

6 Biblical Counseling Convictions

By Bob Kellemen and [RPM Ministries](#), © 2023

A Word from Bob

For a condensed version of [this post](#), see: [6 Biblical Counseling Convictions: Shortened Version](#).

A 16-Word Description of My Model of Biblical Counseling

On my Twitter (now known as X) [profile](#), and on my [Facebook Gospel-Centered Biblical Counseling Group](#), I have the following profile-size, 16-word summary of my convictions about biblical counseling. As biblical counselors we seek to be:

- *Gospel-Centered, Theologically-Saturated, Relationship-Focused, Church History-Informed, Research-Aware Soul Physicians of Embodied-Souls*

A Few Longer Descriptions...

If you'd like a 12-conviction statement of my biblical counseling, see the [Biblical Counseling Coalition Confessional Statement](#). In 2010, I had the honor of facilitating three-dozen biblical counseling leaders, including David Powlison, in a nine-month process of developing ten drafts of the BCC Confessional Statement. You could also read [12 Biblical Counseling Distinctives](#), which is based upon the BCC Confessional Statement.

If you're interested in my book-size convictions about the **theology** of biblical counseling, see [Gospel-Centered Counseling: How Christ Changes Lives](#). If you're interested in my book-size convictions about the **methodology** of biblical counseling, see [Gospel Conversations: How to Care Like Christ](#).

Our Focus

I'll walk us through a summary of each of these six biblical counseling convictions:

1. *Gospel-Centered* Biblical Counseling
2. *Theologically-Saturated* Biblical Counseling
3. *Relationship-Focused* Biblical Counseling
4. *Church History-Informed* Biblical Counseling
5. *Research-Aware* Biblical Counseling
6. *Soul Physicians of Embodied-Souls*

Conviction #1: *Gospel-Centered Biblical Counseling*

My Conviction: It is my conviction that we must build our model of biblical counseling on the gospel of Christ's grace (John 1:14; John 8:31-32; John 10:10; John 14:6; John 17:17; Romans 1:16-17; Galatians 1:6-9; Colossians 1:3-2:23; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:3).

In my first book, [*Soul Physicians: A Theology of Soul Care*](#), and in [every one of my books since then](#), I've sought to ask and biblically answer the question:

- "What would a model of biblical counseling look like that was built solely on the gospel of Christ's grace?"

What is gospel-centered biblical counseling? Here's how we said it in the [Biblical Counseling Coalition Confessional Statement](#):

Biblical Counseling Must Be Centered on Christ and the Gospel:

- "We believe that wise counseling centers on Jesus Christ—His sinless life, death on the cross, burial, resurrection, present reign, and promised return. Through the Gospel, God reveals the depths of sin, the scope of suffering, and the breadth, length, height, and depth of grace.
- Wise counseling gets to the heart of personal and interpersonal problems by bringing to bear the truth, mercy, and power of Christ's grace (John 1:14).
- There is no true restoration of the soul and there are no truly God-honoring relationships without understanding the desperate condition we are in without Christ and apart from experiencing the joy of progressive deliverance from that condition through God's mercies.
- **We point people to a person, Jesus our Redeemer, and not to a program, theory, or experience.** We place our trust in the transforming power of the Redeemer as the only hope to change people's hearts, not in any human system of change.
- People need a personal and dynamic relationship with Jesus, not a system of self-salvation, self-management, or self-actualization (John 14:6). Wise counselors seek to lead struggling, hurting, sinning, and confused people to the hope, resources, strength, and life that are available only in Christ."

As I noted earlier, for a fuller development of gospel-centered counseling, see [Gospel-Centered Counseling: How Christ Changes Lives](#).

Conviction #2: *Theologically-Saturated Biblical Counseling*

My Conviction: It is my conviction that **before** we seek to be research-informed or research-aware, we **must first be** theologically-saturated and theologically-informed (Colossians 1:15-23; Colossians 2:2-15).

My Conviction: It is my conviction that God’s sufficient, authoritative, rich, robust, relevant, inerrant Word provides all we need to build our **prescriptive** biblical counseling theology of people (Creation) problems (Fall), and solutions (Redemption and Consummation) (Romans 15:14; Philippians 1:9-11; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:3).

To see the specifics of this conviction see:

- [*Gospel-Centered Counseling*](#) where I use the ten classic systematic theology doctrines as a grid for answering the question, *what makes biblical counseling truly biblical?* I turn those ten doctrines into [8 ultimate life questions](#).
- [*Ponderings About Being a “_____ -Informed Biblical Counselor”*](#).
- [*A Theologically-Informed Approach to Sexual Abuse Counseling: Implementing the Hermeneutical Spiral*](#).

Here’s how we described theologically-saturated biblical counseling in the [Biblical Counseling Coalition Confessional Statement](#):

Biblical Counseling Must Be Grounded in Sound Theology:

- “We believe that biblical counseling is fundamentally a practical theological discipline because every aspect of life is related to God. God intends that we care for one another in ways that relate human struggles to His person, purposes, promises, and will.
- Wise counseling arises from a theological way of looking at life—a mindset, a worldview—that informs how we understand people, problems, and solutions. The best biblical counselors are wise, balanced, caring, experienced practical theologians (Philippians 1:9-11).
- Biblical counselors relate the Scriptures relevantly to people’s lives (Hebrews 3:12-19). All wise counseling understands particular passages and a person’s unique life experience within the context of the Bible’s larger storyline: God’s creation, our fall into sin, His redemptive plan, and the consummation of all things. Thus we engage in person-specific conversations that flow naturally out of a comprehensive biblical theology of life.”

Conviction #3: Relationship-Focused Biblical Counseling

My Conviction: It is my conviction that truly biblical counseling must embody truth-in-love. Because the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:35-40) is to love God and others, the goal of our counseling is Christlike love (2 Corinthians 1:3-9; 2 Corinthians 6:11-13; Galatians 4:19; Ephesians 4:15; Ephesians 5:1-2; Philippians 1:9-11; 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8; 1 Timothy 1:5).

My Conviction: It is my conviction that at times biblical counseling can become “truth-only counseling” where the counselor **“teaches at”** the counselee. According to passages such as Matthew 22:35-40; 2 Corinthians 1:3-9; 2 Corinthians 6:11-13; Galatians 4:19; Ephesians 4:15; Ephesians 5:1-2; Philippians 1:9-11; 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8; 1 Timothy 1:5; God calls us

as biblical counselors to exhibit and express Christlike shepherding love as we relate soul-to-soul with our counselees.

Perhaps this conviction is somewhat unexpected. But it should not be. As the list of verses above demonstrate, all of life and all of ministry is truth-in-love-focused. Yes, the message matters—which is why we started with gospel-centered and theologically-saturated biblical counseling. However, the Bible also teaches that the **messenger's Christlike character** (1 Timothy 4:16) and the **messenger's relationship** to the hearer (1 Thessalonians 2) **also matter greatly**.

I develop this much further in [5 Biblical Portraits of a Biblical Counselor: Sharing Scripture and Soul](#). In summary I say:

- Biblical counseling involves gospel conversations where we engage in soul-to-soul relationships as **brothers, mothers, fathers, children, and mentors** who relate Christ's gospel story to our friends' daily stories (1 Thessalonians 2).

For equipping in 22 biblical counseling truth-in-love relational competencies, see [Gospel Conversations: How to Care Like Christ](#).

For more on the relational nature of truly biblical counseling, see [Consider Your Counsel: Addressing Ten Mistakes in Our Biblical Counseling](#).

Conviction #4: Church History-Informed

My Conviction: It is my conviction that comprehensive, compassionate biblical counseling is best developed when we listen to that great cloud of **historical Christian witnesses** who teach us how the church has always applied gospel truth in Christlike love to *sustain, heal, reconcile, and guide saints* who face *suffering* and battle against *sin* on their *sanctification* journey (Deuteronomy 32:7; Jeremiah 6:16; Romans 14:19; Romans 15:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:11, 14; 2 Thessalonians 3:15; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 12:1).

My Conviction: It is my conviction that biblical counseling is weakened when it is built predominantly upon one biblical word, any one individual's views, any one group's perspective, any one culture, or any one era of church history. Today's biblical counselors would demonstrate wisdom and humility by learning from [historical biblical counseling](#) which began with the Old Testament, continued throughout the New Testament, and has a 2,000-year history from the early church to the church today (Genesis 1-3; Psalms 1; Proverbs 1; Isaiah 9:6; John 14:6; Acts 20:20; Revelation 7:9; see also my word study mini-series on [parakaletic biblical counseling](#)).

This is another conviction that might surprise some. It shouldn't. As I've said often over the past 40 years:

- “The Church has always been about the business of helping hurting and hardened people find hope and healing in Christ.”

G. K. Chesterton said it beautifully:

- “Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes—our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking around.”

[Historical biblical counseling didn't begin 50 years ago](#) with the modern nouthetic counseling movement. As I noted above, historical biblical counseling began in the Old Testament, continued in the New Testament, and was actively developed and practiced **across a multitude of eras and cultures** for 2,000 years since the time of Christ. If we are wise and humble, we will listen and learn from those Christian soul physicians, soul care givers, spiritual friends, [pastors](#), shepherds, theologians, and biblical counselors who preceded us.

For more on the history of Christian soul care and what we can learn from it today, see:

- [3 Books on Biblical Counseling in Church History: A Treasure Hunt!](#)
- [Spiritual Care in Historical Perspective: Martin Luther as a Case Study in Christian Sustaining, Healing, Reconciling, and Guiding](#)
- [12 Top Resources on the History of Biblical Counseling, Pastoral Counseling, and Soul Care](#)
- [When Did “Historical Biblical Counseling” Begin?](#)
- [Bob Kellemen and David Powlison Discuss Biblical Counseling and Church History](#)

Conviction #5: Research-Aware

My Conviction: It is my conviction—based upon theological categories such as common grace, the imago Dei, the Creation/Cultural mandate, the noetic effect of sin, natural revelation, special revelation, total depravity, a biblical theology of the role and place of science and research—that awareness of research findings can provide potentially helpful contributions (secondarily to Scripture and assessed under the lens of Scripture) to our understanding of the impact of various physical, cultural, and societal experiences in our fallen world of sin and suffering, tragedy and trauma (Genesis 1:26-28; Psalm 19:1-14; Romans 1:18-25; Romans 2:14-15; Romans 3:1-23; Hebrews 1:1-3; 1 Peter 3:8-22).

My Conviction: It is my conviction, as described in the [Biblical Counseling Coalition Confessional Statement](#), that “when we say that Scripture is comprehensive in wisdom, we mean that the Bible makes sense of all things, not that it contains all the information people could ever know about all topics. God’s common grace brings many good things to human life. However, common grace cannot save us from our struggles with sin or from the troubles that beset us. Common grace cannot sanctify or cure the soul of all that ails the human condition. We affirm that numerous sources (such as scientific research, organized observations about human behavior, those we counsel, reflection on our own life experience, literature, film, and history) can contribute to our knowledge of people, and many sources

can contribute some relief for the troubles of life. However, none can constitute a comprehensive system of counseling principles and practices.”

This part of this post can be a “hot topic” in the biblical counseling world. The topic goes by various names and notions, such as:

- Research-informed,
- Neuroscience-informed,
- Evidenced-based-research-informed,
- Science-informed, and
- Descriptive psychology research-informed, etc.

You’ll notice that I’m using the generic term “research.” By doing so, I am including all the types of research in the preceding bullet points.

You’ll also notice that I am using the word “*aware*” instead of “*informed*.” In small part, that’s because I already used “informed” related to the study of the history of Christian soul care. More importantly, the word “aware” communicates my intent: that as biblical counselors we can have a healthy and humble interest in research findings, their potential implications for our ministry to hurting people, how those research findings can play a catalytic role in driving us back to Scripture, and how common grace research findings can assist us in dealing comprehensively with the whole person.

Be sure to notice where “research-aware” comes in our list—**after** gospel-centered, theologically-saturated, relationship-focused, and church history-informed counseling. For more on how vital these theological areas are for assessing research findings, see:

- [*10 Questions About Biblical Counseling and Neuroscience: Becoming Soul Physicians of Embodied-Souls*](#)
- [*Scripture and Soul: How to Study the Bible for Biblical Counseling*](#)
- [*Ponderings About Being a _____-Informed Biblical Counselor*](#)

What Other Christians Have Said: A Small Sampler

The modern nouthetic counseling movement saw a place—under the authority of Scripture—for scientific findings, [neuroscience](#), and descriptive research. In his first book, Jay Adams noted,

“I do not wish to disregard science, but rather *I welcome it as a useful adjunct* for the purposes of illustrating, filling in generalizations with specifics, and challenging wrong human interpretations of Scripture, thereby forcing the student to restudy the Scriptures” (Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, p. xxi, emphasis added).

In 1993, at the 25-year mark of the modern nouthetic counseling movement, Jay Adams, John Bettler, and David Powlison discussed [what nouthetic counseling does with secular](#)

[psychology](#). They used 6 “re” words: Recycle, Reinterpret, Reshape, Reconcile, Redeem, and/or Recast. It’s instructive to note that none of these 6 “re” words include the word “**reject**.” Classic nouthetic counseling, as discussed at the quarter-century mark, by the three main leaders of the modern nouthetic counseling movement at that time, did **not** reject secular knowledge. Instead, they sought to recycle, reinterpret, reshape, reconcile, redeem, and/or recast secular psychology through the lens of Scripture.

Even more recently, in an excellent chapter in [Scripture and Counseling](#), entitled “Caution: Counseling Systems Are Belief Systems” co-authors Ernie Baker and Howard Eyrich explain:

“Now that we have clarified that counseling systems have to do with beliefs let’s consider briefly what can still be used from other systems. For example, we would conclude it is **not** syncretism *to learn about psychology and psychological research*. To say that is syncretism would be like saying it is syncretism to learn geology. There are worldview issues with psychology and geology, *but they are still academic disciplines*. *We can learn useful **descriptive** information from the secular psychologies as they research humans. It is wise to acknowledge these findings but also to assess them biblically.*

It is **not** syncretism to *acknowledge scientific research* that does not violate biblical Truth. For example, it would not be syncretism to acknowledge that hypothyroidism may be the cause of the experience of depression. *Wisdom would tell me that I should know this.*

It is **not** syncretism to *learn from helpful methodologies*. For example, if a secular counselor has learned through experience what good questions sound like and how bad questions are worded I can learn from his experience. Why repeat the effort to learn *strategic question asking* if someone else has already done the work? On the one hand, it is important to keep your radar active though so that you don’t buy into the philosophy behind why those questions are being asked (the framework of that system). On the other hand, learning how to ask questions from another system is not as much of a core issue as say incorporating their answer to the question, why do people do what they do. The answer to that question would be in competition with a biblical framework” (174-175).

What Church History Has Said: A Small Sampler...

Being church history-informed helps us to biblically think through issues of being research-aware. For example, Clebsch and Jaekle, in [Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective](#), note that Christians have always engaged with the philosophy and science of the day, but always used their pastoral theology to assess and evaluate those perspectives.

Reformed theologian and Pastor, John Calvin, shared:

“When we so condemn human understanding for its perpetual blindness as to leave it no perception of any object whatever, we not only go against God’s Word, but also run

counter to the experience of common sense” (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.ii.12).

“But if the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other like disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance. For if we neglect God’s gift freely offered in these arts, we ought to suffer just punishment for our sloths” (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.ii.16).

“Therefore, in reading profane authors, the admirable light of truth displayed in them should remind us that the human mind, however much fallen and perverted from its original integrity, is still adorned and invested with admirable gifts from its Creator. If we reflect that the Spirit of God is the only fountain of truth, we will be careful, as we would avoid offering insult to him, not to reject or condemn truth wherever it appears.... If the Lord has been pleased to assist us by the work and ministry of the ungodly in physics, dialectics, mathematics, and other similar sciences, let us avail ourselves of it” (*Institutes*, Beveridge ed., 2.2.15–16).

Some Additional Resources

In the past year, I’ve examined this topic of research in great detail. Here are a few resources you may find beneficial as you think through research-aware biblical counseling.

- [400+ Resources on Biblical Counseling and Psychology-Related Research](#)
- [24 Resources for Counseling the Whole Person](#)
- [Biblical Counseling and Scientific Research](#)
- [Biblical Counseling, Neuroscience, and Descriptive Research Psychology](#)
- [What Does Biblical Counseling Believe About Extra Biblical Literature](#)
- [Chapters 1 and 2 of *Gospel-Centered Counseling: How Christ Changes Lives*](#)

Conviction #6: Soul Physicians of Embodied-Souls

My Conviction: It is my conviction that biblical counselors are soul physicians of embodied-souls, and thus, truly comprehensive and compassionate biblical counseling must understand the Bible’s Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation teaching on the complex interrelationship of body and soul (embodied-soul), and can benefit from awareness of neuroscience research assessed under the lens of Scripture (see: [112 Biblical Passages on Being Embodied-Souls](#)).

My Conviction: It is my conviction that biblical counselors—as *under-shepherds* (Genesis 1:26-28)—will develop and follow a “theological anthropology”—a rich and robust biblical understanding of embodied-souls that leads to relevant and practical counseling that ministers to people comprehensively—as relational (spiritual, social, self-aware), rational, volitional, emotional, and physical beings—embodied-souls.

My Conviction: It is my conviction that biblical counselors—*as under-scientists* (Genesis 1:26-28)—will use the lens of God’s sufficient Scriptures to carefully assess and evaluate neuroscience research regarding the brain/body connection and then will potentially discerningly implement interventions that specifically address our embodied nature.

There is no such thing as an unembodied-soul—unless we are counseling dead people. There is no such thing as only counseling the soul. There is no such thing as only counseling the body. We are embodied-souls counseling other embodied-souls. God fearfully and wonderfully made each one of us as a complex combined unity of body/soul.

Because this issue is so vital and so controversial (though, biblically, it ought not to be controversial), I collated 112 Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation biblical passages on embodied-souls: [*112 Biblical Passages on Being Embodied-Souls*](#).

Here are additional resources on biblical counseling and embodied-souls that you may find helpful:

- [*24 Resources for Counseling the Whole Person: God Designed Us as “Embodied-Souls”*](#)
- [*A Biblical Counseling Perspective on Neuroscience and the Soul*](#)
- [*400+ Resources on Biblical Counseling and Psychology-Related Research*](#)
- [*Biblical Counseling and Scientific Research*](#)
- [*Biblical Counseling, Neuroscience, and Descriptive Research Psychology*](#)
- [*10 Questions About Biblical Counseling and Neuroscience: Becoming Soul Physicians of Embodied-Souls*](#)
- [*Anxiety and Our Physical Bodies: God’s Care for Embodied Souls*](#)
- [*4 Reasons Why I Write About Embodied-Souls*](#)
- [*Jay Adams, Nouthetic Counseling, and Neuroscience*](#)
- [*How Biblical Counselors Could Engage Matthew LaPine’s The Logic of the Body*](#)
- [*7 Biblical Truths Countering the False Gospel of Emotional Health and Wealth*](#)
- [*Emotions: God’s Idea*](#)

What If We Disagree?

I’m not assuming that your 6 convictions (or however many convictions you might list) about biblical counseling would be the same as mine. I’m pretty positive that if you developed a 16-word description of your model of biblical counseling, it would be different from mine.

What if we disagree? Here’s a final link to a resource that could help us talk maturely to each other as biblical counselors:

- [*5 Biblical Counseling Principles for Addressing Disagreements Among Biblical Counselors*](#)

Your Reflections

How would you word and summarize your convictions about biblical counseling?

If you had ten-to-twenty words to describe your model of biblical counseling, what would your description be?

Where do you agree or disagree with any of my biblical counseling convictions from this post?