

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction: The Sufficiency of Scripture, the Biblical Counseling Movement, and the Purpose of This Book

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**T**HIS BOOK IS A COLLECTION of true accounts about real people. The men and women featured here received hope, peace, joy, and dramatic change in their lives from Jesus Christ as they met with him in the pages of his Word, the Bible. These stories recount the details of how these people came to seek biblical counseling for problems they were experiencing in their lives, how caring Christians assisted them and oriented them toward Jesus, and how they encountered the rich and transforming presence of Christ through his Word in the community of the church.

The problems recounted in these stories are not trivial. The people in the following pages struggled with some of the most difficult and complex problems that any human can encounter in this life. They struggled with pain and difficulty for weeks, months, and even years, seeking help from many sources. Our contributors engaged them in relationship, walked with them through difficulty, and watched as Jesus used the ministry of counseling to bring life, comfort, and transformation.

These counselors-turned-storytellers ministered out of the shared conviction that God has given his people adequate resources to do the work of conversational ministry. They believe that God has given his people a Savior, a Bible, and a church—all of which equip his people to tackle the kinds of problems that surface in counseling—even when those problems are extremely challenging. They believe that God equips his people to counsel the hard cases.

If you are familiar with the counseling conversations taking place among Christians over the last several decades, you know that this is an audacious assertion. The church has been engaged in an ongoing debate over the resources necessary for counseling. Most do not agree with the conviction that Christians have sufficient resources to inform counseling conversations. The contributors of our book believe, however, that God has given his church all the graces necessary to do counseling. God's inerrant, authoritative, and sufficient Word reveals a church, calls all Christians to ministry in that church, identifies the Spirit as the empowering force for that ministry, points in the direction of prayer as the dynamic means of encountering God, and demonstrates that all these belong to Christians because of the finished work of Christ. Because of this strong disagreement over sufficiency, we want to frame the counseling context of these stories before telling them. The scenarios did not arise in a vacuum, and they must be retold in the context of the much larger Christian conversation about counseling resources. That conversation has been dominated by questions about the sufficiency of Scripture.

### Counseling Debates and the Sufficiency of Scripture

Is Scripture sufficient to inform all the possible counseling situations in this fallen world? The implications of such a question are massive. If Scripture is an overflowing source of wisdom for all counseling, then the pressing task for Christians is to be busy mining the text of Scripture for an understanding of the manifold problems people experience and for the wisdom to help them. If Scripture, though valuable and useful, is ultimately inadequate as

a source of wisdom for all counseling, then the urgent work is to look to the corpus of secular psychology for those truths that supply the Bible's lack. The debate revolves around the relationship between an understanding of hard problems, the nature of counseling, the contents of Scripture, and the role of secular psychology. How we answer the question about the sufficiency of Scripture ultimately describes our understanding of the content of Scripture and defines the kind of literature counselors should use to help them in their work—whether theological or psychological in nature. Christians have disagreed about this question. The rhetoric has been bitter at times.<sup>1</sup> Of course, all such disagreements are a result of our fallen nature and are also regrettable (Phil 2:2; 1 Pet 3:8). Yet, as unfortunate as such disagreements have been, they have revealed some honest and important issues. That is to say that when we talk about these matters, we are talking about the resources and methods we use to minister to people and whether those people are ultimately helped. Such issues are far from inconsequential.

The debate began in the late 1960s with the work of Jay Adams. By the time Adams began to write about counseling, it had been over a century since a Christian had written a book explaining how to use the Bible as *the* source of wisdom to help people with their counseling-related problems.<sup>2</sup> It is not possible here to address all of the manifold factors that led to this situation.<sup>3</sup> The point to understand is that by the middle of the twentieth century most Christians did not believe that the Bible was a book that was pointedly relevant for the kinds of conversations that happen when counseling someone with hard problems. Instead, mainline

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<sup>1</sup> See Gary Collins, "An Integration Response," in *Psychology & Christianity: Four Views*, ed. Eric L. Johnson and Stanton L. Jones (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 232; Mark R. McMinn and Timothy R. Phillips, "Introduction: Psychology, Theology & Care for the Soul," in *Care for the Soul*, ed. Mark R. McMinn and Timothy R. Phillips (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 12–13.

<sup>2</sup> Ichabod Spencer, *A Pastor's Sketches* (Vestavia Hills, AL: Solid Ground, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> For more information, however, see Heath Lambert, *The Biblical Counseling Movement After Adams* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011).

Protestant pastors began to mix their liberal theology with secular psychological principles to create what became known as “clinical pastoral care.” Later, so-called integrationists sought to do the same thing but replaced liberal theology with conservative theology. The evangelical commitments of the integration movement were an improvement. It led to less optimism and naiveté concerning the worldview commitments of secular psychologists, but the outcome was the same. Christians—whether liberal or conservative—continued to believe that the Christian counseling resources found in the Bible were weak while secular resources for counseling found in the modern psychological corpus were strong.<sup>4</sup>

By the middle of the twentieth century, the Christian effort to help people with their problems had basically become a conversation about how much and what kind of secular psychology to add to the inadequacies of Scripture to offer *real* help. This conversation turned into a debate with the groundbreaking ministry of Adams. His central contribution to Christian counseling was a bold and controversial claim that the task of counseling was a theological enterprise that should be primarily informed by a commitment to God’s Word. He further argued that any attempt by the discipline of psychology to address counseling-related issues must be judged according to biblical standards rather than secular ones. In his first book on counseling, Adams stated:

All concepts, terms and methods used in counseling need to be re-examined biblically. Not one thing can be accepted from the past (or the present) without biblical warrant. . . . I have been engrossed in the project of

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<sup>4</sup>For more information tracing the development of mainline Protestantism to the integration movement, see E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983); Donald Capps, *Biblical Approaches to Pastoral Counseling* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981); Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Living of These Days* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 214–15, 280; Seward Hiltner and Lowell Colston, *The Context of Pastoral Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1961); Andrew Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988); Howard Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966); Anton T. Boisen, *The Exploration of the Inner World: A Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954).

developing biblical counseling and have uncovered what I consider to be a number of important scriptural principles. It is amazing to discover how much the Bible has to say about counseling, and how fresh the biblical approach is. The complete trustworthiness of Scripture in dealing with people has been demonstrated. There have been dramatic results. . . . Not only have people's immediate problems been resolved, but there have also been solutions to all sorts of long-term problems as well. . . . The conclusions in the book are not based upon scientific findings. My method is presuppositional. I avowedly accept the inerrant Bible as the standard of all faith and practice. The Scriptures, therefore, are the basis, and contain the criteria by which I have sought to make every judgment.<sup>5</sup>

With these words the biblical counseling movement was launched, and the debate about the sufficiency of Scripture for counseling followed hard in its wake.

Since the 1950s a number of different groups have articulated different counseling theories. There have been many different views of how the Christian faith relates to psychology.<sup>6</sup> Each position possesses critical distinctions that create boundaries between the other views. Basically, three groups have emerged: One group is secular psychology, which believes that the Bible is completely irrelevant to counseling. Another group is biblical counseling, which believes that the Bible is sufficient for counseling. A third group takes their cures from the first and believes that the Bible is relevant to counseling but insufficient for it. In this

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<sup>5</sup> Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), xviii–xxi. In the very next line Adams clearly stated that his commitment to Scripture did not mean that he believed his own interpretation of Scripture to be infallible. He further qualified his strong assertions by saying that he did not reject science but rather welcomed it as “[a] useful adjunct for the purposes of illustrating, filling in generalizations with specifics, and challenging wrong human interpretations of Scripture, thereby forcing the student to restudy the Scriptures. However, in the area of psychiatry, science largely has given way to humanistic philosophy and gross speculation.”

<sup>6</sup> Eric L. Johnson, ed., *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010), 29–38.

chapter I refer to this large, complex third group of evangelicals as Christian counselors.<sup>7</sup> There are other issues in play, but the chief disagreement remains the perennial question of the adequacy of the contents of Scripture to inform counseling comprehensively.<sup>8</sup>

### The Sufficiency of Scripture

Since this debate began, Adams, together with his heirs in the biblical counseling movement, have defended Scripture's sufficiency against Christian counselors who advocate an insufficiency position concerning Scripture's relationship to counseling.<sup>9</sup> The biblical counseling view of sufficiency is not simplistic as critics have charged: How can you believe that all information about

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<sup>7</sup> Within this large group of Christian counselors, I include the integration movement, the Christian psychology movement, and the transformational psychology position.

<sup>8</sup> In the pages that follow I talk over the sufficiency fence with two neighbors in counseling. I interact with Eric Johnson, *Foundation for Soul Care: A Christian Psychology Proposal* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007) and Stan Jones, "An Integration View" in *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views*, ed. Eric Johnson, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010), 101–26. I also make a few references to Stan Jones and Richard Butman of *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991). Johnson identifies himself as a Christian psychologist, whereas Jones and Butman refer to themselves as integrationists. The two groups are alike in that neither affirms the sufficiency of Scripture for counseling. They are also alike in that each advances strong arguments against the sufficiency of Scripture for counseling—many of which have not received an adequate response at this point. I appreciate and have learned much from each man. In fact, Johnson taught some of my doctoral courses, and I consider him a friend. I hope that my words about the positions of all three are both truthful and loving (Eph 4:15).

<sup>9</sup> Though many in Adams's biblical counseling movement have advanced, developed, and refined some elements of his model, every biblical counselor has followed him in a commitment to the sufficiency of Scripture. Some have charged that many in the biblical counseling movement have disagreed about whether the Scriptures are adequate for counseling. But the truth is that the biblical counseling movement has been united in an unshakable commitment to the sufficiency of Scripture in helping people with their counseling-related problems. For just one example, see the statement on Scripture's sufficiency from the Biblical Counseling Coalition (BCC) at <http://biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/about/confessional-statement>. This BCC statement was approved by a diverse group of biblical counselors from almost every institution in the country committed to biblical counseling—including most of the contributors to this volume. That so many could sign such a robust statement stands as a testimony to the unity of the movement on this issue.

people is in the Bible? How can you reduce counseling to quoting Bible verses? Biblical counselors have never articulated such simplistic caricatures created by critics. Instead, they have stated their position in dynamic and nuanced terms. Biblical counselors have advanced their belief that Scripture is an ample source of wisdom for counseling ministry in two principal ways. First, biblical counselors have affirmed sufficiency by redefining secular psychology's diagnosis of the problems people face. Second, biblical counselors have affirmed Scripture's sufficiency by paying careful attention to the content of the Bible. Each of these is engaged in turn.

### Redefining Secular Psychological Diagnoses

Modern psychologies have a secular, anthropocentric starting point. This has pervasive effects beginning with diagnostic categories. From the very beginning, psychologists have sought to help people with their life problems apart from any awareness of God, Christ, sin, the purposes of God in suffering, and Holy Scripture.<sup>10</sup> Secular psychology proceeds on the assumption that people can be understood, and their problems ameliorated, in a thoroughly man-centered way. Of course, there is nothing shocking about this. Christians do not expect unregenerate people to behave and think like regenerate people (1 Cor 2:14–16). What is shocking is that Christians themselves so often look to their theories about people, their understandings of their problems, and their efforts at assistance as the central resource for helping others. Too often Christians fail to consider that God has revealed his own competing understanding of what is wrong with people, along with startlingly different prescriptions for what people need and how to help.

When Adams founded the biblical counseling movement, he was concerned that the church had imported secular diagnostic categories and had ignored the way problems are explained in the pages of Scripture. He argued:

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<sup>10</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Question of Lay Analysis* (New York: Norton and Company, 1950). Cf. Freud, *Psychoanalysis and Faith* (New York: Basic Books, 1964), 104.

Organic malfunctions affecting the brain that are caused by brain damage, tumors, gene inheritance, glandular or chemical disorders, validly may be termed mental illnesses. But at the same time a vast number of other human problems have been classified as mental illnesses for which there is no evidence that they have been engendered by disease or illness at all. As a description of many of these problems, the term mental illness is nothing more than a figure of speech, and in most cases a poor one at that. . . . [The problem with the “mentally ill”] is auto-genic; it is in themselves. The fundamental bent of fallen human nature is away from God. Man is born in sin, goes astray “from his mother’s womb speaking lies” (Psalm 58:3), and will therefore naturally (by nature) attempt various sinful dodges in an attempt to avoid facing up to his sin. He will fall into varying styles of sin according to the short term successes or failures of the particular sinful responses which he makes to life’s problems. Apart from organically generated difficulties, the “mentally ill” are really people with unsolved personal problems.<sup>11</sup>

Adams articulated the fundamental critique of secular psychology: their understanding of people’s problems is oriented away from God. When psychologists diagnose persons with difficulties they see medical problems, developmental difficulties, and dysfunctional behaviors. They do not see the operations of sin. They do not see guilty people who create difficulties for themselves and exacerbate existing problems by their moral failures before God. They do not see innocent people who are menaced by those who transgress against them. They do not see God the Savior of sinners as the refuge for the afflicted. In missing these categories, secularists miss reality (Rom 1:18–23).

Secular psychologists cannot truly understand the problems people have because people’s problems are deeply theological. Secularists suppress the truth in unrighteousness and so miss the

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<sup>11</sup> Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 28–29.



godward dimension at the root of all problems that lead to counseling. None of this means that advocates for sufficiency have nothing to learn from science or from secular efforts at helping people. Biblical counselors can learn much, and they have been saying this from the beginning.<sup>12</sup> In fact, biblical counselors have consistently stated that the *observations* of secular psychology can often fill in gaps for—and provoke biblical counselors to more careful biblical reflection about—all manner of issues. The secular interpretations of those observations (as well as the efforts at ministry) by psychologists are what biblical counselors have objected to since they are contaminated by an atheistic worldview. For biblical counselors, secular psychology—although able to observe many things—is unable to interpret the significance behind their observations.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of this argument. Christian counselors, believing that Scripture is ultimately insufficient for counseling, argue that secular approaches to counseling address more issues and deal more profoundly with them than the biblical authors do.<sup>13</sup> They fail to understand that all problems in living—emotional, mental, relational, behavioral—have a spiritual core. This is a powerful argument for the adequacy of Scripture’s counseling resources. It claims that a biblical understanding of the problems people have, which is rooted in life lived before a sovereign God, has been hijacked by humanistic thinkers and thus secularized. This argument turns the debate on its head: the real concern is not with the sufficiency of Scripture but with the sufficiency of psychology. When problems are understood in the light of Christ’s light, it is psychology—not Scripture—that is truly insufficient to help people.

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<sup>12</sup> Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, xxi; Jay Adams, *What About Nouthetic Counseling?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 31; Wayne A. Mack, “What Is Biblical Counseling?” in *Totally Sufficient*, ed. Ed Hindson and Howard Eyrich (Ross-Shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2004), 51; David Powlison, “Questions at the Crossroads: The Care of Souls & Modern Psychotherapies,” in *Care for the Soul*, ed. Mark R. McMinn and Timothy R. Phillips (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 14–15.

<sup>13</sup> Jones, “An Integration View,” 108–15.

## Paying Careful Attention to the Contents of Scripture

Redefining secular psychological diagnoses into theological categories is not the only way biblical counselors have advanced an understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture. Careful investigation into the contents of Scripture has also marked the mission. Biblical counselors have shown how a correct understanding of the contents of Scripture leads to a conclusion that the Bible is sufficient for counseling ministry. Over the years biblical counselors have used a number of different arguments about the canon of Scripture to advance their belief in the sufficiency of God's Word. These arguments fall reasonably into four categories.

**Biblical texts.** First, biblical counselors have argued for the sufficiency of Scripture for counseling by highlighting specific biblical texts. It is impossible to highlight every passage that directly bears on the nature of Scripture's sufficiency for counseling. It is only necessary to focus on two classic passages. One text that biblical counselors have turned to time and again is 2 Tim 3:14–17, where Paul wrote to Timothy:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed. You know those who taught you, and you know that from childhood you have known the sacred Scriptures, which are able to give you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

This passage has been used by many biblical counselors to support their claim that Scripture is sufficient to provide the wisdom necessary to solve problems requiring counseling. Christian counselors have argued, however, that this text merely shows that Scripture is sufficient to make us wise for salvation, not that it is adequate to address the many different counseling-related problems we might face.<sup>14</sup> David Powlison responded:

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<sup>14</sup>Johnson, *Foundations*, 180–86; Jones and Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies*, 26–27.

Scripture proclaims itself as that which makes us “wise unto salvation.” This is a comprehensive description of transforming human life from all that ails us. This same passage goes on to speak of the Spirit’s words as purposing to *teach* us. The utter simplicity and unsearchable complexity of Scripture enlightens us about God, about ourselves, about good and evil, true and false, grace and judgment, about the world that surrounds us with its many forms of suffering and beguilement, with its opportunities to shed light into darkness. Through such teaching, riveted to particular people in particular situations, God exposes in specific detail what is wrong with human life. No deeper or truer or better analysis of the human condition can be concocted.<sup>15</sup>

Powlison understands salvation here in maximalist terms. Counseling theorists who find the Scriptures insufficient seem to understand “salvation” here in minimalistic terms. In 2 Timothy, salvation is not a limiting term but rather a mammoth expression referring to all of the problems from which Jesus intends to redeem his people. Will there be dissociative identity disorder in heaven? No. How about obsessive-compulsive disorder? No. Postpartum depression? Not a chance. Indeed, none of the difficulties in living mentioned in this book will exist in heaven. Why? Because these problems will finally be eradicated by the precious blood of Jesus and the life-giving Spirit in God’s great work of salvation.<sup>16</sup>

The full salvation that Jesus brings is not instantaneous. It grows slowly over time. This is why the rest of the 2 Timothy passage is vitally important. Salvation happens in a process—the believer is “*train[ed]* in righteousness.” We grow up. The

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<sup>15</sup> David Powlison, “Is the Adonis Complex in *Your Bible?*” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 22, no. 2 (2004): 43.

<sup>16</sup> Neither will there be difficulties that are obviously physical in nature. That is a different matter, however, because the Bible addresses spiritual and physical issues in an asymmetrical way. “Even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day” (2 Cor 4:16). The Bible indicates with the hope that is in Christ, it is possible for our spiritual problems (our difficulties requiring a counseling solution) to recede. The Bible never indicates this to be the case with regard to our physical problems.

Scriptures are critical to help us grow. The Scriptures impart instruction (teaching). The Bible makes us aware of our problems (reproof). The Scriptures are profitable for pointing in the direction of positive change (correction).

If you pay attention to these categories, you can see how they are the elements of any halfway decent counseling theory—religious or secular. All counseling theories possess some apprehension of what is wrong with people (a “diagnosis” or version of reproof); what should be right (a goal of healthy humanness—a version of correction); some process of communicating that understanding; and some theory of what the change process might look like (“teaching” and “training”). All counseling theories take this form even though the contents are radically divergent. Scripture takes this form. To say that the Bible is profitable for these things is tantamount to saying that Scripture is profitable for counseling. A person only misses this connection when he misconstrues problems in living by employing secular categories and demanding that Scripture speak in those same categories.

Another passage often highlighted by biblical counselors is 2 Pet 1:3–4:

His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. By these he has given us very great and precious promises, so that through them you may share in the divine nature, escaping the corruption that is in the world because of evil desires.

Ed Bulkley described this passage as one that clearly affirms the sufficiency of Scripture for counseling:

A necessary presupposition of biblical counseling is that God has indeed provided *every* essential truth the believer needs for a happy, fulfilling life in Christ Jesus. It is the belief that God has not left us lacking in *any* sense. The apostle Peter states it emphatically. . . . Note the word *everything*. God has provided absolutely *everything* man needs for physical and spiritual life. This is a primary

consideration. If Peter is correct, then God has given us all the information we need to function successfully in this life. *Every* essential truth, *every* essential principle, *every* essential technique for solving human problems has been delivered in God's Word.<sup>17</sup>

Biblical counselors believe that Christians possess everything necessary to help people with their nonmedical problems (2 Pet 1:3–4). Peter does not teach that Christians have access to everything there is to know about everything but that we have access to everything *necessary*. We possess everything *essential*. We have *Christ*. God's Word provides Christians with what we need for the counseling ministry.

This granting of all essential things flows from the faithfulness of God in Christ. That is to say that God has provided these essentials *in Christ*. The Bible is sufficient because Christ is sufficient, and God shows us in his Word how to encounter him in all of life's complexities. Biblical counselors trust they have what they need for counseling because they believe the promise of these resources in the faithfulness of God in Christ.

Many committed Christians are not convinced, however. They love God and the Bible, but they do not see the sufficiency of Scripture for counseling as one of the glories of this passage. Those who deny the sufficiency of Scripture for counseling question the biblical counselor's interpretation of this passage in two ways.

Some argue that applying this passage to counseling is illegitimate because it does not specifically mention the Bible. "It has to be pointed out that Scripture is not mentioned here," wrote Eric Johnson.<sup>18</sup> The argument is that Peter does not identify Scripture as the source of all things needful but rather God himself as the source.<sup>19</sup> After all, the text does say, "*His divine power* has given us everything required for life and godliness."

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<sup>17</sup>Ed Bulkley, *Why Christians Can't Trust Psychology* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1993), 268.

<sup>18</sup>Johnson, *Foundations*, 118; cf. 19.

<sup>19</sup>"We must remember that it is God, not the Bible itself, who is declared to be all-sufficient, to provide all that pertains unto life" (Jones and Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies*, 26).

This point is certainly correct—as far as it goes. God gives Christians the power to live lives fully pleasing to him, but how do we have access to such divine power? Peter explained that this power comes through the knowledge of Christ manifested in his precious and great promises. The word “Scripture” is not used here, but no faithful Christian interpretation of Peter’s words could conclude that a person has access to this knowledge of Jesus Christ and his promises *apart from Scripture*. It is gloriously correct: sufficiency rests on Christ and not on the Bible. When critics use this to neutralize sufficiency, however, it proves little. The same text that teaches this principle simultaneously drives Christians to the pages of Scripture to grasp the promised divine resources. They are correct in what they affirm but mistaken in what they deny.

A second criticism against the biblical sufficiency view of 2 Pet 1:3–4 is that the Bible, rather obviously, does not include the reams of information that come on the table during counseling. Stan Jones wrote, “There are many topics to which Scripture does not speak—how neurons work, how the brain synthesizes mathematical or emotional information, the types of memory, or the best way to conceptualize personality traits.”<sup>20</sup>

Once again this objection is accurate—as far as it goes. The Bible certainly does not tell us everything we come to know or might want to know.<sup>21</sup> Such an argument, however, has never been made by biblical counselors. The carefully developed view of the biblical counseling movement is not that the Scriptures provide Christians with all of the information we *desire* but rather with the understanding we *need* to do *counseling ministry*.

I have counseled people who were “down in the dumps” and people who were extremely depressed. I have counseled couples who wanted a marriage “tune-up” and couples on the brink of divorce. I have counseled cutters, worriers, wife abusers, drunks, heroin addicts, and people just wanting to die. Never were any of the categories mentioned by Jones (knowledge of how neurons work, information about how the brain synthesizes information, types of

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<sup>20</sup> Jones, “An Integration View,” 116.

<sup>21</sup> Jones and Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies*, 27.

memory, or conceptualizations about personality traits) pivotal in whether the counseling succeeded or failed. What is pivotal in such situations is access to the power of God through his Word—access that has enabled me to unpack powerful themes of redemption. What helped such strugglers? What turned on the lights? What gave them hope? What guided them? *Psalms, Romans, 1 Corinthians, John's Gospel*. Anyone who has relied on God's Word as the sufficient source of wisdom for counseling could give the same testimony.

Other texts could be mentioned, but this sampling provides ample evidence that a biblical counselor's conviction about the sufficiency of Scripture grows out of an understanding of explicit texts in the Bible.

***The form of Scripture.*** The Bible presents a diverse assortment of communication styles. God reveals himself to us in the pages of his Word in a dynamic package of history, parables, proverbs, poetry, prophecy, song, letters, and apocalyptic literature. Beyond the many different genres, God displays other kinds of diversity in his communication in Scripture. Sometimes the Bible speaks in generalities—"All those who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim 3:12). At other times it speaks specifically—"I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to agree in the Lord" (Phil 4:2). The Bible uses hyperbole—"Hezekiah trusted in the LORD God of Israel; not one of the kings of Judah was like him" (2 Kgs 18:5). The Bible uses scientific accuracy—"The cloud covered it for six days. On the seventh day He called to Moses from the cloud" (Exod 24:16). Sometimes the Bible describes God anthropomorphically—"The LORD's hand is not too short to save, and His ear is not too deaf to hear" (Isa 59:1). At other times God is described with more theological precision—"God is spirit" (John 4:24). The Bible employs different genres and literary methods to communicate all that God wants his people to know.

Such an understanding of Scripture is important because the counseling approach of Christian counselors commonly argues for Scripture's *insufficiency* by pointing out that the Bible's instruction is unscientific. Eric Johnson wrote:

The extreme sufficiency position would seem to entail that the Bible is adequate as a scientific text, that it is scientifically sufficient, having the same level of precision, specificity and comprehensiveness regarding psychological and soul-care topics that one finds in good contemporary psychological textbooks and journal articles, and that is obviously not the case.<sup>22</sup>

Biblical counselors have not argued that the Bible is adequate as a scientific text. They have argued that the Bible is adequate *as it is*. The demand that the Bible be scientific in order to be sufficient originates with the various *insufficiency* positions. Such views betray a fundamental dissatisfaction with the form of Scripture, and those who express this dissatisfaction reveal their partiality to scientific modes of discourse. Of course, there is nothing wrong with a scientific style of communication, but when a preference for that kind of communication leads to disappointment with the text that the Lord has actually given, it becomes a problem.<sup>23</sup>

Biblical counselors, on the other hand, have rejoiced in the many and varied forms found in the Bible, believing that such a

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<sup>22</sup> Johnson, *Foundations*, 122. In this quotation Johnson did not intend to make a reference to the biblical counseling movement in general but to a subgroup within the movement he refers to as Traditional Biblical Counseling (TBC). Johnson argued that TBC has a more strict understanding of sufficiency than others in the biblical counseling movement. I have shown elsewhere, however (see Lambert, *The Biblical Counseling Movement After Adams*), that no such distinction can be made within the movement. The beliefs that Johnson criticized as unique to so-called TBC are actually the same sufficiency beliefs of the biblical counseling movement as a whole. For more discussion on the Bible as a scientific text, see Johnson, *Foundations*, 182–89. In these pages Johnson explained the differences between the biblical text and scientific texts. He explained how it is inappropriate for biblical counselors to demand that the Bible function as a scientific text. The problem with his argument is that biblical counselors do not make such a demand. Their conviction is that the Scriptures are sufficient for counseling without being scientific in nature. Johnson's argument misunderstands the convictions of the biblical counseling movement and is therefore irrelevant to their arguments.

<sup>23</sup> None of this is meant to indicate that counseling approaches such as integration and Christian psychology place no value on the Bible. Most of these people have great love and regard for the Scriptures. What is being addressed here is their level of respect for the form of Scripture with regard to counseling over and against a more scientific mode of literature.



colorful format was given purposefully by God as a vibrant and instructive revelation for his people. Ed Welch commented on this element of biblical sufficiency:

Given the degree to which God has revealed himself and ourselves, we can assume that the Bible's counsel speaks with great breadth, addressing the gamut of problems in living. It is certainly able to speak to the common problems we all encounter, such as relationship conflicts, financial pressures, our responses to physical health or illness, parenting questions, and loneliness. But it also speaks to distinctly modern problems such as depression, anxiety, mania, schizophrenia and attention deficit disorder, just to name a few. Of course, the Bible doesn't speak to each of these problems as would an encyclopedia. It doesn't offer techniques for change that look like they came out of a cookbook. But through prayerful meditation on Scripture and a willingness to receive theological guidance from each other, we find that the biblical teaching on creation, the fall, and redemption provide specific, useful insight into all the issues of life.<sup>24</sup>

Welch's strong statement about sufficiency comes in the context of appreciating the style of revelation given in Scripture. Disappointment with the form in which God has communicated his truth grows out of a prior fascination with a scientific manner of discourse employed by psychology to communicate its diverse understandings of people and its various approaches to help. Those fascinated by that mode of communication are typically frustrated when they come to Scripture and find it less formal, scientific, and encyclopedic.

In the face of such frustration and disappointment, it is important to remember that while scientific discourse is one good way to communicate many things, it is not the only way—or even the best way. One of the reasons this is true is because God has

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<sup>24</sup> Ed Welch, "What *Is* Biblical Counseling, Anyway," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 16, no. 1 (1997): 3.

chosen to communicate with humans in all of the ways mentioned above—from narrative to apocalyptic. God’s choice to communicate through a spectrum of genres makes the issue here larger than sufficiency. His chosen form of infallible communication (the Bible) makes this an issue of biblical authority as well. A belief in the authority of God’s Word mandates our submission to that authority in whatever form it takes. In a corollary way, such authority also forbids discouragement that Scripture has not been given in some other mode that we might prefer, whether scientific or encyclopedic or otherwise.

In fact, God knew exactly what he was doing in communicating his truth through his chosen styles. The dynamic forms of Scripture make the Bible much more interesting to read. Why is it that far more people sit in their living rooms and read the Bible than will ever read *The Journal of Psychology*? God’s style of communication in Scripture speaks to people in ways that are deeply powerful, emotional, wise, and compelling. His words are accessible to a broad spectrum of people. No matter how insightful a scientific text may be, it will never have the power to affect the soul in the way God’s more colloquial manner of speech does. In addition to these powerful characteristics, the form and style of the Bible in no way undermine its power to communicate authoritatively. Texts do not need to be scientific to be authoritative, profound, precise, and relevant for counseling. Such a sense of authority, profundity, precision, and relevance is only lost to those who come to the text with an *a priori* belief that unscientific forms of discourse are inherently less valuable. We must embrace it as an article of faith, trusting in our God of steadfast love, that his way of communicating with us is superior to other modes we might prefer.

***God’s language for problems.*** A third major element biblical counselors have emphasized in the debate over the sufficiency of Scripture has to do with terminology. Biblical counselors want to appreciate the language God uses to describe people’s problems. The previous section considers the canonical form of Scripture. This section zeros in on the language God uses to describe people’s individual problems.

In the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*,<sup>25</sup> secular professionals applied secular labels to life problems. These labels sound official and scientific: agoraphobia, borderline personality disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, and the like. Though they have a technical ring, these labels describe behaviors repeatedly observed by many others. The Bible describes the same kinds of problems, but it uses different language: fear, pride, cravings, disobedient to parents, and things like these. The Bible's concrete language is closer to the actual observations. Differences in nomenclature do not amount to denials of observations.<sup>26</sup>

What happens when Christian counselors begin with the nomenclature used by secular psychologists?<sup>27</sup> They feel frustrated when they come to Scripture. The Bible does not address problems they learned in their interaction with the secular psychologies. They are unable to see the Bible's relevance. Biblical counselors, on the other hand, start with the Bible and desire to use the sort of language God uses—concrete, vivid, oriented to issues of good and evil, true and false, right versus wrong.

The divergence of language reveals different starting points. For example, the term *bulimia* does not appear in Scripture, but this does not preclude God from talking about a problem like this in different language. The Bible regularly uses the categories of sinful desire, works of the flesh, and lusts of the flesh. The “bulimic” vacillates between sinful cravings for thinness and sinful cravings for the comforts of food. The bulimic's gluttony and self-induced vomiting describe the oscillation. When understood in this light, the Bible's language is far more profound than the secular label. The Bible makes sense of both poles of bulimic behavior (bingeing and purging) and connects the extremes of behavior to life lived before the face of God.

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<sup>25</sup> *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

<sup>26</sup> E.g., David Powlison, “Is the Adonis Complex in *Your Bible*?” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 22, no. 2 (2004): 42–58; Marshall and Mary Asher, *The Christian's Guide to Psychological Problems* (Bemidji, MN: Focus, 2004).

<sup>27</sup> Jones, “An Integration View,” 110.

Those not embracing the sufficiency of Scripture for conversational ministry are perplexed by biblical counselors who steer away from language considered profound by secular psychology and are frustrated by the use of other language for problems that they consider to be relatively beside the point. For biblical counselors who start with the language of Scripture, however, secular classifications are not profound but present an understanding that runs contrary to God's revelation that emphasizes the spiritual nature of people's problems.

***Comprehensive, not exhaustive.*** Fourth and finally, biblical counselors have argued for the sufficiency of Scripture for counseling by arguing that Scripture includes comprehensive resources for counseling rather than exhaustive ones. Those who disagree frequently object that the content of Scripture is limited. Stan Jones and Richard Butman, whose work is often credited as a strong argument against the sufficiency of Scripture, explained this point:

While the Bible provides the most important and ultimate answers as well as the starting points for knowledge of the human condition, it is not an all-sufficient guide for the discipline of counseling. The Bible is inspired and precious, but it is also a revelation of limited scope, the main concern of which is religious in its presentation of God's redemptive plan for his people and the great doctrines of the faith. The Bible doesn't claim to reveal everything which human beings might want to know.<sup>28</sup>

Their point is happily conceded. Indeed, the Bible's revelation is limited in scope. The Bible does not reveal everything human beings desire to know, nor does it claim to do so. In fact, biblical counselors have never argued that the Bible is exhaustive in its contents. They agree that the Scriptures are limited. The real question that must be answered is what those limitations are.

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<sup>28</sup> Jones and Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies*, 27. For a similar argument, see Johnson, *Foundations*, 119, 184.

Biblical counselors *have* argued that Scripture is comprehensive. Scripture does not contain every last bit of information that can be known. Scripture contains all things that bring the counseling task into focus like a pair of glasses.<sup>29</sup> Scripture is relevant to the counseling task like a compass that reorients every problem. The grace of Christ is a master key that allows access to even the most difficult issues of life. Jones and Butman miss this reorienting and refocusing effect of God's Word when they reduce the Bible's comprehensive contents down to "God's redemptive plan and the great doctrines of the faith." These 10 words are employed to reduce the contents of the Christian faith and show the irrelevance of Scripture to the counseling problems people face. They are meant to make Scripture seem so high-flying that it never touches down in the lives of people. Such a distillation mocks the contents of the Bible and rips the vitality out of biblical categories.

Biblical counselors also refer to those 10 words as a summary of the contents of Scripture. They take the summary, however, and run in the opposite direction. For biblical counselors those 10 words summarize the teachings of Scripture in all their beauty, profundity, glory, richness, depth, detail, truth, and power. Those 10 words summarize 10 million glorious details in Scripture. They refer to God's understanding of what is wrong with us, what he thinks should be right with us, and how he intends to redeem us and repair us through the precious blood of Jesus.

When these 10 words are used to describe the limitations of Scripture and the inadequacy of God's resources for conversational ministry, biblical counselors cry "Foul!" In these 10 words biblical counselors see dozens of years of ministry, hundreds of books and articles, thousands of counselees, and tens of thousands of hours of careful counseling conversation. In these 10 words millions of people have found relief from the pain of childhood abuse,

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<sup>29</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Library of Christian Classics, vols. 20–21, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), I.6.I. Calvin's analogy has been applied to counseling by David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition Through the Lens of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 9–16.

strength to overcome sin, light in the midst of the darkest despair, and hope to endure unrelenting pressures. These 10 words are the comprehensive keys which unlock the problems that bind humanity. They are not a summary statement describing the limitations of Scripture. They encapsulate God's antidote that can defeat the precise details of sin and despair in all their twisted forms.

Earlier David Powlison was quoted as saying that salvation is a "comprehensive description of transforming human life from all that ails us." This is what he said about the power of Scripture to address all of our life problems in a comprehensive way:

Our Father teaches us the common themes threading through all of life. Wisdom. A feel for how life breaks, a skilled engagement. *Kyrie eleison*, Lord, have mercy. Teach us this skill of skills. It's to die for, and to live for. In the economy of our God's instruction, things that He said and did with desert shepherds in the ancient Middle East proved directly instructive and encouraging to urban Greco-Romans one or two thousand years later (Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:11) and prove the same for us today, yet another couple thousand years along. Wildly different circumstances are not fatal to significance and relevance. There is no temptation that is not common to all (1 Cor 10:13), yet no situations or persons are identical. The merciful Father comforted Paul in *his* troubles, making him able to comfort those facing *any* trouble (2 Cor 1:4), including you in *your* troubles, so that you also can help those in any trouble. This dynamic of the living and omni-adaptable Word creates one of the many deep joys of Christian faith. It also makes you game to tackle any problem however unfamiliar, dark, and contorted.<sup>30</sup>

Powlison went on to explain how the Bible gives master categories and explanations which are sufficient to help us understand and help people with any problem that can be faced and counseled in this life.

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<sup>30</sup> Powlison, "Is the Adonis Complex in *Your Bible*?" 43. Cf. Powlison, "Critiquing Modern Integrationists," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 11, no. 3 (1993): 24–34, 26–27, 30.

These master categories—these large-scale interpretive themes—ensure Scripture’s sufficiency for counseling. No single theory—or any collection of them—can ever reach the impossible standard of being exhaustive. No counseling theorist—not Freud, Adler, Jung, Maslow, or anyone else—has ever created an exhaustive counseling theory. They created theories that were system constituting. Their theories were general in nature and limited in scope. Details got filled in as their theories were worked out over time. Scripture has enduring and all-encompassing relevance—it is sufficient—precisely because it is not exhaustive but rather comprehensive.

Every counseling system is, essentially, a worldview which presents its own understanding about how life works best and how best to help someone make changes in his life consistent with that worldview. Biblical counselors believe—at the level of worldview—that Scripture holds its own against any of the other dozens (hundreds? thousands?) of worldviews out there. They further believe that since the biblical worldview comes from God, it is superior to all others. The worldview that comes from God is superior because it is true. The book you are reading is an exercise in proving that the large, dynamic, adaptable, comprehensive, God-breathed worldview presented in the pages of Scripture is precisely what makes the Bible sufficient to engage the particulars of numerous and complex problems.

### Our Purpose

These arguments about the categories of secular psychology’s diagnosis of problems and the contents of Scripture summarize the views that biblical counselors have held and developed for almost a half century about the sufficient wisdom contained in the Scripture for hardships that require counseling. These arguments form the context for the stories in this book. These arguments have persuaded our contributing authors (and many others) that Scripture is comprehensively sufficient to do ministry with people experiencing profound difficulties in their lives.

The reason for this book, however, is to avoid making that argument in the abstract. Anyone who teaches biblical counseling

knows what it's like to be discussing the sufficiency of Scripture and to see a hand go up: "But what about the hard cases? What about schizophrenia, sexual abuse, eating disorders, bipolar? When you say that the Bible is sufficient, do you really mean that it's sufficient for *those problems*?" These questions arise because the problems are real and the arguments can seem abstract. It is one thing to hear that God's categories in the Bible rightly identify and engage all the different problems people face. It is another thing to show how that looks when encountering a complex, secularly defined problem like dissociative identity disorder.

That gap is precisely where this book is meant to fit. This is not a book of arguments. It is a book of stories. It is a book about counselors and their relationships with people who have struggled in profound ways. It is a book about how those counselors used God's words in Scripture as the sufficient source of wisdom to help people. Each one of the counselees in this book had a severe problem with a secular diagnosis, a problem that God was pleased to change by the power of his Son Jesus and through the personal ministry of the Word of God. Taken together, these stories constitute a powerful argument that the Scriptures are indeed sufficient for the kind of effective counseling those outside the biblical counseling movement claim we cannot do. These stories are offered with a prayer that they will encourage you with the understanding that the perpetually relevant truths in God's Word are sufficient to make the man of God complete and equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:17).