

THE JOURNAL OF BIBLICAL SOUL CARE

Advancing Scholarship *for the*
Biblical Care of Souls *within* Higher Education

Articles *by*
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IN LOVE



This journal provides a means for advancing scholarship within higher education in the historical, instructional, and practical areas of biblical soul care in an academic forum. We aim to facilitate profitable interaction among scholars through articles, critical book reviews, and reader responses. We stand on the shoulders of generations of men and women whose commitment to the Word of God and care of souls has laid the groundwork for a resurgence of biblical soul care. The *Journal of Biblical Soul Care* reflects our dedication to the sufficient Word of God and its ability to speak into the complexities of human nature and experience.

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Editorial

ACADEMICS IN (OR AND?) BIBLICAL COUNSELING

Dr. Greg E. Gifford¹

At times I don't want to write academic papers. I find them to be drudgery, esoteric, potentially relevant (potentially not), and having very little immediate impact on the everyday ministry of the counselor. There is a blue-collar wisdom within me that asks, "how are you going to make money with that?" Or, more accurately, "will anybody read this?"

It takes discipline on my part to write academic papers—and to read them. I discipline myself toward reading and writing academically for a few reasons: first, it allows my thoughts to gain clarity and (potentially) be changed. That's right. In the counseling room, I'm siloed. In the counseling room, I am the authority about what the Bible says. But in academia, I subject my ideas to a group of trained experts and ask them if it's true. That process is valuable, and it makes my counseling better.

Second, reading and writing academically helps me have a clear apologetic. If pragmatism wins, then I will be at the ebb-and-flow of whatever seems to work in counseling. The neo-integrationists suggest an idea that sounds a lot like Bessel van Der Kolk re-warmed, and I can be enticed. Why? Because it seems to work. Knowing theories and positions is an academic work and it gives you the eyes to see error. Pragmatism can rule practitioners if they're not careful.

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Lastly, reading academically strengthens my counseling. It helps me to understand good exegesis, systematic theology, biblical studies, and all the things that I *need* to be a good counselor. As I have worked at The Master's University for the past 8 years, I have worked with arguably some of the best minds in biblical and theological studies. And it has been transformative. In the counseling room, I have worksheets and application points from theology. In academia, my very position is tested against the sure Word of God. Academics will be the protection of good counseling methodology going forward. We will only be as strong as the institutions teaching biblical counseling.

The JBSC exists to make the counselor better. How? By addressing the upstream issues that counselors are utilizing in the counseling room.

Michael Burgos is going to speak to the use of the moral law in biblical counseling. His work is providing a place for those Old Testament books that you might be unsure of how to use in counseling.

Sam Stephens is one of the sharpest minds currently in biblical counseling. I know this first-hand as a peer in our PhD programs together. He dismantles the “biblical-counselor-as-missionary-to-psychology” arguments. Anything that Stephens writes, you should read, including this article.

Ryan Thomas analyzes the anthropology of EMDR and reconstructs a biblical anthropology. He exposes psychiatry’s lack of validity in the utilization of EMDR, to end by reminding the biblical counselor of the sufficiency of Scripture in counseling.

Lastly, and quite remarkably, we have a response. The response is to Ed Welch’s article published in Spring 2024, entitled “Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor.” Francine Tan addresses the multiple concerns with Welch’s paper. Tan suggests that there are inconsistencies, theological and biblical, that need to be considered. Remember, peer review is an important part of excellence in commitment to the Scripture. I think you’ll find Tan’s critique to be just that effort to be excellent.

May God give us grace to honor his sufficient word for his glory and the good of our counselees!

THE FIRST USE OF THE LAW IN BIBLICAL COUNSELING

*Michael R. Burgos*¹

INTRODUCTION

Early in John Bunyan's venerable classic, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian encounters one Worldly Wiseman who invites him to entertain his counsel.² The two discussed how to rid Christian of his burden most efficiently. Wiseman counseled him to pursue a man named Legality, who dwelt on a treacherous mountain (i.e., Mt. Sinai). Not long after heeding Wiseman's counsel, Christian realized his error but needed the counsel of Evangelist, who would redirect him toward the strait gate.³ Perhaps no other literary scene outside of Scripture demonstrates so palpably the inherent connection between biblical counseling and discipleship. Indeed, biblical counseling is *discipleship*.

Biblical counseling is the timely application of the truth of God's Word that is occasioned by an important decision, suffering, sin, or a combination thereof. Biblical counselors derive their counsel from the rich treasury of God's Word. Through the careful exposition and contextualized application of Scripture, they exhort counselees to engender God-honoring change in their lives. Because biblical counseling is necessarily biblical, it is also imperatival in shape. Its goal is identical to discipleship, namely, to teach all of the commands of Christ (Matthew 28:19) and to see those commands applied.

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² John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Minneapolis, MN: Desiring God, 2014), 15.

³ Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 20-1.

This article will examine the first use of the moral law in biblical counseling. Following a concise explanation and defense of the ongoing relevance of the Old Testament moral law, an examination of the use of the first use of the law in evangelistic counseling is provided. Thereafter, Paul's teaching in Galatians 3:23-4:7 is explored, with particular relevance to counseling method, the first use of the law, and Christians who struggle with shame related to past sin.

THE IMMUTABLE MORAL LAW

While not neatly divided into a three-fold taxonomy, the Pentateuch presents three varieties of laws: moral, civil, and ceremonial. As with broader Christianity, Evangelical Protestantism affirms that the threefold division of the law is a foregone conclusion. Philip Ross observed, "Not uniquely Eastern or Western; Roman Catholic or Protestant; conservative or liberal; Patristic or Puritan; Thomist, Calvinist, or anything else; the threefold division of the law is catholic doctrine."⁴

Although a defense of the tripartite division of the law is beyond the scope of this study, it may suffice to observe that one means through which moral laws and the general equity of civil laws may be discerned is through the application of those principles to those outside of the Mosaic covenant. God did not judge the people of Canaan for their consumption of shellfish, but he did judge them for their detestable sexual immorality (Leviticus 18:24-25). Whereas the prohibitions related to food were specifically revealed and given to Israel (i.e., "They are unclean *to you*," Leviticus 11:8),⁵ the prohibitions of a moral variety were given to mankind and are a segment of natural revelation (Romans 2:15).

As a facet of natural revelation, the moral law is binding on the whole of mankind and is immutable since it reflects the nature of God. Richard Dabney explained: "[The moral law is] the necessary and unchanging expression of

⁴ Phillip S. Ross, *From the Finger of God: The Biblical and Theological Basis of the Threefold Division of the Law* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Pub., 2010), 1.

⁵ Emphasis added. All English biblical citations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

God's rectitude.”⁶ The moral standards of God, according to John Frame, are “simply himself, his person, his nature. His acts are righteous because he is a righteous God. Righteousness, therefore, is his desire, his pleasure. The standard of our moral behavior is not an abstract concept, but an infinite person, God himself.”⁷ Therefore, the moral law has an inviolable claim not merely on the Christian, but on the entirety of the human race. If indeed God is man’s environment, then the law is the air man breathes.⁸ The contemporary theological models that defend an abrogation of this or that moral law err in that they assume that the moral law is a convention of divine command and may thus be changed. As Dabney observed, “[Moral] duties are not obligatory and right solely because God has commanded them; but he has commanded them because they are right.”⁹ Thus, the moral law has abiding continuity and relevance to every person.

The magisterial reformers observed the three-fold application of God’s moral law. For example, John Calvin argued that the first use of the law “shows God’s righteousness” and “warns, informs, convicts, and lastly condemns, every man of his own unrighteousness.”¹⁰ The second use of the law informs “the public community of men,” especially the civil magistrate, in order to curb the depravity of men.¹¹ Lastly, the third use of the law serves to demonstrate how those “in whose hearts the Spirit of God already lives and reigns” how to live in obedience to their Savior.¹² Whereas both the first and third uses of the law have vast relevance to biblical counseling method, the first use is of particular consequence to discipleship.

⁶ R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 353.

⁷ John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Pub., 2013), 259.

⁸ Jay E. Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling: More Than Redemption* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), 39.

⁹ Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 352.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 354.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 358.

¹² *Ibid.*, 360.

THE USE OF THE LAW IN EVANGELISTIC COUNSELING

It has been well observed that the modern therapist functions as a secular priest.¹³ In order to define a litany of necessary concepts such as “mental health” or “abnormality,” the secular therapist must draw from a preexisting worldview complete with its transcendentals. His worldview provides the basis for his counsel or, in the case of the client-centered therapist, his assumption that his counselees hold the route to self-actualization. Biblical counseling, as a form of discipleship, redirects its audience from the transient mores of the therapist to the High Priest.¹⁴ That is, biblical counseling confronts the errors of worldly thought and practice and directs its participants to what the Creator has revealed.

Within modern society, the vast therapeutic industry has displaced the church as the quintessential soul care provider. Biblical counselors inadvertently draft on the general acceptance and popularity of the therapeutic culture by offering the church and the public counseling firmly rooted in the historic Christian tradition. Subsequently, biblical counselors frequently counsel unbelievers who are entrenched in secular thought. In this context, biblical counseling is problem-occasioned evangelism. Because it is occasioned by a problem, evangelism within counseling necessarily depends upon the correct use of God’s law. However, prior to considering the use of the law in evangelistic counseling, clarification is needed regarding the counseling of unbelievers.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO COUNSEL UNBELIEVERS?

Jay Adams famously argued that one cannot engage in biblical counseling with an unbeliever since true change is only possible through the Holy Spirit’s

¹³ London popularized this sentiment: “They [i.e., therapists] take the roles of secular priests who arbitrate the moral dilemmas of secular people.” Perry London, *The Modes and Morals of Psychotherapy*, Second ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), xii.

¹⁴ Cf. the “grace-based” model articulated by Fowler and Ford which bifurcates counseling and discipleship: “To disciple someone is to disseminate insights. Counseling, even when using Scripture, is coming alongside someone in the midst of a crisis or life issue as a conduit of help, insight, and encouragement.” Richard A. Fowler, Natalie Ford, *Grace-Based Counseling: An Effective New Biblical Model* (Chicago, IL: Moody Pub., 2021), 121. This perspective neglects the authoritative nature of Scripture to direct conformity to Christ via discipleship in all of its iterations, especially counseling.

empowerment.¹⁵ He wrote, “Precounseling...that is all you can do for an unbeliever; you precounsel him. And all that precounseling means is that you are going to do some problem-centered evangelism.”¹⁶ Underlying Adams’ claim is a conventional biblical anthropology that affirms the doctrine of the total inability of the unconverted person. Since “unregenerate persons can neither understand nor do those things that God requires, it is impossible to counsel them.”¹⁷ Rather, progressive holiness is “part of the sanctifying work of God’s Spirit that takes place only in regenerate persons.”¹⁸

Others have suggested that it is entirely possible to counsel unbelievers. For example, Alistair Groves has asserted that not only may one counsel an unbeliever, the biblical counselor may address issues of a practical nature, such as relationship struggles.¹⁹ Groves confessed, “I sometimes worry that practical advice that is not riveted to the gospel will teach harmful self-reliance, even if it leads to better behavior.”²⁰ However, he rationalized his approach by asserting that his tack sows the seeds of evangelism.

Richard Fowler and Natalie Ford offer a similar approach, arguing that while “the one who is lost cannot know the things of God,” counselors should meet “the counselee where he or she is, finding common ground for a positive relationship. Even if a counselee is totally against the things of God, the counselor can still interject truth principles from Scripture without revealing the chapter and verse of the principle.”²¹ This approach seems to neglect the doctrine of the total inability of the unbeliever altogether. Further, there is a tacit contradiction in these claims: If the unbeliever “cannot know the things of God,” what is the point of seeking to incite change through the clandestine interjection of Scripture?

¹⁵ Jay E. Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling: More Than Redemption* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), 318.

¹⁶ Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 320.

¹⁷ Jay E. Adams, *I Corinthians and II Corinthians, The Christian Counselor’s Commentary* (Cordova, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2020), 18. Cf. Adams’ commentary on Romans 8:7: Jay E. Adams, *Romans, Philippians, I Thessalonians, and II Thessalonians, The Christian Counselor’s Commentary* (Cordova, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2020), 65-6.

¹⁸ Adams, *I Corinthians and II Corinthians*, 18.

¹⁹ J. Alistair Groves, “How Do You Counsel Non-Christians?,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 26, no. 3 (2012): 62.

²⁰ Groves, “How Do You Counsel Non-Christians?,” 66.

²¹ Fowler and Ford, *Grace-Based Counseling*, 123.

Setting aside the semantics of “precounseling” versus counseling, Adams’ construal effectively encourages counselors to prioritize evangelism before other matters. It is admittedly difficult to understand how one can harmonize the approaches articulated by Groves and Fowler and Ford with the Bible’s description of the unconverted. Since even the most altruistic act of the unbeliever occurs outside of the Lordship of Christ, it is, therefore, sinful. Issuing practical counsel in order to improve an unbeliever’s situation is tantamount to a physician removing a splinter from a gangrenous foot. Whatever positive changes the unbeliever appropriates are, apart from conversion, ultimately futile since he does not possess peace with God. While helping unbelievers with practical concerns may serve the greater goal of evangelism and conversion, such a roundabout approach is not reflected in the Scripture (e.g., John 4:1-26; Acts 5:42; cf. Proverbs 27:5). A consistently biblical approach neither ignores biblical anthropology nor the presenting problem but uses the problem to contextualize an invitation to faith and repentance.²² Therefore, inasmuch as evangelism is the introductory component of discipleship, evangelism is the first element of biblical counseling.

EVANGELISTIC COUNSELING AND THE FIRST USE OF THE LAW

The first use of the moral law is essential to all evangelism, especially evangelistic counseling. In applying the moral law, one affords the unbelieving counselee a true spiritual audit that divulges his sin and demonstrates his need for Christ. “Just as a mirror shows us the spots on our face,” the law reflects our deplorable spiritual condition.²³ Evangelism without the law introduces an antidote without a convincing diagnosis. Suppose a man is confronted by an acquaintance who insists that if he does not immediately inject a syringe full of medication, he will perish in an hour. The man has no reason to believe he

²²Robert Jones has articulated this perspective well: “As in the case of Christians, we enter the non-Christian’s world, understand their struggles, and bring them Jesus and his gospel-soaked answers; the main difference is that we adapt our goals, strategies, and methods to their spiritual condition. We might call this problem-occasioned evangelism.” Robert D. Jones et al., *The Gospel for Disordered Lives: An Introduction to Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2021), 234. Cf. Michael R. Emlet, *Saints, Sufferers, & Sinners: Loving Others as God Loves Us* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2021), 47-50.

²³Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 355.

is in danger and is inclined to believe the acquaintance is either mistaken or has ill will toward him. Indeed, that man is likely to run from the medication. However, if the acquaintance arrived with the man's personal doctor, who held in his hand a recent test result that demonstrates that his life is in immediate danger, only then will the man entertain the medication. In evangelistic counseling, the counselor applies the law to the unbeliever such that his conscience is awakened: "It awakens their [i.e., the unconverted] consciences, to a conviction of their guilt, and to a dread of everlasting punishment; and so, discovers to them their absolute need of Christ, and his perfect righteousness, for their justification in the sight of God."²⁴ Thereafter, the counselor invites the counselee to lay hold of the crucified and risen Christ by faith.

The predominant biblical approach of applying the law in an evangelistic context involves confrontation, as with Paul's response to the idolatry of the Athenians (Acts 17:29-30) or Nathan's response to David's involvement with Uriah and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:1-7). Jesus' approach with the Samaritan woman demonstrates an initial indirect approach (John 4:16) followed by a more pointed confrontation (vv. 17-18). Whereas the Scripture affords the counselor discretion in the tenor and timing of confrontation, its expectation is that sin will be addressed (cf. Ezekiel 33:1-7).

Some integrationists have argued that confronting sin within a counseling context may be unwise and unnecessary. For example, Mark McMinn argued that it is likely better not to confront a counselee with their sin. To do so, he argued, is to seek mere behavior modification and not substantive personal change.²⁵ He wrote, "Most of the time, in my opinion, it is more appropriate to simply model the fruit of a transformed life with the ultimate goal of helping people find their deep inner cry for intimacy with God and others."²⁶ McMinn evidently believes that the unconverted person possesses a "deep inner cry for intimacy with God" even though the New Testament claims the contrary (e.g., Romans 3:11). Instead of confronting a self-righteous person, McMinn proposed that the counselor should provide a "safe relationship" wherein

²⁴ John Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2022), 120.

²⁵ Mark R. McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling*, Rev. ed. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Pub., 2011), 172.

²⁶ McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling*, 174.

the counselee can “begin exploring his feelings.”²⁷ He went on to describe a married woman named “Kate” who was remorseless about her adulterous affair. He stated, “It is unnecessary, and probably damaging, to use Scripture to confront Kate with her sin.”²⁸

The only biblical justification McMinn gave to warrant his non-confrontational approach is the *Pericope Adulterae* (John 7:53-8:11).²⁹ However, McMinn seems unaware of the significant challenges to appropriating this narrative. To summarize, the account has underwhelming textual support as does not appear in all the extant witnesses through the fourth century, including the papyri (P66, P75, and likely P39), the great codices (e.g., Χ, A, B, C), and the fathers (e.g., Tertullian, Origen). The passage first occurs in the fifth-century codex Bezae but is not attested to again until the ninth century. Moreover, the story is found in several locations in both John and Luke within the MSS and is likely not an original part of the fourth gospel but a tradition searching for a home.³⁰

The account’s poor textual basis is the main reason why the critical editions of the GNT have enclosed the text in double brackets (e.g., NA28; UBS5; cf. ESV; NASB; NIV) or have omitted it altogether (e.g., THGNT). Murray Harris concluded, “If any item of doctrine depends solely on anything in this passage for its support, it cannot claim Scriptural authority.”³¹ Therefore, McMinn’s uncritical appropriation of this text ignores its dubious canonicity at the expense of the consistent and uncontested teaching of the New Testament regarding the confrontation of sin, especially sexual sin.

Aside from McMinn’s problematic biblical argument for his non-confrontational approach, he has assumed that modeling righteousness is

²⁷ McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling*, 135.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 135-6.

³⁰ Comfort noted, “The inclusion of this story in the NT text is a prime example of how the oral tradition, originally not included in the text, eventually found its way into the written text.” Philip W. Comfort, *New Testament Text and Translation Commentary: Commentary on the Variant Readings of the Ancient New Testament Manuscripts and How They Relate to the Major English Translations* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Pub., 2008), 286.

³¹ Murray J. Harris, John, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2015), 166.

a biblically valid and effective form of evangelism. This is an unsupported assumption that, should it be taken seriously, undermines the evangelistic examples of Christ and his apostles. Christ confronted the Samaritan woman with her adultery by enjoining her “Go, call your husband, and come here” (John 4:16). When she claimed not to have a husband, Christ observed that she had “five husbands” and that she was presently in an adulterous relationship (v. 18). Christ’s statement is an unmistakable application of seventh commandment (Exodus 20:14; cf. Matthew 5:32) and it exposed the breadth of her sin. Given that the woman had come in the heat of the day to gather water, it is likely that her sordid lifestyle resulted in significant exclusion from the other women of her community. Although the woman was a social pariah, Jesus did not believe that confronting her sin was unnecessary or damaging. Instead, he was “shining his light into the darkness of a woman’s soul,” resulting in her conviction and subsequent faith in him.³²

Whatever benefits “Kate” may receive from McMinn’s non-confrontational approach pale compared to the riches available to her in Christ. Her adultery is ultimately the outcome of an idolatrous heart (Matthew 15:19). Kate’s idolatry has distorted her view of life and God and has resulted in disordered desires and disastrous actions (Romans 1:21-22; Ephesians 4:18). The defiling effect of this idolatry may only be counteracted by the work of Christ and, therefore, McMinn’s approach is limited to addressing the symptom and not the cause of Kate’s problem. Whereas confronting Kate’s sin with the holiness of God may be offensive to her, this offense is nonetheless necessary if she is to receive peace with God. Just as the physician offends the flesh through the scalpel to enable healing, the Spirit of grace offends the conscience through the law to enact repentance.

Applying the law to the unconverted redirects the focus from self to God as the law demonstrates how sin is most critically an affront to God. True confession of sin must begin with acknowledging that one has transgressed God. Thus, an awareness of one’s sin in light of the law is the forerunner to repentance. Without using the law as a precursor to the gospel, evangelistic counseling may inadvertently portray sin as merely a horizontal problem. For

³² Edward W. Klink III, *John*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 241.

example, one Christian counselor suggests confronting sin in counseling is to play the role of judge.³³ Instead, she suggests that counselors “empathize with their struggles...and collaboratively develop plans to help them reach their goals.” On this view, sin has effectively become an obstacle to self-fulfillment instead of an affront to the cosmic Lord.

The biblical counselor’s use of the law in evangelistic counseling does not result in the counselor playing the role of judge any more than that of a physician who diagnoses a severe disease. Instead, the counselor articulates the preexisting judgment of God (cf. John 3:18) in pursuit of another’s reconciliation with God (2 Corinthians 5:11-21). However, the correct tone and timing for applying the law is crucial. The New Testament’s evangelistic narratives consistently depict gentleness, humility, and truthfulness; therefore, these qualities must be similarly employed. A derogatory, abusive, or cruel application of the law is, itself, a violation of the law (Galatians 5:14). To proclaim as Paul, “Christ came into the world to save sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15), is to implicate oneself as a sinner. The use of the law as preparation for the gospel should be approached not as a judge approaches a defendant but as a freedman tells his fellow slave how to obtain freedom.

THE FIRST USE OF THE LAW AND THE OBSTINATE COUNSELEE

In the event that a counselee rejects the application of the law to his life either through refusal to acknowledge the validity of the law or the reality of his own guilt, the biblical counselor must rely upon intercessory prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit to convict. Since the Scripture is replete with warnings about refusing repentance, the counselor should similarly warn his counselee of the dire consequences of rejecting God. Christ appealed to the calamity of those who died at the hand of Pilate and those who perished in the tower of Siloam in order to call his audience to repentance: “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:5). The counselor may similarly appeal to the uncertainty of life through contemporary examples of tragedy and death.

³³ Virginia Todd Holeman, *Theology for Better Counseling: Trinitarian Reflections for Healing and Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 86.

A refusal to acknowledge one's sin should not preclude further sessions since this affords strategic opportunities to demonstrate the counselee's need for Christ. Continued appointments provide the counselor with additional time to appeal to the counselee's conscience and for the Holy Spirit to work. In between sessions, the counselee may reflect on his experience in light of the counsel he has received.

COUNSELING, SHAME, AND THE FIRST USE OF THE LAW

As in discipleship, sins of the past, especially sins that occurred prior to one's conversion, may serve as a considerable stumbling block within biblical counseling. Whereas Christians may have to deal with the ongoing worldly ramifications of past sins, these sins invite reflection on the sufficient grace of God. While comprehensive pardon from sin is found in Christ, believers may grapple with great shame and regret over past sins. Paul's treatment of the law in Galatians 3:23-4:7 has considerable relevance to dealing with shame in the believer's life. In this pericope, Paul utilizes a layered analogy to explain how God wielded the first use of the law to bring about the redemption of his people. While an exposition of this passage would exceed the permitted space, a concise explanation of the text and its counseling implications is provided below.

Paul wrote, "Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed" (Galatians 3:23). The first-person plural pronouns in vv. 23-24 require that this statement is not an allusion to redemptive history and the incarnation but the history of every believer before their conversion. Prior to their receipt of faith, every Christian was inescapably imprisoned by the law. However, this legal incarceration was God's means of drawing his elect unto himself: "So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith" (v. 24). Remarkably, Paul characterizes the law as a *παιδαγωγός*. The term is defined as "one who has responsibility for someone who needs guidance."³⁴ Ceslas Spicq notes that *παιδαγωγός* refers to a "servant working as a child's

³⁴ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 748.

guardian and tutor... the one who shows the way to a child, thus teaches a child how to behave.”³⁵ Children among the Greek-speaking ancients did not go out in the city alone but were supervised by a *παιδαγωγός*. Spicq notes further that the *παιδαγωγός* was typically a trusted slave who functioned as a teacher-instructor.³⁶ An *au pair* or even a legal guardian are the approximate modern counterparts. Paul’s optimistic depiction of the law and his use of the conjunction of purpose (*ἵνα*) implies that God had determined the law to oversee his children-to-be as a caretaker, instructing them of righteousness, showing their need for Christ.³⁷ However, following their conversion, believers are no longer under the law but are now in Christ and share in his Sonship (v. 25).

Beginning in Galatians 4:1, Paul added another layer to his characterization: “I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything.” In Christ, the believer is a co-heir to the promises of the Abrahamic covenant (3:29), but he does not receive the covenant benefits until his conversion. Even though a son will inherit his father’s property as he is “owner of everything” (lit. “lord of all”), his youth requires that he is treated “no different from a slave.” That is, while Christians enjoy “every spiritual blessing” in Christ (Ephesians 1:3), prior to their conversion, they possess a significantly inferior status. During that pre-conversion period, the believer is “under guardians and managers” (*ἐπιτρόπους καὶ οἰκονόμους*) (Galatians 4:2). *Ἐπίτροπος* refers to those who oversee the operations of a property.³⁸ The same term is used for Herod’s “household manager” (Luke 8:3) and the “foreman” of the vineyard in Jesus’ parable of the laborers (Matthew 20:8). The term *οἰκονόμος* refers to an administrator the

³⁵ Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, vol. 3 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pub., 1994), 1.

³⁶ Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, 2-3. Tenney states that the term referred “usually to an old slave, who was charged with the responsibility of preparing them [children] for school and of hurrying them safely off to the schoolmaster lest they loiter on the way or be endangered by the traffic of the streets. When they reached the schoolmaster the responsibilities of the *paidagōgos* ended. So with the law, its authority ended when it had brought men to Christ.” Merril C. Tenney, *Galatians: The Charter of Christian Liberty*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), 127.

³⁷ Dunn similarly notes, “So what Paul had in mind was almost certainly protective custody.” James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 197.

³⁸ Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, 385.

father placed in charge of the entirety of the estate, particularly that of wealth (i.e., a treasurer).³⁹ These terms serve to expand Paul's depiction of the law as guardian in 3:23-25, characterizing the law as the divine servant who prepares the unconverted elect for grace.

Notably, the guardianship of the law ends precisely when God intends: "But he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father" (4:2). The language Paul employed has a startling import to counseling the Christian dealing with shame. The term translated "date set" (*προθεσμία*) is a hapax that refers to "a point of time set in advance."⁴⁰ John Eadie observed that "the word is a legal term found often in classical writers, as meaning the time defined for bringing actions or prosecutions...and it also denotes the period allowed to a defendant for paying damages."⁴¹ The implication is that God was using his law redemptively, even through the errors of pre-conversion sin, in order to bring his elect unto faith at precisely his foreordained time (cf. vv. 4-6). Paul then resolved his analogy by describing the pre-converted elect as "children" who were "enslaved to the elementary principles of the world" but who were redeemed at precisely the right time (vv. 3-7).⁴² Consequently, however regrettable, past sins were the divinely ordained pathway (in conjunction with the law) through which God brought his people to faith in Christ.

³⁹ Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, 698. Cf. Luke 12:42; 16:1, vv. 3, 8; Rom 16:23.

⁴⁰ Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, 869.

⁴¹ John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1979), 292.

⁴² There is a vast debate in the literature regarding the identity of the "elementary principles of the world" (*στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου*) in Gal. 4:3. *Στοιχεῖα* refers to actual physical elements (e.g., earth, wind, fire, water) most of the time in ancient Greek texts. See J. Blinzler, "Lexikalisch zu dem Terminus τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου bei Paulus," in *Studiorum Paulinorum Congressus Internationalis Catholicus 1961*, vol. 2 (Rome, IT: The Pontifical Biblical Inst., 1963), 430. It is unlikely that Paul is referring to physical elements, as these are never described this way in the text of Scripture. Other interpreters understand *στοιχεῖα* to be a reference to non-human persons (e.g., angels or demons) as noted in Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians, Galatians*, 295-6. However, given that v. 3 is the explanation of the analogy, Paul afforded a contextual key to identifying the *στοιχεῖα*. In 3:23 Paul wrote that prior to their salvation, God's people were "held captive" and "imprisoned" by the law. The pre-converted were subjected to the law a legal guardian (3:24) and as "guardians and managers" (4:2). When Christ came, a legal guardian was no longer needed (3:25-26; 4:4-5) because the elect are united with Christ (3:27; 4:5). Paul's analogy depicts this transition, from slave and future son to son in union with Christ. Subsequently, the analogy implies that the *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου* is a reference to the law. See also Gordon D. Fee, *Galatians*, Pentecostal Commentary Series (Blandford Forum, UK: Deo, 2011), 146-7.

A CASE STUDY DEALING WITH SINS OF THE PAST

Rich came to faith in Christ well into his forties. He met his wife through his small group, and they have been married for nearly three years. In his early twenties, Rich had a child with his long-term girlfriend. However, the relationship ended after his girlfriend discovered that Rich was sexually involved with another woman. Following the breakup, Rich did not consistently seek out a relationship with his son. While he and his wife are growing in Christ, Rich feels tremendous regret over his failures as a father. He cannot help but grieve the years he was not involved in his son's life, and he blames his son's unbelief on himself. Rich has reached out to his now-adult son in recent months, but his son has no interest in a relationship.

Rich's counselor invited him to testify about how he came to know Christ. It was a story in which the providence of God was writ large. After years of seeking material possessions and pleasure, he found that this pursuit left him desperate and disgruntled. Rich's sister and brother-in-law had unsuccessfully invited him to their church several times over the years. Rich remarked that he always rejected the invitation because he believed "churches were out for money." When Rich's young niece was in a Christmas play, he set aside his reservations and attended a service. The sermon confronted Rich with his sin and invited him to find salvation in Christ, and he believed.

Rich's testimony was interspersed with expressions of the shame and regret he felt due to his failure as a father. He consistently reflected on what he should have done and how foolish his actions were. During his second session, Rich's counselor noted how he viewed his pre-conversion life as a total loss. He directed Rich to Galatians 3:23-4:7, and in carefully unpacking the passage, the counselor demonstrated how God used Rich's sin to bring him to himself. He noted that through his failures, God used his law to draw Rich to repentance and faith. Moreover, his counselor explained that just as God's sovereignty is depicted in Rich's testimony, the same sovereign Lord is fully capable of redeeming his son.

CONCLUSION

The moral law of God reflects God's unchanging holiness and holds every person accountable to its standards. Applying the law in its first use is the means through which both discipler and counselor awaken the conscience and demonstrate one's need for the substitutionary ministry of Christ. Though some have sought to evade the application of the law in counseling, such efforts do not adequately account for the biblical depiction of the unconverted soul or the evangelistic examples of the New Testament. Moreover, the first use of the law, as depicted by the apostle Paul in Galatians 3:23-4:7, has vast utility in aiding the Christian who struggles with shame due to sins of the past.

CHRISTIAN MINISTRY AND THE MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING COMPLEX: Understanding Missions, Counseling, and Biblical Structures of Care

Samuel Stephens¹

INTRODUCTION

The idea that Christian counselors should be considered as missionaries within the mental health professions has been popularized in various circles for years; however, this approach to counseling brings up a host of issues relating to the nature, purpose, and context of what is truly biblical counseling. This essay will confront the misguided thinking behind this argument and present the biblical alternative which seeks to maintain the integrity of not only the counsel provided, but the biblical counseling movement overall.

As a biblical counselor, I view the task of counseling, with all of its principles and methods, as distinctly Christian ministry.² However, over the last couple of centuries, counseling has been uprooted from its historical and theological moorings and replanted firmly in secular soil.³ Today, for many, counseling has become something that is considered primarily clinical, professional,

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² Jay Adams, *How to Help People Change* (Nashville: Zondervan, 1986), 33-40. See also, Samuel Stephens, *The Deception of Psychological Labels* (Kansas City: Truth in Love, 2022); and Jay Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling* (Nashville: Zondervan, 1979), 1-10.

³ For a sociological perspective on this see: Stephanie Muravchik, *American Protestantism in the Age of Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); and Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006). For a theological perspective see E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1983); and Samuel Stephens, *The Psychological Anthropology of Wayne Edward Oates: A Downgrade from the Theological to the Therapeutic* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020).

academic, and psychological rather than an endeavor which is essentially pastoral, ecclesiastical, ministerial, and theological. Sadly, the cultural milieu by which counseling has become defined is the only one by which many Christians are aware.

I have worked around theological education at some capacity for nearly a decade as either an administrator or a professor, and during this time I have had countless conversations with prospective and current students about the nature, purpose, and context of counseling. This fact, in and of itself, is by no means a bad thing. In fact, I am grateful for the way that the discipline of biblical counseling has grown in popularity and accessibility within theological education.⁴ With that being said, the postures and trends of these conversations often leave me troubled and discouraged. For instance, more often than not, when a prospective student asks about our biblical counseling program, the top questions I receive have little to do with how well our degree program provides ministerial preparation and theological acumen in building a comprehensive, distinctly biblical approach to counseling and care. Instead, these questions focus on what types of careers the students should expect to enter. Salary ranges, professional advancement, state licensing, and therapeutic competencies are common refrains characterizing such conversations. In short, I find that students are often sizing up a biblical counseling degree program for what it can offer them as it relates to professional relevancy and occupational security.

So, how do I answer such concerns? Like any well-trained biblical counselor, I begin my answer by asking *more* questions! Does the student desire to advance the mission of the church? Does he or she want to learn how to competently minister the Scriptures that maintains biblical integrity and fidelity while also building critical counseling skills? Does the student ultimately trust the Lord to supply his or her financial needs? Is the student willing to forsake frameworks, terms, and concepts that categorize and diagnose the problems people face from a naturalistic (and God-less) worldview? Is the student firm in his commitment to the centrality of the gospel of Jesus Christ for

⁴ For instance, the first biblical counseling degree program among Southern Baptist seminary began at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (SEBTS) in the late 1990s. Since then, similar degree programs have formed at three additional Southern Baptist seminaries, not to mention those in other protestant denominations.

the counseling task, and is he willing to look like a fool in the eyes of the professional counselor? If the answer to any of these questions is no, then I typically recommend they find the nearest secular college or university and inquire about what those counseling programs can offer.

From a recruiting perspective, it may seem strange that I would ask such counterintuitive questions as this. However, what these students are *really* looking for, and indeed what they *truly* believe, is that counseling training is related more to vocational preparedness than it is for training in Christian ministry within and *for the church*. I would like to think that such misguided thinking is reserved for the ignorant, but I have seen that even those who should know better, even those with platforms within the Biblical Counseling Movement (BCM), follow similar tendencies.⁵

In 2007, David Powlison's article “Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies)” was published in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*. Nearly twenty years later, this article has proven the test of time as one of the most comprehensive and succinct appraisals of the Christian counseling landscape in terms of its relevancy, foresight, and analysis. In his essay, Powlison's articulation of the two organizing centers for Christians who counsel (represented by the acronyms VITEX and COMPIN) spares no one. He outlines the epistemological, anthropological, ethical, and societal errors that so-often characterize integrationist positions. But along with those critiques, he warns biblical counselors to avoid reverting to proof-texts and platitudes and instead urges us to seek prioritizing “positive biblical truth” and a “systematic theology of care and counseling for souls” that would “wed conceptual, methodological, and institutional elements.”⁶

In the final consideration of his essay, Powlison evaluates available helping structures with an eye towards their “viability and validity.”⁷ Essentially, he

⁵ It is not the intention of this essay to provide a thorough accounting of recent debates among biblical counselors. For a systematic review of concerns see Sean Perron, “Summer of Sufficiency,” *First Thoughts* (June 10, 2024). <https://fbcjax.com/first-thoughts/summer-of-sufficiency/>.

⁶ David Powlison, “Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies),” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* (Spring 2007), 5-35. See also, Eric L. Johnson, ed., *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010), 245-291.

⁷ Powlison, “Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies),” 29.

wanted his readers to consider not just the *why* or *what* of soul care, but *how* Christians should best offer and apply gospel hope and help to counselees and then to understand the implications of those particular arrangements. In summarizing his position about the appropriate context in which biblical counselors should operate, he noted, “There is no legitimate place for a *semi-Christian counseling profession* to operate in autonomy from ecclesiastical jurisdiction and in subordination to state jurisdiction [emphasis added].”⁸ Obviously, just as in the time of his writing, the Christian church and the secular mental health professions remain the two distinct helping structures that exist at the intersection of Christian faith and counseling psychology. Powlison’s point is that the Christian church alone offers the required guardrails, authority, and accountability to protect doctrinal fidelity, promote biblically faithful living, and preserve Christian conscience in counseling from a biblical vantage point.

As with any movement, evolution of thought and positions is a constant factor and the BCM is no exception. Since the publishing of Powlison’s article, there have been many voices that have interacted with his proposals and analyses. That is no surprise. But what may be surprising are the arguments within the biblical counseling camp that have articulated opposing views than that of Powlison regarding how we should think about the various ways and contexts in which counseling and help are offered.

I have become convinced that the thinking among current and prospective seminary students studying counseling corresponds to philosophical and practical drifts that are happening not only within Evangelicalism, but also among influential counselors within the BCM.⁹ Broadly speaking, I have held concerns about the integrity and trajectory of the BCM for a few years now. I have recognized a subtle, yet consistent, steering away from foundational and historical tenets that once distinguished biblical counseling from other approaches to counseling.¹⁰ I have noticed an emphasis given to fostering the

⁸ Powlison, “Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies),” 31.

⁹ For helpful texts that outline the ongoing professionalization of pastoral ministry and general Christian work within the church see T. Dale Johnson, Jr., *The Professionalization of Pastoral Care: The SBC’s Journey from Pastoral Theology to Counseling Psychology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020).

¹⁰ What I have seen here is the fragmentation of the BCM into evidently divergent paths. No longer are “traditional” and “progressive” sufficient designations that distinguish different

dual needs of cultural relevancy and professional respect from those within the mental health counseling complex.¹¹

One key argument that has been made, and continues to hold currency within biblical counseling circles today, is that these perceived needs can (and should) be met through thinking of Christian counselors as missionaries. While this analogy seems, on its face, to be a noble and even biblical one, once the specifics are explored there are several troubling implications that can be brought to bear on a movement that finds itself at a crossroads. The argument that Christians should seek to serve as missionaries within the mental health field has been circulating among biblical counselors for years; however, this approach to counseling reveals several inconsistencies relating to the nature, purpose, and context of *truly* Christian counseling. In this essay, I will confront key elements of this argument and present a theological evaluation in order to underscore the need of the BCM today to return to structures of help and care that are consistent with biblical counseling positions.

The core of the “counselors as missionaries” argument suggests that Christians have the duty, or at least the privilege, to work within the

flavors of biblical counselors, but now, those on the left of the spectrum are frequently identified with several qualifiers including research-aware, clinically informed, holistic, trauma-informed, redemptive counselors, among others. For an earlier look at this, see John Babler and T. Dale Johnson, Jr., “Issues in Biblical Counseling: Addressing The Elephant in the Room,” ACBC (November 17, 2017) <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/articles/issues-in-biblical-counseling-addressing-the-elephant-in-the-room/>. Those who would seek to unhelpfully broaden and redefine biblical counseling, thus removing it from its historical, methodological, and theological moorings, would seek to divide those who identify with biblical counseling’s roots. For an example of this see Nate Brooks, Tate Cockrell, Brad Hambrick, Kristin Kellen, and Sam Williams, “What is Redemptive Counseling/Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?” Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (accessed July 8, 2024). <https://www.sebts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/What-is-RCCIBC.pdf>.

¹¹ This term has been used to describe a group of psychotherapeutic and client-centric professional industries that have been identified in the past as the “helping professions” associated with the social sciences. These would include state-licensed counseling professions, the fields of psychiatry and psychology, and other clinically oriented occupations which work upon the assumptions articulated by the mental health/illness paradigm. The modern pastoral counseling movement has long viewed the work of pastoral counseling as only one part of a necessary partnership with secular experts in addressing the needs of the whole person. See, Raymond J. Lawrence, *Recovery of the Soul: A History and Memoir of the Clinical Pastoral Movement* (New York: CPSP, 2017) and Allison Stokes, *Ministry After Freud* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1985).

secular counseling professions in order to, as one proponent put it, “speak prophetically into the mental health subculture.”¹² For those of us who are committed to biblical counseling and desire for this ancient work to survive in a form that maintains its doctrinal definition, foundational tenants, historical consistency, and worldview, we must be willing to boldly and clearly refute arguments that denigrate and threaten its legacy and longevity. To this point, I contend that arguments encouraging Christians to operate as missionaries within the mental health counseling complex demonstrate not only a faulty understanding of Christian missions and the spiritual nature and goals of counseling, but also leads Christians away from structures of help and care that are consistent with biblical counseling.

I will seek to support this thesis by unpacking the nature of the “counselors as missionaries” paradigm and provide critique of its assumptions. As I have already intimated, while these propositions are made by those who carry the mantle of biblical counselor, we would be in error if we simply assumed that their claims correspond with biblical counseling tenets. Once we view these arguments through the lens of biblical counseling commitments, I believe that we will see how errant they actually are. Ultimately, my desire is to offer a call for the biblical counseling movement to retrieve its foundational view of the church as the ultimate context for the task of biblical counseling instead of simply relegating the church as one option among many.¹³

NECESSARY CAVEATS AND KEY DEFINITIONS

Before moving into the substance of the essay, I would like to provide a few caveats in an attempt to provide some insight to the spirit of my approach to this topic. Any criticism the author offers in this essay about the current drift

¹² Sam R. Williams, “Counselors as Missionaries,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* (vol. 26, no. 3, 2012), 28. Williams has written on this subject in several places towards the end of the first and into the second decade of the twenty-first century. See also, Sam R. Williams, “Christian Counseling as Mission,” Biblical Counseling Coalition (July 27, 2011). <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2011/07/27/christian-counseling-as-mission/>; Sam R. Williams, “Should You Study Counseling Outside Christian Institutions? Yes and No,” *The Gospel Coalition* (October 15, 2012). <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/should-you-study-counseling-outside-christian-institutions-yes-and-no/>.

¹³ I would include parachurches here. However, secular institutions would not even come close.

of the BCM and of the poor state of counseling in the church at-large should be offered in a spirit of humility. Offering criticism and refutation with a humble spirit, which should be the only way Christians engage in this type of exercise, requires not only pointing out various problems and the need for correction, but should also demonstrate a willingness to be part of moving the conversation forward.

Secondly, as it relates to the “counselors as missionaries” paradigm in particular, my criticism will seek to reflect respect. Christians should never participate in constructing arguments *ad hominem*. That being said, the ideas, principles, and implications of arguments put forth by others, especially in a public forum, are fair game for criticism. While I strongly disagree with the premise of the paradigm I am critiquing in this essay, I can at the same time, recognize and appreciate the intentions and any anecdotal benefits that this paradigm may provide.

Lastly, it is important to be clear as to what I *do not* mean by the terms “counselors as missionaries” by looking at two aspects of both of this phrase, those being *missions* and *counseling*.¹⁴ The former concept consists of the nature and call of the new life in Jesus Christ. In this, we can see that mission-mindedness is a fundamental component of not only the Great Commission, but of Christian religion (Matthew 5:16ff; 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). Christians are to bring the light of the Gospel into the darkness, and this is both commanded and demonstrated throughout the Bible. The latter aspect, that of counseling, by its nature is closely associated to the first. As a ministry to and for Christians, biblical counseling is about refining the image of Christ in the saint who struggles, suffers, and sins.¹⁵ However, the founder of the modern movement himself, Jay Adams, also saw the need for an evangelistic call expressed through this vehicle of care. From its earliest days, the BCM has viewed counseling and care as not only a vital in-reach ministry of the church for the church, but as an

¹⁴ Throughout this essay, I will use the phrases counselors as missionaries, missional counseling, and counseling as missions in synonymous fashion to refer to the argument articulated by Sam Williams and others that biblical counselors can and should serve as missionaries to and within the mental health field and sub-culture.

¹⁵ For a definition that represents a biblical counseling perspective see the definition of the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors here: <https://biblicalcounseling.com/about/our-mission/>.

out-reach ministry to a community of people in search of hope and salvation.¹⁶ The reason behind this is because we understand that the church was never an afterthought in the mind of God. Her purpose is to be the vehicle for Christian mission and no other institution can supplant or replace her in this duty. What is promoted in this effort, however, is different from what is proposed in the paradigm that I will now attempt to explain and critique.

MISGUIDED ASSUMPTIONS

I am not a missiologist and am aware of my limitations regarding the specifics of some technical terms associated with this field. With that being said, I will attempt to demonstrate that even a cursory examination of how Christian missions is used in this argument fails to accurately reflect the nature, methods, and goals of missions in general.

In his article published in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* entitled, “Counselors as Missionaries,” Sam Williams, now retired professor of biblical counseling at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, argues that since Christianity is considered a missionary religion, all Christians who counsel should, by natural expression, “always be moving toward and into any part of this world that excludes God from the human equation.”¹⁷ Building on this

¹⁶ Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Nashville: Zondervan, 1970), 67ff. Jay noted, “Any such counseling that claims to be Christian surely must be evangelistic. Counseling is redemptive” (67).

¹⁷ Williams, “Counselors as Missionaries,” 28. I often find language like this unhelpful (to say the least) due to its ambiguity. Interestingly, the impact of Williams influence at Southeastern Seminary’s counseling program, now identified as Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling (RC/CIBC), can be seen in its affirmations here: <https://www.sebts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/What-is-RCCIBC.pdf>. In a document that predated the current one, the counseling faculty at SEBTS not only affirmed that the application of the Word of God must be done in a “clinically informed manner” (a manner that was neither clarified nor explained), but also that an understanding of people from the Bible will result in considering them as “spiritual, moral, relational, and psychological beings.” Again, it not explained how *psychological* differs from *spiritual* or *moral*. It can be surmised that the clinically informed approach to SEBTS’s biblical counseling program leads them to affirm concepts that are foreign to categories provided to us in Scripture including, “psychological suffering,” “mental disorders,” “relational trauma,” and “psychological well-being.” That document can be found here: https://www.sebts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biblical_Counseling_Affirmation.pdf. For a look at where such missional approaches to counseling eventually lead, see *Southeastern Theological Review* (vol 15, no. 1, Spring 2024).

general assumption, he accuses “Christians who counsel – of all sorts and of all backgrounds” of being “missiologically myopic” if they do not view their counseling through the missional lens, and that a failure for some to do so has resulted in a lack of adequate engagement, influence, and ministry within the secular mental health subculture.¹⁸ Williams uses the term *missions* to refer to the general “activity of God in the world . . . through his people to fulfill his mission.”¹⁹ While such a broadly applied conceptualization of missions does seem to be biblically framed and seeks to glorify and honor God, it also does not insulate or shield his key argument from substantive critique as revealed in the inconsistent and doctrinally vague ways his view of mission is applied to the nature, purposes, goals, and activities of Christian counselors. In order to understand this paradigm, it is important to provide an outline of key assumptions that Williams holds in support of “counselors as missionaries.”

MISSIONS AND THE MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONS

The first striking characteristic of this argument, and one that is often pronounced, is his identifying the mental health profession as a legitimate object of Christian missional focus. Of course, this proposition assumes much about how the mental health counseling complex works and how it corresponds to actual ethnic or geo-political people groups which are often identified as objects of evangelism in modern missions movements. At face value, those within the BCM who support this view do correctly identify the mental health field as distinctly secular. How these professions understand reality, human nature, the etiologies and descriptions of the problems people face, and the solutions to these problems all reject a biblical worldview. These qualities may seem to suggest that the mental health field is exactly like any other foreign field in need of Christian witness. Perhaps Williams and others are right about the need for Christian counselors to engage the mental health field with missional fervency. If this is where the argument ended, I could be persuaded to agree; however, there are multiple misguided assumptions that make this aspect of the argument untenable.

¹⁸ Williams, “Counselors as Missionaries,” 28.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Proponents assume that a *Christianized* mental health field can (and should) exist alongside a secular one, and that Christians can (and should) applaud recent moves of many mental health professions of becoming more “tolerant and inclusive of all religions and moralities.”²⁰ This is problematic on many levels. All of the systems and structures that uphold the mental health field are ones that promote unbiblical theologies of God and man (among others). For Christians to counsel within these systems, and thereby operate in accordance with the ethical, clinical, methodological, and professional standards set forth by accrediting bodies supporting these professions, is for them to dilute their ability to be salt and light in the particulars of their counsel.²¹

For his part, Williams does not ignore this challenge and even says that Christian counselors must “continue to expect that the cross of Christ will still be offensive;” however, he also calls his readers to “reevaluate” not only the mental health field, but also themselves.²² While it seems that the object of this re-evaluation has to do with the strategy of constructive contextualization for missions within the mental health field, I suggest that the true objective of mission (which is the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ) is *not* going to be advanced by Christians celebrating that a godless, secular, and morally bankrupt field has finally warmed up to “spiritual approaches” to counseling or us seeking to earn our seat at the mental health profession table. What seems to be lost on Williams is the two-fold purpose of missions in advancing the gospel. This two-fold purpose includes both *evangelism* and *discipleship*.

When the Scriptures speak of evangelism, what exactly does it entail? Well, it should include a recounting of the gospel message as the clearest expression

²⁰ Williams, “Counselors as Missionaries,” 29. There are many important questions that must be asked that can’t be adequately addressed in this essay. Do we *need* a corresponding mental health system that operates with Christian principles? Would the emulation of such a system actually carry principles along with it that are antithetical to biblical principles and solutions?

²¹ Heath Lambert refers to the many contradictions and pitfalls that are baked into licensure (and I argue by extension) of working within the mental health fields. See Heath Lambert, “Should Christians Be Licensed by the State to Counsel?” *Association of Certified Biblical Counselors*, (September 11, 2017). <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/podcast-episodes/til-119-should-christians-be-licensed-by-the-state-to-counsel/>. See also Jim Newheiser, “Why I Don’t Want or Need a License to Counsel,” *Biblical Counseling Coalition* (January 21, 2013). <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2013/01/21/why-i-dont-want-or-need-a-license-to-counsel/>.

²² Williams, “Counselors as Missionaries,” 29.

of God's grace to the lost, but ultimately, evangelism is a call to the lost for a change of allegiance. However, at the heart of this argument is an unspoken assumption that once Christian counselors faithfully "evangelize" the mental health professions (in specific ways we are never told), the profession--with all of its existing paradigms, structures, language, methods, and contexts--will essentially remain as it is albeit look a bit more "Christianly." Is this possible? I would argue emphatically not!²³ Consider, as Paul Vitz does in his book *Psychology as Religion*, that the mental health complex is *not* actually like any other unreached, unengaged people group. In truth, the psychologies have more in common with pagan religions where the sacred text is the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders* (DSM) and clinicians and psychiatrists serve as shamans and secular priests.²⁴ If this is the proper way to view the mental health counseling professions, then it would be impossible for any real allegiance change to result in the continuance of practices that came before.

The same argument goes for the goals and purposes of discipleship. The call to discipleship requires inside-out conformation to Christ initiated by a change of heart (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 2:20). This call is to hear the Words of life and to heed them. It is a call to sit at the feet of Jesus in order to subjugate and surrender our inner man (with its particular affections, will, and thoughts) to God's desires, will, and purposes. All of this has as its goal that we may be holy as He is holy! While it is admirable to advocate for a revolutionary "Christian invasion of the secular mental health establishment – for the glory of God and the good of men," the question that remains is that if such an invasion was possible, would the secular mental health establishment even be able to continue in form or function as it has been previously?²⁵ I would again suggest it would not. When the individual parts are altered, the sum of those parts becomes something new. As a thought exercise, consider that if a certain false religion rejected every heretical doctrine and replaced each of

²³ Stanton Jones and Richard Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011), 434-478. Unfortunately, Jones and Butman fail to provide a comprehensive appraisal or rationale, outside of platitudes, regarding the place of the church should take in counseling, they spend a majority of their argument assuming the legitimacy of professional counseling.

²⁴ Paul Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans, 1995).

²⁵ Williams, "Counselors as Missionaries," 36.

them with corresponding orthodox doctrines, then that false religion would cease to be a false religion! Unfortunately, common refrains from those within the BCM who favor this type of engagement rarely discuss how the outcomes of faithful “mission work” (that being evangelization and discipleship) within the mental health professions would actually alter their own professional and occupational standing and positions within those very same structures.

MISSIONAL CONTEXTUALIZATION AND COUNSELING

As we consider the work of foreign missionaries, it is clear that contextualization, to some extent, happens. In many situations, these missionaries have to learn a new language, understand culturally sensitive customs, acknowledge and operate by the laws of the country in which they are to live, and many more besides. But one thing, the most important thing, that cannot be compromised or contextualized is the message of salvation and the particular call of discipleship, conformation, and personal obedience to Jesus Christ. Williams argues that if Christians do not enter into the mental health professionals as missionaries, then they are being myopic. I argue that if Christians enter into the mental health professionals as the kind of missionaries he suggests, it will not be the mental health and counseling professions that will change, but the Christian missionary himself.

In support for contextualization, Williams relies upon a biblical account found in Acts 17:16-34. Williams views Paul and the pagans of Athens as stand-ins for Christian counselors and secular therapists. In his working through this passage, Williams attempts to re-imagine Paul as a conceptual bridge-builder whose approach to the pagans on the Areopagus is best described as commendable and inoffensive in order that he may gain a hearing from them. This understanding makes sense when we see that Williams’ approach includes not only an “effort to communicate the message of God in a way that is faithful to Scripture,” but one that is also “meaningful to respondents in their context.”²⁶ Is it possible for one to truly make the gospel meaningful to

²⁶ Williams, “Counselors as Missionaries,” 31. Can we make the gospel meaningful? Is this even our purpose in gospel proclamation? See, Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, xii-xiii. Williams does mention that there are two risks to the contextualization that he proposes. One such problem is an “over-contextualization which is essentially syncretism and is found

those who are enemies of the cross? By examining Williams' interpretation of the account, there seems to be more eisegetical than exegetical hermeneutic applied.

The passage opens with the statement that Paul's "spirit was troubled within him, when he saw that the city [Athens] was full of idols" (Acts 17:16). Instead of the idea that Paul made it his aim to make his message palpable to his pagan respondents, a careful reading of this passage suggests that when Paul saw these idols, he was provoked, irritated, exasperated, and perhaps righteously angry at what he beheld. Nowhere in Scripture do we see pagan idolatry as something that either God or his servants tolerate, and the same goes here for the apostle. Paul then begins to speak to the men of Athens observing that they seem "extremely religious in every respect" (Acts 17:22). Williams interprets this comment as proof that Paul sought to be inoffensive towards the men of Athens by reframing the idolatry as "object of worship" and goes even further to commend them for their religious devotion of the unknown gods. Once again, this reading of Paul does not seem consistent with his teaching and posture towards idolatry in any of his other epistles or writings. While Williams does go on to explain that Paul eventually calls the pagans to repentance, it is clear that the bent of his interpretive lens highlights the necessity and priority of building mutual respect, appreciation, and meaningful dialogue.²⁷ Williams also uses the first chapter of John to argue that the apostle used the term *logos* in order to "strategically co-op both their terminology and their desire for reason, logic, and truth."²⁸ To correspond this claim with the argument for Christians to integrate the trappings of the mental health complex is irresponsible at best.

most frequently integrationism" (32). The second problem, one that he notes is especially problematic for biblical counselors is "under-contextualization" which essentially betrays a separatist attitude to what could be gained in "the mental health world and 'secular' research." Williams clearly views the latter risk as a serious error which will eliminate "meaningful and persuasive interaction" with the mental health counseling complex (32). One doesn't have to imagine where Williams' appeals to have such interactions ultimately leads. Current biblical counseling faculty at SEBTS demonstrate the effects of this misguided argument. See Kristin Kellen, "Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ," *Southeastern Theological Review* (vol. 15, no. 1, Spring 2024), 47-58.

²⁷ Williams, "Counselors as Missionaries," 31.

²⁸ Ibid.

What is striking throughout much of the literature that I have read by those who identify as biblical counselors but promote a faulty missionary paradigm is that their posture towards secular psychology and the helping professions is one of advocacy in encouraging substantive interaction and utilization of extra-biblical data.²⁹ Oftentimes, these arguments are tempered with what I call “scriptural sufficiency talk” that encourages trust in “empirical inquiry” as long as biblical fidelity is maintained. Such shibboleths almost always are used as safety nets that provide open doors for functional integration.³⁰

PROMOTING PROFESSIONAL COUNSELING LICENSURE

The culmination of the argument that all Christians should have “some sense of being on mission to the mental health subculture” is on the open advocacy for Christians to seek or maintain professional and state-endorsed counseling licenses or practice in “biblically faithful” ways within mental health structures.³¹ Williams suggests that in order to be a relevant voice with

²⁹ Heath Lambert refers to this as “fascination” and Jay Adams refers to such counselors as being “caught up in the views and practices of unbelievers that in their writings they spend more time attacking those who attempt to set forth biblical positions than those who oppose them” (8). See Heath Lambert, “Priests in the Garden, Zombies in the Wilderness, and Prophets on the Wall; The Current State of the Contemporary Biblical Counseling Movement,” *First Thoughts* (May 13, 2024). <https://fbcjax.com/first-thoughts/priests-in-the-garden-zombies-in-the-wilderness-and-prophets-on-the-wall-the-current-state-of-the-contemporary-biblical-counseling-movement/>; and Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 8. A clear example of such fascination, and even what I would term a pro-eclectic approach to counseling methodology, can be seen in recent articulations made by Nate Brooks, et. al., “What is Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?”

³⁰ Jeremy Lelek, “The Sufficiency of Scripture and Holistic Care: A Cursory Introduction,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, (vol. 49, no. 3, 2021), 268-284. I would argue that Lelek is a representative of a neo-integrationist position. Such Christian counselors are those who identify as biblical counselors but practice functional integration. In other words, they believe they are presenting a modified version of biblical counseling, but in reality, they are presenting a modified version of classic integration. Much of their writing echoes the “fail safe” phrases that actively promote integration while attempting to maintain a definitive stance of sufficiency of Scripture. See also, Nate Brooks, “Everybody Integrates: Biblical Counseling and the Use of Extrabiblical Material,” *Southeastern Theological Review* (vol. 15, no. 1, Spring 2024), 7-20.

³¹ Sam R. Williams, “The Licensure Question,” *Biblical Counseling Coalition* (January 22, 2013) <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2013/01/22/the-licensure-question/>; and Jeremy Lelek, “Biblical Counseling as a Licensed Professional: Functionally Speaking,” *Biblical Counseling Coalition* (January 23, 2013). <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2013/01/23/biblical-counseling-as-a-licensed-professional-functionally-speaking/>.

a significant standing in the culture, and by extension have the largest platform for the gospel, a Christian counselor would “need to be both well-trained in our faith’s psychology and in one of the secular mental health professions . . . licensure or certification will often be necessary.”³²

At an alarming rate, professional counseling licensure, currently an expansive bureaucratic and lucrative governmental activity, forces Christians to choose between compromising their biblically informed conscience in matters relating to the counsel they provide, or risk losing their credentials.³³ By definition, licensing is a civil government action of restricting entry into and conduct within a certain occupation or profession. While licensing of professional counseling is hardly any older than the BCM itself, the earliest licensing of professions began around 1200 A.D. in medieval Europe. Wealthy professional guilds, which held monopolies in their respective fields, ultimately excluded the poor to insulate the wealthy, regardless of merit. Such guilds flourished until the 16th Century but re-emerged in modern Europe and the Americas in the early 19th Century where civil governments regulated various professions in order to promote and maintain “public confidence.”³⁴

³² Williams, “Counselors as Missionaries,” 32, 39.

³³ For more on legal implications relating to these issues, see T. Dale Johnson, Jr. and Edward Charles Wilde, eds., *Legal Issues in Biblical Counseling: Direction and Help for Churches and Counselors* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2022); and Mark R. McMinn and Katheryn Rhoads Meek, “Ethics Among Christian Counselors: A Survey of Beliefs and Behaviors,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* (vol. 24, no. 1, 1996), 26-37. All state credentialing and regulating entities, such as the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), or organizations designed to promote professional counseling competency are governed by codes of ethics by which counselors must abide at the risk of losing their license, or worse. To demonstrate just how morally and ethically biased such professional guilds are, take for example a practice question from the National Counselor Examination given through the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC). The sample question asks, “A client asks a counselor if abortion is morally acceptable. Which one of the following would be an ethical response?” of the four answers, three give clear stances that are objectively either moral or immoral, but the correct answer to the question is “My opinion about this topic seems important to you. Can you tell me more?” Additionally, the *Code of Ethics* for the NBCC states, “Counselors shall demonstrate multicultural counseling competence in practice. Counselors will not use counseling techniques or engage in any professional activities that discriminate against or show hostility toward individuals or groups based on gender, ethnicity, race, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, disability, religion, or any other legally prohibited basis.” *National Board for Certified Counselors Code of Ethics* (revised August 24, 2023) <https://nbcc.org/assets/Ethics/nbcccodeofethics.pdf>.

³⁴ Stanley J. Gross, “The Myth of Professional Licensing,” *American Psychologist* (vol. 33, November 1978), 1011-1012.

It is assumed and claimed that professional licensing protects the public. There is a widely embraced correlation between such credentialing and competency, but as you may have experienced yourself, licensing is not a fail-safe against incompetence or even harm.³⁵ In truth, in all the years since its re-emergence in the West, there has been no “experiential data to relate licensing to increased competency or public safety, and that includes in the areas of professional counseling and therapy.”³⁶ In addition to these concerns about professional counseling structures, are accompanying concerns about the ethical and moral subjugation of the counselor’s conscience. Ultimately, unaccountable state-endorsed licensing boards dictate the standards of “professional orthodoxy” thus holding complete control of conduct, content, method, and quality of the counseling “service” provided. Because the state (or professional institutions and experts) regulates counseling as a profession, those who operate within those structures and spheres of jurisdiction find themselves under their authority as well.³⁷

THEOLOGICAL DIVERGENCE

Since counseling is Christian ministry and Christian ministry requires one to be missional in the ways I have described herein, there is no room for secular structures of care to either inform or stifle the individual Christian counselor’s conscience. Every Christian should have the freedom to make

³⁵ For more on the limitations of professional licensing for mental health counselors during the nascent years of state licensing in the United States, see: Gross, “The Myth of Professional Licensing,” 1009-1016; Joseph K. Neumann, “A Theological Perspective on the Licensing of Helping Professionals,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* (vol. 17, no. 3, 1989), 252-262; Joseph K. Neumann, “Licensing of Health Care Professionals from a Biblical Perspective,” *Journal of Biblical Medical Ethics* (vol. 2, no. 2, 1988); Donald S. Arbuckle, “Counselor Licensure: To Be or Not to Be,” *Personnel and Guidance Journal* (vol. 55, no. 10, 1977), 581-585; Marguerite R. Carroll, Shirley Griggs, and Fredrica Halligan, “The Licensure Issue: How Real Is It?” *Personnel and Guidance Journal* (vol. 55, no. 10, 1977), 577-580; and Dean Porter, Mary Clare Gildon, and Susan Zgliczynski, “Is Licensure in Your Future?” *International Career Development Conference* (October 2000), 85-13.

³⁶ Neumann, “Licensing of Health Care Professionals from a Biblical Perspective,” n.p.

³⁷ Joe Boot, “The Cult of the Expert,” The Ezra Institute (April 25, 2020). <https://www.ezrainstitute.com/resource-library/articles/the-cult-of-the-expert/>; Abigail Shrier, *Bad Therapy: Why the Kids Aren’t Growing Up* (New York: Sentinel, 2024); and James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age without Good or Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

much of Christ and to frame their care of others in the Holy Scriptures. Any structure or context of counseling that keeps counselors from proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ to the glory of God through the work of the Holy Spirit by giving counselees Jesus first and often, is not a structure in which Christians should seek to participate.³⁸ In addition, what drives the ethics and goals of the Christian conscience is biblical doctrine. Doctrine must be expressed in the particulars and the particulars should inform practice. Ultimately, the Christian who counsels is beholden to God and judged by His standard as expressed in Scripture alone (cf. Hebrews 4:12-13).

There are several examples of theological fault lines that have formed within the BCM. These include the means of sanctification, the openness to integration regarding theory and method, among others. While I can't cover all of these in this essay, I do want to look at three points of divergence that directly relate to my thesis here. These include questions relating to authority, jurisdiction, and interpretation.

THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

When speaking of counselors serving as missionaries to and within the mental health field, Williams is primarily speaking about Christians providing counseling in professional, clinical, and occupational spaces as licensed counselors. Biblical counselors should not support the idea of pursuing state-endorsed licensure, just as the church should not defer its responsibility for soul care to the state, professional agencies, and the like.³⁹

³⁸ This is not to say that Christians cannot be a Gospel witness in these contexts, but to say that they would be doing so in spite of the mental health context. We should instead be pushing Christians to counsel within the context of the church. See, T. Dale Johnson, Jr., *The Church as a Culture of Care: Finding Hope in Biblical Community* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2021); and David Powlison, "Modern Therapies and the Church's Faith," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* (vol. 15, no. 1, Fall 1996), 32-41; David Powlison, "Counseling is the Church," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* (vol. 20, no. 2, Winter 2002), 2-7; and David Powlison and Heath Lambert, "Biblical Counseling in Local Churches and Parachurch Ministries," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* (vol. 33, no. 2, 2019), 7-37.

³⁹ There are examples, unfortunately, from biblical counselors and those who have worked adjacent to the biblical counseling movement that place greater value on the helpfulness that comes from utilizing mental illness paradigms and reduce biblical counselors to roles that merely "hold the water" for professional psychological counselors. See David Murray and Tom Karel, *The Christian's Guide to Mental Illness* (Nashville: Crossway, 2023); and Helen Thorne and

The reasons behind this are many, but I will focus on two. First, licensure is all about authority. When a Christian who seeks to counsel the whole counsel of God's Word (especially in the cultural milieu that we find ourselves in), but that Christian has the authority of the secular government over them, they will find themselves at odds with necessary God-ordained authorities (e.g., the church, Scripture, etc.) at one time or another. While the government is a good and God-ordained institution, its primary purpose is *not* the care of souls (which is the central concern of counseling). The church has been given that primary responsibility. This leads to an additional point that when secular careers in counseling are pursued, the actual and practical authority of the church is challenged or outright disregarded. Among other serious implications behind this is that when the work of counseling becomes divorced from pastoral and church oversight, the stigma that many Christians carry about sharing troubles with others in the family of God is maintained, and the tone, language, descriptions, and prescriptions provided by the counselor about their counselee and his/her problems take on an ever-encompassing secular viewpoint (this is the natural drift). Powlison noted that "Christians in mental health settings typically are far more profoundly socialized and enculturated than they realize."⁴⁰

THE QUESTION OF JURISDICTION

Obviously, since the early days of the BCM, the call from its leaders was a call back to the church. The Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF) which was founded by Jay Adams and helmed for many years by David Powlison, holds as its mandate the work of "restoring Christ to counseling and counseling to the church."⁴¹ This is more than a slogan. It represents a key tenet of biblical counseling. The fact that some self-identified biblical counselors actually support the notions Williams and others have advanced demonstrates

Steve Midgely, *Mental Health and Your Church* (The Good Book Company, 2023). For a critical analysis of Murray's book see, T. Dale Johnson Jr. and Samuel Stephens, "A Christian's Guide to Mental Illness," *Truth in Love Podcast* (Episode 464) <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/podcast-episodes/a-christians-guide-to-mental-illness/>.

⁴⁰ Powlison, "Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies)," 36.

⁴¹ This phrase has can be used and seen on imprints of CCEF branded materials as on their website for several years.

jurisdictional upheaval of the gravest kind. Jurisdictional theology refers to the study of God-ordained institutions and how each of these are designed to operate in and of themselves, and appropriate ways they are to interact with one another. Upheaval or jurisdictional overreach occurs, however, when one institution (e.g., human government) takes over responsibilities of another institution (e.g., church).⁴²

Those who have diverged from biblical counseling are generally favorable of Christians working within secular counseling contexts. Oftentimes they highlight the importance of cultural relevancy to validate their own counseling commitments. Thinking that real cultural impact can best occur from within the mental health counseling professions because that is where people are looking for help is not only their common refrain, but it reveals where their trust for this important work is found. A wise counselor once reminded me that I should be careful never to place the measure for success for ministry on the reactions or responses of people, but instead success is measured by my seeking to obey and please God. This is something that all biblical counselors should remember. If effectiveness is derived from secular credentialing, validation, or recognition, then it can't be grounded in other means. It is important to note that the mental health complex itself, both in content and context, is a committed *secular* institution. It is not a parachurch ministry. It is not committed to the mission, goals, and purposes of the church. Why then would we seek to achieve the ends of the Great Commission with means that run counter to those ends?

THE QUESTION OF INTERPRETATION

According to David Powlison, there are many Christians today operating in secular structures who “fail to recognize that they are working in a radioactive zone, and they absorb faulty diagnostic, explanatory, and treatment models without knowing that they have done so.”⁴³ These secular counseling

⁴² See Rob Rienow, *Limited Church, Unlimited Kingdom: Uniting Church and Family in the Great Commission* (Nashville: Randall House, 2013) and Edward T. Welch, “When Independent Counselors Do Pastoral Care,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* (Vol. 25, No. 2, Spring 2007), 55-60.

⁴³ Powlison, “Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies),” 36. Preceding this warning, Powlison states, “It is not necessarily wrong for Christians to work within the secular mental

structures promote the legitimacy of mental illness paradigms of explanation for emotional and behavioral problems. The DSM contains hundreds of psychiatric disorders and syndromes that do not represent medically verifiable diseases. On the contrary, they are collections and groupings of clinically observed symptoms arranged into particular categories that hold stigmatizing labels that remove, among other things, matters of personal identity, moral responsibility, and life purpose.⁴⁴

To his credit, Williams notes that psychotherapy is “desperately in need of redemption, not because their [secular therapists] insights and intentions are entirely wrong, but because they are fundamentally wrong about the most important things.”⁴⁵ Even Williams has to point out that there are major interpretive flaws in psychological counseling. The concept of *mental illness* itself is merely an interpretive construct that is chosen by secularists to represent and explain of problems people face in a closed system that has no place for God. Only by deriving our interpretations of problems from the Bible and using biblical terminology leads people to correctly understanding their identity and the nature of their problems. The Bible is clear, the heart of man is active and entails the will, emotions, and thoughts of a person.⁴⁶ Being made in God’s image, but under the effects of original sin means that oftentimes our desires, perceptions, and allegiances are “disordered,” meaning

health system, if they can do so without being forced to communicate false ideas, diagnostically and prescriptively, to those they counsel . . . But Christians in such settings must realize that when they are barred from mentioning sin and Christ . . . they are limited to being relatively superficial and moralistic in the context of their counsel.” Redemptive Counselors / Clinically Informed Biblical Counselors state that they desire to be evangelistic in their counseling in cases where clients are open to hearing the good news of Jesus Christ. However, if their clients are not open to the gospel, these counselors are “willing to use the more limited techniques afforded by clinical counseling” and believe that “these techniques are always guided by the truth found in Scripture and employed to affect the greatest amount of good possible for the sake of the individual and society, especially in secular clinical settings” (9). Unfortunately, these counselors do not heed Powlison’s prophetic warning. The only “good” that such counselors can provide in these contexts is one that is foreign to Scripture. Take note that this is the best-case scenario for many well-intentioned Christians operating in a context that is not merely indifferent to the Gospel, it is hostile towards it. Any counsel that does not explicitly make use of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is anything but Christian (cf. 2 Timothy 4:3-5).

⁴⁴ Stephens, *The Deception of Psychological Labels*, 8.

⁴⁵ Williams, “Counselors as Missionaries,” 31.

⁴⁶ For good examples for a biblical theology of the heart (inner man) see, A. Craig Troxel, *With All Your Heart: Orienting Your Mind, Desires, and Will toward Christ* (Nashville: Crossway, 2020) and Jeremy Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2016).

they are oriented on self-interest instead of the love and worship of God. Can people experience change and freedom from problems? Yes and No. Real and lasting change is only sustained and upheld by the work of the Holy Spirit and predicated upon salvation (renewed heart/mind) along with a willingness to repent and obey the Scriptures (revealing a spirit of submission and discipleship to God).⁴⁷ However, even in this, none of us are promised problem-free lives. The reality of our fallenness remains.

THE NEED FOR BIBLICAL COMMITMENTS TO CARE AND COUNSELING

If you think that the concerns I have laid out are overblown, I can point out that the development of 20th Century evangelical psychotherapy essentially parallels what is advocated for from within contemporary BCM to disastrous results. Christian mission does not need, nor has it ever needed, to wed itself to paradigms, theories, or structures of care that are antithetical or foreign to the gospel. It is incumbent upon biblical counselors to continue upholding key tenets of biblical counseling practice in order to see this work continue to thrive within the life of the church and committed to the sufficiency of Scripture for the care of souls. While I can't cover all of these in one essay, I will provide a few points that do represent alternatives to what is promoted by those who endorse the mental health counseling complex.

One point I have already made throughout this essay is that the church alone is responsible for soul care. While biblical counseling can occur whenever and wherever Christians are ministering the Word to one another, it is only through the context of the local church where Christian worship and mission meet discipleship. The body of Christ centers on all matters concerning salvation and sanctification, and these are all the matters that concern counseling. How we view Scripture will determine our theology, which in turn will influence our ministry. The mental health complex has no place for Christian theology in the active care of souls. The liturgy of the secular counseling professions marginalizes Scripture at best, and at worst, completely ignores it as God's special revelation of hope to man.

⁴⁷ Samuel Stephens, *Hope for Lasting Change: Meeting Today's Problems with the Eternal Power of the Gospel* (Kansas City: Truth in Love, 2021).

The Christian church affirms that Scripture is authoritative because it is from God and provides the metaphysical backdrop for all aspects of philosophy and theology. It alone makes life make sense. Because it is authoritative, it is also sufficient and should be where we go to find out how to truly help people with their problems in living. Biblical counselors in themselves are wholly insufficient to effect change in the lives of our counselees. Instead, we depend upon the necessary and supernatural work of the Holy Spirit as He works within contexts of intensive discipleship leading to progressive sanctification. Lastly, we turn to Jesus Christ is the standard for right and fruitful human living. This final point is one of the most important missing pieces within modern psychological thinking. In our culture, therapists direct their clients to self-love, self-esteem, self-satisfaction, and self-rule as answers to what ail them. But God granted the church to His children as the ultimate structure of help and hope as its members work together to join in on the individual journey and corporate project of conformity to Christ.

CONCLUSION

I affirm that Christians who counsel should be missional. However, the nature of Christian mission and Christian counsel mandates that we maintain the integrity of our conscience within structures that has God has ordained and provided for counsel. We cannot operate faithfully within structures of care that are fundamentally at odds with biblical worldview. Such structures for operation only serve to challenge and dilute the power and authority of the Scriptures for life and godly living. Instead, we should once again, as a movement, double-down on our commitment and faith in the work of God through the Word of God in the church of God.

Among the many insightful things that Jay left for us who follow in his footsteps, was a helpful perspective about the reality of dueling wisdoms (what he termed divine counsel versus devilish counsel). In the first two chapters of *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, Jay establishes the necessity for biblical theology in counseling. He noted that in order for the discerning counselor to avoid error, or worse falling into the snare of fascination with worldly (or devilish) wisdom, he must be a careful student of the Bible. He

noted that Satan, the great deceiver, was a master at confusing what was made clear by God and taking what was unclear and raising that to undeniable truth. Relating this to the state of counseling in his own day, Adams noted that many Christians had become captivated by philosophies which denied the sufficiency of God's Word. He stated:

Now, at such turning points it is not unusual to discover Christians who unwittingly continue to side with the enemy, and who fight against their brothers when they try to defend and promote the cause of God's truth in counseling. Frequently this results from good motives, wrongly directed. Yet, their influence is tragic. They not only set back helpful counsel, but confuse many who are in transition. Still it is not the persons, as persons, whom we must challenge, but their teachings.⁴⁸

Fast forward several decades, and what he has written here is as applicable as ever. The doctrine of Scripture's perspicuity is one that should be held high for all believers, and especially those of us who counsel. When we face high-sounding arguments that would tempt us to make use of a wisdom that finds its genesis in fallible man, we should exercise caution. First Corinthians 1:18-31 is a key text that I go to often to demonstrate just how contrasting these two wisdoms are:

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE." Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks,

⁴⁸ Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 7.

Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, “LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD.”

What is striking about this contrast, is that nowhere does Paul suggest that the two can co-exist, much less that they both accomplish the same goals. In every way, they are different. Only in one, God's wisdom, will the sinner be saved and the believer be blessed.

THE TRAUMA-INFORMED MIND: EMDR and the Rise of Scientism

Ryan Thomas¹

INTRODUCTION

Counseling victims who have painful, traumatic memories can often be overwhelming, leaving the counselor to question the best kind of care they can offer. In these moments of crisis, the counselor has a choice to either hold fast to the Word of God or attempt various man-centered therapies in the care of souls. Today, a third group of counselors exists, seeking to integrate the Word of God with secular psychological findings to provide the best of both worlds, especially integrating what is considered “scientifically based evidence” or “scientifically factual.” This paper is an evaluation of one such utilized therapy. Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)² is a popular evidence-based psychotherapy utilized by some Christian counselors³ to desensitize traumatic memories via voluntary bilateral eye movements. Yet, along with having no scientific consensus to prove that eye movements are directly linked to memory reconsolidation, biblical counselors should reject adapting EMDR into their counseling methodology because it is contradictory to the goals of biblical counseling. Instead, they should utilize teaching God’s Word, submitting to God’s method of change, and incorporating God’s Church to help those who are suffering from painful memories to rely upon

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² Francine Shapiro, *Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR): Basic Principles, Protocols, and Procedures*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 2018), Kindle.

³ See minutes 4:31-35 and 14:00. Jeremy Lelek and Eliza Huie, “What is EMDR Therapy - With Author & Biblical Counselor Eliza Huie,” Speak the Truth, May 25, 2020, <https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/speak-the-truth/ep-59-what-is-emdr-therapy-Y5L39voKUyA/>. Both Jeremy Lelek and Eliza Huie utilize this therapy in their practices.

and trust in Christ’s healing power. This article will first define pertinent terms and then briefly provide an overview of EMDR’s methodology and epistemology. This will be followed by a survey of the various explanations of eye movement mechanisms that have emerged in the psychiatric world. The aim is to demonstrate the lack of consensus within the scientific community and the rise of scientism regarding EMDR in the counseling world. Finally, this article will discuss what is being assumed and adopted by those who accept EMDR under the guise of common grace, and then a retort will be given by advocating for using God’s sufficient words, methods, and church over EMDR in biblical counseling methodology.

DEFINING TERMS

Before moving forward with arguing for and defending the thesis of this article, it is important to define certain terms that will be used throughout to provide clarity for the readere. Since EMDR is classified as an evidence-based therapy in treating post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that is utilized to desensitize traumatic memories, clarifying the meaning of both “evidence-based” and “trauma” is important to furthering the argument.⁴ The working definition of being evidence-based is “the integration of the best available research with clinical expertise in the context of patient characteristics, culture, and preferences.”⁵ In conjunction with this definition, trauma is defined as “an event, series of events, or a set of circumstances an individual experiences as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening, which may have lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being.”⁶ Lastly, scientism is defined as “an

⁴Mark C. Russell, and Francine Shapiro, *Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy, Theories of Psychotherapy Series*, ed. Matt Englar-Carlson (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2022), 5, Kindle Pages 5-7 list out the major organizations it is recommended for the treatment of PTSD. It is also adapted for use in treating other disorders.

⁵ American Psychological Association, “Evidence-Based Practice in Psychology,” APA.org, 2008, <https://www.apa.org/practice/resources/evidence#:~:text=Evidence%2Dbased%20practice%20is%20the,at%20their%20August%202005%20meeting>. For EMDR’s classification as an evidence-based treatment, see Francine Shapiro, and Margot Silk Forrest, *EMDR: The Breakthrough Therapy for Overcoming Anxiety, Stress, and Trauma*, New York, NY: Basic Books, 2016, 275-76. Kindle.

⁶ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), *Practical Guide for Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach*, Rockville, MD: National Mental Health and Substance

exaggerated trust in the efficacy of the methods of natural science applied to all areas of investigation.”⁷

THE INCEPTION OF THE PROBLEM

One example of biblical counselors deviating from traditionally held

Abuse Policy Laboratory, 2023, VII. See also Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), SAMHSA’s *Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach*, Rockville MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014, 7-9. Shapiro states this about trauma: “These may include intrusive images; negative thoughts or beliefs the client has about herself or her role in the rape; negative emotions such as fear, guilt, or shame and their associated body sensations; and, conversely, the precise way the client would prefer to think about herself instead.” Shapiro: *EMDR*, 2. “Although the adverse events may not breed the intrusive imagery of PTSD, the emotions, beliefs, and physical sensations arise in the body and mind, coloring present perceptions and leading to unhappiness and inappropriate behaviors in the present. In simple terms, the past is present. It therefore does not matter whether it is a “big T” traumatic event that precipitates PTSD or the more ubiquitous “small t” events that are rampant throughout childhood. There is a long-lasting negative effect on self and psyche. By dictionary definition it is a “trauma” and, in information-processing terms, it is posited to be dysfunctionally stored as an emotional/episodic memory, in a form that prevents it from subsequently evolving into a usable integrated/semantic memory.” See Shapiro, *EMDR*, 4. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is defined as “a mental health condition triggered by a traumatic event—either experiencing it or witnessing it in person. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares, and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event.” SAMHSA, *Practical Guide for Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach*, VII. Psychotherapy is defined as “any psychological service provided by a trained professional that primarily uses forms of communication and interaction to assess, diagnose, and treat dysfunctional emotional reactions, ways of thinking, and behavior patterns.”, The American Psychological Association, “Psychotherapy,” *APA Dictionary of Psychology* (11/15/2023), https://dictionary.apa.org/psychotherapy?gl=1*1uep704*_ga*Mjc3MjUxMDQ0LjE2NjY3MjAyMTA.*_ga_SZXLGDJGNB*MTY5MTU5NDAyOS41Ny4wLjE2OTE1OTQwMjkuMC4wLjA.&_ga=2.225164890.1711128830.1691594030-277251044.1666720210. It is also described as carried out by psychiatrists and psychotherapists and is derived from Freud’s psychoanalysis. However, it is also described as referring to all psychological treatments. See Richard Gross, *Psychology: The Science of Mind and Behavior*, 8th ed., (London, England: Hodder Education, 2020), 6, 774. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=nlebk&AN=2550075&site=eds-live>.

⁷ Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2024), s.v. “scientism.” “Scientism is qualified by the recognition that many of the events that require explanation are not simple physical or physiological processes, but complex phenomena that can be explained only by taking into account the cultural significance they undoubtedly possess, such as “the meanings of words,” “the morals of a story,” “the significance of gestures and facial expressions,” “the challenges and obligations and social opportunities,” and “all the intricacies that make up a functioning culture.” See John Kekes, *The Nature of Philosophical Problems: Their Causes and Implications* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2014), 137, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198712756.001.0001>.

positions regarding the adaptation of secular psychologies with Scripture was Eliza Huie's podcast interview in 2020 explaining what EMDR is and why it is acceptable for biblical counselors to use.⁸ In the podcast, she introduced EMDR as "good neuroscience." She described the mechanism of EMDR's eye movements as based upon rapid eye movement (REM), and since it has helped so many people, it must be beneficial for biblical counselors.⁹ Since then, a debate has ensued as to whether or not EMDR is an acceptable practice for biblical counselors to use based on the "scientific fact" of eye movement within EMDR being able to help sufferers.¹⁰ Within the Christian counseling domain, EMDR is a commonly accepted practice and is utilized by many regardless of the scientific nature of it.¹¹ Therefore, a decision has to be made. Do biblical counselors reject "legitimate science" and use the Bible only?¹²

There are misconceptions that biblical counselors are against using science or scientific facts in counseling.¹³ Even within the biblical counseling

⁸ Lelek and Huie, "What is EMDR Therapy?" Eliza Huie is a self-proclaimed biblical counselor who serves as the director of counseling for McLean Bible Church. She is certified through the Christian Counseling Education Foundation (CCEF) and is a licensed clinical counselor specializing in trauma and EMDR. More biographical information may be found at <https://www.elizahuie.com/about>.

⁹ See Lelek and Huie, "What is EMDR Therapy?" Minutes 8:40-10:45.

¹⁰ In the podcast, Jeremy Lelek states that a therapist at his clinic, Metroplex Counseling, practices EMDR. <https://www.metroplexcounseling.com/wellness-team/>. See Lelek and Huie, "What is EMDR Therapy?" minute 7:53. Jeremy Lelek is the president and founder of the Association of Biblical Counselors (ABC). While the acceptance of EMDR is not currently stated within their doctrine or core beliefs, seeing that their president and influential member (Eliza Huie) both utilize it in counseling, it is safe to assume that ABC accepts the integration of EMDR into counseling.

¹¹ The American Association of Christian Counselors endorses the use of EMDR: <https://aacc.net/2023/02/27/can-christian-clients-benefit-from-emdr-therapy/>. Focus on the Family ministries advocate for EMDR at <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/family-qa/eye-movement-desensitization-and-reprocessing-emdr/>. There is also a Christian EMDR therapist website at <https://christianemdrtherapists.com>. All of this is to show that EMDR is a commonly accepted therapy in the treatment of trauma and PTSD.

¹² For the sake of clarity for this paper, Christian counselors are defined as counselors who utilize both the Bible and secular psychological findings within their counseling methodology. Another term for this could be "integrationists." Biblical counselors do not utilize secular psychological findings within their counseling methodology. Instead, the Bible alone is used in counseling others through problems.

¹³ While the authors of these blogs do not outright state that biblical counselors are "anti-science," they emphasize that Christian and clinical counselors utilize evidence-based practices and biblical counselors do not. See Rachel Miley, "The Difference Between Biblical Counseling & Christian Counseling," Crossroads Professional Counseling, July 9, 2020,

movement, there is a debate about what may be integrated into the counseling methodology based upon the utilization of God's common grace.¹⁴ Before those questions are settled, how does the secular psychiatry world think about the eye movement mechanism in EMDR, and is it considered a settled scientific fact by psychologists and therapists? These questions must first be addressed before answering whether biblical counselors can accept EMDR as scientifically valid and thus integrate it into their counseling methodology.

EMDR OVERVIEW

EMDR debuted in the psychological world in 1987 after the founder, Francine Shapiro, made a "chance observation" while walking in a park and thinking about painful memories. She moved her eyes back and forth and found that the more she did that while thinking about the memory, the negative intrusions decreased.¹⁵ At that point, she first tried out her technique on colleagues, and then the first controlled study was done on Vietnam veterans, and her therapeutic process began to be formulated.¹⁶ Since then, it has developed into an eight-phase therapeutic process that targets disturbing memories, negative images, negative emotions, and negative beliefs to "(1) help the client learn from the negative experiences of the past, (2) desensitize present triggers that are inappropriately distressing, and (3) incorporate templates for appropriate future action that allow the client to excel individually and

<https://crossroadcounselor.com/christian-living/christian-counselor/>. See also Joel Michael Herbert's blog at <https://joelherbert.medium.com/biblical-counseling-is-not-counseling-6d1f4857546d>. Sheila Wray Georgie, "4 Concerns with Biblical Counseling: And Why Integrated Christian counseling is the Best," Bare Marriage Blog, <https://baremarriage.com/2022/04/4-concerns-i-have-with-biblical-counseling/>.

¹⁴ See Nate Brooks, "Everybody Integrates: Biblical Counseling and the Use of Extrabiblical Material," *The Southeastern Theological Review* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2024): 7-20. See also this blog by Robert Kellemen: <https://rpmm ministries.org/2023/11/a-highly-recommended-journal-of-biblical-counseling-article-on-common-grace-deep-breathing-and-biblical-counseling/>. A discussion on common grace will be addressed later.

¹⁵ Shapiro, *EMDR*, 6-7. Francine Shapiro is the founder of EMDR therapy and was a California licensed psychologist before her passing. She received her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from the Professional School of Psychological Studies and was the executive director of the EMDR Institute. More information regarding her published works, as well as awards, may be found at: <https://www.emdr.com/francine-shapiro-ph-d/>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7-10.

within her interpersonal system.”¹⁷ The EMDR process is epistemologically rooted in an eclectic conglomeration of various psychodynamic practices and beliefs that each provide a unique flavor to the therapy.¹⁸ The eight phases of EMDR therapy employ these beliefs throughout to provide treatment so that the client’s previously disruptive memory would become adaptive and non-distressing.¹⁹

Phases one through three involve client history intake and evaluation for establishing a treatment plan, preparing the client for the therapy process by coaching them through various affect-regulating practices for managing disturbances in therapy, helping the client rate their current distress level along the Subjective Units of Distress (SUD) scale, and determining the validity of positive cognitions along the Validity of Cognitions (VoC) Scale.²⁰ This article will discuss phases four and five because both phases utilize eye movements and bilateral stimulation to first desensitize disturbing/intrusive memories and then replace them with positive self-created cognitions with the goal of raising the “client’s sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem.”²¹ It is proposed that within both of these phases, eye movements (and later bilateral stimulation) are the key to desensitizing and replacing (putting off and putting on) traumatic memories with new self-derived “truths” to help the client feel better.²² Phases six, seven, and eight involve the client scanning their body for

¹⁷ Shapiro, *EMDR*, 2.

¹⁸ Ibid., 3. The eclectic nature that follows demonstrates where beliefs and convictions fall. “The importance of early childhood memories clearly fits into the psychodynamic model, and the importance of focused attention to current dysfunctional reactions and behaviors is completely consistent with the conditioning and generalization paradigms of classical behaviorism. In addition to being a client-centered approach with a strong affective and experiential basis, EMDR therapy addresses the concept of positive and negative self-assessments, which has firm roots in the field of cognitive therapy and the emphasis on the physical responses related to a client’s presenting dysfunction is an important element in its full therapeutic utilization.” Shapiro, *EMDR*, 19.

¹⁹ Ibid., 2.

²⁰ Ibid., 65-67; 85-134.

²¹ Ibid., 68-69, 141-53. The bilateral stimulation, along with holding the painful memory in their mind, is repeated until the SUD score is reported to be 0. At that point, the installation phase begins and will continue with the new belief being held in the mind along with bilateral stimulation until the client self-reports a seven on the Validity of Cognition (VOC) scale. The rating is based upon how the client feels, not whether or not the statement is objectively true. “It is crucial that the client choose the positive cognition that is most meaningful for her.” Shapiro, *EMDR*, 152.

²² Russell and Shapiro, *Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy*, 85-87.

how they feel, and if better, then the therapist brings the session to a close.²³

THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF EYE MOVEMENT

Understanding how EMDR determines the nature of man's problem will provide clarity as to why this cure is being offered. The Adaptive Information Processing (AIP) model is the driving hypothetical mechanism of healing in EMDR that Shapiro developed to explain the clinical results.²⁴ It is the theoretical body's natural information processing system. When the AIP mechanism works properly, the various components metabolize new information to be integrated into existing memory networks and appropriate emotions for future guidance.²⁵ When trauma happens, as defined above, fluctuations in cortisol, adrenaline, and other neurotransmitters bring about dysregulation and dysfunction within the limbic system and prefrontal cortex.²⁶ The traumatic stress will then inhibit the functioning of the prefrontal cortex, whereas the limbic system facilitates the memory forward.²⁷ However, according to Shapiro's AIP model, it is never resolved and thus becomes maladaptively stored in the brain.²⁸ The understanding of the nature of traumatic memories becomes evident here as Shapiro relies upon Bessel van der Kolk to provide an explanation and support for how traumatic memories elicit physical responses.²⁹ Shapiro hypothesizes that as memories are stored in

²³ Shapiro, *EMDR*, 70-71, 154-60. A fuller critique of Shapiro's work can be read at Ryan Thomas, "Choose This Day Whom You Will Serve: EMDR and Biblical Man," a paper submitted for DR31280 The Bible and Pastoral Care, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, August 20, 2023.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 26. See also Margaret Duval Hill, "Adaptive Information Processing Theory: Origins, Principles, Applications, and Evidence," *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work* 17, no. 3 (2020): 317-20. Roger M. Solomon, and Francine Shapiro, "EMDR and the Adaptive Information Processing Model," *Journal of EMDR Practice and Research* 2, no. 4 (2008): 315-16.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 26. Here, Shapiro states that adrenaline, cortisol, and other neurotransmitters are involved, yet she does not name which neurotransmitters. Instead, she cites three studies in support. See Gerald D. Griffin, Dominique Charron, and Rheem Al-Daccak, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: Revisiting Adrenergics, Glucocorticoids, Immune System Effects, and Homeostasis," *Clinical and Translational Immunology* 3, no. 27 (2014):1-7. It is accepted that in trauma, as well as fight or flight, neurochemicals are involved.

²⁷ Hill, "Adaptive Information Processing Theory," 321.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Shapiro cites *The Body Keeps the Score* and various other studies by Bessel van der Kolk. Shapiro, *EMDR*, 17, 19. She relies heavily on him in other notable works such as, Francine Shapiro,

a distressed state in the brain, the result will be negative behavioral, emotional, and cognitive reactions as this memory or adjacent parallel memories are accessed.³⁰ Shapiro states, “Attitudes, emotions, and sensations are not considered simple reactions to a past event; they are seen as manifestations of the physiologically stored perceptions stored in memory and the reactions to them.”³¹ Therefore, according to Shapiro, the emotions, physical fight or flight bodily reactions, and painful memories that image bearers display as a result of suffering in a fallen world are nothing more than dysfunctionally processed and storied memories in the cortex.³²

EMDR advocates maintain that since the impact of traumatic stress is understood to be biologically-rooted, dysfunctionally-stored memories, the proposed treatment is to “recalibrate” the problem. Shapiro hypothesizes that bilateral stimuli (eye movements, tapping, auditory cues) initiate the AIP self-healing process; however, she is unable to substantiate the evidence

Getting Past Your Past: Take Control of Your Life With Self-Help Techniques from EMDR Therapy, New York, NY: Rodale Publishers, 2012. Kindle. In developing her theory of embodied trauma, this resource is used: Bessel van der Kolk, “The Body Keeps the Score: Memory and the Evolving Psychobiology of Post Traumatic Stress,” *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* (January 1994): 1-21. Shapiro states: “Traditional psychotherapy has been time-bound in the sense that its effects occur only after a protracted period of time. Conventional therapy uses verbal (rather than physiologically based) procedures to shift information that is dysfunctionally locked in the brain (see also van der Kolk, 2002, 2014). In the AIP model the healing of psychological dysfunction is viewed as being comparatively “time-free,” because rapid treatment effects can be observed when EMDR processing is initiated, regardless of the number of disturbing events and no matter how long ago they occurred.” Shapiro references van der Kolk’s work here to imply how trauma is stored biologically, and since that is the case, a solution that addresses the biological nature of trauma is needed. Shapiro, *EMDR*, 45. There will be a further discussion on Van der Kolk’s influence on EMDR below.

³⁰ Solomon and Shapiro, “EMDR and the Adaptive Information Processing Model,” 316. See also Shapiro, *EMDR*, 26.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² An important note is made here by Shapiro, “It is particularly important to underscore that the efficacy of EMDR therapy is independent of the validity of the model being proposed. This is relevant because the physiology of the brain is not yet sufficiently understood to confirm the validity of this or any other psychotherapy model at that level. However, the model does not appear to contradict anything known to be true, is consonant with the current knowledge in cognitive neuroscience, is congruent with the observed treatment effects of EMDR therapy, and serves as a clinical road map for treating a wide range of pathologies.” Shapiro, *EMDR*, 26. Shapiro does not necessarily care how her proposed mechanism helps or harms. Instead, efficacy triumphs due to the brain’s complexity. This is alarming as many counselors utilize this therapy without understanding the iatrogenic effects of EMDR. Also, Shapiro’s “truth” is atheistic in nature, which she is pushing to be adapted into other treatments.

by which this happens.³³ Shapiro states that the body will naturally default towards self-healing once activated.³⁴ At the inception, Shapiro claimed that eye movements were the crucial component to the efficacy of the therapy and the jumpstart to AIP functioning, but after others' research into alternative bilateral stimulations affected the therapeutic process, she changed her hypothesis to include both.³⁵ Therefore, the next questions to be considered are: what is the proposed mechanism of actions for the eye movements that jumpstart an innate healing process, and is this scientifically factual or conjecture? The following sections will evaluate the REM sleep hypothesis, Working Memory, Orienting Response, and Interhemispheric Interaction mechanisms to provide a factual basis for evaluating EMDR's claims.

REM SLEEP MECHANISM

When Shapiro first developed EMDR, she hypothesized that rhythmic eye movements reduced distressing emotions connected to traumatic memories because they seemed to function like rapid eye movements (REM) in sleep. Therefore, to jumpstart the AIP process and heal the dysregulated memory, bilateral eye movements would be used for reprocessing.³⁶ This initial hypothesis was later picked up and developed further by Robert Stickgold as he sought to prove that the physiological state of mind in REM sleep supports memory integration that is necessary for distressing memory recovery. Stickgold maintains that if this is the case, “it is not unreasonable to conclude

³³ Shapiro provides three possible proposals: “1. Deconditioning caused by relaxation response, 2. A shift in brain state, enhancing the activation and strengthening of weak associations, and 3. Other factors involved in the client’s dual focus of attention as he simultaneously attends to the present stimuli of the past trauma.” Shapiro, *EMDR*, 27.

³⁴ Ibid. The reader should note the humanistic understanding of the nature of healing in EMDR.

³⁵ Francine Shapiro, “Efficacy of the Eye Movement Desensitization Procedure in the Treatment of Traumatic Memories,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 2, no. 1 (1989): 220. She states, “It would therefore appear, congruent with the author’s personal experience, that the crucial component of the EMDR procedure is the repeated eye movements while the memory is maintained in awareness. If so, it is of interest to speculate how eye movements might produce these results.” See also Ramon Landin-Romero et al. “How Does Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy Work? A Systematic Review on Suggested Mechanisms of Action,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 9, (August 2018): 3. See also Landin-Romero et al., “How Does Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy Work,” 3.

³⁶ Landin-Romero, “How Does Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy Work,” 15. Shapiro, *EMDR*, 27, 29, 73, 373. Shapiro, *EMDR*, 373.

that interventions which shift the brain toward this state likewise would be beneficial.”³⁷ Stickgold went so far as to hypothesize that the rhythmic saccadic eye movements produced an orienting response in clients and thus induced a “REM-like state” by which memories may be processed and desensitized.³⁸ This claim is made without direct peer-reviewed scientific or medical support, but instead, multiple studies are used to perform scientific gymnastics to prove his hypothesis.³⁹

REM sleep contains several biological processes, and a discussion of them all is beyond the scope of this paper. However, one process that concerns the subject of this paper is the bursts of eye movements during this brain state, which are random and unpredictable.⁴⁰ Eye twitches, brain activity, and dreaming all occur during the REM sleep phase, and the main function regarding memory seems to be consolidation rather than sorting out or through memories. Still, there is no record of involuntary eye movements being involved in the process of memory consolidation.⁴¹ The functions associated with these processes may be inhibited if that person is deprived of REM sleep.⁴² However, the question remains: do saccadic eye movements

³⁷ Robert Stickgold is a psychiatrist and professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. Stickgold primarily focuses on studying the role of sleep in memory processing. Robert Stickgold, “EMDR: A Putative Neurobiological Mechanism of Action,” *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 58, no. 1 (2002): 70.

³⁸ Ibid., 71. Stickgold states, “Activation of these systems simultaneously shifts the brain into a memory processing mode similar to that of REM sleep. This REM-like state permits the integration of traumatic memories into associative cortical networks without interference from hippocampally mediated episodic recall.” The reader should remember, this is not being stated as factual science, but theory.

³⁹ Ibid. “Thus it seems reasonable to suggest that having a subject repetitively reorient her attention from one location to another could produce shifts in regional brain activation and neuromodulation similar to those produced during REM sleep.” The reader should note the subjective nature of this quote.

⁴⁰ The author could find no scientific textbooks that noted that eye movements are predictable. See Julie M. Hereford, *Sleep and Rehabilitation: A Guide for Health Professionals* (Thorofare, NJ: Slack Incorporated, 2014), 39, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mbts-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4396507>. Hereford states, “REM sleep involves a state of sleep in which there are binocularly synchronous rapid movements of the eye.” Page 5.

⁴¹ Alan Baddeley, *Essentials of Human Memory: Classic Edition* (New York, NY: Psychology Press, 2014), 110-11.

⁴² “The generally accepted current view is that sleep helps the process of consolidation of the memory trace, whereby its representation within the brain becomes more robustly established.” Alan Baddeley, Michael W. Eysenck, and Michael C. Anderson, *Memory*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 137-40. Kindle. See also Jan Born, Bjorn Rasch, and Steffen Gais, “Sleep

(i.e., rapid, jerky) in EMDR induce a “REM-like state” by which memories may be reprocessed and consolidated? Currently, this hypothesis is merely that—a hypothesis—as there is a lack of studies that directly test this REM hypothesis.⁴³ Stickgold argues that “most proposed mechanisms of action of EMDR hypothesize that the bilateral stimulation results in an altered brain/mind state in which trauma processing is enhanced,” and these eye movements trigger “global changes in the brain/mind state, which are in turn responsible for the treatment benefits.”⁴⁴ In the end, utilizing eye movements to induce the reduction of vividness and intensity of memory is largely mysterious, and this hypothesis remains in the minority among scientists today.⁴⁵

WORKING MEMORY THEORY

The working memory theory is the most popular among the proposed EMDR eye movement mechanisms and is thought to be the most likely.⁴⁶ This theory is derived from the working memory model proposed by Dr. Alan Baddeley.⁴⁷ The premise of Dr. Baddeley’s theory is that the working memory function of the brain has four critical components, each limited in

to Remember,” *The Neuroscientist* 12, no. 5 (2006): 410-24.

⁴³ Landin-Romero, “How Does Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy Work,” 15. Numerous theories seek to explain what the eye movement’s roles are in-memory processing, but as Landin-Romero states, “these theories remain to be tested empirically.” The authors note that none are available.

⁴⁴ Robert Stickgold, “Sleep-Dependent Memory Processing and EMDR Action,” *Journal of EMDR Practice and Research* 2, no. 4 (2008): 296.

⁴⁵ The REM eye movement mechanism is only mentioned in passing in this following journal article that lists multiple mechanisms of action. See Olivia G. Calancie, et. al, “Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing as a Treatment for PTSD: Current Neurobiological Theories and a New Hypothesis,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1426 (2018): 132.

⁴⁶ Carter, Clare, and Derek Farrell, “A Systematic Review Exploring the Role of Eye Movements in EMDR Therapy From a Working Memory Perspective,” *EMDR Therapy Quarterly*, (Spring 2023): 3. <https://etq.emdrassociation.org.uk/2023/05/10/a-systematic-review-exploring-the-role-of-eye-movements-in-emdr-therapy-from-a-working-memory-perspective/>. See also Calancie, et. al, “Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing as a Treatment for PTSD,” 128-30.

⁴⁷ Alan Baddeley, Michael W. Eysenck, and Michael C. Anderson, *Memory*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 73-87. Kindle.; Baddeley, *Essentials of Human Memory*, 42-64. Dr. Alan Baddeley is a British psychologist and a professor of psychology at the University of York who has devoted his career to the study of memory and neuropsychology and is famous for his research into working memory. He received his doctorate from the University of Cambridge. Shapiro, *EMDR*, 357, 370.

capacity. These components are the central executive, phonological loop, visuospatial sketchpad, and episodic buffer.⁴⁸ The domain of primary concern regarding EMDR is the visuospatial sketchpad. This is “responsible for the temporary maintenance of visual and spatial information” for “maintaining and manipulating visual images.”⁴⁹ The primary task deteriorates when multiple tasks engage a working memory domain.⁵⁰ When applied to EMDR, the theory is that when the traumatic memory is recalled within the visuospatial sketchpad, eye movements (a visuospatial task) then utilize more of the working memory capacity, and the negative feelings associated with that memory deteriorate, and it becomes less vivid and intrusive.⁵¹ Eye movements are primarily used as they have shown the most impact on desensitizing emotions connected to memory, but other bilateral stimulations may also have an impact.⁵² As the memory is reconsolidated, it is integrated into normal long-term storage with less intrusion.⁵³

⁴⁸ Baddeley, Eysenck, and Anderson, *Memory*, 74-84. The Central Executive “is assumed to be a limited-capacity attentional system that controls the phonological loop and sketch pad and relates them to long-term memory. The executive is almost certainly considerably more complex than either of the two slave systems, which make it considerably harder to investigate.” Baddeley, *Essentials of Human Memory*, 62. This working memory domain functions more like the central control at an airport, which directs traffic. The Phonological Loop functions as a form of verbal short-term memory. It serves as one of the slave systems to the central executive, encoding speech and sound for the memory system. This domain is hypothesized to facilitate language learning. Baddeley, *Essentials of Human Memory*, 46. Baddeley, Eysenck, and Anderson, *Memory*, 74. The episodic buffer “assumes a multidimensional code, allowing the various subcomponents of working memory to interact with long-term memory.” Baddeley, Eysenck, and Anderson, *Memory*, 86. This component was developed later to explain how working memory interacts with long-term memory.

⁴⁹ Baddeley, *Essentials of Human Memory*, 64. Baddeley, Eysenck, and Anderson, *Memory*, 73. Baddeley states “Our own approach is to suggest that spatial information is probably stored in some abstract code in long-term memory, but that one method of displaying and manipulating such information is via a spatial slave system.”

⁵⁰ Shapiro, *EMDR*, 369.

⁵¹ Ibid. See also Jongh, “State of the Science,” 4. “Research on the working memory hypothesis has consistently demonstrated that performance is degraded when participants engage in two simultaneous tasks that require the same working memory resources, suggesting that the EM’s in EMDR impairs the ability to hold a visual image in conscious awareness, resulting in the degradation of its vividness.” Landin-Romero, et al., “How Does Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy Work?” 5-14.

⁵² Calancie, et. al, “Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing as a Treatment for PTSD,” 129.

⁵³ Jongh, “State of the Science,” 4. There is no absolute scientific or medical consensus on memory reconsolidation. For a fuller discussion, see Josue Haubrich, and Karim Nader, “Memory Reconsolidation,” *Current Topics in Behavioral Neuroscience* 37 (November 2016): 1-26.

One observation that has propelled this hypothesis to the forefront is that taxing working memory through rapid eye movements consistently reduces the “vividness and emotionality” of memories across multiple studies.⁵⁴ Helping clients “feel better” or dulling the emotionality of memory has been the primary catapult for accepting this hypothesis. So much so, EMDR 2.0 has been proposed as the next phase in the evolution of this therapy.⁵⁵ This is to make “EMDR therapy [appear to be] more effective and efficient.”⁵⁶ Shapiro herself was not fully convinced that this hypothesis fully explained the mechanism of EMDR as she stated, “Despite occasional failures to support

⁵⁴ Ibid., 4-5. From a neurobiological point of view, taxing working memory has been shown to suppress the activity of the amygdala. The amygdala acts as the “alarm” of the brain and is central to the storage and reconsolidation of memories. Eye movements and other bilateral stimulations that tax the working memory “can cause a weakening and desensitizing effect on emotionally laden memories.” Jongh, “State of the Science,” 5.

⁵⁵ Suzy J.M.A. Matthijsen et al., “The Effect of EMDR versus EMDR 2.0 on Emotionality and Vividness of Aversive Memories in a Non-Clinical Sample,” *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 12 (2021): 1-11. EMDR 2.0 is an updated version of the normal EMDR procedure but enhances certain aspects of treatment to “increase working memory taxation and activation of traumatic memory, add arousal, add modality-specific working memory taxation, and an element of surprise.” The authors of this updated therapy have stated that the non-clinical trial results showed that EMDR 2.0 protocol was effective in vividness and emotionality of traumatic memories. For further discussion, see Valentijn V. P. Alting van Geusau et al., “The Effectiveness, Efficiency, and Acceptability of EMDR VS. EMDR 2.0 vs. the Flash Technique in the Treatment of Patients with PTSD: Study Protocol for the Enhanced Randomized Control Trial,” *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 14 (November 9, 2023): 2-3.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 2. This study states that EMDR can be improved in multiple ways. “There is some evidence that a larger impact on working memory is found when both the dual task performed and the (dominant) sensory modality of the memory are in the same modality. Hence, findings show anecdotal evidence for another possible treatment enhancing effect in that, albeit the general effect of WM taxation is large, adding modality-specific taxation might enhance the effectiveness of EMDR therapy somewhat more.” There is a push to increase the efficacy of EMDR 2.0 by helping the patient be more motivated to process their traumatic memory through activities to maximize their WM load. Taxing the working memory at an increased rate would help reduce the amount of treatment time and sessions needed. Time and cost are becoming the driving force of efficiency in therapy. Another suggestion is that “there is evidence to suggest that the element of surprise makes complex memories mouldable by destabilizing them.” Lastly, “there is evidence to suggest that arousal could boost memory updating during reconsolidation.” It is evident here that the desire for efficiency and becoming a “better therapy” is driving the push for better results. This is concerning because this hypothesis is seeking to be accepted as fact. Matthijsen et al., “The Effect of EMDR versus EMDR 2.0 on Emotionality and Vividness of Aversive Memories in a Non-Clinical Sample,” 2-3. The results of this study demonstrated that EMDR 2.0 was no more effective than regular EMDR in desensitizing memories, but it was slightly more efficient. The authors of this study are convinced that it can be made “better” and more enhanced. So much so that they propose to focus on further “dismantling working mechanisms” so they can better understand and tweak the therapy.

the fine details of the working memory hypothesis, the consensus conclusion is that this mechanism is an important aspect of EMDR processing.”⁵⁷ Another major criticism of the working memory theory is that most studies are performed in non-clinical settings, and the results do not support current neurobiological conjectures.⁵⁸ Regardless, this hypothesis is not accepted as factual by the scientific community at large at the current moment.⁵⁹

ORIENTING RESPONSE

The orienting response is another major hypothesis attempting to explain the voluntary eye movement mechanism in EMDR. This is described as an “innate response of interest that is elicited when attention is drawn to a new stimulus.”⁶⁰ Rooted in Pavlov’s theory of behaviorism, it is a “physiological reflex that occurs in response to sudden, potentially dangerous stimulation, and initially increases sympathetic tone.”⁶¹ In the absence of danger, it is

⁵⁷ Shapiro, *EMDR*, 370. It seems that consensus won the day in her mind.

⁵⁸ Landin-Romero et al., “How Does Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy Work?,” 17. The following is a summary of criticisms, “First, most studies are performed in non-clinical populations and therefore cannot address which additional mechanisms contribute to treatment effects in PTSD. Results are often not supported by concurrent neurobiological evidence and only offer partial explanations. Research on the working memory hypothesis has also relied on conditions that do not fully match those used in the standard EMDR protocol. At least two different studies have found no significant effects on memory following EMs in healthy participants. Further, the working memory hypothesis fails to explain some well-documented effects of EMDR. These include the state of relaxation most patients experience after a few sets of bilateral stimulation, the spontaneous generation of positive insight, the reports of increased recognition of accurate information, attentional flexibility and improved retrieval of episodic memory. Finally, most early psychological models ascribe to the EMs, and later to other forms of BLS, the underlying mechanism of action of EMDR, ignoring the potential additive effects of other components of the therapy.”

⁵⁹ Nor should it be. “The logical flaw here is the assumption that a phenomenon is demonstrated just because inferences from various studies can be linked together to suggest a mechanism whereby that phenomenon might occur.” Harrison Pope, *Psychology Astray: Fallacies in Studies of “Repressed Memory” and Childhood Trauma* (Boca Raton, FL: Upton Books, 1997) 20, <https://archive.org/search.php?query=external-identifier%3A%22urn%3Alcp%3Apsychologyastray0000pope%3Aepub%3A7db33a10-ff5a-415b-9943-573020dd566e%22>

⁶⁰ Shapiro, *EMDR*, 370.

⁶¹ Sarah J. Schubert, Christopher W. Lee, and Peter D. Drummond, “The Efficacy and Psychophysiological Correlates of Dual-Attention Tasks in Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* 25, no. 1 (2011): 2. See also Andrew M. Leeds, *A Guide to the Standard EMDR Therapy Protocols for Clinicians, Supervisors, and Consultants*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Springer Publishing, 2016), 39, EBSCO Host, <https://search.ebscohost.com>

theorized that the initial response is rapidly replaced with a feeling of relaxation with the potential to desensitize traumatic memories.⁶² It is then proposed that eye movements trigger an orienting response.⁶³ The eye movements in EMDR are utilized to prevent avoidance, facilitate continued attention to the traumatic memory, activate emotional processing, facilitate incorporation of new trauma-relevant information, and reduce pain via the release of endorphins.⁶⁴ According to the theory of reciprocal inhibition, when a new stimulus appears, a natural response of interest is elicited.⁶⁵ Focus is then put on the new stimulus while the original stimulus has a gradual weakening effect that eventually leads to disappearance. However, two incongruent responses cannot coexist, and therefore, pairing eye movements with distressing memories that produce anxiety or some other felt symptoms helps desensitize and extinguish the feelings.⁶⁶

This is the first and only mechanism that addresses incorporating new information into or combined with the original traumatic memory. Shapiro states that the body of research that examines the presence of an orienting response within EMDR is not extensive. Still, she states that the effects of eye movements have been described in various studies for years.⁶⁷ Shapiro gives credence to this theory by attributing the orienting response to the dual attention focus within her work.⁶⁸ While this theory is addressed

ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=nlebk&AN=1165202&site=eds-live. Calancie, et. al, “Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing as a Treatment for PTSD,” 132. Michael S. Armstrong, and Kevin Vaughan, “An Orienting Response Model of Eye Movement Desensitization,” *Journal of Behavioral Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry* 27, no. 1 (1996): 24.

⁶² Landin-Romero et al., “How Does Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy Work,” 4.

⁶³ Ibid. The eye movements trigger an orienting response that “(1) facilitates access to the traumatic memory without avoidance and (2) causes subsequent rapid extinction after the determination of no immediate threat.”

⁶⁴ Leeds, *A Guide to the Standard EMDR Therapy Protocols for Clinicians, Supervisors, and Consultants*, 39. “The orienting reflex manifests as an initial “freeze response” that is rapidly replaced with a feeling of relaxation. The relaxation response then acts to desensitize a traumatic memory. Raymond W. Gunter, and Glen E. Bodner, “EMDR Works...But How? Recent Progress in the Search for Treatment Mechanisms,” *Journal of EMDR Practice and Research* 3, no. 3 (2009): 165.

⁶⁵ Shapiro, *EMDR*, 371. Pavlov described this as the “what-is-it” reflex.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 23, 167, 357, and 369.

by Shapiro and other psychologists who have historically surveyed the neurobiological mechanism of eye movements, modern surveys have strayed away from incorporating it into the literature.⁶⁹ It is worth considering if the psychophysiological nature (as opposed to neurobiological) of this mechanism and the modern fascination with trauma stored in the body have caused some psychiatrists to pause on advocating this mechanism. In other words, the shift towards the belief that the body keeps the score of trauma has changed the dynamic of advocating for this theory. Regardless, the orienting response is not considered the sole explanation for eye movements but is “likely” one among several.⁷⁰ But currently, according to other published works, EMDR is not accepted as fact as it “is not consistent with an orienting response explanation.”⁷¹

INTERHEMISPHERIC INTERACTION HYPOTHESIS

The interhemispheric interaction hypothesis focuses on retrieving episodic memories via saccadic eye movements.⁷² Dysfunctional episodic memories are associated with PTSD patients, so the mechanism hypothesis is that saccadic eye movements in EMDR through left-right stimulation induce activity within the frontal lobe regions of memory processing and increase interaction via the

⁶⁹ Ad de Jongh’s article “State of the Science” (written in 2023) does not mention orienting response once throughout the article, while Landin-Romero’s “How Does Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy Work” (2018) does. This is significant because the modern surveys are starting to dismiss this explanation as fact.

⁷⁰ Sara Forster, “How Does Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Work? An Examination of the Potential Mechanisms of Action,” (PhD diss., Pepperdine University, 2020), 122.

⁷¹ The quote comes from Gunter and Bodner, “EMDR Works...But How?,” 165. The following articles dismiss the orienting response in bringing explanatory power to the mechanism of action. In this journal, the authors found that the physiological changes did not completely match the orienting response hypothesis. See Hans Peter Sondergaard, and Ulf Elofsson, “Psychophysiological Studies of EMDR,” *Journal of EMDR Practice and Research* 2, no. 4 (2008): 282-88. Ulf O.E. Elofsson, et al., “Physiological Correlates of Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing,” *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* 22 (2008): 622-34. Glen E. Bodner, and Raymond W. Gunter, “How Eye Movements Affect Unpleasant Memories: Support for a Working-Memory Account,” *Behavior Research and Therapy* 46 (2008): 913-31.

⁷² Leeds, *A Guide to the Standard EMDR Therapy Protocols for Clinicians, Supervisors, and Consultants*, 37. Episodic memory is “a system that is assumed to underpin the capacity to remember specific events.” Baddeley, Eysenck, and Anderson, *Memory*, 14.

corpus callosum.⁷³ Advocates for this hypothesis initially proposed that eye movements enhanced episodic memory recall.⁷⁴ However, since then, there has been no consensus of scientific support for this hypothetical mechanism, as others have repeatedly disproved the initial findings by demonstrating that eye movements did not necessarily mediate change in interhemispheric interaction at the cortical level.⁷⁵ During clinical trials, due to vertical eye movements not enhancing hemispheric communication, it is stated that “hemispherical communication does not appear to be responsible for the phenomenological changes to traumatic recollections that are induced by a dual task.”⁷⁶ Shapiro does not give much space to this theory within her work but does reference it within her neurophysiological research.⁷⁷

SUMMARY AND ASSESSMENT

The question posed at the beginning of this section is whether these proposed EMDR eye movement mechanisms are considered scientific facts or conjectures/hypotheses. As defined by the National Center for Science Education, scientific fact is “an observation that has been repeatedly

⁷³ Ruth E. Propper, and Stephen D. Christman, “Interhemispheric Interaction and Saccadic Horizontal Eye Movements: Implications for Episodic Memory, EMDR, and PTSD,” *Journal of EMDR Practice and Research* 2, no. 4 (2008): 270-71, 274. The root of this theory stems from the Hemispheric Encoding/Retrieval Asymmetry (HERA) model of episodic memory, which argues that the left versus right cerebral hemispheres are specialized for the encoding and retrieval of episodic memories. Propper and Christman, “Interhemispheric Interaction and Saccadic Horizontal Eye Movements,” 269.

⁷⁴ “As a whole, such superior episodic memory takes the form of improved recall and/or recognition for list words; increased identification of the spatial location of previously presented stimuli; increased identification of the color of previously presented information; increased accuracy for recall of paired associates; increased accuracy for recently experienced autobiographical information; an earlier age of first childhood memory; increased recollection for previously presented stimuli in the form of increased “remember” responses during recognition; and decreased false recall or recognition of previously presented information.” Propper and Christman, “Interhemispheric Interaction and Saccadic Horizontal Eye Movements,” 272-73.

⁷⁵ Samara et al., “Do Horizontal Saccadic Eye Movements Increase Interhemispheric Coherence? Investigation of a Hypothesized Neural Mechanism Underlying EMDR,” *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 2 (March 2011): 5. Sara Forster also lists four other studies that disagree with the interhemispheric hypothesis. Forster, “How Does Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Work,” 63-64.

⁷⁶ Gunter and Bodner, “EMDR Works...But How,” 164.

⁷⁷ Shapiro, *EMDR*, 366, 493, 496-97.

confirmed and for all practical purposes is accepted as ‘true.’”⁷⁸ The answer to this question is No. Each hypothesis desires to provide explanatory power to understanding the underpinnings of EMDR. Still, there is no scientific consensus or verifiable proof on how eye movements definitively work within this theory, nor is anyone able to state it as fact so that it is accepted as true. Even Shapiro states that “all information-processing models are inherently speculative,” yet she advocates for EMDR’s acceptance into the scientific community not based upon factual evidence but efficacy.⁷⁹ It seems that all hypothetical theories are accepted as “true” at some level but do not rise to scientific facts.

EMDR uses voluntary eye movements in the desensitization and installation phases. However, apart from the orienting response model, none of the other hypotheses clearly explain how eye movements are involved in reprocessing memories with adaptive emotions.⁸⁰ Instead, the majority of models focus on desensitization. If eye movements are involved in memory “reprocessing,” why are they not being studied in that capacity? The following statement is in the *Journal of EMDR Practice and Research*:

Although the exact locus in memory processing of these effects is still not clear, two things are apparent. First, the beneficial effects of eye movements are at the retrieval stage, not at other memory stages such as encoding or consolidation; in fact, there is evidence that saccadic horizontal eye movements immediately before

⁷⁸ The definition goes on to say, “Truth in science, however, is never final and what is accepted as a fact today may be modified or even discarded tomorrow.” See National Center for Science Education (NCSE), “Definitions of Fact, Theory, and Law in Scientific Work,” NCSE.ngo, March 16, 2016, <https://ncse.ngo/definitions-fact-theory-and-law-scientific-work>.

⁷⁹ “It is particularly important to underscore that the efficacy of EMDR therapy is independent of the validity of the model being proposed. This is relevant because the physiology of the brain is not yet sufficiently understood to confirm the validity of this or any other psychotherapy model at that level. However, the model does not appear to contradict anything known to be true, is consonant with the current knowledge in cognitive neuroscience, is congruent with the observed treatment effects of EMDR therapy and serves as a clinical road map for treating a wide range of pathologies.” Shapiro, *EMDR*, 12, 26. This quote is restated here to remind the reader that Shapiro herself acknowledges her own theory as speculative at best.

⁸⁰ The literature barely mentions it as involved. Shapiro, *EMDR*, 370.

encoding impair subsequent memory performance.⁸¹

Is there scientific or medical consensus that eye movements are even necessary for the therapy process?⁸² Or, is EMDR nothing more than exposure therapy with eye movements? While Shapiro advocates for the uniqueness of eye movements' role in EMDR, she quickly reminds readers that the therapy's efficacy results from following all protocols with eye movements.⁸³ To obtain the full benefit of "healing," the counselee does not simply move their eyes back and forth. Instead, they are to submit themselves to the full therapy protocol.⁸⁴ The reader will note that this quickly enters the sphere of scientism instead of scientific fact as subjective pseudoscience becomes "fact" as people utilize it to help themselves feel "better."⁸⁵ With this, it is time to return to Huie's claim that EMDR is "good neuroscience" and consider whether it should be utilized within biblical counseling methodology.

⁸¹ This is an alarming statement coming from the Journal of EMDR Practice and Research. The second is "the beneficial effects of eye movements at retrieval appear to be driven in large part by better source memory, as evidenced by the decreased false memory rate associated with such eye movements." Propper and Christman, "Interhemispheric Interaction and Saccadic Horizontal Eye Movements," 273.

⁸² "The results of our study do not support the idea that during EMDR the induction of eye movements by following the therapist's moving hand offers an advantage compared to visually fixating on a nonmoving hand." Martin Sack et al., "A Comparison of Dual Attention, Eye Movements, and Exposure Only During Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Results from a Randomized Clinical Trial," *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* 86 (2016): 364.

⁸³ "Any assessment of the therapeutic effectiveness of EMDR therapy must take account of all of its procedural elements. Many of these elements are drawn from disparate traditions that collectively contain the aspects of effective psychotherapy." Shapiro, *EMDR*, 1-3, 22, 352.

⁸⁴ "However, if it were just about bilateral stimulation, every trauma survivor at a tennis match would be spontaneously healed. Or they could simply sit in their cars and watch their windshield wipers go back and forth. There are, in fact, many other elements to EMDR therapy. The therapist assists the client in choosing the best "target" to focus on and helps him fully "activate" that target—i.e., memory of a traumatic experience or trigger situation—before introducing bilateral stimulation. The therapist also actively helps the client remain attentive to whatever emerges: images, thoughts, emotions, physical sensations and impulses, and previously dissociated fragments of memory. It is the therapist's presence and careful attention to keeping her client within his window of tolerance—while confronting memories—that is key." Michael Baldwin, and Deborah Korn, *Every Memory Deserves Respect: EMDR, the Proven Trauma Therapy with the Power to Heal* (New York, NY: Workman Publishing, 2021) 138. Kindle.

⁸⁵ For a definition of scientism, see footnote 7.

COMMON GRACE, SCIENTIFIC FACT, AND WHAT IS REALLY HAPPENING

It has been demonstrated that due to the lack of scientific consensus in the secular psychiatric world, the failure to meet the basic definition and standard of scientific fact, and the overall subjective explanation that EMDR provides regarding its mechanism of action, EMDR is more appropriately labeled “pseudoscience” than “good neuroscience.” Further, EMDR has no place in a biblical counseling methodology. EMDR seeks to reduce the problems people face down to biological dysregulation, for which a biological treatment is needed.

If the problem is dysregulated neurons resulting in anxiety, panic attacks, or depression, then the treatment needed is something that can “flush” the neuronal blockage out to regulate memories and feelings.⁸⁶ However, this “cure” cannot be verified and is therefore impossible to responsibly affirm. If a counselor is committed to believing and accepting that man’s problems are reduced to dysregulated neurons, then that person is adopting a non-biblical understanding of the problem and nature of man. This has become a major problem as biblical counselors have begun to adopt the trauma-informed framework.⁸⁷ Because defining and understanding what trauma is and how to address it is so subjective, many biblical counselors begin to feel inadequate or underprepared to address the problems as they come. Therefore, it is natural to look outside the Bible to provide explanatory power to the problems people face.⁸⁸

The main explanation that is publicized, promoted, and accepted now in the secular and Christian counseling world is that trauma is stored within the

⁸⁶ Shapiro, *EMDR*, 17-18.

⁸⁷ Trauma-informed is defined as “A program, organization, or system that is trauma-informed realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; and responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization.” SAMHSA, *Practical Guide for Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach*, VII. One example of Christians embracing trauma-informed therapy is <https://christiantraumahealingnetwork.org>.

⁸⁸ Heath Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling: The Doctrinal Foundations of Counseling Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016) 51-53. Kindle.

body. This means that everything that someone has endured and the current symptoms or struggles they face is simply the “recalibration of the brain’s alarm system.”⁸⁹ Throughout her work, Shapiro relies upon van der Kolk’s understanding and explanation of how trauma is stored, and van der Kolk references EMDR as one of many therapies that treat embodied trauma.⁹⁰ Van der Kolk spends almost 300 pages in *The Body Keeps the Score* discussing the nature of trauma before getting to his solutions, which can leave the average reader confused and desperate for clarity.⁹¹ Regardless, the emphasis of Shapiro and van der Kolk is on reframing trauma into the need to regulate one’s biological responses. Instead of defining trauma and suffering according to the biblical description, alluring explanations that seem full of wisdom and scientific backing are being adopted without considering the full ramifications of what is behind the theory.

The push to classify EMDR as “scientific” has another added benefit for some who understand trauma as biologically rooted. If understood as “science,” it is believed to fall under the domain of common grace and potentially be utilized in biblical counseling methodology. However, that is not the goal of common grace in the Bible nor in counseling.⁹² Common grace is defined as

⁸⁹ Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 21-22. Van der Kolk goes on to state, “Research from these new disciplines has revealed that trauma produces actual physiological changes, including a recalibration of the brain’s alarm system, an increase in stress hormone activity, and alterations in the system that filters relevant information from irrelevant. We now know that trauma compromises the brain area that communicates the physical, embodied feeling of being alive. These changes explain why traumatized individuals become hypervigilant to threat at the expense of spontaneously engaging in their day-to-day lives. They also help us understand why traumatized people so often keep repeating the same problems and have such trouble learning from experience. We now know that their behaviors are not the result of moral failings or signs of lack of willpower or bad character—they are caused by actual changes in the brain.” Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 21-22. In this quote, van der Kolk provides the rationale for Christians to adapt embodied trauma without seriously considering the epistemology behind that statement. This is alarming as it now excuses anything labeled “traumatic” and puts the responsibility on dysregulated neurons. A full critique of this theory is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, the reader should reference 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 (2023): 26-61.

⁹⁰ Shapiro, EMDR, 16, 17, 19, 23, 41, 45. Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 363-83.

⁹¹ Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 19-298.

⁹² “While common grace expresses the goodness and kindness of God to all humanity, it is in the overflowing blessings of his special grace that God’s character as Savior is fully displayed.” John MacArthur, and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 789, Kindle. The main purpose of common grace is not to see how much knowledge God allows us to use in counseling, but instead, it is meant to point

the “good kindness of God that he shows to all people regardless of whether they have experienced the salvation that comes through Jesus Christ alone.”⁹³ While God does grant unbelievers such as Francine Shapiro and Bessel van der Kolk the ability to make true observations about how the body may or may not process memories via eye movement, it does not necessitate acceptance because the noetic effect of sin leads to incorrect interpretations of that data.⁹⁴ Even if certain aspects of the observations of EMDR’s eye movement mechanism are true, that would still not necessitate acceptance by biblical counselors into counseling methodology. EMDR does not conform born-again believers into the image of Christ, which is the ultimate goal of biblical counseling.⁹⁵

All scientific information obtained is meant only to serve the goal of biblical counseling: helping the counselee know and glorify God in their life.⁹⁶ However, the Bible is the sole authority in counseling by which the counselor and counselee submit their lives and methodology because the Scriptures are God’s inspired and sufficient words for those whom He created so that they may know how to live in a manner pleasing to Him.⁹⁷ Therefore, when counselees come into the church suffering from painful memories, what kind of care may biblical counselors offer? The following section will answer that question by helping counselees know God’s Words, according to God’s methods, and receive care from God’s family in God’s Church.

unbelievers towards God’s kindness so that it leads them to repentance.

⁹³ Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 67.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 68-72. See also Romans 1:18-32; Ephesians 4:17-18; 1 Peter 1:18. Jay Adams defines the noetic effect of sin as “the effect of sin upon thought and thinking.” See fn. 2 of Jay Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling: More Than Redemption* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), 165. Kindle.

⁹⁵ The definition of Biblical Counseling affirmed by the author is: “Biblical counseling is the personal discipleship ministry of God’s people to others under the oversight of God’s church, dependent upon the authority and sufficiency of God’s Word through the work of the Holy Spirit. Biblical counseling seeks to reorient disordered desires, affections, thoughts, behaviors, and worship toward a God-designed anthropology in an effort to restore people to a right fellowship with God and others.” T. Dale Johnson Jr., *The Church as a Culture of Care: Finding Hope in Biblical Community* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2021), 16, Kindle.

⁹⁶ John Babler, and Nicolas Ellen, eds., *Counseling By the Book: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Fort Worth, TX: CTW, 2014), 70, Kindle.

⁹⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:9; 2 Peter 1:3-4. See also Robert Jones, Kristin L. Kellen, and Rob Green, *The Gospel for Disordered Lives: An Introduction to Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2021), 41-44.

CARING FOR SUFFERERS OF PAINFUL MEMORIES

God's Words

When counselees struggle with painful memories that lead to difficult thoughts and bodily responses, what is needed most at that moment is to be reminded of what is true so they may reset their frame of thinking on their Healer.⁹⁸ The Bible is God's very Word to satisfy all we need and provide true and lasting hope.⁹⁹ Hope in God's power is greater than anything someone is facing is what is needed by those who suffer because they often feel alone and isolated in those moments. Hope from the Bible reminds them that God has not abandoned them but is with them and will keep them until the end when Christ returns and makes all things new.¹⁰⁰ Knowing the Bible is sufficient to bring them through this difficult trial brings hope and steadfastness in God's care.¹⁰¹

Part of reorienting those suffering from painful memories is to remind them of who they are in Christ and why God created them, as stated in the Scriptures.¹⁰² The fact of one's purpose in life reframes responses and pushes the counselee toward their relationship with Christ, which is the most important truth and reality at that moment.¹⁰³ Being truth-led instead of feelings-led helps the counselee not to get caught up in basing their feelings on believing that they have embodied trauma or trusting in pseudoscience.

⁹⁸ Psalm 6:2; 30:2; 41:4; 103:3.

⁹⁹ Romans 8:28-29, 15:4; 2 Peter 1:3-4.

¹⁰⁰ Psalm 33:18, 43:5; 71:5; 119:81; Romans 5:4-5, 15:13; 2 Corinthians 1:10; Philippians 1:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24; Revelation 21-22.

¹⁰¹ Steve Viars lists several aspects of sufficiency that are important to counseling. They are 1) The Bible has all we need to draw us to Christ, 2) It has all we need to help us order our affections, 3) It has all we need to explain our Identity in Jesus, 4) It has all we need to reveal the motivations of our hearts, 5) It has all we need to change into the image of Christ, and 6) It has all we need to find our hope in eternity. Bob Kellemen, and Steve Viars, eds., *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling: Changing Lives with God's Changeless Truth* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2021), 90-96.

¹⁰² 1 Corinthians 10:13; 2 Corinthians 5:9. Curtis Solomon, "Counseling Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," *The Association of Certified Biblical Counselors Blog* (ACBC), Oct 24, 2019, <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/essays/counseling-post-traumatic-stress-disorder-plotting-the-course/>.

¹⁰³ John Babler, "PTSD, Memories, and Biblical Counseling," *The Association of Certified Biblical Counselors Blog* (ACBC), Oct 24, 2019, <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/essays/ptsd-memories-and-biblical-counseling/>.

Instead, they can look to the written Word of God for meaning.¹⁰⁴ Having a standard of truth to orient them toward their Maker helps keep sufferers from being sucked into faulty understandings of trauma and memory. Rather, looking to the Scriptures for a theology of suffering will help them endure and trust in their good King, who works through this event for their godliness.¹⁰⁵

God's Methods

In *Redeeming Memory*, Matt Rehrer states, “Human memory battles with the remnants of indwelling sin. To reiterate, you forget what you should remember and remember what you should forget, while doubting that God will forget what He promised and will remember what He promised to forget.”¹⁰⁶ Since the fallen human mind is prone to forget God, whether we suffer or sin, it is imperative to abide by God’s methods of sanctification and growth for care. Discipling the counselee through applicable truths in the Bible is imperative for their growth and reliance upon God. If change is needed, then adhering to Ephesians 4:22-24 is vital. If hope is needed, then take the counselee to the promises of God that speak to their situation. Reliance upon the Holy Spirit while orienting the counselee toward the spiritual disciplines will push them into a deeper trusting relationship with God.¹⁰⁷

God's Church

When a counselee feels alone and is struggling with difficult memories, a family resource is needed and available for care and support to help.¹⁰⁸ The needs of one person walking through trials are too great for just one counselor, and therefore, a community is needed for support, love, and care.¹⁰⁹ The best

¹⁰⁴ Matt Rehrer, *Redeeming Memory: How God Transforms Memories From a Heavy Burden to a Blessed Hope*, (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2022), 87-90.

¹⁰⁵ Greg E. Gifford, “Helping Marriages Through Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,” *The Association of Certified Biblical Counselors Blog* (ACBC), Oct 23, 2019, <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/essays/helping-marriages-through-post-traumatic-stress-disorder/>. Romans 8:28-29.

¹⁰⁶ Rehrer, *Redeeming Memory*, 81.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 82-93. David Mathis, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus Through the Spiritual Disciplines* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), Kindle.

¹⁰⁸ John 13:35; Acts 20:28; Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Timothy 3:15; 1 Thessalonians 5:14. See Johnson, *The Church as a Culture of Care*, 28-42.

¹⁰⁹ For a good description of how this looks practically, see Stuart Scott, and Heath Lambert, *Counseling the Hard Cases: True Stories Illustrating the Sufficiency of God’s Resources in Scripture* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2012), Kindle.

family and abundant resources available are within God's church, and many will be able to minister grace faithfully to the counselee as they walk through a season of trials.¹¹⁰ It is important for the counselor to call upon the various comprehensive resources of care (i.e., brothers and sisters) within the church to further "encourage the fainthearted" and "help the weak."¹¹¹ Worship in and with the local church also provides visual, auditory, and haptic cues to how God is working through the church to sanctify, encourage, and sustain the counselee through painful memories.¹¹² The preaching of God's Word "enters the ear, deposits in the mind, quickens the affections, and matures the soul."¹¹³ Singing in the worship of God reminds the mind and soul of deep theological truths so they may be reoriented toward God's care. In summary, God's church is the place where God's Words are expounded regarding how God's method of change and care happens in the lives of those struggling through painful memories.

CONCLUSION

Walking with someone through bodily responses to painful memories is complicated and can be confusing as to what is the best kind of care for healing. For biblical counselors, healing the body is not the goal, rather, it is to help the image bearer grow in their sanctification. The argument made in this article is that counselees should avoid the pseudoscience and biological reductionistic view of suffering presented by EMDR in preference for the infallible, authoritative, and sufficient Word of God. By listening to God's Words, abiding by God's methods of change, and utilizing the resources in God's Church, care and support will be full-orbed and lasting for God's Glory.

¹¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 1:3-7.

¹¹¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:14. This is also reiterated in Bob Kellemen, and Kevin Carson, eds., *Biblical Counseling and the Church: God's Care Through God's People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 20-34, 89-152, Kindle.

¹¹² Rehrer, *Redeeming Memory*, 96-114.

¹¹³ Ibid., 105.

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

Francine Tan¹

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,

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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://rpmm ministries.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 misuse 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.prrca.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://ketocin.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 phenomenism. 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-

⁴⁹ Jeffrey 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.

⁵⁰ Vliet, "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, NJ: 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, NJ: 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, NJ: 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

⁸⁴ 276–81, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsq.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>.

⁸⁵ 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, NY, 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>.

⁸⁶ 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," *TJTMI* (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.



The Association of Certified Biblical Counselors is committed to championing the sufficiency of Scripture for the Church as she engages the problems people face, speaking the truth in love. Christians have the responsibility to bring the truth of God to bear on the problems of everyday life, and to embody that truth in a life of love.

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