

# GENERATIONAL TRAUMA, EPIGENETICS, AND BIBLICAL HOPE

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## INTRODUCTION

The debate over “nature vs. nurture” has long influenced research trends in the disciplines of both biological and social sciences. At the center of this debate lie questions of responsibility, culpability, prognosis, and intervention. If human behavior is simply the byproduct of inheritance, genetic factors, and other unchosen, yet determinative factors, how should counselors treat various maladies, especially those which arise from one’s fundamental constitution? And where should blame for poor behavior be assigned? Alternatively, if behavior results from environmental factors, parenting, and traumatic experiences, how should we understand the effects and functions of hereditary traits?

Redemptive counselors (also known as Clinically-Informed Biblical Counselors) have sought to bridge this dichotomy, expressing sympathies with the historic biblical counseling movement’s<sup>2</sup> focus on Christ-empowered heart change while attempting to integrate the Scriptures with scientific research on epigenetics, familial trauma, neuroscience, and developmental psychology.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ernie Baker defines “historic” biblical counseling as those who follow closely in the footsteps of Jay Adams and David Powlison in maintaining a Van Tillian presuppositional approach to analyzing and employing counseling methodologies. Ernie Baker, “Presuppositionalism, Common Grace, and Trauma Theory,” *The Journal of Biblical Soul Care* 8, no. 1 (2024): 64–89.

<sup>3</sup> Nate Brooks et al., “What Is Redemptive Counseling/Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?,” Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2024, <https://www.sebts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/WhatIsRCCIBC-1.pdf>; Sam Williams et al., “SEBTS Counseling Professors Roundtable: As It Is and as It Could Be,” *Southeastern Theological Review* 15, no. 1 (2024): 73–86; Steve Midgley, *Understanding Trauma: A Biblical Introduction for Church Care* (Surrey, UK: The Good Book Company, 2025), 103–13; Curtis Solomon, *I Have PTSD: Reorienting after Trauma*

Claiming that common grace provides theological justification for incorporating secular approaches into biblical counseling, redemptive counselors “disagree [with historic biblical counselors] that all methods emerging from secular psychotherapy are by necessity tainted by their worldview.”<sup>4</sup>

One redemptive counselor, Kristin Kellen, associate professor of biblical counseling at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, asserts, “If we already do integration by default, then there’s an imperative to do it well, not haphazardly. In our care and love for our neighbor, it is an ethical imperative to care for them with excellence.”<sup>5</sup> To illustrate her claim, Kellen authored an article titled “Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1)” in the Spring 2024 issue of the *Southeastern Theological Review*, aiming to show that “through Christ, and only through Christ, generational sin and struggles can be resolved.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, throughout the article, Kellen bases her understanding of “generational trauma” not on scriptural anthropology, but on biological and social sciences. Furthermore, she commits numerous hermeneutical errors which undermine the authority of the Scriptures, allowing room for her reliance on secular psychological findings. Her approach to integration functionally sidelines scriptural methodology for secular approaches to counseling, even while claiming to place Christ at the center.

While Kellen correctly identifies Christ as the ultimate solution to generational dysfunction and intergenerational trauma, her approach raises significant theological and scientific concerns. Her conflation of scientific correlation with biblical causation, combined with her misinterpretation of key biblical texts regarding individual responsibility and generational consequences, reflects an underlying assent to biological and social behaviorism. This commitment fundamentally undermines biblical anthropology and the sufficiency of Scripture by diminishing human moral agency and failing to address the heart as both the locus of generational dysfunction and the subject of Christlike transformation

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(Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2023), 24–29.

<sup>4</sup>Brooks et al., “What Is RC/CIBC?,” 6.

<sup>5</sup>Williams et al., “SEBTS Counseling Professors Roundtable,” 81. For a brief critique of this argument, see Austin Collins, “Psychological Charlatans and Common Grace,” in *A Call to Clarity: Critical Issues in Contemporary Biblical Counseling*, ed. Heath Lambert (Jacksonville, FL: First Baptist Church Jacksonville, 2024), 63–64.

<sup>6</sup>Kristin L. Kellen, “Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1),” *Southeastern Theological Review* 15, no. 1 (2024): 47.

through biblical methods.

## A BRIEF SUMMARY OF KELLEN'S ARTICLE & ARGUMENT

Kellen's article draws from the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 the thesis, "Proper counseling, then, particularly for generational dysfunction must point towards Christ for redemption."<sup>7</sup> She defines "generational dysfunction" as "the influence of past generations [that faced] difficulties that had a lasting impact on their children, grandchildren, and others to come."<sup>8</sup> She then walks through three distinct sections before drawing conclusions about Christ and the counselor's role in providing help and hope to those dealing with generational dysfunction. The first section consists of a brief exposition of the incipit of Matthew 1:1. In the second section, Kellen describes modern generational dysfunction as "modern-day parallels [to the scriptural examples]. Conflict and sexual sin abound, poor communication is almost universal, and parental failure is commonplace."<sup>9</sup> She examines research on substance use disorders, trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACE), and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Notably in this section, Kellen cites scientific studies related to epigenetic transmission and genetic inheritance as they relate to behavioral outcomes in children of traumatized parents.<sup>10</sup> Finally, Kellen offers her insights from case experience in working with traumatized and dysfunctional families.<sup>11</sup> She concludes by stating, "Jesus is the only answer for generational dysfunction. He is the only healer, he is the only deliverer, and he is the only hope. Outside of Christ, there is no hope of change."<sup>12</sup> While biblical counselors would heartily agree with Kellen's conclusion, her hermeneutic and underlying presuppositions do not logically lead to this conclusion. Instead, her argumentation of generational dysfunction and how the Bible brings about hope for the hurting contains significant theological and methodological errors.

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<sup>7</sup> Kellen, "Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1)," 47.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>11</sup> Kellen, "Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1)," 54–55.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 55.

## A BIBLICAL & THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

Kellen's first error comes from interpretative and hermeneutical fallacies she commits in dealing with the text of Matthew 1:1-17. First and of most concern, Kellen explicitly performs eisegesis, imposing her own agenda onto the text without providing exegetical warrant: "Though this article has already drawn out the connection between Abraham and David and the covenants that Jesus came to fulfill, this is not the primary focus. Instead, the focus is on generational dysfunction."<sup>13</sup> Kellen disregards authorial intent by using the biblical text to further her own ideas about generational dysfunction. One can agree with Kellen that generational dysfunction is rampant throughout the Abrahamic lineage, but proper biblical exegesis seeks to understand the author's intended purpose for including what he says and how he says it.<sup>14</sup> Only after establishing authorial intent can one draw contemporary implications and applications, but these must flow directly from exegesis.<sup>15</sup> This critique illustrates how Kellen subtly positions herself as the starting point for determining the meaning of the text for counseling rather than submitting to the text of Scripture as her authority for counseling methodology.

### AUTHORIAL INTENT & FAULTS WITH KELLEN'S HERMENEUTIC

To establish her interpretation, Kellen cites Charles Quarles' commentary on Matthew throughout her initial exegesis.<sup>16</sup> Yet, Quarles (a fellow professor at Southeastern Seminary) is the only commentary that Kellen directly interacts with in her paper. Far from critical scholarly work, Kellen's citation of a single source as the authoritative interpretation of Matthew, regardless of the commentator's

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>14</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 29; Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2010), 130–40.

<sup>15</sup> J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-on Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 195–204; Daniel M. Doriani, *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1996), 164–67.

<sup>16</sup> Charles L. Quarles, *Matthew*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Thomas R. Schreiner, and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022).

reputation or caliber, gives one pause when receiving her exegesis as thorough.<sup>17</sup> She cites Quarles' assertion that Matthew's use of the term "βίβλος γενέσεως (book of genealogy)" refers not simply to the genealogical list and birth narrative that follows immediately in Matthew 2:17, but to the entire Gospel account.<sup>18</sup> He ties this reference to the LXX use of the term in Genesis 2:4 and 5:1 which both include creation accounts followed by extensive narratives. Thus, Quarles understands Matthew to be referencing these usages to signal that Matthew 1:1 stands basically as a title for the Gospel and points to Jesus being the start of the New Creation.<sup>19</sup> Yet this viewpoint is not without significant scholarly controversy and thus becomes a precarious point on which to build a full-fledged interpretation of the verse.<sup>20</sup>

Kellen follows Quarles in this point and attempts to connect Matthew's genealogy to the opening of John's Gospel (1:1-4), which proclaims Christ as the

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<sup>17</sup> Contrary to her claim in the opening paragraph that she will "exegete the verse." Kellen, "Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1)," 47. Further, she claims she will "highlight several assertions that connect the nation of Israel and the modern church." Yet the *only* assertion that Matthew makes in 1:1 is that Abraham and David are ancestors of Jesus. It mentions nothing of the familial dysfunction they experienced. These asserted connections are Kellen's own, yet she fails to establish her claim from her exegesis that Matthew intended to bridge the nation of Israel and the modern church by highlighting generational dysfunction as the connector between the two. Rather, Matthew intends to show by his mention of Jesus as the son of Abraham and David that the nations will be blessed through Christ, and he will rule over his people. The connection to the church comes through the church's establishment in Christ's fulfillment of the covenants and the inauguration of the New Covenant. For arguments to support this claim, see Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew*, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 1:16; Stephen J. Wellum, "Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants," in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2006), 103, 109–13; Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church, Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 61–100; Jason S. DeRouchie, "Father of a Multitude of Nations: New Covenant Ecclesiology in OT Perspective," in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2016), 7–38.

<sup>18</sup> Quarles, *Matthew*, 106.

<sup>19</sup> Quarles, *Matthew*, 107.

<sup>20</sup> For brief arguments in favor of "βίβλος γενέσεως" referring primarily or only to the birth narrative of Matthew 1-2, see Craig L. Blomberg, "Matthew," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 2–3; J. Knox Chamblin, "Matthew," in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995), 725; Richard B. Gardner, *Matthew*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991), 29; John MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1985), 3.

beginning of creation, just as Matthew asserts Jesus is the beginning of a New Creation who will redeem and restore the sins of past generations.<sup>21</sup> Yet, her exegesis does not follow. If Matthew truly was attempting to show that Jesus is the *genesis* of a New Creation, why would his genealogy not include Adam? Why does he begin with Abraham who comes twenty generations after Adam (generations also filled with dysfunction and in need of redemption)?<sup>22</sup> This should signal to the reader that, while it may be present, Matthew is not pressing the New Creation motif alleged by Kellen.

Obviously, Matthew has other goals for structuring and bookending his genealogy as he does. Here, Kellen backtracks because it is “clear to any reader that Matthew is asserting Jesus is the Messianic King.”<sup>23</sup> Matthew sets up Jesus as the king who comes to fulfill both the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. As the long-foretold Messiah, Jesus comes to bless the nations as Abraham’s seed (Genesis 12:7; Cf. Galatians 3:15-16) and ascend David’s throne (Cf. Psalm 2; 110:1).<sup>24</sup> The purpose, therefore, of Matthew’s genealogy is to establish Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament promise and the hope of all nations.

While Kellen would agree with this,<sup>25</sup> she makes a fatal hermeneutical error at this point by failing to allow Matthew’s primary authorial intent to drive her interpretation of this passage. Instead, she overlays modern psychological trauma

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<sup>21</sup> A point which commentators, including Quarles, do not make. Kellen commits an equivocation fallacy. John’s term translated “beginning” is “ἀρχή” which BDAG defines as “beginning, origin in the absolute sense” whereas BDAG defines “γένεσις” as “an account of someone’s life, history, life.” While similar, these terms are employed by these authors for vastly different theological assertions. John points to Christ’s eternal deity and creational power, whereas Matthew emphasizes the covenantal fulfillment and royal lineage of Christ. Kellen’s conflation of the terms to suggest that both gospels are attempting to make the same theological point about Christ, when in reality, they are emphasizing various aspects of Christ. Kellen’s equivocation violates the semantic distinctions of the terms and leads to a misreading of each Gospel’s unique themes. William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 138, 192.

<sup>22</sup> What’s more, Kellen misses the perfect opportunity to link this New Creation motif she sees to a biblical anthropology – that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17). Yet were she to do so, she would contradict her own biological determinism she espouses later in the article by her misunderstanding of epigenetics.

<sup>23</sup> Kellen, “Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1),” 49.

<sup>24</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 22:53; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 20–21; Gardner, *Matthew*, 29.

<sup>25</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 22:53.

theory onto her recounting of the stories of Abraham and David, forcing their connections to contemporary life where the biblical author has no wish to do so.<sup>26</sup> She provides no hermeneutical framework that appropriates her modern addiction and trauma connections from the Abraham/David accounts. This was not Matthew's purpose in presenting the genealogy of Jesus by focusing on Abraham and David. Matthew's structure of his genealogy provides readers with his intent, and that intent should drive the interpretation *and* application of the text.

Matthew denotes Jesus as the son of Abraham to signal the universal blessing to the nations that Jesus would bring (Genesis 12) through the salvation he offers to both Jew and Gentile (Cf. Micah 4:2, Romans 1:16). In fact, his inclusion of Gentile women in his commentary point to this exact understanding.<sup>27</sup> He denotes Jesus as the son of David to inaugurate him as the King of the Jews (Amos 9:11-12). Historically, genealogical accounts were used to establish legitimacy and identity for the readers.<sup>28</sup> Matthew, writing to a primarily Jewish audience, includes his genealogy of Jesus to establish his claim that Jesus truly is the Jewish Messiah of Old Testament prophecy.<sup>29</sup>

Crucially, Matthew himself provides his reader with the clue to understand the structure and purpose of Jesus' genealogy. He constructs the genealogy on Hebrew gematria based on David's name.<sup>30</sup> Thus, David becomes the exemplar, not the failure. Christ will do all that David did (such as being a man after God's

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<sup>26</sup> Kellen, "Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1)," 52–53. In this section, Kellen attempts to parallel the dysfunction that results from "substance use disorder" (a DSM-5 label) to the stories of conflict just discussed in the lines of Abraham and David. Ironically, none of the generational dysfunction in the stories of Abraham nor David result from drunkenness. Furthermore, the Bible has much to say about drunkenness (Prov 20:1, 30; 21:17; 23:20; 23:29-35; 31:4-7; Isa 5:11; Rom 13:13; 1 Cor 5:11; 6:10; Gal 5:21; Eph 5:18; 1 Pet 4:3). Why does Kellen not lean upon these verses to demonstrate the destruction wrought by alcohol (and other substances) abuse? Again, this points to Kellen's misuse of the Scripture for her own purposes.

<sup>27</sup> Quarles, *Matthew*, 115.

<sup>28</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 47.

<sup>29</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 22:34.

<sup>30</sup> Gematria is the ancient practice of assigning numerical values to names. In Hebrew, the consonants for "David" (דָּוִד, DVD) correspond to 4+6+4 which adds up to 14. Matthew structures his genealogy into three sets of 14 generations from (1) Abraham to David, (2) David to the Exile, and (3) the Exile to Christ (Matt 1:17). By doing so, Matthew makes explicit that Jesus' descent from the line of David is the focal point of the genealogy. Blomberg, *Matthew*, 22:53; Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 25.



own heart, 1 Samuel 13:14), and more. True, he will succeed where David sinned; he will follow his Father's will perfectly (Matthew 26:39, Hebrews 4:14-16). But Matthew is at pains not to show that David or Abraham was faithless or created tumultuous (or even genetically heritable) generational dysfunction. Rather, the Bible judges the kings who succeeded David based on their conformity to David's character and behavior. A faithful king "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as David his father had done" (1 Kings 15:11).

Furthermore, if Matthew had intended his genealogy of Jesus to highlight that Christ is the solution to generational dysfunction, why then did he neglect to include wicked kings such as Ahaziah (2 Kings 8:25-29), Jehoash (2 Kings 12:1-21), and Amaziah (2 Kings 14:1-22)? Certainly, including these names for his readers to recall their nefarious deeds would have underscored a focus on generational dysfunction that Kellen tried to find. Yet, Matthew instead purposefully focuses on the greatness (rather than scandals) of David as the covenant king and ancestor from which the Messiah shall come.<sup>31</sup> Matthew's desire is to show that Jesus Christ of Nazareth is this Messiah.

Moreover, why did Kellen not include a discussion of Tamar (Genesis 38, Matthew 1:3) to draw out her point of generational dysfunction? If, according to Kellen, Matthew was seeking to point to Jesus being the hope of generational dysfunction, surely Kellen should have mentioned the generational dysfunction in the story of Judah's incestuous encounter with his daughter-in-law? Jesus, being the Lion of Judah (Gen 49:9-10, Rev 5:5), has "generational dysfunction" built into this title, yet Matthew does not choose to comment on this sinful encounter in his genealogy. Why does Kellen not draw out this story in her article?<sup>32</sup> Quarles himself does not seek to draw the same conclusions concerning generational dysfunction as Kellen. It would have provided greater evidence for her argument! This is quite confusing – Kellen's hermeneutical outlook is backwards: she highlights the generational dysfunction of Abraham and David which Matthew actively suppresses by his genealogical arrangement and their tie-in as the fathers of Jesus. Simultaneously, she overlooks Matthew's explicit

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<sup>31</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 49–51.

<sup>32</sup> Perhaps because she read in Quarles' commentary, "The inclusion of four gentile women in the genealogy confirms that Jesus is the son of Abraham, the promised seed in whom all nations will be blessed, even Canaanites, Moabites, and Hittites. These great themes will permeate the entire Gospel." Quarles, *Matthew*, 115.



inclusion of women in his genealogy (something striking and uncommon in Jewish genealogy practice<sup>33</sup>) that one could say actually points to the restoration Christ brings to generational dysfunction.<sup>34</sup> This, again, exposes that Kellen has imposed her own agenda upon Matthew's text.

## SHIFTING AUTHORITY

While subtle, this hermeneutical technique of shifting the main point from the author's intent to the reader's response sets one at the precipice of a slippery slope. Conforming a text to one's agenda places the individual, not the Scripture, as the final authority. Seeing a truth contained in the text is different from recognizing what the text's primary purpose is as determined by the biblical author. Furthermore, it relegates the applicational use of the text to the reader's purpose, allowing for the twisting of Scripture to suit the reader's situation or personally desired application (cf. 1 Timothy 6:20-21, 2 Peter 3:16).<sup>35</sup> A hermeneutical approach like Kellen's fundamentally erodes the power of the Scripture in the counseling room and places the authority into the hands of the counselor who becomes the arbiter of the text's meaning rather than its appropriate application to a counseling situation.<sup>36</sup> Yet, this drains the power of the Scripture to speak into the lives of counselees as God has intended.<sup>37</sup> If this hermeneutical approach characterizes one's counseling approach, one may be tempted to seek counterfeit solutions for complex counseling presentations.<sup>38</sup> Instead, biblical counselors

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<sup>33</sup> Weber, *Matthew*, 1:17.

<sup>34</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 23.

<sup>35</sup> Adams warns against following this route of application: "That is the fundamental problem of all counseling systems: counselors are out to change others, but they can't agree on what the end product should be like. The fundamental question is, 'Change people – into what?' It is a question of standards." Jay E. Adams, *How to Help People Change: The Four-Step Biblical Process* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 59.

<sup>36</sup> Frame notes, "That fact suggests to me that the exegesis of specific texts is more fundamental than the truth of any broad theological principle. That is, the exegesis determines the principle, rather than the other way around. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 3:220.

<sup>37</sup> Adams takes up this argument by reminding counselors that counseling problems must be defined by scriptural definitions if the Scriptures are to provide any hope for change. See Jay E. Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling: More than Redemption* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), 143–46.

<sup>38</sup> "A refrain at conferences of Christian psychologists is, 'We have Ph.D.s in psychology but Sunday school understandings of the Bible and theology.'" David Powlison, "Ready to Speak,

must seek to “rightly handle the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15) by allowing the Scriptures to both *interpret* and *determine which application to use* to solve the counselee’s problem.<sup>39</sup>

By making this theological move, Kellen can go on to defend her belief that “common grace observations, sometimes articulated in terms of ‘scientific observations,’ [are] necessary to understand people and their problems, to which we then apply Scripture.”<sup>40</sup> Here, Kellen steps completely out of the historic biblical counseling movement.<sup>41</sup> By claiming that scientific observations are *necessary* to understand people, she is simultaneously claiming that God has not provided sufficient material in his Word for dealing with counseling problems. While she might claim that *solutions* to problems that people face should come from scriptural application (which she ends up denying by her reliance upon psychological interventions),<sup>42</sup> her dependence upon common grace insights to even ascertain the problem places epistemological primacy (or at least equivalence) on common grace psychological findings over the Bible.<sup>43</sup> Powlison warned three decades ago about this exact concern for integrationists:

When their grasp of the Bible proved disappointing in the face of human sin and suffering, psychology stepped persuasively into the gap. Psychology’s abundance of hitherto unrecognized [insights] made psychology’s theories and techniques – its distorting glasses and

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with Gentleness and Fear,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 12, no. 2 (1995): 7; See also Heath Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling: The Doctrinal Foundations of Counseling Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 59; David Powlison, “A Biblical Counseling View,” in *Psychology & Christianity: Five Views*, ed. Eric L. Johnson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 245; Stuart W. Scott, “A Biblical Counseling Approach,” in *Counseling and Christianity: Five Approaches*, ed. Stephen P. Greggo and Timothy A. Sisemore, with Thomas G. Plante et al. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 158.

<sup>39</sup> Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor’s Manual: The Practice of Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973), 103–11.

<sup>40</sup> Williams et al., “SEBTS Counseling Professors Roundtable,” 80.

<sup>41</sup> Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 29–30, 73.

<sup>42</sup> Williams et al., “SEBTS Counseling Professors Roundtable,” 81.

<sup>43</sup> T. Dale Johnson, “Future Hope and the Folly of Fig Leaves,” in *Sufficiency: Historic Essays on the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Kansas City, MO: Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, 2023), 118. What’s more, were Kellen to claim that solutions to problems can be found in the Scriptures would mean that the Scriptures must also provide a description of the problem. The Scriptures are sufficient not only to cure, but to diagnose souls.

fun-house mirrors – seem wonderfully persuasive.<sup>44</sup>

In this case, the Bible becomes merely a supplement to the vast array of secular anthropological discoveries. But scientific data, while illustrative, cannot and should not define the bounds of problem/solution sets.<sup>45</sup> Rather, the Scriptures provide the criteria, language, and categories for diagnosing and solving man's problems.<sup>46</sup>

## HUMAN AGENCY AND RESPONSIBILITY IN THE BIBLE

Kellen draws from Matthew 1:1 alone to focus on Christ's redemption from generational dysfunction, but the Scriptures are filled with other teachings on how the generations interact and how the consequences of sin affect one's family members. The Bible sets up a careful tension between individual responsibility and generational consequences.<sup>47</sup> In Exodus 34:7,

The Lord passed before [Moses] and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

Here, the Scriptures teach that that while children are not held responsible for their parents' sin, nevertheless, sins that parents commit will have lasting repercussions on the lives of their children.<sup>48</sup> But what is crucial is that the reception

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<sup>44</sup> David Powlison, "Critiquing Modern Integrationists," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 9, no. 3 (1993): 32.

<sup>45</sup> Jay E. Adams, *What about Nouthetic Counseling? A Question and Answer Book with History, Help and Hope for the Christian Counselor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977), 31.

<sup>46</sup> David Powlison, "The Sufficiency of Scripture to Diagnose and Cure Souls," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 23, no. 2 (2005): 2.

<sup>47</sup> While this distinction must be made, the Bible continues to teach throughout that man is morally accountable for one's volitional responses to the environment. Lou Priolo, *Presuppositions of Biblical Counseling: What Historical Biblical Counselors Really Believe* (Conway, AR: Grace & Truth Books, 2023), 7.

<sup>48</sup> Douglas Stuart, *Exodus*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 2:717.

of ill effects in no way necessitates a sinful response on the part of the children.<sup>49</sup> Rather, as Ezekiel 18:20 states, “The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.” Kellen’s essay fails to systematize passages like this into her understanding of the issue of “generational dysfunction.” A key distinction must be made between the traumatized son responding in a sinful way to his father’s sin and learning to suffer for righteousness sake (1 Peter 3:13-14).

Dysfunction in the family does not arise from parents passing on any physically hereditary material that would cause the child to sin.<sup>50</sup> Sin, as Jesus goes to great lengths to make clear, is *always* a volitional desire that leads to improper thoughts, wicked behavior, or ungracious speech (Mark 7:15-23, Luke 6:43-45; 11:39-41). Lou Priolo helpfully summarizes this presupposition of biblical counseling: “Apart from organically caused factors, all of man’s voluntary thought and behavior is moral, for which man is responsible before God and neighbor.”<sup>51</sup> The burden of proof rests upon Kellen to show that organic, epigenetic factors determine behavioral *causation*. As of the time of writing, these studies in humans are correlational at best.<sup>52</sup>

Biblically, responsibility for sin rests not between the generations nor on biological determiners but on individual response. Kellen notes, “my parents [sic] thumbprints are all over me as a person.”<sup>53</sup> Yet habituation acquired as a child is never determinative.<sup>54</sup> Rather, through mind renewal initiated by the Spirit

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<sup>49</sup> Adams, *The Christian Counselor’s Manual*, 174.

<sup>50</sup> Critically, one must understand that one’s sin nature does not arise from organic heredity but from original sin (Rom 5:12-21). Because sin is spiritual, it requires a spiritual cure. Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 142.

<sup>51</sup> Priolo, *Presuppositions of Biblical Counseling*, 38–43. Priolo mentions blunt force trauma, cerebral meningitis, and brain tumors as examples of organic factors.

<sup>52</sup> Blerida Banushi, Jemma Collova, and Helen Milroy, “Epigenetic Echoes: Bridging Nature, Nurture, and Healing across Generations,” *International Journal of Molecular Sciences* 26, no. 7 (2025): 3075. Furthermore, God’s infallible Word will never be disproven by man’s scientific endeavors.

<sup>53</sup> Kellen, “Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1),” 54.

<sup>54</sup> Adams, *The Christian Counselor’s Manual*, 137–40; Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), 184–92. Habituation plays a critical role in sanctification as the renewed spirit wars against the sinfully habituated flesh, but the flesh cannot defeat a spirit that is submissive to Christ (Romans 6:6-18). As will be mentioned below, biological changes arise from one’s sin and entrench the flesh in sinful habits and patterns. But since Scripture teaches that the heart is the agent of the person and not the body, these habits

(Romans 12:2, Ephesians 4:23), one can repent of and put off entrenched patterns of sin and replace them with godly behaviors that bear much fruit (Galatians 5:16-24).<sup>55</sup> The reverse can also be true. Godly parents who seek to raise their children to follow the Lord are given no guarantees their children will repent and believe the gospel. In fact, the Bible illustrates this principle in the lives of Saul and Samuel. Saul was a wicked king who is portrayed as a poor father (1 Samuel 20:30-34), but his son Jonathan is upheld as virtuous and celebrated as a righteous man (1 Samuel 14:45, 2 Samuel 1:25-27; 9:7). On the other hand, Samuel was a prophet, priest, and judge – a man who was well-acquainted with the Scriptures and no stranger to the Lord (1 Samuel 1:26; 3:19-21; 7:15). However, his sons were so wicked that Israel demanded his sons not rule over them after his death (1 Samuel 8:1-5). Both examples prove that neither righteousness nor dysfunction between generations is destined or inevitable. Rather, each shows that one's heredity is nondeterminative for righteous or sinful living.

Thus, what is needed for true change is to have one's heart regenerated by the Lord (Ezekiel 36:26-27).<sup>56</sup> Biblical anthropology situates agency in the heart (Proverbs 4:23, Luke 6:45).<sup>57</sup> Dysfunction and trauma stem from sinful desires wreaking havoc in families. Inordinate, idolatrous, or simply sinful desires of the heart lead to conflict, trauma, and pain (James 4:1-4).<sup>58</sup> This sin arises not

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and patterns can be put off, and as the Spirit works through the Word, new habits and patterns of godliness can be put on.

<sup>55</sup> Greg E. Gifford, "Jay Adams' Teaching of Habituation: Critiqued, Revisited, and Supported," in *Whole Counsel: The Public and Private Ministries of the Word: Essays in Honor Jay E. Adams*, ed. Donn R. Arms and Dave Swavely (Memphis, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2020), 129–46; Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, 171–216.

<sup>56</sup> Adams, *What about Nouthetic Counseling?*, 65–67; Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 315–20; Jay E. Adams, *Sanctification and Counseling* (Memphis, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2020), 15–27; Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 281–87, 297–303; Priolo, *Presuppositions of Biblical Counseling*, 59.

<sup>57</sup> Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 119–24; David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition through the Lens of Scripture* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2012), 129–32; Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), 60–68.

<sup>58</sup> Jay E. Adams, *A Thirst for Wholeness: How to Gain Wisdom from the Book of James* (Woodruff, SC: Timeless Texts, 1988), 104–10; Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, 176–212; Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, 69–70; Heath Lambert, *The Biblical Counseling Movement after Adams* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 77–80. For two excellent overviews of the concept of idols of the heart and how desire affects motivation and behavior, see Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes*, 145–62; David Powlison, "Idols of the Heart and 'Vanity Fair,'" *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 11, no. 2 (1995): 35–50.

from the body, but from the heart (James 1:14-15).<sup>59</sup> The Scriptures place the responsibility for sin on the individual and locates sin in the heart, not in the gene pool.<sup>60</sup>

Kellen's exegetical faults and her lack of systemization with the rest of Scripture generates numerous problems for her use of Matthew 1:1 to support her argument for the integration of modern psychological trauma theory. Her misunderstanding of biological science also undermines her claim that only Christ can cure generational dysfunction.

## A SCIENTIFIC CRITIQUE

While Kellen's hermeneutical methodology sets herself as the authority for biblical interpretation, she looks to science to substantiate her thesis. Ironically, recent scientific findings condemn her claims. Kellen's engagement with scientific studies betrays not only her misuse of sources, but also a complete misinterpretation of the current data, biological mechanisms, and the epistemological underpinnings of the contemporary biological paradigm and a Christian view of science.

### MISUSING SCIENTIFIC SOURCES & MISUNDERSTANDING SCIENTIFIC FINDINGS

The second section of Kellen's article deals with generational dysfunction as understood in modern, psychological terms. She mentions the case of substance use disorder, noting that children of parents who battled addiction have higher rates of substance use disorder themselves. She correctly claims, "Regardless of whether or not there is an underlying genetic or physiological predisposition, the fact remains that children learn maladaptive coping behaviors based on what they are exposed to."<sup>61</sup> This understanding aligns with a biblical view of agency coupled

<sup>59</sup> Adams, *A Thirst for Wholeness*, 28–35; Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 221–23; See Adams' assertion that counseling problems must be understood biblically in Jay E. Adams, *The Use of Scripture in Counseling* (Memphis, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 1975), 19–21.

<sup>60</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Hebrews, James, I & II Peter, and Jude*, *The Christian Counselor's Commentary* (Memphis, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2020), 166–68.

<sup>61</sup> Kellen, "Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1)," 52. While Kellen is careful to use language of "predisposition," as will be demonstrated below, the scientific evidence



with the effects of environmental temptations on individuals.

However, this creates a problem for Kellen. If she believed in the sufficiency of Scripture, she would not need science to support her claim. Biblical counselors could simply take her exegesis of Matthew 1:1 as authoritative and not require further scientific evidence to back up the claim. To a biblical counselor, scientific discoveries can be helpful, but it is neither authoritative nor necessary.<sup>62</sup> Not only that, but the Bible also provides parenting principles to teach us that when we parent our children in a godly way, things might turn out well for them and the converse is also true (Exodus 20:12, Deuteronomy 6:6-7, Psalm 78:5-7, Proverbs 1:8-9; 4:1-4; 14:26; 20:7; 22:6, Ephesians 6:4). For example, Proverbs 31:2-9 shows King Lemuel speaking to his own son about the dangers of alcohol. Biblical wisdom – from general parenting principles to specific warnings about alcohol’s familial destruction – addresses what psychology now categorizes as Adverse Childhood Experiences, demonstrating Scripture’s sufficiency without requiring modern scientific validation.

Yet, immediately following this example, Kellen jettisons biblical anthropology for a behavioristic and biologically determined view of man.<sup>63</sup> Kellen references the field of epigenetics as a source for understanding human behavior and reactions to trauma. To see how Kellen’s use of epigenetics is problematic, one need only understand basic cellular biology and genetics.

Human cells contain DNA that serves as an instruction manual to produce proteins. Sections of DNA which code for specific proteins or other cellular components are called genes. Using an incredibly complex biomechanical process,

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she cites would prefer her to use “determination.”

<sup>62</sup> Adams, *What about Nouthetic Counseling?*, 31, 71; Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 73.

<sup>63</sup> Kellen cites Bessel van der Kolk’s *The Body Keeps the Score* as evidence for her claim that “research has shown that trauma can have lasting effects on the brain and nervous system by altering stress response systems, influencing emotional regulation, and changing cognitive processing” (Kellen, 53). Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Broadway, NY: Penguin, 2015). For a scientific critique of van der Kolk’s book, see Michael Scheeringa, *The Body Does Not Keep the Score: How Popular Beliefs about Trauma Are Wrong* (Independently published, 2024). For a critique of van der Kolk’s book from a biblical counseling perspective, see Francine Tan, “A Critical Evaluation of Bessel van der Kolk’s *The Body Keeps the Score*,” *The Journal of Biblical Soul Care* 7, no. 2 (2023): 26–61. Tan clearly demonstrates that biblical anthropology and van der Kolk’s somatic traumatic memory are incompatible and antithetical to one another. Biblical counselors cannot have both.



cells “read” (known as transcription) the instructions of these genes and then “construct” (known as translation) proteins from the building blocks of amino acids.<sup>64</sup> Proteins then perform all major roles in the cell such as catalyzing chemical reactions for metabolism, breaking down toxins, responding to environmental stimuli, producing chemicals and hormones, maintaining homeostasis, granting physical structure to the organism, and much more.<sup>65</sup>

Epigenetics refers to modifications to a creature’s genome that regulate genetic expression.<sup>66</sup> In response to various environmental factors, cells can modify molecular sites on DNA (without altering the DNA sequence itself) in order to promote or repress the transcription of certain genes.<sup>67</sup> As a result, a cell will produce more or less of a protein which will in turn have an effect on the cell’s biological function in the organism. Thus, any claims regarding epigenetics by counselors in relationship to human behavior must immediately distinguish between causation or correlation since genetic expression relates closely with biological mechanisms for behavior.<sup>68</sup> The distinctions between causation and correlation in the counseling room is critical.

Kellen’s discussion of trauma theory displays a fundamental understanding of biological science, causation, and experimental design. She cites a 2018 review as evidence that:

...if a parent or grandparent experienced a traumatic event such as war, violence, abuse, or a natural disaster, the impact of that trauma may be transmitted to their children or grandchildren through epigenetic changes, modifications to gene expression without altering

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<sup>64</sup> This is what is known as the “central dogma of molecular biology.” F. H. C. Crick, “On Protein Synthesis,” in *Symposia of the Society for Experimental Biology, Number XII: The Biological Replication of Macromolecules*, ed. F. K. Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 138–63.

<sup>65</sup> Summary information for this paragraph taken from the author’s own undergraduate background in molecular biology and biochemistry as well as Lauren Dalton and Robin Young, *Fundamentals of Cell Biology* (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University, 2024), 64–116.

<sup>66</sup> Carrie Deans and Keith A. Maggert, “What Do You Mean, ‘Epigenetic’?,” *Genetics* 199, no. 4 (2015): 887–96.

<sup>67</sup> Cathérine Dupont, D. Randall Armant, and Carol A. Brenner, “Epigenetics: Definition, Mechanisms and Clinical Perspective,” *Seminars in Reproductive Medicine* 27, no. 5 (2009): 351–57.

<sup>68</sup> For example, in the field of oncology, studies on epigenetic modifications are proliferating rapidly as these irregularities in genetic expression appear to play a role in carcinogenesis: R Kanwal and S Gupta, “Epigenetic Modifications in Cancer,” *Clinical Genetics* 81, no. 4 (2012): 303–11.

the underlying DNA sequence. These changes can affect how genes related to stress response, emotional regulation, and mental health are expressed...<sup>69</sup>

However, the review she cites plainly states:

The state of the science in relation to human offspring at present is that, whereas some neuroendocrine and epigenetic alterations have been documented in connection with maternal and paternal trauma exposure and PTSD, studies have not yet conclusively demonstrated epigenetic transmission of trauma effects in humans.<sup>70</sup>

What Kellen presents as definitive, the cited article views skeptically. In fact, numerous scientific reviews and studies are cautious about linking epigenetic changes to the causation negative mental health outcomes.<sup>71</sup> At best, there is a *correlation* between epigenetic changes and intergenerational trauma or generational dysfunction, but no *causal* pathology has been established.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, expression of a particular gene that might be linked to trauma transmission happens in a mosaic of thousands of other biological functions. While it is true that some genetic mutations or regulatory abnormalities can have more profound impacts on the body than others (for example, the single base-pair substitution that leads to sickle cell disease<sup>73</sup>), there have been no definitive studies

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<sup>69</sup> Kellen, “Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1),” 53.

<sup>70</sup> Rachel Yehuda and Amy Lehrner, “Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma Effects: Putative Role of Epigenetic Mechanisms,” *World Psychiatry: Official Journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA)* 17, no. 3 (2018): 252.

<sup>71</sup> One review notes the opposite can occur: “prenatal stress does not necessarily predispose individuals to problematical development, but rather increases sensitivity to both adverse and supportive postnatal contexts. Thus, prenatal stress may actually foster positive development if paired with supportive and caring postnatal environments.” Sarah Hartman, Jay Belsky, and Michael Pluess, “Prenatal Programming of Environmental Sensitivity,” *Translational Psychiatry* 13, no. 1 (2023): 161.

<sup>72</sup> For other studies that express this skepticism see Ewan Birney, George Davey Smith, and John M. Greally, “Epigenome-Wide Association Studies and the Interpretation of Disease-Omics,” *PLoS Genetics* 12, no. 6 (2016): 1–9; Bernhard Horsthemke, “A Critical View on Transgenerational Epigenetic Inheritance in Humans,” *Nature Communications* 9, no. 1 (2018): 2973; C. Murgatroyd et al., “Effects of Prenatal and Postnatal Depression, and Maternal Stroking, at the Glucocorticoid Receptor Gene,” *Translational Psychiatry* 5, no. 5 (2015): e560; S. V. Sotnikov et al., “Bidirectional Rescue of Extreme Genetic Predispositions to Anxiety: Impact of CRH Receptor 1 as Epigenetic Plasticity Gene in the Amygdala,” *Translational Psychiatry* 4, no. 2 (2014): e359.

<sup>73</sup> M. A. Bender and Katie Carlberg, “Sickle Cell Disease,” in *GeneReviews*, ed. Margaret P. Adam

which demonstrate a determinative role in epigenetic regulation and one's mental (i.e. immaterial, or heart) response to trauma.

There are numerous reasons why scientists have been skeptical about attributing epigenetic changes to mental health. First, all replicable experiments on epigenetic modification have been performed in model organisms, but not humans. To date, there are no controlled or replicable protocols for testing epigenetic effects on human behavior.<sup>74</sup> Second, mammals undergo two separate “resets” of epigenetic modification, the first in utero and the second during germ cell proliferation.<sup>75</sup> These resets provide opportunities to erase any deleterious epigenetic modifications that may result from trauma exposure and be passed between generations.<sup>76</sup> Third, while some studies show stronger connections between epigenetic modification and physiology, such as metabolic rates,<sup>77</sup> these focus on *physical* health but say little to nothing about *mental* health or behavioral outcomes.<sup>78</sup> Finally, as one review notes, “It is important to acknowledge that not all individuals who are exposed to trauma and stressors develop adverse outcomes. As such, there is an important need for studies to incorporate and understand

et al. (Seattle, WA: University of Washington, Seattle, 1993).

<sup>74</sup> While there have been studies in human populations, (see, for example, Nader Perroud et al., “The Tutsi Genocide and Transgenerational Transmission of Maternal Stress: Epigenetics and Biology of the HPA Axis,” *World Journal of Biological Psychiatry* 15, no. 4 (2014): 334–45; Bastiaan T. Heijmans et al., “Persistent Epigenetic Differences Associated with Prenatal Exposure to Famine in Humans,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 105, no. 44 (2008): 17046–49; Rachel Yehuda et al., “Holocaust Exposure Induced Intergenerational Effects on FKBP5 Methylation,” *Biological Psychiatry* 80, no. 5 (2016): 372–80; A summary of findings can be found in Nagy A. Youssef et al., “The Effects of Trauma, with or without PTSD, on the Transgenerational DNA Methylation Alterations in Human Offsprings,” *Brain Sciences* 8, no. 5 (2018): 83.) these populations have all experienced singular events (the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda, the Holocaust, and the Dutch Hunger Winter) that make controlled, replicable experiments nigh-impossible. Furthermore, subjecting humans to induced trauma violates biblical and ethical standards for experimentation. Thus, studying how trauma affects epigenetic change in humans is extremely difficult outside of surveys and post-traumatic blood draws. Studies also almost always have low sample sizes.

<sup>75</sup> Edith Heard and Robert A. Martienssen, “Transgenerational Epigenetic Inheritance: Myths and Mechanisms,” *Cell* 157, no. 1 (2014): 95–109.

<sup>76</sup> Gary Felsenfeld, “A Brief History of Epigenetics,” *Cold Spring Harbor Perspectives in Biology* 6, no. 1 (2014).

<sup>77</sup> Heijmans et al., “Persistent Epigenetic Differences Associated with Prenatal Exposure to Famine in Humans.”

<sup>78</sup> Sumra Komal, Li-Rong Zhang, and Sheng-Na Han, “Potential Regulatory Role of Epigenetic RNA Methylation in Cardiovascular Diseases,” *Biomedicine & Pharmacotherapy* 137 (2021): 111376; Elmar W. Tobin et al., “DNA Methylation as a Mediator of the Association between Prenatal Adversity and Risk Factors for Metabolic Disease in Adulthood,” *Science Advances* 4, no. 1 (2018): eaao4364.

the factors that may buffer the development of adverse outcomes in response to trauma or stressor exposure.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, environmental factors, such as parenting or religion, can stall or even reverse some of the effects wrought by epigenetic dysregulation due to trauma.<sup>80</sup> With all of these factors in mind, one can see how difficult it is to establish any sort of causal link between trauma exposure, epigenetic modification, and genetic expression that leads to adverse mental health outcomes.

For all these reasons, Kellen’s deference to scientific hypotheses concerning mental and behavioral health in relation to trauma is completely unfounded.<sup>81</sup> Ironically, the Scriptures (and following suit, historic biblical counselors) are clear that the heart is always primary over the body in matters of *moral responsibility*.<sup>82</sup> As Adams notes, “Behavior is responsible conduct.”<sup>83</sup> Bodily changes can proceed from the heart’s moral response to environmental distress. Furthermore, biblical counselors affirm that bodily effects of sin, such as trauma, can play a role in temptation, but they deny that the heart is at any point finally subject to the body’s infirmity.<sup>84</sup> Thus, from a scriptural perspective, any scientific finding about

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<sup>79</sup> Andie Kealohi Sato Conching and Zaneta Thayer, “Biological Pathways for Historical Trauma to Affect Health: A Conceptual Model Focusing on Epigenetic Modifications,” *Social Science & Medicine* 230 (2019): 79.

<sup>80</sup> A recent study has shown that previously assumed connections between DNA methylation and genetic expression associated with depressive symptoms are more complex than a simple 1:1 correlation between epigenetic change, gene expression, and symptomatology. Patricia A. Handschuh et al., “Summer and SERT: Effect of Daily Sunshine Hours on SLC6A4 Promoter Methylation in Seasonal Affective Disorder,” *The World Journal of Biological Psychiatry*, 2025, 7–8.

<sup>81</sup> “What God has said about human nature, our problems, and the only Redeemer is true. His truth is reliable. What the Bible says about people will never be destroyed by any neurological or genetic finding... But biopsychiatry cannot explain, nor will it ever explain, what we actually are. All people are in the image of God and depend on God body and soul.” Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes*, 244.

<sup>82</sup> Rich Thomson, *The Heart of Man and the Mental Disorders: How the Word of God Is Sufficient*, 3rd ed. (Sugar Land, TX: Biblical Counseling Ministries, Inc., 2022), 1:123–48; A. Craig Troxel, *With All Your Heart: Orienting Your Mind, Desires, and Will toward Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 106.

<sup>83</sup> Adams, *The Christian Counselor’s Manual*, 116.

<sup>84</sup> Thomson, *The Heart of Man and the Mental Disorders*, 1:140. Thomson writes, “The point is abundantly clear in Scripture. If man’s inner spirit can endure his physical infirmity – and it can (Prov 18:14) – and if God will not allow the believer to be tempted beyond what he is able in Christ to endure – and He will not (1 Cor 10:13) – then a believer’s material body and brain cannot compel his immaterial heart to entertain or to communicate wrong thoughts, words, or actions, nor can his brain and body generate within him the unique heart consequences which issue from those sins: a sense of guilt, apparently uncaused fear, and a desire to flee when there is little or no reason to do so.”

trauma and bodily modification that removes personal culpability or subordinates the heart's volition to physical responses is immediately suspect and must be reanalyzed using biblical presuppositions.<sup>85</sup>

Even if, for argument's sake, Kellen is correct that a traumatic event can change body chemistry, how should a biblical counselor provide help to such an individual? Biblical counselors would affirm that chemistry changes as a result of the heart's reaction.<sup>86</sup> In modern terms, material molecular reactions and neurotransmission stem from the immaterial heart's desires and beliefs.<sup>87</sup> These chemical changes then drive physical behavior.<sup>88</sup> Sometimes this might be a split-second reaction – a testament to God's design of our bodies to respond to events like real, imminent danger – but the physical, habituated response is still mediated by the heart.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, if sinful behavior appears to result from split-second reactions to the environment – for example, a previously traumatized individual having a violent outburst induced from a door slamming – this physical reaction is a habituated response *preconditioned by the heart's unbelief or rebellion prior to the incident*.<sup>90</sup> Simply put, there is a substantial difference between influence and determinism from chemicals in the environment.

The great hope of the Scriptures is that sinful habits can be put off and godly habits can be put on through nouthetic confrontation and the spiritual disciplines.<sup>91</sup> According to Adams, the purposes of the Scriptures are to elicit this kind of change.<sup>92</sup> But to leave counselees requiring a medical miracle or genetic therapy in order to respond biblically to trauma, in all practicality, moves the

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<sup>85</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003), 27.

<sup>86</sup> Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, 112.

<sup>87</sup> For an in-depth examination of this phenomenon and critique of the naturalist, trauma-informed approach, see Greg E. Gifford, "Does the Body Keep the Score? Biblical Counseling and the Body," *The Journal of Biblical Soul Care* 8, no. 1 (2024): 41–63.

<sup>88</sup> Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 96–97; Thomson, *The Heart of Man and the Mental Disorders*, 1:123–48.

<sup>89</sup> Brian A. Mesimer, "Rehabilitating Habituation," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 34, no. 2 (2020): 53–79.

<sup>90</sup> Jay E. Adams, *The Practical Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling* (Memphis, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2020), art. Body; Gifford, "Jay Adam's Teaching of Habituation."

<sup>91</sup> Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 44–52; Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, 191–216; Mesimer, "Rehabilitating Habituation," 60–67.

<sup>92</sup> For Adams argument and step-by-step process on nouthetically confronting and training counselees in righteousness see Adams, *How to Help People Change*.

hope from Christ to the doctor. While Kellen, and this author, would affirm that Christ can work any miracle he desires – genetic, medical, or spiritual – the Bible does not promise that all physical afflictions will cease this side of heaven. But it does promise victory over sin (Romans 8:10-11). Yet, according to Kellen’s understanding of inherited trauma, at best we can only mitigate the effects of temptation or sin. There remains little hope for the sanctifying work of the Spirit who changes hearts (but does not promise to change bodies before the eschaton). There is nuance here: at the resurrection, both body and soul will be perfected and glorified, so in this sense, Christ is truly the only hope. The Bible everywhere promises that our spirits can grow *now* in righteousness, maturity, and holiness, regardless of bodily affliction or past experience (2 Corinthians 3:18; 4:16-18).<sup>93</sup> But the counselee’s growth always comes directly from the means of grace – the spiritual disciplines – and through participation in the body of Christ, not from psychological interventions as Kellen espouses.<sup>94</sup>

But redemptive counselors (Kellen included) believe:

The Bible affirms that what we think about is important, both for righteousness and for our well-being. Scripture gives us some strategies for changing our thoughts (Phil 4:8): memorization of God’s Word (Ps 119:11), the use of mnemonic devices such as acrostics (Ps 25, 34, etc.), and biblical meditation (Ps 119:15). However, because the Bible was not written to be a comprehensive manual on every manner by which thoughts may be changed, observation and research may uncover for us additional strategies to effect lasting thought change, particularly when they do not contradict Scripture. Some empirically validated strategies have emerged out of CBT, which counselors may then employ to effect godly thought change by the power of the Holy Spirit who provided those tools through his common grace.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Consider Job’s response to traumatic events and bodily affliction (Job 1:6-2:10).

<sup>94</sup> T. Dale Johnson, *The Church as a Culture of Care: Finding Hope in Biblical Community* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2021), 143–57; Tony Loseto, “Tools of the Trade: Spiritual Disciplines in Biblical Counseling,” in *Anchored in Truth: Reflections on Biblical Counseling*, ed. Chris Chumita (Elyria, OH: Soul Doctor Publications, 2025), 251–67. In effect, Kellen sees Christ mediated and applied through psychological methods, rather than through biblical means.

<sup>95</sup> Brooks et al., “What Is RC/CIBC?” 7.



This creates a conundrum for historical pastoral practice. Without the modern advent of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), were Christians left without sufficient tools for thousands of years as they sought to “renew the spirit of [their] mind[s]” (Ephesians 2:23)?<sup>96</sup> By asserting that CBT has discovered strategies unforeknown (or at best, lost) to believers in the past, redemptive counselors have effectively claimed that the scriptural techniques outlined were insufficient for change.<sup>97</sup> This position is a complete denial of the historic biblical counseling position of the total sufficiency of Scripture.<sup>98</sup> To claim that the Bible is insufficient for changing the “thoughts and intentions of the heart” is a direct contradiction of, or at best, a dulling of “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:17, Hebrews 4:12).

Instead, the Lord’s call to people experiencing dysfunction due to sin is:

“Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live” (Ezekiel 18:30-32).

From a biblical perspective, there is much hope, for the Lord provides the new heart required for repentance. He does not promise a change in *body*, but a change in *spirit*: “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

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<sup>96</sup> Adams and Lambert sound a resounding, “No!” Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 16; Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 43, 84.

<sup>97</sup> Yet historical studies into patristic and Puritan pastoral theology and soul care contradict redemptive counselors at this point. See Mark Deckard, *Helpful Truth in Past Places: The Puritan Practice of Biblical Counseling* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2009), 9–16; Thomas C. Oden, *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 12–13, 17–24; Andrew Purves, *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 1–8. Of note is Oden’s study. While Oden himself was a liberal and was not opposed to psychotherapy (and by theoretical extension modern secular psychological interventions) as a whole, he was skeptical of psychology’s success or superiority in providing the help Christians needed or desired. Instead, he harkens back to Gregory the Great’s *Book of Pastoral Rule* as a biblically based forerunner to many of the therapeutic interventions popular in the mid-twentieth century.

<sup>98</sup> See Mack’s standard definition for the sufficiency of Scripture in counseling as historic biblical counselors understand it in Wayne A Mack, “The Sufficiency of Scripture in Counseling,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 9, no. 1 (1998): 82.



And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (Ezekiel 36:26-27). The Lord holds out repentance and heart transformation as his method for seeing true change. With this, Kellen would agree. But her understanding of biological factors sets up a roadblock for some counselees who feel victimized by their lineage, their genetic inheritance, or epigenetic modifications brought on by experiencing trauma. There is no escape from biology. And if biology is causative, then there is no escape from sin this side of glory apart from biological intervention.<sup>99</sup>

If counselors communicate to their counselees that their temptations or sins stem from biology, either from inheritance, from trauma, or from chemical imbalances, rather than from desires of the heart that can be transformed and idols that can be cast down, the hope of the gospel evaporates from the counseling room. The Lord’s solution in this life is to effect change through the primacy of the heart directing the body, not the reverse.

Additionally, Kellen’s confusion about epigenetic mechanisms lacks support, as no evidence or identified pathology links a specific traumatic event to epigenetic changes. Studies show biological after-effects, but causal mechanisms remain elusive.<sup>100</sup> Thus, for Kellen to claim, “These changes can affect how genes related to stress response, emotional regulation, and mental health are expressed, potentially increasing the risk of mental health disorders” makes absolutes where scientists only recognize correlations at best.<sup>101</sup>

In the only places where we have hard evidence of harmful effects of epigenetic expression, there are physical effects on the body (such as Prader-Willi syndrome) and gene expression that results in medically treatable, physiological conditions.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> And counselors who prescribe biological interventions are doing so illegitimately since this is being done outside of the scope of the practice of medicine.

<sup>100</sup> Yehuda et al., “Holocaust Exposure Induced Intergenerational Effects on FKBP5 Methylation”; “This inherently limits the ability to determine causality, as human studies are often influenced by numerous confounding variables. Environmental factors such as diet, socioeconomic status, education, social support, and concurrent life stressors can all influence epigenetic marks, making it difficult to attribute any observed epigenetic difference solely to an ancestral trauma.” Banushi, Collova, and Milroy, “Epigenetic Echoes,” 10–11 Simply put, due to the sheer number of variables in human life, it is simply impossible to make any claims of causality for complex human behavior based on simplistic observation of epigenetic modifications.

<sup>101</sup> Kellen, “Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1),” 53.

<sup>102</sup> Douglas C. Bittel and Merlin G. Butler, “Prader–Willi Syndrome: Clinical Genetics, Cytogenetics and Molecular Biology,” *Expert Reviews in Molecular Medicine* 7, no. 14 (2005): 1–20.

But these physical maladies are fundamentally different from behavior or psychological issues. Biologically measurable changes in the body, such as increases or decreases in metabolic rates, are not necessarily causative of cognitive processes.<sup>103</sup> Utilizing these scenarios builds her case if, and only if, Kellen is willing to claim that moral behavior results directly from the body without the heart as an intermediary. However, such a claim would align her, at least partially, with behaviorism or biological determinism.

While this might not be her intention, it is a reasonable implication. Instead, grounding her anthropology in biblical foundations might enable Kellen to recognize the inherent limitations present in these studies. Very few of the studies consider one's belief in God as a contributing factor in response to trauma.<sup>104</sup> The first question that any biblical counselor would ask of the participants in these studies is, "Are you a Christian?"<sup>105</sup> One's worldview must inevitably shape one's response to trauma, whether in their own life or in relationships with others.

## EPIGENETIC TRANSIENCE

One of the strongest arguments against Kellen's position on epigenetic modifications and trauma inheritance is the universally acknowledged plasticity

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<sup>103</sup> In fact, one recent study has shown the opposite to be true. Dealing with one's anorexia leads to changes in brain structure. Tatiana Stratton et al., "Transient Patterns of Advanced Brain Ageing in Female Adolescents with Anorexia Nervosa," *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 225, no. 5 (2024): 499–505.

<sup>104</sup> Interestingly, one study that did investigate religion/spirituality's effect on trauma shows that "positive religious coping (using one's religion or spirituality to cope with stressful life situations)" actually appears to decrease long-term biological impacts of hardship. Alexandra E Shields et al., "Stress and Spirituality in Relation to HPA Axis Gene Methylation among US Black Women: Results from the Black Women's Health Study and the Study on Stress, Spirituality and Health," *Epigenomics* 13, no. 21 (2021): 1127. If the body were to keep the score, it appears the body may forget over time if Christ is involved.

<sup>105</sup> A study that specifically included Christians showed that "observed behavior in these religions [Christianity, Islam, Hinduism] reflects the potentials for the DNA methylation process that may signal appropriate gene expression, improve cellular activities and optimize health outcomes." Laurens Holmes et al., "Implication of Spiritual Network Support System in Epigenomic Modulation and Health Trajectory," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16, no. 21 (November 2019): 9–10.

of genetic regulation.<sup>106</sup> Some epigenetic modifications are transient.<sup>107</sup> This means that while environmental stressors may modify gene expression through epigenetic mechanisms (such as DNA methylation, histone modifications, and ncRNA regulation), studies have shown that epigenetic changes can be reversed or mitigated. Furthermore, establishing a direct link between epigenetic transmission and trauma has proven to be an elusive task.<sup>108</sup> Simply put, too many environmental factors outside of the researcher's control prevent definitively proving that epigenetic changes in F1 generations result directly from trauma experienced by the F0 generation.<sup>109</sup> However, as stated above, historic biblical counselors would not be surprised that the body is affected by the heart's response to the environment. They would simply want to clarify and emphasize that the heart's response was always *a priori* any biological changes that elicit behavior.

In fact, a common critique of overemphasizing the role of epigenetics in intergenerational trauma is the significant role of culture, society, and environment in behavioral modification and genetic regulation. Experiments have shown that parental interaction can up- or down-regulate genetic expression. For example, mother and child contact correlates to adult stress responses later in life.<sup>110</sup> A mother rat engaging in licking or grooming of her pups results in positive genetic expression related to an induced stress response.<sup>111</sup> Another study indicated that DNA methylation in the stress-response pathway is an unstable biomarker for ACEs and trauma exposure.<sup>112</sup> These studies show that culture, society, and

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<sup>106</sup> For a study which demonstrates that stress gene regulation can be modified by environmental factors, see Sotnikov et al., "Bidirectional Rescue of Extreme Genetic Predispositions to Anxiety." Whether these genetic factors play a role in human anxiety is still uncertain (though this author would reaffirm the biblical anthropology argued above which claims that genetic regulation and physiological response is downstream of the heart).

<sup>107</sup> Conching and Thayer, "Biological Pathways for Historical Trauma to Affect Health," 76.

<sup>108</sup> Yehuda and Lehrner, "Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma Effects," 252.

<sup>109</sup> Horsthemke, "A Critical View on Transgenerational Epigenetic Inheritance in Humans."

<sup>110</sup> Murgatroyd et al., "Effects of Prenatal and Postnatal Depression, and Maternal Stroking, at the Glucocorticoid Receptor Gene"

<sup>111</sup> Ian C.G. Weaver, "Epigenetic Programming by Maternal Behavior and Pharmacological Intervention: Nature versus Nurture: Let's Call the Whole Thing Off," *Epigenetics* 2, no. 1 (2007): 22–23.

<sup>112</sup> This study also concluded that religiosity and spirituality in populations "may modify the biological impact of childhood financial hardship by attenuating *NR3C1* DNAm, and suggests that certain sources of adversity and stress may only have a lasting biological impact in those without resources for resiliency to deal with these sources of stress." Shields et al., "Stress and Spirituality in Relation to HPA Axis Gene Methylation among US Black Women," 1728–29. A biblical counselor should interpret this to mean that hope in the gospel can actually produce *somatic* changes (as well as heart transformation) that lead to better outcomes.

parenting play major (possibly even *more* formative) roles in the subsequent generation's response to trauma.

But Kellen assumes from a single study on epigenetic transmission and inherited trauma that generational patterns of dysfunction in families must have a correlating biological mechanism underlying this transmission. This places Kellen dangerously close to the outworkings of behavioristic (even evolutionary) presuppositions, raising questions about her underlying epistemology. Again, she backpedals at this point and states, "In sum, whether the influences are physiological, relational, or emotional, healthier families lead to healthier children; unhealthy families lead to unhealthy children."<sup>113</sup> The Bible (and biblical counselors) would heartily agree with this statement. However, her claim is *non sequitur* from her prior assertions of genetic determinism regarding what biblical counselors classify as moral behavior – "stress response, emotional regulation, and mental health."<sup>114</sup> Kellen must either accept a form of biological determinism predicated upon epigenetic modification and transmission or reevaluate her epistemology to align with a biblical anthropology that better accounts for scientific evidence.<sup>115</sup> Biological modifications are ultimately nondeterminative of behavioral outcomes, and rehabilitation can alter body chemistry.<sup>116</sup> Genetic influences might predispose someone towards a particular temptation, but the heart controls the person and holds responsibility towards God and his Word.

Simply put, the scientific evidence does not substantiate Kellen's claim that epigenetic modification plays a definitive role in the transmission of trauma. Man's response to trauma remains solely in the realm of the heart, for which the Scriptures provide all that is needed for lasting change.

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<sup>113</sup> Kellen, "Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1)," 54.

<sup>114</sup> Kellen, "Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1)," 53.

<sup>115</sup> Along with the resulting entailments of the removal of responsibility and the requirement of medicine to treat what the Bible ascribes to the heart. Furthermore, she must accept this position against the scientific evidence itself.

<sup>116</sup> Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, 112.

## CONCLUSION

Kellen is right that Christ provides the only hope for trauma and generational dysfunction. However, her view of the biological underpinnings of trauma experience and response is faulty from both a scientific and scriptural standpoint. The hope of Christ she proposes is ultimately only eschatological. But the Bible calls counselors to point people to the Word *today* that they might grow in holiness and sanctification (Hebrews 3:12-15). Kellen's eisegesis of Matthew 1:1 coupled with her attempts to map modern psychological trauma theory onto the Scriptures undermine the authority of the Scriptures and allow room for her psychologically influenced anthropology to creep in. Yet by doing so, the Christological solution she proposes helps neither the biblical man, who becomes victim to biology, nor the psychological man whose hearts stand in antithesis to Christ.

Kellen's article demonstrates the failure of redemptive counseling to responsibly incorporate scientific findings into an overall biblical counseling system that places the Scriptures as the ultimate authority for grounding truth claims, the standard for evaluating scientific data, and the sufficient means for sanctification in the lives of counselees. Kellen does not take into account the resultant practical pastoral implications were epigenetic determinism true. Church discipline for unrepentant counselees dealing with trauma unbiblically would stall since fault and blame are thrown up in the air. Accountability would be reduced to ensuring that counselees take their medications.

Biblical counselors, instead, by adhering to a scriptural anthropology, submitting to the Scripture's authority, relying on its sufficiency, and offering scriptural hope of Christ can truly help those whose lives have been devastated by trauma. While biblical counselors will need to address epigenetic research in depth as the field develops further, a biblical anthropology provides the God-designed backdrop for assessing scientific claims. By knowing and clinging to God's creational anthropology revealed in the Scriptures, biblical counselors are more than equipped to help those scarred by trauma through the nail-scarred hands of Christ.