

A Concise History of Jay Adams's Launch of the Modern Nouthetic Counseling Movement

By

Robert W. Kellemen

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Abstract

Are you interested in the history of the modern nouthetic counseling movement, but you don't have the time to read a dissertation-size book about it? I wrote this concise history *for you*. In it, you will learn about:

- 1.) The Words *Nouthetic*, *Nouthesia*, and Nouthetic.
- 2.) The Story of Jay Adams and the Launch of the Modern Nouthetic Counseling Movement.
- 3.) 3 Reasons Why Jay Adams Called His Counseling Model "Nouthetic."
- 4.) What Jay Adams Meant by "Nouthetic Counseling" and "Nouthetic Confrontation."
- 5.) Bonus Content: Jay Adams, Nouthetic Counseling, and Neuroscience.

A Concise History of Jay Adams's Launch of the Modern Nouthetic Counseling Movement

Introduction

I love history. I especially love church history. And I really love the history of Christian soul care. I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation on the history of Martin Luther's soul care. And I've written three books on the history of Christian soul care.

In preparation for this document, I read and reread dozens of resources—all with the goal of providing a *chapter-size history of the launch of the modern nouthetic counseling movement*.

This document was first a blog post which you can find here under the name: [3 Reasons Why Jay Adams Called His Counseling Model "Nouthetic."](#)

Noutheteo, Nouthesia, and Nouthetic

Jay Adams chose an English form of the Greek words *noutheteo/nouthesia* when he launched the modern nouthetic counseling movement. So the *noutheteo* word group has great significance for anyone interested in biblical counseling.

Noutheteo is the verb form of the word. It is used in the following 8 passages: Acts 20:31; Romans 15:14; 1 Corinthians 4:14; Colossians 1:28; Colossians 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; and 2 Thessalonians 3:15.

Nouthesia is the noun form of the word. It is used in the following 3 passages: 1 Corinthians 10:11; Ephesians 6:4; and Titus 3:10.

"Nouthetic" is the English version of the word coined by Jay Adams to encapsulate his approach to counseling.

The Story of Jay Adams and the Launch of the Modern Nouthetic Counseling Movement

Jay Adams: Looking for Truth-for-Life

In 1952, a young twenty-three-year-old Jay Adams began his first pastorate. Ministering from 1952-1954 at Mount Prospect United Presbyterian Church outside of Pittsburg, Adams **felt inadequate** as a pastoral counselor.

"Early in my first pastorate, following an evening service, a man lingered after everyone else left. I chatted with him awkwardly, wondering what he wanted. He broke into tears, but could not speak. **I simply did not know what to do. I was helpless.** He went home that night without unburdening his heart or receiving any

genuine help from his pastor. Less than one month later he died. I now suspect that his doctor had told him of his impending death and that he had come for counsel. **But I had failed him.** That night I asked God to help me to become an effective counselor.”¹

Adams attributed a large part of his lack of preparedness to the dearth of counseling training during his seminary experience. “Like many other pastors, **I learned little about counseling in seminary, so I began with virtually no knowledge of what to do.**”²

Over the next decade, Adams read widely in the counseling field, studying secular psychologists, mainline pastoral counselors, and the first generation of evangelical psychologists, such as Clyde Narramore.³ However, by the end of that ten-year process, Adams saw himself as **incompetent to counsel.** “I muddled along, with no coherent alternative to the secular stuff.”⁴

Then, in 1964, thirty-five-year-old Jay Adams was asked to teach a course at Westminster Theological Seminary—a course that included a unit on counseling. Years later, reflecting on this experience, Adams shared how unprepared he was:

“What would I teach? I was stuck, and I didn’t know the answers. So I started digging. I read everything I could find on counseling in two or three seminary libraries, as well as other books on psychology. I got immersed in Freudianism because that was the thing that both the pagan books and the Christian books taught. I threw something together for a course; **it was horrible.** But at least I had **started to wrestle** with the issues.”⁵

Over the next half-decade, Adams’s views on counseling theory and practice dramatically changed.

The Impact of Secular Psychologist, O. Hobart Mowrer, on Jay Adams

Still seeking to crystalize his approach to counseling, a Christian psychologist friend thought Adams might be interested in the work of O. Hobart Mowrer.⁶ A secular psychologist, for two decades Mowrer had been challenging Freudian theory, and had been describing people as morally responsible, while describing their troublesome behavior as sin.⁷

In the summer of 1965, Adams applied to a six-week intensive fellowship program for clergy sponsored by the Eli Lilly Foundation, and run by Mowrer. Accepted into the program, Adams and the other five trainees “virtually lived with Mowrer,” spending their days working in therapy groups that Mowrer conducted in state mental health hospitals in Galesburg and Kankakee, Illinois.⁸

That summer with Mowrer was **eye-opening** for Adams. He watched Mowrer confront his counselees about their actions, urge them to take responsibility, and not hide behind psychological labels.⁹ As Adams described it, “Mowrer was **rough on people** in the psychiatric hospital. He would tackle the impossible cases, and in groups he would go after someone **relentlessly** until a breakthrough occurred.”¹⁰

Adams summarized Mowrer's impact on him. "**I learned much** during that time, and while today I certainly would not classify myself as a member of Mowrer's school, I feel that the summer program was **a turning point in my thinking.**"¹¹

Mowrer's Catalytic Effect on Adams

Those six weeks with Mowrer had a catalytic effect on Adams. And Adams was duly appreciative of what Mowrer had given him.

"Mowrer did two things for me. First, he *destroyed* the Freudian system in my mind.... Second, he shook my faith in the mental health professionals. Previously I was still caught up in the idea that we preachers shouldn't be doing counseling. Mowrer cleared the rubble for me. He gave me the confidence to go forward."¹²

Powlison summarizes the impact of Mowrer on Adams.

"Mowrer's moral framework, conversational intent, **direct manner**, and polemic against the dominant models dovetailed with many of Adams's existing commitments, discontents, successes, failures, and gropings....

Mowrer had given Adams **the contours of a counseling model** and had set him in motion....

During 1965-66, Adams began implementing what he had learned from Mowrer and what he was discovering in the Bible. He did counseling in his own church, experimenting with more intentional probing of counselee's lives and **more directive methods** of addressing the problems discovered."¹³

Reflecting on the birth of the modern nouthetic counseling movement, Corbin Page writes, "Ironically, this response, which stressed that psychologists had no special authority, had its origins in the writings of one of the most eminent secular psychologists of the 20th century."¹⁴

Over the years, many critics of Adams sought to detail numerous significant structural resemblances between Mowrer's theory and methodology of secular counseling (Integrity Therapy), and Adams's theory and methodology of Nouthetic Counseling. However, Adams strongly insisted that he was not a disciple of Mowrer's, and he criticized many particulars of Mowrer's system.¹⁵

3 Reasons Why Jay Adams Called His Counseling Model "Nouthetic"

On June 1, 1966, Jay Adams was appointed Assistant Professor of Practical Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary. Adams describe the content of his first counseling course this way:

“For the first couple of years **that course was a mess**, rough. I spent night and day studying: studying people, studying counseling books, studying the Bible. I was counseling and I didn’t have answers, counseling by the seat of the pants.”¹⁶

The first rough outline of what would become nouthetic counseling began to emerge in his 1966 class on Pastoral Theology. In Adams’s own words: “At first it was little more than ‘Sin is the problem and the Bible has the answers,’ illustrated with a few case studies.”¹⁷

Over the next five years (1966-1970), as he studied counseling issues, Adams began to form a counseling system for his **frank, direct style** of pastoral conversation—an approach he came to label “nouthetic counseling.” But why name it “nouthetic”?

Reason #1: The Personal Reason

First, there was a personal reason. The Institute of Nouthetic Counseling explains it like this:

“Adams knew every system of thought—theological, philosophical, mathematical—eventually got tagged with a label. **He was loath to think that anyone would ascribe his name to his system in some way, so he decided to use an anglicized form of the Greek word Paul used for counseling and coined the word ‘nouthetic.’** That system began to crystalize into a set of notes Adams wrote for his seminary class, which made their way into the hands of a publisher who asked Adams to work them into a book” (*Competent to Counsel*).¹⁸

Donn Arms states this personal motivation for the term “nouthetic counseling” even more concisely:

Adams was concerned that supporters would **attach some awkward adjective like ‘Adamsonian’ or ‘Adamsian’** to it so he preempted them with the word ‘nouthetic.’¹⁹

Stated simply, Adams, in humility, did not want his counseling approach named after himself.

Reason #2: The Conceptual Reason

In 1976, in *What About Nouthetic Counseling?*, Adams explained the conceptual reason for his choice of the word “nouthetic.”

“I prefer the words ‘biblical’ or ‘Christian’ but reluctantly have used the word ‘nouthetic’ ... **as a convenience by which the biblical system of counseling** that has been developed in such books as *Competent to Counsel* and *The Christian Counselor’s Manual* might be identified more easily. The reason why the title Nouthetic Confrontation is not to be preferred is because while **admirably embracing the major biblical concepts of counseling**, the use of *nouthesia* is **not universal**. It appears almost exclusively in Paul. Other terms are employed by other writers.”²⁰

Adams makes two very vital points here. First, *noutheteo* and *nouthesia* **encapsulate and embrace the major concepts of Jay Adams's model of nouthetic biblical counseling**. The *noutheteo* word group is a vital summarizing idea, a word picture capturing the essence of his approach. Adams develops this thought further in *Competent to Counsel*.

"I have no great zeal for the label 'nouthetic' beyond its **obvious advantages**. However, since every school of thought eventually must be identified by an adjective, I should prefer to choose that adjective for myself."²¹

Second, Jay Adams did **not** build his model of counseling **exclusively** from one New Testament Greek word used 11 times. As Donn Arms clarifies:

"So while Dr. Adams derived the English word 'nouthetic' from the Greek word 'noutheteo' it was understood by him, and each of the men who founded NANC (National Association of Nouthetic Counselors, which is now The Association of Certified Biblical Counselors), to be *shorthand for that system of biblical counseling* taught by Dr. Adams in his foundational books."²²

While there is more to Adams's model of counseling than *noutheteo/nouthesia*, that word group does represent the basic contours of his counseling model.

Reason #3: The Contextual Reason

Third, there was a contextual reason for Adams's choice of "nouthetic" for his approach to counseling. By "contextual," I mean the "culture" of the day—the counseling mindset and writings prevalent during that time.

Notice Adams's disdain for the Rogerian/Freudian models that were dominant in his day.

"In my first efforts to improve, I bought, borrowed, and devoured as many of the current volumes on counseling as I could, but in these I found little help. Almost all commended **non-directive Rogerian methods or advocated Freudian principles**.... I found it ludicrous **to nod and grunt acceptingly in detachment without offering biblical directives**."²³

David Powlison, writing about the impact of Adams's six weeks with Mowrer, describes why Mowrer's approach resonated with Adams.

"Mowrer's counseling methodology was a revelation to **an authoritative pulpit proclaimer**. Adams had **chafed at the passivity, patience, and professional reserve enjoined by the reigning counseling authorities**.... Mowrer was **direct and directive**.... Mowrer aimed to **identity and solve problems quickly**.... Mowrer was **assertive, no-nonsense**, and dealt practically with objectively discoverable failings."²⁴

Adams opposed both the non-directive approach of Rogers and the Medical Model approach of Freud. Adams saw both of these approaches as denying or diminishing personal responsibility, and as robbing pastors of their scriptural authority.

Adams highlighted how “Mowrer’s focus on **responsibility was central.**”²⁵ Mowrer’s “Moral Model” approach “particularly opposed the Medical Model” which “removed responsibility from the counselee.”²⁶ Adams was seeking an approach that would counter “the Freudian ethic of non-responsibility.”²⁷

Writing pejoratively of Rogers and of pastors who parrot him, Adams says, as only he can:

“Think of the sorry picture the conservative Christian minister makes as he sits behind his desk **grunting non-judgmentally.** The Christian pastor is called to be a paraclete, not a parakeet.”²⁸

Instead of this passive, non-authoritative approach, “the pastor who is nouthetically oriented will tend to become lovingly **frank** with his people.... Therefore, he will **not mince words** or spar around with people. Rather, he will be specific about personal problems and **straightforwardly** attempt to correct them.”²⁹

We might encapsulate it like this:

In *noutheteo/nouthesia/nouthetic*, Adams found a concept of directive confrontation of sin that countered the prevailing non-directive, non-responsibility approach that reigned in the counseling world of his day.³⁰

What Did Jay Adams Mean by “Nouthetic Counseling” and “Nouthetic Confrontation”?

Adams spent a lifetime and penned a library of books and resources to answer the question, “What is nouthetic counseling?”

In his very first book on counseling, Adams used “nouthetic counseling” and “nouthetic confrontation” interchangeably. He entitled chapter 4 of *Competent to Counsel* “What Is Nouthetic Counseling?” Adams then notes in the first paragraph of chapter 4, “Perhaps the best place to begin is with a discussion of what I have called ‘**nouthetic confrontation.**’”³¹ His very first header in chapter 4 is: “**Nouthetic Confrontation: By the Whole Church.**”³²

Then, in exploring how the word *noutheteo/nouthesia* is used in the New Testament, Adams states:

In Colossians 3:16 Paul urged: Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and [for the moment we shall simply transliterate the next word] **confronting one another nouthetically.**³³

Adams goes on to say that, “In both Colossians and Romans, then, Paul pictured Christians meeting in **nouthetic confrontation as normal every-day activity**.”³⁴ Based upon his translation and interpretation of Colossians 1:28 and Acts 20:32, Adams also stated that “Paul **confronted people nouthetically** in the day-to-day contacts of pastoral work.”³⁵

In summary, for Adams, at its core, **nouthetic counseling equals nouthetic confrontation**.

3 Elements of Nouthetic Confrontation

Adams consistently identified three core elements related to nouthetic counseling/nouthetic confrontation. For example, when interviewed in 2014 by Ligonier Ministries, and asked, “What is nouthetic counseling?”, Adams replied:

“The word nouthetic comes from the Greek word noutheteō. The word, which is primarily used by Paul in the New Testament, is translated into English as ‘admonish,’ ‘correct,’ or ‘instruct.’ This is the word that occurs in Romans 15:14, where Paul writes, ‘I myself am satisfied about you my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.’

Briefly, let me add that the Scriptural view of counseling **involves three C’s—Concern, Confrontation, and Change**. Out of concern for a brother or sister in trouble spiritually, one lovingly confronts him in order to bring about change that is pleasing to God. Such change is brought about by the ministry of the Word in the power of the Spirit working both in the counselor and the counselee.³⁶

Adams develops these “3 C’s” in more detail in his article, *What Is Nouthetic Counseling?* He explains that nouthetic counseling embraces three primary ideas.

“The three ideas found in the word nouthesia are **confrontation, concern, and change**. To put it simply:

*Nouthetic counseling consists of **lovingly confronting** people out of **deep concern** in order to help them make those **changes that God requires**.*

By **confrontation** we mean that one Christian personally gives counsel to another from the Scriptures. He does not confront him with his own ideas or the ideas of others. He limits his counsel strictly to that which may be found in the Bible, believing that: *All Scripture is breathed out by God and useful for teaching, for conviction, for correction and for disciplined training in righteousness in order to fit and fully equip the man from God for every good task (2 Timothy 3:16,17)*. The nouthetic counselor believes that all that is needed to help another person love God and his neighbor as he should, as the verse above indicates, may be found in the Bible.

By **concern** we mean that counseling is always done for the benefit of the counselee. His welfare is always in view in Biblical counseling. The apostle Paul put it this way: ‘I am not writing these things to shame you, but to counsel you as my dear children.’

(1 Corinthians 4:14) Plainly, the **familial** nature of the word *noutheteo* appears in this verse. There is always a **warm, family** note to biblical counseling which is done among the saints of God who seek to help one another become more like Christ. Christians consider their counseling to be a part of the sanctification process whereby one Christian helps another get through some difficulty that is hindering him from moving forward in his spiritual growth.

By **change** we mean that counseling is done because there is something in another Christian's life that fails to meet the biblical requirements and that, therefore, keeps him from honoring God. All counseling—Biblical or otherwise—attempts change. Only Biblical counselors know what a counselee should become as the result of counseling: **he should look more like Christ**. He is the Standard. Biblical counseling is done by Christians who are convinced that God is able to make the changes that are necessary as His Word is ministered in the power of the Spirit."³⁷

Conclusion

With the publication of *Competent to Counsel* in 1970, Jay Adams launched a new, revolutionary approach to soul care. It was an approach focused on nouthetic confrontation out of concern for change.

Bonus Content

Jay Adams, Nouthetic Counseling, and Neuroscience

Introduction

I first published this material at my RPM Ministries blog site here: [Jay Adams, Nouthetic Counseling, and Neuroscience](#). From the start of the modern nouthetic counseling movement, Jay Adams used neuroscience in support of his nouthetic model of counseling.

Fascinating Reading from Jay Adams in 1970

I've read Jay Adams's *Competent to Counsel* several times over the past 50 years. Here's something I had not thought a lot about until now:

Jay's view and use of neuroscience.

Perhaps my past two years of examining neuroscience has alerted me to this topic.

“The Nervous System Corresponds to the Nouthetic Approach”

On pages 96-97 of *Competent to Counsel*, Adams uses his understanding of 1970s neuroscience (“the nervous system”) to say: **“The Nervous System Corresponds to the Nouthetic Approach”** (p. 96/Header).

Adams proposes that there are two sides to the human nervous system. One side is emotional and involuntary. The other side is associated with problem-solving and voluntary action and has to do with behavior (96).

Then Adams concludes with this summary implication for nouthetic counseling from his understanding of 1970s neuroscience/nervous system studies:

“While there is no direct voluntary access to the emotions, the emotions can be reached indirectly through the voluntary system, because extensive fiber overlappings in the cortex allow unified correlation of the two systems. Voluntary behavioral alterations will lead to involuntary emotional changes. It is important to understand, therefore, that feelings flow from actions” (Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, p. 97).

What Most Intrigues Me

Whether Adams's conclusion and application of 1970s neuroscience were totally accurate or not, could be debated, then and now.

But here's what most intrigues me:

From the start of the modern nouthetic counseling movement, the founder, Jay Adams, at the very least **used “nervous system studies” or “neuroscience” as illustrative and supportive of his nouthetic model of counseling. Adams used these studies at least in a catalytic way, if not more.**

Adams does not cite footnotes for his views on pages 96-97. Elsewhere in *Competent to Counsel*, Adams cites many footnotes related to other topics. Adams does not make any statement on pages 96-97 about any limitations of the scientific method or any potential biases. Earlier in the book, Adams does share his perspective on science, the Bible, and counseling:

“I do not wish to disregard science, but rather I welcome it as a useful adjunct for the purposes of illustrating, filling in generalizations with specifics, and challenging wrong human interpretations of Scripture, thereby forcing the student to restudy the Scriptures” (Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, p. xxi).

Implications for Today

Adams's early use of neuroscience raises a question that is much discussed these days:

How does the modern nouthetic/biblical counseling movement see the role of neuroscience?

Or, we could ask the question like this:

Since Jay Adams used his understanding of 1970s neuroscience in his foundational book, what does that imply about the nouthetic counseling way of viewing and using neuroscience?

What does Adams's use of neuroscience in 1970 suggest about how biblical counselors might view and use neuroscience today?

For Further Study

This resource is one of many resources that I've collated related to biblical counseling, embodied-souls, and neuroscience. You can find all of these resources here:

[*23 Resources for Counseling the Whole Person: God Designed Us as Embodied-Souls.*](#)

Notes

¹ Adams, Jay. *Competent to Counsel*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1970, xi.

² Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, xi.

³ Powlison, David. *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context*, 31.

⁴ Powlison, 34.

⁵ Powlison, 34-35.

⁶ Some have described Mowrer during this period of time as “an atheist.” According to his own autobiographical assessment, Mowrer’s religious/spiritual beliefs and commitments were complex and fluid. Born into a Christian home, he turned to atheism as a young adult. However, later he joined the Unitarian Church, and still later Mowrer and his family joined the Presbyterian Church. And still later, his written views on religion and Christianity were “liberal” at best. From his own testimony, it does appear that at some point Mowrer once again rejected the historic Christian faith. See: Mowrer, O. H. (1966). “Abnormal Reactions or Actions? (An Autobiographical Answer).” In J. Vernon (Ed.), *Introduction to General Psychology: A Self-Selection Textbook*. Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown. Also see: Page, Corbin. “Preserving Guilt in the ‘Age of Psychology’: The Curious Career of O. Hobart Mowrer.” *History of Psychology* 20, no. 1 (Feb. 2017): 1-27.

⁷ Page, Corbin. “Preserving Guilt in the ‘Age of Psychology’: The Curious Career of O. Hobart Mowrer.” *History of Psychology* 20, no. 1 (Feb. 2017): 1-27.

⁸ Powlison, 35.

⁹ Institute for Nouthetic Studies. “Dr. Jay E. Adams,” January 2021. Accessed online May 26, 2023:

<https://nouthetic.org/about/jay-adams/>.

¹⁰ Powlison, 36.

¹¹ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, xv.

¹² Powlison, 36.

¹³ Powlison, 36, 37.

¹⁴ Page, 22.

¹⁵ Powlison, 37, and footnotes 71-74, and chapter 8.

¹⁶ Powlison, 38.

¹⁷ Powlison, 38.

¹⁸ Institute for Nouthetic Studies. “Dr. Jay E. Adams,” January 2021. Accessed online May 26, 2023:

<https://nouthetic.org/about/jay-adams/>.

¹⁹ Arms, Donn. “What’s In a Name, Part 2.” ND. Accessed online May 26, 2023:

<https://silo.tips/download/what-s-in-a-name-part-2-by-donn-r-arms>.

²⁰ Adams, Jay. *What About Nouthetic Counseling?* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976, 1.

²¹ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 52.

²² Arms, Donn. “What’s In a Name, Part 2.” ND. Accessed online May 26, 2023:

<https://silo.tips/download/what-s-in-a-name-part-2-by-donn-r-arms>.

²³ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, ix.)

²⁴ Powlison, 35-36.

²⁵ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, xv.

²⁶ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, xvi.

²⁷ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 18.

²⁸ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 84.

²⁹ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 62-63.

³⁰ The New Testament uses many words for what we today call “counseling” and “soul care.” Prominent among them in usage is the *parakaleo/paraklasis/paraklatos* word group (variously translated as comforting, encouraging, counseling, Advocate, Comforter, Counselor, etc.). New Testament writers use forms of this *parakaleo* word group **143 times, compared to 11 times** for the *noutheteo/nouthesia* word group. See: Kellemen, Robert. “Biblical Counseling Word Study #1: *Parakaleo*—Empathize, Encourage, Exhort, Empower.” May 18, 2023. Accessed on May 31, 2023. <https://rpmministries.org/2023/05/biblical-counseling-word-study-1-parakaleo-empathize-encourage-exhort-empower/>.

³¹ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 41.

³² Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 41.

³³ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 41.

³⁴ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 42.

³⁵ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 42.

³⁶ Ligonier Ministries. "Competent to Counsel: An Interview with Jay Adams." January 25, 2014. Accessed on May 26, 2023. <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/competent-counsel-interview-jay-adams>.

³⁷ Adams, Jay. *What Is Nouthetic Counseling?* ND. Accessed May 26, 2023. <https://nouthetic.org/about/what-is-nouthetic-counseling/>.