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*Reformation*  
& **REVIVAL**  
**JOURNAL**

CHRISTIAN  
COUNSELING:  
THE CARE OF SOULS

*A Quarterly for Church Renewal*

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## FINAL THOUGHTS

John H. Armstrong

The Bible clearly addresses both objective and subjective guilt before God. All persons are objectively guilty before God; they have violated God's will and their potential for relationship and, by so doing, have a debt to punishment on account of God's justice. Moreover, it is clear that persons are immersed in their own neurotic guilt feelings both on account of impaired relations with God and others. These guilt feelings are evident in the account of the first sin (Genesis 3) where sin and objective guilt was immediately accompanied by shame (uncomfortableness with human weakness) and fear of punishment or rejection by God (as evidenced by their hiding from his presence).

S. BRUCE NARRAMORE AND JOHN HENRY COE,  
*ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PSYCHOLOGY & COUNSELING*, 535.

The phrase "cure of souls" probably comes from the Latin term *cura*, from which our English word cure originates. The primary meaning of cure is care, noted John T. McNeill in his classic volume, *A History of the Cure of Souls* (New York: Harper, 1951). Adds McNeill, the term is "readily applied either to the tasks involved in the care of a person or thing, or to the mental experience of carefulness or solicitude concerning its object" (vii). It is by this comprehensive idea that the term "cure of souls" came into common English use many centuries ago. Frankly, it is too bad that we lost the older expression and substituted the modern word "counseling" for the more comprehensive term.

The cure of souls became principally marked by systems of ecclesiastical practice that were primarily corporate until the time of the Protestant Reformation. It was Luther, deeply interested in the ministerial care of people, who restored a balance between the individual and the interests of the group. Says McNeill, Luther "had in view the integral liberation, health and enrichment of souls" (ix). The Reformers substituted a voluntary confiding of sins and "griefs" to a minister, or suitable adviser, for obligatory and exhaustive confession to a priest. Their task was not to handle ecclesiastical authority, as such, but to deliver, or free, troubled consciences. The way they charted directly opened the intellectual door to the contributions of science and medicine as well as common grace and natural revelation. If the Church is to renew itself in this area of ministerial practice then a much richer understanding of this subject will be needed.



Counseling has become big business in the Church. It is also extremely divisive, especially in conservative congregations where a high view of the Bible is still regnant. Sadly, many have come to associate the view one takes of a particular approach to counseling as a litmus test for faithfulness to Holy Writ.

Take nouthetic counseling, as one approach that claims to be uniquely *biblical*. (There are many other popular schools of thought that claim to be *the* biblical one!) Sometimes called "biblical counseling," to suggest a distinction from Christian counseling (whose proponents are called "integrationists" because they use methods *not* drawn from the Scripture), this nouthetic school of thought holds powerful sway in many conservative churches. It was launched by the publication of *Competent to Counsel* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 1970), by Reformed practitioner, Jay E. Adams. Adams sets forth a good popular critique of several of the most widely-cited secular psychotherapies of the day. He argues that Scripture *alone* is sufficient for dealing with the issues and questions related to counseling. His approach to humans is quite simple. Problems faced in pastoral care are of two sorts: (1) Illnesses of the body (which are medical in nature), and; (2) Illnesses of the soul, which should be placed in the sphere of pastoral care and answered only by the Bible. Influenced by the epistemology of Cornelius Van Til, Adams sought to bring the total message of the Bible to bear on counseling by setting it forward as the *only* starting point for methods or ideas employed in correcting emotional or life choice issues.

The appeal of this approach, in contrast to those that hold deficient views of human persons, such as the systems advanced by Freud, Rogers and Skinner, is striking. For pastors who want to help confused and emotionally disturbed parishioners there is a certain amount of hope in this approach. It also restores the role of soul care in ways that are quite appealing to conservative ministers. But what does

Adams actually believe? And is his emphasis truly biblical, as popularly claimed by large numbers of advocates?

Nouthetic counseling stresses that the way people *feel* is much less important than what they *do*. Behavior is the important issue here. And change in behavior is primarily an issue of making biblical decisions, or proper choices. Says Adams in *Competent to Counsel*, "People feel bad because of bad behavior: feelings flow from actions" (93). According to the *Christian Counselor's Manual* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973) Adams believes, consistent with his view of sin, that the choices we make in living are really between two ways of living. One is "the feeling-motivated life of sin oriented toward the self" while the other is the "commandment oriented life" (118). Some have suggested that for Adams "there is no such thing as an emotional disorder" (*Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling*, Second Edition, David G. Benner and Peter C. Hill, editors. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999, 798).

The model that Jay Adams has popularized is based on the Greek word, *noutheteo*. This verb is generally translated by English words like "warn, admonish, or instruct." The model Adams developed, which has now been altered by some and thus widely debated among proponents, is strongly confrontational and directive. The way to encourage hope is to confront people with their specific sin and correct them with the Bible. The emphasis is on *what* you do, not *why* you do it. The emphasis, at least in the early stages of this approach, is on short term counseling that brings about rather *immediate* change.

There have been numerous critiques of nouthetic counseling over the past thirty-plus years. Several have proven helpful while some are simplistic and unfair. Advocates, in a few cases, have allowed for change and growth. Yet in the popular use of the approach, especially in fundamentalist settings, the method is still employed with little change. What can we say about this matter in terms of restoring soul care to the Church and to the work of faithful pastors?

First, nouthetic counseling places undue emphasis upon a narrow biblical range of texts and thus builds a foundation

that is extremely questionable. It has been noted, fairly I believe, that *parakaleo* (translated comfort, console or exhort) is a more appropriate biblical foundation for Christian counseling than *noutheteo*. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 suggests at least three approaches to soul care; admonition (*noutheteo*), encouragement (*paramutheo*) and help (*antexo*). The language of the Bible is rich and should not be reduced too easily.

Second, the relationship of general and special revelation is deeply related to this subject. Here Adams follows Van Til's epistemology closely. He sees no meaningful place for learning answers to "how" and "what" questions from outside the Bible. But Adams fails to understand how much his hermeneutical method is rooted in Enlightenment certainty and method. When pressed about the fact that Christians do not all interpret the Bible the same way, the conclusion is that good exegetes will find solutions as long as they follow the right approach. (This is the problem of the nine hundred pound exegetical gorilla in the room: "What is the *right* approach?")

The appeal of this approach, at least to some conservatives, is that the Bible is given its rightful place as divine authority. The flaw is quite obvious. The interpreter can be certain he has read the Scripture correctly and thus arrived at the right, or final, interpretation. In my experience this method does not engender humility in pastoral method. It creates a "superior" approach to soul care and one that divides churches and people at the most profound levels of human relationships. My friend, David Powlison, a fair-minded and extremely generous nouthetic counselor and writer, actually reveals the fundamental problem I have in mind when he writes:

We nouthetic counselors have many failings. But I believe that by the grace of God we are fundamentally right and occasionally wrong, foolish and blind. . . . But integrationists are fundamentally wrong and, by the grace of God, occasionally right, wise and perceptive (*The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Volume 11: No. 3, Spring 1993).

How does the serious Christian, who wants to be faithful to Scripture, respond to such a claim? In the first place, those who minister to the souls of fellow believers are best served by adopting a reading of Scripture that sees the interpretation of the Bible as an *art*, not simply a *science*. The history of biblical interpretation quickly reveals that the Church has never consistently read the Bible in the way Van Til and Adams teach. The approach that underlies Adams' views of Scripture is very modern, not ancient. This system is built on an idea of certainty that is not consistent with the hermeneutical affirmations that have characterized catholic Christianity. A careful reading of Scripture will reveal that a *range* of understandings often exists, not a single "clear" answer to every question we bring to the Bible. This is not to say the Bible does not speak, and speak clearly at times. It is to say that hermeneutical humility is not generally found in the approach undertaken by Van Til and Adams. (As in all such systems of thought, one can find individuals who are far better than their system!)

What is needed here is a fresh encounter, by the Spirit, with the *core teaching* of the Bible. Men and women of faith, who together desire to hear God speak to the problems we face in our time, must seek this encounter for the sake of the people of God. Scripture truthfully tells the story of God's action of creating, judging and saving the world. To rightly understand the Scripture we must, engage the narrative of the canon, not just texts here and there that are used to support a theory (*noutheteo*) which has been developed by a very narrow range of words and uses. (Interestingly, Adams came to his theory by studying under O. Hobart Mowrer at the University of Illinois, the father of integrity therapy.)

Adams, like so many conservatives, approaches Scripture with the idea that texts have a *single meaning*, a meaning limited to the original author's intent. This view, which I was taught in seminary like most students of my era, has increasingly fallen into suspicion in our time, and for good reason. It is not the view held by the historic Church. A text may have multiple senses, as the New Testament clearly reveals by the way it treats the Old Testament. The medieval Church's use of

the “fourfold sense” of Scripture is a good place to start a fresh discussion of how to use the Bible. The emerging Church is beginning to understand this ancient witness and this bodes well for the future.

In the second sense, and some sectors of the nouthetic movement have already begun to move in this direction, we would be best served by recovering a great deal more respect for the role of medicine in caring for souls. The advances of modern medicine are a genuine gift of God. It would be unwise, even unkind, to turn away from these advances. The link between the body and the mind, seen for example in the treatment of schizophrenia in recent years, should not to be ignored by Christians who care for the souls of others. I commend nouthetic writers who have acknowledged this type of insight and hope for more.

John Frame, a conservative and confessional Reformed theologian, states my concerns well in his essay, “Machen’s Warrior Children,” published in *Alister E. McGrath & Evangelical Theology: A Dynamic Engagement*, edited by Sung Wook Chung (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003). Frame surveys twenty-two “hot buttons” that have divided the followers of J. Gresham Machen over the past seventy-five years. (His list is *not* exhaustive in my view.) He concludes that “Reformed Christianity needs a vision that encompasses not only doctrinal statements, but also our piety, evangelistic outreach and mission of mercy” (146). He urges Reformed thinkers to continue to develop bright new ideas but to “discourage the rapid formation of parties to contend for those ideas” (146). I am encouraged that some in the nouthetic movement are working very hard to stop the “formation of parties.” Is it too much to hope that pastors and lay counselors, who have embraced this school of thought called “biblical counseling,” might learn to listen and enter into more thoughtful discussion? I pray so.



Understanding the soul, in terms of biblical usage, has never been easy. Most lexical scholars believe that the best

English word for the Hebrew *nepesh* and the Greek *psyche*, is *not* soul but *person*, or *self*. David G. Benner has properly argued that the great advantage of this understanding is that either word, person or self, carries the connotation of wholeness. He writes, “Self is not a part of the person but their totality. Similarly, personhood is not some part of us; it points to the totality of our being” (*Care of Souls*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998, 22).

If this is true then we do not *have* a soul, we *are* a soul. We do not have bodies, we *are* body. We are living, vital whole persons, in body and spirit. Even though death separates our body and soul during a temporary state, at the resurrection, and thus throughout all eternity, we will be body-soul. Care of souls, by this understanding, means the care of persons. It has a special reference to the inner world of persons in terms of their thinking, feeling and willing. If this approach is kept clearly in mind, and it is the ancient Church’s thinking, a great deal of misunderstanding will be overcome and real reformation can begin to take place in our churches and ministries.



Ellen T. Charry, Princeton theologian, has understood the relationship of theology to psychology quite well and captures several important truths when she writes:

From a theological perspective, to speak of the intersection of psychology and theology is imprecise and misleading. It casts psychology and theology as opposites rather than as different perspectives on the same topic: the understanding of human personhood. Christianity has a distinctive take on these issues because it cannot consider persons except as creatures of God. It is more precise, therefore, to consider the relationship between secular psychology and theological psychology, often referred to as theological anthropology.

[Charry argues that] . . . within some churches secular psychology has overwhelmed the care of souls so that theological

psychology has lost its voice. On the other hand, Christian doctrine has failed to incorporate important insights from secular psychology with the result that pastoral practitioners have turned away from doctrine toward secular psychology for help in pastoral matters ("Theology After Psychology," in *Care for the Soul*, Mark R. McMinn and Timothy R. Phillips, Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2001, 118).

Charry believes that pastors need to be far more aware of mental health issues than they often are. She also writes that the pastoral arts should never begin with secular psychology but with Christian theology. In the end this is the great tension in the modern Church. Major advances, through a proper dialogue, have been made in recent years. Much work remains to be done. The place to go in this needed dialogue is to bring serious theologians, psychologists and philosophers together in an interaction which listens to the Christian story as the defining way of understanding human persons. The Church has nothing to fear if it does its part well. We all have much to learn from one another.