity, for it is great (Ps. 25:11); I will go talk over these things with that person whom I’ve treated with disrespect”);
- the myriad stories of all literature and film (e.g., Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* that tells Kumalo’s story of beauty, injustice, violence, sorrow, infinite patience, pointed self-examination and exhortation, generosity and humility, the eruptions of indwelling sin, and the transaction of mercy);
- the myriad stories of case-wise pastoral counseling (“He blames his wife for what he will not admit in himself, but the fear of the Lord is teaching him to own his reactions”; “That husband and wife minimize their own sins and cast their spouse’s sins, whether real or perceived, in a lurid light. He lives for power and she lives for love, but Jesus can forgive and change these lusts, teaching them to love from a pure heart”).

None of these descriptive sources will rightly orient you on its own. Your critics won’t rightly orient you, either, unless they’ve been rightly reoriented. You can read a thousand books, live your life for eighty years, talk with a thousand counselees, read the newspaper every day, and get hit upside the head weekly. But you need the inworking Word and Spirit to make

impulses and habits in your own giving and receiving criticism. And I hope that you have caught a vision for the mission of Jesus Christ, and your part in it. Peacemakers are blessed because they will be called the sons of God. The Son of God is a peacemaker who takes fractious and factious people—like you and me—and turns us around 180°.

I’d like to close by giving a new spin to the phrase, “Let’s agree to disagree.” Most often, people use this as a polite way to end the conversation, “Good-bye, and don’t bother me. We’re not going to talk about this anymore, but we’ll try to be nice if we happen to see each other again. You’re not going to change my mind, and I’m not going to change yours, so let’s forget it. Let’s just agree to disagree.” Such an attitude has nothing to do with Jesus’ purposes in our midst.

How about giving it the opposite meaning? *Let’s agree...to disagree.* Let’s commit to starting candid, constructive conversations, and let’s keep them going. I need your questions and criticisms, and you need mine. This has something to do with all that talk in the Bible about “one another,” and “different gifts distributed by the Spirit,” and “growing up,” and the “body of Christ,” and “every nation, tribe, tongue, and people,” and “the sons of Issachar understood the times,” and “speaking the truth in love we grow up into Him.” The Lord’s sovereign eye is on every impulse of every

heart: “Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.” He is interested in every human interaction: “You will be judged for every careless word out of your mouth.” Every word comes motive-loaded. Every word counts. Every word matters.¹⁵ Let’s agree to disagree the right way.

We may not convince each other. You probably won’t become my clone at the end of the long conversation, and I probably won’t become yours. But we both might come out changed for the better, in ways that make each of us—and *us*—more faithful to Christ. The body of Christ will come out better.

Let’s agree to disagree. That doesn’t mean “See you later (but I hope not).” And it certainly doesn’t mean *being agreeable*. Let’s agree to *disagree*. We shouldn’t just smooth over real, significant, substantial, life-and-death, wisdom-or-folly, I-care-about-what’s-at-stake differences. Remember, the Lord of all seems to take particular delight in the messiness, change, variety, and volatility of human history. (The kind of world He chooses to run is not a nice, tidy, “let’s all just get along” world.) The God of peace acts and speaks as a polemicist and controversialist. He’s always “fussing” about what He sees going on. Jesus Christ is the trouble-making peacemaker, the grace-giving rebuker, the constructive voice and hands who tears out old wiring and remodels His house. The Teacher teaches His disciples to become the same.¹⁶

And this surely doesn’t mean *being disagreeable*, either. *Let’s agree* to disagree. Surly mistreatment of each other, dismissive caricatures, the sneer, name-calling—these aren’t pretty sights. What John Frame says about how we defend Christianity also applies to how we defend what we think Christianity means in the counseling arena: “To defend the Christian faith with a quarrelsome spirit is to defend Christianity plus quarrelsomeness—a

self-destructive hybrid.”¹⁷ If we’re willing to listen, to hear criticism as well as to give it, that goes a long way towards overcoming the disagreeable tendencies that lurk in us all.

Let’s agree to disagree, and let’s agree that we will disagree well.

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¹⁵And it’s worth reminding ourselves that everything written is a “word out of the mouth” that “overflows from the heart.” So the Lord is the final audience of One for every written word, as well as for every planned talk and casual remark.

¹⁶These last sentences digest my “Troubling the Waters— and Spreading Oil on the Waves” (*The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 19:1, Fall 2000, pp. 2f).

¹⁷John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1994), p. 29.