

# How Theology Shapes Ministry: Jay Adams's View of the Flesh and an Alternative



BY EDWARD WELCH

Theological distinctions make a difference in the way we live. A person who is a post-millennialist will pray differently than someone who believes that Christ will rapture His church before the tribulation and millennium. A trinitarian will look at relationships differently than a Unitarian. A Calvinist will evangelize differently than an Arminian. Significant differences in how we live and minister to others can be traced to differences in our theology.

Within the broad spectrum of Christian counseling, differences in theological assumptions account for the variety of perspectives. This is not to say that these assumptions are always self-consciously held. In some cases, Christian authors cite little or no Scripture, and might not even claim to have explicit theological foundations for proposed counseling models. Yet, when you listen carefully to key statements and recurring metaphors, all counseling models evidence an underlying theology. For example, “your number one priority is to yourself” is a statement that can easily be traced back to a view of the person that is more individualistic than communal and more person-centered than God-centered.

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“Your unfulfilled need for love has left you depressed” comes out of a model of personal emptiness and a passive view of the human heart in contrast to counseling models that emphasize idolatry and the purposeful nature of human behavior. “You have an emotional problem” is, most likely, an expression of a trichotomist rather than a dichotomist view of the person.

One of the distinctives of biblical counseling is that it attempts to make an explicit connection between theology and practice. Biblical counseling wants to make theology practical, and it wants to support its theory and practice with clear exegesis and explicit theological reference. Although biblical counselors also have theological assumptions that are implicit and of which they are unaware, the aim is to establish a clear and evident link between theology and practice.

This feature of biblical counseling is no more apparent than in Jay Adams's work. He was the first modern voice to call the church back to Scripture for its theory and practice of counseling, and he consistently backs his model up by explicit Scripture citation. Because of his handling of Scripture, his theory is very open to biblical inspection.

I will consider just one element of Adams's theological foundation—his view of *sarx*, translated as “flesh” or “sinful nature”—and suggest how it informs his counseling

method. At first glance, this might seem like a trivial point to investigate. Discussion about one Greek word would appear to have little impact on our personal ministry. But in targeting *sarx*, we are entering an active area of theological investigation in which conclusions “will go far toward determining the whole character of Paul’s conception of religion.”<sup>1</sup> This is very practical theology.

Why Jay Adams in particular? There are at least three reasons to consider Adams’s view of the flesh. First, it provides an opportunity to consider the many practical consequences of *any* theological commitment. Second, in this particular case, Adams acknowledges that he is out of step with other translators and interpreters of *sarx*. When we depart from mainstream, conservative interpretation, our propositions deserve particularly careful scrutiny. Third, Adams is insistent on his particular interpretation of “the flesh” and its implications for understanding people’s struggles and helping people change. He believes that it is an important proposition within his larger system. As such, it provides clues to the deeper logic of his theological and pastoral model, and allows us to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the model he proposes.

### **Adams’s View of the Flesh**

Adams believes that we consist of two substances: material and immaterial. Our material substance is referred to as the body; our immaterial substance is referred to in various ways: spirit, soul, heart, conscience, mind, inner person. In this, Adams’s theological assumptions are very traditional. Human beings are “duplex,” a unity of two entities.<sup>2</sup> He further believes that *sarx*—“flesh”—does *not* refer to our immaterial “sinful nature” (New International Version), “corrupt nature” (Knox), or “lower nature” (New English Bible). Instead, it is best understood as the human body that has become programmed to sin by our

mind and behavior. It is at this point that his thinking has few, if any, precedents.

Unfortunately, the translators of the NIV had a proclivity for settling exegetical questions in their translations, thereby becoming interpreters rather than translators. Among their most serious blunders resulting from this practice was the decision to translate the Greek word *sarx* (“flesh”) by the theological prejudicial phrase, “sinful nature.” This is unfortunate, I say, because this obvious interpretive bias is *wrong*. The specialized use of the word flesh refers neither to man’s sinful *nature* nor to the sinful *self* that he developed, but to the sinful *body* (as Paul calls it in Rom. 6:6). When Paul speaks of the body as sinful, he does not conceive of the body as originally created by God as sinful..., but rather the body plunged into sinful practices and habits as the result of Adam’s fall.<sup>3</sup>

In clarifying “fleshly” in Romans 7:14, Adams states that this means the “fleshly remnants in the body.”<sup>4</sup> From this perspective, when the Apostle Paul speaks of the flesh and its immoral propensities, he refers to the body as it physically encodes sinful habits which must be reprogrammed through a dehabituating and rehabilitation process.

[There is a] tension in believers occasioned by the regeneration of the inner man and the indwelling of the Spirit in a body habituated to do evil. This leads to an inner/outer struggle. The warfare is increasingly won by the Spirit, who renews and activates the inner man, who helps the body to put off sinful patterns and to put on new biblical responses.<sup>5</sup>

The body has become habituated to sin. The sinful nature within, with which one

<sup>1</sup>E. D. Burton, *Spirit, Soul, and Flesh* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1918), p. 191.

<sup>2</sup>Jay E. Adams, *More Than Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), p. 110. (Subsequently retitled *A Theology of Christian Counseling*.)

<sup>3</sup>*More Than Redemption*, p. 160.

<sup>4</sup>Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor’s New Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), p. 481.

<sup>5</sup>*More Than Redemption*, p. 160.

was born, has programmed the body to act under certain circumstances automatically, smoothly, comfortably, and unconsciously in sinful ways.<sup>6</sup>

“Mind” speaks of the capability of the spirit to program the brain to operate the body...Prior to regeneration, the spirit could only program the brain to respond and act sinfully...The [regenerated] spirit must reprogram the brain and through it, the members of the body, to live righteously.<sup>7</sup>

What practical difference does this make? Sin is sin, regardless of where it might be located. Isn't that enough? Not exactly. Adams indicates that the brain and body have retained old etchings of sin. Through sinful practice, the body has inscribed sin and has learned how to sin automatically. Then, even after we are converted, those old patterns can continue to exert themselves. Although we are new creatures, our bodies can keep playing old tunes, old habits. The counseling task is to erase or overwrite these physical reactions and replace them with godly habits.

This has significant implications for counseling method. For example, following this model, Adams offers little detailed discussion of such things as pride, unbelief, or idolatry, because these are motives of the heart, and the flesh is not located in the heart. Instead, the emphasis is on thinking right and doing right, then thinking and doing right again and again until the brain-body gets reprogrammed. Instead of a goal of “taking our souls to task,” counseling strategies are focused on establishing new behaviors and are less interested in personal motivations. The idea seems to be that if these behaviors are done often enough, the brain-body will be rewired and less prone to sinful, automatic responses.

### **Other Perspectives on the Flesh**

Before considering other practical conse-

quences of this position, consider the reliability of the basic proposition. Is the flesh the sinfully programmed body? There are no other interpreters who have come to the same conclusions as Adams on this point. Whereas many interpreters have wrestled with the meaning of *sarx*, fewer have suggested that it is always associated with the body, and none, that I am aware of, have spoken as specifically about “a body habituated to do evil.”

Consider first the relationship between the body and sin. Although Adams has a unique way of using “flesh” (*sarx*), there is biblical warrant for his idea that the physical body has some intimate connection to sin. For example, the New Testament word most often used for the physical body, *soma*, is called the “body (*soma*) of sin” (Rom. 6:6). “Members” (*melesin*) is another word for the physical body, and it too seems to be associated with sin, as noted in Romans 7:5, “sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies (*melesin*),” and Romans 7:23, “the law of sin at work within my members (*melesin*).” Although these passages are not using *sarx*, or “flesh,” they seem to make the connection between the body and sin.

Yet, if these passages suggest that the body retains sinful patterns, they do not square with other biblical references to the body. Typically, the physical body does not bear responsibility for the cause of sin. The body is “weak” (Matt. 26:41) or “wasting away” (2 Cor. 4:16), but not sinful. Sin is consistently rooted in the heart or the immaterial, spiritual center of our being (Luke 6:45). Do these passages in Romans embed sin in our brain and sinews in a way that should change our previous way of understanding the body? Not necessarily. For example, the Apostle Paul uses an expression that is similar to the “body of sin” when he refers to the “law of sin” (Rom. 8:2). The law of sin, however, does not mean that the law is somehow sinful. Rather, it means that “the law was weakened by the sinful nature (*sarx*).”<sup>8</sup> The law itself is good. The law *provokes* sin because of how it is used by the sinful heart, but it is not sinful. Similarly, the body is neither the residence for sin nor the cause of it. It will reveal or express

<sup>6</sup>Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Commentary, I and II Corinthians* (Stanley, NC: Timeless and Texts, 1994), p. 146.

<sup>7</sup>John Vandegriff, *In the Arena of the Mind: Philippians 4:8* (Howell, NJ: Ask, Seek, and Knock Publishing, 1992), foreword by Jay Adams.

<sup>8</sup>In this context, *sarx* is paired with the “mind,” which overlaps with heart rather than with body.

the sinful inclinations of the heart—a kind of repository for the sinful heart—but it is not the cause of sin. The roots of sin reside in the heart or inner person. When the physical body is associated with sin, the emphasis is on the fact that sin is *expressed* in bodily actions but is not residing or programmed in the body. So, *soma*—the most frequent New Testament word for the body—should not be translated as body-habituated-to-do-evil. But what about *sarx* or “flesh”? This is a word of particular importance in Adams’s system. Does *sarx* add another dimension to the way sin affects the body or is

which case it emphasizes our frailty and the fleeting nature of physical life on earth (Matt. 16:17, 2 Cor. 12:7, Col. 2:5).

- Some maintain that it refers to our frail and temporary life on earth, to those people who have not been converted and therefore are not indwelt by the Spirit (Rom. 7:7-24).
- Some have also maintained that it can refer to our frail and temporary life on earth, to those not indwelt by the Spirit, but they add that, in much of the Pauline literature, it emphasizes “bodily existence distinguished by circumcision and constrained by Torah.”<sup>11</sup> In

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stored in the body?

The meaning of *sarx* is more difficult to determine than that of *soma*. Whereas *soma* always keeps the material body in view, *sarx* has been ascribed multiple meanings.

- Many have suggested that *sarx*/flesh can refer to the principle of sin that lingers in the believer (Gal. 5:19). It is “the inclination or tendency within man that drives him to do evil.”<sup>9</sup> This can be put in terms of battles and opposing spiritual forces, two different natures, or, as Luther suggested, “two contrary captains in you.”<sup>10</sup>
- This principle of sin can be put in less dualistic terms (e.g., “lower nature”), in which case interpreters still maintain that it is something that is happening in the heart of the person rather than the body. The difference is that the flesh is less of an inherent “nature” and more of an intruder.
- Almost everyone agrees that *sarx* can and often does refer to the material body, in

this case, flesh refers to early members of the Christian community who took their cue from the Mosaic covenant more than from the death and resurrection of Christ.

*Sarx* can refer to the human body and its frailty, but when *sarx* has sin in view, it does not refer to the body, at least in the sense that it has its origin in the body. For example, in Romans 8:12-13, Paul exhorts us not to live according to the flesh. But he would never substitute the expression, “not live according to the body.” Whereas there are times when flesh (*sarx*) is a synonym for the physical body (*soma*) or our members (*melesin*), it can also be categorically different than the body. In these cases it might refer to the heart when its wants are contrary to those of the Spirit (Gal. 5:17). Or, even better, it refers to a lifestyle that looks for life in Mosaic practices, especially circumcision. Either way, Scripture consistently teaches that sin has its

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<sup>9</sup>C. K. Barrett, *Freedom and Obligation: A Study of the Epistle to the Galatians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), p. 75.

<sup>10</sup>Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (Philadelphia: Smith, English and Co., 1860), p. 568.

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<sup>11</sup>Walter Russell, *The Flesh/Spirit Conflict in Galatians* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997), p. 214. Russell's book is an excellent presentation of this perspective.

<sup>12</sup>Robert Gundry has a helpful discussion of this issue in his book *Soma in Biblical Theology* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

ultimate source in our heart, our “mindset,” our spiritual substance, and it is expressed through the instrument of the body.<sup>12</sup> Certainly, sinful desires can have a physiological component: love of pleasure, sexual sins, gluttony, and “addictions” all intersect with physical desires. Yet many sinful desires do not have physical pleasures in view: self-righteousness, pride, superiority, fear of man, love of power, love of money, and so on are not dependent on any physical sensations.

No text clearly teaches that the body of a sinful person is gradually programmed to sin to the point where the body can sin by itself, without the agency of a heart that is inclined to evil. “Flesh” has a physical meaning in many passages of Scripture, but in Romans 7 and 8 the Apostle Paul no longer uses it in a purely physical sense (e.g., 7:14, 18; 8:3). In Galatians 5:17 and 5:24 it is even more evident that he leaves the material sense of the word behind and infuses it with hostility to God. William Barclay is representative of a number of commentators who hold this position.

Clearly the flesh is not the body...The flesh is what man has made himself in contrast with man as God made him. The flesh is man as he has allowed himself to become in contrast with man as God meant him to be. The flesh stands for the total effect upon man of his own sin...The flesh is man as he is apart from Jesus Christ and his Spirit.<sup>13</sup>

One could argue that Adams simply wants to be consistent in applying the physical sense of *sarx*. That is, he wants to keep the physical definition unless he is compelled to do otherwise. If this were the case, *sarx* could still be given a more ethical and less material meaning if you grant that the meaning of words can expand. For example, the Apostle’s development of *sarx* could be thought of as evolving from physical, to mortal, to “that

which is natural to mortals,” to human nature, to sinful human nature.<sup>14</sup> This would suggest that there is some continuity in the use of the word, but Paul has significantly extended its meaning. However, there is no reason to try to find a linguistic path from one meaning to another. As in English, one Greek word can have two or more different meanings that are not necessarily related to one another. Even when there is continuity between meanings—and I believe that *sarx* does tend to emphasize some linkage to our physical existence, particularly as outside of Christ—that does not establish that sin indwells by a physiological habituation.

For Adams, the issue is deeper than which definition to use in a lexicon. Rather, the identity of the individual believer is in view. Adams, I believe rightly, wants to maintain the theological proposition that the Christian has one nature, not two. In other words, he wants to avoid partitioning the spirit into the new person and the old person. He is persuaded that believers are united to Christ by faith. Period. The old is gone, the new has come. In our inner beings, we have one nature. We are one self. To suggest anything else diminishes the transforming work of the gospel, implying that the cross of Christ has been largely ineffective in dealing with sin.

### **One Nature or Two?**

It is at this point that the discussion about *sarx* is recognizable to many Christians. The old man/new man distinction is common in evangelical language, and, like all theological propositions, it has very practical consequences.

- The Christian becomes a battlefield of two different natures, and since our old nature has as much right to us as our new nature, we don’t have high hopes for radical change. We may have a tendency toward passivity, which would suggest that sin is “only human,” or we may have a tendency to overvalue human effort and undervalue God’s power: the “good

<sup>12</sup>Robert Gundry has a helpful discussion of this issue in his book *Soma in Biblical Theology* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

<sup>13</sup>William Barclay, *Flesh and Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), pp. 21-22.

<sup>14</sup>C. C. Cole, *The Letter of Paul to the Galatians: An Introduction and Commentary*. In L. Morris, Gen. Ed., *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 205.

dog” beats the “bad dog” if I feed it more.

- Sin actually can be minimized. It becomes relegated to a smaller place. It is in our old, sinful nature in contrast to our new, pristine nature. Such thinking could blind us to the way sin still can affect our entire being.
- The cross of Christ will not be considered as decisive as it really was. Instead of only enlivening us to fight against sin—which it does—it has ushered us into an entirely new way of life.

Adams wants to avoid these conclusions and emphasize the definitive, once-and-for-all quality of what Christ has done. He stresses the antithesis between what we were and who we are in Christ. According to Romans 6, our old self was crucified (v. 6), we have been set free from sin (v. 7), and we are dead to sin but alive to God (v. 11). Therefore, when Adams encounters *sarx* translated as “sin nature,” meaning an immaterial, spiritual nature, he believes that it is theological error. It implicitly teaches that the old sinful nature continues intact while a new nature is simply added.

In Adams’s theological model, if you disavow such a two-nature view of the inner person, you are left with a question: Where, then, is sin? We are, after all, new people who still sin. If we now have a new nature in Christ, and the old person has died, where is sin? Has the new nature moved in, while the old, “sinful nature” just moved over? Is the Christian life such that we once were pure, sinful nature, we now are hybrids of new nature and sinful nature, and, when glorified, we will be pure new nature? If we reject these views, we feel compelled to find someplace to put the ethical dimension of *sarx*. Adams resolves this apparent dilemma by embedding sin in the body.

Adams is concerned about an important theological issue, and he has offered a creative alternative to a two-nature view. Yet there are other possible interpretations that can maintain both the distinctly spiritual roots of sin and a one-nature view of the Christian life. When we are in Christ, we do, indeed, have one nature. We have a new heart (Ezek. 36:26-27), but we are still prone to sin, and this sin comes from our hearts (Matt. 15:18). Does this mean that our hearts are divided into a good side and a bad side? Scripture does not seem to

be overly concerned about geography on this point. Instead, it just teaches that we are new creatures who are still sinners. It is hard to blend this into an elegant theological model, especially in light of the antithetical statements of Romans 6. In fact, the Apostle Paul himself seems at times to be aware of the conceptual oddness of *already* having a new nature but *not yet* being done with sin, as evidenced by his apparent surprise that there is still such blatant sin in the church of Christ. But even Romans 6 indicates that we are sinners: “Let not sin reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions” (v. 12). Where is sin? Scripture is content simply to say that it is.

Notice that the question of sin’s location relies on a spatial or house metaphor. In other words, if the renewed spirit lives in our spiritual house, how can sin live in the same place? You can’t have two different owners of the same house. It doesn’t make sense. But theology must always be careful how far it extends its metaphors. In this case, there are ways the human heart is like a house, and there are ways it is unlike a house. We don’t expect metaphors to correspond to a particular truth in every detail. If we want to use the house image, rather than saying that the traces of sin are now found in the body, it is more accurate to say that sin is still in the house, but it is an alien. We are still sinners, but sin is now more of an intruder than the homeowner. It has no legal right. Therefore, we can demand that the squatter leave rather than broker some agreement with him.

Another approach would be to consider other biblical illustrations. For example, our fight with “indwelling” sin can also be pictured in geographical images that allude back to the Exodus. After all, God’s people were given the Promised Land and then were told to fight for it. In a similar way, we are given new natures and then are told to fight against the defeated enemy that remains in the land. A related image is that of dominion and lordship. We have been set free from the dominion of Satan, sin, and the law. Now, having been liberated, we must turn our back on old masters and yield ourselves to God (Rom. 6:13). But the defeated oppressors still exert some influence in our lives, and they will continue to until we are with the Lord. Once-and-for-all sanctification

is accompanied by progressive sanctification in which we continually put sin to death. We are increasingly transformed into the image of Christ. The illegitimate “gangster government” exerts influence everywhere, but it no longer rules, because the king has returned.<sup>15</sup> As such, we can maintain confidence in our battle with sin, as Adams insists, but we don’t have to “locate” sin in the physical body.

Ultimately, we do not have to find where sin is hiding in the new creature. If I say, “I am a sinner,” I am not thinking of a location within myself, I am thinking simply of me. We do the same thing when we say, “I am a husband,” “a wife,” “a counselor,” “a parent,” or “a friend.” In all these identities, we are not compelled to “locate” the term. In fact, we can’t locate them. They are different perspectives or views of ourselves, but they cannot actually be found somewhere.

### ***Practical Implications of Adams’s Position***

As with all theological commitments, Adams’s view of the flesh is expressed in his

habits. Changing behavior is akin to developing a tennis serve. Through constant repetition we develop a new “body memory.”

- Counseling will be similar to a consultation with a physician. What is important is the right diagnosis (the habit that must be broken) and the proper prescription (the habit that must be substituted).
- Counseling will be similar to a consultation with a behaviorist. It will be a step-by-step, somewhat mechanical process.<sup>16</sup> It will be a problem-solving task. Motivations will not be the target for change; overt behaviors will. Adams has often been accused of sounding like a Christian behaviorist. His view of the flesh is one theological commitment that leaves him vulnerable to such charges. The language of reprogramming, the emphasis on practice, and the lack of a robust model of the inner life have analogies to present day behavioral and cognitive-behavioral approaches.
- The relationship between counselee and counselor will be significant because we are called to love one another, but there will be

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counseling theory and practice. What follows are what I view as natural extensions of Adams’s theological commitment to physiologize sin. Not all of them are mentioned by Adams, and some he might disavow when stated so explicitly, but they do seem to follow from his proposition about the flesh.

His counseling practice likely will have these distinctive features.

- Self-discipline will be the central task. Certain behavioral patterns and thought patterns must be broken. New behaviors and thought patterns must be substituted so the body can develop a new repertoire of automatic responses.
- Counseling will focus on repetition and

little consideration of how the relationship itself can be a means of God’s grace to a counselee.

- The counseling relationship will not necessarily communicate, “I’m in this with you. My heart is no different than your own.” If the counselor struggles with problems similar to those of the counselee, he or she should not counsel. Counseling is needed by the less mature believer. A mature believer should have dealt with old brain programs earlier in the sanctification process.
- Counseling will *not* emphasize the present-tense call to “fix your eyes on Jesus” (Heb. 12) in the battle against sin. A converted person has already turned to Christ, so now

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<sup>15</sup>Exorcistic movements err in their exclusive reliance on a house image. Unlike Adams, these models often assume that there can be two owners in the house at the same time.

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<sup>16</sup>This is said with the knowledge that one of Adams’s best books, in my opinion, is *Creativity and Insight in Counseling*, which argues against a mechanical, wooden approach to counseling.

the task is to put off old habituated patterns.

- Faith will be described as establishing new habits more than depending on, trusting in, knowing, and loving in a reciprocal relationship.
- Since both sinful behavior *and* sinful thinking are etched in the brain, when counseling addresses thinking it will be heavy on teaching and rote memorization. It will focus on rewiring one's thoughts more than on growing in the knowledge of Christ.
- When dealing with a problem such as depression and other types of suffering, it will not focus on the importance of human relationships that love and comfort, but it will focus on establishing new brain patterns through right thinking and right actions.
- Without attentiveness to motives and the inner life, counselees might not feel understood. They will sometimes have a sense that a counselor did not go "deep" enough.
- Counseling will be brief. It will last only as long as it takes to develop other neuromuscular programs or habits. Adams suggests that new brain programs can be established within six to twelve weeks. If it lasts longer—and if both counselee and counselor are doing their jobs—it is only because there are other brain patterns that also must be reprogrammed.
- "Who will you worship (love, trust, hope in)?" is a question that is answered largely at conversion. It is not necessarily a question that must be asked daily. It is not relevant to the process of dealing with sin habituated in the body. Idols of the heart will be mentioned in "precounseling" with unbelievers, rather than assumed to be an ongoing battle in every heart.
- Counseling will *not* be alert to good behavior that has ungodly motivations because, since sin is embedded more in the body than in the heart, the model does not induce one to examine motivations. The *body* doesn't have motivational patterns: beliefs, desires, hopes, trusts, aspirations, anxieties, identities, etc.
- Counseling will address sexual lust, gluttony, laziness, and "addictions," because those lusts have some connection to bodily desires, but it will be much less alert to pride, unbelief, idols of the heart, legalism, the fear of man,

and other non-bodily expressions of the human heart.

- Counseling will oppose psychiatric medications primarily because godly habits, not medications, are needed to reprogram the brain. Medications might interfere with this reprogramming. But other reasons to oppose medications, such as false hopes that people attach to them or avoidance of the struggle with suffering, aren't as notable.
- The counseling model does not easily explain egregious sin among those who have made early professions of faith. The basic idea of the sin-etched-in-the-body model is that the longer the serious sin continued in the past, the more difficult it will be to avoid the deep ruts such behavior has left in the brain. This explains why the person who was a serial adulterer before conversion will struggle with those problems after. But it doesn't explain as well the person who grew up in a Christian home, had no evidence of rebelliousness, and did the right thing, but commits adultery twenty years after a sincere profession of faith that bore fruit in the interim.
- The counseling model does not attend to the fact that believers can invent new ways to sin even though our bodies have not been trained to do so. For example, a person might no longer struggle with drunkenness, but now struggles with self-righteousness or with a sense of failure to live up to an idealized (false) image of Christian maturity.
- The counseling model does not attend to the multiple meanings that accompany some behaviors. For example, sinful anger that is expressed in yelling at a spouse is, indeed, sinful, but it may also be an expression of fear. Both issues must be addressed. A drunkard sins in his or her excesses, but drunkenness may also be an expression of guilt, anger, suffering, fear, or laziness. Changing the drunken behavior does not change the various motives that were part of the drunkenness.
- Counseling will not look for patterns that are covert. It will not seek to reveal what is hidden. It will not emphasize the self-deceptive, secretive, sneaky ways of sin. Its focus is on habits that are obvious. There is no reason to dig deeper.

These extensions of Adams's view of the flesh have been noted before, both by practitioners of nouthetic counseling and critics of it. They are not new. But embedding these in theological propositions opens paths for new discussion. For example, to make the claim that Adams is a Christian behaviorist will rarely lead to profitable dialogue. A biblical approach to the person will *always* have formal similarities to secular thought (because secular thought must use "borrowed capital," taken from God, used against God), yet its core assumptions will be radically different. What *could* lead to profitable dialogue is a discussion about fundamental theological assumptions and how they appear in actual life and ministry. At this level, we avoid ad hominem arguments, and we implicitly assert our common commitment to have Scripture adjudicate our theoretical and methodological differences. Even if the dialogue ends with a difference in interpretation, we leave as family. We remember with humility that our theological development is a work in process, and continue to refine our practical theological foundations.

### **An Interpretation of the Flesh**

Adams consistently encourages his readers to develop positive, biblical alternatives whenever they raise questions about his or another person's position. Up to this point, I have suggested that his view has many practical consequences, yet is not the best way that the flesh could be interpreted, but I have not developed alternatives. As such, I will briefly highlight an alternative to Adams's view of the flesh. Since the Apostle Paul emphasizes the ethical dimension of *sarx*, I will focus on a few passages within his letters.

According to Paul, there are two ways to live: by the Spirit or by the flesh.

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature (*sarx*). For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. (Gal. 5:16-18)

Ever since Luther, the most popular interpretation of this idea is some version of two warring natures. In other words, the passage has been interpreted to refer to what is going on *within* the individual believer. Yet a growing tradition argues that it refers to two different communities that offer two very different versions of the Christian life.<sup>17</sup>

The "flesh group" consisted of the Judaizers within the Christian community who identified with the Mosaic covenant. They insisted that the community retain its Jewish roots by mandating circumcision of the flesh—therefore, the flesh group—and living according to a modified version of Mosaic law. This, they taught, was the path of sanctification and purity.<sup>18</sup> They did *not* live as though the cross was the turning point of all human history that ushered in a new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:26, 27).

The result? Wherever the law reigns, the flesh group taught, there will be exclusiveness, pride, factions, competitive striving, and the host of sins which characterized the people of Israel throughout the Old Testament. The law could not and cannot restrain sin! Both the "works" of the flesh group, as witnessed by the early Christian community, and the history of Israel are proof. Furthermore, if the flesh group insisted on retaining the old covenant, then they did not have the Spirit.

In contrast, the "Spirit community," which Paul represented, consisted of those who identified with the cross of Christ and were enabled by the Spirit as they were being liberated from sin's dominion. They rejoiced that the new covenant, in which the Spirit would put God's law in their hearts, had come to pass (Jer. 31:31-34). In contrast to the inclusive, competitive, striving of the flesh group, they were characterized by the inclusion of all nations, love for one another, and love for neighbor.

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<sup>17</sup>Advocates include Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) and Russell, 1997. Russell cites a number of commentators who generally share this opinion.

<sup>18</sup>Borgen indicates, "among the Jews of that time, circumcision was understood to portray the removal of passions, desires, and evil inclinations," cited in Russell, p. 147.

Christ, writes Paul, changes everything. The flesh life is over. It has been crucified (Gal. 5:24). The law was powerless to control sinful desires, but the Spirit transforms us. He indwells us and empowers us to live a life of love. We still sin, but now we restore a brother with gentleness rather than judgment (Gal. 6:1). The gospel has made it clear that there is no room for pride in ourselves. It has leveled the human race by making it clear that we are all sinners, and it has elevated the human race by incorporating into Jesus Christ all those who believe.

This reasoning also can be applied to the difficult passage in Romans 7:14-25, where Paul describes the tension between what he wants to do and what he actually can accomplish. The most common question asked of this passage is whether Paul was talking about himself in the present tense or past tense. A possible resolution is that Paul was talking about the life of a devout Jew who was in the flesh, that is, living under the old covenant and not indwelt by the Spirit. Paul's autobiographical style could have been a rhetorical device rather than representative of his actual experience, but if he was referring to himself, he would have been highlighting his previous *sarx* life in contrast to his present Spirit life in which he is in Christ and controlled by the Spirit.

This interpretation of the flesh avoids the dual-nature dilemma that Adams also wants to avoid, but it does so by locating the Galatians and Romans flesh-Spirit tensions in life under two historical covenants rather than within the individual. This perspective can still acknowledge the inner battles of the Christian life (Rom. 8:13; 1 Cor. 9:26-27; Eph. 6:10-18), but it avoids the need to find flesh as a programmed pattern of sin resident in the body. It, too, has many practical applications.

- New covenant passages such as Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:26-27 will be banners in our homes, reminding us that what was anticipated in the Old Testament has come.
- We will have new vigor in our battle with sin

and Satan's temptations. As optimistic as Adams is about his theory of change, this view of the flesh is even more optimistic.

- The cross of Christ will be our identity. We will remind each other constantly that this event has changed everything.
- In keeping with the relational features of the new covenant, especially as expressed in the distinctions between flesh-living and Spirit-living, our goal is faith expressing itself in love (Gal. 5:6). We will counsel in a way that love is evident, and our counseling times will include brainstorming sessions on how to love others deeply from the heart.
- A prominent and ongoing question is, To whom do you belong? Are you committed to your own system of works that stand apart from Christ, or do you rest in Christ alone?
- Since the gospel levels all people, there will be a mutuality to our ministry. In other words, if we counsel with believers who have the Spirit, we should expect to be influenced by the Spirit in them.
- We will be inclusive. We will not simply form coalitions with those who are like us, but we will invite others and cross ethnic boundaries.
- We now go out into the world as salt and light rather than insulate ourselves from the world.
- If Paul's discussion about flesh is oriented toward the community rather than the individual, we should expect to retain more of the New Testament emphasis on community over against the modern emphasis on the individual.

All theology is practical theology,<sup>19</sup> and all practice is rooted in theological beliefs. Adams's view of the flesh has significant implications for his entire system of counseling. To view "flesh" as neurophysiologically embedded sin creates certain defects and blindspots in Adams's counseling model. To view "flesh" as a wider problem—touching how a person's motives, mindset, and identity are oriented to earthly-physical existence rather than to life in Christ—provides a salutary corrective.

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<sup>19</sup>This idea comes from John Frame's *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1987).