

[MJTM 16 (2014–2015)]

BOOK REVIEW

Robert W. Kellemen. *Gospel-Centered Counseling: How Christ Changes Lives*. Equipping Biblical Counselors Series. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014. 320 pp. Pbk. ISBN-13: 978-0310516132.

Gospel-Centered Counseling seeks to reclaim the practice of Christian soul care for clergy and other church workers. This emphasis on soul care is evident in the themes for each chapter, which draw the reader to consider how the gospel speaks to the needs of the human condition. Thus the author differentiates the practice of gospel-centered counseling from the practices of psychology-informed (i.e., theologically integrated) and psychology-based (e.g., secular) counseling practices. While this is not the first book with this focus, it is the most recent to make a case for a theologically grounded view of psychology and counseling (e.g., Oswald Chambers, *Biblical Psychology* [God's Revivalist Office, 1914] and Jay Adams, *More Than Redemption* [Baker, 1979]).

Although the author does not explicitly divide *Gospel-Centered Counseling* into sections, this book is oriented around a number of major themes that shape the content and the author's argument. Kellemen begins by focusing on the unique perspective offered by the gospel and Scripture, i.e., the Written Word (chs. 1 and 2). These chapters assert the sufficiency of God's self-revelation through the gospel and Scripture, and make the case for a biblically-based, Gospel-centered, non-integrationist approach to counseling. Next, the author focuses on God, i.e., the Living Word, as he outlines his understanding of how a right knowledge of God and an awareness of how Satan's efforts to subvert God relate to the practice of soul care (chs. 3, 4, 5). Kellemen's third theological foundation takes the reader into the

realm of theological anthropology (ch. 6) where he moves beyond affirming the significance of the *imago Dei* and asserts that the purpose of human life is to be God-focused (*coram Deo*).

In chapter 7 the author outlines his perspective on the practice of soul care. Thus the gospel-centered counselor is portrayed as a physician of the soul (ch. 7) whose task is to assess and diagnose the spiritual maladies of the counselee (chs. 8 and 9), bring the comfort and hope of the gospel to those who suffer (ch. 10), prescribe what he calls soul-utions (chs. 11 and 12) and dispense grace (ch. 15).

Three themes characterize the remaining numbered chapters of this book: the transformative possibilities of being in community with other Christians (ch. 13), the sustaining power of eschatological hope (ch. 14), and progressive sanctification as a Christian paradigm for change (ch. 16). The author concludes with a summative chapter, "Living Life Empowered by Christ's Changeless Gospel Truth." The book also includes endnotes, a bibliography, and a Scripture index, but does not provide a subject index, an oversight that will limit the use of this book as a reference text.

I affirm Kellemen's desire to restore the historical practice of soul care to the work of pastoral ministry. Indeed, his emphasis on soul care has the positive effect of separating the uniquely pastoral work of the ministry generalist from the therapeutic emphasis that often characterizes the work of ministry specialists such as chaplains and Christian counselors. Similarly, I welcome his desire to draw on the biblical and theological resources of the Christian community to inform the work of soul care and the broader task of counseling. In fact, this emphasis is an important reminder to those of us who do not belong to the Biblical Counseling Coalition of the vital role of these things. A third refreshing emphasis of this book is Kellemen's focus on living life in the presence of God (*coram Deo*). That being said, this book also raises significant concerns, four of which are discussed below.

To begin, Kellemen's use of Scripture reflects a view of the sufficiency and purpose of the Christian Scriptures that readers

who are outside his theological community may find to be overly inclusive. This tension comes into focus when we compare the *Statement of Faith* of the American Association of Christian Counselors (AACC), which states that Scripture is the “final authority for all matters about which it speaks,” with the *Doctrinal Statement* of the Biblical Counseling Coalition (BCC), which states that “the Bible reveals the meaning of our *total life situation in each and all [of] its aspects*” (emphasis added). While subtle, the difference between these affirmations is the difference between practices that are Scripture-based (BCC) and those counseling practices that are both Scripture-informed and psychology-informed (AACC). The limitations of the BCC view, which Kellemen endorses, shape the argument of *Gospel-Centered Counseling* in at least two important ways.

The agenda of this book is clearly to demonstrate the biblical basis of the model and is seen in the author’s copious use of Scripture. In other words, the question “Is it biblical?” is foremost in the author’s thinking. The influence of the BCC view of Scripture is also observable in the fact that Kellemen makes minimal allowance for the fruit of sound scientific (i.e., quantitative) inquiry and even less place for what he refers to as descriptive (i.e., qualitative) research (ch. 2). This perspective on the role of science has significant implications at both the practice level and the level of theory development and refinement. On the practice level, the author (i) makes no allowance for the use of psychological interventions and (ii) provides no guidance as to how the pastoral task of soul care relates to the therapeutic work provided by (Christian) medical practitioners, psychotherapists, and psychiatrists, even though he acknowledges a role for psychotropic medication and neurological psychology. As a result, the reader is left with the impression that biblically-informed and scientifically-informed approaches to the care of persons function as separate and unrelated entities. On the level of theory development and refinement, Kellemen’s descriptions of his model suggest that the question “Is it biblical?” is of significantly greater importance than the questions that inform scientific inquiry, such as “Does Gospel-Centered Counseling work?” and “What factors contribute to the effectiveness of

Gospel-Centered Counseling?” Indeed, aside from his use of illustrative stories that are intended to demonstrate how the model is envisioned to work, these questions are not addressed within this book. Thus there is no indication that anyone has conducted efficacy studies of either the model or any of the interventions that are discussed.

Second, I am puzzled by the fact that while the BCC *Confessional Statement* clearly affirms the work of the Holy Spirit in Counseling, Kelleman’s treatment of this topic does not appear to be well developed (cf. chs. 3 and 15). In chapter 3 the Spirit is identified as the source of wisdom and the source of transforming power. Unfortunately, Kelleman does not elaborate on these points. In chapter 15 he writes of the importance of yielding to, being filled with, and being empowered by the Spirit. In the same chapter he states that the spiritual disciplines “empower us to actively appropriate and depend on God’s Spirit in our lives: to live by, be led by, yielded to, filled with, controlled by, walking in, and keeping in step with God’s transforming and indwelling Holy Spirit” (265). Perhaps the author addresses this question elsewhere in his writings? Unfortunately, the propositional style of this book means that these ideas remain underdeveloped and this risks communicating that spiritual transformation is dependent on an individual’s efforts to submit to and appropriate what God has to offer. This is a critical point, as any attempt to counsel another person by means of either secular or Christian methods that is done apart from an acknowledgment of and reliance upon the operation of the Holy Spirit within the counseling process becomes nothing more than another human endeavor (works righteousness)—even if the gospel is stated to be at the core of the model.

Third, I have significant concerns about what appears to be a limited range of counseling skills and foci. To his credit, Kelleman provides the reader with a number of what may be described as case summaries as well as an extended case description (ch. 7). These case examples demonstrate a clear focus on behavior, cognition, and the replacing of faulty (i.e., sinful) cognitive schemas with a biblical perspective. The counseling skills most in evidence are using questions, making educative

comments, exploring discrepancies, directing (guiding), clarifying, listening, reinforcement, noting a theme, and paraphrasing. Thus it is observed that Gospel-Centered Counseling is portrayed as a directive model that, in the interest of engaging a person to change behavior and faulty thinking, at least in the hands of the inexperienced pastor, lacks appropriate reflexivity with respect to self, others, and emotions. As any experienced pastor, spiritual director or counselor knows, an overemphasis on exhortation not only runs the risk of making the counseling encounter one in which the counselor imposes their perspective on the counselee, but also risks limiting the extent to which real change occurs. What is needed, and what this book lacks, is a discussion of the range of skills required to operationalize the model, a discussion amply illustrated with verbatim type dialogues and accompanied by explanatory comments that assist the reader in developing the critical thinking skills to use the model effectively. Perhaps this shortcoming will be addressed in Kellemen's forthcoming book *Gospel Conversations: How to Care Like Christ* (Zondervan, Sept 2015)? Until then, the reader is left with an incomplete picture of how to operationalize Gospel-Centered Counseling.

Finally, while I applaud the fact that Kellemen avoids the trap of primarily defining the problems of living as either due to the influence of others in a person's life (i.e., faulty nurture) or a diagnosable mental health condition (i.e., faulty nature), I am concerned that he sees no difficulty employing this model in situations involving serious problems such as bulimia or counseling a couple/family with a recent history of domestic violence (ch. 3). This broad application of the Gospel-Centered Counseling model without any discussion as to the dangers or appropriateness of its use in certain situations raises ethical concerns about the physical and emotional well-being of those who are counseled. Of these, perhaps the most significant concern is the fact that an eager pastor or church leader who lacks access to appropriate supervision is likely to cause spiritual, emotional, physical, and relational harm to others as a result of enthusiastically and uncritically attempting to use the methods described in this book with situations that are inappropriate for the model.

In conclusion, *Gospel-Centered Counseling* is a helpful

reminder that the believer lives *coram Deo*. Unfortunately the title is a misnomer as the book is not about therapeutic counseling nor anything that approximates it. Instead, *Gospel-Centered Counseling* represents one approach to the work of soul care or spiritual guidance, leaving me to wonder if perhaps *Gospel-Centered Guidance* would have been a better title. Although I appreciate the emphasis upon helping people to live faithfully in the presence of God, I recognize that this model represents only one way of doing soul care and is not likely to appeal to many pastors or church workers who are outside the author's theological, ecclesiological, and professional circles. In addition, the limitations of *Gospel-Centered Counseling* are of such significance that the model is not suitable for use by ministry specialists such as chaplains who work within a pluralistic or multi-faith environment.

Kelvin F. Mutter
McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, ON