

[MJTM 16 (2014–2015)]

BOOK REVIEW

Robert W. Kellemen and Jeff Forrey, eds. *Scripture and Counseling: God's Word for Life in a Broken World*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014. 480 pp. Hbk. ISBN-13: 978-0310516835.

Scripture and Counseling is a collaborative effort by twenty-one men and one woman, each of whom self-identifies as a Biblical Counselor. As noted in the Preface, the intent of *Scripture and Counseling* is to provide the reader with “a robust, loving, best-practice guide so [that the reader] will gain competence in using God’s Word to address the real-life issues of people in a broken world” (15). *Scripture and Counseling* is divided into two sections to which are added three appendices, endnotes, a reference list, a Scripture index, and a subject index.

Part 1, “How We View the Bible for Life in a Broken World,” includes an introductory chapter and ten numbered chapters, each of which considers various aspects of the Biblical Counseling Coalition’s (BCC) position on the sufficiency of the Christian Scriptures. In chapter 1, “The Richness and Relevance of God’s Word,” the author asserts that “the Bible delivers to us the necessary relevant information, in conjunction with our position in Christ through the gospel, to impact our responses to living life in a broken world” (39). This discipleship theme continues in chapter 2, “Sufficient for Life and Godliness.” “Where Do We Find Truth?” (ch. 3) considers the relationship between Scripture and science. Chapter 4, “What Is Psychology?” differentiates between the discipline of psychology, which the author states describes human experience, and the practice of biblical counseling, which the author claims is able to offer complete explanations and offer prescriptions for living. “Scripture Is Sufficient But to Do What?” (ch. 5), makes the case that God’s

revelation in Scripture is “sufficient for constructing a model of psychology” (104) and needs to control the counselor’s priorities and practices. In chapter 6, “The Christ-Centeredness of Biblical Counseling,” the writer argues that Christ’s teachings, example, redemptive work, power, and eschatological return provide the understanding, example, motivation, strength, and hope that is required for Christ to be formed in those we counsel. Chapter 7, “A Counseling Primer from the Great Cloud of Witnesses,” connects the Biblical Counseling Movement with the historical tradition of Christian soul care. “What about the Body?” (ch. 8) differentiates between medical (e.g., neurological impairment, paranoid schizophrenia, bipolar disorder), mental (e.g., anxiety), and moral/spiritual problems. The next chapter, “Caution: Counseling Systems Are Belief Systems,” warns pastor-counselors about the dangers of mixing their biblical worldview with the worldview(s) that inform secular counseling. The last chapter in this section, “The Bible Is Relevant for That?” (ch. 10), proposes a model for biblical and theological reflection to guide the Biblical Counselor as they respond to the variety of concerns that people bring to their attention.

Part 2, “How We Use the Bible for Life in a Broken World,” includes ten numbered chapters plus a concluding chapter that reflects on the implementation of the Biblical Counseling model. Chapter 11, “The Rich Relevance of God’s Word,” is written by the same author who wrote chapter 10, and demonstrates the use of his theological method as he reflects on the case study introduced in the previous chapter. “The Practicality of the Bible for Becoming a Church of Biblical Counseling” (ch. 12) develops a theology of community care. The same author continues to focus on community in chapter 13, “Uncommon Community: Biblical Counseling in Small Groups,” where he develops his vision for making small groups a place for discipleship and soul care. The power of speech and the importance and the significance of “speaking the truth in love” (Eph 4:15) as a template to shape the counselor’s interactions with others is the focus of chapter 14. “The Competency of the Biblical Counselor” (ch. 15) differentiates between the competencies of five different types of soul care providers, ranging from those who are engaged in

“one-another ministries” through to experienced Biblical Counseling specialists. Chapter 16, “Relating Truth to Life: Gospel-Centered Counseling for Depression,” explores a concern that, based on widely-published epidemiological research, is estimated to affect a minimum of 6 percent of North American adults in any given year. Given that Scripture is the unifying theme of this book, it is no surprise that the editors devote the final chapters to a discussion of the use of biblical narrative (ch. 17), the wisdom literature (ch. 18), the Gospels (ch. 19), and the epistles (ch. 20) in the work of soul care. The final chapter of the book is a personal reflection by an experienced pastor entitled “Lessons Learned through Counseling Experience.” The appendices provide the reader access to three key documents from the Biblical Counseling Coalition: “Mission, Vision, and Passion Statement,” “Confessional Statement,” and “Doctrinal Statement.”

Among the chapters in this book that I appreciated were the two that described and illustrated a model for theological reflection (chs. 10 and 11). This method of theological reflection consists of six elements: (i) a clear definition or assessment of the problem; (ii) reflection on what Christian writers have historically said about this topic (tradition); (iii) reflection on what other Biblical Counselors say about this topic (tradition/experience); (iv) reflection on what secular psychology may say about this issue; (v) reflections on the counselor’s ministry and personal experience with this issue (experience); and, (vi) reflection on what the Scriptures may say about the issue (Scripture). This theological method is very similar to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral and provides a valuable window into the mindset of the Biblical Counselor, demonstrating that there is more to the Biblical Counseling movement than just Scripture.

Next, I appreciated the fact that chapters 8 and 16 provide a framework for understanding the Biblical Counseling position concerning mental health. Chapter 8 provides the reader with a framework for differentiating between medical, mental health, and moral/spiritual problems. The functional value of this framework is that it opens the door to treating medical and mental health concerns differently than moral/spiritual problems.

One other feature of this chapter is that the author wisely advises that the soul care provider needs “to be familiar with the primary diagnostic categories of the DSM-5” (153), highlighting the reality of working in a multi-disciplinary world. In chapter 16 the author outlines a process for giving soul care to a person with depression that begins with humility before focusing on the importance of listening, building a relationship, and offering meaningful hope. This discussion ends with a reminder of the counselor’s need to trust God to work. What I appreciated most about this process is the reminder that the care provider, like the care recipient, needs to humbly live each moment in the presence of God.

Third, Higbee’s reflections on the role of the community of faith in the practice of soul care are a reminder of the general responsibility of each Christ-follower to care for others as well as of the importance of creating healthy faith communities, that is, churches (ch. 12). In chapter 13 Higbee expands on this general vision and applies it to the small group ministry of the church, noting the importance of training small group leaders to be able to respond to the soul care needs within the group. While I am sympathetic toward any model of soul care that enhances relationships within the Body of Christ, I must admit to feeling troubled by Higbee’s use of the word “directive,” which conveys the idea that the process, content, and outcome of soul care are determined by the care provider (251). A second concern is that these small group leaders may attempt to provide care for issues for which they lack adequate training. This concern was somewhat allayed by the competency descriptions for one-another ministers and lay-counselor and recovery group ministers. Nevertheless, I remain concerned that some churches may cut corners with respect to the level of training and on-going oversight that needs to be provided to small group leaders who practice soul care.

While I appreciate aspects of this book I continue to have a number of “big picture” questions and concerns about the practice of Biblical Counseling. My first concern relates to the use of the words “counsel” and “counseling” as descriptors. It is clear from what has been written by the contributors to this book that

they share the conviction that the Scriptures are sufficient to foster spiritual healing and growth. Indeed, it is worth stating that most of what is discussed in *Scripture and Counseling* can readily be described as either guidance or the historical practice of soul care rather than pastoral psychotherapy. For this reason, I wonder if a better title may have been either *Scripture and Spiritual Guidance* or *Scripture and Soul Care*.

Next, despite the generous tone of chapter 16, I have continued reservations concerning the manner in which Biblical Counseling may be practiced, especially by those who have minimal training. Specifically, I am concerned about what can readily become a content-rich approach to counseling that may be overly concerned with communicating important truths. Historically such approaches to counseling and soul care have tended to be directive, imposing the views of the counselor upon the situation, rather than the counsellor listening to and journeying with the care recipient. To address this concern, I invite those who are Biblical Counselors to devote as much space to discussing the counseling relationship as they do to their core value that Scripture is the sufficient basis for the work of soul care.

Third, I have concerns that the desire to elevate the role of Scripture in counseling is not attended by an equal emphasis upon the role of the Holy Spirit in counseling. Indeed, references within this text to the work of the Spirit are both rare and brief. I hope that future books and articles from the Biblical Counseling Coalition will contain a full, deep, and lively discussion about the ministry of the Holy Spirit in and through the soul care provider, in the life of the soul care recipient, and in the process of providing guidance, counsel or soul care.

Finally, although I appreciated the inclusion of chapters on theological reflection and counselor competencies, there are two additional topics that, while outside the scope of this book, need to be addressed. Specifically, along with the topic of competency there is need for a discussion of the range of counseling skills that are required to be an effective Biblical Counselor. Second, as a companion to the discussion on competency, there is need

for a single coherent description of the training process for attaining the skills and competencies that are foundational to the practice of Biblical Counseling. Included with this is a need to outline the basis upon which someone may be assessed as being competent in the practice of this model. While I hope that these matters will be addressed in Kellemen's forthcoming book *Gospel Conversations: How to Care Like Christ* (Zondervan, Sept 2015), those who only have access to the present volume are likely to struggle to effectively incorporate this approach to soul care within their ministry.

In conclusion, *Scripture and Counseling* advances the reader's understanding of this model of soul care or spiritual guidance. If it is used sensitively and with discretion, some pastors may find this to be a useful paradigm for engaging people in conversations about the issues that concern them. That being said, the assumptions that inform this approach to soul care do not reflect the theological perspective of all Christians, not even all Evangelicals, and for this reason will not appeal to everyone. Finally, this approach to soul care is not suitable for anyone who ministers within a pluralistic or multi-faith environment.

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