

IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES:

Emotionally Focused Therapy and Biblical Anthropology

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INTRODUCTION

Emotionally focused therapy (EFT) is a short-term clinical approach to the modality of marriage therapy. EFT is presented as evidenced-based, empirically-substantiated, and demonstrably effective.² The approach has captured the attention of marriage and family therapists across the Christian counseling spectrum.³ Advocates of Christian integrationism and Christian psychology have argued for integrating, translating, or redeeming the methodologies of EFT into a Christian approach to counseling.⁴ The question is whether the primary

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²Jones and Butman note that “EFT is one of the most effective contemporary couples’ therapies as evidenced by promising outcome research.” Stanton L. Jones and Richard E. Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 294. Wiebe and Johnson offer that EFT has “strong empirical support with a substantial evidence base of efficacy and effectiveness studies.” Stephanie A. Wiebe and Susan M. Johnson, “A Review of the Research in Emotionally Focused Therapy for Couples,” *Family Process* 55, no. 3 (September 2016): 391. As a mode of couples therapy, one study claims “70-73% recovery rate for relationship distress.” Tracy L. Dalglish, Susan M. Johnson, Melissa Burgess Moser, Marie-France Lafontaine, Stephanie A. Wiebe, and Giorgio A. Tasca, “Predicting Change in Marital Satisfaction throughout Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy,” *The Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 41, no. 3 (July 2015): 276.

³For more on the Christian counseling spectrum, see Stephen P. Gregg and Timothy A. Sisemore, *Counseling and Christianity: Five Approaches* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012). See also Eric L. Johnson and David G. Myers, eds., *Psychology & Christianity: Five Views*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010).

⁴From an integrationist perspective, see Gregory J. Cheney, “Emotional Connection of Military Couples after 16 Years of War: Integrating Pastoral Counseling and Evidence-Based Theory,” *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 71, no. 3 (2017). From a Christian psychology perspective, see Todd Hardin, “Redeeming Emotion-Focused Therapy: A Christian Analysis of Its Worldview, Epistemology, and Emphasis,” *Religions* 5, no. 1 (March 1, 2014). See also Michael R. McFee and

assumptions of EFT are compatible with the teaching of the Christian Scriptures. Furthermore, if incongruence exists between the core assumptions of EFT and biblical doctrine, the implications of attempting to adopt its therapeutic techniques must be considered. Like all counseling theories, EFT is undergirded by a robust philosophical foundation from which its methodologies arise.⁵ The leading EFT theorist, Susan Johnson, helpfully provides clear statements concerning the philosophical assumptions that inform the methodologies of EFT.⁶ The techniques and methodologies of EFT are designed to accomplish specific tasks within a well-defined therapeutic framework that is meticulously constructed on a specific philosophical foundation. In what follows, the primary assumptions of EFT will be delineated and examined in light of biblical doctrine in order to demonstrate the disparity between the two. The thesis of this paper is that emotionally focused therapy must be rejected by Christians on the basis that the theory's primary assumptions as articulated by Susan Johnson are incompatible with biblical anthropology.

DEFINING TERMS AND SCOPE OF THESIS

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the disparity between the primary assumptions of Susan Johnson's theory of EFT and biblical anthropology. Susan Johnson is one of the founders and major architects of EFT theory and practice. EFT is characterized by specific assumptions about human nature, function, relationships, problems, and solutions.⁷ Johnson provides five primary assumptions that form the ideological foundation of EFT. First, she argues

Philip G. Monroe, "A Christian Psychology Translation of Emotion-Focused Therapy: Clinical Implications," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 30, no. 4 (2011).

⁵ Jay Adams argued that "all counseling systems rest upon presuppositions" and these presuppositions "govern and condition all the research (it is *not* objective), practices and development of methods and techniques within these systems." Jay E. Adams, *Update on Christian Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 35. The presuppositions that form the theory are the breeding ground for technique and methodology. Similarly, Susan Johnson indicates that "a therapist needs a theory of healthy functioning, including a formulation of how problems occur and disrupt such functioning and a theory of therapeutic change." Susan M. Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy: Creating Connection*, 3rd ed. (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2020), 26.

⁶ Johnson provides an overview of the primary philosophical assumptions that shape the theory of EFT. Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy*, 48-50.

⁷ Johnson articulates the necessity of defining beliefs about human nature, the nature of the problem, the goal of treatment, and the process of change for the construction of a therapeutic theory. Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy*, 26.

that “the most appropriate paradigm for adult intimacy is that of an emotional bond” and “the key issue in marital conflict is the security of this bond.”⁸ Second, she suggests that “emotion is key in organizing attachment behaviors and in organizing the way the self and the other are experienced in an intimate relationship.”⁹ Third, she offers that “problems in relationships are maintained by the way interactions are organized and the dominant emotional experience of each partner in the relationship.”¹⁰ Fourth, she proposes that “attachment needs and desires of partners are essentially healthy and adaptive.”¹¹ Fifth, she theorizes that “change in EFT is associated with the accessing and reprocessing of the emotional experience underlying each partner’s position in the relationship.”¹² These are five specific, primary assumptions of EFT offered by Johnson that will be assessed in what follows.

While other vantage points could be assumed, the perspective of anthropology provides a lens through which to see the disparities that exist between the primary assumptions of EFT and the core teachings of the Bible. Biblical anthropology is what the Bible teaches concerning what it means to be human. By incompatibility, the anthropological tenants of EFT stand in opposition to the teaching of Scripture insomuch that the two are unable to coherently coexist together. One may be true and the other false, but both systems cannot concurrently be true. The disparity that will be demonstrated between EFT and biblical anthropology presents a problem for those who aim to eclectically integrate, translate, or redeem the methodologies of EFT into a Christian approach to counseling. Namely, the implication is that EFT methods are not philosophically neutral, but are part of a larger system with anthropological commitments that are contrary to the teachings of Scripture.

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF EFT

EFT emerged in the 1980’s in the work of the Canadian psychologist Leslie

⁸ Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy*, 49.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Greenberg along with one of his students, Susan Johnson.¹³ EFT is experiential, process-oriented, and focuses on emotions. The theory originally grew in reaction to the psychoanalytic, behavioral, and cognitive approaches, and it imbibes the humanism of the so-called *third force* of psychology. It is an offshoot of the process experiential psychotherapy developed by Greenberg for the modality of individual therapy. EFT blends person-centered, attachment, and systems theories.¹⁴ The theory posits people as basically good and if given the right conditions they will move toward growth.¹⁵ The therapeutic process in EFT is not information and content-driven but experience and process-driven. In Rogerian fashion, the therapeutic alliance must be characterized by an empathic, non-directive, and affirming posture toward the client. EFT holds to epistemic phenomenology and assumes that the client's experience is prime reality and "truth" is the perceptual product of the phenomenal field of the client.¹⁶

By 1996, Susan Johnson had augmented the process experiential approach, thus making it her own and distinguishing herself from Greenberg, by adding insights from attachment theory.¹⁷ Johnson was influenced by the work of John Bowlby and began to argue for adult attachment as the key to understanding human relationships.¹⁸ While there is significant overlap and similarities, Johnson's EFT

¹³ See Leslie S. Greenberg and Susan M. Johnson, *Emotionally Focused Therapy for Couples* (New York: Guilford Press, 1988).

¹⁴ Jones and Butman acknowledge that "contemporary humanistic-experiential psychotherapies draw heavily from the personality theory of Carl Rogers's client-centered therapy." Jones and Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal*, 303.

¹⁵ Carl Rogers wrote, "I have discovered man to have characteristics which seem inherent in his species, and the terms which have at different times seemed to me descriptive of these characteristics are such terms as *positive, forward-moving, constructive, realistic, trustworthy*." Carl R. Rogers, "A Note on 'The Nature of Man,'" in *The Carl Rogers Reader*, ed. Howard Kirschenbaum and Valerie Land Henderson (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1989), 403. Greenberg indicates that "like Rogers, EFT theory posits a growth and development tendency." Leslie S. Greenberg, *Emotion-Focused Therapy, Theories of Psychotherapy Series* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2011), 14. Susan Johnson concurs that EFT has a "positive view of human nature and a belief in people's ability to change and grow." Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy*, 57.

¹⁶ Greenberg, *Emotion-Focused Therapy*, 4.

¹⁷ Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy*, 28. See also Susan M. Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Marital Therapy: Creating Connection* (Philadelphia, PA: Brunner/Mazel, 1996).

¹⁸ Bowlby claimed that attachment theory "facilitates a new and illuminating way of conceptualizing the propensity of human beings to make strong affectional bonds to particular others and of explaining the many forms of emotional distress." John Bowlby *Attachment and Loss*, vol. III, *Loss, Sadness, and Depression* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 39.

should be distinguished from Greenberg's model. Amid the similarities, the key distinction is the way Johnson makes use of attachment and systems theories. Johnson proposed that EFT is "integrative," by which she means that "it integrates an *intrapsychic* focus on how individuals process their experience, particularly key attachment-oriented emotional responses, with an *interpersonal focus* on how partners organize their interactions into patterns and cycles."¹⁹

EFT AND CHRISTIAN COUNSELING

From the popular-level to the Christian academy, the relationship between Christianity and EFT is an ongoing conversation. As indicated above, EFT has been a theory of interest to Christian integrationists and Christian psychologists.²⁰ More broadly, Johnson's work has been popularized and aimed directly at a Christian readership.²¹ The scope of EFT's influence has expanded through several popular-level books written by Johnson. In scholarly discourse, some have presented arguments for creating a Christian version of humanistic experiential therapeutic models like EFT.²²

Can a Christian approach to marriage counseling adopt the perspectives and techniques of EFT? Jay Adams argued that "well-thought-through systems are

¹⁹ Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy*, 15.

²⁰ Tim Clinton and Gary Sibcy adopt the assumptions of EFT and cite Johnson's work. Clinton and Sibcy write, "Attachment is an overarching system that explains the principles, the rules, and the emotions of relationships—how they work and how they don't, how we feel when we're with the ones we love the most." Timothy E. Clinton, and Gary Sibcy, *Attachments: Why You Love, Feel, and Act the Way You Do: Unlock the Secret to Loving and Lasting Relationships* (Brentwood, TN: Integrity Publishers, 2002), 12. In fact, Susan Johnson appeared as a plenary speaker at the 2017 American Association of Christian Counselors world conference. See Susan Johnson, "Created for Connection" (video of lecture, AACC World Conference 2017, The American Association of Christian Counselors, September 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVhcbUqxKYI>.

²¹ See Susan M. Johnson, *Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love* (New York: Little, Brown & Co, 2008). Susan M. Johnson, *Love Sense: The Revolutionary New Science of Romantic Relationships* (New York: Little, Brown & Co, 2013). For the so-called Christian version, see Susan M. Johnson and Kenneth Sanderfer, *Created for Connection: The "Hold Me Tight" Guide for Christian Couples: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love* (New York: Little, Brown & Co, 2016).

²² See Lydia C. W. Kim-van Daalen and Eric L. Johnson, "Transformation Through Christian Emotion-Focused Therapy," in *Transformative Encounters: The Intervention of God in Christian Counseling and Pastoral Care*, ed. David W. Appleby and George Ohlschlager (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 168-182. Also, see Lydia C. W. Kin-van Daalen, "Emotions in Christian Psychological Care" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013).

self-contained packages.”²³ He emphasized that therapeutic methods are not transferable between counseling systems, because he suggested “methods do not stand alone but are parts of systems.”²⁴ For this reason, Adams distinguished counseling practices as either “means” or “methods.” A counseling “means” is a tool that is basically neutral and “non-oriented” while a counseling “method” is “goal oriented and consists of structured ways of using means.”²⁵ He discussed a sample of six common means of counseling including talking, listening, rewarding/punishing, acting, questioning, and using Scripture.²⁶ He showed that each means of counseling may not be adopted from the methods of other counseling theories without being contaminated by the other theory’s attending assumptions and goals. For example, he contrasts the means of listening with the method of Rogerian listening.²⁷ The two forms of listening may appear similar but are decidedly not the same activity because of the embedded assumptions and goals. For this reason, Adams suggests clarifying the assumptions, purpose, and end goal of the means to ensure it is a thoroughly biblical method.

EFT is a complex counseling system that offers far more than a set of neutral techniques. EFT has a clear view of what it means to be human, what goes wrong in human relationships, and how to go about solving relational problems. The theory’s techniques are methods irretrievably enmeshed within its philosophical assumptions and therapeutic goals. For these reasons, an attempt to integrate, translate, or redeem the methods of EFT is untenable, because the method is coherent and functional only within its therapeutic model of origin.²⁸

Doug Bookman offers a framework with which to describe the process for

²³ Jay E. Adams, *What about Nouthetic Counseling?: A Question and Answer Book with History, Help and Hope for the Christian Counselor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977), 73.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Contra Eric Johnson, this assertion is not an example of the so-called “genetic fallacy.” Eric Johnson argues that “TBC [traditional biblical counseling] in particular often seems to assume what logicians have called the ‘genetic fallacy’ as an argument against the validity of the psychological knowledge of non-Christians, that is, since modern psychology originates from non-Christians, it all must be invalid.” Eric L. Johnson, *Foundations for Soul Care: A Christian Psychology Proposal* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 111. The rejection of EFT is not on the basis of its non-Christian origin, but it is based, in part, on the clear contradiction between the core claims of EFT as opposed to the core claims of Scripture regarding the task of repairing relationships.

how Christian integrationists and Christian psychologists seek to incorporate the perceived insights of psychological theory into a Christian approach to counseling.²⁹ The author raises Bookman's work here to further make the point that ontological disparity prevents Christians from adopting methods from therapeutic frameworks like EFT. Bookman presents three issues in the form of three questions. The three issues related to the integration of psychology and theology are ontology, ethics, and methodology.³⁰ First, the ontological issue answers whether theology and psychology can be integrated. Second, the ethical issue answers whether theology and psychology ought to be integrated. Third, assuming ontological and ethical permission, the methodological issue answers the question as to how theology and psychology may best be integrated.

In the case of EFT, integrationists claim that the insights of EFT can and ought to be incorporated into a Christian approach to counseling. There is a recognition, however, that the neo-humanistic presuppositions are incompatible with biblical doctrine.³¹ Nevertheless, the conversation briskly moves to adopting methodology without adequately addressing the underlying ontological disparity. The methods are cast as neutral and available for recontextualization within a Christian paradigm. In light of Adams and Bookman's insights, however, it is reasonable to suggest that the extraction of methodology from EFT to be used within Christian counseling is untenable. The main argument made in this paper is that the core assumptions of EFT are ontologically incompatible with biblical doctrine.³² Bookman broadly asserts that it is "the essence of theology which makes it constitutionally incompatible with psychology."³³ Applied to EFT, this author will make the claim that the core assumptions of EFT are "constitutionally incompatible" with biblical doctrine.

²⁹ Doug Bookman, "The Word of God and Counseling," in *Sufficiency: Historic Essays on the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, 2016), 41-93.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 45-46.

³¹ Hardin, for example, acknowledges the problems with neo-humanism but then attempts to adapt a sort of Christian humanism by taking elements of humanism and recasting each with Christian verbiage. In the end, the attempt at blending humanism with Christianity results in distorting the integrity of both. Todd Hardin, "Redeeming Emotion-Focused Therapy: A Christian Analysis of Its Worldview, Epistemology, and Emphasis," 328.

³² It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the ethical question, but an argument could be made that EFT ought not be integrated on the basis of the sufficiency of Scripture in marital counseling. If this claim is demonstrable, EFT it is neither ontologically nor ethically reasonable to integrate EFT into a Christian approach to marital counseling.

³³ Bookman, "The Word of God and Counseling," 46.

Nonetheless, Christian psychologists and integrationists attempt to make use of EFT.³⁴ One Christian psychologist argues that it is essential for Christian counselors to be informed by EFT.³⁵ The strategy of the integrationists and Christian psychologists is to rework, redefine, and recontextualize techniques from EFT theory and methodology.³⁶ Michael McFee and Philip Monroe argue, “It does appear that viewing the relationship between humanistic psychotherapy models and Christian understandings of change and growth as one of translation between dialects (rather than integrating two competing worldviews) offers more options to thoughtful Christian practitioners.”³⁷ Specifically, the techniques of interest for McFee and Monroe are “empathic understanding, empathic exploration, process guiding, experiential presence, and content directive non-experiential responses.”³⁸ McFee and Monroe reject that EFT and Christianity must be approached as “two competing worldviews” which means for them that nothing precludes Christians adopting EFT techniques.³⁹ To the contrary, this author will argue that it is impossible to adopt EFT methods without importing its implicit philosophical assumptions, because EFT methods are inherently value-laden and aim at specific therapeutic goals. In what follows, some of the core assumptions of EFT will be contrasted with the teaching of the Bible to demonstrate disparity.

³⁴ McFee and Monroe argue for the use of EFT by taking up Eric Johnson’s metaphor of seeing theology and psychology as two languages or dialects that need to be conversant with one another. See Michael R. McFee and Philip G. Monroe, “A Christian Psychology Translation of Emotion-Focused Therapy: Clinical Implications,” 319-320. See also Johnson, *Foundations for Soul Care*, 226-239.

³⁵ Eric Johnson argues that “it is essential that the Christian soul-care community refamiliarize itself with this modality [EFT] —while avoiding an overemphasis on subjectivity (unrelated to the Word of God)—in order to foster greater healing of the human heart and its affections” (italics mine). *Ibid.*, 596.

³⁶ Eric Johnson argues that Christians should develop models that have as a “starting point” with distinctly “Christian assumptions beliefs, and practices.” He continues to argue, then, that Christian “models may benefit from the knowledge and legitimate insights of modern psychology.” Eric L. Johnson, “Forward: Counseling and Psychotherapy on a New Foundation,” in *Transformative Encounters: The Intervention of God in Christian Counseling and Pastoral Care*, ed. by David W. Appleby and George Ohlschlager (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 20. In practice, however, Christian psychologists begin with EFT and work toward Christian adaptation not the other way around as Eric Johnson suggests.

³⁷ Michael R. McFee and Philip G. Monroe, “A Christian Psychology Translation of Emotion-Focused Therapy: Clinical Implications,” 326.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 321.

³⁹ Contra McFee and Monroe, the questions asked by counseling theory is inextricably connected to worldview issues. They wrongly assert that “worldview issues do not come to bear on the client needs in any critical manner.” *Ibid.*, 323.

PARADIGM AND KEY ISSUES

Susan Johnson offers that “the most appropriate paradigm for adult intimacy is that of an emotional bond. The key issue in marital conflict is the security of this bond.”⁴⁰ Two related but distinct subjects are raised in this assertion: a paradigm for understanding relationships and the key issue in marital conflict. The first subject describes a paradigm for adult intimacy, which can be taken more broadly but applies specifically to a committed, romantic relationship between two people. Johnson is offering a paradigm for understanding the nature and meaning of the marriage relationship; it is essentially what she calls an emotional bond.

To understand the paradigm, it is necessary to define the construct of an emotional bond and consider why it governs Johnson’s understanding of the marriage relationship. The construct of an emotional bond applies the principles of the theory of attachment developed by John Bowlby to adult relationships.⁴¹ Johnson believes that “one of the most primary human needs is to have a secure emotional connection—an attachment—with those who are closest to us.”⁴² She holds that the interpersonal dynamic of marriage is a person’s innate emotional need to feel secure, safe, understood, and loved by another.⁴³ According to attachment theory, humans are hardwired through evolutionary processes to seek a secure attachment with a mate for safety, survival, and reproduction.⁴⁴ Johnson takes “the view of human beings as social bonding mammals who require close relationship with dependable others to survive and thrive.”⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Therapy*, 26.

⁴¹ See John Bowlby, *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

⁴² Susan M. Johnson, “Introduction to Attachment: A Therapist’s Guide to Primary Relationships and Their Renewal,” in *Attachment Processes in Couple and Family Therapy*, ed. Susan M. Johnson and Valerie E. Whiffen (New York: Guilford, 2006), 4.

⁴³ Johnson offers the following 10 central tenets of attachment theory: (1) attachment is an innate motivating force, (2) secure constructive dependency complements autonomy, (3) attachment offers an essential safe haven, (4) attachment offers a secure base, (5) emotionally accessibility and responsiveness build bonds, (6) fear and uncertainty activate attachment needs, (7) the process of separation distress is predictable, (8) a finite number of insecure forms of engagement can be identified, (9) attachment involves working models of self and other, (10) isolation and loss are inherently traumatizing. See Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Therapy*, 27-33.

⁴⁴ See Cindy Hazan, “The Essential Nature of Couple Relationships,” in *Attachment Processes in Couple and Family Therapy*, ed. Susan M. Johnson and Valerie E. Whiffen (New York: Guilford, 2006), 45-51.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

These assumptions about the nature of marriage and marriage problems must be compared with a corresponding biblical explanation. Biblical anthropology provides the definition and essence of the marriage relationship. In the opening chapters of Genesis, God creates Adam and his helpmate Eve. The creation of Adam and Eve demonstrates the divine intent of marriage. In Genesis 2:18-25, the creation of Eve provides a window into the divine origin and institution of marriage. Eve is made as Adam's complementary helpmate.⁴⁶ One author describes marriage as a "covenant of companionship" established by God "to solve the problem of human loneliness."⁴⁷ The companionship springs from self-giving love in the context of a covenantal union. Verses 23-24 evoke covenantal language as Adam and Eve become a "one flesh" union.⁴⁸ The "one flesh" union is the essence of marriage as a man and woman enter a covenant together in self-giving love toward one another. As image bearers, the covenant of marriage is meant to mirror God's relationship with His own people. In Ephesians 5:22-33, the Apostle Paul brings the idea to fruition by showing how the "one flesh" union displays the relationship of Christ and the church.⁴⁹ The essence of marriage in Scripture is covenant-keeping companionship that reflects the self-giving love and the palpable nearness of God the Creator and Redeemer.⁵⁰

Several Christian authors have attempted to "redeem" this core assumption of EFT by arguing that the emotional bond is analogous to the "one flesh" union.

⁴⁶ Gordon Wenham notes that "the help looked for is not just assistance in his daily work or in the procreation of children, though these aspects may be included, but the mutual support companionship provides." Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1 – 15*, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1987), 68.

⁴⁷ Jay Adams surmised, "Companionship, therefore, is the essence of marriage" (italics original). Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980), 8.

⁴⁸ Gordon Wenham offers that "the use of the terms 'forsake' and 'stick' in the context of Israel's covenant with the Lord suggests that the OT viewed marriage as a kind of covenant." Wenham, *Genesis 1 – 15*, 71. Likewise, Victor Hamilton explains that "the man's *this one, this time, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh* becomes a covenantal statement of his commitment to her." (italics original) Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), 180.

⁴⁹ F. F. Bruce points out that "the formation of Eve to be Adam's companion is seen to prefigure the creation of the church to be the bride of Christ." The human relationship of marriage is deeply theological by essence and design. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 395.

⁵⁰ This brief treatment has focused on the companionship that springs from the covenantal "one flesh" union. The opening chapters of Genesis have much more to commend about marriage, such as sexual expression, stewardship of resources, and progenerating. See Genesis 1:28.

Winston Smith suggests that the emotional bond is an “embodiment of the ‘one flesh’ principle of the Bible.”⁵¹ McFee and Monroe argue that “the language of attachment bonds may be viewed as same-saying with the theological language of covenant bonds.”⁵² It is reasonable to see some similarities between a marital attachment bond and the “one flesh” union. For example, both are characterized by closeness, companionship, intimacy, sexual pleasure, and stability. However, these similar characteristics are incidental and not indication of sameness. To conflate emotional bonding with covenant companionship is to minimize important and legitimate differences. Despite perceived overlapping features, an emotional bond within attachment theory is decidedly not the same as covenant-keeping companionship within a biblical framework.

In EFT, marriage is fundamentally an attempt to fulfill an emotional bonding need procured by naturalistic evolution. In Scripture, marriage is fundamentally two created image-bearers, a man and a woman, seeking to display God’s glory through covenant-keeping, self-giving companionship. In anthropological terms, Scripture does not describe humans as defined by relational attachment needs that drive men and women to romantic relationships with others. Biblically, humans are created in the image of God and interpersonal relationships are a part of the way humanity reflects the image of the Triune God.⁵³

Since the construct of an emotional bond explains the nature and meaning of marriage in Johnson’s model, it makes sense that Johnson would point to the emotional bond when marriages become troubled. She asserts that “the key issue in marital conflict is the security of this bond.”⁵⁴ Johnson presents attachment theory as the way that science has now clinically explained romantic relationships. She says that “attachment is a clinical theory that takes the mystery out of adult love and shows us the plot underlying the drama of distress so that we can redirect this drama effectively.”⁵⁵ She goes on to say that “attachment theory offers

⁵² Michael R. McFee and Philip G Monroe, “A Christian Psychology Translation of Emotion-Focused Therapy: Clinical Implications,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 30, no. 4 (2011): 323.

⁵³ Scripture teaches that humans are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-28). While debates ensue in regard to how to best define image-bearing, reflecting and mirroring the Creator is inherent to the concept. The God of the Bible is triune; three persons subsisting in one God.

⁵⁴ Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy*, 48.

⁵⁵ Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy*, 36.

answers to some of the most fundamental questions about human relationships.”⁵⁶ According to Johnson, this becomes the master key to understanding marriage and marriage problems. Johnson claims that “the problem is never about content issues, whether those issues are sex, money, parenting, or in-laws,” but “the issue is always how the couple talks together and deals with key attachment needs and fears.”⁵⁷ In EFT, marriage problems arise from damaged or unsecure emotional connections and negative interaction cycles.

Returning to the opening chapters of Genesis, the Bible offers an explanation for marital discord. Namely, the historic fall wherein Adam and Eve sinned against the Lord is the fountainhead for marriage troubles. Marriage problems are the result of human sin.⁵⁸ A broken relationship with God is the source of broken relationships between people. In this way, EFT gets human nature and the nature of human conflict wrong. The importance of this assumption cannot be overstated, because the biblical solution of two sinners being changed by the gospel of Christ through faith and repentance only makes sense if the problem is rightly diagnosed as sin and the effects of sin.

A FOCUS ON EMOTION

Susan Johnson argues that “emotion is key in organizing attachment behaviors and in organizing the way the self and the other are experienced in an intimate relationship.”⁵⁹ Further, she suggests that “problems in relationships are maintained by the way interactions are organized and the dominant emotional experience of each partner in the relationship.”⁶⁰ The focus on emotion is a distinctive of the EFT approach. The claim is that emotion is the key factor in relationships. Johnson clarifies that by emotion she means the “*small number of basic universal emotions*” (italics original).⁶¹ In EFT, these emotions are specifically “anger, fear,

⁵⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 215.

⁵⁸ In Genesis 3, the Bible offers the historical narrative of the original human sin. The sin brought about a fracture in man’s relationship to God and immediately introduced marital problems. Adam abdicated his duties to lovingly lead, protect, and provide for his wife, and Eve rebelled against God and Adam’s God-ordained authority.

⁵⁹ Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy*, 49.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy*, 59.

surprise, joy, shame/disgust, hurt/anguish, and sadness/despair.”⁶² Johnson summarizes her view of emotions as “basically adaptive, providing a response system that is able to rapidly reorganize a person’s behavior in the interest of security, survival, or the fulfilment of needs.”⁶³

The role of emotion in EFT is information processing, which Johnson describes “as an integration of physiological responses, meaning schemes, and action tendencies, as well as the self-reflexive awareness of this experience.”⁶⁴ Emotions are understood to be intuitive responses based on schematic structures developed through personal experience. Johnson explains that “emotional frames or blueprints are constructed in relation to situations that frustrate or satisfy needs and goals.”⁶⁵ Emotion is largely precognitive and reflexive. Johnson says that the flow of emotion follows the contours of appraisal, arousal, reappraisal, and action.⁶⁶ Emotional experiences, upon reflection, can provide opportunity for “compelling feedback on how our environment is affecting us” and serves to “mobilize us to deal rapidly with important personal encounters.”⁶⁷

Emotions are the intrapsychic and interpersonal focus of EFT. Johnson offers three reasons why emotions are the focus in EFT. First, while she sees emotions as generally adaptive, they can “arise out of context and constrict how present situations are processed.”⁶⁸ Second, emotions must be regulated in order to not become overwhelmed by the experience of it. Third, “limitations of emotional awareness or expression” can result in “spirals of negative emotions and interactions.”⁶⁹

In EFT theory, the personal and interpersonal experiences of emotion are viewed as central. Recall that marriage conflict in EFT occurs when the emotional bond is broken, so the emotional experience of emotions like fear, anger, hurt, or

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid, 61.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Johnson goes on to say that “these frames then guide people in the differentiation and classification of experience, and in organizing expectations and reactions. These frames help us predict, interpret, respond to, and control our experience. Emotions are not stored, but are reconstructed by the appraisal of a situation that activates a frame, an organized set of responses.” Ibid., 42.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 60.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 61.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 62.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 63.

sadness between spouses provide the information needed to clarify the negative cycle patterns and resecure the bond. Accessing, enacting, and affirming the emotional experience become vital aspects of the therapeutic process. In EFT, the aim is to change the emotional experience and change the way the couple emotionally experiences one another.

The Bible has much to say about emotions and some of which seems to correspond with aspects of EFT, such as the goodness and importance of emotion in providing information and motivation.⁷⁰ Notwithstanding, EFT presents emotion as a product of evolutionary adaptation and assesses emotion only in terms of utility. Two specific aspects are biblically problematic for how emotion is construed in EFT. First, the notion that emotional experience is seen as adaptive and must be affirmed without interjecting judgment from external frames of reference. Emotions function according to evolutionary adaptivity; they are activated within the self to pursue and preserve self-interests. Emotions are not viewed in moral or ethical terms but only in utilitarian and person-centered terms. For example, anger is not cast as right or wrong but, anger is accepted, affirmed, and explored. The Bible, however, teaches that emotions are either righteous or unrighteous in motivation and expression.⁷¹ On the contrary, a thoroughly positive view of man's nature is assumed by EFT, and emotions are deemed essentially good and trustworthy guides to getting personal attachment needs satisfied. The innate goodness of man is a major tenant of EFT and a major departure from biblical anthropology.

Second, emotions are presented as necessary attachment needs that must be met for a person and relationship to thrive. If a man can secure an emotional bond and get his attachment needs satisfied, he can survive and flourish. On the contrary, the alleged emotional and attachment needs Johnson describes are more accurately deep desires and longings of the heart.⁷² The desire for safety, security,

⁷⁰ For example, in Genesis 4:6, God asks Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen?” The emotions of anger and despair were external responses that corresponded to inward motivations. God probes Cain’s emotive experience in order to draw out the deeper issue of heart-level motivations.

⁷¹ For example, the Apostle Paul write in Ephesians 4:26 to “be angry and do not sin.” The implication is that anger can be expressed in either a sinful or righteous manner.

⁷² Jeremy Pierre asserts that emotions are the “gauge of desire.” Jeremy Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life: Connecting Christ to Human Experience* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016), 40. Similarly, Groves and Smith suggest that emotions express “what we value or love.” Alasdair J. Groves and Winston T. Smith, *Untangling Emotions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 32.

control, affirmation, and so forth are not human needs like water, food, or shelter. While these desires may be expressed and fulfilled in godly ways, they can also become ungodly and sinful. The Bible describes the role of inordinate desires and how otherwise good desires can spiral to the level of sinful demands.⁷³ EFT casts having an emotional connection, bond, and acceptance with another person as essential to humanness in a way the Bible does not. For example, the alleged need for affirmation and acceptance from one's spouse may be an intensely strong desire that is attended by fear, disappointment, and anger when denied, but it cannot biblically be described as an attachment need that must be satisfied in order for the spouse to be emotionally whole and able to love the other. In a biblical framework, addressing the inordinate desires of the heart that are being sinfully expressed is the key issue in understanding and resolving interpersonal conflict.⁷⁴ Unmet expectations and thwarted desires, not unmet attachment needs, are at the heart of conflict.

Johnson says that emotions are the key to solving marital problems. While emotions are important, the Bible goes deeper than the emotional experience to solve human problems. In biblical anthropology, emotions are active expressions of what is in the heart or soul—the immaterial, inner part of the person.⁷⁵ For this reason, the deeper and key issue in marriage problems is not regulating the emotional experience but renewing the heart. Emotions are a gateway to the inner

⁷³ Commenting on James 1:14, Ralph Martin notes that “at the heart of the solicitation to evil (which we may connect with a God-denying stance when the person is set in the midst of trying circumstances) lies the personal (*ἰδίας*) desire (*ἐπιθυμίας*) that is bent on self-interest and self-pleasing.” The desire to meet one’s emotional desires can be an occasion for sin. Ralph P. Martin, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), 36.

⁷⁴ Douglas Moo commenting of James 4:1-2 writes, “The source of these quarrels, James now goes on to note, is *your desires that battle within you*. *Desires* translates the Greek word *hēdonē*, which means simply “pleasure,” but often with the connotation of a sinful, self-indulgent pleasure (we get our word “hedonism” from it).” He continues, “Frustrated desire, James makes clear, is what is breeding the intense strife that is convulsing the community.” Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 181-183.

⁷⁵ Craig Troxel has biblically demonstrated that “the heart feels anger, joy, envy, rage, anxious fear, longing, sorrow, lovesickness, anguish, despair, and many other emotions (1 Sam. 1:8; 4:13; 2 Sam.13:1; Ps.13:5; 69:20; Prov.13:12; 19:3; 23:17; Jer. 8:18; Matt. 5:22; Rom. 9:2).” Craig A. Troxel, *With All Your Heart: Orienting Your Mind, Desires, and Will Toward Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), Kindle Edition, chap. 15. To clarify, emotion is not a function of the heart but it is an external, visceral response to the functions of the heart. On this point, see Jay E. Adam, *A Theology of Christian Counseling: More Than Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 114. For this reason, counseling must not stop at emotion but get deeper to the human heart as the key issue.

workings of the heart.⁷⁶ The experiential, process-oriented focus on affect that aims to aid emotional awareness, emotion regulation, and emotional connections is insufficient to transform the deeper structures of the heart where the underlying thoughts, beliefs, desires, and commitments remained unchanged.

EFT's highly evolved mammal that emotes in order to get attachment needs met is far from a biblical view of man. The Christian, instead, understands man as a worshiping image-bearer who lives according to the overflow of what is in his heart. While Johnson rightly emphasizes the importance of emotion, she defines emotion, construes emotional functions, and prioritizes the emotional experience in ways that are out of step with biblical anthropology. The biblical assumption is that emotion is used to discern what is happening in the heart in response to the person's relational experience.

THE CHANGE PROCESS

When approaching the task of therapeutic change, it is important to consider that EFT is a synthesis of experiential and systemic approaches to therapy.⁷⁷ Humanistic, person-centered, experiential presuppositions are essential to its model of therapeutic change.⁷⁸ Likewise, aspects of systems theory are equally essential to EFT methods.⁷⁹ The intrapsychic and interpersonal combination reflects the convergence of ideas from systems theory and humanistic experientialism to create a distinct form of therapy. The change process aims at intrapsychic

⁷⁶ The primary biblical metaphor for the inner man or soul is the heart. Pierre offers a biblical model of the heart that includes three interrelated and overlapping functions: cognition, affection, and volition. Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life: Connecting Christ to Human Experience*, 22. Troxel defines the heart as “the governing center of a person. When used simply, it reflects the unity of our inner being, and when used comprehensively, it describes the complexity of our inner being—as composed of mind (what we know), desires (what we love), and will (what we choose). Troxel, *With All Your Heart*, Kindle Edition, Introduction.

⁷⁷ Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy*, 40.

⁷⁸ Susan Johnson offers five main tenets of her humanistic experiential approach: It is focused on process, necessity of the therapeutic alliance, health, emotion, and on corrective emotional experience.” Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy*, 41-43.

⁷⁹ Susan Johnson writes, “Systems theory here refers to the systemic structural approach as exemplified by the work of Minuchin and Fishman (1981). Systems theory places the focus on context, that is on present interactions and the power of those interactions to direct and constrict individual behavior. The hallmark of all family systems therapies is that they attempt to interrupt repetitive cycles of interaction that include problematic or symptomatic behavior.” Ibid. 45.

emotion regulation and interpersonal emotional responsiveness.⁸⁰ It is rigorously focused on the present, not past or hypothetical emotional experiences. The therapist is not interested in content but on emotional experience and attachment behaviors.⁸¹ Brent Bradley explains that “the focus is not only on cognitive models cued by affective signals but also on delineating the automatic procedural maps for affect regulation—that is, how one deals with, integrates, pushes away, or acts upon one’s own affect in times of relational distress.”⁸² The therapist is facilitating an emotional experience in order to help raise emotional awareness. Johnson says that “unfolding key emotions and using them to prime new responses to one’s partner in therapeutic enactments is the heart of change in EFT.”⁸³

The EFT therapeutic process can be described in three stages and nine distinct steps. Each of the steps work within the stages to sort out the emotional experience of each partner and to reconnect the couple by facilitating the creation of a more secure emotional bond. Johnson articulates three major stages in the EFT process: de-escalation, restructuring the bond, and consolidation.⁸⁴ In other words, the EFT therapist aims at helping the client become aware of his own emotional experience and needs and how to become emotionally accessible, responsive, and engaged with his spouse.⁸⁵ The ideal outcome that depicts therapeutic success is each spouse becoming “a source of security, protection, and contact comfort for the other” and helping to “assist the other in regulating negative affect and

⁸⁰ Susan Johnson says that the first goal of therapy is to access and reprocess the emotional responses underlying each partner’s often narrow and rigidly held interactional position, thereby facilitating a shift in these positions toward accessibility and responsiveness, the building blocks of secure bonds. The second goal of therapy is to create new interactional events that redefine the relationship as a source of security and comfort for each of the partners.” *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸¹ Susan Johnson notes that “the problem is framed in terms of the way the couple interacts, and the emotional responses that organize such interactions.” *Ibid.*, 132.

⁸² Brent Bradley, “New Insights into Change in Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy,” in *The Emotionally Focused Casebook: New Directions in Treating Couples*, ed. James L. Furrow, Susan M. Johnson, and Brent A. Bradley (New York: Routledge, 2011), 62.

⁸³ Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy*, 17.

⁸⁴ The three stages contain nine steps. Stage one includes four steps: (1) alliance & assessment, (2) identify negative cycle/attachment issues, (3) access underlying attachment emotions, and (4) reframe problem, cycle, and attachment needs/fears. Stage two includes three steps: (1) access implicit needs, fears, models of self, (2) promote acceptance by other - expand dance, and (3) structure reach & response, express attachment needs, and create bonding interactions. Stage three includes two steps: (1) facilitate new solutions and (2) consolidate new positions, cycles, and stories of secure attachment. Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy*, 21.

⁸⁵ Johnson explains that a secure attachment bond is characterized by “mutual emotional accessibility, responsiveness and engagement.” *Ibid.*, 17.

constructing a positive and potent sense of self.”⁸⁶ An important feature is that “intervention is marker guided.”⁸⁷ In EFT, change is about facilitating the creation of new emotional experiences within the individual and the marriage.⁸⁸ Johnson notes that “the goal is to discover and clarify the emotional reality—the engine of fears and longings behind the narrative that each client brings concerning their problems and dilemmas.”⁸⁹

At the end of EFT, the aim is for the couple to display the following marks of therapeutic progress.⁹⁰ The couple will display individual/interpersonal regulation of affect. The couple will be more emotionally accessible, responsive, and engaged with one another. Each spouse will have a new perspective of the self, on the other, and on the relationship. The negative interaction cycles will have been replaced with a more secure, positive emotional attachment.

In contrast, the Bible provides a model for how change and growth occurs. The biblical change process does not accord with Johnson’s core assumption that “change in EFT is associated with the accessing and reprocessing of the emotional experience underlying each partner’s position in the relationship.”⁹¹ EFT has a therapeutic process that telically facilitates change in how couples emote toward one another, and the change in emotional posture and practice is meant to reestablish an emotional bond in which each partner feels that his or her needs are being met. In EFT, the problem is fundamentally emotional and attachment based. Biblically, the problem in broken relationships is fundamentally sin and its effects. In this way, relationship problems are spiritually rooted.⁹² Anthropologically, EFT

⁸⁶ Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy*, 17.

⁸⁷ Greenberg, *Emotion-Focused Therapy*, 85. Johnson expounds, “A marker is a point in therapy where a particular type of expression or interactional event signals to the therapist an emotional processing or interactional problem, or an opportunity to intervene in the above.” Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy*, 122. These markers can intrapsychic or interpersonal in nature.

⁸⁸ Johnson argues that “change is not then primarily the result of insight, the ventilation of emotion, or improved skills. It arises from the therapist leading a client INTO and THROUGH their most emotionally charged experience. This results in the formulation and expression of new emotional experience that has the power to transform how the individual structures his internal drama, views him- or herself, and communicates with others.” *Ibid.*, 43.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁹¹ Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy*, 49.

⁹² In Ephesians 2:1-3, the Apostle Paul defines the human problem as being spiritually dead and living according to the sinful desires of the heart. Therefore, it follows that no hope exists apart

does not accord biblically with the nature of human problems or God's solution for human problems.

The model of change presented in Scripture is sanctification.⁹³ Biblical change is the process of conforming the active participant into the image of Christ so that he may love God and others rightly for God's glory.⁹⁴ Repairing human relationships in a way that pleases God requires Spirit-empowered sanctification and applying the resources of the Word of God to the specific problems couples face. For example, Robert Jones offers a biblical model that presents five foundational principles for biblical, Christ-centered change.⁹⁵ These principles, as opposed to EFT, are redemption-oriented, address sin and suffering, and aim at heart-level and behavioral changes through the power of God's Word and Spirit. These foundational assumptions lead to three key movements in the biblical change process: believing, repenting, and obeying.⁹⁶ Repairing human relationships requires faith, repentance, and obedience toward God. The point is that the Bible has a change process that does not cohere with EFT. Counseling on the basis of biblically faithful assumptions will produce a biblically coherent methodology for the purpose of helping married couples to have a relationship that pleases God.

from the regeneration and renewal of the human heart. See also Titus 3:3-7.

⁹³ Louis Berkhof defines sanctification as “*that gracious and continuous operation of the Holy Spirit, by which He delivers the justified sinner from the pollution of sin, renews his whole nature in the image of God, and enables him to perform good works*” (italics original). Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1996), 532.

⁹⁴ See Romans 8:29, 1 Corinthians 15:49, Ephesians 4:13, and Colossians 1:28. Biblical change is nothing less than growing in Christ-likeness.

⁹⁵ Here are Jones' five foundations principles of biblical change. First, godly change is God's work (Romans 8:28-39; Philippians 1:6). Second, godly change is motivated by God's grace and promises. Third, godly change involves the believer actively responding in faith and obedience to God's work (Philippians 1:6; 2:12-13) Fourth, godly change is a process of maturation, of what theologians call progressive sanctification (2 Peter 1:3-11). Fifth, godly change occurs in the context of God's church, that is, within the body of believers (Acts 2:42-47; Ephesians 4:11-16; Hebrews 10:24-25). Robert D. Jones, “An Overview of the Change Process,” in *The Gospel for Disordered Lives: An Introduction to Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling*, ed. Robert D. Jones, Kristin L. Kellen, and Rob Green, (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2021), 150-156.

⁹⁶ Believing entails recognizing and embracing the past, present, and future provisions and promises of God made in Christ. Repenting means to turn to Christ in faith while turning from and forsaking behavioral sins and heart-level sins. Obeying means to put off the sinful desires and works of the flesh and putting on Christ and bearing the fruit of the Spirit. Ibid., 150-156.

CONCLUSION

The thesis advanced in this paper is that EFT must be rejected by Christian counselors on the basis that the theory's primary assumptions as articulated by Susan Johnson are incompatible with biblical anthropology. The thesis has been demonstrated in the following ways. First, the argument was made that methodology is unavoidably connected to underlying assumptions that are value-laden and telic-oriented. Second, Susan Johnson's primary assumptions were contrasted with biblical anthropology. The disparity between EFT and biblical anthropology was demonstrated in the matters of human nature, the purpose of marriage, the function of human emotions, and the change process.