

T. Dale
Johnson Jr.

The Church as a Culture of Care

Finding Hope in
Biblical Community

R BOOK REVIEW // THE CHURCH AS A CULTURE OF CARE FINDING HOPE IN BIBLICAL COMMUNITY T. DALE JOHNSON JR. // REVIEWED BY CASSIE WATSON

Where do you turn when life gets hard? How do you cope when you're assailed by fear, grief, sorrow, addiction, or the myriad of other problems that fallen humans face? In contrast to our modern society that has become increasingly dependent on mental health professionals, Dale Johnson argues that the church should be the place where people look for soul care.

In his new book *The Church as a Culture of Care*, Johnson highlights how dangerous it is that the tenets of psychology have become so uncritically accepted among believers. He identifies a shift that happened around the turn of the 20th century:

The adoption of secular techniques and theories about humankind and their problems became prominent in the church. The pastor was no longer viewed as properly equipped to be the physician of the soul. The Word of God and prayer were viewed as too simplistic an approach for the complexities of new problems. (43)

And so, Johnson argues, we must reclaim the primacy of the church as the place for soul care. This book is aimed mainly at church leaders, but as a lay reader I still found much that was helpful in it.

WHY MUST THE CHURCH CARE?

Pastors used to be known as “physicians of the soul,” and people would come to them with all kinds of problems. But today, we so often compartmentalise our lives. We might think that our big, obvious sin issues are what we bring to the church, but

other life problems have different solutions and remedies. Johnson corrects us: “In God’s economy, all issues are under his lordship, and facing them is an opportunity to turn to him for the help we need” (24). We can’t make a distinction between “spiritual issues” and “nonspiritual issues”—every problem we have will either teach us to rely more on Christ or on some other (ultimately inadequate) source of help.

WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY IS SOUL CARE?

Throughout the book, Johnson keeps his focus on Jesus. Jesus is the head of the church, the Good Shepherd who cares for us. It’s important that Jesus himself is our end and goal, not merely a means to an end (like feeling better about ourselves). Otherwise, something else will take his place:

Our hearts will be shepherded by something or someone. I fear that for many the doing of God’s will has been replaced by the seeking of our happiness and peace by our own means. Secular culture becomes our shepherd rather than the Good Shepherd. But life abundant can only be found in him and through him. (89–90)

In the church, we experience Jesus’s care in part through the actions of the elders and our fellow saints. That second part is important, because if we accept that the church is charged with soul care we might assume it’s just the pastor’s job. Johnson devotes a chapter to exploring the crucial role that elders play as Christ’s under-shepherds, but then the next chapter explains how these elders must train *every saint* in the church to do soul care.

EVERY SAINT IS A COUNSELOR

That was one of my main takeaways from this book—that we’re all responsible for soul care. Most of us won’t be formal, trained counselors, but every single believer is involved in counselling others through ordinary discipleship. Johnson challenges us:

What type of counselor are you? Is your counsel shallow? Is it dominated by cultural ideas or fads? Or do you give counsel that is based on the wisdom of the Wonderful Counselor? Everything we think, say, and do makes a statement about God. Are the things you think, say, and do in your

interactions with others accurate representations of the character of God? (145)

So Johnson has challenged me to carefully consider how I think about my own problems and help others through theirs. Am I relying on the care God provides through his Holy Spirit applying the Word? Or am I looking to sources of help that will never give us what we really need?

The Church as a Culture of Care will encourage both pastors and laypeople to enthusiastically apply themselves to the “one another” commands of Scripture, so that every saint can be cared for and grow up into maturity in Christ.

We all know people in our world are struggling—eating disorders, addictions, depression, sexual issues, marital problems—the list goes on and on. Can the church help or is that an outdated concept that no longer fits modern problems? Biblical counselor Dale Johnson explains that the church is still the primary place where those who struggle can receive lasting hope and healing. Pastors, counselors, and lay leaders will be empowered to have confidence in God’s purpose for the church, the power of his Spirit, and the sufficiency of his Word for soul care.

“Dale Johnson has written a brief but powerful call to the church to reclaim its essential mission to care for people who need it. As a pastor and counselor, I was encouraged and reinvigorated for this important work. If there were any doubts as to the church’s role in the vital work of counseling ministry, look no further than this excellent primer.”

JONATHAN D. HOLMES, Pastor of Counseling, Parkside Church; executive director, Fieldstone Counseling

“Dale Johnson shows that a high view of Scripture leads to a high view of the church and its essential role in soul care and that Christ is both the true standard of what God intends to be ‘normal’ for humanity and the model for elders/pastors in caring for the sheep. I am hopeful that this book will contribute to the restoration of biblical soul care in the church.”

JIM NEWHEISER, Director of the Christian Counseling Program, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC

“Dale Johnson has written a very compelling book to show pastors and others how, by God’s grace and in love, to help those in their church become more like our Lord Jesus Christ. This book is amazing and I highly recommend it not only to pastors but to anyone seeking a Christ-centered, God-glorifying view of the responsibility of the local church to shepherd its flock.”

MARTHA PEACE, ACBC certified counselor; author of *The Excellent Wife*

T. DALE JOHNSON JR., MDIV, PHD, is the Executive Director of The Association of Certified Biblical Counselors and the Director of Counseling Programs and Associate Professor of Biblical Counseling at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He previously served as an associate pastor and continues to seek the strengthening of the church by training pastors and members to minister in their local churches. Dale and his wife, Summer, live in Kansas City, MO, with their six precious children.

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