The Next Generation of Biblical Counseling: A Tribute to the Legacy of David Powlison

by **BRAD HAMBRICK**

It is hard to be both *excellent* and *engaged* in multiple areas of ministry. Being excellent in one area often comes at the expense of other areas. Sometimes this is because of our time limitations: whatever time we spend studying and refining skills in one area can't be spent on another area. Other times it is because of the inverse relationship between particular aptitudes. For example, it is hard for one person to have the strengths of both an extrovert and introvert. Being good at one thing can actually get in the way of being good at other things. As the saying goes, "All strengths have their corresponding weaknesses." But occasionally it seems that an exception to the rule comes along.

David Powlison was one of those exceptions. As I reflect on his life and legacy, I am struck by how many things he did well, things that often don't go together. David was great with words, but also an incredible listener. David held to the timeless truth and authority of the Bible, but was tender and compassionate toward those who were suffering. David never hid his strong convictions, but was equally curious about the views

Brad Hambrick (ThM, EdD) is pastor of counseling at The Summit Church in Durham, North Carolina where he produces many resources to equip churches for counseling (bradhambrick.com).

of those who saw life and counseling differently. Because he did so many things well, his influence reached far and wide.

David's influence can be attributed to his character just as much as to his brilliance. If you had the privilege of having a conversation with him, one of your likely takeaways was that you never felt like you were talking to someone special. You walked away feeling like he may have been more interested in you than you were in him. David embodied C.S. Lewis's famous quote on humility:

> Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call "humble" nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him.[1]

Why do I bring up David's character, his humility? It is not merely a nostalgic affirmation of someone I greatly admired, although it is that. His character enhanced his effectiveness in counseling, both with his counselees and in appealing to those outside the biblical counseling movement. In any form of ministry, character and long-term effectiveness go hand in hand. David believed emphasizing character formation (becoming Christ-like) was important for both effectiveness as a counselor and flourishing as a counselee. David believed that character formation is a central focus of biblical counseling, and that a primary way God forms our character is through worship (falling more in love with Christ).[2] And so these were the two focal points of David's counsel—*becoming more like Christ by falling more in love with Christ*.

This focus marked a change in emphasis for the biblical counseling movement. A primary focus of the first generation of biblical counseling was *personal agency*—restoring a sense that individuals cannot blame external influences for their choices. The first generation of biblical

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1. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2015), 128.

2. If the language of *character formation* and *narrative reframing* is new to you to conceptualize different types of helping conversations in counseling, consider reading the brief blog article at bradhambrick.com/four-types-of-helpful-counseling-conversations.

counseling reminded the church that we are sinners who are responsible for our choices and, by God's empowering grace, we are capable of making God glorifying choices that contribute to our flourishing. A primary focus for David, as a representative of the second generation of biblical counseling, was *the power of adoration to explain motives and effect change*. In other words, *we become like what we worship*. The second generation of biblical counseling reminded the church that every choice we make is an act of worship that reveals our heart. Counseling is about more than biblical behavior modification; it should aspire to restore a life-giving relationship with God. If the theme verse of the first generation of biblical counseling is Ephesians 4:20–24 (put off and put on), then the theme verse for David and the second generation was Ephesians 5:1 ("be imitators of Christ as beloved children").

This emphasis on worship shaped how David counseled and what he wrote about counseling. David loved Jesus Christ. David believed that if others knew Jesus for who he is, this would profoundly change their lives. David wanted counseling to be a vehicle through which people come to know God's love for them and fall in love with Christ in the midst of their hardships. As people fall in love with him, they are motivated to become like him. And to grow in Christlikeness, David believed, is the essence of human flourishing. This was David's counsel. But David didn't just counsel what he believed; he lived what he believed. He viewed his life through the same set of lenses that he invited his counselees to see their lives. David was an exemplary testimony of the power of a counselor's character and integrity to enhance the influence of their counsel.

We see David living what he counseled in his reflection about his five-year struggle with emotional-relational resilience after open heart surgery. Eventually he and his doctors realized a sleep disorder was causing the resiliency challenge, and a change in medication resulted in significant relief. What was David's assessment of this prolonged trial? In one of his final books on suffering he reflected, "This is not a story of medical cure (joyous as that was). It is a story about the ongoing cure of a soul."[3]

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3. David Powlison, *God's Grace in Your Suffering* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 87.

Those last two sentences are an excellent Rorschach Test (not that we believe in those) of what people think of biblical counseling. Some read it and shout, "Amen! That's what I want biblical counseling to be—conversations toward Christlikeness." Others read it and shout, "Oh my! That's what I'm afraid biblical counseling will be—an approach that downplays everything else in the name of sanctification."

Let's hold off on that discussion—we will get to it—in order to focus on what David is saying. In this medical hardship, the most important thing to David was not what God did *to restore his temporal body* but what God was doing *to refine his eternal soul*. David was grateful for physical relief, but he was focused on character formation (Christlikeness). When he told his story, he put the focus on the latter. When he counseled, he put the focus on the latter as well.

How to Honor David Powlison's Legacy

We will resume the previous discussion, but let's introduce another question to create a more complete context for our reflection. "How do you best honor the legacy of someone like David Powlison?" One answer is to continue the trajectory of the work he did.

If you followed David Powlison's writings in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* (*JBC*), you noticed that he was perpetually considering how to refine biblical counseling and where we need to grow: "Crucial Issues on Contemporary Biblical Counseling" (1988), "A Call for Papers on the Emotions" (2001), "Does the Shoe Fit?" (2002), "How Does Scripture Teach Us to Redeem Psychology?" (2012), "Revisiting Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair" (2013), and "Giving Reasoned Answers to Reasonable Questions" (2014).

David loved biblical counseling the same way God loves people; he was not content for it to remain as it was but always wanted it to become all that God intended. David saw biblical counseling not only as a ministry *of* sanctification, but a ministry *in the process of* sanctification. We honor David's legacy by continuing his passion for refining what he loved.

So, let me ask the same question with a clearer focus. "What were the primary advances that David Powlison made in the second generation of biblical counseling, and what developments remain for the current

generation of biblical counseling?" Asked more simply: "What needs to be celebrated? What remains to be done?"

What Needs to Be Celebrated?

Obviously, this article will not answer these questions exhaustively. I invite each reader to wrestle with these questions as a way to honor the legacy of David Powlison. I will offer five answers to the question of what advances we can celebrate.

1. *Character formation enhances human flourishing.* David believed emphasizing personal agency honored the dignity of individuals. In this sense, David promoted *a virtue psychology*, an approach to counseling that claimed Christlikeness was an essential part of optimal emotional-relational living.
2. *The Christian life is life-in-community.* David highlighted the church as a context of giving and receiving care. David did not just emphasize the sufficiency of the Bible, but the necessity of all that the Bible creates—in this case, the church. In this sense, David promoted a *collectivist psychology* to counter the individualism at the forefront of much of modern counseling.
3. *People, as both sufferers and sinners, are complex.* David wrote in a way that had a more balanced focus on the role of suffering in counseling conversations. He spoke of people not just as sinners in need of forgiveness, but also sufferers in need of comfort. He spoke of Jesus not just as holy Redeemer but also as empathetic High Priest.
4. *Motivations matter.* David led in biblical counseling's emphasis on the heart and conceptualization of idolatry as a means for understanding the "why" behind the "what" of human behavior. David's writing on counseling pushed us to cultivate theologically-informed insight in addition to giving biblically-based directives in counseling.
5. *"Psychologies" merit engagement.* David created a more nuanced approach to interacting with the multi-faceted field of psychology. In his contribution to *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views* (2010), he identified six ways the term *psychology* is used, and then reflected on the distortions and benefits of each.

> Frequently he would speak of psychologies (instead of psychology) to denote plurality of references for this term and the need for nuance in how we approach the field. Both the content of his writing and the tone of his interactions with his evangelical counseling peers were an advance in how we relate to psychologies and psychologists.

If you want a more complete reflection on the development and advances of biblical counseling in its second generation, you can read my dissertation, *A Conceptual Analysis of the Counseling Theory and Practice of David Powlison, Ed Welch, and Paul Tripp*. My admiration for David's work is such that I selected him as a primary subject of my doctoral studies.

What Remains to Be Done?

This is where we will return to the tension noted earlier. David Powlison wrote, "This is not a story of medical cure (joyous as that was). It is a story about the ongoing cure of a soul." Why would proponents of biblical counseling get excited by this and critics be concerned? What does the tension in these two responses tell us about the work that is yet to be done in the next generation of biblical counseling?

Perhaps another way to ask these questions would be to return to the truism: every strength has a corresponding weakness. So, we ask, "What weaknesses emerge from the strengths that were developed in the second generation of biblical counseling? What gets neglected when character formation and narrative reframing (i.e., understanding particular hardships in light of the gospel) are the predominant or near-exclusive focal points of counseling?"

Here's one answer. An emphasis on character formation and narrative reframing can easily result in the neglect, or sometimes even the denigration, of relief-oriented strategies in counseling. It can be construed that pursuing relief is to neglect, or even rebel against, pursuing Christlikeness. That is what critics of biblical counseling hear in David's quote: medical relief from a sleep disorder is tangential to the work God did in David's soul.

In the same book on suffering referenced earlier, David makes a statement that would again elicit a comparable positive response from

biblical counseling advocates and a negative response from biblical counseling critics:

> There are countless ways to simply lessen anxiety: vigorous exercise, getting all the facts, Prozac, cognitive behavioral therapy, finding the best possible doctor, yoga, a vacation in Bermuda, a glass of wine, getting some distance from the problem, finding support from fellow sufferers, throwing yourself into work. Some of these are fine in their place. But none of them will make you fearless in the face of trouble. None of them creates that resilient fruit of the Spirit called "endurance," which comes up repeatedly when the New Testament talks about God's purposes in suffering.[4]

We could engage biblical counseling critics with a point-counterpoint style of questions, "Do you really think David Powlison was against medication for sleep disorders, exercise, and vacations? No! By his own testimony he took the medication, exercised, and went on vacation (usually to Hawaii, not Bermuda, because that is where he was born and raised)."

But let's ask, "Is that how David would respond to his critics?" No, the humility David displayed and the bridges he built with those outside the biblical counseling movement indicate that he listened, considered critics' questions reasonable, and sought to give reasonable responses. From my experience writing a dissertation on David's work and having conversations with him, I would imagine him asking something like, "Help me understand. What have I said or left unsaid that would lead you to believe I discourage relief-focused interventions out of my love and appreciation for the soul-refining work God does in hard times? What do you sense is missing or omitted from what we do as biblical counselors?" *It was David's style to extend a conversation rather than seize a moment to win a debate.*

Again, using my imagination, I think a biblical counseling critic is likely to reply, "Where in your writings do you affirm the goodness of relief-oriented strategies and equip those who practice biblical counseling

4. Ibid., 82–83.

to become skilled with these approaches? It feels like this is missing. If you only teach character formation approaches, then it implies this is all you believe is needed. Often your references to relief-oriented strategies come in contrast to heart change. They either place them in competition with sanctification or give them much less importance."

Here, I will leave my imaginative dialogue and offer my own assessments directly. As we've already said, every strength has weaknesses. In emphasizing character formation and narrative reframing, it is easy to downplay relief-oriented strategies. And our existing biblical counseling literature *is* vulnerable to this critique. The next generation of biblical counseling needs to build upon the foundation laid by the first generation and expand the developmental work of the second generation. One of the ways to do so is to increase our movement's willingness and ability to utilize relief-oriented strategies in the care of those who are suffering, or with those whose battle with sin would be strengthened by relief from some of the effects of sin. As just one example, where in our biblical counseling literature do we teach how to recognize the signs that a sleep disorder may be contributing to someone's struggle with emotional regulation and resilience? Our theology clearly teaches that the body has profound influences on the soul, but our assessment and intervention literature does not equip us to minister the implications. We acknowledge these realities, but do not offer instruction on how they impact our approach.

We cannot allow the dominant metaphor for relief-oriented strategies in biblical counseling to be "taking the batteries out of the fire alarm" or "air conditioning the trains to hell." *Relief from suffering and forgiveness of sin are not in competition with one another*. We cannot allow our passion for the latter to result in a neglect of the former. Therefore, we must review our writings in biblical counseling. Will we find that we have equipped practitioners to help strugglers:

- decrease the intensity of and duration of a panic attack,
- remain grounded in the present during a flashback,
- restore voice to a survivor of domestic violence,
- manage the trigger experiences associated with trauma,
- introduce healthy habits to a gastrointestinal system disrupted by anorexia,

- or reconcile with the productivity limitations that result from chronic pain?

If not, then we each need to ask, with David, "does the shoe fit?" to the concerns of those who have noted that our approach is less than holistic.

In the same book on suffering referenced earlier, David Powlison makes the observation, "The [hymn] title 'Jesus! What a Friend to Sinners!' communicates only half of the hymn's story. Jesus is also a true friend for sufferers."[5] The skills I listed in the paragraph above push us to ask, "Are we as effective at being an ambassador of Christ's friendship to those who are suffering (e.g., violation, trauma, physical deterioration) as we are for those who are sinning (i.e., their life struggle is rooted in their personal agency)?" This is a hard question to ask of ourselves. But one of the things that I greatly admired about David is how he moved toward hard questions. The more difficult the question, the less defensive and more curious he became. His ears became sharp, not his tongue.

My hope is that we, as a biblical counseling movement and in honor of David Powlison, will continue to grapple with the kinds of questions that David frequently addressed in his *JBC* articles. David's life and legacy invite us to ask: "Where do we see that biblical counseling needs to grow next?" As a man of such humility and grace, David always had the courage to ask this question. It invigorated and motivated him rather than discourage him. May it do the same for us.

5. Ibid., 29.

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