

Conversion of a Clinical Counselor

My journey From Clinical to Biblical Counseling

In this “conversion” story, I share about my transition from a clinical to a Biblical counselor. In it, I seek to explain my initial doubts about the sufficiency of Scripture to help people deal with a diverse array of mental anguish and relational struggles.

Family Background

I have been in the world of counseling for over two decades. Serving as a communications director for a parachurch organization in Cameroon 1996, I had the privilege of providing lay Christian counseling to many young people on our team. I didn’t have a clue about what I was doing and I wasn’t payed a dime for it, but it helped me find a wife.

Winnie and I met in 1999 (the same year I felt called to counseling by the Lord). She had attended one of our meetings in Bamenda and was later introduced to me by my cousin – Hilda. Much later, she came to see me to provide counseling for her regarding a major decision in her life: a man was proposing marriage to her but her entire family was opposed to it; “what should I do”, she asked? Summary of it, we ended up reconnecting later and becoming really good friends. Our friendship later led to me proposing on June 29, 2001. It was about 10pm at her sister’s balcony. I am so glad she said “yes” even though I hadn’t completed my formal university education and was jobless.

Our journey as a married couple (now living in the US) the second year of our marriage took another turn. After Alfred was born (2005), we relocated in order to focus toward the pursuit of a higher education. After Bible college by a correspondence course, through Liberty Home Bible Institute, we moved from Maryland to Lynchburg VA, the home of Liberty

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University. We spent the next ten years in Lynchburg where two of our other kids (Arllene and AJ.) were later born.

I went on to complete a Bachelor's degree, completed a Master's in studied pastoral counseling in Seminary, I later earned a doctorate in professional counseling. *Our current* ministry is focused on doing something broader than merely teaching technics in Biblical Counseling; we are teaching about the more holistic "Biblical Soul Care." And seeing that God graciously gave me what I'd call a "second touch of salvation" regarding my calling and understanding of counseling, I have a unique story to tell. I believe my story could add value to those interested in learning to care for souls God's way, in their journey toward *becoming Biblical Counselors*.

But before I talk about my second "touch of salvation", you may be wondering what a "touch of salvation" even means. You see, every human being is a sinner by nature and by choice (Romans 3:10-12; Romans 3:23). Seeing that God is perfectly just and holy (Leviticus 19:2; 1 Peter 1:16), no sinner will spend eternity in His presence. Every one of us is guilty and deserves total separation from God in the lake of fire (Romans 6:23). But God is also loving and merciful; He has made a way of escape for us by sending His Son, Jesus Christ to pay the price for our sins by dying a sinner's death on the cross (John 3:16). Though He had no sin, He was falsely accused and crucified by sinners so He could satisfy the justice of God (2 Corinthians 5:21).

So, if you will accept that you are a sinner; and believe that Jesus died for your sins and God raised Him up on the third day, you will be saved (Romans 10:9-10; 1 John 1:9). Only those

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who have trusted Christ for salvation and turned from their sin in humble repentance will be saved. You can be saved today by grace alone through faith, and not by any good work you do. It is a gift from God and you can never boast about it (Ephesians 2:8-10). You can trust him today and join me on this journey toward becoming a Biblical Counselor. Now, here is my story.

A Counseling Job at a Barbershop

About 28 years ago God did a great work in my life when he graciously granted me faith to believe the gospel. My life was radically transformed as I read the Bible and believed everything about it and its teachings. But as I continued my studies – Bible College Diploma, Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree, Ph.D. in Clinical Counseling, my faith in God's Word gradually dwindled. Unlike it was during my early days of childlike faith in Christ, I began to esteem psychological principles and theories as being more reliable for bringing about desired change in people than the Bible.

I remember joining other seminarians while studying Pastoral Counseling in graduate school to mock a certain Jay Adams' book on a radical model of Biblical Counseling. Until now I don't agree that all psychological theories must be rejected and only the Bible should be used for counseling. But, as I look back at my reaction to Bible-only counseling, I am appalled at the disdain and disregard I felt for the very inspired Word of God – simply because someone applied its truths in a way that I did not think was appropriate. I was dangerously and helplessly slipping into a form of pride about the knowledge I was gaining in Psychology.

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That false sense of an in-depth understanding of human nature, behaviors and emotions (outside of God's Word) grew when I began pursuing a second Master's Degree in Human Services Counseling. Although I was just three courses short of completing its requirements before I applied and was taken into the Ph.D. in Clinical Counseling program, I was so glad to move on to this higher level of learning about people. My mentor the late Dr. Bill Simmer used to jokingly say a Ph.D. stands for "piled high and deep". Obtaining the degree took me deeper into my self-dependence and pride.

Before my graduation, the Dean of Students for a university offered me a job while I was getting a trim at a local barbershop. When I refused the offer, he increased his offer by \$5000 at the spot as he sat opposite me also getting haircut. Both barbers burst out laughing as they witnessed the bargain between what looked to them like two strangers. What they didn't know was that the Dean and I first met each other five years earlier at a university-organized Award ceremony.

I had just started my pursuit of a doctorate and had also recently founded a campus-based care ministry called Grace Evangelism Ministry (fondly known as "GEM"). At GEM, I counseled students during the week *with the Word*. We visited nursing homes in the city over the weekends and comforted the elderly and sick *with the Word*. I gently corrected and exhorted students at our weekly meetings on Friday nights *with the Word*. You get the point. At the ceremony where I first met the Dean of Students, hosted by the University's then "Center for Multi-cultural Enrichment", the Chancellor had recognized our "Bible-based work"

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on campus among international students by offering our ministry a Community Service Award – which I still keep to this day.

Back to the barbershop, I finally took the job offer and started working as a Clinical Counselor for this large University in Virginia. But it did not take long before I began to notice a difference in fruitfulness between my campus ministry and my newly-started clinical counseling career. I had seen over two hundred clients (students and staff) after two years of working there; done over two thousand hours toward my 4 thousand-hour licensure requirement but I was ready to quit. Being primarily clinical in my approach (with snippets of the Word here and there) was not as fruitful and joy-giving as my campus ministry had been. I assessed my work and quickly realized that I was heavily focused on symptoms than on the **heart** of the issues. My learning of theories in counseling and psychotherapy had prepared me to diagnose and treat the symptoms or modify behaviors more than care for the deeper spiritual issues that underlie most symptoms. I was unfulfilled in my calling and vocation as a counselor.

Quitting My Clinical Counseling Job and Moving to Canada

After a season of reflection I decided to change careers! I decided that Christian coaching would be the next best thing for me. I had facilitated two Christian coaching courses online for a university and, though I saw a big difference between coaching and counseling, I was fascinated by coaching concepts. It was that same spring that I was introduced to the John Maxwell Team and I attended their training conference in Florida. Upon completing the

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weeklong training and completing other requirements, I was certified as a John Maxwell Team speaker, trainer and coach. I began using their materials for my presentations at different departments on campus (the Dean of Student's Administrative Team, the Law School Library Staff and the Center for Multicultural Enrichment staff). I was well on my way to becoming a career personal coach, speaker and trainer. But one more thing was holding me back – my clinical counseling job.

I decided that I'd quit clinical counseling but I continued teaching online for the university. I applied and was offered a part-time teaching position for a small Christian university in Toronto (Canada). July 30, 2015 was my last day working as a Clinical Counselor for Liberty University. I had committed myself to move out on the 31st with my family to teach while also serving a small Church plant (as pastoral counselor) in Scarborough – Greater Toronto Area. Nothing worked. Maybe, not *everything* went wrong but most everything didn't work for me and my family for the entire six months we were there – except *Biblical Counseling*. I will spare you all the details but here are a few examples.

Teaching Opportunity Teaches me a Lesson

Beginning with the Christian College that had offered me a part-time psychology professor position, I never got to teach for them. The initial plan was for me to return to Canada after my interview (I visited for Toronto a couple of weeks prior to our moving) and get a signed offer letter. The letter was to be issued only by the College's president (or so I was

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told). With it I was to go to the immigration office and request for a work permit. After my work permit was granted then our three kids could attend school and my wife (a Registered Nurse in Virginia) could derive a status from me, complete the process of converting her nursing license, and also get a job. The only problem was, the college president was never on seat to issue my offer letter. He was ill for what seemed like an eternity!

I quickly realized that my family's survival in Canada had come down to a simple (or rather costly) signature of one man's pen. So, in desperation, I chose to not call but go to the campus about twice a week for about a month. I asked if no one else could issue the letter on his behalf to no success. The Dean was very encouraging and kept giving me hope that we were going to do well collaborating on writing projects in the near future. That *future* never came and my family began to feel the pinch.

On returning home one last time in our blue old Ford Explorer that barely had gas these days, I had learned the hard lesson of not moving a family from one country to another just on the mere word of a stranger – a verbal promise of a job. When I arrived in our driveway, I could see my kids' smiling faces pressed to the large front window glass and my heart would sink. I knew they'd be hopeful that daddy was bringing good news about a certain letter he had been seeking for a couple of months, since our crossing in Canada July ending. This was already early September and the fall semester was just about beginning. The kids had been rejected at every school we had been to on grounds that, though we were all American citizens, we did not yet have a permanent status in Canada. So while other kids had just started school, ours were

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home with us 24/7. That was scary because it meant a lot of food needed to be available – if you know what it means to feed a family during summer when everyone is home *all the time*.

How We Got Our Canada Connection

As fall wore out and winter approached, I had completely turned my attention to the small Church plant in Toronto. I had met a young Canada-born Church planter pastor at “Refuel” – a pastors’ annual conference organized by our Thomas Road Baptist Church. That same week, he took me and Winnie to meet with the elders of this sending Church based in Virginia. We had enjoyed a meal together and cross-examined by the pastor and his team in a very kind and cordial manner. At the end, as I understand, they had reassured us of sending regular financial support (like a small stipend) until I had been established in my job and be able to provide for my family. We left very encouraged knowing that even if things didn’t work out with the college and with the Church plant, we would at least have the sending Church’s support. We were wrong.

Biblical Counseling - An Unlikely Source of Provision

Around the time when the college president couldn’t sign my job offer letter, the young and vibrant pastor asked me to provide Biblical Counseling to a struggling couple who were committed core team members. They had been married for almost 10 years and the last three or so were joyless and completely bereft of sexual intimacy. Starting with them, I thought I would begin to experience the dreaded sense of fruitlessness like I had in the past. But that was not the case. Beginning with the woman (since he wouldn’t come to counseling at first – in

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the presence of the pastor), I worked hard at helping her see God's perspective on marriage and why persevering a little longer was my recommendation. As was my custom before, in this case I don't remember thinking about any applicable secular theories in Marriage and Family therapy while working with them. It was pro-bono and yet I looked forward to driving for about 40 minutes to Church just to help her with the Bible. I was discovering a fresh joy and fulfillment in counseling that I hadn't experienced in my days as a clinical counselor. But my enthusiasm soon turned to unease seeing that she was feeling better *without* her husband. That was not the plan – it was supposed to be marriage/couples counseling.

Financial Blessings for Food

We sought to reach out to him again and thankfully he agreed to come. As counseling progressed, things looked better and my "joy meter" went up. But my gas meter stayed low because at this point we were completely depleted of our meagre savings, and a few dollars here and there from friends and family. Just before I could start prematurely wrapping up the sessions and excusing myself from counseling, they began to contribute toward the fueling of my car. That was a huge help because there was always leftover money after the tank was filled to buy a few groceries and feel like a "Godly provider" to my family once again. These contributions came in most handily during Thanksgiving – not to buy presents for the kids but to put necessary food in their stomachs.

Then came December – the Christmas month – and the fridges were completely empty by this time. The couple seemed to be getting much better as her parents also got involved and

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provided much-needed support and accountability for them. One evening they opted to offer their home for our session since it was much closer than the Church building where we had been meeting. After a session at their home was over, to my surprise her parents came and handed me an envelope that looked “pleasantly suspicious” – why had it come from them? Had someone said something to them about my struggles? How could they have known that we didn’t have food since I had not complained to my counselees? All these questions came to mind and more as I drove back home with a bag of baked assorted Christmas goods that they packed for me. As I dug in the bag and pulled them out one by one I worried that I could inadvertently finish it before reaching home – I was also quite hungry that night. Thankfully, there was still plenty left for them when I got home. As the kids scrambled over the bag I handed the unopened envelope to Winnie and we hurried to one corner to open it together. We were like kids on Christmas morning eagerly unwrapping our present to see what our parents had gotten for us.

The sight of three hundred shiny Canadian dollar bills felt like we had just seen the three (not sure of the real number in Matthew 2:1) wise men bringing their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to Jesus in the manger. It was more than gold for us. It was love in an envelope. It was help in a time of dire need. It was God at work, just in time to salvage a hopeless situation. I don’t know if Winnie agrees but I think I cried a few tears of joy. Once again, through Biblical Counseling the Lord was providing for my family. Since it was Christmas and we needed to treat the family a little more special than normal, the money vanished within a day or two. But God...!

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The Joy of Warm Clothes in the Canadian Winter

Another couple who had been very instrumental in helping us find and stay at that residence also needed marriage counseling during that season. By this time I had begun seeing a pattern in how God was providing for us – through Biblical Counseling. So, I thought I was just happy to help but I soon realized that that was not always the case. I am not proud to admit that with them I was also looking forward to the benefit it might bring. They did not fail. Although they had already been quite kind toward us in the past, they became even more generous as I began counseling with them. They invited us over for dinners and provided gently used clothes for me and my family to keep warm during the winter. Their kindness was much appreciated.

As I did Biblical counseling in Canada, the joy it brought to me just observing people and their situations change through the direct influence of Scripture was priceless. Knowing that God was being glorified in that the second couple could point to the Lord as the source of their help (and not to my psychotherapy skills and knowledge) was relieving in a weird way. I wasn't used to seeing this in my clinical practice and I was beginning to seriously consider the option of continuing counseling – *Biblical* counseling in particular – and not give it up altogether.

Rent-Money Financial Blessings

Through a series of circumstances, God used one Ms. Karen – who came to visit with us – help provide much-needed rent money without us complaining about it. On hindsight I can better understand why our problems look so big when we are not seeing it from God's

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perspective. We are finite and weak creatures; mere mortals who like vapor are here today and gone tomorrow (James 4:14; Psalm 103:15). We truly are in need of God's viewpoint on things (Isaiah. 55:1-13). We are more inclined to have faith to make our requests to Him after seeing it through his lenses. His Word helps us have faith to believe Him to intervene in our problems and provide for our every need (cf. Romans 10:17). His Word helps us pray according to His will. God will provide for our every need as we follow His leading and pray according to His plan (1 John 5:14-15; Romans 8:26; Isaiah 1:18-19).

By coming to Canada I firmly believed I was following God's plan for my life. But, it was getting clear that we needed to return to the US after Karen left. Though it happened through unusual ways such as spotty Biblical Counseling ministry opportunities and the generosity of family and friends, He was faithful to provide all our needs – including our travel expenses to return to Virginia (Philippians 4:19). Needless to say, we returned to the United States about 1 week after Karen's visit. Of course our travel expenses were covered by part of her gift to us. But on the way back I prayed and wondered what I'd do about my counseling practice. An idea came to mind!

Starting a Small Biblical Counseling "Practice" in Lynchburg

While at Liberty, we had put together a committee to help kick-start a counseling ministry that would help people dealing with addiction in the Church. Just before our departure to Canada in July, 2015, our Church was gracious to help us launch it at the Church premises. At the launch ceremony, pastor Matt Wilmington (representing pastor Jonathan Falwell) laid his

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hands and prayed for Winnie and I as our advisory team – Dean Dane Emerick, Paul McLinden, Dorian Watson, Michael Trexler, Mark, Anthony Ikwueme and Brandon Riley surrounded us. Our new Biblical Counseling ministry was born which we initially called “GEM Coaching and Counseling”. But this organization was all but put on hold in Canada due to the crisis situation discussed above – except for the two couples we served. So, having seen the benefits of a *clinical approach to Biblical counseling*, I couldn’t wait to start a new private practice in counseling.

While driving back from Toronto, through New York, New Jersey and Delaware, all the way south to Virginia, my heart rejoiced to see my family coming out of the hardship we had experienced for the past six months. The thought of going into my “new-found” Biblical Counseling also filled me with anticipation as I pondered and prayed over this approach to counseling. I wondered what my secular colleagues in the professional world of counseling would think of me. Of course, many of them have no value for the Bible and would often quickly dismiss any reference to it, as a viable means and source of help for people.

But I wasn’t worried about non-Christian secular counselors. I was more concerned about Christian professional counseling colleagues who, because of the extreme views of some Biblical counselors, have also become very skeptical of the term “Biblical Counselor”. On arriving in Virginia I was careful to start my practice in Biblical counseling done with “clinical accuracy”. I practiced for a few months and moved to Chicago for a 1-year Senior Pastor Training residency. I least expected that the Executive Director of Counseling for this 13-

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thousand member Church (7 campuses all together) did have a similar counseling journey as mine.

Inspiration to Start a Non-Profit for Biblical Soul Care “Training”

On meeting Garrett Higbee, and learning about his conversion from a Licensed Clinical Psychologist to a Biblical Counselor, I got quite curious about how he was dealing with his former colleagues and other critics. After the six-month pastoral residency was successfully completed, I was privileged to be asked to enter into a *Biblical Soul Care* (BSC) internship with him. I spent 8 hours from Tuesday to Friday for 4 months in an office next to his learning about BSC. During this residency and internship I got to learn more about the concept of Biblical Soul Care than all my 2 years studying pastoral counseling in seminary. I listened closely when he told his “conversion story” and could relate to nearly every emotion and hesitation he had felt during that time of deliberating within himself about this radical turn.

In one of his recorded testimonies he explained it so succinctly and yet so clearly, it is best to quote him verbatim. This is what he said:

“I am a trained Clinical Psychologist. So, very unlikely candidate to talk to you about Biblical Soul Care except for one thing – I am saved. God did a radical thing in my life about 16 years ago and I can tell you, I have never been the same. I quickly realized – and praise God for this because I am not the sharpest crayon in the box – I needed to lose psychology in the rearview mirror. I began to immerse myself in the Word of God; saw the hope in it. [I] saw the healing [and] health in it and began going to Biblical Soul

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Care conferences. [I] got with some of the leaders in Biblical Counseling by God's grace and really learned what it is to be a Biblical Counselor. So, God got a hold of me and changed me so that I might be a part of changing hearts and lives – you probably have a similar story."

He is right. I feel the same way. I believe for the past 5 years when I started feeling dissatisfied with the spiritual results of my clinical counseling work, God's taken a hold of my heart in a new way. Garrett's testimony and mine are particularly similar in that, the more I learned about BSC the more I realized that was going to be my new path - I also *quickly* realized I needed to lose psychology in the rearview mirror. That is to say, first, the emphasis on the clinical aspects of helping people change would *quickly* have to give way for the Biblical way of helping people experience Christ-likeness. Biblical counselors do this by prioritizing the glory of God in the change being experienced by Christians.

Second, BSC is not a job only to be done by "specialists" but by *every Christian* to one another. I became very passionate about this Biblical idea that, as the Body of Christ, we all use our different gifts to help one another to grow to become more like Jesus. Ephesians 4:11-16 (ESV) says:

"And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 - to *equip the saints* for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 - until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, 14 - so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every

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wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. 15 - Rather, *speaking the truth in love*, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 - from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

As a result of realizing that we are all responsible for the well-being of the Church, the Lord convicted me to engage in playing a small part to equip Christians with the tools I have learned about using the Bible to provide Soul Care. But we needed to be more organized to effectively train the Body of Christ. That’s when the idea of founding the *Ambassador Biblical Counseling and Care Services (ABCs)*.

However, it was a team effort that helped get ABCs to where it is today. Some of the key players were Bob and Katrina Berdelle, Jen Bennett, Cheryl Taylor and Moriam Abiola (who currently serve as some of our Board Members). Cheryl Taylor has played an important role in helping shape my thinking about the fundamentals of Biblical Counseling and continues to contribute in the development of training content. Bob, who is the first Chair of ABCs’ BOD, has been of invaluable help to the ministry both spiritually and financially. Due to terrible miscommunication the host organization and ABCs, we unexpectedly needed to buy our tickets and pay for our room and board expenses for our first international trip to Uganda. This invitation to train 200 pastors in Uganda was single-handedly sponsored by the Berdelles – on a very short notice. We have been to a few other countries since then and over 900 pastors and Church leaders have had some training from ABCs’ resources and model of BSC.

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