Book Review

The Biblical Counseling Movement after Adams

Heath Lambert, (Wheaton, IL; Crossway, 2012), 224 pages.

Reviewed by WINSTON T. SMITH

The brief history of biblical counseling is a complex one. This may surprise some, considering its straightforward premise that the Bible is the sufficient foundation and guiding authority of counseling. But biblical counseling is a complex practice, shaped by diverse influences—hermeneutics, psychology, ecclesiology, apologetics, and even epistemology. The interplay of these various disciplines naturally leads to different emphases and practices by biblical counselors.

Heath Lambert has performed a great service in providing a succinct, well-organized summary of the biblical counseling movement as it has developed after Jay Adams.[1] I recommend it to those who want an overview but aren't ready to tackle David Powlison's hefty, 352 page *The Biblical Counseling Movement*, a book I recommend for those who want to dig deeper. One of the prominent characteristics of Lambert's book is that it is not simply a history of the movement, but an invitation to participate in it—to know what the movement is, where it has been, and to play a part in where it is going.

Biblical Counseling: The First and Second Generation

Chapter one sets biblical counseling in its historical and cultural contexts. Lambert reminds us that biblical counseling, understood broadly as personal pastoral ministry, is not really new; and describes the Puritans' diligent application of Scripture to the

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[1] Jay E. Adams is a Reformed pastor who taught practical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, PA in the 1960s and 70s. In *Competent to Counsel* (1970), he critiqued secular psychology from a biblical basis and called pastors to be the counseling professionals of the church. In doing so, he launched the modern biblical counseling movement, which he called nouthetic counseling.

challenges of Christian living. He then traces the gradual decline of pastoral counseling, highlighting the flaws of revivalism, the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, and the psychological revolution of the 20th century. This brings us to the time when biblical counseling, as we know it, was born.

Jay Adams. Lambert provides a helpful summary of key ideas set forth in Adams' *Competent to Counsel* and other early works. Undoubtedly, many readers will already be familiar with Adams' central tenets, but Lambert's summary is useful, considering Adams has penned over one hundred books.

In brief, Lambert explains that Adams understood all counseling to be inherently theological. It requires explicit or assumed beliefs about the goals and purposes of life and how one ought to live—specifically addressing attitudes, values, and relationships. Adams rightly recognized these as fundamentally theological questions that secular psychology could not properly address given its lack of a theological framework. Despite this fundamental flaw, secular humanistic assumptions had thoroughly infiltrated pastoral counseling by the 1960s, and Adams understood his mission as both destructive and constructive. These false assumptions had to be directly refuted and pastoral care re-established on a biblical basis.

Lambert describes three of Adams' bold strokes. First, Adams denied the reality of inorganic mental illness and replaced it with the biblical doctrine of sin. Second, he declared psychiatrists to be illegitimate counselors and called pastors to take up their responsibility as God's ordained counseling professionals. Third, he argued all of this on the basis of the Bible as God's authoritative word. As Adams unfolded the implications of these foundations, an approach to counseling emerged in which sin is the fundamental problem counselors address. Counselors assist the people in their care to "put off" sinful behaviors and replace them with the fruits of Christ's redemption.

Second Generation. Lambert then introduces David Powlison of the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF) as the "second generation" leader exerting the most influence in biblical counseling after Adams. Powlison, as editor of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, along with Paul Tripp, Ed Welch, and other colleagues at CCEF, engaged in focused theological reflection that led to critical developments in biblical counseling. The following four chapters in the book describe advances in: (1) the way biblical counselors think about counseling, (2) practice counseling, (3) talk about counseling, and (4) think about the Bible.

For those who have been critical of biblical counseling as described by Adams, two developments will likely stand out. First, the second generation counselors have been concerned to understand counselees not only as sinners, but also as sufferers. While Lambert points out that Adams does acknowledge suffering and that all problems are not caused by personal sin, he explains that Adams does little to develop that under-

standing other than to acknowledge the ways Christians may grow through suffering. Powlison and others have developed a biblical understanding of suffering as something that all of us are subject to, that is the result of diverse causes, and as an experience that counselors must speak to with compassion.

Second, Adams tended to emphasize the authoritative role of the pastor as counselor, advocating a "take-charge" and "business-like" approach. He even suggested that pastors counsel from behind a desk as a matter of principle. But second generation biblical counselors have emphasized the familial qualities of rapport, affection, and being person-oriented. Lambert quotes Powlison, "Real understanding—accurate, concerned, merciful, probing, gentle, communicated—matters a great deal in counseling. When a counselee, a friend, a spouse, a child knows, 'This person cares about me, this person knows me, and this person knows my world,' good things tend to happen" (p.91). And quoting Paul Tripp, "I am deeply persuaded that the foundation for people transforming ministry is not sound theology; it is love. Without love our theology is a boat without oars" (p.92). The emphasis for second generation counselors is not so much identifying and confronting sin, but humble and gracious engagement with counselees in which the love of Christ is both the self-conscious method and context of addressing problems.

Future Direction and Critique

In chapter six, "An Area Still in Need of Advancement," Lambert makes his own positive suggestion and affirms that the area of motivation needs to be further developed. In chapter two, Lambert described how Powlison advanced biblical counseling's understanding of motivation by identifying *worship* as a fundamental category of motivation, making idolatry the root of sinful behavior. Lambert argues, however, that the prideful, self-exalting nature of idolatry is too often left unexplored and unstated by biblical counselors. Instead, counselors tend to engage in "idol hunts," satisfied with analyzing and categorizing the general types of heart idols they find.

However, I believe that the self-serving nature of idolatry has been thoroughly explored and described. Many counselors do help counselees see the human heart's self-serving nature. I wonder if advancement lies in a different direction. Perhaps we should be thinking more broadly about all of the ways that Christ redeems us. The human condition isn't just one of high-handed sin, but also ignorance, shame, weakness, and suffering, none of which necessarily involve idolatry or the need for rebuke. It seems to me that advancement isn't so much a matter of further clarifying the sinful core of idolatry, but of exploring the variety of ways that the Bible asks us to understand our brokenness and need for redemption.

Another area that would have been helpful for Lambert to explore is the relationship between biblical counseling and psychology. Lambert does touch on this, but it is a critical area that deserves more focus. One consistent theme from Adams through to the

present day is the affirmation that psychology does indeed have a role to play in biblical counseling. While asserting the "sufficiency of Scripture," most biblical counselors, along with Adams, agree that psychology can be a "useful adjunct for the purposes of illustrating, filling in generalizations with specifics, and challenging wrong human interpretations of Scripture, thereby forcing the student to restudy the Scriptures" (p.39). But in the same way that Adams mentioned suffering without elaboration, biblical counselors often mention the potential value of psychology, but don't unpack the specifics. What is claimed in theory, but not borne out in practice, means very little. For biblical counseling to advance there must be clarity on exactly what is meant by "sufficiency of Scripture" in counseling and precisely how the concepts of antithesis (the diametrical opposition between belief and unbelief) and common grace (unbelievers possess some truth) provide direction in interacting with psychology. To my knowledge, there is no clear method for interacting with secular theories or the practice of Christian psychology, and few examples within biblical counseling. Like Adams' thoughts about compassion for suffering, it is permitted by writ but relatively unexplored in practice, at least as measured by what has been published.

Softened Rhetoric on Adams

Biblical counseling shares the challenge of many movements who owe their foundation to a particular person. How are we to honor Jay Adams, while recognizing the need to develop and even critique his ideas and approach? Lambert does this extremely well—perhaps in a way not done before. He is careful to give an honest assessment of Adam's strengths and weaknesses. He shows appreciation for the groundbreaking nature of Adams' work, even if he remains a bit reluctant to translate observations into criticisms.

For instance, Lambert is right to remind us that the biblical counseling movement began with a provocative call to action. Adams' emphasis on being "nouthetic" or confrontational was, in part, a response to the non-directive humanistic therapy dominant at the time. We also learn that Adams' polemic style was intentional, designed to wake up the church both to its slide into psychological error and the untapped riches of God's counsel.

But it was Adams' very boldness and brash style that caused many to reject his message. To this day, some find the claims of biblical counseling easy to dismiss because of the manner in which they were delivered. In fact, Lambert reports several lost opportunities for engagement with the broader Christian counseling movement because of Adams' "vociferous, irascible and sectarian" tone (p.104). Interestingly, however, Lambert contrasts the combative tone Adams used with Christian integrationists to the more irenic approach he took when interacting with secular psychologists. Lambert explains, "Why the harshness with integrationists and the patience with secularists? The obvious answer is that, as a Reformed evangelical, Adams did not expect unregenerate

persons to believe the Bible's teaching on how to counsel in a gospel-centered way. On the other hand, he had very little time for Christians who should know better." (p.110). But perhaps we need to move beyond framing Adams' harshness as a strategy and call it a mistake. After all, as biblical counselors don't we all need to remember that "pleasant words promote instruction" and interact accordingly (Prov 16:21)?

A Helpful Contribution

Lambert has taken up a task for which we should be very grateful. He models what Jay Adams himself charged us to do: to critique and build on his work rather than treating it as a finished product. Lambert shows us that biblical counseling has taken that charge seriously, developing an increasingly rich and nuanced understanding of how the Bible teaches us to counsel. And he reminds us that all Christians have a role to play in the future of this movement.