

Some Reflections on Biblical Counseling, Adams, and Powlison

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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

There 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.¹ 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.²

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:

¹ Jay E. Adams, *Ending the Quest for Something More* (Cordova, TN: Institute for Noutheitic Studies, 2020).

² *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!³

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

³ 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."⁴ (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.⁵

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"?

⁴ David Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2010), 241–59.

⁵ *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.⁶

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?⁷

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!⁸

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?

⁶ Ibid., 248.

⁷ Ibid., 252.

⁸ 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.⁹

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.¹⁰

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?

⁹ Ibid., 256.

¹⁰ 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 4.¹¹

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.¹²

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

¹¹ Ibid., 271.

¹² 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.¹³

¹³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 37 (1.1.1).