

Pauline Teaching on the “Flesh (σάρξ)”: What Implications for Counseling?

I. Introduction

A. Theology should drive our counseling.

- “Christians are duped into the acceptance of pagan thought and practice in counseling *when they do not think theologically.*”¹

B. The text and sound exegesis should form/define our theology.

- You must build your Systematic Theology from your Biblical Theology, which **MUST** come from the text! You must study and know the text! Everything you do in ministry will ultimately be determined by how well you have studied the text!

C. Why “flesh?”

1. Jay Adams’ definition of “flesh,” particularly in Paul’s writings, has gone unchallenged for nearly 30 years and forms the foundation of much of his Nouthetic Counseling model.
2. However, the Spring of 2002 saw Dr. Adams challenged and an alternative given by one of his peers in the Biblical Counseling movement, Ed Welch.
3. I have been “uncomfortable” with Dr. Adams’ definition since I first read *A Theology of Christian Counseling* in 1994. I am even more “uncomfortable” with Dr. Welch’s alternative definition.²
4. This provides a great case study on how our exegesis (or lack thereof) directly affects our approach to counseling.

II. Adams’ view

A. Explained

- “The specialized use of the word flesh refers neither to man’s sinful *nature* (i.e. the corrupt nature with which he was born) nor to the sinful *self* (or personality) that he developed (as some others think), 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

¹ Jay E. Adams, *More Than Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), p. 9. (Subsequently retitled *A Theology of Christian Counseling*.)

² When I first read Dr. Welch’s article (see note 8) I was disappointed...I thought he stole my idea. I have been studying this topic for the purpose of writing on the subject for two years.

sinful (as if he were Gnostic), but rather of the body plunged into sinful practices and habits as the result of Adam's fall. There is no ultimate mind/body (flesh) dualism here, but only 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."³

- Although Dr. Adams is a strong advocate for sound exegesis, I believe (as will be demonstrated) that his exegesis is flawed in his definition of "flesh" as Paul uses it;⁴ and therefore has resulted in an incomplete counseling model, if taken without modification.
 - With that said, I have an incredible amount respect for Dr. Adams and the Nouthetic Counseling movement. I do believe he has struggled with the text, which is commendable, and I will be forever indebted to what his teaching has done for my life and that of my family.

B. Practical affects on counseling.⁵

1. Self-discipline will be the central task. Counseling will focus on repetition and habits. One must be disciplined to develop new habits to replace the old ones.
2. The counseling session will be similar to a consultation with a physician. One must get the correct diagnosis (what habit must be broken?) and the proper prescription (what habit must be substituted?).
3. Faith will be described as establishing new habits more than depending on, trusting in, knowing, and loving in a reciprocal relationship with their Heavenly Father.
4. Counseling will not be alert to good behavior that has ungodly motivations. Since sin is embedded in the body more than in the heart, the model does not induce one to examine motives.
5. 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, fear of man, and other non-bodily expressions of the human heart.

³ Jay E. Adams, *More Than Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), p. 160. (Subsequently retitled *A Theology of Christian Counseling*.)

⁴ To my knowledge, no other theologian in history has ever held to the position Dr. Adams holds. This does not automatically rule it out, but requires it to be closely scrutinized.

⁵ Many of these affects have been taken from Dr. Welch's article (see note 8) and expanded here.

6. The counseling model does not adequately address the sinful struggles of one who was converted very early in life. There was no time, so to speak, to habituate one's body to sin.

■ In summary: the counseling model will be focused primarily on outward behavior. The counselor will stand afar off, more as a practitioner challenging the counselee to replace his sinful habits with new ones, than a fellow sinner, encouraging the counselee to grow in the knowledge of Christ; therefore changing his heart, which will naturally lead to outward change.

III. Welch's view⁶

A. Explained

1. "Yet a growing tradition⁷ argues that it (Gal. 5:16-18) refers to two different communities that offer two very different versions of the Christian life..."
2. "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."
3. "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."⁸

- I am disappointed in Ed Welch's seeming lack of dealing with the text and simply buying into a model proposed by post-modern thinkers.

B. Practical affects on counseling.

1. The primary affect I see this having on the counseling model is that of one's interpretation of the text. One of the alternative tasks of the

⁶ His view is actually that of those who are supporting a hermeneutic that includes a consideration of "interpretive communities". See: Walt Russell, *Insights From Postmodernism's Emphasis On Interpretive Communities In The Interpretation Of Romans 7*. (JETS 37:4 December 1994), p. 512-529; also: Walter Bo Russell, III, *Does The Christian Have "Flesh" In Gal. 5:13-26?*. (JETS 36:2 June 1993), p. 180-207.

⁷ This "tradition" has had no advocates in church history until the mid 1990s. Russell claims that Chrysostom holds this position in his *Homilies on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*; however after reading them myself I would disagree.

⁸ Edward Welch, *How Theology Shapes Ministry: Jay Adams' View of Flesh and an Alternative*. (The Journal of Biblical Counseling, Spring 2002), p. 16-25.

counselor is to assist the counselee in understanding God's word (proper interpretation), which then leads to proper application.

- Dr. Welch's definition of "flesh," in my view, has been derived from inadequate exegesis.
 - He, like Dr. Adams, has focused almost entirely on the Romans 7 and Galatians 5 passages, which only include 6 of Paul's 91 uses of the word σαρκί (Even if you expand to Romans 6-8 and Galatians 5 & 6, it is still only 26 of 91.)
 - With the interpretation that Dr. Welch has suggested, you as a counselor/exegete are left with two options:
 1. Conclude that these two passages do not apply to us today, since it is unlikely you will counsel a Judaizer who is trying to insist that one be circumcised in order to be saved/sanctified.
 2. "Spiritualize" these texts to conclude that they are referring to any attempt to come to salvation/sanctification by a list of rules (i.e. legalism).⁹
- 2. In summary: the counselor may not be aggressive enough to help the counselee change certain outward behaviors because they are too focused on being the counselee's "co-sinner" and not wanting to push them away.¹⁰

IV. Textual/Exegetical Alternative

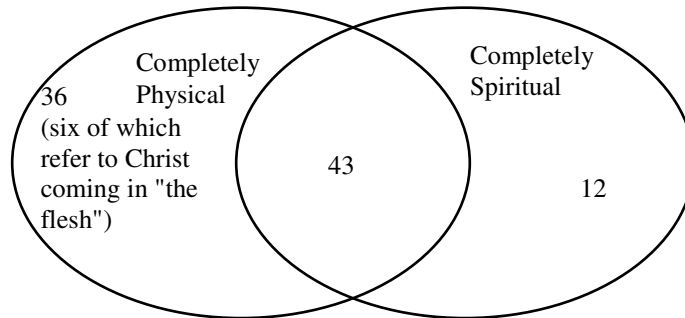
A. Explained

1. In order to form an adequate theology of Paul's use of σαρκί, one must evaluate every use in its context.
2. The result in doing this exercise is to come to a conclusion on the acceptable semantic range (range of meaning) for σαρκί, as used by Paul.

⁹ Trying to avoid what he perceives as Adams' "behavior focused" view, this is the option Dr. Welch seems to take in the conclusion to his article. This also makes Welch define "Law" in Paul as something other than Mosaic Law (i.e. any form of legalism), although I am not sure he realizes it. This is a huge area we do not have time to get into here.

¹⁰ The counselor is a sinner just as the counselee and there needs to be a relationship with the counselee that is transparent; however, you are the counselor, and they came to you for counsel.

- This exercise produced the following results:
 1. Paul uses σαρξ 91 of the 147 occurrences in the NT.
 2. The semantic range (for Paul's uses) can be seen as follows:



- As can be seen the majority of the uses fall into the overlapping area.
- This area is indicating Paul's use of one word to imply two different meanings at the same time. He is using σαρξ to refer to the physical and non-physical part of man—the total person.

3. Examples:

a. Completely Physical:

- (Romans 4:1)¹¹ What then shall we say that Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh, has discovered regarding this matter?

b. Completely Spiritual:

- (Romans 8:8) For the outlook of the flesh is death, but the outlook of the Spirit is life and peace,

c. Both Spiritual and Physical:

- (Romans 8:13) (for if you live according to the flesh, you will die), but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body (σώμα)¹² you will live.

¹¹ All Scripture quotes are taken from *The NET Bible*, (www.netbible.org) copied from Bible Works 5.0.

¹² Σώμα in Romans is almost exclusively used to refer to the physical body. However, in this context it cannot simply be speaking of all physical deeds (i.e. eating?), however it would refer to some physical deeds as adultery (or is adultery simply outwardly physical in nature?).

- (2 Corinthians 4:11) For we who are alive are constantly being handed over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our mortal flesh.

4. Textual/Exegetical Conclusion:

- a. In the majority of cases (including Romans 7 and Galatians 5) Paul is using one word to refer to both the physical and non-physical aspects of man.
- b. This "overlap" is a result of Paul's understanding of anthropology as God has designed man.
- c. Although sin does not "exist" in our flesh (as Gnostics would have taught), we are beings that live in the flesh (ἐν σαρκί).
 - (2 Corinthians 10:3) For though we live in the flesh, we do not wage war according to the flesh.
- d. As a result the only sphere we have in which to manifest our sinfulness is that of the flesh -- according to the flesh (κατὰ σαρκά).
 - (2 Corinthians 10:2) now I ask that when I am present I may not have to be bold with the confidence that (I expect) I will dare to use against some who consider us to be behaving according to the flesh.
- e. The other side of the coin is true as well. The only sphere we have in which to manifest our Christ-likeness is that of the flesh.
 - (2 Corinthians 4:11) For we who are alive are constantly being handed over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our mortal flesh.

B. Practical affects on counseling.

1. A counselor with this balanced view of anthropology will counsel the whole person.
2. There will be times to lovingly come along side a counselee and guide them to the issues (idols) of their heart at the root of the sin in their life – non-physical.
3. There will also be times to lovingly challenge a counselee to perform “radical amputation” – this sin needs to stop and it needs to stop now – physical behavior!

4. There is almost always a need in the counseling situation for both!
 - Sometimes there are behaviors that need to stop quickly, but the counseling is not over when the behavior changes. We must then guide the counselee to the heart issue (idol) behind the outward physical action.
 - (Matthew 12:34) "...For the mouth speaks from what fills the heart."
 - In every counseling situation we must spend time with the counselee helping them evaluate their life so as to properly apply (which requires proper interpretation) God's Word.
 - (Proverbs 18:13) The one who gives an answer before he listens—that is his folly and his shame.
5. I would agree with Dr. Welch in that this will take time, sweat & tears. You generally do not guide people along the path God has for them, helping them overcome various outward and inward struggles in just a few, hour long counseling sessions.¹³

¹³ Edward Welch, *How Theology Shapes Ministry: Jay Adams' View of Flesh and an Alternative*. (The Journal of Biblical Counseling, Spring 2002), p. 16-25.

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