

GUIDANCE FOR THE
BEGINNING, MIDDLE, and END

A BIBLICAL
—
Counseling
Process
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LAUREN
WHITMAN

A BIBLICAL COUNSELING PROCESS

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MIDDLE, AND END

Lauren Whitman



CONTENTS

Introduction: The Purpose and Scope of This Book	1
Chapter 1: What Is a Biblical Counseling <i>Process</i> ?	4

Part 1: The Beginning of the Counseling Process

Chapter 2: Building a Counseling Relationship	12
Chapter 3: The First Session	17
Chapter 4: The Second Session	34
Chapter 5: A Case Study in the Beginning: Nadia	39
Chapter 6: Considerations at the Beginning	49

Part 2: The Middle of the Counseling Process

Chapter 7: Interpreting Biblically	54
Chapter 8: Imagining the Faithful Way Forward	66
Chapter 9: An Example of Using Scripture in Counseling	75
Chapter 10: A Case Study in the Middle: Nadia	81
Chapter 11: Considerations in the Middle	88

Part 3: The End of the Counseling Process

Chapter 12: Building Momentum and Perseverance	94
Chapter 13: The Last Session	100
Chapter 14: A Case Study at the End: Nadia	105
Chapter 15: Considerations at the End	110

Afterword: A Promise for You, Counselor	112
Further Resources	114
Acknowledgments	117

Introduction

THE PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THIS BOOK

This is a small book with a focused purpose. The content works together to address the following three broad “what” questions for the beginning, middle, and end of the counseling process:

- What does the process focus on at each stage?
- What should I consider at each stage to maximize the help I’m offering?
- What might each stage look and sound like in a counseling case?

These questions are explored in the context of an adult who has voluntarily sought out individual counseling. The questions are considered in a way that highlights biblical priorities, and they are specifically for counselees who desire their counselor to work from a Christian perspective.

The process I describe is what we’re aiming for—and therefore doesn’t account for how things do not always go the way

we would hope in counseling. Sometimes people end counseling prematurely; sometimes they drop off, and you hear from them two years later; sometimes they feel that their counselor isn't a good fit; sometimes you refer them elsewhere because you feel you aren't the right fit. Any of these outcomes can happen—and are common within the counseling field! But this book will help you do what you hope to do with a willing counselee who remains committed to the process.

To capture the process in a big-picture way, I have identified two major tasks for each phase of it. You will find that all of the chapters in each of the book's three parts work together to explain, describe, support, and illustrate these major tasks. Surely, there are dozens of tasks that go into the work of serving as a counselor, but I chose two primary tasks for each stage in order to focus on providing an overview of the entire process. However, I have compiled a list of resources at the end of the book that point you to some of the topics that I did not cover or alluded to only briefly.

I've written the book's guidance from the vantage point of my service at the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF), which is a nonprofit, fee-for-service counseling center. Though I hope what I share will also be helpful for a pastoral counseling session in a church, or even for talking with another church member over coffee, the book is primarily intended to help those who work as counselors in a formal setting. For this reason, the process I will describe has an end to it because it assumes that people won't remain in your life, but instead that you will have come alongside others for a season to offer help for their specific needs.

Why read a book about a biblical counseling process? To grow in skillful love. To call ourselves biblical counselors, we aim for nothing less than to love others from a pure heart, a

good conscience, and a sincere faith (1 Timothy 1:5). Therefore it is appropriate, it is beneficial, and it is fitting to pursue resources that help us grow in the applied, biblical wisdom we rightfully want to offer those we counsel. If people reach out for our help, we want to be ready to respond and offer the fruit of our skills and training. This practical book intends to add to your training so that you can increase in skillfulness. It intends to add to your training so that you can grow in how you show God's love to your counselees.

Chapter 1

WHAT IS A BIBLICAL COUNSELING *PROCESS*?

Before we begin exploring the phases of the counseling process, we must define our terms. If you have picked up this book, my guess is that you already have a working definition in your mind of *biblical counseling*. Here's mine: biblical counselors believe that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is not only the turning point of human history but also has supreme relevance for people's lives today. Jesus is alive, reigning now in heaven, interceding for his people, offering real-time help through his Spirit—and biblical counselors habitually consider who Jesus is because we have faith that he speaks pointedly and intimately to all aspects of human experience. The Bible speaks to our joys, sorrows, sins, hopes, fears, and desires, and we endeavor to handle God's Word with deft and skill, to handle it in a way that spurs people toward greater trust, obedience, and worship of God, no matter what they are facing. To do this, we consider together God's good words; we discern together what wisdom

looks like in light of God’s good words. We explore how we, as followers of Christ, can bring the vivaciousness and verve of his counsel into how we live our everyday lives.¹

We will spend a bit more time now fleshing out what a biblical counseling *process* is because “process” runs the risk of abstraction and, therefore, can be less helpful. For our counseling process to be biblical, I will propose two defining characteristics.

A BIBLICAL COUNSELING PROCESS IS *PERSONAL*

The word *process* sounds stiff and wooden. But the process is personal because biblical counseling endeavors to connect the person of Christ to the person we are meeting with. In revealing himself to us, by making his invisibility visible (Colossians 1:15), God has been personal with us. He wants us to know him as he is. He wants us to receive him into our lives and to be in communion with him. And so we can anticipate that he will be personal with our counselees. God comes to each of us personally—he stands at the door and knocks—again and again, repeatedly, daily, over a lifetime. He always sees our needs, always knows our hearts, always lives to provide for us. And his Word—a living and active Word—speaks personally. How will his living Word direct and guide as he draws near to our counselees in their struggles? Biblical counselors will have the privilege to see how the Lord does this in an up-close and personal way.

As God speaks and ministers to us, he invites us to make ourselves known to him, just as he has made himself known to us. And herein we find one goal of our counseling. Any kind of counseling aims to help people grow in self-understanding—a valid endeavor that we’ll discuss later—but biblical counseling

1. For a detailed, full-orbed description of biblical counseling, see the Biblical Counseling Coalition’s confessional statement at biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/confessional-statement/.

also encourages people to take what they have come to understand about themselves and share it with their God. Counseling conversations help people better know their hearts *and* pour out their hearts to God (Psalm 62:8). We want to help people connect personally with God, to not only pray but to know what it is to dwell in the shelter of the One in whom they live, move, and have their being (Acts 17:28).

Additionally, the process is personal because you are there! God made you a unique person, and he has called you to bring yourself—your heart, your personality, your story, your experiences—into the counseling room for the blessing and benefit of your counsees. Who are you in the counseling room? You are in a role, to be sure. The role is counselor, and the person you are meeting with has sought you out to play this role. There are certain boundaries and guardrails with this role, and those are good and important to maintain.²

Regardless of the specific professional boundaries you implement, it is important to remember that people are helped by genuine relationships, not the role. So biblical counselors are personal with people in ways that are appropriate to the kind of relationship we are in. This means that you should be you. For example, you are being personal in counseling when you say, “I am not quite following you. Can you say a bit more?” because you really can’t follow and you’re glad to say so if it means you gain clarification that you would have otherwise missed. You are being personal when you let yourself tear up because you really are moved by what this counselee is telling you. You are being personal when you show your anger because this person has been

2. For example, I don’t share my personal phone number with counsees. They can reach me through formal channels—at my work email address or by calling the front desk and leaving a message with the receptionist. Depending on the context in which you counsel, and your personal preferences, these boundaries and guardrails will differ.

harmed by an injustice, and it really doesn't sit well with you. Again, people are helped by people, not by the role. Who we are—what we think, how we feel, what we're bothered by, what delights us—is what we want to freely bring with us into our counseling. Making ourselves known in the counseling room is surely not the focus of the counseling, but neither is it irrelevant.

Why we've become a biblical counselor is also relevant. We are not in the counseling room just because we really like helping people (though we do like that!). We are there on behalf of another Person. Because Jesus has won you over, his mission and his good purposes in people's lives have become your mission. Thus the counseling process is also personal because God has been personal with you. He has worked in your life. And part of his work has led you into the counseling room.

What are you there to do? Metaphors can help here. Ed Welch writes, "There is typically a dominant metaphor—a picture—that shapes our care for other people. . . . The possibilities include shepherd, brother, sister, father, mother, friend, priest and scores of others."³ One metaphor that has shaped my care for people lately is that I am an *ambassador* for Jesus in the counseling room.

An "ambassador" may not have initial appeal because it sounds formal. But my conception of it very much coincides with a counseling process. By definition, an ambassador is an official representative, and I draw the word from the apostle Paul (see 2 Corinthians 5:20). In his letter to the church at Corinth, he affirms that Christians—those whose lives have been changed by Christ and now bear his name—are to represent the God who saved them. Therein is the connection that inspires me: How am I representing Christ in the counseling room? How

3. Ed Welch, "Counselor as Host," *CCEF* (blog), August 4, 2014, <https://www.ccef.org/counselor-host/>.

am I making God and his ways appealing to this person? This is personal because representing the person of Christ requires that I know him for who he is, know what he says, and know what he is like. If I don't know him well, I cannot represent him in my responses, words, comfort, encouragement, and exhortation. Therefore, one of my tasks as an ambassador is to intimately know the person of Christ so that I can represent him well. The way I personally represent him is distinctly "Lauren" because I, too, am a person, but it is the Lauren who is a worshiper of Christ, who is being transformed and recreated into the image of Christ. Somehow, as Jesus recreates us into his image, we become more uniquely ourselves, and this is who we want to authentically be when we counsel.

Thus, as you read the suggestions and guidelines in this book, you should be actively considering how you, specifically, will enact them. How do they intersect with your unique gifting, skills, training, and approach to biblical counseling?

A BIBLICAL COUNSELING PROCESS IS ADAPTABLE

This point builds off the first. If our process is personal, then it must take the counselee into account at every juncture. That requires us to adapt our counsel to the true concerns, fears, desires, and struggles of each individual. We do not invite people to enter into a preformulated program when they come to counseling. Instead, we want to respond to the actual needs on the ground. To do that, we must get to know this individual. We must reject our own tendencies to generalize and make assumptions about people. To be personal, we ask questions. We follow up. Biblical counseling is an exploratory process that unfolds over time. We are humble; we don't know what we will discover, but we want to know. And as we hear from people,

as we learn about what is on their hearts, we are spontaneous, quick on our feet, willing and ready to consider and reconsider, to circle back, to clear up misunderstandings—to *adapt*—all based on what we’re hearing in real time.

Many Christian authors have pointed out the adaptability of Jesus’s ministry. Jesus was—in the most positive sense of the word—unpredictable in his responses to people. Although he was unpredictable from our perspective, of course he possessed complete knowledge and understanding of a person’s heart. He knew where each person’s struggles really were, and he responded accordingly. We don’t have his same level of insight into people’s hearts. But we can pursue it. Proverbs 20:5 is a favorite verse among counselors. It tells us, “The purpose in a man’s heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.” We want to be men and women of understanding who can skillfully draw out what is in the hearts of the people we counsel. Adaptability is required for carefully handling the deep waters we draw from a person’s heart. We respond to what is actually there—not what we think is there.

To summarize, a biblical counseling process is personal. We represent the personal God as we pursue knowing and loving people as they are and meeting them where they are. And as an outworking of being personal, our counsel adapts to people as unique individuals as we contextualize God’s Word to the particulars of their lives. These two principles undergird the guidance that follows in this book.

Let me draw your attention also to the word *guidance* itself. This word is in the book’s title, and it fits well with what we’ve covered so far. Guidance is not prescriptive. It is not a set of rules that must be strictly followed. Rather, guidance provides tracks to run on, but, to extend the metaphor, as a counselor you have to determine how fast to go on the tracks, when to make stops,

when to pull over, when to change directions, and when to call for backup. All of these adaptations are based on the individual you're meeting with and your discernment of what will best meet the needs of the moment.

Part 1: The Beginning of the Counseling Process

The primary focus of the beginning of the counseling process is to build your relationship with your counselee. Two major tasks will help you accomplish this:

1. Coming to know the person and their concerns accurately, and
2. Earning the person's trust by showing a kind of care that embodies the love of Christ.

Chapter 2

BUILDING A COUNSELING RELATIONSHIP

Chapter 1 built the case for a biblical counseling process that is personal, as well as the idea that people will be helped most when we as counselors are personal with our counsees. In this chapter, we will think more deeply about the counseling relationship itself. Why do this? It is widely established in counseling research and studies that the relationship between a counselor and a counselee is influential in bringing about positive changes in the counselee's life, and that a counselor's empathy for the counselee is an especially important ingredient within that influential relationship. Even more than evidence in counseling literature for the importance of the counseling relationship, our Christian faith intuitively leads us to similar ideas. So let's now think biblically about the topics of the counseling relationship and the counselor's expressions of empathy so that we can be encouraged and motivated in how we build relationships with those we counsel.

To begin, let me first acknowledge that some readers might be wary of the word *empathy*. I want to be clear that empathy does not mean we are in blind agreement with someone and accept his or her perspective as the true perspective. Rather, empathy simply aims to accurately understand someone's perspective and experience. I don't want us to reject this idea because we are skeptical of the word. There is a strong biblical basis for the idea. Therefore, I will offer a working definition of empathy that demystifies the word and captures the idea. Then I will back it up with biblical support.

Empathy is an outworking of love and it says, "I see you and that you are struggling. I am committed to not standing far off from you, just as Christ does not stand far from you. I will work hard to understand you, your experience, and your perspective because I want to know you."

To love like this, we pattern ourselves after Christ, because it is the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us that captures *empathy*. By entering into our world and becoming like us in our humanity, in our frailty and vulnerability, Jesus put himself in our shoes (John 1:14). He didn't stand far off from us when he saw us in our helpless estate, but he was moved by our sin-filled, sorrow-filled experiences and took up the mission of our salvation. He did this because he understood very well what we were facing. He knew our circumstances, our helplessness, and our fate, and he responded—at great cost to himself. He was so willing to identify with us that he became one of us. Even now he sympathizes with our weaknesses because he has taken on flesh. He knows what it's like to live in a world with fallen, sinful people. He knows what it's like to be tempted (Hebrews 4:15). He practiced perfectly how to turn to the Father in faith and obedience, which now makes him a perfect intercessor for us (Hebrews 7:25). He knows what we need.

As his people who are now being remade into the image of Jesus, we also are called to enter people's lives in ways that echo his incarnational love (John 13:35). We humbly enter into people's stories, cultural understanding and experiences, emotions, and narratives, seeking to really understand what this person's life is actually like. We ask questions. We eschew assumptions. God knows us truly. We seek to know others truly. If we fail to come to know people accurately—that is, if we fail to empathize truly with their experiences—then we will miss the opportunity to come alongside them in ways that are most helpful because we won't be speaking knowledgeably. If we can't or won't enter into the person's world, we will "miss" what is most important to the person and therefore miss the opportunity to have the kind of impact we'd hope to have. If we don't come to accurately understand both what is happening and the person's experience and perspective of what is happening, then how can we help guide them? Empathy helps to lay the groundwork for effective influence.

So to build a relationship where you steward your influence well, you aim to inhabit this person's world, which is an act of humility that reflects and is reminiscent of Jesus humbly entering our world (Philippians 2:5–8). Because of how God made us, we are drawn to those who take the time to care about what we are facing and put in the effort to understand us. Empathetic movements in counseling build the person's trust in you. And trust builds the relationship, which leads us to our next point.

As we consider the counseling relationship we are building with counselees, what biblical support can capture *why* the relationship is of critical importance? Here's a description of the nature of the relationship, followed by biblical support.

To enter into a counseling relationship with someone is to say, "I am with you in what you are going through. Just as God is for you

and your flourishing, I, too, am for you. With God's help, we will find a way forward together."

Understanding that God made us in his image helps us with this idea. God in three persons is in relationship with himself. And the Trinitarian God made us to be in relationship with him and one another. Jesus's great commandments—love your God and love your neighbor—are a logical outflowing of these realities. Relationships are preeminent in our God's personal experience, preeminent in his mind and heart. He intends his relationships to be united and influential. He intends our relationships to be united and influential.

Here again, our ability to form, build, and sustain an influential relationship with our counsees will be tied to how well we empathize and identify with their situation. Are we moved with compassion for what they are facing? Do we demonstrate curiosity, deference, and appreciation for the unique contexts they live within? Do we love, respond, and care for them in such a way that echoes the God who is for them? This is an opportunity to image God by being *for* our counsees. It's providing the sense and experience of "I am with you," a reflection of Jesus, who is God-with-us. Jesus, who is our peace in the midst of our struggles. Jesus, who is our ally. Jesus, who is our friend. These are the ways Jesus relates to us. And counselors can pattern after Jesus in how we relate to our counsees.

Indeed, to form good relationships, we must look to our God, to what is he like. This makes *our* personal relationship with the Lord so important, because when we know him well, then we represent him well. As we do life with the Lord, as we press in to knowing him more deeply, as we worship him with growing love and awe, as we mature in trusting him in ways that are increasingly becoming instinctive to our new nature, then we learn more intimately, in a firsthand way, what he is

like. We receive from him; we are comforted by him. And that comfort becomes what we can offer to others (2 Corinthians 1:4–5). We give away what we have received from him.

As we depend on Jesus, he makes us righteous and “one who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor” (Proverbs 12:26). This proverb gives us yet another way to think about our work as biblical counselors: we aim to be a *guide* for counselees, who are, indeed, our neighbors. Because of our relationship with God, we serve as a humble guide in the paths and ways of the Lord.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, the focus of the beginning of the counseling process should be to build strong, trusting relationships with our counselees. As we embody Jesus’s attributes and bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit, we contribute positively to establishing a relational dynamic in which our counselees can be helped. Empathy builds trust. Trust builds the relationship. People will only let a counselor guide them if they trust that the counselor cares about them. And the solidified relationship creates a context in which counseling can be one means for God to grow his people in godliness. Biblical counseling can be a means for a counselee to flourish—and to truly flourish is to grow up in every way into Christ (Ephesians 4:15).

The next chapter provides a flexible structure for how you can begin building that relationship during the very first session.