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“Like any significant church movement throughout ecclesiastical history, the biblical counseling movement has been subject to many changes and considerable growth. It has become a worldwide, multicultural agent of change for the church of Jesus Christ. Heath Lambert has written an amazing account of key influences that God, in his perfect sovereignty, has brought about in this movement. This factual account is an important contribution to understanding how and why the biblical counseling movement has had such a profound and lasting impact. It is a must-read for anyone who desires to understand the movement.”

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The Master’s College and Seminary

“Having been a part of biblical counseling for some twenty-five years, I greatly appreciate and wholeheartedly endorse Dr. Lambert’s incredible work. He informs the novice, the veteran, and the critic on how the great heroes of the biblical counseling movement have built upon one another. He shows how an understanding of the movement must proceed from both historical and biblical contexts. And, as he reflects on the past one hundred years of church history, Lambert contributes a clear perspective on present day biblical counseling by demonstrating its strengths and weaknesses. He does this work in a way that leaves readers challenged, more unified, and strengthened in their faith and resolve concerning the sufficiency of the Scriptures.”

Stuart W. Scott, Associate Professor of Biblical Counseling,
Southern Seminary; author, *The Exemplary Husband* and
Biblical Manhood

“A thoughtful analysis of the development of a growing discipline, Lambert offers a careful assessment of the intriguing history of the biblical counseling movement. He goes to great lengths to help the reader understand the rich heritage of biblical counseling, transitions in its development, and wise recommendations for its future. Definitely an insightful read!”

Jeremy Lelak, President, Association of Biblical Counselors

“I deeply appreciate the impact Jay Adams’s teaching has had on my life, writing, family, and ministry. His emphasis on progressive sanctification, of continually growing and changing as followers of Christ, has been especially meaningful. This volume is a fascinating story of how Jay’s students, building on his remarkable foundational work, have caused the biblical counseling movement to grow and change for God’s glory. Thanks, Heath!”

Randy Patten, Executive Director, National Association of
Nouthetic Counselors

“This book is an excellent resource for explaining the history of the biblical counseling movement, including the successes and failures along the way. Lambert presents a great framework for all who want to grow in and advance biblical counseling.”

Dennis Lee, Program Manager, Hebron Center Addictions
Recovery Program

The Biblical Counseling Movement after Adams

Foreword *by* David Powlison

HEATH LAMBERT

 **CROSSWAY**
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To Jay Adams,
who reawakened generations
to the sufficiency of Scripture, and
to Norman and Belita,
whose kind and gracious care
made this work possible.

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1

The Birth of a Biblical Counseling Movement and the Need for Growth



This is not a book about counseling. Even though you might be tempted to think it is a book about counseling, it is really a book about ministry. The fact is that counseling is ministry, and ministry is counseling. The two are equivalent terms. *Counseling* is the word our culture uses to describe what happens when people with questions, problems, and trouble have a conversation with someone they think has answers, solutions, and help. Those kinds of conversations are what ministers do every day, all day long, and the ministers who don't do this know that they could spend their time this way if they wanted to. So don't think that just because this book is about counselors, it doesn't have anything to do with your ministry. That it is about counselors means it has *everything* to do with your ministry.

If counseling is equivalent to ministry, it means that it must be informed by the Bible and that those who do it are theologians. Ministry always grows out of worldview commitments. As Christians we believe that our worldview is authoritatively informed by God's Word, the Bible; that is to say, it is *theologically* informed. Counseling is, therefore by definition, a theological task. Counselors may understand that counseling is a theological task or they may not. They may be good theologians or bad ones, but make no mistake: they are theologians who are neck deep in a theological enterprise.

I hate to say it, but most people don't understand this. In fact two very different groups have been guilty of cutting the theological foundations away from the counseling task. The first group is secular psychotherapists who are very well intentioned but ultimately seek to help people solve

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their problems while ignoring Christ and his Word. They have rejected the Godward dimension of counseling, moving in the opposing direction to claim that God and his people should have little or no role to play in the counseling task.¹ Their diagnoses of and their attempts at “curing” people and their problems are man-centered and so will always fall short of offering people true and lasting change for their deepest problems. Integrationists, taking their cues from this group, attempt to be theologically faithful but formulate the theology in an unfaithful way.²

A second group misunderstanding this issue is—ironically—conservative, Bible-believing, Christ-exalting ministers of the gospel. These conservative ministers fail to grasp that counseling is an essential part of ministry and so disconnect theology from counseling. They demonstrate the misunderstanding every time they say things like, “Oh, I don’t counsel people; I’m a preacher,” or, “Counseling takes too much time away from my other ministries,” or, “I don’t think the Bible has anything to say about this problem; you need to see a professional.” Such people mean well, but they are wrong about the theological, ministry-driven nature of counseling. Each of these groups fails to understand the intrinsic connection that counseling has with ministry and theology. The truth of the matter is that I used to be in the second group. Let me tell you my story.

My mother was addicted to vodka during the first eleven years of my life. By the grace of God she quit drinking, repented of her sins, and became a believer in Jesus a few years before her death, but that was after I had grown up. A large portion of my childhood was filled with the roller coaster of my mother’s months and years of drunken stupors followed by her many failed attempts to stop drinking. I would sit with my mother during her many visits to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and at these meetings I overheard a great deal of talk about “the disease of alcoholism” and statements like, “It wasn’t me who did those things; it was my disease.” At a very young age I remember thinking, “It doesn’t *seem* like a disease.” When my grandfather died of cancer I thought, “Now *that* seems like a disease.” The point here is that even before I became a believer, I was not convinced about the application of a disease model to problems such as drunkenness that were clearly moral in nature, because such problems involved issues like self-control and avoidance rather than being merely physical.

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Then, years later, after I became a Christian in my freshman year of high school, one of the first books I read was the first book Jay Adams wrote about counseling, *Competent to Counsel*. I read through the book in one sitting, and my mouth was hanging open the entire time I read it. I was captivated by Adams's vision to reclaim counseling as a theological and ministerial task and of his mission to make counseling an enterprise that was centered on Christ, based on his Word, and located in the local church. From that point on, I was a wholehearted believer in biblical counseling and wished the best to those who were a part of the movement. I only wished them well, however; I certainly did not want to *be* a counselor.

I wanted to be a pastor, and by that I meant that I wanted to be a preacher. By my second year of college, the Lord had created in me a strong desire for the work of ministry. I wanted to preach. I wanted to spend my weeks surrounded by commentaries unearthing the glories of God's Word. I wanted to spend my Sundays dispensing those glories to God's people. I admired preachers such as R. C. Sproul, John Piper, John MacArthur, and Tim Keller. A few years later I reported for duty to my first paid pastoral position and couldn't wait to hit the books. Little did I know that in that first week God was going to completely redefine how I conceived of pastoral ministry.

That very first week, three separate groups requested meetings with me. I wasn't sure what they wanted to talk about but was thrilled at the thought of conducting such meetings. I couldn't wait to answer the theological questions these people had. I was ready to deal with issues about the Trinity, inerrancy, Calvinism, whatever. Let me at it!

I was in for a surprise.

The first meeting was with an elderly couple who were having marriage problems and wanted advice. Their words to me were, "We've been married for more than fifty years and all of it has been bad. We don't know how much time the Lord has for us, but we want what is left to be good. Can you help us have a better marriage?" The second meeting was with a mother and her daughter, who had been molested, and they wanted help they had not received from secular therapists. The third meeting was with a mother who wanted help knowing how to control a difficult child.

To say that I had absolutely no idea what had hit me would be putting

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it mildly. I had no kids, had never been molested, and had been married for only a few weeks! What did I know? I realized in the span of one week that I should not only wish biblical counselors well but figure out how to do what they were doing. I realized that there was no arbitrary distinction between the public ministry of the Word in preaching and the personal ministry of the Word in counseling. I realized that being a faithful pastor and preacher meant also being a faithful counselor.

So I began to work hard to understand biblical counseling. I made friends with people who were committed to counseling and spent a lot of time with them. I also started reading everything I could get my hands on and even began formal study in the area. In fact, I got a little carried away and ultimately earned a PhD on the topic.

I tell you that story because I want you to know how I came to see that learning about counseling is really about learning how to do ministry well. Here is a fact that you'd better write down, underline, circle, highlight, and memorize: if you want to be faithful in ministry (I didn't say *successful*) you're going to have to learn something about counseling. There's just no way around it.

The other reason I tell you that story is to help you understand something I began to figure out about biblical counselors. As I read all the different books and all the different authors on biblical counseling I started to notice that not everybody sounded the same. Oh, there were plenty of strong similarities: everyone was committed to Scripture as the source of wisdom for change, to Jesus as the source of power for change, and to the church as the central location for change, but there were also a lot of differences. Specifically, people who wrote during the first twenty years of the movement often sounded different from those who have been writing in the last twenty years of the movement. I also noticed that these differences were really improvements. The movement was not merely changing but was changing for the better. I further noticed that there was actually a fascinating story that surrounded these changes and improvements.

The purpose of this book is to tell you that story and to describe the improvements that have happened in the biblical counseling movement. I think it is important to tell you this because I believe that if you know how the biblical counseling movement has advanced, you will be a better church

member, friend, brother, parent, or minister who is more equipped to have the kinds of conversations Jesus wants his church to have.

The story of this group of men and women is actually the fourth part of an even larger theological drama. You see, the Christian effort to help people with their problems did not begin forty years ago but rather is as old as the Scriptures themselves. God inspired the Scriptures for the very purpose of helping people with their problems (2 Pet. 1:3–4). Throughout the centuries of church history God’s people have been at times more faithful and at times less faithful to use the Scriptures in ministering to struggling persons. The last forty years have been a time when the American church has been growing in its facility to use the Scriptures this way, but it is not really possible to understand what has happened in the last few decades without a brief peak into the last few centuries for some historical perspective. The church’s attempt to do ministry in the last several hundred years has unfolded in a drama of deep theological reflection, theological neglect, theological recovery, and theological advancement.

A Period of Deep Theological Reflection

The Puritans took counseling seriously. They didn’t call it counseling, but they believed that ministry was important, and they began a particularly rich period in theological thought regarding personal ministry of the Word. Those men wrote hundreds of works to help people deal with their problems in living. It is impossible to survey all the literature there, but it will be helpful to mention a few works. Richard Baxter wrote *The Christian Directory*, outlining in exhaustive detail the spiritual problems Christians face.³ John Owen wrote, among other things, *The Mortification of Sin* as a practical guide for dealing with the flesh.⁴ *A Lifting Up for the Downcast* was intended by William Bridge to be an encouragement to Christians struggling with all manner of life’s difficulties.⁵

Writing in the Puritan tradition in America, Jonathan Edwards wrote *A Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections* to deal with the pastoral issue of judging true works of the Spirit from false ones.⁶ One of the last careful works was Ichabod Spencer’s *A Pastor’s Sketches* in the 1850s.⁷ In this work, Spencer recounted his conversations with many troubled persons and showed—in the context of nineteenth-century case studies—how min-

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isters might talk with troubled people about their problems. Spencer's work was not perfect. He could be a bit heady and ignored internal realities that helped some secular thinkers believe that Protestant reflection on counseling was a wasteland. Still, in many ways, it represented the end of careful and uniquely Christian reflection about the task of interpersonal ministry.

Theological Neglect

The next book after *A Pastor's Sketches* that would offer uniquely biblical insight into helping people with their problems was Jay Adams's book *Competent to Counsel*, more than one hundred years later!⁸ Why is it that Christians neglected a robustly biblical approach to counseling for more than a century? The truth of the matter is that there were many reasons why this happened, and here I want to address nine of the most important.

1) People Want to Understand and Help Other People

Just look at the best-seller list. Books written by psychologists thought to explain people and their problems typically dominate. Seen any TV lately? Talk-show hosts often serve the role of pop-psychologist to their viewers (when they are not professionally trained as such). With increasing frequency, news programs invite psychologists to explain the inner workings of newsmakers or the public that observes and responds to them. Psychology is the most popular undergraduate degree program in colleges across the United States. All of this is true, because people love to know how they and others function. But there is a rub. When people begin to discover how others function, they become aware of problems and want to help. This is where counseling and therapy come in: when you observe, you see trouble and try to give help.

This reality ensures that what David Powlison calls "the Faith's psychology"⁹ will always have competitors. That competition will come from both inside and outside Christianity, but this drive to know about people will mean that many different philosophies of helping people with their problems will always be present and in need of critique and correction. Therefore, Christians must always be vigilant to strengthen their understanding of the problems people have and be aware of alternative positions

so that such positions may be critiqued. When this fails to happen, the faith's psychology will recede and a faithless psychology will ascend.

2) Counseling Is Hard to See

Another consistent problem that makes it hard for Christians to engage in theological reflection on counseling is that it is hard to see. Think about it. Preaching is not hard to see at all. It's a public ministry visible to the masses. The opposite is true with the interpersonal ministry of counseling. Very often, those who are in the room at the time are the only ones aware that counseling is happening. Out of sight, out of mind—that is the problem here. People do not generally give much thought to things they never see.

As I mentioned earlier, the Lord used the preaching ministry of several men to ignite a passion for ministry in my heart, and this centered initially on preaching rather than counseling, because I could see the former and not the latter. There are thousands just like me in this regard. They think about and love the public ministry of the Word because they see it. Conversely the personal ministry of the Word doesn't occur to them, because they never see it. Because this is true, it is critical that Christians be vigilant to use the public ministry of the Word to exhort other believers toward the importance of the personal ministry of the Word.

3) Counseling Is Hard to Do

Another timeless difficulty of personal ministry is that it is hard. That is not to say that the public ministry of the Word is easy. I have spent years as a pastor preaching three to five different sermons a week, so I know it can be tough. I'm also saying, however, that the challenges of personal ministry in counseling are on display in a way that the challenges of public ministry—in preaching, for example—are not. Both the audience and the content of public ministry are general. However, preachers preach to crowds, addressing no particular person or problem. Because this is true, the sermons of a preacher could potentially fail to produce change in the lives of his hearers for quite some time before anyone caught on.

But personal ministry is the exact opposite. Both the audience and the content of personal ministry are, by definition, specific. The counselor counsels specific people with names, faces, and stories. Because this is

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true, counselors cannot fail to address problems and pursue change with their counselees. Failure is immediately apparent to real people with real problems who need real grace from a real God. Counselors cannot hide behind crowds but are always under scrutiny from the others in the room.

The difficulties of counseling are, therefore, more difficult to obscure than the difficulties of public ministry of the Word. Because this is true, some may be less inclined to engage in counseling ministry. Quite frankly, the level of scrutiny present in counseling is likely to make it an undesirable locale of ministry for many people. This reality makes it incumbent on those who would be faithful ministers of the Word in all its forms to be diligent to practice the personal ministry of the Word as well as to proclaim its necessity to anyone who would be an authentic servant of Christ.

These three issues make counseling difficult to reflect on theologically in all times and places, but Christians will always need to think through counseling in the face of these difficulties. These three factors are partially to blame for the failure of Christians between the middle of the 1800s and the middle of the 1900s to think theologically about counseling, but they are not the only reasons. There were also some important historical factors that caused the church to take its eye off the counseling ball and move away from the rich resources of the Puritan area. These historical forces came both from within the church and from the surrounding culture.

4) Revivalism

In the 1700s a religious phenomenon began to grip Christianity—revivalism. In discussing the history of revival, Iain Murray quotes eighteenth-century theologians Jonathan Edwards and Solomon Stoddard, saying, respectively, that revival is “a surprising work of God,” and is “some special season wherein God doth in a remarkable manner revive religion among his people.”¹⁰ A century or so later, things were much different. Murray says:

[By the close of] the nineteenth century . . . a new view of revival came generally to displace the old, and a distinctly different phase in the understanding of the subject began. A shift in vocabulary was a pointer to the nature of the change. Seasons of revival became “revival meetings.” Instead of being “surprising” they might now be even announced

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in advance, and whereas no one in the previous century had known of ways to secure revival, a system was then popularized by “revivalists” that came near to guaranteeing results.¹¹

Revival, historically seen to be the unilateral work of God, had given way to *revivalism*, which was seen to be based on the engineering of people.

There is a lot that could be said about revivalism, but for the purposes of this project, only two elements demand attention. The first is the focus among revivalists on drawing a crowd. The camp meeting was so called because spectators would travel long distances to the meeting and then camp there for several days. This ability to camp out in one location made it possible to have bigger crowds, since attendees could travel from long distances and stay for long periods of time. The crowds were often quite large. One revival, the largest ever, in Cane Ridge, Kentucky, had anywhere from thirty thousand to one hundred thousand persons in attendance.¹² Though this meeting was larger than most, crowds were typically in the hundreds and thousands—much larger than any single-day event could ever be.

The second element of revivalism that is important to address regards the purpose of drawing a crowd—conversion. The revivalist’s motivation in drawing a crowd was to preach the gospel so that sinners would trust in Jesus and be saved. Other components, such as religious education, also occurred during revivals, but they were secondary to the primary goal, which was to preach sinners out of hell and into heaven.

Revivalism has been rightly criticized for much of its excesses,¹³ and yet it must also be said that with regard to the elements addressed here, there is nothing wrong in principle with drawing a crowd and seeking the conversion of those in that crowd. In fact, it is a good idea. Having said that, revivalism’s emphasis on these two aspects did over time have a devastating impact on the interpersonal ministry of counseling.

In many ways, counseling and revivalism have opposite emphases. First, revivalists concern themselves with drawing huge crowds and preaching to the masses, but counselors are concerned with individualized ministry and conversation. Second, where revivalists have conversion as the goal, a minister seeking to counsel biblically will have that same goal but is just as likely to focus on discipleship. Third, revivalists tend to focus on instantaneous change that is measured in a moment of decision; coun-

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selors tend to work in the details of change that happen in a process and over time. Given these emphases it is not difficult to see how a Christian culture that was consumed with revivalism for many decades had trouble reflecting upon and emphasizing the activity of interpersonal ministry.

5) The Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy

The church was confronted by another significant challenge by the end of the nineteenth century. The problem was what came to be called “modernism.” In this controversy higher criticism and Darwinism worked to undercut the confidence that many ministers and ordinary Christians had in the authority of the biblical text. The Bible’s teaching on the origins of the world, its understanding of the problems of people, and even the words of Scripture itself all came under fire. George Marsden addresses this issue:

The publication of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* in 1859 had sparked an intellectual crisis for Christians that no educated person could ignore. Darwinism focused the issue on the reliability of the first chapters of Genesis. But the wider issue was whether the Bible could be trusted at all. German higher criticism, questioning the historicity of many biblical accounts, had been developing for more than a generation, so that it was highly sophisticated by the time after the Civil War when it became widely known in America. It would be difficult to overstate the crucial importance of the absolute integrity of the Bible to the nineteenth-century American evangelical’s whole way of thinking. When this cornerstone began to be shaken, major adjustments in the evangelical edifice had to be made from top to bottom.¹⁴

The church was in crisis, and its leaders sprang into action. Leaders of the so-called Princeton School were the first ones to deal with the crisis. The Princeton theologians famously addressed the issue of biblical authority in works such as *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* by B. B. Warfield.¹⁵ Years later, *The Fundamentals* was published, which was meant, as the title indicates, to defend the fundamentals of the faith against liberal attacks.¹⁶

Such defenses of the faith were necessary. Defending the faith against liberalism was critical work. Such critical fights, however, have a way of marginalizing other important activities. *The Fundamentals* was a defense

of important issues including the authority of Scripture and the origins of the universe; however, a biblical defense of theology that was pastoral, personal, and practical was not included in its pages. Counseling was ignored. As mentioned above, it was ignored for all the right reasons, but it was ignored all the same. This left an opening for the modernists to come in and take over counseling within the church. With conservative minds focused on defending the Bible, modernists began to be consumed with secular approaches to counseling in their excitement over the social gospel.¹⁷ This modernist connection with counseling made it only more difficult for conservatives to reflect on the topic.

6) The Psychological Revolution

While the church was grappling with revivalism and modernism on the inside, there were also big changes happening in the culture. One big change was a revolution that occurred in the field of psychology toward the end of the nineteenth century. To understand the psychological revolution, it is necessary to understand two of its most important leaders, Wilhelm Wundt and Sigmund Freud.

Wilhelm Wundt founded the world's first psychological laboratory and is regarded as the father of experimental psychology.¹⁸ Wundt is responsible for what he called physiological psychology. According to Wundt, all of a person's psychological processes are rooted in some element of their biology.¹⁹ What this means is that basically everything you think and feel begins in your physical parts. This made Wundt years ahead of his time, as this is what most psychologists believe today, even though Jesus and the apostles said that everything we think and feel grows out of our heart or soul (Matt. 12:33–37; Mark 7:14–23; James 1:14–15).

For Wundt, then, psychology and physiology were intrinsically inter-related. Wundt is an important figure in the history of science because he is credited with rounding out the scientific revolution, bringing it into the field of psychology. He was among the first to bring the scientific method to psychology using experimentation and was the first to urge his students to find relationships between the physical and spiritual realities of people. If you are going to understand why the church stopped thinking about counseling in a theological way, you need to understand Wundt, because he

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took the first steps in making psychology a respectable scientific discipline based, at least in part, in a study of the human body.

Sigmund Freud is perhaps the most famous (and infamous) figure in the history of psychology. Here it is only necessary to draw out one main element regarding Freud's stated goal. He initiated a practice called "psychotherapy" or the "talking cure." As I argued above, historically pastors provided the guidance and wisdom for helping people with life's problems, but Freud thought the church had failed in this task. In his work *The Question of Lay Analysis*, Freud argued for a class of "secular pastoral workers" with the goal of secularizing the counseling task.²⁰ The term *counseling* was not in vogue in Freud's day, so, amazingly, he described the task of helping people as the "pastoral" task. In this book, Freud makes clear that his task was to remove counseling from the ministerial context and place it in a secular one.

It is essential to understand the work of Wundt and Freud to appreciate the decline in theological reflection on counseling. Once psychology began to be defined in secular scientific terms (Wundt), it became possible to argue that psychotherapy should be the prerogative of secular professionals (Freud). The emphasis on each of these elements resulted in a massive decline in ministers reflecting on this same subject. During another time such a decline might not have happened, but at this peculiar period of history, as has already been mentioned, the church was focused on other things.

7) A Changing American Economy

The transition from the 1800s to the 1900s was a critical period not only for the church and the scientific community but also for the American economy. The change happened in two respects. On the one hand, Americans began to move from the country to the city. On the other hand, and linked to the first change, Americans began to move from farm work to factory work.

The Industrial Revolution, as it was called, created a new category of person—the titan of industry. The titan of industry served to stoke a kind of tough masculinity that the culture found desirable at that point in history.²¹ It highlighted the kind of strong-willed man that could hold the masses in his sway. As the culture became enamored with this type of individual, the

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effects carried over into church life as well and stoked the flames of desire for the larger-than-life preacher that was accentuated in revivals.²²

The move from small towns to big cities and from farm work to factory work had another impact on the church's theological reflection regarding counseling. In the old agrarian economy, workers had to be experts with *things*—soil, farm equipment, seasons, and crop rotations. In the new industrial economy, the barons of industry had to be experts in, among other things, *people*. The larger a company became, the more employees it hired. The more employees a company hired, the larger was the necessity to keep those employees happy, cooperative, and productive. A historian by the name of E. Brooks Holifield describes what I'm talking about:

[The new American] working as members of staffs, faculties, committees, and management teams . . . needed to be adept at handling people and manipulating abstract symbols. Their task was to maintain the morale and high motivation of people who worked under them, adapting themselves to the expectations of superiors who valued "well-rounded personality." . . . [This kind of economy] could not have been better designed to stimulate interest in the nuances of "personal relations." . . . Large corporations began to value good scores on "personality tests" as much as experience or intellectual ability. . . . [On the other hand], churches presented themselves as preservers of the family or as havens of friendliness.²³

As the church was focusing on a revivalistic effort at soul winning and a defense of the fundamentals of the faith, secular psychologists were gaining ascendancy employing the scientific method with cutting-edge work in understanding people in their relationships with others. As it turns out, this was information that a changing American culture found useful, while the church sat on the sidelines. Christians were simply not involved in these activities. Psychology came into vogue, and the church was behind the times.

8) The Civil War

Christian reflection on counseling declined because of changes in the church and in the culture but was also brought about by three major wars. The first was the American Civil War. Between 1861 and 1865 America was

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involved in the deadliest war it had ever fought or would ever fight up to the present day. The American Civil War called upon countrymen to fight against one another, brother against brother. The war consumed the country, leaving no segment of the population untouched. The war also toughened the country. A brutal and bloody war served to emphasize certain masculine virtues such as strength and toughness. In the aftermath of the war, there seemed to be no time for casual conversation and discussion. Such activities were seen to be effeminate at a time when more masculine activities were prized. Holifield also refers to this phenomenon when he says:

By promoting a cult of masculinity in intellectual circles, the war raised a question about the cure of souls: Was the whole enterprise perhaps unmanly? The question implicitly equated pastoral care with genteel and refined conversations that proceeded delicately in parlors and sitting rooms. Such an image of pastoral labor embarrassed ministers who had come to admire the “bold virtues.”²⁴

Ministerial embarrassment regarding the “gentility” of pastoral counseling is one element behind a decline in pastoral counsel. They were afraid to act like girls. The American Civil War coarsened the country, emphasizing a certain kind of toughness over against biblical reflection on the practice of interpersonal conversation.²⁵ Theological impoverishment was a direct result of this unhappy reality.

9) World Wars I and II

Wars bring trouble and massive social change. Psychology was introduced to the military during World War I in the form of placement tests to properly locate the vast numbers of manpower in the workforce. By the end of the war, the problem of “shell shock” presented an urgent need for the military to help those who crumbled under the intense pressure of battle.²⁶ During World War II, the United States government enlisted thousands of men as chaplains to assist those psychologists in counseling soldiers with their problems that stemmed from prolonged exposure to the violent and volatile battlefields of war. The involvement of chaplains in the war effort helped address the problem of effeminacy that came

about in the wake of the American Civil War but, interestingly, created another problem.

Upon returning from the war, many chaplains involved in the effort expressed chagrin at their lack of preparation for the work. Many simply felt unqualified to help battle-torn soldiers deal with the complex problems they were facing. Holifield observes:

When the service people began to talk to the chaplains, something often seemed awry. A study of veterans after the war revealed that their complaints about the wartime clergy returned almost invariably to one issue: The chaplains too frequently lacked the skills appropriate to the cure of souls.²⁷

Christians serving as chaplains had the resources in Scripture to help these men but lacked competency in how to use them. For years secular psychology had been on the rise, while biblical reflection had been on the decline. Now, when placed on center stage in the war effort, the bareness was beginning to show. When this failure was placed alongside the relative success that psychologists had coming out of the war effort,²⁸ it resulted in more lost ground for those committed to a biblical philosophy of helping people.

Pressures from within the church and from without all played an important role in the decline of biblical reflection on how to care for people experiencing problems in living. Just as Christian reflection on these matters was decreasing, secular reflection and practice was on the rise. The work of Sigmund Freud led to the work of dozens of others until, by the middle of the twentieth century, most Christians who were taking seriously the responsibility to care for people's problems in living had adopted the person-centered approach to counseling of Carl Rogers. Christian thinking had given way to secular thinking in the ministry to persons. Original and distinct Christian reflection was not happening. Regarding counseling, the church had experienced a devastating theological loss.

Theological Recovery

The absence of theology in counseling was the order of the day when, in 1970, Jay Adams published *Competent to Counsel*.²⁹ In that book and

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many others in the 1970s Adams sought to alert Christians to their failures in the area of counseling and began pointing the way to the resources laid out in Scripture for helping people. It was the role of Adams to begin to restore to the church an understanding that it had held before the American Civil War, namely, that counseling was within the realm of the church, every bit as much as its counterpart in public ministry, preaching.

Adams believed that counseling was intrinsically theological. He claimed:

All counseling, by its very nature (as it tries to explain and direct human beings in their living before God and in a fallen world) implies theological commitments by the counselor. He simply cannot become involved in the attempt to change beliefs, values, attitudes, relationships and behavior without wading neck deep in theological waters. . . . These theological commitments may be conscious or unconscious, biblical or heretical, good theology or bad, but—either way—they surely are theological . . . Thus . . . the relationship between counseling and theology is organic; counseling cannot be done apart from theological commitments. Every act, word (or lack of these) implies theological commitments.³⁰

Adams's conception of the counseling task was deeply rooted in Scripture and was, therefore, intensely theological. This conviction was the basis of Adams's work. A focus on counseling that was theologically informed, however, brought a problem into focus for Adams. As he looked over the counseling landscape, he saw a field full of compromise in the counseling arena. Theological reflection on counseling that had been in place at earlier points of history had given way to a thoroughly secular approach in modern psychology. When people conceived of counseling, their categories of thinking were not shaped by biblical presuppositions but by secular ones.

While this was perhaps to be expected, another reality that Adams needed to confront was that these secular categories of thought had infiltrated the church. Because that is true, Adams's theological recovery of counseling logically operated in two modes: a destructive mode and a constructive mode. On one hand, Adams needed a destructive element in his model aimed at discrediting secular approaches to counseling. On the other hand, Adams needed to build a positive biblical model.

Critiquing Secular Approaches to Counseling

Adams believed that secularists had commandeered the domain of counseling, which rightfully belonged to Christians. Because he believed this to be true and because the secular model for counseling was the dominant one, it was critical for Adams to make the case against it. Adams said:

Biblically, there is no warrant for acknowledging the existence of a separate and distinct discipline called psychiatry. There are, in the Scriptures, only three specified sources of personal problems in living: demonic activity (principally possession), personal sin, and organic illness. These three are interrelated. All options are covered under these heads, leaving no room for a fourth: non-organic mental illness. There is, therefore, no place in a biblical scheme for the psychiatrist as a separate practitioner. This self-appointed caste came into existence with the broadening of the medical umbrella to include inorganic illness (whatever that means). A new practitioner, part physician (a very small part) and part secular priest (a very large part), came into being to serve the host of persons who previously were counseled by ministers but now had been snatched away from them and placed beneath the broad umbrella of “mental illness.”³¹

There are several elements of Adams’s view to note here. First, Adams denied the existence of inorganic mental illness. The operative term here is *inorganic*. Adams never denied the existence of physical (i.e., organic) problems and diseases in the brain. What he explicitly denied is the notion of mental illness that is disconnected from pathology. Adams argued:

Growing numbers of authorities have begun to object to the concept of “mental illness,” and the vigorous propaganda campaign, which has been conducted under that misleading misnomer. The fact is that the words “mental illness” are used quite ambiguously. . . . Organic malfunctions affecting the brain that are caused by brain damage, tumors, gene inheritance, glandular or chemical disorders, validly may be termed mental illnesses. But at the same time a vast number of other human problems have been classified as mental illnesses for which there is no evidence that they have been engendered by disease or illness at all. As a description of many of these problems, the term mental illness is nothing more than a figure of speech, and in most cases a poor one at that.³²

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Second, Adams argued that psychiatrists as counseling practitioners are illegitimate. Because inorganic mental illness is a nonentity, when psychiatrists attempt to help people with their problems, they are actually engaging in the work of the ministry. (As Adams said, they are functioning as “secular priests.”) Adams said further, “Psychiatry’s legitimate function is to serve those who suffer from organic difficulties. The psychiatrist has reason for existence only when he specializes as a physician to treat medically those persons whose problems have an organic etiology.”³³

Third, as Adams argued against the existence of inorganic mental illness and against psychiatrists as “separate practitioners,” he did so standing on the authority of God’s Word. It is Adams’s reading of Scripture that helped him to see three legitimate problem sources: demonic activity, personal sin, and organic illness; and one illegitimate source: inorganic mental illness. It was Adams’s further reading of Scripture that led him to rule out-of-bounds the psychiatrist’s efforts at secular ministry. Adams’s worldview was thoroughly biblical. God’s Word stood as his standard, and he viewed it as a fundamentally faithless act to evaluate counseling—or anything else—by another standard. He said:

The Bible itself provides the principles for understanding and for engaging in nouthetic counseling and directs Christian ministers to do such counseling as a part of their life calling in the ministry of the Word. . . . Therefore, those who develop other systems, based on other sources of information, by which they attempt to achieve these same ends, by the very nature of the case *become competitive*. It is dangerous to compete with the Bible, since all such competition in the end turns out to be competition with God.³⁴

Adams, therefore, believed that secularists in the field of counseling were illegitimate. Their theories compete with God’s Word. They engage in work reserved for Christian ministers. They misunderstand the problems that people have. Their solutions are false gospels.

While it was true that Adams had strong disagreements with those practicing psychotherapy, it would be going too far to say that Adams believed psychological science had no role to play. Adams believed that psychological science did have value when used rightly. In fact, at the very beginning of Adams’s very first book on counseling he said:

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I do not wish to disregard science, but rather I welcome it as a useful adjunct for the purposes of illustrating, filling in generalizations with specifics, and challenging wrong human interpretations of Scripture, thereby forcing the student to restudy the Scriptures. However, in the area of psychiatry, science largely has given way to humanistic philosophy and gross speculation.³⁵

In other words, Adams believed psychology³⁶ could be useful when appropriately understood and rightly applied. When psychology stayed on its own turf and dealt with organic issues, Adams believed it could be helpful and beneficial. What Adams ferociously objected to, however, was the atheistic worldview of psychology as well as his perception that psychologists were meddling in the domain of the Christian ministry. It was crossing this line—not their existence in general—that earned them the ire of Adams.

Constructing a Biblical Approach to Counseling

Adams's fundamental task was positive. His critique of secular psychology and its encroachment into the church served to clear the ground so that he and others could construct a biblical approach to counseling and helping people with their problems.³⁷

Adams's construction of a biblically based theology of counseling began with theology proper. An understanding of God's existence, power, and authority was central both to Adams's critique of psychology and to his own positive understanding of counseling. Adams said:

God is around us, in us and with us. He knows (and cares) about every word on our lips and every thought in our minds. He knows us—indeed has known all about us from all eternity past! The omniscient, omnipresent God is our environment, inescapably so! And though most people rarely recognize it, they are deeply influenced—in all their thoughts and actions—by their environment (I am not speaking about that truncated, superficial and distorted view of the environment that is so much a part of various counseling systems like Skinner's or Glasser's. Rather, I refer to nothing less than God Himself, and a creation that serves and honors Him). In this sense, every unregenerate man, and every system he designs, is influenced by his sinful failure to describe the environment properly and, as the necessary consequence, his inability to develop a

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counseling system (or counseling method) that corresponds to the reality of the environment as it truly exists. A false view of the environment, therefore, can lead to nothing else but a counseling system that is askew, and that rebelliously misrepresents man and the rest of creation because it misrepresents God. Indeed, because it is in such basic error—a system designed to promote life apart from God—it is in competition with God, and at odds with His creation.³⁸

Several things are clear here. Adams wanted to restore a thoroughly theistic framework to counseling because he believed that God is the inescapable reality with whom all persons have to do. Secular psychology's failure to grapple with this fundamental reality led Adams to argue that such approaches to counseling were fundamentally wrong and, therefore, unhelpful. But Adams argued much more strongly than this; the atheistic worldview of those in secular psychology not only rendered their counseling systems "askew," but they themselves were "rebellious," "competitors" with God. For Adams, the only counseling model that could be helpful in any meaningful sense was the one that had a firm grasp on the God of the Christian Bible.

Since, for Adams, God is the "air" people breathe, all the problems people have are directly related to him and to their failure to reach his perfect standard. Adams argued therefore, for an understanding of problems in human living that was grounded in the doctrine of sin. Adams addressed his understanding of the problem of sin in his typically clear manner:

Corruption of the whole person, but especially of his inner life, is a dominant and essential theme for every counselor to know, to teach and upon which to base all his work. Clearly, he cannot bring about biblical change by means of the old heart, since from it flows only sin. He will counsel, then, only believers . . . he will evangelize unbelievers. But, conversely, he also will recognize the tremendous potential of the new heart. He will not give up on truly regenerate persons (or those who through profession of faith he must presume to be so); in them is the capacity to understand and obey God's counsel (Ezek. 36:27). The indwelling Spirit makes this a genuine reality.³⁹

Adams believed that the most basic problem people face is their separation from God because of sin, and this understanding held numerous implica-

tions for Adams's counseling model. To begin, Adams did not believe counseling was possible for an unbeliever, because counseling aims for the fruit of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁰ This belief underlined an important reality for Adams: the counseling task is an activity that has specifically to do with issues of sin and righteousness in a person's life. Because an unbeliever does not have the resources to obey God's counsel and to put off sin, the only option for such a one is problem-centered evangelism with the hope that true counseling then becomes possible.⁴¹

This understanding brought great optimism regarding the counseling task. Since believers do possess God's resources to stop sinning and learn love, the counselor and counselee could have great hope in God that enduring change would ultimately come about in counseling.⁴² It is clear then that Adams believed the most basic counseling problem is sin, and the goal, by exhortation, was to see the counselee put away his sin.⁴³

This reality leads to another key tenet of Adams's counseling system. If the basic problem that human beings have is sin, then their basic solution is found in the person of Jesus Christ and in his saving work of redemption. Adams said:

How, then, shall we approach the Bible's teaching about salvation in its relationships to counseling? To begin with, it is important to restate the fact that salvation is what makes Christian counseling possible; it is the foundation (or basis) for all counseling. This is the positive side of the coin mentioned earlier about the impossibility of counseling unbelievers. When doing true counseling—i.e., working with saved persons to enable them to make changes, at a level of depth that pleases God—it is possible to solve any true counseling problem (i.e., any problem involving love for God and one's neighbor). Such assurance stems from the fact that all the resources necessary for change are available in the Word and by the Spirit. No counseling system that is based on some other foundation can begin to offer what Christian counseling offers. How tragic, then, to see purely human ideas and resources. They offer little hope and have no good reason to believe that they will succeed; yet (sadly) many Christians lap up (and follow) such advice.⁴⁴

This quotation is worthy of careful analysis for several reasons. In the previous discussion regarding sin, reference was made to God's resources for change. Here, Adams made clear that *the* resource for change is the

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salvation that Jesus Christ accomplishes for his people and applies to them by his Spirit. Adams stated that counseling systems based on any other foundation offer “little hope” and have “no good reason to believe” that success will be the outcome of their efforts. Adams was clear that success in counseling (i.e., change) is possible only because of the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Adams did not believe that the transformation that the gospel brings happens in a mystical or instantaneous way. Rather, it occurs through a *process* of biblical change. Adams believed that change occurs in a two-part process of dehabituating and rehabilitating. Adams grounded this teaching in passages such as Ephesians 4, with its exhortations to “put off” unrighteous behaviors (v. 22) and to “put on” righteous behaviors (v. 24). Adams illustrated this point with a dialogue:

Q. “When is a liar not a liar?”

A. “When he is something else.”

Very good, but *what* else? When he *stops* lying, what must he *start* doing? With what does the Bible say that lying must be replaced? (That is the kind of question that counselors continually should be asking and answering.) Well, what does Paul say? Look at [Eph. 4:25]:

Therefore [he is now applying the principle of change] laying aside falsehood [putting off], speak truth, each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another [putting on].

There you have it.

Q. “When is a liar not a liar?”

A. “When he has become a truth teller.”

Unless he has been “reprogrammed” or rehabilitated, when the chips are down, when he is tired, sick, or under great pressure, a counselee’s good resolves and temporary cessation of lying will not last. He will revert to his former manner of life because he is still programmed to do so. The old sinful patterns have not been replaced by new ones. Until that occurs, he will remain vulnerable to sinful reversion. Dehabituating is possible

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only by achieving rehabilitation. The counselee must be repackaged. New patterns of response must become dominant. It is to these instead that he must learn to turn habitually under life stresses.⁴⁵

Adams's counseling model was not mystical but involved a process. This process was not passive but active, and it involved not only the task of putting a stop to sinful practices but also the task of beginning to practice righteous behaviors.

In Adams's system, God is the fundamental reality, sin is the fundamental problem, and redemption in Christ is the fundamental solution. Therefore, the Christian minister operating in the context of the local church is called to the task of helping people with their problems, of mediating God's truth to people, and of walking alongside them in the struggle to put off sin and put on obedience. Adams said:

Counseling is a work that every minister may, indeed must, perform as a faithful shepherd of Jesus Christ. He must plan to do counseling, must learn how to do counseling and must make himself available for counseling. Referral, except to another faithful shepherd, is out of the question. Better than referral is personal growth on the part of the pastor through discovering and ministering God's answers to the problems encountered in pastoral counseling.⁴⁶

Adams believed that all wise, growing Christians were *competent* to counsel,⁴⁷ but he also believed that the ordained Christian minister had the unique *mandate* to counsel.⁴⁸ Because of that conviction Adams railed against those mental health professionals outside the church who attempted to seize the counseling task of the church. He also railed against those inside the church who accepted the message, either referring to secular "experts" or joining them.⁴⁹ For Adams, the only place true counsel can be found is within the church. The Christian minister must counsel, not as an optional but an essential element of his ministry.

Adams's four major books on counseling were published between 1970 and 1979.⁵⁰ During that decade, Adams made a vigorous and thorough proposal for restoring theological reflection to the counseling task. As a result of Adams's ministry, much progress was made in recovering uniquely

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Christian reflection on the counseling task. After the initial work of theological recovery, however, the task of theological development still lay ahead.

Theological Advancement

Adams continued to publish books throughout the 1980s but none were as seminal as his major works in the previous decade. He also continued his work of editing the *Journal of Pastoral Practice*. All this effort made Adams the uncontested leader of the biblical counseling movement. Indeed, his name was equated with the movement.

But by the late eighties and early nineties new leadership began to rise up, mostly out of one of the organizations founded by Adams, the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF). This new blood wanted to continue to think about conversational ministry that was theologically informed in the same tradition as Adams. The new blood consisted of men such as Ed Welch and Paul Tripp, but the clear leader was David Powlison.

Powlison had come to faith in Christ as an adult. He had majored in psychology at Harvard and had been working for several years in private psychiatric hospitals. Disillusionment with the mental-health system was a significant catalyst for his conversion. Even the elite level of psychiatric care had remarkably few resources to offer confused, hurting persons and no power to change people at a level of depth. Shortly after becoming a believer, he entered Westminster Theological Seminary to study biblical counseling. After graduation he became a faculty member at CCEF and later the editor of their journal, which he renamed the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*. He earned his PhD in the history of science and medicine from the University of Pennsylvania.

In his leadership roles as a faculty member, and ultimately as editor of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Powlison was able to exert massive influence in directing the discussions that biblical counselors were having. It was ultimately under Powlison that biblical counselors began to reflect on their movement for the very first time. The foremost thinker in the movement had always been Jay Adams, but though he wrote voluminously over many years, he presented his thoughts with a certain finality and was never self-critical in print. A reader never gets the impression that there was an “early Adams” and a “late Adams.” There was just “Adams, *period.*” This is not to say

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that Adams did not broach new subjects or ever nuance his views (he did both). It is to say that before Powlison's leadership, there had never been a time of critically evaluating where the movement had been, considering some problems in the movement, and charting a positive way forward in the years ahead. Under Powlison the movement did all three.

Biblical counselors have followed Adams in almost every respect. There continues to be agreement that God in Christ is the fundamental reality behind all counseling. Biblical counselors have continued to believe that any positive change must flow from the power of Christ as he does his work in the believer through the power of the Holy Spirit. All biblical counselors continue to believe in the authority, wisdom, relevance, and sufficiency of the Bible to help people with any problem that requires counseling (see the appendix for more information about this). Having said that, the new group of biblical counselors, taking their cues from Powlison, have advanced the movement in several different ways.

First, there have been conceptual advancements. Counseling concepts are the fundamental set of beliefs that structure every counseling model. They are how counselors *think* about counseling. A counseling model answers questions such as: Who are we? What is wrong with us? How do we fix it? Who is God? *Is* there a God? What is the change process? All counseling systems answer such questions either overtly or covertly. Biblical counselors have advanced the theological reflection of Adams about how to do ministry, in two important ways. (1) They have brought about great development in an understanding of how to do ministry to people who are suffering as well as to people who are sinning. Adams did a great job of helping Christians know how to talk to and confront people who are caught in sin. It took some time and maturing for the movement to grow in wisdom concerning how to do ministry to those mired in suffering. (2) More contemporary biblical counselors have developed the movement with regard to motivational issues. When we talk about motivation, we are discussing the issue of why people do the things they do. Adams's answers to the issue of human motivation proved to be in need of change and development in order for the church to know how to help people in the wisest way possible.

Counseling methods are the second area where biblical counselors

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have advanced. Methodology refers to how counselors *do* counseling. What is the counselor's role in counseling? What is the role of the counselee? How does the change process transpire? Whether clearly stated or not, all approaches to counseling have a theory of how to proceed in the counseling relationship. For Adams, counseling was done in a very formal and authoritative way. Contemporary biblical counselors have sought to improve this approach based on the biblical teaching of loving, brotherly, one-anothering relationships.

The final area of advancement in theological reflection about counseling is apologetics. Apologetics has to do with how counselors *talk* to other, competing counseling systems. What is good in other counseling systems? What is not good? How much time will counselors spend investigating other systems? How will they use and interact with other systems? How can counselors advocate for the superiority of their own system? The existence of numerous, competing counseling systems necessitates that counselors seek to defend their own approach. Adams wanted to build a model, not engage with other models. Contemporary biblical counselors have seen the importance of talking with advocates of other models in a tone that is kind and gracious and less bombastic than Adams's.

Don't Misunderstand Me

This is a book about how biblical counselors have grown up and matured since the initial leadership of Jay Adams, but it is not a strike against Adams. To the contrary, the ministry of Jay Adams changed my life, and I love him. One of the great honors of my life has been to get to know him a bit over the last several years. I have spoken with him over the phone, talked for hours with him over pizza, and received great personal encouragement from him. He is one of the most gracious, godly, funny, and humble men I have ever met.

Beyond any personal connection, I believe Adams has been one of the most consequential men in church history in the last 150 years. His work revolutionized the way thousands of people do ministry. In the last forty years everyone who ministers the Scriptures or has had the Scriptures ministered to them according to the principles of biblical counseling has Jay Adams to thank. God has used him mightily to recalibrate the church's

thinking about how to help hurting and struggling people. I have no interest in any sort of unkind or ungodly attack on a man to whom the church owes so much.

Having said that, Jay Adams's work was imperfect. This is, of course, a distinction his writing shares with every other Christian author whose work was not inspired by the Holy Spirit. Every great man in church history had imperfections in his work, whether it be Athanasius, Augustine, Calvin, or Edwards. God loves to raise up powerful though imperfect servants. Jay Adams is one of their number. Adams built a movement from scratch, almost alone, and was doing so against powerful forces opposed to his model. It is my goal to honor Dr. Adams by carefully considering his work and the context in which he built it and by highlighting the efforts of men laboring in the tradition he began, to improve upon the good work he started.

Because that is true, I want to be very careful in how I refer to Adams as well as to those who followed him in advancing the task he began. As I've mentioned, all biblical counselors are united around core principles of the sufficiency of Scripture, the necessity of the power of the gospel to bring about true and lasting change, progressive sanctification, the importance of the church, and concern over secular psychology. But because there has been advancement, I need a way to refer to those more contemporary biblical counselors who have attempted to advance his thought.

In this book I will refer to the leadership of Adams as the "first generation" of biblical counseling. I will refer to the leadership of Powlison and those who have followed him in improving Adams's thought as the "second generation." Such generational language captures the idea of change occurring but in the context of family union. This language also rightly captures the distinctions within the larger unity that have characterized biblical counselors.

So now we will turn to how the second generation of biblical counselors advanced the beliefs of the first generation. First we will look at how they advanced the movement conceptually, regarding how biblical counselors *think* about counseling. Second, we will look at how they advanced the movement methodologically, in how biblical counselors *do* counseling. And finally we will look at the way in which the movement developed apologetically, in how biblical counselors *talk* about counseling.

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As we look at this together, please don't think that this is merely some book about a bunch of counselors. It really isn't. It's a book about how to do one-on-one ministry with people in a way that is theologically faithful. Specifically, it is about a group that has spent the last four decades trying to help the church figure out how to have conversations with troubled people in a way that is most faithful to the Scriptures and most honoring to Jesus Christ. Knowing their story will help you grow in faithfulness to Jesus, as well.