
Pro Rege

Volume 9 | Number 1

Article 5

September 1980

Pastoral or Christian Counseling: A Confrontation with American Pastoral Theology, in Particular Seward Hiltner and Jay E. Adams (Book Review)

John B. Hulst
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Hulst, John B. (1980) "Pastoral or Christian Counseling: A Confrontation with American Pastoral Theology, in Particular Seward Hiltner and Jay E. Adams (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 9: No. 1, 33 - 35.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol9/iss1/5

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Book Reviews

by John M. Zinkand

Pastoral or Christian Counseling: A Confrontation with American Pastoral Theology, in Particular Seward Hiltner and Jay E. Adams, by J.S. Hielema. Leeuwarden: De Tille, 1975. 305 pages, \$18.45. Reviewed by J.B. Hulst, Vice-President for Student Affairs.

J.S. Hielema is a pastor of the Christian Reformed Church who is presently serving a congregation in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. The book under review is a dissertation written and completed in 1975 in fulfillment of requirements for a Th.D. degree from the Free University of Amsterdam.

By way of introduction to his subject Hielema observes that the forces of alienation, operative in our society, have invaded the world of counseling. If this alienation is to be overcome, every counselor must inquire whether "he really has access to the key to an adequate understanding of man and his world" (p. 3). Seward Hiltner of Princeton Theological Seminary, according to Hielema, seeks his understanding of man and his world "in terms that are relevant to the people in the situation in which they are at the present time" (p. 4). On the other hand, Jay Adams, associated with Westminster Theological Seminary, seeks this understanding "from the Bible which is the infallible Word of God. As long as this infallible Word of God is repudiated there can be no peace in the heart of men" (p. 6).

Hiltner

Hielema analyzes the underlying principles of Hiltner's pastoral theology—principles in terms of which Hiltner seeks to communicate with the person in the pew and the man on the street. Hielema describes how Hiltner's "eductive" theology arises out of the impact made upon this Princeton theologian by Alfred North Whitehead's "process philosophy," Paul Tillich's "method of correlation," and Anton T. Boisen's "living human documents" theory. It is a theology in which nothing is certain, revelation allows for constant change, sin is an incentive to constructive action, morality is defined situationally, providence calls for cooperation between God and man, and resurrection is a constant experience.

Hiltner's general theological position produces a *pastoral theology* which is "operation

centered" (emerging from reflection on acts or events or functions from a peculiar perspective) and "functional" (mediating the Word of God to troubled people). Hiltner's *theological method* is always in the making and never finished because it functions in terms of a "field theory model" which is constantly experimenting with changing data, findings, principles, and concepts. *Pastoral theology* is "that branch or field of theological knowledge and inquiry that brings the shepherding perspective to bear upon all the operations and functions of the church and the minister" and then draws theological conclusions "from reflection on these observations" (p. 74).

In Hiltner's view *counseling* must be contextual, non-judgmental, and an ongoing process which gives no final answers. Counseling must teach people to be responsible rather than to obey rules. As concerns *pastoral counseling*, there is nothing special about pastors, but pastoral counseling does evidence a difference of perspective concerning "human destiny" (p. 85). It is not a profession, but an activity which may be regarded as involving two things: "First, something done by any minister as part of his ministry of pastoral care; and second, a 'functional' speciality of pastoral practice" (p. 85).

In order to overcome alienation and communicate with modern man the counselor must be free from theological dogma and "look upon the counselees as children of this century and not of the first or the sixteenth century" (p. 90).

The people whose writings and lives are recorded in the Bible were on a great pilgrimage. Man today, Hiltner holds, is also part of that pilgrimage. In terms of theology this means that there are no final answers. Glimpses of truth come to us as we give ourselves to the world around us. What, then, does the pastoral theologian have? He has nothing and, in a deeper sense, he has everything. Reformation and progress in Hiltner's theology are signs

of renewed hope and honesty (p. 92).

Adams

Hielema also focuses upon the nouthetic counseling approach of Jay E. Adams, best known for his book *Competent to Counsel*. Adams' approach assumes that man's crisis is a religious problem, and that man's doubt in dealing with the crisis is due to his unwillingness to submit to divine revelation. It is a perspective which owes much to the basic principles of Cornelius Van Til's apologetics, and views the "big battle" as the "ongoing collision between autonomous man and the absolute authority of Jesus Christ" (p. 117).

Adams promotes "nouthetic counseling" which assumes two things: first, "the need for a change in the person confronted" and, second, that change can be brought about "by the use of verbal means" (pp. 119, 120). A nouthetic counselor is one who "seeks to deal with the sinner in terms of the Gospel of Jesus Christ with an ardent hope and a fervent prayer that man in his troubles and perplexities may go 'out on a limb' with Jesus Christ" (pp. 121, 122). The purpose of nouthetic counseling is to teach, correct, reprove, and train by bringing the whole of Scripture to bear upon the whole of man's life.

"The minister," according to Adams, "who is gripped by the power of God's Word will be aroused by His Spirit to tell a man 'who is dead in trespasses and sins' to stand up and walk" (p. 125). In this light, the best preparation for changing men's lives is a good seminary training, rather than medical school or a degree in clinical psychology. Contemporary training in psychology has been distorted by the "anti-theism" of Freud, the "human autonomy" of Rogers, and the "subjectivism" of Mowrer. In an attempt to avoid such pitfalls Adams turns to the Scriptures. In his counseling he acknowledges that God is the supreme authority, that God's authority is mediated through the Bible, and that Christian counseling must therefore be subject to the directives of the Bible and not be a law unto itself (p. 169).

Pastoral counseling, according to Adams, is a matter of helping a Christian become sanctified. Sanctification is always brought about by the Holy Spirit working through the Scriptures. One of the Spirit's most important instruments is the pastor. The pastor must work in the context of the Christian community to bring about the restoration "of a brother which makes him useful in the Kingdom of God once more" (p. 185).

When these principles are "applied" it becomes clear that, to Adams, mental illness is a myth which "has become a substitute for the biblical teaching of sin and human responsibility. Man must answer to God for his life. Thus by

means of "action therapy" nouthetic counseling seeks to move man toward responsibility. Man is a creature who can be changed, if only he will "practice" what God tells him to do. There is a biblical solution to every problem. Man, as a sinner, is obsessed with problems, but the answer is to be found in Jesus Christ and the power of His Spirit.

Evaluation

In conclusion Hielema compares and evaluates the views of Hiltner and Adams. He begins by pointing out similarities. Both stand in a Reformed, Calvinistic Presbyterian tradition which emphasizes that man "is face to face with God" (p. 228). Both, stressing the concept of responsibility, are concerned to make the counselee recognize that he has many "resources" with which to face the perplexities of life.

Hielema then moves to the making of *comparisons*. Hiltner does not view *Scripture* as the final Word of God or as the sole means of guiding the counselor. Adams views *Scripture* as the very Word of God and a textbook for counseling. Hiltner has surrendered to subjectivism, and Adams has given way to biblicism; and neither position helps us to understand the relationship between *Scripture* and life.

In his view of *man* Hiltner leaves a good deal of room for man's independence. Adams insists that, if man subjects himself to the Word of God, he will inevitably be led to a practice of the truth. Hiltner works in terms of a "self-fulfillment concept," and Adams promotes a "human-becoming notion," and thus both tend to embrace a type of "behavior modification."

According to Hiltner *ethical norms* for pastoral care can be gathered from a study of operations and interview material. Adams, however, claims that "ethics—like theology—can only be *biblical ethics*" (p. 240). Both says Hielema, work out of "nature-grace" motif. "Hiltner emphasizes nature at the expense of grace and Adams is inclined to do the opposite" (p. 242).

Hiltner insists that believers must serve the cause of justice in every human situation, while Adams teaches that it is the *office of believers* to use their gifts—including the gift of counseling—for the welfare of the body of Christ. Accordingly Hiltner is weak on the proclamation of the gospel; but Adams is weak on relating the gospel to man's contemporary problems.

As concerns the relationship of *Scripture and science*, Hiltner is convinced that *Scripture* must be dealt with in the light of science. Adams, on the other hand, believes that *Scripture* must teach or instruct science. Thus Hiltner detracts from the uniqueness of *Scripture* and Adams makes *Scripture* a text for the sciences.

Finally in setting forth a *theory of cure*, Hiltner is more concerned with direction than solutions. Adams thinks solely in terms of sanctification, i.e. a restored relationship to Christ. In the process Hiltner denies the biblical diagnosis of man's plight and Adams spiritualizes healing.

In his concluding observations Hielema acknowledges Hiltner's erudition and his "eye for the needs of man," but disapproves of his interpreting special revelation in the light of general revelation. Hielema applauds Adams' summons to return to the Bible, but deplores his tendency to absolutize his own insights.

As a reviewer, I have learned much from reading Hielema's dissertation. His analysis of the positions of Hiltner and Adams is keen and perceptive. Further, I am in basic agreement with his concluding evaluations.

However, as I finished reading this dissertation, I also had a feeling of disappointment. In the opening chapter Hielema states that the purpose of his work is to promote the search for "renewal" in counseling. While it may be claimed that much is implied in Hielema's critique of Adams and Hiltner, there is little that is explicitly stated to give us an idea of the desired nature and

direction of that search for renewal.

Further, when Hielema does offer a closing perspective for our "drive for renewal" (p. 262), he speaks of the importance of theology, i.e. of seeing pastoral theology in proper relationship to other theological studies, and of seeing theology in proper relationship to other scientific disciplines. (This is an emphasis made also in an earlier critique of Adams' position [pp. 223-226]). Admitting the importance of seeing theology in the context of its relationship to other sciences, is it not more important and basic for renewal, however, to gain a clearer understanding of the relationship of *Scripture* to pastoral theology, to theology in general, and to all scientific disciplines?

Finally, Hielema doesn't make clear if we should speak of pastoral or Christian Counseling. In any case, would it not be preferable to put this choice aside and simply speak of Christian pastoral counseling?

These criticisms must not be misunderstood, however. They are presented to help in the search for biblical renewal in counseling, a search in which Hielema has clearly and capably participated.

Lionel Trilling: Criticism and Politics, by William M. Chace. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1980. 200 pages. Reviewed by James Vanden Bosch, Assistant Professor of English.

An essay on Lionel Trilling which appeared two years after his death bore the title "The Elusive Trilling." The author of the essay, Mark Schechner, after characterizing Trilling with that adjective, demonstrated that his attempt to capture Trilling was no more successful than other attempts had been.* But his title, at least, is an accurate one: Trilling resists the kind of analysis which relies upon simplification, whether generous or reductive. And he remains elusive in spite of the notable presence of his work. Trilling influenced American intellectual life for several decades, beginning in the 1940s. His work is now being republished in a uniform edition by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, an edition which will include one or two volumes of essays not published since their initial appearance in reviews and journals. When this uniform edition is completed, we will have not only the Lionel Trilling of past significance, but also a Lionel Trilling made readily available to the present.

Nor is it the case that there has been little effort by critics to explain or account for Trilling. After his death in 1975, many critics and writers tried to sum up his career and to specify his significance. In the past three years, Robert Boyers, Tom

Samet, and Mark Schechner have written short studies of Trilling, although none of them is complete or fully satisfying. We now have William Chace's book, *Lionel Trilling: Criticism and Politics*, as the first full-length treatment of Trilling, but it, too, is characterized by its limitations.

For one thing, Chace does not always read Trilling accurately. This is not Chace's problem alone, since others have also been misled by Trilling's elaborately ironic prose. But Chace sometimes mistakes an ironic statement, or one meant to be attributed to someone other than Trilling, as a straightforward declaration of Trilling's personal position, as in his discussion of Trilling's remarks of 1952 in the "Our Country and Our Culture" symposium sponsored by *Partisan Review* (pp. 99-102). At other times, Chace misplaces the emphasis of a Trilling argument (especially in his analysis of Trilling's essay on James Joyce [pp. 140-145]), or confuses the meaning of key words ("complication" [p. 96], and "sincerity" in relationship to "authenticity" [pp. 146-151]).

It is part of Chace's strategy in this book to try to give the reader a sense of experiencing with Trilling some of his dramatic encounters with