

THEOLOGICAL MISREPRESENTATIONS FOR COUNSELING:
A Review of J.V. Fesko's Book *Theological Foundations for Counseling*

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Huddled around a small table in the back of a sunlit café sit several elderly men who have been engaged in the same conversation for half a dozen hours. They are deeply absorbed, and their coffee tab continues to grow. These men know one another well and have gathered around this same table nearly every weekend for years. Before one man can finish speaking, another already knows how the sentence will end. Although they do not agree on everything, their conversation is marked by mutual respect and understanding.

Then, one day, a new face appears. He is intrigued by the men's discussion, yet he does not understand the depth or history of their exchange. Week after week, month after month, and year after year, these men have carried on their conversation. Nevertheless, the newcomer believes he has something fresh and important to contribute. When he begins to speak, however, he quickly reveals his shallow understanding both of the men themselves and of the subject they have been discussing.

Academic research may be compared to this scene in the sunlit café. Every field has its experts, its established body of knowledge, and its foundational assumptions. It is not the responsibility of scholars to rehearse every published conversation that has taken place within their discipline. Rather, it is the responsibility of the student or novice to become familiar with that conversation and to demonstrate a sufficient knowledge of the field before expecting established interlocutors to take his contribution seriously.²

J. V. Fesko has an impressive résumé. He served as Academic Dean and Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Westminster Seminary California until June 2019 and currently holds the Harriet Barbour Chair of Systematic and Historical Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi. His publication record is substantial, and his

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² This analogy grows from the Burkean Parlor metaphor along with other ideas presented in Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, *"They Say / I Say": The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021), 1–16. Further information on engaging sources wisely can be found in Wayne C. Booth et al., *The Craft of Research*, 4th ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 88–101; Michael Kibbe, *From Topic to Thesis: A Guide to Theological Research* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 77–85, Kindle.

works have appeared with leading academic publishers. Although his primary area of research has been Reformed historical theology, his most recent book, published by Baker Academic, is entitled *Theological Foundations for Counseling*.

The book has been eagerly anticipated within clinically informed Christian counseling circles. Many have regarded its publication as a significant moment: an established Reformed theologian would now weigh in on the longstanding debate over the sufficiency of Scripture as it relates to counseling. Expectations have therefore been high, and the book has arrived amid considerable anticipation.

This review will not focus primarily on the theological arguments Fesko advances. Although those arguments will receive some attention, the central purpose of this review is to examine a more surprising and fundamental problem: the quality of his research—or the lack thereof. This review argues that Fesko has entered the sunlit café in which pastors, theologians, and counselors have been discussing these questions for decades, yet he has begun speaking before adequately familiarizing himself with the conversation.

Fesko’s work falters in two fundamental respects. First, his insufficient familiarity with the fields of biblical counseling and integration weakens his argumentation. Second, his treatment of the authors with whom he does engage is repeatedly inaccurate and falls short of ordinary scholarly standards. These deficiencies are substantial. They are especially troubling in a work written by a scholar of Fesko’s reputation who seeks to contribute, whether modestly or substantially, to the field of counseling.

Is Fesko a Biblical Counselor or an Integrationist?

In the opening paragraph of the preface, Fesko acknowledges the ever-controversial nature of the project he is undertaking: “A cloud of discord, however, hangs low and dark over the horizon when it comes to determining how, precisely, Christians should counsel.”³ He thus presents as someone familiar with the contours of contemporary counseling debates. He later writes, “Finally, as humans are wont to do, readers will try to classify this book within the overall discussions about counseling about to what degree counselors can admit and use extrabiblical authorities.”⁴ Fesko identifies himself as a counselor who is biblical because his position is grounded in Scripture. In this respect, his usage reflects a broader contemporary tendency to reject the label *integrationist* while identifying as a *biblical counselor*.⁵

³ J. V. Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2026), ix. See also 21–22.

⁴ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, xii.

⁵ We are not claiming Fesko identifies as a biblical counselor in the historic categorical sense. We are pointing out that he prefers the term *biblical* because he believes his position is biblical and that he does not prefer the term *integrationist*. Many today want to be called a biblical counselor because few want to be found unbiblical. This reality has been addressed in the essay by Sean Perron, “Mislabeling Counseling and the Great Commission,” in *A Call to Clarity: Critical Issues in Contemporary Biblical Counseling*, ed. Heath Lambert (Jacksonville, FL: First Press, 2024), 95–123.

Fesko realizes many readers will classify him as an integrationist, but he rejects this label:

I suspect most will want to categorize this work as integrationist, rather than biblical, counseling. But I object to this classification on two grounds. First, the positions laid out in this book are decidedly biblical. I understand that people may disagree with my biblical reasoning, but I strive to be biblical in all my claims. Second, I object to the integrationist label because I am not seeking to integrate two things that do not otherwise belong together. Rather, God has written both the books of creation and Scripture, a truth the historic Reformed tradition has taught for centuries, even if it has been somewhat muted or even forgotten in the recent past.⁶

Fesko denies that he is an integrationist and instead describes his approach to counseling as biblical. Is this classification legitimate? Merely affirming that one's conclusions are biblical does not, by itself, distinguish biblical counseling from integration. Advocates of integration also maintain that their positions are consistent with Scripture. For Fesko's claim to be true (and his rejection of the integrationist label to be persuasive) he must first demonstrate he accurately understands the classification of integration and then explain how his own methodology differs from it.

Fesko states he is not an integrationist because he is "not seeking to integrate two things that do not otherwise belong together."⁷ He seemingly believes this statement is an accurate representation of integration. However, this statement provides the first indication that Fesko is unfamiliar with integration as integrationists define it. Is it true that integrationists actually believe they are seeking to unite two things that do not belong together?

To prove his point, Fesko provides a footnote: "This is the way, for example, that Heath Lambert characterizes the integrationist position. See Lambert, *Common Grace*, 73-74. Integrationists make similar claims [to Lambert] because they give the impression that the truths of psychology are alien to Scripture, and thus they want to try and blend 'hot' and 'cold' air—two things that do not belong together (McMinn and Campbell, *Integrative Psychotherapy*, 23)."⁸

⁶ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, xii.

⁷ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, xii.

⁸ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, xii, n14. Of note, as we chased the citation to Lambert's book, we were simply unable to locate what Fesko referenced as Lambert's position. On 73–74, Lambert discusses integration's fascination with utilizing secular resources; he is not discussing epistemological claims about sources of truth. Attempting to give Fesko the benefit of the doubt, we also checked the special twin-book edition that couples Ernie Baker's *The Psychologies* with Lambert's *Common Grace*. Since the pagination is different in this edition, we added 100 and checked pages 173–174 to no avail. Simply put, Fesko's supposed reference of Lambert's claim is not identifiable to what Lambert actually writes on those pages (or anywhere else). This example is either an editing mistake (although we can't find the source of this claim) or an indication of poor scholarship in not accurately representing what another author actually wrote.

The first problem with this citation is that the cited passage in Lambert's work does not characterize integration this way. The reason Lambert does not characterize integration this way is because leading integrationists Mark McMinn and Stanton Jones do not make this claim. Lambert does not describe integrationists as Fesko claims he does, and integrationists do not ordinarily define their project in those terms either. Fesko is not only incorrect about the Lambert citation, but he inaccurately quotes integrationist McMinn.

Fesko states, "Integrationists make similar claims because they give the impression that the truths of psychology are alien to Scripture. . . ." He thus suggests that the integrationist position affirms that the "truths of psychology are alien to Scripture."⁹ He further implies that this understanding aligns with how Lambert characterizes integration. This is not the case, revealing that Fesko has misunderstood and mischaracterized the integrationists he cites.

Compare Fesko with the full context of the citation: Fesko writes, "Integrationists make similar claims because they give the impression that the truths of psychology are alien to Scripture, and thus they want to try and blend 'hot' and 'cold' air—*two things that do not belong together* (McMinn and Campbell, *Integrative Psychotherapy*, 23)."¹⁰

This claim is not what McMinn and Campbell argue on the cited page. Their full discussion reads:

Integrationists believe that some sort of reciprocal interaction between faith and psychology is the best way to gain a comprehensive understanding of personality and counseling. This is not to say that psychology carries the same authority as the Christian faith, but that understanding and wisdom can be discovered in both. By way of analogy, consider the temperature system in an automobile (see figure 1.1). On one end of the continuum is hot air and on the other end is cool air. Often a person selects a temperature in the middle, mixing the hot and cool air for the desired effect. The climate is more desirable and adaptable by combining both sources of air than it could be if only one source of air were available. Though some Christians would be quick to say that psychology is a bunch of hot air, and some scientists would say the same about religion, this is not the point of the analogy. In this analogy we are considering two sources of information: psychology and Christian faith. To what extent do we let the "air" from both systems mix in order to achieve an optimal balance? Or should we trust only one source of information and not the other? Reciprocal interaction involves the assumption that caring for people's souls is best done by *bringing together truth from both sources*.¹¹

⁹ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, xii, n14 (emphasis ours).

¹⁰ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, xii, n14 (emphasis ours).

¹¹ McMinn and Campbell, *Integrative Psychotherapy*, 23–24 (emphasis ours).

In context, McMinn and Campbell do not claim that psychological truth and Scriptural truth are inherently alien to one another. On the contrary, they believe integration is “best done by bringing together truth from both sources.” The hot-and-cold-air analogy is therefore not an image of two incompatible things being artificially combined. It illustrates two sources contributing to a desired result. McMinn and Campbell think the hot and cold air *do* belong together and produce a more comfortable ride.

Fesko’s interpretation reverses the point of the analogy. McMinn and Campbell use it to describe the productive interacting of two sources of knowledge and truth, whereas Fesko presents it as evidence that integrationists seek to combine two repellant sources. His summary imposes upon the analogy a meaning its authors explicitly reject.¹²

Had Fesko sought to understand how integrationists view their work, he could have cited the IVP Academic volume from the well-reputed Spectrum Multiview on *Psychology and Christianity* edited by Eric Johnson.¹³ In that work, Stanton Jones represents the integrationist position and writes:

For instance, some critics claim that the term [integration] wrongly implies having to artificially *mix together two things that do not naturally belong together* (like oil and water). Others complain the term suggests an undesirable end product of an unpalatable “psychotheology” or “Christo-psychology,” which degrades both of its two constituent elements. Such complaints take the term in directions its users do not intend. Still, no one has yet come up with a better summary label for this complex approach. What matters ultimately is not the word, but what the term summarizes—the complex understandings and commitments to living out our faith with integrity. We seek to integrate because, in a perfect world, that which would go together seamlessly is now, in this world, dis-integrated and fragmented.¹⁴

Jones directly addresses the very characterization Fesko advances. Integrationists do not understand their task as the artificial combination of two inherently incompatible things (such as hot and cold air). Rather, they believe that truths which properly belong together have become fragmented and must be brought back into a coherent relationship.¹⁵ Whether one agrees with this methodology is a separate question. The immediate issue is whether Fesko has represented the claim accurately.

¹² Since Fesko has misread and therefore misunderstood both leading biblical counselors and integrationists in describing their own positions, Fesko’s self-description in reference to those views is suspect. We are not fully able to evaluate what Fesko means by biblical counseling or integrationism because his reading of those views would not be recognized by their authors.

¹³ Eric L. Johnson, ed., *Psychology & Christianity: Five Views*, with David G. Myers et al. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010).

¹⁴ Stanton L. Jones, “An Integration View,” in *Psychology & Christianity: Five Views*, 102 (emphasis ours). Of note, Mark McMinn agrees with and commends Jones’s definition, see Mark R. McMinn, “An Integration Approach,” in *Counseling and Christianity: Five Approaches*, ed. Stephen P. Greggo and Timothy A. Sisemore (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 85.

¹⁵ This claim mirrors Fesko’s own arguments surrounding the bringing together of the books of Scripture and nature, see Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, 13–15.

Fesko not only proports an inaccurate understanding of integration, but he repeats a mischaracterization that integrationists reject and have openly addressed in seminal literature. This is a significant scholarly error on Fesko’s part that demonstrates substantial mischaracterization and a problematic ignorance of the field of integration. Such a failure weakens his analysis and raises serious concerns about his familiarity with the field he seeks to evaluate.

Fesko	McMinn & Campbell	Stanton Jones
Integrationists make similar claims because they give the impression that the truths of psychology are alien to Scripture, and thus they want to try and blend "hot" and "cold" air—two things that <u>do not belong together</u> (Fesko, xii, n14).	Often a person selects a temperature in the middle, mixing the hot and cool air for the desired effect. The climate is more desirable and adaptable by combining both sources of air than it could be if only one source of air were available... Reciprocal interaction involves the assumption that <u>caring for people's souls is best done by bringing together truth from both sources</u> (McMinn and Campbell, 23–24).	some critics claim that the term [integration] <u>wrongly implies having to artificially mix together two things that do not naturally belong together</u> (like oil and water) (Jones, 102).

Figure 1. A comparison of Fesko’s characterization of integration with statements from classic integrationists.

This error is compounded by Fesko’s confidence that a better way could be charted forward in the counseling conversation by choosing to speak of using “all truth” no matter where it is found. Fesko writes, “The discussion, I believe, can move forward if people instead speak of using all truth, whether from creation or Scripture. God is, of course, the source of all truth. This is the tack that classic Reformed theology has taken and is the view presented in this book.”¹⁶ Fesko appears to regard this approach as both constructive and distinct from the integrationist position. Yet this is exactly how integrationists have viewed their work for decades.

On the next page (p. 24) of Fesko’s citation of McMinn and Campbell, they write: “Squarely in the middle of figure 1.1 is an integration perspective, which we hold as the most tenable position. Integrationists attempt to find truth from both sources—Christian faith and psychology.”¹⁷ McMinn and Campbell therefore describe integration as the attempt “to find truth from both sources.” This is precisely what Fesko says he is doing when he advocates using “all

¹⁶ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, xii, n14.

¹⁷ Mark R. McMinn and Clark D. Campbell, *Integrative Psychotherapy: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Approach*, Christian Association for Psychological Studies Books (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 24.

truth, whether from creation or Scripture,” even though he insists that his position is not integrationist.

Indeed, integrationists have long appealed to the principle that “all truth is God’s truth” and have frequently employed a two-book approach to epistemology.¹⁸ Fesko’s proposed way forward is not a fresh alternative to integration; it is one of integration’s most familiar epistemological commitments.

The well-known integrationist Larry Crabb, for example, explicitly grounded his counseling position in the conviction that all truth belongs to God. In his chapter, “Christianity and Psychology: Enemies or Allies?,” Crabb does not describe integration as the reconciliation of two realities that are inherently opposed (which is what Fesko suggests integrationists believe). Crabb clearly states, “All truth is certainly God’s truth.”¹⁹ McMinn likewise acknowledges that “all truth is God’s truth,” which is a common slogan in the integration field. He affirms the principle, but he gives primacy to Scripture:

When we claim “all truth is God’s truth,” we are both correct and incorrect. All that is true, whether discovered through science, literature, philosophy, theology, counseling, or Scripture, comes from God. However, science, literature, philosophy, theology, counseling, and Scripture are not equally direct ways of knowing God, and every way of knowing God is limited by our hermeneutic methods for understanding truth. Scripture is the most direct way of knowing God; therefore it deserves our respect.²⁰

McMinn’s formulation is significant because it demonstrates that an integrationist appeal to truth outside of Scripture (by general revelation or common grace) does not necessarily place psychology and Scripture on equal epistemological footing.

In the same work, McMinn writes,

This should not surprise us, because God *is the author of all truth*. If theologians and philosophers study the image of God in humans, and psychologists study human behavior, it seems reasonable that they would come to some similar conclusions, whether or not the psychologists acknowledge God as the creator of humanity. After all, this is God’s world, and everything we study has God’s fingerprints all over it.²¹

¹⁸ Note McMinn and Campbell’s book was published in 2007, and Jones’s chapter was published in 2010. Similar statements can be found as far back as 1988 in sources such as Gary R. Collins, *Can You Trust Psychology? Exposing the Facts & the Fictions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 94–95.

¹⁹ Larry Crabb, *Effective Biblical Counseling: A Model for Helping Caring Christians Become Capable Counselors*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 42. As a note, while Crabb’s book is titled *Effective Biblical Counseling*, Crabb did not place himself within the biblical counseling movement (properly speaking), but was rather a self-styled integrationist.

²⁰ Mark R. McMinn, *Psychology, Theology and Spirituality* in Christian Counseling, AACC Counseling Library rev. ed. 1996 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2011), 125 (emphasis ours).

²¹ McMinn, *Psychology, Theology and Spirituality* in Christian Counseling, 67–68 (emphasis ours).

This language closely parallels Fesko's own appeal to God as the source of truth in both creation and Scripture. Whatever differences might remain between Fesko and McMinn, the general framework Fesko presents as an alternative to integration is already embedded within integrationist literature. Whether Fesko realizes it or not, he is parroting the exact arguments and even the same language employed by leading integrationist scholars for decades to defend and advance their specific approach to psychology in contrast to biblical counseling.

This same position also appears in the writings of John Carter and Bruce Narramore, who are widely regarded as pioneers for integrationist approaches to Christian counseling. They explain, "Most of these efforts [at integration] are based on one essential philosophical underpinning—the belief that all truth is God's truth, wherever it is found. This proposition is frequently referred to as 'the unity of truth... This unity is the basis for all attempts at integrating one's Christian faith with academic and professional pursuits.'" ²² Carter and Narramore believe this concept is "one essential philosophical underpinning" of integration and yet Fesko believes he is offering something fresh that is not integration. Again, they write, "All truth is God's truth. Consequently, the truths of psychology are not contradictory to the truths of divine revelation; in fact, they have the potential of being integrated into a harmonious whole."²³ Carter and Narramore elaborate elsewhere:

The sacred version of the Integrates [sic] model is rooted in the assumption that God is the author of all truth. Reason, revelation, and the scientific method all are seen as playing a valid role in the search for truth... Believing in the unity of truth, proponents of the Integrates model do not look at psychological and theological understandings as distinct fields of study that are essentially unrelatable. Instead, they assume that since God is the Author of all truth, and since He is the Creator of the entire world, there is ultimately only one set of explanatory hypotheses.²⁴

Gary Collins, one of the grandfathers of integration, argues the same as early as 1977:

God is truth and, it is from him that all truth springs. Truth is assumed to come from God to man in two ways which theologians call general revelation and special revelation. General revelation, sometimes called natural revelation, refers to the truths that God has revealed through nature, science, or history; and which man can know by observation, empirical investigation, logical deduction, intuition, feeling, the study of tradition, or any other technique apart from reading the Bible.²⁵

²² John D. Carter and Bruce Narramore, *The Integration of Psychology and Theology: An Introduction*, Rosemead Psychology Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), 13–14.

²³ Carter and Narramore, *Integration of Psychology and Theology*, 49.

²⁴ Carter and Narramore, *Integration of Psychology and Theology*, 103–4.

²⁵ Gary R. Collins, *The Rebuilding of Psychology: An Integration of Psychology and Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1977), 121.

Fesko	McMinn & Campbell	Carter & Narramore	Collins
<u>I suspect most will want to categorize this work as integrationist, rather than biblical, counseling. But I object to this classification... I object to the integrationist label because I am not seeking to integrate two things that do not otherwise belong together</u> (Fesko, xii). <u>The discussion, I believe, can move forward if people instead speak of using <u>all truth</u>, whether from creation or Scripture. <u>God is, of course, the source of all truth</u></u> (Fesko, xii, n14).	Integrationists attempt to <u>find truth from both sources</u>—Christian faith and psychology (McMinn and Campbell, 24).	Most of these efforts are based on one essential philosophical underpinning—the <u>belief that all truth is God’s truth, wherever it is found</u> (Carter and Narramore, 12–14). If <u>all truth is God’s truth</u>, there is a basic unity between all disciplines.	<u>God is truth and, it is from him that all truth springs</u>. Truth is assumed to come from God to man in two ways which theologians call general revelation and special revelation (Collins, 121).

Figure 2. Fesko’s claim that “all truth is God’s truth” is not an integrationist argument compared to statements made by classic integrationists.

More sources could be cited, but it is abundantly clear that for decades integrationists have been arguing for what Fesko is articulating. The difference is that these other authors (McMinn and Campbell, Carter and Narramore, and Collins) all openly describe their approach as integration, whereas Fesko does not. It is unclear to us what is motivating Fesko’s aversion to self-describing his approach in alignment with the standard scholarly sources, but his lack of accurate citations, dearth of references to more authors, and his posture of purporting to be offering a new proposal lead us to believe he lacks familiarity of the field. His appeal to “all truth,” general and special revelation, and God as the source of both does not move the discussion beyond integration but instead places him squarely within one of integration’s most established theological traditions.

Fesko Misrepresents Biblical Counseling

Fesko not only misrepresents integration in his work, but he also mischaracterizes biblical counseling. In the course of his argument, he directly critiques Jay Adams, David Powlison, Ed Welch, Heath Lambert, and the *Association of Certified Biblical Counselors*. This review will focus on his treatment of Jay Adams and Heath Lambert. Jay Adams founded the modern biblical counseling movement, and his extensive writings are easily accessible.²⁶

²⁶ Fesko critiques Powlison and Welch which places his work beyond the recent “clinically-informed biblical counseling” (CIBC) approach because advocates of this approach claim to be inheritors of Powlison’s work. More could be said about these matters, but space is limited. Even when focusing on Adams and Lambert in this essay, we had to be selective in which areas of mischaracterization we addressed. More instances of misrepresentation could be pointed out. For example, Fesko misunderstands the relationship with the body and the soul that biblical counselors have articulated but space does not permit this to be explored. We hope that others in the future will notice these mischaracterizations and write about them.

Fesko introduces Adams in the following terms, “Jay Adams (1929–2020), the founder of the nouthetic counseling approach, *a method that argues that all counseling problems lie in unconfessed sin*, has said, ‘In the area of psychiatry, science largely has given way to humanistic philosophy and gross speculation.’”²⁷

Did Adams actually espouse a view of counseling which teaches that “all counseling problems lie in unconfessed sin?” In his most famous book, *Competent to Counsel*, which helped launch the biblical counseling movement, Adams writes, “It is plain that the Scriptures never represent all sickness as the result of immediate sin or even sinful patterns of life. The book of Job protests against any such notion. The Bible teaches that the existence of all sickness, however, goes back to Adam’s sin, and in that sense all sickness may be said to be the result of sin; but only in that sense.”²⁸ From the beginning of the movement, Adams explicitly denied that every form of sickness or suffering results from a person’s immediate sin or sinful patterns of life. Fesko misrepresents Adams in an egregious way by collapsing the distinction between the particular sins of the individual counselee and the universal consequences of Adam’s fall.²⁹

This mischaracterization is made more perplexing by Fesko’s failure to engage Adams’s seminal theological work, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*.³⁰ Despite writing a book about the theological foundations of counseling and directly criticizing the theology of biblical counseling, Fesko does not cite or discuss Adams’s principal work on the theology of counseling. This omission cannot be explained by the introductory nature or relatively modest length of Fesko’s book. Fesko repeatedly places the theology of biblical counseling in the crosshairs.³¹ Once he undertakes to criticize that theology, he assumes scholarly responsibility of engaging its most obvious and consequential primary sources. If we were to write an introductory textbook on the Reformation which included material critiquing John Calvin’s theology but never referenced the *Institutes*, a Reformation scholar should be perplexed. The introductory character of such a work would not excuse the omission but rather make it more conspicuous.

Moreover, Adams did not merely hold a more nuanced position than the one Fesko attributes to him. Adams explicitly identified and rejected this precise misrepresentation:

²⁷ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, 57 (emphasis ours).

²⁸ Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), 108–9.

²⁹ “Jay Adams is well-known for his view that categorizes some bodily ailments as being ‘self-imposed’ by personal sin. His work is often presented as if he did not have a category for suffering outside of the consequences of personal sin. This reductionistic view of Adams’ perspective is unfair and unhelpful, because he clearly presented an additional category for human suffering outside of personal sin: ‘There is, however, another kind of suffering, for which one is not responsible. It is suffering as in the case of Job (or Christ, for that matter), one did not bring upon himself by his own sin.’ Even when chronic illness arises merely from the general effects of sin and not personal ones, we must be careful that we do not limit our care only to the physical suffering.” T. Dale Johnson, Jr., “No End in Sight? Biblical Help for Chronic Illness,” in *Whole Counsel, the Public and Private Ministries of the Word: Essays in Honor of Jay E. Adams*, ed. Donn R. Arms and Dave Swavely (Memphis, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2020), 177.

³⁰ Jay E. Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling: More than Redemption* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979).

³¹ See for example, Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, xii, n14, 22, n22, 57–61, 67–69, 74, 76–78.

Now, let me say one thing at the outset and be done with it. The notion that is so widely spread abroad (sometimes by those who ought to know better), that nouthetic [i.e., biblical] counseling considers all human problems the direct result of actual sins of particular counselees, is a gross misrepresentation of the facts. From the beginning (cf. *Competent to Counsel*, 1970, pp. 108, 109) I have stated clearly that not all problems of counselees are due to their own sins. In *Competent*, I cited the cases of Job and the man born blind (John 9:1ff.). *Those who persist in attributing to me views that I do not hold are culpable. Either they ought to know better before they speak and write (by reading the material available—nouthetic counseling has not been done in a corner!), or they should have investigated on their own what they accepted as fact (but was actually only gossip).*³²

Adams’s statement is especially relevant because it predates Fesko’s book by decades and directly addresses the exact claim Fesko repeats. Additional works by Adams could be cited to demonstrate Fesko is inaccurate in his understanding, but they are not necessary to prove Fesko is, as Adams noted in 1979, “culpable.” Adams is correct that his critics, including Fesko, “ought to know better.” At minimum, Fesko should have investigated Adams’s actual position before using it to define and criticize the “nouthetic” counseling approach.

Fesko	Adams, <i>A Theology of Christian Counseling</i>
Jay Adams (1929–2020), the founder of the nouthetic counseling approach, <u>a method that argues that all counseling problems lie in unconfessed sin</u>, has said, ‘In the area of psychiatry, science largely has given way to humanistic philosophy and gross speculation (Fesko, 57).	The notion that is so widely spread abroad (sometimes by those who ought to know better), that nouthetic counseling considers all human problems the direct result of actual sins of particular counselees, is a gross misrepresentation of the facts. From the beginning (cf. <i>Competent to Counsel</i> , 1970, pp. 108, 109) <u>I have stated clearly that not all problems of counselees are due to their own sins</u> (Adams, 140).

Figure 3. Fesko’s claim that Adams believed all counseling issues stem from unconfessed sin compared to Adams’s prior rejection of the claim.

Adams’s charge of culpability should not be applied casually. Nevertheless, his underlying scholarly principle is sound: an author bears responsibility for accurately understanding a position before publicly criticizing it. Fesko either did not consult the readily available sources in which Adams clarified his position or failed to represent those sources accurately. In either case, his characterization of Adams falls short of the standards expected in a scholarly treatment of biblical counseling.

³² Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 140 (emphasis ours).

Common Grace and Inaccurate Observations from Fesko

Mark McMinn, Stanton Jones, and Jay Adams are not the only counselors whom Fesko misrepresents. Fesko devotes considerable attention to critiquing Heath Lambert. Although space does not permit an examination of every instance, his treatment of Lambert's position on common grace provides another substantial example of inaccurate interpretation. Fesko writes:

Why does Lambert pit common grace against special grace? He says, "There are things more important than common grace." We can restate this claim in broader terms to see if his notion still holds true. Take the statement, "There are things more important than _____," and then fill in the blank with any of the following: creation, general revelation, natural law, human reason. Is redemption more important than creation? Is Scripture more important than general revelation? Is faith more important than reason? Quite simply, no.³³

There are problems with Fesko's reading of Lambert, but the most glaring error is his failure to consider the context in which Lambert uses the term *important*.

It is obvious Lambert believes there are distinctions between common grace and special grace, but we are not aware of any instance in which he pits common grace against special grace. Perhaps he does this somewhere, but Fesko fails to demonstrate it. Instead, Fesko's argument is that Lambert has pitted common grace against special grace because Lambert believes that, when it comes to counseling, there are "things more important than common grace."³⁴ Fesko interprets Lambert as making an absolute theological comparison between common grace and special grace. Lambert, however, is discussing the relative priority and practical relevance of different kinds of information within the particular task of counseling.

Lambert organizes this portion of *A Theology of Biblical Counseling* around the need to prioritize biblical truth. Significantly, Fesko draws the quotation from the chapter on common grace but fails to acknowledge the context, such as the following section entitled "Prioritizing Biblical Truth above Secular Articulations" and the section entitled "Information That Is Peripheral to the Discipline of Counseling." Lambert writes:

The doctrine of common grace teaches that God allows unbelievers to know information about all kinds of things, including science. It does not mean that all of that information is equally *relevant* for all people and all disciplines. It is important to consider this idea in the face of accusations against biblical counselors that they shun certain kinds of scientific information.³⁵

³³ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, 61.

³⁴ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, 60–61.

³⁵ Heath Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling: The Doctrinal Foundations of Counseling Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 93.

Lambert is therefore discussing *importance* as it relates to what is relevant to counseling ministry. Lambert is familiar with the accusations that biblical counselors reject common grace, and he spends a significant amount of time explaining his position. He does not deny that common grace enables unbelievers to discover genuine knowledge. Nor does he suggest that scientific knowledge is necessarily false or worthless. His narrower claim is that not every true piece of information is equally pertinent to every counseling situation. Lambert continues, “The point is that, like most biblical counselors, I have access to all kinds of information that I believe to be true and interesting but beside the point when it comes to counseling. The biblical belief in God’s common grace does not require us to believe that all true information is equally relevant for the discipline of counseling.”³⁶

Lambert further argues that all counselors must determine which information should receive priority in their work. This process of selection is not unique to Christians or biblical counselors:

This conviction is not unique to biblical counselors. It is also shared by the vast majority of those in the mental health field who do counseling without any medical training whatsoever. When biblical counselors do their work, they are engaging in a conversation about the questions, problems, and troubles of their counselee and seeking to offer answers, solutions, and help. All manner of information may be true and available to a counselor that is not relevant.³⁷

Lambert’s argument is therefore not that common grace must be opposed to special grace, but that the truth of a proposition does not automatically establish its relevance to a particular counseling situation.

Lambert again makes himself unmistakably clear: “The issue concerns the nature of central information vital to a task, such as counseling, versus *peripheral information*. Biblical counselors do not reject neuroscience. Instead, they have rightly put their emphasis on certain practical knowledge to help them do their counseling.”³⁸ Fesko has pulled Lambert’s statement out of context and attributed a perspective about common grace to Lambert that does not belong to him. By interpreting *important* as an absolute judgment about the theological value of common grace, Fesko constructs a false dilemma between common and special grace. Lambert’s actual concern is far more modest: some truths are more immediately relevant than others to the discipline and practice of counseling. Does anyone who has ever sat in a counseling case think any differently?

³⁶ Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 94.

³⁷ Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 96.

³⁸ Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 97 (emphasis ours).

Lastly, Fesko's complaint against Lambert is not practical. In counseling someone with devastating grief, truths expressed in biblical passages such as Psalms 23 and 46 are obviously more important than countless other facts found in creation. Common grace might be able to help researchers uncover fascinating information about the breeding activities of the wrasse basslet fish in the Great Barrier Reef, but this information is not important (truly, irrelevant and peripheral) when it comes to helping someone understand suffering, seek comfort in God, and endure sorrow faithfully.

It is a bizarre suggestion to argue all truth is relevant to helping people overcome sin. Such an idea is plainly untenable. Suppose a husband seeks counseling to overcome an addiction to pornography. The fact that Jupiter's Great Red Spot is a storm larger than Earth and is gradually shrinking may be true but is neither necessary nor helpful for the man to forsake pornography. How do we know this? One reason is that Christians have resisted and overcome sexual sin for centuries without possessing any astronomical knowledge.³⁹

In practice, theologians and ministers routinely recognize some truths take priority over others in particular contexts. Fesko himself acknowledges this principle: "This chapter defends the thesis that God reveals himself in general (creation) and special (Scripture) revelation, which means that counselors have two sources from which to draw God's truth. Scripture, however, *usually takes interpretive priority* over general revelation."⁴⁰ Fesko therefore grants that theological categories do not function with equal priority. In his own framework, Scripture "usually takes interpretive priority over general revelation."

Fesko's misinterpretation of Lambert obscures and stifles a more substantive debate that could otherwise take place. One real issue at stake is the question: Why does Fesko say Scripture "usually" takes priority? Why only usually? Should Scripture not always take interpretive priority over general revelation and common grace? This is a conversation worth having, but it is hindered by Fesko's inaccurate presentation of Lambert's position.

³⁹ In fact, this is an argument Adams himself makes. "Where were Christians before Freud? Up a tree? Were they bereft of all crucial knowledge about man's relationship to God and his neighbor? Was the church's counseling a hopeless, primitive, stone-age activity that should have disappeared with flint knives? Were Christians shut up to sinful, harmful living before the advent of psychotherapy? Did God withhold truth for living until our present age? Or did men like Paul, Peter, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Spurgeon and many others have something worthwhile to say to their converts and parishioners about how to live in a sinful world and about how to solve problems?" Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 16.

Lambert echoes Adams when he states, "Prior to the eighteenth century, if you were a Christian and you had problems in your life and had to talk to someone, you would look to a pastor or other religious leader. There was hardly anywhere else to go. All that began to change in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Since that time, a culturally credible alternative to Scripture has arisen as the source of wisdom to help people respond to their problems in living. That alternative is the counseling interventions offered by secular therapy." Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 43. For a deeper understanding of this shift towards therapeutic interventions within pastoral care see E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1983).

⁴⁰ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, 14 (emphasis ours). See also xxiii.

There has been extensive debate over general revelation, common grace, and psychology in the counseling world, and Fesko gives no indication he is aware of this conversation. Regardless of where one stands in the debate, the questions Fesko asks do not make sense when one reads Lambert—even when one disagrees with Lambert theologically. For example, Fesko asks, “Does Lambert mean to suggest that there are truths about the world that do not come from God?”⁴¹ This does not appear to be a rhetorical question. Fesko seems genuinely uncertain about Lambert’s position. But Lambert’s answer is a resounding “no” because he clearly places the knowledge of truth in the category of common grace—a gift from God Himself. Lambert has written, “The doctrine of common grace allows unbelievers to know true things about the world even as they reject the God who creates those truths and reveals himself in them.”⁴² Lambert therefore does not believe that any truth exists independently of God. His position is that unbelievers may know genuine truths about God and God’s world despite refusing to acknowledge the God from whom those truths come.

Fesko next asks, “Moreover, when general revelation reveals things about God, are these revealed truths irrelevant to counseling?” Again, Lambert’s answer is unambiguously “no.” Lambert makes this clear when he says, “General revelation is an authoritative display of the character of God in the things that have been made. It is binding on all people. Its authority is not held in check by another reality. If we were to place the findings of psychology under the doctrine of general revelation, we would imbue it with a sense of authority that it does not deserve.”⁴³ Lambert explicitly affirms that general revelation has authority and is binding on all people—including counselees. His concern is not that general revelation lacks authority or relevance. Rather, he rejects the identification of psychological conclusions with general revelation itself. In Lambert’s view, general revelation is God’s authoritative self-disclosure through creation, whereas psychological theories are fallible human interpretations of that created order. Whether one agrees with this distinction or not, Fesko should represent it accurately before criticizing it.

⁴¹ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, 22n22.

⁴² Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 328.

⁴³ Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 328. Lambert defines general revelation as “the reality that God shows himself to the world in the things he has made so that the world is without excuse in their rejection of him. General revelation, therefore, condemns mankind by an obvious declaration of the existence and goodness of God, which they reject in their sin.” Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 326–27. Here, Lambert concurs with Fesko’s own definition of general revelation: “General revelation is God’s revelation in creation... General revelation teaches us that God exists and discloses attributes such as his goodness, power, and wisdom. God has embedded this truth in the wider creation and in human beings since they bear the divine image.” While Fesko defines general revelation accurately, he presents a slippery application of that definition when he says, “Counselors can use the truths of general revelation in counseling so long as they read the book of nature through the corrective lenses of Scripture to counter the noetic effects of sin.” Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, 26. Lambert offers a correction: “General revelation is not what your cardiologist knows about how to do heart surgery... General revelation is not what a psychologist knows about human functionality. God reveals his existence and his glory in the beating of human heart, in the wonder and joy of animals, and in all the ways that human beings function. Unbelievers are likely to know a great deal about these things, often knowing far more than Christians. The ability of people to know these things is not due to the theological reality of general revelation, but rather to the doctrine of common grace.” Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 328.

Fesko continues and asks the question, “Is not all truth relevant to helping people overcome sin?” Lambert has already answered this question directly. “The doctrine of common grace teaches that God allows unbelievers to know information about all kinds of things, including science. *It does not mean that all of that information is equally relevant for all people and all disciplines.* It is important to consider this idea in the face of accusations against biblical counselors that they shun certain kinds of scientific information.”⁴⁴ Lambert’s answer is straightforward. All truth comes from God, but not every truth is equally relevant to every person, problem, or discipline. He does not reject scientific knowledge, nor does he deny that unbelievers can discover truth. He denies only that the truth of a claim automatically makes it pertinent to the work of counseling or to the task of overcoming a particular sin.

The problem with Fesko’s questions is not that he is disagreeing with Lambert. The problem is Fesko seemingly doesn’t know Lambert’s decade-old answers. Disagreement and debate are acceptable features of scholarship; ignorance of primary sources and misrepresentation of an interlocutor’s position are not.

Fesko believes he is making a significant claim that “there is truth in psychology that is worth collecting and employing not because it comes from psychology but because it is true.” He writes as though Lambert rejects this principle. However, Lambert repeatedly affirms in numerous publications that psychologists can discover true things. For example, “God enables the minds of unbelievers to operate and to be able to know true things. Secular psychologists are able to make discoveries that are often true and helpful. Christian theology requires biblical counselors to be grateful for this true information.”⁴⁵ Elsewhere, Lambert makes the same point: “Christians must be thankful for the display of God’s common grace that leads many experts in the field of secular psychology to know much true information, from which Christians can learn a great deal.”⁴⁶

Lambert therefore does not deny that secular psychologists can discover truth. He explicitly affirms that they can produce information that is true, helpful, and instructive for Christians. His disagreement with integrationists concerns the authority, interpretation, relevance, and proper use of psychological claims—not whether unbelieving psychologists can know anything true.

Fesko’s criticisms of biblical counseling may sound persuasive to readers unfamiliar with the movement’s primary literature. However, those who have read the full discussion of Lambert and Adams in context know that Fesko is burning straw men. Lambert’s view is consistent with

⁴⁴ Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 93 (emphasis ours).

⁴⁵ Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 70.

⁴⁶ Heath Lambert, *95 Theses for an Authentically Christian Commitment to Counseling* (Jacksonville, FL: Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, 2017), art. 41.

that of Jay Adams, who clearly maintained that biblical counselors can learn from unbelieving psychologists.

In his 1977 book *What About Nouthetic Counseling?* Adams answers the question, “Don’t you think that we can learn something from psychologists?” His response is worth quoting at length:

Yes, we can learn a lot; I certainly have. That answer surprised you, didn’t it? If it did, you have been led to believe, no doubt, that nouthetic [i.e., biblical] counselors are obscurantists who see no good in psychology...

While I can understand how the idea that I am opposed to psychology and psychologists could have gotten abroad because of my strong statements about the failures of psychologists as counselors, *a careful reading* of my materials will make it clear that I do not object to psychology or to psychologists as such. My objections are directed solely to so-called clinical and counseling psychology in which most of what is done I consider not to be the work or province of psychology at all. That I deplore psychology’s venture into the realms of value, behavior and attitudinal change because it is an intrusion upon the work of the minister, in no way lessens my interest, support and encouragement of the legitimate work of psychology.

I have profited greatly, for instance, from the results of the work done at the Harvard sleep labs (and elsewhere). This sleep study I consider to be a valid and worthwhile enterprise for psychology. Indeed, I wish all psychologists would go back to such work. But when psychologists attempt to change men, although they have no warrant from God to do so, no standard by which to determine what are proper or deviant attitudes or behavior, no concept of what man should look like, and no power by which to achieve the inner changes of the heart and thoughts that are so necessary, I cannot help but be concerned.

I would not oppose psychiatrists either if they were doing the important medical work that it is necessary to do to help people whose behavior is adversely affected by organic causes.⁴⁷

Adams’s position is unmistakable. He does not oppose psychology or psychologists as such, nor does he deny that Christians can learn from their research. His objections concern the movement of psychology from empirical description into moral evaluation, behavioral prescription, and the attempted transformation of persons.

One may disagree with Adams’s boundaries, his understanding of psychology, or his conclusions regarding the proper domain of counseling. Those are legitimate matters for scholarly debate. What cannot responsibly be claimed, however, is that Adams believed

⁴⁷ 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.

psychology had nothing true or useful to offer. His own words directly contradict such a characterization.

The same is true of Lambert. Both authors affirm that unbelievers can discover genuine truths about human beings and the created world. Their concern is not whether such truths exist but how those claims should be evaluated, what authority they possess, and whether they are relevant to the counselor's task. Fesko obscures these distinctions and consequently presents his affirmation of truth in psychology as an alternative to biblical counseling when leading biblical counselors have long affirmed the same basic principle.

Adams's appeal to "a careful reading" (see the quotation above) is therefore especially pertinent to *Theological Foundations for Counseling*. Fesko has not demonstrated the sustained engagement with primary sources necessary to support his characterizations. Scholarship welcomes disagreement over psychology, general revelation, common grace, and counseling methodology. It does not excuse the neglect of central texts or the repetition of caricatures that those texts explicitly correct.

Who Is Misunderstanding Sufficiency?

Fesko writes at length about the sufficiency of Scripture and its implications for counseling. He states, "The historical doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture has always left room for the use of extrabiblical knowledge so long as it rests under the authority of Scripture. Yet this is not the stance that some advocates of biblical counseling take."⁴⁸ The difficulty with this claim is that biblical counselors do affirm the legitimate use of extrabiblical knowledge. It, in fact, *is* the position *all* biblical counseling advocates take!

Counseling necessarily involves information not found in the Bible. For example, counselors can only help people by listening to them share extrabiblical information about their personal problems, present circumstances, family histories, temptations, and suffering. The core issue has always been where the counselor obtains wisdom *for counseling*. Does it come from the wisdom of man or the wisdom of God? Does it come from the fount of all wisdom—Jesus Christ (Col 2:3)—or is the wisdom of Jesus in His Word lacking and insufficient? Or must the wisdom revealed in His Word be supplemented because it is insufficient for the counselor's task?

The Bible is not deficient in wisdom, nor can its wisdom be exhausted: "I have seen a limit to all perfection, but your commandment is exceedingly broad. Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts" (Psalm 119:96–100).

⁴⁸ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, 76. Here, Fesko references Lambert again.

What evidence, then, does Fesko provide that biblical counselors leave no room for extrabiblical knowledge? His central example is his treatment of Heath Lambert's interpretation of John Frame. Fesko quotes Lambert as follows: "When Frame says that the Scripture is sufficient for plumbing, he means that God has given to plumbers a sufficient amount of revelation to know how to do their work in a way that honors him."⁴⁹ Fesko then responds,

First, Frame does not describe the historic understanding of the doctrine of sufficiency. Recall that the framers of the Westminster Confession specifically focused the scope of Scripture's sufficiency on salvation and the duties that God requires of his people; they describe Scripture in this respect as a rule for life. Does Scripture contain words sufficient for all of life as Frame attests? Yes. Does it have all the words that the plumber and the theologian need? Yes, for salvation and the duties God requires of plumbers and theologians. Scripture does not, however, contain any instruction whatsoever aimed directly at plumbing as a vocation. Should a plumber use PVC or copper pipe? A traditional or a tankless water heater? What type of insulation should pipes have? To borrow language from the Westminster Confession, these are matters that are "common to human actions and societies," and plumbers can use reason, judgment, and common sense to make plumbing decisions as well as learning gleaned from civil engineering, material science, and building codes.⁵⁰

This passage is central to Fesko's argument. It is at the core of all the debate and is a prime example of how Fesko misreads the sources he cites. Fesko argues that Lambert and Frame understand the doctrine of sufficiency to mean the plumber has all the technical information needed to fix the pipes in someone's house. The problem is that Lambert and Frame explicitly deny the position Fesko attributes to them. What Fesko quotes above is immediately followed by this clarification:

When Frame says that the Scripture is sufficient for plumbing, he means that God has given to plumbers a sufficient amount of revelation to know how to do their work *in a way that honors him*. This does not mean that the Bible is a guide for all information about plumbing, because it is not. There is, indeed, very little specific information about plumbing, but a great deal of specific information about plumbing *in the world*.⁵¹

The contrast could hardly be clearer. Fesko argues that Lambert claims Scripture tells plumbers whether to use PVC or copper pipes. But the original context shows Lambert states the opposite: the Bible contains very little technical information about plumbing, while the world contains a great deal of such information. Lambert's claim is that Scripture provides the divine revelation necessary for plumbers to understand how to honor God in their vocation, not that it provides every technical detail necessary to repair a sink or install a water heater.

⁴⁹ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, 76–77.

⁵⁰ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, 77.

⁵¹ Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 50.

Frame and Lambert therefore distinguish between the moral and theological direction required to perform a vocation faithfully and the technical information required to perform its particular tasks. Scripture does not contain the engineering knowledge necessary to build a bridge, the medical knowledge necessary to perform surgery, or the technical knowledge necessary to install a plumbing system. It does, however, provide the divine instruction necessary for engineers, physicians, and plumbers to honor God through their work. God has given His people what they need “for life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3), and construction workers can glorify God in whatever they do (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Fesko’s critique thus addresses a position that Lambert expressly rejects on the very page Fesko cites. Biblical counselors do not claim that the Bible is a technical manual for plumbing, aerospace engineering, medicine, or any other vocation. Plumbing is not a ministry of the Word. Counseling, however, differs from plumbing insofar as it directly addresses questions of faith, worship, moral responsibility, suffering, repentance, wisdom, and progressive sanctification. Counseling is therefore a theological discipline in a way that plumbing is not.⁵² The Word of God claims to provide what believers need for sanctification: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17).

The kinds of problems counseling seeks to interpret and address are substantially coterminous with the matters to which Scripture speaks authoritatively. The Bible does not claim to be a sufficient textbook on astronomy, engineering, or medicine. Biblical counselors contend that it does claim comprehensive authority and sufficiency for the theological and moral domain in which counseling properly operates.

The situation is made only more bizarre by a citation from Fesko in which he writes, “Elsewhere Lambert seems to backtrack when he writes, ‘I am aware of no person in the biblical counseling movement who has argued that the Bible contains every word about every topic’ (Lambert, *Common Grace*, 68). So, while it does not address every topic, apparently it does address plumbing.”⁵³ Lambert is not backtracking. He never claims that the Bible contains every word about every topic, including plumbing. His earlier statement explicitly denies that Scripture provides a complete guide to technical plumbing information. He is not backtracking at all due to

⁵² “What is counseling? From God’s point of view, counseling is as broad as whatever proceeds from ‘the tongue.’ Our every word communicates values, intentions, and worldview; ‘the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart’ (Matt. 12:34). Counseling, then, is either wise or foolish. Some words are destructive, misleading, un-nourishing (Eph. 4:29a); others are constructive, timely, true, loving, grace-giving (Eph. 4:15, 29b). None are neutral. More narrowly, counseling is any conversation intended to help someone solve a problem... *What sense should counselors make of the problems they address?*... What’s really happening in lives? What ought to change? What ought to be encouraged? All counseling is value-laden. Counseling is inescapably a moral and theological matter. To pretend otherwise is to be naïve, deceived, or deceitful. Whether implicit or explicit, theologies and counseling systems differ... All counseling explicitly or implicitly deals with questions of redemption, faith, identity, and meaning. The redemptions offered differ.” David Powlison, *Speaking Truth in Love: Counsel in Community* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2005), 160–61 (emphasis original).

⁵³ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, 79.

the fact that Fesko has set up a strawman. The Bible is *not* sufficient for plumbing precisely in the same way it *is* sufficient for counseling. This argument has been fundamental for the sufficiency of Scripture that the biblical counseling movement has made since its inception. And this is why Lambert makes the distinction between material sufficiency in the *general* sense and in the *particular* sense.⁵⁴

As they have written, Frame and Lambert believe God has given us all the divine words we need for plumbing *to honor God*. Lambert is in print resolutely rejecting the notion that God has given us all the details necessary for how to assemble a water tank or do the detailed task of plumbing. Unfortunately, this is not the final strawman that Fesko creates, but it could be the straw that breaks his book.

Fesko's chapter on sufficiency is critical to review carefully. Fesko asserts, "Lambert foists a false dichotomy on counselors when he argues that one must choose between viewing the Bible either as insufficient or as sufficient. He makes this claim because he *misrepresents* the doctrine of sufficiency."⁵⁵ The accusation of misrepresentation is serious.⁵⁶ To misrepresent a position is to give a false or misleading account of it. Determining whether Lambert has misrepresented the historical doctrine requires two steps: first, identifying how Fesko defines the doctrine; and second, comparing that definition with what biblical counselors actually affirm.

Thankfully, Fesko provides a clear definition of sufficiency: "This chapter's thesis is that the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture teaches that the Bible is sufficient for believing in God and for teaching Christians what their duties are to him. The sufficiency of Scripture does not mean that counselors should use only Scripture in counseling."⁵⁷

Perhaps surprisingly, biblical counselors *affirm* this definition. They understand counseling as an aspect of discipleship and that God has provided us everything necessary for Christians to fulfill their duties before Him. Furthermore, biblical counselors affirm what Fesko says, "The sufficiency of Scripture does not mean that counselors should use only Scripture in counseling." It is impossible to have a meaningful conversation with someone and not use extra biblical information. For example, in order to have an effective loving meeting with an individual, it is a good (and biblical) idea to learn their name, relationships, history, and presenting concerns. Where integrationists overstep is by seeking to incorporate secular *interventions and prescriptions* into their counsel.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ See Lambert's explanation of the distinction in Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 48–52.

⁵⁵ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, 68 (emphasis ours).

⁵⁶ We are aware of and understand the gravity and irony of the fact that we have repeatedly charged Fesko with misrepresentation of counseling issues throughout this review. We believe the evidence confirms that Fesko has misrepresented multiple people and readers can fact check each citation in their original contexts.

⁵⁷ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, 69.

⁵⁸ Adams, *What about Nouthetic Counseling?*, 73–75.

Fesko similarly asserts that “Scripture’s sufficiency does not mean that counselors either cannot or should not consult extrabiblical sources in the counseling process.”⁵⁹ Again, biblical counselors do not deny this claim. A counselor helping a couple think through *in vitro* fertilization and other reproductive technologies should consult extrabiblical medical and scientific sources in order to understand the procedures under consideration. Such information is necessary for identifying the moral questions accurately, even though it does not itself provide the theological and ethical wisdom by which those questions are resolved. In fact, Lambert and other biblical counselors wholeheartedly agree with Fesko when he writes, “Sufficiency does not rule out extrabiblical resources but rather objects to placing these sources on an equal footing with Scripture.”⁶⁰ The disagreement concerns neither the existence nor the legitimate use of extrabiblical information. It concerns the authority, interpretation, and proper role of that information in counseling.

While we do not seek to belabor the point, but since Fesko makes such a significant issue concerning this matter of extrabiblical information, it is important to include more examples of him misunderstanding the biblical counseling position. He writes:

Scripture is not a rule for medical doctors or mathematicians. To update Burgess’s observation, does Scripture teach algebra or geometry? Does Scripture address neuroscience or human anatomy? More importantly, did God specifically give Scripture for the purpose of medicine or mathematics? No. Burgess admits that acknowledging Scripture’s specific scope does not detract from its perfection ... God did not design the Scriptures to speak to everything; thus, to say that Scripture is not a rule for medicine or math does not mean Scripture is deficient... Likewise, Scripture teaches neither foreign languages, such as Latin, nor astronomy. Scripture testifies to the existence of the cosmos—the stars, moon, and sun—but it does not explain their nature, orbits, or sizes, for example.⁶¹

Fesko is correct that Scripture does not explain algebra, human anatomy, foreign languages, or planetary orbits. But no leading biblical counselor claims that it does. These

⁵⁹ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, 69.

⁶⁰ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, 71. See, for example, the following biblical counselors from both ACBC and CCEF who have articulated in writing how biblical counselors do not reject extrabiblical information (and thus actually agree with Fesko’s claim): “‘Are you saying, then, that psychology has no value when it comes to counseling?’ No, I am not. I believe there is a place for Christians to utilize, in a very limited way, some of the research of secular descriptive psychology without resorting to integration... Many helpful resources are utilized in the process of exegeting (and ultimately applying) the biblical text. Interpreters use the disciplines of archaeology, history, science, linguistics, logic, geography, and textual criticism to assist them in elucidating the meaning of the text. I believe we can use certain types of psychological data in much the same way theologians use these ‘uninspired’ disciplines—as tools to help us better elucidate the meaning of a text and perhaps even to motivate (provoke) us to search out more biblical truth.” Lou Priolo, *Presuppositions of Biblical Counseling: What Historical Biblical Counselors Really Believe* (Conway, AR: Grace & Truth Books, 2023), 83–84.

“Extrabiblical information—of many kinds—is always an integral part of biblical counseling. The Bible then becomes a lens through which we gain the wisdom to interpret all of our experiences and things observed in the world. This has broad implications. Biblical counseling must be careful that we do not denigrate the wide-ranging wisdom and life experience that are necessary for skilled biblical counseling.” Winston T. Smith, “Common Ground and Course Corrections: An Essay Review of Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 28, no. 1 (2014): 44.

⁶¹ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, 72–73.

observations therefore do not refute the biblical counseling position. They instead give the appearance of force by responding to a view that the movement's leading writers have explicitly denied. Fesko is establishing a straw man that makes his argument ring true for those who are ignorant with the field of biblical counseling.

Fesko believes Lambert holds such a view because Lambert writes, "The Bible was written to be a comprehensive guide to all of human life and functioning;" to which Fesko responds, "Sufficiency does not mean that Scripture addresses science, art, medicine, or business—it does not address every circumstance in life. It does not preclude the use of extrabiblical creeds and confessions."⁶² Fesko claims that Lambert's writings stand in contrast to the historic definition of sufficiency. The contrast, however, depends upon equating *comprehensive* with *exhaustive*. These terms are not synonymous, and the distinction between them is a central feature of the biblical counseling position. Fesko is correct that there is misrepresentation taking place, but he has identified the wrong individual. Lambert is not misrepresenting the historical doctrine of sufficiency. Rather, Fesko is misrepresenting not only Lambert, but the entire biblical counseling project.

Later, Fesko proceeds to write, "Just because Scripture does not address everything exhaustively in the Christian life does not mean it is insufficient."⁶³ Lambert fully agrees. Fesko appears to be assuming Lambert means "exhaustive" when Lambert said "comprehensive." Lambert fully agrees with Fesko that Scripture does not address everything *exhaustively* and this is not a problem for sufficiency. The biblical counseling movement has written extensively on the difference between the terms "comprehensive" and "exhaustive."⁶⁴ Biblical counselors do not claim that Scripture addresses every subject exhaustively. They claim that it addresses the domain of counseling comprehensively by providing the authoritative categories, interpretations, purposes, and moral direction necessary for understanding and helping people. This is a key element of the biblical counseling position that Fesko fails to understand in his arguments because he either doesn't acknowledge the difference or is unfamiliar with the material.

Regarding the classic biblical counseling distinction between *comprehensive* vs. *exhaustive*, Lambert writes, "It is not necessary that the Bible comprehensively address biological issues and medical care to be authoritative and sufficient for counseling conversations. It is not necessary that the Bible agree with, or even address, the findings of modern psychology to be sufficient and authoritative for counseling conversations. It is not necessary for the Bible to

⁶² Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, 74.

⁶³ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, 75.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Heath Lambert, "Introduction: The Sufficiency of Scripture, the Biblical Counseling Movement, and the Purpose of This Book," in *Counseling the Hard Cases: True Stories Illustrating the Sufficiency of God's Resources in Scripture*, ed. Stuart Scott and Heath Lambert (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2015), 20–23; Greg Norfleet, "Planting a Church—on the Fly!," the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 24, no. 3 (2006): 35–45; David Powlison, "Critiquing Modern Integrationists," the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 9, no. 3 (1993): 32–33; John Street, "Why Biblical Counseling and Not Psychology?," in *Counseling: How to Counsel Biblically*, ed. John MacArthur (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 39.

be an exhaustive source of information to be comprehensively authoritative and sufficient for the work of counseling.”⁶⁵

Lambert did not invent this concept. He explicitly connects this teaching to David Powlison. Lambert writes,

Powlison went on to explain how the Bible gives master categories and explanations which are sufficient to help us understand and help people with any problem that can be faced and counseled in this life. These master categories—these large-scale interpretive themes—ensure Scripture’s sufficiency for counseling. No single theory—or any collection of them—can ever reach the impossible standard of being exhaustive. No counseling theorist—not Freud, Adler, Jung, Maslow, or anyone else—has ever created an exhaustive counseling theory. They created theories that were system constituting. Their theories were general in nature and limited in scope. Details got filled in as their theories were worked out over time. Scripture has enduring and all-encompassing relevance—it is sufficient—precisely because it is not exhaustive but rather comprehensive.⁶⁶

Powlison himself refutes the position that Fesko is claiming biblical counselors believe. Powlison writes,

We affirm that wise counseling requires ongoing practical theological labor in order to understand Scripture, people, and situations. We must continually develop our personal character, case-wise understanding of persons, pastoral skills, and institutional structures. We deny that the Bible intends to serve as an encyclopedia of proof texts containing all facts about people and the diversity of problems in living.⁶⁷

Powlison immediately grounds this in the historic understanding of sufficiency and says,

We affirm that the ideas, goals, and practices of counseling must cohere explicitly with the historic creeds, confessions, hymns, and other wise writings that express the faith and practice of the church of Jesus Christ. We deny that the wisdom of the past sufficiently defines the issues of counseling ministry for today, as if the requisite wisdom were simply a matter of recovering past achievements.⁶⁸

Powlison therefore affirms the legitimate use of extrabiblical creeds and other historical writings. At the same time, he denies that historical resources relieve contemporary counselors of

⁶⁵ Lambert, *95 Theses for an Authentically Christian Commitment to Counseling*, arts. 33, 34, 35.

⁶⁶ Lambert, “Introduction: The Sufficiency of Scripture, the Biblical Counseling Movement, and the Purpose of This Book,” 22–23.

⁶⁷ David Powlison, “Affirmations & Denials: A Proposed Definition of Biblical Counseling,” the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 19, no. 1 (2000): 19.

⁶⁸ Powlison, “Affirmations & Denials,” 19.

the responsibility to undertake fresh theological and pastoral work. His position is neither biblicism nor an encyclopedic account of Scripture.

Fesko claims biblical counselors have misrepresented the doctrine of sufficiency because they reject extrabiblical information. But this does not match the repeated and sustained argumentation found in print. Lambert, for example, responds directly to this objection:

The problem with this objection is that it is hypothetical. It is a potential critique, but not an actual one. I can say this because there is nothing about an embrace of the sufficiency of Scripture for counseling that requires someone to reject the presence of other sources of knowledge outside the Bible. While some may choose to embrace the sufficiency of Scripture and reject extra-biblical information, it is not necessary to do this. In fact, I am aware of no biblical counselor who has made this error.⁶⁹

This quotation appears in *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, a work Fesko cites repeatedly. Lambert's position is unambiguous: affirming the sufficiency of Scripture for counseling does not require rejecting knowledge outside Scripture. Although an individual could affirm sufficiency and also reject extrabiblical information, such a rejection does not follow logically from the doctrine itself.

Fesko nevertheless describes Lambert's later statement in *Common Grace* as a retreat from his earlier position: "Elsewhere Lambert seems to backtrack when he writes, 'I am aware of no person in the biblical counseling movement who has argued that the Bible contains every word about every topic' (Lambert, *Common Grace*, 68). So, while it does not address every topic, apparently it does address plumbing."⁷⁰

That quotation is from Lambert's later book, *Common Grace*, which was written almost a decade after *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*. Fesko says Lambert is backtracking from his *A Theology of Biblical Counseling* book. But it is impossible to backtrack if Lambert's position remains the same.

⁶⁹ Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 53.

⁷⁰ Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, 77n23.

Compare the statements which are over a decade apart:

Fesko	Lambert, <i>A Theology of Biblical Counseling</i>	Lambert, <i>Common Grace</i>
<u>The historical doctrine of sufficiency of Scripture has always left room for the use of extrabiblical knowledge so long as it rests under the authority of Scripture. Yet this is not the stance that some advocates of biblical counseling take.</u> Lambert, for example... (Fesko, 76)	While some may choose to embrace the sufficiency of Scripture and reject extra-biblical information, it is not necessary to do this. In fact, I am aware of no biblical counselor who has made this error... <u>The biblical counseling position is that there is much true information that exists outside the Bible</u> —that found in the sciences, for example (Lambert, 53).	<u>I am aware of no person in the biblical counseling movement who has argued that the Bible contains every word about every topic</u> (Lambert, 68).

Figure 4. Statements by Lambert on the comprehensive nature of Scripture’s sufficiency compared to Fesko’s assertion that biblical counselors reject extrabiblical knowledge.

Lambert never claims the Bible gives every word for every topic, and that includes plumbing. He openly states the opposite when he continues addressing this objection by writing:

From the very beginning of the biblical counseling movement, leaders have made clear their belief in the legitimacy of sources of information outside of Scripture. Biblical counselors do not ignore or outright reject extra-biblical sources or counseling insights. In fact, I would argue that biblical counselors have demonstrated a high level of theological sophistication about the use of extra-biblical data, often greater than our brothers to the theological left. The biblical counseling position is that there is much true information that exists outside the Bible—that found in the sciences, for example. Any objections from biblical counselors to data outside Scripture have been objections about the relevance of that information to biblical counseling, the accuracy of that information, and the degree to which that information encroaches on territory that rightly belongs to the realm of Christian ministry.⁷¹

This is not an obscure qualification buried in an unrelated work. It is a direct explanation of how biblical counselors understand extrabiblical knowledge. Fesko cites this book repeatedly but the original work is unrecognizable in how Fesko references it. Lambert was not unclear. Simply put, the Lambert whom Fesko criticized is not recognizable in Lambert’s own writings.

How, then, could Fesko so consistently mischaracterize Lambert, Adams, and the broader biblical counseling movement? The available evidence does not permit a definitive answer. One possible explanation is that insufficient engagement with the primary literature led him to accept established caricatures and then interpret the relevant sources through those assumptions.

⁷¹ Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 53–54.

Another possibility is that his reliance upon readers and conversation partners who already favored integration shaped the categories through which he approached biblical counseling. Fesko acknowledges that two of his principal reviewers were licensed clinical psychologists.⁷² Furthermore, he does not acknowledge that any biblical counselors provided feedback prior to publication. Fesko is therefore correct that misrepresentation has occurred, but he appears to have identified the wrong party.

A Word About the Academic Conversation and Counseling

Some have argued that readers should be grateful that Fesko has ventured beyond his customary field of historical theology and entered the counseling conversation. On this view, his willingness to address these matters should be welcomed rather than criticized. There is some truth in this response: serious theological engagement with counseling should be encouraged. Yet gratitude for a scholar's participation cannot exempt his work from careful evaluation, particularly when that work introduces confusion rather than clarity.

Counseling concerns some of the most tender and consequential problems people experience, including suicide, divorce, depression, anxiety, addiction, abuse, and profound grief. The stakes therefore extend far beyond the refinement of scholarly categories. Inaccurate accounts of counseling positions may influence how pastors, counselors, churches, and institutions understand and care for suffering people. A distinguished academic pedigree cannot compensate for inadequate research, and the publication of misleading claims should not be celebrated simply because they have brought additional attention to the subject.

Counseling is not a hobby, a scholastic tournament, or an intellectual thought experiment. Nor is it merely a conversation to be advanced for its own sake. It is ministry to precious people who are suffering, confused, guilty, fearful, and in need of wise care. At times, it resembles life-and-death surgery. The glory of Christ in the transformation of His people, together with the spiritual welfare of those seeking help, is too important to permit substandard scholarship to pass without criticism. We write this review as those who care much about the academic development and defense of biblical counseling, but we also write as pastors who spend hours week in and week out ministering to sinful and suffering sheep in our congregation through biblical counseling. Sinners need to be saved, and saints need to be sanctified. As ministers of the gospel, our reliance is on the Spirit of God using the Word of God to help produce effective change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we do not intend to insult Dr. Fesko. If he were our father, we would have encouraged him not to publish the book without more careful study and competent

⁷² Fesko, *Theological Foundations for Counseling*, xv.

prepublication reviews by recognized authorities in biblical counseling. We truly wish others had told him this before the book went to print. But now it is too late, and his work must be critiqued for what it is. Publishing a scholarly book in the public square inherently implies the invitation of critical scrutiny and debate. Sadly, his book is repackaged integration that is regrettably ignorant of the fields of both biblical and integrative counseling and misrepresents the selected material he chose to directly engage.

Theological Foundations for Counseling presents itself as a theological compass to the field of counseling. In practice, however, much of Fesko's constructive position substantially resembles long-established integrationist arguments concerning all truth as God's truth, the two books of creation and Scripture, and the legitimate use of knowledge acquired outside the Bible. At the same time, the book displays insufficient familiarity with seminal literature from both the integrationist and biblical counseling traditions. It repeatedly mischaracterizes authors and sometimes attributes to them positions they explicitly deny in the very works Fesko cites.

These problems are not incidental. They affect the book's classification of counseling positions, its treatment of common grace, its account of extrabiblical knowledge, and its central argument concerning the sufficiency of Scripture. Fesko's critique repeatedly depends upon collapsing distinctions which his interlocutors carefully maintain: truth and relevance, general revelation and human interpretations of creation, comprehensive and exhaustive sufficiency, moral authority and technical information, and the use of extrabiblical knowledge and the attribution of authority to it. Once those distinctions are restored, many of his criticisms lose their force.

The result is a work that does not meet the scholarly standards its subject and publisher require. Rather than clarifying the counseling debate, it frequently reproduces familiar caricatures and introduces further confusion. In this respect, *Theological Foundations for Counseling* serves as a cautionary example of what can happen when a scholar enters an established conversation without sufficiently engaging its central texts, historical debates, and leading representatives. For these reasons, we cannot recommend the book as a reliable introduction to theological foundations of counseling. In short, Fesko's work is a demonstration of what not to do in Christian scholarship.