

A Review of

Adams, Jay E., *The Christian Counselor's Manual: the practice of nouthetic counselling* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1973)

and

Collins, Gary R., *Christian Counselling: a comprehensive guide* revised edition (W Publishing Group, 1988)

for Pastoral Care and Counselling

Although both Drs Adams and Collins are card-carrying Evangelicals, former professors at prestigious American seminaries, writing Christian counselling manuals, there are significant differences in their approaches to pastoral counselling. Important matters of substance divide them and there are also differences of emphasis that, if followed through, would lead to divergent pastoral care being offered.

Who should counsel?

Adams argues that: "While every Christian must become a counsellor to his fellow Christians, the work of counselling as a special calling is assigned particularly to the pastor."¹ Although Collins recognises that: "As defined traditionally, pastoral counselling is the work of an ordained pastor.", he argues that: "In view of the scriptural teaching that all believers are to bear the burdens of one another, counselling can and should be a ministry of sensitive and caring Christians, whether or not they are ordained as clergy."² Collins further contends that: "It should not be assumed that all pastors and other Christian leaders are gifted in this area, and called to counsel. Because of temperaments, interests, skills, training, or calling, some Christians avoid counselling, preferring to devote their energies to other ministries. This is a legitimate decision, especially if it is made in consultation with fellow believers."³

¹ Adams, p9

² Collins, p17

³ Collins, p16

While both authors note the importance of every church member caring for every other, Adams seems right to emphasise that the pastor has a particular responsibility and authority for pastoral care, especially when it seems likely that counselling and church discipline will sometimes have to be linked. Collins' argument for specialisation may be particularly pertinent to team ministries, but counselling is surely part of the pastoral office, which must not be neglected.

Collins' recognition of a whole area of "pastoral psychotherapy... [which] is the work of a trained specialist and rarely will be mentioned in this book."⁴ is clearly extra-Biblical. Even if it cannot be conclusively shown that non-organic mental illness is an illegitimate anti-Biblical category, as Adams argues, his thesis that pastors have too quickly entrusted the care of their flock to non-Christian psychiatrists seems well established. If the overall goal of Christian counselling is to promote Christ-likeness then this will surely involve bringing every thought in submission to God's Word, and thus addressing many areas which have become subsumed under the banner of "mental health".

The sufficiency of Scripture

Adams and Collins are divided over the scope of the sufficiency of Scripture.

Collins argues that: "The Bible... never claims to be a psychiatric diagnostic manual and textbook for counselling.... Some problems, for example, may be caused by faulty learning, misinformation, early traumas, environmental stress, physical illness, misperception, confusion over decision making, or other issues that may not discussed by biblical writers. Counselling people with these problems may involve using techniques derived from the Scripture. More often the counsellor will use methods that are *consistent with the Bible's teaching and values* but discovered and developed by social science and common sense."⁵ Similarly, he says: "... the Bible never claims to be a textbook on counselling... it was never meant to be God's sole revelation about people helping.... we

⁴ Collins, p17

⁵ Collins, p572, emphasis original

have been permitted to learn much about God's creation through science and academic study."⁶.

Adams specifically responds to this charge that "using the Bible to meet human needs" "is analogous to... [using]... the Bible" "as a textbook for 'modern physics or geography or shipbuilding'" by arguing that: "The Bible was not written to deal with the intricacies of shipbuilding, but surely it tells us all that we need to know about interpersonal relations. In the Bible are all things necessary to know how to love God and one's neighbour. Counselling directly pertains to the intricacies of those matters."⁷ For Adams, "the subject matter of counselling is precisely the same as that of the Scriptures."⁸

Adams is not engaged in a thorough-going Barthian "*Nein!*" to natural theology, but gives it the traditional place which it occupies in Reformed epistemology: "In the common grace of God, unbelievers stumble over aspects of truth in God's creation. They always distort these by their sin and from their non-Christian stance toward life. But *from the vantage point of his biblical foundation* the Christian counsellor may take note of, evaluate, and reclaim the truth dimly reflected by the unbeliever so long as he does so in a manner consistent with biblical principles and methodology."⁹.

Adams sees Collins as involved in futilely attempting an eclectic fusion of Christian theology and psychological speculation¹⁰. 2 Timothy 3:16f does seem to seriously undermine the contours of Collins' system since he seems to think that the Bible does not actually equip the Christian minister with everything he needs for the work of pastoral care. To accommodate the full force of the text, Collins would have to hive off many more issues into his specialist psychotherapy category as not the proper work of the pastor, which he is not prepared to do.

Sin and support

⁶ Collins, p22

⁷ Adams, p18

⁸ Adams, p33

⁹ Adams, p92, emphasis original

¹⁰ Adams, p33, n2

In his chapter entitled “sin is the problem”, Adams argues that “personal sin... [is] the root and cause of most of the day-by-day counselling problems that arise.”¹¹.

Collins dissents from the view that “counselling must consist primarily of confronting people with sin, urging them to confess, and teaching them to live in accordance with biblical teachings.... We do not assume that all or even most problems come primarily because of specific sinful behaviour or thinking in the counselee.”¹².

Whilst the counselee will face many “problems” as a result of living in a sinful world and will be sinned against as well as sinning, Adams is right to emphasise that godly responses are always possible. This stress on the avoidance of sin offers hope to the counselee that whatever difficult circumstances he faces, he need not be overwhelmed by them (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Collins includes “support” as one of the six most likely counselling goals¹³ but Adams criticises Collins for emphasising that the counsellor must “support” the counselee¹⁴. Adams sees the modern notion that the counsellor must above all provide passive listening support simply by his presence for the counselee as harmful and unbiblical¹⁵. It seems that Adams is not entirely fair in citing Collins as a representative of such an approach since the rest of Collins’ work shows that he recognises that the Christian will offer active Biblical counsel and be directional at times, though he is admittedly rather more cautious about this than Adams. Collins specifically says that the counsellor must accept the counselee as a person without condoning their actions¹⁶, which seems more balanced than Adams’ reading might imply.

¹¹ Adams, p136

¹² Collins, p72

¹³ Collins, p40

¹⁴ Adams, p154, n1, quoting Collins, Garry, *Effective Counselling* (Carol Stream, Creation House, 1972)

¹⁵ Adams, p158.

¹⁶ Collins, p43

Adams might also think that sympathy for the counselee has gone too far when he sees Collins as “quite seriously in error” and guilty of a “most deplorable” “capitulation to pagan psychological notions” since Collins argues that “the tendency to blame other people for the deficiencies and motives which are really our own” is one of several “defense mechanisms” that are healthy reactions which all of us use at times to meet the pressures of life.”¹⁷. Adams is surely right here: just because something is normal to sinners, does not mean that it is right and “healthy”. Crucial to Adam’s approach is to identify and name sinful behaviours as such (“calling the sin “sin””¹⁸) so that they might be repented of.

Conclusions

Perhaps some of these differences flow from the fact that Adams is above all a practical theologian whereas Collins is a clinical psychologist. Whilst Collin’s work may prove a useful reference tool, Adams has made a more compelling and coherent case that the biblical pastor will find informs his whole approach to counselling, whatever the particular presenting issue.

Bibliography

Adams, Jay E., *The Christian Counsellor’s Manual: the practice of nouthetic counselling* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1973)

Adams, Jay E., *Competent to Counsel* (Philipsburg, P & R, 1970)

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¹⁷ p267, quoting Collins, Garry, *The Search for Reality* (Wheaton, Key Publishers, 1969)

¹⁸ Adams, p316.