Guidelines for Grading ACBC Exams[[1]](#footnote-2)

# General Comments

Welcome to the guild of graders for ACBC! Being a grader is time-consuming and challenging, but it is a rewarding and essential role in developing effective biblical counselors. If you’ve ever graded (or been graded) in an academic setting, this is a very different kind of grading.

As an ACBC grader, your work goes well beyond marking up a paper and turning in a grade. You must be concerned about the applicant’s development as a counselor. Your goal is not simply to assign a grade, but to encourage and disciple the applicant through your grading. Also, unlike in academic settings, grading ACBC exams is most often a cycle of interaction. You will usually be asking applicants to rewrite or revise their exams, and you will be re-grading their work looking for progress in their thinking, clarity in their explanation, and growth in their articulation of biblical truths and principles. When done well, applicants understand the significance of this work and will express their appreciation to you.

As you continue reading this document you’ll find comments on the sidebar. These are exemplary comments demonstrating how comments should be made. If you do not see them, be sure to open this in Microsoft Word.

# The Training Process

Upon affirming that you’ve read this manual, ACBC will assign you a set of exams to grade. Once finished, your work will then be reviewed by an experienced grader who will give you feedback. They might explain and suggest changes to how you graded questions, or give you feedback on the comments that you make, or even make example comments—they will give whatever feedback they deem to be helpful. In the same way that your work on the exam is intended to help the counselor grow, the grader’s comments on your grading is intended to sharpen your grading skills.

Once you receive their feedback, you will make changes to your grading as appropriate. Then be sure to delete the supervising grader’s comments. The applicant should only see comments from you. If you like a comment the grader made, copy the content and make a duplicate so that it will show your name, not the supervising grader’s name.

In some cases, the supervising grader may ask to see the final version before having the exam returned to the applicant. If they suggest further changes, follow the same process in the previous paragraph. Because graders operate with significant autonomy after the training process is complete, it is imperative that each grader learns to follow the guidelines laid out in this manual.

# The Applicant’s Perspective

Grading exams is generally the first opportunity ACBC has to interact with an applicant. Up until now they have taken a class, read books, and observed someone’s counseling. But now they are submitting themselves for evaluation.

Step into the applicant’s shoes for a moment. For most applicants, these exams represent the most significant writing they’ve ever done. For some, their writing of the exams is separated by decades from the last time they wrote papers in school. That doesn’t necessarily mean the quality of their writing will be less, but it likely means their *concern* about their writing ability will be higher. They may even be having anxious thoughts as they await the results of your grading. *Did I do enough? Were my answers clear? Did I say the right things? Will I measure up to their standard?*

Most applicants are not accustomed to being graded. They don’t usually have people critique their writing or teaching. If you’ve worked with an editor, you are likely very comfortable with constructive criticism about your writing. Most people aren’t. So, our feedback should recognize their sensitivity to critique.

We should also recognize that applicants have spent many months, even years in some cases, working on their exams. They’ve put forth significant effort to produce the 60-90 pages you’re about to grade. While grading typically takes between 3-5 hours (depending on the quality of the exams), we should handle their exams with commensurate effort.

# Qualities of an Effective Grading

Always keep in mind that while the applicant is interacting with *you* through the exams, you are serving as the face of ACBC to that applicant. Think of yourself as an ACBC staff member—because that is how the applicant sees you. How you interact with them will reflect on ACBC. Not only that, how you grade can model, in a small but real way, good counseling practice in the way you write comments and interact with the applicant. Key attributes of grading include the following:

*Compassion* – While the application will tell you some things about the applicant, sometimes applicants will reveal more about themselves in their exam. Most often we don’t know anything about the personal life of this individual, but we do know they have dedicated significant time, energy, and resources to get to this stage for well over a year (in most cases). Many people finish the exam exhausted, having made great sacrifices of time. Especially if an exam warrants significant rewrites, be compassionate toward the individual who has worked hard and potentially overcome various challenges to get here.

*Humility* – As an experienced counselor, you likely know *a lot* more than the applicant in terms of using Scripture and counseling. It is unreasonable to expect applicants to have the same level of competence, always select the right passage, or use your favorite counseling resources. When making corrections and recommendations, even if you need to discourage their use of a particular resource, be sure that your comments lovingly move them forward in their progress without pointing out their ignorance in a way that demeans them. Another key aspect of humility is recognizing that you may misunderstand what they mean by their words. This might be because they were not clear, or because your mind is tired or distracted and you’re not analyzing it properly. Either way, when you come across statements that sound like they are affirming error or otherwise don’t make sense, be sure to couch your comment with the possibility that you may not be understanding it properly.

*Gentleness* – It’s not unusual to come across unbiblical, unclear, or otherwise unhelpful statements. Our comments that address such statements should gently point out the issue without tearing down the applicant. Again, we’re here to help them grow, not just point out deficiencies.

*Patience* – It’s not unusual for an applicant to have various kinds of problems on their exam (formatting, spelling, etc.). Because those can slow down the grading process, it can be easy to become impatient and make comments that reveal that impatience. It is critical that we bear up with the weaknesses of those who struggle with writing and properly formatting documents.

*Grace* – When making comments, our words should reflect Colossians 4:6, “Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt. . . .” When we salt our food, we don’t just drop a few grains on there—we put enough so that we can taste it. In the same way, short comments—especially incomplete sentences—are to be avoided. Without being verbose, we should explain our thoughts in complete sentences, remembering that the applicant cannot read our minds. In some cases, it’s been months since they wrote the words you’re commenting on, so they may not understand their own words let alone yours. Be sure to write sufficiently so your words are understood.

*Discernment* – One of your responsibilities as a counselor is to discern what kind of counselee sits in front of you (1 Thess 5:14). While the categories are different, when grading exams, it is helpful to recognize what kind of applicant you are evaluating. Are they older, mature, but not formally educated? Are they a vocational pastor with an M.Div.? Are they a younger person who is eager to serve the Lord but lacks life experience? There are many kinds of applicants you will encounter as a grader, and considering who this individual is should factor into your grading. Don’t hold a worker-at-home mom to the same standard of writing and clarity as a pastor, and hold Level 2 applicants to a higher standard than others. After all, pastors will likely be training future counselors. Their exams must be excellent.

*Dedication* – As noted earlier, exams can take as little as three hours (for both exams) or up to five hours, depending on the quality of the exam. Most graders say that the average exam takes three to four hours to grade. Some graders block out the time to grade an exam all at one time, while others devote smaller blocks of time to complete the exam over several days. Whatever approach fits your schedule, be sure that you’re able to stick to it. The two factors that determine how many exams you grade are your availability and the number of exams that need to be graded. Whatever exams you agree to grade, be sure you set aside the time to grade them within **three weeks** of receiving them. Don’t agree to take on more exams than you can handle.

# Grading Process Overview

When you are assigned a set of exams, you will have access to download the Theology and Counseling exams. Before diving into grading, it is critical to read through the individual’s application. This will help you get to know the individual in broad strokes. Some key elements that will be helpful will be their age, education, training, whether they are in ministry, and their salvation testimony. If you see something in application that is of concern, contact the Membership Services Coordinator.

It is best to grade the Theology exam first. Since theology is the foundation of biblical counseling, knowing the counselor’s biblical framework will be helpful to have in your mind as you grade their counseling exam. Once you are finished going through the exams, you will upload both exams to the Grader Dashboard, indicating whether it is a “Pass” or “Rewrite”. There’s also a box to make overview comments. This sends the exam back to the applicant immediately. While it is possible to submit the theology exam before grading the counseling exam (which might be days earlier, depending on your personal grading schedule), it is usually best to upload them both together. However, if you personally see a benefit to sending their theology exam first, that is acceptable.

When rewrites are required, applicants have up to **three months** to upload their revisions. If you grade consistently, you may have a queue of exams and rewrites to work on. Ensure that you only take on as much as enables you to complete exams and revisions within **three weeks**. Life circumstances may extend that on occasion, but three weeks is the goal.

# Grading Guidelines on Revelation, Guidance, and Miraculous Gifts

The Board of Trustees has approved a statement on [Revelation, Guidance, and Miraculous Gifts](https://biblicalcounseling.com/about/beliefs/statements-from-the-board/revelation-and-guidance/) and has provided the following guidelines for grading this issue:

* Because approaches that encourage guidance from sources other than, or in addition to, the Bible cannot be objectively verified by Scripture, applicants who hold to them are to be rejected.
* One such erroneous approach has to do with receiving additional revelation from God that elucidates, or in some cases even transcends, the guidance that we receive from the Bible.
* Another approach that denies that the Christian is receiving additional revelation from God, but suggests that believers can be assisted in their understanding and application of the Bible through prophetic utterances and impressions from the Lord is also unacceptable.
* Moreover, teaching that guidance may be obtained through hunches, inner sensations, and spiritual experiences or by any means other than through objective, biblical revelation may hinder or disqualify applicants from pursuing certification.
* Because claims to forms of revelation outside the completed canon of the Bible invite confusion and breed a growing distrust of the truth of God’s divinely revealed written Word, ACBC cannot approve those who espouse them for certification.

# Assigning Grades

Each question must receive a grade. It is imperative, for the sake of clarity, that you give a grade to each question and not leave the applicant uncertain about whether they are supposed to make any changes (especially if you’ve made comments on the answer). Grades should be designated by making a comment on the question itself as you see below. While making your grading comment at the bottom of the exam may be convenient for the flow of grading, it is inconvenient for the applicant and your future rounds of grading, as both of you will need to scroll to the bottom to review the grade rather than read the grade and review the comments. Additionally, scrolling to the top to write out your grade and explanation ensures you don’t miss comments you made along the way that may factor into your grading decision or overview comment.

1. Describe the inspiration, inerrancy, and authority of Scripture as well as the relationship of each one of these issues to one another.

You may make additional comments as you deem appropriate and helpful. For example:

9. Explain, using biblical categories, your understanding of the image of God in man.

10. Provide a biblical description of the dichotomist view of mankind. Explain the counseling implications of this doctrine with regard to the inner and outer man.

There are three grades questions can receive. They are as follows:

**Pass** – A passing grade means that the applicant sufficiently addressed the question(s), providing adequate biblical support. For questions that have multiple parts (such as #1 and #10 above), it is critical that every component is directly and sufficiently addressed. You are encouraged to make comments on their answer, ask questions for them to consider or study further, or even correct minor aspects of their answer. But a Pass means they do not need to make any changes before continuing on in the process.

**Rewrite** – As noted in the General Comments, graders have the opportunity to help counselors learn and grow through the grading process. An exam passes only when all questions on that exam receive a passing grade. There is no question on the exam which is unimportant, and thus which can contain error or be inadequate. All answers must meet a minimum standard of accuracy and thoroughness. Therefore, counselors must rewrite each non-passing answer until it receives a passing grade. There are three possible types of rewrites that can be required: *expand*, *revise*, or *rewrite*.

*Expand.* Often there are answers that are mostly good but need some additional content to be sufficient. This could include adding biblical support for statements, or expanding upon a statement to provide clarity, or even answering a part of the question they forgot to address. In this scenario, the existing answer is being expanded, not replaced.

*Revise*. Some answers may need clarification and correction of existing content. They may have worded something in an inadequate or confusing way, or they stated something in error. Or perhaps one of the parts of the question was not properly or adequately answered. Revising an answer means they need to change a portion of the answer without writing an entirely new answer.

*Rewrite*. A rewrite grade means that the answer needs to be replaced with a new answer. The existing answer either does not answer the question, is formatted incorrectly, or is otherwise unable to be modified to a passing condition. For example, questions 13 and 18 of the counseling exam require that the applicant write the answer in the form of a monologue. If they write it in the third person like the rest of the questions, they need to rewrite the answer. Excessive quotations, using outline or bullet point format also requires a rewrite. Sometimes the explanation of an answer is either misguided or tangential to the answer to the degree that the whole answer needs to be rewritten. In some cases, a portion of the answer can be utilized, and you can indicate this to the applicant when possible. Otherwise, the applicant should not use their previous answer as part of the new answer.

**Fatal Error** – In very rare situations an answer will reveal such significant problems that the applicant cannot continue with the certification process. This may include theological error, inconsistency with ACBC’s doctrinal standards, or a consistent inability to interpret Scripture properly. Another reason may be if the applicant embraces psychological thinking and concepts and hasn’t learned to distinguish between psychology and biblical counseling. As well, the inability to clearly explain truth and concepts is a fatal error. Counselors are teachers, and so even if they know the correct truth and principles, if they cannot communicate them with clarity, they should not continue at this time.

A grade of Fatal Error must not be made lightly. The following considerations should be made:

* Ensure that you are judging the theology based on ACBC’s Standards of Doctrine, not your own personal views. For example, while the majority of ACBC counselors are cessationist, some expressions of charismatic theology do not violate ACBC’s standards.
* Ask yourself if the problems can be addressed by personal study and growth over a period of weeks or months. Does the applicant simply need to study an issue? That should not receive a Fatal Error. Is their needed growth a matter of life maturity and broader biblical understanding that will take many months or years? Or would a change of conviction, if they were willing, require leaving their ministry (e.g., a woman who is an elder)?
* Consider whether the applicant is ready for the supervision stage. Given your concerns, would you feel comfortable having this person counsel someone under supervision at this time? As soon as they pass their exams, they will. Don’t pass them if you have legitimate concerns.

If you feel you need to assign this grade, it is critical that you have a phone call with the applicant before returning the exam to ACBC. Begin by asking them questions around the issue of your concern. Express your concern and see how they respond to it. Are they firm in their conviction? Do they humbly acknowledge their need to learn and grow? If you are convinced that they should not continue in the process, be prepared to give them action steps they can take if they would like to restart the process in the future. Recommend specific resources or classes they will benefit from. Encourage them to pursue discipleship with a pastor or leader. Remember—our goal is not simply to assign a grade; it is to help the applicant grow in Christ.

After you have spoken with the applicant and confirmed your conviction that a Fatal Error is warranted, write out your concerns on the exam. Then let the ACBC office know about the situation as these exams should not be uploaded to the website.

Receiving a Fatal Error grade will be difficult for the applicant. They may feel like all their effort to this point was wasted. Be sure to encourage them and build them up. Help them see how beneficial this process has been, and encourage them toward growth. Thankfully, Fatal Errors are very rare—less than 1% of exams.

# Grading the First Attempt

When grading an answer, here are the key elements to look for:

* **Ensure each part of the question is answered clearly and directly.** Ideally, each part of the question will be answered in its own paragraph, but if the applicant’s writing skills are limited and they don’t use paragraphs properly, that is ok. However, if answers to the various parts of the question are interwoven, they usually aren’t answered as completely as necessary.
* **Ensure answers are supported with Scripture.** They must show that they can identify the key passages that teach the things they are saying (especially on the Theology exam). This can be done by teaching from Scripture (e.g., “Ephesians 2:3 tells us that . . .”) or by putting references in parenthesis at the end of a sentence (e.g., “The penalty of sin is death (Romans 6:23).”). Long lists of Bible references at the end of an answer do not suffice. They must include Scripture throughout the answer showing direct connections.
* **Ensure their use of Scripture reflects proper hermeneutics.** Pay attention to the verses they use to ensure they are using Scripture accurately. If you’re not familiar with a reference they cite as support, look it up! Improper Scriptures here and there can be corrected via comments, but a consistent pattern of an inaccurate use of Scripture should require a rewrite with a strong encouragement to be careful in their use of Scripture. This may also lead to a Discontinue if the applicant is unable to correct this problem.
* **Ensure that their answers are specific and clear.** If someone is not able to make ideas clear in writing, they will likely struggle to do it in a conversation. They must demonstrate a clear flow of thought. Sometimes answers read like a bullet list formatted into a paragraph—a list of disparate thoughts with no explanation. Look for cogent explanations that are easily understood.

Common issues to watch out for:

* **Excessive quotations.** Answers should be in the applicant’s own words as much as possible. If their answer is insufficient when removing the quotations, then the answer must be rewritten.
* **Short answers.** The exam instructions require answers to be minimum of one page long. There are some questions that could be briefly answered in a half page, but because we’re aiming at discerning their ability to explain, all the questions can easily be expanded to at least one page. Very occasional short answers (3/4 pages) are acceptable, but any answer less than 3/4 page must be rewritten or expanded. If many answers are less than a page, they should all be expanded.
* **Long answers.** The exam instructions require answers to be a maximum of 1.5 pages long. While any question can occupy a chapter in a book (if not a whole book!), that is usually because there is a lot of extraneous content to the core issue. There are a couple questions that are really difficult to sufficiently answer in 1.5 pages, so occasional answers that reach two pages are acceptable. But any answer more than two pages should be condensed down to about 1.5 pages. You will often be able to help them identify specific areas to condense.

Other considerations:

* Commenting on spelling and grammatical issues is not usually necessary. Occasional mistakes can be ignored. One exception is if there are certain key words that are consistently misspelled (especially words used often in counseling such as “psychology” or biblical/theological terms). If you need to comment on such issues, explain why you are doing so.
* Excessive spelling and grammatical mistakes that are a distraction need to be addressed. While the ACBC exams and process are not designed to help people become better writers, we want to make sure that ACBC certified counselors can communicate effectively. Because biblical counseling is a teaching function, good communication is essential. Sometimes the Spelling and Grammar feature is turned off, in which case you can turn it on. When assigning the Rewrite grade for other reasons, have them correct all the spelling and grammatical issues on those questions.
* If the applicant expresses strong convictions that would exclude others within ACBC, remind them about the need to be both charitable and accepting of those with different convictions.
* When the counselor misrepresents opposing views, or is ungracious in their words, address those issues as appropriate.
* It is always appropriate to suggest resources that will help the applicant grow. This can include resources that will help them answer the question, as well as resources they can use for personal growth later. Many applicants have read only the minimum pages required, and thus have very limited awareness of the wealth of resources available.

# Using Sources

On occasion you will encounter those who do not use resources properly. You may discover that they include quotations without citing the source. You may even discover that they quote sources without indicating they are using a source (which is effectively plagiarism). Before concluding the applicant has sinful motives, contact the applicant to discuss the issue and identify their mindset. In past situations, those pursuing ACBC certification are not intentionally plagiarizing—they are just unaware of how to properly use and cite sources. When this is the case, provide instruction on quoting and citing, and have them rewrite any and all questions where this issue is suspected.

How will you know if the applicant is quoting sources if they don’t use quotation marks? Often you will be able to discern a difference in writing style between the applicant’s normal way of writing and particularly well-worded sentences. One way to validate your suspicion is to copy a portion of the sentence into Google and search it with quotation marks (so Google searches for the quote, not just the individual words). This is not full-proof, of course, but it is usually helpful. If you’re not already familiar with popular definitions and quotations, over time you will learn to recognize common sources such as Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*.

# Finishing an exam

When you’re done grading an exam, you will want to make a comment at the top of the exam providing an overview of your thoughts, suggestions, and listing the specific questions you want them to work on. Here is an example of what I do.

Upload the exam to the Grader Dashboard and copy this overview comment to the Comments section.

# Grading the Second Attempt

When the application uploads their revisions, you will receive an email notifying you it is available for download. When grading the revisions and rewrites, be sure that they sufficiently address your concerns. Do not allow them to pass with insufficient answers just because you may feel bad that the process is taking longer. If they express discouragement, encourage them!

If you come across a new concern in an answer that you didn’t pick up on before (on a question that is being revised/rewritten), it’s ok to ask them to address it.

When assigning the grade for the second and subsequent attempts, don’t delete your existing comments, but reply to the original comment to maintain the trail of grading.

# Receiving Payment

Applicants pay an exam fee which is reserved for paying the grader. ACBC sends graders one check per month based on the number of exam sets completed during each calendar month. Because the revision cycle usually takes several months, ACBC pays graders after they have completed the first round.

ACBC keeps track of completed exams through the Grader Portal. At the beginning of each month, the Member Services Coordinator reviews which exam sets were completed the previous month and calculates your payment. If you finish the theology exam on March 31st, and then complete the counseling exam on April 1st, that exam will be considered part of your April sets to be paid in May.

To process the payment, the Member Services Coordinator will send an email to both you and the ACBC Accountant with the amount to be paid and the names of the applicants who are included in the payment. You can verify that with your records.

While ACBC keeps track of the exams you grade, it is important for you to keep your own records for verification. On rare occasions an exam may be missed one month or double-counted between two months. One simple way of keeping your own record is to have an Excel document with columns for Name and Date Uploaded (and any additional information you desire to keep).

# Exam Guidelines and Specifications

* The exam must be written in the ACBC Applicants own words. They are not permitted to copy and paste from counseling and theological sources. Sources may be quoted sparingly, but ALL sources must be cited. If an exam is found to quote sources without citing them, this will be considered plagiarism and the exams will be returned and they will need to be completely rewritten before ACBC will consider receiving them.
* The exams should be in two Word documents: One for the theology exam and one for the counselor’s exam. The exams are open-book essay style. ACBC Applicants name is to be on each exam.
* You should use 1.5 spacing (paragraphs should be indented. Do not insert extra lines before and after paragraphs), 12 point, Times Roman font, and standard 1 inch margins. Please start each question on a new page.
* The exams should be numbered and the questions written out exactly as they are on the exams. This would include the headings on the theology exam.
* Each answer should be 1 to 1 ½ pages per numbered question. Please write your answers as though you are explaining them to a counselee (when applicable), defining all terms clearly and precisely, with scriptural support for your answer. Exams with answers consistently shorter than requested will be returned with an email asking you to review your work. Please start each question on a new page.
* Footnotes—You should document the sources used when answering your questions. Formal numbered footnotes are not required. Items that are not documented after a quotation should be noted at the end of the question. You can start your footnote one space after the end of your answer. You should include the author, name of book, and pages used. Example: Jay Adams, Competent to Counsel, pages 125-135.
* Your exams are graded on a pass, rewrite, or fatal error basis. If you are required to submit a rewrite, your grader will give input to help you deepen your understanding of the topic. He will be available for further discussion, when necessary. You will have three months to submit your rewrites from the date your graded exams are emailed to you.
* Exams requiring significant revisions have the potential to postpone the certification process until further study and growth can be demonstrated. This will be at the discretion of the ACBC office.

# Sample Answers

4. Define general revelation and special revelation and describe the nature of their authority as well as their relationship to one another.

General revelation is God’s disclosure of Himself to the entire human race in the things God has made. (Psalm 19:1-6) It is revelation about God, His character NOT general truth about science for example or what a neurologist knows about the brain or a psychologist knows about how humans’ function.

Special revelation is God’s disclosure of Himself, who He is, to His people in the pages of the Bible; not to everyone, just to His chosen people. It shows us details about God’s character and teaches us how we are to live a life that glorifies and honors Him. (2 Tim 3:16, 2 Peter 1:3-4)

General revelation shows us God’s amazing power and beauty in creation which is evidence to all people that there is a God. The world displays an obvious existence of a good God therefore we are without excuse if we reject Him. (Romans 1:18-23) Secondly, God has made humans in His image (Genesis 1:26) and inside of us we have a sense of right and wrong, a conscience, an awareness of guilt. (Romans 2:15, 13:5) The unsaved suppress the truth about God in general revelation because they do not want to be accountable to Him. Because of this rejection, God’s wrath is upon them by giving them over to their sin, who sin more and more (Romans 1:24-32) and eventually face forever wrath and judgment in hell. (Romans 2:5) General revelation helps us to understand that there is a God and we all have fallen short of His standard and therefore we are in great need.

Both general and special revelation are from God, His revelation. General revelation tells us we have a saving need but special revelation tells us how to come to Christ and to grow in Him. Though both are authoritative, we need the superior authority of the Scriptures to teach us who we are, who God is, what Christ has done through the work of the cross and how we can live in a reconciled relationship with God. “General revelation requires special revelation to be properly understood and applied.”[[2]](#footnote-3) They are equal in authority but different in content.

8. Explain each of the following attributes of God describing the practical implications of each attribute for life and counseling: wrath, mercy, holiness, omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence.

The attributes of God are all those distinct characteristics or qualities of God that are not separated from God’s very essence.

The attribute of wrath is defined as His anger toward and punishment of wickedness. (Romans 1:18, 2:5) Most people are not fond of this attribute of God but God’s desire to punish evil is a very good thing. God’s love and devotion to Himself motivates His wrath upon sin and He is the only One who knows how to avenge perfectly. His wrath is right and necessary. Romans 12:17-19 speaks of God’s wrath and his vengeance upon sin; He says it is His to do and He will do it. This is very comforting to a counselee who has been repeatedly sexually assaulted as a child. They are set free knowing the promise that God will punish the wrong done to him (Nahum 1:2-3) and they no longer need to carry bitterness or anger towards the abuser but can live peaceably.

The attribute of mercy is God’s goodness and kindness to people who need His help, those in distress. (2 Samuel 24:14) In time of need, we can draw near to God’s throne to receive His mercy (Hebrews 4:16) People do not come to a biblical counselor unless they need help (Matthew 9:27) therefore how comforting to share with the counselee how God loves to help His people and show His mercy to us in our time of need. (Psalm 103:8) His mercy and comfort are rich in abundance through our unity with Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). Every counselee will be encouraged by the mercy of God as He comforts them in serious hardships.

The attribute of holiness says that God is completely separated from sin, devoted to seeking His own honor. (Isaiah 6:1-5) This is good news and necessary because if God was more devoted to something else, He would be an idolater. God must be devoted to Himself, the only and highest object of worship. We see this characteristic of God in the tabernacle where God dwelled in the most holy place, separated from evil and sin and in a place of full devotion to His service. (Exodus 26:33) God teaches us that our love and devotion must be to Him firstly before we can rightly love others. Our greatest need is to be holy, to be set apart from sin and devoted to God. My counsel should help people grow in their devotion to God, to become like Jesus Christ. A mother who is more devoted to her children, making them idols in her life therefore causing stress in her marriage needs to be counseled to place God as center, to glorify and please Him first, rightly aligning herself in God’s will for her holiness as He is holy. (Leviticus 19:2)

The attribute of omnipotence declares that God is able to do anything that is consistent with His character. (Ephesians 1:11) God has infinite power. (Job 26:14) His power cannot go against His desires as God; He always does what is best (for example, God cannot lie Titus 1:2) God does what He pleases, and never grows weary and all things are possible with God. (Psalm 115:3, Isaiah 40:28, Revelation 3:7, Matthew 19:26) God’s power is a work in us His people therefore we are strengthened by His power. (Ephesians 3:16-17) Isaiah 40: 29-31 continues to speak about the Lord giving power to the faint, increasing and renewing their strength, giving them a supernatural ability to run and not be weary. For a counselee struggling in a loveless, broken marriage, this attribute gives great hope that with God all things are possible and to persevere in His power as they work towards reconciliation.

The attribute of omniscience states that God has full knowledge of everything. (Psalm 139:1-6, Hebrews 4:13, 1 John 3:20) He knows every event, piece of information, complete knowledge past present and future. God knows us perfectly, more than we even know ourselves. Because God has no limitations in knowledge about a counselee, it gives me great comfort that God is able to help and care for the counselee through His Word and the power and presence of His Holy Spirit. He knows them intimately and with perfect knowledge. (Isaiah 49:15-16, Job 37:16) As a counselor who has limited knowledge, this is a wonderful truth for me as I trust the One who knows all things about my counselee and will be able to direct my counsel in God’s Word to bring the hope and help they need. It gives me confidence in God’s ability to care for the counselee. It humbles me and quiets my soul to hope in God in the counseling room. (Psalm 131)

The attribute of omnipresence says that there is no place that we cannot go that God is not present. (Psalm 139:7-12) God cannot be contained, He is fully present in all places, in past, present and future whether we sense or feel His presence or not. (Jeremiah 23:23-24) We can’t trust our perceptions of God’s nearness because even though we cannot see Him, He is just as real and present as the person standing next to us. This produces a serious and wonderful truth. God witnesses all, including our sin. (Psalm 51:4) Because of this, every sin we commit is first a sin against God. This knowledge that God sees all and is present with us reminds the counselee struggling with sin that he cannot hide his actions from God. This can become a helpful deterrent to the counselee when they are tempted to sin, for example tempted to view pornography or cheat on his taxes. On the other hand, a counselee struggling with fear or loneliness can be assured and comforted that a strong, perfectly good God will always be with us. (Psalm 23: 4)

5. Provide a biblical definition of depression. Describe manifestations of depression in both the inner and outer man. Explain the biblical factors that drive depression. Detail several biblical strategies to respond to depression.

Depression can be a physical problem that is able to be determined objectively through medical treatment, but people also use the term to refer to negative feelings that are subjectively experienced. In the latter sense of the term, depression can be defined as a emotions-based response to situations often leading to a downward spiral of more intense emotions and responses. In Scripture, we see Cain and Elijah demonstrating a depressed mindset. Genesis 4:1-14 tells us how Cain’s disobedience to God’s instructions about offerings, and his subsequent willful rejection of God’s warning about sin, led to a defiant, angry, and depressed mindset. 1 Kings 19 records how quickly Elijah forgot God’s power and providence and how he became afraid, even to the point of despairing. These individuals allowed their emotions to control their actions, which in both cases led to more willful sin.

Like anger, depression first shows up in the inner man before the outer man. First, a person experiences strong feelings that they perceive to be indications of reality. These feelings are real to the person and we must not skip over that if we are counseling them. Second, because the person believes what they are feeling is real, they make choices according to those feelings, even allowing their feelings to dictate what they do and believing it ought to be that way. In the biblical worldview, what we feel is subjective but what we do is objective. That is, our actions can be observed and measured. These actions often demonstrate that the person who feels depressed values these feelings more than what God says is true and real.

Multiple factors both lead to and intensify depression in people. The first factor is using depressing feelings to justify certain types of behavior regardless of what God says about those types of behavior because again, someone who is depressed often thinks their feelings should determine how they act and they can’t escape those feelings. Then the intensifying nature of always doing things according to what you feel becomes a factor. For example, if a person focuses on how depressed they feel and fails to carry out every day responsibilities, they are likely to feel even more depressed. This downward spiral will only get worse if the depressed feelings are given total sway over decision making, and the person will feel trapped in their sin because they think they have to change how they feel before they can change their actions.

Like anger or other issues, the first and primary biblical strategy when responding to depression is to change how one thinks, starting with confession as needed (1 John 1:9). The counselor must encourage the counselee to consider Romans 12:1-2, Ephesians 4:22-24, and other similar passages because of how they describe God’s goal to transform us first through renewing our minds so that we think the way God does about all of reality, including, but not limited to, the relationship between feelings and actions. Counselees must come to believe that certain feelings often reflect lies that have taken hold of their thinking and that these lies must be replaced with truth. Counselors must help counselees see and encourage them to believe the truth about their thoughts and feelings. And, because in the case of depression so many of the feelings that are dealt with are negative, counselors should help counselees find things to be thankful for (Hebrews 13:15-16).

As a counselee learns to replace lies with truth in their thinking, they must also learn to change their actions so that they obey regardless of their feelings at any particular time (James 1:22). In other words, they must learn that oftentimes faith looks like doing what’s right despite how we feel. This could look like making and following a schedule with accountability for daily household and family tasks, showing up to work on time, showing up to church, etc. Pleasing God by doing what they know is right must become the primary goal as opposed to feeling better before embarking on obedience (2 Corinthians 5:9; 1 Corinthians 10:31).

1. Written by Gabe Powell in 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Lambert, Heath “A Theology of Biblical Counseling” Page 334. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)