

# The Problem with Nouthetic (or “Biblical”) Counseling

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Mental health awareness has been on the rise for some years now. And such was exacerbated even more due to the Covid pandemic. With that, counseling, or therapy, has been a growing field of expertise to serve those with life challenges and larger mental health issues.

To begin, what’s the difference between [counseling and therapy](#)?

*Counseling* is about working on issues in more of the short-term, whereas *therapy* focuses on the long-term addressing of deeper issues

(and mental health disorders) that may be affecting the client.

Still, regardless of whether we call it counseling or therapy, there is another term that needs to have light shed upon it: *nouthetic* counseling. This is sometimes referred to as *biblical* counseling. As the title of this post suggests, I believe there is a *problem* with this kind of counseling.

First of all, nouthetic counseling comes out of the Greek word *noutheteó*, which gets translated as *counsel*. This word, or other similarly rooted words, is found in places like Acts 20:31; Rom 15:14; and Col 1:28. Some English translations use the word *admonish*, rather than *counsel*.

Now wait. For the Christian, what's the big problem with nouthetic, or *biblical*, counseling?

Well, of course, looking to Scripture for God's wisdom is not problematic in and of itself. That's actually important for the Christian. We do this all the time in life, whether we are supporting someone going through a difficult situation or we are facing some challenge ourselves. We want God's wisdom and Scripture provides such.

However, what nouthetic counseling suggests is that Scripture is the primary, if not sole, text for counseling. This is seen in statements like the one below, found at the website of the [Institute for Nouthetic Studies](#).

"...we mean that one Christian personally gives counsel to another from the Scriptures. He does not confront him with his own ideas or the ideas of others. He limits his counsel **strictly** to that which may be found in the Bible..." (emphasis added).

I've added emphasis to the word *strictly* to highlight where the issue lies. Again, Scripture lays out much wisdom from God. That is not in question. But to hold that counsel is to be *strictly*, or *solely*, drawn from Scripture is a false conclusion.

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[Another site](#) describes it this way:

Nouthetic counselors believe that people can ***only*** get to the truth of a matter, through scripture and prayer, so you will need to thoroughly understand the Bible and the behaviors of the characters in the Bible. Often, Nouthetic counselors choose to approach a person by comparing their inappropriate behavior to that of a Biblical character and their situation to a story from the Bible. They are able to use the character's actions and experience as a mirror for the person they are counseling (emphasis added).

Note the use of *only*, instead of *strictly*.

One final example can be found at the website of the [Association of Certified Biblical Counselors](#) (ACBC):

As an organization committed to the ***sufficiency of Scripture for counseling*** we believe that the Bible provides profound wisdom to guide us in caring for people diagnosed with mental disorders (emphasis added).

Scripture is seen as *all-sufficient* for counseling. Thus, other resources are questioned. Furthermore, such a view leads to a *very cautionary*

approach to the fields of psychology, psychotherapy, and psychiatry. These disciplines cannot be trusted, as they are primarily “secular”. Now, I do want to note that there has been some movement amongst nouthetic counselors to not stand wholly against the language, diagnoses, and insights offered in these psycho-scientific fields. The ACBC also states:

The compendium for mental illnesses that our culture recognizes as authoritative is [\*The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders\*](#) (DSM). This manual makes many accurate observations about the manifold problems that afflict people.

The DSM-5 (it is in its fifth edition, hence the number 5) is the official manual for diagnosing mental disorders. So, the above statement seems a helpful step. Yet, the ACBC goes on to express the following:

For biblical counselors, the DSM paints an inadequate and misleading picture. It fails to express, recognize, or understand the spiritual aspect of problems that afflict people. Because of that failing it cannot offer clear help and hope for people diagnosed with its labels.

Well, of course, the DSM-5 may, and probably *does*, miss some things. Yes, it is also not written from a “spiritual” angle. But, consider this. Should we also be suspect of highly regarded texts in anthropology and sociology, since the Bible already addresses human nature and societal issues? What about ancient Mesopotamian history books, since the Old Testament addresses that through the lens of Israel?

The *skeptical nature* of nouthetic-biblical counselors remains – the goal is to start with Scripture and stay with Scripture, if at all possible.

But the Bible is **not** a psychological text. It addresses matters regarding the soul (Greek = *psuché*), even fundamental issues about the soul. But it is not a thorough catalog on issues related to the soul, psyche, and brain. Scripture references plants and animals, but it is not a book of botany and zoology, nor a geological or biological resource for that matter. A fundamental flaw any many evangelical circles is expect the Scripture to speak with detail into the scientific arenas in which it never does. Yet this fails to remember that God has given us general revelation outside the knowledge of his Son and Scripture.

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Many have heard the mantra, "*All truth is God's truth.*" And that includes God's good, general revelation within the fields of psychology, psychotherapy, and psychiatry. Matter of fact, I think the pastor and the therapist can *both* serve their places in the life of the believer, even if the therapist is not a Christian. My own, along with my psychiatrist, is a follower of Christ. I work with a group of counselors and coaches who are Christian. But it doesn't have to be that way. Just like with a medical doctor or lawyer of whom you may be a client. Many don't choose someone in these fields based upon their faith, though some may. Rather, the choice is made based upon *competency* and *fit*. Are they qualified and are they able to truly help?

In all, if you are in counseling or are looking to enter into it, I encourage you to be aware of nouthetic or biblical counseling. It sounds solid and spiritual, but I recommend you inquire as to the person's approach and whether they appreciate the fields of psychology, psychotherapy, and psychiatry. That can tell you a lot and whether they will be willing to

refer you to the proper specialist who will be able to diagnose you, if such is needed. And many counselors will offer a free consultation appointment to see if they may be a good fit for what you hope to address and explore. So, ask about that as well.

I am grateful for counselors and therapists who are Christians. But I am also greatly appreciate those who are verse in psychology, psychotherapy, and psychiatry.