

COMMON GRACE IN DEBATE:
A Response to Edward T. Welch's "Common Grace,
Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor"
*Francine Tan*¹

CAN NON-BELIEVERS DISCOVER TRUE THINGS?

Almost twenty years ago, Jay Adams published "Is All Truth God's Truth?" to examine the implications of this axiom regarding whether psychology is a source of God's truth.² Adams wrote, "The discoveries [through common grace] are distorted by man's limitations and rebellion and are certainly not inerrant or inspired, as revelation always is... Revelation comes from God; discovery from man."³ Adams addressed the theological formulation of special revelation and general revelation for early integrationists and warned against justifying the use of secular sources as "general revelation" to be on the same plane as special revelation in one's theology of soul care.⁴ Today,

¹ Francine Tan is an ACBC-certified counselor from Malaysia and is currently pursuing her PhD in Biblical Counseling at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Please contact jbsc@biblicalcounseling.com with questions for the author.

² Jay E. Adams, *Is All Truth God's Truth?* (Memphis, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2004).

³ *Ibid.*, 140-1.

⁴ One of the most significant attempts to produce an integrative construct is that of Gary R. Collins, *The Rebuilding of Psychology: An Integration of Psychology and Christianity* (Eastbourne, Eng.: Wheaton, Ill: Coverdale House; Tyndale House, 1977). See also J. Roland Fleck and John D. Carter, eds., *Psychology and Christianity: Integrative Readings* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981); Kirk E. Farnsworth, *Wholehearted Integration: Harmonizing Psychology and Christianity through Word and Deed* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1985); Stanton L. Jones and Richard E. Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Approach*, 2nd ed (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2011). For critiques of these integrationists' efforts, see David A. Powlison, "Which Presuppositions? Secular Psychology and the Categories of Biblical Thought," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 12, 4 (December 1984): 270-78; Michael Scott Horton, ed., "Integration or Inundation?" in *Power Religion: The Selling out of the Evangelical Church?* (Chicago: Moody Pr, 1992); Jay E. Adams, *A Call for Discernment: Distinguishing Truth from Error in Today's Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Timeless Texts, 1999); Heath Lambert et al., *Sufficiency: Historic Essays on the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Glenside, PA: Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, 2016).

the doctrine of common grace has become the new theological category for incorporating and promoting trauma-informed care and evidence-based practices with Scripture in the biblical counseling movement.⁵ The argument is that since believers have an ethical obligation to offer the best care possible, it makes sense that they would use secular discoveries, research, knowledge, and/or interventions to inform their practice of soul care.⁶ While a different theological doctrine lies at the forefront of biblical counseling debates today, the same question that Jay Adams sought to address remains— “Can non-believers discover true things?” If yes, what do we do with the knowledge of non-believers, as it relates to the counseling issues of men?⁷ This is where the doctrine of common grace is at the crossroads of utilizing extra-biblical

⁵ The doctrine of common grace is now an issue that is debated in the biblical counseling movement. See Brad Hambrick, “Southeastern Theological Review: SEBTS Counseling Professors Roundtable: As It Is and As It Could Be,” *Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary* 15, 1 (Spring 2024); Nate Brooks et al., “What Is Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?” (Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, July 8, 2024), <https://www.sebts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/What-is-RCCIBC.pdf>; Beth Broom, “Our Ministry Philosophy,” Christian Trauma Healing Network, accessed January 20, 2024, <https://christiantraumahealingnetwork.org/about/>; Robert W. Kellemen, “7 Reformed Theologians on ‘Common Grace,’” RPM Ministries, August 9, 2022, <https://rpmministries.org/2022/08/7-reformed-theologians-on-common-grace/>. In his article, Kellemen wrote, “In Reformed Christian theology, unregenerate persons are totally depraved, and all of their thinking is seen as under the noetic (mind) impact of sin and fallenness. Yet, also in Reformed thinking, the unregenerate/unsaved person can make valid contributions to society, culture, the arts, research, science, and more. How can these two truths be held together at one time? The Reformed doctrine of “common grace” explains this...and explains why it is possible for Christians to learn from non-Christians.” For examples of biblical counselors who have addressed the misused of common grace in counseling, see Ernie Baker, “Presuppositionalism, Common Grace, and Trauma Theory,” *Journal of Biblical Soul Care* 8, 1 (Spring 2024), <https://acbcdigitalresources.s3.us-west-2.amazonaws.com/resources/JBSC/Spring2024/JBSC+2024+Spring+Baker.pdf>; Heath Lambert, *Biblical Counseling and Common Grace* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherds Press, 2023); Heath Lambert, “Six Crucial Confusions of The New Integrationists,” First Baptist Church Jacksonville, *First Thoughts* (blog), May 20, 2024, <https://fbcjax.com/first-thoughts/six-crucial-confusions-of-the-new-integrationists/>; Heath Lambert, ed., *A Call to Clarity: Critical Issues in Contemporary Biblical Counseling* (Jacksonville, FL: First Baptist Church Jacksonville, 2024).

⁶ Hambrick, “Southeastern Theological Review: SEBTS Counseling Professors Roundtable: As It Is and As It Could Be,” 79.

⁷ While the nature of counseling is spiritual/theological, and therefore, the care of souls belongs to the domain of God, the recent issue of neuroscience discoveries (i.e., effects of trauma on the brain and body) have brought a new dimension to the debate—what do we do with the knowledge of non-believers without undermining the sufficiency of Scripture? This author addresses the problems with Welch’s openness to utilize Bessel van der Kolk’s *Body Keeps the Score* and Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery* later in this paper (see p. 26ff), but for now, the author will first address the intricacies of the doctrine of common grace.

information while attempting to maintain the sufficiency of Scripture in a believer's counseling system. Ed Welch's essay "Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor" is an example of misapplying this biblical doctrine to that end.⁸

According to Welch, the doctrine of common grace offers a common epistemological ground for the unregenerate and the regenerate, and among other things, promotes the general helpfulness of observations and descriptions about people and their behaviors from secularists that biblical counselors can utilize to shape soul care methodology. Welch begins his essay with "Biblical counselors always bring extrabiblical information to their care and counsel," and then proceeds to claim, "given that my own 'looking' and knowing people has been useful. I expect that unbelievers will make worthy observations too. Biblical counselors read broadly, not simply to critique the work of unbelievers but also to take away a provocative idea or a methodological trinket that will be reshaped and incorporated into our growing store of wisdom."⁹

In response to Welch's position, this essay will first address the theological and methodological inconsistencies in Welch's articulation of common grace.

⁸ Edward T. Welch, "Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor," *Journal of Biblical Soul Care* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2024). Welch's essay was first submitted at the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC) colloquium held in the summer of 2023. The colloquium was an invitation-only event where experts and leaders in the Biblical Counseling movement were invited to present on the topic of common grace as well as field questions and feedback about their papers.

⁹ Welch, "Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor," 24, 38. It is worth noting that Welch contradicts himself by saying, "When secular theories are incorporated into our counsel, the doctrine of sin is the first one to suffer, and when the doctrine of sin is minimized, the gospel of Jesus Christ is lost" (25). Welch cautions against absorbing eclectic pieces of information, yet, his view of common grace results in "[taking] away a provocative idea or a methodological trinket that will be reshaped and incorporated into our growing store of wisdom." In fact, the utility of extra-biblical information that arises from man's natural reasoning is one of the reasons some have argued that the rightful place of common grace is found traditionally among Roman Catholics and Arminian thinkers. Both traditions have accented to what all men have in common: the correct use of the rational faculty, the empirical observation of human experience and natural phenomena, and the common comprehension on the part of all men of general and natural revelation. See William D. Dennison, "Van Til and Common Grace," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 9, 2 (1993): 226; David Engelsma, *Common Grace Revisited: A Response to Richard J. Mouw's He Shines in All That's Fair, Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Pub. Association, 2003), 14; Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 2. ed, In *Defense of Biblical Christianity* 2 (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co, 1967).

Second, this essay will argue that common grace should be defined as God's non-salvific yet kind posture towards all mankind, displayed in the delay of final judgment, the restraint of sin's full impact on the earth, and the bestowal of temporal gifts (i.e., physical blessings in the sphere of creation, man's intellect, and physical abilities) for the providential preservation of the world.¹⁰ In other words, common grace is a preservative act of God and should not be understood as a positive contribution of unregenerate men. It is not the discoveries, insights, or "good deeds" resulting from the restraint of sin or the use of temporal gifts. A correct understanding of common grace maintains the epistemological and ethical antithesis between the regenerate and the unregenerate, most clearly seen in Romans 1:18-32, without providing biblical counselors with the license to embrace either the content or methodology of secular psychologies. Put simply, mankind benefits from common grace but does not participate in generating it. So, common grace should not be used as a category of knowledge accessed by both the unregenerate and the regenerate because Scripture offers us a comprehensive counseling system, and there will not be any necessary insights from unregenerate men.

COMMON GRACE IN THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE: A LONG-STANDING DEBATE

A few definitional and theological inconsistencies of Welch's articulation of common grace (hereinafter abbreviated as CG) must first be addressed before highlighting nuances with this doctrine among the Reformed position.¹¹

¹⁰ "Temporal" in the sense that they do not have any spiritual or eternal value, and these gifts are given to mankind on this side of heaven as an expression of God's universal benevolence and kindness.

¹¹ A few preliminary matters on this doctrine—it is not soteriological (it is not saving grace) or the Arminian doctrine of prevenient grace, but an expression of the universal goodness and benevolence of God that is experienced by all people without exception, including those who will never receive salvation (Psalm 33:5; 52:1; 107:8; 119:68; 145:9). See John MacArthur, ed., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2017), 488; John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991); Barry Gritters, "Grace Uncommon: A Protestant Reformed Look at the Doctrine of Common Grace," 2000, https://www.prca.org/pamphlets/pamphlet_55.html; Mathes Glenda, "3000 People Attend A Debate on Common Grace," *Banner of Truth*, December 5, 2003, <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2003/3000-people-attend-a-debate-on-common-grace/>; Engelsma, *Common Grace Revisited*. Although it is outside the purview of this essay,

First, Welch uses Herman Kuiper's classification of CG, namely universal, general, and covenant CG.¹² Yet, Welch also claims that "common grace owes its existence to the doctrine of sin and its incomplete description of the human condition."¹³ Besides the fact that Kuiper's classifications of CG are not accepted by all within the Reformed camp, Kuiper underscored that "God as Creator is the fountain of all good so that we seek everything from Him alone [and there is] not a particle of wisdom, light, justice, power, or rectitude, which does not flow from Him, and of which He is not the cause."¹⁴

some people—especially those in the Presbyterian circle—question the validity of the doctrine of CG itself and would prefer to call it "the providence of God" instead. The argument is that Scripture never uses *hen* or *charis* to refer to His blessings on creation generally or on non-elect humanity. So, it would perhaps be better to speak of God's common goodness or common love, rather than His CG. A few more objections include: 1) our problem with CG is that it teaches that God gives those good things to unbelievers in His love for them or His favor towards them; 2) it teaches that God restrains sin by a gracious operation of His Spirit and in an attitude of favor toward them; and 3) unbeliever cannot do anything by which God is pleased with him personally. There are no works that unbelievers perform which God approves, about which He says, "good work," and upon which He puts His stamp of approval. All works of unbelievers are unrighteous.

¹² Welch mistakenly references "[Abraham] Kuyper" even though it is Herman Kuiper's classification of CG that was cited, and the functional usage of CG throughout this paper is largely grounded within the traditional Dutch Reformed position (e.g., Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and Valentine Hepp). Kuiper (1889-1963) was a minister in the Christian Reformed Church (C.R.C.), and a professor at Calvin Seminary, and his work was historically significant during the debates that followed the C.R.C.'s assertion of the 3 Points of CG in 1924 (see footnote 13). Kuiper believed that Calvin is the discoverer of this doctrine by examining a variety of terms in Calvin's *Institutes* and his commentaries which, he says, are synonyms of grace in Calvin's writing, such as: "goodness, kindness, liberality, benignity, beneficence, love, mercy, clemency, good will, and favor." Herman Kuiper, *Calvin on Common Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Smither Book, 1928), 3.

¹³ Welch, "Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor," 25. Here, Welch says that "unbelievers still see many things. They do not know that God is love, but they can love family and neighbors. They do not know the Truth, but they can make wise observations, and they can speak the truth about events they witnessed."

¹⁴ Kuiper, *Calvin on Common Grace*, 5. For those who disagreed with Kuiper and the traditional Reformed view of CG and the history of the 1924 Synod, see Herman Hoeksema, "Herman Hoeksema's Critique of Cornelius Van Til's Common Grace and the Gospel" (The Standard Bearer, 1942), <https://www.cprf.co.uk/articles/hhvantilcritique.pdf>; John Bolt, "Common Grace and the Christian Reformed Synod of Kalamazoo (1924): A Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Retrospective," *Calvin Theological Journal* Spring (2000), <https://www.prca.org/articles/ctj1.html>; Barry Gritters, "Grace Uncommon: A Protestant Reformed Look at the Doctrine of Common Grace," 2000, https://www.prca.org/pamphlets/pamphlet_55.html; David Engelsma, *Common Grace Revisited: A Response to Richard J. Mouw's He Shines in All That's Fair, Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Pub. Association, 2003). Without going into the details of the 1924 Synod's decision and the debate regarding common grace, suffice it to say that the key issue had to do with the favorable or gracious attitude of God

This means that the doctrine of CG does not owe its existence “to the doctrine of sin” or “the doctrine of man,” but it begins with the doctrine of God. More specifically, it is the universal goodness and benevolence of God that is experienced by all people without distinction, including those who will never receive salvation (Psalm 33:5; 52:1; 107:8; 119:68; 145:9).¹⁵

Second, Welch assumes a consistent articulation and application of CG in church history when he applies a broad description of CG to the use of secular knowledge in soul care. For example, Welch says, “common grace can be understood as continuing grace and earlier grace that comes from both our created connection to God,” “common grace gives us points of contact,” and hence, we can have “common-grace-eyes” to know people and make “common-grace-observations.”¹⁶ Besides a lack of demonstration from Scripture of what he meant by “continuing grace and earlier grace,” it is also a misnomer to describe this doctrine about God’s universal benevolence towards all mankind as man’s innate ability to discover “common grace pieces” for the care of souls.¹⁷ More importantly, Reformed theologians were addressing this doctrine due to the contextual issues of their own time and had different emphases on the purpose and operations of CG in the world. For example, John Calvin reacted to Roman Catholic doctrines of sin and grace with CG as a fundamental and crucial step in his argument against the Pelagian or semi-Pelagian Catholicism of his day.¹⁸ Abraham Kuyper sought to answer the question concerning the

toward all people. This doctrine of CG was expressed under these points: (1) that God’s favour or grace extended to all his creatures, including the non-elect; (2) that this grace manifests itself in the restraint of sin in the life of the individual and in societal life as well, benefiting elect and non-elect alike; and (3) that the unregenerate, because of the operation of this common grace, are able to perform “civic good” but remain unable to do “good works” born of redemption in Christ.

¹⁵ Unless otherwise specified, all Bible references in this paper are to the New American Standard Bible, 1995 (NASB) (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995). MacArthur, *Biblical Doctrine*, 488.

¹⁶ Welch, “Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor,” 27, 29, 32, and 31.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 39. Welch says, “Is all this an accumulation of incompatible parts? Common grace pieces—observations—inserted into the care of souls, untethered from biblical categories? No. Most observations and theories about people, if they have any popularity and endurance, have inklings of larger truths.”

¹⁸ It should be noted that the subject of CG in Calvin’s thought has generated a number of divergent interpretations among scholars. The critical question in both older and more recent scholarship has been whether it is proper to ascribe to Calvin a doctrine of CG and, thus, by implication, whether God is in any way favorable or loving toward those he has predestined to perdition. If one were to attempt to summarize the results of this research in schematic form, one

value of non-Christian culture, science, and philosophy with this doctrine.¹⁹ More recently, Cornelius Van Til developed a reconstructivist view of CG, which has become a key feature in presuppositional apologetics.²⁰ The scope of this paper does not cover the nuances of CG in historical theology, but the consensus on the nature, benefits, purpose, and means through which this doctrine operates is not easily established. Some have attempted to categorize this doctrine into three camps (the traditional position, the denial position, and the reconstructionist position), while others have described it as having different emphases (e.g., Calvin has a theological emphasis, Kuyper has a social emphasis, and Van Til has a methodological/apologetic emphasis).²¹

might say that the various interpretations exhibit three trajectories. First, there are interpreters who argue that Calvin's theology elicits a fairly detailed doctrine of common grace, with some writers linking this doctrine to Calvin's treatment of the gospel-offer question. Second, there are those who argue that Calvin's thought only sets forth this doctrine in an embryonic form, being left undeveloped, informal, and/or on the periphery of his theology. Third, a few writers maintain that any notion of CG that might seem to be present in Calvin's thought constitutes a gross inconsistency in the Reformer's thinking and perhaps even reveals that Calvin was given at times to flagrant contradictions. See J. Mark Beach, "Calvin's Treatment of the Offer of the Gospel and Divine Grace," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 22 (2011): 55-76; Richard Arden Couch, "An Evaluation and Reformulation of the Doctrine of Common Grace in the Reformed Tradition" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1959); Donald K/ McKim, *Readings in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984); Walter Campbell-Jack, "Grace without Christ? The Doctrine of Common Grace in Dutch-American Neo-Calvinism" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1992); David Engelsma, *Common Grace Revisited: A Response to Richard J. Mouw's He Shines in All That's Fair, Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Grandville, Mich: Reformed Free Pub. Association, 2003).

¹⁹ Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) was a Dutch theologian, statesman, and journalist who led the Anti-Revolutionary Party, an orthodox Calvinist group, to a position of political power and served as prime minister of the Netherlands from 1901 to 1905. His three-volume, 1700-page study on *De Gemeene Gratie* (Common Grace) is the lengthiest formulation of this doctrine to date among Reformed theologians.

²⁰ Van Til wanted to provide a "third way" to think about the CG problem: "Going off to the right by denying common grace [as with Hoeksema] or going off to the left by affirming a theory of common grace patterned after the natural theology of Rome [as in some of Kuyper's formulations] is to fail, to this extent, to challenge the wisdom of the world." (Cornelius Van Til and K. Scott Oliphint, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, Second Edition, including the complete text of the original, 1972 edition (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Pub, 2015), 168.

²¹ See Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "Herman Bavinck's 'Common Grace,'" *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (April 1989): 35-65; Henry Vander Kam, "Some Comments on Kuyper and Common Grace," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 2, 1 (March 1986): 51-60; Jacob Klapwijk, S. Griffioen, and G. Groenewoud, eds., "Antithesis and Common Grace," in *Bringing into Captivity Every Thought: Capita Selecta in the History of Christian Evaluations of Non-Christian Philosophy* (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 1991); Dennison, "Van Til and Common Grace"; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2017); Charles R. Biggs, "Common Grace: John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper and Cornelius Van Til" (Puritan

So, Welch would need to provide further theological clarity on his definition of CG before claiming that this doctrine begins with the question, “What can human beings see without the lens of Scripture?”²²

Another theological difference is seen in the description of CG. Kuyper differentiates CG as a negative operation whereby God restrains the devastating effects of sin, and a positive operation whereby the Holy Spirit proactively acts upon all mankind for civil righteousness and the testimony of the existence of God and the moral law upon the conscience of men.²³ Van Til, however, found Kuyper’s view of CG as limiting the breadth and depth of total depravity, especially with an unclear distinction between the Christian and non-Christian system of knowledge that is a remnant of Rome’s semi-Aristotelian epistemology.²⁴ Van Til maintained that Kuyper was ultimately unwilling to draw a clear demarcation between the Christian and the non-Christian methodology of science because Kuyper believed that where sin has not changed the metaphysical situation, the difference between believer and unbeliever does not need to be distinguished.²⁵

Reformed Theological Seminary, 2016), https://ketocoin.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/PRTS.2016.Soteriology.Common-Grace-and-the-Gospel.finaldraft.April_.2016-1.pdf.

²² Welch, “Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor,” 26.

²³ Abraham Kuyper et al., *Common Grace: God’s Gifts for a Fallen World, Collected Works in Public Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press: Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, 2016).

²⁴ Dennison, “Van Til and Common Grace,” 230. Kuyper certainly did not deny total depravity, but Van Til postulated that Kuyper’s discussions of CG assumed this. Van Til maintained that Kuyper’s view suffered from Kantian phenomenalism. Plato said that the distinction between the universals must be placed in the Form world, whereas Kant said that the distinction between universals belongs to the categories of the mind and its projections. Kuyper followed this Kantian line of thought, and so, Van Til claimed that “there is a vagueness inherent in Kuyper’s treatment of CG. He seems to be uncertain in his mind as to what is common to the believer and the unbeliever” (Van Til and Oliphint, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 40). In other words, when the starting point is the human mind that shapes the world instead of the doctrine of the ontological trinity of the triune God, then one’s epistemology still has traces of a dualism of the human mind and the God of Scripture, which is akin to medieval epistemology. This is why Shannon argues that Van Til did not disagree with Kuyper on the topic itself but only on its application. Nathan D Shannon, “Christian Cultural Defeatism in the Arts: The Theology of a Common Grace Misstep,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 11, 4 (2017): 402, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15697312-01104011>.

²⁵ For Van Til, such a distinction compromises the full extent and gravity of the fall and, thereby, a consistently Reformed formulation of CG. After all, Roman Catholic and Arminian theologies also believe that CG allows man to correctly use reason and observation. However, Van Til contended that the Reformed tradition did not start with the same foundation as the

For example, Kuyper makes the following generalization about the field of empirical research in natural science: “There is a common territory where the difference in starting point and standpoint does not count [because] there is not a twofold, but only one logic. There is a very broad territory where the difference between two groups [the regenerate and unregenerate] has no significance.”²⁶ So, unbelievers can have logic (or natural reasoning) that is fully functioning with little to no difference between a believer’s use of logic. In contrast, Van Til maintains a consistent distinction between the metaphysical and epistemological aspects of knowledge.²⁷ Metaphysically, man has knowledge by virtue of being created in the image of God and living in God’s objectively created and planned world, as God has implanted the *sensus divinitatis* into man.²⁸ On the other hand, epistemologically, man has knowledge by self-conscious intuition from his own adopted principles, as he seeks to think, understand, analyze, and know.²⁹ This means that as God’s creatures, both believers and unbelievers have the same essence of being as well as a general knowledge of who God is (Romans 1:19-20), but given the suppression of the truth—the denial of the knowledge of God in unbelievers because of sin—unbelievers cannot have a proper epistemology (a system of knowledge) without beginning with the ontological reality of the triune God.

Roman Catholic and Arminian systems. He wrote, “If we are to hold to a doctrine of common grace that is true to Scripture, we shall need to build it up after we have cut ourselves clear of Scholasticism.” John Frame, “Van Til on Antithesis,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57 (1995): 88–89.

²⁶ Abraham Kuyper et al., *Common Grace: God’s Gifts for a Fallen World, Collected Works in Public Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press: Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, 2016), 104–5.

²⁷ Metaphysics refers to the study of what cannot be reached through objective studies of material reality, so the first causes of things and the nature of being, and epistemology refers to the philosophical study of the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge. Van Til uses these terms in a technical sense. Van Til is making the distinction between a consistent and an inconsistent application of one’s worldview. When he speaks of metaphysically knowing, he means that which non-Christians know in spite of their worldview, which is made possible by being made in the image of God and also borrowing ideas from Christian theism. When he speaks of epistemologically knowing, Van Til means that which is known through a consistent application of one’s interpretive principle, which no non-Christian does. Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, N.J: P&R Publishing, 1998), 407.

²⁸ The metaphysical aspect of knowledge contains more than the *sensus divinitatis* but not less. One could not know many facts about the world merely through the *sensus*. However, the *sensus* furnishes one with the operational basis for properly functioning cognitive faculties which interpret the world in light of it. Van Til and Oliphint, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 67.

²⁹ Van Til and Oliphint, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 66, 146.

Their knowledge of the ultimate reality (God) will shape their knowledge of everything else. Hence, Van Til emphasized the relationship between metaphysical and epistemological aspects of knowledge in this way:

We must, accordingly, frankly challenge the Roman Catholic notion that the natural man knows truly of God. And we should challenge the procedure by which the natural theology of Rome is obtained. We shall need to deny that true scientific certainty is something that can be demonstrated to every rational creature. True scientific certainty, no less than true religious certainty, must be based upon the presupposition of the ontological trinity... The believer and non-believer have everything *metaphysically* in common, but nothing *epistemologically* in common [emphasis added].³⁰

Therefore, with these different emphases in mind, it is inconsistent for Welch to use Kuyper's definition of CG to describe the common ground between believers and unbelievers, and then subsequently recognize Van Til's position that there are "no brute facts" or mere observations in a non-believer's interpretation of a situation.³¹ Welch states, "We are not compelled to emphasize how facts are interpreted in all situations," but at the same time, "some secular observations are more skewed by their assumptions and some less so."³² So, how does Welch differentiate between observations that are skewed and observations that are helpful for a believer's counseling system? Welch even stresses the necessity of secular observations when he concludes, "Without them, people are less known and we will be less helpful. Without them, our compassion falls short because we miss the complexity of human experience."³³

³⁰ Jan Van Vliet, "From Condition to State: Critical Reflections on Cornelius Van Til's Doctrine of Common Grace," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 61, 1 (1999): 73. This position is consistent with Abner Chou's essay whereby he noted that, "The unbeliever sees scientific data as purely isolated fact with no ground or purpose in God and the supernatural. But the believer must see such scientific data as an inherent part of the work of the triune God, with its grounding and purpose inseparable from that reality. So while in form believers and unbelievers may appear to say the same things, in substance, the entirety of their claim is utterly different." Abner Chou, "Common Grace and the Sufficiency of Scripture," *The Journal of Biblical Soul Care* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2024), 17.

³¹ Welch, "Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor," 28.

³² *Ibid.*, 29.

³³ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

The third theological inconsistency is that Welch did not address the antithesis between believers and non-believers before proposing to utilize extra-biblical knowledge from non-believers.³⁴ Welch claims that “the doctrine of common grace listens to unbelievers who ‘unless and until proven otherwise... are also seeking the good, as they understand it.’”³⁵ For Welch to say that this doctrine presents us with the presence of “good” and “wisdom” in unbelievers, thus compelling believers to listen to non-believers on spiritual issues, is a basic denial of biblical anthropology—no one seeks for God, no one does good, the natural man cannot understand the things of God, and non-believers will keep on seeing but will not truly perceive spiritual things (Romans 3:9-23; 1 Corinthians 2:14; Matthew 13:13-15). Put simply, Welch cannot bypass the antithesis between believers and non-believers to talk about the utility of secular knowledge without the aid of Scripture. He would need to demonstrate how the three main points of contention in this discussion—the cognitive abilities of non-believers with the various aspects of man as image bearers of God (*imago dei*), intellectual gifts, and the noetic effects of sin—are resolved before discussing the possible utility of secular knowledge to the care of souls.³⁶

³⁴ Welch, “Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor,” 26. Welch states that “Common grace opens the discussion to what we ourselves, without the obvious aid of Scripture, have observed and found useful. This entry point will affect the tone of what follows. It will delay a discussion of the antithesis between believer and unbeliever, and the incompatibility of light with darkness. It will lead with a point of contact.”

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 26. Welch notes in a footnote that while he will not qualify terms like “wise” or “good” in relation to non-believers, he also observes that “the presence in non-believers of the good, and even the wise [is what] leads us to the door of common grace.” Welch makes a contradictory statement when he claims that non-believers are unable to perceive God clearly and are blind to God, but at the same time, “much is retained,” and this doctrine of CG calls on us to listen to people and look at the world around us for the purpose of obtaining “common grace pieces” for the care of souls. The burden of proof is on Welch to demonstrate what is retained by unbelievers if they are able to see, understand, and/or interpret spiritual issues in counseling.

³⁶ This slippery tension between common grace and the noetic effects of sin is not new. In Heath Lambert’s “A Theology of Biblical Counseling,” he wrote: “Biblical counselors embrace the observations of secular psychologists as being most readily attributed to God’s common grace. Biblical counselors have objected to secular psychology when the noetic effects of sin cause the secular worldview of secular counselors to displace the Christ-centered worldview of the Bible” (Heath Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling: The Doctrinal Foundations of Counseling Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 81. Although a clarifying definition of common grace is discussed below (p. 83ff), it is worth mentioning that there is no Scriptural data for divine moral provision due to CG; even with intellectual gifts, it appears that there is a difference between the blessing/gift of intellect and the use/outcome of the gift since non-believers are unable by their own efforts to use any gift from God (including physical life/health) to the glory

Here is how these three aspects appear to be incongruous under the theological category of CG: 1) the image of God is inherently structural to man (i.e., ontologically, volitionally, intellectually, emotionally, relationally, and functionally bearing the image of God),³⁷ which means man has a rational mind; he can think critically and he possesses memory, imagination, creativity, and language skills; 2) how is it that unregenerate men can exhibit intellectual gifts with intellectual breakthroughs, cultural achievements, and various social (i.e., medical or technological) advancements?;³⁸ and 3) the doctrine of total depravity means that the corruption of original sin extends to every aspect of human nature, including one's cognitive abilities (noetic effects of sin).³⁹ A primary result of the depravity of the mind is that man will use his mind in pursuit of sin (Mark 7:20; Matthew 15:19; Romans 8:5; Ephesians 4:17). Scripture describes the unregenerate's mind as "darkened in their understanding," "suppresses the truth in unrighteousness," "hostile in mind," "alienated from the life of God because of ignorance," and this is why "God has made foolish the wisdom of the world" (Ephesians 4:17-19; Colossians 1:21; Romans 1:18; 1 Corinthians 1:20b). So, if man's continuing presence of cognitive abilities is because he bears God's image, and at the same time, man's mind is presuppositionally opposed to God and His truth, then

and worship of God.

³⁷ Three views have been offered to answer the question of how exactly man is made in the image of God: substantive, functional, or relational. The author takes the substantive view that the image of God is part of man; it is not just something that he does. See MacArthur, *Biblical Doctrine*, 412; Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986); G.C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God (Studies in Dogmatics)* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962).

³⁸ Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*; Dennis E. Johnson, "Spiritual Antithesis: Common Grace, and Practical Theology," Westminster Seminary California, *The Paradox of Common Grace* (blog), n.d., <https://www.wscal.edu/resource/spiritual-antithesis-common-grace-and-practical-theology/>.

³⁹ The term "noetic" is taken from the Greek word *nous* which refers to the mind. Thus, the noetic effects of the fall are the ramifications of sin on man's cognitive abilities. Total depravity has often been misunderstood. Negatively, the concept does not mean: 1) that every human being is as thoroughly depraved as he or she can possibly become, 2) that unregenerate people do not have a conscience by means of which they can distinguish between good and evil, 3) that unregenerate people will invariably indulge in every conceivable form of sin, or 4) that unregenerate people are unable to perform certain actions that have relative goodness, which corresponds with what Jesus said: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children..." (Matt 7:11). Total depravity, then, means that the impact of sin on the person covers three related concepts: 1) the pollution and corruption of all aspects of a person, 2) the complete inability of a person to please God, and 3) universality, in that all are conceived and born as sinners. See Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 150; MacArthur, *Biblical Doctrine*, 467.

the question of secular knowledge's usefulness for believers remains.⁴⁰

Thus, I propose that biblical counselors ought to revisit how we define CG and make a few qualifications to the traditional Reformed view of CG.⁴¹ When CG is defined as God's non-salvific yet kind posture towards all mankind, displayed in the delay of final judgment, the restraint of sin's full impact on the earth, and the bestowal of temporal gifts for the providential preservation of the world, the doctrine distinctly remains an expression of God's communicable attributes of kindness and goodness.⁴² CG should not be understood as the positive contribution made by unregenerate men through discoveries, insights, or "good deeds." This is because the doctrine of CG is about God's character and attributes, not the outcome of man's use of God's blessings and gifts. Conflating this distinction would collapse the Creator-creature distinction, which ultimately denigrates God's glory, goodness, and kindness toward a rebellious creation.

In particular, God's CG provides mankind with three benefits:⁴³ 1) it delays

⁴⁰ While cognition is a creational endowment included in the substantive view of being an image bearer of God, this view still does not sufficiently account for the variation in people's cognitive ability. Also, variation in cognitive ability is not an expression of the degree of *imago dei* (otherwise, someone who is cognitively impaired or has any kind of physical disability would be less of an image bearer). This is why intellect/cognition is not merely part of the substantive view of man as an image bearer, but intellect, talent, artistic, or physical abilities are all considered as God's gifts/blessings under common grace.

⁴¹ John Murray defined common grace as every favor of whatever kind of degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God. Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 96.

⁴² For example, Mozart's music and Picasso's art are examples of perceived positive outcomes due to the use of God's gifts, but their music pieces and art are not good according to God's standards. Rather, they are evidence that God is good and has given us good gifts (including man's artistic talents) to enjoy His goodness.

⁴³ MacArthur, *Biblical Doctrine*, 488. Some Reformed theologians have held that "natural benefits accrue to the whole human race from the death of Christ, and that in these benefits the unbelieving, the impenitent, and the reprobate also share" (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 432; Geerhardus Vos and Richard B. Gaffin, *Reformed Dogmatics: A System of Christian Theology*, Single volume edition (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2020), 4:12-15; Van Leeuwen, "Herman Bavinck's 'Common Grace.'" 1 John 2:2 "and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for *those of the whole world*" is often referenced to substantiate this view that there are secondary and indirect benefits on mankind indiscriminately as a result of the redemptive, atoning work of Christ. For more on a critique of the multiple intentions view of the atonement of Christ, see Michael Riccardi, *To Save Sinners: A Critical Evaluation of the Multiple Intentions View of the Atonement* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2023). But for the purpose of

final judgment to afford sinners time to hear the gospel so that they might be motivated to repent (Ezekiel 18:3, 32; 2 Peter 2:5; 1 Timothy 4:10);⁴⁴ 2) it temporarily restrains sin and works against sin's damaging effects through the conscience, which enables sinners to understand the difference between right and wrong (Romans 2:15), the authority of parents (Proverbs 2:1-5), and the institution of civil government to maintain order in human society; and 3) it enables unbelievers to enjoy temporal gifts in this life (Psalm 50:2; 104:14-15; Matthew 5:45; Acts 14:15-17; 17:25). Here, temporal gifts include physical blessings in the sphere of creation (i.e., rain and sunshine; Matthew 5:45; Psalm 104:14-15), man's intellect, and physical abilities (Exodus 31:2-11; 35:30-35; 2 Chronicles 2:13-14; Ecclesiastes 1:16; Psalm 73:3-4; James 1:17). They are temporal in the sense that they do not have any spiritual or eternal value, and they are given to mankind on this side of heaven as an expression of God's universal benevolence and kindness.

More specifically, the expression of God's kindness in these blessings points towards the kindness of God for all mankind to repent and place their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. As the apostle Paul explained in Romans 2:4, "Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" In all the Scriptural data, the doctrine of CG only pertains to God's act of giving gifts (i.e., intellectual, physical, artistic, material and physical blessings,

this paper, the author agrees with MacArthur's three benefits of CG (restraint of sin, temporal blessings, and free offer of the Gospel to all), and the divine intention for the atonement does not include natural benefits for the reprobate. Scripture testifies that the divine intention for the atonement was to save sinners (Luke 19:10; John 3:16-17; 12:46-47; 1 Timothy 1:15; 1 John 4:14), to satisfy divine wrath (Hebrews 2:17), to take away sin (1 John 3:5; cf. John 1:29), to impart spiritual life (John 6:51; 10:10; 1 John 4:9), to free captives from slavery (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; Hebrews 2:14-15; 1 Timothy 2:6), to rescue from evil (Galatians 1:4), to impute righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21), to impart adoption (Galatians 4:5), to sanctify His people (John 17:19; 2 Corinthians 5:15; Ephesians 5:25-27; Titus 2:14; Hebrews 13:12; 1 Peter 2:24), and to glorify us and bring us into the presence of God (Hebrews 2:10; 1 Peter 3:18).

⁴⁴ Calvin's conception of CG also includes the free offer of the gospel to all mankind. Calvin portrays God as genuinely offering salvation to all sinners, this being an expression of divine love, but it is not for us to know why God doesn't choose to convert all to whom that call of salvation comes. Calvin is content to leave this "unresolved." He does not allow God's will of decree to trump his will of precept. In other words, in addressing the matter of the offer of the gospel to sinners, thus to elect and non-elect alike, Calvin does not refrain from talking of divine mercy, kindness, goodness, and grace directed toward all people. See Beach, "Calvin's Treatment of the Offer of the Gospel and Divine Grace"; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John Thomas McNeill (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960).

etc.) and restraining sin and delaying judgment, and not what man does with the gifts (i.e., products of the gifts that result in discoveries, advancements, civic righteousness, social good, etc.). Also, the outcome of those gifts would fall under the category of God's sovereignty and providence.⁴⁵ This is because non-believers are unable to steward God's grace in its various forms to worship and glorify God (1 Peter 4:10; Matthew 24:45-51).⁴⁶ Since the fall, man has done with his intellect what he has also done with the rest of his life: using the good gifts from God for his temporary benefit, all the while refusing to acknowledge the One who has given such good gifts, the very One in whom "we live, and move, and have our being" (Romans 1:21; Acts 17:28a).⁴⁷ So, any perceived positive outcome due to the use of those gifts or the restraint of sin is wholly under the sovereign control of God over all of creation and all of history.

God's purposeful sovereignty in His creation is also known as providence, which means that God continually is involved with all created things in such a way that He 1) keeps them existing and maintains the properties with which He created them; 2) governs all creatures, actions, and things; and 3) directs them to fulfill His purposes to the praise of His glory.⁴⁸ God preserves and providentially directs all things to accomplish His sovereign purposes (Job 42:2), and any relatively good outcome or progress that is accomplished by mankind falls under God's sovereign rule over His creation (Psalm 103:19; Ephesians 1:11; 1 Corinthians 15:27). For example, the intellect of J. Robert Oppenheimer is a gift from God, but his use of the gift to create the atomic bomb is under God's sovereignty and providence, not the purview of CG.

⁴⁵ Of God's sovereignty and providence, see Arthur W. Pink, *Sovereignty of God - Unabridged HC* (New Jersey: Reformed Brothers Books, 2001); John Piper, *Providence* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2020), 30. The word *providence* is built from the word *provide*, which has two parts: *pro* (Latin "forward," "on behalf of") and *vide* (Latin "to see"). So, in reference to God, the noun *providence* means "the act of purposefully providing for or sustaining and governing the world."

⁴⁶ In Matthew 24:45-51, the evil slave represents an unbeliever who refuses to take seriously the promise of Christ's return. Though he is an unbeliever, he is nonetheless accountable to Christ for the stewardship of his time. Jesus was teaching that every person in the world holds his life, natural abilities, wealth, and possessions in trust from God and must give an account of how all these gifts are used for the glory of God.

⁴⁷ K. Scott Oliphint, *Reasons [for Faith]: Philosophy in the Service of Theology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2006), 166.

⁴⁸ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England: Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 315, 333.

Another example is found in leucotomy, commonly known as lobotomy, which is a method to sever brain tissue to treat psychiatric disorders. It offered much hope to the masses at the time, was considered by many the height of medical progress, and even won Portuguese neurologist António Egas Moniz a Nobel Peace Prize in medicine in 1949. But lobotomy has since been denounced, shelved in the public imagination between the guillotine and straightjackets.⁴⁹ Discoveries, advancements, or scientific breakthroughs at one point in time may be reversed and judged as harmful to mankind. But more importantly, non-believers are unable to do good according to God's objective standard of good (Romans 3:12b; Isaiah 64:6). Because Psalm 16:2 states, "You are my Lord, I have no good apart from you," non-believers are unable to apprehend what is truly good or do what is truly good if they do not acknowledge that God is the ultimate source of goodness.

With this distinction in mind, the epistemological and ethical antithesis between the regenerate and the unregenerate will be maintained because the doctrine of God is the necessary presupposition for a true analysis of the laws of creation (1 Corinthians 2:14-16).⁵⁰ Here, Van Til set forth two ideas that capture why the knowledge of God as the first order of knowledge determines one's knowledge of everything else: 1) The believer and non-

⁴⁹Jeffrey A. Lieberman, *Shrinks: The Untold Story of Psychiatry* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2015), 10. Lieberman, who served as president of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) from May 2013 to May 2014, noted that the history of psychiatry has always been a search to answer the question, "What is mental illness? Where does it come from? What do we do with it?" and the field "has always been susceptible to ideas that are outlandish or downright bizarre: the deplorable insane asylums, the fever therapies, the induced comas, the lobotomies." Consider also Julius Wagner-Jauregg, a preeminent Austrian psychiatrist, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1927 for the development of malaria therapy for the treatment of neurosyphilis, or general paresis of the insane. Wagner-Jauregg exposed patients to malaria-infected blood to supposedly cure or alleviate general paralysis.

⁵⁰Vliet, "From Condition to State: Critical Reflections on Cornelius Van Til's Doctrine of Common Grace." Heath Lambert's new book "Biblical Counseling and Common Grace" provides a more detailed treatment of the topic in comparison to the chapter on common grace from "A Theology of Biblical Counseling" with the three lenses to evaluate the role of common grace in counseling methodology: the lens of assumption, the lens of analysis, and the lens of authority (Heath Lambert, *Biblical Counseling and Common Grace* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherds Press, 2023), 81. Out of these three lenses, the lens of assumption could be further clarified that believers ought to have a skeptical assumption towards the discoveries of non-believers because the gap between an observation and an interpretation/explanation is difficult to differentiate, as observations often involve interpretation. Cf. Tom Vail, *Grand Canyon: A Different View* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2003).

believer differ at the outset of every self-conscious investigation, which is why there is no such difference in the mere description of the facts, and 2) the believer and the non-believer have everything metaphysically in common, but nothing epistemologically in common.⁵¹ Therefore, the doctrine of CG refers to God's non-salvific kindness to all His creatures, rather than a category of knowledge accessed by both the unregenerate and the regenerate due to God's non-salvific kindness.⁵² It follows then that biblical counselors ought to maintain a posture that is skeptical of the discoveries of the natural man about the immaterial problems of man and instead seek to plumb the depths and riches of Scripture to fortify their counseling system.

COMMON GRACE MISAPPLIED: FIVE IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUL CARE

Without the biblical parameters of the doctrine of CG, one would be tempted to open the door to a slippery tension between CG and the noetic effects of sin, ultimately conflating the expression of God's universal benevolence to men with the discoveries of men about mankind and the world. Instead of being a mere recipient of CG, mankind could be wrongly perceived as contributing to CG concerning the potential utility of secular knowledge (i.e., "CG-observations" or "CG-pieces" to be used in soul care). Examples of such a misapplication of CG is the following implications drawn from Welch's essay.

⁵¹ Van Til and Oliphint, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 3, 5. Van Til maintained that every description is an explanation of a fact, and the description of a fact is not a neutral category which exists irrespective of God. Since God describes and interprets (explains) the fact, then no fact is neutral. Every self-conscious investigation into the fact does not separate description from explanation. He wrote, "According to any Christian position, God, and God only, has ultimate definitory power. God's description or plan of the fact makes the fact what it is... [So] the non-Christian sees all of reality through the lens of his own false worldview. He is "blind with respect to the truth wherever the truth appears. It is of these systems of their own interpretation that we speak when we say that men are as wrong in their interpretation of trees as in their interpretation of God." This is why, according to Van Til, the Reformed Christian must reject all traditional forms of natural theology.

⁵² Chou, "Common Grace and the Sufficiency of Scripture," 8; Lambert, *Biblical Counseling and Common Grace*, 81.

1. Studying Creation and People Instead of Scripture

In his essay, Welch includes a quotation from J.I. Packer: “The pastor must study two books, not just one. Certainly, he must know the book of Scripture [and] also be a master in reading the book of the human heart.”⁵³ While he qualifies this application as “case wisdom” and “discernment,” Welch welcomes insights from both “the book of Scripture” and “the book of the human heart,” and claims that “we are called to study creation in order to subdue it... Rather than give us a manual of specific instructions, we watch [God] in action, then he sends us out to study, understand and bless both creation and people.”⁵⁴ Welch also asserts that “the better we understand a person, the more meaningful the entrance into Scripture,” thus implying that a biblical counselor would need to understand something outside the Bible before wisely applying Scripture to a counseling situation.⁵⁵ Gathering information has always been the first step on the agenda of a biblical counselor,⁵⁶ but to equally value the study of people (the creature) with the study of God (the Creator) is to render the whole task of theology subservient to anthropology when they are put on the same level. We do not mystically “watch God in action,” and we are also not called to study creation in order to subdue it, but the first order of knowledge must begin with the knowledge of God, which enables a person to live well before the face of God.

In fact, this premise has already been proposed and promoted by Anton Boisen (1876-1965), the founder of the clinical pastoral education movement, who believed that a first-hand study of human experience was necessary for pastoral training.⁵⁷ Boisen noted that his theological method sought to answer

⁵³ Welch, “Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor,” 31. The quotation is from J.I. Packer, “Ministry of the Word Today,” *Westminster Magazine*, 2:4 (Spring 2022), 26.

⁵⁴ Welch, 31, 40, 27-28. Welch wrote, “Instead of asking, ‘Is this orthodox?’ or ‘What does this text of Scripture mean?’ the questions are, ‘Is this what it is like for you?’ ‘Is this a fair way to describe what you are saying?’ or ‘Does this help?’ (32-33).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵⁶ Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor’s Manual* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973), 252–90.

⁵⁷ See Robert David Leas, *Anton Theophilus Boisen: His Life, Work, Impact, and Theological Legacy* (Jpcp Monograph Series) (Atlanta, GA: Journal of Pastoral Care Publications Inc., 2009); Ralph Underwood, “Current Periodical Literature: ‘Anton T. Boisen and Theology through Living Human Documents,’” *Journal of Pastoral Care* 23, 1 (March 1969): 59–60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002234096902300116>; Glenn H. Asquith, “Anton T. Boisen and the Study of ‘Living Human Documents,’” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 60, 3 (1982): 244–65, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23328440>. Prior to his work with Clinical Pastoral Education, Boisen was a

the problems of men with a different method: “What is new is the attempt to begin with the study of living human documents [through empirical research] rather than with books.”⁵⁸ So, even though Welch initially qualifies knowing people as “case wisdom” and “discernment,” his practical outworking of “knowing/studying people” under the umbrella of CG led to a two-book epistemology in this manner: biblical counselors “take away a provocative idea or a methodological trinket that will be reshaped and incorporated into our growing store of wisdom... Most observations and theories about people, if they have any popularity and endurance, have inklings of larger truths.”⁵⁹ However, believers do not need to smuggle in piecemealed truisms into their counseling system because when unbelievers affirm true things on occasion, they do that only by inconsistency with their presuppositions and by relying inconsistently on the Christian worldview, as Van Til put it, by “borrowed capital.”⁶⁰

2. Elevating Experiences over God’s Special Revelation

Welch develops his view of the doctrine of CG largely according to his experiences and provides an example of his counseling that is dependent upon both “a biblical view of the person and years of having looked at depression.”⁶¹ For example, Welch concludes that his “particular walk within common grace took a less traveled path. Rather than focusing on worldview, it worked in personal experience and what is actually seen.”⁶² While God often uses the

Presbyterian minister who had struggled professionally, not only in his congregations that had failed to grow but also in his other attempted careers in the academy and forestry. In the midst of his professional struggles, Boisen was also plagued by recurrent psychotic episodes, which began in his early twenties and continued intermittently throughout his life. He was diagnosed with catatonic schizophrenia in his forties during his first hospitalization. Boisen concluded that mental illness, when not spanning from a physiological origin, could be understood as “the disorganization of the patient’s world,” which Boisen understood as a religious problem. See Anton T. Boisen, *Out of the Depths an Autobiographical Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience* (Massachusetts: Harper & Brothers, 1960).

⁵⁸ Charles V. Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 200. Boisen reiterated that he was simply casting religious practice and inquiry into a new method of study, *now examining people rather than texts* to understand religious experience. He thus sought to tie scientific medicine and religious practice together via sustained empirical research.

⁵⁹ Welch, “Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor,” 38-39.

⁶⁰ John M. Frame and Cornelius Van Til, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995).

⁶¹ Welch, “Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor,” 34.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 40.

comfort that we have received from Him in our afflictions and experiences to comfort others (2 Corinthians 1:3-4), biblical counselors ought to be careful not to elevate the role of experiences to the same plane as the inerrant, infallible, and authoritative Word of God. Life experiences also do not qualify a biblical counselor as being more competent than those without similar experiences to minister Scripture to other believers with love and grace. Instead of having a special knowledge about a particular issue since one has experienced it himself, which is likened to Gnosticism, the authority of a believer's counsel is the Word of God. In fact, the apostle Peter himself declares that Scripture is even more sure than his experience of God's revelatory activity when he asserts, "We have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place" (2 Peter 1:19a).

Besides emphasizing experiences, Welch does, however, underscore the importance of discernment, as he says, "Within common grace, discernment is the order of the day."⁶³ Nonetheless, his conclusion is misguided in this way: "As discernment grows, it is not always definitive in its conclusions... If you have seen someone profit from a [psychiatric] diagnosis in a way that Scripture has opportunities to go even deeper, you will argue for their usefulness."⁶⁴ In contrast, biblical discernment begins with the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10), grows with the believer's knowledge of God and His Word (Romans 12:2; 1 John 4:1), and it is essentially a skill of godly living of discerning truth from error and good from evil (Isaiah 5:20; Ephesians 5:6-10). Biblical discernment is not an amorphous process of trial and error that will lead to inconclusive answers because God's Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, and believers will grow in true understanding from His precepts (Psalm 119:104-105). To assume that counselees will "profit from psychiatric diagnoses in a way that Scripture has opportunities to go even deeper" is to accuse God of not providing believers with all that they need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3) as well as to claim that believers need a worldly remedy before they can be truly helped by the Great Physician of their souls (Mark 2:17). When man attempts to ameliorate spiritual issues of the soul without fundamental reference to God's special revelation, man has engaged in profound foolishness that will only provide temporary relief at best and,

⁶³ Welch, "Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor," 3.

⁶⁴ Welch, "Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor," 32.

at worst, sear their own conscience as a branding iron instead of finding true salvation, hope, and help in God (1 Timothy 4:2).

3. Going Beyond the Limitations of CG (“Seeing and Knowing People”)

According to Welch, mankind still retains these three skills even after the fall: “1) to describe someone effectively; 2) to identify connections, correlations and patterns within a person; and 3) to know when it is legitimate to generalize those patterns to a larger group.”⁶⁵ Welch initially discusses “connection, correlations, and patterns,” but he goes on to say that non-believers can see “genuine cause and effect,” and make generalizations such as, “If a person tends to be a compulsive checker, then they are also likely to believe they have committed an unpardonable sin.”⁶⁶ However, a believer’s ability to understand Scripture and notice themes in Scripture is radically different from a non-believer’s ability to observe similar patterns in people’s behavior (1 Corinthians 2:14-16; 2 Corinthians 4:4; John 9:39-41). Non-believers may be able to describe the pattern of a person’s emotions, speech, and behavior (i.e., the outward fruit of one’s life), but they cannot truly interpret the heart issues that are revealed in the outer man.

Hence, it is incongruent for Welch to maintain that “Common grace observations cannot lay claim to deep insights into our humanity,” yet, at the same time, embracing the discoveries and insights from the secular world because “the world can and does try to enter into people’s struggles and know people.”⁶⁷ Contrast this with Solomon’s words in Ecclesiastes 8:17b: “Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, “I know,” he cannot discover.” This means that unregenerate men cannot see, know, and understand the purpose and problems of men, and hence, they cannot provide a proper remedy for the spiritual distress of men. So, why would believers unmoor themselves from the sufficiently

⁶⁵ Ibid., 32. According to Welch, “To describe a person effectively means that the person feels known in ways that are helpful.” (32). To see connections, correlations, and patterns in a person refers to identifying behaviors that correlate or travel together. With regard to seeing patterns in a group, Welch says, “We accrue wisdom when these individual patterns can be generalized to others” (33).

⁶⁶ Ibid., 33.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 34.

comprehensive system of care, availed in the spiritual resources of God (the Word, the Spirit, the Church, and the power of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ), for “provocative ideas or methodological trinkets” that are quasi-salvation and will never satisfy?

Biblical counselors ought to always remember that the cause of man’s problems belongs to the domain of God and His Word, and non-believers are blind to spiritual things (1 Corinthians 2:12-16; 2 Corinthians 4:4). David Powlison aptly summarized how secular counseling will always miss the mark of true diagnosis: “No counseling model whose genes contain secular DNA ever gets motivation theory straight. It is clear that every heart (at every moment, in every circumstance) is either actively serving lies and lusts or is actively loving the Lord.”⁶⁸ What is missing in the heuristic paradigm of secular psychologies will always be the spiritual component, and in particular, the effects of sin, an individual’s personal sins, the decay of the body, and the sins of others against the individual.⁶⁹

4. Mischaracterizing the Taxonomy of “Mental Illness” as That of Medical Diseases’

The fourth implication of misusing the doctrine of CG as man’s contribution is to give credence to the secular world’s psychiatric contribution, as seen in Welch’s assumption of the neutrality and “helpfulness” of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual’s (DSM) classifications of mental disorders. Welch acknowledges that while the DSM itself has been critiqued by people both inside and outside the psychiatric community, it still is an overall helpful taxonomy of disorders, such as the diagnostic labels of Autism Spectrum Disorder and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).⁷⁰ Just as medical

⁶⁸ David Powlison, “Vive La Différence!,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 28, 1 (2014): 3.

⁶⁹ See Abner Chou and John MacArthur, eds., *What Happened in the Garden: The Reality and Ramifications of the Creation and Fall of Man* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2016); Karl A. Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975); David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993).

⁷⁰ Welch, “Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor,” 36-37. For critiques of the DSM, see Wilbur J. Scott, “PTSD in DSM-III: A Case in the Politics of Diagnosis and Disease,” *Social Problems* 37, 3 (August 1990): 294-310, <https://doi.org/10.2307/800744>; John P. Wilson, “The Historical Evolution of PTSD Diagnostic Criteria: From Freud to DSM-IV,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 7, 4 (October 1994): 681-98, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.2490070413>; Gary Greenberg, *The Book of Woe: The DSM and the Unmaking of Psychiatry*

diseases began with observations, Welch claims, “Psychiatry, too, has worked to find patterns and clusters.”⁷¹ However, medical diseases are not the same as “mental disorders” as posited by the secular world, and to assume that the taxonomy within modern psychiatry is the same as the taxonomy of medical diseases (i.e., legitimate, physical issues) is a categorical mistake. Steven Hyman, M.D., the former director of the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) from 1996 to 2001, described the DSM-V as “an absolute scientific nightmare,” indicating that diagnoses made under the DSM are not equal to those made under other medical specializations.⁷²

Moreover, Welch’s language of “the matter seemed more hard-wired than heart-wired” to describe the physical weaknesses in an individual with autism collapses legitimate physical issues with other mental disorders under the psychiatric construct of the DSM.⁷³ Concerning PTSD, Welch explains that PTSD could result in dissociation, which then leads to the manifestation of multiple personality disorder.⁷⁴ However, many secularists themselves

(New York: Blue Rider Press, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc, 2013); Allen Frances, *Saving Normal: An Insider’s Revolt against Out-of-Control Psychiatric Diagnosis, DSM-5, Big Pharma, and the Medicalization of Ordinary Life* (New York: William Morrow, 2013); Hannah S. Decker, *The Making of DSM-III: A Diagnostic Manual’s Conquest of American Psychiatry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Allan V. Horwitz, *DSM: A History of Psychiatry’s Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021). In short, the DSM created diagnostic inflation while fulfilling psychiatry’s need for professional legitimacy, as the number of diagnoses went from 106 in DSM-I to nearly 300 in DSM-V. Yet, despite vast advances in brain-imaging technologies, psychiatry is still dependent upon observable symptoms for classifications. The overall goal of the DSM to produce an evidence-based manual reflecting scientific research was no different than the German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin’s theory-neutral categorizations in the 1890s. Thus, Horwitz poignantly concluded, “The chemical and physical operations of the brain have yet to, and might never, provide clues to unravel the mysteries of human consciousness and its distortions.” (163). Therefore, biblical counselors and believers ought to recognize that the DSM is still an ideological construct of mental disorders.

⁷¹ Welch, “Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor,” 34.

⁷² Allan V. Horwitz, *DSM: A History of Psychiatry’s Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), 210.

⁷³ Welch, “Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor,” 35. Please note that I do not dismiss legitimate physical/medical issues that secular physicians can help to alleviate, but the believer’s goal is not to bifurcate the complexity of spiritual and physical issues or to emphasize either the body-only care or the soul-only care. Instead, one should seek to gather extensive information (Proverbs 18:13), leave the physical issues to a physician’s care, and then seek to address spiritual issues with the Word of God and the help of the Holy Spirit.

⁷⁴ Welch, “Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor,” 36. Welch writes, “For example, various personalities might emerge from women who have been sexually violated or traumatically oppressed. Among those personalities are a few constants: guilt,

have already refuted the theory that trauma causes dissociative disorders.⁷⁵ Even with depression, Welch proposes a potential genetic cause when he says, “I saw that depression can come and go for no apparent reason, a genetic link is worth considering, medication is not always helpful, and reason alone cannot correct the strong sense of doom.”⁷⁶ But this “genetic link”

shame, anger, fear and misery. These occasionally have their own names. Some are frozen in time at the age when the trauma occurred. And all these experiences swirl around together, at the same time” (37). The concept of dissociation was first systematically developed by Pierre Janet as the crucial psychological process with which a person reacts to overwhelming experiences by expressing them as sensory perceptions, affect states, and behavioral re-enactments. Essentially, the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. See Pierre Janet et al., *Subconscious Acts, Anesthesias and Psychological Disaggregation in Psychological Automatism: Partial Automatism* (London ; New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022); Karl-Ernst Bühler and Gerhard Heim, “General Introduction to the Psychotherapy of Pierre Janet,” *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 55, 1 (January 2001): 74–91, <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.2001.55.1.74>. For examples of how dissociation is widely debated in the field of traumatology, see Allan Young, *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, 3. print., 1. paperback print, Princeton Paperbacks (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Michael R. Trimble, *Post-Traumatic Neurosis: From Railway Spine to the Whiplash*, A Wiley Medical Publication (Chichester [West Sussex] ; New York: Wiley, 1981); Edward Shorter, *A History of Psychiatry: From the Era of the Asylum to the Age of Prozac* (Canada: John Wiley & Sons, 1997); Anne Harrington, *Mind Fixers: Psychiatry's Troubled Search for the Biology of Mental Illness*, First edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019).

⁷⁵I am merely pointing out that the secular insights that Welch seeks to embrace have/are already being questioned by other secularists themselves in the field of traumatology. For example, the recovered memory movement in the 1980s revived the interest in split personalities since Pierre Janet and other late 19th-century French psychologists and psychiatrists had discussed a few cases of multiple personality disorder (MPD). See Steven J. Lynn and Judith W. Rhue, eds., *Dissociation: Clinical and Theoretical Perspectives* (New York: Guilford Press, 1994); Frederick C. Crews, ed., *The Memory Wars: Freud's Legacy in Dispute* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1995); Jenny Ann Rydberg, “Research and Clinical Issues in Trauma and Dissociation: Ethical and Logical Fallacies, Myths, Misreports, and Misrepresentations,” *European Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* 1, 2 (April 2017): 89–99, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejtd.2017.03.011>; Richard J McNally, “Debunking Myths about Trauma and Memory,” *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 50, 13 (November 2005): 817–22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/070674370505001302>; Richard J. McNally, “The Science and Folklore of Traumatic Amnesia,” *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 11, 1 (2004): 29–33, <https://doi.org/10.1093/clipsy.bph056>; Allan V. Horwitz, PTSD: A Short History, *Johns Hopkins Biographies of Disease* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 115; Richard J. Loewenstein, “Dissociation Debates: Everything You Know Is Wrong,” *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 20, 3 (September 30, 2018): 229–42, <https://doi.org/10.31887/DCNS.2018.20.3/rloewenstein>.

⁷⁶ Welch, “Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor,” 33. In Welch’s second edition of *Blame It On the Brain*, he similarly suggests, “It is possible that future research will confirm chemical differences in the brains of some people with psychiatric diagnoses... Depression, disobedience, fatigue, dyslexia, and every other human behavior is represented on a neurochemical level” (Edward T. Welch, *Blame It on the Brain?: Distinguishing Chemical*

that Welch is willing to consider as the cause for depression is unfounded in scientific research.⁷⁷ This is because non-believers may be able to describe the symptoms of an immaterial problem, but they will not be able to truly interpret the immaterial issues of the human soul. More importantly, to excuse one's responses to life due to biological factors would inevitably lead to a blurring of personal responsibility to please Christ.⁷⁸ This is because the body (and brain) mediates the desires of the heart, but it will never cause a person to sin. A person may have complex physical issues on the brain and body due to the body-soul interconnectedness, but the primary etiology for every human response will always be the heart (Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 4:16; Proverbs 4:23; Luke 6:43-45).⁷⁹ Therefore, if biblical counselors begin to embrace the explanations behind the psychological labels of the DSM, their understanding of the problem and subsequent solution would no longer be tethered to the sufficient Word of God

Imbalances, Brain Disorders, and Disobedience, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, N.J: P&R Publishing, 2024), 105).

⁷⁷ Despite intensive research during the past several decades (e.g., early twin studies, linkage studies, genome-wide association studies), the neurobiological basis and pathophysiology of depressive disorders remain unknown. Thus far, no single genetic variation has been identified to increase the risk of depression substantially. See Falk W. Lohoff, "Overview of the Genetics of Major Depressive Disorder," *Current Psychiatry Reports* 12, 6 (December 2010): 539–46, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-010-0150-6>.

⁷⁸ Welch, "Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor," 37. Welch's language here marks a drift from his earlier works that clearly distinguished between primary and secondary influences and how the heart of man is always the primary control center of every human response despite legitimate, physical weaknesses (2 Corinthians 4:14-16). See Edward T. Welch, *Blame It on the Brain? Distinguishing Chemical Imbalances, Brain Disorders, and Disobedience, Resources for Changing Lives* (Phillipsburg, N.J: P & R Pub, 1998); Edward T. Welch, *Counselor's Guide to the Brain and Its Disorders: Knowing the Difference between Disease and Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991). For a biblical view of autism, see Daniel R. Berger and T. Dale Johnson, "Thinking Biblically About Autism," *Truth in Love*, n.d., <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/podcast-episodes/thinking-biblically-about-autism/>.

⁷⁹ Edward T. Welch, *Blame It on the Brain? Distinguishing Chemical Imbalances, Brain Disorders, and Disobedience, Resources for Changing Lives* (Phillipsburg, N.J: P&R Publishing, 1998). The biblical principles that Welch outlined in this book are helpful to biblical counselors to think through the body-soul interconnectedness: 1) Any behavior that does not conform to biblical commands or any behavior that transgresses biblical prohibitions proceeds from the heart and is sin; 2) Any behavior that is more accurately called a weakness proceeds from the body and is sickness or suffering; 3) The outer man (including the brain) cannot cause the inner man to sin, but it can expose the issues of the heart; and 4) The heart will always be the primary cause for all human behavior, even with possible secondary influences like environment, family, experiences of being sinned against, and so on. With these biblical principles in mind, the believer cannot blame it on the brain (and/or body).

5. Confusing Scientism with Hard Sciences

The final implication of conflating scientism with hard sciences is to readily embrace secular knowledge when it is committed to a worldview, subject to the cultural philosophy of our time, and flawed when it comes to explaining the immaterial problems of man in soul care. For example, Welch claims that “all those observations contribute to what we call science, with its strengths and limitations.”⁸⁰ Welch readily embraces trauma-informed resources by commending Bessel van der Kolk’s *The Body Keeps the Score* and Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery* because these resources helped him to “better understand people who once had no words to describe their inner worlds.”⁸¹ As trauma-informed resources find themselves to be at the center of the common grace debate in the biblical counseling movement (i.e., Does trauma irreparably damage the brain and body? How should we utilize this new ‘scientific evidence’ in our counseling system?),⁸² it is worth noting that these resources are not verified science and are not inherently neutral in their worldview.

Rather, they are philosophically laden systems that seek to define and describe reality based on a specific set of presuppositions, and so they stand in competition with and in contradiction to a biblical worldview.⁸³ For example,

⁸⁰ Welch, “Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor,” 40.

⁸¹ Ibid, 37. See also Edward T. Welch, “Trauma and the Body: An Introduction to Three Books,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 33, 2 (2019): 61–83.

⁸² I have previously critiqued Bessel van der Kolk’s work, see Francine Tan, “A Critical Evaluation of Bessel van Der Kolk’s *The Body Keeps the Score*,” *The Journal of Biblical Soul Care* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 26–61, <https://biblicalcounseling.com/jbsc/>. See also Heath Lambert et al., *Can Jesus Heal Our Trauma? - Biblical Counseling Panel Discussion* (Florida: First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, 2023); Ernie Baker, *Trauma-Informed Counseling, Biblical Evaluation Series* (Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, 2023); Abigail Shrier, *Bad Therapy: Why the Kids Aren’t Growing Up* (New York: Sentinel, 2024).

⁸³ For example, Judith Herman acknowledged that her dialectical view of trauma and feminist presuppositions are partly some of the opposition that she anticipates towards her creation of C-PTSD (instead of the lack of scientific support), and that the fate of the field of trauma depends on the same political movement to sustain it. She wrote, “In the late 19th century the goal of that movement was the establishment of secular democracy. In the early 20th century was the abolition of war. In the late 20th century its goal was the liberation of women. All of these goals remain. All are, in the end, inseparably connected” (Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 32). For more, see Judith Lewis Herman, *Truth and Repair: How Trauma Survivors Envision Justice*, First edition (New York: Basic Books, 2023); Susan Rubin Suleiman, “Judith Herman and Contemporary Trauma Theory,” *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36, 1–2 (2008):

trauma theories include the belief in Pierre Janet's dissociation, Sigmund Freud's phylogenetic repression, Carl Roger's humanistic psychotherapy, and Charles Darwin's theory of epigenetic determinism.⁸⁴ To cherry-pick best practices from secular sources is to also imbibe their views of theology, metaphysics, epistemology, anthropology, hamartiology, and soteriology. This is why Jay Adams poignantly underscored the inherent difference in the knowledge of the world and the knowledge of God: "A godless system designed to do precisely what the Scriptures themselves were designed to do—to change men's lives so as to function in proper ways (i.e., designed to teach people how to live)—can never be syncretistically blended with Scripture."⁸⁵ Therefore, the doctrine of CG does not and cannot give biblical counselors the license to embrace secular knowledge that appears to be "helpful" on the surface (however helpfulness is defined) without considering the inherently antithetical systems of thought between the truth of God found in His Word and the suppression of truth found in non-believers.⁸⁶

276–81, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsqs.0.0016>; Lucy Britt and Wilson H. Hammett, "Trauma as Cultural Capital: A Critical Feminist Theory of Trauma Discourse," *Hypatia*, April 4, 2024, 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.22>.

⁸⁴ Gerhard Heim and Karl-Ernst Bühler, "Psychological Trauma and Fixed Ideas in Pierre Janet's Conception of Dissociative Disorders," *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 60, 2 (April 2006): 111–29, <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.2006.60.2.111>; J. Moussaieff Masson, *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (New York, N.Y., USA: Penguin Books, 1985); Carl R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995); Miranda R. Waggoner and Tobias Uller, "Epigenetic Determinism in Science and Society," *New Genetics and Society* 34, 2 (April 3, 2015): 177–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14636778.2015.1033052>.

⁸⁵ Jay E. Adams, *Matters of Concern to Christian Counselors: A Potpourri of Principles and Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 89.

⁸⁶ Biblical counselors ought to discern whenever the claim of "helpfulness" is used to describe secular knowledge and intervention by asking what is deficient in Scripture for the goal of counseling, which is sanctification. Also, temporary alleviation should not be the goal of counseling. For example, Darby Strickland talked about EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing therapy) being helpful to some people who have experienced traumatic memories (Strickland, *Trauma: Caring for Survivors*, 530 on Kindle). EMDR is based on an early Freudian thought of repression, and for the failures of the recovered memory movement due to the iatrogenic nature of recovered memories, see Elizabeth F. Loftus and Katherine Ketcham, *The Myth of Repressed Memory: False Memories and Allegations of Sexual Abuse*, 1st St. Martin's Griffin ed (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996); Henry Otgaar et al., "The Return of the Repressed: The Persistent and Problematic Claims of Long-Forgotten Trauma," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 14, 6 (November 2019): 1072–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691619862306>; Henry Otgaar, Mark L. Howe, and Lawrence Patihis, "What Science Tells Us about False and Repressed Memories," *Memory* 30, 1 (January 2, 2022): 16–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658211.2020.1870699>; Shrier, *Bad Therapy*, 107–136.

For these reasons, biblical counselors need not “absorb” and “accumulate” secular knowledge into their counseling wisdom because any extra-biblical information does not and cannot possess an authority that is only found in the holy Scriptures.⁸⁷ Second Timothy 3:16-17 states, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” One’s familiarity with these verses should not result in any functional disbelief in the veracity of these verses—God’s Word is sufficient for every good work, and God’s ministry done in God’s way will never lack the resources needed to help people with their problems on this side of heaven.

COMMON GRACE CLARIFIED: ANTITHESIS BETWEEN BELIEVERS AND UNBELIEVERS

Besides maintaining a biblical definition of CG, biblical counselors ought to tether their theology to the clear texts of Scripture instead of their own experiences.⁸⁸ In other words, in one’s hermeneutical endeavor to derive clarity on any particular doctrine, the clearest text in Scripture must govern the less clear texts to formulate one’s theology.⁸⁹ The epistemic paradigm of Romans 1:18–32, which is one of the clearer texts of Scripture that accounts for the noetic effects of sin and the intellectual abilities of the unregenerate,

⁸⁷ Welch, “Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor,” 38. Welch makes an alarming remark when he said, “When a behavior is identified as sin, the conversation is not necessarily over. For example, to pursue porn is sinful. But, porn can also have different purposes. It can be about power, pain, isolation, shame, anger. Each one would be accompanied by a distinct way of helping.” Believers are not called to spiritualize or over-analyze a particular sin, but to confess the sin, forsake it, and then turn to Christ for forgiveness. Believers are to fix their eyes on Christ for a biblical motivation to hate sin and love God, not remain fixated on analyzing their sin or minimizing the reality of sin in their lives with various justifications under the guise of “different purposes” to cope with something. For a biblical view of the mortification of sin, see Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance*, 1. Banner of Truth ed, *Puritan Paperbacks* (Carlisle, Pa: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989); John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2004); Stuart Scott, *Killing Sin Habits: Conquering Sin with Radical Faith*, n.d.; Kris Lundgaard, *The Enemy within: Straight Talk about the Power and Defeat of Sin*, Revised edition (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2023).

⁸⁸ Key passages that are used to substantiate the doctrine of common grace are Matthew 5:45; Luke 6:35-36; Acts 14:16-17; Psalm 145:9.

⁸⁹ Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching*, 1st paperback ed (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1998); Abner Chou, “A Hermeneutical Evaluation of the Christocentric Hermeneutic,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 27, 2 (2016).

should be revisited to biblically maintain the epistemological and ethical antithesis between believers and unbelievers in one's understanding of the doctrine of CG.⁹⁰

In this passage, man's universal problem is that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men (Romans 1:18a), which is why every person is without excuse.⁹¹ This is because the unrighteous suppress the truth of God (v. 18), refuse to believe that which has been revealed to them (v. 19), are without excuse (v. 20), refuse to honor or give thanks to their Creator (v. 21), are futile in their thinking (v. 21), are fools who profess to be wise (v. 22), are prone to idolatry (v. 23), are given to various lusts that dishonor their mortal bodies (v. 24), exchange the truth of God for a lie (v. 25a), worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator (v. 25b), are given over to degrading passions (v. 26-27), have a depraved mind (v. 28a), are filled with all unrighteousness (v. 29), are haters of God (v. 30), are without understanding (v. 31), and give hearty approval to those who practice things that are worthy of death (v. 32). With this biblical description of the condition of mankind, it is evident that the noetic effects of sin distort one's intellect so that evil appears as good and good as evil (Isaiah 5:20), and a person is both intellectually and morally corrupted by the dominion of sin. Nonetheless, the name *homo sapiens* that we have given to describe mankind, meaning "the wise thinking creature," is often how we view ourselves.

⁹⁰ The overarching theme of Romans is the righteousness that comes from God: the glorious truth that God justifies guilty, condemned sinners by grace alone through faith in Christ alone. Chapters 1-11 present the theological truths of that doctrine, while chapters 12-16 detail its practical outworking in the lives of individual believers and the life of the whole church. This passage is in the sectional context of 1:18 to 3:20 whereby the apostle Paul expounds on the need for God's righteousness because every person is under the just condemnation of God (the unrighteous Gentiles in 1:18-32, the unrighteous Jews in 2:1-3:8 and the unrighteous mankind in 3:9-20). See Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996); C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004); Daniel M. Doriani, *Romans, Reformed Expository Commentaries* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2021).

⁹¹ While this passage has been recently used to justify the place of natural theology in the church, the context of this passage must be interpreted in light of its immediate context—the wrath of God is revealed from heaven (v. 18a), not the usefulness of the natural man's reasoning. For more, see Jeffrey D. Johnson, *Saving Natural Theology from Thomas Aquinas* (New York, NY: Free Grace Press, 2021); Michael Sudduth, *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology* (Routledge Philosophy of Religion Series) (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016).

Certainly, this does not mean that individuals do not have any intellectual capacity,⁹² but Scripture's assessment of man is that the intellectual bent and ambition of human beings operate as mechanisms to actively suppress the truth of God, and they suppress the truth in *unrighteousness*.⁹³ Due to the suppression of God's truth in unrighteousness, man's knowledge of everything else in creation is subjected to error, misinterpretation, and misuse (Job 12:25a; Deuteronomy 28:29a). It would be erroneous to place greater weight on man's fallible reason and life experiences than God's inerrant revelation. Nonetheless, man's temptation is always to elevate human knowledge to the level of God's revelation so that he can refashion a god of his own making (Psalm 50:21).⁹⁴ Like the doctrine of general revelation used by early integrationists, it would be a categorical mistake to use human knowledge under the doctrine of CG since God does not reveal truth or insights that are necessary for the care of souls through man's intellect.

In God's wisdom, He restrains sin to some extent and graciously blesses all people without distinction until the culmination of redemptive history when Christ returns to rule and reign (2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1-4). This means that any positive contribution made by unregenerate men belongs

⁹² Sometimes, non-believers can demonstrate more common sense, analyze, and affirm true things over current affairs. For examples, see Robert Whitaker, *Anatomy of an Epidemic: Magic Bullets, Psychiatric Drugs, and the Astonishing Rise of Mental Illness in America*, Paperback edition (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 2015); Horwitz, *DSM*; Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* (Washington, D.C: Regnery Publishing, 2021); Shrier, *Bad Therapy*.

⁹³ Some modern schools of philosophy are even now catching onto this truth that the Bible had already made clear — the will is the great engine of the intellect. The conceit of the modern age was the belief that the intellect is neutral because human beings were viewed as basically good or morally neutral. That worldview saw ignorance as the great enemy and enlightenment as the answer. Enlightenment cannot be the answer, however, because the will drives the intellect. See Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*; John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (P&R Publishing, 2015).

⁹⁴ Abner Chou's treatment on the limitations of human knowledge and the necessity of special revelation is constructive. Because the source of man's knowledge is himself, man's knowledge does not have the same certainty, value, content, completeness, power, or authority as God's revelation. He also pointed out that the book of Job is a lesson on the strict limits of man's understanding and that if one is to have any real wisdom or answers, one must fear and surrender to God. Without this, one will appear smart like Job's friends, but will also be just as foolish and unhelpful as they were. In short, man needs revelation from God to figure out life. Abner Chou, "The Queen of the Sciences: Reclaiming the Rightful Place of Theology and Creation," *TJTM* (Spring 2022), 4-12.

solely to God's universal benevolence to men, and men do not participate in generating any CG-value for soul care. Anthony Hoekema aptly noted that "if God did not restrain sin in the unregenerate world, this earth would be like hell... Belief in common grace [should not] be used as an excuse for softening the antithesis between a Christian worldview and a non-Christian one, or toning down of biblical teaching on the depravity of man, or an absolute necessity of regeneration."⁹⁵ In other words, when we look at the biblical defense of the epistemological and ethical antithesis between believers and non-believers, we ought to maintain this spiritual distinction and recognize that there will not be any *necessary* discovery from unbelievers for the care of souls.⁹⁶ This is due to the fact that counseling is by its very essence spiritual (1 Corinthians 2:14), and since God has given us everything we need for life and godliness, Scripture offers us a comprehensive counseling system (2 Peter 1:3). David Powlison expressed the historical position on the sufficiency of Scripture in the biblical counseling movement when he said that the Christian faith contains *comprehensive internal resources* to enable us to construct a Christian model of counseling whereas secular psychologies do not have a *vital external contribution* in the development of a believer's counseling system.⁹⁷ Rather than Welch's articulation of CG, which has deviated from the biblical

⁹⁵ Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 199–200. In fact, this is why Calvin's view of common grace grew out of a recognition of the depravity of man.

⁹⁶ R.C. Sproul helpfully provided five precepts on the modern mind that is characterized by postmodern anti-realism, moral relativism, therapeutic universalism, radical pluralism, and managerial pragmatism. He wrote, "We must think about thinking, because if we are not intellectual disciples of Jesus Christ, we will find the natural mind staring us in the face. Because of our own intuitions and reflexes, when those who believe the gospel are put under intellectual pressure, it is very easy to be inconsistent. Therefore, if as Christians we are going to think in a way that honors God, we must first avail ourselves constantly of the Word of God. Secondly, we must avail ourselves constantly of the life of the local church. Third, we must depend constantly upon the corrective presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives to conform us to the image of Christ. At the end of the day, we are not smarter than the rest. We are not morally superior to those who do not know Christ. We did not come to know salvation in Christ because we are wise. Salvation is all of grace. Our intellectual discipleship must be demonstrated in the renewing of our minds — by the Word and through the Spirit and in the church." R. C. Sproul, *The Consequences of Ideas: Understanding the Concepts That Shaped Our World* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2018).

⁹⁷ David Powlison, "Cure of Souls and the Modern Psychotherapies," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 25, 2 (2007). See also Heath Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling: The Doctrinal Foundations of Counseling Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2016), 84; Baker, *Biblical Counseling and The Psychologies*, 59–60. For example, Ernie Baker wrote, "Do we really need to know about the amygdala in order to help a counselee live a God-glorifying life as he processes horrific circumstances?" to which he answered with a resounding 'no.'

counseling movement's position on the sufficiency of Scripture with regard to extra-biblical information, biblical counselors should heed Heath Lambert's exhortation on the priority and necessity of Scripture in our counseling system:

I am ready to promise that eternity will reveal countless counselees who would gladly trade their time engaging such therapies, regardless of any common grace value they may hold, for time spent lingering over the Word of God... Common grace never stops being a servant. Common grace does not and cannot supply the strategy or content of counseling conversations. That role is reserved for special grace, and the *Holy Scriptures are alone sufficient for that* [emphasis added].⁹⁸

CONCLUSION

Besides the theological inconsistencies in Welch's essay, he also espouses a view of CG that is based on his personal experiences and concludes that without CG observations, "people are less known and we will be less helpful."⁹⁹ In contrast, this essay has maintained the theological parameters of CG as God's non-salvific yet kind posture towards all mankind and not the contribution of unregenerate men through discoveries, insights, or "good deeds" resulting from the restraint of sin or the use of temporal gifts. This distinction not only maintains both the epistemological and ethical antithesis between the regenerate and the unregenerate but also affirms that Scripture offers us a comprehensive counseling system, and there will not be any necessary insights from unregenerate men. Admittedly, I have not surveyed every instance of the doctrine of CG in church history's literary corpus in this essay, and this doctrine needs further analysis and scholarly discussion. In particular, work needs to be done, far more than what this essay is able to do here—to determine the scriptural, theological, and doctrinal parameters of the description and application of CG in the biblical counseling movement.

⁹⁸ Lambert, *Biblical Counseling and Common Grace*, 74, 81.

⁹⁹ Welch, "Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor," 39.