

[MJTM 19 (2017–2018)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

Heath Lambert. *A Theology of Biblical Counseling: The Doctrinal Foundations of Counseling Ministry*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016. 344 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-0-3105-1816-7. \$24.99.

This is not the only theology of counseling on the market today (e.g., Virginia Todd Holeman, *Theology for Better Counseling* [2012]; Eric L. Johnson, *Foundations for Soul Care* [2014]). Neither is the author the first to propose a biblically based perspective on pastoral care and counseling (e.g., Oswald Chambers, *Biblical Psychology* [1914]; Jay E. Adams, *More Than Redemption* [1979]; William B. Oglesby, *Biblical Themes for Pastoral Care* [1980]). For these reasons it is worthwhile to ask, “Why this book, and why now?” *A Theology of Biblical Counseling* coincides with the revitalization of the biblical counseling movement and serves several apologetic functions. To begin, the book seeks to provide and develop the theological and biblical foundations of the current biblical counseling movement. Next, this book differentiates the biblical counseling movement from the Christian psychology movement (e.g., Eric L. Johnson) and the integrationist paradigms employed by many, if not most, Christian counselors. Thirdly, the perspective offered by *A Theology of Biblical Counseling* seeks to challenge and critique secular counseling and some integrationist counseling approaches. For example, this text, as well as the biblical counseling movement at large, reminds us that both the counselor’s and the counselee’s Christian faith should make a difference in the counseling room.

Lambert’s text contains twelve chapters, three appendices, and a Scripture index. Chapter 1, “Counseling and Theology: A Crucial Introduction,” and the last chapter, “Biblical Counseling

and the Goal of Theology,” function as bookends to the body of the text. The remaining chapters seek to relate the work of biblical counseling to ten key topics in Christian theology: Scripture (chapter 2), common grace (chapter 3), God (chapter 4), Christ (chapter 5), the Holy Spirit (chapter 6), humanity (chapter 7), sin (chapter 8), suffering (chapter 9), salvation (chapter 10), and the church (chapter 11). This structure parallels that of Adams’ *More Than Redemption*. The similarities between these texts go deeper than structure, as both reflect a Reformed theological perspective and Lambert’s text makes statements that echo or reframe content that is found in Adams’ book. Unlike Adams’ work, however, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling* lacks both a name index and a subject/topic index, two shortcomings that limit the usefulness of the book as a reference text.

One of the duties of a book-reviewer is to strike a balance between focusing on general themes and discussing specific topics. Recognizing that space prevents a thorough review of the book and a complete exploration of the text, this review will focus on some key assumptions that inform Lambert’s work. Due to the foundational role of the first chapter, the discussion will focus primarily on this chapter and will be supplemented with reflections that draw on other portions of the book.

Lambert makes this thesis statement early in the first chapter: “counseling is a theological discipline” (11). This statement is reminiscent of Adams’ comment that “the relationship between counseling and theology is organic; counseling cannot be done apart from theological commitments . . . counseling without theology is dead” (*More Than Redemption*, 15). This alignment of biblical counseling with theology underlies Lambert’s understanding of the purpose of pastoral counseling as the work of “soul care.” In his view, biblical counseling is differentiated from the processes and outcomes of psychotherapy, both Christian and secular. The theological tenor of his vision for counseling is heightened when he states that his definition of theology “is concerned with establishing what the Bible teaches today about *any* given topic” (13, emphasis added). On this point Lambert appears to move beyond Adams’ comment that “theology is the attempt to bring to bear upon any given doctrine (or

teaching) all that the Bible has to say about it" (*More Than Redemption*, 11). Indeed, whereas Adams confines theology to reflection on doctrines that are taught by Scripture, Lambert states that this biblical wisdom can be applied to *any topic*. Building on this premise, Lambert proposes that the form, process, and content of any counseling that is truly Christian needs to be shaped by theological reflection. This emphasis invites clergy and other counselors to remember that there are problems in people's lives that are at least partially a consequence of spiritual factors and thus are likely to be responsive to sensitive spiritual counsel. What is lacking in much of Lambert's text, however, is a nuanced discussion of the fact that some of the problems pastors encounter cannot be separated from biological factors (e.g., behavioral problems resulting from an organic brain injury or disease) and/or the person's formational and relational history (e.g., the research on the effects of adverse childhood experiences on children, adolescents, and adults). In other words, in seeking to make a theological case for biblical counseling, Lambert does not adequately engage the complexities of the problems people live with and potentially isolates those seeking help from the skills and knowledge others may bring to the conversation.

Two real contemporary pastoral challenges highlight the importance of testing Lambert's vision of biblical counseling as the application of biblical wisdom to *any topic*. First, consider the situation of a refugee who in the confusion of fleeing his homeland ends up in a refugee camp in one country while his wife is in a refugee camp in another country. The man is granted asylum in a new country and, several years later, believing he will never again see his spouse, enters a second marriage that is deemed to be legal even though he never formally divorced his first wife. The situation becomes complicated when he receives word that his first wife is looking for him and wishes to reunite. How would a pastor in this situation counsel the man and his new wife? What Scriptures apply? What Scriptures would guide the church in this situation? Secondly, consider the situation of a woman whose husband self-identifies as a woman and intends to undergo a gender change but wishes to remain married and co-

parent their children. How would a pastor in this situation counsel the couple? What Scriptures apply? Each of these circumstances has been and is currently being encountered by clergy of evangelical and fundamentalist congregations. The challenge is that situations such as these require careful theological reflection due to the fact that neither is addressed directly in Scripture. Unfortunately, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling* fails to provide the reader with a model of theological reflection that may be employed by a counselor who is faced with issues that are not directly addressed in Scripture.

Lambert makes two key statements concerning the role of theology and Scripture in counseling that invite further reflection on his above-quoted thesis. Drawing on Wayne Grudem and John Frame's definition of theology, Lambert states that "systematic theology is about the teachings of the entire Bible" (12). A few lines later he reinforces this when he writes that theology is concerned with "what the whole Bible teaches us *today*" (12). Curiously, a review of the Scripture index reveals no references to twenty Old Testament books (1 and 2 Kings, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel, and the Minor Prophets) and three New Testament books (Philemon and 2 and 3 John). While it is understandable that a book the size of *A Theology of Biblical Counseling* may not cite passages from every biblical book, some of the omitted texts contain themes that pertain to biblical Christian counseling, such as God's presence in the wake of traumatic loss, a topic that is addressed in Job's reflections on his situation and in Lamentations; and the issue of coping with the stresses of a challenging work environment, a topic that is present in Nehemiah and Daniel. However, what is more telling than the list of omitted biblical documents is the fact that over 83 percent of Lambert's Scripture citations come from the New Testament. One wonders how a broader use of Scripture would have shaped this book.

Further examination of the use of Scripture in this volume raises additional questions as to whether it engages sufficiently with the whole Bible. For example, by following the form and structure of a theological text, Lambert does not reflect on a "theology of the helping relationship." Indeed, an assumption

that defines the form, content, and argument of this book is found in the author's definition of counseling as "a conversation where one party with questions, problems, and trouble seeks assistance from someone they believe has answers, solutions, and help" (13). Unfortunately, this definition does not acknowledge that it represents only a part of the range of behaviors that may characterize a helping encounter, a range that includes advising, coaching, counseling, guidance, and psychotherapy. These behaviors are differentiated by, among other things, the degree to which the "helper" seeks to collaborate with the one seeking help. Interestingly, it may be argued that there are aspects of a collaborative approach to helping and change that are present in God's encounter with Cain (Gen 4:9–16) and in Jesus' use of the question "What do you want me to do for you?" (Matt 20:32; Mark 10:36, 51; Luke 18:41). Other strategies and ideas in Scripture that demonstrate a need for a theologically nuanced view of the counseling encounter include the use of story to invite reflection and insight (e.g., Nathan and David in 2 Sam 12:1–6, Jesus' parables), the use of a wide range of question styles to draw awareness out of a person instead of merely "telling" (e.g., Jesus' "ranking question" in Matt 23:17 and his other-centered "meaning question" in Matt 16:13 and Mark 8:27), and the role of the Holy Spirit in promoting change in a person's life. The absence of a thoroughly nuanced and biblically grounded theology of the helping relationship not only raises questions about the way Scripture is used but also leaves the reader with a limited view of the helping or counseling relationship.

Another key assumption underlying this book is that the validity of a counseling methodology can be confirmed or denied based on the assumptions that inform the intervention or counseling model. On this point, Lambert engages in a form of syllogistic reasoning that proceeds as follows:

**Major Premise:** "Every vision of reality about counseling will be theological" (17).

**Minor Premise:** "secular counseling [as represented by figures such as David Burns] does not have a vision of reality that includes God" (23).

**Conclusion:** "Secular counseling cannot produce real

change” (25).

The first problem with this logic is that the conclusion makes a claim about “real change” that assumes content not present within the argument, thus raising the question, “How does Lambert define real change and how is it measured?” As a theologian Lambert embraces an epistemology of divine revelation that informs his worldview, his perspective on change, and his actions. In contrast, the vision of reality that is embedded in many counseling approaches is based on an epistemology of empirical observation and experimentation. In dismissing data that results from legitimate empirical inquiry, Lambert is asserting that whatever knowledge that can be gained from psychology is of limited use. This claim seems rather curious when one ponders how Adam and Eve’s descendants could possibly have learned to relate to others and organize into communities without learning from their observations about human behavior. With this in mind, it should not be a surprise that the Scriptures reveal insights about human beings that reflect the results of repeated observations of human behavior over time (e.g., Prov 17:28; 22:6).

A second difficulty posed by Lambert’s logic is the operative assumption of the major premise, namely that the desired outcome, “real change,” is necessarily dependent on an implied minor premise that the means of change involves the communication of biblical truth. Such a claim needs to be examined theologically. To begin, one must ask whether Scripture alone is sufficient to produce real change. If one answers affirmatively, then Scripture becomes a sacrament that is effective *ex opere operato* (from the work worked). In other words, this view makes Scripture a tool or an instrument in the hands of an individual that they use to create change in their own life through the practice of rituals such as reading Scripture, contemplation, and memorization. Another perspective, and one that is more likely to be embraced by biblical counselors, is that the effective witness of Scripture in counseling requires someone to speak and interpret it (see, e.g., Rom 10:14). Theologically, this makes the process of biblical counseling a sacramental encounter that is effective *ex opere operantis* (from the work of the doer, i.e., the counselor).

In other words, Scripture becomes an effective counseling tool that produces change in people's lives when an individual speaks its truth to others or incorporates practices such as reading Scripture, contemplation, and Bible memorization into the counseling process. A third theological option, and one that is explicitly and implicitly affirmed in Scripture, is that the truth of Scripture as it applies to a person's life is confirmed through the witness of the Holy Spirit in the heart and mind of the hearer (e.g., John 16:8). While Lambert acknowledges this third perspective, the reader is left wondering why he did not introduce this point earlier in the text.

In addition to what has already been noted, I wish to make the following brief observations and comments. First, in chapter 2 Lambert affirms the use of resources aside from Scripture. Unfortunately, this aspect of his theological methodology is not evident throughout the book, and the absence of a name index, subject index, and bibliography makes it virtually impossible to explore the extent to which Lambert's work is informed by the rich resources of Christian theology and spirituality. Lambert's reflections on the role and work of the Holy Spirit in counseling are a helpful beginning point. I find, however, that his reflections on the Holy Spirit are overly focused on the Spirit's role in the life of the counselor and as teacher and guide. One aspect of the Spirit's work in counseling that I wish Lambert developed is his role as a witness to God's grace, particularly towards those whom Isa 42:3 describes as "bruised reed[s]." Lastly, I find that the chapter on the "Theology of Sin" belies one of the basic assumptions of the biblical counselling movement, namely that the problems of living are largely a consequence of a person's sins of commission and omission. Despite his acknowledgement that there are counseling problems that are the result of the sins of others, Lambert's primary foci in this chapter are (1) acknowledging, confessing, and repenting of our sins and (2) forgiving those who sin against us. While these are important dimensions of the Christian life, I found myself wishing for a recognition of the pain of human suffering resulting from the interpersonal effects of the sins of others.

In conclusion, I read books like *A Theology of Biblical*

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*Counseling* because I welcome the ways in which they invite me to reflect on my work as a counselor. Unfortunately, the assumptions that inform this book raise as many questions as they seek to answer, thus limiting the value of this text. Indeed, like so many others before it, I find that *A Theology of Biblical Counseling* is written with neither the pastoral sensitivity of John Chrysostom, Gregory the Great, and the great Puritan pastors nor the theological incisiveness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, or Irenaeus.

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