

Biblical therapy: Southern Baptists reject "pastoral counseling"

by [David Winfrey](#) in the [January 23, 2007](#) issue

It was not a big surprise in 2005 when Southern Baptist Theological Seminary announced that it was making a “wholesale change” in its counseling program. The Louisville school, flagship seminary of the Southern Baptist Convention, declared that it was jettisoning the “pastoral counseling” model in favor of “biblical counseling.”

The switch was foreshadowed three years earlier when Southern’s dean coauthored a resolution at the SBC’s annual convention on “The Sufficiency of Scripture in a Therapeutic Culture.”

School officials say the new approach is “built upon the view that scripture is sufficient to answer comprehensively the deepest needs of the human heart.” Among other results of this change: the school no longer participates in the Clinical Pastoral Education program, a staple of education for almost all mainline seminarians.

“All aspects of our lives—including our spiritual, moral, and psychological conditions—are to be informed and governed by the application of and obedience to Holy Scripture,” the 2002 SBC statement declares. “In this therapeutic culture,” the statement continues, “physicians and counselors often ignore human sin and its effects, neglect our most fundamental human and spiritual needs, and therefore misunderstand our condition, mistreat our problems, and sometimes unintentionally do more harm than good.” The resolution calls on SBC churches “to reclaim practical biblical wisdom, Christ-centered counseling, and the restorative ministry of the care and cure of souls.”

In line with this approach, Southern Seminary has reoriented both the theology and methodology of its department of psychology and counseling.

Ironically, Southern Seminary was the home of Wayne Oates, one of the pioneers in the movement to integrate secular psychology with theology. Oates taught at Southern from 1948 to 1974 and afterward at the University of Louisville School of Medicine. The author of 57 books—including *The Christian Pastor*—which shaped the field of pastoral counseling, Oates died in 1999.

“Oates’s unique contribution,” said Wade Rowatt, one of Oates’s disciples, “was to lead Baptists to say we need to be thoroughly informed about understanding persons through personality theory, and understanding families through family systems theory, and understanding groups of people, understanding society, and then integrate [these understandings] with sound biblical theological scholarship in constructing a theory for the pastoral shepherding of persons. That has been the collaborative, interdisciplinary approach to preparing ministers to walk with persons in a time of crisis,” he said.

But Russell Moore, dean of Southern’s school of theology, bluntly called Oates’s approach a “failed” model. The effort to integrate psychology with theology failed, he said, “because it is so naive about the presuppositions behind secular psychologies. You can’t simply say you’re going to integrate the science of psychotherapy with scripture because there are only sciences and theories of psychotherapy that are contradictory and incoherent.”

The SBC, always on the conservative end of the theological spectrum, became more so after 1979. In that year and following years conservatives and some self-described fundamentalists won the presidency of the denomination, often flying the flag of biblical inerrancy. Conservative leaders used the president’s powers of appointment to place like-minded Baptists on the boards of SBC mission agencies and seminaries. In 1993 Southern Seminary’s trustees elected R. Albert Mohler Jr. as president, and Mohler led the seminary in a more conservative direction, which involved a significant turnover in faculty.

In announcing the changes in the counseling program, Mohler commented, “In this psychotherapeutic age, it is really important that we think as Christians, that we employ authentically Christian thinking, biblical thinking to human life, and that we do this in a way that, without apology, confronts and critiques the wisdom of the age and seeks the wisdom that can come only from God and from God’s Word.”

Opposition to the change has been strong from Oates's students. Roy Woodruff, retired executive director of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors, said the implication that the pastoral counseling model is not biblically based "is either totally ignorant or totally arrogant, and I don't know which." Pastoral counseling, Woodruff said, is "always focused within a theological and spiritual frame."

Added Woodruff: "Pastoral care and counseling without theological integrity and biblical bases is deficient and lacks something pretty crucial. But biblical counseling without the discipline of psychotherapeutic awareness and study in that area . . . has the danger of being abusive, and not understanding the dynamics and dimensions of the person being counseled."

Vicki Hollon, executive director of the Wayne Oates Institute in Louisville, established to advance the field of pastoral counseling, said seminary officials were creating a false dichotomy "by implying that pastoral care and counseling is not and has not been biblical."

Southern officials "have created the proverbial straw man," Hollon said. "And their movement away from science reveals a lack of faith, or at least a fear that somehow science is outside the realm of God's creation and domain."

One convert to biblical counseling is Stuart Scott, a former pastor who now teaches that method at Southern. Scott recounts that he lost his faith in traditional pastoral counseling while serving as a pastor in South Carolina. Scott said that as he was referring parishioners to Christian counselors, he became concerned that the clients weren't getting better and that they also seemed to be getting advice that contradicted biblical teachings.

Counselors, he said, were encouraging patients "not to read [the Bible] or go to church if that made them feel worse. I thought psychology was the place where they would get the answers, and when I found out what was happening in their lives, I was then disillusioned with the answers out there."

Scott said he also found that his own confidence in the Bible was beginning to wane. "I would preach the scriptures to the people I was looking at, but then I was referring them out for help and I thought, 'What good is the Bible if it's not helping God's people?'"

In the course of advising one couple with marriage problems, Scott turned for help to his former pastor and mentor, Randy Patten, who guided him through a process of asking the couple questions and helping them apply scripture to their marital issues.

As a result, Scott said, the Holy Spirit began to change the couple and helped them resolve issues ranging from depression to hostility. "That's what created a thirst in my heart to learn more on how God's Word deals with issues that are spiritually based," he recalled. "I said [to Patten], 'Where did you learn how to do this?'"

While Moore and Scott regard pastoral counseling as a failed model, Loren Townsend views biblical counseling as a very flawed model. Townsend, who teaches pastoral counseling at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, just down the road from Southern, said he sees many clients who have been hurt by biblical counseling. These patients, he said, are doubly burdened: "Not only haven't they been able to get over their depression following the biblical example, but now they're also a failure as Christians because they had inadequate faith to be able to do that."

He recalled one woman whose marriage was falling apart and who had experienced abuse in the relationship. "The biblical counselor [gave her] no choice. 'You stay married. That's the way it is, and here's how you're to organize it.' The way it was organized was the woman being subjected to this man's abuse," Townsend said.

"What ended up happening was that this woman finally just came apart at the seams. She wound up psychotic as a result of that and ended up in our system of care. Now we have to deal with her psychosis and the fact that she has this religious ideation that's eating her alive as a result of failing as a Christian."

Townsend said he believes that there are some situations in which the biblical counseling approach can be of help, but he contends that in rejecting the behavioral sciences biblical counseling is abandoning a source of important information that God has made available.

"Where I become very concerned is where the entire limits of counseling are drawn around what is said in the Bible . . . with the assumption that the Bible has the answer to every human problem in it.

"I think the Bible does have some answers about how to organize life effectively," he added. "But I do not believe that the Bible itself claims to have all the answers to

every problem that humans are going to come up against, particularly when you're dealing with mental health and the shifts in culture that people have to deal with."

Biblical counseling, sometimes called nouthetic counseling (from the Greek word for "admonish" or "instruct"), traces its modern origins to a mid-20th-century pastor named Jay Adams. His book *Competent to Counsel* "severely criticized psychiatry and psychotherapy," according to a summary by Eric Johnson and Stanton Jones in *Psychology and Christianity: Four Views*. Adams characterized psychiatry and psychotherapy as "radically secular and fundamentally opposed to Christianity," Johnson and Jones wrote.

Says Townsend: "I'm not convinced [Adams] ever read the [pastoral counseling] stuff. I think [his book] is poor scholarship."

Organizations that promote biblical counseling include the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors (Scott's mentor, Randy Patten, is executive director of the association) and the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation, which Adams founded in 1968. One of the staff members of the foundation is David Powlison, who is also editor of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*. Southern Seminary leaders cite Powlison's article that defines biblical counseling as one of the manifestos that set the new direction for Southern's counseling department.

Powlison also has helped faculty at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in North Carolina as that SBC school has adopted the biblical counseling model, according to Barbara Lane, a spokesperson for the CCEF.

Powlison's chief argument is that the discipline of psychology is undermined by its divergent and competing theories. "There is no unitary psychology," he writes. "Modern psychology . . . is a marketplace of differing popular philosophies of life."

Rowatt, a former professor at Southern Seminary and a pastoral counselor in Louisville, is not impressed by this argument. He said the same criticism could be made of biblical theology. Different theories of biblical theology exist, but ministers still can learn and apply the scriptures, he observed.

Powlison contends that various psychological theories agree on only one thing: that human dysfunctions can be solved without regard to God or God's design for humanity. "All [secular psychologies] agree that the problem with people is anything but sin, and the problems can be explained in purely psychological, psychosocial or

psychosocial-somatic terms,” Powlison writes. “All agree that both answers and power to change reside either in the individual, in human relationships or in medical chemistry.

In Powlison’s view, any counseling other than biblical counseling is in competition with pastors’ efforts to help Christians become more like Christ. “Modern psychotherapy is simply the attempt to do face-to-face pastoral work in service to different gods, different ideals, different diagnoses, a different gospel.”

Townsend terms that perspective simplistic. Furthermore, he notes, there is a “critical component” in pastoral counseling that is ignored by advocates of biblical counseling. Pastoral counseling does not entail “wholesale acceptance of behavioral sciences.” Moreover, “If you read the pastoral counseling literature, it’s very, very clear that it is the pastoral counselor’s responsibility and the pastoral counseling movement’s responsibility to do the critical analysis. . . . The assumption is that theology can teach behavioral science a thing, and that behavioral sciences can help us understand our theologies better and can actually expand our theologies in important ways by helping us understand the human person.”

How would a biblical counselor deal with someone suffering from depression? Scott explained that “if [the person is] not a Christian, there’s hope through Jesus Christ, the gospel, for salvation. If [the person is] a Christian and [is] disillusioned and discouraged, there’s just the various promises of God and the hope that’s there.”

To address a person’s low self-esteem, Scott said, he typically would learn what judgments the person was making about herself. “In the book of Philippians it says, ‘Think on things that are true.’ So I want to bring those things over and say ‘Are they true?’” False statements would be addressed head-on. He also would probe various areas and relationships to learn what specifically the person was depressed about.

Ultimately, all broken relationships and emotional issues are in some way related to the fall of Adam, Scott maintained, adding that some of these issues can be traced to a person’s sin and others traced to trials that the person is facing in a fallen world.

Townsend said biblical counselors often fail to acknowledge that they aren’t just applying scripture but are working out of specific interpretations of scripture. Many proponents of biblical counseling have uncritically accepted “a literal interpretation of scripture without realizing that, in itself, is an interpretive structure,” he added.

“They see themselves as applying the scripture, without any acknowledgment that in order to do that they go through an interpretive process that’s unacknowledged. It is unfair to clients and it’s deceptive not to own up to the fact that you’re interpreting it through a set of interpretive lenses.”

The biblical counseling movement does acknowledge that there is a place for medicine and medication in treating some mental illnesses. But Townsend thinks that this official admission is not sufficient. Almost all mental illnesses are diagnosed by drawing on both behavioral science and medical science, Townsend said. If a counselor refuses to draw on both those disciplines, he or she will be unable to make a diagnosis.

“You can’t go point to a germ that caused a mental illness and cure that. So how do you, in that biblical counseling frame, make a decision about which mental illnesses are a problem of Christian living? And how do you make a distinction between that and a depression that is medically induced that needs medication?” Townsend said the distinctions that biblical counselors make between the sciences they accept and those they reject is an artificial one—“and I think it’s self-deceptive on the part of that movement.”

Scott says scripture is sufficient to treat even dysfunctions such as anorexia or bulimia. Though the term *bulimia* is not in scripture, the principle for treating it is. “We would look at that as lusting over something so much that you’re willing to do what you’re doing. . . . Another word for lust would be *idolatry*.” Persons suffering from bulima “want something so much they’re willing to sin to get it or sin if they don’t. So what we would ask is, ‘What is it that you want so much that you’re resorting to gorging the food down and then throwing it up?’ And oftentimes it centers around appearance.”

Townsend noted that when the American Association of Pastoral Counselors held its annual meeting in Louisville recently he tried to coordinate a dialogue between that group and the advocates of biblical counseling at Southern. Neither side was interested in participating.

“You really are dealing with two very different epistemologies,” Townsend said. “One says that knowledge can come only through religious voices and that the scripture itself is the judge of all knowledge. There’s another epistemology that says that knowledge is very diverse, it’s as diverse as God. There are all kinds of knowledges, and when you cut off all those knowledges your doctrine of creation

suffers.”