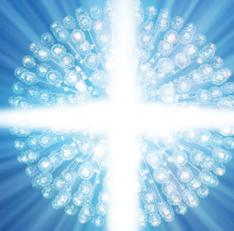


INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF REFORMED THEOLOGY AND LIFE

# UNIO CUM CHRISTO<sup>®</sup>

UNION WITH CHRIST



## Biblical Counseling



Westminster  
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# Biblical Counseling

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# The Sin behind “Sin”

**PAUL WELLS**

**A** Dutch friend recently told me about his scary experience of going through the ice into the canal while skating. Once under, you should aim at surfacing not directly toward the light but to one side, allowing for the fact that light refracts through water. I will take his word for it—happily, I have never faced the predicament and never will.

However, it is an apt illustration of sin in the human condition. Sin has refracted and distorted reality, skewing everything. Nothing is normal, although it might seem so. Looking at our broken human experience, nature, and history—what we call reality—does not give direct access to light or release from anguish. We are misled, or blinded, and hit the ice ceiling trying to surface. When we seek to lead others, we can become “blind leaders of the blind,” as Jesus said in Matthew 15:14—a sobering thought indeed.

The reality of sin means that in pastoral counseling, efficiency will ultimately be proportional to its recognition, both in those suffering and those ministering to them. Scientific theories and analysis may have a part to play, but they are not the last word on human nature and its redemption. Jay Adams made a point of this years ago when he set out his stall in *Competent to Counsel* by affirming that psychological problems were sin problems—a claim that sparked a lot of lively debate.<sup>1</sup>

Where Adams was right is that sin cannot be sidelined, as though mental health problems were the result of badly jumbled neurons waiting for chemical correction. Nor are human individuality and the soul reducible to a collection of atoms to control.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970).

<sup>2</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things* (London: Virago, 2015), 3–16.

Adams was, of course, working in a culture in which the idea of sin still had a Christian aroma. Generally, people knew what was being referred to, although the word was often focused on sexual transgression. This has changed with the postmodern turn. The Duke of Sussex can speak of his adolescent frolics in a soggy field behind an English pub without batting an eyelid. In our churches, Reformed or evangelical, sin also figures more and more superficially in preaching, and one would suppose in counseling as well. The major sin people recognize today is hurting someone's feelings.

All of this requires a review of our doctrine of sin in the context of the gospel message, whether in counseling, preaching, or missional witness.

## **I. *Contrasting Views of Sin***

This new attitude spreads its tentacles to all areas of life in society, including questions of law and crimes that are prosecuted, as well as mental health issues. However, there is a big difference between a biblical worldview and the posttruth woke mentality, which pointedly calls into question what we think sin is.

The “sins” people around us have no problem pointing the finger at are racism, sexism, patriarchalism, and intolerance or refusal of diversity—discriminatory attitudes against others, who feel degraded by them. What is viewed as “sinful,” if the word is used at all, is what is perceived as aggressive and shame inducing for those who feel belittled as victims. Reconciliation is not demanded, but reparation is.

I imagine this changes many of the issues raised in counseling by comparison with biblical and traditional notions of guilt.

## **II. *Biblical Sin Is God Related***

Sin in the Bible is an *objective* reality, the condition of being a sinner. It primarily concerns *God*, his law, and the way he judges sinfulness, even when it is against our neighbor. It is relational and measured by God's holiness. It involves stepping outside a right relation with God and others and missing the mark. It is rebellion, rejection of God's order, and transgression (cf. 1 John 3:4).

Sinfulness is not something we recognize naturally. We do not easily think we are sinners. It is no joyride to accept that we are “miserable sinners,” and it is even harder to confront others with their sin. We try to dodge accusations when we can, including those of our conscience, and to back off confronting sin in others, most of all in our nearest and dearest.

Sin is revealed by God’s word, and it is known by the inner voice of conscience echoing God’s law, both natural and revealed. G. C. Berkouwer argued in his work on the subject that it is inexplicable and irrational—an enigma that leads to death.<sup>3</sup>

Long before being enacted outwardly, sin is an illness of the heart. Therefore, the intention behind a crime is important. This is why seeking the motive for a crime was part of traditional criminal investigations. Acts, thoughts, and feelings are all objectively right or wrong, righteous or sinful, because of what is outside us—a personal God, who is the moral standard, and his law. Even if hurt looms large in today’s mentality, sin cannot be reduced to those feelings, because lurking behind the hurt, inflicted or received, there are invariably sinful dispositions—pride, anger, self-pity, jealousy, lust, narcissism, and the whole gamut of ego-related pleasures.<sup>4</sup> Counseling cannot simply deal with feelings to make people feel good about themselves. Like preaching, it must focus on a serious view of sin and on the lasting dispositional problems of a sinful nature.

### III. *The Subjective Turn*

Many people today seem to like the idea of being home alone in the universe, where they rule the roost because “the world is their oyster.” This posture brushes out a hard truth—that sin is an objective reality in the eyes of a divine judge who sets the standards. It is not a horizontal passing feeling, defined in terms of personal devaluation or abuse. Wrong is lastingly detrimental to the individual.

In the present mentality, wrong is antisocial behavior to which victims are unjustly subjected. Even though no criminal offense may have been intended or done, they feel ill done by. Hence, two new categories, unknown a generation ago, figure largely. Hate crimes are defined as criminal offenses done to others, while hate incidents are prejudices felt by victims without the law having been broken. All this may explain why police forces seem to spend hours on perceived hate offenses while burglaries go unsolved.

Standards are no longer seen as straightforward violations of external laws but are defined in the murky depths of abuse to which someone claims to have been subjected. For instance, the term *black market* originated during the Great Depression of 1931 and was used during World War II to

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<sup>3</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971).

<sup>4</sup> The Traveling Wilburys, “Seven Deadly Sins, That’s How the World Begins,” *Album 3*, 1990.

describe shady dealings. However, we do not use it now. Black people find it racist, seeing it as a reference to the slave market. They may take deep offense at it, whether or not the speaker even makes the connection.

It is also the way many Christian people today will probably see sin, particularly the younger generation. Older people with more biblical grounding may well try, with some difficulty, to tack it onto a biblical understanding.

Perhaps this is also why there is not much preaching on sin, or we are uneasy with it, or with the idea of hell. Pastoral counseling provides an opportunity to deal with some of the modern myths about sin and to focus on reconciliation with God.

#### **IV. *The Sinfulness of Sin***

Preaching, teaching, and counseling have to bring people to see that what the Bible calls sin is not primarily something felt, although bad feelings may be a consequence of sin, both in the perpetrator and the victim. What is wrong or bad is a transgression against a living and a holy God (cf. Ps 51:4). He is the one to whom we have to give an account before we deal with any wrong we may have caused others to feel or claim to have felt ourselves. This way of thinking may be a challenge for those who are immersed in the world around them by their exposure to the media. We have to think of upgrading our talk about sin.

The modern mindset on sin, and much counseling in evangelical circles, tends to deal with it in a therapeutic way. It fails to face the deep problem of sin in relation to God, which is totally different from having bad feelings about oneself because one is subjected to abuse by others or because one has abused others.

To face the real problem of sin, we have to allow our Christian mentality to have the last word over our feelings, whether good or bad. To do that, feelings have to bow the knee to the authority of Scripture, because in it God alone sets the standard of right and wrong. This is madness for our contemporaries. No matter. “Let God be true and every man a liar” (Rom 3:4).

# **The Progress of the Kingdom: Calvin’s Pastoral Care for Rulers**

**HERMAN H. (ERIC) VAN ALTEN**

## **Abstract**

John Calvin was ever the pastor, not only to those close to him but also to those far away, not only to normal believers but also to those in high places. In the dedicatory letters to his writings, Calvin very often addresses kings, queens, and other rulers. He places their reigns on the continuum of the kingdom of Christ from its beginning until its consummation. On this continuum, Calvin encourages and exhorts rulers to work for the restoration of true doctrine and the eradication of all heresy. He does this in the context of each dedicatee’s context and current affairs. These texts reveal a form of pastoral ministry seldom discussed.

## **Keywords**

*John Calvin, pastoral care, earthly rulers, kingdom, restoration, true doctrine, heresy, Queen Elizabeth II, Vladimir Putin*

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## **Introduction**

**F**or seventy years (1952–2022) she was the monarch of the United Kingdom, a constant figure among world leaders. Needless to say, after Queen Elizabeth II passed away recently, a lot has been written about many aspects of her reign and personal character. For Christians around the world the queen’s faith

was one of her most outstanding qualities. Besides her formal role as “Defender of the Faith and Supreme Governor of the Church of England,” which came with the monarchy, it was her personal faith that stood out. “Pray for me ... that God may give me wisdom and strength to carry out the solemn promises I shall be making, and that I may faithfully serve Him and you, all the days of my life”—thus she requested in her first Christmas message in 1952.<sup>1</sup> And in her last Christmas message in 2021 she spoke of “the life of Jesus, a man whose teachings have been handed down from generation to generation, and have been the bedrock of my faith.”<sup>2</sup> A seventy-year reign, guided by as many years of personal faith. But who took care of that faith—except, of course, for God himself? *Who pastored the queen?* A tentative attempt to answer this question can be made. On the one hand, there were royal chaplains. About one of these, Carl Trueman, in a eulogy on the queen, writes,

A friend who once had the privilege of being a royal chaplain and spending a weekend at Balmoral Castle confirmed that the conversations he had with the queen revealed her to be a thoughtful, devout Christian. As a humble Christian she took her earthly vocation seriously, placing the needs of the office and of the people she ruled before her own.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, it is fairly well known that the queen attached particular value to the company and counsel of the American evangelist Billy Graham. From the mid-1950s, when Graham was first invited to preach at the chapel at Windsor Castle, he and the queen met on at least a dozen occasions. Graham often ended these meetings in prayer; he also pledged to remember the queen and her family daily in his prayers.<sup>4</sup> What we have in these ministries, both by the chaplains and the evangelist, is pastoral care to the highest authorities in the earthly realm.

On January 15, 1559, John Calvin, the Genevan Reformer, writes to Queen Elizabeth—not the second, but the first (r. 1558–1603).<sup>5</sup> It was the day of

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<sup>1</sup> Author unknown, “Queen Elizabeth’s Faith,” *Christianity*, January 9, 2023, <https://christianity.org.uk/article/queen-elizabeths-faith>.

<sup>2</sup> Queen Elizabeth II, “The Queen’s 2021 Christmas Speech,” *The Royal Family Channel*, January 9, 2023, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3ACe\\_3eKnw&ab\\_channel=TheRoyalFamilyChannel](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3ACe_3eKnw&ab_channel=TheRoyalFamilyChannel).

<sup>3</sup> Carl Trueman, “The Quiet Faith of Queen Elizabeth II,” *First Things*, January 9, 2023, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2022/09/the-quiet-faith-of-queen-elizabeth-ii>.

<sup>4</sup> Billy Graham, *Just as I Am* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 689–90.

<sup>5</sup> *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia* (hereafter, *CO* followed by the volume and page number[s]), 59 vols., ed. Wilhelm Baum, Eduard Cunitz, and Eduard Reuss (Braunschweig, 1863–1900), 17:413–15.

her coronation. In this letter Calvin laments the short period of dispersion of the church and oppression of pure doctrine in England that occurred under the reign of Elizabeth's predecessor (Mary I, 1553–1558). He expresses the hope that under the reign of Elizabeth the doctrine of godliness will be restored, and he implores her in the name of Christ to promote religion. He reminds the queen that she too had to suffer under the previous reign and that God saved her, and therefore she is under obligation to devote herself to her Protector and Redeemer. Calvin calls on the queen to be a nursing mother to the church (based on Isa 49:23). Finally, he prays that God will guide her by the Spirit of wisdom, and that he will protect and enrich her with every kind of blessing.<sup>6</sup>

In this and many other such letters, Calvin gave pastoral care to the highest authorities in the earthly realm. Pastoral care to earthly rulers—not many pastors today think about, are afforded the opportunity to, or are confronted with the needs and requirements of such a form of pastoral ministry. This article will explore this form of pastoral ministry, particularly as found in Calvin's so-called dedicatory letters, which he attached to several of his writings. Before we get to these dedicatory letters, however, we will first consider some foundational issues.

### ***1. The Framework for Calvin's Pastoral Ministry to Kings and Queens: The Kingdom of Christ***

The pastor has a fourfold task, according to Calvin. He has to proclaim the word of God, visit the flock, administer the sacraments, and apply church discipline.<sup>7</sup> Visiting the flock is the task that is of particular interest to this article. This manner of proclaiming the word was Calvin's answer to the Roman practice of confession: he put the confessional booth on wheels so that it could be driven to each address in the church. The confessional was not stowed away in the closet but was placed in the living room of every member. The pastor became mobile and went to every sheep, instead of waiting to see whether the sheep would come to him.<sup>8</sup> Calvin himself took this task very seriously—such was his commitment that he offered himself

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<sup>6</sup> To Elizabeth I, *CO* 17:414–15.

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Ordonnances ecclésiastiques* (1541), *CO* 10:17. Something similar can be seen in Calvin's 1537 Catechism. See also Mark Ryan, "The Pastoral Theology of John Calvin," *The Burning Bush* 6.1 (2000): 32–47; W. S. Reid, "John Calvin, Pastoral Theologian," *The Reformed Theological Review* 41.3 (1982): 68–70; R. J. de Vries, "Individueel Pastoraat bij Calvijn," *Theologia Reformata* 54.1 (2011): 27–43.

<sup>8</sup> Herman J. Selderhuis, *Calvijn een Mens* (Kampen: Kok, 2008), 114.

to visit the sick during the plague, even when the city council of Geneva forbade him to do so.<sup>9</sup> For Calvin, however, visiting could also be done in other ways, and the flock was often much broader than only the believers in Geneva. For Calvin “visiting the flock”—that is, taking pastoral care of believers—could also be done through his writings, chiefly the *Institutes*,<sup>10</sup> tracts,<sup>11</sup> and letters.<sup>12</sup> “He was often asked to pastor persons from a distance ... and he did so willingly and thoroughly.”<sup>13</sup> This pastoral care from a distance did not exclude kings, queens, or other rulers—after all, they were also part of the flock and worthy to be cared for.<sup>14</sup>

As a result of the positions rulers hold, Calvin’s pastoral care of them necessarily has its own emphasis and color. Calvin views these rulers not primarily as individual members of a congregation but as holders of an office, and their reign as part of and subject to the kingdom of Christ. This framework is important to an understanding of his pastoral approach to these royal dedicatees.

Calvin identifies at least three periods of the kingdom of Christ: its beginning, its progress, and its consummation.<sup>15</sup> The beginning is located particularly at the time of the ascension of Christ, the outpouring of the Spirit, and the proclamation of the gospel by the apostles.<sup>16</sup> The consummation, though sometimes located in the apostolic era, is generally referred to as the last day.<sup>17</sup> Between the beginning and the consummation, Calvin sees the progress of the kingdom: “From the perspective of the sixteenth century he can look back at its beginnings, and forward to its consummation; between these two points, he can chart its inexorable progress.”<sup>18</sup> And it is

<sup>9</sup> Ryan, “The Pastoral Theology of John Calvin,” 41.

<sup>10</sup> See Shawn D. Wright, “John Calvin as Pastor,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 13.4 (2009): 4–17.

<sup>11</sup> See Thapelo Khumalo, “Calvin’s Reply to Sadolet as an Extension of His Pastoral Ministry,” *Koers* 82.2 (2017), doi.org/10.19108/KOERS.82.2.2346.

<sup>12</sup> See Raymond Potgieter, “Discerning Calvin’s Pastoral Care from His Letters,” *In die Skriflig* 48.1 (2014), doi.org/10.4102/ids.v48i1.1830.

<sup>13</sup> Wright, “John Calvin as Pastor,” 5.

<sup>14</sup> See Samuel Cardwell, “‘What Sort of Love Will Not Speak for a Friend’s Good?’: Pastoral Care and Rhetoric in Early Anglo-Saxon Letters to Kings,” *Journal of Medieval History* 45.4 (2019): 405–31.

<sup>15</sup> See Pete Wilcox, “Evangelization in the Thought and Practice of John Calvin,” *Anvil* 12.3 (1995): 201–17; Pete Wilcox, “Calvin as Commentator on the Prophets,” in *Calvin and the Bible*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 121–30; Herman Hendrik van Alten, *The Beginning of a Spirit-filled Church: A Study of the Implications of the Pneumatology for the Ecclesiology in John Calvin’s Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 64–72.

<sup>16</sup> Van Alten, *The Beginning of a Spirit-filled Church*, 71.

<sup>17</sup> Wilcox, “Calvin as Commentator on the Prophets,” 122–23.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

on this continuum between beginning and consummation that Calvin can place the kings and the queens whom he addresses—they have a particular role to play in the “inexorable progress” of the kingdom of Christ; their kingdoms are taken up in the grand scheme of his kingdom.

Calvin makes this more concrete when he closely relates the progress of the kingdom in the sixteenth century with the progress (and restoration) of the (Reformed) church: “In the first place, Calvin considered the progress of Christ’s Kingdom to consist in the establishment of reformed (or ‘true’) churches, where none existed.”<sup>19</sup> The progress of the kingdom and the restoration of the church lie on the same continuum from beginning to consummation. It is in this regard that Calvin deems the role of rulers to be of the utmost importance—in his dedicatory letters and his private correspondence he often commends kings and rulers for their zeal for the progress of the kingdom of Christ and the restoration of the church, or he reminds them of their responsibility for it.<sup>20</sup> Two examples among many will suffice. In his dedicatory letter to his commentary on Acts (1552), addressed to Christian III, king of Denmark, Calvin writes,

I thought it would be suitable to connect you with the narrative of that history, which embraces the very beginning of the Christian church, right from its actual birth, and then its advances and increases, so that the precise resemblance of the reborn church, which the Lord has committed to your protection, may encourage you more and more in the right course of duty.<sup>21</sup>

When, in 1560, he rededicates the commentary on Acts to Duke Nicolaus Radziwil,<sup>22</sup> he writes:

Indeed, most illustrious Prince, again I must ask you, even implore you both privately to yield yourself completely to the sovereignty of Christ, in accordance with the auspicious beginnings you made before, and to be not only a faithful and indefatigable helper, but also a standard-bearer, in advancing the kingdom of Christ.<sup>23</sup>

These examples sum up well how Calvin approached the pastoral care that he extended to kings, queens, and rulers. They are important role-players in the progress of the kingdom of Christ and the restoration of the church

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<sup>19</sup> Wilcox, “Evangelization in the Thought and Practice of John Calvin,” 213.

<sup>20</sup> For examples, see Wilcox, “Evangelization in the Thought and Practice of John Calvin,” 213.

<sup>21</sup> Helmut Feld, *Commentariorum in Acta Apostolorum*, COR XII.1 (Geneva: Droz, 2001), lxix–lxx (hereafter, COR).

<sup>22</sup> For more on this rededication, see Van Alten, *The Beginning of a Spirit-filled Church*, 43–45.

<sup>23</sup> COR XII.1:6.

in their respective territories. And in that particular office they need to be praised, encouraged, implored, and in some cases even reprimanded. They are to be reminded constantly that they serve Christ and his kingdom in executing their high office. This framework determines the topics that Calvin addresses in his correspondence with them, also in the dedicatory letters.

## II. *Dedicatory Letters—General*

Before moving on to how Calvin used the dedications to pastor kings and queens, a few words on his dedications in general are in order. Dedicatory letters, as a particular literary genre, were used for almost two centuries after the second half of the fifteenth century.<sup>24</sup> What made these dedicatory letters so unique was that they were personal letters read by a large audience—therefore, they combine the characteristics of a private letter with the standards of a public document.<sup>25</sup> Calvin wrote thirty-three such dedicatory letters.<sup>26</sup> Within this group of thirty-three, Gilmont identifies three different types of dedicatees: private individuals (e.g., teachers, colleagues, and friends), rulers (e.g., kings, queen, princes, and city councils), and religious authorities (e.g., groups of pastors); there is also one collective dedication addressed to “all the faithful servants of God who want the reign of Christ to be properly established in France.”<sup>27</sup> The next section will focus on the second category of dedicatees: rulers.<sup>28</sup> The exact number of dedications in this category is hard to establish because Calvin, on more than one occasion, rededicated some of his works as a result of a negative response by the initial dedicatee.<sup>29</sup> Depending on how one counts, then, the number of

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<sup>24</sup> Ulrich Maché, “Author and Patron: On the Functions of Dedications in Seventeenth-Century German Literature,” in *Literary Culture in the Holy Roman Empire, 1555–1720*, ed. James A. Parente, Richard Erich Schade, and George C. Schoolfield (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 195–205; Jean-François Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book, Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies 72* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2005), 195–212.

<sup>25</sup> Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, 195.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 307–8.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 198–202.

<sup>28</sup> A full list of the dedications in this category is given at the start of the next section.

<sup>29</sup> This happens in the case of his commentary on Acts—the first part was dedicated to Christian III, king of Denmark (1552), and the second part to his son, Fredrick II (1554); the entire commentary in one volume was rededicated to Prince Nicolaus Radziwil of Poland (1560). Also, Calvin’s commentary on Genesis, initially dedicated to the sons of Duke Johann-Friedrich of Saxony (1554), was in 1563 republished together with a harmony of the other four books of Moses and rededicated to Henri de Vendôme, future King Henri IV of France. In addition, Calvin’s dedication of his *Institutes* to King Francis I is not considered in this article, as this is not a dedication in the typical sense—it is unlikely that Calvin ever asked

dedications in this category ranges between eleven and fifteen. These are the dedications that will be investigated in the following section.

It is interesting to note that almost all dedications to rulers can be dated between 1548 and 1563, whereas the dedications addressed to private individuals generally appear during the preceding years, 1539 to 1550. This fact most probably has to do with Calvin's increasing influence on the European religious scene.<sup>30</sup> It shows that, when Calvin started dedicating his works to kings, queens, and princes, there was no great need to garner their favor and financial support, though he did hope for a certain amount of publicity for his works;<sup>31</sup> he also did not need to make use of excessive flattery, as was often the case with dedicatory letters, though he was generally lavish in his compliments. Calvin had a different aim with his dedications—from their content it can be seen that his aim

was specifically to encourage his correspondents to pursue the work of the Reformation, or to make them receptive to the Calvinist cause. His intention was to be a spur ... in the defence of the true faith.<sup>32</sup>

This is also how Calvin's colleague and successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza, explained their purpose: "As for his other dedications intended for certain kings or princes or governments, his aim was to use these means to encourage some to persevere in the protection of the children of God, and to encourage the others to do the same."<sup>33</sup> This goal corresponds with the framework of the kingdom laid out in the previous section. In several instances these dedicatory letters also afforded Calvin the opportunity to comment on current affairs.<sup>34</sup>

### **III. *Pastoral Care in the Dedications to Rulers***

For the sake of overview, and to prevent unnecessary repetition, here is a list of the dedicatory letters that are relevant to this study (together with the date on which Calvin wrote them, for which commentary they were intended, and where they can be found in the published works of Calvin):

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for the king's approval, intended him to read it, or sent him a copy; therefore, one cannot properly speak of pastoral care in this letter.

<sup>30</sup> Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, 198.

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., *CO* 13:281; *CO* 17:445.

<sup>32</sup> Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, 207.

<sup>33</sup> *CO* 21:36.

<sup>34</sup> Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, 209–10.

1. To Christopher, the duke of Württemberg (February 1, 1548, commentary on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, *CO* 12:658–59);
2. To Edward, the duke of Somerset (July 25, 1548, commentary on First and Second Timothy, *CO* 13:16–18);
3. To Sigismund-Augustus, king of Poland (May 23, 1549, commentary on Hebrews, *CO* 13:281–86);
4. To Edward VI, king of England (December 25, 1550, commentary on Isaiah, *CO* 13:669–74); later a dedication was added to Elizabeth I, queen of England (January 15, 1559, *CO* 17:413–15);
5. To Edward VI (January 24, 1551, commentary on the Catholic Epistles, *CO* 14:30–37);
6. To Christian III, king of Denmark (March 29, 1552, commentary on Acts I, *COR* XII.1); to Frederick II, his son (January 25, 1554, commentary on Acts II, *COR* XII.1); later rededicated to Nicolaus Radziwil, duke of Lithuania (August 1, 1560, commentary on Acts, *COR* XII.1:3–10);
7. To the Small Council of Geneva (January 1, 1553, commentary on John, *CO* 47:iv–vi);
8. To the sons of Johann-Friedrich, the duke of Saxony (July 31, 1554, commentary on Genesis, *CO* 15:196–201); later rededicated to Henri de Vendôme, future King Henri IV (July 31, 1563, commentary on the five books of Moses, *CO* 20:116–22);
9. To the city council of Frankfurt (August 1, 1555, commentary on the harmony of the Gospels, *CO* 15:710–12);
10. To Gustavus I, king of Sweden (January 26, 1559, commentary on the minor prophets, *CO* 17:445–48);
11. To Frederick III, elector Palatine (July 23, 1563, commentary on Jeremiah and Lamentations, *CO* 20:72–79).

What can be learned from these dedications in terms of Calvin's pastoral approach? How did he care for these rulers? Within the framework outlined above, this article will identify the following four themes.

### **1. *Encouragement to Restore the Church***

As has already been noted, Calvin's main aim in his pastoral care for rulers is to encourage them in their office to continue in (or take up) the right course of restoring true religion and pure worship. The basis for Calvin's encouragement is his conviction that establishing and restoring (*fundandae*

*et instaurandae*) the church is ultimately God's work.<sup>35</sup> When we repair the ruins of the church, we give our labors to the Lord in obedience to his laws and injunctions, and yet the restoration of the church is his own work.<sup>36</sup> It is God who has, in the time of the Reformation, given the doctrine of the gospel in greater purity to the world—the earthly ruler is merely the defender and protector (*patronum ac vindicem*) of that very doctrine.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, when we undertake to promote the doctrine of salvation and the well-being of the church, aid from heaven will be given us.<sup>38</sup> It is from this solid theological basis that the Reformer can encourage and exhort his dedicatees to do this work of restoring the church. A brief summary of this from the respective dedicatory letters will suffice.

Calvin praises Christopher, the duke of Württemberg, for pursuing the right course with great spirit and energy. However, in the current distress of the church, Calvin feels that it is necessary to strengthen the duke's resolution.<sup>39</sup> Calvin is probably referring here to Emperor Charles V's victory over the Schmalkaldic League in April 1547, which would eventually lead to the Augsburg Interim.<sup>40</sup> Amid this storm, while others had been shaken or thrown down, the duke had preserved composure, moderation, and steadfastness. Therefore, Calvin considers him an example of someone who has chosen to fight under the banner of the cross rather than to triumph with the world.<sup>41</sup> Later that same year Calvin writes to Edward, the duke of Somerset and tutor for the young King Edward VI.<sup>42</sup> Despite numerous difficulties, the duke has made the restoration (*instaurandae*) of religion his priority—he has allowed the Son of God to rule in England again. By restoring the true doctrine of godliness, banishing idols, and setting up pure worship, he has put the kingdom of England on a solid basis. The letters to Timothy (and by implication Calvin's commentary on them) will provide the duke with the pattern to continue this work and will help him guide the many Timothys under his charge.<sup>43</sup>

When writing to King Sigismund-Augustus of Poland, Calvin expresses the hope that his commentary on Hebrews will serve as an encouragement to the king, who is already engaged in the work of restoring (*instaurandum*)

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<sup>35</sup> To Sigismund-Augustus, *CO* 13:286.

<sup>36</sup> To Edward VI, *CO* 13:672.

<sup>37</sup> To Edward, *CO* 13:17.

<sup>38</sup> To Sigismund-Augustus, *CO* 13:286.

<sup>39</sup> To Christopher, *CO* 12:658–59.

<sup>40</sup> Van Alten, *The Beginning of a Spirit-filled Church*, 33–34.

<sup>41</sup> To Christopher, *CO* 12:659.

<sup>42</sup> To Edward, *CO* 13:16–18.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 17–18.

the kingdom of Christ—because the happiness of the kingdom of Poland will only be established when Christ is its chief ruler and governor.<sup>44</sup> Calvin assures the king that it is not inconsistent with his high position to submit his scepter to Christ. This kind of obedience can only be rendered when the whole of religion is reformed according to Christ's holy doctrine. Calvin compares the king, who is restoring the pure teaching of the gospel to the kingdom of Poland, to Old Testament kings like Hezekiah and Josiah.<sup>45</sup>

After writing to Edward VI's tutor, Calvin subsequently writes to the young king himself.<sup>46</sup> From Isaiah's prophecy (the commentary on which is dedicated to the king), he touches on the subject of the restoration of the church—he shows that this restoration already started at the return from the exile but was far exceeded by the coming of Christ, the Sun of Righteousness. Calvin then takes his dedicatee on a brief tour through the history of the church—the spreading of the gospel throughout the whole world, the persecutions during the first centuries, the conversion of the Roman empire, the desolation of the church during the Middle Ages, the destruction under the Roman Antichrist, until the Reformation, during which time God started to raise up what had fallen.<sup>47</sup> Calvin then calls on the king to carry forward the restoration of the church, which has been so successfully begun in his kingdom. From Isaiah 49:23 Calvin calls the king a nursing father of the church, just as he would later call Queen Elizabeth a nursing mother.<sup>48</sup> A month later he would again write to the same king, this time calling on him to follow Moses's directive of having a copy of the law at hand.<sup>49</sup>

In dedicating his commentary on Acts to Radziwil, Calvin encourages the duke that, just as he had embraced the pure teaching in the beginning, he should go on until the end and not grow weary in this sacred warfare.<sup>50</sup> It is, therefore, profitable to look at the origin of the church as Luke describes it in Acts—Calvin connects this beginning of the church in Acts to the beginning of the church in Radziwil's land and encourages him to advance the kingdom of Christ, especially among the nobles in his land.<sup>51</sup>

In writing to the Small Council of Geneva, Calvin praises the goodness of God by which the Genevans have fixed the anchor of their faith in the truth of God. However, knowing the city and its inhabitants intimately, Calvin

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<sup>44</sup> To Sigismund-Augustus, *CO* 13:282.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>46</sup> To Edward VI, *CO* 13:669–74.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 671–72.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 672–73.

<sup>49</sup> To Edward VI, *CO* 14:37.

<sup>50</sup> To Radziwil, *COR* XII.1:4.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 5–6.

notices that too many of the Roman pollutions still remain. True, God has restored purity of doctrine, pure worship, and faithful administration of the sacraments, but reformation of conduct and of life has yet to be attained.<sup>52</sup> This contains the implicit call for the council to take this task in hand.

For a long time, Calvin wanted to dedicate a work to the elector Palatine, Frederick III, and this desire finally materialized in his commentary on Jeremiah. In it, Calvin wants to encourage the elector, who has embraced the sound doctrine, especially with regard to the Lord's Supper, but this has caused great uproar in his territory. Some even accuse him of Calvinism.<sup>53</sup> Calvin exhorts the elector to persevere in his course by dedicating to him his commentary on Jeremiah. To Henri de Vendôme, Calvin writes that God has given him a sincere and ingenuous profession of faith from which he has not swerved—he is not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. For this Calvin congratulates him, but he also exhorts him to stay in this faith in the future.<sup>54</sup> Just as was the case with young King Edward VI, Calvin advises the equally young Henri to follow Moses's directive of having a copy of the law at hand. This will help him form good habits from a tender age and avoid the pleasures that the royal court offers him.<sup>55</sup>

From this brief summary it is clear that Calvin's pastoral aim in his dedicatory letters is to encourage and exhort the earthly rulers to continue in their personal profession of faith—but more importantly, to continue in their office of restoring the church and true worship. Although he occasionally mentions personal details, his focus is on pastoring these rulers in the office to which they have been called. He does this to each dedicatee in his or her own circumstances, and for this purpose he did some research into each one's circumstances, whether by reading about them or consulting with acquaintances.<sup>56</sup> However, the golden thread in Calvin's pastoral ministry to each of his dedicatees is his continuous encouragement to restore the church with the aid of God.

## **2. True Doctrine**

Pastoring is a form of proclaiming the word, the true doctrine. Calvin time and again pastors his dedicatees by proclaiming the word and focusing them on it.

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<sup>52</sup> To the Small Council of Geneva, *CO* 47:v.

<sup>53</sup> To Frederick III, *CO* 20:72.

<sup>54</sup> To Henri de Vendôme, *CO* 20:116.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 21–22.

<sup>56</sup> Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, 207.

On the one hand, Calvin shows in a general sense that the restoration of the church implies a return to true doctrine. All of his dedicatees are praised for having restored the true doctrine of godliness (*restituatur genuina pietatis doctrina*) in their territories and encouraged to continue doing it.<sup>57</sup> Those who promote the doctrine of salvation (*salutis doctrinam*) and the well-being of the church can expect aid from heaven.<sup>58</sup> God will be the Guardian of those cities where the doctrine of the gospel remains<sup>59</sup> because purity of doctrine is the soul of the church.<sup>60</sup>

On the other hand, Calvin does not hesitate to address specific doctrines. His commentary on Hebrews, he says to Sigismund-Augustus, sets forth the whole power and work of Christ: his eternal divinity, his government, and his unique priesthood. This will be very beneficial to the king, who is well known for his zeal for the doctrine of Christ.<sup>61</sup> Calvin discusses his understanding of the Lord's Supper at length in his letter to Frederich III—how the substance of Christ's flesh and blood is our spiritual life, communicated to us under the symbols of bread and wine.<sup>62</sup> Calvin also gives a whole list of doctrines when denouncing the Council of Trent to Edward VI: the depravity of human nature, the miserable and lost state of humankind, the grace and power of Christ, the free nature of our salvation, and the sacraments.<sup>63</sup>

Thus, after having praised and commended his dedicatees for their work in restoring the church and true worship in their respective territories, Calvin gives them the necessary tools to continue on this course. He shows them the nature of the soul of the church, by which it is kept alive: true and pure doctrine, as found in the word of God. It is therefore no surprise that Calvin, as shown in the previous paragraph, encourages several of his dedicatees to keep a copy of the law (i.e., the word) at hand. It is also interesting to see that, in several instances, he commends his dedicatees for following a liberal education in the Latin language and for reading good books. The duke of Württemberg, for example, has one big advantage in his endeavor to restore the church: he has had a liberal education and has the leisure to read profitable and religious books from which he can draw consolation in the present time of distress for the church.<sup>64</sup> King Gustavus's son, Heric, is

<sup>57</sup> To Edward, CO 13:17.

<sup>58</sup> To Sigismund-Augustus, CO 13:286.

<sup>59</sup> To the Small Council of Geneva, CO 47:iv.

<sup>60</sup> To Radziwil, COR XII.1:8; for more on doctrine as the soul of the church, see Van Alten, *The Beginning of a Spirit-filled Church*, 186–88.

<sup>61</sup> To Sigismund-Augustus, CO 13:281–82.

<sup>62</sup> To Frederich III, CO 20:73.

<sup>63</sup> To Edward VI, CO 14:35.

<sup>64</sup> To Christopher, CO 12:659.

similarly praised: he has made such progress in the liberal sciences that he had consecrated in his palace a sanctuary, not only to the heathen muses but also to celestial philosophy (i.e., the wisdom of Scripture).<sup>65</sup> Calvin also expresses the hope to Queen Elizabeth I that, after the short period of oppression of pure doctrine under Mary I, all orthodox books may again be welcomed and circulated in England—and that through them she would promote true religion. Calvin speaks from experience: he knows that his commentary on Isaiah, initially dedicated to Edward VI and now also dedicated to Elizabeth, was banished under Mary, to the deep sorrow of many godly people.<sup>66</sup>

Reading—reading of the word, in which is found the pure doctrine, and reading orthodox books—is the very practical tool that Calvin offers pastorally to his dedicatees. It is through reading the word and good religious books that pure and holy doctrine can be restored, without which the church will be a body without a soul.

### ***3. Identifying Heresies***

Heresy is the other side of the coin of true doctrine. This matter is an important part of Calvin's pastoral ministry to his dedicatees, who are called to uphold true doctrine by identifying and warning against prevailing heresies. This helps them in their calling.

Calvin's focus in identifying heresy is, unsurprisingly, mainly on the Papists. In most of his dedicatory letters he warns against the Papists by name, often referring to them as the Antichrist. For too long, true doctrine has been crushed and buried by the tyranny of the Roman Antichrist, and the church has been corrupted by the wickedness of Popery.<sup>67</sup> This state has led to the pollution of worship, the doctrine of faith, the sacraments, church government, and the power of Christ.<sup>68</sup> At times Calvin gives the Papists a very recognizable face. Twice, for example, he mentions the Council of Trent meeting in sessions during that period—he does not want King Edward VI or Duke Radziwil to ascribe any value to this fictitious council, as they are not gathering under the guidance of the Spirit but under the authority of Antichrist.<sup>69</sup> Calvin has no hope that from Trent a church will suddenly emerge, for there is no comparison between the church and the pope's

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<sup>65</sup> To Gustavus I, *CO* 17:448.

<sup>66</sup> To Elizabeth I, *CO* 17:414.

<sup>67</sup> To Edward, *CO* 13:17–18.

<sup>68</sup> To Sigismund-Augustus, *CO* 13:283.

<sup>69</sup> To Edward VI, *CO* 14:30–37; to Radziwil, *COR XII*.1:9–10.

synagogue.<sup>70</sup> In another instance Calvin refers to the Roman theologian Johannes Eck by name. Years earlier Eck had written a book on the mass as sacrifice, dedicating it to Sigismund I of Poland. Therefore, “when Calvin wrote on Hebrews he dedicated his work to Sigismund II in an explicit attempt to refute Eck’s work ... by emphasizing the once-for-all quality, the non-repeatability, of the sacrifice of Christ.”<sup>71</sup> Calvin also refers to Desiderius Erasmus as an example of someone who scorns the Reformers and considers it impossible to destroy Popery.<sup>72</sup>

But there were other adversaries. Calvin warns Radziwil against the anti-trinitarian ideas of Franciscus Stancarus and George Blandrata.<sup>73</sup> He expresses his gratitude to Frederich III for embracing the sound doctrine concerning the Lord’s Supper and not holding to the gnesio-Lutheran teaching of the ubiquity (*ubiquitatis*) of Christ’s humanity, even though these adversaries accuse him of Calvinism (*Calvinismum*).<sup>74</sup> And he makes Prince Henri, duke of Vendôme, aware of certain morose professors of the gospel who continuously disturb the peace in the church, as well as other writers who make everything in Scripture a matter of doubt.<sup>75</sup>

Truth and falsehood, light and darkness—Calvin shepherds his dedicatees in both, attuned to the circumstances of each, thereby equipping them to fulfill their office and helping them to hold on to Christ, the Sun of Righteousness.<sup>76</sup>

#### 4. *Current Affairs*

As was true for many dedications during that time, Calvin also uses his dedicatory letters to address current affairs.<sup>77</sup> Pastoral care, after all, takes place in the very concrete circumstances of every day. As already stated, Calvin does not really delve into the personal circumstances of his royal dedicatees, but he does address the current affairs that pertain to their office. This included identifying heresies, as has been outlined, and referring (sometimes vaguely) to the political circumstances of the day.

However, the issue that resurfaces most often in Calvin’s dedicatory letters to rulers is the question of religious refugees and their acceptance by

<sup>70</sup> To Radziwil, COR XII.1:10.

<sup>71</sup> Gary Neal Hansen, “Calvin as Commentator on Hebrews and the Catholic Epistles,” in *Calvin and the Bible*, ed. McKim, 259.

<sup>72</sup> To Edward VI, CO 13:672.

<sup>73</sup> To Radziwil, COR XII.1:7–8; for more on Stancarus and Blandrata, see Arie Baars, *Om Gods Verhevenheid en Zijn Nabijheid* (Kampen: Kok, 2004), 236–42, 256–58.

<sup>74</sup> To Frederich III, CO 20:72–73.

<sup>75</sup> To Henri de Vendôme, CO 20,120–21.

<sup>76</sup> To Sigismund-Augustus, CO 13:285; to Edward VI, CO 13:671.

<sup>77</sup> See Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, 209–10.

the dedicatees. This issue was close to Calvin's heart, as he himself was an exile in more than one way, and he often ministered to exiles.<sup>78</sup> In addition, the period of the Reformation in which Calvin wrote his dedications to rulers (1548 onwards) was what Heiko Oberman termed "the Reformation of the refugees."<sup>79</sup> This phase began after the defeat of the Schmalkaldic League (1547), when cities were recatholicized and Protestant believers had to flee. These events had such an influence on Calvin that in his commentary on Isaiah 16:4 he could make the following exhortation and bold statement: "Let us therefore learn from this passage to be kind and dutiful to fugitives, and especially to believers, who are banished for their confession of the word. No duty can be more pleasing or acceptable to God."<sup>80</sup>

In dedicating his commentary on the Gospel of John to the Small Council of Geneva, Calvin does not waste any time before addressing the matter of the refugees.<sup>81</sup> The refugee question was, after all, very pressing in Geneva during those years.<sup>82</sup> Calvin does not afford the council unreserved praise for accepting religious refugees, which reflects something of the tense relationship between Calvin and the council before 1555, but he rather shows "the extraordinary honour which [God] has been pleased to confer on you, by making your city the resort [*hospitium*], not of one or a few individuals, but of his church at large."<sup>83</sup> Being inhospitable was considered, among the heathens, a part of being barbarian or savage. But now, Calvin tells the council, the "angels bless you from heaven, and the children of God bless you from every quarter of the world."<sup>84</sup>

In the only other dedication to a city council, this time to the council of Frankfurt, Calvin is more open in his praise.<sup>85</sup> Again referring to the calamitous situation following the defeat of the Schmalkaldic League, he praises the council for standing firm in an open profession of the faith and for maintaining the pure doctrine of godliness. Not only did they show their faith openly toward their own citizens, but they also received "as torn members those fragments of a dispersed church which had been thrown out

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<sup>78</sup> See Robert R. Vosloo, "The Displaced Calvin: 'Refugee Reality' as a Lense to Re-examine Calvin's Life, Theology and Legacy," *Religion and Theology* 16 (2009): 35–52.

<sup>79</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, *The Reformation: Roots and Ramifications* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 217–20.

<sup>80</sup> *CO* 36:303.

<sup>81</sup> To the Small Council of Geneva, *CO* 47:iv–vi.

<sup>82</sup> See William G. Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 121–39.

<sup>83</sup> To the Small Council of Geneva, *CO* 47:iv.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, v.

<sup>85</sup> To the city council of Frankfurt, *CO* 15:710–12.

in other countries.”<sup>86</sup> Exiles from England and other places were received with warm hospitality in Frankfurt, and the gospel was even preached in the foreign languages of these refugees. Calvin calls this “sacred hospitality” (*sancta hospitalitas*), and it is the direct cause for dedicating his commentary on the harmony of the Gospels to the city council.<sup>87</sup>

Queen Elizabeth I is not so much praised as implored to discharge her duty of gathering the exiles, especially after they were banished from England during the reign of Queen Mary I:

This will be the crowning proof of your gratitude to God, and a sacrifice of most delightful savor, that the faithful worshipers of God, who, on account of their profession of faith, were constrained to wander far and wide through distant countries, shall now, through your kindness, be restored to their native country.<sup>88</sup>

At the end of the dedication of his commentary on Jeremiah to the elector Palatine Frederick III, Calvin expresses his gratitude to the elector for receiving the Christian refugees who have fled to him. He knows what he is talking about because, he writes, “Thirty years have passed away since my voluntary exile from France, because the truth of the gospel, pure religion, and the true worship of God were exiled from there.”<sup>89</sup> Calvin calls on the elector not to be discouraged by exiles who have deceived him—he specifically discusses the case of a certain François Baudouin—but to look at the advantages that he has received from qualified men at the University of Heidelberg.<sup>90</sup>

From the more primary matters of restoration, truth, and heresy, Calvin also takes the time to pastorally address current affairs, especially the very pressing and relevant matter of religious refugees. He is fully aware of the position of his dedicatees; he knows that they have the power to address the plight of these exiles. And he does not shy away from reminding them of this—sometimes couched in the language of praise, but the message would have been clear to the receivers. Calvin’s pastoral heart, both for his dedicatees and for the refugees themselves, shines through in this matter.

## Conclusion

I started this article with a reference to Queen Elizabeth II—her personal faith and those who pastored her. I want to finish with a reference to

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 711.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> To Elizabeth I, *CO* 17:415.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 78–79.

another contemporary world leader, Vladimir Putin, and the one who, by all accounts, pastors him—Patriarch Kirill of Moscow. The contrast between Elizabeth and Putin, but even more importantly between the pastoral visions of Kirill and Calvin, could not be starker. Whereas Calvin saw kings and queens, and their kingdoms, in the framework of the kingdom of Christ, Putin and Kirill work with the Justinian concept of *symphonia*—a symphony between church and state.<sup>91</sup> This creates harmony—not between two independent powers, but of a single human society, for which the emperor is ultimately responsible.

In Russia this vision has led to a relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin that has grown so close that in 2012, Kirill could describe Putin as a miracle from God. During a meeting in 2017 in Moscow, Putin praised the Russian Orthodox Church for her contribution to the Russian people and to the Christian civilization in Russia's history. In turn, the patriarch thanked Putin for the open dialogue between the church and the government—this would inevitably lead to the fatherland's success in both the near and the distant future.<sup>92</sup> And in October 2022, during the ongoing war in Ukraine, Kirill said that Putin's reign over Russia had been mandated by God: "God put you in power so that you could perform a service of special importance and of great responsibility for the fate of the country and the people entrusted to your care." The patriarch praised Putin for "transforming the image of Russia, strengthening its sovereignty and its defence capability, protecting its national interests."<sup>93</sup>

This is something very different from Calvin's pastoral care for rulers in the framework of the kingdom of Christ. The highest priority for Putin and Kirill is the fatherland, its past and its future, its success and its sovereignty—though it must be said that the Russian Orthodox Church's place in this history is not to be neglected. Calvin's framework, however, keeps kings, queens, and other rulers focused on their place on the continuum of the heavenly kingdom of Christ from its beginning until its consummation. It keeps them humble in their high office of restoring the church; it reminds

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<sup>91</sup> Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "Church and State in the Orthodox World: From the Byzantine 'Symphonia' and Nationalized Orthodoxy, to the Need of Witnessing the Word of God in a Pluralistic Society," in *Religioni Liberta, Potere Atti del Convegno Internazionale Filosofico-Teologico Sulla Liberta Religiosa*, ed. Emanuela Fogliadini (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2014), 39–74.

<sup>92</sup> Herman H. van Alten, "Een symfonie in Poetins hoofd," *Nader Bekeken* 27 (2020): 59–63, <https://www.woordenwereld.nl/files/geregistreerd/NaderBekeken2020/NB%20februari%202020.pdf>.

<sup>93</sup> *The Moscow Times*, "'God Put You in Power': Russian Orthodox Leader Tells Putin on 70th Birthday," October 7, 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/10/07/god-put-you-in-power-russian-orthodox-leader-tells-putin-on-70th-birthday-a79020>.

them of their task of aiding the progress of the kingdom by upholding the biblical doctrine and fighting heresy. Calvin is not fazed by the personal ambitions of earthly rulers—he simply shows them the way to follow—for the true doctrine and against heresy. This is not done in a detached and theoretical manner; rather, it takes account of current affairs and circumstances in any given territory.

Calvin's vision for the pastoral care of earthly rulers can, therefore, be summed up with the title of this article: the progress of the kingdom. Within this vision the Reformer encourages rulers to restore the church and true worship, hold on to true doctrine, fight against heresy, and in all of this be mindful of current affairs.

# Adapting the Structural Perspectives of the Westminster Larger Catechism for Biblical Counselor Training

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## Abstract

Biblical counseling resources lack structural coherence with the doctrine and Christian life model of the Westminster Standards. This article proposes reorienting counselor-trainers and counselors with these perspectives as a contribution to David Powlison's vision to formulate a unified theory of systematic theology for soul care. The twofold structure of the Larger Catechism, called the *symphonic-pedagogical* perspective—building up the saints to know our Triune God and his work—is paired with teaching disciples to do everything that Jesus commanded. We observe five substructural patterns to integrate its instructional method. This essay explains the significance of each perspective for counseling cases.

## Keywords

*Westminster Confession of Faith, Westminster Larger Catechism, Grand Unified Theory, perspectivalism, descriptive and prescriptive presuppositions, God's attributes, lex Christi, man's derivative reflections*

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## Introduction

**F**rom the perspective of biblical counseling theory as developed over the past fifty years, Heath Lambert notes that biblical counseling journals, booklets, and books have mostly devoted themselves to matters of the Christian life and sanctification.<sup>1</sup>

The repetition of one model and the lack of new foundational theory development is seen in *How People Change*.<sup>2</sup> A diagram with two trees with a cross in the center (the gospel) illustrates this model: it includes our situation with a scorching sun representing our suffering and communicates that our behavior is rooted in the heart (cf. Matt 7:17–20). This illustration shows up in the teaching of biblical counselors trained by Westminster Theological Seminary or the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF) who have come to Taiwan or China in the past twenty years. This is the same basic model David Powlison taught at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. It is a simple, memorable way to link biblical concepts to a few of the key topics that most counseling needs to address. However, we need a better model that provides *explicit* coherence with the Westminster Standards.

Powlison was one of the most articulate spokesmen for the biblical counseling movement, as a biblical counselor, historian of its founding by Jay Adams, visionary, and apologist. He envisioned that biblical counseling teachers' ongoing goal should be "articulating biblical truth and developing our systematic theology of care for the soul, ... for understanding and transforming human nature" and ultimately developing a "Grand Unified Theory" that "appreciate[s] the ... historic resources of the Christian faith" and "do[es] fresh theological work"; since it "arise[s] from Scripture, it will explicitly cohere with long-formulated Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy" and "cohere intellectually and structurally with every other form of the church's

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<sup>1</sup> Heath Lambert, *The Biblical Counseling Movement after Adams* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 211, note 48. David Powlison's articles and books on the Christian life and sanctification issues show his orientation to using the moral law. David Powlison, *Making All Things New: Restoring Joy to the Sexually Broken* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017); *Good and Angry: Redeeming Anger, Irritation, Complaining, and Bitterness* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2016); "Counsel Ephesians," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 17.2 (1999): 2–11; Charles Spurgeon, David Powlison, and Jay E. Adams, "The Law Written on the Heart," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 12.2 (1994): 25–32; David Powlison, "The Sufficiency of Scripture to Diagnose and Cure Souls," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 23.2 (2005): 2–14. The following book, inspired by Powlison's teaching, centers sanctification on the moral law as well: Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp, *How People Change* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2008), 153–60, 180–81, 190, 196–98, 203.

<sup>2</sup> Lane and Tripp, *How People Change*, 97, 100; also translated into Chinese in 2013.

ministry: worship, preaching, teaching, discipleship, child-rearing, friendship, evangelism, mercy works, missions, and pastoral leadership.”<sup>3</sup>

What follows are my proposals to support Powlison’s vision for developing a unified theory for biblical counseling training.<sup>4</sup> This article provides a very brief summary of my latest book, *Westminster Foundations*, which observes and adapts six integrating motifs from the Westminster Standards that explicitly cohere with the Standards’ mature systematic-practical theology and intellectually and structurally cohere with any church ministry.<sup>5</sup> This counseling framework has been developed using the structure of the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC), which is organized around its integrating motif of the moral law, which I have named *lex Christi*.<sup>6</sup>

I am assuming that the theological content of the Westminster Standards, including its *unified structural themes*, accurately represents what the Scriptures teach,<sup>7</sup> even as many seminaries and Reformed denominations have required their ordained faculty, elders, and deacons to take this vow in explicit agreement: “Do you sincerely receive and adopt the *Confession of Faith* and the *Catechisms* of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> David Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2010), 278, 281–83, 299.

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Vern Poythress for offering important editorial suggestions on this journal article.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Paul Yates, *Westminster Foundations: God’s Glory as an Integrating Perspective on Reformed Theology* (Lancaster, PA: Unveiled Faces Reformed Press, 2023). About half of the book is adapted from Timothy Paul Yates, “Adapting Westminster’s Moral Law Motif to Integrate Systematic Theology, Apologetics and Pastoral Practice” (PhD diss., NorthWest University, Potchefstroom, South Africa, 2021). These works and the illustration files (not used in this article) and other resources are free for downloading at [www.bethoumyvision.net](http://www.bethoumyvision.net).

<sup>6</sup> *Lex Christi* is my Latin adaptation of the phrase “law of Christ” (Gal 6:2; 1 Cor 9:21), a purposely less recognizable theological phrase that I can define using Westminster’s nuanced meanings with less preconceived misconceptions. I substitute this phrase as an adaptation of the Westminster Standards phrase “moral law” below and identify uses latent in the structural patterns of the WLC beyond the three commonly identified uses in WCF 19:6, which are to show us our sin, lead us to Christ as mediator, and teach us our duty. Poythress has also adopted my *lex Christi* virtues vocabulary; see Vern Poythress, “Introducing the Law of Christ (*Lex Christi*): A Fruitful Framework for Theology and Life,” February 20, 2021, updated December 17, 2022, <https://frame-poythress.org/introducing-the-law-of-christ-lex-christi-a-fruitful-framework-for-theology-and-life/>.

<sup>7</sup> See Stephen Casselli, *Divine Rule Maintained: Anthony Burgess, Covenant Theology, and the Place of the Law in Reformed Scholasticism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016), 140–42. Casselli demonstrates how the theology of Anthony Burgess, a Westminster Divine who influenced the Confession’s wording on the moral law (ch. 19), was based on careful biblical exegesis, ecclesiastical and pastoral concerns for the church in that day, and sensitivity to the progress of revelation that led to fulfillment in Christ.

<sup>8</sup> “The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America,” (2019), chapter 21-5, <https://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/BCO-2019-with-bookmarks-for-website-1.pdf>.

## I. A Comprehensive Counseling Framework: The Symphonic-Pedagogical Perspective

This overarching WLC perspective sets forth God and man in relation to each other. The WLC organizes its discussion under two headings: what the Scriptures principally teach us to believe concerning God and what the Scriptures principally require as the duty of man (WLC 91, 5). I call this the *symphonic-pedagogical* perspective.<sup>9</sup> The Westminster catechisms use Exodus 20:2–17 as the organizing text for this framework that defines the Christian religion. The preface to the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20:2, “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt,” is adapted by WLC 101 as a summary of what to believe concerning God. Thus, WLC 101 concisely summarizes WLC 1–90 into one terse sentence. The whole duty of man is reorganized under the headings of the moral law (WLC 91–151), followed by specific expansions of the meaning of the second and third commandments defining the means of grace (WLC 152–96, explaining the word sacraments and prayer).

### *Details of the WLC’s Symphonic-Pedagogical Perspective*

God: What God is, his glory defined by his attributes and Triune persons  
(WLC 6–11)

*Summarized in the preface to the moral law* (WLC 101; Exod 20:2)

What God does, revealed in his decrees concerning angels and men  
(WLC 12–13)

execution of his decrees in creation and providence (WLC 14–90)

creation of the world, angels, and man in *lex Christi* righteousness  
(WLC 15–17)

providence about angels:

permits some angels to irrecoverably fall for his glory, limiting their sins, while establishing the elect angels to administer his *lex Christi* glory (WLC 19)

providence about man, preserving and governing by *lex Christi* and ordering them to his glory (WLC 18, 20):

covenant of life/works with the first Adam by *lex Christi*; all mankind falls into sin under his headship, some left in sin (WLC 20–30)

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Additional support for these six perspectival tools can be seen in the significant continuities between the structural patterns in the WLC and Romans.

<sup>9</sup> For the detailed explanation of this perspective, see Yates, *Westminster Foundations*, 101–10; “Adapting Westminster’s Moral Law Motif,” 57–58.

covenant of grace in the second Adam, Christ: all the elect restored to *lex Christi* righteousness under his headship (WLC 30–56)

Christ the mediator of the covenant of grace (WLC 36–56)

his person as God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ (WLC 36–41)

his execution of the offices of prophet, priest, and king (WLC 42–56)

his humiliation (imputing Adam’s *lex Christi* disobedience, suffering its curses) and exaltation (rewarded for perfectly obeying *lex Christi* in the covenant of works; WLC 46–56)

Christ’s mediatorial benefits

to preserve the witness of the visible church (WLC 60–63)

to redeem the invisible church by the Spirit and word (WLC 57–59, 64)

faith-union with Christ in effectual calling (WLC 65–68)

communion with Christ in full *lex Christi* righteousness (WLC 32, 65, 69–90)

in grace: justification, adoption, and sanctification (WLC 69–81)

in glory: this life, intermediate state, and resurrection (82–90)

*What duty God requires of men:* Exercise the benefits they have received in the covenant of grace from Christ the mediator.

The meaning, use and interpretation of *lex Christi* (WLC 90–101)

Duties to God (WLC 102–21)

Duties to man (WLC 122–48)

The whole *lex Christi* reveals man’s sinfulness and his deserved wrath (WLC 149–52), awakening man’s conscience to flee from God’s wrath by faith and repentance and diligent use of the means of grace (WLC 96, 153–96), which are defined as duties to God (second and third commandments; WLC 108, 112), including duties of ministers to their flock (fifth commandment) to properly represent God in these means, and how the flock should receive these means word (WLC 155–60)

sacraments (WLC 161–77)

prayer (WLC 178–96)

Why is this *symphonic-pedagogical* perspective important? Westminster’s use of Exodus 20:1–17 provides a simple biblical text for training children (Westminster Shorter Catechism) or adults (WLC). Furthermore, Exodus 20:1–17 can serve as an outline for the entire seminary curriculum because it emphasizes what to believe about God and his work, which is the scope of systematic theology, and what duty God requires of man, which is the scope of practical theology. This perspective provides vital theoretical formation for biblical counselors. Lay counselors usually get exposed to how-to resources as the primary formation tools since the prominent biblical counseling certificates by CCEF and the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC) mostly provide methodology and sanctification-related resources. Training institutions need to be reawakened to the value of the WLC’s condensed pedagogy. Powlison’s visionary appeal to show how counseling “explicitly cohere[s] with long-formulated Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy” can be answered, in part, by a retrieval of the WLC adapted to all levels of counselor training. Working familiarity with the themes of the WLC’s theological structure and the wording of the outline will help counselors explain the major themes of Christianity to counselees. Furthermore, its memorability helps locate and contextualize the good biblical themes they learn from practical theology books and articles within the larger structure of the WLC’s mature systematic-practical theology. It will also serve as a guard against unbalanced counseling messages within the biblical counseling community. Popularized in the 1980s, counseling theory claimed that faith in one’s new identity in Christ or justification should be the only motivator for the Christian imperatives in sanctification, becoming nearly synonymous with being truly gospel- or Christ-centered.<sup>10</sup> The WLC’s corrective answer is union and communion with our mediator Christ in grace and glory by the Spirit-and-word-worked effectual call to saving faith, such that all of faith’s exercises—whether to justification, adoption, sanctification, or glorification—are by grace alone.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> David Powlison, *How Does Sanctification Work?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 27–30, 42, 53–60, 76. Chapter 5, “We are Sanctified by Remembering Our Justification” (pp. 53–60), critiques the tendency to consider legalistic self-righteousness as the main problem Paul is addressing in every text mentioning justification; in, e.g., Rom 8:18–39, the problem is the readers’ doubting of God’s love in times of suffering, so Paul reminds them of justification so they can be comforted by God’s inseparable love and not lose heart, since various interdependent truths show that “God is for us!”

<sup>11</sup> Richard Gaffin addresses this overreliance on and misuse of justification as the primary motivator in sanctification, compared with actual biblical texts pointing to the main motivator as grace that unites us with Christ by faith. See Richard Gaffin, *In the Fullness of Time: An Introduction to the Biblical Theology of Acts and Paul* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 390–98.

Why is this perspective important in the weekly practice of counseling? It provides a framework for evaluating the relative pastoral needs of counselees. Church member Jack shares how he cannot seem to overcome his self-condemnation for leaving his wife and daughter for a two-year affair with another woman, though now his marriage and membership have been restored after repentance. Jack needs strengthening and encouragement related to his understanding of God's redemptive work, "what to believe concerning God," as do any like him who struggle with assurance of forgiveness, assurance of salvation, and God's providence over suffering. Young church planter David comes to you after his elders have pointed out his sins of dominating and manipulating others using condemning words and explosive anger. David and others like him need help to understand and practice their fifth- and sixth-commandment moral law duties while learning how to resist what these commands forbid. Generally, however, counselees need a combination of counsel strengthening both areas. Why? Counselors who understand the WLC's symphonic-pedagogical structure will know that the *redeeming work of God* in effectual call to faith-union and communion in grace and glory *provides grace to the elect for their performance of every required duty toward God and man*. "What to believe concerning God" shows God's divine decree to save through the covenant of grace in effectual call to union with Christ as mediator by imputing, imparting, and preserving the duties required for communion in grace and glory. Those same duties to have communion in grace and glory through faith-union with Christ are to be exercised and vivified as our *lex Christi* responsibilities. God graciously gives the elect what he requires of them and then commands the elect to exercise what they have been given through diligent use of the means of grace in the trials and tests of life. In Augustine's words, "Give me the grace to do as you command and command me to do what you will."<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, one of the most significant theoretical debates in biblical counselor training is the relationship it should have with the various psychologies. The WLC *integrates* various topics of biblical truth using a moral law motif to develop a mature systematic-practical theology. However, extra-biblical knowledge cannot be *integrated* with this truth; it can merely supply illustrations and applications of this truth. First, the Westminster Standards *describe* the authority of Scripture to reveal God's Triune nature and attributes and his works of creation and providence to angels and men. The first heading of the *symphonic-pedagogical* perspective (WLC 1–90) provides the

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<sup>12</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 10.29, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin, 233, [https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Augustine\\_ConfessionsX.pdf](https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Augustine_ConfessionsX.pdf).

supreme presuppositions for all other *descriptive* knowledge. True knowledge of God, his purposes in creation and providence, and knowledge of man must come from Scripture (2 Tim 3:16–17) and from those who proclaim its truths (Eph 4:11–16). *Descriptive* extrabiblical knowledge from science or psychology, for example, may contribute merely illustrative or applicational knowledge about God’s works in creation as a whole and the behaviors of man under God’s providence.<sup>13</sup> Second, the primary purpose of WLC 90–196 is to *prescribe* the moral law as the binding duty of all men.<sup>14</sup>

The second heading of the *symphonic-pedagogical* perspective *prescribes* the duties to God and man that can function as the presuppositions under which all other *prescriptive* extrabiblical knowledge can be engaged. WLC 102–21 (duties of man to God) and WLC 122–48 (duties of man to man and to creation as it impacts man) can function as epistemic filters, especially relevant for evaluating any *prescriptive* knowledge from the social sciences (economics, history, political science, sociology, psychology, and anthropology).<sup>15</sup> Christians can apply any *prescriptive* extrabiblical knowledge conforming to these scripturally defined man-to-God, man-to-man, and man-to-creation duties, reform any knowledge that can be taken captive to Christ (2 Cor 10:5), or reject any knowledge that cannot comply with God’s moral vision for human flourishing (Acts 17:24–31)!<sup>16</sup> This use of the moral law to engage psychological *prescriptions* for man coheres with how the Westminster Divines used the moral law to engage worldviews.<sup>17</sup>

While Reformed counselors acknowledge that these applications will not always be certain due to limited knowledge, such as whether attachment theories between caregivers and infants are valid applications of the biblical

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<sup>13</sup> David Powlison, “Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies),” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 25.2 (2007): 14–20.

<sup>14</sup> WLC 91–196 also *describes* the meaning of the moral law and its purposes in redemption and judgment. The moral law informs them of God’s similar righteous nature, his moral will as their duty, reveals their sinful bondage and inability to keep it, while also *prescribing* humble submission to seek righteousness by faith in Christ for mercy and credited righteousness (WLC 93, 95), which is also our first- and second-commandment duty (WLC 104, 108).

<sup>15</sup> See Yates, “Adapting Westminster’s Moral Law Motif,” 270–319 (ch. 9), for an example of engaging psychology using biblical presuppositions, both *descriptions* of the moral conscience (Rom 2:14–15) and *lex Christi prescriptions* for counseling related to those suffering dissociative identity symptoms due to trauma.

<sup>16</sup> For an example of reframing Esther Meek’s Polanyian epistemology in *Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011) under a *lex Christi* rubric, see Yates, “Adapting Westminster’s Moral Law Motif,” 6–9.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Ackerman also uses the moral law to engage psychology. See Paul Ackerman, “The Integrated Model for Relating Psychology and Christianity: A Critique in the Light of Biblical Creation,” *The Creation Social Science and Humanities Society Quarterly Journal* 10.4 (1988): 7–13, <https://creationism.org/csshs/v10n4p07.htm>.

*descriptions* of how man relates to God or *prescriptions* defining our duties to God (first commandment) or whether prescribing certain psychiatric medications conforms to the duty to be pro-life (sixth commandment), we can at least begin to reframe our engagement with any truth-telling psychologies as *descriptive* and *prescriptive* applications of Westminster’s epistemological presuppositions. The WLC provides anchor points to an irreducibly complex, interdependent, *indicative-imperative* system of new covenant transformation, union-with-Christ-in-grace-and-glory truth, that helps guard against importing *descriptions* of man divorced from the context of God’s sovereign providence or mere *prescriptive* moralism, emotional quotient theories, cognitive therapies, or positive psychology disconnected from faith-union with the risen Christ (Col 2:19–3:4).

## **II. *Descriptive and Prescriptive Presuppositions Explained***

Within the overarching *symphonic-pedagogical* framework, five subsets of perspectives can serve as counselor tools to integrate and apply a mature systematic-practical theology: the descriptive presuppositions of (1) the *symphonic attributes* perspective, (2) the *symphonic persons* perspective, and (3) the *symphonic lex Christi* perspective and the prescriptive presuppositions of the decalogue as an outline for (4) the *symphonic-morality* perspective, and its irreducible prescriptive complexity in (5) the *symphonic-commandments* perspective.

### **1. *Descriptive Presuppositions Explained: Symphonic Attributes Perspective***

The *symphonic attributes* perspective is defined as the glory of God revealed in his attributes and Triune persons (WCF 2:1–3) throughout the topics of Westminster’s systematic and practical theology *to, on, in, and by* his creatures (WCF 2:2).<sup>18</sup> These four prepositions are key to Westminster’s integrative systematic-practical theology and the reason why this *symphonic attributes* perspective must be creatively adapted for biblical counselor training. This perspective is key to knowing what it means to honor and bless the name of the LORD (the I AM), our third-commandment duty, and to properly witness to who man becomes in union with Christ, our ninth-commandment duty.

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<sup>18</sup> For the details on attributes, see Yates, *Westminster Foundations*, 39–80, and “Adapting Westminster’s Moral Law Motif,” 61–105. For the meaning of *symphonic*, see Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), ch. 7, <https://frame-poythress.org/ebooks/symphonic-theology-by-vern-poythress/#ch7>.

It presents an integrative perspective connecting the doctrine of God with what union with Christ accomplishes in justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification. Deductive research and extrapolation of the logic uncover the rudiments of an integrative theology between the doctrines of God and man and contribute a partial answer to Powlison’s “Grand Unified Theory” vision of “*articulating biblical truth and developing our systematic theology of care for the soul ... for understanding and transforming human nature.*”<sup>19</sup> Counselors must understand what man’s embodied-soul derivative attributes look like in relation to the Lord’s perfective attributes. Unfortunately, Reformed academic development of the doctrine of God has developed in its own specialized, isolated trajectory without being correlated with the doctrine of man created in God’s likeness. When the meaning of God’s name is fragmented from the study of man in his likeness, academics also fail to observe the specifics of the corollary teaching that man is created in God’s likeness to reveal the eternal power and divine nature of God (Rom 1:20).

For the sake of counselor training, the long list of God’s attributes in WCF 2:1 could benefit from a reorganization into three creatively adapted sets. The first set of attributes is the attributes of God’s essential being, called *supra-actuating attributes*.<sup>20</sup> The Lord is living, unchanging, almighty, determinate, all-knowing, eternal, spirit (WLC 7–8; WCF 2:1). A second set of attributes can be grouped and named God’s *supra-righteousness attributes* (WLC 7; WCF 2:1). However, this group lacks specificity, linked only to God’s holiness. Ten new attribute names can be created to represent the virtues of each of the Ten Commandments. A third set can be grouped as *supra-familial attributes*, originating in the eternal love of the Father for the divine begotten Son in the bond of the Spirit, and expressed in creation and providence by loving all who share this affection for the Son and hating all those who reject the Son.<sup>21</sup> God differentiates between men based on

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<sup>19</sup> Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement*, 278, repr. of Powlison, “Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies),” 14.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Muller mostly defines a similar list as God’s divine essence, names, and “essential” attributes. See Richard Muller, *The Divine Essence and Attributes*, vol. 3 of *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 227–364.

<sup>21</sup> WCF 2:3. The Father and the only begotten Son share mutual love before creation (John 1:14, 18; 3:35; 5:20; 17:24; Heb 1:2–3, 5), with the Spirit proceeding from both as the bond of the Father’s delight in the Son (John 15:26; 2 Cor 13:14; Isa 42:1; Matt 3:16–17; 12:18; John 1:32–34; Rom 1:4); see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Abridged in One Volume* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011) 238–39, 242. The term “familial” is derived from the metaphor God uses to describe himself as Father (first person of the Trinity), to the Son (second person of the Trinity), used in our baptismal formulation (Matt 28:19) and in the Trinitarian theology of WCF 2:3. It also provides one biblical motif for explaining the benefits of union with Christ

covenant relations. He shows wrath and justice to law nonconformists outside Christ's covenant of grace and mercy, grace, patience, goodness, and truth to his people who are in Christ's new covenant of grace (WLC 13, 93; WCF 3:5–7).

After God's attributes are reorganized into the above three sets, three derivative reflection sets can be proposed to describe man in God's image. The first set could be called derivative attributes of man's *formative abilities*, defined as those of living, changeable, enabled, reasonable, choosing, knowledgeable, immortal souls (WLC 17; WCF 4:2). A second set of ten commandment-linked virtues can be grouped and named man's reflective *lex Christi virtues*, or obedience to the moral law (WLC 7; WCF 2:1). A third set of derivative attributes can be grouped as the *covenant-relational affections*, both justice to enemies and mercy toward all, especially those of the household of faith (Gal 6:10; e.g., WLC 135, sixth-commandment duties that overlap with all other commandments). Perhaps we could use a computer-language metaphor of a) essential hardware to represent man's *formative abilities*, b) an operating system to represent man's *lex Christi virtues*, and c) software applications to represent man's *covenant-relational affections*. Union with Christ specifically focuses on renewal of the *lex Christi virtues* (Eph 4:24), which then changes the *formative abilities* of man's being and his *covenant-relational affections*, "the frame and disposition of the whole man, soul and body" (WLC 17, 93).

We can adapt and augment the WCF 2:1 list of God's attributes, unify the vocabulary with modern English, and arrange them into three attribute sets (totaling forty interdependent attributes), as below, where they are termed the ten *supra-actuating attributes* of essential being, the ten *supra-righteousness attributes* defined by moral law, and the twenty *supra-familial attributes* (one subset of ten pertaining to those in the covenant and another, contrasting, subset of ten pertaining to those outside the covenant).<sup>22</sup> These three sets are revealed in symphonically repeating motifs throughout Scripture and have integrated connections with all subsections of systematic and practical theology. All three sets of attributes are noted to situate the creatively developed set of ten *lex Christi* attributes within the WCF 2 attribute list

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as adopted sons by the Spirit (WLC 74; WCF 12; Rom 8:14–16; Gal 4:4–7; 1 John 3:1), and the restoration of human family love in Christ (Luke 1:17; Eph 5:1–2, 25; 6:1–4). For similar ideas noted in the Trinitarian origin of the *supra-familial attributes*, see Vern S. Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), 496–98, 514–15, 528–29, 563–66.

<sup>22</sup> Three sets of ten are suggested to create a motific illustration using nested ten point stars; see "2023 lex Christi–DRL Illustrations PDF," [www.bethoumyvision.net](http://www.bethoumyvision.net).

and highlight that the origin of the *lex Christi* motif is from God's own attributes. In addition, I suggest that *all* Westminster's divine attributes have derivative reflections in man.

The first set, called *supra-actuating attributes*, are as follows. "I am the LORD your God": the I AM is supremely perfect, boundless, present, consistent, eternal, exalted, powerful, knowing, independent, determinate. These ten are respectively reflected in man's body and soul as *formative abilities*: the "I am" (self-consciousness) with qualities of perfectability, luxuriance, availability, reliability, endurance, complexity, ability, teachability, dependency, and decidability.

The second set, called *supra-righteousness attributes*, is developed by the creation of ten names to represent God's likeness in each of the commandments, below in the order of the decalogue, respectively: the Lord is superior, holy, blessed, dynamic, harmonious, living, beautiful, sufficient, truthful, and contented. These ten are respectively reflected in man's *lex Christi virtues* to represent each commandment's renewal in man: pro-Lord, pro-covenantal (meaning the elect can only approach his holiness through his covenants), pro-blessing, pro-theosynchrony, pro-harmony, pro-life, pro-marriage, pro-stewardship, pro-truth, and pro-contentment.

The members of the third set, called *supra-familial attributes*, originate in the love of the Father for the Son in the bond of the Spirit, but are expressed in creation and providence in the ways God relates to man outside or within his covenants.<sup>23</sup> These are divided into two subsets of ten. The first subset is called God's *covenant-reconciliation attributes*. God is loving, gracious, merciful, patient to save, good, forgiving, rewarding, slow to anger, disciplining, and rejoicing to those in covenant. The second, contrasting, subset is called God's *covenant-enmity attributes*. God is hating, jealous, wrathful, patient to judge, just, condemning, penalizing, furious, abandoning, and grieving to those outside the covenant. The derivative set reflected in man's body and soul are called *covenant-relational (reconciliation or enmity) affections* and use identical words.

Why is this *symphonic attributes* perspective important? As noted above, enriching our vision for soul care includes knowing what it means to call on the *name* of the Lord, what "put on in Christ" should look like, and what "put off in Adam" looks like.<sup>24</sup> In an infinitely complex way, the integrity of our third-commandment witness to the LORD, I AM, depends on knowing

<sup>23</sup> The list is not exhaustive but suggestive of many other relational words in Scripture.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Chewing offers another thoughtful perspective linking divine attributes to human reflections, but without the three sets categorization. See Richard C. Chewing, *Becoming Partakers of the Divine Nature* (Quarryville, PA: Great Rock Publishing, 2013).

the proper use of his name, as his glory is revealed *to us* in all his works, that his glory may be revealed *on us* in creation and justification, as well as *in us* and *by us* in sanctification and glorification. The typical doctrine of man experienced in weekly corporate worship tends to focus on the “do not’s” of the moral law and use the Ten Commandments in weekly worship to expose sin and call for prayers of repentance. Believers seldom hear the positive demands of the law linked to the attributes of God himself. This adapted perspective proposes a specific, simplified *lex Christi virtute* related to each commandment situated within other attributes defined in the doctrine of God. Better grasp of the meaning of God’s name produces better witness to who man is re-created to be in his likeness. Union and communion with Christ in grace and glory means that, in faith-union with the second Adam, his *lex Christi* virtues are actually linked to the specific moral attributes of God defined under the term *righteousness*, purposed in election, imputed in justification, imparted in sanctification, and awaiting perfection in glorification. The visible church, in honor of and proper witness to God’s name, should utilize its important corollary ministry of biblical counseling by choosing counselors that exemplify, proclaim, intercede, and administrate *lex Christi* virtues and discipline *lex Christi* failure.

When we notice that the focus of redemption is the renewal of the *lex Christi virtues*,<sup>25</sup> how shall we relate these *virtues* to the other two sets of *formative abilities* and *covenant-relational affections* describing man’s soul by the instrument of man’s body? These *abilities* and *affections* are meant to be used to please God and promote human flourishing, but they are only properly redirected when the core *lex Christi virtues* are renewed. For example, *lex Christi virtues* command duties of love for all men within the details of the second table of the moral law. When nuanced with *covenant-relational affections*, counselors can distinguish between the duties of love to those in the covenant and those outside the covenant. While imitating God’s display of patient common grace love to all, there should be a special display of *covenant-relational reconciliation affections* to “one another” in the visible church (Matt 5:44–45; Rom 9:22–23; Gal 6:9–10; Eph 4:1–6:4). Since God loves the saints as new creatures in Christ and shows them his *covenant-relational reconciliation attributes*, all the assemblies of believers need to show these same affections to one another, whether in the context of marriage, family, schools, businesses, or churches. Likewise, current models of biblical counseling lack a clarified category for how the visible church imitates

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<sup>25</sup> Ephesians 4:24 motivates us to research how Ephesians covers every commandment’s renewal in union with the resurrected Christ.

God's *covenant-relational enmity attributes* in biblically defined ways, hating sin, grieving over and separating from unrepentant sinners, giving men up to their lusts, disciplining neighbor-harming sins under her laws, and waiting for God's final justice (Rev 2:5; Heb 1:9; Eph 4:30; Rom 9:2; Matt 10:14; 15:14; Acts 13:46; Rom 13:3–4; Rev 6:10). These nuances contribute to a systematic-practical theology for soul care.

## **2. Descriptive Presuppositions Explained: The Symphonic Persons Perspective**

WCF 2:3 explains a Trinitarian presupposition that is integrated throughout its systematic-practical theology using an *inseparable operations* perspective that describes each person of the Trinity as participating in all God's works, such as decrees, creation, providence, redemption, and judgment.<sup>26</sup> Many systematic theology books have developed this integrative approach.<sup>27</sup>

Throughout the Westminster Standards, the word "Godhead" generally represents the Triune Lord: Father, Son, and Spirit (WCF 2:3; 26:3; WLC 6, 9–10).<sup>28</sup> While this inseparable operations motif is only explicit in the doctrine of creation (WCF 4:1), the doctrine of perseverance (WCF 17:2), and the eternal communion of the saints with the Triune God in glory (WLC 90), the *symphonic persons* perspective means that whenever the divine name of "God"<sup>29</sup> is used in the Westminster Standards, it represents the Trinity. There is hardly any section of the Standards that omits the

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<sup>26</sup> Adonis Vidu, "How the Doctrine of Inseparable Operations Unlocks the Gospel," *The Gospel Coalition*, May 3, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/doctrine-inseparable-operations/>.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 108–24; Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity*, 563–87. There is a reawakening to Trinitarian themes in modern theology and biblical counseling: Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012); Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010); Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004); Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005); Stephen Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God: The Trinitarian Shape of Christian Service* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

<sup>28</sup> WCF 8:2 is an exception, where "Godhead" refers to the divinity of Christ in union with his "manhood."

<sup>29</sup> This occurs 171 times in the WCF, 241 times in the WLC. Also, there are about ten uses of the name "Lord" to represent the Trinity in WCF 1:1; 7:3; 13:1; 20:2–3; 21:7–8; 23:1; 24:3; 33:2. Its primary uses in the WLC are found in the many mentions of the phrases of the Decalogue and its preface: WLC 101–2, 107, 110–11, 114–15, 120, 123, 133, the only exception is WLC 165, which states that baptism into the Triune name brings one into an "open and professed engagement to be wholly and only the Lord's." The other fourteen or so uses of "Lord" in the WCF refer to the Lord Jesus Christ, plus additional uses naming the Lord's Day and the Lord's Supper.

mention of God or one of the divine persons, which is evidence for the *symphonic persons* perspective. We affirm that the supremacy attributes of the Lord God the Father are the same supremacy attributes of the Lord God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, and they are the supremacy attributes of the Lord God the Holy Spirit—shared equally as *autotheos*, God-of-himself, the self-existent Triune God.<sup>30</sup>

In the application of “God’s decree” of redemption and “all the means thereof” (WCF 3:1, 3, 6–7; WLC 13), the *symphonic persons* perspective reveals the archetypical *mediate representative* of the resurrected, ascended, right-hand-seated Christ receiving authority to send the Spirit to apply the virtues of his mediation to his elect within the context of the visible church (Acts 2:33). This archetypical *mediate representative* pattern is then administered over all the universe, most visibly revealed as *symphonic abilities, virtues, and affections* by created *persons* (angels and men) *in relationship* to God, to one another, and to all creation. From the perspective of the Lord’s *covenant-relational attributes*, even the wicked reveal his wrath when he gives men up to their lusts, and his justice, while he also reveals to them his common grace kindness and patience, so that they might benefit the righteous in the common operations of society.<sup>31</sup> Biblical counseling is one way to alert counselees to the reality of relational mediate representation. The counselor is a mediate representative to the counselee. They equip counselees to actively participate in mediately representing God’s supremacy attributes in derivative ways in all their relationships.

### **3. Descriptive Presuppositions Explained: The Symphonic Lex Christi Perspective**

The WLC also uses a *lex Christi*-integrating motif that helps explain the various stages of the biblical narrative and various aspects of systematic and practical theology. I call this the *symphonic lex Christi* perspective because it resembles a symphony in which melodies are repeated. The *symphonic lex Christi* perspective refers to the recurrence of the *lex Christi* motif, most commonly summarized by the terms *righteousness* or *unrighteousness* (but also including holiness, godliness, good works, and sinfulness) throughout the symphony of topics in Westminster’s systematic and practical theology.

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<sup>30</sup> John Calvin used the Greek term *autotheos* to affirm and protect the biblical teaching about the divinity of Christ as self-existent God, God-of-himself, *ex se ipso*, but also to indicate that the Son derives his *hypostatic identity* as the second person of the Trinity from the generated relationship he has with the Father from before the ages. See Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 327–31.

<sup>31</sup> Prov 16:4; Isa 45:1–13; Rom 1:18–32; 9:22; Acts 14:17; 17:30; Matt 5:45; 13:28–30.

Melodic repetitions are sounded in creation, fall, Sinai, Christ, and salvation, as described in WCF 19, “Of the Law of God.” The following provides a summary.

Scripture trains in righteousness. The Lord is righteous. The Lord elects some men to righteousness. The Lord creates Adam righteous and gives him his entire righteous law in Eden. The Lord permits man’s fall into unrighteousness and passes by some, leaving them in their unrighteousness unto final judgment. The Lord promises Christ, the righteous offspring of the woman, who became incarnate to fulfill righteousness as the second Adam. Through effectual call we believers are united to Christ to commune with him in grace and glory. We are credited with *lex Christi* righteousness in justification and recreated with *lex Christi* wisdom in sanctification. We appropriate the means of grace in communion with the saints and by electing leaders who exemplify, proclaim, intercede, and administer these *lex Christi* virtues in all assemblies of two or more. The Lord leads his church to discipline according to the prohibitions of *lex Christi* to restore its virtues. The saints hope for a perfected *lex Christi* world and relationships in glorification. The Lord consummates judgment on unrighteousness and eternally prepares a home of righteousness in the new heavens and the new earth, while hell is the application of justice, a place filled with the total chaos of an anti-*lex Christi* environment.<sup>32</sup>

Why is this perspective important in biblical counseling? This perspective prevents the legalistic application of the other perspectives. Everything we are commanded to do in the moral law is an exercise of the grace received in the symphonic *lex Christi* perspective. Christ in his work and the Spirit intimately integrate the *lex Christi* such that faith-union with Christ applies the *lex Christi* righteousness required to see God (Heb 12:14).

#### **4. Prescriptive Presuppositions Explained: Symphonic-Morality Perspective**

The third WLC perspective is that *all* biblical morality falls under the scope of the Ten Commandments. This perspective is summarized in love for God and love for neighbor (WCL 102, 122), and on these two great

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<sup>32</sup> For the specific symphonic WCF patterns cited and adapted with biblical texts and for the use of *lex Christi* to interpret creation, fall, final renewal, and final judgment, see Yates, *Westminster Foundations*, 91–100, and “Adapting Westminster’s Moral Law Motif,” 127–32. Richard Muller highlights two theologians who used this perspective after the Westminster Standards were published; see Richard Muller, “The Covenant of Works and the Stability of the Divine Law in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy: A Study in the Theology of Herman Witsius and Wilhelmus A. Brakel,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (1994): 75–101.

commandments the WLC builds its understanding of the moral law. The WLC uses the Decalogue's imperatives (eight "you shall not" and two "you shall" ["Remember," "Honor"], Exod 20:3–17) to create ten sets of duties and prohibitions drawn from logical connections to any related biblical morality from anywhere in Scripture (WLC 102–49). I call this the *symphonic-morality* perspective.<sup>33</sup> For example, in WLC 108, the second-commandment prohibition, "You shall not make or worship idols," creates a contrasting set of duties to "receive, observe, and keep pure the use of prayer, the word, sacraments, church government and discipline, fasting and vows" that are all developed logically from the entire Bible related to proper worship under the terms of the covenant. Showing that this biblical *symphonic-morality* perspective can be further expanded, WLC 152–96 further explains that brief summary of second-commandment duties with even greater detail related to the effectual use of the outward means (word, sacraments, prayer) to receive the benefits of Christ's mediation in the new covenant. The biblical teaching about prayer (WLC 178–85) is an expanded explanation of the duties of the second commandment, and to that is added the specifics of the Lord's Prayer (WLC 186–96) as a structure for worship and intercession to receive new covenant *benefits* (expansion of Christ's kingdom, forgiveness, deliverance from temptation and evil and removal of its sources, provision of daily bread) and enable the performance of new covenant *duties* (hallowing God's name, doing his moral will, forgiving debtors). As an example of the biblical legitimacy of creating this logical *symphonic-morality* perspective, notice how Paul reframes the eighth commandment as a prohibition and duty in one verse: "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need" (Eph 4:28). Further, by examining the Scripture index to the WLC,<sup>34</sup> readers note that its primary use of the entire book of Proverbs as proof texts is organized under the rubric of its moral law exposition, illustrating that many of its themes can be restructured under individual commandments.

However, we can note that the WLC's details of each commandment's biblical virtues are not comprehensive of every possible nuance of biblical morality. Some of its detailed emphases reflect the sharp turns away from

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<sup>33</sup> For a summary of WLC 103–49 on the moral law, see Yates, *Westminster Foundations*, 29–34, and "Adapting Westminster's Moral Law Motif," 41–47.

<sup>34</sup> Presbyterian Church in America, *Scripture Index*, <https://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Scripture2022.pdf>.

errors in the Church of England and Roman Catholicism.<sup>35</sup> Today, some of the commandments need larger biblical headings to define their overall virtue. Some adaptation and additions will be required to show how all morality in the modern age can be organized under the rubric of the moral law.<sup>36</sup> For example, I have adapted the second commandment as the virtue requiring us to be pro-covenantal—all proper worship must be according to the demands of the covenant under which God’s people lived, in addition to the WLC 107–10, focusing on what defines proper corporate worship—and the fourth commandment as the virtue requiring us to become pro-theosynchronic—we align our lives with God’s sovereign providential timings in weekly cycles, annual patterns, and lifetime perspectives, as well as with God’s interpretation of history, past, present, future, in addition to WLC 115–21, which focuses on the observance of the Lord’s Day.

Why is this *symphonic-morality* perspective important? Pastor Bob has met with married church member Lisa, mother of a three-year-old daughter, and learned of her tragic seven-year history of bondage to many food-related health and diet rules with related pills by day, combined with her indulgence in junk food frenzies and vomiting by night. For homework Pastor Bob emails her his own notes providing a *supramorality* perspective on food and drink to discuss at their next counseling session, namely, that any obedience to God about food from anywhere in the Bible can be organized under the *lex Christi* outline. All Lisa’s eating should fulfill the Lord’s command to seek first his kingdom and righteousness. Her eating should be an act of joy in and communion with God, seeing his eternal power and divine nature in food even as she prays that God would provide her daily bread (first commandment; Rom 1:20–21; Matt 6:11). The Lord uses food metaphors to lead Lisa into new covenant worship and calls her to taste and see that he is good in the Lord’s Supper (second commandment). Lisa must praise and bless God for the food she receives (third commandment; 1 Tim 4:3–5). Lisa learns a historical perspective on food in noticing seasons of God’s abundant provision, such as Thanksgiving holidays (fourth commandment; Acts 14:17). Most evidently, Lisa needs to yield herself to God’s design to eat with family relationship–building purposes (fifth and seventh commandments), to rule over the earth’s produce to serve her health and life and

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<sup>35</sup> See WLC 108–9 and WLC 21 on proper forms of worship, excluding many forms used in the Church of England and the Romans Catholic Church; WCF 20:1 on freedom of conscience under the word of God; WCF 23:3 rejecting the interference in presbyterian church matters by the pope or kings or bishops with civil authority. WCF 25:6 originally condemned the pope of Rome as the Antichrist and refutes his claim to be head of the church.

<sup>36</sup> See Yates, “Adapting Westminster’s Moral Law Motif,” 121–26.

share with those in need (sixth commandment), spend her food budget on *lex Christi* purposes (eighth commandment), aim for a *lex Christi*-honoring reputation rather than a secular world-imposed body-image reputation (Jas 2:1–5, 12; ninth commandment) and find freedom from her particular forms of food and body-image coveting (tenth commandment). Pastor Bob knows all these *lex Christi* neighbor-love designs come from the Triune God by the new covenant writing of the law on Lisa’s heart (Heb 10:16), though her actual transformation will likely be a daily battle of dying to sin and living to righteousness. Proper self-care under *lex Christi* is reinforced by knowing who God is and what he has done for her rescue from bondage through Christ, the mediator of the covenant of grace, by his Spirit, with the support of the visible church. Lisa will likely need more than just verbal counsel, as various compulsions and addictions usually require larger interventions with the support of the visible church that remove her opportunities to sin until she develops self-discipline, truly hating wickedness for its damaging curses and loving righteousness while experiencing its consequent blessings (Ps 1; WLC 95, 97).

### **5. Prescriptive Presuppositions Explained: Symphonic-Commandments Perspective**

The sixth WLC perspective provides another tool for biblical counselors. I call this the *symphonic-commandments* perspective.<sup>37</sup> This perspective is defined as the *interdependence* of each commandment on the others. Man’s obedience to God must be obedience to all commandments together as an inseparable unity, to speak and act according to the whole law of liberty (Jas 2:10–12). WLC 99 shows the pattern of using each commandment as a way of interpreting other commandments. For example, the heart sin of coveting (tenth commandment) is a root of many other sins, so it defines each commandment as having spiritual or heart dimensions (WLC 99:2). According to each one’s role of authority, submission, or equality (fifth commandment), each is to model, explain, and use their role to represent and encourage obedience to all the commands and prevent or resist what disobeys the commands (WLC 99:7–8). There are many interconnections and parallels in meaning between the first four commands and the last six commands. The third commandment honoring the Lord’s name has parallels with the ninth commandment honoring the name of our neighbor truthfully and mercifully. The aggravations of sin in WLC 151 also show

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<sup>37</sup> For an explanation of this perspective in WLC 99 and 151, see Yates, *Westminster Foundations*, 34–37, and “Adapting Westminster’s Moral Law Motif,” 38–41.

the interdependence of each commandment on the others: the tenth commandment provides guidance about whether sin was committed only in the heart (with delight in sin, willful foolish presumption, pride, anger, or malice) or also included first- to ninth-commandment multiple combined sins against various commandments, and against our promises, contracts, or vows related to those commands (with repeated relapsing, in public view). These may be against God (first commandment), his proper worship (second commandment), the means whereby he makes himself known and our use of them (prayers, covenants, vows to God; third commandment), or the purpose of the Lord's Day and during or around that time (fourth commandment). They may be committed against witnesses, whether superiors or equals or inferiors, and their lawful restraints, admonitions, and discipline (all fifth commandment related). They may be against the reputations of others and do irreparable damage (ninth commandment). This perspective identifies an irreducible complexity to the entire set of moral law commandments such that they cannot be separated and must be received as a whole coherent system. As a unity, *lex Christi* should functionally control the way Christians develop epistemology for any other *prescriptive* knowledge, and it is vital for apologetics, enabling it to engage worldview *prescriptions* and *prescriptive* ethics.

Why is this important in counseling? Consider how the *symphonic-commandments* perspective is useful in analyzing a marriage counseling case. Nancy comes to your pastoral office complaining with many tears about her husband John. Both are long-term church members who affirm the five *solas* of faith, Christ, grace, Scripture, and all to God's glory. Though counselors should always be cautious when hearing only one side of the marital story, you know Nancy is well respected among the church sisters, and you get enough detailed data to verify her story. She shares how John recently threatened her in anger for her refusal to tell him about her personal finances. This type of threatening behavior had occurred only once before in their twenty-five-year marriage.

You ask detailed questions about their marital history and discern that John, a former bank employee, has a pattern of pride about his acumen in family finances (disobedience to the fifth commandment) coupled with repeated condemnation of Nancy's forgetfulness in paying her half of the mortgage payments (disobedience to the ninth commandment). However, Nancy has a deeply held belief that if any man ever threatened her, she should divorce him. She has been crying in hopelessness for the past three months about their impending retirement future, not wanting to share her life with a man who has threatened her. She has been unwilling to share her

variable monthly income for fear that John, who recently lost his high-income job, will demand that she pay more of the monthly mortgage, leaving her less to care for their daughter's college costs, of which their established pattern has been to share half the monthly payments.

The *symphonic-commandments* perspective provides a tool for you as counselor to look at *lex Christi* interdependence, how each commandment operates or is neglected in family dynamics. When Nancy brings a reluctant John in for the next counseling appointment, you use this tool to reorient them both to a balanced representation of each other's reputation wherever each has been faithful to any commandments (obedience to the ninth commandment). Nancy has overemphasized John's fifth-commandment misuse of authority and sixth-commandment anger and threats, while John has overemphasized Nancy's eighth-commandment financial forgetfulness. They both lack contentment (tenth commandment) and confidence in God's daily provision (first commandment).

The *symphonic-commandments* perspective provides a total marital health check-up, pointing the couple to the biblical requirement of interdependent love, delight, thankfulness, and contentment in each commandment's righteousness and of hatred and grief to repent of each commandment's unrighteousness. It reminds them to diligently use the means of grace to restore trust that God will not suddenly forsake them in retirement (first commandment). It reminds them that God dynamically orders their times and places and calls them to *theosynchrony*, to participate in God's *chrono-order*, from a macrohistorical perspective of God "joining them together" (Matt 19:6) to a weekly microscheduling of time together rebuilding trust after this emotional fallout (fourth commandment). It encourages John to use his authority to build up Nancy, while she should not throw away her respect for him over one emotional incident (fifth commandment). It teaches John to repent of his emotional outburst and Nancy to repent of her bitterness and unwillingness to forgive, and it teaches John to frequently praise Nancy's God-given strengths used to protect family health, physical life, and peace (sixth commandment). It points John to greater appreciation for their differences in sex and sexuality, living with Nancy in an understanding way (1 Pet 3:6; seventh commandment). It teaches both to be patient with their shared property stewardship and Nancy in particular to repent of her unfounded fear of disclosing her monthly income to John and to frequently praise John's God-given financial acumen (eighth commandment). It reorients each to God's way of speaking about those united to Christ (Rom 8:1; Phil 1:3–6; ninth commandment). It warns them both against coveting an unrealistic retirement dream home with a mortgage they

cannot afford (tenth commandment), repentance from proud, take-control planning for the future (Jas 4:13–16), coupled with submission to God’s providence in John’s recent job loss and their new income realities (first commandment). You send a follow-up email reminding them of this counsel, reminding them also that God’s covenant of grace promises to accomplish this moral law renewal in them both, and give them the WLC 91–151 moral law section to ponder for homework. Nancy reports to you a few months later that this *symphonic-commandments* perspective has proven vital to restoring their marital trust and joy and led them to sell their unaffordable retirement home and buy something within their adjusted income range.

## Conclusion

The fragmented systematic-practical theology books and articles of the biblical counseling movement are not the most important translated resources needed to expand biblical counseling in non-English-speaking cultures. The WLC symphonic-pedagogical framework and its five subperspectives are vital to Reformed, cross-cultural missions. The translated WLC can be used as our core counseling resource, both for counselor training and counselee homework, together with our own biblical theology-oriented Bible book studies using these interpretive perspectives, with applications to all of life!

Further, these six perspectives can be used as analytical tools for a counseling method using six “R” words: *research* a counselee’s life in order to *reckon* strengths and weaknesses compared to any or all six perspectives, and choose counseling responses of *reassure*, *reform*, or *remove*, together with regular evaluation of counseling *results*.<sup>38</sup>

This *lex Christi* model “cohere[s] intellectually and structurally with every other form of the church’s ministry: worship, preaching, teaching, discipleship, child-rearing, friendship, evangelism, mercy works, missions, and pastoral leadership.”<sup>39</sup> Through his representative counselors, may the Lord bring *lex Christi* “Joy to the World!”

No more let sins and sorrows grow,  
Nor thorns infest the ground;  
He comes to make His blessings flow

<sup>38</sup> See Yates, *Westminster Foundations*, 217–39, and “Adapting Westminster’s Moral Law Motif,” 132–42, for more details.

<sup>39</sup> Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement*, 299; “Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies),” 35.

Far as the curse is found,  
Far as the curse is found,  
Far as, far as, the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace,  
And makes the nations prove  
The glories of His righteousness,  
And wonders of His love,  
And wonders of His love,  
And wonders, wonders, of His love.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Isaac Watts, "Joy to the World" (1719), based on similar themes in Psalm 98, cf. *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Atlanta: Great Commission Publication, 1990), #195.



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Matthias Grünewald: Meeting of St. Erasmus and St. Maurice, ca. 1520-ca. 1524.  
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# Bavinck, a Patron Saint of Biblical Counselors? A Case Study of Bavinck's Theological Description of Shame<sup>1</sup>

KAZUSA OKAYA

## Abstract

Herman Bavinck is not usually associated with the biblical counseling movement. Nevertheless, his formulation of “biblical psychology” provides essential resources for biblical counselors today. This article treats shame as a case study to demonstrate how his biblical psychological account differs from that of secular psychology by providing a more nuanced and biblical approach to shame. He places shame within the organic understanding of sin and considers shame to be caused by the self-judgment of conscience. Hence, depending on the alignment of one's conscience, good shame can provide a positive pedagogy for Christian formation, while false shame can lead one away from God. While the cure for shame is often thought to be its eradication, Bavinck equips pastors and counselors with an alternative model.

## Keywords

*Herman Bavinck, shame, biblical counseling, psychology, conscience*

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a presentation, “Herman Bavinck on Shame,” given at the Kuyper Conference at Calvin University and Seminary, April 5–7, 2022.

## Introduction

Shame has traditionally been associated with Eastern culture, which is assumed to have a different set of moral categories from that of the West. This separation of so-called Western “guilt culture” and Eastern “shame culture” was a result of an influential work by anthropologist Ruth Benedict in 1944, who pointed to Christianity and the concept of sin as the cause of the Western development of a guilt-oriented moral culture.<sup>2</sup> This West versus East dichotomy of guilt and shame has since been discredited by later anthropologists but still looms large in popular imagination. However, today’s influx of social media is creating a global “shame-fame” culture in which shame provides an incentive for consumer behavior, especially among youth.<sup>3</sup> In today’s world, shame can no longer be dismissed as an Eastern concept, as “shame-fame” culture is quickly emerging as a malady whose sufferers are in need of urgent pastoral care.

In the field of psychology, shame is often considered a negative and unnecessary emotion, while guilt is seen as having potential benefits in leading to behavioral change. This consensus is reflected in the remarks of psychologists Judy Price Tangney and Donda Dearing, who wrote that “guilt is good, shame is bad,” and although guilt can influence people in a moral direction, shame “does little to inhibit immoral action.”<sup>4</sup> This message is amplified to the public through influential speakers such as Brené Brown.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to this trend in psychology and popular consensus, a growing number of Christian authors have challenged this dominant view. In the field of New Testament studies, Te-Li Lau’s recent *Defending Shame* attempted to retrieve Paul’s use of shame rhetoric in Christian formation.<sup>6</sup> Christian philosopher Greg Ten Elshof has argued for retrieving shame as an essential emotion for

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<sup>2</sup> Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> For such an analysis from a Christian perspective, see Glenn Russell, “Fame, Shame and Social Media: Missional Insights for Youth Ministry,” *Faculty Publications* 16.1 (January 1, 2017): 30–55.

<sup>4</sup> Judy Price Tangney and Ronda L. Dearing, *Shame and Guilt* (New York: Guilford, 2002), 136–38.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Brené Brown’s TED talk on shame and vulnerability has over 60 million views today. Brené Brown, “The Power of Vulnerability,” TED, June 2010, [https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_vulnerability](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability).

<sup>6</sup> Te-Li Lau, *Defending Shame: Its Formative Power in Paul’s Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020).

cultivating Christian virtue.<sup>7</sup> In missiology, Jayson Georges and others have advocated utilizing the concept of shame for contextualizing the gospel in Asian soil.<sup>8</sup>

While we are witnessing a growing literature that re-evaluates the emotion of shame in biblical studies, Christian philosophy, and missiology, theologians remain largely silent.<sup>9</sup> The theme of shame is also seldom addressed in the literature on biblical counseling. In the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, there has never been an article-length treatment addressing the emotion of shame. Even in Heath Lambert's recent publication *Theology of Biblical Counseling*, the word "shame" only appears sporadically without receiving in-depth treatment. The absence of shame-related research within the biblical counseling movement is peculiar, considering today's increasing pastoral need.

This is where the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Dutch Reformed theologian can shed light on this perplexing emotion of shame. Not only was Herman Bavinck one of the first theologians who attempted to construe a "biblical psychology," but he is also among the rare theologians who have provided theological explanations of the emotion of shame.<sup>10</sup> Contrary to the consensus by secular psychologists who consider shame a negative and unnecessary emotion, Bavinck's "biblical psychology" provides an alternative account by situating shame within the doctrine of sin and providing resources for today's pastors and counselors in analyzing and offering prescriptions for shame.

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<sup>7</sup> Gregg Ten Elshof, *For Shame: Rediscovering the Virtues of a Maligned Emotion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> For a pastoral and missiological approach situating shame and honor as a paradigm for the atonement, see Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016). For a unique approach that situates the atonement as a restoration of God's honor, see Jackson Wu, *Saving God's Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation through Honor and Shame* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Some recent exceptions are seen in the works of analytic theologians such as Eleonore Stump and Thomas McCall. For example, see Eleonore Stump, *Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 39–70, and Thomas H. McCall, *Against God and Nature: The Doctrine of Sin* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 279–338.

<sup>10</sup> Bavinck's treatment of shame is an under-studied area of research. Mary Vandenberg is among the few exceptions, although her understanding of Bavinck's account of shame relies solely upon *Reformed Dogmatics*, ignoring later psychological works that deal more fully with shame. See Mary Vandenberg, "Shame, Guilt, and the Practice of Repentance: An Intersection of Modern Psychology with the Wisdom of Calvin," *Christian Scholar's Review* 50.3 (Spring 2021): 297–313.

## I. *Bavinck and Biblical Counseling*

What does Bavinck have to do with the biblical counseling movement born in the cradle of the post-World War II United States? Jay Adams, the founder of the biblical counseling movement, never mentions Bavinck in *Competent to Counsel*, nor has Bavinck's name been mentioned in influential texts on biblical counseling. Nevertheless, the biblical counseling movement and Bavinck's theological project share an essential epistemological foundation. As David Powlison notes, one of the hallmarks of the biblical counseling movement is its commitment to the sufficiency of Scripture and its epistemology, which is shaped by Reformed Protestantism.<sup>11</sup> Epistemology and the sufficiency of Scripture also lay at the heart of Bavinck's theology of knowledge, as has been recently retrieved by Nathaniel Gray Sutanto.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Bavinck was among the first theologians to engage with the newly developing field of psychology. This is contrary to Roland Fleck and John Carter's historical analysis, which argued that the interaction between Christianity and psychology is a very new and post-World War II development.<sup>13</sup> Bavinck was well ahead of his time in his attempt to dialogue with the discipline of psychology during its initial stages of growth. In 1897, Bavinck published *Foundations of Psychology* as a sequel to *Reformed Dogmatics* to further develop his discussion of theological anthropology while interacting with different emerging schools within psychology.<sup>14</sup> Most relevant to the context of biblical counseling is his evaluation of "empiricist psychology," which is the model of psychology closest to the way the discipline is understood today.<sup>15</sup> Bavinck recognizes the usefulness of the empirical approach:

The experimental method can be helpful within its limits. It can, for example, explore the conditions under which sensations originate, the duration of elementary psychic

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<sup>11</sup> David Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2010), xvii. Here, "Reformed epistemology" does not refer to Alvin Plantinga's epistemological system but to the traditional Reformed framework of situating epistemology in relation to the doctrine of sin and illumination of Scripture.

<sup>12</sup> For example, see Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, *God and Knowledge: Herman Bavinck's Theological Epistemology*, T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology 31 (London: T&T Clark, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> J. Roland Fleck and John D. Carter, *Psychology and Christianity: Integrative Readings* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 15.

<sup>14</sup> Herman Bavinck, "Foundations of Psychology," trans. John Bolt, Nelson D. Kloosterman, and Jack Vanden Born, *The Bavinck Review* 9 (2018): 1–244.

<sup>15</sup> Bavinck also critiques other strands of psychology, such as Johann Hebert's metaphysical psychology and John Stuart Mill's "associationist" psychology.

events, the limitations of consciousness, the strength or weakness of attention, or the reproduction and association of ideas.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, he is strongly critical of its underlying worldview, commenting that “empirical psychology cannot suffice for the right understanding of the psychical life” and therefore “will never be able fully to explain psychical life.”<sup>17</sup> Contrary to secular models of psychology, Bavinck sought to develop a model of psychology that explicates the human heart from the scriptural narrative and humanity’s relationship to God. *Biblical and Religious Psychology* is one of his later works, and it exemplifies this approach of “biblical psychology.”<sup>18</sup> Bavinck writes in the introduction that “the significance which Biblical Psychology has for our study appears thus in the first place from this that Scripture speaks of the same man who still exists, lives and thinks, feels, wills, and acts.”<sup>19</sup> Because of humanity’s universal nature, Scripture can shed light by providing the explanation of the human heart in a way that empirical science cannot. As Nate Brooks has suggested, Bavinck may be considered a “patron saint” of biblical counselors, both in his methodology, which prioritizes the revelation of Scripture, and his material content, which provides explanations of the human heart from the biblical narrative.<sup>20</sup>

Associating Bavinck with the biblical counseling movement may seem surprising to some due to Bavinck’s strong emphasis on general revelation. After all, it was Bavinck’s dissatisfaction with the sectarianism of his denomination that led him to his studies at Leiden University.<sup>21</sup> Bavinck sought to construct a philosophy of revelation that maintained the primacy of Scripture while affirming and interacting with scientific truths revealed by the manner of general revelation. As he explains in *Philosophy of Revelation*, Bavinck attempted to articulate a philosophy of revelation that seeks to

<sup>16</sup> Bavinck, “Foundations of Psychology,” 8.

<sup>17</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 214–15.

<sup>18</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Biblical and Religious Psychology*, trans. Herman Hanko (Grand Rapids: Protestant Reformed Theological School, 1974), originally published as *Bijbelsche en religieuze psychologie* (Kampen: Kok, 1920), right before Bavinck’s death, combining two different sources: “Bijbelsche Psychologie,” *De School met den Bijbel / Orgaan van het Gereformeerd Schoolverband* (January 4, 1912–March 5, 1914); “Religieuze Psychologie,” *De School met den Bijbel / Orgaan van het Gereformeerd Schoolverband* (June 11, 1914–April 22, 1920).

<sup>19</sup> Bavinck, *Biblical and Religious Psychology*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Nate Brooks, “Herman Bavinck, Patron Saint of Biblical Counselors: How an Old Dutch Theologian Helps Us Make Sense of Biblical Sufficiency” (Convocation Address, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, August 30, 2022). This is one of the rare treatments of Bavinck by a biblical counselor.

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed account, see James Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 59–72.

“correlate the wisdom which it finds in revelation with that which is furnished by the world at large.”<sup>22</sup> For Bavinck, all truth is God’s truth because God is the source and origin of the knowledge of the truth.<sup>23</sup> The conservative strand of biblical counseling often critiques this understanding of general revelation. For example, Doug Bookman critiqued such a view as relying upon a “two-source theory of revelation.” For Bookman, the term “general revelation” itself is flawed in that it tends to place scriptural revelation and human empirical knowledge on the same empirical plane as both being sources for “revelation.”<sup>24</sup> Wayne Mack has even put into question any extrabiblical insight not derived directly from Scripture.<sup>25</sup> However, this is not the case for all biblical counselors. For example, Powlison assessed Adams’s attack on secular psychology as polemical, reductionistic, and at risk of ignoring positive elements within psychology.<sup>26</sup> In the interview series titled “The Best of Psychology,” Powlison mentions how secular practices in psychology provide valuable skills, a lived understanding of people, and virtues like patience, which are not erased but transformed by the biblical worldview. He advises biblical counselors to properly locate the continuity and discontinuity between the two practices and not critique psychological “skills” per se; instead, they should evaluate how they are employed according to their underlying worldview.<sup>27</sup> Powlison’s approach to discerning the continuity and discontinuity between the two approaches to counseling mirrors Bavinck’s approach to general and special revelation. Bavinck certainly did not hold to the “two-sources” theory of revelation as criticized by Bookman, for Bavinck did not see the two modes of revelation on equal grounds, instead writing, “The knowledge that general revelation can supply is not only meager and inadequate but also uncertain, consistently mingled with error, and for far and away the majority of people unattainable.”<sup>28</sup> For Bavinck, Scripture always takes primacy in relation to the sciences, as grace perfects nature, and special revelation perfects general revelation. Scripture

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<sup>22</sup> Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 26–27.

<sup>23</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2: *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 209–10.

<sup>24</sup> Doug Bookman, “The Word of God and Counseling,” in *Sufficiency: Historical Essays on the Sufficiency of Scripture*, ed. Heath Lambert (Glenside, PA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016), 48–64.

<sup>25</sup> Wayne Mack, “What Is Biblical Counseling?,” in *Sufficiency*, ed. Lambert, 25.

<sup>26</sup> Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement*, 156.

<sup>27</sup> David Powlison, “The Best of Psychology,” Interview, CCEF, November 2017, <https://www.ccef.org/podcast/best-psychology-david-powlison>.

<sup>28</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1: *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 313.

provides the basis for the biblical worldview, which functions to critique and evaluate all other scientific systems, including psychology.

It is difficult to tell whether Bavinck would have self-aligned with the biblical counseling movement if he were alive today. His commitment to the sufficiency of Scripture and his critique of experimental psychology may position him close to the biblical counseling approach in its methodology, while his commitment to general revelation and interaction with secular science points to a more integrationist approach. Such speculations are inherently anachronistic, considering how “experiential psychology” was still in its early development stage during Bavinck’s time. Such considerations aside, Bavinck’s commitment to the primacy of Scripture and his early attempts to produce a biblical psychology for diagnosing the condition of the human heart provide essential resources for biblical counselors today. Bavinck’s biblical psychology is especially relevant in the consideration of the phenomenon of shame, an emotion deemed harmful and unnecessary by secular psychologists and seldom addressed by practitioners of biblical counseling.

## II. *Bavinck’s Definition of Shame*

Bavinck’s treatment of shame spans his writings, and his understanding of shame went through certain modifications over the years, culminating in *Biblical and Religious Psychology*.<sup>29</sup> In her essay “Shame, Guilt, and Practice of Repentance,” Marry Vandenberg quotes Bavinck’s definition of shame from *Reformed Dogmatics*: “an unpleasant feeling that steals over us after we have done something wrong or improper and consists especially in the fear of disgrace.”<sup>30</sup> She concludes that “it is unclear what distinguishes guilt from shame in Bavinck’s view.”<sup>31</sup> However, this statement distorts Bavinck’s view of shame, as it is dependent solely upon earlier sources. In his later work *Biblical and Religious Psychology*, he comes to a developed definition of shame as “a disagreeable, oppressive and troublesome feeling which comes upon us when something improper is seen by us or is done by us. ... It is born out of the fear that our honor and good name shall suffer damage by

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<sup>29</sup> Bavinck treats shame in *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (1898/1910), *Reformed Ethics* (lectures in Kampen, 1883–1902), *Sacrifice of Praise* (1901), *Christian Family* (1912), but most extensively in his later work *Biblical and Religious Psychology* (1920).

<sup>30</sup> Vandenberg, “Shame, Guilt, and the Practice of Repentance,” 297; see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3: *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 175.

<sup>31</sup> Vandenberg, “Shame, Guilt, and the Practice of Repentance,” 297.

others.”<sup>32</sup> Hence, over the years, Bavinck’s view of shame seems to have gone through some adjustment, so that the role of external perception (name, honor, and work) receives greater attention. This understanding of shame as involving perception and loss of honor aligns with the contemporary understanding of shame, where one of the distinguishing factors of shame is the devaluation of self-worth due to external perception by others.<sup>33</sup>

However, there is one noteworthy difference between contemporary psychology’s understanding of shame and Bavinck’s. While there is no fixed consensus in defining shame, it is broadly agreed that guilt is an emotion that has to do with one’s *act*, while shame has to do with one’s *identity*. In other words, guilt considers “what you have done,” and shame considers “who you are.”<sup>34</sup> However, contrary to contemporary psychology, Bavinck does not draw a stark distinction between guilt and shame along the lines of act and identity. For example, in *Biblical and Religious Psychology*, Bavinck writes that shame “comes upon us when something improper is seen by us or is *done* by us.”<sup>35</sup> This remark seems to suggest that shame is related not only to perception but also to action. Some may critique Bavinck for the inadequate differentiation between the two emotions in not associating one with action and the other with identity. Nevertheless, Bavinck’s refusal to draw such a sharp line between act and identity derives from his theological understanding of sin.

For Bavinck, humanity is created in the image of God, exemplifying the “unity in diversity” of the Triune God. This theological anthropology is the basis for his “organic motif,” an organizing principle utilized to explain the unity-in-diversity of creation.<sup>36</sup> As Sutanto has argued, Bavinck views original sin as an all-pervasive distortion of human nature, which turns the self against God and neighbor, destroying the organic unity of humanity.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Bavinck, *Biblical and Religious Psychology*, 86–87.

<sup>33</sup> For example, David Ausubel writes, “Shame may be defined as an unpleasant emotional reaction by an individual to an actual or presumed negative judgment of himself by others resulting in self-depreciation vis-a-vis the group.” David P. Ausubel, “Relationships between Shame and Guilt in the Socializing Process,” *Psychological Review* 62.5 (September 1955): 382.

<sup>34</sup> For example, see Brené Brown, “Shame Resilience Theory: A Grounded Theory Study on Women and Shame,” *Families in Society* 87.1 (January–March 2006): 45. For Christian literature utilizing this distinction, see Lewis Smedes, *Shame and Grace: Healing the Shame We Don’t Deserve* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 9.

<sup>35</sup> Bavinck, *Biblical and Religious Psychology*, 87.

<sup>36</sup> See James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck’s Organic Motif*, NIPPOD edition (London: T&T Clark, 2014).

<sup>37</sup> For a treatment of Bavinck’s view of sin as egocentricity that destroys the organic unity of humanity, see Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, “Egocentricity, Organism, and Metaphysics: Sin and Renewal in Bavinck’s Ethics,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 34.2 (May 2021): 223–40. For an analysis of how Bavinck’s organic construal of humanity relates to his understanding of

However, not only does Bavinck see humanity as an organic whole, but he also utilizes the organic motif to speak of sin. Bavinck writes in *Biblical and Religious Psychology* that “sin must be considered organically” as a “body of sin,” a sinful organism, of which sinful thoughts, words, and deeds are its “members.” Sin does not consist of isolated and atomized emotions or behavior but is an organism that includes various emotions and behavior as its members.<sup>38</sup> Hence, for Bavinck, one cannot separate guilt and shame as isolated and atomized emotions that operate on their own, as they are both interconnected within the whole organism of sin. Contrary to the psychological distinction between guilt and shame, Bavinck sees an organic unity between the two emotions. Bavinck explicates this organic connection from the fall narrative of Genesis 3, in which both original guilt and original shame were birthed as a consequence of sin.

### III. *Bavinck's Explanation of the Origin of Shame*

In the second half of *Biblical and Religious Psychology*, Bavinck outlines what he labels “religious psychology,” a psychology of the human heart as it relates to God. This is where Bavinck analyzes the doctrine of sin from a psychological perspective, paying attention to the movement of the heart. He starts by narrating how sin and different sin-related emotions entered the world in what we might call the *ordo peccatum* or the order of sin. Bavinck starts by posing the question, “What change was brought about by sin in man’s soul and soul-life?” and writes that although Scripture “does not offer a metaphysical answer to the origin of sin, it nevertheless offers a psychological description.”<sup>39</sup> Bavinck retells Genesis 3 by explaining how the sinful act of disobedience brought about a decisive change in the human soul.<sup>40</sup> He outlines the effects of sin as an “opening of the eye” (Gen 3:7) that signals a “total change in their consciousness.”<sup>41</sup> This change in the soul is explained as three consecutive movements. The first was an awakening of the consciousness of guilt. Bavinck explains *guilt* as “a consciousness of the discord” between what Adam “had been (ought to be) and now was.”<sup>42</sup>

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original sin, see Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, “Herman Bavinck on the Image of God and Original Sin,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18.2 (April 2016): 174–90.

<sup>38</sup> Bavinck, *Biblical and Religious Psychology*, 91.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>40</sup> For a detailed explanation on the change sin brought to human consciousness, see Cory C. Brock, *Orthodox yet Modern: Herman Bavinck's Use of Friedrich Schleiermacher* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 121–70.

<sup>41</sup> Bavinck, *Biblical and Religious Psychology*, 86.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

Second, this sense of guilt immediately led to a sense of *shame*—a second change in the soul. Bavinck points out how this opening of the eye in Genesis 3:7 was immediately followed by a shameful awareness of nakedness. Where guilt attested to an internal consciousness of the fall, shame was its outward manifestation. This results in the self-judgment of conscience. Third, followed by guilt and shame, the third change in the soul emerged as *fear* toward God (Gen 3:8). Thus, Bavinck outlines the three emotions of guilt, shame, and fear as three new changes in the soul-life of humanity as the result of sin. Bavinck does not distinguish the three emotions as distinct and unrelated but considers the three to be functioning together as an organic whole, where guilt led to shame, shame led to fear, and fear finally led to Adam and Eve fleeing and hiding from the presence of the Lord.<sup>43</sup> Hence, contrary to Vandenberg, Bavinck is not conflating guilt and shame or sharply distinguishing the two as isolated emotions; rather, he is situating them within the organism of sin as an interrelated consequence of the fall. Here, Bavinck is not attempting to articulate an all-encompassing model of guilt, shame, and fear. One may experience the three emotions in isolation from each other, and Bavinck admits that the fall narrative does not provide an exhaustive explanation of all human emotions in every situation.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, Bavinck provides a paradigmatic case study in which guilt, shame, and fear operate as an organic whole in the context of sin.

#### **IV. Good and False Shame**

Another important differentiating factor between Bavinck and secular psychology lies in their different evaluations of shame. While psychologists tend to view shame as a harmful emotion, Bavinck's understanding is more nuanced. Bavinck locates human conscience as the primary moral capacity that causes the emotion of shame. Conscience plays a significant role in Bavinck's ethics, as he devotes a substantial amount of space to it in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, his *Reformed Ethics*, and in a separate journal article titled "Conscience."<sup>45</sup> For Bavinck, conscience is a self-awareness existing in every human heart, which contains natural principles of religion, morality, and justice. This conscience is the power or activity of self-judgment. This self-judgment of conscience is brought about by "a practical syllogism

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>44</sup> In fact, Bavinck goes on to offer a list of biblical examples of shame, including cases where shame arises in nonmoral situations.

<sup>45</sup> Herman Bavinck, "Conscience," trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, *The Bavinck Review* 6 (2015): 113–26.

where God's law provides the major premise, and consciousness supplies the minor premise."<sup>46</sup> Bavinck understands conscience as the capacity of humans to enact judgment upon themselves according to the divine law written in their hearts. Conscience is not infallible, since conscience, too, is under the influence of the fall. As Bavinck acknowledges, "The supreme norm for our life is the divine law that may echo in our conscience as a voice that is dull and unclear and as though from a distance. Something can be a sin before God that nonetheless is not against our conscience."<sup>47</sup> Hence, Bavinck points out how there can be an "upright conscience" that works in accordance with the divine law and an "erring conscience" that rather leads one away from God.<sup>48</sup>

Conscience is where Bavinck locates the cause of the emotion of shame. As he writes in *Reformed Ethics*, the function of human conscience "especially manifests itself in shame."<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, "Shame is a sign of an awakened conscience, that human capacity which pronounces a person guilty and condemns him."<sup>50</sup> Bavinck also explains how shame manifests itself through physical change (e.g., blushing): "What the conscience does for us inwardly in the soul, shame performs for us outwardly in the body. Shame has been described, not without cause, as the body's conscience."<sup>51</sup> Hence, for Bavinck, shame is a sign and an outward manifestation of the self-judgment of inner conscience.<sup>52</sup>

Because Bavinck views shame as the judgment of conscience, he can identify a positive use of shame in Christian formation, unlike the modern trend of dismissing shame as being altogether negative. This is because the "minor premise" of one's conscience points back to the "major premise" of divine law. As long as one is aligned with the law of God, the "upright conscience" causes good shame, which protects one from sinning. Bavinck

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<sup>46</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics I: Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt, annotated edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 166.

<sup>47</sup> Bavinck, "Conscience," 126.

<sup>48</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:207–8.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:207.

<sup>50</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids: Christian's Library Press, 2012), 30.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> This positive role Bavinck attributes to human conscience is remarkably different from that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer writes, "Conscience is concerned not with man's relation to God and to other men but with man's relation to himself." Bonhoeffer saw conscience as an individualistic echo chamber of idolatry rather than God's law written in human hearts. In contrast to Bonhoeffer, Bavinck saw conscience as reflecting, though marred by sin, the law of God. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 24.

writes that “the pedagogical value of this feeling of shame is extraordinarily great” and “the feeling of shame protects man also in his contacts with others from all kinds of sins and debauchery, not only in deeds but also in gestures and words.”<sup>53</sup> For Bavinck, contrary to psychology and popular consensus, not all shame is bad; it is only bad when it is birthed out of one’s alignment with an “erring conscience.” Bavinck also sees a positive pedagogical side of shame in the fall narrative. Even though shame was birthed out of human rebellion, the existence of shame points to the fact that humans still retained some sense of good and evil, proper and improper, and decent and indecent.<sup>54</sup>

This leads to his discussion of the role of clothing in the second volume of *Reformed Ethics*.<sup>55</sup> For Bavinck, clothing is a reminder of our fall into shame, and therefore, it ought to humble us instead of making us proud.<sup>56</sup> Contrary to the Darwinian worldview, which fails to locate the uniqueness of humanity, shame is what distinguishes humans from animals.<sup>57</sup> Shame proves that humanity has remained human and retained its dignity and honor, even after the fall.<sup>58</sup> Hence, for Bavinck, the state of *shamelessness* is a far worse degradation of humanity than the state of shame. Bavinck writes that a shameless person is “doubly wounded who silences his conscience, who hardens and sears his conscience, which leads ultimately to living without conscience and without shame!”<sup>59</sup> This insight is vital in today’s world, where the cure for shame is often understood to be its eradication altogether.

On the other hand, not all shame is good, since not all conscience is aligned with divine law. When the self-judgment of shame is enacted according to the “erring conscience,” it renders “false shame,” which leads one away from God and truth. In *The Sacrifice of Praise*, he names false shame the most powerful force that threatens Christian living.

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<sup>53</sup> Bavinck, *Biblical and Religious Psychology*, 166.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>55</sup> Although Bavinck follows the Reformers in their opposition to adornment and luxury, he also, following Kuyper, considers uniformity of fashion to be a modern curse. For an analysis of Kuyper’s polemics against uniformity in fashion in relation to trends in the Netherlands, see Robert Covolo, *Fashion Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020), 28–36.

<sup>56</sup> This view echoes John Calvin’s sermon “Sin’s Nature, Effects, Results, and Remedy,” where he points to God’s clothing of Adam and Eve as a reminder of their sinful condition. See, John Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis: Chapters 1:1–11:4*, trans. Rob Roy McGregor (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 329.

<sup>57</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics: The Duties of the Christian Life*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 347–62.

<sup>58</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Sacrifice of Praise: Meditations before and after Admission to the Lord’s Supper*, trans. Cameron Clausing and Gregory Parker (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2019), 118.

<sup>59</sup> Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, 30.

For even when the tribulations and persecutions are over, it continues to work on and makes thousands and ten thousand to fall. ... This false sense of shame places a heavy stumbling block in the way of the confession of the Lord's Name.<sup>60</sup>

Christians can be ashamed of the church as not being powerful, the Bible as being contrary to science, and even be ashamed of Christ and the gospel. This is because “we are afraid that by siding with Christ we will lose entirely our name and honor as a person before others and will become an object of scorn and derision, of abuse and persecution.”<sup>61</sup> False shame arises when one's conscience is not aligned with the law of God but rather with the preservation of one's honor and status in front of others. Nevertheless, Bavinck points out that in an ironic way, even this false shame points us to the image of God because “even in false shame lies the foundation of a darkened understanding that we were once created in the image of God and still have a certain status and honor to preserve.”<sup>62</sup> Hence, for Bavinck, although shame is a post-lapsarian emotion, it is neither good nor bad by itself. Because shame is a self-judgment of conscience, shame can be good or false, depending on whether one's conscience is attuned to the law of God.

## Conclusion

Shame is a pervasive phenomenon in today's “shame-fame” culture. Secular psychology has generally treated shame as a malignant and unnecessary emotion, while biblical counselors have largely remained silent on the issue. Herman Bavinck takes a different approach to shame, starting from the biblical narrative in locating shame within the whole organism of sin. For Bavinck, shame is a post-lapsarian emotion birthed out of the self-judgment of conscience, neither good nor bad by itself. When a Christian's conscience is aligned with the law of God, shame provides a good pedagogy that protects them from sin. Where secular psychotherapy sees the individual conscience as the guide for truth and shame as a harmful obstacle, Bavinck's account locates conscience in relation to God and sees the positive side of shame in reorienting one to the law of God. On the other hand, when one is led by an erring conscience, shame functions as “false shame,” which leads one to seek their own honor rather than God. In Bavinck's biblical psychological account of shame, the cure for shame is not to seek a state of *shamelessness*

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<sup>60</sup> Bavinck, *The Sacrifice of Praise*, 79.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

but rather to seek true shame by aligning oneself with the law of God. In a world where social media perpetuates peer pressure and Christians feel obligated to be in line with the rest of the world, Bavinck's biblical and nuanced treatment of shame provides valuable resources for pastors and biblical counselors today.

# “The Hidden Artist”: Edith Schaeffer and the Success of L’Abri Fellowship

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## Abstract

While much attention has been given to Francis Schaeffer, his work, and his influence on the L’Abri community, less attention has been given to Edith Schaeffer’s unique contribution. She complemented Francis’s more intellectual, apologetic, and discussion-oriented approach by cultivating a family-oriented community with an emphasis on hospitality, creativity, and prayer. L’Abri’s visitors have lauded Edith’s crucial contribution to their enduring community. However, to fully understand L’Abri community’s impact, there remains a need to assess Edith Schaeffer’s work and contribution more fully. This article considers Edith’s written work, as well as observations from those who attended L’Abri, and in doing so, evaluate Edith’s unique contribution. I will argue that Edith Schaeffer’s thought and work were a necessary component to L’Abri Fellowship’s enduring success.

## Keywords

*Edith Schaeffer, Francis Schaeffer, hospitality, community, family, L’Abri Fellowship*

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**M**uch of L’Abri’s influence has been closely tied to the apologetic thought and practice of Francis Schaeffer. This focus certainly seems appropriate given Francis Schaeffer’s involvement and his key role in facilitating “honest answers to honest questions” in the chalets in Huémoz, Switzerland. Yet, when discussing the embodied practice of apologetics and Christian community at L’Abri, few, outside of her own admission, have emphasized Edith Schaeffer’s role in the success of L’Abri. Complementing Francis’s thoughtful interaction with guests’ questions, Edith promoted and practiced in-home hospitality with an intentional focus on shared living and open conversations. Further, her conceptuality of “family” played a key role in L’Abri’s organizational structure. Therefore, this article will argue that Edith Schaeffer’s thought and work were a necessary component to the enduring success of L’Abri.

Commending the work of Edith Schaeffer in the life of L’Abri is not without its proponents. William Edgar states “Edith, many of us believe, was the ‘hidden artist’ who held L’Abri together.”<sup>1</sup> Barry Hankins underscores this thesis: “While Francis might have accomplished much as a pastor and lecturer without Edith, there would have been no L’Abri without her.”<sup>2</sup> Upon these assumptions this article will first explore Edith Schaeffer’s unique contributions to the L’Abri community, which include but are not limited to her conception of family and practice of in-home hospitality. I will then survey the lasting influence of L’Abri, seeking to evaluate what areas and emphases have led to its continued influence, noting the work of its founders, specifically Edith Schaeffer.<sup>3</sup>

## **I. Edith Schaeffer’s Contributions**

Little has been written on Edith’s unique contributions to the overall legacy of both Francis Schaeffer and L’Abri. Those references that do exist are often

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<sup>1</sup> William Edgar, *Schaeffer on the Christian Life: Countercultural Spirituality* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 62.

<sup>2</sup> Barry Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 9.

<sup>3</sup> I have chosen not to engage thoroughly with Frank Schaeffer’s writings on his parents and their ministry. This omission is twofold. First, Frank Schaeffer’s historiography is peculiar and often times inconsistent. Colin Duriez argues that Frank Schaeffer’s memoir *Crazy for God* is not intended to be a factually accurate biography in all its details. Second, his critiques have often been repudiated or challenged by those closest to the Schaeffers. Therefore, as one who has no firsthand experience with the Schaeffers, I thought it best to avoid these treacherous waters—though, of course, his writings are not without significance for the legacy of the Schaeffer family. See Edgar, *Schaeffer on the Christian Life*, 35, 40, n. 1; Colin Duriez, *Francis Schaeffer: An Authentic Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 183.



**EDITH SCHAEFFER**

1914-2013

utilized as a backdrop to Francis's larger work and do not generally emphasize the strengths and works Edith exhibited in and of herself. Remarkably, references to Edith are not assessed on their own merits. Therefore, crucial to this argument is highlighting those elements and contributions unique to Edith that were brought to bear at L'Abri.

Regarding contributions to L'Abri, Os Guinness gives a sterling endorsement of Edith Schaeffer's work and character:

Edith Schaeffer was one of the most remarkable women of her generation, the like of whom we will not see again in our time. I have never met such a great heart of love, and such indomitable faith, tireless prayer, boundless energy, passionate love for life and beauty, lavish hospitality, irrepressible laughter, and seemingly limitless time for people—all in a single person. There is no question that she was a force of nature, and that her turbo-personality left many people, and particularly young women who tried to copy her, gasping in her slipstream. To many of us she was a second mother, and in many ways *she was the secret of L'Abri*.<sup>4</sup>

Guinness was not alone in this observation. Those who interacted with Edith noted equally her mothering quality, as well as her incredible zeal and work ethic put to practice in creative endeavors.

Much as Francis's list of books are categorized into various emphases (i.e., culture, truth, spirituality, church, and the West), Edith's books can be roughly catalogued as well. Edith was just as prolific in her own right. Books like *Christianity Is Jewish*, *Affliction*, and *Everybody Can Know*—the last of which she co-wrote with Francis—can be loosely defined as apologetic works. Her two collections of L'Abri letters, *The Tapestry* and *L'Abri* are largely biographical works, full of personal reflection. *The Hidden Art of Homemaking*, *A Way of Seeing*, *Forever Music*, *The Life of Prayer*, and *Common Sense Christian Living* all express how beauty and imagination are expressed in everyday Christian life. Lastly, her books celebrating children, marriage, and, of course, *What Is a Family?*, demonstrate her lasting love and focus on God's design for marriage and the family.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Os Guinness, "Fathers and Sons: Francis Schaeffer, Frank Schaeffer, and 'Crazy for God,'" *Banner of Truth USA*, May 20, 2008, <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/book-review-resources/2008/fathers-sons-francis-schaeffer-frank-schaeffer-and-crazy-for-god/> (emphasis added).

<sup>5</sup> Edith Schaeffer, *A Way of Seeing* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1977); *Common Sense Christian Living* (Nashville: Nelson, 1983); *Lifelines: The Ten Commandments for Today* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1984); *The Tapestry: The Life and Times of Francis and Edith Schaeffer* (Waco, TX: Word, 1985); *The Hidden Art of Homemaking* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1985); *Forever Music: A Tribute to the Gift of Creativity* (Nashville: Nelson, 1986); *The Art of Life* (Westchester, IL: Good News, 1987); *With Love, Edith: The L'Abri Family Letters, 1948–1960* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); *Dear Family: The L'Abri Family Letters, 1961–1986* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989); *L'Abri* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1992); *The Life of Prayer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1992); *Affliction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993); *10 Things Parents Must Teach Their*

Utilizing these categories, one begins to see the overlap between her written work and her lasting influence on the work at L'Abri. Her written work and what information we have of her work at L'Abri reveal that Edith's contributions include, but are not limited to, her (1) apologetics, (2) creativity, (3) emphasis on community, (4) conception of family, (5) practice of in-home hospitality, and (6) dependence on prayer. Therefore, we will assess each of these contributions in relation to their influence and practice within the L'Abri community.<sup>6</sup>

### 1. *Apologetics*

Francis garnered attention as a significant apologist of the twentieth century, yet Edith was not without her own commitment to defending the Christian faith. Interestingly, Edith and Francis first met at a young people's meeting at a liberal Presbyterian church in Germantown, Pennsylvania. After Ed Bloom, a Unitarian preacher, spoke on why he did not believe in the divinity of Christ or the inspiration of Scripture, both Francis and Edith stood up to voice their opposition. Francis, standing up first, would not address all the issues Bloom had brought up, but instead spoke of his resolution and belief that Jesus was the Son of God and how that truth changed his life. Interestingly, it was Edith who stood up and quoted apologetic rebuttals from J. Gresham Machen and Robert D. Wilson.<sup>7</sup> They were "that type of apologetic for the truth of the Bible which [she] had heard in lectures and read."<sup>8</sup> In the first meeting between Francis and Edith, it was Edith who initially was more versed in apologetic topics.

Further, it was Edith, who on early dates with Francis, encouraged that they read together *Christianity and Liberalism* by J. Gresham Machen. These early discussions demonstrated that Francis had found his counterpart in apologetic thinking.<sup>9</sup> To be sure, they were very different people, each having different strengths and weaknesses. Yet, as Colin Duriez notes, Edith's culture and refinement complemented Francis's concern for personal relationships. Both had a concern that biblical truth should be applied

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*Children* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); *A Celebration of Marriage: Hopes and Realities* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); *What Is a Family?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997); *A Celebration of Children* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); *Christianity Is Jewish* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this article, Edith Schaeffer's work is largely evaluated in the context of her work alongside Francis at L'Abri. While some of her writings date from after Francis's death, the writings engaged within this article were first published prior to 1984. While Francis Schaeffer died in 1984, Edith Schaeffer lived until 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Duriez, *Francis Schaeffer*, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Schaeffer, *The Tapestry*, 132.

<sup>9</sup> Duriez, *Francis Schaeffer*, 31.

in the lives of those who professed Christ. Francis and Edith “stood together as intellectual equals trying to interpret and respond to the contemporary world.”<sup>10</sup> Their apologetic focus was similar, though not the same. They both spoke of the very real presence and work of God, but they emphasized this truth according to their own gifting.

Later in life Edith would pen various works that had apologetic leanings to them, though not as explicitly apologetic or philosophic as Francis’s work. One of these books spoke to the continuity of biblical revelation (*Christianity Is Jewish*), whereas others sought to engage more thoroughly with the problem of evil (*Affliction*). Even here, though, Edith understood these issues to be dealt with in the reality and context of the lived life. Francis himself recommended her book *Affliction*, believing it to be helpful to people because “she did not write this book in a vacuum, but in our own difficulties, battles, tears—as well as joys—in a part of that battle which we have known.”<sup>11</sup> Her apologetic was rooted in lived experience and spoke to the experiences of others.

## 2. Creativity

Visitors to L’Abri consistently noted Edith’s ability to practice hospitality in creative ways. Her resourcefulness in caring for those who visited was nearly as influential as the long discussions often referenced in summaries of L’Abri. Yet, her approach to creativity was not simply for the sake of artistic license but instead led to and was focused on warmth, beauty, and cultivating a compelling atmosphere.<sup>12</sup> This inclination to practical creativity, specifically in the context of the home, is most explicit in her book *The Hidden Art of Homemaking*. Edith saw her role in L’Abri’s work as not simply “homemaking” but one of artistic expression. For Edith, “hidden art” was “the art which is found in the ‘minor’ areas of life.”<sup>13</sup> Her work here comes from the conviction that “there should be a practical result of the realization that we have been created in the image of the Creator of beauty.”<sup>14</sup> She understood her work to be more than menial chores, but instead a way in which she could fulfill her image-bearing privilege of creative work.

Her own work and creativity were grounded in a theological foundation, a foundation from which she encouraged others to live “artistically,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>11</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *Letters of Francis A. Schaeffer: Spiritual Reality in the Personal Christian Life*, ed. Lane T. Dennis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1986), 156.

<sup>12</sup> Barry Seagren, “Francis Schaeffer—An Appreciation,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 24.2 (2020): 103.

<sup>13</sup> Schaeffer, *The Hidden Art of Homemaking*, 31.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 32–33.

aesthetically, and creatively” in all aspects of their lives.<sup>15</sup> She impressed visitors with her naturally artistic sensibilities and culinary gifts. She possessed physical beauty, confidence, and charisma, and she used it all to exemplify beauty and creativity in the context of the L’Abri community.<sup>16</sup> This practice of art-making was both an element Edith encouraged in ordinary Christian living, as well as an aesthetic case for the beauty of the Christian life. Edith’s example in teaching and practice demonstrated both a new perspective in Christian discipleship and an imaginative apologetic.

A deep appreciation for beauty at L’Abri was expressed not only in the art that hung on the wall or works found in books around the chalets. The appreciation of beauty was not just the discussion of various artists and art forms either. Edith intentionally avoided an exclusive definition of what was “artistic” but instead demonstrated her creativity and artistry even in the way she prepared food and set the table. The “hidden art” included not only classical music, but also fresh flowers on the tables. Whether explicit or not, she demonstrated the Reformed belief of Christ’s Lordship in all areas of life—including her creative endeavors within the home, in her ministry, and toward guests. Charles Cotherman writes, “Her entire life was a performance of aesthetics and class that few who stopped at L’Abri could miss.”<sup>17</sup> L’Abri was a canvas and Edith Schaeffer was often the artist.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. Community

For those who observed L’Abri from a distance, one might assume it was nothing more than a collective in which there was a free exchange of intellectual ideas. Instead, L’Abri emphasized embodied practical living in the context of community. Edgar notes that “a typical day at L’Abri consisted of an early rise, then breakfast, then four hours of study in the morning, followed by an extended lunch, and then four hours of physical work around the community.”<sup>19</sup> This emphasis on physical work certainly had ties to Francis’s blue-collar upbringing and stood in opposition to those who might think of L’Abri exclusively as an intellectual community.<sup>20</sup> Yet, this physical

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 32. She writes earlier in the book, “So our creativity is not on God’s level at all. His creativity is unlimited and infinite. Nevertheless, we have been created in His image, so we can be, and are *made* to be, creative” (25).

<sup>16</sup> Charles E. Cotherman, *To Think Christianly: A History of L’Abri, Regent College, and the Christian Study Center Movement* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 44.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>19</sup> Edgar, *Schaeffer on the Christian Life*, 68.

<sup>20</sup> Scott R. Burson and Jerry L. Walls, *C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 44.

work was not simply to balance out the intellect but was an affirmation of the whole of creation as a responsibility for Christians to steward well.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, many non-believers did come with intellectual questions, and this was directly tied to the Schaeffers' original purpose for L'Abri. Yet, as the ministry progressed, many who came to L'Abri were already Christians who were struggling with personal and/or spiritual problems, looking for a more vibrant expression of faith. Even these seekers, according to Edith, were an answer to their prayer that L'Abri would be a demonstration that God exists. By finding solutions to their problems, often through answers to their prayers, the mission of L'Abri was affirmed.<sup>22</sup> Through embodied practice in all areas of life, and engaging with both Christians and non-Christians, Edith often led the way in cultivating a sense of community at L'Abri.

This focus on intimate community was essential to L'Abri. As the Swiss L'Abri was expanding, other chalets were added to the ministry. While everyone at L'Abri would come together for church services and lectures, they would eat in smaller groups in the different chalets.<sup>23</sup> Edith thought this shift in format was helpful and that it led to “smaller numbers around a table, [gave] more opportunity for continuing the informal family atmosphere, and encourage[d] conversation around tables.”<sup>24</sup> She understood this focus on family to require sacrifice on the part of individuals—not to mention the difficulty of logistics with various homes. Edith was committed to find solutions so guests and attendees would feel welcome and at home.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4. *Family*

One of Edith's most enduring contributions to the work of L'Abri was her understanding and subsequent practice of family life. While she mothered four children, she offered counsel and care to thousands of people who attended L'Abri. She writes in her book *What Is a Family?*, “From birth to death, a human being needs a shelter.”<sup>26</sup> To be sure, every human being needs a shelter, and for those who were part of their family, the Schaeffer's had their own *abri*. While *What Is a Family?* employs various metaphors for a biblical perspective of family, there is significant overlap between how she understood the biblical family and her conception of L'Abri. She makes a

<sup>21</sup> D. G. Blomberg, “Apologetic Education: Francis Schaeffer and L'Abri,” *Journal of Christian Education* 18.3 (1975): 9.

<sup>22</sup> Bryan A. Follis, *Truth with Love: The Apologetics of Francis Schaeffer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 56.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>24</sup> Schaeffer, *L'Abri*, 205.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Schaeffer, *What Is a Family?*, 38.

case for the nature of the “Lord’s family” and how those part of the Christian community must take care of one another, bearing one another’s burdens.<sup>27</sup> As one reads the latter chapters of the book, the similarities to L’Abri become more prominent.

Edith recounts, as she looked back over the years of ministry at L’Abri, “To us it is a thing of wonder and awe to see how God has continued to make it a ‘family’ shared, even as it was in the beginning, although the shared family now contains our ‘spiritual children’ as well as our personal family.”<sup>28</sup> Edith and Francis understood their work to be so intimate with those they were caring for that only a familial concept seemed appropriate. L’Abri itself was formed around the families in the chalets—allowing an organic development of a familial atmosphere.<sup>29</sup>

This family dynamic was equal parts unity and diversity, according to Edith. She believed that those involved at L’Abri were united in oneness in the Lord, as well as in prayer and dependence upon the Lord. Workers involved at L’Abri were unified in major decisions and seeking faithful Christian practices. Yet, she was also quick to note that this “family” was diverse, as well. Because of the lack of human perfection, those working together at L’Abri did not always enjoy perfect unity. There was also significant diversity as the “family” of L’Abri changed over the decades.<sup>30</sup> Even so, the “family” of L’Abri was unified and diverse, much like any biological family.

This perspective of L’Abri as family is recounted by Maria Walford-Dellù. Dellù, upon becoming a Christian, found herself separated from her family. She would frequent L’Abri almost every weekend for seven years while she attended the University of Lausanne. She writes that the Schaeffers “had offered L’Abri as a second home for me.”<sup>31</sup> Her parents had told her to leave their home, but she believed she had found a new family in L’Abri and the Schaeffers. For Dellù and others, especially young girls, Edith Schaeffer became like a spiritual mother at L’Abri.<sup>32</sup> L’Abri represented a home and shelter for her and others in myriad ways.

Dellù stated that Edith Schaeffer brought creativity to the center of her ministry, often conveying wonder and joy even in the making of a meal. Dellù saw firsthand the practices and patterns that would later find their

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>28</sup> Schaeffer, *L’Abri*, 216.

<sup>29</sup> Blomberg, “Apologetic Education,” 8.

<sup>30</sup> Edith Schaeffer, “Introduction,” in Betty Carlson, *From the Mountains of L’Abri* (Westchester, IL: Good News, 1977), 7–8.

<sup>31</sup> Maria Walford-Dellù, “You Can Have a Family with Us,” in *Francis A. Schaeffer: Portraits of the Man and His Work*, ed. Lane T. Dennis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1986), 132.

<sup>32</sup> Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America*, 70.

way into Edith's books. She records watching Edith multitask with incredible balance: cooking, preparing, parenting, and participating in open-ended discussion with those beside whom she was working.<sup>33</sup> L'Abri was a place of hospitality, love, and deep care for those who were staying there. When Dellù eventually married, Edith signed a card to her in which she referred to herself as "Your mother and friend."<sup>34</sup>

### 5. *In-home Hospitality*

Connected to her conception of family was Edith's practice of in-home hospitality. She writes, "We are very clearly taught that we are to present an open door to other people, as Christian families."<sup>35</sup> She continues, "We are showing a compassion for the lost world in a practical way by showing it to some specific individuals on our own doorstep."<sup>36</sup> It was this open-door, in-home hospitality that operated as its own kind of tangible and visible apologetic. Edith Schaeffer records a story about a young Hindu girl reading her book *L'Abri* and becoming convinced by the account of the truthfulness of Christianity.<sup>37</sup> L'Abri's space for and practice of hospitality provided a seedbed for both spiritual and intellectual development.<sup>38</sup>

A brief look through Francis's letters demonstrates Edith's hospitality work. The Schaeffers consistently sent their love to each of those they were corresponding to, but Francis mentions on more than one occasion a gift that was sent along from Edith in appreciation to the recipient.<sup>39</sup> This was not a discipline that manifested itself later at L'Abri but was prominent throughout Edith's life. In the 1940s, more than a decade before L'Abri, Edith had an African-American cleaning woman, and the two would have lunch together every day. Each day, as they ate together, Edith would place a candle in the middle of the table to make each lunchtime special.<sup>40</sup> As Follis notes, "To Edith, the woman was not just the person who cleaned, but a woman made in the image of God."<sup>41</sup> Edith's in-home hospitality was grounded in a rich and compelling theological anthropology.

<sup>33</sup> Walford-Dellù, "You Can Have a Family with Us," 133.

<sup>34</sup> Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America*, 70.

<sup>35</sup> Schaeffer, *What Is a Family?*, 185.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>38</sup> Cotherman, *To Think Christianly*, 38.

<sup>39</sup> To "Matthew," Francis writes, "Edith sent you a box of cookies a week ago, and we do hope that you received them in time for Christmas. Do be assured that you're in our thoughts and prayers." Schaeffer, *Letters of Francis A. Schaeffer*, 117–18.

<sup>40</sup> Follis, *Truth with Love*, 54.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

Sylvester Jacobs recollection of his first visit to L'Abri is illustrative of this point as well. He writes, "I couldn't figure this place out. It didn't seem like an intellectual community; more like a real homey home."<sup>42</sup> He continues, referencing specifically Edith's efforts at hospitality, "She did it with such joy, as though the greatest thing in the world was giving strangers a square meal. Hard to believe we'd only just met."<sup>43</sup> As he and his fiancée prepared to marry and leave L'Abri, he summarized his feelings about L'Abri: "I tried to put into words what the community had meant to me; that I had felt sheltered, secure and loved. These people had given me back my life, and with it all the things that had been suppressed and denied me."<sup>44</sup> Specifically about the care Edith Schaeffer expressed to him personally, Jacobs stated, "I think of her as someone who cares, someone who loves me. She was part of my life in a very special way."<sup>45</sup> Jacobs tied this practice of in-home hospitality directly to the work done by Edith Schaeffer.

## 6. Prayer

D. G. Blomberg gives much credit to Edith's dynamic involvement in prayer that promoted an attitude of spiritual dependence that was fostered at L'Abri. He writes, "The whole history of L'Abri speaks of the belief that God has led each individual to teach or to study at L'Abri, and has provided for them each step of the way in response to prayer."<sup>46</sup> While Francis often employed intellectual propositions, even about prayer, Edith would be quick to take those propositions or ideas and bring them into the Christian experience at L'Abri. Francis and Edith both offered instruction for prayer in the context of community.

Prayer was an absolute essential at L'Abri—a "mainstay of the whole work."<sup>47</sup> Francis often talked about the biblical emphasis of prayer, but it was Edith who organized the community to these spiritual ends. She would arrange for prayer in the chalets. Two prayers were said at each meal, and if a crisis occurred during the day at L'Abri, everything stopped, and prayer would commence among the whole L'Abri community.<sup>48</sup> A day was set aside each week for staff prayer. L'Abri housed prayer rooms in which

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<sup>42</sup> Sylvester Jacobs with Linette Martin, *Born Black* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1977), 106.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>45</sup> Follis, *Truth with Love*, 137.

<sup>46</sup> Blomberg, "Apologetic Education," 17.

<sup>47</sup> Christopher Catherwood, *Five Evangelical Leaders* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw, 1985), 137.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

various workers would pray for the ministry, the Schaeffers, or any other number of concerns. Yet, it was not just organized prayer, but spontaneous prayer that happened around coffee tables or on hikes.<sup>49</sup> As Edgar remembers humorously, “I would have to get used to smelling the excellent savors of the great cooking at L’Abri while the praying person went from Genesis to Revelation, then the cosmos.”<sup>50</sup> Edith, as well as Francis, kept this spiritual dependence and Christian practice of daily prayer as a keystone of their ministry.

Dick Keyes, a long-time L’Abri worker, describes Edith’s contribution to L’Abri, stating, “It is important here to realize the gifts of Edith Schaeffer in her prodigious energy and creative work making the L’Abri community function but also in her high awareness of the supernatural workings of God in the world and ability to communicate this to a wide range of people.”<sup>51</sup> He continues, summarizing and illustrating Edith’s gifts in practice at L’Abri,

Edith Schaeffer was very gifted at communicating these truths in word and deed, with great attention to beauty in detail. Her book, *Hidden Art*, has helped many people to make this real. I remember that a friend of mine stumbled into the Schaeffers’ L’Abri chalet late one night, unannounced and a stranger. Edith Schaeffer was still up, working in the kitchen on meals for the next day and quickly discovered that he had not had a meal in a long time. Within minutes, filled with conversation, she brought him a tray with a hot meal, a tiny flower arrangement and a lit candle on the tray. He couldn’t believe it. But it was a small piece of what eventually enabled him to believe that a loving God is really there. This is the humanness of spirituality and the spirituality of humanness which is so needed in this world of “inhumanity and impersonality and facelessness.”<sup>52</sup>

This testimony of Edith’s work describes not only her larger ideals but her day-to-day practice. Clearly, her work and practice were crucial to the success of L’Abri.

## **II. Influence and Success of L’Abri**

L’Abri was birthed out of the desire to see the truth of Christianity lived out in a demonstrable way before the watching world. Even some of the Schaeffers’ biggest critics found “the description of life at L’Abri

<sup>49</sup> Cotherman, *To Think Christianly*, 30.

<sup>50</sup> Edgar, *Schaeffer on the Christian Life*, 24.

<sup>51</sup> Dick Keyes, “The Spiritual Integrity of Francis Schaeffer,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 24.2 (2020): 79–97.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

exhilarating.”<sup>53</sup> As L’Abri spread around the globe, its popularity grew. J. I. Packer notes,

Each L’Abri is study center, rescue mission, extended family, clinic, spiritual convalescent home, monastery, and local church rolled into one: a milieu where visitors learn to be both Christian and human through being part of a community that trusts God the Creator and worships him through Christ the Redeemer.<sup>54</sup>

As Charles Cotherman notes,

To spend time at L’Abri ... was to enter into communities who deeply believed that loving God was the work of the heart, the mind, and the hands as one’s understanding of the gospel worked itself out into any number of vocational interests and propensities.<sup>55</sup>

Clearly, L’Abri was and is a unique ministry.

Cotherman rightly labels L’Abri as a faith-and-life community. L’Abri was not a commune. Likewise, it was not strictly a study center. Instead, it was a place to flesh out a Christian worldview in the context of compassionate community. The combination of Francis’s deep discussions and Edith’s ability to cultivate beauty in everyday experiences offered guests a window into the meaningfulness of the Christian life.<sup>56</sup> Put another way, it became “a launching pad where a generation learned to aspire to meaningful action.”<sup>57</sup> Scott Burson and Jerry Walls write, “The L’Abri community is in many ways a microcosm of what the church ought to be. It combines spiritual formation, intellectual stimulation, holy living, ethnic diversity, shared responsibility and mutual interdependency. It is a fertile context for engaging the whole person.”<sup>58</sup>

Undoubtedly, it was the combined work of Edith and Francis Schaeffer that made L’Abri such a sustained success. L’Abri has enjoyed growth since its beginning, though it has changed some over the years. L’Abri boasts works in the United States, Canada, Holland, Switzerland, England, South Korea, Brazil, South Africa, and Australia. Further, L’Abri hosts annual conferences to facilitate the engagement of topics on important cultural and philosophical questions. However, these elements of success would not

<sup>53</sup> Jack Rogers, “Francis Schaeffer: The Promise and the Problem,” *Reformed Journal* 27.6 (1977): 19.

<sup>54</sup> James I. Packer, “Foreword: No Little Person,” in *Reflections on Francis Schaeffer*, ed. Ronald W. Ruesegger, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 14.

<sup>55</sup> Cotherman, *To Think Christianly*, 259.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 5–6.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>58</sup> Burson and Walls, *Lewis and Schaeffer*, 270.

have been realized if it were not for the work of its founders and their embodied practices. While appreciating the prophetic tone and apologetic-evangelistic approach of Francis, L'Abri workers have taken the spirit of L'Abri and applied it to a new generation.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, it is the continued work of family life and in-home hospitality that has thrived at various L'Abris around the world.

L'Abri's success can be tied to a variety of elements, many of which have already been mentioned. One component of success was the way in which ideas were handled by those involved in the ministry. There was one rule for L'Abri discussions, one that helped develop a culture of civil discourse:

Discussions for our own family and for those who had joined us must revolve around ideas and not organizations or personalities—that is, people. The realm of “ideas” was a wide one, including art, music, books, creativity of a variety of kinds, science, philosophy, medicine, law, world events, religions, and how you can know truth. Of course, the Bible was read and discussed, but in a wide spectrum of being “true” and “important”—in the *whole* of life. Discussion was not categorized into subject matters and separated into “disciplines” but invited thinking and recognizing relationships across the board.<sup>60</sup>

There was no subject that was too taboo for discussion at L'Abri. The Schaeffers and L'Abri workers held to a firm conviction of both the truth of Scripture and the worth of the human person. Thus, all areas of life were open for exploration.<sup>61</sup>

L'Abri also seemed to be successful because of the “structure of plausibility” it offered to those who attended. This community and hospitality, along with the visual and practical love that was exemplified, were core components of L'Abri's apologetic and evangelistic approach.<sup>62</sup> As noted before, it was the combination of reasoned arguments, embodied practice, and cultural imagination—a unified whole for the Edith Schaeffer—that made L'Abri so persuasive. The commitment to overcome barriers and to care for all made in the image of God was a significant strength of the ministry. The consistent attitude of care in this direction was, “actually making L'Abri a possibility, as people have come to L'Abri literally from the ends of the earth.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 14–15.

<sup>60</sup> Schaeffer, *The Tapestry*, 434.

<sup>61</sup> Blomberg, “Apologetic Education,” 13.

<sup>62</sup> Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America*, 232.

<sup>63</sup> Louis Gifford Parkhurst Jr., *Francis Schaeffer: The Man and His Message* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1985), 41.

The work at L'Abri, and Edith Schaeffer's role in it, has been substantial.<sup>64</sup> L'Abri was not only substantially different but was also involved in "substantial healing" in the way it practiced its ministry.<sup>65</sup> Edith and Francis Schaeffer sought to model what a Christian community could look like in an incarnational practice. While not overly novel in its approach, the practice and participation of L'Abri became exceptional, at least from an evangelical perspective. Few other places offered a community that engaged in rich philosophical discussion while likewise engaging in manual labor, family gatherings, and spiritual formation. Thus, L'Abri was and is a shelter for not only the skeptical unbeliever but also the troubled believer as well.<sup>66</sup> L'Abri was not envisioned solely for discussion and hospitality, no matter how beneficial those elements are in their own right. Instead, it was a place for resolution—for cognitive, emotional, and moreover, personal healing.

L'Abri offered a particular demonstration of Christian spirituality, as noted already by Edith's emphasis on prayer. Francis believed the success of L'Abri to be tied to an almost existential dependency on God, moment by moment, grounded in the sacrifice of Christ. If it were not for those moments of dependency, he writes, "I don't believe there ever would have been a L'Abri."<sup>67</sup> For the Schaeffers, L'Abri was a ministry of faith—one in which they simply offered themselves to God in a way that demonstrated his existence to those around them. Francis was resolute that this was how their ministry at L'Abri began, and this was how the ministry should continue.<sup>68</sup>

L'Abri has enjoyed a lasting influence, exemplified not least of which in the lives of those who attended. This includes not only thinkers like William Edgar, Nancy Pearcey, and Os Guinness but also artists like Sylvester Jacobs and Jane Stuart. Edith discusses the variety of ways in which L'Abri attendees were excited about future endeavors: "An actor at *L'Abri* at present is planning television productions; a landscape architect, a sculptor, a photographer, an educator are excited about ideas. In other words, a whole flood of creativity is being released as if a dam had been removed, and we can only guess at the possibilities ahead."<sup>69</sup> What did these individuals have in common? They had "a burning desire to communicate the truth of the universe and the

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<sup>64</sup> Regarding Francis Schaeffer's use of "substantial healing," see Francis Schaeffer, *True Spirituality*, and Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man in the Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1982) [hereafter, *CWFS*], volumes 3 and 5 respectively.

<sup>65</sup> Parkhurst, *Francis Schaeffer*, 13.

<sup>66</sup> Follis, *Truth with Love*, 160.

<sup>67</sup> Schaeffer, *Two Contents, Two Realities*, in *CWFS* 3:417.

<sup>68</sup> Burson and Walls, *Lewis and Schaeffer*, 41.

<sup>69</sup> Schaeffer, *L'Abri*, 224.

existence of God in the medium of their own talents.”<sup>70</sup> Much of this is attributed to the “personalness” and examples of the entire ministry.<sup>71</sup>

As Packer notes, L’Abri institutionally incarnated the ministerial emphases of both the Schaeffers. Not only truth, but beauty and goodness as well were embodied at L’Abri. Packer’s observation is key to the thesis of this article.<sup>72</sup> L’Abri worked out visibly the ministerial vision of both Francis and Edith Schaeffer, not simply one or the other. They both sought to demonstrate the existence of the God who is there. Francis, caring for the individual, hoped to answer questions and offer hope in compassionate conversations. Edith, caring for the individual, hoped to offer a home and family in compassionate practice. Of course, their visions for ministry were complementary, not contradictory. Both Edith and Francis Schaeffer shared an imitable focus on the human person, whether through caring for cognitive struggles or emotional distress. As Edgar rightly notes, for Francis (and one could add, Edith) Schaeffer “It’s all about anthropology.”<sup>73</sup> This incarnational aspect of L’Abri may have been their best and most enduring apologetic. As Hankins comments, this incarnational emphasis, in which Edith had a key role, “was the perfect complement to [Francis’s] reasoned arguments for the Christian faith.”<sup>74</sup> L’Abri, under the leadership of Francis and Edith, produced Christian witness in both word and deed, both truth and love.

A compassionate focus on human beings remains a lasting influence of L’Abri and the Schaeffers’ ministry. Edgar notes, “Treating everyone, disabled or not, as fully human, was one of the most remarkable testimonies from this place.”<sup>75</sup> While space is not available here, the Schaeffers’ commitment to live out a holistic and resolute biblical-theological anthropology is one of their abiding legacies.<sup>76</sup> Many visitors and participants of L’Abri remember both of its founders as caring, compassionate, and emphasizing

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>72</sup> Packer address specifically Francis’s influence on L’Abri. However, out of seven things he noted Francis did that other evangelicals had not done, the seventh seems to have significant overlap in Edith’s contribution as well. He writes, “He celebrated the wholeness of created reality under God and stressed that the Christian life must be a corresponding whole—that is, a life in which truth, goodness, and beauty are valued together and sought with equal zeal.” Packer, “Foreword: No Little Person,” 9.

<sup>73</sup> Edgar, *Schaeffer on the Christian Life*, 28.

<sup>74</sup> Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America*, 108.

<sup>75</sup> Edgar, *Schaeffer on the Christian Life*, 30.

<sup>76</sup> See Christopher Talbot, “The Mannishness of Man and the *Imago Dei*: An Analysis of Francis Schaeffer’s Anthropology and Apologetic Methodology,” *Eikon: A Journal of Biblical Anthropology* 3.1 (2021): 72–95.

the dignity and worth of each individual that darkened the doors of the Swiss chalets. Guests and attendees consistently felt seen, heard, and sheltered.

The apologetic focus of Edith and Francis was often in harmony. They both lauded the importance of communication, both from God and to other people. As one attendee of L'Abri noted, for the Schaeffers communication was not just an abstract concept to be discussed in literature and film. It was something to be demonstrated as a reality in their own daily lives—in the abundant giving of their time.<sup>77</sup>

As Guinness notes, “Truth mattered and people mattered; those were the two secrets of L'Abri.”<sup>78</sup> L'Abri was resolute in placing an appropriate emphasis on these areas.

Francis recognized the combined nature of his and Edith's apologetic ministry. In writing the foreword to her book *L'Abri*, Francis stated that his books and hers were “two sides of a single coin.”<sup>79</sup> Francis infers from this comment that “his side” of the coin was the more intellectual and exegetical approach, seeking to give honest answers to honest questions, whereas Edith's “side” was “the demonstration that the Personal-Infinite God is *really there*.”<sup>80</sup> He seems to say that Edith's works not only speculate on God's existence but also record and demonstrate his actual work in history. While many of Edith's writings are more biographical, she seems just as set on demonstrating the existence of God as her husband.

One author records Francis as saying, “You must read her books along with mine to see the balance of the total work we have tried to do with L'Abri over the years.”<sup>81</sup> Their books work in tandem with one another. As Francis focused on giving honest answers, Edith focused more on giving concrete glimpses of the *personal*-infinite God. Francis's work, at times, reads more abstract, or at least more philosophical. Conversely, Edith's work is more biographical and personal. Louis Parkhurst argues that Edith focused more on Christian living, whereas Francis's work was more evangelistic and apologetic—yet both cared about individuals becoming part of the larger Christian community and saw it as their shared goal to facilitate that end.<sup>82</sup>

Together, both Edith and Francis, and their combined work at L'Abri, sought to promote a holistic, complete worldview and a commitment to put all areas of life under the Lordship of Christ.<sup>83</sup> As Eduardo Echeverria

<sup>77</sup> Walford-Dellù, “You Can Have a Family with Us,” 135.

<sup>78</sup> Os Guinness, as quoted in Catherwood, *Five Evangelical Leaders*, 131.

<sup>79</sup> Francis Schaeffer, foreword to Schaeffer, *L'Abri*.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Parkhurst, *Francis Schaeffer*, 13.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>83</sup> Burson and Walls, *Lewis and Schaeffer*, 42.

states, “Undoubtedly, the enduring legacy of L’Abri Fellowship is found in Schaeffer’s vision of true Christian spirituality, that is, the Christian faith as a way of life.”<sup>84</sup> Both Francis and Edith demonstrated and wrote about a persuasive vision of Christian spirituality—one that was demonstrative as much as it was dependent on the supernatural work of the Spirit of God. In many ways, this vision of spirituality is hard to untangle between the two founders of L’Abri. Both heralded and encouraged a resolute Christian spirituality.

The success of L’Abri required the commitment and practice of both Francis and Edith. Together they opened their home with rich hospitality. Each sought to engage with the honest questions posed with honest answers. The sacrifice was one that required the commitment of their entire family. However, the identity of L’Abri was not primarily in its intellectual pursuits or in its engagement with culture or the arts. Instead, L’Abri seemed to find its identity in the gifting and vision of its two founders and how they demonstrated that vision in an authentic belief in God. Put another way, the strengths and influence of L’Abri seem to be a natural overflow from the influence of both Edith and Francis Schaeffer.

## Conclusion

As Frank Schaeffer eulogizes his mother, he writes that she combined “compassion, cultural literacy, and loving energy.”<sup>85</sup> While this sums up the character and life of Edith Schaeffer, it also seems to speak to the success and heart of L’Abri. Edith’s work to demonstrate compassionate care and cultural awareness and express all of it in loving interaction with those around her demonstrates what made her contributions to L’Abri so compelling. Charles Cotherman argues that Edith Schaeffer was one of the most powerful and multitalented women in American evangelicalism of the last century.<sup>86</sup> Francis and Edith Schaeffer as a pair not only laid out an exemplary paradigm for doing apologetics but also embodied Christian community. Thus, the claim stands: Edith Schaeffer’s thought and work were a necessary component to the success of L’Abri.

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<sup>84</sup> Eduardo J. Echeverria, “The Christian Faith as a Way of Life: In Appreciation of Francis Schaeffer (on the Fiftieth Anniversary of L’Abri Fellowship),” *Evangelical Quarterly* 79.3 (2007): 244.

<sup>85</sup> Frank Schaeffer, “Goodbye Mom, Edith Schaeffer 1914—2013 RIP,” *Why I Still Talk to Jesus—In Spite of Everything*, March 30, 2013, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/frankschaeffer/2013/03/goodbye-mom-edith-schaeffer-1914-2013-rip/>.

<sup>86</sup> Cotherman, *To Think Christianly*, 44.

Of course, Edith Schaeffer's contributions led to L'Abri's success. Her work and writing make up a significant piece of the L'Abri puzzle—one combined with her husband's contributions that produced a remarkable community. David Colson says it right:

At the Schaeffers' L'Abri, ideas and lived experiences intersected in life-altering ways. ... Embracing the enduring vision of L'Abri can help us tackle the particular challenges of today's world. May our homes and hearts be a true shelter for others, holding within them the words of eternal life for people who have nowhere else to go.<sup>87</sup>

The work and life of Edith Schaeffer speaks to the lasting influence of L'Abri. Further, while L'Abri has changed over the years, the basic tenets of the ministry are still there and sustain its continued mission.

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<sup>87</sup> "SBJT Forum," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 24.2 (2020): 164.



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# Where Has the Soul Gone in Pastoral Care? The Case and Cure of Pastoral Counseling

MAARTEN J. KATER

## Abstract

In this contribution, we first explore the situation we find in our century in the field of pastoral theology. It turns out that there is a constant back and forth between “theology” on the one hand and “therapy” on the other. One of the main causes of this problem seems to be that we have decoupled God from man, Christology from pneumatology. We need a theological anthropology in which the soul regains its central place: pastoral care is care for the soul, or it is not pastoral care at all.

## Keywords

*Kerygma, therapy, hermeneutics, soul, theological anthropology*

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Practices that owe more to managerial, therapeutic, consumerist, and entertainment cultures increasingly characterize Evangelical churches, so much so that they are in danger of becoming the *de facto*, if not *de jure*, authority for the Evangelical way of life.

— Kevin J. Vanhoozer<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 26. Cf. J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 21–25,

## Introduction

**W**hat is the leading, decisive principle in pastoral care— theology or therapy?<sup>2</sup> In his famous disputation *Spiritual Desertion*, Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676), appears to be aware of some psychological aspects of *depression*. In this specimen of what pastoral care is about, however, he does not make any use of specific psychological or therapeutic methods as a guide to curing the deserted soul. What he actually did was show the differences between desertion as a spiritual phenomenon and depression as a mental health challenge and what it means to be a “doctor of the soul”; he clarified what desertion is and the goals God has for desertion, as well as its causes, characteristics, and means of cure.<sup>3</sup> This is just one example, not to muddy the waters, of describing what soul care is about using psychological categories.<sup>4</sup> Desertion is definitely not depression in itself.

On the other side of the spectrum, the Scottish practical theologian John Swinton of Aberdeen University in his study *Finding Jesus in the Storm* signals in psychology an overemphasis on diagnosis based solely on so-called evidence-based methods in mental health care (as in the notorious DSM-V handbook), which leaves too little place for the significance of Christian faith in this kind of health care and in any case shows too little theology in dealing with mental health challenges such as depression, hearing voices, and bipolar disorder.<sup>5</sup> But he warns that if some theology is allowed to play

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on what is called a “moralistic therapeutic deism.” What is the real problem? “Because on a deeper level, they think we have no need for a mediator—our sin has not alienated us from God. Instead of forgiveness and communion with God, the purpose of religion is therapeutic: religion should help us to be happy and feel good about ourselves” (22).

<sup>2</sup> In this article “therapy” is used as an umbrella term to refer to all methods and perspectives from the social sciences, especially psychology, psychiatry, and psychotherapy.

<sup>3</sup> Gisbertus Voetius and Johannes Hoornbeeck, *Spiritual Desertion* (first published at Utrecht, 1646), trans. John Vriend and Harry Boonstra, ed. M. Eugene Osterhaven (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003; repr., Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012). Cf. Joseph Symonds, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul or A Treatise Concerning the Nature, Kinds, Degrees, Symptoms, Causes, Cures of, and Mistakes about Spiritual Desertion* (1671; repr., Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> I acknowledge that psychology has been a science since the nineteenth century, but that does not make this example less instructive. One could also argue the opposite—namely, that psychology as a science has too much influence on our pastoral practices. If many pastors complain that they are seen as social workers or psychological counselors, one of the reasons might be the pastor’s view of the nature of pastoral care.

<sup>5</sup> John Swinton, *Finding Jesus in the Storm: The Spiritual Lives of Christians with Mental Health Challenges* (London: SCM, 2020). His plea for a so-called “thick spirituality” seems to be his life’s work, as seen from John Swinton, *Spirituality and Mental Health Care: Rediscovering*

its role, a psychiatrist should not use what he calls lazy theodicy: “Lazy theodicy is a form of thinking in which Christians ascribe sinful distance from God, sin, or the demonic to explain the presence of unexplainable (in their view) psychological distress.”<sup>6</sup> Depression is not spiritual desertion, the awareness of the absence of God, a spiritual alienation as such.

These two examples illustrate the small way over the deep divide between soul care and mental health care, between theology and therapy. In speaking of pastoral care *and* counseling without further explanation, the pastor risks falling into the trap of using therapeutic methods—which are supposedly based on evidence—from the secular sciences such as psychology and psychiatry to deal with spiritual distress and problems.

The question, therefore, is what has happened in pastoral theology during the twentieth century, which saw all sorts of scientific methods replace the pastoral conversation, the pastoral encounter that is principally colored by the reading of Scripture and prayer. First, therefore, we explore the case of twenty-first-century pastoral care to see which types have been used up until now and to discover some traps in them as a danger for too much counseling (therapy) and too little soul care (theology) within pastoral theology and practices. The second part will make a case for the necessity of a theological anthropology to get the soul back in pastoral care as the meeting point between God and man.

## **I. *The Case—Types and Traps***

When we take note of different visions of pastoral care that have emerged over the course of the twentieth century into our time, it always seems to be a particular choice between “theology” and “therapy”—in other words, between “God-centeredness” and “man-centeredness.” A few movements do try to establish a relationship between these two poles, but then the question is how that connection is made and how it fits into a Reformed vision of pastoral care.

### **1. *Kerygmatic without Therapeutic***

First, in the wake of Karl Barth’s dialectical theology, a movement known as *kerygmatic* pastoral care presented itself. This current revolves around a theological vision, a thinking from God as subject and not as an object.

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<sup>a</sup> “*Forgotten*” *Dimension* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2001). Too many understandings of spirituality turn out to be just self-actualization.

<sup>6</sup> Swinton, *Finding Jesus in the Storm*, 67.

Historically, this includes Eduard Thurneysen (1888–1974), a theologian who was a practitioner of the so-called dialectical theology associated with Barth, who saw man first and foremost as a sinner dependent on grace. In other words, the sinner’s justification is central, eliminating the break between God and man. Facing and confessing sin come into play so that grace can come into full play.

However, in the scholarly literature on pastoral care, the designation “kerygmatic pastoral care” is used in a more generalizing sense for forms of pastoral care in which the Bible is opened because of the conviction that God’s word has a fixed, indispensable place in pastoral care. The latter is indeed the case in classical Reformed pastoral ministry; on this point, then, it agrees with Thurneysen’s pastoral vision. The same can be said of the position of the pastor as servant of the word. Pastoral care is ultimately about the direct relationship with God established and nurtured by his word.

Soteriology is the beating heart of this movement, the justification of the sinner is central to it, and pastoral care is all about “salvation” rather than “healing.” Certainly, Thurneysen’s thought has evolved, which led him to see pastoral care as an encounter with great significance in itself. Nevertheless, his main point was “Save your soul”—or, more aptly, “Be ye saved.”

## ***2. Therapeutic as Kerygmatic***

Because in the kerygmatic vision pastoral care is determined by “guilt and penance,” there is the danger of discussing man only as a sinner. First, however, man is a creature of God, and as such, he has sides to his life other than the guilt and power of sin and needs other than overcoming them. There is joy and care, gratitude and rebellion, and there is the desire for healing and the search for meaning. In other words, a person’s life experiences are wide and deep. In response to this current—and partly due to the influence of the thinking in which the human “self” became increasingly central—so-called therapeutic bonding emerged. Its main representative was Seward Hiltner (1909–1984), who was influenced by the theology of Paul Tillich (1886–1965) and the thinking of psychologist and psychotherapist Carl Rogers (1902–1987). In this movement, humans and their lives are central. They must learn to accept themselves and to know that they are allowed to do so. Moreover, they have inner strength—healing power from God—to achieve growth and self-realization. Pastors who want to be able to guide such a process also need to have insight into their own possibilities and pitfalls, their own feelings and conflicts. This form of pastoral care is about “healing” *as* “salvation.” On this basis, one could say that the biggest

trap is to take as a starting point “the therapeutic *is* the kerygmatic”—or, therapy *is* theology. This is not a “save our soul” but more a “realize self.”

### **3. *Kerygmatic as Therapeutic***

Another movement came to the fore to pull the pendulum as far as possible to the other side. Most evangelicals (in the broader sense of the word) are quite familiar with the name Jay Adams and his so-called *nouthetic* counseling method, which could be described as a radical opposition to the therapeutic strategies that exerted great influence within pastoral settings. Adams rejected all secular psychology as a means of solving spiritual problems. In 1970, he published his *magnum opus*, *Competent to Counsel*<sup>7</sup> at the same time as the opening of the Christian Counseling and Education Center (now known as the CCEF), and later on in 1976, the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors (NANC) was founded. He is quite polemical with those whom he considers “integrationists,” whom he believes have sold their birthright for a bowl of pottage by trying to blend theological truth and therapeutic theories. Christians are convinced that knowing Jesus Christ is the original and abiding cure of the soul. However, it turned out that mental health professionals were seen as the experts, and churches were increasingly handing responsibility for pastoral care to them. According to Adams, worried and disturbed people in churches do not need such “experts”; rather, they need pastors because what they stand in need of is found not in secular psychology or psychiatry but in the Bible. People should go to doctors for their bodily problems but should not seek any secular help for mental problems and diseases. Adams criticized his opponents sharply. They in turn accused him of prooftexting without context, of not making room for the effects of suffering or being sinned against, and of basing his approach on moralism and legalism rather than grace. To put it under one heading: theology *is* therapy, and outside it there was no salvation or healing from psychological diseases.<sup>8</sup>

### **4. *Hermeneutic as Correlation***

A movement emerged during the 1990s that sought a connection between the two poles, theology and therapy, understanding Scripture on the one

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<sup>7</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), which has been reprinted over thirty times.

<sup>8</sup> For a nuanced evaluation of Adams and the biblical counseling movement, see David Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2010).

hand and understanding human experiences on the other.<sup>9</sup> The bipolarity is the decisive principle within the hermeneutical view: faith and life, revelation and experience, God's story and one's life story relate to each other in a mutual—albeit sometimes tense—relationship. The pastor functions more or less as an interpreter. On the one hand, they interpret the congregants' life stories—where human beings are living human documents—and, on the other, they incorporate or merge that story with the “story of God.”<sup>10</sup> One of the biggest traps in this narrative-hermeneutical approach turns out to be that the history of salvation takes a back seat to the congregants' stories. It emphasizes heavily the human and within it discusses the work of the Spirit. Furthermore, Christology often disappears into the background. The essential notion that there is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ (see, e.g., Acts 4:12) fades into a general Christian religiosity. Ultimately, therapy eclipses theology.

### 5. *Reformed Alternative*

After this short exploration of the case of pastoral counseling in the twenty-first century, it is time to ask the following question: Is another connection possible between the two poles, theology and therapy? We should not seek it in a self apart from God; when we do that, we arrive at the cardinal concept of theological anthropology. From a Reformed perspective we cannot speak of man apart from God, because every single human being is a creature of our Creator and therefore has a relationship with God, even one who does not want to accept that relationship. So, then, in biblical theology there is not a “self” as a synonym for a “soul,” unless we understand that the self is *coram Deo* (before God). In summary, theology determines every anthropology, so it follows from this position that we need a theological anthropology. In taking that framework on, we will see that within it the soul is a central theme; that is, the soul in the duality of body and soul, thus the human being as a whole.

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<sup>9</sup> I do not dwell on the philosophical background of this approach, which is partly based on Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of language and human beings as *narrative* beings. In practical theology, Charles Gerkin is the “founding father” of hermeneutic pastoral care. See Charles V. Gerkin, *Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), and earlier, *The Living Human Document: Re-Visioning Pastoral Care in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984). In The Netherlands, Gerben Heitink, practical theology professor at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, was one of the leading figures of this movement.

<sup>10</sup> Later CCEF authors also relate the counselee's story with God's story; see, e.g., Edward T. Welch, *When People Are Big and God Is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997), esp. 34–36, 95–134; Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 26–35, 142–59.

Thinking from within a theological anthropology, I would like to show in what follows that when our soul is the object of pastoral thinking, we do not have to choose between God-centered and man-centered thinking, as such a choice would be a false dichotomy. The kerygmatic movement might be too narrowly focused on Christology. Other perspectives seem to stress the work of the Holy Spirit in man, so pneumatology reigns. A trap in this perspective could be too strong a focus on what the Spirit can do in human beings by means of therapy. When we respect both the Christological and the pneumatological parts of the theological Trinitarian symphony, there is actually no reason to despise therapy as such because of the desire to give theology primacy. Theology as such is not therapy, and therapy as such is not theology. But theology does not exclude therapy, just as therapy should not keep theology out. It is decisive where we start in our thinking: God is not the goal but the source of theologically based pastoral care that is really soul care.

## II. *The Cure (1): Using Theological Anthropology*

What is man? That really is a very big question. Those looking for the answer to what man is can consult all kinds of sciences that try to answer this question from within their own disciplines. That we speak of man (in general), however, actually seems to be nonsensical in the context of pastoral care. It is especially important to realize that from this perspective there is no such thing as man. We meet a *particular* man or woman, are dealing with a *concrete* person in a great variety of circumstances, in their state as believer or nonbeliever, in days of decline and of increasing knowledge of the Savior Jesus Christ.

In the context of reflection on pastoral care, various studies from Western contexts have paid attention to different classifications. One can, for example, think from proposed German models of what it means to be human, such as (1) the perspective of psychological-psychotherapeutic concepts;<sup>11</sup> (2) a more or less thematic approach, such as man as a single person, in relationship, in development, in crises, and *coram Deo*;<sup>12</sup> (3) the basis of life themes: looking for identity, living in relationship, looking for meaning, living with fear, coping with self-blame, and learning to believe.<sup>13</sup> *Mutatis mutandis*, these approaches are apparent in other contexts as well.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Klessmann, *Theologie und Psychologie im Dialog: Einführung in die Pastoralpsychologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021), 65–108.

<sup>12</sup> Christoph Morgenthaler, *Seelsorge* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2017), 99–222.

<sup>13</sup> Jürgen Ziemer, *Seelsorgelehre* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 235–300.

What about man? From a theologically Reformed perspective we choose to speak first and mainly about man as the image of God (*imago Dei*). By doing so, we see the *theological* interpretation of man from the outset from the perspective of who God is. God and man are uniquely connected. That connection is definitely fundamental to our thinking about the very nature of pastoral care. True wisdom in pastoral care stems from the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves, which are inextricably linked.<sup>14</sup>

God created man “in his image” (Gen 1:26–27). This expression “image of God” has been interpreted in different ways. There are structural, functional, and relational approaches:<sup>15</sup>

- a. *Structural*. The image of God is expressed in certain faculties of human beings, in particular, the spiritual faculties of the soul and the ability to use reason (*animale rationale*).
- b. *Functional*. The phrase “image of God” points not what man is but what he has to do: man’s vocation is to perceive his management task, often called stewardship, on behalf of God.
- c. *Relational*. The “image of God” is the interpretation of the relationship between God and man, so man cannot be characterized other than as a relational being; he is not an individual but a person.

Without neglecting valuable elements from the structural and functional views, the relational approach seems to do the most justice to the multifaceted aspects of the image-of-God being. This relational view of man has far-reaching implications for our theological reflection on human identity, equality, and responsibility. A human being does not make it alone but is fundamentally dependent on others. Man needs peers. Indeed, we must view our relationship with our fellow human beings and with creation theologically, beginning with the all-important relationship with and to God. Fundamental to our humanity is our attunement to God—the encounter with God. Man is addressed by God and is therefore responsible; he owes an answer, a response. According to David Kelsey, the danger in theological anthropology is that the practitioner runs the risk of viewing

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<sup>14</sup> This approach refers to John Calvin’s famous opening paragraphs in his *Institutes*, which ultimately could be seen as a “pastoral dogmatic handbook.” Cf. Arnold Huijgen, ed., *The Spirituality of the Heidelberg Catechism*, Papers of the International Conference on the Heidelberg Catechism Held in Apeldoorn, 2013 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Gijsbert van den Brink and Kees van der Kooi, *Christelijke dogmatiek: Een introductie* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2012), 241–47 [cf. *Christian Dogmatics: An Introduction*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma with James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017)].

humans as relatively independent persons with capacities, whereas one must always start with the claim that the relation to God is crucial for understanding human beings and their relationships.<sup>16</sup>

Within a theology that has its reference point in Scripture, there is consensus on at least three aspects of our humanity when we reflect on our existence as human beings: it is bestowed, violated, and healed. It is these adjectives that become flesh and blood in pastoral encounters:

*Bestowed existence.* That people are creatures means that it is good that they exist, regardless of their characteristics; that is, regardless of their physical or mental faculties or capacities.<sup>17</sup> As persons they are wanted and loved by God and therefore worthy of our care and love. Our identity—who we really are—is not determined by capacity. A violated existence is still a gifted existence. Indeed, the relationship that God establishes with people confers value on them regardless of their abilities or capacities.<sup>18</sup> Man, seen as a creature, does not need to prove himself or his existence. Our existence is existential in the deep sense of the word: it is an existence that is available, bestowed by our Creator.

*Violated existence.* A violated existence demands space to give words to the need and to be silent. After all, besides greatness, there is also the misery of man:<sup>19</sup> loneliness, fear, despair, brokenness, and a whole dictionary of misery. Daniel Louw identifies three basic existential problems in which man is addressed by God: his anxiety (fear of isolation, rejection, and death), his guilt and blame, and the experience of despair and meaninglessness (despair).<sup>20</sup> That we share in a violated existence points to the breach that occurred in the relationship between the Creator and creation (the fall). Biblically-theologically, we therefore interpret misery not as a tragic fate in which we can assume a victim role but as a rebellious act in which we as rebels do what God has forbidden. A theological anthropology for pastoral care also deals with man as sinner (e.g., Hans Wolff, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Christian Möller).

*Healed existence.* A healed existence is an existence we receive in the promise of the gospel. In other words, it is an existence in the care of hope.

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<sup>16</sup> David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 1:281–88, 363–78.

<sup>17</sup> John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 2017), 181–85.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Hans Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., “Man’s greatness comes from knowing he is wretched”; Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin Books, 1966), 59 (6.114).

<sup>20</sup> Daniel J. Louw, *Cura Vitae: Illness and the Healing of Life in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Wellington: Lux Verbi, 2008), 2.

Who we may truly be before God, by virtue of our createdness, is not determined by any particular status or condition either of our body or of our spirit. A person's identity is decisively determined by being created "in Christ," being re-created in his image (Col 3:10). This is a matter of faith. It means being offered a different perspective in this world of sin and misery, guilt and shame, in the reality of the future unlocked by him (2 Cor 5:17). So, then, man, as the image of God, has an eschatological element: the new man in Jesus Christ is being re-created in accordance with his image.<sup>21</sup>

The relationship that God establishes with his creatures becomes audible and noticeable in that God communicates. He does so with words, through the Scripture. The effect of God's speaking in his word is life-giving, bringing to life by the breath of God's voice. If his words return "empty" because they do not find a hearing and bounce off, the result is death. Just as rain is life giving, so is the life-giving *verbum externum* (Isa 55:10). Theologically speaking, neither man and religion nor church and society are self-contained realities but are included in the movement of the word of God in promise and contradiction.<sup>22</sup> The relationship with God is thus a word relationship. There is a liberating "*Ephphatha*" from Jesus's mouth (cf. Mark 7:34), an opening from the outside inward so that we hear and respond in freedom. Along these lines the conversation, both hearing and speaking, can begin. "I am speaking to you" (*vocativus!*) is the claim and is the beginning of every Christian community. This is how we start hearing, and by means of this hearing, we start to live.

The following three characterizations summarize once more how man comes into the picture from a theological perspective: man as a creature of God, as a sinner before God, and as a believer in God. These theological interpretations of man can be further elaborated Trinitarianly, as it is by J. W. Louw and Hans Van Pelt, who show that the close connection between a Christological and a pneumatological perspective is essential.

A much-quoted statement by Eduard Thurneysen reads, "Tell me what you think of man, and I will tell you what kind of pastor you are!"<sup>23</sup> How we think about human beings is closely related to how we think about

<sup>21</sup> Theo Pleizier, "Psychology and Narrativity in Pastoral Care: Some Considerations at the Come Back of the Soul," *Kerk en Theologie* 70 (2019): 126.

<sup>22</sup> F. Gerrit Immink, *In God geloven: Een praktisch-theologische constructie* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2003), 30; cf. F. Gerrit Immink, *Touch of the Sacred: The Practice, Theology, and Tradition of Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), esp. chs. 1 and 2.

<sup>23</sup> Eduard Thurneysen, *A Theology of Pastoral Care*, trans. Jack A. Worthington and Thomas Wieser (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1962), 66; "Sage mir, wie du über den Menschen denkst, und ich will dir sagen, was für ein Seelsorger du bist." Eduard Thurneysen, *Die Lehre von der Seelsorge*, 7th ed. (1946; repr., Zurich: TVZ, 1994), 30.

God. Pastoral care therefore requires an ongoing reflection on theological anthropology.

### III. *The Cure (2): Soul Care for the Whole Person*

I am convinced that from a Reformed perspective we are to understand pastoral care as *soul* care. This characterization does, of course, raise the question of what we actually mean by “the soul.” In a general sense, it is often seen as denoting our inner self, or even our consciousness. The beautiful and tricky thing about talking about the soul is that it does not easily allow itself to be mapped, to be objectified. Attempts to do so and to get a grip on the soul caused the soul, and thus the inspiration of life, to sink into a naturalistic worldview. In this, the soul is no more than our mind(set) or a psychic apparatus that can be described in laws and mechanisms using algorithms.

However, the soul is first and foremost a (phenomenological) experiential fact, and awareness of it is based on life experience that touches on the inscrutability of the origin and destiny of life. Nevertheless, its unimaginability is not a strong argument against its existence. Our inability to imagine or explain something need not lead us to deny what experience teaches us exists. Below is a brief exploration to clarify that pastoral care is care for life, because that connection does appear to be decisive: the soul as an indication of life. Where there is a soul, there is life. Soulless is lifeless. Theology primarily speaks about the soul from a pneumatological perspective (cf. Gen 2:7). Christian speaking about the soul is possible only in connection with the life-giving Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 15:45).

The Old Testament shows that the soul (*nephesh*) determines the life of the whole person. The *nephesh* typifies man with his desires, quite often connected with hunger and thirst as expressions of them. We thus use body language to represent something of our inner selves. The word *nephesh* is in the language field of *ruakh*, the breath of life, life, the life force.<sup>24</sup>

The *nephesh* turns out to be so defining of our humanity that it is even the expression of the whole person, the self, the soul that is “I.” One can render “my soul hopes in God” as “I hope in God with every fiber of my being.” Thus, the animated man can enter into a dialogue with his inner self, with himself. He not only is addressed by God or by fellow creatures but can also address himself and call himself to order (cf. Pss 42; 103). In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, *nephesh* is usually rendered as *psychē*, the word we find in the New Testament to denote the principle of life, the

<sup>24</sup> Hans W. Wolff, *Antropologie des Alten Testaments* (Munich: Kaiser, 1970), 25–48.

living-being of human beings. It is also the word with which the core—the deepest inner self, where a person is most deeply touched—of man gets an interpretation. This *psychē* forms one whole with the body so that there is a duality (distinction) without a dichotomy (division). The *psychē* is a gift for which man must also account because in it he is addressed by God. Thus, the important thing about the soul is not that it is an independent substance but that it is a living entity that comes from God and relates to God. The existence of the soul is an indication of a special relationship between the Creator and the creature. Fundamental to a theological interpretation of soul care is understanding the Old and New Testament testimony as the charter of God's soul care for human beings.<sup>25</sup>

Speaking of “with body and soul” emphasizes the connection between the two, rather than the distinction. We are created by God with a body. Biblically speaking, one cannot speak of a “self” or “person” separate from the body.<sup>26</sup> There is no inner self without an outer manifestation (body). This is not to say that our consciousness coincides with our brain, as in the materialist view that there is therefore no survival after death. However, it is our body that God brings to life and sustains by his Spirit (Gen 2:7; Acts 17:25). So the Bible does not have a dichotomy of body and soul or even a trichotomy of soul, spirit, and body as its own biological or psychological characterization of who man is.

A holistic view of man emerges from many places in Scripture. This gets particular expression when the *heart* of man is spoken of as the center of the whole person. The heart is the place where man's most essential being resides, decisions are made, and feelings arise. It is the place where desires and emotions, as well as the triad of reason, intellect, and will, come together. The heart is the home of the soul. What your “soul” is, is yourself; that is, yourself *coram Deo*. When we speak of doing something “with heart and soul,” we are actually speaking tautologically.

Relationship and communication with God take their place in the heart because the heart is the place touched and renewed by the Holy Spirit. The soul comes into existence from hearing the word of the living God, and “all that is in me” (Ps 103:1) starts praising God. A conversation takes place with the soul through the language of the soul, given in words in the Scripture. Thus, alienation is broken, and the soul regains a home, lifted from its introspection (I-centeredness), and the meaning of life is received. As Viktor Frankl famously said, meaning is the soul's homeland.

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<sup>25</sup> Ziemer, *Seelsorgelehre*, 52.

<sup>26</sup> Swinton, *Dementia*, 165–72.

Speaking about the soul is nevertheless returning in the twenty-first century. There is apparently a desire to speak about the inner life, about change and the spiritual dimension of life. In the search for language for this “inside,” “soul” appears to be an important term. Religion, too, has no longer necessarily been viewed with suspicion in the last decade. It is no wonder that questions of meaning are also being allowed to come up for discussion again. Surely, receiving meaning turns out to be more than giving meaning, and created meaning is something essentially different from discovered meaning.

In pastoral care, the question of being, the question “Who *are* you?” exceeds the question of meaning. Certainly, the former question is preferable to the “What are you?” question. Theological reflection on what pastoral care is will also have to account for its relationship with “secular pastoralism,” with bodies of meaning in the broad sense of the word. After all, there is increasingly a certain de-Christianization of religion in the twenty-first century, at least in the Western world.

The above outline about the soul means that soul care is, by its nature, the care of the whole of life. This life is viewed from a spiritual perspective—namely, from the relationship with God, who gives life. Although the pastor is not a physician or therapist, he is there to connect the physical and the psychological from the perspective of living before God. Surely, elements of self-help and spiritual “methods” may be integrated into Christian soul care. As shown in the introduction, in Reformed pastoral care there has always been an awareness of the necessity to acquire some knowledge of basic notions of the psyche as a pastor. Moreover, a counselor must have some elementary knowledge of psychological diseases to recognize in pastoral care when and where another counselor, a psychologist or psychiatrist, has to come into play.

Nevertheless, as Martine Oldhoff convincingly has shown from the pneumatological anthropology of Paul, there are at least three possible important particularities of the soul that should be thought through within pastoral theology:<sup>27</sup>

1. In a theological context, one has to take sides concerning the norm or frame of reference for change and for what counts as a good life and person: the soul’s *telos* is to be a self *before God*. One’s state of soul may lead to the actual pastoral question concerning one’s relationship to God.

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<sup>27</sup> Martine C. L. Oldhoff, “Soul Searching with Paul: A Theological Investigation of Cultural, Traditional, and Philosophical Concepts of the Soul” (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2021), ch. 7, summarized on 296–97.

2. The source or agent of change seen from a theological perspective is primarily God. The soul is not changed by one or another practice of a particular philosophy therapy or the application of a method. God is not only the creator of the soul but also its savior and transformer. This leads to the question: Are you willing to be saved by God's grace in Jesus Christ and changed by the Spirit?
3. The fulfillment of the process of change is to be awaited, as seen from a theological and eschatological perspective. This perspective offers space to acknowledge vulnerabilities and deficits that may last as it offers hope for this and the coming life.

Pastoral care is about inspiration: a being touched to the depths of their soul by the sacred—in the encounter with God—and thus truly catching their breath. *Cura animarum* (care of souls) is *cura vitae* (care for life): life must be healed. From the perspective of eternal life received here and now (cf. esp. the Gospel of John and 1 John), we can talk to each other about distress and joy, vulnerability and desires, pitfalls and being retrieved from them, inner fatigue and somatic complaints, and so many more variations on the theme of caring for the soul within the Christian community. Any individualistic approach to the soul as the self is ruled out by Paul, with his emphasis on the common worship of God in which the Spirit works.

## Conclusion

Pastoral care as connecting soul and body can also be summarized as care for *vitality*.<sup>28</sup> After all, Christian soul care is about encountering Christ as the source of life; otherwise, it should not be called soul care at all, and there will be no cure of the soul without a faith relationship with him. In soul care one has the privilege of stimulating the receptivity of the soul for the voice of the good shepherd (John 10:3, 11) and to point at and perhaps take away the hindrances that caused a buffered self. The pastor is both witness to and addressee of God's word. He is aware that he is at the service of the movement of God toward man in his concrete life. Pastoral care as soul care ultimately is the action of God himself, through his Son and by his Holy Spirit. With a grateful nod to Swinton's book, let me conclude: soul care is about finding Jesus *in* the storm.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ziemer, *Seelsorgelehre*, 17.

<sup>29</sup> As the title of Swinton, *Finding Jesus in the Storm*.

# Six Keys to Protecting and Strengthening Marriages

JIM NEWHEISER

## Abstract

While almost every Christian marriage begins with great hope and joy, many end in divorce. Other marriages endure but fall significantly short of the biblical ideal of growing personal intimacy. After forty years of counseling, I have identified six issues that are crucial to preserving and strengthening Christian marriages and present them below. The gospel offers hope that couples who have drifted apart can enjoy renewed joy and fulfillment in their marriages to the glory of God.

## Keywords

*Marriage, reconciliation, affirmation, lies, laziness, adultery, lust, grace, communication, hope*

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## Introduction

**T**here has been a great deal of concern among evangelical Christians about the attacks on the family in our culture. Same-sex marriage has been legalized. Heterosexual marriage is on the decline. Traditional marriage roles are denigrated and abandoned. Perhaps of greater concern, however, is the state of marriage among professing Christians. Cohabitation apart from marriage is accepted and practiced by an increasing percentage of evangelicals.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Julian Menasce Horowitz, Nikki Graf, and Gretchen Livingston, “2. Public Views of Marriage and Cohabitation,” Pew Research Center, November 6, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/11/06/public-views-of-marriage-and-cohabitation/>.

Divorce,<sup>2</sup> spousal abuse, and infidelity are far too common among those who profess to follow Christ. The church seems to be conforming to the world (Rom 12:2). What the statistics do not reveal is that too many Christian couples remain legally married, but they lack the relational and physical closeness God designed. They are miserable. In the past, I have likened such marriages to an individual who has a cold or a mild case of the flu that never goes away. A more contemporary illustration is that some marriages seem to have relational long Covid.

I have been married for over forty-three years and have been engaged in pastoral and biblical counseling for approximately forty of those years. Most of my recent marriage counseling has been with my wife, Caroline, as my valued and gifted cocounselor. When miserable couples come to us, I sometimes try to imagine what their relationship must have been like in the early phases of courtship and honeymoon. I have thought of asking them to bring a wedding photo just to try to connect with better days and then encouraging them to work with us toward a renewal of a marriage that has wilted.

Several years ago, I was invited to speak at a biblical counseling conference, where I was asked to share the most important lessons we have learned over our years of marriage counseling. After much thought and prayer, I came up with six. Furthermore, I was able to alliterate for only the second or third time in my life with six L's. Three are positive encouragements, and three are negative warnings.

1. The Lord must come first.
2. Laziness will cause your marriage to deteriorate.
3. Lies are like a deadly cancer to your relationship.
4. Lust can destroy your marriage.
5. Lift one another up with affirmation.
6. Love, not law, will keep your marriage strong.

### ***1. The Lord Must Come First***

We have found that there is a correlation between the lack of a vibrant personal walk with the Lord and a failing marriage. Often, when a couple whose marriage is troubled comes to see us, we will ask each of them how their personal walk with the Lord is going. Almost always, they will confess that

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<sup>2</sup> Terry Goodrich, "Evangelicals Have Higher-than-average Divorce Rates, According to a Report Compiled by Baylor for the Council on Contemporary Families," Baylor University, February 5, 2014, <https://www.baylor.edu/mediacommunications/news.php?action=story&story=137892>.

their personal time in the word and prayer has suffered in recent months. Often, one or both are pulling away from the church. We explain that during this crucial time, it is vital that they make their relationship with God the most important thing in their lives, even more than their marriage.

Rebuilding a marriage is difficult. Jesus declares, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5 ESV). If we are to bear fruit, including that of a God-honoring marriage, we must cling to Christ with a sense of humble dependence on him. Hopelessness can be overcome as we realize that through Christ we can again bear good fruit in our marriages. We must not be ruled by our embittered feelings, but rather submit our desires to his word: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths” (Prov 3:5–6; see also 14:12) and “Your will be done” (Matt 6:10b). We must look to gain our strength, not primarily from our spouses but from God. One of the major causes of marital problems is expecting one’s spouse to meet needs that only the Lord can meet.

Jeremiah 17:5–6 warns that those who put their ultimate trust in people will dry up like a bush in the desert during a drought. Jeremiah continues in verses 7–8 to explain that the answer to your neediness is not to hope that there will be sufficient “rain” from other people (including your spouse) to sustain you. Rather you must put your ultimate trust in the Lord. Then you will be like the tree planted by a stream that can thrive even in a time of drought (e.g., when your spouse is not meeting your needs or “raining” on you). This is not to say that marriage partners should be unconcerned about meeting one another’s needs. Marriage is meant, in a sense, to complete us (Gen 2:18), but because of the fall, our spouses will sometimes fall short. Satan may tempt you to believe that there is no hope for the marriage unless the other person changes. But if you are abiding in the Lord, like the vine in the branch or the tree in the river, you can endure when your spouse is not there for you. God may use you to rescue and rejuvenate your marriage.<sup>3</sup>

You build your connection to the Lord as you regularly feed yourself by reading and meditation upon Scripture. Peter gives you this encouragement: “Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation” (1 Pet 2:2). As a tiny baby’s life is sustained by regularly being nourished by their mother’s milk, you need God’s word to strengthen you—especially when life is hard. Along with spending time in

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<sup>3</sup> I realize that there are some situations, such as abuse or infidelity, in which one spouse cannot save the marriage alone.

God's word, your soul requires regular seasons of prayer. The reality that your marriage may be in trouble along with your knowledge of your inability to solve the problems in your own strength should daily drive you to your knees in humble dependence with the hope that the Lord will answer in ways beyond what you could imagine (Eph 3:20–21). Ideally, the husband and wife will regularly pray together, confessing their sins and pleading with God to renew their love for him and for each other.

In addition to taking advantage of the private means of grace, it is also vital for a couple to be committed to a sound church. It is common for one or both parties in a struggling marriage to neglect drawing near to God in public worship (Heb 10:25). Church attendance is not merely an obligation. It is a privilege and a blessing, as God speaks to us and strengthens us through the public means of grace, including the reading and proclamation of his word, prayer, and the sacraments. In addition, the informal fellowship among believers should stimulate one another toward godliness (Heb 10:24). Another reason to be committed members of a sound church is the benefit of pastoral oversight and counsel from gifted church leaders who shepherd the flock of God (1 Pet 5:2). I remember one man whose marriage had gone through much turmoil saying to me, "We do not know what we would have done if this church had not been here for us." We know of cases in which the faithful disciplinary ministry of a local church has been used by God to restore a wayward spouse and rescue a failing marriage. In other cases, what is most needed is not marriage counseling as much as discipleship in the basics.

## ***II. Laziness Will Cause Your Marriage to Deteriorate***

A few years ago, I had the privilege of performing our nephew's wedding. It was only after the wedding that I realized that perhaps I was the first person in two thousand years of church history to choose this particular passage for a wedding homily.

I passed by the field of the sluggard and by the vineyard of the man lacking sense, and behold it was completely overgrown with thistles; its surface was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. When I saw, I reflected upon it; I looked and received instruction. "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, then your poverty will come as a robber and your want like an armed man."  
(Prov 24:30–34)

I view this picture of the sluggard's field as a kind of parable of many marriages. Since moving to North Carolina several years ago we have enjoyed driving through the countryside. On one side of the road is a beautiful

field with neatly planted rows of crops awaiting harvest, perhaps with a painted red barn in the background. On the opposite side of the road is a field that is overgrown with weeds and thorns, even as the rows from crops planted in past years remain visible through the undergrowth. If a barn is still standing, it is teetering, and the paint is gray and peeling. Years ago, the two fields were probably identical in appearance. The owner of the ruined field did not set out to destroy his property. He just did nothing and allowed the second law of thermodynamics to take over. Little by little, his formerly beautiful field was overgrown. Many marriages resemble the sluggard's field. There was no physical abuse or sexual adultery. There may not even be open conflict. Instead, these relationships are gradually being overrun and choked out by neglect.

Courting and engaged couples typically spend every possible hour together. When they are separated by distance, they talk every day on FaceTime. They cannot get enough of each other. Sometimes, after marriage, they become so busy with career, hobbies, and children (especially their activities and sports) that they take their relationship with each other for granted and neglect each other. It is often the wife who senses that something is wrong, only to have her husband say that she is worried over nothing. "We are just in a busy season. Soon things will return to normal." But there is a new normal in which their marriage is drying up. A different issue for some couples is not that they are never around each other but that they are not present with each other when they occupy the same room. Television, video games, and social media keep people apart. How often do you see a couple in a restaurant where each is looking at their phone and no productive conversation is taking place? Marriages can die of inattention.

To keep your marriage from becoming the sluggard's field, you need to consistently pull the weeds and plant the flowers. Pulling the weeds refers to the importance of quickly resolving conflicts, not letting the sun go down on your anger and thus giving the devil an opportunity (Eph 4:26–27). Small conflicts, like small weeds, can become large if ignored over time. Ken Sande's book *The Peacemaker*<sup>4</sup> teaches these biblical principles of conflict resolution:

1. Glorifying God should be our chief aim in relationships (2 Cor 5:9).
2. Getting the log out of our own eye should come first (Matt 7:3–5).
3. Gently restore others when they are in the wrong (Gal 6:1–2).
4. Go and be reconciled, which includes forgiving others (Eph 4:31–32).

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<sup>4</sup> Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991). For counselees who are not readers, we assign the audio series, "Biblical Peacemaking" on [www.ibcd.org](http://www.ibcd.org).

While conflict resolution is important, it is not all that is needed. Merely pulling the weeds without putting anything in their place will just leave room for more weeds to grow in the future. Planting flowers refers to positively pursuing the joy, blessing, and intimacy that God intended in marriage. After you are married, it is even more important that you invest in relational and romantic closeness. Caroline and I have sought to establish habits, such as spending time together every day catching up and ensuring the relationship is healthy, having a more extended time (date night) at least twice a month, and getting away together on a special trip at least once a year. These habits are more important (and more difficult to follow) when you have children in the home. God designed physical intimacy as a means of expressing and enhancing our marriage bonds, so this should not be neglected (Gen 2:24; 1 Cor 7:3–5). Spending time together praying, discussing Scripture, and serving God together also binds us together.

Couples whose marriages have suffered through neglect may benefit greatly from marriage counseling with a godly couple.

Sadly, we have counseled many ministry couples whose marriages were brought to the brink by laziness. It is easy for the husband to assume that because he is doing the Lord's work, his family should understand his lack of engagement. The wife may feel guilty about saying anything about the deterioration of their relationship because she does not want to be seen as a high-maintenance wife who keeps her husband from ministry. We have seen cases in which a wife has become deeply embittered after years of seeing her husband rushing to meet the needs of everyone but her. Several years ago, a young pastor and his wife were referred to us because of a deeply troubled marriage that called into question whether he was still biblically qualified for the ministry (1 Tim 3:1–7). She was angry and bitter. He was harsh and distant. Early in the first session, I read the passage from Proverbs about the sluggard's field. Immediately, the pastor exclaimed, "*That describes our marriage!*" As we continued, I suggested that they each were deeply hurt, feeling rejected and cast aside by the other, and they both yearned to be loved by their spouses. Both were thankful (and surprised) to learn that their partner was absolutely committed to the marriage and that they each yearned to be loved by the other. Both repented of their sins against God and each other. Over time they developed new habits of biblical conflict resolution (pulling the weeds in marriage) and investing time and effort in pursuing marital intimacy (planting the flowers). By God's grace, their marriage was renewed.

### **III. *Lies Are Like a Deadly Cancer to Your Relationship***

Nothing is more important in marriage than mutual trust, and nothing is more destructive to marriage than falsehood. Marriage begins with the making of a covenant in which each party makes important promises before God and witnesses. We typically call adultery infidelity or unfaithfulness because sexual sin is the breaking of a covenant promise. I have often heard the victim of marital infidelity say, “I probably can forgive the sex, but I do not know if I can forget the lies or if I can ever trust this person again.”

Paul illustrates the importance of honesty in close relationships: “Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another” (Eph 4:25). While the immediate context refers to the need for believers to trust one another in the church, marriage is an even more intimate relationship, as husband and wife are “one flesh” (Gen 2:24). Let me develop Paul’s illustration: It would be terrifying if I could not trust certain body parts while I was jogging. For example, if my eyes deceived me by saying that the light is green and the coast is clear when the light is red and cars are speeding by, or if every few hundred steps my leg were to erupt in sharp pain and cause me to fall, I would quit running for exercise. In the same way, it would be unbearable if you could not trust the person with whom you are yoked for life—your “other half.”

Why do people lie? Typically, they lie for selfish reasons. They may lie to gain something from another person—for example, someone may misrepresent the mechanical condition of a car they wish to sell. Others may lie just to maintain peace. A husband may promise that he will take care of a household task to get his wife off his back, even though he has no plan to carry out his commitment. Perhaps the most common reason for lying is to avoid painful consequences. I have counseled men who were going to casinos or strip clubs during times when their wives thought they were working. When I have insisted that such men confess their sins to their wives and seek forgiveness, I have heard the objection that it would hurt her too much if he were to tell her. My reply is that their sin was what causes the hurt, and the confession would make it possible for the process of healing to begin. I know a man who covered up adultery for several years until it was finally exposed. “Be sure your sin will find you out” (Num 32:23b). He thought he was protecting his wife from the pain of knowing. Instead, her suffering was compounded because she had to try to forgive the fact that he had lived a lie, deceiving her for years.

Lying also involves withholding the truth from someone who has the right to know (as in the cases above). Another example would be if one

spouse were to spend a large amount of money without telling the other. Until the truth is told, that spouse is, in a sense, living a lie.

Lying also includes the failure to keep a commitment; the righteous man “swears to his own hurt and does not change” (Ps 15:4c). This principle would apply to the husband who promises to do a chore around the house but does not keep his word on a timely basis. Lying even includes misleading through exaggeration or spin. Another example of how some spouses do violence to the truth is when they misuse words such as “always” or “never” during an argument.

Just as people who are drunk are sometimes portrayed in films as comic figures, many habitual liars try to make a joke out of their deceptions. Some people are so accustomed to lying that I tell them that they need to learn to speak the truth as a new language as citizens of God’s kingdom the same way an immigrant would need to learn the language of his new home country. This fits the context of Ephesians 4:25, as it reminds us that we have in a sense been delivered from our old life to a new life in union with Christ. The former liar must learn to be slow and careful in his speech (Jas 1:19) as he learns to trust God that it is better to tell the truth, even if it may seem that he could avoid trouble through falsehood.

Another way to promote truth in marriage is to make it safe for one’s spouse to reveal their sins and failures. A wife whose husband had been struggling with porn discovered that the accountability software on his computer had been uninstalled. He denied having any knowledge of how this might have happened. If he did it, which is extremely likely, it would have been better for him to have confessed his failure to his wife while also seeking additional accountability from church leadership. In another case, a wife got a very expensive traffic ticket. She could have been tempted to try to pay it without her husband’s knowledge. Instead, she told him as soon as she saw him, and thankfully, his (my) response was kind and understanding. The gospel both gives us a new truth-telling nature (Eph 4:25) and a new gracious spirit (Eph 4:31–32), even when the truth hurts.

#### ***IV. Lust Can Destroy a Marriage***

If laziness is like allowing the weeds to grow and lying is like a cancer, lust can be like a bomb going off in a marriage. Our concern to help couples preserve the purity of their marriages is heightened by the number of adultery cases in which we have counseled, including several involving pastors and other ministry leaders. Few Christians plan to have an affair, yet because we are vulnerable, Scripture admonishes us, “Therefore let him

who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall” (1 Cor 10:12)—in other words, if you believe that you are not capable of sexual sin, you may be in grave danger.

There is also a positive side to fighting against sexual temptation. We often quote the first part of 2 Timothy 2:22, “Flee youthful lusts” without giving adequate attention to the rest of the verse, “pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, with those who call upon the Lord from a pure heart.” While it is important to put off sinful desires, it is also vital that we pursue and put on that which is good. This corresponds to the teaching of wisdom in the book of Proverbs, which contains extensive warnings against sexual sin (the strange woman of Proverbs 5:1–23; 6:24–35; 7:1–27), while also extolling the pursuit of godly wisdom (portrayed metaphorically as Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 1:20–33; 4:5–9; 9:1–6) in the fear of the Lord as the best protection against sexual sin; God’s wisdom will guard you from disastrous immorality and will bring blessing and satisfaction to your soul (Prov 2:16–21). While having a fulfilling sexual relationship with your spouse may help you avoid lust (Prov 5:15–19), not every person enjoys such a happy and fulfilling marriage. You cannot blame your spouse or your lack of a spouse for sexual sin (1 Cor 10:13; Gal 5:16). Wisdom will guard you even when you do not enjoy an ideal marriage.

We have seen common patterns that lead to marital infidelity. First, one or both partners are not pursuing the Lord and his wisdom for their ultimate joy and fulfillment. This strips away their spiritual armor and makes them vulnerable to the evil one’s onslaught (Eph 6:10–17). This spiritual malaise is then compounded by the deterioration of the marriage relationship due to laziness or conflict. We have observed that the most common cause of adultery has not so much been sexual desire as feeling rejected by one’s spouse. We hear, “He treats me like I am stupid. No matter how hard I try to please him it is never enough,” or “He is always so busy with his work or his sports or his video games that he does not pay any attention to me.” This makes her vulnerable to the seducer who flatters and thus spreads a net for her feet (Prov 29:5). Women often fall into sinful relationships with men who pay attention to them, saying that they are smart and attractive. Men are vulnerable to women who treat them with honor and respect.

The path to adultery is often like this: A man and a woman notice each other at the gym, or when each takes their child to soccer practice. We have even seen adultery begin at a church activity or a shared ministry. They have no conscious intention of falling into the sin that will later wreak havoc on many lives. They engage in conversation and find that they enjoy each other’s company. He feels disappointed when she is not there, or she times

her visits to the gym when she knows he will be working out. They might start texting each other while hiding their communications from their spouses. They feel comfortable and alive in each other's company. At some point, a barrier is crossed. Their hands touch. She squeezes and he squeezes back. Or he confesses that he is attracted to her, expecting that she will be repulsed, but instead she acknowledges similar feelings. Sin is deceitful (Heb 3:13; Jer 17:9). They slide into their affair trying to tell themselves that it is temporary or that no one else needs to know or get hurt by what they are doing. Yet when they are discovered, or when one of them is overwhelmed by guilt and confesses to their spouse, they will reap a harvest of suffering that will affect many—spouse, children, extended family, church, and friends (Gal 6:7). Ultimately, they, like King David, will face hard consequences (Ps 32:3–4; Prov 5:20–23; 6:26–35; 7:22–27). Yet there is hope after adultery. We have seen several marriages restored as God has granted repentance and grace to a couple.<sup>5</sup> However, it is much better to avoid disaster than to recover from it.

Worldly wisdom states that you can safely enjoy intimate friendships with those of the opposite sex. They often imply that when a friendship becomes sexual, it was “meant to be” as people followed their hearts. In recent years, many evangelicals have criticized the Billy Graham rule as being overly restrictive to male-female friendships among Christians. Knowing the moral dangers faced by those in the ministry, Graham and his team members each committed to not spending time alone with a woman other than his wife to avoid temptation or even the appearance of compromise. Later, Vice President Mike Pence was criticized for having a similar safeguard, which some claimed kept women from having equal opportunities for advancement. While we recognize that men and women can enjoy appropriate friendships, we have seen enough cases of moral failure that we are convinced that caution is appropriate. Scripture warns us to stay far away from temptation: “Keep your way far from her and do not go near the door of her house” (Prov 5:8).

Even secular research has shown that being emotionally vulnerable with someone of the opposite sex often leads to romantic attraction. In her *New York Times* article “To Fall in Love with Anyone, Do This,” Mandy Len Catron examines a study by psychologist Arthur Aron that suggests that total strangers can accelerate the intimacy between them by asking each

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<sup>5</sup> Jim Newheiser, “Bringing Healing to Marriages Broken by Sexual Sin,” *IBCD*, 2020, <https://ibcd.org/bringing-healing-to-marriages-broken-by-sexual-sin/> (audio); Jim Newheiser, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 245–53.

other a specific series of personal questions.<sup>6</sup> Catron and Aron have merely noticed what many have realized for centuries. Proximity coupled with personal intimacy often leads to romantic and sexual attraction between men and women: actors may fall in love on a movie set, or a military leader and an author may fall in love while working together on his autobiography.

We believe that couples should agree upon guidelines for propriety and safety. Some of Caroline's and my guidelines include no time alone and no private personal interactions (such as texting) with a member of the opposite sex.<sup>7</sup> If you need to pour your heart out to someone, find a mature same-sex believer. We also avoid any appearance of flirtation, and we are careful about touching and hugging.

We realize that external rules alone will not keep your marriage safe from infidelity. It is most important to guard your heart (Prov 4:23), from which sexual sin comes (Mark 7:20–23). Inward lusts and fantasies (especially pornography) are sinful in and of themselves (Matt 5:27–28). They can also lead to deadlier sins. Evil desires when conceived must be aborted or they may lead to sinful acts and death (Jas 1:14–15; Col 3:5).

We also believe that it is vital for couples to actively pursue both personal and sexual intimacy within their marriages. We should not blame the innocent spouse when their partner commits adultery, supposing that if only she had been a better lover this would not have happened. Rather, if only he had been walking in the Spirit, he would not have given in to fleshly desires (Gal 5:16–24). However, the Bible does explicitly teach that a sexually fulfilling marriage is a safeguard against sexual sin (Prov 5:15–20; 1 Cor 7:3–5). We also believe that personal intimacy, including conflict resolution (pulling the weeds) and building friendship (planting flowers), is the prerequisite to long-term sexual fulfillment in marriage.

## **V. Lift One Another Up with Affirmation**

Several years ago, when a friend gave me Sam Crabtree's book *Practicing Affirmation*,<sup>8</sup> I was a bit suspicious. I am a Calvinist who believes in total depravity, and I am a biblical counselor who rejects psychobabble about

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel Jones, "The 36 Question That Lead to Love," *New York Times*, January 9, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/09/style/no-37-big-wedding-or-small.html>; Mandy Len Catron, "Modern Love: To Fall in Love with Anyone Do This," *New York Times*, January 11, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/style/modern-love-to-fall-in-love-with-anyone-do-this.html>.

<sup>7</sup> We are not absolutely rigid about this rule. For example, if we have an opposite-sex houseguest who needs a ride, our spouse can agree that an exception can be made.

<sup>8</sup> Sam Crabtree, *Practicing Affirmation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

self-esteem being the key to personal fulfillment. But as I read Crabtree's book and later heard him speak, I realized that he makes a strong biblical case for appropriately affirming the good work of God in one another—or, as Crabtree puts it, “giving God-centered praise to those who are not God.”

There are many cases in Scripture in which those who are faithful and obedient are praised (Num 12:3; Job 2:3; Ps 89:20; Heb 11). When Paul writes his epistles, he ordinarily finds something to affirm about the recipients (Col 1:3–8; 1 Thess 1:2–10), including the Corinthians, even if he will be bringing correction later (1 Cor 1:4–8). In Jesus's letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor in Revelation 2 and 3, he usually begins by praising a church for its faithfulness before he addresses concerns that they must address.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the most relevant passage for spousal affirmation is Proverbs 31:28–29 “Her children rise up and bless her; Her husband also and he praises her, saying: ‘Many daughters have done nobly, But you excel them all.’”

Crabtree points out that most romantic relationships begin with a great deal of affirmation. Just the fact that this other person is so attracted to you that they want to marry you is very encouraging! He then observes that as time goes by, there is often more correction and less affirmation.<sup>10</sup> They become more vocal about where their expectations are not being met and less appreciative of their spouse's finer qualities and better deeds. Many of us have seen couples who constantly quarrel over every little thing (Prov 20:3; 25:24; 29:22). It is no surprise that such marriages can grow cold. Some men manage by exception. If his wife and children do what is expected, he says nothing, but when their performance does not meet expectations, he is quick to correct. This attitude can lead to other temptations, as we discussed in the previous section. A wife who believes that she can never satisfy her husband's demands may be more vulnerable to a man who affirms her.

Crabtree asserts that affirmation is like making a deposit into the relationship account, and criticism is like making a withdrawal. Crabtree suggests that it takes several affirmations to counterbalance one correction.<sup>11</sup> Just as a bank no longer honors your checks when your account is overdrawn, others stop listening to you when the bank of relationship is significantly overdrawn.

Most of us have seen people on the beach using metal detectors to try to find coins and jewelry in the sand. I encourage my counselees to become affirmation detectors, searching for what can be legitimately praised in one another. I sometimes ask a counselee, “What would you think if someone

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<sup>9</sup> I would express caution about an approach to personal correction that begins with affirmation just so one can get to the criticism that was really the main agenda.

<sup>10</sup> Crabtree, *Practicing Affirmation*, 42–44.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 44–48, 52.

could grow one blade of grass on the moon?” You could compare it to a rainforest on earth, and it is not much. But even one blade of grass on the moon would be amazing. Some of us may have to search carefully for that one blade of grass that we can sincerely affirm. For some of us (and I include myself), for whom criticism and correction come more naturally, this takes a radical change of thinking. Sometimes I have given the assignment for each spouse to find two things about the other person that they can affirm each day. And then to keep doing this for the rest of their lives together.

One might ask, “But if my spouse and children are not believers, can I still affirm them?” Crabtree answers yes.<sup>12</sup> We can still acknowledge the common grace good done by unbelievers as God restrains their sin and produces a kind of civic righteousness. Unsaved family members can still be honest, respectful, and hardworking. We know that this is only by God’s (common) grace, and we pray that one day they will know his redeeming grace. Perhaps the Lord will use your affirmation to draw them to himself.

Affirmation can be very powerful. I have interrupted a couple during an argument and asked each of them to say three things they appreciated about the other. The temperature in the room changed immediately. She said, “I did not know you thought that about me.” “Sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness” (Prov 16:21b).

Affirmation glorifies God for his good work in others. We could even say that to fail to affirm is to rob God of his glory.

## ***VI. Love, Not Law, Will Keep Your Marriage Strong***

Most human relationships, including many marriages, operate based on the principle of law. If you are kind to me and meet my expectations, I will be kind to you. If I do not like what you say, I will pull away from you and give you the silent treatment. If you do the chores, I will have sex with you. If you do not pay enough attention to me in conversation, I will not offer you any physical affection. If you mistreat me, I will find a way to retaliate and get revenge. To the natural man, this approach seems both just and reasonable. Law-based marriage leads to strife, anger, bitterness, separation, and sometimes divorce. I had one professing Christian husband in a very troubled marriage who incessantly talked about reciprocity in marriage. He was absolutely determined to give his wife whatever he decided that she deserved based upon her treatment of him. Sadly, she could not meet his expectations, and the marriage was on the path to dissolution. Thankfully,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 121.

this is not how God has treated us: “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to his mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). Many marriages struggle or even fail because of what we call a gospel disconnect.<sup>13</sup> We want God to treat us according to grace, but we, like the unmerciful servant (Matt 18:21–35) treat others according to law.

Both the Old and New Testaments portray the Lord’s relationship with us, his people, as a marriage (Isa 54:5; Eph 5:32). God deals with us according to grace. He does not treat us as our sins deserve (Ps 103:10). God’s gracious love should move us to love one another. “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:10–11). Later, John writes, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). You must first know God’s love for you in Christ before you can reflect that love to your spouse. The best thing you can do to help your marriage is to better understand the love of Christ for you. Paul, after spending almost three chapters describing how God has loved us from eternity and at great cost, prays that his readers would be spiritually strengthened so they can comprehend the dimensions of Christ’s love for them (Eph 3:14–21). This love serves as the basis for the practical exhortations in Ephesians 4–6, including admonitions to forgive and love one another in marriage. We often assign Paul’s prayer to our counselees. If they will only know and appreciate Christ’s love for them, God will do more than they could have imagined in their lives.

The key for a husband to successfully fulfill Paul’s exhortation to love his wife (Eph 5:25) is not merely to employ techniques such as forcing himself to help around the house and buy her flowers every now and then. The husband who is failing to love his wife well has lost sight of Christ’s gracious love for him. The husband who so knows Christ’s love can treat his wife well even though she sometimes may not have earned it.

Dave Harvey’s book *When Sinners Say “I Do”*<sup>14</sup> is one of our favorite resources to give to couples in struggling marriages. He says that a key to being gracious to your spouse is to humbly realize that because you are the “chief of sinners” (1 Tim 1:15), you are in no position to judge (Jas 4:11–12).<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, you are married to a sinner, so you should not be shocked

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<sup>13</sup> We have observed that if some spouses had the same unconditional love for each other that they do for their children (“Nothing will ever stop me from loving you”), their marriages would be much stronger.

<sup>14</sup> Dave Harvey, *When Sinners Say “I Do”* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 33–44.

when they (also) sin. You should see their sin as an opportunity to show mercy and help them (Gals 6:1–2), rather than punish them.<sup>16</sup> Try to lead them toward repentance the same way God helped you: “The kindness of God leads you to repentance” (Rom 2:4).

Consistently showing such love is not easy. Paul warns, “For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please” (Gal 5:17). Paul Tripp writes, “The big battles in marriage are not the ones you fight with your spouse. No, the big battles are the ones being fought in your heart.”<sup>17</sup> We should never say that our partner made us sin—“You made me angry.” Paul encourages us this way: “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (Gal 5:16). Your spouse may tempt or provoke you, but they cannot cause you to sin—“enmities, strife ... outbursts of anger, disputes” (Gal 5:20). You can bear the fruit of the Spirit, including love, patience, and kindness, even when it is hard (Gal 5:22–23).

## Conclusion

The most important key to having a successful marriage is the gospel. The deeper your experience of God’s love for you in Christ, the more you will be motivated to show gracious, sacrificial love to your spouse. My prayer for myself is that I will become a man of grace, especially in my marriage. My hope is that when my wife thinks about how I treat her, she would, at least in some measure, think, “That is how Christ loves me.”

Be encouraged that God is working in your marriage. Many of us approach marriage with the goal that our needs will be met and our spouse will make us happy. God’s goal for you is that you become more like Jesus (Col 1:28). Marriage, in addition to being a great source of joy and blessing, is also an important means by which God sanctifies us. Sometimes our failures and our struggles are how he teaches us about his love and conforms us to Christ.

Finally, a word for the single reader. One day you may be married, in which case these principles can be a blessing to you and your spouse. Also, as you consider what the Bible says about marriage, you can appreciate the perfect sacrificial love of Christ and how you are to gladly submit to him. Finally, you can apply these principles as you live in community with family members and the believers in your church.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 77–96.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Tripp, *Marriage: 6 Gospel Commitments Every Couple Needs to Make* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 141.

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# A Pastoral Framework for Infidelity Counseling

MICHAEL GEMBOLA

## Abstract

Marital restoration from infidelity follows the biblical pattern of Christian discipleship, involving specific action steps and progress of insight in a relational context. The teaching of Jesus that adultery comes from the heart provides a central guiding insight for conceptualizing infidelity and marital restoration. A framework is presented for the varied helping efforts required for the spouse who was unfaithful, for the spouse who was betrayed, and for the marriage.

## Keywords

*Pastoral counseling, infidelity, adultery, affairs, marriage counseling, divorce, marital reconciliation*

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**C**ontrary to commonly cited statistics, most first marriages do not end in divorce. Though estimates vary, it is likely also true that most marriages survive infidelity.<sup>1</sup> There is much reason for hope. Many times, the work of pastoral care and counseling after infidelity is analogous to medical interventions after a heart attack. Most people survive heart attacks. But the care provided in the aftermath has great consequences for the person's long-term health. So it is with marriage. A marriage may not be killed by an affair, but it needs urgent help, followed by wise care over time.

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<sup>1</sup> See Wayne Grudem, *What the Bible Says about Divorce and Remarriage* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 10–13.

Therefore, a pastoral framework is called for that will provide the holistic care that a family needs in the aftermath of infidelity. After establishing brief foundations for a philosophy of pastoral care, this essay considers infidelity in a modern context. Then, the concerns and care for each spouse, as well as the marriage, are considered. A central guiding theme is drawn from the words of Jesus that all grievous sins, and adultery specifically by name, come from the heart. Ministry to couples after infidelity must be skilled work on the heart.

## **I. Foundations**

Pastoral theology as a discipline has always sought to answer the problems of the day with ancient words still relevant. This task requires application to people and problems, so it builds on systematic biblical teaching on what a person is, what a marriage is, and what a church is. The work is always interdisciplinary, not separating what God has brought together. To craft pastoral theology today in an historic Protestant perspective is to work from one ultimate authority, the Bible. Although biblical studies naturally takes a primary role, it does not exist in isolation. All interpreters work from a confessional framework, though not all give us the courtesy of writing out that confession or working within one of the church's historic statements of faith. Interpretation is always theological. Beyond biblical studies, therefore, theological anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and ethics are all relevant to this complex task of marital restoration. Wise pastoral care and counseling will also pursue humility by engaging two additional conversation partners: pastoral theology and psychology.

Both are useful in different ways. Engaging the pastoral theology tradition works against the blind spots particular to every age. The project of theological retrieval has received strong attention in recent years in general, and increasingly in the fields of pastoral care and counseling.<sup>2</sup> Yet it is still generally true that there is a lack of historical consciousness in evangelical counseling resources. This need not be the case, because Christians have carefully studied people and problems from the church's earliest days. Pastors saw themselves as physicians of the soul, knew human maladies well, and left a corpus with both conceptualizations of problems and methodologies to treat them.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for the preeminent example, the works of the late Thomas Oden. However, within biblical counseling and Christian psychology circles there are also examples of scholars engaged in this effort, such as Robert Roberts, Eric Johnson, Dennis Okholm, Kent Dunnington, Bob Kelleman, and Mark Deckard.

Engaging modern psychology similarly helps the counselor avoid other kinds of blind spots, especially in its extensive case knowledge and observation of trends in infidelity. This knowledge is not, according to Cornelius Van Til, uninterpreted brute facts.<sup>3</sup> Christians who have been most critical of efforts to integrate psychological science and Christian ministry have, nonetheless, long conceded that observations and descriptions from psychology are especially valuable. Yet it has not always been demonstrated how to best leverage those resources to strengthen the care pastors and counselors provide. David Powlison's epistemology treated extrabiblical sources in this way: both psychology and the history of pastoral care play a *provocative* rather than *constitutive* role because the Bible has unique authority, necessity, and sufficiency.<sup>4</sup> All extrabiblical sources, Christian or secular, are valuable to the extent that they provoke deeper engagement with biblical truth. This epistemological perspective guides engagement with voices from Christian history and psychology. With this foundation in place, it is now possible to consider the challenge of infidelity.

## II. *The Pressing Need*

Infidelity matters because the ideal of committed marital love is precious and good. Infidelity happens because people fall short of this ideal. Humanity lives in a fallen state, bearing the marks of both the original created blessedness and a cursedness that infects every area of life under the sun (cf. Eccl 1:9). Sin is not new, yet every age has unique challenges. In an effort to explain why “happy people” cheat, Esther Perel says,

Never before have our expectations of marriage taken on such epic proportions. We still want everything the traditional family was meant to provide—security, respectability, property, and children—but now we also want our partner to love us, to desire us, to be *interested* in us. We should be best friends and trusted confidants, and passionate lovers.

She continues, “We want our chosen one to offer stability, safety, predictability, and dependability.” Yet “we want that very same person to supply awe, mystery, adventure, and risk.”<sup>5</sup> In this context, vulnerability to infidelity

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Cornelius Van Til, *Christian—Theistic Evidences*, Defense of Biblical Christianity 6 (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), 51, and John M. Frame, *Cornelius van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995), 180–81.

<sup>4</sup> See David Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2010), 151.

<sup>5</sup> Esther Perel, “Why Happy People Cheat,” *The Atlantic*. October 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/why-happy-people-cheat/537882/>; see also Esther Perel,

comes not from marriage being so difficult but from it being insufficient to carry the freight given it. Fallen human marriage falters under these burdens.

Understanding the logic of infidelity, the processes by which evil takes root and bears fruit, enables various Christian helpers to respond thoroughly, see bad fruit disposed of, and go further still, cutting down the tree and grinding up the roots. The helpers called upon to respond typically include pastors, counselors, family, and friends, and they each have valuable roles. Each role functions best within a unified biblical framework.

### **III. A Biblical Vision**

A foundation for restoration from infidelity can be drawn from the apostle Peter's call to believers in his second epistle:

Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins. (2 Pet 1:5–9 NIV)

“Make every effort” indicates the need to take concrete action steps to grow. However, this character growth includes *knowledge* in addition to faith, goodness, and the rest. All of these qualities make knowledge effective or productive (v. 8), which is the opposite of spiritual-sounding knowledge devoid of fruit. Effective knowledge of Christ means a life increasingly formed into the image of the Lord Jesus. To fall short of this character progression requires suppression of the knowledge of the core Christian message. “Nearsightedness” and “blindness” are the metaphors Peter draws upon. What is lost from sight is their having “been cleansed from their past sins” (v. 9), and this loss hinders progress in the listed virtues. In the context of these virtues, adultery is merely one dramatic example of their opposite vices. This character growth is not only a personal improvement project. Efforts to grow in holiness always exist within a relational context of close connection to God and others, and they extend to the whole church. Every believer is on a growth trajectory. Discipleship principles provide guidance in different ways to both spouses after infidelity. This

foundation frames the help required for three parties: the offender, the offended, and the marriage.

#### **IV. Help for the Offender**

The central insight for restoration can be drawn from the words of Jesus: adultery comes from the heart (Matt 15:19; 5:27–28). Jesus points within the person, so understanding the particulars of the path that led to getting lost will be relevant for finding the pathway home. The interventions of insight-oriented reflection, study, and counseling are not directly what the apostle Peter means by warning against losing insight, forgetting the forgiveness of sins in Jesus, and being unproductive in the knowledge of the Lord. This particular effort of insight instead follows the guidance of Paul to not be outwitted by the adversary but instead to be cognizant of his schemes (2 Cor 2:11). What are these schemes, then?

##### **1. The Psychology of an Affair**

This psychology or logic of an affair is often not immediately apparent. What is typically visible are protective barriers, such as defensiveness or the spiritual language of quick and full deliverance. Getting past these protections exposes at least two categories of motivation.

*Type One: Running toward.* One cluster of motivations provides fuel for a person running toward the affair. This experience is a mix of resentment and entitlement. Resentment is not a necessary consequence of suffering but a *reaction* to suffering. People are sometimes more vulnerable to affairs in times of great despair, but vulnerability often occurs in times of the subtler suffering of boredom, listlessness, and purposelessness. Although these feelings can emerge in any marriage, not everyone turns their marital pain into marital resentment. Resentment fosters entitled behaviors. The pattern can also go in reverse order. For example, one spouse may spend long weeknight hours at the gym or with friends, while the other spouse is home with children. This pattern of entitlement does not remain contained but grows and expands to the use of money and sex for self-seeking purposes. Entitlement in these cases is more fundamental than pain or resentment, yet the presence of pain or resentment is useful because it provides justification and permission to take steps toward infidelity. Then, in the process of marital reconciliation, those marital sufferings and resentments are often weaponized to blame the betrayed spouse.

The suffering of a difficult marriage may not be a main driver of infidelity, at least in the cultural context of the United States at this time. As Perel

says, “Affairs are not what they used to be because marriage is not what it used to be”—rather, she continues, “So often, the most intoxicating ‘other’ that people discover in an affair is not a new partner; it’s a new self.”<sup>6</sup> It is not so much a new marriage but “a new me” that is so tempting. Shirley Glass, in her popular book on infidelity, saw a similar trend:

A compelling aspect of emotional affairs is the positive mirroring that occurs. We like how we see ourselves reflected in the other person’s eyes. By contrast, in our long-term relationships, our reflection is like a 5x makeup mirror in which our flaws are magnified. In a new romance, our reflection is like the rosy glow of an illuminated vanity mirror.<sup>7</sup>

In marriage, spouses regularly face their imperfections. But in a new relationship, people see themselves not as irritating or boring but as exciting and attractive. Infidelity often arises in the context of the desire to regain a sense of self—a desirable or even admirable self. This is ironic because even in secular societies infidelity is one of the least admired sins. Yet the fantasy allures many. Perel captures this allure well, explaining, “It’s more about feeling sexy than having sex.” She quotes one woman who told her, “It makes me feel alive.” Here, the connection with entitlement remains, as Perel says: “We ... live in an age of entitlement; personal fulfillment, we believe, is our due. In the West, sex is a right linked to our individuality, our self-actualization, and our freedom.”<sup>8</sup> Christian counselors Tim Clinton and Mark Laaser similarly notice this trend: “Many adulterers think they are looking for love when, in fact, they are seeking to feel better about themselves.”<sup>9</sup> An affair is typically not first about sexual desire. An affair provides the opportunity to experience, in mind and body, the fantasy of having a different and more exciting life and of being a different and more exciting person. It is not uncommon for people to share the sentiment, “Everything else in life is for other people, but this one thing is for me.” This does not capture the motivation for every affair, but it is a common and powerful motivation.

*Type Two: Running Away.* A second category of motivation is a mix of fear and refuge seeking. Some find less resonance with the idea of entitlement because when they look back on when the affair occurred, they remember

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<sup>6</sup> Perel, “Why Happy People Cheat.”

<sup>7</sup> Shirley Glass, *Not “Just Friends”*: *Rebuilding Trust and Recovering Your Sanity after Infidelity* (New York: Atria, 2004), 45.

<sup>8</sup> Perel, “Why Happy People Cheat.”

<sup>9</sup> Tim Clinton and Mark Laaser, *The Quick-Reference Guide to Sexuality and Relationship Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 136.

feeling desperate, that they needed the forbidden relationship for survival. For example, a work colleague who served as a confidant can become a paramour during a time of major suffering, whether that be an illness that threatens one's children or the death of a parent. Other times it is not a loss or near miss but, as in Type One, the long slog of a difficult life. For example, those who serve as caretakers for family members, those with several young children, and those with burnout-inducing work lives feel weary. The affair then feels not so much like the spark of vitality in a dreary world (as in the entitlement pattern) as warmth to survive a blizzard. This experience of suffering makes one vulnerable to seeking false refuge and, to shift metaphors, drinking from the broken cistern. Sometimes people will say that prior to the affair, they felt like everything had been dry and dead for some time. Or they use the opposite metaphor and say they were drowning. Here entitlement does not come through in the same way because it does not always sound like "It's only fair that I have this" or "I deserve this," but rather "I need this" or "I can't live without this." It is no less misguided or entitled in a certain sense than in the pattern of overt entitlement, but it is a different internal logic, and so the unraveling of the problem works differently. Unlike the entitlement pattern, here people do not feel so wonderful about themselves or that their lives are now finally exciting. They feel a mountain of guilt and shame. The sentiment is, "I'm a terrible person for doing this, but I can't live without it." That shame often lingers long after the affair ends.<sup>10</sup>

This survey has covered common infidelity motivations and narratives. The central theme visible in each is the message of Jesus: adultery comes from within the person. The sufferings of life can be a context for infidelity but not the cause. The New Testament word often translated *temptation* (*peirasmos*) also carries the meaning of *testing* or *trial*. Two key components in all temptation are *affliction* and *allure*.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, a person who is tempted faces an attack or bombardment. On the other hand, part of the person wants it. As the apostle James says, "Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed" (Jas 1:14). After infidelity, offenders often point to the external context and resonate with what is called the "symptom theory." Yet treating infidelity as a symptom of

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<sup>10</sup> One variant of this experience includes cases where it appears that people replay the dynamics of their past traumatic suffering through successive affairs. Some elements of this essay may be applicable, but the experience is sufficiently complex to merit its own study.

<sup>11</sup> This principle of the allure and affliction of temptation is a thread throughout David Powlison's *Making All Things New: Restoring Joy to the Sexually Broken* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).

marital dysfunction does not do justice to the Bible's teaching on the primacy of the heart. Seeking sources of culpability outside the person creates a major obstacle to restoration.

## **2. Overcoming Obstacles to Restoration**

The primary obstacle to restoration is a set of self-protective behaviors: minimization, denial, blame shifting, and defensiveness. The greatest aid to restoration is the opposite of each. Rather than minimization and denial, the person soberly considers the gravity of infidelity and speaks about its impact on one's relationship with God, spouse, and family. Rather than blame shifting and defensiveness, the person takes responsibility, owning the infidelity, the lies, and the whole pattern of life that supported the infidelity.

The Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC) explains what infidelity entails and gives positive commands that are its opposite. Specifically, WLC 138 calls for "diligent labor in our callings" and "temperance" as two component parts in obeying the seventh commandment. First, productive engagement in one's calling is a wise antidote to the ennui that makes infidelity alluring for many. Second, temperance, a virtue broader than sexual restraint, locates infidelity as connected to other sins. For example, as seen in the virtue ethics tradition following Evagrius, Cassian, and Gregory, vices are interlocking and mutually sustaining. To turn away from adultery involves not only avoiding the sexual sins but also turning away the web of sins that enabled it and sustained it.<sup>12</sup> In this tradition, cultivating patience, endurance, and temperance is a prophylactic and cure for appetitive and addictive sins. To resist sexual sin requires temperance in food and alcohol, as well as in anger, so that one's manner of driving in traffic or talking to customer service representatives is a microcosm of the problem.

Nothing less than the cultivation of mature Christian character brings safety from falling back into infidelity, and nothing less than mature Christian character makes it possible to restore loving marriage and family relationships. Otherwise, immaturity leads to feeling victimized by spouses or children saying "ouch" and makes it impossible to appreciate the impact of infidelity and speak compassionately to those most hurt.<sup>13</sup> To grow in

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<sup>12</sup> See Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 19, 33–34, and Dennis Okholm, *Dangerous Passions, Deadly Sins: Learning from the Psychology of Ancient Monks* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2014), 14.

<sup>13</sup> This tendency is a natural extension of what made infidelity possible in the first place: "Self-deception can take the form of denying self-indulgent motives or refusing to acknowledge the potential damage. With practice, people find it easier to hide those unacceptable parts of themselves from themselves. They gloss over aspects that are inconsistent with their

character means being stronger, steadier, and more resistant to the winds that blow and threaten to take believers off course (Eph 4:11–16). None of this may be disconnected from the core gospel message. Progress in Peter’s list of character qualities requires knowledge of Christ and his cleansing, and that knowledge is lived out precisely in these efforts toward holiness. God is the one who saves from sin, but he uses means.

A major part of growing in insight and character is confession. As Ed Welch says, “The fastest way to bring a wrecking ball to our skewed interpretations is through confession.”<sup>14</sup> Yet this is fraught work because, often early on, the words of confession are thin. Many who have been unfaithful reflexively shift the blame. Michael White explains how one comes to take responsibility and recommends that counseling include the discovering and naming of cultural messages that were received and then over time were internalized and acted upon. For example, “What did you learn about sex growing up? What messages are in the world around us about sex?” Or, “What messages have you received about what to do with unhappiness?” This initial distancing of the messages from the person exposes the messages for what they are. It also allows counselors and pastors to establish collaborative relationships with people who are not taking responsibility yet, even though they say they are. Discovering the lies is a good precursor to owning what one has done in response to those internalized lies. “Responsibility,” White says, “is the outcome of these explorations, not the starting point.”<sup>15</sup>

White’s approach echoes the method taken by Evagrius of Pontus, who offers ways to combat an extensive list of messages suggested to believers, whether by demons or the believer’s own fallen heart.<sup>16</sup> Evagrius highlighted the message or the lie and answered every message with Scripture. This approach of uncovering and talking back to the messages offers a way forward for helpers to get past the defenses in a less directly combative manner. It invites the helper to come alongside the fallen brother or sister and look outside at the messages or lies they were sold. This method does not deviate from Jesus’s teaching of adultery coming from the heart but rather supplements it with the perspective of sin as a prowling and attacking force in Genesis 4:7, in the Lord’s warning to Cain: “Sin is crouching at your door.”

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internalized values. They tell themselves that what they are doing isn’t so bad, that everybody does it and life goes on,” (Glass, *Not Just Friends*, 63).

<sup>14</sup> Edward Welch, *Shame Interrupted: How God Lifts the Pain of Worthlessness and Rejection* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2012), 91.

<sup>15</sup> Michael White, *Narrative Practice: Continuing the Conversations* (New York: Norton, 2011), 103.

<sup>16</sup> Evagrius of Pontus, *Talking Back: A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).

Sin is internal, but in some sense it is also external, and there is rhetorical value in externalizing the problem. Pastors and counselors are realistic, though, about the effectiveness of any technique; as the old hymn says, “All is vain unless the Spirit of the Holy One comes down; brethren, pray!”<sup>17</sup> All this work depends on spiritual intervention, and helping a person leave behind defensiveness and take responsibility often takes time.

This time of working past defenses and blame shifting remains connected to the ongoing work of facilitating confession. The confession to one’s spouse should occur in at least two parts. The first should be a plain admission of the sin. The second will be most effective if delayed. As White explains, “The idea of an apology will be meaningless until significance is attributed to the consequences.”<sup>18</sup> The Old Testament prophets teach that certain conditions must be met with the seeking of forgiveness. Coming to God with bare words has no value if the people have no willingness to own the severity or consequences of their sins. If they are not prepared to rend their hearts, they need not rend their garments (Joel 2:13). This principle applies both vertically and horizontally, with both God and the betrayed spouse and children.

This ability to grieve one’s sins and speak empathetically about their impact on others is a key fruit of repentance. The more communication contains no attacks or defensiveness, the more likely it is that marital counseling and reconciliation efforts will be effective. The change will be visible and far-reaching. As Archibald Alexander said, “Christians, when recovered from backsliding, are commonly more watchful, and walk more circumspectly than they ever did before. They cannot but be more humble.”<sup>19</sup>

## **V. Help for the Offended**

Pastoral care appropriately locates the problem in the heart of the person who committed infidelity and not in the betrayed spouse; therefore, pastoral energy is typically directed toward the person who was unfaithful. The unintended side effect is that, from a pastoral care standpoint, betrayed spouses commonly feel neglected in their suffering. What does the betrayed spouse need from the church? The specific help and healing needed become clearer as the nature of the wound becomes clearer.

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<sup>17</sup> George Akin, “Brethren, We Have Met to Worship,” (1817) *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Atlanta: Great Commission Publication, 1990), #381.

<sup>18</sup> White, *Narrative Practice*, 106.

<sup>19</sup> Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 175.

### 1. *The Need for Clarity amid Confusion*

The disclosure of an affair affects people in very different ways. Some experience the disclosure as clarifying and vindicating because they long suspected they were being misled and they finally have proof. Although disclosure is commonly experienced as traumatic (as in the section below), some initially feel a small relief: “I knew I wasn’t crazy. And to think my spouse accused *me* of being suspicious!” This also sparks feelings of injustice and anger. Before, the active deception fostered confusion, disorientation, or even guilt. Now, having the truth is validating, but it does not take away the need for validation from helpers. Here, the bridled righteous indignation of a friend or pastor validates suffering and often feels further clarifying and sanity giving. God is displeased with betrayal; helpers are too. This empathic response solidifies the betrayed spouse’s feeling that this sin was indeed serious. The spouse is then better prepared for various unhelpful pressures.

*Pressure from spouse.* Some betrayed spouses are persuaded to minimize and take blame for the affair, to feel pressure to now be sexually intimate more frequently, to avoid sharing grievances or “being negative,” to do better with money or the house, to research marital resources, to schedule counseling, or to lead the restoration plan. In the wake of an affair, these pressures are inappropriate and damaging. In cases that follow the entitlement pattern, when spouses or pastors give in to the unfaithful spouse’s narrative, it only affirms unfaithful spouses in self-centeredness and assists them in sustaining their mode of blame shifting. In addition to the pressure connected to blame shifting, some unfaithful spouses will even seek to enforce strict silence on the other, as though the presence of a single apology now renders the offended party voiceless in the matter and no family, friends, or church leaders can or should know about the affair. Ken Sande and Kevin Johnson answer this question wisely: “Can you ever mention the sin[s] again?” Yes, they argue, by “bringing them up for [the offender’s] good.”<sup>20</sup> Sensitive believers who have been betrayed will often find themselves willing to accept this pressure and rush to full reconciliation without yet observing sustained repentance. They long for a testimony of a reconciled marital relationship. They desperately pray for a story of redemption for the marriage. They want to be able to say, “Look at what the Lord has done!” They often pray, “Wouldn’t I be able to glorify you more through a story of a rescued marriage?” This pressure to reconcile quickly is intensified by insensitive comments often made to betrayed spouses.

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<sup>20</sup> Ken Sande and Kevin Johnson, *Resolving Everyday Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 94–95.

*Pressure from others.* The “takes two to tango” and “always a two-way street” comments commonly expressed suggest that many believe that underlying marital problems are the primary cause of infidelity. Even worse is the idea that a deficiency in the betrayed spouse primarily drives infidelity. Perel takes exception to the prevailing theory that infidelity is merely a symptom of a diseased marriage, naming two faulty underlying principles. The first is that lust can take hold, even if a marriage is good. Second, “infidelity does not always correlate neatly with marital dysfunction.”<sup>21</sup> She is right that both principles are faulty. Sex in marriage is a help, but it cannot be one’s hope; spouses provide care, but no cure. Paul’s affirmation of the usefulness of marital intimacy must not be taken past its intent (1 Cor 7:1–7). Further, although infidelity often occurs amid challenging marital dynamics, moral failure can happen in one spouse independent of the other. What a gift it is, then, when a pastor or friend affirms the words of Jesus that adultery comes from the heart (Matt 19:9). No marital dynamic however ugly, no grievance however valid, and no problem in the spouse however extreme justifies an affair as the next step.

Another pressure exists in two forms. One is to reconcile quickly and not choose divorce, even in the absence of observable fruit of repentance. Another pressure is to move quickly to divorce. Both perspectives unhelpfully pressure the betrayed spouse. Helpful guidance will not only avoid blaming the betrayed spouse for the infidelity but will also resist binding the conscience on whether and on what timetable to reconcile. It cannot be said that divorce in this context is wrong on a particular timeline or is antithetical to forgiveness, because Scripture grants permission for divorce after adultery. Yet restoration is a beautiful thing. Even Bible scholars who offer the most robust defense of there being true biblical grounds for divorce recognize that the dominant thread going through Scripture is to encourage believers to cultivate lifelong marriages.<sup>22</sup> God often works miraculous healing in these circumstances, and a decision of this magnitude merits an unhurried prayerful time of decision.

It is possible to reconcile prematurely. The risk is of surface reconciliation without sustained repentance. As many have observed, God does not restore closeness of fellowship with unrepentant people; God’s people cannot,

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<sup>21</sup> Perel, “Why Happy People Cheat.”

<sup>22</sup> For example, David Instone-Brewer takes a broader view of biblical grounds than the majority Protestant tradition, yet he still maintains that “Jesus and Paul ... discouraged divorce even for valid grounds” and “emphasized ways to stay married rather than ways to divorce.” See David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), ix, 302.

either. Wise pastoral care follows the teaching of Jesus in upholding the creational ideal of a lifelong marriage, while also maintaining this clarity: permission truly is permission. Two principles must be held together. First, marital restoration is a good and worthy goal to which we give our best efforts, and in God's kindness, many, or even most households are restored after infidelity. Second, some fires burn the house down, some spouses are unrepentant after infidelity, and sometimes divorce is mercy.

## **2. *The Need for Care amid Chaos***

Although some betrayed spouses experience clarity and anger with the disclosure of an affair, for others it is more immediately traumatic. The life that had existed before, the reality that had been present, the sense of what is up and what is down—all of this has now been shattered. Perel says,

The maelstrom of emotions unleashed in the wake of an affair can be so overwhelming that many psychologists turn to the field of trauma to explain the symptoms: obsessive rumination, hypervigilance, numbness and dissociation, inexplicable rages, uncontrollable panic.<sup>23</sup>

Like soldiers returning from war and feeling instant panic when they hear a car backfire, spouses who have been betrayed in marriage can likewise experience profound disturbances when reminders or anniversaries of the disclosure occur. Walking past pictures in the house from the time before or during the betrayal can be greatly upsetting.

To the extent that betrayal trauma functions like other traumas, it calls for patient care over time to bring the broken memories back together. In Diane Langberg's summary, the initial way forward after traumatic suffering involves "talking, tears, and time."<sup>24</sup> The months after the disclosure are typically the most emotionally intense. Although separation in general is not a therapeutic next step for addressing basic marital troubles, separation after infidelity may provide two constructive benefits. First, it may provide the distance for the offended party to regain stability and begin healing. Second, it may provide an appropriate consequence that communicates the severity of the broken trust. In some cases, there is no need for separation, or it is as short as a weekend.<sup>25</sup> In others, it is an occasional night requested

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<sup>23</sup> Perel, "Why Happy People Cheat."

<sup>24</sup> See Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2015), 146–53.

<sup>25</sup> I have observed this, for example, when the offending spouse was humble and communicative, and the couple were able to immediately spend many nights talking and working hard on the restoration process. Also, at times minimal separation occurs even when the offending spouse is not humble or repentant because of the heavy burdens of single parenting.

apart during the worst of the pain, and in still others, it becomes indefinite, based more upon the presence of the fruits of repentance than upon the completion of a set period of time.

During the initial weeks after disclosure, intrusive thoughts and urgency to make sense of it all can be overwhelming, and it becomes difficult to think about anything else. So, as the early intensity begins to fade and the demands of life return, some find it helpful to cordon off the ruminating and instead protect a little time on purpose each day or throughout the week to reflect, journal, or pray. This is also the time for building a support network of people for the difficult days ahead. Although some of the work of retelling the life story and putting the pieces back together can be particularly valuable in the context of professional counseling, pastoral care also has a significant role to play, especially on some of the questions that are very pressing: “What does God think of this? Where was God in all of this? What is my life and marriage, if not what I thought it was?” For centuries, Christian leaders have mined the Scriptures for wisdom on these questions and have much to offer, especially by way of guiding in prayerful lament (e.g., Pss 42; 55–56; 102).

At times, though, pastoral care encounters an impediment connected to gender dynamics. Of course, both men and women have affairs. Yet, anecdotally, the common crisis presented to a pastor is that of an unfaithful husband and a betrayed wife. A male pastor or elder in the church then provides a high level of interventive care for a male offender, and frequently a betrayed wife feels forgotten. Yet even if church leaders and friends sometimes feel they have little to say by way of solutions for such grave suffering, they are an invaluable help. After the initial six to twelve weeks of the crisis, when pastoral contact often is more frequent, the value of even a monthly phone call from a church leader to check in and pray for the betrayed spouse should not be underestimated.

## **VI. *Help for the Marriage***

Although infidelity is not merely a symptom of a marital problem, that point can be misapplied in a way that complicates the work of marital restoration. Here is where the difficulty lies. On the one hand, adultery is one person’s fault, and so marriage counseling must begin with this conviction as a foundational principle and resist blame shifting. On the other hand, the process of marriage counseling is not effective when one spouse remains the sole perpetrator and the other is the sole victim. Marriage counseling becomes productive when each can say, “I have suffered in this marriage,

but I have also contributed to the distance or challenges in this marriage.” In Mike Emlet’s phrase, in Christ people are “saints, sufferers, [and] sinners.”<sup>26</sup> Effective counseling addresses all three. But because a betrayed spouse was not a “coperpetrator” of the affair, there is a danger of counseling taking the tone of being *for* one person and *against* the other. Is marital counseling after infidelity consigned to being a two-on-one effort, the helper in alliance with the betrayed spouse to change the other? The short answer is no, but the first of the two stages of marital counseling is vulnerable to the charge of imbalance.

### **1. Stage One: *Appreciating the Impact***

In the first stage, the offending spouse begins the process of appreciating the impact of infidelity. Progress is observable when offending spouses are able to speak about their spouse’s pain without turning it into a conversation about their own pain and directing their attention back to themselves. That can occur when the pain they feel about their own sin overshadows their spouse’s pain, overtaking their ability to sit with their spouse’s pain and express compassion. This obstacle is difficult to overcome but is addressed through redirection and encouragement toward bringing that pain to the Lord and to others. But the priority of this stage is for offending spouses to pay attention to the pain of their spouse.

This process of discovering and speaking about the impact functions best in a cyclical way. Spouses who have been unfaithful first prayerfully reflect on the impact of infidelity, studying the harm it caused and taking a few notes. They then share the fruits of reflection with a wise friend, pastor, or counselor, inviting feedback: “Is there anything I’m saying that gives you the impression that I don’t get it or that I’m minimizing?” Honest feedback then leads to more prayerful reflection. Then they speak with their spouse, asking, “Am I getting closer to understanding what this has done to you? Would you tell me if anything I said doesn’t quite get it?” Then, with the benefit of their spouse’s feedback, they can go through the cycle again: reflection, friend’s feedback, and then more reflection prior to sharing again with the spouse, receiving the spouse’s feedback, and so on. When the betrayed spouse can respond, “I do believe you really get it now” and desires to move forward in concerted reconciliation efforts, the first stage has reached a close.

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<sup>26</sup> Michael R. Emlet, *Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners: Loving Others as God Loves Us* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2021).

Yet the need to appreciate the impact does not entirely end. The topic of infidelity will come up at various points over the coming years, and it is generally best when those conversations are proactive, initiated by the spouse who has been unfaithful. This spouse will offer conversation when reminders arise, for example, when infidelity comes up in a sermon, or when a TV show that the couple had otherwise enjoyed takes a plot twist related to infidelity. This spouse will frequently ask, “How was it for you when that reminder happened? Would you like to talk about it?” This proactive, sensitive communication effectively builds marital trust and closeness in the years beyond the second stage.

## **2. Stage Two: Mutual Rebuilding**

The transition to this stage is delicate but hopeful. In Perel’s words, an affair is a “disorder that may actually lead to a new order.”<sup>27</sup> An affair is a fire that burns the house down. However, planning a rebuild often exposes structural problems or fire hazards in the old house. These problems meant vulnerability and risk for the marriage, and when the person who was unfaithful lit the match, it burned and was devastated. Wise rebuilding means not repeating the original design but building something new. And so in this process of rebuilding the house, counseling becomes more mutual. It does not require locating offenses of equal magnitude in the betrayed spouse to do this work. It is sufficient for the betrayed spouse to adopt a new mindset: “We were both cocreators of a problematic status quo that included some distance, bad conflict patterns, and vulnerabilities.”

In this second stage, the tasks of marriage counseling are possible and productive. The first stage provided the opportunity, especially in the context of counseling, to foster an environment of grace and safety in the marriage, where honest confession and vulnerability could be well stewarded. This process builds an initial working level of trust and creates the conditions for trust to continue to be built. In the second stage, a wise counselor can begin, then, to help the couple discover longstanding patterns of distance and closeness, conflict and repair. The couple may discover that when one pursues, the other often withdraws, or when one attacks, the other defends, or when one withdraws, the other also withdraws. They may discover that they frequently miss the other’s repair attempts or do not know how to de-escalate or regulate their own intense emotions or to remain steady and present when the other spouse experiences the more intensely painful

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<sup>27</sup> Esther Perel, quoted in “How Can Couples Rebuild Trust after an Affair?,” *TED Radio Hour*, NPR, May 15, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/406455947>.

emotions. Counseling helps a couple uncover those conflict patterns and disrupt them. The disrupting at first typically involves slowing down and noticing or pointing out in retrospect, for example, “Was that a time when we do that pattern of me going away emotionally when I’m afraid I’ve disappointed you?”

The tone of these new patterns is similar to what the couples learned from stage one. They now find it easier to see the impact of their words or actions, often asking, “What message was playing in your mind when I said that?” or “Regardless of my intention, when I said that, you felt misunderstood and alone in your pain, and you were worried that I didn’t even care. I hate that my words had that effect, and I’m so sorry. I want you to leave our conversations feeling the exact opposite—I want to understand you and be with you when things are hard.” When the couple is, over time, better able to repair their conflicts and regain closeness with minimal guidance from the counselor, the formal process of marriage counseling can be drawn to a close, or meetings can be reduced in frequency.

This condensed description of the process of marriage counseling follows the pattern of the love of Jesus evidenced on the cross. He repairs the breach at his own cost, which leads to closeness. Elements of this process are also consistent with the work of Sue Johnson’s couples counseling model.<sup>28</sup> Although Johnson connects her work with her understanding of Jesus’s method of caring for people, the model in itself does not include a robust understanding of sin and forgiveness and of the need for divine redemption. Johnson does see two principles about how relationships work: specifically, how humility and burden-bearing function.

First, putting aside intentions and dealing with the impact of one’s actions requires humility. The temptation remains to require a spouse to respond to one’s noble intention rather than accepting the spouse’s experience of the actual words and actions. However, there is no room for ego in relational repair. Second, the burden-bearing ministry in a marriage follows the model of the love of God. God alone is our ultimate refuge and strength, so marital love aspires to be a small but meaningful echo of that refuge and strength. As Powlison often said, God is the sun, and the human helper is just a 40-watt light bulb; yet in a dark world, a small light can make all the difference. Loving spouses want to offer this care. Many of the destructive actions in marital conflict occur when one or both spouses are

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<sup>28</sup> See Susan M. Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy: Creating Connection* (New York: Routledge, 2004); cf. Winston T. Smith, review of *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy: Creating Connection*, by Susan M. Johnson, *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 26.1 (2012): 54–56.

in a mode of self-protection—or, in common parlance, the response of fight, flight, or freeze. It is a kindness and mercy to offer refuge or safety to one's spouse who is escalated and fearful. To help one another mutually become calmed, heard, and comforted is to give a soft answer that turns away wrath. This posture is nothing less than the blessed mode of peace-making. Spouses who serve one another in this way demonstrate their belonging as children in the family of God (Matt 5:9).

### **VII. *The Noble Work of the Heart***

That most people survive heart attacks speaks more to the advancement of modern medicine than to the severity of heart attacks. Severe conditions are life threatening without proper intervention. Many who survive are walking heart attacks living in peril. Likewise, that marriages frequently survive after infidelity does not always mean they are well. Many couples attend church with marriages in hidden peril, desperately needing intervention. Just as a heart attack is followed by years of visits to the cardiologist, the ongoing sustaining of spiritual health after an affair is a years-long process.

Christians have long known that infidelity restoration is not a quick fix. Although Protestants disagree with much of the penitential tradition, the early manuals record useful case wisdom on this point. In these texts it is rare to see a restoration process shorter than several years for infidelity, and for those who fell from a place of great spiritual leadership, it could be up to twelve years.<sup>29</sup> Pastors and counselors today do well to consider the weightiness and duration of the restoration process. Adultery is truly a grave sin. If it takes years to become an expert in cardiology, physicians of the soul must likewise plan to refine their craft over time. The church fathers certainly believed that being spiritual doctors of the heart was harder.<sup>30</sup> These heart matters are no less complex, no less consequential, and no less worthy of the church's best efforts. However, the fruit of these labors, like those of modern cardiology, are sweet. In God's kindness, those efforts lead to extended years of rich, restored life in the family.

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, "The Penitential of Columbanus," in *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal "Libri Poenitentiales" and Selections from Related Documents*, ed. John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), 250–57.

<sup>30</sup> See Gregory of Nazianzus, Oratio 2.16, trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, rev. and ed. Kevin Knight (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1894), <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310202.htm>.

# Rightly Applying God's Law Makes Legalism Impossible

**BRAD BEEVERS**

## **Abstract**

Legalism is, at its core, a wrong theology of the law. It is rooted in the conviction that God's commands can be fundamentally kept with disciplined and earnest effort. A robust and practical theology of the law completely undermines this false faith. It shows how the law is spiritual (about the heart, not just behavior), comprehensive (addressing every similar situation), and perfect (requiring active love, not just avoiding harm). Grasping this makes Pharisaic piety impossible. God's law is so demanding that only perfect holiness satisfies it, and the law shows how far we are from this holiness. Understanding this severs the root of legalistic pride and wonderfully drives us to the cross.

## **Keywords**

*Legalism, Pharisees, God's law, works-righteousness, heart, sanctification, gospel, love, biblical counseling*

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## I. Legalism Misunderstands God's Law

I have wrestled with the topic of legalism for over forty years and found it particularly difficult to understand—even to define. The subject is exceptionally important, yet rarely studied carefully or attacked biblically. Even how we use (or do not use) the word *legalism* is hardly precise. We would be wise to examine the topic thoroughly. Like most theological issues, it dramatically shapes real life and, therefore, counseling. This article summarizes two chapters on fighting legalism from my upcoming book.

One good way to define legalism is with respect to God's law: legalism is a wrong *theology of the law*. This is evident in the term the Lord himself uses instead of legalism: Pharisaism. Pharisaism gets the law wrong. It sees it as

1. requiring right behavior (Mark 7:6; Luke 18:11);
2. promising God's blessing and acceptance to those who do what it says (Matt 23:25–28; Mark 7:1–23; Gal 3:10–12); and
3. consisting of obligations we must fulfill (Matt 12:2; 19:3).

Note that none of these convictions is heretical in itself in the way wrong theologies are. They seldom proclaim barefaced falsehoods. Instead, they overemphasize a subordinate point, reverse the relationship between two truths, or subtly redefine important terms.

Point 2 is what we usually associate with legalism: God accepts us when we do what is right. Biblical teachers usually counter this by showing how God's grace and Christ's obedience justifies us.

Point 3 is important, but it usually flies under the radar. Legalists see God's law primarily as a requirement, not a blessing. In their view, man is made for the law, not the law for man. The truth is the opposite, and wonderful: "Oh how I love your law!" (Ps 119:97 ESV).

This article addresses point 1: seeing God's law as requiring the right *behavior*. This lie can be effectively countered by a threefold biblical truth. The law is *spiritual*, *comprehensive*, and *perfect*.

In explaining each term, I lean on the excellent material in the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, Modern English Version, Evangelical Presbyterian Church, [epc.org/wp-content/uploads/Files/1-Who-We-Are/B-About-The-EPC/LargerCatechismModernEnglishORIGINAL.pdf](http://epc.org/wp-content/uploads/Files/1-Who-We-Are/B-About-The-EPC/LargerCatechismModernEnglishORIGINAL.pdf).

## II. *The Law Is Spiritual*

What does it mean that the law is spiritual? It means that the law is primarily about the heart. Even when it regulates behavior, its focus is on what we love, fear, trust, serve, and worship. Jesus underscores this again and again.

For example, when Pharisees ask him when the law allows divorce, Jesus uses the law to point to their hardened hearts and their wrong attitude toward marriage. God joins husband and wife, and man may not separate them. Divorce is an aberration, allowed only when absolutely necessary (cf. Matt 19:6, 9).

Notice what happens. Jesus is asked about behavior, but his answer addresses the heart: their views of marriage and divorce. His was a radically different perspective, for the disciples (not the Pharisees) say, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” The law demands we *love* our wives like the Lord loves his bride (cf. Eph 5:25). That *is* scary!

Jesus focused on the heart because he understood the law. Maybe you picture the law as mostly regulating behavior: Keep the festivals, bring offerings, eat this, do not eat that, plant and harvest this way, be ceremonially clean. That is not true! In hundreds of verses, the Lord expects to be served with gladness, trusted, feared, hoped in, and loved. God speaks to the heart throughout the law.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. (Deut 6:4–6)

This heart focus is central to *every* law.

### 1. *The Law Is Fundamentally Not about Behavior*

The Pharisees saw the law as regulating *behavior*. So they followed it in their conduct. They were moral, diligent, dedicated, conservative believers. But they did not grasp that the law’s focus was their heart-loves, not their behavior. By trying to follow it *outwardly*, they missed its real focus: *inward* need.

To the legalist, outwardly following the law is “obedience.” This is not true. It could be hypocrisy! Hypocritical behavior looks good, but it is not obedience. Obeying the law means following it from the heart. Good fruit is only real when the tree (the heart) is good. Pharisaic fruit does seem good. But if we look closely, we can see that it is just tacked on.<sup>2</sup> The heart is not right.

<sup>2</sup> See Paul Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing,

This truth determines Jesus’s perspective. Because the law’s focus is the heart, hypocritical “obedience” is *not* keeping the law. Note his pointed use of “lawless” to describe the legalist:

You are like whitewashed tombs ... outwardly [you] appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and *lawlessness*. (Matt 23:25–28, emphasis added)

## 2. *Me Too*

This is relevant for *us*. We too can focus on behavior and miss the heart. Yesterday I was talking with a pastor friend. We were discussing a counseling case, and it occurred to me that his approach would depend on whether he was asking questions about the person’s behavior or his attitude. So I made up an example. I asked him what he would think if a man who was caring for his elderly mother suddenly told him he was putting her in a retirement home. “Having to deal with her is a pain. Caring for her all the time cramps my life like you would not believe. I’m done with this. It is just too much hassle.” The pastor thought a minute, then said, “Hmm. Well, 1 Timothy 5:8 comes to mind: someone who does not care for his own family is ‘worse than an unbeliever.’ But maybe paying for the retirement home would be caring for her.” He thought a bit more, I asked another question or two, then he said: “If he wants to love her, it could be a good thing. But if he wants to get rid of her, that is sin.”

Did you notice the radically different answers? Initially, he focused on behavior: Is it right or wrong to put your mom in a retirement home (for whatever reason)? That perspective promotes legalism. It ignores the heart. The son’s thoughts and intentions came out in what he said, as they always do: “a pain,” “cramps my life,” “I’m done,” and “too much hassle.” These statements indicate that his motive is not to love his mother. That is a problem. And my friend was able to correct his perspective. He wisely realized he was on the wrong track. The question was not whether a retirement home was right or wrong in *every* case. It was much more important to ask about *this* case. What was in the son’s heart? Did he want to care for his mom or get rid of her? That focuses on the law as *spiritual* and is the right perspective on the law.

Incidentally, this *spiritual* perspective prevents another fruit of legalism—adding man-made rules. Man-made rules try to define exact outward

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2002), 63. This will be evident in the person’s life, as with the Pharisees. Because their behavior did not come from a heart for God, they were proud, greedy, deceptive, and immoral. And their faith was false and twisted. Seen as a whole, we can and should “know them by their fruits.” But an individual fruit can look good and be bad. This is precisely what makes it hypocrisy.

conformity. They do not help the heart be more loving. They are unattractive and distracting if we aim to obey the law spiritually.

### 3. *The Seventh Commandment*

Here is another example: “You shall not commit adultery.” Obeying this law means more than not misbehaving! Morality is fundamentally a heart matter. Behavior is secondary. Note how the Westminster Larger Catechism first describes the heart and then the behavior:

Since it is spiritual, the law involves our understanding, our will, our affections and all the other faculties of the soul [i.e., heart-attitudes], as well as our words, actions, and self-expressions [i.e., behavior]. (WLC 99)

Why is this so? “Since it is spiritual.” The law does not just regulate behavior. Thinking it does is legalistic. God’s law involves “our understanding, our will, our affections [loves, emotions, tastes] and all the other faculties of the soul.” This is why Jesus says, “Everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has *already committed adultery*” (Matt 5:28, emphasis added).

Let me anticipate an objection: Does not the law also regulate actions? Yes, but actions and the heart have a certain relationship. When the law requires an action, it is primarily pointing to the heart; conversely, the heart expresses itself in actions. Not committing adultery in behavior but only “looking with lustful intent” *is* committing adultery. The Lord looks on the heart. The Bible never says that living a moral life fulfills the law. *Love* is the fulfilling of the law. That is why I am focusing on *attitudes*. Right actions are valuable only insofar as they express a right heart. Otherwise, they are hypocritical and Pharisaical—legalistic!

Therefore, Jesus is not adding to the seventh commandment in Matthew 5:28. He is explaining it. God’s focus was never behavior; it was always the heart. Like all laws, the seventh commandment requires *heart-obedience*. “All the faculties of the soul”—understanding, will, emotions, loves, tastes—should please the Lord. Everything having to do with our spirit (and that’s a lot) must completely conform to the law.

What does that mean in practice? To take one example, we *perceive* blood brothers and sisters differently from how we perceive eligible singles. We do not flirt with them or fantasize about them. Learning a similar family-type perception is part of keeping the seventh commandment. Seeing the person in front of us as an object of our desires is already breaking the seventh commandment (among others!). For this dehumanizes them. Learning to see a *person*, with feelings, troubles, and needs, is a big step forward.

When I was a pastor, I took a series of photos of advertising billboards and made a collage after cropping each one down to just the person's face. Seeing the face without suggestive poses and clothing unmasks this dehumanization. It trains us to see the person, not an object. I was particularly struck by the facial expressions. They were not faces you would like to come home to. In fact, most of them were ugly, despite the model's natural beauty. The person had been turned into a product. It was remarkable how many seemed sad, angry, afraid, or cold. If you looked carefully, you wanted to reach out to them.

Seeing the person before us as someone to love, serve, and win for Christ is incompatible with seeing them as sexual objects. Seeing fellow believers as brothers and sisters is also contrary to this lustful perspective. If we learn to perceive this way, we will have won much of the battle for purity. A selfish, pleasure-seeking heart dehumanizes and sexualizes others. This quenches biblical love and stokes the fires of lust.

Or take another example: Men have a God-given responsibility to protect women, not just from physical injury, but from spiritual and emotional harm. This is important, as many trends in Western culture make women especially vulnerable: our preference for short, shallow, and hedonistic relationships, the impact of feminism on both men and women, men's hesitation to commit to marriage, and changing morals about dating, intimacy, marriage, and divorce. If a man embraces his biblical responsibility to protect the women in his life emotionally and spiritually—and I did a poor job as a young man—he will enjoy a significant advantage in his battle for purity.

The law is spiritual. Its focus is the heart's thoughts and intentions. God's attention is riveted on "all the faculties of the soul." Note how the Catechism reflects this emphasis:

The seventh commandment requires us to be sexually pure in body, *mind, inclinations, words, and actions* ... we are to *live temperately*, keeping pure company ... and *resisting any temptation* to say, *think*, or do *anything* indecent or obscene. The commandment forbids ... *all unnatural desires; all impure imaginations, thoughts, purposes, and inclinations.* (WLC 138–39)

#### **4. This Truth Sets Free from Legalism**

This biblical emphasis on the heart's perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and desires is absolutely necessary for the battle against legalism. Only a spiritual law drives us—all of us—to Christ. Here's an excellent example from one of my students. He preached to his youth group on the subject of waiting until marriage:

I began the sermon with a story from my childhood: I liked to pick raisins out of the Christmas fruitcake, though my mother had told me not to. This should draw an initial parallel to the topic.

In the second part of the message, I showed how God gives Adam a companion, Eve, in Genesis 2. I described the origin of marriage and the sexual relationship: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”

Man and woman become one flesh even if they do not marry. This is the problem when sexuality is not lived out according to God’s plan. I then cited 1 Corinthians 6:16: “Do you not know that whoever attaches himself to a prostitute is one body with her? For the Scripture says, The two shall be one flesh.” Sex is not in itself a sin before God, except when it occurs in pre- or extramarital relations. When a man and a woman have intercourse, they are automatically bound together and become one.

I explained how God wants to protect us from this by describing the spiritual and psychological wounds that such a sexual relationship can cause. These wounds demonstrate that living out sexuality this way is not God’s idea.

In the last part of the sermon I shared my own negative experience. With my testimony, I confirmed and reinforced my statements and exhorted the young audience to wait with sex until marriage. Only then can sex be right in God’s eyes. Mental and spiritual wounds can be avoided and sexuality can be enjoyed to the fullest.

If this sermon had been preached in your church’s youth group, would you be happy with it? It has central and obvious strengths: clarity, humility, and honesty. Here is my friend’s initial evaluation:

I still remember preparing this sermon and wanting to teach good, healthy values to the youth. It was my first sermon after taking homiletics. I was excited about the topic and the opportunity to apply what I had learned and show what I could do.

The audience’s reaction was positive; our youth pastor, in particular, was enthusiastic about my clear and radical message. I was convinced that I had preached the best sermon of my young career.

Looking back, the student had a different perspective:

However, something else turned out to be true. The content of my sermon did not fulfill the conditions of biblical and Christ-centered interpretation. I fell into the trap of moralism. There were already problems in my intentions during preparation. My sermon was not about the gospel, but only about good ethical and moralistic principles. It was about legalism.

My message did not end with the gospel. I preached only moralism and legalism. I clearly said how to behave in the sexual area, but without giving any help from the gospel.

This is useful self-criticism. The preacher is absolutely right. He missed the gospel. And it started with missing sin—failing to understand the law. In his

sermon, “sin” was bad behavior: having sex before marriage. The heart attitudes addressed in the seventh commandment were totally ignored. Defining “sin” this way divides the group into “good kids” and “bad kids.” The “good kids” have not had sex; the “bad kids” have. This is not, however, what God’s law does. It convicts us all. Only Christ has been righteous, and our only hope is in his obedience and his sacrifice. If the preacher had understood God’s law as spiritual—as about the heart—he would not have fallen into Pharisaism. He would have preached the gospel.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, this moralistic perspective is common. The student was unusual only in his refreshingly accurate self-critique. For example, what guidelines for physical affection should unmarried couples adhere to?

If we fail to see the law spiritually, our aim will be that they not “go too far” *physically*. If we see the law as spiritual, our goal will be the complete opposite, to help them not “go too far” in their *desires*. I hope you can see how radically different that is! Rather than helping ensure that nothing happens in their behavior, we want nothing to happen in their desires. We might ask, “Tell me about your thoughts, passions, desires, and temptations in the following contexts: at a restaurant, watching a movie, taking a walk, visiting friends, and in your apartment.” It could easily be true that watching a movie and being in the apartment together triggers imaginations and temptations that do not arise at restaurants or with friends. Let us do our best, then, to keep the seventh commandment by fighting for heart purity, including how and where to spend time together. If God’s law demands sexual purity “in body, mind, inclinations, words, and actions,” we need to find out how each person ticks and what strengthens temptation for him and for her. Biblically speaking, the main goal is clear. It is not to keep their behavior pure. That is just the result. It is to keep their desires pure.

This counsel is not radical, and it is not particularly wise. Actually, it is fairly rudimentary. It is not complicated, or controversial; it is obvious. Yet I am afraid it is rare. We are, unfortunately, all die-hard Pharisees in our old natures. We need God’s word again and again to bring us back to the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

## 5. *The Sixth Commandment*

Jesus also applied this heart emphasis to “You shall not murder”:

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<sup>3</sup> Ed Clowney’s diagram in *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* is very helpful (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 32. It is just one of many good resources highlighting the danger of moralistic interpretation. The Bible always points to Christ and the cross.

I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. (Matt 5:21–22)

Jesus is not adding to this commandment either. Anger and contempt are forbidden in the law. The sixth commandment summarizes sins of this type. What is “this type”? Christ mentions anger, contempt, and insulting, but he is clearly not listing all sins that could lead to murder. Instead, he is giving examples. Anger is one heart attitude behind killing, but there are others—like hatred. In fact, anything that undermines love violates the sixth commandment.

Let us go one step deeper. “You shall not murder” includes suicide. Both others’ lives and ours belong to the Lord. But think about this. If anger or hatred endangers others’ lives, what attitudes endanger our own? We all endanger our lives in many, many ways: by not taking care of our bodies, worrying, being angry or stressed, driving too fast, and being reckless. Most of these dangers stem less from anger-type affections than from pleasure-seeking or carelessness. But the result is the same.

Therefore, the Catechism wisely explains,

The sixth commandment forbids ... sinful anger, hatred, envy, or desire for revenge; all excessive emotions and distracting anxieties; intemperate eating, drinking, working, or recreations; provoking words, oppression, quarreling, striking, wounding, and whatever else tends to the destruction of the life of any. (WLC 136)

This perspective is critically important to our combat against legalism! If we fail to understand the law like this, we will always think, “At least I’m not as bad as *them*.” If we rightly understand the law, however, it does what the Lord appointed it to do: discerns the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb 4:12) and condemns us *all*.

The law, then, is the thunderbolt of God by which he hurls to the ground both manifest sinners and hypocrites, and suffers no one to be in the right, but drives them all together to terror and despair. This is the hammer, as Jeremiah says, 23:29: “Is not my word like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?”

This, then, is what it means to begin true repentance; and here man must hear such a sentence as this: “You are all of no account, you are manifest sinners. ... Here no one is righteous.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *The Smalcald Articles*, 1537, Third Part, III. Of Repentance, trans. F. Benter and W. H. T. Dau, <https://reformed.org/documents/smalcald.html>.

Failing to see the law as spiritual is not a minor matter because Pharisaism is not a minor problem. It is a matter of eternal life and death. Left to themselves, our legalistic hearts will always reduce the law to behaviors that can be kept with earnest effort and self-discipline. And this opposes the life-giving gospel! We need the accurate mirror of God's law—a sharp law that convicts us not just of bad behavior but of what is really wrong with us: our hearts. We need the thunderbolt and hammer Luther spoke of. And God has given them to us in the law's being *spiritual*. This truth is one of the best ways to fight legalism. A law that convicts us all of our heart's wickedness makes legalism impossible. Pharisaism cannot survive in an environment of radical conviction of sin.

### **6. *Because the Law Is Love, It Is Comprehensive and Perfect***

In every matter regulated by the law, God's aim is that our hearts, and not just our actions, please him. We are to love each other, not just act as if we did!

The whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."  
(Gal 5:14)

There are two consequences of the law requiring *love* for God and neighbors; they are our next two points. We have to grasp both to understand the law rightly:

- 1) *The law is comprehensive* because love is comprehensive. A loving heart will obey the Lord, not only in the situation addressed in a particular law but in every similar situation.
- 2) *The law is perfect*. It goes beyond forbidding evil. It commands good. Loving is more than just not harming. It is actively caring.

### **III. *The Law Is Comprehensive***

When we say the law is comprehensive, we mean that its precepts always address similar situations. For example, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain" (Deut 25:4). This law contains three elements:

- 1) Do not muzzle
- 2) An ox
- 3) While it is threshing.

The law's comprehensive nature means that each element illustrates the principle, or spirit of the law. Let us start with the animal involved:

2) An ox.

Obviously, this means horses, donkeys, mules, camels, dzos, yaks, buffalo, dogs, and any other animal that might be used to thresh. The law says "ox" because that is the animal that was usually used. If your slave is threshing, you cannot argue that it is OK to forbid him from eating because he is not an ox! In fact, God's logic is "more so for humans."

2) An ox → any animal or human worker

The same logic applies to the third element:

3) While it is threshing

"Threshing" is a symbol of all kinds of similar work. Could someone argue, "It is not threshing!" and muzzle an animal driving a harvester or grinding grain? Of course not. The principle includes all work that gives access to a natural reward. If a shepherd takes your sheep into the mountains, this law allows him to drink the milk! If someone helps harvest your grapes, they can eat as many as they like. Paul spells this out in 1 Corinthians 9:7, and he is arguing from the principle, not quoting the law: "Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?"

3) Threshing → harvesting, winnowing, grinding, tending or any similar work

What makes the work "similar"? Again, the principle. An ox that threshed did not just get to eat hay when he was done. Unlike plowing or hauling, threshing included a perk—yummy, ripe grain right in front of his nose. Harvesting, threshing, and grinding offer the same. This natural benefit is the issue. The law is not saying you have to fit your animal with a feed bag while it plows. God wants those tasks *he* made naturally beneficial to be handled this way. If you are tending cows, you can milk them. If you are harvesting fruit, it is there to be enjoyed. If you are harvesting potatoes, on the other hand, you will want to wait for dinner.

- 1) Do not muzzle → Give access to those benefits God made part of the work.

Let us summarize how we proceeded. Each element of the law was translated into the principle it embodies. The “ox” is any animal or human worker. “Threshing” is work with a natural reward or benefit (including getting paid, 1 Cor 9:11). “Muzzling” blocks access to this reward. These principles apply to all similar situations, especially for human workers and especially for spiritual work.

This is always how we should interpret God’s law: unpack the principles implied in the regulation and apply them to analogous situations. The law is *comprehensive*:

The prohibitions against specific sins and the commandments to observe specific obligations are typical [“types” = symbols, parallels, patterns, principles] and so cover not just those particular sins or obligations but *all others of the same kind*. They similarly include *all the contributory causes*, means, opportunities, and appearances related to these sins and obligations. (WLC 99)

Interpreting God’s law as comprehensive showcases its justice, goodness, and wisdom! If we miss this, many statutes will seem only interesting relics of a bygone agrarian age. God’s law is so much more!

#### **IV. Digging Deeper: The Fifth Commandment**

Understood comprehensively, even harvesting laws reveal God’s love and wisdom. How much more will the Ten Commandments! For example, “honor your father and your mother” has four elements:

- 1) Honor
- 2) Your father and mother
- 3) That your days may be long
- 4) In the promised land.

As mentioned above, each element should be understood comprehensively. Each is an example or an illustration. So “honor” refers to everything similar:

Those over us deserve respect in our hearts, our words, and our actions. We must pray and give thanks for them, emulate their virtues and gifts, willingly heed and

obey their lawful commands and advice, submit to their correction, be faithful to them, and defend and support their persons and authority, as is appropriate to their rank and position. We must also tolerate their imperfections and infirmities and cover them with our love, so that we will be an honor to them and to their authority. (WLC127)

- 1) Honor → respect, prayer, thanks, emulation, willing obedience, faithfulness, support, covering their sins

If this is what honor is, how well did you (or do you) honor your parents? I learned much of this only as an adult—and every point still convicts me. God's law sets a high standard!

The standard gets higher when we examine the second element:

- 2) Your father and mother

This also includes “all others of the same kind”:

Father and mother refer not just to our parents but to everyone who is older or more gifted than we are, and especially those whom God has ordained to be over us in positions of authority, whether in family, church, or civil government. (WLC 124)

[By using] the terms father and mother ... those under them are encouraged to accept their authority more willingly and cheerfully, as if they were their parents. (WLC 125)

Think about this! The fifth commandment refers not only to parents but also to older or more gifted siblings, fellow students, coworkers, believers, and especially those responsible for us: spiritual and political leaders. With that in mind, review what honoring them means: praying for them, giving thanks for them, emulating their virtues, willingly following their commands and advice, accepting correction, being faithful to them, defending and supporting them, tolerating their imperfections, and covering them with love. How well do you do that with your pastors, elders, music leaders, youth workers, small-group leaders, children's ministry workers, and others in positions of spiritual responsibility? How well do you do this with those older or more gifted? How many of these attitudes characterize the way you see political leaders or civil servants? To my shame as a former pastor, I have rarely heard someone admonish the church to “tolerate their imperfections and infirmities and cover them in love.”

When the Lord convicts us, it means we are starting to understand his perfect law.

- 2) Father and mother → pastors, elders, leaders, government authorities, those older, more gifted

This comprehensive perspective is important for fighting legalism. Legalism lives from a standard that some people meet and others do not. The legalist is then either a proud Pharisee who thinks he is keeping the law and looks down on others or a fearful and downcast Pharisee who knows he has not kept the law “well enough.” But a law that spells out “honor” and “parents” so comprehensively hews down all the proud and lofty oaks of our arrogance and puts us in the dust (Isa 2:11–17). The law, rightly applied, lays us so low that there is no hope that we will adequately keep it. And that makes it nearly impossible to be a legalist. Instead, it reveals our acute need for the One who will both bear our deserved punishment and fulfill the law on our behalf. It makes us desperate for Jesus. And desperate for Jesus is where we need to be.

Part of the wonder of God’s law is that every piece, including its promises, includes “all others of the same kind.” God’s blessings are comprehensive, too.

- 3) That your days may be long

Long life is also “typical”—it stands for all God’s covenant blessings. There are many: “That it may go well with you” and “that you may multiply greatly” in “a land flowing with milk and honey” (Deut 6:3), with “great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things” (6:10–11). And the Lord will eliminate your enemies too (6:19). Because the promise is comprehensive, Paul is right to add (!), “That it may go well with you” to the promised “that your days may be long” in Ephesians 6:3.

- 3) That your days may be long → go well, be blessed; prosperity, victory, peace, and more.

God also expands the place for this promise. The original commandment promised long life *in Canaan*. This is fulfilled in the whole *earth*, and ultimately in eternity.

- 4) Blessing in the promised land → in the earth

This comprehensive understanding is why Jesus expands “The meek shall inherit the *land*” (Ps 37:11) to “The meek shall inherit the *earth*” (Matt 5:5)

and why Paul says that Abraham would inherit not just Canaan but “the world [*kosmos*]” (Rom 4:13). It is why the patriarchs’ waiting for a “land of promise” (Heb 11:9) was acknowledging “that they were strangers and exiles *on the earth* (!)” (v. 13). The homeland they longed for was “a better country, that is, a heavenly one.” (vv. 14–16). Even the Bible’s land promises are Yes and Amen in Christ—and thus Yes and Amen for those in him!

Understanding God’s law as *comprehensive* heightens its requirements and its blessings; it underscores our sin and emphasizes grace. Both protect us from legalism.

## **V. *The Law Is Perfect: It Forbids Evil and Commands Good***

Because the law is love, it is also *perfect*. It does not just forbid evil; instead, it requires holy love for God and neighbors. The Bible emphasizes this again and again:

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Rom 13:8–10)

This is an astounding claim, because on the surface there is a huge difference between “Do not mistreat your ornery neighbor” and “Love him.” The four commandments Paul cites are each negative; they tell us *not to wrong* our neighbor (do not commit adultery, murder, steal, or covet). Even if we understand the law spiritually so that it includes wrong attitudes—not being lustful, jealous, angry, greedy, coldhearted, or proud—that is still not love. *Loving* someone means caring for him, blessing him, wishing him well, and having compassion and affection for him. This love is what each law commands!

In other words, *negatively formulated laws require positive actions and attitudes*. This is a central principle for interpreting God’s law. Because God’s law is perfect, it includes every aspect of what it regulates, positive and negative. When God criticizes Joseph’s brothers for hating him (Gen 37:4–8), he does not mean they should have been indifferent toward him. No! They should have loved him.

This is true of every precept, blessing and curse:

When something is required, the opposite is forbidden, and where a specific sin is forbidden, its opposite is required. In the same way, when a requirement of the law

adds a promise of some blessing for obeying it, that promise also includes a threat for disobeying it, and when a threat is added, an opposite promise is included. (WLC 99)

This makes God’s law amazing! It means that the more we unpack it, the more we hear God saying, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). For example, the muzzling law, if read literally, just forbids *muzzling* an *ox* while it is *threshing*. However, if we interpret the law rightly, we see it has other attributes:

- 1) *Spiritual*: it includes heart attitudes. “Do not muzzle your ox” implies “do not be cruel.” “A righteous man has regard for the life of his animal, but even the compassion of the wicked is cruel.” (Prov 12:10)
- 2) *Comprehensive*: it includes all animals and people who work in similar ways. We are not to be harsh or unfeeling toward any.
- 3) *Perfect—that is, both negative and positive*: we are not just to *avoid abusing* animals and people; we must be *kind*, considerate and sympathetic. “A righteous man *has regard* for the life of his animal” (Prov 12:10a). And even more so toward employees. We should pity them (Lev 25:43) and be generous (Deut 15:14) and compassionate (2 Chr 28:15). Indeed, we should love them and not just treat them well.

Do you see how wise this is? The more we expound this law that talks about oxen on farms, the closer it gets to “Love your neighbor as yourself!” Because the law is spiritual and comprehensive, and because each precept implies every aspect of God’s perspective on its subject, it really does teach his perfect law of love. This is also why breaking it at one point is breaking it at every point. When we break a law, we fail to love. And when we fail to love, we break every law. So James puts these topics together:

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. (Jas 2:8–10)

God’s law is amazing! It is perfect! It is beautiful! It is fascinating, wise, fair, and righteous, like he is.

Let us revisit the sixth commandment and complete its expectations by considering the law’s perfection.

### 1. *The Sixth Commandment*

Remember that the law’s being *spiritual* means that “You shall not murder”

forbids all attitudes related to taking a life, whether someone else's (anger, hatred, envy, revenge) or our own (pleasure seeking, self-hatred, recklessness). Its being *comprehensive* means it includes everything similar and their contributory causes (any related actions or thoughts that endanger someone or promote evil attitudes).

The law's *perfection*—that it commands love rather than just forbids evil—means that actively *promoting* life and health is part of the sixth commandment:

The sixth commandment requires us to do our best to make every lawful effort to preserve our own life and the lives of others. ... In the pursuit of that goal, we must defend others from violence, patiently endure afflictions from God's hand, have a quiet mind and a cheerful spirit, practice temperance in the way we eat, drink, take medications, sleep, work, and play. We should also harbor charitable thoughts, love, compassion, meekness, gentleness, and kindness. Our speech and behavior should be peaceful, mild, and courteous. We should be tolerant of others, be ready to be reconciled, patiently put up with and forgive injuries against us, and return good for evil. (WLC 135)

Amazing. God's perspective opens our eyes to see how "You shall not murder" includes these fruits of love. Wow! And the better I understand the law's perfection, the clearer I see how guilty I really am and how much the Lord has forgiven me. That is good! We want to welcome the Spirit's conviction and be driven to Christ all the more.

## ***2. Rightly Interpreting the Law Lets Us See Growth***

There is another vital advantage to understanding the law as spiritual, comprehensive, and perfect: viewing it this way opens our eyes to a great encouragement. We can see how we are growing.

This might seem completely counterintuitive. What? The law convicts me all over! It destroys my so-called righteousness! Yes, it does. But at the same time, because the law has a perfect standard, it lets us see that we are not as guilty as we used to be.

A friend of mine, Will, told me the following story: Before he was saved, Will was a drug addict and violent. Then God gave him new life. He spent his first months as a Christian being disciplined at a Bible-believing drug and alcohol rehab center. One day, a colleague tricked Will into putting himself in a defenseless position and twisted his arm painfully. "I'll get him," he thought. So he snuck a stapler off the desk and put a staple in the other guy's arm. The guy promptly tattled on him, and he was disciplined. But that was not what bothered him. He was upset at himself. He went to his room to pray, "Lord, what's wrong with me? Am I no better?" Then he saw it—yes, he did take revenge and repay evil with evil, but he was *also* different.

In the past, a stapler would not have been his weapon of choice!

That is a great illustration of sanctification. We do not put off unrighteousness all at once. We still fall into bad behavior and evil attitudes. Will was angry and vengeful. Yet he was not nearly as angry as in the past, his vengeful thoughts were milder, and he quickly repented. Should he have been encouraged? Yes! God had transformed him.

A legalistic understanding of the law does not allow us to see this. Because it focuses on behavior, you're either 100% guilty or 100% OK. If Will thought God's law required what the rehab center required—no fighting—he'd be guilty, period. And if he could restrain himself from hitting back the next time, he'd be good, period. Even if he was boiling inside.

This is always legalism's perspective. "Just say no to desserts and chips." If you can do so, you are OK. If not, you are guilty. "Just stop doing pornography." If you can, you are OK. If not, you are guilty. Pharisaism ignores the heart. "Just behave."

God's law, because it is spiritual, comprehensive, and perfect, has a totally different perspective. The real issue is what is going on inside. How did Will do in responding to the other man's provocation? Very well! Yes, he struck back. But look at his heart. He was much less angry than in the past. He hated having taken vengeance. He cried out to the Lord. He repented. He was not upset at getting disciplined; he knew he deserved it. His deepest desire was to have the Lord change him. He was discouraged because he could not see it. Well done!

If we understand this, we will ask the right questions of someone who is consuming pornography or overeating or angry at their children or has just overspent their budget on a nonessential item (again) or is treating co-workers in an unloving way. We will aim at the heart. How bad do they think their behavior was? How well can they identify the fleshly passions driving it? To what extent are they learning to hate what they used to love and enjoy?

## **Summary**

The better we understand God's law, the easier it becomes to avoid legalism. Seeing it as spiritual, comprehensive, and perfect makes it impossible to view it Pharisaically. The more we unpack the incredible perfection God's law demands of our hearts, the more ridiculous it becomes to think we have obeyed! And this honest self-assessment severs the root of legalistic pride and wonderfully drives us to the cross.

# Presuppositions of Biblical Counselors

**JIM NEWHEISER**

## **Abstract**

From its inception, the modern biblical counseling movement has been rooted in the presuppositional apologetics of Cornelius Van Til and John Frame. The presupposition that the Bible is absolutely authoritative and sufficient leads to certain conclusions regarding who we are, what our purpose is, what is wrong with us, and how God can make us what we are meant to be. While we see a role for knowledge outside of the Bible, such knowledge is secondary in value and subject to the authority of Scripture. This is in contrast to those who rely on secular psychology or who believe that it is essential to integrate techniques used in secular psychology with biblical principles.

## **Keywords**

*Biblical counseling, presuppositionalism, sufficiency of Scripture, Jay Adams, Cornelius Van Til, John Frame, integration, authority, anthropology*

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## Introduction

**E**veryone operates from presuppositions, which are ultimate assumptions or beliefs.<sup>1</sup> A person's presuppositional starting place will determine how they answer the important questions addressed by psychologists and other counselors:

*Anthropology.* Who are we as human beings?

*Aim.* What is our purpose?

*Ailment.* What is wrong with us?

*Answer (or Antidote).* How can we best be helped?

*Authority.* What will guide our conclusions about the above questions?

John Frame writes, "For a Christian, the content of Scripture must serve as his ultimate presupposition."<sup>2</sup> A person who places ultimate faith in human science, human reason, or human experience will reach very different conclusions compared to the person who regards the Bible as their ultimate authority.

Jay Adams's landmark book *Competent to Counsel*<sup>3</sup> launched the modern biblical counseling movement over fifty years ago. In this book Adams explicitly builds his approach to counseling on the foundation of the presuppositionalism of Cornelius Van Til (who was his colleague at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia). In his introduction, Adams affirms Van Til's view that "all non-Christian systems demand autonomy for man, thereby seeking to dethrone God."<sup>4</sup> He continues,

The conclusions in this book are not based upon scientific findings. My method is presuppositional. I avowedly accept the inerrant Bible as the Standard of all faith and practices. The Scriptures, therefore, are the basis, and contain the criteria by which I have sought to make every judgment.<sup>5</sup>

In his conclusion Adams affirms Van Til's famous statement that "there is no such thing as brute uninterpreted fact."<sup>6</sup> There is no neutrality when it comes to truth claims. Scientists, including psychologists and psychiatrists,

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<sup>1</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 45.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., xxi.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 269.

have presuppositions that influence their interpretations of data and conclusions.

Adams adds an important caveat that while Scripture is without error our interpretations of Scripture can be mistaken. “I am aware that my interpretations and applications of Scripture are not infallible.”<sup>7</sup> He also acknowledges that the findings of science may drive the biblical counselor back to Scripture to reexamine whether his interpretation is accurate. We must remain humble and open to the possibility that our interpretation of God’s word needs to be corrected or refined. When discussing biblical counseling, it is important to distinguish between the statements of counselors and teachers who aspire to be biblical and Scripture itself. Biblical counselors may err in their interpretation and application of God’s word.

Those of us who aspire to be biblical counselors start from the presupposition that the Bible is what it claims to be, that the Bible accurately explains what it claims to explain about human nature, and that it does what it claims to do to transform lives. While we acknowledge that we can learn from sources outside of Scripture, their findings are subordinate to the authority of Scripture because we recognize that a worldview that is not in submission to the Lord will produce faulty conclusions.

### **I. Authority: The Bible Is What It Claims to Be**

The Bible is what it claims to be in many ways and for many reasons.

*Scripture is divinely inspired.* “All Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Tim 3:16a). The sixty-six books of Scripture are unlike any other human writing. God guided the human authors through their own personalities and gifts to write down the exact words he intended to reveal to humanity. “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:21).

*The Bible is inerrant and infallible.*<sup>8</sup> Because God himself is the ultimate author of Scripture, we can trust not merely the big ideas but every word (Matt 4:4; 5:18). God’s character is true; thus, he cannot lie in the words he has revealed (Titus 1:2). “Let God be true though every one were a liar” (Rom 3:4a).

*Scripture is timeless.* Human science, including psychology and psychiatry, changes from generation to generation. Much of the “settled science” of

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., xxi.

<sup>8</sup> The Bible is infallible in the original manuscripts, which have been remarkably preserved by God’s providence through the copies preserved throughout history.

psychology from fifty years ago has been discredited in both theory and practice. For example, homosexuality was considered a mental disorder prior to 1973. Now, a psychologist can lose his license if he attempts to change a client's homosexual orientation. In contrast, God's word reflects his eternal immutable character in that it is perfectly true and unchanging for every age: "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isa 40:8; see also Pss 19:9 and 119:160).

*Scripture is authoritative.* When God speaks, all people must listen and submit: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you [Moses] from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to him all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him" (Deut 18:18–19). God's word must be believed and obeyed. Refusal to submit to what Scripture teaches is intellectual and moral rebellion against God: "As it is said, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion'" (Heb 3:15).

*The Bible is self-authenticating.* There is no higher standard of truth above the Bible by which it can be proven or disproven. It is the standard by which all other truth claims are judged. The Holy Spirit makes the perfection and beauty of Scripture plain to God's people. God's word cannot be appreciated or properly understood by those who approach it in unbelief (1 Cor 2:14).

*Scripture is sufficient.* God's word contains all the wisdom we need to live well, that is, according to God's purpose. Scripture is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16b–17). While the Bible does not give us exhaustive information, it gives us sufficient and comprehensive wisdom to guide us in all things. As theologian John Murray writes, "There is no situation in which we are placed, no demand that arises for which Scripture as the deposit of the manifold wisdom of God is not adequate and sufficient."<sup>9</sup> Frame adds, "Scripture contains all the divine words necessary for any aspect of human life."<sup>10</sup> Our belief in the sufficiency of Scripture distinguishes biblical counselors from Christian counselors who might believe in the inspiration of the Bible but also believe that the Bible is limited in its usefulness and thus that other sources of knowledge are authoritative and necessary if they are to faithfully help God's people with problems of the soul.

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<sup>9</sup> John Murray, "Holy Scripture," in *Life; Sermons; Reviews*, vol. 3 of *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 261.

<sup>10</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 220.

## **II. *The Bible Accurately and Authoritatively Explains What It Claims to Explain***

Scripture focuses on the vertical—everything about humanity is correctly understood in relationship to God. This contrasts with the view of secular psychologists, which merely focuses on the personal and the horizontal. Their distorted view of who we are, what our purpose is, and what is wrong with us leads to wrong psychological interpretations and solutions.

*Anthropology: Scripture reveals who we are.* It is impossible to understand human nature apart from understanding ourselves in relation to God. We have been created by God in his image (Gen 1:27a). This teaching implies that one must know God before one can accurately know oneself. We are not merely highly evolved animals. God has created us as male and female (Gen 1:27b), which has important contemporary implications, as the Bible teaches that God defines and regulates gender and marriage (Gen 2:18–25; Matt 19:4–5). We do not autonomously create our own identities. The Bible also teaches that we are duplex beings. Human nature consists of both body and soul. This contrasts with those who claim that we are merely physical beings. For example, Joseph Henrich writes, “The best available science says that our minds are produced entirely by our bodies and brains so they can’t have an independent existence.”<sup>11</sup> The apostle Paul confirms that we have both a physical body and an immaterial soul: “We would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:8; see also Phil 1:21–23 and Rev 6:10). Our thoughts and desires cannot be explained merely by brain activity. We have an immortal soul that chooses between sin and righteousness and worships either God or the creation (Rom 1:18–32; Mark 7:20–23). Refusing to submit to what Scripture reveals about human nature—and instead presupposing that we have evolved over time by chance and that we are merely physical beings—leads to significant and sinful errors in the theory and practice of psychology.<sup>12</sup>

*Aim: Scripture reveals our purpose.* We are designed by God to be in relationship with him and to thus worship, glorify, and please him, which is humanity’s supreme good. This is in sharp contrast to the view of secular psychology, which assumes human autonomy and focuses on human happiness as its goal. We are not autonomous. We are accountable to our Creator, to whom we owe worship and obedience. Our every thought, word, and act are either

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph Henrich, *The Weirdest People in the World* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2020), 129–30.

<sup>12</sup> Edward T. Welch, *Blame It on the Brain? Distinguishing Chemical Imbalances, Brain Disorders, and Disobedience* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998).

acts of worship in glad submission to our Creator or autonomous sinful acts of rebellion against him. The greatest commandment addressed to all of humanity is, “You shall love the LORD your God with all of your heart and all of your soul and with all of your might” (Deut 6:5). All of life is to be lived with an awareness of his presence and consciously for his glory: “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). Our ultimate goal should be to please him, both in this life and beyond. “So, whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him” (2 Cor 5:9). As the Westminster Shorter Catechism declares, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever” (WSC 1). The Bible also teaches that living for the glory of God results in the greatest possible human happiness. “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps 16:11). A psychology that does not see worship and God’s glory as man’s primary purpose is actively rebellious against God and can never lead to ultimate human happiness. “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food” (Isa 55:2).

*Ailment: Scripture reveals what is wrong with humanity.* We have a broken relationship with God (vertical), which then leads to personal brokenness and brokenness in relation to others (horizontal). The present miserable condition of humanity and the world in which we live is not as it is meant to be. Humanity fell when our representative Adam chose his way over God’s way (Gen 3), resulting in our physical and spiritual corruption. Our bodies, including our brains, are subject to decay and death (Gen 2:17; 3:19; 1 Cor 15:21–22; 2 Cor 4:16). Our desires are perversely opposed to God’s holy law (Rom 8:5–8; 3:12; John 3:19; Matt 15:18–19). Our thinking is twisted (Eph 4:18; Rom 3:11; 1 Cor 2:14) as we actively suppress the knowledge of God, which is displayed in creation and is revealed in our own hearts (Rom 1:19–23, 28–32). At the heart of sin is misplaced worship that elevates self and created things above God our Creator (Rom 1:21–23). We choose our own way instead of God’s way (Isa 53:6), thus falling short of God’s glory (Rom 3:23).

In contrast to secular psychology, which in effect promotes false worship of self, biblical counseling confronts idolatry, calling all people to repent of and turn from our sin (Acts 17:30). It understands our conflicts with other people as the bad fruit of our broken relationship with God and our sins against others as primarily sins against God (Ps 51:4; Gal 5:14–6:1; Jas 4:1–2). We cannot blame our environment or our genetics for our wrongdoing. These may be influences that should be understood, but they are not

determinative (1 Pet 1:18; Gal 5:16; 1 Cor 10:13; Ps 27:10). We are fully responsible for our sinful choices (Jas 1:13–15; Mark 7:20–23). Our biblical belief in human sin and responsibility is in sharp contrast to that of psychologists who label sinful behaviors as diseases (e.g., drunkenness as alcoholism) or disorders and excuse them as being caused by nature or nurture. In addition to being sinners, human beings are sufferers in this fallen world. We are harmed by the sins of others, including oppression and abuse (Gen 50:20; 2 Sam 13; Gen 37, 39). We are also affected by the fallenness of the creation, as we experience the effects of the fall through natural disasters and bodily problems (including brain malfunctions).<sup>13</sup> God’s revealed word also speaks to us in our suffering and teaches us how to endure and glorify God in the midst of trouble (Jas 1:2–5; Rom 8:18; 2 Cor 4:16–18).

### **III. *The Bible Does What It Claims to Do***

Scripture not only reveals who we are, what our purpose is, and what is wrong with us, but it also provides the means by which our lives may be transformed out of the misery caused by sin.

*Answer or Antidote: Scripture reveals the gospel, which is the only solution to the human problem.* “The law of the LORD is perfect; reviving the soul” (Ps 19:7a). Because human brokenness is rooted in our sinful alienation from God, we must be reconciled with God so that we can be restored as image bearers who glorify God. The Bible alone shows the way of reconciliation and restoration through faith in Jesus Christ, who redeems us from the guilt and power of our sin. When we turn from our sinful idolatry to Christ (1 Thess 1:9), we are transformed from being God’s enemies to being reconciled to him through Jesus’s blood (Col 1:21–22; Rom 5:8). Our sins are forgiven (1 John 1:8–2:2). Our fellowship with God is restored (1 Pet 3:18). The Bible is the means by which God’s Spirit regenerates spiritually dead men and women and brings them to saving faith in Christ. “You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Pet 1:23; see also Rom 10:17 and Jas 1:18). When unbelievers come to us for counsel, we direct them to the gospel, which is the only means by which they can fulfill God’s purpose for their lives and enjoy true happiness. Troubled believers also need more of the gospel as the source of help during their struggles.

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<sup>13</sup> See Jeff Forrey and Jim Newheiser, “The Influences on the Human Heart,” in *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling*, ed. James MacDonald, Bob Kellemen, and Steve Viars (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2013), 123–38.

*The Bible reveals life-transforming wisdom.* “The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple” (Ps 19:7b). Scripture provides wisdom and help so that we can gain victory in our struggle with our own remaining sin and the suffering we experience in a fallen world (Ps 19:7–10). After reviving us from spiritual death, God continues to work in our lives through the Bible to progressively sanctify us, conforming us to Christ (Phil 1:6). We who were formerly in the flesh and unable to please God (Rom 8:6–8) are given a new nature (2 Cor 5:17). In union with Christ we have been set free from sin (Rom 6:1–23) so that we can fulfill God’s purpose for us by loving and worshiping him. We are now able to glorify him by putting off our sinful behavior and replacing it with works of righteousness (Eph 2:10; 4:17–29). Our relationships with others are transformed because we are empowered by the gospel to forgive and love as we have been forgiven and loved (Eph 4:31–5:2). We are enabled to patiently endure suffering as we walk in Jesus’s steps (1 Pet 2:21–25) and anticipate coming joyously into his presence when he returns (Rom 8:18).

*Redemption is the central theme of Scripture.* Biblical counseling is not merely about morality and rule keeping. Adams writes, “Jesus Christ is at the center of all truly Christian counseling.”<sup>14</sup> Paul Tripp adds, “We need Christ. Only His person and work can free us from slavery to self and our tendency to deify the creation.”<sup>15</sup> David Powlison likewise declares,

God’s story is not about finding refuge and resources in yourself or in other people or in psychopharmacology. It’s about finding Christ in real times and places, the only Savior able to deliver you from what is really wrong within you and your world.<sup>16</sup>

Any system for helping people with their psychological (soul) problems that excludes the divine answer to humankind’s brokenness is woefully deficient.

*There is nothing human wisdom offers that compares to Scripture.* “More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb” (Ps 19:10). Our counseling must be saturated with biblical wisdom. “The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Ps 19:8). When people come to us seeking wisdom, we want to give them

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<sup>14</sup> Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 269.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 28.

<sup>16</sup> David Powlison, *Speaking the Truth in Love: Counsel in Community* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2005), 180.

the best possible answers. We do not want to send needy souls who are seeking the bread of life away with a stone (Matt 7:9). In our training of biblical and pastoral counselors we expect them to use God's word in every session as they feed the spiritually hungry with the bread of life.

#### ***IV. How Do Biblical Counselors Use Sources of Knowledge Outside of the Bible?***

A major difference between biblical counselors and other Christian counselors is the precedence we give to Scripture over what we believe to be the often-flawed conclusions of varying psychologies based on unbiblical presuppositions. This does not mean that we disregard science. Rather, we interpret and utilize scientific findings under the authority of God's word.

*All truth is God's truth because truth is always properly related to him.* We acknowledge that psychologists can offer useful descriptions of human behavior. However, their interpretation of their observations will be influenced by their presuppositions and worldviews. Those who deny the authority of God's word have faulty underlying beliefs about who we are, what our goal is, and the source of our problems, which will be the lens through which they arrive at their conclusions. Adams adds,

Data are collected and related and presented by *men*, all of whom are sinners, and subject to the noetic effects of their sin. In God's world all men are related to him as covenant breakers or covenant keepers (in Christ). The judgments of unbelievers, therefore, are arrived at and presented from a point of view which attempts to divorce itself from God.<sup>17</sup>

*Natural revelation contains truth, but it is insufficient for counseling.* Many Christian counselors claim that the insights of natural revelation should be valued alongside insights gained from Scripture. According to Scripture, God's revelation of himself in creation is designed to reveal his existence and attributes (Ps 19:1–6; Rom 1:19–20). The effect of general revelation is that believers worship God's glory as it is displayed in his creation. Unbelievers suppress the knowledge of God in the creation and in their consciences, thus rendering them without excuse (Rom 1:21–22, 32). We can only come to truly know God through the special revelation of Scripture (Rom 10:14). Often what is called "natural revelation" by Christian counselors who rely upon secular psychology includes interpretations that are corrupted by antibiblical presuppositions.

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<sup>17</sup> Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 269.

*We learn from common grace insights of psychology.* The way biblical counselors may benefit from psychology is analogous to how common grace wisdom informs the public ministry of the word in preaching. The Bible does not explicitly teach homiletical principles addressing issues such as how sermons should be organized (one clear purpose developed in approximately three main points) or how to keep the hearers' attention (mix in relevant stories and illustrations). Nor does the Bible explicitly teach principles for sermon delivery (eye contact, gestures, etc.).<sup>18</sup> We benefit from common grace wisdom, which one might learn in a college speech class. But the content of the message of the preacher is to be God's word (2 Tim 4:1–5), not secular wisdom. In the same way, biblical counselors may learn valuable counseling techniques such as listening skills and communication techniques from the common grace wisdom of secular psychologists. But the message we aspire to deliver is God's word.

*We appreciate that psychology can sometimes contribute to human happiness and relieve suffering.* We appreciate medical interventions for certain problems, and we attribute the benefits these provide to God's common grace for humanity. For example, a person who is having a panic attack may be helped by performing breathing exercises. We also acknowledge the benefits the use of medications and other therapies to relieve psychological suffering in some cases. These interventions often provide symptomatic relief, but they do not address spiritual causes. They cannot satisfy the ultimate need of humanity, which is to know God and to be rightly related to him through Jesus Christ (John 17:3). "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36).

*We are wary of assertions of "truth" that are rooted in unbiblical presuppositions.* Scripture teaches that there is no neutrality when it comes to truth. Either our thinking is under God's lordship as expressed through Scripture, or we imbibe the false ideologies of the world (Rom 12:2).

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. (Col 2:8–10)

While psychologists who do not submit to the authority of Scripture can make profound observations of human behavior, their interpretations of this behavior and their solutions to human problems are tainted by their unbelieving worldview.

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<sup>18</sup> But see Nehemiah 8:4.

## Conclusion

To summarize:

*Authority.* Secular psychology relies on empirical data and experience. Biblical counselors point out that their “science” is actually interpreted based upon their unbelieving presuppositions. Our authority is God’s infallible revealed word, by which we approach all of the issues listed below (2 Tim 3:16–17).

*Anthropology.* Secular psychology typically sees people as merely physical beings who are the product of evolution. The Bible teaches that we have been created in God’s image (Gen 1:27) and that we have both a body and a soul. God breathed life into Adam (Gen 2:7). The apostle Paul tells us that at death our souls will be with the Lord while our bodies are in the grave awaiting the resurrection. “Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:8).

*Aim.* The primary aim of psychology is human happiness (usually defined by the counselee or client). The aim of biblical counseling is that we please and glorify God (2 Cor 5:9; 1 Cor 10:31).

*Ailment.* Secular psychology typically sees our problems as coming from nature (i.e., genetic disposition to alcoholism) or nurture (growing up in an alcoholic or abusive family). While biblical counselors take the influences of nature and nurture seriously (because the Bible does), the underlying human problem is sin. We are fallen creatures born in sin and personally guilty of rebelling against God. We set our will above his (Isa 53:6; Rom 3:23) and need redemption.

*Answer (or Antidote).* Secular psychology has a variety of approaches to human problems, including different forms of talk therapy and medications. Scripture teaches that the only way for a person to fulfill their ultimate purpose of glorifying God is for them to be reconciled to him through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 8:6–8; Heb 11:6), through whom their sins are forgiven and they receive a new nature (2 Cor 5:17). Then they are enabled to glorify God through worship, service, and obedience.

Because we believe the Bible is what it claims to be, that it accurately answers the questions it claims to answer, and that it does what it claims to do, the goal of biblical counseling is to give wise instruction from the Bible so that the counselee can achieve God’s goals in his or her life. Just as God uses the public ministry of the word to transform lives, so does biblical counseling the private ministry of God’s word. “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present

everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” (Col 1:28–29).

As Frame writes, “The Word does things that only God can do.”<sup>19</sup> Human beings, through common grace, may discover in creation various useful means (medical and psychological) that may reduce the harmful effects of sin. However, without Scripture, their best efforts will result only in temporary symptomatic relief, what Ed Welch and Powlison refer to as “David’s harp.”<sup>20</sup> While we are thankful that common grace wisdom offers some relief from suffering, it grieves us to see Christian counselors whose faith in God’s word is so limited that they devote little time to studying it and applying it to their counselees. Instead, they put their hope in sophisticated earthly wisdom, which cannot transform the heart and mind as only Christ can (Col 2:8–10). God’s word alone has the power to expose our sin and renew our hearts as it points us to Christ. There is no earthly wisdom more sophisticated or powerful than that of God’s revealed word. “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12).

We do not oppose common grace psychological techniques, which may relieve human suffering or contribute to human happiness. But we want our fellow Christian counselors to come to a greater appreciation of the wisdom and power of Scripture for helping people, not merely in a few limited circumstances but in all the challenges of life. There may be cases in which both Scripture and common grace methodologies will be helpful. There will never be a case in which Scripture is not essential.

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<sup>19</sup> Frame, *Doctrine of the Word*, 67.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Welch and David Powlison, “Every Common Bush Afire with God: The Scripture’s Constitutive Role for Counseling,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 16.4 (Winter 1997): 315. (David’s harp playing helped Saul only in a limited and temporary way and did not deal with his real spiritual problem.)

# Biblical Counseling in the Spanish-Speaking World

NATALIE CARLEY

## Abstract

Spanish translations of Jay Adams's pioneering works slowly attracted pastors and counselors in Spain and Latin America to biblical counseling. Beginning before the turn of the millennium, the content of the biblical counseling courses of Westminster / Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF) were taught in Mexico, where CCEF faculty books were increasingly translated. As new centers for biblical counseling training arose at Westminster West, California, at Faith Church in Lafayette, Indiana, and through the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, their international students began to take biblical counseling education to their home countries, many Spanish speaking. Finally, through the internet, biblical counseling training and practice have spread rapidly in Latin America and more slowly in Spain.

## Keywords

*Biblical counseling, consejería bíblica, Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF), Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC), Spanish-speaking, training, seminary*

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## Introduction

**T**he subject of this article is the expansion of biblical counseling to Spanish-speaking cultures. However, before surveying the international scene, it is worth noting that a surprising 38.3 million or 11.5% of Americans speak Spanish as their primary language in the home, and that is not counting Puerto Rico.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the number of native Spanish speakers in the United States exceeds the population of most Spanish-speaking countries! Spanish-speaking Americans could be the first target audience of Spanish biblical counseling ministries, including training programs and publishers. Nonetheless, the more important training recipients for the purposes of this article are those who bring this ministry of the Word to their home countries, extending its reach. In the course of describing the origin and growth of these training ministries, some of their pros and cons will emerge as well.

A word of clarification of what is meant by biblical counseling is in order. The specific scope of this article is the Spanish-language expansion of the movement initiated and developed by the faculty of the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF) beginning with Jay Adams around 1970. Today CCEF is joined in expanding and extending biblical counseling principally by the ministries of Faith Church in Lafayette, Indiana, which include master's level seminary study, the Biblical Counseling Coalition, and certification through the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC). Other ministries using “biblical counseling” in their name are not included in this article. In some cases, this is because I have personal experience with the ministry and know it to have a different conceptualization of the term; in other cases, I have no familiarity with the ministry and could only go by what I read online. I have almost certainly missed some ministries that deserve mention; this report is, inevitably, not exhaustive.

### I. *Distinctives and Challenges*

Some confusion arises from the way the term *biblical counseling* is used in Spanish-speaking countries. In the United States most people in Christian counseling are *intentionally integrationist*—they aim to integrate biblical

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<sup>1</sup> “The Prevalence of the Spanish Language within the US,” Milestone Localization, January 18, 2021, <https://www.milestoneloc.com/the-prevalence-of-the-spanish-language-within-the-us/#:~:text=53%20million%20Hispanic%20people%20live,a%20first%20or%20second%20language.>

principles with the secular psychologies because they believe each presides over its own domain, and wisdom from both is needed. This is probably true in Spanish-speaking countries as well. However, in recent years the term biblical counseling is gaining in popularity as a self-designation for ministries. Some educational institutions have simply changed the name of their program or course from “Christian counseling” to “biblical counseling” without changing any of the content. This practice can make it difficult to identify Spanish counseling resources that are genuinely biblical. Ministries that use “biblical counseling” in their name but which I know from personal experience to be integrationist at their core are not included in this article; rather, only those whose origins can be traced to CCEF or Faith/ACBC.

### **1. Lack of an Agreed-Upon Definition of “Biblical Counseling”**

The misuse of the designation “biblical counseling” is at least in part due to its lack of a standard definition. If someone says he is an amillennialist, it is understood what he means, or it can at least be looked up. But what does it mean to be a biblical counselor? The Spanish-language websites that offer a definition of biblical counseling tend to mention the following:

- Counseling belongs (wholly or mostly) to the church, and believers in general can and should engage in it.<sup>2</sup>
- The word of God is authoritative and sufficient to enable the believer to comprehend the problems of life in a fallen world.
- It is Christ centered.
- It is a form of discipleship.
- It is Spirit empowered; the Holy Spirit is the One who ultimately works change (sanctification) in a person’s heart.

No website mentions all of the above, but these characteristics appear repeatedly. In answer to the question of what the difference is between psychology and biblical counseling, Pastor Kike Torres identifies three characteristics that distinguish biblical counseling. Biblical counseling (1) honors the supremacy of the word, (2) prioritizes what the Bible prioritizes, and (3) has as its objective the glory of God.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I call counseling a “one-anothering” ministry, but the term is probably not originally from me.

<sup>3</sup> Questions answered by the author on the promotional page for Kike Torres’s book, *Una Nueva Vida: de Cristo en Adelante* (New York: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2023), <https://www.editorialhccp.com/vida/una-nueva-vida-de-cristo-en-adelante/>.

I will opine that all of the above are accurate descriptions of what we biblical counselors aspire to offer. There is yet another aspect not mentioned that proceeds from the supremacy of Scripture but deserves to be emphasized as a separate item in any list of distinctive characteristics of biblical counseling: For counseling to be biblical, the counselor needs to have a *biblical anthropology* or *doctrine of man*. I believe this is the most difficult criterion to attain because having a robust biblical model of the person entails years of deprogramming from many ideas that are so much a part of Western cultures that they are assumed or taken for granted.

This assertion requires an example to be clear. One popular false anthropology holds that a person has basic psychological “needs” and is even defined by them. However, when identified, the needs are all subjective, such as needs for affection, encouragement, and purpose, all of which would more accurately be called desires. Objective needs would include forgiveness, salvation, redemption, and regeneration. Larry Crabb found subjective needs to be at the core of the person. In his books on biblical counseling, he taught that man has two basic needs, security and significance (or relationship and impact).<sup>4</sup> Yet, such needs-based models are not biblical conceptualizations of the person; they are repackaged secular theories.

David McClelland posited that there were three different basic needs: affiliation, power, and achievement.<sup>5</sup> Affiliation is another way to say relationship; power and achievement together are equivalent to significance and impact. It is clear that needs-based models of the person derive from psychologists like McClelland, not from Scripture. This is not to say that there can be only *one* biblical model, just that a biblical model derives from inductive Bible study.

David Powlison uses the scriptural metaphor of two trees and a cross to analyze the beliefs and desires of the heart.<sup>6</sup> Other authors write about man from the perspective of creation, fall, and redemption. Still others focus on man as a worshiper who will worship either the true God or idols. In my biblical counseling curriculum, I devote an entire semester to a course on “theological anthropology” in order to clarify the difference between an

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<sup>4</sup> Larry Crabb, *Effective Biblical Counseling: A Model for Helping Caring Christians Become Capable Counselors* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977). Later, in his book *Understanding People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), Crabb changed the names of these two needs to relationship and impact.

<sup>5</sup> David McClelland, *The Achieving Society* (Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand, 1961).

<sup>6</sup> Powlison taught this model for over 25 years as a foundation to the understanding of how people change in his course “Dynamics of Biblical Change” (Westminster Theological Seminary, Glenside, PA).

anthropology that starts from an unquestioned premise and then finds Bible verses to support it and one that starts with the word of God and asks what the Creator says about human beings.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Interpretation into Spanish

Another challenge to establishing a biblical counseling ministry is that the Spanish language has no word that means exactly the same as “counseling” in English. In Spain, the word *consejería* without any context or modifiers could most easily be understood to mean professional financial advice. (Thus *consejería bíblica* could have been understood to mean biblical financial services!) As the field grew in Spain, *orientación*, *consejería*, *aconsejamiento*, and *asesoramiento* were all used to translate what we call counseling in English. The first Adams book translated into Spanish, *Competent to Counsel*, was called *Capacitado para Orientar*,<sup>8</sup> not *Capacitado para Aconsejar*. In the dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy (RAE), the undisputed (at least to purists) authoritative source for the Spanish language, *consejería* only refers back to *consejo* (counsel or council), the definition closest to our concept being “opinion expressed in order to orient an action in a certain way.”<sup>9</sup> As Jaime Morales noted in his introduction to his course on biblical counseling, “The terms *consejería* and *aconsejamiento* are not part of the Spanish language according to the Dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy, at least not with the connotation we give them.”<sup>10</sup> The result of this minor vocabulary handicap was that, while there is a lag time with any trend that crosses the Atlantic in either direction, in this case the delay in establishing counseling itself as a legitimate enterprise was perhaps exacerbated.

## 3. Pushback from Pastors

Finally, there has been pushback from pastors with respect to counseling. It was thought that

<sup>7</sup> Natalie Carley, *Antropología Teológica: La Doctrina Bíblica del Hombre*, MINTS Online, <https://mintsonline.org/curso-antropologia-teologica.php>.

<sup>8</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970); Jay E. Adams, *Capacitado para orientar* (Barcelona: Editorial Portavoz, 1981).

<sup>9</sup> My rough translation of “Opinión que se expresa para orientar una actuación de una determinada manera,” from “consejo,” *Diccionario* (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 2022 update), <https://dle.rae.es/consejo#H36BPCo>.

<sup>10</sup> “Los términos *consejería* y *aconsejamiento* no pertenecen al español según el Diccionario de la Real Academia Española (DRAE), por lo menos no en la connotación que nosotros les damos.” Jaime Morales, “Principios bíblicos en el aconsejar,” extracto de “Consejería Bíblica Práctica,” MINTS Online, <https://mintsonline.org/blog/principios-biblicos-en-el-aconsejar/>.

counseling was an extreme measure for cases of extreme harm or need. If you asked the pastor for counseling or help, it was because you were already in bad shape and desperate. Pastors even avoided counseling since they felt unprepared and thus intimidated. It was always easier to recommend the church member seek a “professional.” Even today, this is how many understand counseling; for example, there are pastors who are beloved and used by God who, when someone comes to request counsel or help, they refer the person to their sermon archives.<sup>11</sup>

## II. *Various Cultural Contexts*<sup>12</sup>

### 1. *Receptivity to American Ideas and the Spanish Divide*

We are looking at the expansion of a movement that began in the United States. Different countries have different responses to the importation of American ideas. Spain is separate from the rest of the Spanish-speaking world not only geographically but culturally. Nothing brought in from outside, especially from the United States, is immediately embraced. In contrast, American ideas brought to Mexico are not only embraced but welcomed, especially when they come from a sister denomination, such as a Presbyterian denomination with which they share the Westminster Standards, and to whose seminaries they send their pastors to be educated. However, denominations are not as prevalent in some Spanish-speaking countries. Spain, for example, has mostly looser associations of churches that function more independently, called *federations*. It is less common for a Spanish pastor to study for the ministry in the United States and, from what I have observed, the Spanish in general have less interest in learning English.

The aforementioned observations illustrate how, despite the common language, the cultural differences between Spanish-speaking countries and even regions within a country can be quite large. Some of the most significant differences are seen between Spain and the rest of the Spanish-speaking countries. Spain is a more developed country, and its culture is more post-modern. Spain has a much higher median age than that of Latin American countries and a higher percentage of people who profess no faith at all. I

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<sup>11</sup> “Consejería era una medida extrema para casos de extremo daño o necesidad. Si tu pedías consejo al pastor o ayuda, era porque ya de plano estabas muy mal y desesperado. Aún hoy, sé que es el formato en que muchos entienden la consejería, y por ejemplo, hay pastores amados y usados por Dios, que cuando alguien viene a pedir consejo o ayuda, los refieren a sermones pasados que dieron.” “¿Consejería Bíblica vs. Suficiencia de la Palabra?” Coalición de Consejería Bíblica, <https://www.consejero.org/post/consejer%C3%ADa-b%C3%ADblica-vs-suficiencia-de-la-palabra>.

<sup>12</sup> Much of this section is based on my doctor of ministry project: Natalie Carley, “Dynamics of Biblical Change’ for Spanish Speaking People” (DMin Project, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, PA, 2010), 20–24.

think this makes Spanish believers more disconnected from their own cultures.<sup>13</sup>

## **2. *The Status of Evangelicals***

The place of Christian faith in Spanish-speaking cultures is markedly different from that in the United States. Evangelicals are a vocal minority in the United States and a political constituency to be reckoned with. In Mexico, evangelical organizations were only allowed to formally exist starting in the 1990s, and the degree to which they are recognized (for example, allowed to publish announcements of activities in local newspapers) in the community varies, although overall it is improving. The evangelical community is increasingly less marginalized in some parts of Latin America, but still not in Spain. Widespread ignorance of Protestant Christian faith in Spain is seen in that even the appeals of respected pastors cannot get the press to call Christians evangelicals (*evangélicos*) instead of evangelists (*evangelistas*)!

## **3. *Cultural Awareness in Teaching***

Spanish-speaking cultures differ from one another in vocabulary, not for theological concepts but for everyday things. When I taught in new cities, I made a point of asking before my first class the most common words for elements of my examples from everyday life. When possible, I had a native review my PowerPoint presentations beforehand to make sure that they did not contain any unrecognized words. I had been using a certain slide for ten years only to find when I went to Argentina that a word on it was unknown there.

The differences between Spanish-speaking countries include political ones, which can also have a bearing on teaching if one wants to use culturally relevant examples, as I try to do. For example, when in Colombia I used a cartoon of Saddam Hussein to represent the abuse of authority, I was told that I should use a caricature of Hugo Chavez instead, so I made the substitution. However, I could not use this image in Ecuador or Bolivia, which have affiliations with Venezuela, all of their governments being populist. At least some political awareness is helpful to teach in a way that is more sensitive to students.

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<sup>13</sup> The precisionist in me has to say “cultures” because there is no one Spanish culture. The autonomous communities that comprise Spain are each proud of their own heritage and culture, and the Basque region, Catalonia, and Valencia have their own languages.

The more urban a culture is, the more like the United States it is, and vice versa. When I taught in a rural area, I had to take special care to ask questions beforehand to get an idea of the pressures that these people regularly face—for example, no traffic jam illustrations on the Island of Cozumel (where there is one road and few cars).

Economic factors are a large part of the pressures people in all countries of the world face today. I have had to expand the way that I teach about responding to life circumstances to address variations of the “health and wealth gospel.” The wealthier a culture, the more like the United States it is.

#### **4. Grassroots Appeal**

While historically there has been pushback from pastors on practicing counseling in general, there is now a grassroots appeal of biblical counseling to conservative pastors. The vast majority of Latin American pastors have not gone to seminary, where their beliefs might have been liberalized. Because biblical counseling is an outworking of the doctrines of the inerrancy and sufficiency of God’s word, it appeals to pastors of Reformed and other conservative denominations with a high view of Scripture. Through these pastors and churches, biblical counseling is spreading.

### **III. The Introduction of Biblical Counseling Training in Spanish-Speaking Countries**

Biblical counseling initially came to the Spanish-speaking world via the early works of Adams. Editorial Portavoz published *Competent to Counsel* (*Capacitado para Orientar*) in 1981, eleven years after its debut in English. Barcelona-based Editorial Clie, at that time the largest publisher of Christian (Protestant) books in Spanish, published the *Christian Counselor’s Manual* in Spanish in 1984.<sup>14</sup>

Clie’s primary markets are North America and Spain, where David Barcelo encountered the nouthetic counseling of Adams while studying psychology. As a result, he changed paths and went to the United States to study biblical counseling. He has been giving seminars on biblical counseling in churches and educational institutions ever since he returned to Spain in 2004.

Westminster alumnus David Legters worked to bring biblical counseling to pastoral education in the Yucatan. In 1987 he wrote to his alma mater requesting that they send someone to Mérida, Mexico, to teach biblical

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<sup>14</sup> Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor’s Manual* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973); Jay E. Adams, *Manual del consejero cristiano* (Terrassa: Libros Clie, 1984).

counseling at San Pablo Presbyterian Theological Seminary, which he co-founded.<sup>15</sup> There was no one at Westminster to meet this request at the time, but ten years later I was put in touch with “Don Bito” (the name by which he went), and he persuaded me of the value of this opportunity. Thus, after graduating from Westminster in 1998, I went to Mérida as a missionary, where I began to teach counseling courses to pastoral program students at San Pablo Presbyterian Theological Seminary. In 1999, I began teaching a two-year diploma program<sup>16</sup> of study offering Spanish translation versions of the Westminster/CCEF courses I had taken, with the permission of the original professors. Classes met each Saturday of the school year for two years. The program has grown and continues to this day.

Adams’s books also reached Latin America, and starting in the 2000s, Barcelo and I received invitations to travel from Spain and Mexico, respectively, to teach biblical counseling classes and conferences in countries in Latin America. Torres, Felix Ramirez, and others followed in the 2010s. Countries where biblical counseling has been taught in person in Spanish include at least Mexico, Nicaragua, Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, Chile, Paraguay, Costa Rica, and Peru.

In 2009, after being recruited by Barcelo, I moved from Mexico to Barcelona with the goal of establishing a biblical counseling training program there. The larger, better-known Bible school, Instituto Bíblico y Seminario Teológico de España (IBSTE), was not interested in biblical counseling then, but Centro Evangélico de Estudios Bíblicos (CEEB) was. I presented a very pared-down version of my two-year diploma program to the faculty, and it was approved. In addition to those who attended in person, some students from Mexico and the Dominican Republic attended virtually, synchronistically. The first cohort of students graduated in 2013. Unfortunately, the program did not continue because I returned to the United States. Since 2014 only an occasional introductory biblical counseling course has been offered by CEEB, taught by one or another of my former students.

In 2014 the president of IBSTE (who had not been interested in biblical counseling five years earlier) wanted to put together a master’s degree program in biblical counseling with the help of me and others, but that did not materialize.

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<sup>15</sup> To give credit where credit is due, a CCEF student from Acapulco named Maggie Gonzalez connected me to San Pablo Seminary. Maggie gave some seminars on biblical counseling in Acapulco before becoming a clinical psychologist specializing in neurological disorders in children.

<sup>16</sup> This diploma is an extension program of San Pablo Seminary, which itself was equivalent to a Bible school rather than a graduate school at the time.

## **IV. Spanish Biblical Counseling Ministries Today**

### **1. United States**

As mentioned in the introduction, there are more Spanish-speakers in the United States than in most Spanish-speaking countries. Responding to this demographic, Faith Church in Lafayette offers their biblical counseling training programs fully in Spanish. (Although it has been considered, the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation has not branched out into Spanish-speaking training to date.) Steve Viars, the senior pastor of Faith, completed his Doctor of Ministry degree at Westminster under CCEF faculty. CCEF has given them the rights to publish CCEF faculty-authored books in Spanish, and they have picked up where others left off in publishing a large number of CCEF's minibooks<sup>17</sup> in Spanish.<sup>18</sup>

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary offers a fully online master of divinity in biblical counseling degree at a reduced price for students in their Hispanic program. Since 2004, they have offered “a master of divinity program taught entirely in Spanish—a first for an accredited Protestant seminary in the continental United States, according to the Association of Theological Schools.”<sup>19</sup> The biblical counseling specialty was added later.<sup>20</sup>

### **2. Spain**

Barcelo continues receiving invitations to give seminars on biblical counseling to more and more churches in Spain, South America, and Central America, and he teaches biblical counseling as a member of the faculty of the Argentina-based Seminario Bíblico William Carey. He would say that biblical counseling is expanding in Spain almost entirely at this grassroots level. At the institutional level, CEEB offers a single course or occasional seminar called “biblical counseling,” but it does not have a full program of study at this time.

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<sup>17</sup> This is the term CCEF uses for its single-topic booklets.

<sup>18</sup> “Videos de Observación de Consejería Bíblica en Español,” Lafayette: Faith Resources, Faith Church, <https://faithresources.vhx.tv/products/videos-de-observacion-de-consejeria-biblica-en-espanol>.

<sup>19</sup> David Roach, “M.Div. Taught in Spanish Slated at Southern Seminary,” Baptist Press, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/m-div-taught-in-spanish-slated-at-southern-seminary/>.

<sup>20</sup> “Maestría en Divinidad en Consejería Bíblica,” The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, <https://www.sbts.edu/hispanos/maestria-en-divinidad-en-consejeria-biblica/>.

### 3. *Mexico and Beyond in Latin America*

The diploma program in biblical counseling, which I began at San Pablo Seminary, Mérida, Mexico, in 1999, has continued under the direction of two of its graduates, Ramirez and Elsy Castellanos, who each also studied for a year at Westminster. The training of the Coalición de Consejería Bíblica (CCB), the Spanish iteration of the Biblical Counseling Coalition, of which CCEF's former Executive Director Powlison was a founding member, is intensive, but the training offered by the San Pablo diploma programs and the recently formed "Red de Consejeros Bíblicos" (Network of Biblical Counselors)<sup>21</sup> is *intense*, necessarily meaning it includes fewer students. Nonetheless, the program has grown, and cohorts have formed in other states in eastern Mexico. Growth has occurred via word of mouth. San Pablo now offers the diploma program entirely online and its professors are beginning to develop an online presence through YouTube videos and social media.

Meanwhile, in 2012 the Mexican pastor Torres began studying the ACBC-certified training program of biblical counseling at Faith Church,<sup>22</sup> and in 2015 he initiated a ministry for ACBC certification in Spanish at his church on the west side of Mexico (unaware of the training program that already existed in the Yucatan). This ministry has grown in a manner parallel to the San Pablo diploma programs, but it has expanded much more through Torres's boundless energy, his vision to reach internationals, and the backing of the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC) with whom Torres received his certification. His Horizonte Church in Querétaro (on the other side of Mexico from Yucatan) hosts a well-attended week-long annual conference "Con Tu Consejo" (With Your Counsel), which his website says reaches hundreds of people from over three hundred different churches. This conference also offers his intensive fundamentals program for ACBC certification. He heads the CCB.<sup>23</sup> In recent years Torres has been impressively active in networking and extending biblical counseling in Latin America, and he has a strong online presence, which includes YouTube videos. Conferences and seminars comprise most of the training, making it more accessible to students who cannot commit to weekly classes and assignments.

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<sup>21</sup> The network's co-founders and principal instructors are Pastor Ramirez, Castellanos, Dr. Froylan Ceballos, and Leticia Vivas.

<sup>22</sup> Conversation with Kike Torres, January 6, 2023.

<sup>23</sup> Torres also added fundamental counseling courses to the offerings of Seminario de Estudios Bíblicos Aplicados al Ministerio (Seminary of Biblical Studies Applied in Ministry, or SEBAM), which he founded in Querétaro, Mexico.

The Association of Certified Biblical Counselors has a Spanish website listing their certified study centers, which include Torres's center in Mexico as well as a center in Ecuador.<sup>24</sup> (A center in Chile was listed, but it appears inactive at this time.) Students at these centers attend conferences in person or online to become certified biblical counselors. The website also shows a map with the location of certified ACBC counselors in South America: Peru, one; Ecuador, three; Paraguay, one; Chile, one; and Argentina, one. Biblical counselors are also listed in Honduras, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic.<sup>25</sup>

Although I did not find it on the ACBC site, the Reformed Seminario Bíblico William Carey in Argentina offers a fully online diploma in biblical counseling that is ACBC certified.<sup>26</sup>

Jairo Suarez, an ACBC-certified biblical counselor, is leading the initiatives of the Biblical Counseling Coalition in Colombia. Julio Benitez, president of the Seminario Reformado Latinoamericano (Reformed Latin American Seminary, formerly known as Gospel to Colombia), based in Medellín and having eighteen branch sites, is in the process of creating a master's degree program in biblical counseling that teaches CCEF material. Historically, the majority of pastors in Colombia (as in Latin America in general) did not practice counseling their sheep except in some grave cases, in which case they addressed "inner healing" or "spiritual warfare." However, in recent years due to the influence of biblical counseling literature and the internet, some neo-Calvinist pastors have been studying biblical counseling and beginning to apply its principles.

#### **4. Online-Only Ministries**

The ministry *Coram Deo* has a podcast and a team of biblical counselors who offer their services, paid by the hour, through their website.<sup>27</sup> Front and center on their main biblical counseling page, *Coram Deo* directly addresses the problem (mentioned at the beginning of this article) with the use of the term "biblical counseling" in Spanish to identify ideologically

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<sup>24</sup> "Get Training," Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, <https://biblicalcounseling.com/training/get-training/training-centers-map/>.

<sup>25</sup> "Find a Counselor," Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, <https://biblicalcounseling.com/find-a-counselor/>.

<sup>26</sup> "Diplomado en Consejería Bíblica," Seminario Carey, 2023, <https://www.seminariocarey.org/academica/diplomado-en-consejeria/>.

<sup>27</sup> "Servicios de Consejería," *Coram Deo*, <https://proyectoCoramDeo.com/citas>. The *Coram Deo* website also contains links to the ministries that they have determined are truly biblical counseling. However, the list is not complete or updated. At least one link is broken.

diverse ministries. They warn readers to distinguish biblical counseling training along the lines of CCEF and ACBC from other “biblical counseling” education that they explain is actually integrationist.

Alejandra Sura, a bilingual native of Costa Rica, who completed a master’s in biblical counseling at Westminster, has built a substantial online Spanish biblical counseling ministry over the past few years. She can be found on all the major social media sites. At this writing, she has 68,000 followers on Instagram and 16,000 subscribers on her YouTube channel, where she posts short videos on biblical counseling. She and her husband both offer counseling virtually through the *Coram Deo* website.

## V. Resources

### 1. Publishers

When I started teaching biblical counseling in 1998, I could count on one hand the number of solid biblical counseling books available in Spanish to assign as reading material to students. Now there are so many that I cannot list all the authors or publishers, let alone the titles themselves. What follows are what I have found to be the most important sources of biblical counseling books in Spanish.

As mentioned, Faith Church in Lafayette publishes a number of resources in Spanish, including CCEF faculty-authored books and numerous mini-books, books by Tedd Tripp, Paul Tripp, Robert Jones, Leslie Vernick, Elyse Fitzpatrick, John MacArthur, Ken Sande, Nancy De Moss Wolgemuth, and others.<sup>28</sup>

The ministry *Faro de Gracia* is both a publisher and distributor of Reformed resources in Spanish. Some of their list of offerings overlaps with that of Faith, and they have some resources that Faith does not. *Faro de Gracia* purchased the rights to distribute Ed Welch’s *Blame It on the Brain?* and *When People Are Big and God Is Small* from the small Spanish publisher Peregrino.

Nonprofit *Poiema Publicaciones* is “a reformed, gospel-centered publishing ministry based in Medellín, Colombia.”<sup>29</sup> Although relatively new to the scene, *Poiema* publishes or distributes over 100 titles in Spanish, some of which are not available from other distributors (but can be found on Amazon, of course!).

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<sup>28</sup> “Recursos en Español,” Faith Resources, Faith Church, 2023, <https://store.faithlafayette.org/espanol-spanish/recursos-en-espanol>.

<sup>29</sup> “What Books Have Already Been Published in Spanish by Poiema?,” *Poiema Publicaciones*, <https://poiema.co/pages/poiema-english>.

Editorial EBI has a blog that features entries by biblical counselors such as Ed Welch, Julie Lowe, and Elyse Fitzpatrick.<sup>30</sup>

## 2. Videos and Articles

At the turn of the millennium, I did not know of any biblical counseling videos available online or through mail order. I uploaded as many articles from CCEF's *Journal of Biblical Counseling* as my Mexican colleagues<sup>31</sup> and I could translate to our website. Now, almost all of these articles have been made into the minibooks I mentioned. Although it has not been updated, our website still has a number of articles not available elsewhere.<sup>32</sup>

The Spanish Biblical Counseling Coalition's website has articles, a blog, audio recordings, and videos.<sup>33</sup> It also has a list of most of the most important Spanish biblical counseling books.

The Spanish ACBC website has a substantial library of articles, conference messages, and podcasts.<sup>34</sup> One can find many videos by other professors of biblical counseling online by searching by name and topic.

## 3. Recommended Books

So many biblical counseling books by so many new authors have been published in Spanish in the last decade or so that it can be difficult to keep up with them all. Nonetheless, my colleagues and I still consider the early books by CCEF faculty that were published in Spanish to be the most indispensable foundational resources for Spanish speakers who want to study how to do biblical counseling or to improve their counseling. We recommend the books assigned as required reading<sup>35</sup> for the San Pablo diploma program courses:

- *Encuentros de Poder (Power Encounters)* and the minibook *Enojo: Escapando el Laberinto (Anger: Escaping the Maze)*, by David Powlison
- *Cuando la Gente es Grande y Dios es Pequeño (When People Are Big and God Is Small)* and *¿Es el Cerebro el Culpable? (Blame It on the Brain?)*, by Ed Welch

<sup>30</sup> "Blog," Editorial EBI, <https://ebi-blog.org/category/consejeria/>.

<sup>31</sup> The "Red de Consejeros Bíblicos [Network of Biblical Counselors]" based in Mérida, Yucatan, Mexico.

<sup>32</sup> "Recursos," Consejeros Bíblicos, Red de Consejeros Bíblicos, <http://www.consejerosbiblicos.com/recursos/>.

<sup>33</sup> "Libros," Coalición de Consejería Bíblica," <https://www.consejero.org/libros>.

<sup>34</sup> "Recursos Destacados," Asociación de Consejeros Bíblicos Certificados, <https://biblical-counseling.com/es/resource-library/>.

<sup>35</sup> The list fluctuates somewhat and is not exhaustive.

- *Instrumentos en las Manos del Redentor (Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands)*, *Edad de Oportunidad (Age of Opportunity)*, *¿Qué Estabas Esperando? (What Did You Expect?: Redeeming the Realities of Marriage)*, and *Guerra de Palabras (War of Words)*, by Paul Tripp
- *Cómo Pastorear el Corazón de Tu Hijo (Shepherding a Child's Heart)*, by Tedd Tripp
- *El Pacificador (The Peacemaker)*, by Ken Sande
- *La Consejería: Cómo Aconsejar Bíblicamente (Counseling: How to Counsel Biblically)*, by John MacArthur and the Master's College faculty

Finally, we also consider the textbooks I wrote for my students to be foundational—namely, the aforementioned *Antropología Teológica (Theological Anthropology)* and *La Dinámica del Cambio Bíblico (The Dynamics of Biblical Change)*.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

As one might surmise from the sheer number of ministries cited, there has been an explosion of Spanish biblical counseling ministries, especially training programs, in the past ten to fifteen years. At the time that I wrote my doctor of ministry project (completed in 2010), there were scant Spanish language biblical counseling written resources, and (I perceived) a paucity of Spanish-speaking biblical counselors. My Mexican pastor Wilbur Madera was a prolific translator of CCEF faculty-authored books for me to use in my classes, but getting them picked up by a Spanish publisher was an arduous task.<sup>37</sup>

Now biblical counseling has gained so much popularity that presidents of at least two seminaries to whom I made unsuccessful appeals for biblical counseling in the mid-2000s now have courses called introductions to biblical counseling. Institutes whose loyalty to integrationist approaches or even

<sup>36</sup> “Recursos,” Consejeros Bíblicos, Red de Consejeros Bíblicos, <http://www.consejerosblicos.com/recursos/>. Both courses can be found under “Cursos.” They have not been professionally edited.

<sup>37</sup> David Powlison, *Power Encounters: Reclaiming Spiritual Warfare* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), was published/translated first because I could more easily negotiate the foreign language rights (i.e., between CCEF and Baker Books). Later, I negotiated rights to print and distribute 200 copies of Ed Welch's *Blame It on the Brain?* to my students before I convinced Peregrino in Spain to formally publish it as well as Ed Welch's *When People Are Big and God Is Small*, both of which I edited for faithfulness to the English meaning. In my years of reading translations of books alongside the original, I noticed that if the translator did not have a solid working knowledge of the material, his translations were sometimes not faithful to the meaning of the original.

secular psychologies was behind their refusal of my appeal have ostensibly done an ideological about-face. I should not be surprised by the burgeoning Spanish biblical counseling ministries because in 2010 I wrote that my teaching was timely in that it took advantage of what I saw as perhaps a unique window of opportunity in the development of Latin American Christian thinking about the person to reach Christian leaders before these cultures become as “psychologized” as that of the United States.<sup>38</sup>

My concern with the innovative modular training programs is that, while the content is solid, the overall quality of the learning experience is diminished by this method. The mere proliferation of these new learning venues seems to have brought with it the tendency to ask less of the student. Traditional courses require assignments that are turned in, graded, and returned to the student throughout the semester. This mentoring via ongoing correction and feedback enriches learning. Today courses consisting of week-long conferences or seminars or watching a series of videos online without assignments are the new norm.

The standout ministry in this sea of virtual seminars is the ACBC. Their curriculum seems to have expanded rather than contracted. ACBC certification also requires the student to pass some final exams in counseling and theology and have 50 hours of supervised counseling (which is mentoring). By allowing only ACBC-certified counselors to teach the seminars and supervise the students, they maintain consistency of content and control over who teaches it.

A master’s degree program or even a two-year diploma program requires a substantially larger investment of time and in some cases money. Even if it will prepare him or her more thoroughly, a student who has to earn a living is less likely to have the desire or the resources to invest in a two- to four-year program of study online, let alone residential, often in a distant city. Another drawback of a master’s degree in biblical counseling completed in Spanish is that it does not prepare its graduates to obtain any type of government licensure, which is often needed to receive third-party (insurance) payments for counseling.

In other words, virtual learning, even via seminars, is the more realistic choice for most people. It is so much more accessible that it is the way of the future—or rather, the present. It spreads wider, if not deeper. Moreover, the Lord can use all of these ministries—degree programs or nondegree programs, in person or virtual—to open believers to the riches of his word applied to life, the ministry that we call biblical counseling.

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<sup>38</sup> Carley, “Dynamics of Biblical Change’ for Spanish Speaking People,” 12.

# Some Reflections on Biblical Counseling, Adams, and Powlison

D. CLAIR DAVIS

## Abstract

This essay, based on David Powlison's *The Biblical Counseling Movement* and other works by Powlison and Jay Adams, reflects on the history of biblical counseling, in particular the relationship between Adams and Powlison. It also deals with the connection between biblical counseling and psychology. Concluding with John Calvin's famous statement about the interconnection between knowledge of God and knowledge of self, it advocates with Adams a clear Christian view of the counseling task and with the later biblical counseling movement a sensitivity to complexity of human issues.

## Keywords

*Biblical counseling, CCEF, Jay Adams, David Powlison, psychology, sanctification, Jack Miller, biblical theology, John Calvin*

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**T**here are things in life that are so important you couldn't make it without them. But then things change and you move on. Those Brooklyn Dodgers, with Jackie Robinson and Pee Wee Reese—what a team! But then they moved to LA, so who cares now? Not me.

Your Christian faith can work the same way. To believe in premill was the only smart way once, since people get bogged down into changing the

world—“Just remind them that Jesus has to come back for that really to happen.” A lot of us saw it that way. But Bible teaching on that is still fuzzy, and do you really think God wants us to ignore all the terrible things in the world and do nothing about them? So let’s keep room for premills, but for all the others who aren’t, too.

As long as it’s about all those wonderful things the Lord has shown you in his Word, it’s not as hard; just hang on regardless, no room for theological foolishness. We know God tells us clearly about how idolaters work hard at deceiving themselves, so you can be merciful to those guys without taking seriously what they say. Be wide open to godly growth and change but not to nonsense.

I learned that in my teens. I read my Bible and believed it. But then came Christian summer camp run by folks from the university, so skilled at ignoring any truth, teaching us it’s just not respectable anymore to say somebody’s wrong. “The only really wrong thing is to draw any line in the sand.” That’s the way they talked. Poor old Jesus—he said he was the way, truth, and life (cf. John 14:6). Too bad he didn’t know any better.

There’s our challenge. We know some things are vital. “Christ is risen!” Yes, he is, not rotting away in his grave. But here’s this guy making “the sign of the cross” at lunch—that’s no big deal. Along with “I am the way,” Jesus said, “Be one as I and my Father are” (cf. John 17:21–22). When we put those two together we’re on our gospel way. So should there be anything really new in our faith? Should our prayer sound the same as it did ten years ago?

Serious thinking about that started up when missionaries got through to us. Maybe in the old days we thought that the only right way to think was our own way, so the top missionary job was to teach those Africans or Asians how to think the Western way, and then what they say about Jesus will make sense to them too. But by now we know the Western way has its own heresies, so maybe the longer the Christian way has been in your world, the better you get about lying about it? We learn from those missionaries, get to know the people in your life, listen to them, ask them good questions so they can tell you something worth listening to, and then give them the gospel in the way that resonates with them. We still learn from Harvie Conn, Westminster Theological Seminary professor of foreign missions. After his years of listening in Korea, when he came back to Philadelphia, he learned that he needed to listen here too!

Think about that “biblical theology,” too. What should we do when God’s word in the Bible tell us so many things? We can put them together, can’t we? Systematic theology! Learn from what you read over there, combine it with what you get here, and figure out how they really say the same thing!

But when you do that, aren't you flattening out all those cutting edges? What if you were caught in the Babylonian captivity? Is that really like being in college? Sure, keep on finding that "systematic" unity—it's there since only one God is there. But what if underneath all those differences in the Bible, there's God's own plan for us to see how his kindness really fit that time and place too? So God gives us more than general truths, he's up close and personal?

With that in mind, we're set for a genuine conversation about how we can understand and care for each other. Once we relied too much on what the skeptical and unbelieving culture all around us told us. God's word could tell us what was "objectively" true about God and his salvation, but we still lived out our lives from the secular pagan thinking around us. We were so weak at seeing all the "therefores" in our Bibles, those bridges between God's truth and God's plan for our lives, those precious details of living for God.

Then came prophet Jay Adams! He persistently showed us our calling as comprehensive followers of Jesus, not only to believe in his majestic deity and gracious salvation but also to see his clear and specific direction for our lives. When God tells us what he wants us to do, we see his calling to us for all of our lives. Just enjoy his New Testament translation with all those highlighted verses showing us our specific way ahead. When God shows us the way so well, who needs the distractions of secular psychologists?

All of us are deeply indebted to Jay. He set us free from the lies of the satanic world and opened our hearts to the Lord's kind wisdom. Our salvation in Jesus is so rich and free! We can have confidence in God for every hard thing in our lives—that was his grand vision. Many pastors and counselors live out his insights, to the glory of God and the blessing of his people. But even though what Jay gave us is truly comprehensive, is it really all we need to hear? Can we still profit from the hard work of those psychologists and social scientists, while at the same time seeing their radical unbelief? While their solutions are shabby and pitiful, as all followers of Jesus believe, can they still show us why people struggle so much?

We want to work through our calling to unity in the body of Christ. There are those Baptists who think that sprinkling is not genuine baptism, Pentecostals who want us to fall backwards in order to be "slain in the Spirit," Calvinists who don't want to hear "Jesus died for you." But we know we are all in God's kind family together. So should there also be room for people who learn from psychology?

Loving people whom we don't identify with, that's hard. There was a time when the Jews were God's "chosen people," so didn't that mean no one else was? It seemed easy to think that way, and even when Jesus made it clear

that now all who trusted him were in the family, it was hard to take. So the Lord got through to Paul about that, and he told us the way to go:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph 4:1–6 NIV)

Do we know there are beliefs at the fundamental heart of our faith, that we can all agree upon, while having different takes about other things? Even when getting those “other things” wrong may be dangerous down the way? There’s our challenge now, as we take seriously Jay Adams and love him for his whole-souled commitment to God’s word. To “be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love”—that’s where we need to be as we go ahead.

Jay wrote about a hundred books! What we want to understand is so well expressed in one of his last ones.<sup>1</sup> Why would you want more than what God gives us in his word? That’s his point. He says it so well:

The relics that are our problem are the habitual ways of thinking and doing that were ingrained in us while serving sin. These may be replaced by presenting our bodily members to God. Thus, instead of understanding Romans 12:1 as some sort of special isolated (nearly magical) act in which one “yields” and rises to new heights, Paul’s words in this chapter should be considered further elaboration of his words in chapters 6 through 8 about presenting (yielding) one’s bodily members to righteousness. In the light of the argument in those three chapters, the verb here must be understood as an inceptive aorist, meaning “to begin presenting.” It is not a once-for-all action. There is to be growth over time to come.<sup>2</sup>

Here Jay battles against Higher Life or Keswick teaching about our sanctification as a “second blessing” that we receive by once again trusting Christ. Instead, gradual “growth over time” through obedience to those specific commands has to be the way to grow in following Christ. Jay is right in rejecting anything “magical,” but he tells us how Jesus himself relates to our obedience, in his wrap-up of the book:

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<sup>1</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Ending the Quest for Something More* (Cordova, TN: Institute for Noutheitic Studies, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

The Bible, however, seems instead to teach that past sinful ways can be put off and replaced by new biblical practices .... Back to the apostle Paul, who once breathed out threatenings and slaughter against the Lord's disciples (Acts 9:1). When converted, this murderer of God's people truly and completely turned from those ways. ... Without doubt, the Lord Jesus through his Spirit so alters one's individual thoughts and ways that they may become acceptable to God and pass his scrutiny!<sup>3</sup>

Was Jay telling us that we have been already so thoroughly changed by Jesus and Spirit that we won't have any real issues with the challenges in our lives? Don't we all believe that? But at the same time, aren't we devastated by the "not yet" in our lives? So that even though we know that Jesus has truly won the victory, our own mopping up after that battle is still terribly hard? So that we still struggle with our own "trust and obey"?

The issues between Jay and his followers seemed to be whether secular psychology can really be of value to us, or whether it only confuses our thinking and doing. But wasn't Jay's apparent disinterest in spiritual struggle the underlying issue? Of course, he was right in so many ways: when the Lord tells us to do something we ought to just do it, he's the Lord and he loves us. But we can still find that hard. The Lord is clear about adultery. But when your marriage is hopeless, what then? We know we shouldn't go off to someone else; that's adultery. But how can we stay in this never-getting-better marriage? It's going to take agonizing prayer, with so much trusting in how Jesus has been tempted in every way and how he's always our Mediator, fostering more needed love and trust in him. That has to be more than Jay's "Tough it out; you can do it." Don't we have to keep on asking him to do *his* keeping on with all his steadfast love in our lives?

I was personally very encouraged by Jay Adams and the thoroughness of his pastoral care. Before Jay, we were content with accurate theology, as all around us Christ's church was rapidly disintegrating and the world was bored with what we had to say. The riches of Jesus and his work were just not interesting. Of course, we knew what Jesus said, that the world will hate us as it hates him (cf. John 15:18), so we were ready for the satanic rejection of our Savior in our culture all around us. But we vigorously trusted Jesus our Mediator, the one who leads us in confidently bringing the best of all news to a lost world. We knew our Pentecostal calling to be bold in our witness. Now Jay helped us be bold in our obedience!

We will always agree with Jay that the world's way of seeing reality is seriously lacking, deliberately rejecting God's truth. But don't we also know that psychology tells us about ourselves and others much that we did not

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 91.

know before? All it tells us is distorted by unbelief, but doesn't it still help us open our hearts wide to the riches of the gospel? We barely knew the deep needs of our brothers and sisters, but with the help of all that science, now we do, and we see even more blessedly the riches of Jesus as he abundantly meets us there.

There are many followers of Jay. I was closest to David Powlison, briefly director of the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF). I believe that as we engage with what he says we will see and appreciate the broader concerns of many of his associates. We will always honor Jay for getting the gospel ball rolling in new and necessary ways. But at the same time, we honor how his vision opened the door to even deeper concerns.

The following words from David come from his book, *The Biblical Counseling Movement*, especially from the section "Crucial Issues in Contemporary Biblical Counseling."<sup>4</sup> (It will always be a joy in my heart that he asked me to be the external reader of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania, in many ways the foundation of this book.) Now vigorously work your heart with his words:

I am not saying that there is a fatal defect within existing biblical counseling. Our problem is a lack of emphasis and articulation. We already have a first approximation of the biblical view of motivation .... But there is a wealth of detail to fill in. Filling in that detail will make us realize that motivational issues play a far more prominent role than we have realized, both conceptually and in counseling practice.

... We fail to minister the full inner impact of the conviction of sin. Hence the desperateness of our need for Jesus Christ is weakened. Hence the renewal of mind and heart by the promises of God is practically downplayed. ... The inordinate, swarming desires of the flesh are treated in the same way as the works of the flesh, the simple desires of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, and the fruit of the Spirit. Our instinctive orientation to inordinate desires and false beliefs yields to our orientation to Christ's mercies and wise will.<sup>5</sup>

Those "motivational issues"—we see so much missing in the remedies the world offers, the ones the psychologists give us. But can they also show us "the full inner impact of the conviction of sin," as they do for David? And now that we know our need more deeply, aren't we passionate as we "yield to our Savior's mercies"?

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<sup>4</sup> David Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2010), 241–59.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

I suspect that at times we simply have been deficient in our counseling worldview; we have been subbiblical in the name of being biblical. Would anyone deny that “nouthetic” counseling practice often has been less than biblical in its sensitivity to suffering people? Biblical counselors often have worked for change in how people react to suffering without adequately attending (in word and in deed) to how they experience and interpret suffering.<sup>6</sup>

What do you say about that? Is that how you see it? That your advisor told you what to do while hardly noticing your suffering? Isn't that a vital and necessary part of your care?

The vast bulk of biblical counseling will not look authoritative. In fact, it is desirable that a pastor aim to deemphasize the authoritative, formal, confrontive and unilateral elements in his counseling as much as is appropriate to the case at hand. We should save the fence for when it is really needed. How many counselees have been needlessly confronted—perhaps even put on the defensive—when they would have confronted themselves if a probing and inviting question had been asked?<sup>7</sup>

Now that takes serious thinking. Can it happen that we don't always resist change? That we are glad to hear about it and know what a difference it would make? Do you know the probing questions that would lead to your confronting yourself? When you really know Jesus is there, would you ever want even more and more of him?

This article is in part a call for such tuning and adapting to occur in some critical intellectual areas. But the crucial issues facing us are social as well as intellectual. I am convinced that we are shut up in a fairly narrow sector of believing Christendom, and that to spread the word more widely will bless, stimulate, and change us as much as it edifies others.

... What biblical categories do is give us a way of appreciating, redeeming, and reframing the culture of even the most godless men and women. We are, after all, even able to use the data gathered from godless counselees, reinterpreting their own perceptions back to them in biblical categories that turn their world inside out and upside down!<sup>8</sup>

So how able are you? Able to hear unbelievers show you what you hadn't seen and then put the right face on it? Or do you really learn everything you know only from God's word?

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 255.

There is error “to the left of us”: capitulation and compromise with the world. We live in a Christian counseling world captivated by psychology. There is also error “to the right of us”: running from our enemies, flatly rejecting them, perhaps fearing them, and separating ourselves. This latter temptation is the one nouthetic counseling faces. As in the previous crucial issues, there is an imbalance that needs to be corrected if we are to be more fully biblical.

... Christians should be stimulated by their enemies. We are forced to say what the Bible does say positively. Enemies are incredibly useful. In the sovereignty of God enemies act as catalysts. Unbelievers have often thought long and studied hard in areas that Christians have neglected. The close study of human beings for the purpose of changing them was one of these areas. Biblical counseling was a product of such negative prodding. Biblical presuppositions undergird a strategy of exposition provoked by questions that secular thought and practice raise for the church.<sup>9</sup>

Can that be right, that unbelievers have been thinking more about how to really change people than we have? What do they know about “being born again”? Or is it just that an unbeliever can make a great career out of advertising? Ponder that, asking yourself what you still need to have.

It is a systematic reframing and reinterpreting of what secularized people see most clearly, care about most deeply and do most skillfully. Grasping this difference is a crucial issue for contemporary biblical counseling. Beauty 1: We learn biblical categories, often through the catalyst of our enemies. Beauty 2: We attack every shred of secular thinking which would wrench human life out of context and deny God. Beauty 3: We have categories to reframe every tiny bit of secular thinking so it functions as a comprehensible part of the God-centered world. We know what they are *really* looking at.

Beauty 3 is central to the evangelistic strategy of biblical counseling. By it we redeem what was lost. We take “insights” stolen from God and distorted to work within an alien system. We presuppositional Christians need to ponder beauty 3. We have received the benefit of 1 in order to appreciate biblical truth. We have shouted out 2 in order to hold the fort against alien ideas. But beauty 3 is what a large group of Christians need to hear from us. It is what will also speak to the secular psychological world.<sup>10</sup>

Are we up to that? How about you? Can you take those “stolen insights” and work it inside your faith? I think what that means is, I know Jesus is definitely on his throne and definitely expressing his “steadfast love” to me nonstop, but do I really “feel this way”? But if I don’t, can I be honest about it? Then tell the Lord about it and ask for his healing? Be honest and trusting him too, at the same time?

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 257.

No one in the body of Christ will “arrive” until we all arrive. And arriving is not only a matter of asserting the bare truth of a systematic model. Truth, love, skill and institutional structure must all grow to the same stature. That is the Lord’s call to his children in Ephesians 4.<sup>11</sup>

So we have to do this together, in hard conversations when we just can’t say it out loud but still cry out for help. No space for embarrassment or shame—can’t we just speak up? Doesn’t that do it so well?

The far off snowy mountains are real. God’s people will one day speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, in perfect love, and nothing but love. We can climb in that direction now. The gaze and intentions of the real Christ can in fact shape the interactions between real people in the real world. Grasp that reality—living faith working out into intelligent and purposeful love. Hope for that. Aim for it. Cultivate it. Pray in that direction. Preach in that direction. Live in that direction.

This is the purpose of all God has done in Christ. He who promises is faithful, and he will do it.<sup>12</sup>

There’s another of David’s books, giving us the way ahead so well. Will we ever as God’s people speak the whole truth in perfect love? God can do it; God will do it! I honor David’s so honest faith. Keep on aiming and hoping, when right now it’s not here yet. But we can’t give up, for “he who promises is faithful” (Heb 10:23 ESV).

So are we sure everything in the Bible is God’s word? Everywhere? Or even that he says just the right thing at the right time to the right people? Is there room for Harvie and biblical theology as we stick to inerrancy of the word? How shall we care for people with all their differences? Now there’s where David is: whole truth in perfect love.

My heart jumped when I was asked to write this. I knew Jay, and I loved him and wanted to do justice to his diligence and consistency. I knew also CCEF people David Powlison and Ed Welch and Mike Emlet and Winston Smith and was blessed by them and wanted to pass that on too. I make space in my life for Nehemiah 8:10, “the joy of the LORD is your strength.” It is here too, seeing God’s people glorifying him and loving their neighbors, and delighting in how the Lord sees that too!

We have been betrayed by those liberals and also by those who want to make room for them. What God says is true—not just what we think we hear. We have also been bored by people upset by Jack Miller’s honest preaching as he told us how hard it was for him to live out the truth he

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>12</sup> David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition Through the Lens of Scripture*, Resources for Changing Lives (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 258.

preached. Biblical theology is true, but I know people who lost their jobs when they spoke of the movement in the story. We are called to both trust and obey, the only way to be happy in Jesus.

I love Winston Smith, and he blesses me. Let's close now with how he sees it, unpublished but brilliant:

This is where we must acknowledge that no one comes to the Bible "empty handed." Again, we always, and can only, read and interpret it within the framework of our own experience. When we do that in humility and in conversation with the larger church, we are less likely to absolutize our perspective when scripture does not require us to do so. The category of "experiential knowledge" is where psychology and social sciences play their role. The observations made by psychology are helpful, even unavoidable, in the sense that if we don't interact with someone else's observations, we'll simply be left to supply our own! So, for instance, if I'm interested in understanding bipolar disorder, I can spend ten thousand hours on my own working with that population, but why not benefit from the dozens of other psychologists who have already learned so much from their experiences? Yes, of course, I must take their presuppositions into account, but isn't that required in every area of study and practice?

These insights align well with John Calvin's,

[*Without knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God.*] Our wisdom, insofar as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 37 (1.1.1).

## INTERVIEW

# Interview with Alasdair Groves

**PETER A. LILLBACK**

(September 27, 2022)

**PETER A. LILLBACK:** *Why don't we begin with a word of prayer?*

*Lord, I thank you for this time of fellowship, questioning. And we pray it will be an encouragement for our readers in the arena of biblical counseling and the work that you have called Alasdair Groves to lead. We pray, Lord, that you would give him guidance and wisdom as he shares his recollections and his insights. We pray, Lord, that you will bless your people through this work, and we thank you for the opportunity to serve. We ask it all in Christ's name. Amen.*

*The topic we are discussing is biblical counseling, which is a unique contribution of the Reformed tradition of Westminster Seminary, with its love for the Scriptures and its attempt to engage life for the glory of God and the good of people ministered to. What is the difference between classical pastoral care and biblical counseling? Pastors have always tried to nurture the souls of their congregants through caring for them in day-to-day and crisis moments through their preaching, but what makes biblical counseling unique from that general pastoral task?*

**ALASDAIR GROVES:** Peter, thank you so much for having me here, for giving me the chance to think about these things together. In general, the biblical counseling movement would want to emphasize continuity with pastoral care through the ages rather than distinction. The distinction would probably be mostly one of history and context rather than of substance. It is probably

an oversimplification, but robust pastoral care in the church vanished off of the playing field in around 1870 and did not reemerge until the mid-1960s with Jay Adams. Some places in more progressive liberal churches had some level of pastoral care before that, maybe in the 1950s, but the true reclaiming of pastoral care for the church was with Adams working at Westminster and realizing that what was being offered in the pastoral care courses and training that he had received elsewhere was essentially at odds with everything he knew about Scripture and the gospel and personal responsibility for sin. So, the fundamental difference biblical counseling brings is that it was born reclaiming something that had been intuitive and understood as part of the fabric of the church from the apostle Paul on through to around the mid to late nineteenth century.

**PAL:** *Why did you pick the date of 1870? Is there anything specific, or is that just a general era demarcation?*

**AG:** It is a general era. I do it because David Powlison would speak that way.<sup>1</sup> The 1860s are pre Second Great Awakening; as revivalism caught hold, and the “pray the prayer” attitude was seen as the answer to alcoholism and drunkenness, that caught hold, took root, and had significance. I would date that ethos to post Civil War.

**PAL:** *What unique contribution did Adams give to the whole discipline of biblical counseling?*

**AG:** I can do no better than quote Powlison again on that. He himself was a second-generation biblical counselor whom I imagine we will speak of more as we go on. In light of his research into the biblical counseling movement and his personal friendship with Jay, he would describe him as the Martin Luther of biblical counseling—the man who nailed the thesis to the door and said, “What we are doing does not work, and there must be a reclaiming of something that has been lost.”

**PAL:** *Adams started his work as a seminary professor at Westminster but then began to develop a distinctive ministry. That led to the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF), where you are serving today. How did that come about as he was leading and guiding at that point?*

**AG:** Jay was a professor at Westminster in the Department of Practical Theology and over time really felt a burden for the training of pastors in

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<sup>1</sup> See David Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2010), 11.



**ALASDAIR GROVES**

biblical counseling. Particularly, he saw the need for something broader than simply having guys come back to seminary and redo an MDiv or do another degree. He had a vision for equipping and training pastors, which led him to launch a training center, the CCEF. Fairly early on, Jay and his cofounder, John Bettler, worked together to create not just a training body but also a certifying body to oversee this. And so they separated the two institutions to avoid a conflict of interest. Jay took over the certifying arm, which became known as the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors, and Bettler stayed with CCEF, the training arm. The initial vision was that the two would be partners, working closely hand in hand over the years.

**PAL:** *Then, as the program developed, Powlison, who has recently passed away, had an extraordinary career at CCEF. What were his developments of biblical counseling as he took the Luther-like insights of Adams and became a kind of Calvin to the movement?*

**AG:** It is an apt analogy. David achieved many things, but he functioned as part of a triumvirate with Paul Tripp and Ed Welch. The three of them, in a special way, worked to develop a model. Jay's signature insight was that the church needed to reclaim soul care and in particular needed to restore the dignity and the responsibility of owning your sin in a time when sin had been totally cast off by a secular world. The secular mode of care was essentially to try to work through whatever you were dealing with without ever referencing or dealing with guilt and sin, repentance and forgiveness, and grace and the blood of Christ. All that was wiped off the table, and Jay said, "This is wrong. Taking responsibility for your sin is vital to any hope of health and of life that flourishes." If that was where Jay started, David, Ed, and Paul added a sense of Scripture, speaking to suffering as well. There is a greater complexity than simply repentance for sin; thus, it is not the only central aspect of pastoral care. Scripture is rich with overturning the curse as far as it is found.<sup>2</sup> And that is certainly true where there is sin and where there is suffering, and we need to have both clearly in mind.

David is maybe best remembered, at least by his students, for what he called the Three Trees Model, which was his attempt to capture in a really cohesive, comprehensive way how Scripture looks at all of human life and how it understands the relationship between suffering, sin, and then the transformation the Spirit works through the gospel.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Isaac Watts, "Joy to the World! The Lord Is Come" (1719), *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Atlanta: Great Commission Publication, 1990), #195.

**PAL:** *Why don't you give us a brief summary of the Three Tree Model.*

**AG:** David would launch from Jeremiah 17, and he would talk about the picture given there. There is a thornbush in the wilderness (v. 6), and it is dry and ugly and barren, and anybody who walks by is going to get scratched and scraped by it. However, there is also a fruit tree that flourishes even in the baking heat of the sun, planted by streams of water that nourish its roots (v. 8; cf. Ps 1:3), similar to Psalm 1 imagery and other places in Scripture as well: these are pictures of two different ways of life. So, the thornbush represents life lived for self, in opposition to God, and the Jeremiah language is the language of trusting in man versus trusting in the Lord (vv. 5, 7). Because when you trust in man, this is the kind of life that it produces. And he said that the thing that is true of both trees is that they both have to deal with life under a hot sun. So, the circumstances and the difficulties and the trials and the temptations and the strains and stresses of life are actually the same, both for the thornbush and for the fruit tree. But what it takes for a fruit tree to actually bear fruit in season, as opposed to becoming a withered thorny bramble, is for the tree to be enriched by the water of life flowing into its roots. It is not fundamentally about trying harder to bear good fruit. It is fundamentally about being more deeply rooted in a trust in the Lord, who would yield fruit that would last through the work of the Spirit in someone's life. David said that all of life is recognizing where are there thorns still present in my life, and how I grow in the Lord, and lastly, how I become that third tree, which is the cross that allows us to go from death to life, from thorn to fruit.

**PAL:** *Another key theme that has been developed through the years is the nature of the human heart to create idols that we put above other things. How does the idea of the heart being an idol factory,<sup>3</sup> to use a phrase Calvin developed years ago, fit into biblical counseling?*

**AG:** Yes, the language of idolatry has been helpful. It is certainly not original to biblical counseling. That language goes as back as far as you want—obviously in Scripture, but also in church history. The beauty of that language of idols in biblical counseling is that it gives a way of capturing the stumbling blocks in the heart. The idea is that anything we give our worship to other than God is going to produce and yield behaviors of obedience to that idol rather than to the Lord. So you must worship something, and you will

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<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 65, 108 (1.5.12; 1.11.8); see also David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition Through the Lens of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 152, 265.

worship something, and whatever you worship will determine how you then act and behave. Thus, the language of idolatry is a great way to capture what it is that has really won your heart, where your desires and affections are drawn. The reason it has been helpful for biblical counselors is that it gives an image, a category, that helps people realize that many of the things they are distressed by exist because they have allowed an idol to claim the throne of their heart.

It is worth mentioning that over time we have actually seen some significant problems in the biblical counseling movement from an overuse of the idolatry paradigm. In fact, biblical counselors at times have been known for becoming idol hunters, and the only category they seem to have sometimes is “If something is hard for you, must be that you have an idol.” For instance, if you are sad, or discouraged, or afraid, the only possible way we can help you is saying, “Well, what is your idol? How do you repent of it? And then you will not care so much about this difficult thing.” David himself wrote some things in contrast to the overrealization of the language of idolatry.<sup>4</sup> But yes, it is a brilliantly rich way to get at the fundamental problem that human beings are constantly giving their worship away, and that is going to drive behavior into places of sin and wickedness and self-deception.

**PAL:** *How did biblical counseling, and then ultimately CCEF, become part of your ministry personally?*

**AG:** I grew up the son of a Westminster professor. I was at church with Powlison and Welch, and what was going on at CCEF enormously influenced our church. I did not realize that as a kid at the time, but I grew up in a place where my parents were pouring into me questions of “What is going on in your heart? What are you desiring?” Not just “Are you doing the right or wrong thing?” but “How does what you are doing intersect with the love of Jesus for you and the forgiveness that he has for you? And how does that shape what you are wanting here?” So I came out of high school into college with a passion to sit and have conversations about the Bible and the struggles in life and connect those two. And somewhere through college, I realized this is what I love to do and what I was doing every minute when I was not in class or playing ultimate Frisbee or doing my homework. Then I thought, *I should maybe really consider doing this, because I have to do something for a job.* And so, as I began to explore what biblical counseling is,

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<sup>4</sup> See David Powlison, “Revisiting Idols of the Heart and Vanity,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 27.3 (2013): 37–68; see also David Powlison’s chapter, “I Am Motivated When I Feel Desire,” in *Seeing with New Eyes*, 145–62, esp. 158–59.

I had a conversation with Welch and began to read some of Powlison's materials. I was just captivated, and it felt like it was putting words to so many things I had always felt or sensed, and it brought structure and clarity to what was intuitive from my upbringing. Eventually, that led to Westminster and to CCEF to explore if this was really a career. Every day and in every class, from Greek to thinking about how Scripture speaks to matters of schizophrenia, I just felt more and more that this was what I wanted to do and where I wanted to be. I have never looked back.

**PAL:** *Your father was an Old Testament professor, and your mother teaches Hebrew at Westminster. How does Hebrew impact you personally? Is that something you find yourself engaging with in your work of biblical counseling?*

**AG:** My background and learning Hebrew have greatly impacted me. I probably have a love for the Old Testament that may seem odd to many outside the seminary world. Some of that is what I learned from my parents and some from my seminary training in Hebrew about how understanding language helps you get inside the mindset of a different people of a different time.

I am not a Hebrew scholar myself, but I really have found a knowledge of Hebrew helpful, especially when exploring Hebrew poetry. It is impossible for English translations to bring across the sheer conciseness, the sheer punch, that the Hebrew poetry has in the original, with some of the inner resonances and the ways that they play with language. One phrase in Psalm 88, verse 15, is a word play in Hebrew. One line says, "I am weak, I have been weak," but in the Hebrew, it says, *'ani 'ani* [lit., afflicted I], which are two different words, but they sound almost exactly the same, and the feeling is, "I am weakness." That is, my weakness rhymes with me and with whom I am. Just the way that parts of the Hebrew text capture these things is powerful because they are so condensed as Scripture brings them across.

Also, my favorite book of the Bible is Judges. I speak about it often in counseling. It is my favorite book because it is not the last book of the Bible. It should be the last book, with that horrible ending and the darkest moment when Israel has become Sodom and Gomorrah and everyone is doing whatever they feel like [cf. Judg 21:25]; it is sin absolutely having completely countercorrupted the people of God. But then, the Bible goes on, and the redemptive strait does not end there. If the story can continue after the Book of Judges, your story is not yet over, and life is not beyond redemption.

**PAL:** *If you were to summarize the leading practical principles of biblical counseling that a lay person should know, how would you distill what biblical counseling is?*

**AG:** Three places leap to my mind, into my heart, as I think about capturing the essentials. Number one would be that no struggle, no temptation, no evil has beset you except that which is common to man [cf. 1 Cor 10:13]. The implication is that you are going to hear things that you will not resonate with and identify with: you may not have any idea what it is like to be hooked on heroin because you have never done any illegal drugs in your life, but if you listen hard enough to someone's story, you will hear in them things where you can say, "I do understand that temptation and the pressure on your heart. We are humans. We share the same set of fundamental struggles to run away from the Lord and to trust in ourselves rather than to trust in him." And so I always want to be able to say "we" with the person: "Yeah, this is hard for us." Therefore, principle number one is humility and good listening, and an awareness of the human heart, and your own heart and your own struggles; you do not know this person well enough to help them very well until you can say "we" with them. That would be the place I would start.

The second place says you do not know everything about this person. Your experience will not be exactly the same as theirs, and the fact that you may be able to say "we" does not mean that your job is done or that you just need to tell them what was helpful for you. I remember early on, ... I think the second person I ever counseled as an intern. We had shockingly similar life experiences. We were both the oldest of four or five kids. We were a year or two apart. We had both lost our fathers to cancer in the recent past. And yet none of my experience was helpful to him at all. He was dealing with totally different things in his grief than I was in mine, and Scripture went in very different ways towards him than it had done towards me. So while principle number one is to keep asking questions until you can say "we" with the person who is struggling, principle number two is everyone's story of redemption, everyone's struggle, is going to be different, and we ask, "Where does the Lord meet them?" It is not how you get to some abstract principle or some formula, since change follows a path, not a script.

The last thing I would say is, when in doubt, move toward the other person; do not run away. Do not assume the task is too much and too hard; do not back off when you hear something difficult, ugly, painful, or foolish. When the other person has made their own bed and they are lying in it and they are mourning on that bed, that is not a time to turn away in disgust. Even then, like Christ having compassion over Jerusalem [cf. Matt 23:37], who was about to crucify him, and to whom he had just recited this long list of woes. We want to have a constant attitude of moving toward people who are struggling. And if I am not sure what to do, then I get help, but I still move toward.

**PAL:** *How does a person begin to use the Scriptures in their own personal counseling when working on sanctifying growth and learning to use the Scriptures to deal with struggles, sin, and failures? What insights can you offer for people who are learning to say, “I need to counsel myself, I need to take the Scriptures and own up to things”?*

**AG:** Our first course in our curriculum is the Dynamics of Biblical Change, which Powlison taught for many years, and which I have now inherited. I often tell people it is actually not a counseling class but a Christian life, personal change class, and what is vital is where people would start. You start with yourself. You cannot be equipped to counsel until you have grappled with your own heart before the Lord, until you know something about what change actually looks like and actually requires.

So how do you begin to access the Scriptures for yourself? At the most basic level, I think about what was most helpful to me and led me toward biblical counseling: I would start with any passage of Scripture telling you something about who God is, and, in light of that, the implications for who you are and the implications for how you could grow. So, rather than seeing the Scripture as an encyclopedia or compendium of prooftexts or instructions—that if you just memorize enough verses, you will know the right thing to do in this situation or that—I would want to drive people toward a more redemptive historical approach<sup>5</sup> and one that constantly looks back to who is the Lord, that sort of indicative-to-imperative move, with which I imagine many of the readers of this journal would be familiar.<sup>6</sup> So there is no magic, no new insight from me or biblical counseling other than to say the Scripture is an open invitation to bring all of life to Scripture, and if you are finding difficulties, seeing how it leads, how you understand the Lord’s movement.

Then you go and speak in humility to someone else in the body of Christ and say, “Will you help me understand?” The Christian life—in particular, wrestling with your trials and your temptations—is not a solo endeavor. That is where a lot of us, maybe, lose the thread: “If I just listen to good enough preaching,” or “If I just work hard enough to have a good quiet time,” or “If I just try enough to be a good person and respectable in my community, that is mostly what I need, and it is not worth opening up my heart to someone else who would be willing to sit with me and process these

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<sup>5</sup> Cf., e.g., Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 24–28.

<sup>6</sup> For an introduction to the indicative and imperative in Paul, see Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 77–85.

things.” That is where I would say, “If you are having these questions and finding any level of struggle, by all means speak about it with someone else.” We all need encouragement and accountability. We all need challenge, insight, wisdom, and support from others.

**PAL:** *Where do people get to know more about CCEF? What is available that might actually help me be a better pastor, become more of a biblically minded counselor, or just grow as a human being, to be more faithful? What would you recommend to your reading audience?*

**AG:** I would give a layered set of answers. The beauty of what CCEF is trying to do is that we are simply trying to say what has been here in Scripture all along, and we are just trying to unlock new pieces of it in a new sense of application for each new generation. The church is confronted with different things in every era, and we want to think well about the hardest of those dark spots in human life. So, in anything you are doing—whether it has anything to do with CCEF or not—that moves in the direction of thinking through how Scripture really gets into the nitty-gritty of human life, you are running down the right path.

Regarding specific CCEF resources, you can go to [ccef.org](http://ccef.org). We have got a blog, podcasts, videos, years of conference audio, and books. So there are resources with various levels of depth and interest. A huge piece of what we have developed over the years is our certificate program. We have endeavored to hone that down to what committed engaged disciples of the church need, what the lay leaders of a church, the elders, need as they seek to love others. The two certificates[, the Formation Certificate and the Essentials of Biblical Counseling Certificate,]<sup>7</sup> are intended to equip people who are trying to live life, lead small groups, and be engaged in pastoral care in the church.

Westminster itself offers a Master of Arts in Counseling that has taken many resources developed over the years at CCEF and is using those to equip vocational counselors. Obviously, members of our faculty made contributions to that program. We were excited about the collaboration you have invited us into in the program that you run. So we would love to see more and more people end up in the master’s programs at Westminster, getting in-depth, robust training for the next generation of biblical counselors, who will go and be in the trenches and lead the movements and continue to develop further resources and training.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “Courses,” CCEF, 2023, <https://www.ccef.org/school/courses/#programs>.

<sup>8</sup> “Master of Arts in Counseling,” Westminster Theological Seminary, 2022, <https://www.wts.edu/programs/mac>.

**PAL:** *What are some of Westminster’s distinctives as a seminary that were applied by Adams and Powlison and yourself in developing biblical counseling? Are there any of the unique things of the seminary that have been fruitful tools in the application of the Scriptures to the deeds of people?*

**AG:** I suspect there is probably vastly more than I even know and appreciate, but I will name two that have had landscape-shaping, paradigm-setting impacts for biblical counseling. Here, I am unsure where the boundary lines lie between Adams and Powlison in terms of how this emphasis played out, and Bettler as well, but I would say that the following two distinctives at Westminster have been such gifts to CCEF and to biblical counseling in general.

Number one would be the redemptive historical approach to Scripture, the unfolding of Scripture, how it builds, and the intersection of biblical theology and systematic theology, the way that those are meant to be partners, not antagonists—they shaped biblical counseling. It has encouraged us overwhelmingly again and again as biblical counselors. Powlison, Welch, Tripp, and Mike Emlet have all given voice to this. This perspective has pushed the relational dynamic and its Christocentric character—everything focused on Christ. That does not just mean that he tells you what to do or that he is the crowning example; rather, this is the relational dynamic of a God who has sought and saved and is active in history. So redemptive history and the way that drives you towards a covenantal relational approach to understanding people’s problems and the solutions to help them is visible in how in biblical counseling your job as a counselor is to help someone walk through something hard with the Good Shepherd in the valley of the shadow of death [cf. Ps 23:4], rather than to fix the situation.

The other piece, which in some ways may have had an even greater impact, although it is hard to have a greater impact than what I have just described, is the presuppositional apologetics that came obviously most fundamentally from Cornelius Van Til.<sup>9</sup> What I began to perceive as I went through my own MDiv, and what now is blatantly obvious to me as I read those who have come before me in biblical counseling, is that presuppositional thinking is vital—recognizing both a point of contact with nonbelievers and this incredible gap between thinking that is rooted in Scripture and in trust in the Lord versus what rejects him.<sup>10</sup> The fundamental idea that your presuppositions

<sup>9</sup> For more on the impact of presuppositional apologetics on biblical counseling, see Jim Newheiser, “Presuppositions of Biblical Counselors,” and Michael Gembola, “A Pastoral Framework for Infidelity Counseling,” in this issue of the journal.

<sup>10</sup> For a good introduction to Van Til on “The Point of Contact” and presuppositional method, see Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976), esp. 38–58, 61–65.

shape everything comes up in every single counseling conversation I ever have. I am constantly doing presuppositional apologetics, even with Christians, uncovering places where their own presuppositions and blind spots are shaping their perception of the Lord and who they are, how they are responding or should respond, and their understanding of what is fair, right, and appropriate. So, biblical counseling in its work with Scripture is linked to redemptive historical thinking; in its actual conversational sound, it probably sounds quite different from Van Til having a debate with some secular humanist, but the conversational core is constantly overflowing from a presuppositional apologetics mindset that says, “We want radical consistency between what we find in Scripture, every ounce of the universe being the Lord’s, and the places where we so easily and quickly depart from it in ways we are blind to.”

**PAL:** *Has biblical counseling been able to move beyond the North American context in which it was born? Is it now a global movement? What shape is it taking elsewhere?*

**AG:** It has really been wonderful to see, from my own anecdotal experience, how something has begun to really tilt in the last ten years to a significant and regular and rich development. Some of that may be the availability of digital resources that were not there before. I knew someone who was a missionary in Mexico for many years translating work into Spanish.<sup>11</sup> I think she always felt it was hard, training individuals but not seeing it break through as hoped. What has happened in publishing, digital resources, and media in the past decade is exploding in the Spanish-speaking world, and in a number of countries such as the Dominican Republic, a couple of places in Central and South America, in Quebec, in Canada, and in France and the rest of the French-speaking world. It is actually something that has been sparking in Ukraine for a little while and moving into the Russian-speaking world. We have had a significant relationship with an organization in India for a number of years, and we are watching that grow and watching people come for training and go back to India and see that expand. In the rest of the English-speaking world, there is much happening in Australia, and the movement in the United Kingdom has really come into its own in the last five years. So biblical counseling has really gone global, and it is sweet to get to the point where already we are beginning to see places where those outside the United States are writing, thinking, and teaching in ways that we here appreciate.

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<sup>11</sup> See Natalie Carley’s article in this issue, “Biblical Counseling in the Spanish Speaking World.”

**PAL:** *Where do you see biblical counseling going in the coming years or decades? What would you like to see happen as you look to the future if the Lord should be pleased to fulfill your vision?*

**AG:** Well, if you are asking me in the long run, I will answer big. First, I would love to think that in forty years there would be many people who say, “We owe such a debt of gratitude to CCEF.” Rather than having CCEF on every street corner and CCEF being the brand, I would love to see biblical counseling be vastly bigger than CCEF, and it already is. But I would love to see us continue to be a planter of seeds, a waterer of seeds, see the movement grow, and see each nation, each language group, have wise, mature, thoughtful teachers in their own language, their own organizations. That has already happened in many places. I am speaking of something that is already in motion. That is not a wishful-thinking dream down the road. So, I hope that CCEF would be in the midst of something that would continue to vastly outgrow and outpace us.

I would love to see us take what we already have in the courses we have developed and continue to add to them both in book form and in class form, particularly for challenging issues. Taking what we have applied broadly and generally (e.g., issues of anger) and then driving it into particular aspects of more specific situations, continuing to push forward into high-end, intricate-level thinking, and to see all our resources become more and more widely available in different languages. So we have already translated a few things into Russian. We have translated a few things into French. There are various books that have been translated into a number of languages, but I would love to see our entire program accessible in dozens of languages. And honestly, forty years from now, I actually hope that in many cases no one is really using these translations because the training that is actually native to those places—that is, contextualized, not just in terms of the language, but also in terms of the examples and pastoral issues. I hope there would be such good teaching on the ground in those places that nobody bothers to come to look for the archives but recognizes that there are local partners who could do it better than we could ever hope to.

**PAL:** *I can add that as I have traveled in other parts of the world like South Korea and Indonesia, I have witnessed their real desire to see biblical counseling be expanded and developed. It is quite advanced in some of the universities that are Christian in character in South Korea. I know that seminaries in Indonesia are working on it. So the global reality is quite remarkable. As we wrap up our time, do you have any final thoughts?*

**AG:** One thing I will say beyond what we have already said is, I spoke about

Adams as a line-in-the-sand guy, the Luther, and I appreciate your connection to Calvin as picturing Powlison. If Adams said the church must reclaim soul care and Powlison said the model needs to get all of life, not just sin and repentance, I wonder if the next generation's task is going to be to firm up a methodology more carefully and more clearly. There are plenty of methodological thoughts that have come over the years, and there are, I think, aspects of the biblical counseling movement that would have a focus on various methodologies. However, it is my personal belief that more is needed in finding a way to speak of the incredible flexibility, the radical freedom that we have, and that Scripture gives us in terms of the many different ways to point someone to Christ and counsel someone to walk through difficult times. We can give a more comprehensive methodology to biblical counseling, rather than just simply an endless list of tools or advice to love the person, read Scripture together, and apply it to each individual differently. I think we need something in the center that is more defined, and I do not think we have yet achieved that. So, that will be the task of this generation.

**PAL:** *Thank you, Alasdair, for your time, for your leadership, and for your connection with this seminary. Could I ask you to conclude us in prayer for God to bless the conversation we have had?*

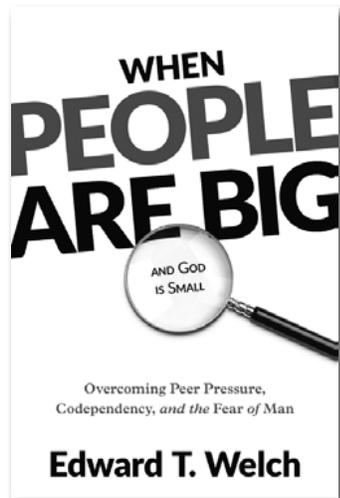
**AG:** I would be honored to do that, and I am deeply grateful to you for inviting me on and for all the work you are doing to get this kind of thinking and material out to people around the world. So yes, let me pray.

Heavenly Father, would you be pleased indeed to bless not just this one conversation, but the thousands upon thousands of conversations that your people have daily with one another. Lord, would you be present in our words and in our hearts. May we indeed run first and foremost to you. May we know what it is to grow and to be sanctified, that we might have something with which to comfort others, with which to encourage, with which to challenge, with which to love in every aspect of our speaking.

So, Lord, would you richly bless Westminster, would you bless all the different programs that Westminster runs, would you bless CCEF as we seek to counsel and to learn more deeply how to train others to counsel. Would you bless the readers of this journal, as each of them, in their particular context, knows intimately and deeply what it is to be faced with a person who is resistant to change, struggling to change, trying with all their might, and pouring their heart out before the Lord,

and doing everything right, and still experiencing deep suffering. Lord, the many different situations that confront us are common, and yet each of them is different. And we ask, Lord, would you give mercy to us, as we seek to encourage, love, support, and engage each other in ways that really are true to Scripture. Would you guard us against being Job's friends, who have one answer and miss the person and abstract our theology from life. Instead, may we be people for whom theology is just our heartbeat, and it leads us to this strong, courageous, gentle, loving application of your word to the very hardest places we encounter in ourselves and others. Would you do this in all of us, for the glory of your name, and for the blessing and the strengthening of your church, we pray. Amen.

## WISE COUNSEL



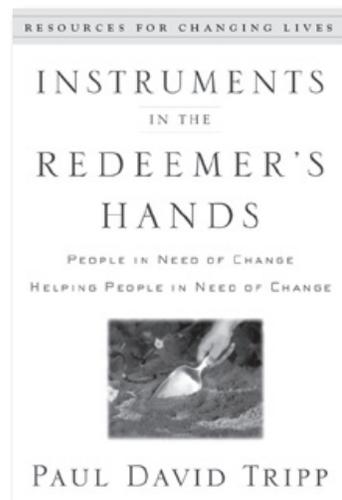
“Welch’s book *When People Are Big and God Is Small* helped me when it first released in 1997, and its insights never stray far from my mind. I celebrate the new lease of life that this revised version represents.”

—DANE ORTLUND



“We’ve been using *Preparing for Marriage God’s Way* for almost ten years now. . . . If you’re looking for biblically based premarital material to use in your church or ministry, don’t look any further.”

—BRAD BIGNEY



“This book is a great companion for pastors and counselors. It will guide anyone who wants to give real help to others, the saving help that is found in Christ’s redeeming work.”

—RICHARD D. PHILLIPS

# Book Reviews

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Carl R. Trueman. *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism and the Road to Sexual Revolution*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020.

Carl Trueman's *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* is a useful and competent work of Christian scholarship. However, one experiences a combined sense of disappointment and frustration because more might be expected from this author. This does not derive from any major weakness in the style or structure of the book, or from a failure to give clear explanations for the points he seeks to make. Trueman presents both fact and analysis in a manner that is informative, coherent, thought provoking, logically sequenced, and easy to understand. Nor are the core subject matter and the legitimacy of Trueman's concerns in question. For some time many of us have quietly longed for an accessible and engaging treatment of the historico-philosophical background to the present moral and cultural chaos by a Reformed scholar of Trueman's stature and academic credentials.

At the heart of the book, Trueman identifies a series of historically influential modern and postmodern literary, philosophical, and artistic narratives in an engaging analysis of the elements that link them together. He then uses that foundation to build an explanation of the origins of cultural Marxism in its espousal of sexual and gender perversion, not merely as activities but as allegedly positive attributes comprising a core component of human identity. In doing so, Trueman provides the historical context for what he and others refer to as "the sexual revolution" of the past five decades and does so competently *as far as he goes*.

From a Reformed Christian perspective (it is legitimate to presume Trueman, a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and former

professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, to be writing from such a perspective), the first inkling one has of Trueman's reluctance to go as far as he ought is found on page 24 of the book, where he makes the following observation:

First, one can so emphasize a universal, metaphysical principle to which one is committed that one fails to understand the particulars of what one is analyzing . . . . Those who hold to grand schemes of reality can all tend this way. The Christian might be tempted to declare that the reason for the sexual revolution was sin. People are sinful; therefore, they will inevitably reject God's laws regarding sexuality. The Marxist might declare that the reason for the Russian Revolution was class struggle. Rich people exploit the poor; therefore, the poor will inevitably rise up in rebellion. Within the framework of each belief system, the answer is true, but in neither case are such blunt statements capable of explaining the particulars of the events in question.

None would disagree that, in order to give an accurate, thorough, and intelligible account of origins and outcomes, in addition to highlighting the general cause, one must strive to identify and articulate the nature and character of particular and proximate secondary causes so as to leave as little doubt as possible regarding the connection between all the relevant causes and the effects that allegedly derive from them. Nevertheless, this paragraph raises some important and disturbing concerns as to Trueman's surprisingly cursory treatment of the origin, character, and operation of sin, the essence of which is surely pivotal to the ultimate credibility and usefulness of his thesis.

First, although it is almost certain that this was unintended, in illustrating the importance of the specifics of detailed historical investigation over the generalizations of "grand schemes," it seems to me that the thrust of Trueman's argument could risk leaving the unwary reader with the impression that he regards human sin as a subjective ideological construct rather than an objective and all-pervasive reality whose origin is firmly and historically located in time and on earth, as described in the Genesis account. This impression derives from the rather confusing juxtaposition that he makes between the conviction of the Christian that the reason for the sexual revolution was sin and the conviction of the Marxist that the reason for the Russian Revolution was the class struggle. Although designed to illustrate the technical point that a true understanding of cause and effect cannot be obtained by reference to generalities alone, the comparison leaves Trueman overly exposed, at least in my view, to accusations of postmodernist relativism in his understanding of the fall and its consequences. Indeed, from the way in which he presents the illustration, one can be

forgiven for concluding that sin, as an actor and cause, is real and valid only within the subjective mindset of a Christian and that the class struggle, as an actor and cause, is real and valid only within the subjective mindset of a Marxist. In truth, however, not only is it the case that sin and the class struggle are equally real and valid, but sin, as the potent and ubiquitous consequence of the fall of man, is as much the root cause of that brutal conflict that Marxists term class struggle as it is of the sexual revolution.

The second concern is that Trueman's somewhat cursory treatment of sin in this passage of the introduction provides an uneasy foretaste of the scant attention that is paid to its importance in the book's core analysis. Indeed, more than that, it is a troubling precursor to the author's unexpected silence as to the sovereign centrality of the victorious, risen, and ascended Christ and the omnipotence of the word of God, of the gospel of redeeming grace, in its role as the power of God unto salvation and the pulling down of the strongholds of sin and Satan, both individually and corporately, including those very fortresses of Western paganism over whose existence Trueman's book (despite his expressed hope to the contrary) becomes a somewhat demoralizing lament.

In this regard, let us take the example of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose philosophy Trueman seemingly considers to be the prime source and *sine qua non* of postmodern expressive individualism and the sexual revolution. As with all the various currents of philosophical thought that form the focus of his book, Trueman provides a very eloquent and accessible summary of the key components of Rousseau's thought pertaining to humanity in the hypothetical state of nature and humanity in the context of society. In this regard, he highlights the Genevan philosopher's distinction between the "Two Loves," *amour de soi-même* ("self-love") and *amour propre*:

In sum, self-love in the natural state is a good, leading individuals to seek self-preservation. *Amour propre*, however, is the result of rivalries and interpersonal competitions and conflicts that society generates. This is what renders men and women corrupt, disingenuous, and false to themselves. ... Gone is the innocence of the natural man whose desires and needs were simple and matched each other perfectly. Now a competitive social sphere has been introduced that creates needs—to be the best, the most highly regarded, to be the master—which by definition cannot be satisfied for all people all the time. Thus comes inequality and the strife and struggles that mark human existence.

... For Rousseau, the individual is at his best—he is most truly himself as he should be—when he acts in accordance with his nature. This is the deep principle of Rousseau's understanding of authentic personhood and of ethics. And conscience is the internal, pristine and God-given voice that points each one in this direction. It is society, with its temptations and corruptions, that prevents conscience from being the omnipotent governor of human action. (117–23)

On the basis of such a fulsome and engaging summary analysis of the foundational principles of Rousseau's moral philosophy, one would have hoped that Trueman might have deepened his analysis further and thereby enhanced the fruits of his investigation by deconstructing these philosophical principles and assessing them through a biblical lens. Speaking merely as one learned in the law, I believe that he could probably have done so without necessarily compromising the historiographical thrust of his narrative.

For example, given the content of the above analysis, one would have expected Trueman to explore the historical background of Rousseau's emphasis on conscience, as opposed to reason, as the principal driver of human nature and identity. The logic behind this assumption, particularly in a Christian context, is that, in identifying the human conscience as the headquarters of individual thought and action, Rousseau is by no means the innovator that Trueman would have us believe but stands very much on the shoulders of the antischolastic legal philosophy formulated by Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon almost two hundred years previously. And, as we shall see, the key to any analysis of how humanity arrived at where it presently stands in terms of the rise and triumph of the modern self is not so much culture per se but the indispensability of law in the formation of culture, and the approach adopted by man in the identification and formulation of legal norms.

The supremacy of human conscience in the thought of the two German Reformers is well summarized by Harold Berman in his book *Law and Revolution, II*.<sup>1</sup> As Berman points out, unlike his Roman Catholic scholastic predecessors,

Luther subordinated reason to conscience. Conscience, he taught, is not merely the skill of applying rational principles of natural law and knowledge. Conscience is the bearer of man's relationship with God, the religious root of man that shapes and governs all the activities of his life, including both his rational apprehension and his application of the natural law. ... Luther did not deny that all people possess the rational faculty of distinguishing between good and evil; he differed from the Roman Catholic scholastics, however, in their assertion that this faculty is independent of, and even superior to, conscience.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, notes Berman, Melanchthon taught that

God has implanted in all persons certain "elements of knowledge" (*notitiae*), which are a light from above, a natural light, without which we would not find our way in

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<sup>1</sup> Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution, II: The Impact of the Protestant Reformations on the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

the earthly kingdom. These inborn moral concepts, argued Melanchthon, are “facts of [human] nature,” which form the premises, not the objects, of rational inquiry. They are thus beyond the power of human reason either to prove or disprove .... Human reason, being corrupted by original sin, is incapable not only of proving the existence of certain fundamental inborn moral concepts but also of apprehending and applying them without distortion.<sup>3</sup>

For that reason, natural law must always be subordinated to biblical law, which is revealed by faith and summarized in the Ten Commandments.

The lethal problem with Rousseau’s philosophy, which Trueman somehow fails to point out, is that, while emphasizing the key role of conscience as the core of human nature and the root of human endeavor, Rousseau rejects the relevance of the external biblical law as fulfilled in the risen Christ and falsely ascribes the perfection of the latter to the conscience of man, which in truth, like every other aspect of human nature in its unregenerate state, is utterly corrupt. Accordingly, rather than simply opposing the gospel, Rousseau confronts us with an antigospel that subtly but effectively turns the truth of God’s word on its head. Like the Pharisees described in Matthew 15, who complain about Jesus’s disciples’ habit of eating without first washing their hands (v. 2), Rousseau is convinced that, in the case of man, purity lies within and defilement comes from without. However, as Jesus makes plain in verses 18–19 of the same chapter, it is those things that proceed from the heart and come out of the mouth that are the true pollutants.

As such, Rousseau’s philosophy presents us with nothing radically new but merely repackages, in a later historical context, the very deception that precipitated the equally historical fall in Eden: the desire for complete autonomy from God, which culminated in the desire to ascertain good and evil apart from the will of God so clearly revealed in his law, which culminated in the degeneration of human nature into total corruption and the inability of man in his own wisdom to recognize that corruption, which culminated in the descent of degenerate man into the state of a self-centered law unto himself.

Finally, then, the historical root of the present-day Western collapse, whose trajectory Trueman valiantly and eloquently sets out to trace, lies not primarily in culture, as Trueman argues, but in law. The ideas variously promulgated and the doctrines of humanity variously defended by the likes of Rousseau, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and other secular thinkers whom Trueman features in his account are all symbolic of

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 79.

the disaster that ensues when finite, corrupted, divided, and ever-restless humanity actively plots to abandon the validity and normativity of the perfect and everlasting law as revealed by God the Creator and fulfilled in Christ the Redeemer. For, by way of substitute, man inevitably seeks to occupy God's throne by devising legal norms, ostensibly perfect in nature and eternal in value for the governance of self and society, that are sourced in corruption and founded on nothing more than a grandiose deception as to his own identity, value, and purpose. And that is precisely what "cultural" Marxism has succeeded in doing in the West in our present era.

On that basis, if the sociopolitical demise of the anglosphere can be traced historically to any of the mainstream philosophers, it must surely be traced to Sir Francis Bacon, whom Trueman surprisingly dismisses in a couple of lines as a relatively insignificant player in the whole drama. Bacon, philosophy's Lord Chancellor,<sup>4</sup> who behind the mask of orthodox sixteenth-century Protestantism, in writings such as *New Atlantis* and *Holy War*, arguably sets out the blueprint for a philosophy that gives "human beings prerogatives of the gods: dominion over all other beings, dominion over the universe, and immortality."<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche repeatedly cites Bacon as one of his chief influences. In turn, Bacon gave philosophical birth to Jeremy Bentham. Trueman completely ignores Bentham, and yet Bentham's legal philosophy of utilitarianism runs to the heart of his book's inquiry, positing that the foundation of all law should be rooted and grounded in human emotion and feeling, taking as its reference point neither the law of God nor rationally objective principles derived therefrom, but instead whatever fosters maximum happiness or pleasure in the corrupt human heart. Utilitarianism is the philosophy that, in the English-speaking world, little by little, over a period of two hundred years, succeeded in supplanting, in the hearts and minds of legislators and judges alike, the sacred philosophical pillars of the covenant-based English Common Law crafted under the light of the gospel, with all its biblical roots and fruits. Given that we are all unavoidably and deeply impacted by the laws governing the communities in which we live, utilitarianism has arguably had more influence in molding the psyche of succeeding generations of ordinary men and women than the ideas of philosophers, poets, and artists with whom (however popular they may be in academia) most people have never come into direct contact.

This is the story I was hoping Trueman would tell, at least in part. Sadly, I have been disappointed. Somebody with scholarly credentials still needs

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<sup>4</sup> See Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche and Modern Times: A Study of Bacon, Descartes and Nietzsche* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), Part 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

to tell that story from a Reformed Christian perspective, and they need to do so sooner rather than later.

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Scot McKnight. *Five Things Biblical Scholars Wish Theologians Knew*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021.

Hans Boersma. *Five Things Theologians Wish Biblical Scholars Knew*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021.

The relation between biblical studies and dogmatics is the subject of a perennial debate often resembling a vicious circle: biblical exegesis needs a theological framework to avoid becoming a simple catalogue of mutually contradictory historical descriptions ... but theology must remain tethered to Scripture, taking into account the literary and historical contexts in which it was given. This discussion has been given fresh expression in two recent books, provocatively titled *Five Things Biblical Scholars Wish Theologians Knew*, by Scot McKnight, and *Five Things Theologians Wish Biblical Scholars Knew*, by Hans Boersma. Although written independently of each other, each author has read his counterpart's book and offers an introduction and friendly rejoinder.

The result is an invigorating conversation between two world-class and well-read theologians. Although no reader will be entirely convinced by either approach, the debate helps clarify the issues involved and points out where underlying problems can be located. The following review will summarize some major points of each book, highlight the strengths and weaknesses of each, and offer some concluding thoughts on the question.

McKnight begins by stating his fundamental position: "I am convinced that we must begin with the Bible, and we must let the Bible speak on its own, and we must cede to the Bible the categories it provides" (3). From this thesis, he develops five convictions, which he fleshes out in five chapters. Theology needs

- a constant return to Scripture,
- to know its impact on biblical studies,
- historically shaped biblical studies,
- more narrative,
- and to be lived theology.

Chapter one presents two typical approaches to Scripture, which McKnight calls “retrieval” and “expansive” models. The former basically defines theology as commentary on Scripture, the latter seeing the necessity of not merely explaining Scripture but expanding on it and building on its foundation. He then proposes a third way, which he calls the “integrative” approach, the two models not canceling each other out but forming “a dialectical relationship with each other, while the anchor is only tied to the Bible” (31). That this is not a thinly disguised “Bible only” approach becomes evident in the following chapters. McKnight shows the importance of the historical creeds for unlocking certain biblical insights, which, although firmly rooted in Scripture, are regularly missed by exegetes who eschew the strictures of systematic theology. At the same time, biblical studies can provide the systematic theologian with a more nuanced approach to revelation than classical formulations afford.

Chapter three shows the importance for theology to take its cue from the way Scripture itself defines terminology and logical categories such as sin, piety, and grace. Chapter four raises the question: What are the theological implications of the fact that the form God chose for revelation is not a handbook of doctrine but an unfolding historical narrative? As McKnight puts it, “What does how God speaks to us in the Bible tell us about doing theology?” (100). Wresting revelation from its narrative context and forcing it into a locus approach, warns McKnight, runs the risk of reducing the wealth of revelation to soteriological categories that neglect other important aspects of Scripture.

Of course, narrativity is not a panacea to a flattening approach to Scripture. However, realizing the story’s endpoint, for example, can give a clearer picture of its overall trajectory and priorities and provide room for the diversity of Scripture’s “actors” and various “scenes.”

In the final chapter, McKnight highlights his conviction—which should be shared by biblical theologians and systematicians alike—that theology and personal transformation are inseparable. McKnight concludes his book with a warning from Lauren Winner: “It is characteristic of modern academia that its participants get corrupted by pride; pride is a corruption that tells us something about what academia is” (147).

The theses McKnight advances correspond to a genuinely “felt need” often expressed by biblical scholars. He is, however, no opponent to systematic theology and brings into the conversation such varied theologians as John Calvin, Robert Jenson, and Katherine Sonderegger. He is well aware of the danger of reducing biblical studies—especially historical-critical studies—to merely historical research. There are quibbles: McKnight

spends a good deal of time showing examples of how recent exegesis can modify entrenched theological positions. *Five Things* sometimes reads like a “who’s who” or a laundry list of assorted exegetical tidbits. Furthermore, not all would agree with the value of some of the examples of recent biblical research or the implications they have for systematics. That being said, the examples are secondary to the book’s general thrust; focusing on them would detract from the positions McKnight presents and develops with cogency and clarity.

Boersma begins his book with a reminder of the Enlightenment distinction between dogmatics and biblical studies that, in practice, has driven a wedge between the two. It is this separation, says Boersma, that must be overcome. As he puts it,

The primary task of theology ... is not to explain the historical meaning of the text but to use the Scriptures as a means of grace in drawing the reader to Jesus Christ. In other words, biblical interpretation is not a historical discipline. To use a patristic expression, it is *mystagogical* in character. (6, italics in the text)

Like McKnight, Boersma develops his thesis in five chapters, which he states negatively:

- No Christ, No Scripture
- No Plato, No Scripture
- No Providence, No Scripture
- No Church, No Scripture
- No Heaven, No Scripture

While some of these are self-explanatory, others require explanation. Boersma underscores first of all his conviction that exegesis cannot be a self-contained discipline; its finality must be the living Christ who reveals himself through its pages. Scripture is thus, first of all, a “sacrament” leading to the living Christ. This means, for instance, that reading pre-Christian Scriptures christologically—as opposed to studying them as mere “historical documents”—is absolutely necessary. Boersma’s sacramental approach is most visible here. As he puts it, “For Christians, the Bible is Holy Scripture because it is a sacrament that renders Christ present. ... The books of the Bible obtain their status as Holy Scripture in relation to Christ” (38).

The second chapter will no doubt raise the most eyebrows. For Boersma, Scripture cannot be interpreted without a prior metaphysical lens that is necessarily Platonism, defined as reading Scripture in a way that is 1) antimaterialist, 2) antimechanist, 3) antinomialist, 4) antirelativist, and

5) antiskeptical. Of these five, Boersma focuses mostly on the third. As opposed to nominalism, Platonism begins not with the particulars of biblical data but with the universal, that is, Christ. Starting from the particulars tends necessarily toward mechanistic and materialist exegesis.

Chapter three raises the question of allegorical exegesis: just as one does not stop at Christ's humanity but seeks to look through it in order to contemplate his divine nature, so, claims Boersma, one must go beyond a literal understanding to reach the divine Logos who reveals himself in it. Authorial intent is thus of secondary importance. The text's meaning is not primarily what historico-grammatical exegesis can discern but what brings the reader to the living Christ.

Chapter four focuses on the role of tradition in exegesis. Rejecting the understanding of Protestant *sola Scriptura* in which tradition plays an ancillary role in interpretation, Boersma contends for a "two-legged approach" in which "church teaching must always be grounded in Scripture and tradition" (95), including the church's creeds and liturgy. This is true first because the canon of Scripture is connected with which books should be read in the church's liturgy.

Boersma's last chapter focuses on the "final end" of Scripture: not activity, which is penultimate, but "the heavenly contemplation of God in Christ" (113). In opposition to essentially this-worldly readings of Scripture (such as liberation theology), Boersma insists that Scripture cannot be made subservient to economic or political goals. Scripture fits us for eternal life.

Boersma's approach is richly documented and evidences a strong knowledge of the history of interpretation, in particular the period extending from the second to the seventh centuries. Each chapter raises points that exegetes will neglect to their own detriment. Having said that, this reviewer opines that Boersma raises as many questions as he answers. While a short review cannot deal with them all, several are worth touching on briefly.

One cannot but be struck, first of all, by what appears to this reviewer as false oppositions or unnecessary conclusions woven throughout the book: the purpose of exegesis is not to explain historical meaning *but* to lead to Christ (5); the eternal Logos identifies himself with human nature, *not* with a book (9); "Ur-platonism" is necessary because nominalism brackets out and excludes providence from interpretation (46). Some of these oppositions may stem from the fact that Boersma is interacting primarily not with generally evangelical or conservative biblical scholarship but with critical exegesis that treats Scripture as a merely human text. However, readers coming from a conservative standpoint may well feel that his criticism regularly speaks past them.

Second, Boersma's insistence on providence goes hand in hand with allegorical exegesis. If the God who sovereignly presided over the process of inscripturation is indeed the Triune God—so goes Boersma's reasoning—then one should logically be able to unearth Christ's presence in the Old Testament in ways that were not possible before Christ's advent. This begs the question of subjectivity in allegorical interpretation, which is often notoriously unverifiable when subjected to criteria based on the text itself. One could even conclude that such a position undercuts the very thesis Boersma seeks to establish. A strong doctrine of providence entails that divine inspiration ensured that biblical authors wrote what God intended. Yet, if *the true intent* is not what can be seen in the text itself but must be found in an allegorical or "hidden" meaning, one may well wonder why God's providence did not make this meaning more apparent to its original readers and hearers in the first place. Boersma's position is all the more striking, as Calvin himself, and most Protestant interpretation since, has rejected allegorical exegesis as going against the grain of Scripture as well as the doctrine of biblical "clarity" or "perspicuity." One could, in fact, fear in Boersma's approach an unintended denigration of human history—the very arena in which God chose to reveal himself and bring about salvation—not to mention Christ's humanity, which, far from being a mere means to the divine, is nothing less than the *locus* of human redemption.

For this reviewer, Boersma's approach raised the most questions in connection with his notion of Scripture as "sacrament." Part of the difficulty stems from the ambiguity of the term itself. At least in Reformation theology, the sacramental sign and the reality signified, while inseparable, are not identical. The bread *qua* bread in no way retains interest; it is only useful as a means by which Christ gives himself to believers. Applied to Scripture, does this mean that the original context and meaning of the text are unimportant, provided the text itself functions as a springboard to receiving Christ? While denying this, Boersma's position is not far from such a formulation. Boersma would no doubt reject the classical Barthian dichotomy "Scripture/Word of God." However, his sacramental terminology gives the appearance of running along parallel tracks.

As a New Testament exegete at home in Reformed theology, this reviewer found himself far more comfortable with McKnight's approach than with Boersma's. Beyond the details, both raise a double question for traditions holding to *sola Scriptura* as the touchstone of all theological construction: Is sacred Scripture—understood and interpreted in the context of the historical situations that gave birth to it—not merely the starting point of the

theological enterprise, but its constant resource and critic, as well as its final arbiter? Conversely, to the extent to which one is committed to the doctrine of Scripture as God’s inspired word and authoritative revelation, should not the biblical scholar expect a coherence and harmony to characterize Scripture, not merely in its overall message but also, to a large degree, in its discreet elements? In principle, the intended reader of the two books would answer both questions affirmatively, but there is a genuine tension between biblical and systematic disciplines in the way these questions come to bear on specific texts and specific doctrines.

As McKnight rightly emphasizes, each approach should inform the other. One cannot simply bracket off the “system” when doing exegesis. However, any theological enterprise taking its cue from *sola Scriptura*—as well as from the perspective of *semper reformanda*—must commit itself to a responsible, rigorous, and contextually sensitive understanding of the text. This could be seen as trying to fit a square peg into a round hole; however, a constant interplay between the two is the only means of avoiding a logical, as well as practical, conundrum: exegesis operates within the provisional bounds of the church’s teachings—which must themselves then be questioned and confirmed or, in some cases, revised in light of a more precise understanding of Scripture. Although this could seem unsettling from a confessional viewpoint, it is the only way of truly respecting the primacy of *sola Scriptura* and avoiding doctrinal stagnation. The great merit of McKnight’s and Boersma’s conversation is to highlight this truth and the ongoing interplay of both disciplines.

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Robert L. Wilken. *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.

The Presbyterian Church in America, like many Presbyterian and Reformed denominations, lays out in its Book of Church Order the fundamental preliminary principle that “God alone is Lord of the conscience and has left it free from any doctrines or commandments of men (a) which are in any respect contrary to the Word of God, or (b) which in regard to matters of

faith and worship are not governed by the Word of God.”<sup>6</sup> The liberty of conscience functions and is delimited by the penumbra of biblical orthodoxy in tandem with the declarative power of the church in faithful persuasive preaching and the conscience of the individual so persuaded. It is a more precise way of stating the words attributed to Luther at the imperial Diet of Worms (1521) that his conscience was bound to the word of God. This preliminary principle does not authorize or endorse a coercive power for the church and also holds as basic that the church is a voluntary society.

Thus, the claim that Robert Wilken advances and defends in his essay that religious freedom is a fundamental human right is welcome. Wilken maintains that religious freedom’s “origins are not political but religious, and its history [is] a tale of inwardness, of spiritual freedom, and of obeisance aimed upward” (2). The three themes around which the book orbits are first, “religious belief is an inner conviction accountable to God alone and resistant to compulsion”; second, “conscience is a form of spiritual knowledge that carries an obligation to act”; and third, “human society is governed by two powers” (4). The author does not claim to offer a thorough treatment of these topics, but he presents a historical essay on the liberty of conscience as a natural right that belongs to all human beings (5). Thus, it is a relatively short popular treatment on a complex topic of religious liberty spread over two thousand years of church history in nine chapters and an appendix, all in 191 pages. It is a comfortable read and flows quickly through a historical narrative. A close reader inclined to evaluate endnotes may occasionally find the scholarly avenues and assumptions undergirding the author’s arguments, but the bibliography is self-consciously incomplete, selective, and not entirely helpful for an inquisitive reader. This essay will certainly introduce issues to the uninitiated and continue conversations with the initiated. It would best fit as an ancillary reading for an undergraduate elective course.

The first chapter is, in this reviewer’s opinion, the strongest, given Wilken’s longstanding expertise and well-documented brilliance as a virtuoso in patristic studies, especially on Christian arguments for religious toleration to pagan Roman authorities. This chapter harkens back to Wilken’s *Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (1984) and sings; it is worth the price of the book. Wilken’s subject expertise and insight shines, especially in the realm of patristic discussions of Tertullian and Lactantius.

The contents of chapters 2 through 5 are best supplemented by works from other authors for more detail: Roland Bainton, Herbert Butterfield,

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<sup>6</sup> Presbyterian Church in America, *Book of Church Order* (Atlanta: Committee on Discipleship Ministries, 2022), Preface, II.1, <https://www.pcaac.org/bco/>; cf. Westminster Confession of Faith 20.2.

Brian Tierney, Oliver O'Donovan, and John Witte, to name a few. Somewhere between the medieval chapter two and the early modern chapter three, we have lost the significance of the Albigensian crusades, the stories of the Waldensian persecutions, the Hussite Wars, and the Peasant War of 1524–1525, which resulted in upwards of a hundred thousand deaths. An economic evaluation of the Peasant War, backed by Martin Luther, might focus on the status of the peasants in the balance of power, but the religious liberty evaluation could have focused on the role of, for example, the Anabaptist clergy in the German Peasant War. What the essay does highlight in these chapters are striking cases of historical figures invoking liberty of conscience in the midst of confessionalized states, which is a helpful contribution consolidating insights from secondary sources. Perhaps a word of encouragement would be helpful here.

A significant legal point that might amplify the changes from the medieval to the modern stance toward religious liberty was the status of heretics. In *Vergentis in Senium* (1199), Innocent III equated heresy with the *crimen laesae majestatis* (offense against the ruler). Such an equation transposed all the criminal punishments corporal and capital associated with treason against a human king onto a heretic as a traitor to God. Besides forming the basis for the use of torture in doctrinal inquisitions, this medieval legal doctrine is informative about how to work with the early modern framework of questions regarding liberty of conscience and the free exercise of religion. Such a legal framework dealt with heretics as both direct enemies of the church and indirect enemies of the state. European nations in this period, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, inherited the assumptions of canon and civil law regarding treason and heresy. Thus, while religious liberty may not originate in political and judicial theory, it was commonly worked out in courtrooms and high-stakes trials regarding the role of the state as a guardian and wall for the church. The variety of ways early modern city-states, territories, and realms handled such issues is beyond the capacity of the reviewed essay and this review, but the issue bears further study. The religious liberty of the individual is always juxtaposed against the tolerance and coerciveness of the political and legal majority. It is not simply a question of the polite disagreement of neighbors but represents an intentional choice and value of a culture and its legal system to honor the rights represented in the doctrine of religious liberty.

Chapter 6 contributes to our understanding of John Owen and William Penn and popularizes some of A. R. Murphy's work on Penn. The discussion of John Locke is one of the bookends for the essay. This is another place where the book is at its best. The turbulent days of the English Civil Wars

are vividly and helpfully summarized with reference to the plight of the separatists and independents. One wonders, however, why the book does not address the arguments by the likes of Baruch Spinoza or Thomas Hobbes, as both of these figures would have fit nicely into the narratives of the Dutch and British contexts, respectively, as divergent voices on the same topic.

The reader could benefit from reading Wilken together with Roland Bainton's *The Travail of Religious Society* (1951) as a baseline for Wilken's trajectory. Wilken's arguments, in the main, track with Bainton's. Bainton's cast of characters limping toward liberty also includes the villain John Calvin (whom Bainton pairs with Tomás de Torquemada) and the heroes Michael Servetus, Sebastien Castellion, Roger Williams, and John Locke. The problem of the significance of heterodoxy as a legal issue in Christian history is not an axis of analysis that colors either work. Locke and Thomas Jefferson might be known for their religious liberty, but equally troubling were their liberties with orthodox Christianity.

Every generation and every context have parameters of social acceptability. And when Christianity functions in its strongest witness, as Christ's words in John 15:18–25 indicate, faithful Christians will be persecuted not for wrongdoing but for orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Wilken's contribution certainly amplifies the importance of religious liberty and its origins, but it does not grapple with the modern reality that nations like the United States of America increasingly view orthodox Christianity and its lifestyle as a form of intolerance and hate. If the origins of religious liberty are, in fact, religious, and not political, does this jeopardize its status in a secular society? If religious liberty is a religious doctrine, what is its status in a society that neither accepts natural law nor tolerates religious influence? This is why chapter one in this essay on the Christian patristic witness and persecution is so very relevant: contemporary secularists, in a way not too dissimilar from those of the pious pagan Romans, frequently view Christians as immoral, antisocial, and superstitious. The veneer of social respectability of Christianity is gone in the upper echelons of academia and politics in Europe and North America, historically bastions of liberty of conscience and religious liberty. But more than the cultural implications are the judicial: whereas prior generations of Americans viewed First Amendment rights—including religious freedom—as inalienable and nonnegotiable, more and more judicial rulings restrict religious liberty and the claims of conscience. Corporations in Europe and the United States in the last five years have found increasing judicial support for prohibiting even the display of religious symbols in the workplace, such as wearing a cross or a star of David. Who is not aware of the French government's restrictions on religious dress? If

religious jewelry and clothing are unacceptable in the workplace and in public, how much more religious speech? What is the status of Christians, their religious liberty, and the free exercise of religion when a society increasingly identifies as spiritual, not religious? When a policy of religious neutrality in the workforce translates into active intolerance and economic persecution, discussions of religious liberty are all the more necessary, relevant, and vital. And thus the importance of this work.

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## IN MEMORIAM

# Jong Yun Lee

(1940-2023)



It is with sadness that we announce that Jong Yun Lee, a member of the editorial board of *Unio cum Christo*, passed away on January 18, 2023. However, we rejoice in the hope of the resurrection. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family, friends, and colleagues. He will be missed.

He studied theology at Yonsei University, Seoul, Korea. Influenced by Cornelius Van Til, he came to Westminster Theology Seminary and completed a Bachelor of Divinity there in 1971. He went on to do a Doctor of Philosophy at St. Andrews Uni-

versity, where he wrote a dissertation on “The Problem of Paul’s Understanding of the Historical Jesus in Critical Study” under the supervision of Ernest Best. He subsequently wrote several books on biblical studies.

Ordained in Philadelphia, Rev. Lee had a vision for world mission and planted several churches in the United States and South Korea. For about twenty years, he was senior pastor of Seoul Presbyterian Church. He was also involved more globally in church leadership, mission, and theological education. He served as the President of the Council of Presbyterian Churches in Korea and the Asian Lausanne Committee.

He received an honorary Doctor of Ministry from Westminster Seminary in 2010.<sup>1</sup>

Photo © Seoul Church

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<sup>1</sup> See “Rev. Dr. Jong Yun Lee Received Honorary Degree,” June 26, 2010, Westminster Theological Seminary, <https://dev.wts.edu/stayinformed/view.html?id=720>.



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Paul Wells  
*Editor in Chief*

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