

THE JOURNAL OF BIBLICAL SOUL CARE

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

Articles by
Marshall Adkins
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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

A NEW ERA FOR THE

JOURNAL OF BIBLICAL SOUL CARE

Dr. Greg E. Gifford¹

THE JBSC NICHE

In 2017, I surveyed the landscape of biblical counseling and soul care to notice that there were no academic journals within our field. A designated place where leaders, experts, scholars, and varying academic institutions could dialogue. There were excellent publications by CCEF, like the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, but those were more methodological in their scope. Also, varying publishers have picked up on the value of biblical counseling so publishing has burgeoned year-over-year. But there was still not a place for academic conversations in print form. Then, ACBC started what was known as its “Essays.”

Around 2018, the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors was transitioning executive directors—from Heath Lambert to Dale Johnson—and also began its academic publications known as ACBC Essays. I had the opportunity to speak at the ACBC Colloquium and publish my paper in the subsequent ACBC Essays of 2019, volume II. Concurrently, the Biblical Counseling Coalition has hosted a retreat of sorts in northern Georgia where invitation-only leaders were welcome to come, read papers, sharpen one another, and potentially publish those papers.

Again, there was no consistent academic journal for upstream conversations within our field. I have desired to fill that academic niche with the *JBSC*, eager to welcome new authors and contributors. “Focus on the ideas behind the methods,”

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is my mantra to would-be contributors. As projected in the 2017 edition of the *JBSC*, this was no easy task. Here are my words from that volume:

For biblical counseling to truly be biblical in fifty years, it will need individuals to focus on the theological and theoretical principles that undergird the methodologies of the movement. The popularity and relevancy of biblical counseling methodology has a potential to underemphasize (perhaps already has?) the foundational theology upon which those methodologies are and were built.²

That vision is continuing to drive the *JBSC* into its fifth year of publications and forward.

A NEW ERA WITH ACBC

This past year was one of no small significance for the *JBSC*. I began to approach organizations who were positioned to better distribute the *JBSC* and were willing to commit resources to its publication. I found my colleagues at The Master's University to be excellent sounding boards and wise friends, but saturated in the busyness of ministry. Thus, the day-to-day of publication schedules, editing, and further acquisition of articles was understandably falling largely on me. I wanted to get support and further resources, which is why I contacted ACBC.

ACBC is not a new organization but has grown in the past few years to offer greater emphasis on publications. As of late, ACBC has even founded their own resource arm, *Truth in Love*[®], which include a podcast, books, and booklets. They were a natural candidate, and after several conversations, the *JBSC* has migrated to ACBC's purview. You are reading the first volume after the transition of the *JBSC* to ACBC.

It has been my intention to carve out the upstream conversations of biblical soul care, and that is the continued mission of the *JBSC* going forward. ACBC has hosted Colloquiums to this end, published ACBC Essays to this end, and welcomed the *JBSC* as part of their desire to foster discussions upstream. The

² Greg E. Gifford, *The Journal of Biblical Soul Care*, (Fall 2017: Vol. 1): 5-6.

JBSC's purpose statement is to "advance scholarship for the biblical care of souls within higher education." That was the mission five years ago, at the inception of the *JBSC*, and that is the mission statement now. ACBC Essays, that were similar in target, are now going to be superseded by the *JBSC*. The *JBSC* will continue in this new era to speak to the same target audience—educators, theologians, instructors in counseling, and academics.

My position has changed a bit, however. I was acting as a Managing Editor by working with authors, editors, copy/content editing, and administration. Now, I will serve as the General Editor and provide oversight to the articles, themes, provide some content editing, and work with the ACBC publication staff. It is my personal aim, and the aim of ACBC, to grow the quality of articles, theme of volumes, and critique of authors would only grow in excellence through these new roles.

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT

As stated above, our mission statement will remain the same. The structure of each volume is informed by that statement, to include editorials, articles, responses, and book reviews. Each of these aspects are a key element of the upstream conversation of biblical soul care.

Articles

Articles are a means of helping contribute through increased clarity on a topic, advancement of a conversation, the exposition of key biblical texts, and other related areas. If you would like to contribute an article, just remember that we are addressing the "why" that informs the "what." And, to be candid, the more exegetical your work, the better! The *JBSC* is aimed at writing upstream articles. These may have been read at different contexts or be parts of a dissertation, but the articles are supporting our mission of advancing scholarship.

Reviews

Reviews are another means of advancing scholarship. A copious book review helps readers, educators, writers, and academics think sharply on a given topic. A

good book review should not be laudatory only. Rather, it should identify what makes a book worth-while and share the strengths of the content of that book. To be candid, within biblical soul care, I have often wondered what books do we *not* recommend? There are glowing endorsements on every new book that has been published by varying leaders in our movement. At times, I'd like to think there are certain erroneous concepts that make a book "unusable." The goal of the *JBSC*'s reviews is not to provide greater notoriety to the author, but genuinely evaluate the book through the lens of Scripture.

Responses

In five years, we have not had one response. *Not one*. Now, there are varying cultural reasons I believe contribute to this phenomenon. For instance, we don't want to be seen as a curmudgeon, who only has negative comments with no positive contributions (or hopefully we don't!). Many leaders in the movement are too busy to write their own article, nonetheless, thoughtfully critique another person's article. The individuals who are most willing to critique are often PhD students who may not be the most qualified for such a task. Or some amalgamation of the above reasons might prevent us from responding.

Yet, those in the biblical soul care movement know of the importance of a good response. Our movement has been shaped by them. In 2002, Ed Welch published, "How Theology Shapes Ministry: Jay Adams' View of the Flesh and an Alternative" in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*.³ That response by Welch warranted another response by Jay Adams, which brought about further clarity in the movement and particularly around habituation, the flesh, Romans 7, and behaviorism. Whatever we think of Welch's response, his work elucidates my point: good responses are necessary for the development and excellence of a field.

So, feel free to send your responses to jbsc@biblicalcounseling.com. This section of our volumes will remain present, even if they are currently empty. They are a sign to the reader that we must continue to sharpen each other and subject our own thoughts to that of established scholars in our own field. Too often biblical soul care has harbored self-proclaimed experts, and our responses (not to mention greater peer review) are integral to a faithful future.

³ Ed Welch, "How Theology Shapes Ministry: Jay Adams' View of the Flesh and an Alternative," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 20, no. 3 (2002): 16–25.

THIS PARTICULAR VOLUME (VOL. VI, I)

I am pleased to introduce two newer authors to you, and two authors you've heard from in the past. Marshall Adkins is a Pastor in Kentucky who has brought us an article assessing the compatibility of Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) with biblical anthropology. His answers are insightful because he breaks down the anthropology of EFT, which leads to a biblical analysis. Take a look at Adkins' work for even a template of how to assess psychological methods and let him show you the dangers of counseling eclecticism.

Rhenn Cherry, a known author to the *JBSC*, has provided an assessment of Richard Baxter's pastoral theology. Particularly, Cherry homes in on the use of Scripture by Baxter. This was a strikingly interesting thesis because Baxter has been commended by many great individuals: Spurgeon, Keller, Powlison, Piper, and so forth. But I've never paused to evaluate how he used Scripture to develop the doctrines he so prominently taught. Cherry does so and, I think, answers the use of Baxter's place in soul care.

Ed Wilde has continued to provide Grade-A articles and has done so again in this volume. Wilde has an uncanny ability to articulate the way we should be thinking, as you may recall from last volume's "Knowledge Hermeneutic." In this volume, he critiques Empiricism by demonstrating what it is and next, where it is incompatible with certain theological commitments.

Lastly, a newer name—Jeremy Oliver. The first paper I read from Jeremy was not on Chrysostom's pastoral care, but another paper regarding Ephesians 4. When I read that paper, I knew Oliver was just the type of author that the *JBSC* needed. He graciously has submitted an article studying Chrysostom's pastoral care here. Try to keep up with Oliver and you will be blessed immensely by his work.

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

—1 Timothy 1:17

IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES:

Emotionally Focused Therapy and Biblical Anthropology

Marshall Adkins¹

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. Dalgleish, 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.

RICHARD BAXTER'S USE OF SCRIPTURE IN PASTORAL MINISTRY

*Rhenn Cherry*¹

INTRODUCTION

Richard Baxter was born November 12, 1615 in Rowton, England, and was baptized into the Church of England one week later; however, he was not converted until the age of fifteen.² As a young boy, Baxter lived with his mother apart from his father, most likely due to gambling debts incurred by his father. Baxter's father was also baptized into the Church of England as a child, but was not born again until he was an adult. And it was his own father who turned out to be Baxter's best teacher. Young Baxter was particularly impacted by his father's piety in maintaining the rest and holiness of the Sabbath.³ Biographer Frederick Powicke confirmed that "his father, though no scholar, taught him so to read the Bible as to acquire a love for it, a benefit which ever afterwards he recalled with gratitude."⁴ After his mother's death and his father's remarriage, Baxter became close to his step-mother and referred to her example of fervent prayer, contempt for the world, and holiness and mortification of sin.⁵

During his childhood, Baxter contracted smallpox, chronic cold and cough, nose-bleeding and spitting of blood. His sickly nature drove him to become consumed with his own apprehension of an afterlife, and he felt called to become

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²Irvonwy Morgan, *The Nonconformity of Richard Baxter* (London: Epworth Press, 1945), 38; Goeffrey F. Nuttall, *Richard Baxter* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1965), 11.

³Morgan, 38; Nuttall, 7-8; Frederick J. Powicke, *A Life of the Reverend Richard Baxter 1615-1691* (London: Jonathan Cape, Ltd., 1924), 15.

⁴Powicke, 15-17.

⁵Ibid., 19.

a pastor and communicate the hope of the gospel to others.⁶ His desire to lead the lost from eternal damnation into eternal worship would later become a major theme in his written works.

Baxter was ordained by the Church of England at age 23, and his decision to be a preacher forced the issue of his conformity or non-conformity to the contents of the *Book of Common Prayer*. Two years later he found himself sympathetic to the nonconformist Puritans and joined their ranks.⁷ It was not the content of the *Book of Common Prayer* that influenced Baxter's decision to become a nonconformist, but instead it was his observance of how badly the Puritans were treated by Bishops for their departures from the prescribed order of worship.⁸ Baxter's main pastoral ministry took place in the town of Kidderminster where he shocked his congregations by preaching the doctrine of original sin and against infant baptism.⁹ It was there that he began catechizing families and individuals once a year, and revival followed. During the last thirty years of his life, Baxter was unable to serve as a pastor due to poor health and imprisonment.¹⁰ But during this time he wrote prolifically and finished his life with 140 published works.¹¹

RICHARD BAXTER'S USE OF SCRIPTURE IN PASTORAL MINISTRY

A survey of Richard Baxter's works confirms his use of Scripture in pastoral ministry and writing that emphasized inspection of oneself, pursuit of the lost with the gospel message, catechization of families and individuals, and practice of church discipline. But he utilized Scripture mostly to explain a proper motivation for pastoral ministry instead of detailing methods for doing pastoral ministry. The majority of scriptural evaluation in this paper was done for his most popular book, *The Reformed Pastor*, but some other written works that Baxter addressed to *all* Christians were also evaluated for his use of Scripture in his pastoral ministry.

⁶Morgan, 39; Nuttall, 10-11; Powicke, 20. Baxter, *Reformed*, 8.

⁷Morgan, 39; Powicke, 20.

⁸Nuttall 12-14; Powicke 20-21.

⁹Morgan, 41; William L. Lamont, *Richard Baxter and the Millenium: Protestant Imperialism and the English Revolution* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 16.

¹⁰William Orme, *The Life and Times of the Rev. Richard Baxter: With a Critical Examination of His Writing* (New York: J. Leavitt, 1831), 346-366.

¹¹Goeffrey F. Nuttall, *Richard Baxter* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1965), 114.

TAKE HEED TO YOURSELF

Richard Baxter confirmed that on December 4, 1655, a group of Protestant pastors met in Worcester, England and formally agreed to renew a practice of pastoral ministry and teach the faith to their congregations by way of catechism.¹² More specifically, these pastors met “to pray earnestly for three requests: pardon of their previous neglect; God’s special help in the work they now committed themselves to undertake; and the success of their renewed teaching with their church members.”¹³ Richard Baxter was supportive of the group’s intentions, but he was unable to attend this meeting due to ill health. Instead, he composed a lengthy correspondence to his brothers in the faith summarizing his own motivation and general approach to pastoral ministry. His letter would be published one year later as *The Reformed Pastor* and would prove to be the most popular of his 140 published works.¹⁴ Although Baxter did shed light into his own methods for organizing and carrying out pastoral ministry, *Reformed* is much more of an appeal for renewed commitment to teach congregants corporately and individually than it is an instruction manual on how to do group or one-on-one counseling.

Baxter’s works overwhelmingly begin with reminders for the ones doing ministry – whether pastor, deacon, or laity – to examine themselves with Scripture. For example, roughly the first half of *Reformed* is dedicated to developing the needs of character examination, self-oversight, and repentance for current and would-be leaders who would respond to the call of the ministry.¹⁵ Even when he seemed to be moving on in *Reformed* to a “how to” section for overseeing the flock, Baxter demonstrated the priority he placed on introspection and reverted back to emphasizing self-examination of motives for doing pastoral ministry.¹⁶ Baxter maintained that the theme of *Reformed* was contained in the words of Acts 20:28, where Paul exhorted the Ephesian elders to “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to

¹² Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor: A Pattern for Personal Growth and Ministry*, James M. Houston, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 3.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ James M. Houston, “Editor’s Note About Baxter and the Relevance of The Reformed Pastor” in *The Reformed Pastor: A Pattern for Personal Growth and Ministry*, James M. Houston, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), xi.

¹⁵ Baxter, *Reformed*, 3-62.

¹⁶ Ibid., 85-117.

care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”¹⁷ The two-fold duty that Paul communicated to elders was to take heed first to themselves and then to all their flocks.

For example, Baxter warned that ministry in general, and pastoral ministry in particular, could be hindered by sin. He stated that “unpardoned sin will never let us rest and prosper” and cited Proverbs 28:13 as an encouragement for leaders to repent of sin, publicly when appropriate.¹⁸

Baxter acknowledged the very real possibility that even preachers who had faithfully warned many others about the place of eternal torment could miss out on knowing the God who saves. To balance the vivid picture of preachers in hell, he provided the scriptural support of Daniel 12:3 as encouragement for those who turn others to repentance and faith.¹⁹ That biblical picture of God’s wise obedient servants shining eternally like stars was certainly appealing. But Baxter quickly followed up with a strong admonition for pastors to inspect themselves as to whether or not they had personally experienced the glory of the gospel that they faithfully proclaimed to others.²⁰

Again, Baxter implored pastors to “Take heed therefore, to yourselves first. See to it that *you* be the worshipper which you persuade others to *be*. Make sure first that you believe what you persuade others daily to believe. Make sure that you have heartily entertained the Christ and the Holy Spirit in your own soul before you offer him to others.”²¹ He cited Paul’s words from Romans 2:21-23 as clear and specific warning against “secret sin” in the life of a shepherd.²² Baxter consistently wrote against a church leader’s sinful tendency to preach the law of the Bible to others but willfully and secretly break it himself.

¹⁷ Baxter, *Reformed*, 10. All scriptural quotations are from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

¹⁸ Ibid., 4. Proverbs 28:13: “Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.”

¹⁹ Ibid., 27. Daniel 12:3: “And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 28.

²² Ibid., 29. Romans 2:21-23: “you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.”

Baxter directed pastors to Peter's warning in 2 Peter 2:17-19 about false prophets and teachers and reminded them that living a life of secret sin was an indication of their own eternal fate.²³ He used that passage to demonstrate how easily overcome leaders can become by the very sin they preach against. Acknowledging a corruption of authority within the pastorate, he warned "Yes, it is easier to judge sin than to overcome it."²⁴ Baxter consistently challenged his readers to yield themselves to an obedience that leads to eternal life instead of a secret rebellion that leads to eternal death.

Baxter referenced Romans 6:16 to further his appeal for elders to examine their own lives – specifically an honest self-examination of whom the pastor has truly submitted himself to as a slave.²⁵ He encouraged leaders to allow no room for self-interest, money, security, and respect as benefits of their ministry. Baxter cited these selfish tendencies as evidence that a pastor is serving the wrong master. His words were piercing: "Do you think someone can fight against Satan with all his might, who is the servant of Satan himself? Will he do any great harm to the kingdom of the devil when he is himself a member and subject of that kingdom? Will he be true to Christ who is in covenant with his enemy, and has not Christ in his heart?²⁶ While Baxter's primary concern was the salvation of pastors themselves, he was also quick to point out the damage that an unregenerate leader could bring upon the local church and ultimately the name of Christ.

Baxter titled the third chapter of *Reformed* "The Oversight of Ourselves," and in it he walked his readers through the collateral damage that disobedient pastors can bring on local church bodies and ultimately the name of Christ. He sought to motivate church leaders to be diligent in relying on the Lord. He utilized Paul's desperate plea in 2 Corinthians 2:16 of "Who is sufficient for these things!" as well as Peter's desire for godliness in 2 Peter 3:11.²⁷ Baxter simply acknowledged that

²³ Baxter, *Reformed*, 29. 2 Peter 2:17-19: "These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved. For speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person to that he is enslaved."

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.* Romans 6:16: "Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness."

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 30. 2 Peter 3:11: "Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people

self-confident pastors fail and ultimately bring disdain upon the holiness of Christ and His Bride.

Having clearly addressed the importance of church leaders experiencing the saving grace of God themselves in *Reformed*, Baxter emphasized a pastor's duty to study as hard to *live* correctly as he did to *preach* correctly.²⁸ He cited the words of James 1:22-25, a popular sermon passage, as foundational to a demonstrated life of holiness for pastors *outside* the pulpit.²⁹ According to Baxter, part of taking heed to one's self involved asking for and applying God-given diligence in order to avoid living a careless life before one's congregation.

Baxter frequently used negative examples of corrupt leadership in the Bible to demonstrate the damage that can be done through the scandalous behavior of God's appointed leaders. He referenced the sad story of Eli's turning a blind eye to his sons' corrupt behavior in administering the holy sacrifices of God's people. Baxter cited the words of an unnamed prophet of God to Eli in 1 Samuel 2:29 as part of God's judgement on Eli and his family.³⁰ Baxter clarified for pastors that they bore a heavier load than other men to rightly handle the honor of teaching God's truth, and this involved living above reproach themselves. He warned that "The nearer men stand before God, the greater dishonor has He by our defaults. And these inconsistencies will be attributed more by foolish men to God himself."³¹

Baxter warned that gossip and blasphemy of God's holy name resulted from the revealed sins of pastors. He effectively used the story of King David's secret sin and God's subsequent revelation and judgment of that sin through the mouth of Nathan the prophet in 2 Samuel 12:11-14.³² King David's brokenness and

ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness."

²⁸ Baxter, *Reformed*, 33.

²⁹ Ibid. James 1:22-25: "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing."

³⁰ Ibid., 38. 1 Samuel 2:29: "Why then do you scorn my sacrifices and my offerings that I commanded, and honor your sons above me by fattening yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering of my people Israel?"

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. 2 Samuel 12:11-14: "Thus says the Lord, "Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor,

repentance notwithstanding, the disgrace of God's holy name brought on by David's sin is the central issue in the passage. Baxter further prodded his readers to examine their own commitment to the holiness and glory of the God whom they preached and asked them a series of graphic questions: "O brethren, could your hearts endure hearing men throw the dung of your own iniquities in the face of our holy God? Or in the face of the Gospel? Or in the face of those who fear the Lord? Would it not break your hearts to think that all godly Christians around you will suffer the reproach of your misdoings?"³³

Baxter's warning to pastors to take heed to themselves ultimately terminated on the well-known and often-preached warning from Jesus in Matthew 7:21-23.³⁴ His heart-felt appeal to church leaders could not have been clearer: "First of all, you have heaven to win or lose yourselves. This is your goal as well as leading souls to everlasting happiness or misery. Therefore, you should begin at home and take heed to yourself first. It is possible for preaching to succeed in the salvation of others without bringing holiness to our own hearts or lives."³⁵ Baxter's words constantly reminded readers, whether pastors or laymen, of their depraved nature and need for the mercy and grace of God in Christ Jesus.

PURSUE THE LOST WITH THE GOSPEL

Driven by a life-long sense of his own imminent death, Richard Baxter consistently preached and wrote about the gospel call of man to repentance. In "Directions to Unconverted, Graceless Sinners, for the Attainment of Saving Grace," Baxter first reviewed man's lost moral capacity to please God on his own as well as man's ability to understand and freely choose good or evil. Then Baxter appealed to 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 as God's directive to all believers, particularly

and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before Israel and before the sun." David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan said to David, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child who is born to you shall die."

³³ Baxter, *Reformed*, 38.

³⁴ Ibid., 33-34. Matthew 7:21-23: "Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then will I declare to them "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."

³⁵ Ibid.

pastors, to take seriously the ministry of reconciliation that had been entrusted to them.³⁶ Baxter's burden for the lost was made clear as he described God's charge to His people: "To procure their consent to this gracious covenant, he hath "committed" to his ministers the "word of reconciliation;" commanding us "to beseech men, as in the stead of Christ, and as though God himself did beseech them by us, to be reconciled unto God; and to shew them first their sin and misery, and proclaim and offer the true remedy."³⁷

In his introduction to pastors and lay leaders in *Reformed*, Baxter's first main point was "the unquestionable duty of all ministers of the Church to catechize and to teach personally all who are submitted to their care."³⁸ He then listed six components of catechizing, the first four of which explicitly connected personal instruction with evangelization. Baxter's first and second claims, respectively, were "People must be taught the principles of religion and matters essential to salvation" and "They must be taught these principles in the most edifying and beneficial way possible."³⁹

After establishing the need for church leaders to take heed of themselves, repent of sin in their own lives, and approach the Lord's work with humility, Baxter charged pastors to pursue the lost with the gospel. He cited the Lord Jesus's own words in Luke 15:4 as an example of humble but confident pursuit of lost sheep.⁴⁰ Baxter saw this work as two-fold in nature. He maintained that elders must first teach men the ultimate good of knowing their Creator by "open[ing] up the treasures of His goodness for them and tell[ing] them of the glory that is in His presence, a glory which all His chosen people shall enjoy."⁴¹ Lost men must first

³⁶ Richard Baxter, "Directions to Unconverted, Graceless Sinners, for the Attainment of Saving Grace," in *A Christian Directory, or A Body of Practical Divinity and Cases of Conscience, Volume 1: Christian Ethics* (London: Richard Edwards, 1825), 1-2. 2 Corinthians 5:18-20: "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Baxter, *Reformed*, 5.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 71-72. Luke 15:4: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?"

⁴¹ Ibid., 70.

see the beauty of God and the treasure of worshipping Him for eternity. Baxter maintained that once lost men affix their hearts on God and heaven, “All the rest will follow naturally.”⁴² Once lost men were shown their correct purpose of worshipping their holy Creator, they must then be shown the right means of attaining this salvation. This was Baxter’s second step. Lost people need to be shown their own need of redemption. On this point, Baxter cited the prophet Ezekiel’s example as a watchman of individuals and his warning to the wicked in Ezekiel 33:14-15.⁴³ Baxter was sensitive to the presence of lost sheep in each pastor’s congregation, and he encouraged pastors that “as long as there is a strong probability that there are several in our congregation who are in this category, we should labor with all our might on their behalf.”⁴⁴

In chapter seven of *The Cure of Depression and Excessive Sorrow*, titled “Depression and Sin for Christians,” Baxter warned that many who claim to be Christians are simply ignorant of the gospel and the true meaning of grace.⁴⁵ He rebuffed the antinomian claim that a Christian need not examine his own faith and repentance, but should instead question the righteousness of Christ Himself.⁴⁶ This was worldly thinking that had crept into local churches, and in response it was a pastor’s duty to clearly explain the truths of the gospel and the hope that sincerely repentant Christians have in the person and work of Christ. Citing Paul’s example in Philippians 3:8, Baxter challenged any depressed believer’s claim to have truly severed ties with the fleshly love of the things of the world.⁴⁷ No matter what circumstances a born-again believer found himself in, any earthly loss was “dung” for someone who had forsaken everything for Christ.⁴⁸

Baxter appealed to Paul’s example of teaching both publicly and house to

⁴² Baxter, *Reformed*, 70.

⁴³ Ibid., 72. Ezekiel 33:14-15: “Again, though I say to the wicked, “You shall surely die,” yet if he turns from his sin and does what is just and right, if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live; he shall not die.”

⁴⁴ Ibid., 73.

⁴⁵ Richard Baxter, *The Cure of Depression and Excessive Sorrow* (Apollo, PA: Ichthus Publications, 2015), 41.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid. Philippians 3:8: “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.”

⁴⁸ Ibid.

house, and he focused on the aspect of *warning* in Paul's teaching in Colossians 1:28-29.⁴⁹ This passage also supported Baxter's contention that pastors must depend on God and humbly submit to Him to empower their pursuit of the lost. Baxter issued his own personal challenge to pastors to focus on their pursuit of the lost: "It seems to me that he who will let a sinner go to hell simply by not speaking to him gives less place to hell than the Redeemer of souls does. So whoever you pass over, do not forget the unsaved. I say it again. Focus on the great work of evangelism, whatever else you do or leave alone."⁵⁰

A component of Baxter's emphasis on pursuing the lost with the gospel was *ignorance*. Baxter contended that there were the lost who did not understand what the gospel was and the lost who did not recognize that the need for the gospel applied to them.⁵¹ As an example of the first ignorance – that of not understanding – Baxter appealed to the uneducated men of his day with 2 Corinthians 4:3-4 to consider their neglect of God's holiness and His purpose for their lives.⁵² Baxter was clear to point out the satanic nature of the blinding of their minds, and he appealed directly to nonbelievers to not resign themselves to an ignorance of the gospel based on their own literary, educational, or social status shortcomings. Baxter consistently taught that God made provision for all men to be saved, but this still required that faithful pastors preach the gospel to the lost.⁵³

In addressing the second type of ignorance – that of not recognizing one's need – Baxter referred to the example of Nicodemus in John 3:3-5 as one who was highly educated in the Scriptures, but did not understand how those words applied to his own need for the gospel.⁵⁴ Baxter maintained that those bound by this type of ignorance, such as Nicodemus, had a more difficult time submitting to Christ as Lord:

⁴⁹ Baxter, *Reformed*, 72. Colossians 1:28-29: "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me."

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵¹ Baxter, "Directions," 14-15.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 14. 2 Corinthians 4:3-4: "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 15. John 3:3-5: "Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus is a lively instance in this case: a ruler in Israel, and a Pharisee, and yet he knew not what it was to be born again. And the pride of these gallants maketh their ignorance much harder to be cured, than other men's; because it hindereth them from knowing and confessing it. If any one would convince them of it, they say with scorn, as the Pharisees to Christ, "Are we blind also?"⁵⁵

Baxter cited Hebrews 13:17, a verse commonly used as a proof text for justifying church membership and submission to church leaders, in his exhortation of pastors to provide oversight to their flocks.⁵⁶ But instead of affirming pastoral authority, he approached the passage from the perspective of the main thing church leaders – true shepherds – would give an account for to the Lord: the watch care of the souls in their congregation. By way of biblical reference, Baxter gave notice to pastors that while they cannot be held accountable for each soul's decision to accept or reject salvation in Christ, they were responsible for providing each person in their congregations with a clear explanation of the gospel message. And they must do this consistently as a first priority. Including himself with the pastors he wrote to in *Reformed*, Baxter stated that "The work of conversion is the first and most vital part of our ministry."⁵⁷

Baxter gave personal testimony of his own desire for the lost around him to come to saving faith in Christ. "Ah, me! The misery of the unconverted is so great that it calls for our utmost compassion. They are in the grip of bitterness, and as yet have no part nor fellowship in the pardon of their sins nor in the hope of glory."⁵⁸ Baxter drew analogy between his and the Apostle Paul's own burden for the lost, as well as God's purpose of preaching the gospel, by referring to Paul's testimony to Agrippa in Acts 26:15-18.⁵⁹ In *Reformed*, Baxter even confessed to

⁵⁵ Baxter, "Directions," 15-6."

⁵⁶ Baxter, *Reformed*, 72. Hebrews 13:17: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* Acts 28:15-18: "And I said, "Who are you, Lord?" And the Lord said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand on your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles – to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who

his readers that he frequently neglected his own work associated with edifying believers in his congregation in favor of seeking the lost sheep in his congregation. And Baxter maintained that this was right; pursuing the lost was the primary task in a pastor's ministry.

TEACH FAMILIES AND INDIVIDUALS

Richard Baxter used Scripture to impress upon pastors their duty to teach and care for individuals and families. As an example of the tender love required of church leaders for their people, Baxter referenced the apostle Paul's example of parental love from Galatians 4:19.⁶⁰ As spiritual parents, elders should demonstrate to their "spiritual children" that they value nothing – worldly gain or comfort – above the salvation and obedience of those under their care. But according to Baxter, the size of "the family" was a factor in the effectiveness of this parental approach to pastoral ministry. In order to establish the proper relationships required for teaching individuals, Baxter believed that pastors should not attempt to pastor too big of a flock. If an elder could not "*personally* supervise, so that they may 'take heed to all the flock,'" then Baxter considered the congregation was too big.⁶¹

Another use of Scripture by Baxter was the example of Moses in Exodus 32:31-32 as a sacrificial leader willing to have his own name stricken from the book of life in return for the sake of the lives of the rebellious Hebrews that he led.⁶² Baxter challenged pastors to first love their flocks and "When the people see, then, that you love them unfeignedly, they will hear what you say – they will bear whatever you ask – and they will follow you the more readily. And when a wound is given in love, it will be more readily accepted than when one issues a foul word that is merely given in malice or anger."⁶³ Baxter was a proponent of establishing foundational individual relationships with church members, and

are sanctified by faith in me."

⁶⁰ Baxter, *Reformed*, 22. Galatians 4:19: "my little children, for whom I again am in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!"

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 22. Exodus 32:31-32: "So Moses returned to the Lord and said, "Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin – but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written."

⁶³ *Ibid.*

his time commitment and systematic approach to family and individual teaching during his ministry, particularly during his pastorate in Kidderminster, is eye-opening and humbling to anyone considering the duties of a pastor.

Insight into the part of Baxter's ministry for which he became most famous – teaching individuals and families – is found in four consecutive paragraphs of his own introduction to *The Reformed Pastor*.⁶⁴ This is, perhaps, the most prescriptive “how to” section of the book, but the actual content that he used for instruction is not described in *Reformed*.

Baxter began this brief section of *Reformed* with an exhortation for ministers to faithfully, immediately, and effectually carry out a personal and family ministry of teaching followed by Baxter's assurance that reform and revival would follow in the churches.⁶⁵ Then he confessed his regret for neglecting his own pastoral duty in this area. “I was long convinced of its value, but was apprehensive of its difficulties. I did not see clearly enough how important it really was. I imagined people would scorn being involved in it, and that very few would want it. Moreover, I did not think I was capable of doing it, having so many other burdens upon me.”⁶⁶ Baxter gave account of his personal repentance before the Lord for shirking this pastoral responsibility of personally teaching his congregants, and then he took to the road and began catechizing his flock – family by family, and person by person. And the Lord blessed his efforts. “When I did try out personal catechizing and teaching those in my care, I found the difficulties scarcely existed about which I had thought – other than my bodily conditions of ill health. Instead, I found the benefits and comfort of the work to be such that I would not now forgo doing it for all the riches in the world.”⁶⁷ Baxter then moved into a structural and logistical description of how he organized and effected family and individual catechizing of his flock.

When Richard Baxter wrote *The Reformed Pastor* in 1655 during his second pastorate in Kidderminster, his congregation was made up of about eight hundred families.⁶⁸ Baxter humbly divulged to his readers his own method of structuring

⁶⁴ Baxter, *Reformed*, 6.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 5-6.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

and carrying out the teaching of families and individuals in his church:

I do not presume to prescribe rules or forms for you, or to encourage the use of the same catechism or exhortations we use. But let me tell you what I do in my parish. We spend Mondays and Tuesdays from morning to about nightfall, taking some fifteen or sixteen families each week in this work of catechism. With two assistants, we make our way through all of the congregation – about eight hundred families – and teach each family during the year. I have not been refused by a single family when I have asked them to come visit me. And I find more outward signs of success with those who come than in all my public preaching. I am forced by the numbers to take a whole family at once, for an hour each. The clerk of the church goes ahead a week beforehand to arrange the schedules of the timetable. I also keep notes of what each family member has learned so I can continue to systematically teach him or her.⁶⁹

Baxter's own account is both sobering and humbling. It shows an obvious commitment on his part as pastor to edify the local body entrusted to his care, but it also provides evidence of the congregation's willingness to receive the truths of the Word rightly taught. It is staggering that such detailed preparation and execution of a ministry could be accomplished in the seventeenth century environment of limited transportation and communication by today's standards.

Baxter held firmly that it was God's very design for the family – individual households – to be a place of worship.⁷⁰ He spoke against any effort to make parents feel incapable of leading worship in the home: "I never yet read or heard any knowing Christian once affirm that God had forbidden families solemnly to worship him, and therefore I think it needless to prove a negative, when no man is known to hold the affirmative."⁷¹ He applied the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30 and the parable of the wicked tenants in Luke 20:9-16 to the

⁶⁹ Baxter, *Reformed*, 6.

⁷⁰ Richard Baxter, "A Disputation, or Arguments to prove the Necessity of Family Worship and Holiness, or Directions against the Cavils of the Profane, and some Sectaries, who deny it to be a Thing required by God," in *A Christian Directory, or A Body of Practical Divinity and Cases of Conscience, Volume 3: Christian Economics* (London: Richard Edwards, 1825), 53.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

unique “advantages and opportunities” provided to parents by God himself, to whom they would give account one day.⁷² Baxter viewed God’s design for family worship as a literal “talent”: “The aforesaid advantages and opportunities are talents given by God, which they that receive, are obliged faithfully to improve for God; therefore families having such advantages and opportunities for God’s solemn worship, are bound to improve them faithfully for God, in the solemn worshipping of him.”⁷³

But Baxter’s approach to pastoral ministry as described in *Reformed* was certainly not the norm of his day. It was received as quite a challenge by even his like-minded contemporaries. Baxter even received formal objections to his first edition of *Reformed*, to which he responded in an appendix to his later editions.⁷⁴ Reflecting a firm conviction for teaching both individuals and families, Baxter summarized his own purpose for writing *Reformed*: “As you know, it has been the whole vision of this book, and behind that the program of our own parish, to teach the catechism – or basic tenets of the faith – to every family within the parish.”⁷⁵

PRACTICE CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Richard Baxter used Scripture to motivate church leaders and congregants to practice church discipline. He began with a call for pastors and congregations to repent for their lack of church discipline. Baxter pled, “If only it were understood how much of pastoral ministry and work really consists of church guidance. Then there would be so much less prejudice against the proper exercise of discipline. For to be against discipline is to be against the pastoral ministry; and to be against the pastoral ministry is to be against the Church; and to be against the Church is to be against Christ.”⁷⁶ Baxter even maintained that a pastor’s neglect to practice church discipline was a work of the enemy that was on par with neglecting to practice preaching.⁷⁷

⁷² Baxter, “A Disputation,” 53.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Baxter, *Reformed*, Appendixes, III. “Objections to Baxter’s *Reformed Pastor*,” 147-151.

⁷⁵ Baxter, *Reformed*, 124.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 84.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Baxter acknowledged the effectiveness of discipline as a progression from private reproof to public reproof that utilized rebuke, repentance, prayer, restoration, or exclusion from the congregation, when necessary.⁷⁸ He cited Paul's instruction to the younger elder Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:20, along with Titus 2:15, to publicly rebuke persistent sinners so that others may fear the Lord.⁷⁹ The public aspect of repentance was stressed by Baxter as a persuasive component for the penitent believer as well as the congregation that bore witness. He referenced the Apostle Paul's public rebuke of the Apostle Peter at Antioch in Galatians 2:11-14 as a reminder that even pastors were not above the public rebuke for unrepentant sin.⁸⁰

For cases where persistent sinners were rebuked and refused to repent, Baxter cited Paul's words from 2 Thessalonians 3:6 as encouragement for pastors and congregations to keep away from unrepentant professed believers in hopes that they would repent and be restored to the flock.⁸¹ Baxter urged pastors to press through the tiring and discouraging process of church discipline by pointing out the biblical example in 2 Thessalonians 3:13-15 of difficult decisions that must be made sometimes by church leaders for the good of the flock.⁸² He furthered this point by citing Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 5:11-13 to purge the unrepentant evil from the church.⁸³ The purity of Christ's Bride was at stake, and church discipline was God's ordained process for keeping his flock holy.

⁷⁸ Baxter, *Reformed*, 82.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 84. 1 Timothy 5:20: "As for those who persist in sin rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear." Titus 2:15: "Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you."

⁸⁰ Ibid., 82. Galatians 2:11, 14: "But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned....But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

⁸¹ Ibid. 2 Thessalonians 3:6: "Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us."

⁸² Ibid. 2 Thessalonians 3:13-15: "As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother."

⁸³ Ibid. 1 Corinthians 5:11-13: "But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler – not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. "purge the evil person from among you."

In a warning to pastors and congregations against bringing God's wrath upon themselves for lax and careless practice of discipline, Baxter referred to the Lord Jesus's scathing words in Revelation 2:20 to the church in Thyatira.⁸⁴ Baxter added that the church corrupts itself in the eyes of the world "when we give the assumption that: (1) To be Christian is merely a matter of opinion, or (2) the Christian religion demands no more holiness than the false religions of the world. If, then, the holy and unholly alike are all permitted into the same sheepfold without Christ's name to differentiate them, then we defame Christ by these actions, as if He were guilty of them."⁸⁵ He also maintained that a lack of biblical discipline was misleading and permitted "the worst of men to remain uncensored," adding that "many honest Christians" would separate themselves and leave churches that allow this to go on.⁸⁶

While Baxter explicitly endorsed the biblically mandated use of church discipline, he acknowledged that it should be carried out with a "prudent mixture of severity and gentleness."⁸⁷ Baxter warned against severe discipline that could discount a pastor's effectiveness in bearing the truth to a sinner. But he was quick to point out that proper administration of discipline required that the shepherd, as best he could, know the spiritual condition of each of his sheep. Noting that church discipline was rarely practiced, Baxter was urgent in his plea for pastors to begin the neglected practice of discipline immediately:⁸⁸ "And there is scarcely such a thing as church discipline in all the land. I never lived in the parish, I confess, where a single person was publicly admonished or brought to public penitence, or excommunicated even for the vilest offences."⁸⁹ But according to Baxter, the groundwork for effective church discipline was laid with each individual relationship that a pastor developed with the congregants entrusted to him. He contended that "they must know their own congregations first."⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Baxter, *Reformed*, 103. Revelation 2:20: "But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols."

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

CONCLUSION

Richard Baxter's approach to pastoral ministry was scripturally-based and straight forward: "Accordingly, my intended method is, 1. To direct ungodly, carnal minds, how to attain to a state of grace, and 2. To direct those that have saving grace, how to use it; both in the contemplative and active parts of their lives."⁹¹ He consistently challenged professed believers, pastors and laypersons alike, to first inspect themselves for evidence of a regenerate life before engaging in ministry to others. Baxter encouraged Christians to pursue the lost around them with the gospel message, specifically encouraging pastors to speak plainly and clearly to their flocks. He reminded pastors of their duty to feed their sheep corporately and individually within the family structure that God had designed. Baxter encouraged church leaders to utilize the personal relationships they developed with families and individuals during instruction and to do the hard work of practicing church discipline when needed.

The areas of Richard Baxter's pastoral ministry examined in this paper do not represent an exhaustive evaluation based on his one hundred and forty works. An area for further research would be Baxter's desire for unity both among pastors as well as among congregants as reflected in his writings. His use of Scripture to encourage pastors to maintain unity by focusing their preaching and instruction on core doctrines of the Christian faith is worth evaluating.⁹²

⁹¹ Baxter, "Directions," 3.

⁹² Baxter, *Reformed*, 16-17.

A THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF EMPIRICISM

Ed Wilde¹

Teasdale: Your Excellency, I thought you left.

Chicolini: Oh no. I no leave.

Teasdale: But I saw you with my own eyes.

Chicolini: Well, who ya gonna believe me or your own eyes?

-Duck Soup²

INTRODUCTION

Biblical soul care faces the charge it is “unscientific,” as opposed to “psychology” (that notoriously broad term) which is a “science.” While philosophically sophisticated definitions will provide far more nuance, such nuance is not the issue when biblical soul care is said to be “unscientific.” In this case, “scientific” is a rhetorical flourish meant to stop discussion.

Something which is “scientific” is true. Something “unscientific” might be “nice for you,” but it is certainly a substandard sort of knowledge.

Another thing about “scientific” knowledge (I’m going to stop putting quotation marks around “science” and “scientific”) is that it is neutral knowledge: It is information which is true for everyone.³ The function of gravity is identical in a Buddhist Temple and a university lecture room.

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² Duck Soup, directed by Leo McCarey (Paramount Pictures, 1933), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHxGUe1cjzM>.

³ Julian Reiss and Jan Sprenger, “Scientific Objectivity,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/scientific-objectivity/>.

Unscientific knowledge, like biblical soul care, is a sort of *preference*, a sort of biased knowledge. But we can expand the problem with biblical soul care to theological claims generally. Theological claims are not “true” in any hard sense of the term. They are just things people believe “without evidence.”

There is no need to belabor this point: it is a commonplace of our culture and it is a given which is simply “true.” Only a benighted “fundamentalist” would possibly conclude anything different.

What then is the bedrock which gives science such an unassailable claim to truth? First, science is based upon empirical observations. We have access to sense impressions which are self-authenticating and unquestionably true presentations of the world (in fact, even our conscious awareness of sense impressions is itself an empirical fact, and thus self-authenticating). Second, by use of rational inquiry, one can logically understand the world in an objectively true manner.⁴

Those twin claims make science “true.” Since theology is not merely examining sense impressions by means of rational inquiry, it cannot be “true” in the same manner in which other knowledge is true.⁵

My goal in this essay is to undermine the first prong of this “scientism” claim: that sense impressions are self-authenticating. This does not mean that I wish to conclude the physical world is an illusion—far from it. My concern is with the

⁴Nora Mills Boyd and James Bogen, “Theory and Observation in Science,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2021), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/science-theory-observation/>.

⁵Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 79–80: “The modern spirit has opted for empiricism as its way of knowing the externally real world, and the inevitable consequence of this decision is secularity. It was David Hume who first among the moderns formulated empiricism as the all-inclusive criterion of truth and applied it to theological assertions with an agnostic outcome. Hume’s theory struck hard at the Thomist case for Christian theism, which, in contrast to the Scriptures, rests its argument on empirical considerations rather than divine revelation. Hume insisted that effective scientific inquiry is thwarted unless finite effects are correlated with equivalent causes only, rather than with an infinite cause; moreover, he denied any objective status to causality in nature. The Humean assault on Christian theism is therefore specially directed against the Thomistic contention that the existence of God, and the existence and immortality of the soul, are logically demonstrable simply through empirical considerations independent of divine revelation. Hume’s contention was that those who profess theological beliefs on empirical grounds have no right to such beliefs unless they produce requisite perceptual evidence, and that in the absence of demonstrative empirical proof, belief is unreasonable.”

justification, the warrant for the belief that sense impressions are objectively true without recourse to any more basic assumption.

Sense impressions, as you will learn, result from a remarkable, strange process: a process which in-and-of itself cannot justify the content of any sense impression as being “true.” Sense impressions can only be justified as true on the basis of an assertion which cannot be grounded in the sense impressions.

Only a theological presupposition can justify sense impressions as being “true.” And so, rather than theological claims being half-witted step-children of rational inquiry, theological claims are the only thing which makes any rational inquiry possible.

I am going to begin with first asserting the nature of “psychology’s” claim to scientific knowledge about the nature of human knowledge. Having based that assertion on sense impression, I will then proceed to demonstrate the manner in which sense impressions bear an arbitrary and unjustified correlation to the “real world.”

This will necessitate a theological grounding to our knowledge. Psychology, which as a science attempts to bar God from consideration, or to relegate religion to a particular psychological state would necessarily bar biblical soul care as anything other than a rhetorical position. We can use “God-words,” but we cannot base any of our counseling upon an actual God.

And yet, as Dr. Ernie Baker has said, we believe that while counseling, divinity is present.

In a way, I am going to ask you to believe me, rather than your lying eyes.

PSYCHOLOGY’S CLAIM TO KNOWLEDGE ABOUT KNOWLEDGE

Psychology occupies a unique place among academic disciplines.⁶ All disciplines

⁶I am well aware that “psychology” is in practice an almost undefinable term. There are so many

whether science or humanity state a claim to knowledge. Roman history is a claim to knowledge concerning Rome. Physics is a claim to knowledge concerning “matter and energy and the effect that each has on the other.”⁷

Psychology claims to have certain knowledge about the internal “psychological” functioning of human beings. In that respect, psychology is similar to other disciplines. Thus, a psychologist who studies the effectiveness of various teaching techniques would have knowledge about that teaching techniques.

But psychology, or at least certain subdisciplines of psychology, claim to possess knowledge about *how we know*. Such a psychologist would claim to have knowledge about how the physicist can understand matter and energy – not about the experiments or observations of the physicist, but rather how the physicist as a human being can acquire knowledge.

For most of human history, the examination of how we know and the justification of that knowledge, epistemology, was the work of philosophers. And as such, the various positions were up for debate. One could hold to Plato or Kant. But something has happened with psychology’s entry into the field. Rather merely positing a philosophy of knowledge, psychology claims to assert a scientific knowledge of knowledge itself.

THE WORD “SCIENCE”

The word “science” has a peculiar place in our rhetoric. By asserting something is “science,” we mean that it is an unassailable truth; it is an objective determination which must be acceded to by all reasonable people. Think of use of the word “science,” in public discourse with “follow the science” as to Covid protocols. It has been used as a rhetorical trope designed to prevent any further discussion of

different schools of thought and such a wide array of fields, that the term is close to meaningless. For purposes of my examination, I am limiting my concerns in this essay to the sort of “scientific” work which is conducted at a university involving experiments and observations and theories which more or less match the procedures of a hard science. This particular essay will focus primarily upon sensory perception, and will concern matter more in the line of physiology than Freud.

⁷Cambridge Dictionary, “Physics,” (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022), <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/physics>.

the issue.⁸

At this point, I need to take an aside to note the difficulty of discussing “science” at this moment in time. There is a rational contention well-grounded in Christian thought that the world is there, is comprehensible, and follows regular patterns laid down by God. We would call these “laws of nature.” Such laws would have no independent exercise; they did not invent or sustain themselves. Such laws are the regular acting of God in the world.

Eventually, the predominate position of those who examine such “laws” was that the laws had independent existence. Somehow, when the universe of itself sprang from a de Sitter Universe or some other quantum void, the laws of nature popped into existence. Such an assertion is “science.” To say God put such laws and creation into place is superstition.

The argument that since there are “laws” in nature, there is no need to conclude there is a God of nature. God is only “necessary” if each interaction in the physical universe appeared to happen ad hoc.⁹ That the laws themselves need explanation is never adequately explained; but that is beyond our immediate concern.¹⁰ The position that there is an objective world which follows laws which can be observed and largely understood is in a general matter a presupposition for science.

This understanding reached its highwater mark when it was enshrined as federal law in the United States. In case which considered whether Intelligent Design could be taught as science, the court held that “science” is a field of

⁸ Daniel Chandler, “Semiotics for Beginners,” *The Kubrick Site*, last modified November 23, 2021, <http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel//Documents/S4B/sem07.html>: “Tropes generate ‘imagery’ with connotations over and above any ‘literal’ meaning. Once we employ a trope, our utterance becomes part of a much larger system of associations which is beyond our control.”

⁹ A belief in a universe of ad hoc interventions by spiritual beings is quite pagan, but has no basis in the Scripture. Why such an argument has gained traction demonstrates both the ignorance of non-Christians, but perhaps an almost implicit atheism in some Christians.

¹⁰ On what basis would one conclude that the various “laws of nature” have the inherent capacity to self-generate and self-perpetuate? Certainly we experience them to act in a continuous and predictable manner, but our continued experience of the laws is not evidence that they cause themselves to perpetuate. The earth turns, but that is a function of gravity. Why then does gravity continually operate in its manner? This sort of thinking is at heart a sort of naïve belief in magic: it just is and just does and these powers are self-perpetuating. It is really quite strange when you take the time to consider it.

knowledge which specifically excludes God, or any agency (beyond “blind” laws) from consideration:

Expert testimony reveals that since the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries, science has been limited to the search for natural causes to explain natural phenomena. (9:19-22 (Haught); 5:25-29 (Pennock); 1:62 (Miller)). This revolution entailed the rejection of the appeal to authority, and by extension, revelation, in favor of empirical evidence. (5:28 (Pennock)). Since that time period, science has been a discipline in which testability, rather than any ecclesiastical authority or philosophical coherence, has been the measure of a scientific idea’s worth. (9:21-22 (Haught); 1:63 (Miller)). In deliberately omitting theological or “ultimate” explanations for the existence or characteristics of the natural world, science does not consider issues of “meaning” and “purpose” in the world. (9:21 (Haught); 1:64, 87 (Miller)). While supernatural explanations may be important and have merit, they are not part of science. (3:103 (Miller); 9:19-20 (Haught)). This self-imposed convention of science, which limits inquiry to testable, natural explanations about the natural world, is referred to by philosophers as “methodological naturalism” and is sometimes known as the scientific method. (5:23, 29-30 (Pennock)). Methodological naturalism is a “ground rule” of science today which requires scientists to seek explanations in the world around us based upon what we can observe, test, replicate, and verify. (1:59-64, 2:41-43 (Miller); 5:8, 23-30 (Pennock)).

As the National Academy of Sciences (hereinafter “NAS”) was recognized by experts for both parties as the “most prestigious” scientific association in this country, we will accordingly cite to its opinion where appropriate. (1:94, 160-61 (Miller); 14:72 (Alters); 37:31 (Minnich)). NAS is in agreement that science is limited to empirical, observable and ultimately testable data: “Science is a particular way of knowing about the world. In science, explanations are restricted to those that can be inferred from the confirmable data — the results obtained through observations and experiments that can be substantiated by other scientists. Anything that can be observed

or measured is amenable to scientific investigation. Explanations that cannot be based upon empirical evidence are not part of science.” (P-649 at 27).¹¹

I say highwater, because shortly after this extreme form of “science” has come under attack from various directions. For example, science is being attacked on racist and oppressive: “A math education professor in New York City claimed that the equation $2+2=4$ ‘reeks of white supremacist patriarchy.’”¹²

These attacks primarily concern the “reasoned discourse” prong of science. The “reason” aspect of science is beyond the scope of this essay. For purposes of this essay, I will limit my examination of “science” largely to the definition of Kitzmiller and the “scientism” as explained by J.P. Moreland:

In scientism, therefore, science is the very paradigm of truth and rationality. *Strong scientism* implies that something is true, rationally justified, or known if and only if it is a scientific claim that has been successfully tested and that is being used according to appropriate scientific methodology. There are no truths that can be known apart from appropriately certified scientific claims, especially those in the hard or natural sciences.¹³

What this means is that if psychology is making scientific claims to understand human knowledge, psychology is in a position to exclude from consideration all things which “psychology” deems unscientific. Holding a position to “scientific” knowledge of knowing is a powerful place. As will be shown below, the claim to a self-authenticating “scientific” knowledge cannot be sustained, because at its most basic level, the matter of sense perception is itself not self-authenticating.

And if sense-perception, the bedrock of empiricism, is not self-authenticating, then the empirical basis of “science” as self-authenticating lacks grounding. This

¹¹ *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* (M.D. Pa. 2005) 400 F. Supp. 2d 707, 735-36.

¹² Emma Colton, “Math professor claims equation $2+2=4$ ‘reeks of white supremacist patriarchy,’” *The Washington Times*, August 10, 2020, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/math-professor-claims-equation-2-2-4-reeks-of-white-supremacist-patriarchy>.

¹³ J.P., Moreland, “The Ironies of Strong and Weak Scientism,” *JPMoreland.com*, September 27, 2018, <http://www.jpmoreland.com/2018/09/27/the-ironies-of-strong-and-weak-scientism/>.

does not mean that science is a false discipline, nor that there is no “real world.” Rather, it means that we must ground our understanding of the world, and scientific inquiry in something better than sense-perception.

It is the position of this paper, that only by grounding our understanding in the presupposition of the triune God can we adequately begin to do science on a rational basis.

EPISTEMOLOGY AS A SUBDOMAIN OF PSYCHOLOGY

Willard Van Orman Quine, was one of the preeminent philosophers of logic in the 20th Century.¹⁴ He went so far as to sound as if the entire field of epistemology were merely an aspect of psychology:

Epistemology, or something like it, simply falls into place as a chapter of psychology and hence of natural science. It studies a natural phenomenon, viz., a physical human subject. This human subject is accorded a certain experimentally controlled input—certain patterns of irradiation in assorted frequencies, for instance—and in the fullness of time the subject delivers as output a description of the three-dimensional external world and its history. The relation between the meager input and the torrential output is a relation that we are prompted to study for somewhat the same reasons that always prompted epistemology; namely, in order to see how evidence related to theory, and in what ways one’s theory of nature transcends any available evidence.¹⁵

In this sense, psychology has a peculiar relationship to knowledge. But there is more. Again, I wish to emphasize what a profound shift is made by claiming scientific knowledge as the basis of epistemology.

¹⁴This entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy nicely introduces Quine: Peter Hylton and Gary Kemp, “Willard Van Orman Quine,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/quine/>.

¹⁵Richard Foley, “Quine and Naturalized Epistemology,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 19 (1994): 245–260, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4975.1994.tb00288.x>.

The great schools of epistemology gathered around Descartes or Plato or Locke or Kant all base their claim on the strength of philosophical inquiry. But the psychologist claims to “science,” a supposed disinterested and objective understanding of the world. A philosopher may have a “belief,” while science has certain objective knowledge.¹⁶

THE PROBLEM PRESENTED FOR THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY

This presents an interesting problem for the theologian looking at psychology. Theology has moved to a subdomain of philosophy (at best) among the broader academic world, and can argue at best for “faith,” a private arena of opinion which may solace one but has no purchase in the “public square.” This is in contrast to “science” which is a kind of knowledge that cannot be denied by any reasonable human being. In fact, to merely charge someone as rejecting science is sufficient to end the argument.

And so, from a “respectable” position, my undertaking here seems a fool’s errand, or at something centuries out-of-date. But I do not believe that it is true. As we will see, there is a fundamental difficulty which lies at the heart of this sure objective knowledge. In fact, it is by examining the peculiar nature of our senses—as our senses are understood by rational scientific inquiry—that makes the entire edifice of self-attesting science suspect.

The rhetorical trick of asserting “science” is in fact that: a rhetorical move, but neither an argument nor is it evidence. It is just an assertion.

But as we shall see, psychology’s claim to knowledge is far from simple or certain. Its claim to scientific certainty is undercut by that same science which gives rise to its claims. Moreover, the questions of knowledge cannot be resolved with resort to philosophy and theology.

In summary: the work of senses does not give us a reliable *basis* upon which

¹⁶ This is a bit of a simplification. Contemporary philosophers of science, mind, knowledge, etc., interact extensively with scientific inquiry and work out the implications of what has been ascertained. In this sense, they are operating with much better information than a philosopher such as Locke who simply had no idea how the eye functioned at a physiological level.

to be certain about the world. I am not saying there is some defect in our senses; rather, the sensory apparatus is not self-authenticating. We have no reason to trust our senses *if the only ground* of that trust is the senses, themselves (and this becomes quite strange when we realize that what we know about our senses comes from our senses).

If we are to ground a belief in the reliability of our senses and the reality of the objective world, we will not find an adequate ground in the production of neurotransmitters (and the production of neurotransmitters is all our senses do).

THE OVERALL PROJECT

While we will begin in this essay with a consideration of our senses and the production of sense impressions; but that is not the totality of our knowledge. To fully understand the production of knowledge, we will need to carve up the question of knowledge into a series of issues.

There is the initial question of how do we apprehend the environment? The information from the outside must be brought through apparatus of our senses to the creation of the sense impressions. The nomenclature herein will be used with less than the precision of professional philosophical discourse; but such is not needed for our ends. When I refer to “apparatus” I mean the physiological structures which respond to the environment, and then result in the processing of a cognizable unit. Additional questions will arise after we consider the bare sensory impression: questions of meaning of what we have seen; questions of mind and brain.

Also, psychological knowledge claims more than just a knowledge of objects in the environment, it seeks to understand the contents of another human consciousness.

My goal will not be to provide a final answer to these issues (which are matters of specialized concern at each level of analysis), but rather a theological view of such matters. The hope here is to create a framework by which one can consider psychological claims while maintaining one’s theological perspective. And even at

that level, I do not claim to have seen into all issues fully. Rather, I understand this work as opening up field for consideration and development. And so, if any find the matters raised herein underdeveloped, it is a charge to which I readily admit.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “FACTS”?

By claiming to be a science and having a certainty of knowledge, psychology claims to possess facts about the world, and also to propose connections and organizing theories concern the world based upon those facts. The manner in which these allegedly discrete points of information, bytes or data (or whatever other term best suits the occasion), are organized determines the nature of the “meaning” claimed.

I propose a general definition of “meaning” as the relationship of some part to some whole. In the context of the Bible, Jesus’ death “means” the redemption of the elect. In the context of Roman imperial history, it “means” something respecting the expression of Roman power in its territories. Indeed, Jesus’ death has been found to “mean” any number of things.

The facts which we will organize are often obtained by means of observation. Sense data is obtained and categorized. Through a process of laborious induction and repeated observations, certain patterns are perceived, such as rain only falls when there are clouds in the sky; or, my skin feels warmer when the sun shines on it.¹⁷

A theory of some sort is proposed which explains “why” rain is tied to clouds or sunlight is tied to heat. That proposal is then tested. If the proposal after testing continues to make-sense, we have an arrangement of information which we call “science.”¹⁸

¹⁷ This reliance upon “observation” lies at the foundation of modern science, although its basic grounding is in Aristotle according to Boyd and Bogen: “Reasoning from observations has been important to scientific practice at least since the time of Aristotle, who mentions a number of sources of observational evidence including animal dissection (Aristotle(a), 763a/30–b/15; Aristotle(b), 511b/20–25),” but the modern version of this process is commonly attributed to Francis Bacon in the first instance. Boyd and Bogen, “Theory and Observation in Science.” However, this emphasis upon observation was a hallmark of Bacon’s contemporary Tycho Brahe, Reiss and Sprenger, “Scientific Objectivity.”

¹⁸ I have heard it said that science is a mnemonic device: it is simply a collection of recollections;

Without question, psychology, like all science, rests upon an essentially empiricist foundation. Empiricism can be described as follows:

In philosophy generally, empiricism is a theory of knowledge emphasizing the role of experience. In the philosophy of science, empiricism is a theory of knowledge which emphasizes those aspects of scientific knowledge that are closely related to experience, especially as formed through deliberate experimental arrangements. It is a fundamental requirement of scientific method that all hypotheses and theories must be tested against observations of the natural world, rather than resting solely on a priori reasoning, intuition, or revelation. Hence, science is considered to be methodologically empirical in nature.¹⁹

While there are variations among particular schools and particular psychologists (for instance, someone like Jung strays rather far afield from this narrower understanding of “science”), unstated givens for the work run along the lines laid down by Locke and Hume. The world is understood on the basis of induction, generated from sense data. A conclusion is then confirmed by the “scientific method.”²⁰

The foundation of this whole process is the certainty that our sensory apparatus provides us a sure access the world. Science is built upon the bedrock of this sense data. Locke, who provides us with the philosophical starting point of empiricism takes the sense data as the given for his analysis:

My purpose, therefore, is to enquire into the origin, certainty, and extent of human knowledge, and also into the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent. I shan’t involve myself with the biological aspects of the mind. For example, I shan’t wrestle with the question of what alterations of our bodies lead to our having sensation through our sense-organs or to our having any ideas in our understandings.

when I saw this, I next saw that.

¹⁹ McGill University, “Empiricism,” <https://www.cs.mcgill.ca/~rwest/wikispeedia/wpcd/wp/e/Empiricism.htm>.

²⁰ There is a great deal to be said by the methodology of science; but at this point a general understanding will suffice.

Challenging and entertaining as these questions may be, I shall bypass them because they aren't relevant to my project. All we need for my purposes is to consider the human ability to *think*.²¹

David Hume furthers this sentiment as follows:

In short, all the materials of thinking are derived either from our outward or inward sentiment: The mixture and composition of these belongs alone to the mind and will. Or, to express myself in philosophical language, all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones.²²

It is the common accessibility of this sense data to all persons which provides a basis for taking this information as "objective."²³

It is at this point of sense data that the agnostic and the atheist reject the notion of God as at best an inference to explain the relationship between various facts and thus as bad science. A claim to knowledge of God is dismissed as 'faith'—a sort of lesser knowledge. It is the inability to gain direct knowledge of God's person *through our senses* in the same way that I gain knowledge of rabbits and rocks that makes God a disputable proposition. This argument lies at the heart of the *Kitzmilller* decision above: since I can't probe God the way I probe a sea cucumber, God is not "real" or least not objectively knowable.²⁴

²¹ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 55.

²² David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London, UK: Penguin Classics, 1986), Kindle edition, part I.

²³ Reiss and Sprenger, "Scientific Objectivity": "Humans experience the world from a perspective. The contents of an individual's experiences vary greatly with his perspective, which is affected by his personal situation, and the details of his perceptual apparatus, language and culture. While the experiences vary, there seems to be something that remains constant. The appearance of a tree will change as one approaches it but—according to common sense and most philosophers—the tree itself doesn't. A room may feel hot or cold for different persons, but its temperature is independent of their experiences. The object in front of me does not disappear just because the lights are turned off."

²⁴ The question of the knowledge of God is far more complicated than is described here. However, the basic theme of all such "you can't prove God" arguments revolves around the nature of the empirical evidence. And even where such empirical evidence is offered (say the Resurrection), the argument is that the empirical evidence is insufficient. See, e.g., these posts on Twitter from Steven Pinker and Michael Schermer: <https://twitter.com/sapinker/status/1515912313936752641>, April 17, 2022.

And so, at the level of sensory perception we have a claim to certain knowledge and a basis upon which we (humans) reject the existence of God.²⁵ In *God, Revelation, and Authority*, Carl Henry further explains this development:

The new empiricism shaped by modern science departed extensively from these earlier views. No longer could the empirical approach be considered merely ancillary or preliminary to a distillation of truth by philosophical demonstration; it now became essential and central to the establishment of truth. Moreover, it gained the indispensable role of experimentally validating and confirming rational deductions, and stressed experiences available to all people. Even after such validation has occurred, the decisive importance of the empirical requires that the resultant hypotheses or rational explanations be considered tentative rather than final. The special interest of empiricism, moreover, is to identify events for the sake of the prediction and control of perceptual experience, rather than to render them comprehensively intelligible in relation to metaphysical reality (cf. Edwin A. Burtt, *Types of Religious Philosophy*, pp. 197 ff.).²⁶

Psychology, laying claim to domain expertise at this very point, thus raises some profoundly theological considerations which we pass by at our peril.²⁷

THE PHYSIOLOGY OF SENSORY PERCEPTION

Our naïve understanding of sight may run along the lines of an analogy to a film camera. Film works because certain substances undergo an effectively permanent

²⁵ This argument goes back, at least to Hume, in its current form: “It is evident, that all reasonings from causes or effects terminate in conclusions, concerning matter of fact; that is, concerning the existence of objects or of their qualities. It is also evident, that the idea, of existence is nothing different from the idea of any object, and that when after the simple conception of any thing we would conceive it as existent, we in reality make no addition to or alteration on our first idea. Thus when we affirm, that God is existent, we simply form the idea of such a being, as he is represented to us; nor is the existence, which we attribute to him, conceived by a particular idea, which we join to the idea of his other qualities, and can again separate and distinguish from them.” David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London, UK: Penguin Classics, 1986), Kindle edition, part I.

²⁶ Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 1, 78–79.

²⁷ The knowledge of God on the basis of inference, or on the basis of Plantinga’s “Reformed Epistemology” are noted here to exist; but will not be considered at this point.

chemical response based upon exposure to light:

The imaging layers contain sub-micron sized grains of silver-halide crystals that act as the photon detectors. These crystals are the heart of photographic film. They undergo a photochemical reaction when they are exposed to various forms of electromagnetic radiation—light. In addition to visible light, the silver-halide grains can be sensitized to infrared radiation.²⁸

The pattern on the film forms an analog to the pattern of light which strikes the film. Light strikes an object, is bounced from the object to the film, and on the film it makes a pattern which corresponds to the pattern and to the color (if color film) of the original. To use a tangible analogy, film works like a seal pressed into wax: one substance repeats the pattern in another substance.

The intuitive understanding of sight, and certainly an earlier understanding of sight, was that the eye simply bears the impress of the world around it. However, a better analogy to understand sight is that it functions like digital photograph. There is in fact a correspondence between the perception and the world, but that correspondence is by means of a fundamental transformation. Texas Tech University provides a useful description of the functionality of digital photography:

The CCD [charge-coupled device] is a collection of tiny light-sensitive diodes, which convert photons (light) into electrons (electrical charge). These diodes are called photosites. In a nutshell, photons are converted to electron by the photosite and the electron is converted to voltage. Then, these analog forms (voltage) are digitized into pixels within the supporting camera circuitry before downloading to memory.²⁹

The importance here is that the original information is transformed from one form into a completely different structure. The pattern of light registered by the

²⁸ Charles Woodworth, “How Photographic Film Works: Inside a Roll of Film,” *HowStuffWorks*, <https://electronics.howstuffworks.com/film3.htm>.

²⁹ JongPil Cheon, “Basic Photography Using a Digital Camera,” Texas Tech University’s College of Education, http://edit.educ.ttu.edu/site/jcheon/manual/Digital_Photography.pdf.

diodes is transformed in a collection of numbers: the information is digitized. The pattern created by the original impress of the light is gone having been translated into an entirely new (although corresponding) form of information.

This is essentially the mechanism by which our senses function: information from the environment is registered and then translated into a new format. A detailed discussion of the physiology of sight would exceed our present needs. However, the general outline of the procedure will be of help. First, there is the matter of bottom-up processing. This is the input of information from the environment. When light has passed through the lens of the eye, it lands on the retina:

The retina is a thin, delicate, transparent sheet of tissue derived from neuroectoderm. It comprises the sensory neurons that begin the visual pathway. The neural retina (neuroretina) is divided into nine layers: layer of inner and outer segments of the photoreceptors (rods and cones), external limiting membrane, outer nuclear layer, outer plexiform layer, inner nuclear layer, inner plexiform layer, ganglion cell layer, nerve fiber layer, and internal limiting membrane....Light must traverse these many layers before initiating signal transduction in the rods and cones.³⁰

If we consider this a bit more, we discover: “First is the fact that photons are discrete and are absorbed entirely, at which point they disappear.”³¹ How exactly does the photon, a particle of light, “disappear”? An article from Duke University’s Department of Physics explains the process:

A single photon can interact with a long photosensitive molecule called retinal and quantum mechanics says that there is a certain quantum amplitude (a complex number whose length squared determines the probability of an event) for the photon to be absorbed, in which case the molecule changes its shape (called

³⁰ Piper M. Treuting, Rachel Wong, Daniel C. Tu, Isabella Phan, “Special Senses: Eye,” in *Comparative Anatomy and Histology*, eds. Piper M. Treuting, Suzanne M. Dintzis (Cambridge, MA: Academic Press, 2012), p. 395.

³¹ “Photons Striking the Retina,” accessed March 10, 2022, <https://webhome.phy.duke.edu/~hsg/264L/images/photons-on-retina.html>.

“photoisomerization”), which in turn triggers a powerful chemical amplification mechanism that makes the brain eventually aware of the photon being absorbed.³²

The photosensitive cells are known as rods and cones:

The retina contains two types of photoreceptors, rods and cones. The rods are more numerous, some 120 million, and are more sensitive than the cones. However, they are not sensitive to color. The 6 to 7 million cones provide the eye’s color sensitivity and they are much more concentrated in the central yellow spot known as the macula. In the center of that region is the “fovea centralis”, a 0.3 mm diameter rod-free area with very thin, densely packed cones.³³

These photosensitive rods and cones are neurons. A primary function of a neuron is to receive a message and/or send a message, a signal. When then rod or cones is struck a photon it immediately passes on that information in a manner “just like any other neurons.”³⁴ Thus, information is transferred by means of neurotransmitters. But the rods and cones are not the only type of cells on the retina. There is an interaction among the various cells to convey information. While you do not need to fully understand the mechanics, even a glimpse of the complexity at this space may help to understand all that follows:

The dichotomy between ON and OFF responses is a central one in the early stages of vision. About half of the cells in the early visual system respond to light by increasing their rate of firing and half by decreasing it. One may imagine the situation as being a push-pull one. Retinal ganglion cells have fairly restricted rates of firing. Their operating range is from around 0 to around 1,000 Hz. The cells that are inhibited by light (OFF cells) tend to have a higher level of spontaneous activity in the dark. They fire steadily even in the absence

³² “Mammalia retinas can respond to single photons,” Duke University’s Department of Physics, <http://webhome.phy.duke.edu/~hsg/264L/images/photons-on-retina.html>.

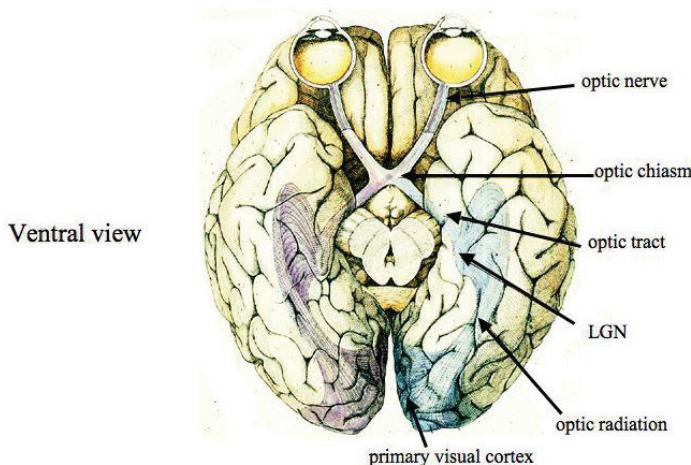
³³ Carl R. Nave, “Rods and Cones,” Georgia State University’s Department of Physics and Astronomy, <http://hyperphysics.phy-astr.gsu.edu/hbase/vision/rodcone.html>.

³⁴ Richard Masland, “Primary Visual Coding,” Harvard University’s Department of Neurobiology and Ophthalmology, November 2, 2005, https://www.hms.harvard.edu/bss/neuro/bornlab/nb204/papers2006/Masland_Lecture2_handout.doc.

of a stimulus. This means that they have a working range at “negative” rates of firing--rates below their resting rate. One interpretation is that the overall range of signaling is thus expanded by having cells that work in two directions. Another way to think about it is to consider the situation at an edge between a light and a dark zone. What the visual system really cares about is transitions between light and dark. Uniform areas of illumination carry little information; it is the points of change where information is contained. If one has a light-dark edge, is the information contained in the lightness or the darkness? It’s a glass that might be half empty or half full. Information is contained in both lightness and darkness and the visual system respects each equally.³⁵

The information generated by means of the various combinations of cells on the retina interacting with the light send a series of messages down the optic nerve and to the thalamus, in particular to the Lateral Geniculate Nucleus, commonly referred to as the LGN. From there, information will eventually make its way to the visual cortex at the back of the brain. A visual representation of the processing channel looks like this:³⁶

Retinogeniculate visual pathway



³⁵ Masland, “Primary Visual Coding.”

³⁶ David Heeger, “Perception Lecture Notes: LGN and V1,” New York University’s Department of Psychology, 2006, <https://www.cns.nyu.edu/~david/courses/perception/lecturenotes/V1/lgn-V1.html>.

The information processed by the LGN then is sent back to the visual cortex where it is processed as “sight.” Now questions about “who” is seeing this, or how anything is “seen” will wait until a later essay. But this stage in our perception is not as “bottom-up processing.”

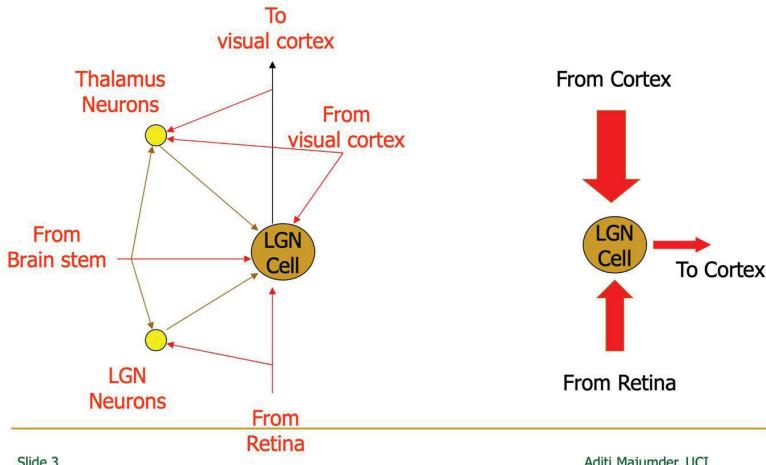
“Bottom-up processing” is the reception of some information from our environment which is observed by our senses by means of some sort of neurological response (a photon hits the retina, a sound wave hits the ear drum, and so one). The thing which is in the environment sets off a neurological cascade. One neuron informs another neuron and so on of the fact that a photon struck a particular place on the retina. The photon is not processed by the brain. The photon is no different than flipping a switch to turn on a light or a fan. The initial reception of the environment is turned into an electro-chemical message. There is a complete translation of the environment into a format which can be processed by our brain.

We have considered a single aspect of our sensory perception: what we know is not the thing itself, but rather a translation of photons into a message conveyed by neurotransmitters. At this point, the question will become more complex—and in a strange way, less “real.”

TOP-DOWN PROCESSING

Now something quite interesting happens at this point. The LGN does not merely receive information from the retina. Information also comes in from other parts of the brain. A schematic of the information appears as follows:³⁷

³⁷ Aditi Majumder, “Lateral Geniculate Nucleus,” University of California, Irvine’s School of Information and Computer Sciences, https://www.ics.uci.edu/~majumder/vispercep/chap3_LGN_highvision.pdf.



Slide 3

Aditi Majumder, UCI

What I want you to see from this image is that information concerning the object observed does not come solely from the light striking the retina. There is information *coming from the visual cortex* as well as the brain stem:

The axons of ganglion cells exit the retina to form the optic nerve, which travels to two places: the thalamus (specifically, the lateral geniculate nucleus, or LGN) and the superior colliculus. The LGN is the main relay for visual information from the retina to reach the cortex. Despite this, the retina only makes up about 20% of all inputs to the LGN, with the rest coming from the brainstem and the cortex. So more than simply acting as a basic relay for visual input from retina to cortex, the LGN is actually the first part of our visual pathway that can be modified by mental states.³⁸

The creation of the image which is perceived is not simply a matter of taking in data from a photosensor, as in a digital photograph. Yes, there is the analogy to the digital photograph, but there is something more. Your brain does not merely translate photons into an array of neurotransmitters, it also constructs the image in something called “top-down processing.”

Below is a more technical explanation of what takes places in top-down processing. In the simplest possible terms, our perceptions are not merely an

³⁸ Alan Woodruff, “Visual Perception,” The University of Queensland’s Brain Institute, <https://qbi.uq.edu.au/brain/brain-functions/visual-perception>.

imprint of the world (like film) nor is our perception simply a digital version of the world (like a digital camera). Rather, our perception is partially the result of information from the outside, but it is also the result of a construction imposed by brain based upon information outside the data from our senses: this information could be prior experience (for instance). What you need to understand is that our perception of the world is a matter of construction based upon current and prior experience of the world. Here is the more technical summary:

The functional properties of cortical neurons are not fixed. Rather, they can be thought of as adaptive processors, changing their function according to the behavioral context, and their responses reflect the demands of the perceptual task being performed. Cortical neurons are subject to top-down influences of attention, expectation and perceptual task. “Top-down” refers to cognitive influences and higher order representations that impinge upon earlier steps in information processing. Such influences represent a reversal of the central dogma of sensory information processing, which is based on feedforward connections along a hierarchy of cortical areas representing progressively more complex aspects of the visual scene. But superimposed on the feedforward pathways there are reentrant or feedback pathways that convey higher order information to antecedent cortical areas. The top-down signal carries a rich amount of information that facilitates the interpretation of the visual scene and that enables the visual system to build a stable representation of the objects within it, despite rapid and continuous eye movements. It facilitates our ability to segment the complex arrangement of multiple objects and backgrounds in the visual scene. In addition, the top-down signal plays a role in the encoding and recall of learned information. The resulting feedforward signals carried by neurons convey different meanings about the same visual scene according to the behavioral context. This idea is in stark contrast with the classical notion of a hierarchy of visual cortical areas—where information is conveyed in a feedforward fashion to progressively higher levels in the hierarchy, beginning with the analysis of simple attributes such as contrast and orientation, and leading to more complex functional properties from one stage to the next—and implies that vision is an active process. As we analyze visual scenes we

set up countercurrent streams of processing, with the resulting percept reflecting the set of functional states of all the areas in the visual cortical hierarchy. In this review we consider the receptive field properties that are subject to top-down influences, the nature of the information that is conveyed by reentrant pathways, and how the information carried by neurons depends on behavioral context. Over longer time periods receptive fields can change to accommodate alterations in visual experience. These lines of evidence point towards an evolving view of the nature of the receptive field, which includes contextual influences and emphasizes its dynamic nature, with neurons taking on different properties in response to experience and expectation.³⁹

What this means is that what we experience as sense perception is not simply looking out at the world and seeing what is there.

Over the course of time, we take in information from the world about us through our sense organs. That information is correlated in various ways to build up a useful understanding of the world. This aspect of our understanding was developed most famously by Jean Piaget. It is not necessary to conclude that Piaget's explanation of the development of objects, space, and causality in the child are correct at all points to find the overall thrust of his understanding to be correct.

In the Introduction to his *The Construction of Reality in the Child*, Piaget explains the development during the first two years of life for a child:

At first directly assimilating the external environment of his own activity, later, in order to extend this assimilation, forms an increasing number of schemata which are both more mobile and better able to coordinate. Side by side with this progressive involvement of the assimilatory schemata runs the continuous elaboration of the external universe, in other words, the convergent development of explanatory function.⁴⁰

³⁹ Charles D. Gilbert and Wu. Li, "Top-down Influences on Visual Processing," April 18, 2018, *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3864796/>.

⁴⁰ Jean Piaget, *The Construction of Reality in the Child*, trans. Margaret Cook (New York: Basic Books, 1954), xi, emphasis added.

That is, the child develops mechanisms to understand the world about him. It is not that the child opens his eyes and sees a world of permanent objects situated in space and time operating upon one another by means of cause and effect. Instead, those concepts of external objects situated in space and time interacting by means of cause and effect are schemata the child develops and uses to understand the world.

It is perhaps interesting to note that Kant held that the concepts of space and time are impositions of our mind and that Hume held that causality was also an imposition upon reality by our mind. But a further analysis of the philosophers is beyond our instant concern.

What does matter is that our understanding of the world around us is not simply seeing “what is there.” Instead, while we begin with information from the world around us, we are also constructing that world by means of schemata. The way in which such schemata function was illustrated by use finding an image from an obscure original:

To illustrate the basic idea of why top-down processing is needed, researchers have created binarized photographs. In such photographs, gray-scale pixels are replaced with white if their brightness value is above a chosen threshold, or replaced with black if it is below this value. Because binarized images are highly degraded, pure bottom-up processes typically cannot organize them correctly into their constituent parts, and often one needs to use previously acquired knowledge about objects to identify the objects in them.⁴¹

The precise nature of this top-down processing is a matter of current research. The particulars of this procedure are not necessary for our purposes. What must be known is that the images we “see” are both based upon the information currently received from the environment and also the information which is constructed by use of pre-existing information.

⁴¹ Giorgio Giannis and Stephen M. Klosslyn, “Multiple Mechanisms of Top Down Processing in Vision” in *Representation and Brain*, ed. Shintaro Funahashi (Tokyo, JP: Springer Tokyo, 2007), 24.

A QUICK NOTE ON PRE-EXISTING INFORMATION

While the schemata applied to construct the imagery we experience is pre-existing, we should also note that even the basic information obtained from the environment is subject to pre-existing information constraints.

A receptor neuron fires on my retina, that information is then passed back to my optic nerve. Some bit of data is processed as a “color” or a “shape.” The colors and shapes which could be constructed must already be existing there in the optic nerve (wherever the actual processing takes places for color and shape). The color is not in the light, the color is in my processing of the light. The blue I see in the sky as I sit in my backyard and write is a construction of my brain. That blue must pre-exist the response of a cone on my retina. The firing of the cone merely says process “blue.” But that “blue” is not out in nature.

This may sound overly “philosophic” or even untrue at present. But by the time we conclude our understanding of sensory perception, you will see the utter strangeness of this problem.

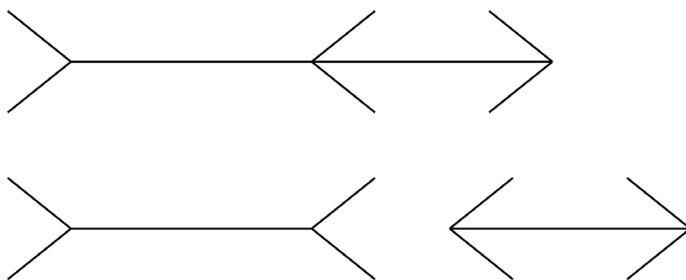
PROOF OF OUR OBSERVATIONS BEING CONSTRUCTION

If you want proof of the extent to which this imposition upon the world is a manufacture of our sensory system, consider the nature of optical illusions.

I will start with a basic example: seeing small things as being at a distance is a construction. My anthropology teacher at UCLA had done his field work with pygmies in an African rain forest. He said that when a pygmy was taken from the forest to the edge of the plain, the man would see buffalo at a great distance. Only the pygmy who had spent his entire life never seeing further than say 30 feet away did not see distance: he saw size. The buffalo were not small because they were far away; they were small because they were small.

The distance is not in what we see but in what we know about what see. We have a scheme for distance; the pygmy had none and could not see that distance. It was not a failure of intelligence; it was a failure prior experience.

It has been discovered that the following illusion (among others) is the product of one's prior experience. Let us consider the Müller-Lyer illusion:



For those reading this essay, the lines on the left (with the flared fins, like the tail of an arrow) will appear longer than the lines on the right (with the pointed fins which appear like an arrowhead). And now to the research:

For decades, vision researchers assumed that the illusion told us something fundamental about human vision. When they showed the illusion to people with normal vision, they were convinced that the line with the inward-pointing arrows would seem longer than the line with outward-pointing arrows. That assumption wasn't really tested before the 1960s, because until then almost everyone who had seen the illusion was WEIRD—an acronym that cultural psychologists have coined for people from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic societies. In the early 1960s, three researchers remedied that oversight when they showed the illusion to two thousand people from fifteen different cultural groups. The illusion deceived the first few groups. Adults living in Evanston, Illinois, perceived Line B to be on average 20 percent longer than Line A, while students at nearby Northwestern University and white adults in South Africa similarly believed that Line B was between 13 percent and 15 percent longer than Line A. Then the researchers journeyed farther afield, testing people from several African tribes. Bushmen from southern Africa failed to show the illusion at all, perceiving the lines as almost identical in length. Small samples of Suku tribespeople from northern Angola and Bete tribespeople from the Ivory Coast also failed to show

the illusion, or saw Line B as only very slightly longer than Line A. Müller-Lyer's eponymous illusion had deceived thousands of people from WEIRD societies for decades, but it wasn't universal.⁴²

Yet, later research offered a contradictory reading of the evidence. A researcher at Macquarie University when using a computer designed to mimic the human eye was also tricked by the illusion.⁴³ This may mean (1) the computer programmer being WEIRD found his bias in the program he created, or (2) people from different places have different physiological functions, or (3) some other process has led to this illusion. While I tend toward answer (1), the fact remains that the illusion has been caused by top-down processing creating the illusion.

Before we leave this matter of top-down processing, I wish for you to be clear on the extent to which our basic perception of the world is a matter of construction: our brain does not passively record the world, it actively constructs the world as we experience it.

There are a number of experiments which have shown that the way food and drink tastes can depend upon a number of factors beyond the food itself. An article in *Wired* magazine cites several studies which conclude with this observation:

And this is why the ambience of a restaurant matters. All those rituals of the table are not mere routines. Instead, they help us make sense of the incomplete information coming from the tongue. For instance, when we eat a meal in a fancy place, full of elaborate place settings, fine porcelain and waiters wearing tuxedos, the food is going to taste different than if we ate the same food in a cheap diner. (This helps explain why people spend more money when restaurants play classical music instead of pop tunes.) Because the music matters, but so does everything else. The tongue is easy to dupe.⁴⁴

⁴² Adam Alter, "Are These Lines the Same Height? Your Answer Depends on Where You're From," *Popular Science*, March 21, 2013, <https://www.popsci.com/science/article/2013-03/are-these-walls-the-same-size-your-answer-depends-on-where-youre-from/>.

⁴³ Charles Choi, "Optical Illusions Can Trick Computers, Too," NBC News, March, 20, 2013, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/all/optical-illusions-can-trick-computers-too-flna1C8982370>.

⁴⁴ Jonah Lerner, "Does Music Change The Taste Of Wine?" *Wired*, November 2, 2011, <https://www.wired.com/2011/11/does-music-make-wine-taste-better/>.

I wish to stand back and defend the tongue. The tongue has not been tricked in the least: it has done exactly what it was supposed to do. But the tongue is not the last word on taste. The tongue provides some of the information we process as the “taste” of food; but just like our sight, the taste is a construction which uses a limited amount of raw materials from the environment.

Here is the bottom line: the world we experience is not exactly the world as it exists. First, a photon, a movement of air, a chemical wafted to our nose, a food on our tongue, triggers a response in a nerve. That nerve then responds to the environment and sends a message to our brain. Our brain takes that information as well as other information which was not present in that particular response and creates some information which we experience as a sight or sound or taste or tactical quality or scent. That thing we experience is not what is out in the world. What we experience is representation built by our brain.⁴⁵ But we are not nearly done with the problems of our perception of the world.

PSYCHEDELIC DRUGS

In 1938, a Swiss chemist named Albert Hoffman began experimenting with a chemical isolated in fungus which grew on rye and was known to cause strange effects on people eating contaminated rye. This fungus is known as ergot. The chemical which affected the circulatory system was isolated. Thereafter, Hoffman developed a means of synthetically producing this chemical, known as “lysergic acid.” Hoffman then began to experiment:

⁴⁵ At every step of this discussion, I am plagued by the knowledge that each element of this discussion entails an impossible number of caveats, qualifications, and claims by every sort of theorist, scientist, and philosopher. Just to keep you partially informed of where the philosophical argument stands at this point, I note some things that are old are still new: “Some philosophers call them Cartesians think that if a perceptual experience itself justifies a belief, then that belief must be about the character of that perceptual experience (Bonjour 1999). It would be a belief about the internal world. This view is often combined with the view that beliefs about the external world are justified by inferences from such beliefs about the internal world. The combined view is known as classical foundationalism. Other philosophers think that if a perceptual experience itself justifies a belief, then that belief might be about the ostensible bit of reality presented in the experience. It would be a belief about the external world the apparently seen, heard, felt, etc. portion of one’s immediate environment.” Berit Brogaard and Elijah Chudnoff, “Consciousness and Knowledge,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Consciousness*, ed. Uriah Kriegel, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020), 590.

Using this method, he recreated ergot's active ingredients as well as novel but similar compounds that, based on the potency of the ergot compounds, could reasonably be expected to have medical uses.

In a sense Hofmann was playing God, combining lysergic acid with various other organic molecules just to see what happened. He created 24 of these lysergic acid combinations. Then he created the 25th, reacting lysergic acid with diethylamine, a derivative of ammonia. The compound was abbreviated as LSD-25 for the purposes of laboratory testing.⁴⁶

In a self-experiment, Hoffman ingested the chemical he created:

Hofmann didn't discover the drug's hallucinogenic effects until 1943 when he accidentally ingested a small amount and perceived "extraordinary shapes with intense, kaleidoscopic play of colors."

Three days later, on April 19, 1943, he took a larger dose of the drug. As Hofmann rode home from work on his bicycle—World War II restrictions made automobile travel off-limits—he experienced the world's first intentional acid trip.⁴⁷

In his first-person account of what happened, *My Problem Child*, Hoffman recounts the effects of this self-experiment as follows:

The dizziness and sensation of fainting became so strong at times that I could no longer hold myself erect, and had to lie down on a sofa. My surroundings had now transformed themselves in more terrifying ways. Everything in the room spun around, and the familiar objects and pieces of furniture assumed grotesque, threatening forms. They were in continuous motion, animated, as if driven by an inner restlessness. The lady next door, whom I scarcely recognized, brought me milk—in the course of the evening I drank more than two liters.

⁴⁶ Tom Shroder, "The Accidental, Psychedelic Discovery of LSD," *The Atlantic*, September 9, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/09/the-accidental-discovery-of-lsd/379564/>.

⁴⁷ History.com Editors, "LSD." *The History Channel*, August 21, 2018, <https://www.history.com/topics/crime/history-of-lsd>.

She was no longer Mrs. R., but rather a malevolent, insidious witch with a colored mask.

Even worse than these demonic transformations of the outer world, were the alterations that I perceived in myself, in my inner being. Every exertion of my will, every attempt to put an end to the disintegration of the outer world and the dissolution of my ego, seemed to be wasted effort. A demon had invaded me, had taken possession of my body, mind, and soul. I jumped up and screamed, trying to free myself from him, but then sank down again and lay helpless on the sofa. The substance, with which I had wanted to experiment, had vanquished me. It was the demon that scornfully triumphed over my will. I was seized by the dreadful fear of going insane. I was taken to another world, another place, another time. My body seemed to be without sensation, lifeless, strange. Was I dying? Was this the transition? At times I believed myself to be outside my body, and then perceived clearly, as an outside observer, the complete tragedy of my situation....⁴⁸

While LSD-25 is perhaps the most “famous” of all psychedelic drugs, having been famous by Harvard psychologist Timothy Leary, it is certainly not the only psychedelic known to human beings. Various psychedelic drugs have been known to produce “mystical” experiences.⁴⁹ The English writer Aldus Huxley, having experimented with psychedelics (which were perfectly legal through much of the 20th century), wrote a provocative book entitled, *The Doors of Perception*. He took the title from an epigram of English poet William Blake, “If the doors

⁴⁸ Albert Hoffman, *LSD: My Problem Child*, trans. Jonathan Ott (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), <https://www.cs.cmu.edu/~ehn/release/problem-child.html>.

⁴⁹ Abigail Calder, “Mystical Encounters, with and without Drugs,” *Psychedelic Science Review*, April 27, 2021, <https://psychedelicreview.com/mystical-encounters-with-and-without-drugs/>. Richard Miller also writes: “The notion that hallucinogenic drugs played a significant part in the development of religion has been extensively discussed, particularly since the middle of the twentieth century. Various ideas of this type have been collected into what has become known as the *entheogen* theory. The word *entheogen* is a neologism coined in 1979 by a group of ethnobotanists (those that study the relationship between people and plants). The literal meaning of *entheogen* is ‘that which causes God to be within an individual’ and might be considered as a more accurate and academic term for popular terms such as *hallucinogen* or *psychedelic* drug. By the term *entheogen* we understand the use of psychoactive substances for religious or spiritual reasons rather than for purely recreational purposes.” Richard Miller, “Religion as a Product of Psychotropic Drug Use,” *The Atlantic*, December 27, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/12/religion-as-a-product-of-psychotropic-drug-use/282484/>.

of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.”⁵⁰ Huxley’s thesis was that the effect of psychedelic drugs lay behind all “religious” or “mystic experience”:

Reflecting on my experience, I find myself agreeing with the eminent Cambridge philosopher, Dr. C. D. Broad, “that we should do well to consider much more seriously....[t]he function of the brain and nervous system is to protect us from being overwhelmed and confused by this mass of largely useless and irrelevant knowledge, by shutting out most of what we should otherwise perceive or remember at any moment, and leaving only that very small and special selection which is likely to be practically useful.” According to such a theory, each one of us is potentially Mind at Large. But in so far as we are animals, our business is at all costs to survive. To make biological survival possible, Mind at Large has to be funneled through the reducing valve of the brain and nervous system. What comes out at the other end is a measly trickle of the kind of consciousness which will help us to stay alive on the surface of this Particular planet. To formulate and express the contents of this reduced awareness, man has invented and endlessly elaborated those symbol-systems and implicit philosophies which we call languages. Every individual is at once the beneficiary and the victim of the linguistic tradition into which he has been born—the beneficiary inasmuch as language gives access to the accumulated records of other people’s experience, the victim in so far as it confirms him in the belief that reduced awareness is the only awareness and as it bedevils his sense of reality, so that he is all too apt to take his concepts for data, his words for actual things. That which, in the language of religion, is called “this world” is the universe of reduced awareness, expressed, and, as it were, petrified by language.⁵¹

I know Huxley’s belief that psychedelic drugs stand behind the “experience” of something divine seems a little afield from the thesis of this essay, which is

⁵⁰ William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Project Gutenberg, 2014), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45315/45315-h/45315-h.htm>.

⁵¹ Aldus Huxley, “The Doors of Perception,” <http://www.ignaciocarnavaud.com/espiritualismo/HuxleyDoors%20of%20Perception.pdf>, 6.

that sensory experience is insufficient to be self-authenticating. But there is a second-thesis in this essay, namely, that the thesis of sense experience being self-authenticating is a basis upon which we can deny God: I don't see God in the same way I see a rock, therefore, a rock is more real than God. If you can't kick it, it isn't real.⁵²

My goal in this essay to bring you to understand that sense-experience can only be justified on the thesis of a guarantee of God. Huxley in a strange way is supportive of my thesis. The belief that God must be justified as a certain type of sense-experience arose in a particular historical context and was justified on the basis of certain presuppositions of that historical context. The Enlightenment understanding (to take the idea in a broad fashion), argues that we can merely "subtract" God from our understanding and we can see the world as it actually is. We can see things in motion, we can see things behaving in a regular manner ("laws of nature"). Since things act regularly, and since the only thing which is true is some-thing I can see, God is an unnecessary thesis: (1) I don't need an agent constantly tinkering; and (2) I don't see that agent anyway.

But this is actually a philosophy which contains various presuppositions. It is not actually "the way things are." James K.A. Smith summarizes an argument from Charles Taylor (in *A Secular Age*) on this point, nicely:

(1) What pretends to be a "discovery" of the ways things are, the "obvious" unveiling of reality once we remove (subtract) myth and enchantment, is *in fact* a construction, a *creation*; in short, this wasn't just a subtraction project. (2) Baseline *moral* commitments stand behind CWS [“closed world structures”: ideas which exclude the divine], specifically the coming-of-age metaphor of *adulthood*, having the courage to resist the comforting enchantments of childhood.

⁵² In James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*, he records this incident: "After we came out of the church, we stood talking for some time together of Bishop Berkeley's ingenious sophistry to prove the nonexistence of matter, and that every thing in the universe is merely ideal. I observed, that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it – 'I refute it thus.' James Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. David Womersley (London, England: Penguin Classics, 2008), Kindle Edition. See also: Douglas Lane Patey, "Johnson's Refutation of Berkeley: Kicking the Stone Again," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47, no. 1 (January 1986): 139–145.

In short to just “see” the closedness of the immanent frame is to be grown-up.⁵³

Taylor explains this “move” as follows:

[W]hat is being claimed is that some move is being passed off as simple discovery, which in fact is much more like a new construction; a change that involves also a new sense of our identity and our place in the world, with its implicit values, rather than simply registering observable reality.⁵⁴

What Huxley’s belief proves is that the secure sensation of a stable “Enlightenment” world is easily capable of being destabilized by merely a modification of top-down processing (which the psychedelic drug causes).⁵⁵ Those effects include:

Perceptual effects occur along a dose-dependent range from subtle to drastic. The range of different perceptual effects includes perceptual intensification, distortion, illusion, mental imagery, elementary hallucination, and complex hallucination (Klüver, 1928; Kometer and Vollenweider, 2016; Preller and Vollenweider, 2016). Intensifications of color saturation, texture definition, contours, light intensity, sound intensity, timbre variation, and other perceptual characteristics are common (Kometer and Vollenweider, 2016; Kaelen et al., 2018). The external world is experienced as if in higher resolution, seemingly more crisp and detailed, often accompanied by a distinct sense of ‘clarity’ or ‘freshness’ in the environment (Hofmann, 1980; Huxley, 1991; Díaz, 2010; Kometer and Vollenweider, 2016). Sense of meaning in percepts is altered, e.g., ‘Things around me had a new strange meaning for me’ or ‘Objects around me engaged me emotionally much more than usual’ (Studerus et al., 2010).

⁵³ James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 99.

⁵⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 565.

⁵⁵ Sarit Pink-Hashkes, Iris van Rooij, and Johan Kwisthout, “Perception is in the Details: A Predictive Coding Account of the Psychedelic Phenomenon,” *Cognitive Science Society*, 2017, <https://cogsci.mindmodeling.org/2017/papers/0550/paper0550.pdf>.

Perceptual distortions and illusions are extremely common, e.g., ‘Things looked strange’ or ‘My sense of size and space was distorted’ or ‘Edges appeared warped’ or ‘I saw movement in things that weren’t actually moving’ (Dittrich, 1998; Muthukumaraswamy et al., 2013).⁵⁶

To put it briefly, psychedelic drugs alter the mechanics of top-down processing.⁵⁷ From the perspective of the person experiencing a hallucination, the sensory data being subjectively understood is completely real. When I was a boy, my doctor treated my asthma with a drug named “Marax.” An uncommon, but quite real, side effect of Marax is visual hallucination. I can tell you for a certainty, that the enormous flying ant with bright white wings terrified me. I can still vividly recall the sight of that “nonexistent” insect on the doorway to my bedroom. The only evidence I had of it not being real is my father calmly telling me there was no such thing there.

Before we move to the next topic of sensory perception, I want to summarize what we have determined. First, the common “objective” experience of us all is the result of not simply seeing “what is there,” but rather the result of a complex process in the brain involving both information from the outside and a deliberate *construction* of that information into a form (a perception as opposed to a bare sensation). Second, those forms are affected by our prior history, including cultural exposure. Third, those forms can create things which cannot physically exist as proven by optical illusions and psychedelic drugs.

No one sees “what is there.” We only see that which our brain constructs in response to neurotransmitters released as a response our neurons on a retina being exposed to photons and having those messages integrated and constructed on the basis of brain structure (which function can be fundamentally altered by drugs)

⁵⁶ Link R. Swanson, “Unifying Theories of Psychedelic Drug Effects,” *Frontiers in Pharmacology* 9 (March 2018), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fphar.2018.00172>.

⁵⁷ “How Psychedelic Drug Psilocybin Works on Brain,” *ScienceDaily*, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/06/200605121512.htm>; George Blackburne, “LSD and the Anarchic Brain,” *The Psychedelic Review*, June 10, 2021, <https://psychedelicreview.com/lsd-and-the-anarchic-brain/>; Jose Alexandre Salerno, “Whole-Body Effects of Psychedelics – Part 1,” *The Psychedelic Review*, June 15, 2021, <https://psychedelicreview.com/whole-body-effects-of-psychedelics-part-1/>; Jose Alexandre Salerno, “Whole-Body Effects of Psychedelics – Part 2,” *The Psychedelic Review*, August 17, 2021, <https://psychedelicreview.com/whole-body-effects-of-psychedelics-part-2-blood-and-immune-system/>.

and prior experience.

I wish to further “problematize” the question of our sensory perception by means a further proof of the strangely arbitrary nature of our understanding: what happens when you “see sound.”

SYNESTHESIA

When I turned 13, I very much wanted to play the piano. My parents were good enough to purchase a piano for me which they could barely afford. I spent entire days doing nothing but banging on the piano our den. What I didn’t know was that the keys on the piano changing colors which waves of colored sound moving up and down the keyboard was an unusual experience. I will tell you that I saw colors moving through the keyboard as I played. Those colors were “there” every bit as much as the black and white of the keys.

And yet, you likely would not have seen any of these colors. Now, if I saw them, and if they were produced by the act of sound waves striking my ear drum and then being processed by brain, how are they not “real”? In what sense can you say that hearing a “sound” as the result of moving ear striking my eardrum is “real,” but seeing a “color” is not “real.”

Your sense organs are merely mechanisms to produce some combination of neurotransmitters. A photon here produces this combination, a sound wave there produces a different neurotransmitter combination, and messages are sent hither-and-yon to be received and processed.

But to this point, we intuitively think there is a reasonableness, a necessity in our perception. We assume that we “see” light because it is the nature of light to be seen. We hear sound because it is appropriate for movements of air to be “heard.” Sounds are what air does; and color is what light does.

If you will recall, above, I said that color does not exist in the light but rather it exists in my brain. Color is something my brain does with a certain signal received by the optic nerve. Color is not in the light; it’s in the brain.

An analogy will help here: If you have ever had the misfortune of installing a combination ceiling fan overhead light, you have my sympathy. It is a miserable task. But it is also a good analogy for what we need to understand about the senses. Near the door to the room, somewhere between 4 & 5 feet from the floor is a toggle switch which regulates the flow of electricity to the room. If the switch is “on” electricity will flow past the switch and to whatever device is attached to the wires.

When it comes to the overhead fan and light the electricity is distributed separately to the light and to the fan motor. Often additional switches are used to regulate electricity to the light and the motor, separately. If the main switch is “on” and the light switch is “on”, the light will shine. If the motor switch is “on”, the motor will turn the fan. If you turn off the light and leave on the motor, the fan will move, and no light will be generated. If you turn off the motor and turn on the light, you will have light and no fan.

The electricity is the same for both the light and the motor. The difference is not in the electricity but what the end of the wire is attached to. Just to drive this point home, because you will want it to be unstuck in a moment, I will mention a television commercial which asks the question, “How sure are you of your wiring job?” A woman comes into the kitchen and flips the light switch. Her husband has his hand in the garbage disposal. Will the light come on, or will he lose his hand? Same electricity, different result.

Your senses work the same way. The message sent from a rod on your retina does not by necessity need to have the message processed by your optic nerve. Those neurotransmitters could send a message to your olfactory nerve and you could “smell” with your eyes. Nonsense you say. But what if were to tell you this actually does happen—usually not retina to olfactory—but it does happen:

Basically, when people experience synesthesia, they can hear colors, smell sounds, and even taste music. And, to add to the complexity, almost every combination of sensory information is possible with synesthesia. Here a few of its most common manifestations.

- Grapheme-Color Synesthesia – Letters and numbers appear with

specific colors.

- Auditory-Tactile Synesthesia – Hearing a sound causes a bodily sensation.
- Chromesthesia – Certain sounds cause a person to see colors.
- Lexical-Gustatory Synesthesia – Hearing certain words triggers specific tastes.
- Mirror-Touch Synesthesia – A person feels (tactile) what another is experiencing.

Interestingly, synesthesia can happen with or without taking drugs.⁵⁸

Since what we perceive is actually the construction of our brain, and since that construction is on the basis of electro-chemical messages, any sense neuron could be paired (theoretically) with any portion of the brain which processes the input of sense neurons.

Here is the bottom-line: there is no inherent correlation between photons and color or shape, between sound waves and sound. That color and light, those sounds, are constructions of the brain.

PERHAPS IT IS ALL A SIMULATION

In 2003 philosopher Nick Bostrom published a paper in *The Philosophical Quarterly* entitled, “Are We Living in a Computer Simulation?” which has generated an enormous amount of secondary literature⁵⁹ And while *The Matrix* reference can be understood readily enough, I wish to underscore a point which follows from the nature of empiricism as complete understanding of consciousness (the “scientism” thesis).

If the nature of consciousness is nothing more processing electrochemical information, then consciousness is replicable in a computer:

⁵⁸ Barbara E. Bauer, “Psychedelic Synesthesia: Smell That Tune. Intertwining of the senses creates some mind-blowing experiences,” *The Pyschedelic Review*, March 22, 2021, <https://psychedelicreview.com/psychedelic-synesthesia-smell-that-tune/>.

⁵⁹ Nick Bostrom, “Are We Living in a Computer Simulation?”, *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53, no. 211 (April 2003): 243–255.

A common assumption in the philosophy of mind is that of substrate-independence. The idea is that mental states can supervene on any of a broad class of physical substrates. Provided a system implements the right sort of computational structures and processes, it can be associated with conscious experiences. It is not an essential property of consciousness that it is implemented on carbon-based biological neural networks inside a cranium: silicon-based processors in a computer could in principle do the trick too.⁶⁰

Nothing in scientism can defeat such a thesis. Indeed, as argued by Fouad Khan in *Scientific American* in 2021, consciousness itself is evidence that we are living in a simulation:

Pretty much since the dawn of philosophy we have been asking the question: Why do we need consciousness? What purpose does it serve? Well, the purpose is easy to extrapolate once we concede the simulation hypothesis. Consciousness is an integrated (combining five senses) subjective interface between the self and the rest of the universe. The only reasonable explanation for its existence is that it is there to be an “experience.” That’s its primary *raison d'être*. Parts of it may or may not provide any kind of evolutionary advantage or other utility. But the sum total of it exists as an experience and hence must have the primary function of being an experience. An experience by itself as a whole is too energy-expensive and information-restrictive to have evolved as an evolutionary advantage. The simplest explanation for the existence of an experience or qualia is that it exists for the purpose of being an experience.⁶¹

And thus, not only does empiricism not rule out computer simulated consciousness, it is arguably even the most likely explanation for such. While the matter will be raised at further length below, it is evident that such an argument is *theological*. It answers a question well beyond the scope of anything which can be seen or heard. It is an answer of ultimate meaning.

⁶⁰ Nick Bostrom, “Are We Living in a Computer Simulation?,” 244.

⁶¹ Fouad Khan, “Confirmed! We Live in a Simulation,” *Scientific American*, April 1, 2021, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/confirmed-we-live-in-a-simulation/>.

DESCARTES DREAMS

Descartes raised the question about being fundamentally deceived by our senses, well before the computer simulation theory. In his *First Meditation*, he raised the possibility that all our understanding is no different than dreaming:

Though this be true, I must nevertheless here consider that I am a man, and that, consequently, I am in the habit of sleeping, and representing to myself in dreams those same things, or even sometimes others less probable, which the insane think are presented to them in their waking moments. How often have I dreamt that I was in these familiar circumstances, that I was dressed, and occupied this place by the fire, when I was lying undressed in bed? At the present moment, however, I certainly look upon this paper with eyes wide awake; the head which I now move is not asleep; I extend this hand consciously and with express purpose, and I perceive it; the occurrences in sleep are not so distinct as all this. But I cannot forget that, at other times I have been deceived in sleep by similar illusions; and, attentively considering those cases, I perceive so clearly that there exist no certain marks by which the state of waking can ever be distinguished from sleep, that I feel greatly astonished; and in amazement I almost persuade myself that I am now dreaming.⁶²

Descartes then questions the argument as follows:

Let us suppose, then, that we are dreaming, and that all these particulars—namely, the opening of the eyes, the motion of the head, the forth-putting of the hands—are merely illusions; and even that we really possess neither an entire body nor hands such as we see. Nevertheless, it must be admitted at least that the objects which appear to us in sleep are, as it were, painted representations which could not have been formed unless in the likeness of realities; and, therefore, that those general objects, at all events, namely, eyes, a head, hands, and an entire body, are not simply imaginary, but really existent.⁶³

⁶² Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Veitch, 1901, http://eddiejackson.net/web_documents/Descartes%20Meditations%20on%20First%20Philosophy.pdf.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Descartes questions the dreaming argument by pointing to its relationship to our waking perceptions.⁶⁴ But I would like to press the argument in a different direction. In light of what we have come to know about sensory perception being a matter of construction, we cannot so neatly distinguish between dreams and waking perception.

Our consciousness has access to the imagery, the perception manufactured by our brain. Our consciousness does not have unmitigated access to the world without the initial processing of senses and brain. In what way does the conscious access of imagery built while sleeping differ from access to imagery built while waking? We could say that waking imagery at least has a genesis in senses while dreams are independent of current sensation. But that is not exactly true, for at least on some occasions sounds from the “outside” become incorporated into our dreams.⁶⁵

There are some psychologists and physicists who argue in a strong sense that dreams and waking are the same sort of constructive reality:

As we go about our lives, we take for granted the way our minds put everything together because the process is effortless, and its underlying mechanisms are baked-in, hidden, and automatic. But you might not have suspected that this same process of fashioning a seemingly external 3-D reality is the one underlying dreams. Since the realms of dreams and wakeful perception are usually classified separately—with only one of them regarded as “real”—they’re rarely part of the same discussion. But there are interesting commonalities that give us clues as to how our consciousness operates. Whether awake or dreaming, we are experiencing the same process even if it produces qualitatively different realities. During both dreams and waking hours, our minds collapse probability waves to generate a physical reality that comes complete with a functioning body. The result of this magnificent orchestration is our never-ending ability to

⁶⁴ For a thorough analysis of the dreaming argument see: Selim Berker, “Lecture 2: Descartes’ Dreaming Argument,” Harvard University, September 6, 2018, <https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/sberker/files/phil159-2018-lec2-descartes.pdf>.

⁶⁵ Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

experience sensations in a four-dimensional world.⁶⁶

I am not contending that we take Dr. Lanza’s “biocentrism” in full. Dr. Lanza is arguing that our perception of reality is just a passive internal construction of reality, but that reality itself (at least what we could possibly know of it) is constructed by our perception of it. I know this sounds outlandish, but I want you to consider the particle/wave experiment in physics.

It is a well-known experimental result that light will “behave” like a particle or a wave, depending upon whether you give light the option of proceeding through one opening or two. If you give it one opening, it goes through as a particle, a photon. If you offer it two openings, it goes through both and behaves as a wave.⁶⁷ The famous Dr. Feynman explains:

The question now is, how does it really work? What machinery is actually producing this thing? Nobody knows any machinery. Nobody can give you a deeper explanation of this phenomenon that I have given: that is, a description of it. They can give you a wider explanation, in the sense that they can do more examples to show how it is impossible to tell which hole the electron goes through and not at the same time destroy the interference pattern. They can give a wider class of experiments than just the two slit interference experiment. But that is just repeating the same thing to drive it in. It is not any deeper; it is only wider. The mathematics can be made more precise; you can mention that they are complex numbers instead of real numbers, and a couple of other minor points which have nothing to do with the main idea. But the deep mystery is what I have described, and no one can go any deeper today.⁶⁸

The weirdness of physics when it approaches the very small and the very large, the very slow and the very fast, will not detain us further. All you need to know is

⁶⁶ Robert Lanza, “Dreams Are More Real Than Anyone Thought Waking reality and dreams are different versions of the same thing,” *Psychology Today*, August 11, 2021, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/biocentrism/202108/dreams-are-more-real-anyone-thought>.

⁶⁷ Mack Levine, “Double-Slit Science: How Light Can Be Both a Particle and a Wave,” *Scientific American*, December 12, 2013, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/bring-science-home-light-wave-particle/>.

⁶⁸ Richard P. Feynman, *The Character of Physical Law* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 145.

that we cannot simply dismiss the contention that our perception of reality has no effect upon the reality, itself.

To return to the question of dreams, I need merely assert the lesser proposition, that a sharp distinction between waking and sleeping consciousness is not as easy as one may have thought. How do you contend, on the basis of what we know of sensory perception, that dreams are a wholly different from waking consciousness? Another way to get at this same problem comes the position of Bishop Berkeley:

The starting point of Berkeley's attack on the materialism of his contemporaries is a very short argument presented in *Principles 4*:

It is indeed an opinion strangely prevailing amongst men, that houses, mountains, rivers, and in a word all sensible objects have an existence natural or real, distinct from their being perceived by the understanding. But with how great an assurance and acquiescence soever this principle may be entertained in the world; yet whoever shall find in his heart to call it in question, may, if I mistake not, perceive it to involve a manifest contradiction. For what are the forementioned objects but the things we perceive by sense, and what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations; and is it not plainly repugnant that any one of these or any combination of them should exist unperceived?

Berkeley presents here the following argument (see Winkler 1989, 138):

- (1) We perceive ordinary objects (houses, mountains, etc.).
- (2) We perceive only ideas.

Therefore,

- (3) Ordinary objects are ideas.⁶⁹

Berkeley turns the empiricist's argument on its head and works outward from ideas and tries to find some "real world" of tangible objects. When look back to

⁶⁹ Lisa Downing, "George Berkeley," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2019), January 19, 2011, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/berkeley/#2.1.1>.

Descartes dismissal of we are always dreaming, he points to our perception objects while awake as a proof that dreams are not reality. To this, Berkeley has a response:

Berkeley is aware that the materialist has one important card left to play: Don't we need material objects in order to *explain* our ideas? And indeed, this seems intuitively gripping: Surely the best explanation of the fact that I have a chair idea every time I enter my office and that my colleague has a chair idea when *she* enters my office is that a single enduring material object *causes* all these various ideas. Again, however, Berkeley replies by effectively exploiting the weaknesses of his opponents' theories: "...though we give the materialists their external bodies, they by their own confession are never the nearer knowing how our ideas are produced: since they own themselves unable to comprehend in what manner body can act upon spirit, or how it is possible it should imprint any idea in the mind. Hence it is evident the production of ideas or sensations in our minds, can be no reason why we should suppose matter or corporeal substances, since that is acknowledged to remain equally inexplicable with, or without this supposition. (PHK 19)"

Firstly, Berkeley contends, a representationalist must admit that we *could* have our ideas without there being any external objects causing them (PHK 18). (This is one way in which Berkeley sees materialism as leading to skepticism.) More devastatingly, however, he must admit that the existence of matter does not help to explain the occurrence of our ideas.⁷⁰

The project of naïvely assuming a real world to which we have direct, self-authenticating access is not as easy it may seem. While Berkeley's argument when made in the 18th century may have sounded like a philosopher having fun with words and ideas, we see a greater cogency in the force of his argument when we realize how much of sensory perception actually is construction. In short, the relationship between what we consciously perceive and the thing we are perceiving raises some exceptionally difficult questions.

⁷⁰ Downing, "George Berkeley."

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT SENSORY PERCEPTION FROM SENSORY PERCEPTION

So far, we have simultaneously argued (1) there is an arbitrary relationship between light and sight, between moving air and sound; and (2) the perception of which we are conscious is a construction.

Let's consider some implications of these propositions. First, the nature of shapes and colors does not come from world outside us. The colors and shapes must *precede* the perception of such shapes and colors. The message sent from our retina merely triggers the production such colors as my sensory perception. The photon cannot create a new color; it can only signal production of a pre-existing color.

Our interaction with the physical world can only result in the production of new combinations information which existed prior to the interaction with the environment. This means we are hardwired with a limitation on what we can understand about the world. This raises the interesting question: What is the source of this information? The sensory system is not built to acquire new information. There is no mechanism to acquire new information. The sensation based upon the environment results in an arrangement of the information which the brain can arrange into a perception.

Second, what we know about sensory perception only comes from the sensory system itself. We can acquire no empirical knowledge *around* our senses. If our senses are arbitrary and contain such limitations, then how can we know that what we know about sensory system is “true” or complete?

There is just one further aspect of sensory perception which we must consider: We don't know what we don't know. Until recently, we were unaware that the same waves which deliver visible light deliver infrared and ultraviolet “light.” Beyond these lie x-rays and radio waves. Bats hear sounds we cannot hear. Bloodhounds track scents we cannot smell. And so, there lies a world beyond our senses.

We have overcome such limitations by developing technology to extend our senses. We track these colors and sounds and then translate the information into

some way which makes sense to us. An infrared photograph of the sun is translated into a visible yet false color photograph. Such a translation provides us some, albeit incomplete, knowledge of that world.

But there is a greater problem. Since our senses are developed to only respond to a narrow range of potential attributes of the “real world,” whatever that might be, there could be any number of things which are attributes of that world which are unknown and unknowable:

It is readily allowed, that other beings may possess many senses of which we can have no conception; because the ideas of them have never been introduced to us, in the only manner, by which an idea can have access to the mind, to wit, by the actual feeling and sensation.⁷¹

This leads to the very real possibility that the world is mostly unknown and unknowable:

The world is mostly unknown. This statement immediately emphasizes the point that we are not conscious of most of the environmental events that occur around us. The world consists of stimuli of which we may or may not be aware. These stimuli are pressure variations, chemicals, electromagnetic radiation, temperature, and even gravity.⁷²

EMPIRICISM IS A TRICKY FOUNDATION

The prestige of “modern, modern science” (to use Schaeffer’s apt phrase), lies in the self-authenticating claim of empiricism.⁷³ But as we can see, empiricism

⁷¹ David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Peter Millican (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Oxford. 2007), 15.

⁷² David R Soderquist, *Sensory Processes* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2002), 1.

⁷³ The early scientists believed in the uniformity of natural causes. What they did not believe in was the uniformity of natural causes in a closed system. That little phrase makes all the difference in the world. It makes the difference between natural science and a science that is rooted in naturalistic philosophy. It makes all the difference between what I would call modern science and what I would call modern modern science. It is important to notice that this is not a failing of science as science, but rather that the uniformity of natural causes in a closed system has become the dominant philosophy among scientists. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*, vol. 1 (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 229–230.

does not provide self-authentication. It provides an arbitrary construction which is limited in ways we cannot even imagine. Indeed, empiricism may lead to the conclusion that what we perceive has been programmed by another. There is no “real world” to which have access.

Empiricism left to itself creates an epistemological trap from which we cannot escape. It cannot justify what we “know.” While perhaps we can be certain, at least in a sense used by Descartes, that we know what we know, we do not know what *it is* that we know. Empiricism leaves us trapped in our brain with no way out.⁷⁴

Indeed, it is difficult to know how empiricism can justify something beyond solipsism (which is merely a correlative of the computer simulation theory). It seems that if we are left with *empiricism alone* the best we can do is either (1) just ignore the problem, or (2) resign ourselves to an extreme form of skepticism such as belief that all life is illusory.⁷⁵

I am not saying that an atheist scientist who denies anything beyond the functioning of his brain and insists, without justification, that this sensation is self-authenticating knows nothing of the real world. Common grace is sufficient to provide a basis for some knowledge even without an adequate justification for the belief in the truthfulness of such knowledge. But problem with meaning remains.

To set up that further consideration, I hope for you to understand the following: a fact “means” something based upon its relationship to some larger matrix of knowledge. If you are holding a baseball and start to throw it but stop, you have committed a “balk” if you are playing a game of baseball.⁷⁶ That is what you stopped motion “means.” If you are in a park with your dog, the stopped motion “means” something quite different. If you are alone in your backyard, it has a third

⁷⁴ I write “perhaps” because even that Cartesian certainty is a matter of philosophical dispute.

⁷⁵ There is the response of Pyrrhonism as articulated by Sextus Empiricus, “And, most important of all, in his enunciation of these formulae he states what appears to himself and announces his own impression in an undogmatic way, without making any positive assertion regarding the external realities.” Sextus Empiricus, vol. 1 *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. Rev. R.G. Bury (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 11. This non-committed response to the problems of sense impressions seems to be the default position of our age.

⁷⁶ Matt Kelly, “What Is a Balk?” n.d. MLB.com, May 27th, 2019, Accessed April 18, 2022, <https://www.mlb.com/news/what-is-a-balk-in-baseball-a-definitive-guide>.

“meaning.” The word “gift” means poison in Germany and a pleasant surprise in Germantown, Tennessee.

What these sense perceptions “mean” depends upon the context in which we understand them to take place. I have attempted to outline the nature of our sensory apparatus based upon our observations of that sensory apparatus. If we understand these sensations developed in our brain as a matter of accumulated solutions to survival problems arrived at over millions of years, they have a particular meaning. If we understand these same sensations as the product of an apparatus designed by a loving Creator who intends for us to understand something of the Creator, the sensations have a different meaning.

The nature of the “meaning” when applied to sensations can be largely overlooked if one is a chemist, say. But when it comes to psychology, the question meaning is critical. As noted above, psychology holds a unique place as a “science” which claims to tell us how we know. The full implications of that claim will be developed as we continue our examination. But that question of meaning begins here when the photon sets off a series of electrical and chemical responses.

And it is to this point which I have aimed from the beginning. The greater claim of “psychology” is that it is scientific and based upon self-authenticating empiricism and reason. We have not considered reason, but we have seen that empiricism won’t answer to the demand made upon it.

To put a theological point on the problem, seeking to rely upon such an understanding of “science” is idolatry:

Like the problems of rationalism, the problems of empiricism are essentially spiritual. Like rationalist, empiricists have tried to find certainty apart from God’s revelation, and that false certainty has shown itself to be bankrupt. Even if the laws of logic are known to us (and it is unclear how they could be on an empirical basis), we could deduce nothing from statements about sensation except, at most, other statements about sensation. Thus, once again, rationalism become irrationalism: a bold plan for autonomously building the

edifice of knowledge ends up in total ignorance.⁷⁷

To justify our knowledge, we must presuppose that (1) there is an appropriate correlation between light and sight (sense and perception); (2) the pre-existing information used to develop perceptions is appropriate; (3) what we have access to is sufficient; (4) what we know is “true.”

Someone with sufficient power and moral goodness outside us and before us alone can guarantee such knowledge. This is not a sufficient argument to contend that such a God must exist. But what this argument does require is that one cannot assert that knowledge of the world or others can be had without such a God.

The manner in which we understand basic sensation, the meaning we assign to such sensation will frame the remainder of our analysis of psychology. As you can see, I propose that understanding sensation as an arbitrary process of our brain—which must be the conclusion of one who seeks to authenticate sensation based on sensation—creates a level of incoherence in our understanding of human beings and certainly creates a trouble at the most basic level of our science.

Since we all must begin with some presuppositions with themselves are not subject to analysis, I will begin the basic Christian propositions that our understanding must be informed by our text.

THE HEAVENS DECLARE

The dead-end of empiricism certainly must be rejected on any Christian reading. Paul, in Romans 1, contends that we are held morally and eternally accountable to what we perceive:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever

⁷⁷John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1987), 119.

since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. (Romans 1:18-25)

Paul here is laying an extraordinary burden upon our perception of the physical world. What is disclosed in the physical world and which is then realized through our senses is the basis upon which God will impose eternal judgment. Look at those words which end verse 21, “So they are without excuse.” That is a dumbfounding sentence.

As we have seen, the senses on their own terms, are a mechanism which transform interactions with the environment into some “perception” fixed in our brain. The relationship between the initial contact with the environment and the realized sensation is a construction (top-down processing), arbitrary (as demonstrated by synesthesia), and incomplete in some unknowable manner. It cannot authenticate the source of its own knowledge. And yet God will hold us eternally accountable for the same.

One corollary of this proposition is that we must understand our sensory apparatus to be more than adequate: it provides us exactly as much information as God deems it minimally necessary. It must be “true” knowledge in a critical sense because God will judge us on this knowledge. In short, Christianity provides a guarantee, a justification for believing the content of our sense perception. Calvin comments, “By saying, that *God has made it manifest*, he means, that man was created to be a spectator of this formed world, and that eyes were given him, that he might, by looking on so beautiful a picture, be led up to the Author himself.”⁷⁸

⁷⁸John Calvin, *Romans*, electronic ed., Calvin’s Commentaries (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998), Romans 1:19.

Consider those words, “Man was created to be a spectator of this formed world.” Our capacity to perceive the world is in part a reason for which we were created. Our sensory apparatus is not merely adequate, it is necessary for our purpose in existing. At this point, I want you to consider the argument above made in connection with computer simulation. The computer simulation position proposes that our conscious, having no survival purpose, can best be explained on the basis of living in a simulation. Calvin, relying upon Paul, says, our sensation and conscious awareness of that sensation is best explained on the basis that we were created to be spectators in the theater of God’s glory.⁷⁹

The knowledge we obtain in this theater should lead to a theological understanding of the world:

But just what does Paul mean when he claims that human beings “see” and “understand” from creation and history that a powerful God exists? Some think that Paul is asserting only that people have around them the evidence of God’s existence and basic qualities; whether people actually perceive it or become personally conscious of it is not clear. But Paul’s wording suggests more than this. He asserts that people actually come to “understand” something about God’s existence and nature. How universal is this perception? The flow of Paul’s argument makes any limitation impossible. Those who perceive the attributes of God in creation must be the same as those who suppress the truth in unrighteousness and are therefore liable to the wrath of God. Paul makes clear that this includes all people (see 3:9, 19–20).⁸⁰

You can begin to understand the importance of putting our sensory perception into a theological framework. We are not just observing this and that for the purpose of not dying. We are observing for the purpose of coming to know God. This is the reason why the Psalmist says the world is declaring God:

⁷⁹ When I was in high school, I had the interesting opportunity of speaking with the head of the philosophy department at University of California Berkeley. The philosopher spoke to me of the “Gia Hypothesis.” He held that human beings were a development of “Gia” so that the earth could observe itself.

⁸⁰ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 105.

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge.

There is no speech, nor are there words,
whose voice is not heard.

Their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

In them he has set a tent for the sun,
which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber,
and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy.

Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them,
and there is nothing hidden from its heat. (Psalm 19:1-6)

The world, to use Calvin's language, is a theater in which we are to observe the glory of God:

Therefore, because God has put us in this world as in a theatre, to contemplate his glory, let us acknowledge him to be such as he declares himself to us, and because he gives us the second instruction which is even more familiar in his word, let us be more confident and stirred with a burning zeal to aspire unto him until we reach that goal, and let us be aware that this world was created for that purpose and that our Lord has placed us here and has favored us with living here and enjoying all the things he has created.

Now, the sun was not made for itself and is even a creature without feeling. The trees, the each, which produces food for us — all of that works for man. The animals, although they move and have some feeling, do not do for all that have this high capacity to understand what belongs to God, for they do not discriminate between good and evil. We also see that their life and death are for men's use and service.⁸¹

⁸¹ Jean Calvin, "The Triune God at Work (Gen. 1:1-2)" in *Sermons On Genesis, Chapters 1:1-11:4: Forty-Nine Sermons Delivered in Geneva between 4 September 1559 and 23 January 1560*, trans. Rob

This means that we should understand epistemology, a theory for knowing what we know and why, as doxological. An understanding of knowledge which does not lead to a deeper understanding of the glory of God is faulty at its core.

Roy McGregor (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 6.

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM'S PASTORAL CARE IN OLYMPIAS'S DESPONDENCY

Jeremy T. Oliver¹

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1960s, theologian Thomas Oden read Nemesius's *On the Nature of Man*. While reading this ancient, theological work, he was convicted that he embraced modern theological argumentation to the neglect of the wisdom of the Christian tradition.² In his forties and armed with this new revelation, Oden's life and research was set on a new trajectory of harkening back to the historical Christian tradition and bringing it to the attention of others.³

In the course of this mission, he realized that a major chasm existed between historical and modern pastoral care. Of modern pastoral care, Oden notes:

The task of the pastoral counselor thus understood in recent years has tended to become that of trying to ferret out what is currently happening or likely to happen next in the sphere of emergent psychologies and adapting it as deftly as possible to the work of ministry. In the adaptation, however, the fundament of Christian pastoral care in its classical sense has at best been neglected and at worst polemicized. So pastoral theology has become in many cases little more than a thoughtless mimic of the most current psychological trends.⁴

Recognizing this massive neglect, Oden further wrote, "A major effort is needed

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² Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life* (San Francisco: Harper Publishing, 1989), 219-220.

³ For a detailed history of Thomas Oden's life and transition in convictions and research, see Thomas C. Oden, *A Change of Heart: A Personal and Theological Memoir* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014).

⁴ Thomas C. Oden, *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 33.

today to rediscover and remin the classical models of Christian pastoral care and to make available once again the key texts of that classical tradition following about fifty years of neglect, the depths of which are arguably unprecedented in any previous Christian century.”⁵ Within his work, *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition*, Oden overviews Gregory the Great’s *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, seeking to show that, although written centuries ago, it speaks to contemporary pastoral care.⁶ Oden’s critics do not see the practical feasibility of studying the classic pastoral tradition;⁷ however, Oden has shown that Gregory the Great’s *The Book of Pastoral Rule* is accessible and applicable to contemporary pastoral care.⁸

The question arises, can Thomas Oden’s theory that the classic Christian tradition of pastoral care has contemporary relevance be shown prior to Gregory the Great? Passing away 133 years prior to Gregory’s birth was another father of the Church whose extensive writings influenced many in their approach to pastoral care. That man is John Chrysostom, whose extensive writings and sermons have greatly influenced many generations of Christians.⁹

⁵ Oden, *Care of Souls*, 26.

⁶ Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, trans. George E. Demacopoulos (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007). Thomas Oden gave a systematized overview of the Christian classic tradition in his four-volume work on the subject. Thomas C. Oden, *Classical Pastoral Care: Four-Volume Set* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books 2000). In addition, William A. Clebsch and Charles R. Jaekle provide an overview of key, classic Christian figures in *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 1994), as does Andrew Purves in *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). Predating Oden’s work is a survey of pastoral care by John T. McNeill, *A History of the Cure of Souls* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951). Others have now begun to write surveys of key figures in classical pastoral care, including Robert W. Kellemen, *Counseling Under the Cross: How Martin Luther Applied the Gospel to Daily Life* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2017) and Mark A. Deckard, *Helpful Truth in Past Places; The Puritan Practice of Biblical Counseling* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2010).

⁷ See Lewis Seymour Mudge, “Gathering around the Center: A Reply to Thomas Oden,” *The Christian Century* 112 (1995): 392-96 and Cornelius Plantinga, “Response to Thomas C. Oden, ‘The Long Journey Home,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 (1991): 93-96.

⁸ Oden, *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition*.

⁹ Although speaking a bit hyperbolically, David Ford writes of Chrysostom’s popularity in the history of Christianity, “His extensive, detailed exegetical preaching on many books of the Bible – especially the Gospels of Matthew and John, Acts, and the Pauline Epistles – makes him the greatest biblical commentator in the history of the Greek-speaking Church, and the spiritual depth and melodic eloquence of his sermons make him the greatest preacher in the history of Christianity, both in the East and the West.” David C. Ford, introduction to *Letters to Saint Olympia* by John Chrysostom, ed. by David C. Ford (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Press, 2016), 9. J.N.D Kelly notes of the amount of sermon-commentaries still preserved, “[They] form the most impressive, and also most readable, collection of patristic expositions of Scripture.” J.N.D.

John Chrysostom's writings contain a unique collection of letters to his spiritual daughter, a long-standing deaconess in Constantinople, named Olympias.¹⁰ Olympias was a wealthy widow who had dedicated her life and wealth to serving God. Like Chrysostom, Olympias valued asceticism. She served alongside Chrysostom during his time as Bishop of Constantinople. When Chrysostom was exiled and those supportive of Chrysostom were ostracized and persecuted, Olympias struggled greatly with despondency. While Chrysostom wrote many other letters during his exile, his letters to Olympias are unique, outlining a progression of Chrysostom's pastoral care for Olympias in her continued battle with despondency.¹¹ Because of this, these letters are a valuable resource for the modern day, providing a case study through which one can view Chrysostom's approach to pastoral care. In addition, these personal letters, written to a woman for whom he greatly cared, are not easily open to the charge of great hyperbole or exaggeration as is his preaching.¹² Therefore, the argument found in this paper is that John Chrysostom believed the Scriptures to be authoritative and sufficient to treat despondency, as shown in his letters to Olympias.

CHYSOSTOM'S UNDERSTANDING OF DESPONDENCY

To properly understand the pastoral care that Chrysostom gave Olympias, it is necessary for us to clearly understand what he means by 'despondency'. The word

Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom – Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 94. For detailed biographies of John Chrysostom, see W.R.W. Stephens, *Saint John Chrysostom: His Life and Times – A Sketch of the Church and the Empire in the Fourth Century*, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1880), *Chrysostomus Baur, John Chrysostom and His Time* (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1959), and J. N. D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth*.

¹⁰ Ford, introduction to *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 17. Throughout writings on the life Olympias, the spelling *Olympias* is typically used. David Ford used the alternative spelling, *Olympia*. Unless referring to the title of Ford's translation of *Letters to Saint Olympia* or in a quotation, this paper will use the traditional spelling of *Olympias*. For further biographical information on Olympias, see Elizabeth Clark, ed., *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1979).

¹¹ David Ford notes how extensive Chrysostom's letter writing was during this period, "These are only a small portion of all his extant letters – some 236 of them, written to about 150 different people while he was in exile." Ford, introduction to *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 21. Yet, as Johannes Quasten notes, "The longest and most cordial are the seventeen communications which he wrote to the widow and deaconess Olympias." Johannes Quasten, *Patrology: Volume III – The Golden Age of Greek Patristic Literature* (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1986), 469.

¹² For example, J.N.D. Kelly notes of Chrysostom's first sermon that he utilized the "stock-in-trade of the ancient genre of encomium as modified by Christian orators" that would be open to exaggerated compliments of Bishop Flavian, whom he eulogized in the sermon. Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 56.

translated despondency, ἀθυμία, is not found in the Scriptures. However, looking at the context of Chrysostom's usage of the word and how he applies it to various biblical characters, it can be shown that Chrysostom understood despondency to be a moral issue akin to spiritually-driven despair or depression.

Chrysostom's Usage of Despondency in *Letters to Saint Olympia*

Within the *Letters to Saint Olympia*, Chrysostom makes sixty-one references to despondency. In a brief survey of the context surrounding Chrysostom's use of the term despondency, it is clear that John sees it as something that can be "chased away"¹³; that one can lead himself from despondency¹⁴; that it can grow worse and become a "tyranny"¹⁵; others can speak into and help alleviate despondency¹⁶; that humanity's increasing in despondency is the desire of the devil¹⁷; that death is easier to bear than extreme despondency¹⁸; that by continuing in despondency one is "demanding a punishment"¹⁹; and that despondency can "produce physical illness."²⁰

David Ford recognized a similar usage of despondency. In the introduction to his translation of *Letters to Saint Olympia*, Ford notes:

[T]he most common theme in these letters is that of instructing Olympia how to avert and overcome the despondency that continually plagues her.... In the letters Chrysostom repeatedly expresses his conviction that despondency is brought on and sustained by *faulty thinking* – by negative, debilitating *thoughts* (*logismoi*) – and so he is likewise convinced that it can be willfully overcome through *proper thinking*.²¹

While this briefly surveys Chrysostom's usage of the word, the issue remains

¹³ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, trans. David C. Ford (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Press, 2016), 33.

¹⁴ Ibid., 56.

¹⁵ Ibid., 57.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 92.

¹⁸ Ibid., 103-4.

¹⁹ Ibid., 145.

²⁰ Ibid., 159-60.

²¹ Ibid., 22. In addition, Ford sees that despondency could be translated "despondency/despair/depression", depending upon the context (Ibid).

how despondency corresponds to Scripture since ἀθυμία is not found in Scripture. Was despondency a new concept that Chrysostom did not see in Scripture? Did he see it as a new problem in humanity that Olympias was facing? As will be shown below, Chrysostom believed his understanding and instruction on despondency was clearly found in Scripture.

Chrysostom's Application of Despondency to Biblical Characters in *Letters to Saint Olympia*

Although the specific term 'despondency' is not mentioned in Scripture, Chrysostom examines multiple biblical figures and applies Scripture related to their lives to his instruction on despondency. While his letters to Olympias are rich with biblical references, letter ten devotes a large amount of attention to biblical figures he wants Olympias to consider. Examining letter ten will provide a thorough sampling of Chrysostom's understanding of despondency.

Chrysostom begins by discussing those who saw how debilitating despondency could be. He notes Elijah's despondency in regards to his flight from Jezebel in 1 Kings 19. Chrysostom writes, “[Elijah] could not bear the tyranny of despondency [*athymias*], for he *was* greatly despairing [*ēthymei*]....”²² In a similar context, he mentions Jonah who, “in fleeing from despair, sought refuge in death...”²³ and David in Psalm 38 who, “was indicating that that fire, fiercer than fire, is the passion of despondency.”²⁴ He also examines Job and how he saw death as a relief from despondency (Job 3:23). Chrysostom writes, “Thus despondency is more burdensome than everything else; and as it is more burdensome, its recompense will be greater.”²⁵

The theme of suffering as a means of bringing greater eternal reward is prominent in Chrysostom's letters. In letter ten, he cites the example of Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) who suffered greatly in life. Of him, Chrysostom writes, “So even though he did not accomplish anything noble, and only because he bore his despondency nobly, he obtained the same end as the patriarch [Abraham] who did accomplish such acts of virtue”.²⁶ Continuing in this subject, Chrysostom

²² Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 104.

²³ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

moves to the Apostle Paul, noting that if “...sufferings have great rewards, and despair is the most grievous and most painful of all suffering, imagine what will be the recompense for it!”²⁷

Chrysostom then transitions to an extended discourse on Joseph, who suffered greatly yet avoided despondency. Chrysostom writes of Joseph’s time in jail and his care for the baker and the butler:

He was so far from being under the sway of despondency that he even dissipated the grief of others with him. For when he saw certain ones troubled and confounded and despairing, he came to them immediately, asking the reason. And learning that the disturbance was caused by visions in dreams, he interpreted those dreams.²⁸

This brief survey of biblical characters mentioned in letter 10 showed that Chrysostom clearly understood despondency to be an issue affecting individuals in Scripture. At this point, it is helpful for us to consider how Chrysostom addresses despondency outside the writings of these letters to Olympias.

Chrysostom’s Uses of Despondency Beyond Letters to Saint Olympia

In his *Ad Stagirium*, John Chrysostom speaks of Stageirios and the sin of despondency. Stageirios was a monk who, upon entering the life of monasticism, had physical struggles. This was possibly from seizures or, Stageirios theorized, demonic affliction.²⁹ Because of these physical maladies, Stageirios contemplated suicide. In his pastoral counsel, Chrysostom understood Stageirios’s thoughts to be a moral issue.³⁰ In this work, Chrysostom goes on to talk of the sin of giving in to despondency. Thuminger and Singer note:

For many people, [Chrysostom] writes, a physical illness is a reason for *athumia*, since bodily suffering always oppresses the soul as well. Stageirios, in contrast, has been relatively lucky in that he is only affected by the *daimōn* in the soul, and temporarily. He should

²⁷ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 110-11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

²⁹ Chiara Thuminger and P.N. Singer, *Mental Illness in Ancient Medicine: From Celsus to Paul of Aegina* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 90.

³⁰ W.R.W. Stephens, *Saint John Chrysostom*, 85.

concentrate on resisting *athumia*, for this is a greater threat than any *daimōn*; Stageirios has greater chances of success, one might add, since neither fasting nor asceticism helped him against the seizures, and the (exorcistic?) efforts of several holy men were also of no avail.³¹

Considering Chrysostom's overall usage of ἀθυμία across his writings and sermons, patristic scholar Robert G.T. Edwards notes, "In each case 'dejection' or 'despondency' seem to be the best English translations of ἀθυμία: they convey the inaction or lassitude associated with sadness, sorrow, grief, and despair."³² Scholar Jessica Wright, similar to Robert G.T. Edwards, recognized that this word in John Chrysostom's writing denotes, "lack of spirit," often translated as 'despondency' or 'depression'."³³

From this understanding, it is reasonable to conclude that John Chrysostom saw despondency as a morally-laden issue that one must overcome in a spiritual manner. In addition, while John did not give a precise definition to despondency, he seems to have understood it to be synonymous with the idea of spiritual despair or depression.

CHYSOSTOM'S UNDERSTANDING OF MEDICAL PHYSICIANS' TREATMENTS

J.N.D. Kelly argues that as Olympias's despondency continued, John Chrysostom could not adequately treat it. He writes, "His ill-success is not really surprising; in her deep prostration she needed something more than intellectual reassurance and brisk admonition to pull herself together. For all his affection and devotion John was temperamentally unsuited to enter sympathetically into her psychological predicament."³⁴ It is true that Olympias's despondency came back and Chrysostom's pastoral care was cut short by his death. However, in making these statements, Kelly is moving from detailing history to making interpretive

³¹ Thuminger and Singer, *Mental Illness in Ancient Medicine*, 90.

³² Robert G.T. Edwards, "Healing Despondency with Biblical Narrative in John Chrysostom's Letters to Olympias," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 28 (2020): 8.

³³ Jessica L. Wright, "Between Despondency and the Demon: Diagnosing and Treating Spiritual Disorders in John Chrysostom's Letter to Stageirios," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 8 (2015): 352.

³⁴ Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 56.

statements regarding that history. Kelly is interpreting Chrysostom's spiritual guidance as insufficient, either because of lack of knowledge of such issues or his inability. Alternative to Kelly, it could be said that Chrysostom believed Olympias's despondency was a spiritual issue. As such, her despondency needed a spiritual solution and would have rejected a non-spiritual alternative that could potentially be offered by the medical establishment. As will be shown, Chrysostom had a clear understanding of medical practices of his day and never told Olympias to seek medical attention for her despondency, which would have been reasonable if he had understood it to be a physical malady.

CHYSOSTOM'S REFERENCES TO PHYSICIAN TREATMENTS FOR PHYSICAL MALADIES

Chrysostom also recognized the importance of medical treatments throughout his writings. He did not view physicians and their treatments negatively. That is initially apparent in Chrysostom's personal need for regular medical care. As a young man Chrysostom took his ascetic lifestyle to the extreme of living in a mountain cave for two years, depriving his body of sleep, or of even lying down.³⁵ When his health greatly deteriorated, Chrysostom returned to the city. Robert Payne notes, "His stomach shriveled up, and his kidneys were damaged by the cold. His digestion permanently impaired, unable to doctor himself, he came down the mountain, walked to Antioch and appeared before Archbishop Meletius, who immediately sent him to a doctor...."³⁶

For the rest of his life, Chrysostom relied on medical practices to help his physical maladies. Throughout *Letters to Saint Olympia*, Chrysostom mentioned being treated by doctors for his physical condition. For example, from Caesarea he writes, "I have enjoyed great solitude, having encountered some excellent, extremely reputable doctors who succeed in their healing ministry to me not only through their skill but also by their sympathy and love."³⁷ One of these doctors even chose to accompany Chrysostom on his journey in exile. Chrysostom was familiar with what a doctor could offer to treat the body physically. He also had

³⁵ Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 32.

³⁶ Robert Payne, *The Fathers of the Eastern Church* (New York: Dorset Press, 1989), 197.

³⁷ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 37.

access to these doctors and could have asked for their input on Olympias's physical problems and, if he thought necessary, her despondency.

In addition to Chrysostom's own personal need for medical care, he told Olympias of the importance of caring for her physical health. In addition, Chrysostom makes clear that he saw her current physical problems as a result of her despondency, not the other way around. Responding to what Olympias had written, Chrysostom replies:

...you have confessed this yourself, if you do not free yourself from this infirmity, we will not believe that you have been delivered from despondency. For if this [despondency] is indeed the cause of your illness, just as you have written to us, it is very evident that if one is removed the other will be terminated with it...³⁸

But as a prescription for Olympias's despondency, Chrysostom continued to encourage her to deal with it in a spiritual manner.

Beyond the interconnectedness of the despondency causing physical problems, Chrysostom told Olympias to take proper care of her physical body. Referring to 1 Timothy 5:23, Chrysostom recognized that there is a proper role for physical health and treatment of illness. Chrysostom writes, "But do not therefore either desire your end or neglect your health; for that is not safe. Therefore Paul heartily advises Timothy to take the greatest care of himself."³⁹

Chrysostom also recognized maladies aside from despondency that can affect the cognitive abilities of a person. In his thirteenth letter to Olympias, Chrysostom urged her to find joy in her present circumstances. He noted that if one weeps, it should be for those perpetrating the evils that are causing her suffering, because of the coming Judgment Day. And in the course of this letter, Chrysostom contrasted these culprits with those that are experiencing mania.⁴⁰ Chrysostom writes:

³⁸ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 167-68.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁴⁰ Rather than 'mania,' or some alternative translation, David Ford used the term 'mental illness.' Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 139. However, within this translation he uses the term 'mania' synonymously to 'mental illness.' This may be to distinguish between two different words used by Chrysostom. Ford made a translation decision to read a modern term back into the text when, in this case, it brings connotations that John would not have considered. The translation

For they are just like those possessed by mental illness – who kick and strike those who approach them, randomly and vainly, even often those who are their benefactors and friends, not recognizing the mania that possesses them. Therefore their illness is incurable, for they neither do allow doctors to approach, nor do they take medicine; but rather they treat in a contrary way those who wish to heal and benefit them.⁴¹

This shows the extent of Chrysostom's familiarity with the medical community of his day and even recognizing a physical issue affecting the mind that he believed needed medical treatment.

Beyond the letters to Olympias, Chrysostom acknowledged that medicine could be a benefit to those struggling with physical maladies. For example, in a homily from Colossians, illustrating Colossians 3:15, he compared the necessity of precision in Christian care of the soul to that in medical care of the body. He writes, “Tell me, if a physician should come to one, and, neglecting the remedies belonging to his art, should use incantation, should we call that man a physician? By no means...”⁴² In addition, of Stageirios in *Ad Stagirium*, Thuminger and Singer note:

by Ford is preserved in the quotation. Let the reader be aware of this translation decision made by Ford. Wendy Mayer makes a more detailed yet similar argument as Ford. Wendy Mayer, “The Persistence in Late Antiquity of Medico-Philosophical Psychic Therapy,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 8 (2015): 337-51. She sees John Chrysostom’s final letter to Olympias and another, final letter to his extensive followers as falling into the category of a medico-philosophical treatise. Yet John saw himself as prescribing biblical care for the soul, and modern definitions and constructs of mental illness did not exist. It seems Mayer, too, is reading modern categories back into the writings of Chrysostom. For example, writing about John’s view of sin, she notes, “In John’s psychology the mindset ($\gamma\gamma\omega\mu\eta$) is the critical faculty responsible for moral error (that is, sin). In this respect, as Laird has shown, he draws on a long Hellenistic tradition (both Christian and non-Christian) and is informed by the same paideia that shaped the views of his compatriot at Antioch, the teacher of rhetoric, Libanius. In this view, sin or moral error is conceived of as a pathological state (a sickness of the psyche), a genuine mental illness that differs from other mental illnesses precisely in respect to personal agency or choice.” Mayer, “The Persistence in Late Antiquity of Medico-Philosophical Psychic Therapy,” 343. As will be shown, John was looking through a biblical lens of sin and the mind.

⁴¹ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 139.

⁴² John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, vol. 13, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J. Ashworth and John Albert Broadus, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 298.

He makes no reference to any possibility that Stageirios's suffering could be a natural illness or that medical treatment could have been attempted, despite the fact that doctors and medicine are mentioned frequently throughout the rest of the document to illustrate divine or ideal human action.⁴³

Graeco-Roman Medicinal Practices and Despondency

Another possible explanation for John Chrysostom's non-medical view of despondency is that the Roman world would not have typically regarded despondency as a physical illness either. At the time of Chrysostom, the Graeco-Roman Hippocratic theory of humors, made popular by Galen, was prevalent.⁴⁴ This theory understood that the body contained four visible liquids that, when out of balance, caused physical problems. And, as David Healy notes, "These humors had corresponding elements, which were also visible and potentially testable."⁴⁵

Examining the question of despondency in the letters to Olympias, Chrysostom made clear that it affects the body. However, he does not make the case that despondency is caused by an imbalance of these humors. Neither Chrysostom nor Olympias claimed that her despondency is caused by her physical body. Chrysostom could easily have encouraged her to go to a physician to see if a physical malady was causing her despondency rather than focus upon her spiritual state. As Healy states elsewhere of physicians of the ancient world:

The texts of Galen and Hippocrates make clear that physicians in antiquity often described diseases, and even mental disorders, that can be recognized today, but they did so on the basis of visible appearances of the disorder – the swelling, heat, and redness of a tumor, the smell of urine, the mute rigidity of stupor, the frenzy of delirium. These were not diseases based on what the affected subject reported about some inner mental state.⁴⁶

⁴³ Thuminger and Singer, *Mental Illness in Ancient Medicine*, 90.

⁴⁴ David Healy, *Mania: A Short History of Bipolar Disorder* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008), 3-10.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁶ Healy, *Mania*, 12.

David Ford, while missing the necessity of biblical transformation through the treatment Chrysostom prescribes from God's Word, sees Olympias's struggle not as an issue of a physical malady but as a cognitive one, writing, "This emphasis on proper thinking as the key to getting out of – and staying out of – despondency/despair/depression is the hallmark of the widespread clinical approach in modern psychotherapy known as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)."⁴⁷

The picture that emerges is that Chrysostom understood medical practices of his day and did not believe that the medical community offered any real means of dealing with the root of despondency. He saw it as a spiritual problem. J.N.D. Kelly could quibble that the ancient world had no treatment for despondency. However, John was certain that despondency was a spiritual issue and that God's Word was the proper prescription. And if despondency is a spiritual malady, no physical treatment, whether ancient or modern, would provide help.

The Issue of Chrysostom's Temperament

As mentioned earlier, Kelly also claimed, "John was temperamentally unsuited to enter sympathetically...."⁴⁸ While Chrysostom is at times firm in directing Olympias to cast aside despondency,⁴⁹ he recognized the depths to which despondency could take a person⁵⁰ and expressed great care and love for Olympias.⁵¹ In one of Chrysostom's most tender appeals to Olympias, it is apparent that he cared deeply for her and that he is firm in his belief that his spiritual prescriptions are exactly what she needs. He writes:

What, therefore shall we say about these things? That certainly it is possible for you, in my absence, to have fellowship with me through my books. And we will make haste, if we can locate couriers, to send you numerous, long letters. But if you desire to hear my living voice, perhaps this is possible, and we will see each other again, God willing – or rather, not 'perhaps,' but surely, without a doubt! For now, I will remind you I have not said these things rashly – neither have I

⁴⁷ Ford, introduction to *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 22.

⁴⁸ Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 56.

⁴⁹ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 61.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

beguiled you, nor made a miscalculation – but that you may hear my living through my letters.⁵²

Spiritual Direction or Ancient CBT?

As raised previously, David Ford saw what Chrysostom offered Olympias as an ancient form of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT).⁵³ While it is true that Chrysostom was concerned with the mind, we must consider if what he prescribed is uniquely biblical or more closely associated with modern behavioral science, specifically the methodology of CBT.

In examining anxiety and treatments of anxiety, Gary Collins briefly summarizes CBT as, "...helping people to change the way they think and/or change their behavior."⁵⁴ Based solely upon that brief definition, it would seem that a biblical approach to such problems is similar to CBT.⁵⁵ Ford mentioned CBT briefly in

⁵² Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 78.

⁵³ Ford, introduction to *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 22. Beyond the scope of this paper, Wendy Mayer made an argument similar to Ford that Chrysostom was more influenced by his Greek philosophical background and that he should be viewed in terms of "medico-philosophical psychic therapy." Wendy Mayer, "Shaping the Sick Soul: Reshaping the Identity of John Chrysostom," in *Christians Shaping Identity from the Roman Empire to Byzantium: Studies inspired by Pauline Allen*, eds. Geoffrey D. Dunn and Wendy Mayer (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 140. Yet to say that his philosophy was informed by them does not consider properly Chrysostom's negative view of Greek philosophy that was expressed especially vehemently in his later writings, with his letters to Olympias being near the end of his life. While it must be acknowledged that Chrysostom was influenced in technique by his Greek education, J.N.D. Kelly notes, "...[I]t remains true that his earlier writings reveal that he had gained at school first-rate working knowledge of the most admired authors of the classical period and regularly looks to them as models....This legacy of his boyhood education is all the more striking in the view of the deeply critical attitude which, as we shall discover, he was to develop towards Hellenistic culture....Libanios [Chrysostom's primary teacher] was dying and his friends inquired who should succeed him in his chair of rhetoric, he answered, 'It ought to have been John had not the Christians stolen him from us.'" Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 8. In addition, Chrysostom received further training and examination in theology in the Antiochian Church, especially under Bishop Meletius and Bishop Flavian. Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, 14-71. While further engagement could be done with Mayer's argument, it seems she is looking at Chrysostom's writing style, not considering the context of his world and the known opposition Chrysostom had to ideas of Greek philosophy.

⁵⁴ Gary R. Collins, *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide*, 3rd ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 151.

⁵⁵ For further critiques of CBT in comparison to biblical counseling see Heath Lambert, *A Biblical Theology of Biblical Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 97-98 and the interview of David Powlison in Ryan Howes, "The Varieties of Religious Therapy: Biblical Counseling – Biblical Counseling According to David Powlison," *Psychology Today*, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/in-therapy/201110/the-varieties-religious-therapy-biblical-counseling>.

passing. He may have had a very general definition in mind. However, to use such a term in a broad sense generalizes the method of care Chrysostom prescribed for Olympias and may conflate two different theories of care. Therefore, we need to consider if Chrysostom is prescribing something similar to CBT and if there is any difference between it and a biblical prescription of care if the classical pastoral tradition is to be considered.

In their critique of cognitive therapies, Jones and Butman note that cognitive therapy is born out of behaviorism, which is anti-Christian and materialistic at a foundational level.⁵⁶ They note, “Materialism denies the existence of the spiritual realm and posits matter is all that matters.”⁵⁷ This materialistic worldview naturally leads to a lack of absolute truth. As Jones and Butman note further, it holds to a “functional relativism” and that, “In most forms of cognitive therapy, the veracity of a client’s thoughts are evaluated based on slippery relativistic criteria that are selected because they bring about enhanced mood and functioning.”⁵⁸

Chrysostom’s writings are permeated with discussion of God, God’s interaction in human lives, and a future eternity that awaits those beyond this life. For example, in Letter fourteen, Chrysostom saw, “...God generally governs the affairs of men.”⁵⁹ At a foundational level, Chrysostom does not hold to the same philosophical commitments as CBT.

While there may be similarities in Chrysostom’s writing to some of CBT’s techniques, it would be a far stretch to say that these similarities would mean he is practicing an ancient form of CBT.⁶⁰ Rather, however different its foundation may be from Scripture, through common grace CBT may have landed upon a technique similar to what we find apparent in Scripture, namely, addressing the mind and behavior in the process of the care of souls.

⁵⁶ Stanton L. Jones and Richard E. Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 207.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 209.

⁵⁹ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 147.

⁶⁰ In regards to technique, Jay Adams writes, “Technique is, to put it simply, skill...A biblical technique is one that is commanded in the Scriptures (cf. Colossians 4:5, 6 above), commended in the Scriptures (cf. III John 5, 6), or grows out of a scriptural principle. There is no counseling apart from technique. You cannot avoid it; the minute you open your mouth you are using technique.” Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselor’s Manual* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 98-99.

However, to note the least common denominator in how CBT and Scripture may similarly address the mind in general, broad-stroke technique is insufficient. Scripture offers a very different view of humanity as created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-28); as living in a fallen world (Genesis 3); that humanity's primary problem is sin (Romans 5:12-14); that our ultimate need is salvation through Jesus Christ (Romans 5:15-21); and that change must occur according to the standard set by God, affecting both the inner and outer man (Ephesians 4:17-24). In CBT's materialistic worldview that denies the supernatural, very little exists internally for man; there is no goal for change beyond the relativistic goals of an individual or society; and CBT is largely amoral in what it has to offer. This radically changes the prescription that CBT would offer in comparison to Scripture. To read ideas of CBT back into Chrysostom's writings rather than concluding that CBT has discovered an element of truth in the natural world would mischaracterize Chrysostom's approach to despondency. Like Chrysostom, CBT recognizes the important role that our thoughts and beliefs contribute to our actions; however, CBT misses Chrysostom's all-important spiritual goal of basing our thoughts and beliefs in the truths of Scripture, leading to thoughts and actions that please the Lord.

CHRYSTOSSTOM'S SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE FOR OLYMPIAS'S DESPONDENCY

Having examined John Chrysostom's understanding of despondency as a spiritual malady, we turn our attention to examining Chrysostom's prescription for Olympias's despondency. Just as the diagnosis was spiritual, so was the prescription. Chrysostom clearly saw that the way out of despondency is intentional meditation upon biblical truths that can transform the mind and conquer despondency.

A Survey of Chrysostom's Direction to Olympias

In the first six letters, Chrysostom briefly engages with Olympias's despondency. In letter four, he states that she can conquer despondency with reason found in wisdom and understanding of Scripture.⁶¹ In letter five, he offers thoughts that may aid her in fighting despondency. First, to alleviate Olympias's worry for him, Chrysostom tells her of the "fellow-sufferers" physically present with

⁶¹ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 36.

him and how they are “abiding in health, in freedom from fear, in great inner stillness.”⁶² He then calls Olympias to meditate upon the temporal nature of this life, asserting that these thoughts would keep her from fixating on concerns of this world and that, instead, she should be burdened for the eternal state of those causing suffering.⁶³ Letter six recounts difficulties Chrysostom himself faced. Regarding her despondency, he mentions he delayed in writing, “lest I make you [Olympias] greatly sorrowful.”⁶⁴

Letter seven has an extended discourse on Olympias’s despondency. In this letter, Chrysostom uses the analogy of one navigating a ship, noting that, one has hope because God is “governing everything,” and reminds her that the only thing to fear is sin.⁶⁵ With these two concepts in mind, Chrysostom reminds Olympias that this world is temporal. He recognizes that she is busy, trying to make things better by going to various people. Yet he calls her to “beseech God” and reminds her that while God often does not work quickly, “when there remains almost nothing that has not been ravaged by the evils of the enemies, then all at once he changes everything to tranquility and leads things to unexpected stability.”⁶⁶ He gives the example of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego at the fiery furnace and how God met them in a similar fashion. Chrysostom moves to giving further examples of God’s longsuffering in the death of Jesus (and release of Barabbas), showing that Jesus’s life was a constant war. He mentions that one would think this a scandal [stumbling block] yet “...the truth was not obscured, but shone forth all the more brightly.”⁶⁷ Chrysostom then closes, pointing Olympias to the strength of the Church in the death of Stephen and calling her to trust God who is working mightily in their present circumstances.

In letter eight, Chrysostom reminds Olympias that if she does not deal with her despondency, it will lead to greater problems. He tells her, “I know the greatness of your intelligence, and the power of your Christian way of thinking [philosophia] which alone is sufficient to command the madness of your despair to be cast into

⁶² Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 39.

⁶³ Ibid., 40.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 46.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 47.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 53.

the sea, making everything calm.”⁶⁸ Chrysostom acknowledges there is mutual suffering in the church yet calls her to “set a limit to your grief.”⁶⁹ He looks at the example of the incestuous man of 1 Corinthians 7 and how, when he repented, Paul did not want him to continue in grief over sin. Chrysostom then calls Olympias to meditate on the Judgement Day when these instigators of persecution will be judged for their evils and Olympias will receive great rewards.⁷⁰ He then recounts, in detail, numerous of her virtues and tells her to meditate upon all the ways she has joyously served Christ in the past as a means of overcoming despondency. He acknowledges how painful it is to be separated from her and shows this is natural, as it was for Paul in being separated from Titus (2 Corinthians 2:12-23) and Paul’s sadness in being separated from the Macedonians, emphasizing his use of the word ‘orphaned’.⁷¹

In letter nine Chrysostom retells recent hardships he faced. In regards to Olympias’s despondency, he notes that she is doing “the devil’s will by increasing [her] despondency and grief.”⁷² He tells her he has sent two letters that contained Scriptural direction, “sufficient to revive anyone in despondency, anyone scandalized, and to lead them to complete restoration of spirit.”⁷³ Chrysostom encourages Olympias to review them regularly and that he grieves because of her sin.⁷⁴

In letter ten, Chrysostom makes a transition in the way he is ministering to Olympias in her despondency. He notes:

For if we have destroyed your despondency and demolished its stronghold throughout previous letters, it is now needful to take further care of you through these words, in order to establish in you a profound peace, and having utterly blotted out every memory of that disturbance, for you to show forth a luminous and steadfast serenity, being secured in great joy.⁷⁵

⁶⁸ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 58.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 62.

⁷¹ Ibid., 80.

⁷² Ibid., 92.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 93.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 97.

He speaks at length about how dangerous despondency is, how God allowed the Israelites to have despondent hearts, noting the examples of Elijah, Jonah, David, Job, and Lazarus who struggled at some point with despondency and saw it was worse than death.⁷⁶

Chrysostom then looks at Paul's thoughts on despondency, noting, "If, therefore, sufferings have great rewards, and despair is the most grievous and most painful of all sufferings, imagine what will be recompense for it!"⁷⁷ In this context Chrysostom is speaking of the wrestle with despondency, not giving in to it, separating the two. He notes how despondency can be used for good, as it was with Nebuchadnezzar, when he saw suffering and then praised God. Also, Chrysostom notes how God used Paul's own thorn in the flesh to reward Paul greatly in his continued perseverance in suffering.

Chrysostom gives an extended discourse, concerning Joseph who, despite the misery of his circumstances, never gave in to despondency. Concluding these examples, and the life of Joseph in particular, Chrysostom notes, "So it is that God allows arenas to remain, not to abandon anyone to the end but to provide a way for those desiring so to excel in virtue..."⁷⁸ Throughout the letter, Chrysostom calls Olympias to ponder and meditate upon these things as a means to overcome despondency and find joy in their common plight.

In letter eleven, Chrysostom notes that Olympias's circumstances have gotten worse, yet she is doing better in her despondency. He then uses Job to teach her about growth in suffering, describing how Satan will increase hardship to try to break a person and yet, "...while even then the devil did not cease his attacks, they were turning upon his own head – just as your situation is becoming more brilliant, grander, and more radiant every day.... Our enemies have actually strengthened us...."⁷⁹ He then encourages her to continue to rejoice in these things.

In letter twelve, Chrysostom notes that Olympias has struggled physically, almost to the point of death. Throughout the letter he commends the way she has viewed this suffering, noting, "So now, I rejoice greatly and am glad, not

⁷⁶ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 103.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

only for your deliverance from illness, but more than everything, for the way you nobly bore everything that befell you..."⁸⁰ Letter thirteen continues with a similar tone, that Olympias is rejoicing and has overcome despondency. Chrysostom encourages her to continue to rejoice and notes that the persecution she is suffering has actually become a source of joy. Although, he warns her that despondency will itself become a punishment. The letter ends with a statement that Olympias still has some struggle. Chrysostom writes, "What, therefore, are you afraid of? What are you troubled about, when you are working yourself up to despise even life itself, should that moment come? But do you desire to see the dissolution of the evils that afflict you? This will come – yes, it will come quickly, as God permits."⁸¹ He then tells her to remain hopeful that they will see each other again.

Letter fourteen is brief and speaks to increased hardship that has been alleviated for Olympias. He tells her not to cry over these hardships but to rejoice because she is freed from them and will receive reward for them. Chrysostom notes that she stood under this trial with great strength and commends her, for, "you are showing forth great intelligence, long-suffering, endurance, and patience, while demonstrating the complete accuracy of your understanding."⁸²

Letter fifteen is also brief and gives an update on Chrysostom's situation as he is facing increased hardship. In letter sixteen, Chrysostom speaks of trials and how they spiritually purify those enduring them. He hopes they will not continue for Olympias, yet he is encouraged by her continued virtue. He notes, "For having been trained in the 'gymnasia' [through enduring previous trials], you are handling these present contexts with great ease."⁸³

In the seventeenth and final letter, Olympias is struggling both spiritually and physically because of despondency. It may be because of the increased hardship that Chrysostom is facing. Chrysostom writes to her, "But if you say that your maladies are the result of your despondency, why do you still seek letters from us, if they have not contributed to your happiness – and if indeed you have been plunged under the tyranny of despair to such an extent that you now wish to

⁸⁰ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 132.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 149.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 156.

depart from this life?”⁸⁴ He reminds her of his previous instruction and, using the examples of Paul and Job, tells Olympias she must be patient in her trial. He writes:

In considering all of this, drive away the despondency that now envelopes you...I have sent you what I wrote recently on the topic that ‘no one can harm the one who does not injure himself.’ That discourse I am now sending Your Excellency fights the same battle. Therefore, it is needful for you to read through it constantly. And if you are healthy enough, read it aloud. For it will be a medicine sufficient for you, if you wish it to be.⁸⁵

Chrysostom tells her not to write long letters if they will not help her fight despondency. He notes that it is up to her to fight it or she will be drowned in it.

As shown through the above survey of Chrysostom’s writing to Olympias on despondency, Chrysostom clearly saw the struggle she was having in spiritual terms. We also see that he understood that the place in which the Christian fights despondency is the mind. Meditation upon a Scriptural understanding of circumstances will not only lift one out of despondency but bring joy. Knowing God and how he is working beyond any circumstances one faced in life is a hope to the one who has a promised eternity with God. Chrysostom sees Olympias’s giving in to despondency as sin and declares that it will overwhelm her if she does not intentionally and regularly meditate upon the truths of God’s Word that will transform her understanding of her current circumstances.⁸⁶

CONCLUSION

As raised in the introduction of this paper, Thomas Oden proposed that there

⁸⁴ Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, 160.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁸⁶ Robert G.T. Edwards makes a similar claim in his “Healing Despondency with Biblical Narrative in John Chrysostom’s Letters to Olympias”. However, Edwards believes that, “Chrysostom provides a narrative ‘deep structure,’ taken from specific biblical narratives, whereby one might cultivate a healthy emotional response in the midst of suffering.” Edwards, “Healing Despondency with Biblical Narrative in John Chrysostom’s Letters to Olympias,” 5. He sees this as a therapeutic pattern that John utilizes in these letters.

is much to learn from the classic tradition of pastoral care. He examined the work of Gregory the Great's *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, showing its contemporary relevance. The goal of this paper was to examine this theory in the writings of John Chrysostom's *Letters to Olympia*. As has been shown, Chrysostom believed that meditation upon the deep truths of God's Word brought a transformation of mind that could take one from despondency to joy in spite of circumstances.

In Oden's original examination of Gregory the Great, he notes:

The task that lies ahead is the development of a postmodern, post-Freudian, neoclassical approach to Christian pastoral care that takes seriously the resources of modernity while also penetrating the illusions and, having found the best of modern psychotherapies still problematic, has turned again to the classical tradition for its bearings, yet without disowning what it has learned from modern clinical experience.⁸⁷

In his work, Oden also showed similarities between Gregory the Great and modern psychotherapy, finding a common ground in some practices between the two, yet he also notes that Scripture cannot be separated from pastoral care.⁸⁸ Oden then notes the way one can utilize classic works for pastoral care, "One best prepares for pastoral counsel by meditating often on scripture and the patristic writers."⁸⁹

However, examination of the classical Christian pastoral tradition should be taken a step further. While there can be much gained from examining classic pastoral works, we can also learn from them how to approach Scripture. Pastors and ministry workers are not merely learning a technique of how to treat spiritual maladies as a medical doctor would to treat the physical body. They should be seeking out those in the classic pastoral tradition that recognized the importance of engaging God in the process, convinced that God alone can bring radical, spiritual transformation.

⁸⁷ Oden, *Care of Souls in Classic Tradition*, 37.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 60.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 66.

For example, in *Letters to Saint Olympia*, Chrysostom was not merely using a technique to alleviate symptoms, but rather believed that through consistent meditation upon and application of God's Word, Olympias could experience internal transformation. This understanding should transform the way we understand the classical tradition of Christian pastoral care. It is not merely reading vocabulary of CBT back into the ministry of men like John Chrysostom or Gregory the Great. It should be a call to examine the writings of those who are committed to God and his Word, depending upon God and utilizing meditation upon His Word as a means for God to bring transformation of the soul. Because it is in God, through His Word that we find true transformation and hope, both in this life and the next.



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.

At ACBC, we seek to strengthen the Church to speak the truth in love by providing a quality training and certification process, a global network of like-minded individuals and institutions, and a source of practical and biblical resources for the Church.

In short, we seek to bring biblical solutions for the problems people face, upholding that the method God has given to do this is truth in love.

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