

Letter from the Editor



by EDWARD T. WELCH

We're pleased to welcome a guest author for this letter from the editor: Ed Welch. Ed shares some observations about David Powlison (1949–2019), whom he worked alongside for over four decades at CCEF. David was the senior editor of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* (JBC) and served as CCEF's executive director for the last five years of his life. Ed's fondness for David and ability to capture his ways bring back memories for all of us who loved and worked with him. He is still missed.

Reflections and Lessons Learned from David Powlison

David Powlison was a polymath who knew much about many things. After working with him for almost forty years, I still chuckled at his passing references to specific flowers, trees, birds, novels, details of a solar event, and trivia about Philadelphia sports—those sports references made all the more unusual because he grew up in Hawaii and spent his pre-CCEF years in Boston. But these were peripheral adornments on a man who knew Jesus, loved him, and fed on the Word.

Here are a few things from his life that still have an impact on me and on others.

Conversion. David was converted after college, keenly aware that it was by God's sovereign grace alone. After he was diagnosed with untreatable cancer, I wondered aloud about his steadiness through it all, and he said with a smile, "God got me into this. He has to deal with it."

Scripture and devotional reading. He loved the God who spoke through Scripture. His habit was to read daily from the Old Testament, Psalms, Gospels, and Letters, and he was always ready to talk about his insights from the morning. With his wife, Nan, he also read Jack Miller's devotional, *Saving Grace*. Jack was the most influential pastor and mentor in David's life. David and I served as elders while Jack was pastoring New Life Presbyterian Church and were disciplined by Jack through every sermon, every prayer meeting, and every elders' discussion.

CCEF. David's job description essentially focused on one question: How does the Spirit, through Scripture, speak into the details of daily life and conform us to Christ? It was his vocation and avocation. To share this job description with other like-minded men and women was enough to make him pinch himself. His primary work was as senior editor of the *JBC* and teacher of the Dynamics of Biblical Change course (DBC). David saw himself as an "essayist"—shorter, thoughtful pieces that were a bit artistic. *JBC* was his canvas; DBC was his baby. David would say that DBC was his life's work, and it was.

Weakness. He was a fine athlete in a body prone to weakness. We both swam in college, so when we were together and a pool was near, we would swim laps and pretend that those years were not forgotten. Yet a weekend conference could wipe him out for a week. For over a dozen years, he had chronic struggles that left him with only a few good hours in a day. Then cancer limited him further during his final year. It is no surprise that his writing has strong themes of childlike dependence on Jesus and strength in weakness. He went through life knowing that eternity is in our hearts, yet we have much in common with the grass of the field.

Nurture, nature, and grace. David grew up in Honolulu on the grounds of Punahou School, where his father started the Asian history department. Waikiki was a few blocks down the road, with its guaranteed waves. His mother oversaw a loving home, and his father made sure there were enough adventures. In this idyllic environment, David was secure and had the no-worries heart of an islander. He most certainly was not driven to be somebody.

He was a man in the present, by nature and nurture, refined by the Spirit. When he stopped to talk to you, he was unhurried, interested,

and engaged. During one of our last conversations, we went for a brief walk. The sky was as blue as a Philadelphia sky can be. There were a few puffy clouds suspended over us. The conversation was sweet. “What a beautiful day,” he said. “How could anyone have worries on a day like today?” I could think of plenty to worry about—for one, my friend dying. But he was content, by faith, in the moment.

Though you might not have known David personally, I am so pleased that you get to know him through his articles, his books, and DBC, and I love how our God still uses his work to guide another generation in wisdom. But I miss him, as do my colleagues at CCEF.

—*Ed Welch*

The *JBC* was David’s “baby,” and we carry on with it.

Our lead article is Aaron Sironi’s “A Marriage Worthy of the Gospel: Philippians for Couples.” Though Philippians never mentions marriage, its focus on standing firm and conducting ourselves “in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” charts the path to unity amid differences and difficulties. Aimed at couples, this practical and refreshing article offers a “new” text to ponder and apply to marriage.

Our next article tackles a tough challenge faced by mothers after abuse has shattered their marriages. Darby Strickland writes that these mothers often suffer a second blow—estrangement from adult children who resent them or take their father’s side. She likens this to the biblical category of exile and uses God’s instructions to the Jewish exiles in Babylon (Jeremiah 29) to minister to these moms. Strickland brings counseling to life, focusing moms on spiritual growth rather than trying to convince their kids to think differently.

Ministry can quietly breed discontentment: unmet ambitions, comparisons, and chasing a name over faithful service. Gunner Gunderson uses Korah’s rebellion in Numbers 16 as an unlikely mirror for the pastor’s heart, showing how discontent with one’s God-given place can breed bitterness and self-promotion. Through Korah’s story, readers are invited to notice and repent of discontentment—reminding us that

what we've been given in Christ and called to in his service is no small thing.

Next, Ed Welch reveals our deepest issue. In "Covering Up and Blaming Others: Sin's Frightening Refrain," he shows how we habitually, though often unconsciously, avoid blame and accuse others when things go wrong. This short essay packs a punch and speaks to everyone.

We hope you enjoy "Book Notes: Volume 8" from Michael Gembola. It is the final installment of his column through which he has broadened readers' awareness of counseling and pastoral care books. As usual, this issue features books on timely, thought-provoking topics like a theology of danger and security, as well as marriage and ministry, church hurt, and group counseling.

Like David, may we learn to trace the Spirit's work in ordinary life and ministry—and find that his grace is no small thing.

—*Brandon Peterson*

The Journal of Biblical Counseling

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

www.ccef.org

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