

Biblical Counseling in Local Churches and Parachurch Ministries



by DAVID POWLISON AND HEATH LAMBERT—

What is the relationship between counseling within a local church and counseling in an outside setting, parachurch or somewhere else? It's an important question. Every person committed to counsel biblically is, by definition, committed to seeing counseling restored as a core ministry of local churches. But the reality is that many biblical counselors practice a significant percentage of their ministry within a parachurch organization. This term, *parachurch*, means “beside the church.” It is counseling done in places such as a counseling center, a school, a chaplaincy, a mission agency, a campus ministry. Is it a contradiction to do counseling “beside the church” instead of solely within the church? Or consider the question from another angle: When biblical counselors say that our goal is to “restore counseling to the church,”¹ what does that mean for parachurch ministries? Are they

¹ This is part of the mission statement for the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF) but others share in this broad goal.

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included or excluded? Valid or invalid?

In this article, we will argue that there is a definable and complementary relationship between local church and parachurch ministries—even to the extent that “the church” includes both local churches and parachurch settings. We will defend that position by covering a wide terrain. We will:

- look at how biblical counseling was born and has grown,
- look at the place of parachurch ministry in Scripture and throughout church history,
- lay out a philosophy for how church and parachurch fruitfully relate,
- sketch how and where people come into maturity as biblical counselors, and
- describe the topography of parachurch ministry roles for men and women committed and trained to counsel biblically, and touch on situations where a Christian counsels entirely outside a Christian context either informally or professionally.

We will now begin with a brief history of the biblical counseling movement.

How Biblical Counseling Emerged and Developed

More than a half century ago, the vision for reestablishing wise, biblical counseling arose within a parachurch context—significantly shaped by a perception of the needs of local church ministry. Jay Adams, an experienced local pastor, was serving as a professor of practical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary (Glenside, Pennsylvania). He was assigned to teach a course on pastoral ministry. Keenly aware of the inadequacies and failures of pastors—including himself—in the area of pastoral counseling, he wrestled with difficult questions and problems such as:

- How can we be faithful to God as we seek to help struggling people?
- What should we teach pastors-to-be about their responsibility for hands-on pastoral care? Should the church’s practice be subordinate to secular models of understanding people and problems?
- What does the Bible say specifically about people’s deepest personal and interpersonal problems?

Adams concluded that Christian faith speaks directly and relevantly to these questions. And so it was at a seminary—a parachurch organization—that biblical counseling was born.

It is not surprising that the next steps of growth also took place in parachurch settings. In 1968, John Bettler, a local pastor, joined with Adams to found the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF) for the dual purpose of doing counseling while training counselors.² The mission of the organization was to think biblically about the issues of living

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in order to equip the church to meet counseling-related needs. At the time, local churches lacked vision and skill for counseling ministry. Pastors had received little, if any, training in the Christian cure of souls. They needed to catch a vision and learn skills somewhere. So building on what was started at Westminster, CCEF and other parachurch ministries³ stepped in to develop the first initiatives in model-building, in training and education, in offering counseling services, and in developing published resources. From the start, the goal was to serve local churches, to help God’s people grow in grace and wisdom, to help local pastors become more faithful, probing, and effective in their care of souls. And, from the start, the goal was also to serve the universal church, including other parachurch ministries—mission agencies, retreat centers, seminaries, Christian schools, and the like—to

² For more on the relationship between Adams and Bettler, their similarities of conviction and their often striking differences of emphasis, see my editorials from volume 32: “Counsel and Counseling: Christ’s Message and Ministry Practice Go Together,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 32:1 (2018), 2-9; “Let’s Celebrate this Golden Anniversary,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 32:2 (2018), 2-7; and “Slow Growth,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 32:3 (2018), 2-11.

³ In addition to CCEF and Westminster Theological Seminary, first generation parachurch ministries included the Biblical Counseling Foundation (BCF); the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors (NANC; now the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, ACBC); the *Journal of Pastoral Practice* (now the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*); and Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing.

become more faithful, probing, and effective.

Today, countless parachurch counseling and educational ministries continue the work in scores of countries all over the world. They serve every major language group. They serve by:

- casting vision for fidelity to Christ and Scripture, relying on the Holy Spirit's fruitful strength,
- further developing and contextualizing the counseling model and skills,
- training men and women to counsel wisely,
- offering counseling to people not being served by their local churches,
- providing networks of association for like-minded counselors, and
- producing books, articles, and other resources.

To this day, each of these parachurch ministries operates out of a conviction that a biblical model of counseling ministry will find its most basic expression as one of the core ministries of local churches. Thousands of churches have caught this vision and are taking steps to implement the vision practically. But parachurch continues, and will continue, to play certain key roles.

And it is a two-way street. Needs arise in the practical problems of churches and individual Christians. Parachurch counseling ministries help to meet the need for wise counseling, both directly and by helping churches to better meet the need. And churches exert a continual reality check on the tendency of parachurch institutions to take on a life of their own that would lose touch with Christian theology, and the life and needs of the local church community. Parachurch can be tempted to substitute their own specialized areas of interest and activity for the comprehensive life of the worshiping community.

This history illustrates something of why our commitment to rich and deep counseling in the context of the local church also leads us to a commitment to parachurch ministry. Local church and parachurch can potentially live in a dynamic, constructive relationship.

The Local Church and Parachurch in the Bible and Church History

The story is as old as Scripture. And it has appeared repeatedly throughout church history. Here is the deep structure biblically.

Local churches are an extension of the creational principle of the *family*. This is where the work of God began, where redemption began, and where all of God's purposes in Christ will culminate. The local church in Genesis was Abraham's extended family. The local assemblies at the first Passover were individual families. The local congregation in the Exodus wilderness was a mega-church of Abraham's descendants—a family—centered around the tabernacle, under the leadership of priests. The local church in the Promised

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Land gathered to worship and learn in homes and at the temple under the guidance of priests. At the time of Jesus, the local church was still gathering in the temple and in homes. In God's providence, synagogues had also arisen as a further development of the familial principle, gathering the people of a village for Sabbath worship and teaching. The local church after the resurrection of Jesus Christ gathered in homes. And local churches have taken on innumerable forms in the subsequent two millennia—but the principle is the same. A family gathers to learn the ways of the Lord, to worship him, and love one another. And a marriage feast and a full family reunion are coming when he returns. The familial principle that got things started will come to full fruition in the end.

Along the way, a second institutional dynamic also participates in the journey toward that destination. As noted, the extended family of Israel gathered to worship and learn both as family units and in the temple under the leadership of priests. But, in addition to priests, there were other leaders called to serve as well. These prophets, wisdom-writers, and occasional kings served in parachurch roles, outside the temple's organizational structure, yet serving its welfare and growth. They acted, spoke, and wrote to inform, reform, disciple the community, and invite strangers in. They also acted, spoke, and wrote to proclaim the Lord's name, promises, and will to the nations. As noted, at the time of Jesus, homes, village synagogues, and the temple

were places of familial gathering. But John the Baptist came as a parachurch prophet, proclaiming a message of personal and institutional repentance and renewal. And, simultaneously, Jesus, his disciples, and other followers formed a parachurch movement bringing salvation, reform, intensive discipleship, and outreach. The Christian movement began as a parachurch movement to revitalize and greatly expand the family of God: new wine for new wineskins.

Throughout both the Old Testament and New, we repeatedly see a close relationship between the open-to-all congregational pattern of the church family, and the selective, disciplined pattern of a parachurch.

After the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, after receiving the Holy Spirit of promise, a missionary band of apostles went out to gather new Christian believers into new synagogues. These parachurch leaders pointedly established local churches. They went out to call all peoples to come into the family of God. They intensively disciplined these new churches through their teaching and writing. Parachurch served local church; it was never an end in itself. And two particular parachurch initiatives are evident in the New Testament. Missionaries followed in the footsteps of the apostles, supplementing and carrying on the work of the apostles in church planting (e.g., 3 John). A famine relief project was also started, carried out by relief workers traveling the eastern Mediterranean (e.g., Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 8–9:5). The pattern of designated individuals gifted and called for a specific mission continued.

Throughout both the Old Testament and New, we repeatedly see a close relationship between the open-to-all congregational pattern of the church family, and the selective, disciplined pattern of a parachurch, called to serve a specialized purpose. Parachurch has a narrow focus but a wide scope. The church family has a comprehensive focus but a local scope. By the way, neither is a guarantee of goodness and truth. Both can stray and do harm. We

encounter false prophets and teachers (parachurch) and corrupt priests and pastors (local church) in both the Old and New Testaments. In the same way, either can become a source of renewal for the other and for the people of God as a whole.

Two thousand years of church history repeatedly demonstrates that the Spirit continues to use variations on these same two organizational structures in order to build and nurture the people of God. Familial congregations welcome all, and all participate in community life. The more selective and specialized parachurch focuses in on a particular mission, either reaching into the community to strengthen it, or reaching into other populations that the community isn't reaching. Over the centuries, a host of monastic, evangelistic, discipling, educational, medical, mercy, justice, theology, music, and missionary organizations have mobilized dedicated Christians called to serve particular purposes that went beyond what a local church could do. When they have served well, they specifically serve the greater cause of the church.⁴

We turn next to how parachurch and local church counseling ministries can and should interrelate.

How the Local Church and Parachurch Intersect

In this section, we will state two crucial principles for understanding the relationship between church and parachurch when it comes to biblical counseling. We will then describe three ways that this relationship can best be lived out. We hope to lay a foundation for establishing wise, careful, and rich connections between local churches and parachurch ministries.

Two crucial principles. The first crucial principle for understanding the relationship between church and parachurch flows from God's overarching goal. Christ has chosen to gather his people into countless congregations—which, in the end, will gather as one great assembly before the face of God. He has chosen to establish the church community as the institution by

⁴ This argument for two redemptive structures has analogies to Ralph Winter's "The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission" in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement, a Reader* (eds. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 4th ed.; Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009). Winter defined parachurch mission agencies as a crucial aspect of how the Spirit works in history in order to build churches. We are drawing wider implications, encompassing a whole range of parachurch ministries.

which he best expresses his mission in the world. He is gathering his children to make disciples of them so that they will become wise adults acting in the image of Christ. The familial church is central to God's purposes; therefore, effective parachurch ministry must be grounded in this reality. When parachurch ministry faithfully serves this principle, it legitimates the multitude of activities and rich proliferation of ministries that pointedly address the many and particular problems that the church faces.

This anchors the very definition of both "the church" and the parachurch to which counseling ministry needs to be restored. Historically, Christians have understood a distinction between particular local churches and the various other levels in which the universal church operates. The Bible

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talks about the church in a layered way. Sometimes church means *a local congregation of believers*—"Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings" (1 Cor 16:19). The Bible also talks about the church as *a city-wide entity*—"Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians" (1 Thess 1:1). The church can be referred to as *a regional reality*—"The church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up" (Acts 9:31). Finally, Scripture understands the church as *a universal body*—"Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25). That all-encompassing body of Christ is built up into maturity by the innumerable ways that each one of the people of God does his or her part (Eph 4:11–16). To develop the practical theology of counseling is to restore Jesus Christ to his central role in redeeming straying and suffering people, and it is to restore counseling ministry as a core ministry of "the church" at all levels of meaning.

This diverse use of the term *church* in the Bible provides a strong biblical justification within which Christians may organize themselves to serve in

activities that we call parachurch. As we noted, missionary church planting and famine relief appear in the New Testament. Those same purposes have found parachurch expressions throughout church history, along with other special-purpose ministries: e.g., schools, publishing, college ministries, chaplaincies, choir schools, and so forth. It is no surprise that individuals who form organizations for such purposes do faithful work for the sake of Christ. They are fulfilling their role as part of the universal church. Those individuals and organizations are drawn from and dependent upon many local congregations. In sum, the people of God always gather in local churches—and as needs are identified, they also organize for special purposes.

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This is the pattern that parachurch biblical counseling ministries seek to express. The important work that parachurch does in and for the church does not make it a substitute for the congregation. Parachurch ministry can often be helpful, and will sometimes be necessary, for a season. But when all is said and done, when Christ has made all things new, the temporary roles served by parachurch ministries will be finished. At the end of history, only the gathered, familial church will remain. While we wait for that day, the dispensable, “seasonal” ministries must be aimed at strengthening and supporting what God has chosen to be indispensable and permanent—namely his gathered family.

So the centrality of the local church congregation is actually an argument *for* principled parachurch ministry—so long as such ministries direct their energies toward the church’s thriving. That is so for seminaries, prison ministries, and international mission societies. It is so for counseling ministries and every other form of faithful and useful parachurch organization. The

mission of local churches endures throughout history. The mission of a parachurch is seasonal, according to a specific need, and must be committed to the welfare of Christian people gathering in local churches.

The second crucial principle defines one specific seasonal need in *our* time. Biblical counseling is an essential part of every church's calling—in fact, every Christian's calling.⁵ Candid, constructive, prayerful, fruitful conversations are a characteristic of a congregation whose people are alive to God and each other. But, on the whole, Christians haven't been doing it, or haven't been doing it well. Social awkwardness and putting on an act, pat answers and quick fixes, avoiding or meddling, false explanations and bad

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advice—the failings are many. So a need exists. A wide gap exists between what our biblical DNA calls for and what our lives together manifest. In hundreds of different ways, the Bible urges Christians to do the work that we moderns call “counseling.” We should be having significant conversations with each other, talking through life-and-death questions in ways that are honest, caring, and helpful.... Who are you?... Where are you placing your trust and hope?... What voices are you listening to?... How are you handling life's hardships and heartaches? We are to help each other grow wise and loving in the midst of the ways each one of us struggles every day with our sins and sufferings.

Scripture doesn't use the word *counseling* for these activities but the reality is everywhere present. Listen to these familiar passages (paraphrased).

- The purpose of a person's heart is deep waters, but an understanding person draws those purposes out.

⁵ Ephesians 4:15, 29; Hebrews 3:13; 10:24

- Take the judgmental log out of your own eye—then you will see clearly to gently take the blinding speck out of your brother’s eye.
- Speak into each other’s lives in ways that are true, relevant, and helpful.
- Find God’s true comfort in your own troubles—then you will be able to truly comfort any person facing any trouble.
- Think hard about how you can stir other people up to love and good works.
- Encourage one another every single day so that none of you are hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.
- Admonish the unruly. Encourage the faint-hearted. Hold on to the weak. Be patient with them all.
- Learn how to sustain with a word anyone who is weary and burdened.
- Pray specifically for your brothers and sisters, that their love will abound more and more in knowledge and discernment.
- Let all of your words be nourishing, constructive, timely, and grace-giving to anyone who hears what you say.⁶

These describe highly desirable skills! And God freely gives such wisdom to those who know their need (James 1:5). Sit with these passages. Hear what they are actually saying and the implications for what you need from others and what they need from you. Every one of us needs help, and needs to learn to give help—and honest, faithful conversations are intrinsic to what counts as eternally helpful.

Don’t let our culture’s office-bound, fee-for-service, professional depiction of “counseling” control how you think about counseling. And don’t let the fact that churches often do everything except have honest, constructive conversations control how you think about counseling. Regardless of what we call it, God wants his people to have personal, prayerful, encouraging, life-renewing interactions with one another. God wants this because he is an intrinsic part of such conversations. They are his forte, and he intends that they become your forte. Sitting under good

⁶ Proverbs 20:5; Matthew 7:5; Romans 15:14; 2 Corinthians 1:4; Hebrews 10:24; Hebrews 3:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; Isaiah 50:4; Philipians 1:9; Ephesians 4:29

preaching and developing a good devotional life do not eliminate the need for counseling—instead, these practices should create a community of wise counselors who have awakened awareness of our mutual need for the input and prayers of others.⁷ That’s the message of the Scriptures mentioned above. If it’s not happening, a disconnect is occurring between real life and preaching, devotional practices, worship, programs, and fellowship. If there is a disconnect, if conversations are evasive and foolish instead of candid and constructive, then those church activities are not living up to their name and purpose.

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When the church loses sight of this crucial work—as happened, for example, throughout most of the 19th and 20th centuries—it is incumbent on believers to restore the church to faithfulness. To become faithful is to become wise. And wisdom is a verbal virtue, able to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. This restoration to faithfulness has been and continues to be the work of the parachurch ministries involved in biblical counseling.

These two realities—the centrality of the local church and the crucial need for biblical counseling—form the principled argument for the existence of parachurch ministries dedicated to biblical counseling. Such organizations exist to restore wise, faithful, loving, excellent biblical counseling in local churches. And they exist to provide such counsel as doing their part in the universal church.

With this understanding, how can the relationship between parachurch and local church best be lived out? We will discuss three relational realities

⁷ See Paul Tripp, “A Community of Counselors: The Fruit of Good Preaching,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 21:2 (2003): 45-53.

by which parachurch can serve churches.

Three relational realities. The first relational reality is training. Parachurch biblical counseling ministry can serve the church by training people in local churches to do counseling well.

All ministry requires skill. Of course, the Holy Spirit is the person who imparts giftedness, wisdom, and love.⁸ This conviction, however, does not make it unnecessary to hone giftedness through careful training. The Spirit uses people. People organize their work together into institutions that put a variety of gifts to work.

Preaching provides a clear historical example. For centuries local churches have relied on parachurch institutions such as theological seminaries to train the ministers who will be called to preach to the flock. Most of us with solid convictions about the significance of preaching in the local church learned many of our convictions, insights, and skills during our theological education in a parachurch seminary. We read books produced by parachurch publishers. We gathered with like-minded believers in parachurch conferences to find fellowship, further teaching, and role models of how to do preaching well.

Training in counseling is as crucial as training in preaching. Counseling training may be even more essential. A pastor-to-be who desires to learn how to preach has no shortage of opportunities to do so. He gets exposed to the ministry of preaching from his local church pastor every week. He can hear preaching at any number of conferences. He can hear the Word preached on countless websites and podcasts. Most books about “ministry of the Word” and about the application of Scripture to life are books about preaching. Pastors are taught how to speak a prepared, scripted message that moves from the biblical text out into general life experience.

Usually, though, only one or two people preach in a church on a regular basis. But everyone, including preachers, does counseling—either well or poorly, either intentionally or unwittingly, informally and perhaps formally on occasion. Yet, no abundance of resources is available for counseling ministry. Seminaries were slow to even teach counseling. They have been

⁸ 1 Corinthians 12:11; James 1:5; Galatians 5:22–23

even slower to consciously build their teaching from Scripture, rather than relying on secular models. Few books on “ministry of the Word” and application direct their attention to the dynamics of interpersonal conversations. Pastors and laypersons are not taught how ministry of the Word and prayer unfolds within an unscripted, improvisational conversation that moves from particular life experiences into biblical truth.

This is an odd imbalance and omission when you think about it. In the Gospels, we listen in on how Jesus conducts significant, personalized conversations far more often than we listen in on his preaching. He does all

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those things on the bulleted list from several pages back. Likewise, in many New Testament epistles, the expression of love, the problem-solving, the perspective-giving, the prayers, the candid self-disclosure, the direct personal exhortation, and the vigorous sense of relationships is much more like the problem-tackling immediacy of counseling than expository preaching. We should be able to both preach and counsel.

Because counseling ministry happens in private conversations, there aren't opportunities to listen in, or podcasts full of counseling session recordings to listen to on the way to work. Even when men and women in a local church are doing dozens of hours of faithful biblical counseling every week, that work remains invisible to most people in the congregation. So if the church of Jesus Christ is going to grow in our ability to counsel wisely, we need experts in biblical counseling to train us in this work.

This is precisely the need that parachurch biblical counseling ministries seek to meet. A hallmark of the parachurch aspect of the biblical counseling movement is the training offered at seminaries, colleges, and other teaching ministries. Teaching also happens through published resources (books,

articles, blog posts). A number of biblical counseling ministries have developed on-line distance education courses. There are a variety of regional and national training conferences both in the United States and in various countries around the world. These parachurch efforts have brought training to tens of thousands of men and women, training otherwise unavailable in their local churches.

The parachurch and the local church honor each other and advance the cause of Christ when the parachurch offers training in biblical counseling that gets spliced into the operative DNA of local churches.

The second relational reality is the usefulness of collaboration. Collaboration is a powerful force in ministry. For example, one of the most positive arguments for the existence of denominations is that our churches—and the Christians in them—can accomplish more for the kingdom together than we can apart.

One example of collaboration is the work of denominations like the PCA, OPC, SBC, and ACNA.⁹ Local churches collaborate to work in a parachurch way and fund parachurch ministries through a larger shared endeavor. This makes it possible for thousands of churches to fund gospel ministry all over the world. No one person or church could ever raise the billions of dollars used to fund seminaries, publishing ministries, and a wide range of missionary and evangelistic projects nationally and internationally. But when that work is supported by millions of people and tens of thousands of churches, it creates a powerful impact.

Collaboration works.

This kind of collaboration is what biblical counseling parachurch ministries have accomplished in partnership with local churches, becoming a biblical counseling *movement*. Every church, whether large or small, can implement biblical counseling ministry in some fashion. But it takes the collaboration of many churches and many parachurch organizations to create a movement.

Christians all over the world have discovered biblical counseling. They have grown and are growing in their ability to counsel wisely, because a

⁹ Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), and the Anglican Church of North America (ACNA).

movement has arisen. Countless numbers of Christians have attended training events, earned a degree, gained experience, received certification, read books, been supervised and mentored, been able to observe counseling, or have themselves received counseling through parachurch efforts in biblical counseling. We have much more work to do, of course. But what has already been accomplished would have been impossible for any one local church to do. The collaborative effect of parachurch biblical counseling ministries, working with and through thousands of local churches, has made this a reality.

The church's ability to offer wise counsel will be strengthened as Christians participate—individually and as churches—in parachurch efforts to help congregations collaborate and advance the cause of the personal ministry of the Word.

The third relational reality is accountability. Accountability is an essential part of faithfulness in Christian ministry. Christianity is a religion of truth, faith, and love. Truth has standards. There are true and false ways to explain the human heart, or to weigh the significance of suffering and personal history, or to describe the goals of human flourishing. Faith takes both wise and foolish forms, either trusting rightly or misplacing and distorting trust. Attempts to love and help another person are sometimes loving and helpful, but sometimes unloving and unhelpful. "Counseling" can fall anywhere across the spectrum. Accountability helps us to clarify our convictions and our counsel, helps to deepen our faith, and helps to make our love more true.

For example, in 1646, more than one hundred pastors gathered in Westminster Abbey to draft guiding documents for the reformation of the Church of England. The document they produced came to be called *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. This document has been used ever since as one measure of confessional accountability in multiple denominations for countless pastors, elders, and laypersons in thousands of congregations. Other churches, ministries, and denominations use other confessional statements directed toward the same end of establishing accountability.

The practice of using parachurch standards of accountability has enjoyed broad acceptance with Christians through the centuries. Biblical

counseling parachurch ministry can also serve local churches by providing the accountability that is so necessary to the practice of personal ministry of the Word.

For example, one complicating factor facing the biblical counseling movement, and the churches offering it, is the current popularity of the very term *biblical counseling*. Many kinds of counselors are quick to say that they engage in biblical counseling. Organizations that once openly advertised that they “integrated Christianity and psychology” now say that they are offering biblical counseling—though what they actually do and say has hardly changed. The term *biblical counseling* was often derided from the 1970s through the 1990s—but now it has become a popular term. So counselors who do not really believe that God intends Scripture to play a central role in counseling, and who have never received any instruction in biblical counseling, use the term. This poses a problem. When a term comes to mean anything, it becomes useless. We need accountability with regard to the definition, ideas, and practices that make counseling worthy of the adjective *biblical*.

This task of creating standards of accountability is something that parachurch biblical counseling ministries have sought to do from the beginning. During the past fifty years, leaders have written hundreds of books and articles proposing to define and refine the content and methodology of biblical counseling. This article is but one more, focusing on one narrow but significant topic. A number of certifying organizations have sought to recognize faithfulness, education, experience, and skill in biblical counseling practice. There have been efforts to create standards for the belief and conduct of biblical counselors.¹⁰ Of course, none of these efforts or secondary standards are final and infallible. But they are a work in progress toward a good end: that we as Christ’s people will be increasingly able to articulate and practice what it means to counsel in fidelity to the

¹⁰ See, for example, the “Confessional Statement” of the Biblical Counseling Coalition (www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/confessional-statement/); the “Standards of Conduct” available from the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (www.biblicalcounseling.com), and “Affirmations and Denials: A Proposed Definition of Biblical Counseling” by David Powlison in *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 19:1 (2000): 18-25, and reprinted in *Speaking Truth in Love* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2005) 167-186.

mind and heart of our Savior Jesus Christ.

As parachurch leaders create a faithful context for accountability in the practice of biblical counseling, local churches will benefit and be able to grow in their conscious faithfulness to this important task.

These relational realities—training, collaboration, and accountability—are a two-way street. Local churches and parachurch ministries complement and support each other. Many of the leaders and participants in parachurch ministries have been or are pastors of local churches, and all, whether or not

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they are pastors, are active in local churches. The differences between local church and parachurch are not absolute—because the persons involved easily and fruitfully live in both institutional worlds as members of Christ’s universal church.

Given the ongoing and dynamic relationship between these two institutional contexts, how and where do people become committed to counsel biblically and grow in competency?

How and Where To Develop Skills and Leadership in Biblical Counseling

As we have seen, counseling ministries are native to Christian faith. We ought to be good at counseling—the very best at both receiving and giving it. No other explanation of human misery goes as wide and long, high and deep as the Christian explanation. No other explanation of human motivation searches the heart as deeply or truly. No one else can offer the hands-on patience, mercy, and strength of a Savior God.

Think about this. Other counseling models never notice that every single human being is made by and dependent on God, and is accountable to God for what they love, trust, say, and do. They never mention that actual human beings are both subtly and overtly sinful by instinct and by choice, that we suffer within a context of meaningfulness, that Jesus Christ entered our plight, that we are redeemable and transformable by intimate

mercy and power. Other explanations and answers look shriveled when juxtaposed with the breadth, length, height, and depth of the love of Christ.

We should be very good at counseling. After all, Christian faith invented the hands-on *care and cure of souls* (the root meaning of psychotherapy). Intentional, life-long, life-transforming, personalized discipleship is a Christian distinctive. God meets *us*, his people; and God meets *you*, his beloved son or daughter.

So how do the people of God become good at counseling? *Where* do we go to learn? *Where* do we gain the essential seasoning of case experience? *Where* do we eventually locate our ministries? Here's the trajectory.

There is a progression of seven stages in the development of a person's counseling wisdom.¹¹ This is the process any one of us goes through in awakening and maturing into an insightful, caring, helpful counselor. These seven stages describe the process that the whole body of Christ goes through as we grow up together. They illustrate the dynamic connection between local church and parachurch.

First stage: personal impact. The seed of wise counseling is sown when the Word of God speaks meaningfully to you. The Word comes to life—your life. God says something that directly illumines what you are going through and how you are living. He's relevant. Your deepest personal struggles and your heaviest situational troubles start to make a new kind of sense. Where does this happen? Anywhere: your local church, your family, a youth retreat, a school or campus ministry, a booklet addressing a personal problem, a parachurch counseling conference.

Second stage: personal interest. You hear—perhaps for the first time—the implication that the church has a unique and significant counseling calling. You begin to reflect that the Lord Jesus interprets personal struggles and situational troubles through a *very* different set of eyes from how other counseling models see things. He engages people with a *very* different set of intentions from how other counseling models proceed. Your church

¹¹ An expanded version of the last six of these stages appeared in "JBC: Renewing our Mission," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 26:1 (2012): 2-10, and in my preface to Heath Lambert's *The Biblical Counseling Movement After Adams* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 11-18.

may currently be doing a poor job of counseling, or counseling through deviant eyes, or abdicating the task entirely. But you come to realize that the Wonderful Counselor intends to form his people into good counselors—and getting better all the time. Until you know that something *might* exist, you can't envision participating. Where does this happen? Sometimes in a local church, most often through a book, article, friend, or counseling ministry.

Third stage: personal burden. You agree that this vision is desirable, true, good, and beautiful. In fact, it is nothing less than the will of God. The church not only *could* become good in counseling, we *should* become wise and fruitful in counseling ministries. We should be able to talk with people about things that matter. We should be able to make deeper sense, better sense, true sense of life's struggles and troubles. We should be able to offer a better trajectory on which to live, the only solid hope, the true way forward in life. You come to say, "Yes, this should be so. I may not yet understand exactly what it will look like, but I agree it ought to happen." Where does this happen? In your heart, responding to the message of the second stage.

Fourth stage: enter the calling. You personally and consciously embrace and seek to embody the vision. This is the decisive step, the *sine qua non*. The first three stages involved that informal, on-the-fly apprehension that Scripture proposes a different way of understanding and addressing your deepest struggles. But what was informal and experiential now becomes conscious and intentional. The Lord's way of engaging broken people in a broken world is the only truly loving engagement. As you take it to heart, you enter consciously into the lively dynamics of transformation portrayed in the psalms, proverbs, prophets, histories, gospels, and epistles. You enter into God's counseling process for yourself. You become his disciple in a conscious new way. Where does this happen? Everywhere in life, perhaps through reading, or in a discipleship group, or through the self-counseling project in a counseling class.

Fifth stage: engage in preparation. You seek to learn with and from like-minded people. Maturity always involves an educational process, a discipleship. You read books, talk with others, take classes, give it a try in practice, get feedback and mentoring. Your skills in loving, listening,

understanding, speaking, and helping develop more relevance and flexibility. Where does this happen? Basic training is increasingly happening in churches with an intentional training program. But more often, and at advanced levels, it happens through reading, getting training from a parachurch educational institution, and friendships with fellow students.

Where will you do counseling, gain experience,
find continuing education, and get feedback and
supervision? Counseling needs a location.

Sixth stage: step out to serve. You start to help people. You get better at counseling. As you gain case experience, you become good at this art of arts, this skill of skills. Certainly it is possible to get training and experience and remain inept. But we do not need to be inept. The most accurate synonym for counseling is “wise love.” Wise love *learns* when to speak and when to be silent, what to ask and what not to ask, what to say and what not to say, how to say it and how not to say it, what is helpful and what is not helpful, what is your responsibility and what is the other person’s responsibility. Wisdom sweetens and brightens the lives of other people. The challenging and never-ending task of preparation brings a great reward.

But where does a person go to learn this way of wisdom? Where will you do counseling, gain experience, find continuing education, and get feedback and supervision? Counseling needs a location. This could be a church lay-counseling ministry. It could be in an internship at a school or a counseling center. It could be in the context of any other parachurch ministry where hands-on cure of souls is happening.

Seventh stage: step up to lead. If God so gifts you, grows you, and calls you, then you mature into leadership. Counseling wisdom is a communicable skill. It must be communicated to others, spread around, passed down the generations, developed further. Three kinds of leaders will be raised up.

Some people will become leaders by their skillfulness in teaching others. They are able to break a complex process down into the component parts.

They have a sense for the scales and arpeggios necessary for someone to learn to play beautiful music. They can identify and engage the gifts and limitations of others, assessing them accurately, selecting good candidates. They offer hands-on training, face-to-face mentoring, insightful supervision, careful coaching. Leadership in teaching means not only the ability to counsel a struggler, but also the ability to help someone else learn to counsel strugglers. It replicates skill. It's not a given that skill in practice (sixth stage) leads to skillful teaching (seventh stage).

Other people will become leaders by their ability to contribute to intellectual progress and to more articulate skillfulness. Biblical wisdom must always be sharpened. Our practical theology needs ongoing development. By engaging new problems, meeting new challenges, hearing the questions people are asking, identifying new needs, and wrestling anew with Scripture, we grow up into greater wisdom. It helps all of us when someone can put familiar truths into fresh words, pointing out unexpected implications. Intuitive insights and intuitive skills can become conscious. It helps all of us when one of us stands back and reflects on what we are all doing, and then points out both our strengths and our weaknesses. We always need to be refreshed. We always need to extend the range and depth of what we understand to be true, doing the research and development work that refreshes and deepens ministry. Where will this happen? It will likely happen in an educational context, not in the trenches of local church ministry.

Still others will become leaders by their talent as entrepreneurs and managers. Counseling needs a home. The care and cure of souls calls for organizational structure, institutional development, delivery systems, support staff, financial underpinning. All ministry costs time and money and occurs in a context. It takes creativity and innovation to design and implement relevant structures. Leaders with gifts in start-up and in administration are able to create and maintain appropriate structures and support systems so that counseling skills are best used—and the body of Christ can deliver good counseling to people in need. Where will this happen? It will happen wherever a local church feels the burden to care for people in need. And it will happen in a wide range of parachurch institutional settings where leadership, vision, and creativity find expression.

Counseling Ministries Exist in a Variety of Parachurch Settings

The next three paragraphs will describe *local church* counseling ministries as they bridge into the world beyond the congregation. Then, the rest of this section will outline some of the many possibilities for parachurch counseling ministries.

First, a fundamental, underlying reality. It is helpful to remember that counseling wisdom should be one component in *every* aspect of local church ministry. It's not a sector of ministry. It's intrinsic to every ministry and every relationship. Think about that. To help another person calls for skills in understanding how Scripture maps onto life experience relevantly and in detail. It calls for skills in understanding the varied needs, struggles, and troubles of various kinds of people. It calls for skills in understanding how God works change in people—and how he works in the midst of what doesn't change. It calls for skills in conversation.

- How do you draw out sensitive, private matters with kindness and purpose?
- When do you listen hard, quietly mulling over what you are coming to know, and when do you respond and speak up?
- When do you ask questions—and what questions do you ask?
- When do you press in with a thoughtful, constructive response?
- When and how do you encourage?
- When and how do you confront?
- When do you draw out what a person already knows and when do you teach what the person doesn't yet know?
- When and how do you pray personally and relevantly for someone?
- When and how do you help a person get practical?

The many wisdoms that go into good counseling are basic aspects of distinctively Christian wisdom.

This means that *every* role within the church is strengthened to the degree that counseling abilities are present. Pastors, elders, youth workers, secretaries, janitors, worship leaders, deacons and deaconesses going about mercy ministry, evangelists, small group leaders, as well as anyone who is simply a friend, a family member, a brother or sister in Christ. In Scripture's vision, "counseling" is as wide as "your tongue" and "your ears." It is not

only those designated and specifically tasked with hands-on pastoral care who can, and should, bear another's burdens, listen well, pray thoughtfully, and speak wisely.

Similarly, the same skillful wisdom applies to all sorts of informal ministry *outside* local church gatherings, programs, and premises. Your ears and your tongue come into play everywhere. The gospel's wise words and thoughtful love are not somehow cooped up within the local church! Every worship service ends with a blessing that sends God's people out into the world—into neighborhoods, workplaces, and families. Those places are almost always a mix of those who believe and those who don't. They

Biblical counseling roles can thrive in many places outside the local church.

often mix believers from multiple local churches. In every one of these “parachurch” settings of daily life, what we say is meant to be “gracious, seasoned with salt, so that we know how to respond to each person” (Col 4:6). This biblical understanding of counseling includes every conversation we ever have, as well as more defined help-seeking and help-offering. So there is a sense in which every Christian individual is daily sent out into “parachurch ministry.” We all serve in this way outside the auspices of the local church, scattering to serve after we've gathered to worship.

The rest of this article, however, will focus on institutional settings, not individual opportunities. Biblical counseling roles can thrive in many places outside the local church. We will offer a sampler of possible venues, roles, and structures. We will break these into three categories: explicitly Christian organizations, organizations that explicitly mix people with different belief systems, and explicitly secular organizations in which a Christian committed to biblical counseling might be able to work faithfully.

Christian organizations. Many men and women committed to biblical counseling serve in true parachurch institutions. In these, the defined mission, leadership, and counseling practice openly proclaim the Lord Jesus

Christ as our Savior, Lord, and Friend. The two most obvious institutions are contemporary variations on the parachurch initiatives we witness in Acts and 2 Corinthians: missions and relief/mercy ministries. But the spectrum is even wider than that, including a variety of social work, educational, and other ministries.

Missions. Missionaries do evangelism and church-planting. Many mission agencies are friendly and committed to biblical counseling. Counseling ministries operate within mission agencies in two obvious ways.

Life-changing conversational wisdom (“counseling”) is intrinsic to the entire missionary endeavor. Evangelism, repentance and faith, baptism, and forming churches express the “come through the door” first half of the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20). The making of a disciple begins with new life in union with God and his people—the import of “baptizing into the Name” of the triune God. And counseling savvy makes the evangelistic message cut deeper by making the personal relevance more obvious.¹² The making of a disciple continues on with Christian formation, the “growing up and living in the family” second half of the Great Commission. “Teaching them to keep all I have commanded” speaks to our growth in grace, in faith, in love, in obedience, in wisdom. Counseling savvy also makes formation cut deeper and more personally. Personally relevant conversation encourages the deeper self-knowledge that corresponds to a more grounded knowledge of God. Jesus Christ is personally present to bless all facets of the Great Commission. Missionary work that does honest conversations well bids to produce deeper and more honest conversions, and then more intentional Christian growth.

In addition, missionaries themselves need care, counsel, and prayer. Counseling wisdom is an obvious key to caring well for missionaries, and for missionaries to care well for each other. Mission agencies increasingly recognize that need, and, when they do, they train their missionaries in biblical counseling and they hire experienced biblical counselors dedicated to missionary care.

¹² Thomas Sigley, “Evangelism Implosion: Reaching the Hearts of Non-Christian Counselees,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 17:1 (1998): 7-14.

Relief missions, Christian social work, and other mercy ministries. Again, whatever the tangible need being addressed, there is always a person in need of pastoral care, in need of Christ, in need of hope, in need of growing in the faith that works out into love. This is a natural place for explicit biblical counseling, along the model of the relief work described in Acts and 2 Corinthians. There is a saying in relief work that runs along these lines: “To present Christ and not offer practical help is heartless. To offer practical help and not present Christ is hopeless.” Just as in medical care, the person who has material needs is also a needy soul who struggles to make sense of life’s troubles and to navigate the way forward.

Crisis pregnancy centers. Those who work with women who are experiencing an unwanted pregnancy are continually presented with counseling opportunities. Some practical information and services are needed, of course—and everything else is counseling. In every “crisis pregnancy” a woman (and the man, too) is at a decisive crossroads and good, godly counsel is essential. The pressures and complications of life are painfully evident, and decisions made at this time of crisis have lifelong implications.

Rescue missions. Similarly, rescue missions offer many practical services as part of their mercy ministry: health care, detox from addictions, improved diet and hygiene, safety, education, and job training and placement. Everything else—Bible study, mentoring, discipleship, accountability, small groups—is ministry of the Word and prayer with a counseling slant.

Prison ministries. Here, everything involves counseling. The sins, sufferings, troubles, and temptations parade in the open. So admonish the unruly. Encourage the fainthearted. Hold on to the weak. Be patient with them all.

Ministries to the elderly. We mention this one because it is so neglected and so needed. Most churches hire an energetic youth worker to disciple young people. But pastoral care for the elderly is rarely approached with a discipleship vision to grow the faith and love of those who are living under the darkest shadows of death. They experience a cascade of losses as they face their last enemy. Christian-based senior living and nursing homes often hire a chaplain who will find biblical counseling as a primary calling. Such

a role should also be a natural ministry of a local church or a parachurch extension of a consortium of churches.

Teachers and guidance counselors in Christian school settings. There are objective jobs to be done when teaching content, helping to plan the next step after graduation, and intervening in problems. But schools deal with people, so counseling issues are always operating just under the surface, and sometimes come out into the open. Counseling skills and wisdom find ready application.

Campus ministries. In both colleges and high schools, parachurch campus workers build friendships, lead Bible studies, and organize events. But most of what they do is talk and pray with students about their struggles and troubles. Biblical counseling skill is a must.

Teachers/professors throughout higher education. Students in Christian seminaries, universities, colleges, and Bible colleges have the same human needs as students on secular campuses. College fellowships and campus workers aim to serve students as persons and as members of a community—but who nurtures the mind? The *content* of seminary counseling classes and of college courses in psychology and counseling should conform to the wisdom and world view of Scripture, instead of being secularized. The current state of affairs is spotty at best in Christian institutions, and there is almost a total vacuum in secular institutions. There are rare exceptions. For example, at Harvard Medical School, Armand Nicholi, a Christian and a psychiatrist, taught the most popular course, a comparison of the world views of Sigmund Freud and C. S. Lewis.

Ministries that provide counseling services. A biblical counseling center can offer care for a wide range of human woes and wanderings—as an auxiliary support to local churches and a service to a community. But general care—e.g., addressing everyday marital troubles, family problems, anxiety, depression, sexual immorality, grieving, and the like—is not the only possible parachurch focus. There is wide room for institutional and organizational creativity. How will biblical counseling help be delivered to otherwise neglected populations and to people with extreme problems who may not be reachable by a local congregation? It calls for institutional and programmatic innovation. Specifically—focused organizations can offer

help to particularly afflicted people: e.g., addictions, domestic violence, eating disorders, psychiatric disorders, lifelong cognitive limitations, or the cognitive disabilities connected with aging. Specialized care serves as an auxiliary to the normal care of local churches.

Christian publishers. Christian publishers choose works to print according to their organization's philosophy. Some are self-conscious that the entire genres of "counseling" and "self-help" need to be candidly, wisely Christian. Publishing is parachurch ministry, and can greatly serve the church when done with a principled vision for faithful pastoral care.

Mixed organizations. Many men and women committed to counsel biblically serve in organizations that have a place for explicit Christian ministry, but whose mission, leadership, and fellow workers include non-Christians.

For example, *chaplains* are a long-established parachurch role that calls for candid and skilled biblical counseling wisdom. Historically, chaplains have served hospitals, the military, first responders, nursing homes, schools, and funeral homes, with occasional opportunities in business and industry. On occasion, some of these settings may be explicitly Christian (e.g., a nursing home or school), but many of them call a Christian chaplain to work as part of a team that includes chaplains who may be Jewish, Muslim, New Age, or from Christian denominations that do not proclaim the gospel or believe in biblical counseling ministry. Some unique forms of biblical wisdom are called for in order to work faithfully with a mixed clientele and as part of a mixed team.

Secular organizations. The normal way of speaking about parachurch refers to Christian institutions, not individual Christians out in the wider world. But this extension of meaning matters because a great deal of biblical counseling ministry occurs outside any institutional context, and even in a secular context. Many men and women committed to counsel biblically serve in committedly secular settings. They are forbidden to openly "proselytize" or to "force their beliefs on someone else," but there are ways to be truly faithful. They can seek to open doors for inquirers by asking the sort of questions that draw out the realities of the human heart, by the explanations they offer or refuse to offer, by the solutions they offer or refuse to offer.

Christians who work in secular medical or legal settings. Medical doctors and nurses, along with lawyers and mediators, serve more effectively as they become more skillful and thoughtful biblical counselors. They meet people in crisis. A Christian does not reduce personal problems to a body gone awry or reduce relational problems to a legal conflict. There is always a person inside every medical diagnosis. Health problems always trigger existential crises and counseling needs, and they often arise from personal problems. A Christian wants to heal both body and soul. Similarly, legal professionals will always deal with their clients' contentious "material issue." But they serve clients well when they also deal with them as persons with broken relationships, who may be aggrieved, obsessed, angry, frightened, guilty, vindictive, or confused. A Christian does not reduce the law to achieving victory over an adversary. Biblical counseling skills are most welcome and useful in these neighboring professions.

Christians who work in secular mental health settings. This final example is one fraught with controversy. Our argument may not persuade people on either side, but we'll seek to offer a redemptive trajectory. Historically, Christians who are psychotherapists, social workers, licensed family therapists, psychiatric nurses, and psychiatrists have tended to bifurcate their faith from their practice. Their education, their personal philosophy of counseling, and the ways they function in the office are often indistinguishable from their secular colleagues. This is changing. Positively, Christians in mental health professions are increasingly becoming committed to a consciously biblical vision of people, problems, and what constitutes the true cure of a soul. Many are being drawn to biblical counseling.

There are ways of practicing faithfully in a secular setting. Biblical categories are concrete, human, and humane. Biblical realities map well onto the details of human suffering, deviancy, and confusion. You can talk cases with anyone, because a struggler's story can always be told in a way that humanizes rather than categorizes a person. A case summary can allude to a diagnostic category as a descriptive shorthand, but need not reify that shorthand into a summation of a person's identity and problems. The line of questioning and the way of interpreting a person's struggle does not need to lead to some form of reductionistic nature/nurture determinism. Personal

history and biology are never the final cause of who a person is. Human agency does not need to be excluded from the cause of problems. And self-salvation strategies do not need to be posited as the way forward in solving life's most significant difficulties. A wise therapist does not need to stoop to enhancing self-trust, self-confidence, self-assertion, and self-esteem. Those are popular contemporary ways of healing the wound lightly by saying "Peace, peace," when there actually is no peace (Jer 8:11). They always come to nothing

It is possible for a Christian in a secular mental health profession to practice with hard-won integrity, rather than bifurcating faith from how one explains and helps.

in the end, so there is no need to start there. Strugglers can be approached more holistically, realistically, responsibly, and compassionately than secular theory and strategy suggest. We believe that taking this paragraph to heart could qualitatively change the counseling practice of numerous Christians in mental health professions.

Counseling in the light of biblical understanding can be done in a secular setting, but it is a daily challenge. It requires a tenacious grasp of biblical practical theology. It takes conscious resistance to the socializing and enculturating forces of professional ideology and the institutional ethos. One needs a compassionate "pastoral" vision for people who are confused and overwhelmed—"harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd," as Jesus put it in Matthew 9:36. These are exactly the kinds of people to whom the Lord reaches out with help (Matt 9:37–38). It is worth noting that one need not call oneself "a biblical counselor." One does need to always counsel biblically, however. That is the *sine qua non* of faithfulness to Christ, wherever one's conversations are located. The alternative is to counsel foolishly.

It is possible for a Christian in a secular mental health profession to practice with hard-won integrity, rather than bifurcating faith from how one explains and helps. The biggest difficulty in this role is subjective. Over time, it is easy

to drift from a Christian vision. But Christians in mental health contexts are also facing an objective threat to their ability to practice with biblical fidelity. Their professional role is increasingly threatened politically as anti-Christian sexual ethics are aggressively imposed on the mental health professions. That hostility will no doubt press some Christian professionals to more conclusively submerge their faith into the closet of a merely personal belief. That is tragic, because it commits them to misunderstand and mislead the men, women, and children who seek their help. But I trust that pressure will strengthen the faith, clarity, and courage of some Christians who consciously embrace a pastoral vision of people, problems, and helping. The institutional hostility will no doubt force many of them to look for an explicitly Christian setting in order to practice biblically—and that’s not necessarily a bad thing.

Strengthening the Church

We have listed only a sampler of possibilities for parachurch biblical counseling practice. Currently there are relatively few “routinized career tracks” in place either in churches or in parachurch organizations for a person described as a biblical counselor. Perhaps that will change—it is already changing to some degree. But it is of first importance to recognize that in whatever context a Christian talks with a struggling person, the counsel ought to be distinctively faithful to the biblical understanding of people that intrinsically leads to Jesus Christ.

Therefore, counseling acumen is part of every ministry, part of every conversation, part of every opportunity to pray with another. Thinking creatively about how counseling wisdom enhances *every* church or parachurch role is a good place to start. From there, wisely conceived parachurch ministries can be built to serve specialized missions, extending the blessings of grace beyond the church, complementing the work of churches, and serving to strengthen the churches of God in every community.

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