

## The Best of the Best: An Annotated David Powlison Reading List

I have a different goal than normal in this reading list: instead of summarizing books that you probably don't need to read, I want to provide a list of classic Powlison writings that you really *do* need to read. Rather than providing summaries, I want to highlight how each of these articles serves us as we care for people, and even more precisely as we think about why *the church* is the place where such care ultimately needs to take place. In other words, these articles and chapters are selected for their apologetic engagement with therapeutic ideas, and how through them Powlison teaches us to interact with a psychologized world. I know of absolutely no one better at this engagement than our late brother David Powlison, and so I commend these articles to you to learn discernment and wisdom in the care and cure of souls.

The articles are arranged chronologically, so you can see development and consistency in Powlison's thinking. I've tried to indicate where they can be found in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* archives, and where they might also be included in essay collections.

### **David Powlison, “Modern Therapies and the Church’s Faith,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 15, no. 1 (1996): 32–41.**

This early article is as close to a comprehensive summary of how Powlison engaged secular psychologies (and the plural “psychologies” is very important). Years ago I took an online version of Powlison’s Westminster Theological Seminary class “Theology and Secular Psychology” (sadly no longer available). It was one of the best and most influential courses I ever took in all my seminary experience. Nothing can boil thirty hours of Powlison teaching down into one nine page article...but this article does give you the main themes of that course. The first part gives a historical overview of pastoral care and psychological takeover of the cure of souls that is excellent (this was a large part of Powlison’s doctoral dissertation). Then the rest covers how Christians should engage. Pay attention to the elephant illustration, the three effects of secularism on understanding human problems, and the brilliant final paragraph.

One important note: in the 1990’s, much of the “psychologizing” of the church was through various forms of psychodynamic theories: love languages, needs theories, family of origin, etc. Much of this article addresses those kinds of theories. But (see the article on biological psychiatry below), even then a biologically reductionistic form of psychology was present. Powlison briefly addresses this, but it’s not a major theme. I think this is the more prevalent form of psychologization of the church today: trauma, abuse, or PTSD theories; anxiety and depression as brain dysfunction; and the umbrella term “mental illness” that locates the primary problem in our bodies and brackets the heart before God as secondary. Read this article with that lens: how would Powlison’s “radical critique and humble service” play out here?

**David Powlison, “Predator, Prey, and Protector: Helping Victims Think and Act from Psalm 10,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 16, no. 3 (1998): 27–37.**

This is a gem of an article, and one that every pastor should be familiar with. I include and commend it here for two specific reasons. First, this is a master class in how one portion of Scripture connects to one specific kind of human experience (and even that language of “one bit of Scripture to one part of life” is indebted to Powlison’s “Think Globally, Act Locally” article, cited below). The ways in which Psalm 10 comes alive here are something we should learn from both for counseling and our own souls.

But second, notice how very different Powlison’s engagement with horrific abuse is than some of the current secular paradigms that creep into the church. He doesn’t reinterpret the experience of vile abuse and abandonment as new category requiring “trauma-informed” special skills – even as he doesn’t minimize the depth of depravity experienced by Helen (the woman who is the case study). As Powlison regularly said, Scripture is *about* these kinds of experiences – sins and miseries, being sinned against and being tempted to sin in response – and the pastor and counselor who sits, with open Bible and open heart, across from a person like Helen isn’t lacking in resources to help care for her soul.

**David Powlison, “Counsel Ephesians,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 17, no. 2 (1999): 2–11. Also Chapter One in *Seeing with New Eyes*.**

Here Powlison channels his love of Ephesians (which he often described as one of his favorite books of Scripture) and his love of counseling and practical theology into one rich introductory article. If you’re a NT studies guy, or a systematic theology lover, you might occasionally bristle as Powlison talks about all the ways Ephesians *is not* an exegetical reader or a collection of systematic loci. Don’t overread Powlison here – he’s not minimizing the importance of those disciplines. When he says, “Ephesians *is* practical theology,” he’s making the same point that our very own Pastor’s College Dean has made to so many of us in Homiletics I: all of Scripture has an *intended redemptive effect*. God is *doing* something in Ephesians (and every other book). Information serves transformation, theology leads to doxology. Powlison is making that point in as many ways as he can from Ephesians.

But notice also the emphasis on “I-you” language in Ephesians. This will transform your counseling (and this article has had a major impact on my preaching application as well). Right handling of Scripture doesn’t talk “about” sin and redemption and suffering in the generic third person: “People do things like this.” Real ministry, whether pulpit or counseling room, brings the Word *to bear* in a first and second person encounter with the living God: “*You* must repent. Hear what God says to you and me: ‘fear not, for *I* am with *you*.’” This classic Powlison article will help you think about that direct, transformational aspect of all ministry of the Word.

**David Powlison, “Biological Psychiatry,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 17, no. 3 (1999): 2–8. Also Chapter 15 in *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition Through the Lens of Scripture* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2003).**

I've mentioned several times in this document and my other book reviews that we face a biologically reductionist model for what afflicts and ails human beings: brain chemistry imbalances, neurological dysfunction, etc. Much of Powlison's direct critique of the psychological world had to do with Christian integrationists appropriating various psychodynamic theories, which is a different kind of error than biological reductionism. But thankfully, this article deals directly with the kinds of medical overgeneralizations we face. Listen to these two sample quotes: “People want to say that we are essentially bodies, because then we can fix what ails us. This is the proverbial 800-pound gorilla in the theater that sits wherever it wants, threatening to squash *both* psychology/psychotherapy and Christianity... We minister to an increasing number of biopsychologized people who think about themselves, their spouses, or their children as *bodies* run amuck.” (4). Again:

...the ethos and practice of biopsychiatry are deeply affecting the church already. If it's broken, or even just not working optimally, it can be fixed from the outside by a drug: better living through chemistry. In your ministry and in your church you are probably already facing the ethos and the practices. Many people in both pew and pulpit are on mind-, mood-, and behavior-altering drugs. We all increasingly face the ideas and knowledge claims, too. The cover story in *Time* magazine [referenced earlier in the article] starts to inform the queries and choices of Christian people in everyday life. Eventually such ideas make it into the educational system as the received wisdom of the culture with which to disciple the next generation. (4)

I would suggest we *are* the next generation who have been disciplined by this received wisdom of the culture. And brothers, this ought not to be.

**David Powlison, “Affirmations & Denials: A Proposed Definition of Biblical Counseling,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 19, no. 1 (2000): 18–25. Expanded form as Chapter 17 in *David Powlison, Speaking Truth in Love: Counsel in Community* (New Growth Press, 2005).**

This article is important for our history and our convictions. It represents Powlison's attempt to put a systematic coherency to the biblical counseling movement's core convictions and engagements in the classic affirmation and denial form. Read this almost like the Statement of Faith (as envisaged by its key second-generation leader) for biblical counseling *and* its engagement with other models. One of my main concerns with many of the current publications and discussions on issues of mental health is that they read as though the biblical counseling movement never happened – all the careful work done by Powlison to build on and refine Adams' model is just left aside. Again: this ought not to be! Read this to make sure you understand what biblical counseling actually is, not only in what it affirms but what it denies. And take current proposals of mental health, etc., and filter them through the model Powlison presents here for engaging other theories that deny (implicitly or explicitly) the sufficiency of Scripture.

**David Powlison, “Think Globally Act Locally,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 22, no. 1 (2003): 2–10. Also Chapter 6 in David Powlison, *Speaking Truth in Love: Counsel in Community* (New Growth Press, 2005).**

This is another article every pastor should be familiar with. It will impact your counseling, your parenting...and also how you care for your own soul. I include it here because no Powlison reading list would be complete without it, but also to especially call your attention to an underlying model for change that shows up on page 8, and implicitly throughout: “the three core ingredients of the change process [are]: orientation, promise, and response.” (When a thinker like Powlison says, “the three core ingredients are...” we should pay attention!) Imbedded in that one sentence is an entire way of approaching the Bible, human experience, and the change process. If you’ve read Powlison’s article on reading the Bible for change in the ESV Study Bible appendices, you’ll recognize something of the same dynamic at work. Scripture reveals God’s perspective (orientation), brings it to bear on human experience (promise), and calls for a response.

If you want to go deeper here, compare this article with his entire book *How Does Sanctification Work?*, which was interacting with a Lutheran-esque, “just remember your justification” view of growth. And compare it also to the three perspectives that Powlison learned from John Frame, discussed in Powlison’s *festschrift* article honoring Frame. See David Powlison, “Frame’s Ethics: Working the Implications for Pastoral Care,” in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2009), 759–77.

**David Powlison, “Is the Adonis Complex in Your Bible?,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 22, no. 2 (2004): 42–58.**

You may or may not encounter this situation pastorally – but either way, how Powlison interacts with “Darnell,” who spends inordinate hours at the gym and worries he’s not ripped enough, is a model for engaging human experience with Scripture. Powlison devoted an entire lecture and reading assignment to this article in his “Theology and Secular Psychology” course. I think he saw it as one, in-depth case study that illustrated much broader principles for how to think about a human problem. Read it with that in mind: what deeper pattern of engagement and reinterpretation is Powlison showing us in the way he understands Darnell’s struggles?

**David Powlison, “Suffering and Psalm 119,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 22, no. 4 (2004): 2–16. Also Chapter One in *Speaking the Truth in Love*. This became, with expansion, David Powlison, *God’s Grace in Your Suffering* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018).**

Powlison’s main course in the CCEF curriculum, “The Dynamics of Biblical Change” (which is still available, though I don’t know what role Powlison’s recorded lectures still play in the current version), made this article an entire assignment that was nearly 50% of the class grade: the “suffering and refuge” project, which invited us to work through an instance of suffering using this Psalm and the hymn “How Firm a Foundation” as a model. Once again, it is vintage Powlison. Read this at two levels: first, for your own soul and how suffering becomes a window into life before the face of God. Pastor, do you know your own heart and your God in the way

modeled by David in Psalm 119, and David Powlison through this article? It's possible to be very articulate about how the Bible helps *other* people in their suffering, and yet when it comes to responding to our own griefs, losses, and hardships to give nothing more than, "I'm trusting God with that. Help me to have faith. Thanks for asking. (Let's move on.)" This article will change the way you think about suffering – not just in "a theology of suffering," but what you actually *do* and *say* when you're suffering.

Then read it as an illustration of the growth in the biblical counseling movement from first to second generation. Without in any way dishonoring Jay Adams, I don't think he would or could have written this article. Powlison lead the biblical counseling movement towards a model of growth and sanctification that could handle *both* unruly sins (things that need to be rebuked and called to repentance, Adams' strength) *and* suffering and grief (which includes many temptations to sin, but is not *itself* a problem to be rebuked). Powlison was fond of saying that "heresies are the unpaid debt of the church," by which he meant that errors often arise in response to a weakness or failure of the people of God to rightly proclaim the riches we have in Scripture. Let's make sure we don't have a defunct view of suffering and its place in our growth that *could* tempt our people to think the world has a better understanding of human misery and need than the Bible does. (I challenge anyone to read this article and compare it to cognitive-behavioral therapy, or Mental Illness 101," and answer honestly: which one sounds more like real human experience before the face of God? Which one is in three-dimensional, Technicolor glory and which one is black-and-white cartoon sketches? Bible-believing Christians are not the ones lacking in rich understanding and vivid detail!)

**David Powlison, "Pray Beyond the Sick List," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 23, no. 1 (2005): 2–6.**

This is a short one, and you need to read it imagining a twinkle in Powlison's eye as he playfully tweaks our generic "sick list" prayers: "Visitors to many of our churches might be pardoned if they get the impression that God is chiefly interested in perking up our health, and that the thing all of us most need is radiant good health. They might also be pardoned if they get the impression that God isn't very good at doing what we ask" (2). (There's the twinkle.)

I include this article here because I think a great way to help disciple our churches in how we think about human problems is what we do in our public prayers, especially the pastoral prayer (but maybe also in smaller group settings). Powlison isn't trying to say everything here about sickness, healing, prayer, etc. Read it with this question in mind: "how are my prayers training my hearers to think about sanctification, growth in Christ, and our deepest needs?" We can err in at least two directions: prayers that camp out "in the deep end" of theology but never intersect with real life, or prayers that are all about the sick list, Randy's aunt's uncle's dying cat in Des Moines, or the "weird sound our brother's car made on the way to community group." Every one of those real life moments is a place where life and the human heart before the face of God are at play – so let's pray that way. (Ok, maybe not with the cat. Might need to just let it die.)

### **David Powlison, “Et al.”**

“Et al” is the academic abbreviation for, “I’ve run out of space, but there’s more I’m thinking of...and you’ll have to take my word for it.” You’ll never go wrong reading Powlison. Get the old JBC archives and work your way through his essays. (Someone needs to publish a “Collected Works of Powlison” volume – if you have connections in the publishing world, try to make this happen!)

Each of his books are outstanding, but my particular favorites are *Good and Angry* (key insight: read this not only about anger, but about any human struggle – for me, thinking why despair and despondency often follow after anger was transformative and opened this book up to whole new areas of human experience), *God’s Grace in Your Suffering*, and *Making All Things New*. If you haven’t read these, you have a treat in store. The daily devotional *Take Heart*, while it can’t give you the full breadth of Powlison’s thinking on any topic, is a great entry into his writings and will serve your soul (especially if you use it to follow up with more reading than the single-page selections). Powlison’s life and writings have shaped Sovereign Grace’s history – may they continue to shape our present and our future to the glory of God and the care of Christ’s people!