

Queries & Controversies

Q: *Why is biblical counseling so concerned about the labels used to describe people's problems?*

A: Labeling is an area in which abuses have created problems for biblical counselors.

There are two extremes that must be considered. On the one hand, there are those who, fed up with abuses, reject labeling outright. Karl Menninger is one good example. Much of what he has said against abuses is informative and correct. But when Wallace Hamilton writes, "...we know that the name of a thing doesn't matter,"¹ I must dissent. On the other hand, there are those who think that they have achieved the acme of counseling when, as Erik Erikson put it, they engage in "diagnostic name calling."²

Both extremes are wrong. Names and labels for persons, things, situations, problems, and conditions are absolutely necessary not only for biblical counseling but also for carrying on everyday conversations with God and one's neighbor.

Labeling is Inevitable

Labeling is inevitable. God *required* Adam to give labels to the animals by which he classified them and made meaningful communication concerning them

¹Wallace Hamilton, *Ride the Wild Horses* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), p. 16. Because the reality remains constant, he thinks the name doesn't matter. But if followed to its conclusion, this logic would destroy all communication: the name communicates a lie when it doesn't tell the truth about the reality.

²In Paul Roazan's *Erik Erikson* (New York: Macmillan, 1976), p. 66, Erikson puts down labeling, but his comments must be taken seriously only about those *abuses* of labeling that we so often encounter.

possible. God Himself calls some of us saints, others unbelievers; He speaks of drunkards, homosexuals, gossips, the slothful, etc. (see 1 Corinthians 6:9ff.). *God* labels. What we want, then, is not to eliminate labels; instead we want appropriate and accurate labels, labels that help because they tell the truth. The fundamental problem with labels is that, as sinners use them, labels often tell lies.

The Need for Accuracy

Labeling that is accurate helps the counselee to get a handle on his problems so that he can begin to *do* something about them. I can remember one counselee who was describing a problem he said he somehow couldn't put his finger on. After listening for a while I said, "Why, what you've been describing to me is just plain, old-fashioned pride!" Instantly, his eyes lit up and he shouted, "Ah! That's it! Now that I have a name for it, I know what I must do about it." The label enabled him to get a grasp of the problem and pointed to its solution.

The difficulty with labeling isn't that diagnosticians call names. The trouble comes (1) when they carelessly gum the wrong label on someone's file, (2) when they don't warn about the fact that labels often refer to temporary, changeable states of being, and (3) when they substitute labeling for genuine help as though a label were an end in and of itself rather than a means to an end. Labels identify, direct, classify, and enable us to understand and communicate. Labeling began in the garden of Eden, before the fall, as a good activity in which man was required to participate for his welfare and for the honor and glory of God. That it has been abused and done harm is a consequence of human perversity since the fall.

Why has there been such a ready accep-

tance of false labels? Because of man's basic nature, because of his thirst for knowledge and order, he must have labels. But because of his sin he will settle for the wrong ones. A wrong view of life leads to false classification. The combination of these two factors spells trouble.

Dangers

Because poor labeling is so dangerous, it is important for us to know ahead of time some of the misuses and abuses that arise in counseling. We must also be able to point out the insidious influence of poor labeling in the lives of our counselees and to avoid all such usage in our own counseling.

Living up to the Wrong Label

First, there is always the danger that some persons who have been inaccurately labeled will try to live up to the label.³ This can happen when one is looking for an excuse to get out of work or to justify his sinful behavior; or, as we so often tragically discover, the label shapes the person's life as he closes out options that the label doesn't allow him to enter. In all such cases counselees must be shown that the label doesn't really fit. A label may add a complicating problem to those that already exist.

A False Sense of Permanence

Secondly, to some, labels imply a permanence that does not actually exist. Always apply a label in a hope-giving way: "Thank God that you are a 'drunkard,' John, and not a so-called diseased 'alcoholic.' Christ didn't come to deal with the fictional disease of alcoholism, but He *did* come to deal with the sin of drunkenness."

A Cover for Ignorance

Thirdly, often labels are given to cover ignorance and disagreement. Labels so used are sometimes also substituted for investigation, work, or careful analysis of a person's problem. In some cases they are used merely to enhance the ethos of the one who pins them on another. Be wary of one who will not explain a label; he may be trying to put something over on you. In the field of counseling this precaution is doubly apropos because of the widespread ignorance among practitioners, many of whom are very proud of their status. Such sinners, rather than admit ignorance, will sometimes resort to labeling.

But a similar thing can happen among Christians, even pastors, who get caught up in label usage that really doesn't grow out of understanding but out of ignorance. The next time you hear a Christian say someone has a "guilt complex," ask him what he means by that. Chances are he means no more than a sense of guilt. But that isn't what a so-called "guilt complex" is supposed to be. Yet many pastors and others use such words, seemingly because they sound more profound than simpler (but clearer) terms. The question, "What do you mean by that?" rarely can be overworked when you are discussing labels. More often than you might like to think, when you press the question, you will get a vague, unintelligible response from the one who a minute or so before was affixing labels with a flourish.

An 'Umbrella' Designation

Fourthly, watch out for umbrella labels like "schizophrenia," "neurosis" (a label dumped by the A.P.A. but still used by many), and "psychosis." These labels are bad because many different problems are categorized under each of them. Take "schizophrenia," for example. The same effect (bizarre behavior) can be generated by organic or by inorganic causes. To use the common label schizophrenia to cover all varieties of both, therefore, is foolish and certainly not helpful. One word to cover problems stemming from sleep loss, hallucinogenic drugs, brain tumors, chemical imbalances of various sorts, camouflaging, fear, inappropriate habits, etc., is, to say the least, confusing. Certainly, it is not helpful. And it can be quite misleading both to the counselee and to those who are treating him.

In a book on schizophrenia, *The Construction of Madness*, where chapters are contributed by various writers, no two chapters are in agreement.⁴ The term schizophrenia disguises these differences of opinion and the ignorance involved, so that a counselee has little or no idea of the vast range of problems that may be the possible cause of his difficulty and the large variety of interpretations of these held by those who practice counseling. Terms covering up differences of opinion, then, can induce a counselee to submit himself for treatment when he ought not to do so without a thorough investigation of what the counselor means by the terms he uses and what the particular practitioner intends to do about it. Moreover, the common umbrella term tends to keep the practitioner from

³Or, what is equally bad, they may try to live it down (spend unnecessary time and energy denying it). Or they may lose hope attempting to solve problems that don't exist.

⁴Peter A. Magaro, *The Construction of Madness* (Oxford, N.Y.: Pergamon Press, 1976), a book to which I contributed a chapter.

making a complete investigation of the problem himself. It locks him into his theory and tends to close out other options, when it is essential to investigate what, in each particular case, is behind such an instance of behavior.

A Conceptual Limit

Fifthly, note that labels limit. It is possible to use a label in such a way that one blinds himself to other factors. Often, a problem is multi-caused; there is no one cause, but a combination of several features lies at the bottom of the difficulty. A label can eliminate these far too easily. The simple statement, "John is a farmer," for instance, limits. One tends to think of him as a farmer *only* and not as a husband, a father, and an elder in the church. The label brings *one* feature into such prominence that others are lost sight of. Of course, the same thing can happen when a biblical counselor says, "John is an adulterer." Some are repentant adulterers, some are not. You know little about John's farming or his adultery by that sentence alone. You must remember to deal with each case as John Smith, farmer, or John Smith, adulterer. The category word is not useless; it teaches you something. But it must not be allowed to limit you so that you do not investigate all the facts of each case individually.

Take the phrase, "out of touch with reality," that is

so readily attached to people in cases that are labeled "catatonic schizophrenia." This label in conjunction with that phrase can keep a counselor from pursuing communication with the counselee ("If he's out of touch, why bother?"). It structures the relationship and limits counseling. You get from a counselee no more than what you expect, and what you expect is what you look for.⁵ But, if, on the contrary, you believe that a person like this, so long as he has suffered no physical damage, is indeed fully in touch with reality, and yet chooses to behave as though he were not, that in turn structures quite a different relationship and dictates counseling of the most intensive communicative sort.

For these, and other similar reasons, the Christian counselor will be careful about his acceptance and use of labels. Whenever possible, he will use biblical labels or labels that clearly express biblical concepts. And he will be careful to use them as the Bible does.

—Jay E. Adams. *This essay first appeared as Chapter 4 in Dr. Adams's book, The Language of Counseling (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1981), pp. 51-57, and is used by permission.*

⁵How important it is, therefore, to have proper biblical expectations.