

The Book of Love:

Biblical Foundations for Christian Counselling

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Introduction

The Bible's authoritative role in Christian counselling is one of the features making it distinct from other kinds of counselling.¹ While there is a wide variety of methodology and approach as to the specific kind of role it plays, it is a near-ubiquitous admission that the Bible is not a counselling handbook, and that some interpretation and/or systemisation is required.²

Oglesby Jr., for example, attempts to identify various “sub-themes”, such as “initiative and freedom”, “fear and faith”, “death and rebirth” and others. Though this provides a helpful way flexibly using the Bible with some degree of flexibility in counselling, it remains unclear how to discover or distinguish between “sub-themes” which are “biblical” or not.³

Adams maintains that God’s guidance is obtained only from the Scriptures, which speak about all of life’s issues either directly or indirectly, thus “narrowing down options” in decision making.⁴ This approach makes application of biblical texts very direct and immediate, though it perhaps is without significant safeguards against harmful use of Scripture in counselling.

Others are less intentional about methodology and adopt a kind of mine-the-riches-of-Scripture approach. Sometimes this means drawing from the experiences of various characters as they deal with issues, or discerning the pastoral tone and

¹ Gary R. Collins, *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide, revised ed.* (Word Publishing: Dallas, 1988), 17-18, 22.

² Eric L. Johnson, *Foundations for Soul Care: A Christian Psychology Proposal* (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois, 2007), 28-29; Timothy Wiarda, ‘Psychology and Pastoral Ministry’, *Church & Society* 7(3): (2004), 120-121; Peter C. Hill, ‘Living On The Boundary: Scriptural Authority And Psychology’, *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 33(2): (2005), 100; William B. Oglesby, Jr., *Biblical Themes for Pastoral Care, 2nd ed.* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1983), 20.

³ Oglesby, Jr., *Biblical Themes for Pastoral Care, 2nd ed.*, 45ff.

⁴ Jay Edward Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling: More than Redemption* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1979), 23-29. Interestingly, Adams espouses a cessationist position concerning “direct revelation” (“...the day of direct revelation ceased with the death of the last apostle.” p.25 fn22), thus leaving the entirety of post-apostolic humanity with absolutely no means of access to divine guidance apart from the Bible.

message of a key biblical book or chapter. Again, while being a very flexible approach, this leaves the door wide open for uses of Scripture which can be questionable for effective counselling.

A key interpretive step very close to – and not at all at odds with – the one I shall shortly adopt is that of Volf.⁵ For him, the only proper context for biblical interpretation and guidance is ‘the narrative of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ understood as an act of obedience toward God and an expression of self-giving love for his followers as well as the model for the followers to imitate.’⁶ This provides a kind of interpretive ‘lens’ through which all the biblical material is seen, understood and used in counselling contexts.

In similar fashion, I seek first of all to discern an interpretive ‘lens’ to guide and illumine any subsequent use of the biblical material. I am most compelled by the ‘lens’ which Wright has called a “hermeneutic of love”.⁷ Not only is this compelling in terms of hermeneutics, philosophy and epistemology, it is in line with the ‘summary of the Scriptures’ found in the New Testament on the lips of Jesus and in the letters of Paul.⁸ Love is the ultimate biblical lens.

Love exists not in a vacuum, but in relationship. Humans are created in relationship to three ‘others’ (the ultimate ‘Other’, the Creator; the ‘others’ of fellow humans; and the ‘other’ of creation), and with their own ‘selves’. Though all of these relationships are vital for a full appreciation of Scripture, for our purposes here, we will focus on the three relationships of God, other and self as seen in the First and Second commandments; “*Love the Lord your God... Love your neighbour as (you love) yourself.*”

⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1996).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

⁷ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Fortress: Minneapolis, 1992), 63-64.

⁸ Matt. 22:36-40, Mk. 12:28-34, Lk. 10:25-28; Rom. 13:8-10, Gal. 5:14.

When read through this lens, the same verses and passages used (helpfully or less-than-helpfully) in other approaches can be understood and used in a way that is both biblically responsible and very counselling-friendly. The purpose, goal or *telos* of restoring these three 'love' relationships (to God, to others, and to self) is easily (if not unavoidably) discerned in both Scripture and Christian Counselling.

Scripture and Counselling

Scripture as a Whole

Scripture is often referred to in terms of specific texts, but it can also very helpfully be used in terms of sweeping themes; in our case, the theme of loving relationships (love of God, others and self). Whereas quoting specific passages can be very helpful, it is also useful to refer to Scripture in more general terms.

Perhaps the most immediately helpful way of presenting Scripture as a whole is the narrative approach, seeing the Bible as an unfolding story.⁹ Understood through the interpretive lens of Love, the biblical drama of Creation, Fall, Redemption and New Creation can be understood and communicated as follows:

- **Creation:** The Creator lovingly creates us with the freedom and possibility to know and love Him, others and self under his wise rule.
- **Fall:** Human rebellion alienates us from ever fully knowing the love of God, others and self for which we were created.
- **Redemption:** Through the person (Son of God) and work (loving obedience) of Jesus Christ, humans are enabled, summoned and invited to be restored in relationship to God, others and self.

⁹ For the Shakespearean 5-act play analogy of Scripture, which has been appreciated and developed by many biblical scholars, see Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 140-143.

- **New Creation:** God will ultimately bring into being a New Creation in which the New Humanity in Christ will freely enjoy full loving relationship to God, others and self.

Using Key Texts of Scripture

That Scripture is of use is agreed by all Christians, but as to *how* to use Scripture usefully is a more difficult question. Adams has outlined in several works what he calls “nouthetic counselling”, which is characterised by confrontation of a wrong doing in a person, with a view to effect change.¹⁰ Clinton, Hart and Ohlschlager offer an appropriate critique of this approach, gratefully acknowledging the need for challenge and correction, yet warning against an overly confrontational style (which may well be inherent to “nouthetic counselling”).¹¹

In agreement with their critique, the New Testament would favour a “*parakaletic*” (to come alongside) approach that comforts and confronts.¹² One finds ample biblical support for such a balanced approach, of which Paul's language about “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15) is an immediate example.

Here we see that our lens of Love enables us to understand and communicate Scripture in a way that is both comforting and challenging, and seeks to restore relationship with God, others and self. The approach that follows from this is both *nouthetic* and *parakaletic*. This balanced and loving approach can serve to keep counselling from being overly harsh on one hand or lacking in direction and guidance on the other.

¹⁰ See Jay Edward Adams, *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1986), 44ff; and Jay Edward Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual: The Practice of Nouthetic Counseling* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1986), 14.

¹¹ Tim Clinton, Archibald D. Hart et al, eds, *Caring for People God's Way: Personal and Emotional Issues, Addictions, Grief, and Trauma* (Thomas Nelson: Nashville, 2005), 47-48.

¹² Ibid, 47-48; concurring is Robert W. Kellemen, 'What Makes Biblical Counseling Biblical? Christ-Centered, Comprehensive, Compassionate, and Culturally-Informed Biblical Counseling and Spiritual Formation,' Biblical Counseling and Spiritual Formation Network. http://bcsfn.aacc.net/wp-content/themes/gear/media/what_makes_biblical.pdf, (accessed 25-8-09).

Always seeking to speak the truth in love, the counsellor must be both *nouthetic* and *parakaletic* in seeking to restore the counselee's relationship to self. The counselee must not be so in love with self that they cannot see things they need to change. However, if they do not sense a warm, comforting acceptance from their counsellor, it will make love of self extremely difficult if not impossible.

Appropriate biblical passages include the entirety of Psalm 8, which captures the balance between humble amazement that God takes notice of us, and the glory with which all humans are crowned with as God's image bearers, and the gently humbling Romans 12:3, 'For I say... to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly...'.

Likewise, the loving, yet truth-speaking counsellor must also be *nouthetic* and *parakaletic* in seeking to restore the counselee's relationship to others. Here, the counselee *challenged* (perhaps to come to terms with either their *own* wrong-doing which they've hidden or the wrong-doing of an *other* which they've excused or explained away) and *comforted* (perhaps to appreciate that we all have hurt others, or to be assured that they were not at fault in a given situation).

Key biblical passages here would be the challenge of the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel 12 for David to recognise his own sin, and the advice of 1 John 8-9, which highlights not only the deception of minimising or denying sin, but also the forgiveness and healing from God that comes with confession.

And finally, the truth-in-love approach will lead the counsellor to be both *nouthetic* and *parakaletic* when counselling persons regarding their relationship to God. Extreme care, however, should be used here. Huge damage can be inflicted with careless statements, however well-meaning. The counsellor needs to be a wise discerner of when to challenge and when to comfort.

Relevant passages to bear in mind, or share when appropriate, are the challenge of James 4:8, 'Draw near to God and he will draw near to you...', and also the comfort of Isaiah 53:6, which acknowledges that all have sinned, but that God's Servant Jesus has borne all our iniquities.

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