

CHRISTIAN MINISTRY AND THE MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING COMPLEX: Understanding Missions, Counseling, and Biblical Structures of Care

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INTRODUCTION

The idea that Christian counselors should be considered as missionaries within the mental health professions has been popularized in various circles for years; however, this approach to counseling brings up a host of issues relating to the nature, purpose, and context of what is truly biblical counseling. This essay will confront the misguided thinking behind this argument and present the biblical alternative which seeks to maintain the integrity of not only the counsel provided, but the biblical counseling movement overall.

As a biblical counselor, I view the task of counseling, with all of its principles and methods, as distinctly Christian ministry.² However, over the last couple of centuries, counseling has been uprooted from its historical and theological moorings and replanted firmly in secular soil.³ Today, for many, counseling has become something that is considered primarily clinical, professional,

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² Jay Adams, *How to Help People Change* (Nashville: Zondervan, 1986), 33-40. See also, Samuel Stephens, *The Deception of Psychological Labels* (Kansas City: Truth in Love, 2022); and Jay Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling* (Nashville: Zondervan, 1979), 1-10.

³ For a sociological perspective on this see: Stephanie Muravchik, *American Protestantism in the Age of Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); and Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006). For a theological perspective see E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1983); and Samuel Stephens, *The Psychological Anthropology of Wayne Edward Oates: A Downgrade from the Theological to the Therapeutic* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020).

academic, and psychological rather than an endeavor which is essentially pastoral, ecclesiastical, ministerial, and theological. Sadly, the cultural milieu by which counseling has become defined is the only one by which many Christians are aware.

I have worked around theological education at some capacity for nearly a decade as either an administrator or a professor, and during this time I have had countless conversations with prospective and current students about the nature, purpose, and context of counseling. This fact, in and of itself, is by no means a bad thing. In fact, I am grateful for the way that the discipline of biblical counseling has grown in popularity and accessibility within theological education.⁴ With that being said, the postures and trends of these conversations often leave me troubled and discouraged. For instance, more often than not, when a prospective student asks about our biblical counseling program, the top questions I receive have little to do with how well our degree program provides ministerial preparation and theological acumen in building a comprehensive, distinctly biblical approach to counseling and care. Instead, these questions focus on what types of careers the students should expect to enter. Salary ranges, professional advancement, state licensing, and therapeutic competencies are common refrains characterizing such conversations. In short, I find that students are often sizing up a biblical counseling degree program for what it can offer them as it relates to professional relevancy and occupational security.

So, how do I answer such concerns? Like any well-trained biblical counselor, I begin my answer by asking *more* questions! Does the student desire to advance the mission of the church? Does he or she want to learn how to competently minister the Scriptures that maintains biblical integrity and fidelity while also building critical counseling skills? Does the student ultimately trust the Lord to supply his or her financial needs? Is the student willing to forsake frameworks, terms, and concepts that categorize and diagnose the problems people face from a naturalistic (and God-less) worldview? Is the student firm in his commitment to the centrality of the gospel of Jesus Christ for

⁴ For instance, the first biblical counseling degree program among Southern Baptist seminary began at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (SEBTS) in the late 1990s. Since then, similar degree programs have formed at three additional Southern Baptist seminaries, not to mention those in other protestant denominations.

the counseling task, and is he willing to look like a fool in the eyes of the professional counselor? If the answer to any of these questions is no, then I typically recommend they find the nearest secular college or university and inquire about what those counseling programs can offer.

From a recruiting perspective, it may seem strange that I would ask such counterintuitive questions as this. However, what these students are *really* looking for, and indeed what they *truly* believe, is that counseling training is related more to vocational preparedness than it is for training in Christian ministry within and *for the church*. I would like to think that such misguided thinking is reserved for the ignorant, but I have seen that even those who should know better, even those with platforms within the Biblical Counseling Movement (BCM), follow similar tendencies.⁵

In 2007, David Powlison's article “Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies)” was published in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*. Nearly twenty years later, this article has proven the test of time as one of the most comprehensive and succinct appraisals of the Christian counseling landscape in terms of its relevancy, foresight, and analysis. In his essay, Powlison's articulation of the two organizing centers for Christians who counsel (represented by the acronyms VITEX and COMPIN) spares no one. He outlines the epistemological, anthropological, ethical, and societal errors that so-often characterize integrationist positions. But along with those critiques, he warns biblical counselors to avoid reverting to proof-texts and platitudes and instead urges us to seek prioritizing “positive biblical truth” and a “systematic theology of care and counseling for souls” that would “wed conceptual, methodological, and institutional elements.”⁶

In the final consideration of his essay, Powlison evaluates available helping structures with an eye towards their “viability and validity.”⁷ Essentially, he

⁵ It is not the intention of this essay to provide a thorough accounting of recent debates among biblical counselors. For a systematic review of concerns see Sean Perron, “Summer of Sufficiency,” *First Thoughts* (June 10, 2024). <https://fbcjax.com/first-thoughts/summer-of-sufficiency/>.

⁶ David Powlison, “Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies),” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* (Spring 2007), 5-35. See also, Eric L. Johnson, ed., *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010), 245-291.

⁷ Powlison, “Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies),” 29.

wanted his readers to consider not just the *why* or *what* of soul care, but *how* Christians should best offer and apply gospel hope and help to counselees and then to understand the implications of those particular arrangements. In summarizing his position about the appropriate context in which biblical counselors should operate, he noted, “There is no legitimate place for a *semi-Christian counseling profession* to operate in autonomy from ecclesiastical jurisdiction and in subordination to state jurisdiction [emphasis added].”⁸ Obviously, just as in the time of his writing, the Christian church and the secular mental health professions remain the two distinct helping structures that exist at the intersection of Christian faith and counseling psychology. Powlison’s point is that the Christian church alone offers the required guardrails, authority, and accountability to protect doctrinal fidelity, promote biblically faithful living, and preserve Christian conscience in counseling from a biblical vantage point.

As with any movement, evolution of thought and positions is a constant factor and the BCM is no exception. Since the publishing of Powlison’s article, there have been many voices that have interacted with his proposals and analyses. That is no surprise. But what may be surprising are the arguments within the biblical counseling camp that have articulated opposing views than that of Powlison regarding how we should think about the various ways and contexts in which counseling and help are offered.

I have become convinced that the thinking among current and prospective seminary students studying counseling corresponds to philosophical and practical drifts that are happening not only within Evangelicalism, but also among influential counselors within the BCM.⁹ Broadly speaking, I have held concerns about the integrity and trajectory of the BCM for a few years now. I have recognized a subtle, yet consistent, steering away from foundational and historical tenets that once distinguished biblical counseling from other approaches to counseling.¹⁰ I have noticed an emphasis given to fostering the

⁸ Powlison, “Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies),” 31.

⁹ For helpful texts that outline the ongoing professionalization of pastoral ministry and general Christian work within the church see T. Dale Johnson, Jr., *The Professionalization of Pastoral Care: The SBC’s Journey from Pastoral Theology to Counseling Psychology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020).

¹⁰ What I have seen here is the fragmentation of the BCM into evidently divergent paths. No longer are “traditional” and “progressive” sufficient designations that distinguish different

dual needs of cultural relevancy and professional respect from those within the mental health counseling complex.¹¹

One key argument that has been made, and continues to hold currency within biblical counseling circles today, is that these perceived needs can (and should) be met through thinking of Christian counselors as missionaries. While this analogy seems, on its face, to be a noble and even biblical one, once the specifics are explored there are several troubling implications that can be brought to bear on a movement that finds itself at a crossroads. The argument that Christians should seek to serve as missionaries within the mental health field has been circulating among biblical counselors for years; however, this approach to counseling reveals several inconsistencies relating to the nature, purpose, and context of *truly* Christian counseling. In this essay, I will confront key elements of this argument and present a theological evaluation in order to underscore the need of the BCM today to return to structures of help and care that are consistent with biblical counseling positions.

The core of the “counselors as missionaries” argument suggests that Christians have the duty, or at least the privilege, to work within the

flavors of biblical counselors, but now, those on the left of the spectrum are frequently identified with several qualifiers including research-aware, clinically informed, holistic, trauma-informed, redemptive counselors, among others. For an earlier look at this, see John Babler and T. Dale Johnson, Jr., “Issues in Biblical Counseling: Addressing The Elephant in the Room,” ACBC (November 17, 2017) <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/articles/issues-in-biblical-counseling-addressing-the-elephant-in-the-room/>. Those who would seek to unhelpfully broaden and redefine biblical counseling, thus removing it from its historical, methodological, and theological moorings, would seek to divide those who identify with biblical counseling’s roots. For an example of this see Nate Brooks, Tate Cockrell, Brad Hambrick, Kristin Kellen, and Sam Williams, “What is Redemptive Counseling/Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?” Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (accessed July 8, 2024). <https://www.sebts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/What-is-RCCIBC.pdf>.

¹¹ This term has been used to describe a group of psychotherapeutic and client-centric professional industries that have been identified in the past as the “helping professions” associated with the social sciences. These would include state-licensed counseling professions, the fields of psychiatry and psychology, and other clinically oriented occupations which work upon the assumptions articulated by the mental health/illness paradigm. The modern pastoral counseling movement has long viewed the work of pastoral counseling as only one part of a necessary partnership with secular experts in addressing the needs of the whole person. See, Raymond J. Lawrence, *Recovery of the Soul: A History and Memoir of the Clinical Pastoral Movement* (New York: CPSP, 2017) and Allison Stokes, *Ministry After Freud* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1985).

secular counseling professions in order to, as one proponent put it, “speak prophetically into the mental health subculture.”¹² For those of us who are committed to biblical counseling and desire for this ancient work to survive in a form that maintains its doctrinal definition, foundational tenants, historical consistency, and worldview, we must be willing to boldly and clearly refute arguments that denigrate and threaten its legacy and longevity. To this point, I contend that arguments encouraging Christians to operate as missionaries within the mental health counseling complex demonstrate not only a faulty understanding of Christian missions and the spiritual nature and goals of counseling, but also leads Christians away from structures of help and care that are consistent with biblical counseling.

I will seek to support this thesis by unpacking the nature of the “counselors as missionaries” paradigm and provide critique of its assumptions. As I have already intimated, while these propositions are made by those who carry the mantle of biblical counselor, we would be in error if we simply assumed that their claims correspond with biblical counseling tenets. Once we view these arguments through the lens of biblical counseling commitments, I believe that we will see how errant they actually are. Ultimately, my desire is to offer a call for the biblical counseling movement to retrieve its foundational view of the church as the ultimate context for the task of biblical counseling instead of simply relegating the church as one option among many.¹³

NECESSARY CAVEATS AND KEY DEFINITIONS

Before moving into the substance of the essay, I would like to provide a few caveats in an attempt to provide some insight to the spirit of my approach to this topic. Any criticism the author offers in this essay about the current drift

¹² Sam R. Williams, “Counselors as Missionaries,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* (vol. 26, no. 3, 2012), 28. Williams has written on this subject in several places towards the end of the first and into the second decade of the twenty-first century. See also, Sam R. Williams, “Christian Counseling as Mission,” Biblical Counseling Coalition (July 27, 2011). <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2011/07/27/christian-counseling-as-mission/>; Sam R. Williams, “Should You Study Counseling Outside Christian Institutions? Yes and No,” *The Gospel Coalition* (October 15, 2012). <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/should-you-study-counseling-outside-christian-institutions-yes-and-no/>.

¹³ I would include parachurches here. However, secular institutions would not even come close.

of the BCM and of the poor state of counseling in the church at-large should be offered in a spirit of humility. Offering criticism and refutation with a humble spirit, which should be the only way Christians engage in this type of exercise, requires not only pointing out various problems and the need for correction, but should also demonstrate a willingness to be part of moving the conversation forward.

Secondly, as it relates to the “counselors as missionaries” paradigm in particular, my criticism will seek to reflect respect. Christians should never participate in constructing arguments *ad hominem*. That being said, the ideas, principles, and implications of arguments put forth by others, especially in a public forum, are fair game for criticism. While I strongly disagree with the premise of the paradigm I am critiquing in this essay, I can at the same time, recognize and appreciate the intentions and any anecdotal benefits that this paradigm may provide.

Lastly, it is important to be clear as to what I *do not* mean by the terms “counselors as missionaries” by looking at two aspects of both of this phrase, those being *missions* and *counseling*.¹⁴ The former concept consists of the nature and call of the new life in Jesus Christ. In this, we can see that mission-mindedness is a fundamental component of not only the Great Commission, but of Christian religion (Matthew 5:16ff; 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). Christians are to bring the light of the Gospel into the darkness, and this is both commanded and demonstrated throughout the Bible. The latter aspect, that of counseling, by its nature is closely associated to the first. As a ministry to and for Christians, biblical counseling is about refining the image of Christ in the saint who struggles, suffers, and sins.¹⁵ However, the founder of the modern movement himself, Jay Adams, also saw the need for an evangelistic call expressed through this vehicle of care. From its earliest days, the BCM has viewed counseling and care as not only a vital in-reach ministry of the church for the church, but as an

¹⁴ Throughout this essay, I will use the phrases counselors as missionaries, missional counseling, and counseling as missions in synonymous fashion to refer to the argument articulated by Sam Williams and others that biblical counselors can and should serve as missionaries to and within the mental health field and sub-culture.

¹⁵ For a definition that represents a biblical counseling perspective see the definition of the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors here: <https://biblicalcounseling.com/about/our-mission/>.

out-reach ministry to a community of people in search of hope and salvation.¹⁶ The reason behind this is because we understand that the church was never an afterthought in the mind of God. Her purpose is to be the vehicle for Christian mission and no other institution can supplant or replace her in this duty. What is promoted in this effort, however, is different from what is proposed in the paradigm that I will now attempt to explain and critique.

MISGUIDED ASSUMPTIONS

I am not a missiologist and am aware of my limitations regarding the specifics of some technical terms associated with this field. With that being said, I will attempt to demonstrate that even a cursory examination of how Christian missions is used in this argument fails to accurately reflect the nature, methods, and goals of missions in general.

In his article published in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* entitled, “Counselors as Missionaries,” Sam Williams, now retired professor of biblical counseling at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, argues that since Christianity is considered a missionary religion, all Christians who counsel should, by natural expression, “always be moving toward and into any part of this world that excludes God from the human equation.”¹⁷ Building on this

¹⁶ Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Nashville: Zondervan, 1970), 67ff. Jay noted, “Any such counseling that claims to be Christian surely must be evangelistic. Counseling is redemptive” (67).

¹⁷ Williams, “Counselors as Missionaries,” 28. I often find language like this unhelpful (to say the least) due to its ambiguity. Interestingly, the impact of Williams influence at Southeastern Seminary’s counseling program, now identified as Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling (RC/CIBC), can be seen in its affirmations here: <https://www.sebts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/What-is-RCCIBC.pdf>. In a document that predated the current one, the counseling faculty at SEBTS not only affirmed that the application of the Word of God must be done in a “clinically informed manner” (a manner that was neither clarified nor explained), but also that an understanding of people from the Bible will result in considering them as “spiritual, moral, relational, and psychological beings.” Again, it not explained how *psychological* differs from *spiritual* or *moral*. It can be surmised that the clinically informed approach to SEBTS’s biblical counseling program leads them to affirm concepts that are foreign to categories provided to us in Scripture including, “psychological suffering,” “mental disorders,” “relational trauma,” and “psychological well-being.” That document can be found here: https://www.sebts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biblical_Counseling_Affirmation.pdf. For a look at where such missional approaches to counseling eventually lead, see *Southeastern Theological Review* (vol 15, no. 1, Spring 2024).

general assumption, he accuses “Christians who counsel – of all sorts and of all backgrounds” of being “missiologically myopic” if they do not view their counseling through the missional lens, and that a failure for some to do so has resulted in a lack of adequate engagement, influence, and ministry within the secular mental health subculture.¹⁸ Williams uses the term *missions* to refer to the general “activity of God in the world . . . through his people to fulfill his mission.”¹⁹ While such a broadly applied conceptualization of missions does seem to be biblically framed and seeks to glorify and honor God, it also does not insulate or shield his key argument from substantive critique as revealed in the inconsistent and doctrinally vague ways his view of mission is applied to the nature, purposes, goals, and activities of Christian counselors. In order to understand this paradigm, it is important to provide an outline of key assumptions that Williams holds in support of “counselors as missionaries.”

MISSIONS AND THE MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONS

The first striking characteristic of this argument, and one that is often pronounced, is his identifying the mental health profession as a legitimate object of Christian missional focus. Of course, this proposition assumes much about how the mental health counseling complex works and how it corresponds to actual ethnic or geo-political people groups which are often identified as objects of evangelism in modern missions movements. At face value, those within the BCM who support this view do correctly identify the mental health field as distinctly secular. How these professions understand reality, human nature, the etiologies and descriptions of the problems people face, and the solutions to these problems all reject a biblical worldview. These qualities may seem to suggest that the mental health field is exactly like any other foreign field in need of Christian witness. Perhaps Williams and others are right about the need for Christian counselors to engage the mental health field with missional fervency. If this is where the argument ended, I could be persuaded to agree; however, there are multiple misguided assumptions that make this aspect of the argument untenable.

¹⁸ Williams, “Counselors as Missionaries,” 28.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Proponents assume that a *Christianized* mental health field can (and should) exist alongside a secular one, and that Christians can (and should) applaud recent moves of many mental health professions of becoming more “tolerant and inclusive of all religions and moralities.”²⁰ This is problematic on many levels. All of the systems and structures that uphold the mental health field are ones that promote unbiblical theologies of God and man (among others). For Christians to counsel within these systems, and thereby operate in accordance with the ethical, clinical, methodological, and professional standards set forth by accrediting bodies supporting these professions, is for them to dilute their ability to be salt and light in the particulars of their counsel.²¹

For his part, Williams does not ignore this challenge and even says that Christian counselors must “continue to expect that the cross of Christ will still be offensive;” however, he also calls his readers to “reevaluate” not only the mental health field, but also themselves.²² While it seems that the object of this re-evaluation has to do with the strategy of constructive contextualization for missions within the mental health field, I suggest that the true objective of mission (which is the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ) is *not* going to be advanced by Christians celebrating that a godless, secular, and morally bankrupt field has finally warmed up to “spiritual approaches” to counseling or us seeking to earn our seat at the mental health profession table. What seems to be lost on Williams is the two-fold purpose of missions in advancing the gospel. This two-fold purpose includes both *evangelism* and *discipleship*.

When the Scriptures speak of evangelism, what exactly does it entail? Well, it should include a recounting of the gospel message as the clearest expression

²⁰ Williams, “Counselors as Missionaries,” 29. There are many important questions that must be asked that can’t be adequately addressed in this essay. Do we *need* a corresponding mental health system that operates with Christian principles? Would the emulation of such a system actually carry principles along with it that are antithetical to biblical principles and solutions?

²¹ Heath Lambert refers to the many contradictions and pitfalls that are baked into licensure (and I argue by extension) of working within the mental health fields. See Heath Lambert, “Should Christians Be Licensed by the State to Counsel?” *Association of Certified Biblical Counselors*, (September 11, 2017). <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/podcast-episodes/til-119-should-christians-be-licensed-by-the-state-to-counsel/>. See also Jim Newheiser, “Why I Don’t Want or Need a License to Counsel,” *Biblical Counseling Coalition* (January 21, 2013). <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2013/01/21/why-i-dont-want-or-need-a-license-to-counsel/>.

²² Williams, “Counselors as Missionaries,” 29.

of God's grace to the lost, but ultimately, evangelism is a call to the lost for a change of allegiance. However, at the heart of this argument is an unspoken assumption that once Christian counselors faithfully "evangelize" the mental health professions (in specific ways we are never told), the profession--with all of its existing paradigms, structures, language, methods, and contexts--will essentially remain as it is albeit look a bit more "Christianly." Is this possible? I would argue emphatically not!²³ Consider, as Paul Vitz does in his book *Psychology as Religion*, that the mental health complex is *not* actually like any other unreached, unengaged people group. In truth, the psychologies have more in common with pagan religions where the sacred text is the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders* (DSM) and clinicians and psychiatrists serve as shamans and secular priests.²⁴ If this is the proper way to view the mental health counseling professions, then it would be impossible for any real allegiance change to result in the continuance of practices that came before.

The same argument goes for the goals and purposes of discipleship. The call to discipleship requires inside-out conformation to Christ initiated by a change of heart (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 2:20). This call is to hear the Words of life and to heed them. It is a call to sit at the feet of Jesus in order to subjugate and surrender our inner man (with its particular affections, will, and thoughts) to God's desires, will, and purposes. All of this has as its goal that we may be holy as He is holy! While it is admirable to advocate for a revolutionary "Christian invasion of the secular mental health establishment – for the glory of God and the good of men," the question that remains is that if such an invasion was possible, would the secular mental health establishment even be able to continue in form or function as it has been previously?²⁵ I would again suggest it would not. When the individual parts are altered, the sum of those parts becomes something new. As a thought exercise, consider that if a certain false religion rejected every heretical doctrine and replaced each of

²³ Stanton Jones and Richard Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011), 434-478. Unfortunately, Jones and Butman fail to provide a comprehensive appraisal or rationale, outside of platitudes, regarding the place of the church should take in counseling, they spend a majority of their argument assuming the legitimacy of professional counseling.

²⁴ Paul Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans, 1995).

²⁵ Williams, "Counselors as Missionaries," 36.

them with corresponding orthodox doctrines, then that false religion would cease to be a false religion! Unfortunately, common refrains from those within the BCM who favor this type of engagement rarely discuss how the outcomes of faithful “mission work” (that being evangelization and discipleship) within the mental health professions would actually alter their own professional and occupational standing and positions within those very same structures.

MISSIONAL CONTEXTUALIZATION AND COUNSELING

As we consider the work of foreign missionaries, it is clear that contextualization, to some extent, happens. In many situations, these missionaries have to learn a new language, understand culturally sensitive customs, acknowledge and operate by the laws of the country in which they are to live, and many more besides. But one thing, the most important thing, that cannot be compromised or contextualized is the message of salvation and the particular call of discipleship, conformation, and personal obedience to Jesus Christ. Williams argues that if Christians do not enter into the mental health professionals as missionaries, then they are being myopic. I argue that if Christians enter into the mental health professionals as the kind of missionaries he suggests, it will not be the mental health and counseling professions that will change, but the Christian missionary himself.

In support for contextualization, Williams relies upon a biblical account found in Acts 17:16-34. Williams views Paul and the pagans of Athens as stand-ins for Christian counselors and secular therapists. In his working through this passage, Williams attempts to re-imagine Paul as a conceptual bridge-builder whose approach to the pagans on the Areopagus is best described as commendable and inoffensive in order that he may gain a hearing from them. This understanding makes sense when we see that Williams’ approach includes not only an “effort to communicate the message of God in a way that is faithful to Scripture,” but one that is also “meaningful to respondents in their context.”²⁶ Is it possible for one to truly make the gospel meaningful to

²⁶ Williams, “Counselors as Missionaries,” 31. Can we make the gospel meaningful? Is this even our purpose in gospel proclamation? See, Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, xii-xiii. Williams does mention that there are two risks to the contextualization that he proposes. One such problem is an “over-contextualization which is essentially syncretism and is found

those who are enemies of the cross? By examining Williams' interpretation of the account, there seems to be more eisegetical than exegetical hermeneutic applied.

The passage opens with the statement that Paul's "spirit was troubled within him, when he saw that the city [Athens] was full of idols" (Acts 17:16). Instead of the idea that Paul made it his aim to make his message palpable to his pagan respondents, a careful reading of this passage suggests that when Paul saw these idols, he was provoked, irritated, exasperated, and perhaps righteously angry at what he beheld. Nowhere in Scripture do we see pagan idolatry as something that either God or his servants tolerate, and the same goes here for the apostle. Paul then begins to speak to the men of Athens observing that they seem "extremely religious in every respect" (Acts 17:22). Williams interprets this comment as proof that Paul sought to be inoffensive towards the men of Athens by reframing the idolatry as "object of worship" and goes even further to commend them for their religious devotion of the unknown gods. Once again, this reading of Paul does not seem consistent with his teaching and posture towards idolatry in any of his other epistles or writings. While Williams does go on to explain that Paul eventually calls the pagans to repentance, it is clear that the bent of his interpretive lens highlights the necessity and priority of building mutual respect, appreciation, and meaningful dialogue.²⁷ Williams also uses the first chapter of John to argue that the apostle used the term *logos* in order to "strategically co-op both their terminology and their desire for reason, logic, and truth."²⁸ To correspond this claim with the argument for Christians to integrate the trappings of the mental health complex is irresponsible at best.

most frequently integrationism" (32). The second problem, one that he notes is especially problematic for biblical counselors is "under-contextualization" which essentially betrays a separatist attitude to what could be gained in "the mental health world and 'secular' research." Williams clearly views the latter risk as a serious error which will eliminate "meaningful and persuasive interaction" with the mental health counseling complex (32). One doesn't have to imagine where Williams' appeals to have such interactions ultimately leads. Current biblical counseling faculty at SEBTS demonstrate the effects of this misguided argument. See Kristin Kellen, "Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ," *Southeastern Theological Review* (vol. 15, no. 1, Spring 2024), 47-58.

²⁷ Williams, "Counselors as Missionaries," 31.

²⁸ Ibid.

What is striking throughout much of the literature that I have read by those who identify as biblical counselors but promote a faulty missionary paradigm is that their posture towards secular psychology and the helping professions is one of advocacy in encouraging substantive interaction and utilization of extra-biblical data.²⁹ Oftentimes, these arguments are tempered with what I call “scriptural sufficiency talk” that encourages trust in “empirical inquiry” as long as biblical fidelity is maintained. Such shibboleths almost always are used as safety nets that provide open doors for functional integration.³⁰

PROMOTING PROFESSIONAL COUNSELING LICENSURE

The culmination of the argument that all Christians should have “some sense of being on mission to the mental health subculture” is on the open advocacy for Christians to seek or maintain professional and state-endorsed counseling licenses or practice in “biblically faithful” ways within mental health structures.³¹ Williams suggests that in order to be a relevant voice with

²⁹ Heath Lambert refers to this as “fascination” and Jay Adams refers to such counselors as being “caught up in the views and practices of unbelievers that in their writings they spend more time attacking those who attempt to set forth biblical positions than those who oppose them” (8). See Heath Lambert, “Priests in the Garden, Zombies in the Wilderness, and Prophets on the Wall; The Current State of the Contemporary Biblical Counseling Movement,” *First Thoughts* (May 13, 2024). <https://fbcjax.com/first-thoughts/priests-in-the-garden-zombies-in-the-wilderness-and-prophets-on-the-wall-the-current-state-of-the-contemporary-biblical-counseling-movement/>; and Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 8. A clear example of such fascination, and even what I would term a pro-eclectic approach to counseling methodology, can be seen in recent articulations made by Nate Brooks, et. al., “What is Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?”

³⁰ Jeremy Lelek, “The Sufficiency of Scripture and Holistic Care: A Cursory Introduction,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, (vol. 49, no. 3, 2021), 268-284. I would argue that Lelek is a representative of a neo-integrationist position. Such Christian counselors are those who identify as biblical counselors but practice functional integration. In other words, they believe they are presenting a modified version of biblical counseling, but in reality, they are presenting a modified version of classic integration. Much of their writing echoes the “fail safe” phrases that actively promote integration while attempting to maintain a definitive stance of sufficiency of Scripture. See also, Nate Brooks, “Everybody Integrates: Biblical Counseling and the Use of Extrabiblical Material,” *Southeastern Theological Review* (vol. 15, no. 1, Spring 2024), 7-20.

³¹ Sam R. Williams, “The Licensure Question,” *Biblical Counseling Coalition* (January 22, 2013) <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2013/01/22/the-licensure-question/>; and Jeremy Lelek, “Biblical Counseling as a Licensed Professional: Functionally Speaking,” *Biblical Counseling Coalition* (January 23, 2013). <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2013/01/23/biblical-counseling-as-a-licensed-professional-functionally-speaking/>.

a significant standing in the culture, and by extension have the largest platform for the gospel, a Christian counselor would “need to be both well-trained in our faith’s psychology and in one of the secular mental health professions . . . licensure or certification will often be necessary.”³²

At an alarming rate, professional counseling licensure, currently an expansive bureaucratic and lucrative governmental activity, forces Christians to choose between compromising their biblically informed conscience in matters relating to the counsel they provide, or risk losing their credentials.³³ By definition, licensing is a civil government action of restricting entry into and conduct within a certain occupation or profession. While licensing of professional counseling is hardly any older than the BCM itself, the earliest licensing of professions began around 1200 A.D. in medieval Europe. Wealthy professional guilds, which held monopolies in their respective fields, ultimately excluded the poor to insulate the wealthy, regardless of merit. Such guilds flourished until the 16th Century but re-emerged in modern Europe and the Americas in the early 19th Century where civil governments regulated various professions in order to promote and maintain “public confidence.”³⁴

³² Williams, “Counselors as Missionaries,” 32, 39.

³³ For more on legal implications relating to these issues, see T. Dale Johnson, Jr. and Edward Charles Wilde, eds., *Legal Issues in Biblical Counseling: Direction and Help for Churches and Counselors* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2022); and Mark R. McMinn and Katheryn Rhoads Meek, “Ethics Among Christian Counselors: A Survey of Beliefs and Behaviors,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* (vol. 24, no. 1, 1996), 26-37. All state credentialing and regulating entities, such as the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), or organizations designed to promote professional counseling competency are governed by codes of ethics by which counselors must abide at the risk of losing their license, or worse. To demonstrate just how morally and ethically biased such professional guilds are, take for example a practice question from the National Counselor Examination given through the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC). The sample question asks, “A client asks a counselor if abortion is morally acceptable. Which one of the following would be an ethical response?” of the four answers, three give clear stances that are objectively either moral or immoral, but the correct answer to the question is “My opinion about this topic seems important to you. Can you tell me more?” Additionally, the *Code of Ethics* for the NBCC states, “Counselors shall demonstrate multicultural counseling competence in practice. Counselors will not use counseling techniques or engage in any professional activities that discriminate against or show hostility toward individuals or groups based on gender, ethnicity, race, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, disability, religion, or any other legally prohibited basis.” *National Board for Certified Counselors Code of Ethics* (revised August 24, 2023) <https://nbcc.org/assets/Ethics/nbcccodeofethics.pdf>.

³⁴ Stanley J. Gross, “The Myth of Professional Licensing,” *American Psychologist* (vol. 33, November 1978), 1011-1012.

It is assumed and claimed that professional licensing protects the public. There is a widely embraced correlation between such credentialing and competency, but as you may have experienced yourself, licensing is not a fail-safe against incompetence or even harm.³⁵ In truth, in all the years since its re-emergence in the West, there has been no “experiential data to relate licensing to increased competency or public safety, and that includes in the areas of professional counseling and therapy.”³⁶ In addition to these concerns about professional counseling structures, are accompanying concerns about the ethical and moral subjugation of the counselor’s conscience. Ultimately, unaccountable state-endorsed licensing boards dictate the standards of “professional orthodoxy” thus holding complete control of conduct, content, method, and quality of the counseling “service” provided. Because the state (or professional institutions and experts) regulates counseling as a profession, those who operate within those structures and spheres of jurisdiction find themselves under their authority as well.³⁷

THEOLOGICAL DIVERGENCE

Since counseling is Christian ministry and Christian ministry requires one to be missional in the ways I have described herein, there is no room for secular structures of care to either inform or stifle the individual Christian counselor’s conscience. Every Christian should have the freedom to make

³⁵ For more on the limitations of professional licensing for mental health counselors during the nascent years of state licensing in the United States, see: Gross, “The Myth of Professional Licensing,” 1009-1016; Joseph K. Neumann, “A Theological Perspective on the Licensing of Helping Professionals,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* (vol. 17, no. 3, 1989), 252-262; Joseph K. Neumann, “Licensing of Health Care Professionals from a Biblical Perspective,” *Journal of Biblical Medical Ethics* (vol. 2, no. 2, 1988); Donald S. Arbuckle, “Counselor Licensure: To Be or Not to Be,” *Personnel and Guidance Journal* (vol. 55, no. 10, 1977), 581-585; Marguerite R. Carroll, Shirley Griggs, and Fredrica Halligan, “The Licensure Issue: How Real Is It?” *Personnel and Guidance Journal* (vol. 55, no. 10, 1977), 577-580; and Dean Porter, Mary Clare Gildon, and Susan Zgliczynski, “Is Licensure in Your Future?” *International Career Development Conference* (October 2000), 85-13.

³⁶ Neumann, “Licensing of Health Care Professionals from a Biblical Perspective,” n.p.

³⁷ Joe Boot, “The Cult of the Expert,” The Ezra Institute (April 25, 2020). <https://www.ezrainstitute.com/resource-library/articles/the-cult-of-the-expert/>; Abigail Shrier, *Bad Therapy: Why the Kids Aren’t Growing Up* (New York: Sentinel, 2024); and James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age without Good or Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

much of Christ and to frame their care of others in the Holy Scriptures. Any structure or context of counseling that keeps counselors from proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ to the glory of God through the work of the Holy Spirit by giving counselees Jesus first and often, is not a structure in which Christians should seek to participate.³⁸ In addition, what drives the ethics and goals of the Christian conscience is biblical doctrine. Doctrine must be expressed in the particulars and the particulars should inform practice. Ultimately, the Christian who counsels is beholden to God and judged by His standard as expressed in Scripture alone (cf. Hebrews 4:12-13).

There are several examples of theological fault lines that have formed within the BCM. These include the means of sanctification, the openness to integration regarding theory and method, among others. While I can't cover all of these in this essay, I do want to look at three points of divergence that directly relate to my thesis here. These include questions relating to authority, jurisdiction, and interpretation.

THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

When speaking of counselors serving as missionaries to and within the mental health field, Williams is primarily speaking about Christians providing counseling in professional, clinical, and occupational spaces as licensed counselors. Biblical counselors should not support the idea of pursuing state-endorsed licensure, just as the church should not defer its responsibility for soul care to the state, professional agencies, and the like.³⁹

³⁸ This is not to say that Christians cannot be a Gospel witness in these contexts, but to say that they would be doing so in spite of the mental health context. We should instead be pushing Christians to counsel within the context of the church. See, T. Dale Johnson, Jr., *The Church as a Culture of Care: Finding Hope in Biblical Community* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2021); and David Powlison, "Modern Therapies and the Church's Faith," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* (vol. 15, no. 1, Fall 1996), 32-41; David Powlison, "Counseling is the Church," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* (vol. 20, no. 2, Winter 2002), 2-7; and David Powlison and Heath Lambert, "Biblical Counseling in Local Churches and Parachurch Ministries," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* (vol. 33, no. 2, 2019), 7-37.

³⁹ There are examples, unfortunately, from biblical counselors and those who have worked adjacent to the biblical counseling movement that place greater value on the helpfulness that comes from utilizing mental illness paradigms and reduce biblical counselors to roles that merely "hold the water" for professional psychological counselors. See David Murray and Tom Karel, *The Christian's Guide to Mental Illness* (Nashville: Crossway, 2023); and Helen Thorne and

The reasons behind this are many, but I will focus on two. First, licensure is all about authority. When a Christian who seeks to counsel the whole counsel of God's Word (especially in the cultural milieu that we find ourselves in), but that Christian has the authority of the secular government over them, they will find themselves at odds with necessary God-ordained authorities (e.g., the church, Scripture, etc.) at one time or another. While the government is a good and God-ordained institution, its primary purpose is *not* the care of souls (which is the central concern of counseling). The church has been given that primary responsibility. This leads to an additional point that when secular careers in counseling are pursued, the actual and practical authority of the church is challenged or outright disregarded. Among other serious implications behind this is that when the work of counseling becomes divorced from pastoral and church oversight, the stigma that many Christians carry about sharing troubles with others in the family of God is maintained, and the tone, language, descriptions, and prescriptions provided by the counselor about their counselee and his/her problems take on an ever-encompassing secular viewpoint (this is the natural drift). Powlison noted that "Christians in mental health settings typically are far more profoundly socialized and enculturated than they realize."⁴⁰

THE QUESTION OF JURISDICTION

Obviously, since the early days of the BCM, the call from its leaders was a call back to the church. The Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF) which was founded by Jay Adams and helmed for many years by David Powlison, holds as its mandate the work of "restoring Christ to counseling and counseling to the church."⁴¹ This is more than a slogan. It represents a key tenet of biblical counseling. The fact that some self-identified biblical counselors actually support the notions Williams and others have advanced demonstrates

Steve Midgely, *Mental Health and Your Church* (The Good Book Company, 2023). For a critical analysis of Murray's book see, T. Dale Johnson Jr. and Samuel Stephens, "A Christian's Guide to Mental Illness," *Truth in Love Podcast* (Episode 464) <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/podcast-episodes/a-christians-guide-to-mental-illness/>.

⁴⁰ Powlison, "Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies)," 36.

⁴¹ This phrase has can be used and seen on imprints of CCEF branded materials as on their website for several years.

jurisdictional upheaval of the gravest kind. Jurisdictional theology refers to the study of God-ordained institutions and how each of these are designed to operate in and of themselves, and appropriate ways they are to interact with one another. Upheaval or jurisdictional overreach occurs, however, when one institution (e.g., human government) takes over responsibilities of another institution (e.g., church).⁴²

Those who have diverged from biblical counseling are generally favorable of Christians working within secular counseling contexts. Oftentimes they highlight the importance of cultural relevancy to validate their own counseling commitments. Thinking that real cultural impact can best occur from within the mental health counseling professions because that is where people are looking for help is not only their common refrain, but it reveals where their trust for this important work is found. A wise counselor once reminded me that I should be careful never to place the measure for success for ministry on the reactions or responses of people, but instead success is measured by my seeking to obey and please God. This is something that all biblical counselors should remember. If effectiveness is derived from secular credentialing, validation, or recognition, then it can't be grounded in other means. It is important to note that the mental health complex itself, both in content and context, is a committed *secular* institution. It is not a parachurch ministry. It is not committed to the mission, goals, and purposes of the church. Why then would we seek to achieve the ends of the Great Commission with means that run counter to those ends?

THE QUESTION OF INTERPRETATION

According to David Powlison, there are many Christians today operating in secular structures who “fail to recognize that they are working in a radioactive zone, and they absorb faulty diagnostic, explanatory, and treatment models without knowing that they have done so.”⁴³ These secular counseling

⁴² See Rob Rienow, *Limited Church, Unlimited Kingdom: Uniting Church and Family in the Great Commission* (Nashville: Randall House, 2013) and Edward T. Welch, “When Independent Counselors Do Pastoral Care,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* (Vol. 25, No. 2, Spring 2007), 55-60.

⁴³ Powlison, “Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies),” 36. Preceding this warning, Powlison states, “It is not necessarily wrong for Christians to work within the secular mental

structures promote the legitimacy of mental illness paradigms of explanation for emotional and behavioral problems. The DSM contains hundreds of psychiatric disorders and syndromes that do not represent medically verifiable diseases. On the contrary, they are collections and groupings of clinically observed symptoms arranged into particular categories that hold stigmatizing labels that remove, among other things, matters of personal identity, moral responsibility, and life purpose.⁴⁴

To his credit, Williams notes that psychotherapy is “desperately in need of redemption, not because their [secular therapists] insights and intentions are entirely wrong, but because they are fundamentally wrong about the most important things.”⁴⁵ Even Williams has to point out that there are major interpretive flaws in psychological counseling. The concept of *mental illness* itself is merely an interpretive construct that is chosen by secularists to represent and explain of problems people face in a closed system that has no place for God. Only by deriving our interpretations of problems from the Bible and using biblical terminology leads people to correctly understanding their identity and the nature of their problems. The Bible is clear, the heart of man is active and entails the will, emotions, and thoughts of a person.⁴⁶ Being made in God’s image, but under the effects of original sin means that oftentimes our desires, perceptions, and allegiances are “disordered,” meaning

health system, if they can do so without being forced to communicate false ideas, diagnostically and prescriptively, to those they counsel . . . But Christians in such settings must realize that when they are barred from mentioning sin and Christ . . . they are limited to being relatively superficial and moralistic in the context of their counsel.” Redemptive Counselors / Clinically Informed Biblical Counselors state that they desire to be evangelistic in their counseling in cases where clients are open to hearing the good news of Jesus Christ. However, if their clients are not open to the gospel, these counselors are “willing to use the more limited techniques afforded by clinical counseling” and believe that “these techniques are always guided by the truth found in Scripture and employed to affect the greatest amount of good possible for the sake of the individual and society, especially in secular clinical settings” (9). Unfortunately, these counselors do not heed Powlison’s prophetic warning. The only “good” that such counselors can provide in these contexts is one that is foreign to Scripture. Take note that this is the best-case scenario for many well-intentioned Christians operating in a context that is not merely indifferent to the Gospel, it is hostile towards it. Any counsel that does not explicitly make use of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is anything but Christian (cf. 2 Timothy 4:3-5).

⁴⁴ Stephens, *The Deception of Psychological Labels*, 8.

⁴⁵ Williams, “Counselors as Missionaries,” 31.

⁴⁶ For good examples for a biblical theology of the heart (inner man) see, A. Craig Troxel, *With All Your Heart: Orienting Your Mind, Desires, and Will toward Christ* (Nashville: Crossway, 2020) and Jeremy Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2016).

they are oriented on self-interest instead of the love and worship of God. Can people experience change and freedom from problems? Yes and No. Real and lasting change is only sustained and upheld by the work of the Holy Spirit and predicated upon salvation (renewed heart/mind) along with a willingness to repent and obey the Scriptures (revealing a spirit of submission and discipleship to God).⁴⁷ However, even in this, none of us are promised problem-free lives. The reality of our fallenness remains.

THE NEED FOR BIBLICAL COMMITMENTS TO CARE AND COUNSELING

If you think that the concerns I have laid out are overblown, I can point out that the development of 20th Century evangelical psychotherapy essentially parallels what is advocated for from within contemporary BCM to disastrous results. Christian mission does not need, nor has it ever needed, to wed itself to paradigms, theories, or structures of care that are antithetical or foreign to the gospel. It is incumbent upon biblical counselors to continue upholding key tenets of biblical counseling practice in order to see this work continue to thrive within the life of the church and committed to the sufficiency of Scripture for the care of souls. While I can't cover all of these in one essay, I will provide a few points that do represent alternatives to what is promoted by those who endorse the mental health counseling complex.

One point I have already made throughout this essay is that the church alone is responsible for soul care. While biblical counseling can occur whenever and wherever Christians are ministering the Word to one another, it is only through the context of the local church where Christian worship and mission meet discipleship. The body of Christ centers on all matters concerning salvation and sanctification, and these are all the matters that concern counseling. How we view Scripture will determine our theology, which in turn will influence our ministry. The mental health complex has no place for Christian theology in the active care of souls. The liturgy of the secular counseling professions marginalizes Scripture at best, and at worst, completely ignores it as God's special revelation of hope to man.

⁴⁷ Samuel Stephens, *Hope for Lasting Change: Meeting Today's Problems with the Eternal Power of the Gospel* (Kansas City: Truth in Love, 2021).

The Christian church affirms that Scripture is authoritative because it is from God and provides the metaphysical backdrop for all aspects of philosophy and theology. It alone makes life make sense. Because it is authoritative, it is also sufficient and should be where we go to find out how to truly help people with their problems in living. Biblical counselors in themselves are wholly insufficient to effect change in the lives of our counselees. Instead, we depend upon the necessary and supernatural work of the Holy Spirit as He works within contexts of intensive discipleship leading to progressive sanctification. Lastly, we turn to Jesus Christ is the standard for right and fruitful human living. This final point is one of the most important missing pieces within modern psychological thinking. In our culture, therapists direct their clients to self-love, self-esteem, self-satisfaction, and self-rule as answers to what ail them. But God granted the church to His children as the ultimate structure of help and hope as its members work together to join in on the individual journey and corporate project of conformity to Christ.

CONCLUSION

I affirm that Christians who counsel should be missional. However, the nature of Christian mission and Christian counsel mandates that we maintain the integrity of our conscience within structures that has God has ordained and provided for counsel. We cannot operate faithfully within structures of care that are fundamentally at odds with biblical worldview. Such structures for operation only serve to challenge and dilute the power and authority of the Scriptures for life and godly living. Instead, we should once again, as a movement, double-down on our commitment and faith in the work of God through the Word of God in the church of God.

Among the many insightful things that Jay left for us who follow in his footsteps, was a helpful perspective about the reality of dueling wisdoms (what he termed divine counsel versus devilish counsel). In the first two chapters of *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, Jay establishes the necessity for biblical theology in counseling. He noted that in order for the discerning counselor to avoid error, or worse falling into the snare of fascination with worldly (or devilish) wisdom, he must be a careful student of the Bible. He

noted that Satan, the great deceiver, was a master at confusing what was made clear by God and taking what was unclear and raising that to undeniable truth. Relating this to the state of counseling in his own day, Adams noted that many Christians had become captivated by philosophies which denied the sufficiency of God's Word. He stated:

Now, at such turning points it is not unusual to discover Christians who unwittingly continue to side with the enemy, and who fight against their brothers when they try to defend and promote the cause of God's truth in counseling. Frequently this results from good motives, wrongly directed. Yet, their influence is tragic. They not only set back helpful counsel, but confuse many who are in transition. Still it is not the persons, as persons, whom we must challenge, but their teachings.⁴⁸

Fast forward several decades, and what he has written here is as applicable as ever. The doctrine of Scripture's perspicuity is one that should be held high for all believers, and especially those of us who counsel. When we face high-sounding arguments that would tempt us to make use of a wisdom that finds its genesis in fallible man, we should exercise caution. First Corinthians 1:18-31 is a key text that I go to often to demonstrate just how contrasting these two wisdoms are:

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE." Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks,

⁴⁸ Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 7.

Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, “LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD.”

What is striking about this contrast, is that nowhere does Paul suggest that the two can co-exist, much less that they both accomplish the same goals. In every way, they are different. Only in one, God's wisdom, will the sinner be saved and the believer be blessed.