

Book Review

Developments in Biblical Counseling

J. Cameron Fraser, (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 144 pages.



Reviewed by SAM R. WILLIAMS

J. Cameron Fraser's book offers a brief history of biblical counseling, but it is more than that. It is also a personal account of his journey to reconcile the seminal insights of Jay Adams with his own experience as a counselor, and with his understanding of the Puritans' approach to personal ministry. He writes comfortably, bringing the clarity and descriptive skill of a good journalist to bear in this short book.

Fraser does not view himself as an insider, meaning that his primary vocational calling is not biblical counseling. He avoids extensive analyses of the personalities of his subjects, sticking more to what they have written or what has been written about them, relying heavily on David Powlison's book on the history of biblical counseling.¹ He acknowledges his commitments but keeps his own biases in the background and does not seem to have much money on any of the horses in the Christian counseling race. He is theologically trained so he possesses a capacity for thoughtful theological engagement with the key issues and controversies within Christian and biblical counseling.

Developments in Biblical Counseling begins with Fraser's personal and yet

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¹ David Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2010).

archetypal history, one that will sound familiar to counselors who aim to be Christian. He grew up as a Bible-believing Christian, but sensed a disparity between the theology and the practice of his church when people with mental illness were reflexively referred to mental health professionals, rather than counseled by their pastors. The lights came on for Fraser when he encountered Jay Adams's nouthetic counseling at Westminster Theological Seminary. He and his wife experienced the practical effectiveness of biblical truth as they began to counsel others. Then, he writes, "as time went on and we were faced with more difficult cases...treating clinical depression as sin only seemed to make things worse...increasingly we felt out of our depth" (p.xii). Fraser's counseling journey then took a significant turn. After reading Larry Crabb, who seemed more cognizant of the complexities of human suffering, Fraser experienced a kind of counter-enlightenment, noting, "what Crabb wrote seemed to ring more true to life as we were experiencing it" (p.xiii). These disparities led Fraser into conversations with J.I. Packer, and then further research and writing, comparing Adams and the puritan, Richard Baxter.

Fraser offers a brief intellectual history of Jay Adams, recounting significant early influences upon Adams's development as a theologian (Robert Rudolph and Cornelius Van Til) and counselor (O. Hobart Mowrer). Fraser describes premonitory differences between Adams's "unadorned biblicism" and John Bettler,² his pastor and first colleague at Westminster. Fraser contrasts Adams's strong emphasis on the antithesis separating Christian and secular thought with Bettler's aversion to fundamentalist separatism, and his open but cautious willingness to learn from secular psychologists. This sets the stage for another key theme in the book: how to reconcile Adams's counseling model and methods with those who followed him. He describes and cites Adams's acerbic responses to Heath Lambert's mild critique in *The Biblical Counseling Movement after Adams* (2011). Fraser sees Adams as "resistant to the idea that his basic approach can be improved upon biblically" (p.13).

Using five categories of analysis, he goes on to provide a fair-minded summary of "Biblical Counseling 1.0," per Jay Adams. These same categories are the main themes addressed in the book: sufficiency of Scripture; definition

² Adams and Bettler co-founded the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation where David Powlison and Ed Welch still minister.

of biblical counseling; biblical counseling's relationship to psychology and psychiatry; means and methods of behavioral change; and sin, suffering, and Satan.

Fraser summarizes three typical criticisms and concerns about Adams's version of biblical counseling:

1. Adams's epistemology relies too heavily upon Van Tillian presuppositionalism, which results in a negation of God's common grace manifest in secular psychology.
2. The focus of first generation biblical counseling is reductionistic in practice, with an over-focus on sin and behavior change, and a neglect of internal dynamics.
3. Biblical Counseling 1.0 evinces a thin understanding of the role of external influences on people's experiences and behavior, such as Satan, the family, and unbidden suffering.

Next, he describes recent developments in biblical counseling, tracing epistemological and conceptual differences that persist between Adams and "Biblical Counseling 2.0"—Ed Welch, David Powlison, and others. Finally, he compares and contrasts nouthetic and biblical counseling with the counseling of the Puritans, of which Fraser is a proponent.

Developments in Biblical Counseling serves the counseling community well as a kind-hearted editorial on the contours and tensions in the contemporary biblical counseling movement. Its concise history of biblical counseling fairly describes the seminal distinctives formulated by Jay Adams, and then advanced by the 2.0 generation. It grapples straightforwardly with the perennial epistemological and anthropological challenges that all counselors must sort out: Are people and their problems simple or complex? Can we learn from psychology? How does the sufficiency of Scripture work out in our counseling model and its practice?

Who should read this book? Anyone who is interested in seeing biblical counseling continue to develop can benefit by listening to a thoughtful assessment from a sympathetic observer/participant. Biblical counseling is not a finished product. It is an unfolding project, because practical theological wisdom always needs to develop.

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