

Rehabilitating Habituation



by BRIAN A. MESIMER

Though the biblical counseling movement was built on the foundation laid by Jay Adams, it is no secret that it has since diverged from his teachings in important respects. In one sense, this is to be expected in the natural development of a movement. We cannot hope to find the full repository of truth about a particular subject from just one person.

In another sense, however, this departure has been more radical than is often realized. Adams, especially in his early works, advocated for habituation¹ because he believed that the continual, intentional, and repeated practice of certain behaviors can either create sinful patterns or replace them with righteous ones.² For example, Adams claimed people might be able to work their way out of a depressed state by intentionally practicing good habits and righteous actions.³ On the surface, though,

1. Adams's view of habituation is well documented in Heath Lambert, *The Biblical Counseling Movement After Adams* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012) and David Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2010). Also see Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1970), 162, and *More than Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1979), 161, as well as *The Christian Counselor's Manual* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973).

2. Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 163; c.f., *More Than Redemption*, 161.

3. Jay E. Adams, *What Do You Do When You Become Depressed?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1975).

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an emphasis on habituation seems to run counter to the biblical emphasis on faith and grace. If you can cure yourself by changing your habits, where is grace? Can a habit-focused approach be considered grace-filled biblical counseling?

This was indeed a hard sell. While Adams's theory went essentially unchallenged within the first generation of biblical counselors, subsequent generations were not convinced. In a disputation contained largely within the pages of this journal, prominent minds challenged Adams's thinking. Ed Welch offered a critique of Adams's anthropology of habituation in his article, "How Theology Shapes Ministry: Jay Adams's View of the Flesh and an Alternative."⁴ A year later, George Schwab, a professor of Old Testament at Erskine Seminary, presented a negative evaluation of Adams's exegesis and theology of habituation in his article "Critique of 'Habituation' as a Biblical Model of Change."⁵ Although gracious,

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neither article was optimistic concerning Adams's particular understanding of habituation. In fact, the articles were like a one-two punch, essentially putting Adams's theory out of commission for the wider biblical counseling audience. Although Schwab's critique was

decisive, he also held out hope that someone would take up the call to rehabilitate Adams's theory of habituation. No one did.

Adams responded to Welch's article, but then discussions of habituation mostly disappeared from biblical counseling literature.⁶ Think of

4. Edward T. Welch, "How Theology Shapes Ministry: Jay Adams's View of the Flesh and an Alternative," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 20:3 (2002): 16-25.

5. George M. Schwab, "Critique of 'Habituation' as a Biblical Model of Change," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 21:2 (2003): 67-83.

6. This response can be found in Jay E. Adams, "What Alternative?," in Heath Lambert, *The Biblical Counseling Movement After Adams* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 165-170. A quick search of this journal's publications reveals that only two articles have been published interacting with the term "habituation" between 2003 and 2017: Michael R. Emler's "Practice Makes Perfect? Exploring the Relationship between Knowledge, Desire, and Habit," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 27:1 (2013): 26-48; and Michael Gembola's "A Life-Giving Look at the Seven Deadly Sins: An Essay Review of Dangerous Passions, Deadly Sins," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 31:3 (2017): 77-91.

some of the most recent biblical counseling books, articles, and seminars you have encountered. Did they mention habituation? Did they speak about how to use good habits as a way to help your counselee become more holy? Chances are, they did not.⁷

This fact alone is worthy of consideration. A major concern of the founder of biblical counseling's theology has been either neglected, rejected, or forgotten. Perhaps this is because Adams advanced a deficient theology in this area. Though renewed attention to habituation in theological circles is inspiring a reexamination of this debate from a different perspective, over sixteen years have passed since the closure of the habituation debate within biblical counseling.⁸ I propose that we take it up again. Welch and Schwab were certainly correct to point out concerns with Adams's theological superstructure and exegesis, and yet I suspect Adams was grasping at something that we should not ignore. His position contains significant biblical truth, even if certain problematic emphases cannot be amended.⁹

So why reopen this debate? My concern is that the failure to reconcile these two viewpoints inhibits the growth of the movement as a whole. If consensus can be reached on the proper place of habituation in biblical counseling, then perhaps an important dilemma can be resolved and our counseling will be better for it. But there is a much simpler and more urgent reason to reopen the debate. If the Bible emphasizes habitual actions toward holiness, then it is imperative that counselors fully grasp this emphasis for the benefit of those under our care. This is a call for bringing the fullness of God's Word to bear in the life of the saints.

In what follows, I will review and reassess biblical counseling's habituation debate. Beginning with a brief overview of its history and context, I will explore the biblical evidence for habituation, including relevant

7. The topic, however, has not been completely abandoned. See Stuart Scott and Zondra Scott, *Killing Sin Habits: Conquering Sin with Radical Faith* (Bemidji, MN: Focus, 2013).

8. Examples for this renewed attention in Christian virtue ethics include James K. A. Smith's *Cultural Liturgies* series, as well as biblical counselor Greg Gifford's work in the area (e.g., "The Puritans on Habits and Spiritual Maturity," December 1, 2016, <https://greggifford.com/2016/12/01/the-puritans-on-habits-and-spiritual-maturity/>).

9. For example, see Schwab, "Critique," 82-83.

passages that were left out of the earlier debates. I will also explore some historical theology on the subject of habituation found in the work of Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and John Owen. Ultimately, I will propose a balanced understanding of habituation, one which pays careful attention to biblical nuance, situates itself in community, and adequately addresses issues of the heart.

A History of Habits in Biblical Counseling

Habituation was an emphasis of Adams's counseling from the beginning. We see the first evidence of it in *Competent to Counsel*, where it figures prominently in his chapter on how to solve problems nouthetically.¹⁰ Drawing on examples from the life of Jesus as well as exhortations that “solid food is for the mature who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil” (Heb 5:14), Adams asserts that “holy living involves habit,” for “patterns of holiness can be established only by regular, consistent practice.”¹¹ Adams finds further support for his thesis in the Greek word *hexis*, which is used for *habit* in Hebrews 5:14. On this reading, Hebrews 5:14 becomes, “solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by *habit* to discern good and evil” (the ESV translates habit as “constant practice”). Holiness is not something that happens immediately, but often comes about through both process and practice. Adams sees habituation in itself as neither good nor evil, but rather as an ingrained and “neutral” ability that can be shaped toward good or evil. But it carries great potential for good in counseling.

10. According to Adams, nouthetic counseling (actually termed “nouthetic confrontation”) is a Christ-centered and church-encompassing ministry. The term is taken from Pauline usage of the term *nouthesis* in Colossians 3:16 and Romans 15:14, where believers are commanded to confront one another in truth and love. Scripture was to be the primary source for counseling, and the process was to be guided by three factors: the acknowledgement of a problem with the counselee, the use of words and instructions, and the goal of the counselee's change. Adams's emphasis on confrontation and the counselor's authority stood in stark contrast to the Rogerian methods popular at the time, and remain a contrast to more modern psychotherapies. Already at this early stage, Adams appears to grapple with the tension between directive confrontation and love. His resolution is to argue that confrontation actually evokes love of God in the counselee. See Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 41-56.

11. Adams, *More Than Redemption*, 162-3. Adams here quotes the New American Standard Bible's translation of Hebrews.

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