

Letter from the Editor



by MICHAEL GEMBOLA

Dear *JBC* readers,

Several years ago, my wife asked me what I was listening to with my headphones while I was mowing the grass. I told her it was Harvie Conn, and that he was messing everything up, but in the best way possible. Listening to his creative theological work, his calls to mission, and his thorough exposition of the Bible's teaching on the poor is life-changing.¹ Harvie and his wife, Dorothy, were missionaries in postwar Korea, and their ministry included outreach to women caught in prostitution. Harvie was severely beaten because of this ministry and walked with a limp for the rest of his life. He later returned to the States and taught missions at Westminster Theological Seminary until his death in 1999. In addition to his graduate studies, first on John Calvin and later in anthropology, he spent his academic career in close reading of the Bible and a wide range of secondary sources. He modeled broad and careful study from a missionary heart.²

1. See, for example, "The Old Testament and the Poor," lectures 1–21 (1981), and "The New Testament and the Poor," lectures 1–22 (1982), available at <https://students.wts.edu/resources/media>.

2. His works include *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992) and *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Dialogue* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992) and several books on urban ministry.

Of the many things I've learned from him, what stands out is his effort to sustain important principles in tension:

- Ministry requires attention to both spiritual and material needs.
- The Bible has political dimensions that should neither be lost to overspiritualizing nor collapsed into any modern state's political liberation narrative.
- Moral responsibility lies on both the individual and the collective group (sin is both personal and systematic).
- Humility commends both living within a particular tradition and studying outside that tradition.

Living with the tension between these principles is not easy. It is more comfortable to systematize and erase them, or at least seek coherence. You can't be of much help to people, and you can't really live sanely, without some clarity of conviction or opinion about how things work. Structures, systems, frameworks, and rules of thumb are necessary. But wisdom also requires maintaining tensions, working with competing principles (e.g., sacrifice and stewardship, work and rest), and making difficult decisions in applying them.

This is precisely why I've found his work relevant to counseling. Counseling similarly requires holding multiple principles in tension. Here are a few examples:

- People need to be personally engaged in the change process (some self-directed efforts are necessary) *and* the counselor takes meaningful action to help (outside efforts are necessary).
- The counseling process should not be rushed (we have patience for the person in process) *and* counseling should keep moving (the person suffers longer when the help stalls).
- God works through us to help people in surprising ways (all depends on the Spirit, and he even uses Balaam's donkey) *and* God uses expertise and experience to increase our effectiveness (we become increasingly equipped for every good work).

Sometimes counselors resolve these tensions unhelpfully. Some, both in Christian circles and in the wider field, understand counseling as a rigid, manualized process. On the opposite extreme, some counselors are so nondirective that people receiving counseling might wonder whether they are hearing anything other than their own thoughts summarized,

tidied up, and offered back to them. Both excesses stem from good goals: (1) it's wise to use methods that have demonstrably and efficiently worked for others with the same problem, and (2) it's powerful to sit with someone in a troubling situation and mainly offer reflective listening and a ministry of presence.

But wisdom commends setting goals while also remaining flexible, and humility demands staying agnostic about whether you have truly understood the person accurately and are guiding them well. Some counselors gravitate away from maintaining these kinds of tensions in other ways. Some overvalue professional expertise in such a way that they miss it when what a person might need most is a friend or community to belong to. Others downplay the value of expert help to such an extent that struggling people are not directed to the resource they might need most. These efforts at wisdom and humility recognize the imperfection of our help and encourage a high degree of dependence on God in everything.

Harvie Conn, as far as I can tell from his writing and lectures, made minimal connections between his work and the task of pastoral care and counseling. Yet he set a strong example with his care for real people on the street, his sharp mind for theology, and his wide reading, all while living within a particular tradition. These qualities are all on my mind as we launch a new column in this issue called "Book Notes."

For years, publishers have sent unsolicited books to the *JBC* office, and since I love books, I've always been eager to look through them to get an idea of what is new across the Christian counseling spectrum. Though counselors are always reading books, over the past several years there have been fewer reviews written in the *JBC*. In addition, we have not reviewed books by our own colleagues at CCEF, because we couldn't offer an unbiased evaluation. The new "Book Notes" column will aim to remedy these problems. We will discuss more books and include our own so you know what's new.

We will offer comments on a breadth of books relevant to the tasks of pastoral care and counseling. We will feature books sent in from across the counseling spectrum, but they will usually be Christian resources. I'll engage some in greater depth than others based on the length of the resource or its particular relevance. My goal will not be to write from a

theoretical midpoint or as an unbiased neutral party, nor to punch right or punch left, but to share the book's viewpoint, intended audience, and contribution for counselors and ministry leaders. At times I will also give commentary, critique, or recommendations.

Returning to Conn's categories, the relevant tension here is the work of serving within a particular Christian tradition while also commending broader reading. The assumption in the task is that something of value is to be gained in this process and that we can learn something rather than nothing from Christian brothers and sisters who are co-laborers in the field.

The intended value for you as the reader is that you can quickly be oriented to books that are available, especially as you weigh which specific purchases to make. We know that the field is flooded with resources on the one hand, and on the other, it is also sometimes difficult to find the most relevant book for the issue you're looking to study.

Harvie Conn can also help us with the purpose. His inaugural address at Westminster Seminary was titled "The Missionary Task of Theology."³ He never wanted to see the study of Christian ideas reduced to abstractions parsed out in the classroom or pinned down like butterflies in a display case. His work often shook things up, interrupted complacent Christian thinking, and led many into creative ministry endeavors. When he died, a statue of him was proposed but never completed. The design was for him to be looking from the hill of the Glenside campus toward the city of Philadelphia, symbolizing how he lived and ministered.

Likewise, the goal of our study is not to look around aimlessly according to personal curiosities or ivory-tower reflections. Our goal is to be guided toward real people in need. The love of God, and the study of all we can know about him and his creation, is a missionary task, because we are always called to bring that love to others. I hope you find this new column to be helpful to you in this task.

On behalf of the *JBC* editorial team,

Michael Gembola

3. Harvie M. Conn, "The Missionary Task of Theology: A Love/Hate Relationship?," *Westminster Theological Journal* 45:1 (Spring 1983): 1–21.

Just as Harvie Conn sought to connect theology to real life, we hope that the articles in this issue help you do the same.

In her featured article, “Finding Hope: Helping a Sexual Abuse Survivor Reframe Her Story,” Cecelia Bernhardt offers guidance to counselors working with adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. She helps survivors reframe their abuse so they can see it as a chapter in their life story rather than as the overriding theme. This frees survivors to pursue healing and growth *now* as their life story continues to unfold. Bernhardt’s extensive experience with survivors and her passion for helping them make this article a must-read.

Next, Pastor Tony Lin offers an invaluable perspective on how Confucian cultural values influence Asian Christians to live in ways that run counter to some biblical principles. Specifically, he addresses the high value placed on avoiding shame and how this can conflict with the biblical command to confess our sins to each other. More than that, Lin shows us the need to think biblically about cultural norms in a way that is sure to challenge believers from other cultures as well.

Is boasting ever good? In our efforts to avoid pride, we often overlook this biblical category. In his thoughtful article, Ed Welch identifies boasting as the surprising endpoint of a path that overcomes shame. He examines how the honor that comes from our connection to Christ leads us to a growing confidence in God’s love and then to boasting about God and other believers. This article will surely help you to see boasting in a new light.

Esther Liu opens a window into how she counsels people experiencing intractable depression. In “Blessed are those who are weary of the struggle,” Liu shows us how poverty of spirit unexpectedly breathes hope into the hearts of discouraged counselees.

Last, “Book Notes” has its debut in this issue. As described above, it will offer descriptive overviews of several books of interest to those engaged in pastoral care and counseling.

Enjoy!

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