

Book Review:

Competent To Counsel (Jay E. Adams)

by Mark A. Blair

GCCS 550

Colorado Theological Seminary

April 2007



Book Review: Competent To Counsel

A brief survey of the fields of psychology and counseling presents a bewildering array of theories, methods, and related concepts. All claim to have some grand insight or practical applicability in explaining (and correcting) the behavior of mankind. Broadly defined, psychology is a science¹ that deals with mental processes and behavior.² The study of psychology contains numerous branches and specializations typically divided into categories of research and applied psychology.

Literally meaning “the study of the mind,” psychology focuses on both individual and group behavior. Clinical psychology is concerned with the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders. Other specialized fields of psychology include child psychology, educational psychology, sports psychology, social psychology, and comparative psychology. The issues studied by psychologists cover a wide spectrum including learning, cognition, intelligence, motivation, emotion, perception, personality, and the extent to which individual differences are shaped by genetics or environment. The methods used in psychological research include observation, interviews, testing, experimentation, and statistical analysis.³

The application of psychological science and associated areas of study to mental and emotional conditions and problems gives rise to even more complex and controversial subject matter: psychotherapy, psychiatry, and counseling.⁴ Again broadly defined, counseling is a “specialty that facilitates personal and interpersonal functioning ... with a focus on emotional, social, vocational, educational, health-related, developmental, and

¹ Science is broadly sub-divided into the categories of [natural sciences](#) and the [social sciences](#). The **social sciences** are a group of academic disciplines that study human aspects of the world. They diverge from the [arts](#) and [humanities](#) in that the social sciences tend to emphasize the use of the [scientific method](#) in the study of humanity, including [quantitative](#) and [qualitative](#) methods. The social sciences, in studying subjective, inter-subjective and objective or structural aspects of society, were traditionally referred to as [soft sciences](#). The use of the word "science" is not therefore always an attempt to claim that the subject in question ought to stand on the same footing of inquiry as a natural science. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Science>.

² The American Heritage © Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition, 2000, Houghton Mifflin Company, www.thefreedictionary.com/psychology, p. 2.

³ Britannica Concise Encyclopedia, www.answers.com/topic/psychology, p. 3.

⁴ For simplicity, this paper will focus on counseling since it represents the majority of interventions that a Christian counselor will encounter.

organizational concerns. Counseling psychology differs from clinical psychology (and therefore some areas of psychoanalysis and psychiatry as well) in that it is focused more on normal development issues and everyday stress rather than serious mental disorders.”⁵

Most counseling interventions (including those conducted by psychoanalysts and psychiatrists) involve direct interaction between the counselor, counselee, and a presenting problem that is causing some degree of mental and emotional distress. The goal, in this case, is to help the counselee move past (overcome) the presenting problem in order to find meaning in life and become healthy and well-adjusted mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.⁶ Therein lies the dilemma: within the existing array of theories, methods, and concepts, there is no agreed upon answer, no single interconnecting thread that can be traced through the entire process from cognition to behavior. Or is there?

Psychology uses scientific methods to describe and predict people’s behaviors, feelings, and thoughts.⁷ In modern times, beliefs that cannot be validated in this manner are typically dismissed. In essence, scientific process has been misunderstood and misapplied; it separates psychology and religion into opposing paradigms. Science tries to distance itself from religion, and religion retaliates by rejecting science. The power struggle within this dichotomy ultimately forms, from my perspective, three distinct camps. One group thinks that since psychology is science, religion is superfluous.

Another group believes that religion is complete and perfect, thus invalidating the need

⁵ Main Article: Counseling psychology, www.thefreedictionary.com/psychology, p. 24. For the purposes of this paper, mental disorders encompass organic illness such as brain damage and other disorders with an identifiable physiological cause such as mental retardation, chemical imbalance, etc.

⁶ *Christian Counseling – Unique Perspective*, www.allaboutgod.com/christian-counseling.htm.

⁷ Faller, George, *Psychology versus Religion*, *The Journal of Pastoral Counseling*, Vol. XXXVI, 2001, p. 21.

for the science of psychology. A third camp recognizes the essential nature of both, combined into a comprehensive body of knowledge that addresses man's mind and spirit.

I clearly fall into the third category, acknowledging that God is the Lord of All — including the science of psychology. God's truth as revealed in scripture contains all that mankind needs — to include the fields of psychology and counseling. If both are used properly, there is not a zero-sum game between religion (the Bible) as truth and psychology as science. The more we understand about humanity through the vast array of psychology and its subordinate specialties, the better we are able to “rightly divide” God's truths as presented in scripture. The better we understand scripture, the better able we are to systematically apply God's truths in the field of counseling. The imperative is to devise adequate models and practices that clearly support God's truth in scripture and demonstrate their credibility through the same scientific techniques that secular psychology claims as its domain.⁸ “Religion and science, if reconciled, can help each other arrive at the same, universal truth.”⁹

In his book *Competent to Counsel*,¹⁰ Jay E. Adams touches on the above considerations, and presents “Nouthetic¹¹ Counseling” as a recommended scriptural counseling model for Christian counselors. To introduce his topic, Adams describes the inadequate training seminary education provided him in the area of counseling as well as his early quest for clear explanation and guidance about Christian counseling methods and practices. Disillusioned with prevailing theories and techniques, Adams adopted a

⁸ This need is a central recommendation in *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality* by Mark R. McMinn. I can think no better way to show the secular scientific community just how subordinate their theories, models, and concepts are to Biblical truth.

⁹ Ibid, p. 22.

¹⁰ Adams, Jay E., *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling*, Zondervan, 1970.

¹¹ According to Adams, *nouthetic* derives from the word *nouthesis* meaning “admonish,” “warn,” and “teach,” p. 44.

style of “hit-or-miss patterns of counseling growing out of on-the-spot application of scriptural exhortations...”¹² What surprised him was the comparative success of these tactics since they seemed so far removed from what he had been taught to accept as the standard. When he was asked to teach a course on basic pastoral counseling at Westminster Theological Seminary, Adams found himself questioning accepted methods and practices all the more.

After further study and practical experience working with O. Hobart Mowrer¹³ under the Eli Lilly Fellowship program¹⁴ in the summer of 1965, Adams determined that the preponderance of persons institutionalized for mental illness, with the exception of those with verifiable physiological disorders, were not sick (in the medical sense of the word). They were refusing to take responsibility for their behavior and escaping from the feelings and consequences generated by those same behaviors. In his words, “the main problems people were having were of their own making ... they themselves were their own worst enemies.”¹⁵

Armed with this opinion, Adams concluded that most theories, methods, and concepts in the world of psychology are more perfectly contained in scriptural truths. Secular psychology begins and ends with man; Christian counselors, on the other hand, need to turn to the scriptures “to discover how God ... says to do it.”¹⁶ Adams was “amazed to discover how much the Bible has to say about counseling, and how fresh the biblical

¹² Ibid, p. xiii.

¹³ O. Hobart Mowrer (1907-1982) received his PhD. from Johns Hopkins in 1932. He is considered the father of "integrity therapy," saying that the solution to man's problems lies in the group. The group provides all that is necessary to handle guilt (by confession and reconciliation), and have a sense of self-worth.

¹⁴ According to Adams, this program allowed him to work in several Illinois mental institutions where he became convinced that most of what society was labeling as mental illness was not really sickness but unresolved sinful behavior.

¹⁵ Adams, p. xvii.

¹⁶ Adams, p. xviii.

approach is.”¹⁷ By admission, his method presupposes an existing problem: sin is the root cause, and sin must be confronted. He considers science a useful adjunct, but, in the end, the Bible is his standard of judgment, faith, and practice, and it is inerrant. This perspective identifies is the one interconnecting thread that can be traced through the entire process from cognition to behavior. The remainder of this paper will attempt to outline the key tenets of Adams’ proposal (which he calls “Nouthetic Counseling”) inserting comments as deemed appropriate.

One primary pillar supporting Adams proposals is the concept of responsibility. According to Adams, people no longer have to accept responsibility for their behavior and actions because errant behavior is presented as a sickness rather than a choice. In other words, problems in behavior, emotions, and relationships are “allogenic (other-engendered) rather than autogenic (self-engendered).”¹⁸ Adams insists that this is inconsistent with reality. Therefore, “illness caused by psychological stress must be distinguished from illness as the cause of psychological stress ... Apart from organically generated difficulties, the ‘mentally ill’ are really people with unresolved personal problems.”¹⁹ Instead, Adams stipulates throughout his book that one must acknowledge guilt, confess behavioral problems, and learn spiritual means to modify irresponsible and/or immoral behavior.

From this conclusion, his presents the thesis that “qualified Christian counselors properly trained in the scriptures are competent to counsel — more so than psychiatrists

¹⁷ Adams, p. xix.

¹⁸ Adams, p. 18.

¹⁹ Adams, p. 29.

or anyone else.²⁰ Additionally, a nouthetic counseling method allows Christian counselors to confront, admonish, teach, and restore just as Christ counseled His disciples and the nation of Israel during His ministry. “The fundamental purpose of nouthetic counseling is to effect personality and behavioral change.”²¹ Personality and behavioral change is the only way to correct the presupposed existing problem of sin.

I find no fault with most of this reasoning if the counselor is able to distinguish true organic mental illness, and if the counselor knows enough about temperament and personality to properly confront a client while at the same time demonstrating and teaching the Fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). Additionally, the counselor must remain true to scripture; he must be theologically sound; scripture must be in context and relevant to the issue at hand; and the “confrontation” must be practical and applicable. However, rather than assuming there is some hidden sin the counselor must ferret out and compel the counselee to admit and face up to, one must take extreme care to “hate sin, but love the sinner.” Confrontation of this sort without love and empathy can be very damaging. Before using any counseling intervention, including prayer and other means, one must consider and anticipate the client’s needs, the situation at hand, and possible effects and impacts that it will engender.²²

Adams allows that background information is needed to answer why a particular problem exists or why the counselee behaves in a certain manner, but his second pillar mainly revolves around “discussion of the what. What was done? What must be done to

²⁰ Adams, p. 18. Adams also explains how the real work in counseling is done by the Holy Spirit and how scripture gives us the requirement to serve in a counseling capacity when needed.

²¹ Adams, p. 41-45.

²² McMinn, Mark R., *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling*, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996

rectify it? What should future response be? ‘What’ leads to solutions of problems.”²³

Through this element of the counseling process, personal conference and discussion can bring about greater conformity to biblical principles and practices. It follows that the third pillar of nouthetic counseling is based on the content of scripture itself. Second Timothy 3:16-17 and 4:2-5 clearly state the authority and purpose of scripture. “Nouthetic confrontation must be scriptural confrontation. Nouthetic confrontation is, in short, confrontation with the principles and practices of the scripture.”²⁴ Scriptural confrontation (in love, 1 Tim 1:5), “stresses turning to God in repentance ... advocates the assumption of responsibility and blame, the admission of guilt, the confession of sin, and the seeking of forgiveness in Christ.”²⁵ Success is defined as the “attainment of the biblical change desired with an understanding by the counselee of how ... to avoid falling into similar sinful patterns.”²⁶

Regarding qualifications for a Christian counselor, Adams pinpoints three essential attributes: goodness, knowledge, and wisdom. “Preeminently, a nouthetic counselor must be conversant with the scriptures. Goodness embraces both the involvement and empathetic concern ... and also comprises an enthusiasm of life in which Christ is apparent, and which thereby communicates hope to the counselee.”²⁷ Adams uses Proverbs 1:1-7 to demonstrate his concept of wisdom: “(1) learning and knowledge; (2) practical skill in the application of general principles to concrete situations; (3) behavior with a covenant-moral orientation.”²⁸ He spends an entire chapter discussing how a

²³ Adams, p. 48-49.

²⁴ Adams, p. 51.

²⁵ Adams, p. 55.

²⁶ Adams, p. 57.

²⁷ Adams, p. 60.

²⁸ Adams, p. 62.

pastor can use his techniques as an evangelistic tool, and then compares and contrasts his model with Rogerian techniques. He appropriately delineates problem areas with Rogers' methods, but he fails to acknowledge that the field of psychology (especially social psychology) holds any value. In one fell swoop, Adams goes from accepting psychology as "useful adjunct" to relegating it to something not even worthy of mention as he outlines the qualifications and knowledge that a counselor must master and apply. I believe that this approach is inappropriate and inconsistent. Isn't this field, after all, part of the knowledge base that could give the counselor some additional insight to the problem at hand?

At this point in the book, Adams abandons all pretense and zeroes in on sin and its dominating role in man's psychological, emotional, and spiritual problems to the exclusion of any other potential causes or mitigating circumstances (except organic illness as discussed earlier). He challenges Rogers' Client-Centered Therapy and makes several key observations that lead directly to the main thrust of nouthetic counseling methods. First he argues that the Rogerian system is humanist – it begins and ends with man. As with many secular theories and methods, various science-based claims place control of behavior and the ability to change within the autonomous capability of man himself. In other words, man has no need for God; religion of its own accord contributes man's mental, emotional, and relationship problems. By doing so, science strips responsibility away from man, and this is the real cause of man's psychological dilemmas.²⁹ Adams rightly argues that science provides no moral judgment, no absolute standards of right and wrong. In Adams' view, there is no neutrality on moral issues, and

²⁹ Adams, p. 78-92. This would place Rogers in the first group and Adams (by ignoring the potential of psychology) in the second group.

a client-centered approach must include scriptural advice and direction. Using Proverbs as a reference, Adams also asserts that a directive approach is the most appropriate counseling method.³⁰ Also, Adams directly opposes Rogers with regard to feelings and behavior (again rightly so). According to Adams, behavior determines feelings: “a good conscience ... depends on good behavior ... Conscience, which is man’s ability to evaluate his own actions, activates unpleasant visceral and other bodily warning devices when he sins ... Visceral discomfort is a God-structured means of telling human beings that they have violated their standards.” Rogers claims the reverse — man reacts or behaves based on perception and feelings.

Having identified sin as the root cause of man’s psychological dysfunction, Adams outlines a three-phase process required for successful resolution of psychological problems: confrontation, restoration, and instilling hope. Confrontation of the problem, through scripture, forms the foundation of his nouthetic counseling technique. Although not specifically delineated, Adams basically divides the confrontation process into three general subcomponents: problem identification, confession of guilt and acceptance of responsibility for one’s actions (past, present, and future), and problem solving (finding and applying biblical truths and behavior patterns) in order to effect the behavioral change necessary (the presupposition of his method). Completion of this phase leads to restoration.

In Chapter 7, Adams discusses his concept of confession in greater detail and clarifies his views on sin as the cause of mental, emotional, and spiritual issues. Expanding beyond his earlier emphasis on autogenic (self-engendered) problems, Adams now introduces the concept of original sin and its contribution to the overall fallen state of

³⁰ Adams, p. 94.

mankind. He writes that scripture does not represent all sickness as the immediate result of personal sin or sinful patterns of life, but that the Bible does “acknowledge an immediate relationship between sin and sickness in many instances.”³¹ I believe what Adams is trying to convey here is that, although sin is the root of man’s problems in the mental and emotional realms, problems encountered are not necessarily the fault of a given individual, but can, at times, be attributed to unrealized sinful behavior, the sinful acts of others, or simply the “fallen-ness” of the world in general. However, once the problem is identified (through confrontation and regardless of the cause), a person is fully responsible for his response and corrective action. Unless a biblical pattern is applied, the underlying cause is now perpetuated in an autogenic form. “Every situation in which one finds himself can be changed because one element in the situation is the client himself, who, by the grace of God, can be changed. In any case he will be changed; the only question is whether he allows the problem to change him, or whether he changes according to the scripture ... to meet the problem differently.”³² The difference here is that all begins and ends with God, not man alone.

Restoration is comprised of several key components as well. Once the problem has been confronted (identified, confessed, and a biblical resolution determined), one must implement a biblical pattern of behavior and trust in God. “We may trust that the way out will come as surely as the problem itself ... We can’t say can’t when God says we can.”³³ At this point, the client is ready to either forgive or be forgiven and reconcile. He is able to apply a biblical standard that resolves his issues and permits him to find “meaning and

³¹ Adams, p. 108-109.

³² Adams, p. 130.

³³ Adams, p. 135.

joy in life, and become healthy and well adjusted mentally, emotionally and spiritually.”
He is restored.

Hope, Adams’ third phase, springs directly from two sources. First, a person has experienced success through confrontation and restoration; he now knows that there is light at the end of *every* tunnel, and that that light is God. He has confidence that by directly applying biblical principles and patterns of behavior, he will achieve the goal attributed to successful counseling. He will find “meaning and joy in life, and become healthy and well adjusted mentally, emotionally and spiritually.” “A problem met by biblical response leads to a solution which strengthens one’s ability to solve new problems.”³⁴ Second, “God created man to live fully and abundantly, and he has outlined the structure through scripture that will produce abundant life through love.”³⁵ God’s structure is the means for moral living and is something that science fails to consider, much less provide.³⁶

The remaining chapters apply nouthetic counseling principles in the areas of discipline (church and individual), problem solving, and mentoring through modeling correct behavior. He continues to emphasize the centrality of scripture and biblical patterns of behavior. He discusses the relative merits and weaknesses of team and group counseling and, finally, addresses reconciliation and concentrating on the problem rather than the individual. Without a doubt, Adams demonstrates the necessity and efficacy of a systematic approach to counseling, and proposes that nouthetic counseling concepts and techniques meets the biblical example and standard. His following comment aptly summarizes the entirety of his book: “good counseling seeks to solve not merely the

³⁴ Adams, p. 145.

³⁵ Adams, p. 160.

³⁶ Adams, p. 160.

presentation or the performance problems, but also attempts to break all non-biblical preconditioning patterns and to replace them with biblical behavior. Sanctification consists of putting off the old man and putting on the new man.”³⁷

Based on my study and personal experience to date, Adams homes in on several absolute keys to the purpose and goals of counseling. There is no doubt that we are, as Christians, called on to counsel. Our counsel, by default, must be soundly based on biblical principle and example. We cannot allow secular means and methods take the place of scripture or God’s structure intended to help us lead moral lives. Science, in and of itself, does not and cannot provide absolute truth and clearly falls short in distinguishing between right and wrong, good and bad. The one answer, the one common ground, the single interconnecting thread that can be traced through the entire process from cognition to behavior is the God of Creation. The purpose of Christian counseling, therefore, is to enable man to grab on to that thread so that, by the grace of God, he can achieve the goal to “move past (overcome) the presenting problem in order to find meaning in life, and become healthy and well-adjusted mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.” Scripture does indeed contain the principles and patterns we need to confront, restore, and instill hope.

Nouthetic Counseling provides a valid option, but it is nothing new; it holds common ground with virtually every counseling technique and problem-solving method. Thorough investigation and analysis identifies the problem. Available resources and the desired outcome determine the appropriate ways and means to resolve the problem. Once resolved, similar patterns are applied to future problems, and each problem generates lessons learned as well as additional skills and knowledge that can be applied.

³⁷ Adams, p. 201.

Nouthetic counseling as a concept and a systematic process holds great promise, but I believe it is limited (as other methods and techniques are) to the abilities, knowledge, and experiences of the counselor using the technique as well as the counselee's acceptance of and willingness to apply the process itself. I think that Adams has simply improved his earlier style of "hit-or-miss patterns of counseling growing out of on-the-spot application of scriptural exhortations" to *targeted* spiritual exhortations *as* counseling. Actually, this is a good thing. Most counseling interventions that Christian counselors will be involved in need this level of spiritual focus and biblical content and advice. For the most part, the counselee has chosen a *Christian* counselor for a specific reason. He recognizes that there is sin in his life and is looking for a way out from underneath it. This book is a good reference in that context.

The imperative not addressed in his book, however, is the one I was hoping he would cover based on the title "Competent to Counsel." The only way Christian truths can become main stream, generally accepted bases for counseling, and be respected by the myriad specialties in the field of psychology, is to join the nay-sayers in their own game. Christian counselors must document their work using scientific methods of study, experimentation, and analysis of religious (as opposed to secular) theories and concepts to clearly demonstrate their validity and efficacy. There is already a great deal of data in the field of psychology that directly reinforces biblical principles and patterns of behavior, and to ignore or discount that because of the rift between secular science and religion is irresponsible. We can't prove legitimacy by divorcing ourselves from those we are trying to convince.

God is the Lord of All. There are no scientific discoveries that are outside of His creation. Psychologists have not discovered any truth not revealed in His Word, but they may have examined it and explained it in more detail so we (mankind) can understand more of its breadth and depth. They have also made many mistakes and grossly misinterpreted facts that we can correct and reinterpret. It is our job to demonstrate the power of our God and the fact that any science, especially psychology, is subordinate to that power. “Religion and science, if reconciled, can help each other arrive at the same, universal truth.” In this manner, Christians will not need to claim to be “competent to counsel” — everyone will already know.

