

# THE JOURNAL OF BIBLICAL SOUL CARE



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

Articles *by*  
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DR. GREG E. GIFFORD, GENERAL EDITOR



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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: Clinically-Informed Biblical Counseling?

Dr. Greg E. Gifford<sup>1</sup>

If you haven't been paying attention, the BC movement has been defining and refining. Leadership changes. Books written. Articles posted. And statements written. In the JBSC's past articles, we have talked much about common grace, the body keeping the score and the Clinically-Informed Biblical Counseling (CIBC) movement and its claims to be biblical. Most recently, ACBC hosted a colloquium in July 2025 in Kansas City where myself, Dale Johnson, and Jared Poulton addressed CIBC. We invited the CIBC representatives who were unable or undesiring to attend. The articles from that colloquium, some pastoral and some academic, I commend to you. While I do not believe that the conversation is over regarding CIBC, there are definitely lines that have been drawn in clarifying and helpful ways. This edition represents a response to the CIBC movement and its claims.

Sam Stephens and Francine Tan are some of the brightest academic minds among us. They have written an article to continue to clarify the nature of common grace entitled, "The Need for Clarifying Counsel." Remember, this article is a further elaboration of last Fall's (2024) edition on the common grace challenges within the BC Movement. Austin Collins' article, "Generational Trauma, Epigenetics, and Biblical Hope" fits nicely into the conversation as trauma and "trauma-informed care" are part of the overall topics within CIBC and modern controversies. I think you'll enjoy both of these articles and I look forward to your thoughtful engagement.

Lastly, be encouraged that it is now time to construct. Many times a movement (like the BC Movement) needs to clarify what it is not, but then move toward greater clarity on what it is. There is a wide-open ocean of topics like understanding the image of God and change within BC (2 Cor. 3:18), or the connection to our environments and how we reflect them (Ps. 115:8). We need to explore the ideological underpinnings for those growing up in foster and adopt homes, or to construct a framework for BC and missions. There are almost innumerable topics that need to be advanced within BC. My recommendation to you is help us construct. We have critiqued—as is good and necessary—but now our desire is to construct. Our counselees need us and the future church needs us to be thinking biblically, clearly, and helpfully about the complex problems that we face. And many look to us not only to say, "Avoid this" but also to say, "Pursue this." Let's construct and develop what it is that still needs work in our movement. The JBSC is simply a cog in the wheel of that effort, as the Lord allows.

Thank you for reading.

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

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## ARTICLES

### Calling Van Til to the Stand: A Reformed Biblical Counselor's Appraisal of the Label "Clinically-Informed"

Dr. Jared S. Poulton<sup>1</sup>

For several years, the biblical counseling movement has been experiencing controversy over the appearance of a new qualifier to the discipline's name. Anecdotally, the label "clinically-informed" can be traced to biblical counselors such as Jonathan Holmes, Brad Hambrick, and Jason Kovacs.<sup>2</sup> These biblical counselors posture themselves as standing within the mainstream of the biblical counseling movement in doctrine and practice, affirming the doctrinal and confessional statements of the Biblical Counseling Coalition.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, whether because of prior education or the location and focus of their counseling ministries, these counselors advertise themselves as offering counsel informed by insights, observations, and counseling tools that have their origins within the secular settings of clinical counseling.<sup>4</sup> The flagship organization providing intellectual leadership for this model is Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, with "clinically-

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<sup>2</sup> Jason Kovacs, "Are clinically-informed Biblical Counseling ministries drifting from Scripture?" X, July 16, 2025, 3:06pm, <https://x.com/jasonkovacs/status/1945560659728765137>.

<sup>3</sup> The Biblical Counseling Coalition, "BCC Confessional Statement," accessed April 29, 2025, <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/confessional-statement/>; The Biblical Counseling Coalition, "BCC Doctrinal Statement," accessed April 29, 2025, <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/doctrinal-statement/>.

<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this essay, "secular psychology" or "secular counseling" could also include insights from non-Christian social sciences, neuroscience, psychotherapies, and philosophical reflections upon human psychology. This paper will use the label "secular psychology" as a stand in for these options for the sake of space and to avoid drowning this paper in endless qualifications.

informed biblical counseling” growing into a dominant model among many para-church biblical counseling ministries.<sup>5</sup>

This essay will seek to answer an important question. Is it theologically justifiable to attach the qualifier “clinically-informed” to the practice of biblical counseling? To help biblical counselors wrestle with this issue, this author calls Cornelius Van Til to the stand. In several places, I have outlined the influence of Cornelius Van Til upon the discipline of biblical counseling.<sup>6</sup> As biblical counseling’s honorary “Godfather” and the most direct theological influence upon Jay Adams, the Dutch apologist Van Til provides biblical counselors with a hereditary conversation partner for discerning the theological trajectories within biblical counseling.

The aim of this essay simple. Imagine the hypothetical scenario in which a Westminster student asked Van Til, “What do you think of the label ‘clinically-informed’? Should Christians offer ‘clinically-informed’ counseling?” This essay will attempt to reconstruct the concepts Van Til would have used to analyze the label “clinically-informed” at face value,<sup>7</sup> arguing that Van Til would have had two responses to the label “clinically-informed.” First, Van Til would conclude that, *in principle*, there are no issues with qualifying counsel from Scripture with clinical insights from psychology

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<sup>5</sup> See Nate Brooks, Tate Cockrell, Brad Hambrick, Kristin Kellen, and Sam Williams, “What Is Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?” Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, July 8, 2024, <https://www.sebts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/What-is-RCCIBC.pdf>. See also Christian Counseling Center Collaborative, accessed April 29, 2025, <https://ccccollab.com/>.

<sup>6</sup> See Jared S. Poulton, “Reforming Counseling: The Adaptation of Van Tilian Concepts by Jay Adams,” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2024); Jared S. Poulton, “Cornelius Van Til: The Godfather of Biblical Counseling,” The Biblical Counseling Coalition, October 18, 2023, <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2023/10/18/cornelius-van-til-the-godfather-of-biblical-counseling/>; Jared S. Poulton, “Presuppositional Counseling: An Introduction to Van Til’s Influence Upon Jay Adams,” The Biblical Counseling Coalition, August 2, 2024, <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2024/08/02/presuppositional-counseling-an-introduction-to-van-tils-influence-upon-jay-adams/>.

<sup>7</sup> This comment is an important caveat that will protect my paper from misunderstanding. The aim of this paper is not to provide extensive engagement with the “clinically-informed” biblical counseling camp. It is essentially a Van Tilian thought experiment. This approach will most likely disappoint many, but the “clinically-informed” biblical counseling position is still growing into an established discipline. There are only a handful of blogs and articles that outline this approach. Also, there are signs that not all who use the label “clinically-informed” mean the same thing. Since I do not align myself with “clinically-informed” biblical counseling and I am not inside of this section of biblical counseling, I am not in a place to synthesize the major beliefs that inform this approach to counseling for critical analysis. My aim is different. Having given extensive attention to the writings of Cornelius Van Til, I am attempting to take the term at face value and analyze this label through Van Tilian concepts. By face value, I mean what the label itself communicates (being “informed” by clinical insights from secular psychology—but see also footnote 3). As the executive director of the Institute for Reformed Biblical Counseling, I am also attempting to provide clarity for those within our own organization concerning why I would not use this label to describe our approach to counseling.

because of the unity between God’s revelation in nature and God’s revelation in Scripture. At the same time, Van Til—a man who reveled in nuance—would argue that, *in reality*, the label “clinically-informed” must wrestle with the complexities of man’s current epistemological state and three qualifications that offer warnings for a Christians engagement with secular psychology: (1) mystery, (2) hostility, and (3) priority. This essay will seek to reconstruct Van Til’s potential assessment of the label “clinically-informed” from these two vantage points (*in principle* and *in reality*).

### **Assessing Clinically-Informed Biblical Counseling *in Principle***

The impulse to assess theological ideas both *in principle* and *in reality* reflects the fact that Van Til viewed the Christian system of truth as an “analogical” system. Central to Van Til’s epistemology is the Creator-creature distinction. As the eternal and omniscient source of all things, God alone has a comprehensive and exhaustive understanding of reality, including himself. “God is *completely self-comprehensive*. God is absolute rationality. God was and is the only self-contained whole, the system of absolute truth.”<sup>8</sup> Man’s understanding of reality, by necessity, is a finite and derivative reinterpretation of God’s system of knowledge. Therefore, Van Til viewed both reality and knowledge as operating upon two distinct planes: the “level of God’s existence” and the “level of man’s existence.”<sup>9</sup> Van Til writes, “Christians must also believe in two levels of knowledge, the level of God’s knowledge, which is absolutely comprehensive and self-contained, and the level of man’s knowledge, which is not comprehensive but is derivative and reinterpetative. Hence we say that as Christians we believe that man’s knowledge is analogical of God’s knowledge.”<sup>10</sup>

The analogical nature of human knowledge has a direct implication for the epistemological endeavors of God’s covenant creatures. God’s knowledge of all things transcends human knowledge. Therefore, all of God’s revelation to man, including God’s revelation in Scripture, is necessarily *anthropomorphic*, or fitted for human understanding.<sup>11</sup> Human “activity” and

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<sup>8</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 30.

<sup>9</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 33.

<sup>11</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint (1969; repr., Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 2023), 29.



“interpretation always runs alongside of and is subordinate to the main plan or purpose of God.”<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, the truths within creation and biblical doctrines are not Lincoln Logs, nicely fitting together in ways that humans prefer. Everywhere man looks, he confronts mystery—or places where the intricate harmony of creation’s truths surpasses human comprehension. Because of the analogical nature of knowledge, mystery exists only for man, not for God.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, man must leave room for mystery and tension, even in Scripture: “One must rather gather together all the facts and all the teachings of Scripture and organize them as best as he can, always mindful of the fact that such ordering is the ordering of the revelation of God, who is never fully comprehensible to man.”<sup>14</sup>

Van Til’s reliance upon analogical thinking appears within his liberal use of two qualifiers within his writings: “in principle” and “in reality.” The phrase “in principle” allows Van Til to analyze a particular doctrine and its distinct qualities in isolation from other concerns. For example, Van Til often focuses his attention upon the doctrine of the antithesis, stressing its absolute and ethical nature as a principle of hostility within man. Standing on its own, the antithesis teaches that man is “*absolutely* or utterly, not partly opposed to God.”<sup>15</sup> Significantly, Van Til argues that the antithesis only operates *in principle* and is restrained in human experience: “It is one of principle, not one of full expression. If the natural man fully expressed himself as he is in terms of the principle of ethical hostility to God that dwells within his soul, he would then be a veritable devil. Obviously he is often nothing of the sort. He is not at all as ‘bad as he may be.’”<sup>16</sup>

As a single strand, Van Til can stress the absolute nature of his theological concepts. When seeking to compile human knowledge together into a coherent system, Van Til acknowledges the presence of tensions and mysteries since the Christian’s system of truth is an analogical system. Therefore, Van Til also addresses theological issues *in reality*. Continuing the example of man’s fallen state, Van Til recognizes that “the man on the street is a complex individual.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the

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<sup>12</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 66.

<sup>13</sup> Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 30.

<sup>15</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 192.

<sup>16</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 45.

<sup>17</sup> Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 229.

absolute ethical antithesis is qualified by man's natural moral nature as being made in God's image as well as the universal restraint of common grace.<sup>18</sup> This pattern of reasoning reveals Van Til's frustrating habit of stressing the absolute or essential nature of a theological truth only to introduce later other theological qualifications that inform man's experience of life in this world.<sup>19</sup>

This author believes that Van Til would apply a similar method of analysis to the question of "clinically-informed biblical counseling," considering the label "clinically-informed" from the twin perspectives of "*in principle*" and "*in reality*." In principle, the labels "clinically-informed" and "biblical counseling" place this discussion underneath the umbrella of God's revelation within creation and Scripture. At this point, biblical counselors may be curious as to why this discussion is not focusing solely on the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture, which was originally included in my assignment for this essay. The sufficiency of Scripture does not receive extensive attention within Van Til's writings because Van Til believes that "God's revelation in nature, together with God's revelation in Scripture, form God's one grand scheme of covenant revelation of himself to man."<sup>20</sup> These two aspects of revelation form "one general philosophy of history," "supplementing" and "presupposing" one another.<sup>21</sup> Central to Van Til's system is the belief that every fact within creation is a "revelational fact." He explicitly states, "for any fact to be a fact at all, it must be a revelational fact."<sup>22</sup> In essence, Van Til is arguing that every aspect of creation (including every fact) testifies that it is what it is because it was created by God. "The flowers of the field and the cattle on a thousand hills are a revelation of God. If the whole universe was created to show forth the glory of God, as the Scriptures constantly say that it was, then it could not do this unless it was a revelation of

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<sup>18</sup> Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 229.

<sup>19</sup> The clearest example of this habit is seen in Van Til's discussions of 1 John 3:9 and the principle of *non posse peccare* ("not able to sin") as applying to Christians within this present life. See Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 66–67.

<sup>20</sup> Cornelius Van Til, "Nature and Scripture," in *The Infallible Word*, ed. Ned Bernard Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 267.

<sup>21</sup> Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 66.

<sup>22</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *The Doctrine of Scripture*, In Defense of Biblical Christianity 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), 9.

God.”<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere, Van Til comments that “the face of God appears in all the facts and principles with which philosophy and science deal.”<sup>24</sup>

The revelational nature of the facts of philosophy and science is central to Van Til’s apologetic. Van Til sees the Christian apologist walking into every science lab, philosopher’s study, and even therapist’s office, and confronting them with the theological truth that their facts and principles are only true because God exists. The scientist “in the laboratory and the philosopher in his study are both dealing with their materials as a covenant-keeper or a covenant-breaker.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the Christian must readily acknowledge the philosophy of facts presented within the Scriptures. The Bible provides the essential principles for “the interpretation of every fact in our lives.”<sup>26</sup> Scripture sheds “its indispensable light on everything we as Christians study.”<sup>27</sup> At the same time, Christians should not “limit” themselves “entirely to the Bible when we study anything else.”<sup>28</sup> When Christians study theology, “we must allow God to teach us.”<sup>29</sup> When Christians engage in the sciences, “we need only to open our eyes and look around.”<sup>30</sup> From the beginnings of creation by virtue of the covenant of works, “natural revelation” was “incorporated into the idea of a covenant relationship of God with man.”<sup>31</sup> Nature speaks with as much authority to man as Scripture.<sup>32</sup> In this way, Van Til can conclude that the facts of the universe “are what they are because they express together the *system of truth* revealed in the Bible.”<sup>33</sup>

To bring this reflection closer to the task of counseling, biblical counselors cannot overlook Van Til’s inclusion of “[man’s] own psychological activity” under the umbrella of “revelational” facts.<sup>34</sup> Truly, Van Til’s works contain the rough outline of a system of psychology,

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<sup>23</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 120–21.

<sup>24</sup> Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 63.

<sup>25</sup> Van Til, *The Doctrine of Scripture*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 37.

<sup>27</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 37.

<sup>28</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 37.

<sup>29</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 36.

<sup>30</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 36.

<sup>31</sup> Van Til, “Nature and Scripture,” 267.

<sup>32</sup> Van Til, “Nature and Scripture,” 274.

<sup>33</sup> Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 29.

<sup>34</sup> Van Til, “Nature and Scripture,” 274. See also Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 73.

despite counseling and psychology not being his primary field of emphasis. His works recognize the distinction between the conscious and subconscious realms of human psychology.<sup>35</sup> He outlines a brief faculty psychology, discussing the relationship between the faculties of the intellect and the will, “natural powers” that allow man to study God’s creation.<sup>36</sup> He references “insanity” or “irrational” behavior among the human race.<sup>37</sup> He also acknowledges the tensions between the body and the soul, including the need for developments in “somatic aspects” of the “psychological sciences.”<sup>38</sup> In summary, Van Til believes that this “revelation that comes to man by way of his own rational and moral nature is no less objective to him than that which comes to him through the voice of trees and animals.”<sup>39</sup>

Psychology plays a critical role in two areas of Van Til’s corpus. First, Van Til is confident that Christians have an identifiable structure to their psychology (that can be studied) since human beings were made in God’s image. Van Til defines the *imago Dei* as the reality that man is “like God in everything in which a creature can be like God,” including the fact that “like God . . . he is a personality.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, man can apply their reason to the material and immaterial aspects of human nature and discern the basic structure of a biblical psychology:

God has created man with intellect, feeling, and will. God created man soul and body. God created the first man as a full-grown person but has caused later generations to spring up by growth from childhood to maturity. God has related man’s self-conscious to his subconscious life, his childhood to his maturity. Every activity of every aspect of the human personality, at any stage of its development, acts as a derivative personality before the background of the absolute personality of God. *Man is an analogical personality.*<sup>41</sup>

Second, Van Til would not give his approval to biblical counselors who downplay a discernible structure of human psychology within general revelation.<sup>42</sup> Van Til views man’s internal

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<sup>35</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2016), 196–98.

<sup>36</sup> Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, 192; Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 192–93. See also, Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 71–88.

<sup>37</sup> Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, 201.

<sup>38</sup> Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, 193. Cornelius Van Til, *Unpublished Manuscripts of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. Eric H. Sigward, elect. ed. (New York: Labels Army, 1997).

<sup>39</sup> Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 73.

<sup>40</sup> Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 40.

<sup>41</sup> Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, 198.

<sup>42</sup> See Winston Smith’s review of *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling* and comments on general revelation and Van Til in Winston T. Smith, “Common Ground and Course Corrections: An Essay Review of *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling*,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 28, no. 1 (2014): 38–52.

nature as a primary arena for apologetic sparring with non-Christians. A central aspect of Van Til's psychology is the Reformed doctrine of the *sensus deitatis* (sense of deity).<sup>43</sup> In essence, human nature and man's universal psychology allow Van Til to call the non-Christian's bluff. The non-Christian *knows* that God exists because the knowledge of God's existence has been implanted within his very being (Rom 2:14–15). "In the *sensus deitatis* (sense of deity), then, we find welling up within the consciousness of man an immediate awareness of the fact that God is the Creator and sustainer of this world. . . . As soon as man is conscious, he is also self-conscious; and as soon as he is self-conscious he is a covenant breaker."<sup>44</sup> In other words, the non-Christian's own psychology is Van Til's greatest ally. A biblical psychology allows Van Til to press upon the non-Christian the truth that the non-Christian knows that God exists, even if he suppresses this truth in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18).

Returning to the question at hand, would Van Til disagree with the label "clinically-informed biblical counseling"? In principle, no. Van Til's own apologetic is "psychologically-informed," or "informed" by the testimony of Scripture to the nature of reality and human nature that allows Van Til to use the non-Christian's own psychology against them. Truly, Van Til's writings reflect no incongruence between the truths of Scripture and the facts of psychology. *In principle*, Van Til would see no reason to divorce counsel derived from Scripture with observations and insights from the scientific study of human psychology, since the facts of Scripture and psychology are part of God's comprehensive understanding of reality. Van Til's writings confirm this idea: "Ministers of the gospel should have a knowledge of a sound psychological approach to men. . . . [We] must know Christian psychology and must be able to distinguish it from non-Christian psychology."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 161.

<sup>44</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 161.

<sup>45</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Psychology of Religion*, In Defense of Biblical Christianity 4 (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976), 2.

## Assessing Clinically-Informed Biblical Counseling *in Reality*

Despite the seemingly conclusive ending of the previous section, this analysis of Van Tilian thought is not yet complete. This consideration of the label “clinically-informed” has yet to wrestle with the present theological tensions surrounding this label. Van Til’s writings reflect the position that, in the garden, man would have been free to walk and commune with God and would have faced few obstacles in the study of his own material and immaterial psychology. Yet, this reality does not reflect the Christian’s current experience. We live in a post-Genesis 3 world. Thus, Van Til’s writings reflect the position that any Christian engagement with secular (i.e., non-Christian) psychology must account for the three following theological qualifications: (1) mystery, (2) hostility, and (3) priority.<sup>46</sup>

### Mystery

Van Til views the concept of “mystery” as a central component to the Bible’s understanding of reality because of analogical thinking. God’s knowledge of all things is comprehensive, transcending all human understanding in its depths and understanding of the created world (see Job 38–41). On the other hand, the “interpretation that man would give to anything in this world can therefore never be comprehensive and exhaustive. . . . God as absolute Light is back of the facts of the universe.” For example, Van Til argues that the atom is “mysterious for us, but not for God.”<sup>47</sup> Mystery originally was not a problem for Christians.<sup>48</sup> The non-Christian, in his rejection of God, desires to be “as God” in becoming “himself the standard of truth” (see Gen 3:1–7).<sup>49</sup> In essence, an essential aspect of the fall is the non-Christian’s desire to set themselves

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<sup>46</sup> As an important comment, this following section should not be read as this author accusing all “clinically-informed” biblical counselors of committing the errors outlined below. This essay is an analysis whereby the author is applying Van Til’s theological system to the qualifier “clinically-informed.” The “clinically-informed” biblical counseling camp is broad enough that some biblical counselors may be conscious of these concerns. Others may have different theological convictions concerning a theological epistemology for counseling. This section should be read as theological guardrails that Van Til would challenge all biblical counselors to heed in their engagements with secular psychology. Van Til would grow concerned with “clinically-informed” biblical counseling inasmuch as they were ignoring these theological qualifications.

<sup>47</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 60–61.

<sup>48</sup> Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 35.

<sup>49</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 63.

up as “the ultimate interpreter of this world” in the pursuit of “*comprehensive knowledge*” of reality.<sup>50</sup> As a result, the non-Christian inevitably “misinterprets all things” because his method and starting point begin in man instead of God.<sup>51</sup> In summary, the Christian view of mystery is that there is “mystery for man but not for God, while the non-Christian holds that there is either no mystery for God or man or there is mystery for both God and man.”<sup>52</sup>

If there is a discipline that exemplifies the hubris of ignoring the limitations of human knowledge and irresponsible interventions, psychiatry and psychology together top the list. Despite their current reverence within the contemporary cultural zeitgeist, the psychological disciplines have historically suffered from a “crisis of legitimacy.”<sup>53</sup> In previous centuries, psychology, psychiatry, and social work were once considered “odd and unusual professions,”<sup>54</sup> being dismissed as “mad-doctors, shrinks, bughouse doctors, and worse.”<sup>55</sup> This skeptical posture has been warranted. Writing in 1941, medical historian Gregory Zilboorg observes that “at no time, even today and particularly in the eighteenth century, has psychiatry enjoyed the advantage of having the causes of mental diseases actually known.”<sup>56</sup> This situation has yet to change. Bessel van der Kolk, in critiquing the DSM and advancing an approach grounded in analyzing “social systems,” observes that the discipline of psychiatry “aspires to define mental illness as precisely as, let’s say, cancer of the pancreas, or streptococcal infection of the lungs. However, given the complexity of the mind, brain, and human attachment systems, we have not come even close to achieving that sort of precision.”<sup>57</sup>

When biblical counselors speak of being “clinically-informed,” Van Til may respond, “clinically-informed by what?” To date, there are no “physical tests” that can confirm the existence of a mental disorder or trace a mental disorder to a clear pathogen or biological event.<sup>58</sup> The

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<sup>50</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 63.

<sup>51</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 65.

<sup>52</sup> Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 35.

<sup>53</sup> Andrew Scull, *Psychiatry and Its Discontents* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 29.

<sup>54</sup> George A. Bonanno, *The End of Trauma: How the New Science of Resilience is Changing how We Think about PTSD* (New York: Basic Books, 2021), 55.

<sup>55</sup> Scull, *Psychiatry and Its Discontents*, 29.

<sup>56</sup> Gregory Zilboorg, *A History of Medical Psychology* (New York: Norton, 1941), 304.

<sup>57</sup> Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 139, see also 166-170.

<sup>58</sup> Bonanno, *The End of Trauma*, 36.

categories of the DSM-5 do not identify the etiologies of mental illnesses but record clusters of psychological symptoms (neo-Kraepelinian), with distinctions between different diagnoses often decided by committee.<sup>59</sup> Despite the concerning evidence that laypersons are more susceptible to believing scientific studies when supported with graphics of brain scans (The “seductive allure of neuroscience explanations” (SANE)),<sup>60</sup> scientists have only recently begun to map completely the brains of creatures such as fruit flies and mice, “let alone successfully tackling the infinitely more complex task of unraveling the billions on billions of connections that make up our own brains.”<sup>61</sup> Even if scientists successfully trace the billions of neurological connections in the human brain, they then must confront the perennial questions of the relationship between mind and matter as well as correlation and causation. Truly, secular psychiatrists and psychologists have a poor track record of “cutting nature at its joints,” a reality reflected in the following quote from psychologist Richard J. McNally:

The boundary between mental distress and mental illness will never be neat and clean. What counts as a mental disorder depends on shifting cultural, political, and economic values as well as on scientific facts about how our psychology and biology can go wrong, producing suffering and functional impairment in everyday life. We’ll never have a clear-cut list of criteria that will enable us to identify all instances of mental disorder and exclude everything else.<sup>62</sup>

These comments do not lead to the conclusion that the psychological sciences contain nothing of value for Christians. The story of Susannah Cahalan’s descent into and return from madness demonstrates that psychiatrists can be heroes.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, Van Til would have jumped upon the inabilities of non-Christians to provide a comprehensive understanding of every fact within the psychological sciences as an opportunity to apply the transcendental argument famous within his apologetic. According to Van Til, when man rejects God, he seeks to become God.

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<sup>59</sup> Bonanno, *The End of Trauma*, 37. For the controversial history of the decision making behind the categories within the various editions of the DSM, see Andrew Scull, *Desperate Remedies: Psychiatry’s Turbulent Question to Cure Mental Illness* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2022), 299–356.

<sup>60</sup> See also Soo-hyun Im, Keisha Varma, and Sashank Varma, “Extending the Seductive Allure of Neuroscience Explanations Effect to Popular Articles about Educational Topics,” *British Journal of Educational Philosophy* 87, no. 4 (May 2017): 1–35. doi: 10.1111/bjep.12162.

<sup>61</sup> Scull, *Psychiatry and Its Discontents*, 237. See also Emma Sprooten, et al., “Addressing Reverse Inference in Psychiatric Neuroimaging: Meta-analyses of Task-Related Brain Activation in Common Mental Disorders,” *Human Brain Mapping* vol. 38, 4 (2017): 1846-1864. doi:10.1002/hbm.23486.

<sup>62</sup> Richard J. McNally, *What is Mental Illness?* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2011), 212.

<sup>63</sup> Susannah Cahalan, *Brain on Fire: My Month of Madness* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012).



Therefore, the psychological sciences have two options: “Man *before the God of the Scriptures*” or “man *in the void*.”<sup>64</sup> In rejecting God, non-Christian thought holds to the “ultimacy of the mind of man” and “interprets everything with which he came into contact without reference to God.”<sup>65</sup> Van Til would argue that non-Christians are not rationally justified to offer any prescriptions or therapies until they understand all the facts of human psychology.<sup>66</sup> He does not let secular psychologists off the hook when they claim to deal with facts in a “neutral” way apart from metaphysics—how the facts relate together and the philosophy that outlines the relationship between facts and reality.<sup>67</sup> If they want to restore rationality to the psychological science, then non-Christians must believe in God.<sup>68</sup>

This unstable footing within contemporary psychiatry and psychology raises significant issues for being “clinically-informed.” The social and political forces that support the modern mental health complex (Big pharma, lobbyists, and activists) make it incredibly challenging for the average Christian (and biblical counselors without previous scientific or clinical training) to discern good science from pop psychology. Furthermore, while non-Christians will stumble upon various facts and observations concerning human psychology and behavior, a Christian theory of knowledge asserts that non-Christians will not ultimately understand these observations and facts without the corrective lenses of Scripture. “The Bible sheds its indispensable light on everything that we as Christians study,” writes Van Til.<sup>69</sup> Van Til discusses the relationship between the truths of Scripture and the facts within God’s creation in the following quote:

The Bible is at the center not only of every course, but of the curriculum as a whole. The Bible is thought of as authoritative on everything of which it speaks. Moreover, it speaks of everything. We do not mean that it speaks of football, games, of atoms, etc., directly, but we do mean that it speaks of everything either directly or by implication. . . . This view of Scripture,

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<sup>64</sup> Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, 199.

<sup>65</sup> Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 71, 70.

<sup>66</sup> See Van Til, *Psychology of Religion*, 87–89.

<sup>67</sup> Van Til, *Psychology of Religion*, 104–105.

<sup>68</sup> For clarification, this paragraph should not be read to conclude that Van Til would argue that non-Christians are *unable* to offer prescriptions or therapies until they fulfill this epistemological requirement. Rather, the non-Christian lacks the rational justification for their therapies and prescriptions until they are able to provide a comprehensive intellectual foundation based solely upon human reason for psychology, an impossible task for a finite creature, unless they repent and begin their reasoning in God.

<sup>69</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 37.

therefore, involves the idea that there is nothing in this universe on which human beings can have full and true information unless they take the Bible into account. We do not mean, of course, that one must go to the Bible rather than to the laboratory if one wishes to study the anatomy of the snake. But if one goes only to the laboratory and not also to the Bible, one will not have a full or even a true interpretation of the snake.<sup>70</sup>

Van Til argues that non-Christians are capable of making true observations about the world, often having a “better knowing of the things of this world than Christians have.”<sup>71</sup> Yet, he also asserts that there are two inevitable outcomes for these facts discerned from outside of Scripture. Either, these facts will find their place and meaning within “the system of truth presented in the Scripture” or a system of truth that has no reference to Scripture.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, it is inevitable that the various systems of secular psychology will find themselves in competition with a Christian understanding of these same facts, resulting in conflict between Christian and non-Christian approaches to man and his problems.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, the label “clinically-informed” must not only confront the problem of mystery, but also, hostility.

## Hostility

Central to Van Til’s theology is a particular view of the doctrine of sin. For many Christians, sin is merely a matter of “falling short” or a “mistake.” It is a failure to fulfill God’s commandments. While these components are true, Van Til stresses the reality that the sinful heart is actively hostile and opposed to God. The natural man is “*absolutely* or utterly, not partly opposed to God.”<sup>74</sup> As Paul writes in Romans 8:7–8, “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for

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<sup>70</sup> Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 19–20. Herman Bavinck writes, “Precisely as the book of the knowledge of God, Scripture has much to say also to the other sciences. It is a light on our path and a lamp for our feet, also with respect to science and art. It claims authority in all areas of life. . . . A great deal of what is related in Scripture is of fundamental significance also for the other sciences. The creation and fall of humankind, the unity of the human race, the flood, the rise of people and languages, etc. are facts of the highest significance also for the other sciences. At every moment science and art come into contact with Scripture; the primary principles for all of life are given us in Scripture. This truth may in no way be discounted.” Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 445.

<sup>71</sup> Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 150.

<sup>72</sup> Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 28.

<sup>73</sup> For clarification, the Christian and non-Christian systems of thought (and therefore biblical and non-Christian systems of counseling and psychology) are not entirely antithetical to one another (as Jay Adams originally proposed in *Competent to Counsel*). Since non-Christians live in God’s world and interact with facts from creation that have their origins in God, it is impossible for them to construct a system of thought that is entirely antithetical to the Christian system of truth. Nevertheless, how Christians and non-Christians synthesize these facts will result in conflict. Non-Christians will seek to synthesize these facts apart from Scripture, Christians with Scripture, resulting in two conflicting systems.

<sup>74</sup> Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 192.

it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God."

Van Til goes as far as to say that this principle is "Satanic. It is exclusively hostile to God. If it could it would destroy the work and plan of God. So far then as men self-consciously work from this principle, they have no notion in common with the believer. Their epistemology is informed by their ethical hostility to God."<sup>75</sup>

As Van Til's reflections reveal, if the non-Christian is consistent in their principle—"so far then as men self-consciously work from this principle"—their entire epistemology is opposed to God. Thankfully, the non-Christian is "not fully self-conscious of his own position."<sup>76</sup> Contrary to many interpretations of Van Til, the Dutch apologist recognizes that non-Christians struggle to be consistent in their rejection of God. Rather, because of the "knowledge of God by virtue of his creation in the image of God" and "the restraining power of God's common grace," the ideas "with which he daily works do not proceed consistently."<sup>77</sup> These necessary ethical qualifications explain how Van Til can allow room for the value of non-Christian knowledge and their relative moral goodness.<sup>78</sup>

Nevertheless, these ethical qualifications do not provide Christians with the license to baptize every secular theory or practice under the guise of "common grace."<sup>79</sup> While non-Christians know God and his law according to their nature, they suppress this truth in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18). Like Van Til, "I am now speaking of [man] as the covenant breaker."<sup>80</sup> Epistemologically, or at the level of man's consciousness, there is active hostility toward God. Therefore, even though

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<sup>75</sup> Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 192.

<sup>76</sup> Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 192.

<sup>77</sup> Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 192.

<sup>78</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 195; Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 196.

<sup>79</sup> Common grace should be understood as recognizing that non-Christians are capable of producing relative knowledge (from their reflections upon God's creation, general revelation) and relative moral goodness (being made in God's image, having the antithesis restrained) that is outside of Scripture but nevertheless consistent with the system of truth contained in the Scriptures and therefore useful for Christians in understanding human psychology and offering counsel. Common grace is always a limiting concept of the antithesis. Therefore, common grace cannot be a license to adopt non-Christian systems, to overlook the moral nature of secular systems and their methodologies, or to expose Christians to every conceivable non-Christian therapy. At the same time, it is impossible for non-Christians to avoid stumbling upon facts, observations, and methods that Christians would recognize as true and helpful, even if non-Christians are unable to understand ultimately why or how they are effective.

<sup>80</sup> Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 258.

man *ought* to believe in God's existence because of the testimony to God throughout creation and in man's heart, Van Til follows Calvin who argues that "no sinner reacts properly to God's revelation." He continues,

Is that too sweeping of a statement? It is simply the doctrine of total depravity. All sinners are covenant breakers. They have an axe to grind. They do not want to keep God in remembrance. They keep under the knowledge of God which is within them. That is they try as best they can to keep under this knowledge for fear they should look into the face of their judge. And since God's face appears in every fact of the universe they oppose God's revelation everywhere. They do not want to see the facts of nature for what they are; they do not want to see themselves for what they are.<sup>81</sup>

Van Til would be suspicious of the label "clinically-informed" for a specific reason. At face value, the label "clinically-informed" contains a supposed neutrality.<sup>82</sup> "Clinical knowledge" is the modern equivalent to hammers and saws—morally neutral tools that man can use however they please. Nevertheless, there is nothing morally "neutral" (in relation to God) about the label of "clinically-informed" since the methods and systems of clinical psychology are the products of moral creatures who are either covenant keepers or covenant breakers. As Van Til writes, "The idea of disinterested or neutral knowledge is out of accord with the basic ideas of Christianity."<sup>83</sup> The methods of the secular (i.e., non-Christian) sciences are the products of covenant breakers. Yes, these covenant breakers are who made in God's image and experience the restraint of common grace, allowing glimmers of knowledge and relative moral goodness to appear in their labors, but they are also sinners who look at the world with "colored glasses" cemented to their faces.<sup>84</sup>

Jay Adams believed that non-Christian systems of thought, and therefore non-Christian

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<sup>81</sup> Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 301.

<sup>82</sup> See also the following quote from the SEBTS statement on CIBC, "RC/CIBC affirms alongside nouthetic counselors that common grace allows for extrabiblical knowledge to be of significant value in counseling. However, we disagree that all methods emerging from secular psychotherapy are by necessity tainted by their worldview. RC/CIBCers draw a distinction between an approach's worldview and its methods." Nate Brooks, Tate Cockrell, Brad Hambrick, Kristin Kellen, and Sam Williams, "What Is Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?" Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, July 8, 2024, <https://www.sebts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/What-is-RCCIBC.pdf>.

<sup>83</sup> Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 40. David Powlison concurs that "because science is not neutral and objective, its findings must always be evaluated and reinterpreted by Christian presuppositions." David Powlison, "Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies)," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 25, no. 2 (2007): 35.

<sup>84</sup> Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 302. The statements in this paragraph may sound absolute, but Van Til would have agreed and included them within his system, while recognizing the tensions of holding these truths together within an analogical system.

systems of counseling, inevitably find themselves in conflict with God's system of interpreting human experience and God's methods of change found within the Scriptures. Adams writes,

The Bible itself provides the principles for understanding and for engaging in nouthetic counseling and directs Christian ministers to do such counseling as part of their life calling in the ministry of the Word (other Christians should counsel as God gives opportunity). Therefore, those who develop other systems, based on other sources of information, by which they attempt to achieve these same ends, by the very nature of the case *become competitive*.<sup>85</sup>

Van Til would have agreed. He comments,

The standards by which the fallen man judges himself are false standards. That is the most important point in his case. Fallen man cannot by his own adopted criteria make a true analysis of his own condition. The remedies that he employs for his own salvation are the wrong remedies just because the diagnosis that he has made of his own disease is made by the wrong criterion. A medical doctor is able to prescribe the right medicine for a patient just because he, rather than the patient himself, has given the correct diagnosis of the patient's disease. In an infinitely deeper sense only Christ, the great physician, can diagnose the disease of men.<sup>86</sup>

In summary, Van Til would have found the descriptor "clinically-informed" unclear and potentially deceptive. The label feigns objectivity in a discipline fraught with moral judgments, frameworks, and choices, doing little to protect Christians from the moral (i.e., sinful) baggage associated with the counsel of non-Christians.<sup>87</sup> There are many "experts" leading secular counseling organizations, presenting "academic" papers, and conducting clinical trials who would fail every biblical test necessary for a counselor, and should never serve as a voice of guidance for Christians and pastors in their care of Christ's flock. Which clinical "experts" should inform the practice of biblical counseling?

## Priority

Finally, Van Til would have challenged the label "clinically-informed" on the matter of priority. A conscious choice confronts every counselor in the counseling room. When it becomes the counselor's turn to speak, *whose words does the counselee need to hear the most? Whose words are most relevant to the counselee's circumstances and situation?* Distinctive to the biblical counseling perspective of

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<sup>85</sup> Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, ix.

<sup>86</sup> Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 35.

<sup>87</sup> For clarification, this comment is the application of a Van Tilian concept, not an accusation that clinically-informed biblical counselors are trying to be deceptive. Van Til would have found the label morally deceptive at face value since he firmly believed that systems and methods are not neutral.

counselees is a “God-centered” view of life, meaning that counselors will fundamentally misunderstand people and their problems apart from recognizing human beings are made in God’s image and made to live in relationship with him. This “God-oriented” insight informs the rich reflections on human experience that defined the legacy of David Powlison. In his defense of biblical counseling, Powlison writes,

Christian faith understands psychology and psychotherapy as implications and outworkings of this God-centered point of view. We are told about God . . . and we realize the God-referential psychodynamic running through every human heart. We are told about God . . . and we learn what it means to be human. When other psychologies abstract people out of this true context, they theorize about an abstraction, never quite seeing the person.<sup>88</sup>

Most biblical counselors may not be aware that Powlison picked up this God-centered orientation from the writings of Van Til. In an interview at Westminster, Powlison comments that, despite his first difficulties with understanding Van Til’s writings,

all that he is saying is that everything has its being, its existence, its meaning with respect to God. That’s all it is. And it is just—Life is lived before the face of God. His famous diagram was—there is a big circle called God. There’s a line, and there’s a little tiny dot, and it’s you or any other piece of creation. And that dot depends upon for its existence and its interpretation, God himself.<sup>89</sup>

Powlison argues that the “Bible locates the core motivational dynamic as existing in covenantal space, not merely in psychological, physiological, or psychosocial space.”<sup>90</sup> This impulse to view life covenantally defines Van Til’s approach to a biblical view of life in this world. For Van Til, the idea of covenant “expresses the idea that in all things man is face to face with God,” and “in all of man’s activities,” whether “philosophical and scientific enterprises,” or in the workplace, at home, or in the privacy of one’s mind, “men are either covenant keepers or covenant breakers.”<sup>91</sup> In other words, Van Til would argue that, first and foremost, covenant creatures need covenant and redemptive words that help them (1) to understand human experience according to God’s authoritative and ruling perspective and (2) to restore their human functioning according to God’s design for human

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<sup>88</sup> David Powlison, “A Biblical Counseling View,” in *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views*, ed. Eric Johnson, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 247.

<sup>89</sup> David Powlison, “Powlison on Van Til. Can you relate?” X, April 17, 2024, 11:27am, <https://x.com/WestminsterTS/status/1780618998696079569>.

<sup>90</sup> Powlison, “Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies),” 25.

<sup>91</sup> Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 62.

flourishing and Christian discipleship through the sanctification and renewal of the inner man—words found in Scripture alone. Counselors must shine the “superior light” of God’s Word upon the lives of counselees.<sup>92</sup> Every major secular counseling system is blind to the spiritual realities presented within Scripture, most chiefly, the reality of conversion and the inner renewal of the Holy Spirit, not to mention the reality of sin and the necessity for repentance, humility, faith, love, and cross-bearing for the restoration of human functioning.<sup>93</sup>

If these are the goals of biblical counseling, are there any problems with this task being informed by “clinical insights”? In principle, no. In reality, secular systems of counseling and human analysis do not play “nice” with the Bible’s approach to counseling. Using historical Reformed language, it is naïve to assume that non-Christian psychologists and therapists would be content functioning as a “handmaiden” or “servant” to Scripture’s framework for counseling.<sup>94</sup> Secular clinical knowledge and modalities aim to defend and advance their own system, posing challenges to Christians seeking to adapt these therapies to align with biblical counseling without undergoing significant renovation.<sup>95</sup> Many secular counselors would argue that religions such as Christianity expose people to influences that may negatively affect their mental health, resulting in religiously inspired guilt and shame, dogmatic thinking, prejudice, obsessive thinking, perfectionism, and even abuse, domination, and violence.<sup>96</sup> Van Til comments, “What would be considered the best psychological approach to a person from the non-Christian point of view may be the worst from a

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<sup>92</sup> “There is no speech or knowledge of grace in nature. God has accordingly condescended to reveal it in Scripture. . . . The light of grace outshines in its brilliance the light of nature as the sun outshines the moon. . . . When the sun of grace has arisen on the horizon of the sinner, the ‘light of nature’ shines only by reflected light. Even when there are some ‘circumstances concerning the worship of God, the government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence,’ they are to be so ordered ‘according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed.’ The Light of Scripture is that superior light which lightens every other light. It is also the final light.” Van Til, “Nature and Scripture,” 265.

<sup>93</sup> Van Til, *Psychology of Religion*, 132–66.

<sup>94</sup> See Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), I.XIII.2.

<sup>95</sup> Significantly, The Biblical Counseling Coalition’s response to EMDR comments that the method cannot be separated from its worldview: “The EMDR worldview and the biblical worldview are not compatible. To the degree that we break it apart and reconstruct it with biblical categories and aims, it ceases to be EMDR.” “BCC Statement on EMDR,” The Biblical Counseling Coalition, December 16, 2021, <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2021/12/16/bcc-statement-on-emdr/>.

<sup>96</sup> See Harold G. Koenig, *Faith and Mental Health: Religious Resources for Healing* (Philadelphia: Templeton, 2005).

Christian point of view. From the non-Christian point of view it will usually be considered a wrong policy to seek to inculcate a sense of sin in people.”<sup>97</sup> In the Western world, a main competitor to pastors and counselors seeking to provide biblical solutions to their church members are the secular counselors—and increasingly Christian counselors trained in secular psychology—who offer their counseling services to the men, women, and children within our churches. Many Christians are leaving their secular or even the “Christian” counseling office with a framework for understanding their problems that fundamentally conflicts with the biblical view of life and their problems they receive on Sunday mornings from their pastor. Regretfully, there are many stories of pastors and counselors getting involved in situations outside of their competency and knowledge, resulting in harm to the people under their care. At the same time, countless stories could also be told of pastoral care situations that were trending in the right direction until a secular psychologist or a supposedly “Christian” counselor got involved.

As biblical counselors begin to open themselves to “clinically-informed” counseling insights, the issue of priority emerges. Van Til’s covenantal paradigm places all of life in relation to God. If counseling methodologies are not neutral, paraphrasing David Powlison, the label “clinically-informed” risks offering counsel informed by secular methods which conflict with “the biblical view of the active heart by considering suffering (socialization, trauma, unmet needs, biochemistry, and genetics) to be determinative and finally causative.”<sup>98</sup> Are secular counselors and

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<sup>97</sup> Van Til, *Psychology of Religion*, 2.

<sup>98</sup> Powlison, “Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies),” 28. Elsewhere, Powlison writes, “On the one hand a Christian engagement with our times will include a radical critique of psychotherapeutic and psychological systems. They are wrong. They’re all committed to be wrong because every single one is committed to say, in the last analysis, that people are not sinners. People can be explained in some way or other either by what happens to them or by choices occurring in a moral vacuum. When a humanistic theory says your needs were not met by primary caretakers or when a psychodynamic theory says that the trauma you endured as a child has determined your life, or when a behavioral theory says you were conditioned by socio-cultural forces to be the kind of person you are, or when a physiological theory explains the problems of living in terms of genetics, neurophysiology, and chemical imbalance, every one of them is committed to defining people in a way in which Christ, the Savior, will not be the answer. That is part of the deceitfulness of sin. Systems are not neutral. If the Bible is right that, indeed, real people are always doing something with God, and I create an interpretive system that rules that truth out, I am committing myself to a fundamental error on the foundational level. As Christians, we can bring a feistiness and a vigor to our critique.” David Powlison, “Modern Therapies and the Church’s Faith,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 15, no. 1 (1996): 38. For questions that aim toward the issue of priority, see David Powlison, “Vive la Différence!” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 28, no. 1 (2014): 2–7.



therapists interested in following a pastor's lead in the care of his flock?<sup>99</sup> A conversation about being "clinically-informed" should begin here.

### Conclusion

The time has come for Van Til's closing argument—how would the Dutch apologist assess the label "clinically-informed" as a qualifier to "biblical counseling"? In principle, "clinically-informed" is an adequate qualifier for biblical counseling. In reality, the label "clinically-informed" confronts various theological challenges that must be addressed by Christians seeking to inform their counseling from Scripture with insights from secular psychology. In principle, counsel offered from Scripture *should* be informed by scientific and philosophical reflections upon the revelational truths of human psychology embedded within the creation. In reality, biblical counselors must be vigilant to guard their counsel from speculative ideas and pop psychology masquerading as "established" science. Biblical counselors will confront many psychological systems that will conflict with the system contained in Scriptures which alone authoritatively explains and interprets human experience. Finally, even as secular counseling may offer interventions that provide temporary relief and help to manage psychological dysfunction, biblical counselors must not allow these secular modalities to usurp the ministry of the Word as God's primary means of reclaiming sinners and conforming them to the image of Christ.

In conclusion, would Van Til himself adopt the label "clinically-informed"? This author cannot conclusively say. Van Til may have acknowledged the efforts of "clinically-informed" biblical counselors inasmuch as they are following the theological reasoning presented above, while growing concerned if they did not heed his warnings and qualifications. At the same time, Van Til would have most likely found the label "clinically-informed" imprecise and unclear for the approach he would recommend to biblical counselors. As a man who, in his lifetime, equated a Reformed

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<sup>99</sup> This comment should also not be read to ignore the fact that pastors should recognize their limitations and be willing to seek out help in complex counseling situations. At the same time, there is a difference between biblical counseling occurring within the context of the local church and biblical counseling occurring *under* the authority of rightfully-ordained and qualified (i.e., 1 Timothy 3; Titus 1) pastors and elders (who are appointed by God and ultimately called to give an account for the souls of those under their care (Heb 13:17)). Biblical counseling should occur under the direction and oversight of church leadership, following and serving the shepherding ministry of the local church.

apologetic with a Christian and biblical apologetic, Van Til would most likely call the approach outlined above “*Reformed* counseling” or “*Reformed* biblical counseling.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, xxxv.

## **“I’m a Biblically-Informed Psychologist”: Is Clinically-Informed Biblical Counseling Really Just Integrationism?**

**Dr. Greg E. Gifford<sup>1</sup>**

If words matter, then terms matter. A term is what describes a position, and a position describes one’s beliefs, from theology to methodology. If the author were to claim to be a “biblically-informed psychologist” it would *seem* to suggest that “biblically informed” is used adjectively to communicate that the author’s primary focus is indeed what kind of psychologist? A “biblically informed psychologist.”<sup>2</sup> The adjectival use of “biblically informed” is modifying, as a descriptor, the type of psychologist the author is. The question still begs answering, “how much Bible? What level of Bible is used in the process of being a psychologist? Can one simply quote Romans 8:28 and claim to be a biblically-informed psychologist?”

The same could be said of the claim for one to be a “clinically informed biblical counselor.” Consider the following statement by the Gospel Care Collective: “Clinically informed biblical counseling [CIBC] seeks to bring the best of psychological research and clinical practices through a biblical worldview, offering clients a comprehensive and tailored approach to their emotional and spiritual growth.”<sup>3</sup> Does this mean that a CIBCer primarily uses the Bible with some psychological insights? Does *clinically informed* mean that the Bible’s use in counseling is the focus, but the occasional incorporation of ‘clinically informed’ material finds its way into the counseling process? This lack of clarity is what has recently affected the biblical counseling movement, as seen through

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<sup>2</sup> Many thanks to Dr. Jenn Chen for the clarification of this statement that came through personal dialogue while at The Master’s University (April 2025).

<sup>3</sup> “Gospel Care Collective – Counseling for the Whole Person.,” accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.gospelcarecollective.com/>.

the varying positions articulated in Heath Lambert's, "Zombies in the Wilderness" article to Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary's (SEBTS) academic journal issued in Spring of 2024."<sup>4</sup>

*In this paper, the author will categorize the CIBC positions, critique those positions, and offer categorical solutions that would better help the overall BC movement.* This purpose statement will be accomplished by citing the leading organizations that call themselves clinically informed biblical counselors and then utilizing biblical categories to help construct how genuine biblical counseling can partly self-conceptualize going forward.

### Key Definitions

In order to establish the author's thesis, a few terms need defining to ensure clarity. First of all, "categorize" is simply to "put into a category or to classify."<sup>5</sup> The author will seek to find categories of biblical counseling in this paper. *Categorize* is being used in its normal semantic range.

*Biblical counseling* will be utilized according to ACBC's definition: "Biblical counseling is the personal discipleship ministry of God's people to others under the oversight of God's church, dependent upon the authority and sufficiency of God's Word through the work of the Holy Spirit."<sup>6</sup> This definition is how the author is using the term *biblical counseling*, which is sometimes referred to as *nouthetic counseling* by those in the CIBC movement.

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<sup>4</sup> Nate Brooks et al., "What Is Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?" (Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2024), 1–12, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.sebts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/What-is-RCCIBC.pdf. Heath Lambert, "Priests in the Garden, Zombies in the Wilderness, and Prophets on the Wall," First Baptist Church, accessed September 15, 2025, <https://fbcjax.com/first-thoughts/priests-in-the-garden-zombies-in-the-wilderness-and-prophets-on-the-wall-the-current-state-of-the-contemporary-biblical-counseling-movement/>.

<sup>5</sup> Merriam Webster, "Definition of CATEGORIZE," May 18, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/categorize>.

<sup>6</sup> "The Nature of Biblical Counseling - Association of Certified Biblical Counselors," <https://Biblicalcounseling.Com/> (blog), accessed June 6, 2025, <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/podcast-episodes/the-nature-of-biblical-counseling/>.

Clinically informed biblical counseling (CIBC) is a newer term, and thus harder to delineate. However, the Gospel Care Collective provides its definition of CIBC, stating that “We provide care through the foundation and lens of Scripture while utilizing common grace findings of research and psychology to inform our methods of client care.”<sup>7</sup> Or, one could use Southeastern’s definition of CIBC, which states: “Redemptive counseling as a term therefore speaks to the redemption of the person and the redemption of common grace tools that may be used to aid in that redemption.”<sup>8</sup> This position seeks to provide both the utilization of the Bible and psychological methods, per its own claims. The above definition is how the author will use the term CIBC.

Next, the term *critique* means, “to examine critically; to review.”<sup>9</sup> The critique will inherently be compared to the Bible and the historic confession of what is meant by biblical counseling. For the sake of this paper, however, there should be no question of what is being meant by the term *critique*.

Finally, “categorical solutions” is intended by the author to synthesize the categories of CIBC and make a recommendation for how biblical counseling can better define camps within the movement. *Categories* means, “a division within a system of classification”<sup>10</sup> and the term *solutions* is intended as, “an answer to a problem: explanation.”<sup>11</sup> The phrase means that answers to the categorizing of biblical counseling will be provided.

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<sup>7</sup> “Gospel Care Collective – Counseling for the Whole Person.,” accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.gospelcarecollective.com/>. Although there is no current authority on CIBC, this definition at least provides the reader with an understanding of the nature of what is being discussed. Furthermore, CIBC may indeed have further conversations, as will be demonstrated, that elucidate CIBC’s need for a uniform definition.

<sup>8</sup> Brooks, et. Al, “What is Redemptive Counseling?,” 1.

<sup>9</sup> Merriam Webster, “Definition of Critique,” accessed May 26, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/critique>.

<sup>10</sup> Merriam Webster, “Definition of *Categories*,” May 19, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/categories>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., s.v. “solution.”

## Categorization of CIBC Positions

First of all, the world of CIBC is relatively new and somewhat small. Only one, prominent seminary of dozens actually claims this form of counseling. Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (SEBTS) offers a Masters of Divinity in Biblical Counseling where Brad Hambrick says, “At SEBTS, you will receive a clinically-informed counseling education that can equip you for either a ministry or vocational setting or prepare you to work effectively with pastors or professionals.”<sup>12</sup> Of note, SEBTS faculty wrote a brief paper defining the nature of what CIBC and Redemptive Counseling entails. In the paper, SEBTS faculty state:

Tools and methods for counseling may be derived from secular approaches to psychology and can be helpful (which is different from being essential). These tools and methods enhance our ability to minister the truth of God’s Word into our clients’ life. These tools and methods are not a replacement for the truth of Scripture or used to inculcate worldliness into the hearts of our counselees. Rather, these tools and methods provide additional ways of engaging the human person that are not explicitly spoken of in the text of Scripture.<sup>13</sup>

This first position of the SEBTS faculty is thus inherently confusing as the CIBC faculty has differentiated between a “nouthetic counselor” and “biblical counselor” as evidenced in this quote: “This is what we are arguing as well – we are neither integrationists nor nouthetic counselors” or the statement, “should you as a reader walk away disagreeing with these commitments, our article has not failed. We are not pretending to be nouthetic counselors, and we are not pretending to be integrationists.”<sup>14</sup> That statement may be true, but in another section of that same document, the authors state: “Biblical counselors (both RC/CIBCers and nouthetic counselors) are in the business of growing moral righteousness.”<sup>15</sup> The discerning reader of the SEBTS position begins to notice

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<sup>12</sup> “MDiv Pastoral Ministry with Biblical Counseling,” *Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary* (blog), accessed May 28, 2025, <https://www.sebts.edu/degree/master-of-divinity/mdiv-pastoral-ministry-with-biblical-counseling/>.

<sup>13</sup> Nate Brooks et al., “What Is Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?” (Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2024), pp. 5-6, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/<https://www.sebts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/What-is-RCCIBC.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Brooks, “What is Redemptive Counseling,” 3, 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

the confusing terminology of the SEBTS faculty. However, the below chart represents, to the author's best ability, what the SEBTS faculty is proposing:

<b>Far Left: Integrationism</b> "Christian by Conviction and clinical by practice." <sup>16</sup>	<b>Moderate: CIBC</b> No clear definition provided but rather 10 core beliefs of the CIBC position.	<b>Far Right: Nouthetic Counseling</b> "Its approach to counseling emphasizes the exposition of Scripture within the counseling setting and eschews the use of therapeutic techniques or tools derived from secular psychology." <sup>17</sup>
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Two helpful distinctions to note is that the CIBC position is attempting to clarify what their definition of CIBC is and, secondly, the SEBTS faculty are not claiming to be nouthetic counselors.<sup>18</sup>

Hambrick, has also provided definitions of his own perspective of clinically informed biblical counseling.<sup>19</sup> He states, "I use the term CIBC to indicate that I am aware of the other types of care that may serve someone in ways I don't, and I am willing to work cooperatively with those care providers."<sup>20</sup> Hambrick further adds that by CIBC, he means that "he is not clinically trained" and the focus of his counseling is "not polemical."<sup>21</sup> Finally, in defining CIBC, Hambrick states that the word *clinical* simply means, "drawing from the systematized wisdom of a large number of cases

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>18</sup> Upon further research none of the SEBTS faculty are certified with the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors as of June 2, 2025 per the "Find a Counselor" function. Samuel Stephens, "Find a Biblical Counselor Near You - ACBC," <https://Biblicalcounseling.Com/> (blog), accessed June 2, 2025, <https://biblicalcounseling.com/find-a-counselor/>.

<sup>19</sup> Note, Hambrick's name is on the paper by the SEBT's faculty but this paper was written before his personal blog post on May 7, 2025. Cf. Nate Brooks et al., "What Is Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?" (Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2024), 1–12, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/<https://www.sebts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/What-is-RCCIBC.pdf>. "What I Mean by Clinically-Informed Biblical Counseling? | Brad Hambrick," accessed June 2, 2025, <https://bradhambrick.com/clinicallyinformed/>.

<sup>20</sup> "What I Mean by Clinically-Informed Biblical Counseling? | Brad Hambrick," accessed June 2, 2025, <https://bradhambrick.com/clinicallyinformed/>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

counseled by a large number of counselors.”<sup>22</sup> Hambrick, also primarily refers to himself as a “biblical counselor.” While he claims this designation, it is interesting to note that he avoids utilizing the term “sufficiency” of Scripture because it has been associated with those who use the word “finally and exclusively.”<sup>23</sup> It appears that Hambrick prefers to use the term *finality* and *primacy* to demonstrate, while Scripture may be the final authority and central to counsel, it is not the only “... source of information on life struggles and their remedy.”<sup>24</sup> This CIBC position emphasizes the legitimacy of the use of clinical methods since the Bible’s authority does not necessitate its exclusive utility in the counseling room.

Perhaps the last and final category of those claiming to be clinically informed biblical counselors would be that of the Gospel Care Collective (GCC).<sup>25</sup> It is an organization that claims to offer counsel for the “whole person” and it is led by Jason Kovacs. The GCC claims the following definitions of what it means by clinically-informed biblical counseling:

Clinically informed biblical counseling seeks to bring the best of psychological research and clinical practices through a biblical worldview, offering clients a comprehensive and tailored approach to their emotional and spiritual growth. ...

We provide care through the foundation and lens of Scripture while utilizing common grace findings of research and psychology to inform our methods of client care. ...

In this counseling model, trained professionals apply evidence-based therapeutic techniques and interventions through the framework and interpretive grid of biblical wisdom and principles.<sup>26</sup>

While the author will offer insights on this definition later, it represents what seems to be quite similar to that of the SEBT’s faculty and Hambrick. One glaring difference is that Hambrick makes

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> “But that term has begun to be used with the connotation of exclusivity (i.e., Scripture is the only source of information on life struggles and their remedy). I want to honor those who use the term to mean they exclusively use the Bible as their only source for the counsel they offer. So here I choose to use the terms ‘primacy and finality’ to allow room to tease out important distinctions while still honoring the ultimate authority, relevance, and transformative power of Scripture” (Hambrick, “What I Mean by Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?”)

<sup>25</sup> “Gospel Care Collective – Counseling for the Whole Person,” accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.gospelcarecollective.com/>.

<sup>26</sup> “Gospel Care Collective – Counseling for the Whole Person,” accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.gospelcarecollective.com/>.



no claim to use the psychological methods that both the GCC and SEBT's claim to either employ or are amenable to employing.<sup>27</sup> Hambrick says he is not clinically-trained to implement such psychological methods, whereas the GCC states that they employ “evidence-based therapeutic techniques.”<sup>28</sup>

Kovacs and Hambrick seem to be on different sides of the CIBC continuum as Kovacs has been trained in, promotes, and utilizes Trust Based Relational Intervention (TBRI). TBRI is defined by the Karen Purvis Institute Child Development as,

TBRI® is an attachment-based, trauma-informed intervention that is designed to meet the complex needs of vulnerable children. TBRI® uses Empowering Principles to address physical needs, Connecting Principles for attachment needs, and Correcting Principles to disarm fear-based behaviors. While the intervention is based on years of attachment, sensory processing, and neuroscience research, the heartbeat of TBRI® is connection.<sup>29</sup>

Kovacs himself implements secular psychological methods while attempting, per the GCC, to vet those methods “through the framework and interpretive grid of biblical wisdom and principles.”<sup>30</sup>

Hambrick offers no suggestion that he would practice such in counseling, although he sees value in such an effort.<sup>31</sup>

In order to better understand the nature of the differing CIBC positions, the author proposes the following continuum based on the above definitions:

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<sup>27</sup> Hambrick says, “If the question is, “Do you do EMDR, EMFT, CBT, or another acronym representing a secular model of counseling?” the answer is simply, ‘No’” in Brad Hambrick, “What I Mean by Clinically-Informed Biblical Counseling? | Brad Hambrick,” accessed June 2, 2025, <https://bradhambrick.com/clinicallyinformed/>.

<sup>28</sup> “Gospel Care Collective – Counseling for the Whole Person,” accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.gospelcarecollective.com/>.

<sup>29</sup> “Karyn Purvis Institute of Child Development,” accessed May 9, 2025, <https://child.tcu.edu/about-us/tbri/#sthash.4RbIqm4W.ne3BFExI.dpbs>. Of the function of the Karyn Purvis Institute, the Institute claims, “The Karyn Purvis Institute of Child Development is a program of the Department of Psychology in the TCU College of Science & Engineering in Fort Worth, Texas. Our mission is: to improve the lives of children through research, education, and outreach that addresses the impact of early abuse, neglect, and trauma. Our research and interventions are empowering parents, professionals, and students with trauma-informed strategies that improve outcomes for children and youth.”

<sup>30</sup> “Gospel Care Collective – Counseling for the Whole Person,” accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.gospelcarecollective.com/>.

<sup>31</sup> “The care of a social worker, psychiatrist, counseling specialists, or residential treatment provider (to name a few) may serve a given individual in ways I cannot.” Hambrick, “What I Mean by Clinically-Informed Biblical Counseling?”

<b>Left: Integrationism</b> “The movement has sought to take legitimate research and theory from contemporary psychology and cultivate a psychological and clinical sophistication in their understanding of people, in order to help promote the well-being of Christ’s people.” <sup>32</sup>	<b>Left-Leaning CIBC:</b> Very little difference from Integrationist but simply offers more biblical content. Practices therapeutic methodology	<b>Moderate CIBC:</b> Believes that the Bible is authoritative but not exclusive. Doesn’t practice therapeutic methodology.	<b>Right: Biblical (Nouthetic) Counseling</b> “Biblical counseling is the personal discipleship ministry of God’s people to others under the oversight of God’s church, dependent upon the authority and sufficiency of God’s Word through the work of the Holy Spirit.” <sup>33</sup>
<i>Example:</i> Eric Johnson	<i>Example:</i> Jason Kovacs	<i>Example:</i> Brad Hambrick	<i>Example:</i> Heath Lambert

The above diagram helps to demonstrate that even within CIBC there is fluidity and the positions are not clearly delineated (to date). The dashed lines represent that the positions are mostly similar, yet Hambrick and Kovacs would represent different perspectives of CIBC. (For the reader, one more chart provided by Tim Allchin helps also delineate the overall perspectives of counseling based on doctrine.<sup>34</sup>)

In light of the above categories, the author will now offer a few critiques that the CIBC position must, at least, consider for the future of their own movement, along with the biblical (nouthetic) counseling position, which must also be considered.

<sup>32</sup> Eric L. Johnson, *Foundations for Soul Care: A Christian Psychology Proposal* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2007), 88.

<sup>33</sup> “Our Mission - A Definition of Biblical Counseling,” <https://Biblicalcounseling.Com/> (blog), accessed June 2, 2025, <https://biblicalcounseling.com/about/our-mission/>.

<sup>34</sup> Tim Allchin, Biblical Counseling Center, “4 Types of Christian Counseling,” February 19, 2025, <https://biblicalcounselingcenter.org/4-types-of-christian-counseling>, Accessed May 23, 2025.

## Critique of the CIBC Positions

Terminology matters, as stated above. If the author states that they are a biblically-informed psychologist, that modifier warrants clarity. Is the author a psychologist primarily? Does biblically-informed mean that the author utilizes the Bible in counseling or believes the Bible has a benefit when used (i.e., similar to that of Kovacs and Hambrick)? The challenge of the CIBC is that the verbiage of the term is inherently confusing. A short history lesson would be helpful for the reader.

According to Heath Lambert, “On Tuesday, October 8, 2013 at our annual meeting The National Association of Nouthetic Counselors (NANC) voted to change our name. The proposal passed with an astounding 91% and our organization is now called the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC).”<sup>35</sup> It has been a brief 12 years that ACBC has identified itself with the phrase “biblical counseling” whereas the phrase, “nouthetic confrontation, Christian counseling” and “nouthetic counseling” have all represented what ACBC has intended by what is currently called “biblical counseling.”<sup>36</sup> The challenge is that when ACBC claims biblical counseling and Jason Kovacs claims biblical counseling, those are quite different claims. Call it nouthetic counseling, Christian counseling, or nouthetic confrontation, a central issue is what is the source of counseling and how does that affect the methodology of counseling. This is part of the current confusion in the biblical counseling movement.

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<sup>35</sup> “From NANC to ACBC - Association of Certified Biblical Counselors,” <https://Biblicalcounseling.Com/> (blog), accessed June 2, 2025, <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/articles/from-nanc-to-acbc/>. An awkward acknowledgment is worth noting for the reader: In 2013, the Association of Biblical Counselors was already existent. ABC claims that, “The *Association of Biblical Counselors* began as a basic website in 2005 serving several dozen members” in “Membership” on the Association of Biblical Counselors website <https://christiancounseling.com/membership/> in “Biblical Counselors,” *Association of Biblical Counselors* (blog), accessed June 2, 2025, <https://christiancounseling.com/>, <https://christiancounseling.com/membership/>. ABC claims that “biblical counselors know that Scripture alone stands sufficient in providing a comprehensive understanding of the psychology of man and they do not mix or ‘integrate’ any other false psychologies with the truth of God’s word” in “Biblical Counselors,” *Association of Biblical Counselors* (blog), accessed June 2, 2025, <https://christiancounseling.com/>, <https://christiancounseling.com/mission-beliefs/>. This means that ACBC renamed itself to ACBC after ABC was already using the biblical counseling term for eight years.

<sup>36</sup> Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1970), 41. Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselor’s Manual* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973).

Historically, the terms that represent *biblical counseling* were to suggest that the counselor is using the Scripture as the authoritative guide for the counseling process. Jay Adams said in 1979: “Only an external, divinely delivered revelation provides the way out of subjectivism. This is so even the commitment of the believing counselor to the Scriptures as his *authoritative source* for counseling, because this commitment itself is not subjectively, but divinely, motivated (cf. 1 Corinthians 2; emphasis added).”<sup>37</sup> The key to understanding what comprises biblical counseling is that Scripture is both the authority *and* the source.

Today, in the midst of ongoing debates within the movement, the term *biblical counseling* warrants clarification. The biblical (nouthetic) counselor claims stake to the term, while the CIBCer also utilizes the term *biblical counseling* but each in a very different way. SEBTS faculty state that, “We believe that nouthetic counselors rely too exclusively on biblical exposition, leading them to focus predominantly on the moral elements of their clients’ struggles, often to the neglect of addressing the suffering dimension of a counselee’s hardship.”<sup>38</sup> The CIBC position is clearly attempting to differentiate themselves from a biblical (nouthetic) counselor while still using biblical counseling to identify themselves.

### Combining of Antithetical Terms

The inherent difficulty of the CIBC counselor is the use of the Bible within the counseling process. Kovacs may promote and practice TBRI, while Hambrick may be open to the use of TBRI but may not practice it personally. CIBC undoubtedly uses the Bible, but not as *the* source of counseling. Hambrick himself, as stated above, uses “primacy” and “authority” without using the

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<sup>37</sup> Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselor’s Manual* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973).

<sup>38</sup> Nate Brooks et al., “What Is Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?” (Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2024).

term “sufficiency.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, to say, “clinically-informed” as a modifier for “biblical counseling” has a wide and confusing range of possibilities. The historic norm has been to suggest that biblical counseling is claiming the authority *and* the sufficiency of the Bible.<sup>40</sup> Again, to quote Adams, “this is the commitment of the believing counselor to the Scriptures as the authoritative source for counseling.”<sup>41</sup>

This semantic confusion for CIBC is that what was formerly a claim to the Bible as source and authority with the term *biblical counseling*, now CIBC is claiming to still be *biblical counseling* but to include the very thing *biblical counseling* was attempting to rid itself of—secular, psychotherapeutic practices. This semantic confusion is like the author claiming to be a morning person, night owl. The author is both an early riser and a person who goes to bed late. Or, if the author claimed to be a non-counseling, counselor. Those terms are confusing because one rightfully wonders what a counselor does if they do not counsel? In the same way, the CIBC movement is inherently confusing because of the terms it has chosen to identify itself. “Clinically Informed Biblical Counselor” has historically meant that a person is not a biblical counselor and that is why they are incorporating therapeutic practices into their own practice.<sup>42</sup> The first critique is that of semantic identifiers for CIBC warrant greater consideration as the terms are confusing and contradictory.

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<sup>39</sup> Brad Hambrick, “What I Mean by Clinically-Informed Biblical Counseling? | Brad Hambrick,” accessed June 2, 2025, <https://bradhambrick.com/clinicallyinformed/>.

<sup>40</sup> Larry Crabb, *Effective Biblical Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977). Tim Clinton, *The Quick-Reference Guide to Biblical Counseling, 2nd Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2024).

<sup>41</sup> Adams, *ATCC*, 21.

<sup>42</sup> In a comment to that of fairness, some have used a newly coined term, “Redemptive Counseling” to communicate CIBC, or to use it synonymously with CIBC. “Many curious Christians, counselors, and church leaders have run across a relatively new term: redemptive counseling, more commonly referred to as clinically-informed biblical counseling” and “There are benefits to both terms, which are to be read as synonymous” Brooks, “What Is Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?” 1, FN1. From the author’s perspective, Redemptive Counseling at least differentiates from biblical counseling and is a better descriptor of what is really taking place.

## No Internal Clarity on the Terms of CIBC

Next, the honest biblical counselor has to reckon with the reality that this newly formed field lacks internal clarity regarding its own categories. Perhaps the most prominent voice of the CIBC movement is the SEBTS faculty. Yet, to date, there are no known book publications that serve as a clarification of the movement. SEBTS is known for its journal, *Southeastern Theological Review*, and one key moment in the CIBC history tracks to the Spring 2024 edition of the review. In that edition, the faculty of SEBTS made claims of integrationism, biblical counseling, and “therapeutic theology.” This is about the extent, however, of publications on the work of CIBC. Furthermore, this journal edition was received with much critical feedback.<sup>43</sup> This journal hardly identified a field and provided clarity to the CIBC movement.

To say this another way, the CIBC field does not know what it is yet, either. Terms like redemptive counseling, clinically-informed biblical counseling, and the differing perspectives of the role of the Scripture have yet to be delineated. The biblical counselor should ask if this is Hambrick’s, Kovacs’, or the SEBTS’ definition of CIBC. Even outsiders to biblical counseling have commented on the unhelpfulness of the term CIBC and how it lacks clarity.<sup>44</sup> Matter-of-factly, the CIBC movement is largely undefined and highly controversial. There are no meaningful publications and no leading organizations on the CIBC movement. What that should tell the reader is that this movement may or may not last. Furthermore, it is difficult, though possible, to critique a movement that has yet to define itself. This second critique lends itself to discernment and a ‘pause and wait’ mentality to see what comes of this movement. It may be an isolated movement to that of SEBTS

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<sup>43</sup> Omri Miles, “Clinically-Informed Biblical Counseling’s Failed Attempt at Balance,” <https://Biblicalcounseling.Com/> (blog), accessed May 23, 2025, <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/articles/clinically-informed-biblical-counseling-failed-attempt-at-balance/>. “Priests in the Garden, Zombies in the Wilderness, and Prophets on the Wall: The Current State of the Contemporary Biblical Counseling Movement | First Baptist Church Jacksonville,” accessed May 28, 2025, <https://fbcjax.com/first-thoughts/priests-in-the-garden-zombies-in-the-wilderness-and-prophets-on-the-wall-the-current-state-of-the-contemporary-biblical-counseling-movement/>.

<sup>44</sup> Bob, “Why I Don’t Call Myself a ‘Clinically-Informed Biblical Counselor’ (CIBC),” *RPM Ministries* (blog), May 26, 2025, <https://rpmministries.org/2025/05/why-not-cibc/>.

or it may indeed grow to larger influence. There are not enough indicators to discern as of the writing of this paper.

### CIBC Has Historically Been Integrationism

What was historically a term to identify “Bible as source” (i.e., biblical/nouthetic counseling) has been combined with a term that conveys “the Bible isn’t the only source (i.e., clinically informed, research aware, etc.). Thus, clinically informed biblical counseling is creating its own array of questions due to its own identification with the field of biblical counseling. Lambert puts his finger on the issue by saying:

Anyone who wishes is free to integrate therapeutic resources with biblical ones. I believe it is a terrible error and think you and the people you mean to help will be harmed by it. But I am not the lord of anyone’s life. You may practice any counseling system you choose. But when you do, you must be honest. The use of secular therapies in counseling is not what biblical counselors do. It is wilderness behavior, not garden behavior. In the old days the voices urging us to integrate the Bible with secular thinking honestly called themselves integrationists. Today the voices calling us to integrate deceptively call themselves biblical counselors. The opposition has concealed themselves in our midst.<sup>45</sup>

The third critique of the CIBC movement is that the CIBC effort is what has historically been an effort of integrationists. As Lambert notes, in the “old days” the integrationists would at least call themselves integrationists. Now, CIBC is attempting to take the term *biblical counseling* and redefine it back to what it was intended to *not* be.

Consider what the following integrationists defined their task as within counseling:

- **James Dobson:** “We aren’t saying that all troubles have a physiological or psychological basis. But physiological and psychological factors are often a critical part of the overall mix. As a result, Christians can find valuable help with many of life’s difficulties by consulting with a qualified doctor, psychologist, or trained therapist. We believe that

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<sup>45</sup> “Priests in the Garden, Zombies in the Wilderness, and Prophets on the Wall: The Current State of the Contemporary Biblical Counseling Movement | First Baptist Church Jacksonville,” accessed May 28, 2025, <https://fbcjax.com/first-thoughts/priests-in-the-garden-zombies-in-the-wilderness-and-prophets-on-the-wall-the-current-state-of-the-contemporary-biblical-counseling-movement/>.

Christ's lordship applies over all these professions—particularly when the practitioner seeks Christ in all aspects of their work.”<sup>46</sup>

- **Eric Johnson:** “The movement has sought to take legitimate research and theory from contemporary psychology and cultivate a psychological and clinical sophistication in their understanding of people, in order to help promote the well-being of Christ’s people.”<sup>47</sup>

Of note, the descriptions of integrationists are those whose definition of their own counseling model is strikingly similar to that of the current CIBCer. Remember that the CIBCer is claiming, “Tools and methods for counseling may be derived from secular approaches to psychology and can be helpful (which is different from being essential). These tools and methods enhance our ability to minister the truth of God’s Word into our clients’ life.”<sup>48</sup> There’s very little, if any, ideological difference between what classic integrationists have claimed about the nature of their counseling and what the current CIBCer is claiming.

It is the claim of the CIBCer that they are inhabiting this in-between space, “RC/CIBC occupies a space between these two approaches [nouthetic counseling and integrationism].”<sup>49</sup> Though this is the claim, the facts are obvious in that this is not the genuine truth. CIBC is more like integrationism than it is different.

### **Categorical Solutions for Biblical (Nouthetic) Counseling**

In order to help the biblical counselor, the author will finish by providing solutions for the BCer to possess clarity on categories of BC. First of all, the CIBCer believes in the authority of

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<sup>46</sup> “Perspectives on the Compatibility of Christianity and Psychology,” *Focus on the Family* (blog), accessed June 5, 2025, <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/family-qa/perspectives-on-the-compatibility-of-christianity-and-psychology/>.

<sup>47</sup> Eric L. Johnson, *Foundations for Soul Care: A Christian Psychology Proposal* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2007), 88.

<sup>48</sup> Nate Brooks et al., “What Is Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?” (Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2024), 1–12, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/<https://www.sebts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/What-is-RCCIBC.pdf>.

<sup>49</sup> Nate Brooks, “What is Redemptive Counseling?,” 8.



Scripture, but not the sufficiency to the same degree.<sup>50</sup> As has been noted, the CIBCer believes that Scripture is true but not the only source.<sup>51</sup> In the Fall of 2024, the author helped draft the Sufficiency Statement (SS) in which this nuance was clearly delineated:

As this doctrine [Sufficiency of Scripture] is applied to counseling, it means that Christians require no special knowledge or methodology drawn from outside Scripture to construct a system of counseling care. Scripture explicitly claims to address our entire spiritual life, including the challenges faced in a fallen world which are the same challenges we face in counseling conversations.

Any approach to counseling that attempts to supplement Scripture with secular resources is in error and will harm those it means to help. Such attempts constitute an implicit denial of Scripture's authority and sufficiency. Accordingly, such practices exist outside the stream of faithful biblical counseling and discipleship.<sup>52</sup>

This categorical differentiation is what draws a marker between the CIBC movement and the BC movement. BC claims integrating is erroneous and hurtful, while the CIBCer claims integrating is helpful and desirous.

In this way, the BCer should have a category of "Sufficiency" by which the BCer can discern from those who would integrate, while still claiming the title of BC. Perhaps the best tool is not only agreement to theological definitions but also to that of the Sufficiency Statement itself. The author has now required of all biblical counseling faculty at The Master's University agreement to the SS. For example, job descriptions now include this qualification: applicant must be "Able to sign in agreement with the Sufficiency of Scripture Statement." This phrase helps to clarify what type of biblical counselor is the faculty applicant (or if they are really a BCer in the first place)?<sup>53</sup>

*Of note, an applicant does not qualify to teach at The Master's University if they cannot sign the SS in agreement. What does this solution provide?*

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<sup>50</sup> See above, fn21.

<sup>51</sup> Brad Hambrick, "What I Mean by Clinically-Informed Biblical Counseling? | Brad Hambrick," accessed June 2, 2025, <https://bradhambrick.com/clinicallyinformed/>.

<sup>52</sup> "Sufficiency Statement," November 22, 2024, <https://sufficiencystatement.com>.

<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, there are other issues of common grace that are clarified in the statement. The doctrine of Sufficiency and the doctrine of Common Grace are perhaps the most misunderstood by the integrationist movement and thus the SS is allowing for clarity.

First of all, the BC movement is in need of a line by which one can evaluate whether a person is a biblical counselor or an integrationist. The SS category should not be used as an adjective, but rather as a confession. “Do you want to go to church with me? Hmm, what type of church is it? We are Southern Baptist.” For instance, biblical counseling can promote itself as such but then use the SS to define what type of biblical counselor they really are. This helpful categorization is a necessity for our modern times and will prevent some of the turf wars over the term *biblical counseling* itself.

One last thought for the reader on this point: if a person does not sign the SS though in agreement with the statement, as they have total right to do, it is the author’s perspective that partnership can still be maintained while not signing the statement. However, if a person cannot sign because of a difference of theology or commitment, then a fracture has occurred. Part of the current debate in BC is the reasons for not signing (which admittedly may be good) but the logical progression is still a lack of clarity. When Billy Graham did not sign the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy, it created many questions: did he agree with the statement, did he believe in inerrancy, and other categorical questions.<sup>54</sup> One author claimed that Graham could not sign the Chicago Statement because, “For the sake of the gospel, Billy had to be very careful with his public endorsements.”<sup>55</sup> That same issue is inevitably present for the SS statement. And the author does not recommend creating shepherding problems and organizational disunity for those in leadership to endorse the SS. Regardless the motivation for not signing, there will be a lack of clarity for those who choose not to sign the SS. In an ideal situation, the SS can at least start a conversation and a line for the BC movement as a whole.

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. Stephen J. Nichols, *R.C. Sproul: A Life* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2021). Christopher Haun, “Billy Graham, Evangelism, Evangelicalism, and Inerrancy,” *Defending Inerrancy* (blog), February 27, 2018, <https://defendinginerrancy.com/billy-graham-and-biblical-inerrancy/>.

<sup>55</sup> Haun, “Billy Graham, Evangelism, Evangelicalism, and Inerrancy.”

## ACBC Certification

The next categorical solution is that of ACBC certification. Of note, none of the faculty at SEBTS, Hambrick, or Kovacs are ACBC certified. The author is not aware of the membership statuses of these individuals but there seems to be no indicator that these individuals have sought to be ACBC certified and have been denied membership. Furthermore, the individuals that were invited from the CIBC movement to the 2025 Colloquium have declined to come. What does this tell ACBC? *The CIBC movement is not attempting to be ACBC certified and ACBC certification is not possible for those who are CIBCers.* This categorical solution is another recommendation from the author.

ACBC's standards of doctrine address issues of revelation, common grace, and the doctrine of Scripture.<sup>56</sup> In these standards of doctrine, ACBC states "the Bible is a sufficient resource to define and direct all counseling ministry."<sup>57</sup> If one becomes a member of the ACBC organization, it thus prohibits them from being a CIBCer. This categorical solution is also one for the good of the movement. Currently, CIBCers are not seeking membership with ACBC and ACBC membership prohibits one from being a CIBCer. Thus, to clarify the movement going forward, true biblical counselors who want to communicate clearly their position should focus on their certification and their organizations certification with ACBC.

## Experienced versus Inexperienced Biblical Counselors

One future category that will need to be included for the biblical (nouthetic) counselors that the CIBCer has recognized. Hambrick says,

It is more accurate to understand that "clinical" means *drawing from the systematized wisdom of a large number of cases counseled by a large number of counselors.* When I am studying a subject, I want to know both (a) what does the Bible *say* and (b) what do those who have worked with a large of number of cases like this *see*. The Bible is authoritative and inerrant. Counselors are

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<sup>56</sup> "Standards of Doctrine - Association of Certified Biblical Counselors," <https://Biblicalcounseling.Com/> (blog), accessed June 6, 2025, <https://biblicalcounseling.com/positions/standards-of-doctrine/>.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

not. But their observations about common patterns and commonly overlooked factors are useful.

Hambrick notes something worthy, but looks to the wrong source for the information. He is speaking to the idea of wisdom and case experience in biblical counseling. Biblical (nouthetic) counseling is on the brink if needing to differentiate between the newly certified biblical counselor and the seasoned biblical counselor. Implicitly, the ACBC counselor may grow in case experience and wisdom but there are no ways to determine when this has happened categorically. The CIBCer wants to learn from those who have counseled such issues but are looking to secular, unbelieving therapists for those insights.<sup>58</sup> The BCer must gently navigate the fact that the Scripture is sufficient *and* a single female counselor may not be the best counselor for an older, male counselee.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, a married counselor may not be able to speak into the nuances of singleness in quite the same way that a single, biblical counselor can. For the sake of categorical recommendations, the author will call this last category “experience.”

What every pastor, biblical counselor, and BC leader knows through wisdom (James 3:13-17) is that some cases are more fitting for a certain counselor and another case is better for different counselors.<sup>60</sup> CIBC has claimed a desire to learn from those in the realm they are counseling, and the BCer must do so, as well, but maintaining the proper focus of *where to look for this information*. In a way, there should be an experienced group of biblical counselors to which the inexperienced group of BCers can look and ask questions. This category warrants establishment within ACBC and the genuine BC movement. As it stands, only the Level II category differentiates but one can simply be

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<sup>58</sup> “Rather, these tools and methods provide additional ways of engaging the human person that are not explicitly spoken of in the text of Scripture” in Nate Brooks et al., “What Is Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?” (Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2024), 1–12, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.sebts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/What-is-RCCIBC.pdf.

<sup>59</sup> Nonetheless that this violates the standards of conduct for ACBC.

<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, case wisdom helps a BCer know where to start in the application of the Scripture and where to avoid in the beginning of counseling. The author’s own counseling has taught him this nuance, as well (cf. Matt. 7:1-7).

ordained and become a Level II ACBC counselor—this level doesn't correspond to counseling experience.<sup>61</sup> The practical effects are that ACBC Counselors can claim expertise in an area, but really should grow in case wisdom from a true BCer that can help them apply the right Scripture to the right problem. Call this discernment, wisdom, or counseling experience—this next category is what the CIBCer is looking for in the wrong places.

In an ideal world, this last category would not only correspond to counseling hours but a measure of fruit in those hours. A BCer can have multiple first sessions, but no second sessions because counselees do not return. In this way, a counselor has 'hours' but not fruit. It is the author's perspective that long-term BCers can be measured in both their hours in counseling and fruitfulness in those sessions. This category of experienced vs. inexperienced will allow the BC movement to grow in wisdom and excellence in the application of the sufficient Scriptures. It is the author's perspective that the newly certified ACBC counselor needs further experience to be well-versed in an array of biblical counseling cases.

This Final categorical solution is this: how much experience does a BCer have as measured in hours and fruitfulness?

## Conclusion

As has been demonstrated, *the author categorized the CIBC positions, critiqued those positions, and offered categorical solutions that would better help the overall BC movement.* The subtitle of this paper is, "Is Clinically-Informed Biblical Counseling Really Just Integrationism?" The answer to that question is, "yes." What has historically been claimed as Integrationism is now what the clinically-informed biblical counseling movement is practicing. Though the CIBC movement is yet to be identified and

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<sup>61</sup> "ACBC Certification FAQs – Association of Certified Biblical Counselors," accessed June 6, 2025, <https://crm.biblicalcounseling.com/certification-faqs/>.

clearly delineated, one can be sure that the CIBC movement is quite different from biblical counseling.

Although this may be true, the BC movement as a whole can have definitional clarity and continue to grow in Christlike excellence in counseling. Furthermore, the CIBCer can use the wisdom of man but the wisdom of God will always prove to be superior: “For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Corinthians 2:25).

The next chapter of the BC movement is one of great hope as the Word of God shines into the most complicated of problems—and provides genuine transformation (Romans 12:2).

## Counseling: For the Church?

“Nothing in this world is harder than speaking the truth, nothing easier than flattery. If there’s the hundredth part of a false note in speaking the truth, it leads to a discord, and that leads to trouble. But if all, to the last note, is false in flattery, it is just as agreeable, and is heard not without satisfaction.” –Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*

**Dr. T. Dale Johnson Jr.<sup>1</sup>**

Zebras are not simply horses with stripes. These four-legged creatures look a lot like horses in structure and appearance, but they are different animals altogether. Critical characteristics, including natural temperament and unmistakable physical features, as well as differences in habitats and instincts, distinguish the domesticated horse from the zebra. In a similar way, there are characteristics of the clinically informed approach that may appear very similar to biblical counseling, but there are critical theological and methodological features that distinguish this approach from those who hold to the key tenets of biblical counseling.

The Christian counseling spectrum has not been a stagnant lot—formal labels have been fluid and difficult to maintain over time. Although they identify as biblical counselors, clinically informed biblical counseling (CIBC)<sup>2</sup> attempts to position itself on the spectrum at the intersection between psychology and theology, situated between integrationists and biblical counselors. At that intersection, they want to stand on the theological side of the fence but adopt a definitive posture gazing toward the modern psychologies. The CIBC posture and practice is different from biblical counseling, so let’s consider options that better categorize their position on the Christian counseling spectrum.

First, an argument could be made that the clinically informed position fits best into a category mentioned by Stanton Jones and Richard Butman in *Modern Psychotherapies*, called “assimilative integration,” which “is rooted primarily in one specific approach to psychotherapy but

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. T. Dale Johnson Jr., is the Director of Counseling Programs and Professor of Biblical Counseling at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

<sup>2</sup> *The Southeastern Theological Review* (15: 1, Spring 2024). Nate Brooks, Tate Cockrell, Brad Hambrick, Kristen Kellen, and Sam Williams, “Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling” <https://www.sebts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/What-is-RCCIBC.pdf>

Clinically informed biblical counseling refers to the self-labeled approach of the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary faculty. The perspective is also referred to as redemptive counseling in addition to the clinically informed label, so I will use both identifiers synonymously.

with an openness to the supportive and helpful but minor contributions from other approaches.”<sup>3</sup> Other possible classifications could be taken from David Powlison’s “Critiquing Modern Integrationists.” Two of Powlison’s categories, sophisticated and covert integration, share applicable characteristics with the clinically informed approach. According to Powlison, “Sophisticated integrationsim . . . seeks to appropriate and evaluate secular psychological theory in an eclectic manner under the guidance of Christian ‘control beliefs.’”<sup>4</sup> Clinically informed counselors desire to employ a “theologically robust theory of integration,”<sup>5</sup> albeit one that is more attentive theologically than historic integration.<sup>6</sup> Even though it is a new type of integration, there must be no doubt that the clinically informed approach is still a pursuit of integration. That characteristic alone, however, is enough to place their approach in a category outside of biblical counseling.

Powlison also suggested “covert integrationism,” as a “seemingly unwitting integrationism—it claims to oppose psychology and to work in biblical categories. But psychological categories slip into the very foundation stones.”<sup>7</sup> This perspective captures the unintended consequences that are inevitable in the functional integration practiced by clinically informed counselors. Elements of each of these (assimilative, sophisticated, or covert integrationism) could be argued as a proper category for the CIBC approach. One could also argue that an amalgamation of these characteristics together, the sophisticated assimilation of covert integration espoused by the clinically informed counselors may be best classified under the label of Christian psychology, championed by Eric Johnson.<sup>8</sup> My goal in this article, however, is not to parse out which category of integration best describes the CIBC approach or to argue whether biblical counseling is right and CIBC is wrong. Instead, I want to make clear some of the obvious differences between the clinically informed approach and biblical counseling in order to eliminate as much confusion and ambiguity as possible. In what follows, the reader may disagree with biblical counseling, but the aim is simply to demonstrate that the label “biblical counseling” is not the proper category for the clinically informed approach.

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<sup>3</sup> Stanton Jones and Richard Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 443.

<sup>4</sup> David Powlison, “Critiquing Modern Integrationists,” in *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* (Volume XI, No. 3, Spring 1993), 25.

<sup>5</sup> Sam Williams, “Introduction: Cracks and Light in Christian Counseling,” in *The Southeastern Theological Review* (15:1, Spring 2024), 1. I appreciate the influence of Sam Williams on my life during seminary. Few know that he was one of my professors in biblical counseling at SEBTS. From my perspective, Dr. Williams taught and thought differently in those days than he does today. We remain friends, and I enjoy our cordial and edifying conversations regarding our different approaches to counseling.

<sup>6</sup> Consider the heritage of Clyde and Bruce Narramore, Gary Collins, CAPS, AACC, etc.

<sup>7</sup> Powlison, “Critiquing Modern Integrationists,” 28.

<sup>8</sup> See works by Eric Johnson: *Foundations of Soul Care* and *God and Soul Care*.



The author will seek to demonstrate that, while the clinically informed perspective is located on the Christian spectrum of counseling approaches, clinically informed biblical counseling (CIBC) significantly departs from critical convictions that define the framework of biblical counseling and is best categorized on a spectrum of integration. The clinically informed/redemptive counseling approach moves toward the *implementation* of psychology and professionalism that are hallmarks of clinical care rather than of the ministry of the church. While the CIBC approach may be considered by many to be a theological improvement on integration, it is not an advancement of biblical counseling and should not be considered within the essential framework of biblical counseling. The theological language of CIBC may appear to be the same animal as biblical counseling, yet modifications made to key tenets make CIBC a “different animal” altogether.<sup>9</sup>

Redemptive counselors hold several commendable commitments due to their Christian faith; however, there are deep and consequential disagreements with biblical counselors regarding the details of counseling theory and methodology. The intramural debate over the biblical counseling movement (BCM) is not a squabble over unplowed ground. If it were, there would be freedom to expand malleable terms to describe the freshly tilled soil. Attempts to modify biblical counseling, however, to incorporate a clinical posture are self-defeating and practice some level of semantic mysticism,<sup>10</sup> rather than simply using a new phrase to describe the distinct and incompatible practice proposed by the CIBC.<sup>11</sup>

Concern regarding attempts to expand the definition of biblical counseling are not new. My initial concerns were expressed as early as 2017 in an article posted by ACBC entitled, “Elephant in the Room.”<sup>12</sup> I was witnessing what Powlison had been observing for years, that “the psychologists seem more biblical and the biblical counselors seem more psychological.”<sup>13</sup> My concerns were best

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<sup>9</sup> As will be demonstrated, key tenets such as the church as the primary context for counseling, the aim of biblical counseling is sanctification, the means of sanctification is the Holy Spirit by the Word, systems of secular counseling psychology are not neutral, and the Bible provides a comprehensive approach to the care of souls are altered compromised.

<sup>10</sup> I first encountered the phrase “semantic mysticism” years ago in the work of Francis Schaeffer, *Escape From Reason* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006). Schaeffer uses this phrase to combat the subjective use of theological language, what he calls “god words,” that supposedly provide psychological comfort that is not rooted in biblical revelation. The spiritualized language provides a façade of hope, but I share Schaeffer’s concern that the definitions of truth are in danger of being diluted by the flowering of language and endless nuancing of terms, which leads to false hope.

<sup>11</sup> A person may disagree with biblical counseling for failure to incorporate clinical techniques, but intellectual integrity suggests that a new label be given to that style of counseling to avoid confusion between the two different frameworks.

<sup>12</sup> T. Dale Johnson, Jr. and John Babler, “Issues in Biblical Counseling: Addressing the Elephant in the Room” retrieved May 31, 2025. [https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/articles/issues-in-biblical-counseling-addressing-the-elephant-in-the-room/?srsltid=AfmBOoqxEs4Jmbrj-A\\_mqLN3fPQjzPoEGTpXgUd-LG1gN6aS0vboYGVE](https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/articles/issues-in-biblical-counseling-addressing-the-elephant-in-the-room/?srsltid=AfmBOoqxEs4Jmbrj-A_mqLN3fPQjzPoEGTpXgUd-LG1gN6aS0vboYGVE)

<sup>13</sup> David Powlison, “Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies),” in *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*. (Volume 25, Number 2, Spring 2007), 10.

summarized as to whether these two parties were heading toward “a rapprochement or toward a more profound collision.”<sup>14</sup> My personal optimism in seeking to have private dialogue with other leaders in the BCM led me to be hopeful that a collision course could be avoided. However, personal concerns offered in private were dismissed as polemical, lacking understanding, or creating dissension. Ironically, here we are in another “counseling war.” I lament the necessity of such skirmishes, but clarification is better than remaining in the shadows of ambiguity.

From my view, there is no question as to where secular influence on soul care will lead the church. The 20<sup>th</sup> century has demonstrated that ambiguity in doctrine and practice always leads to a Christianized therapeutic “expressive individualism” that continues to have a deleterious effect on the mainstream Christian culture.<sup>15</sup> As Thomas Oden observed, “the theologians sat at the feet of the psychiatric Gamaliels and seemed to like it.”<sup>16</sup>

I trust that the thought leaders of the clinically informed approach do not intend the same trajectory we have witnessed since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>17</sup> However, it is my conviction that the clinically informed approach is planting a seed of trajectory which will revert Christian soul care to a therapeutic drama, where Jesus Christ fills a supporting role for “human flourishing” rather than serving as the central figure in the glorious Christian story of redemption and restoration of broken and needy sinners.

Both parties desire growth and improvement in the care of souls, but we starkly differ on how to achieve it. First, who bears primary responsibility for soul care—the local church or the government? The context of counseling matters and the ethics that guide counseling are not subjective. Second, we consider the claim of “common grace insights” as extra-biblical information in relation to the sufficiency of Scripture. Third, is the goal of biblical counseling progressive sanctification or civic righteousness? The remainder of the article will highlight these key areas of disparity in order to demonstrate the departure of the CIBC approach from critical presuppositions established within biblical counseling.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> See Carl Trueman, *Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020). Also, Philip Reiff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> Pruyser in Thomas C. Oden’s, *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984), 35.

<sup>17</sup> T. Dale Johnson, Jr., *The Professionalization of Pastoral Care: The SBC’s Journey from Pastoral Theology to Counseling Psychology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2020). E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1983).

## The Church is the Context of Counseling<sup>18</sup>

Jesus Christ is the head of the church and the chief shepherd of our souls. Therefore, the church is the proper authority to oversee the practice of soul care and to hold that practice accountable to biblical fidelity in the shepherding of souls. “Counseling,” Powlison noted, “ought to express and come under the church’s authority and orthodoxy.”<sup>19</sup> Every function of the church—evangelism, preaching, discipleship, one-anothers, ordinances, church discipline, etc.—is to display the kindness of God in His care for souls. Powlison echoed this sentiment by saying, “Biblical counseling is an expression of church life.”<sup>20</sup> Such care may function as edification and comfort or correction and exhortation, but it falls under the jurisdiction of the church.

The government is not the primary entity responsible for the regulation of the care of souls. Yet, the government wields reams of regulations over psychotherapeutic practice that is religious at its core. The religion it espouses is secular humanism, which actively hides the message and practice of Christianity under a bushel. The Lord has given the government a physical sword to swing that rightly punishes evil doers and protects the peaceful.<sup>21</sup> That sword cannot change the heart nor cure the souls of men. The church has been given the sword of the Spirit for the unique work of redemption and restoration in the cure and care of souls.

Client-centered clinical counseling under the regulations of the mental health complex lacks *kerygma*. Counseling without *kerygma* is soul care distanced from the Scripture and from the oversight of the church. There is little that is Christian about counseling that lacks the proclamation of all of life centered around the person and work of Christ. All men understand themselves most clearly when they see themselves as God sees them.

The clinically informed approach instinctively describes the church as “a *center for* and a *sender of* Christian counselors.”<sup>22</sup> There are, however, at least three concerns which makes this articulation incongruent with their practice that functionally removes the church as the *center* of soul care in relation to other institutions. First, clinical settings, espoused by the clinically informed perspective, operate under the jurisdiction of the state and thereby displaces the church’s central role in

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<sup>18</sup> See T. Dale Johnson, Jr., *The Church as a Culture of Care: Finding Hope in Biblical Community* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2021).

<sup>19</sup> David Powlison, “Counseling *is* the Church,” in *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* (Volume 20, Number 2, Winter 2002), 3.

<sup>20</sup> Powlison, *Crucial Issues*, 243.

<sup>21</sup> For more detail on jurisdiction of church and state as it relates to counseling see T. Dale Johnson, Jr., “The Stewardships of the Church and the State” in *Legal Issues in Biblical Counseling: Direction and Help for Churches and Counselors*. Edited by T. Dale Johnson, Jr. and Edward Charles Wilde (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2022), 9-25.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, “Introduction: Cracks and Light in Christian Counseling,” 3.

counseling. In these cases, counseling is no longer a part of the life of the body of Christ. The CIBC approach encourages “biblical counselors,” who are typically unlicensed by the state, to utilize clinical methods as part of their counseling. On a pragmatic level, an individual who practices “clinical methods” is more vulnerable to litigation because they appear to the state to be practicing therapeutic techniques without a license. Counselors who practice this way unintentionally raise the legal liability of the church they serve.<sup>23</sup>

Second, the approach confuses a call for the church to ‘send’ missionaries into the mental health complex as servants of the state.<sup>24</sup> Missionaries being sent out in the clinically informed approach are not commissioned by or accountable to the church, but are licensed and responsible to the state for their therapeutic practice. “These settings,” which include licensed practice, “will inform how a RC/CIBCer will live out their calling.”<sup>25</sup> Licensed professionals voluntarily submit to the regulations of their state government in the counseling room, where Christian ethics are shackled. The church is intended to be the conscience of the world rather than the world’s influence dulling the conscience of the church. State standards and codes of ethics imposed by the state inevitably replace the Scriptures as life’s moral compass, especially in the taxonomy of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and the economy regulated by the American Psychiatric Association (APA).<sup>26</sup>

In my estimation, one of the primary contexts considered as a “calling” in the clinically informed approach stands against the confessional statement of the Biblical Counseling Coalition. That statement says,

The primary and fullest expression of counseling ministry is meant to occur in local church communities where pastors effectively shepherd souls while equipping and overseeing diverse forms of every-member ministry (Ephesians 4:11-14). Other like-minded counseling institutions and organizations are beneficial insofar as they serve alongside the church, encourage Christians to counsel biblically, and purpose to impact the world for Christ.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Formal biblical counseling under the authority of the church is an appropriate expression of our religious convictions. For more detail, see Johnson and Wilde, *Legal Issues in Biblical Counseling*.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, “Introduction: Cracks and Light in Christian Counseling,” 3. See, Sam Williams, “Counselors as Missionaries,” in *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* (vol. 26, number 3, 2012). Also see, Sam Stephens, “Christian Ministry and the Mental Health Counseling Complex: Understanding Missions, Counseling, and Biblical Structures of Care” in *Journal of Biblical Soul Care* (Fall, Vol.8:2, 2024).

<sup>25</sup> Brooks, et.al., “What Is Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?”, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Consider, especially chapter 5 in, Douglas C. Haldeman, ed., *The Case Against Conversion “Therapy:” Evidences, Ethics, Alternatives*. (American Psychological Association, 2022).

<sup>27</sup> Biblical Counseling Coalition Confessional Statement: <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/confessional-statement/>

Counseling under the jurisdiction of the government is certainly *not* a context that would “encourage Christians to counsel biblically.”

Third, a pluralistic subjectivity is applied to the activity of counseling that depends upon the context of the counselor within the clinically informed approach. Much of what they propose may sound like a version of biblical counseling when done within the context of the church. However, the rules of engagement radically shift toward different aims of counseling (e.g., civic righteousness) and different means (e.g., secular therapeutic modalities) when one is in the context of the mental health complex.<sup>28</sup> This malleability creates an inconsistency and incompatibility with the private ministry of the Word, bending to the ethical preferences of the APA and compromising the covering provided by the authority of the church.

### **Comprehensive Sufficiency**

The purpose of this section is not to debate the various perspectives on the sufficiency of Scripture, but to demonstrate that an appeal to the *necessity* of common grace insights compromises the sufficiency of Scripture for counseling. The BCM has argued that God’s special revelation offers a comprehensive view of soul care for the crown of His creation. Adding secular modalities under the guise of common grace insights within the clinically informed approach may appear subtle to some, but it creates a chasm of division between the perspective traditionally offered by biblical counselors.

The sufficiency of Scripture has been a key tenet of the biblical counseling movement since its inception. The claim is that the Bible has everything we need to live life for the purposes God intended in the world He created. In other words, God has granted revelation in the Scripture that has *comprehensive internal* resources for the care of souls. The claim is not that the Bible is exhaustive—not even science can meet that threshold. In David Powlison’s *VITEX* and *COMPIN* comparison, he distinguishes between systems that rely on “*VITal EXternal contribution*” and the biblical counseling position, which “believes that the Christian faith, specifically the Scriptures,

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<sup>28</sup> According to CIBCers, “[they] work in the realms of both moral righteousness and civic righteousness and they affirm the validity of helping clients who are not interested in divine redemption and reconciliation grow in civic righteousness.” See Brooks, et.al., *What Is Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?*, 7-8.

contains *COMPrehensive INternal resources* to enable us to construct a Christian model of personality, change, and counseling.”<sup>29</sup>

The clinically informed position deviates at this point with a nuance that detracts from the comprehensive nature of the Scriptures. This deviation is clear in two ways: first, by the claim that Scripture is *not* comprehensive, and second, by the implementation of modalities that are necessary for their model. I will address the first issue here and the second in the subsequent section.

The clinically informed explanation alters the biblical counseling tenet that the Bible has comprehensive internal resources. While Powlison argues that the internal information of Scripture is comprehensive, enabling “us to construct a Christian model of personality, change, and counseling,”<sup>30</sup> the clinically informed approach claims that the Scriptures, “have everything necessary to **evaluate** common grace tools.”<sup>31</sup> It seems as though Scripture is reduced to an evaluative tool rather than offering a comprehensive approach. As Brooks stated: “While Scripture helps us **evaluate** all things, it does not explicitly teach us all things **necessary** to offer the best form of care for our counselees.”<sup>32</sup> Further they say, “the Bible was **not written to be a comprehensive** manual on every manner by which thoughts may be changed, observation and research may uncover for us additional strategies to effect lasting thought change, particularly when they do not contradict scripture.”<sup>33</sup> The clinically informed counselors claim their, “. . . practice of *necessity* involves using material not explicitly taught within the pages of Scripture.”<sup>34</sup> Building upon the evidence in illustrating their departure, they state, “In truth, no counselor can consistently hold that the Bible contains all information *necessary* for counseling . . .”<sup>35</sup> Clearly this is a departure from the biblical counseling distinctive and specifically from Powlison’s articulation that the Bible has comprehensive internal information to construct a Christian approach to soul care.

## Posturing Toward Secular Psychology

How do we measure commitment to the sufficiency of Scripture? This can be an arduous task because we usually think of doctrinal commitments in the form of confessions or creeds. The clinically informed approach does indeed give verbal ascent to the sufficiency of Scripture; however,

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<sup>29</sup> Powlison, “Cure of Souls,” 276. Emphasis original

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Brooks, et.al., *What Is Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Brooks, “Everybody Integrates,” 19. Emphasis added

<sup>33</sup> Brooks, et.al., *What Is Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?*, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Brooks, “Everybody Integrates,” 12.

<sup>35</sup> Brooks, “Everybody Integrates,” 19.

as demonstrated above, the stated practices of their view compromise how the BCM has described the sufficiency found within the internal resources of the Bible.

As noted earlier, the second way the clinically informed model deviates from biblical counseling is through the intentional implementation of secular modalities that are necessary for their model. If the model was merely “informed,” there would not be a need to qualify their practice with a list of commitments, since even Jay Adams was “informed” about the secular psychological thought of his day. David Powlison was certainly “informed” about biological psychiatry’s rise to prominence during his time as well.

The need to offer a qualifying term for their practice is more than simply being informed by secular theories and techniques.<sup>36</sup> A better way to describe the clinically “informed” model is clinical “implementation.” This term is a more accurate description of their practices in the counseling room that are different from biblical counselors in the past.

Adams and Powlison both acknowledged that we may learn from secular psychologies. However, the way we learn must be placed in proper context, which requires knowing and understanding the ideological seedbed of the modern psychological paradigm. We do *not* learn for the purpose of implementing their methods in the counseling room. Biblical counselors have historically refrained from implementing secular modalities because those modalities are shaped by and import secular humanistic presuppositions. Proponents of the clinically informed approach, however, “disagree that all methods emerging from secular psychotherapy are by necessity tainted by their worldview,” instead they “draw a distinction between an approach’s worldview and its methods.”<sup>37</sup>

While they accurately identify this point as a divergence from “nouthetic counseling,” they fail to acknowledge that it is also a divergence from subsequent “generations” of the BCM. Powlison noted, “But when we look at psychology, we must take seriously the pervasiveness of secular presuppositions and the malignancy of secular intentions.”<sup>38</sup> Biblical counseling holds that secular counseling techniques are formulated within a worldview system and cannot be extrapolated without significant import of that worldly ideology into the counseling room.

The retort from clinically informed counselors is that “[these] tools and methods are not a replacement for the truth of scripture or used to inculcate worldliness into the hearts of our

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<sup>36</sup> Evidenced by their discussion regarding CBT in Brooks, et.al., or EMDR in the Round Table discussion from the Southeastern Theological Review, 74.

<sup>37</sup> Brooks, et.al., *What is Redemptive Counseling*, 6.

<sup>38</sup> Powlison, “Critiquing Modern Integrationists,” 24.

counselees. Rather, these tools and methods provide additional ways of engaging the human person that are not explicitly spoken of in the text of scripture.”<sup>39</sup> Their goal seems to be well-meaning and unintentional, but it is no less misguided when assuming that the use of secular methods and techniques are sanitized from the worldview that created them. The practice of importing secular theory is not experimental, as Powlison acknowledged: “Under the ‘all truth is God’s truth’ slogan, with its notion that both science and the Bible were revelational, cartloads of undiluted secularism were hauled into the church.”<sup>40</sup>

I am gravely concerned that we are returning to the psychological faddism born in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which left pastoral theology depleted of significance for pastors in their aid to shepherd Christ’s flock. The BCM began out of necessity to return to the Scripture after seeing the landscape of soul care was little more than a flattering mimic of psychological trends. I could not agree more with Powlison’s brief explanation of motivated beginnings and missional ends:

The problems that animated biblical counseling at its start remain live problems today. Counseling in the Christian church continues to be significantly compromised by the secular assumptions and practices of our culture’s reigning psychologies and psychiatries. Biblical-nouthetic counseling was initiated to provide two things: a cogent critique of secularism and a distinctly biblical alternative. The traditional insights, strengths, and commitments of nouthetic counseling must be maintained . . . Secular psychologies remain major competitors within the church.<sup>41</sup>

I firmly believe it is not the intention of the clinically informed approach to drift away from these two foundational elements of the biblical counseling movement. However, their call toward a “theologically robust integration” is drastically different compared to a “cogent critique of secularism” or “a distinctly biblical alternative,” as Powlison suggested.

In their posturing towards secular psychology, at least two points of divergence from biblical counselors can be noted. First, biblical counselors understand that the secular psychologies are competitors to the religious wisdom of the church and therefore, “do not play a constitutive role.”<sup>42</sup> Yet, clinically informed proponents repeatedly describe the *requirement*, *necessity*, and *inevitability* of

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<sup>39</sup> Brooks, Cockrell, Hambrick, Kellen, and Williams, *Redemptive Counseling/ Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling*, 5-6.

<sup>40</sup> David Powlison, “Crucial Issues in Contemporary Biblical Counseling,” in *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (Greensboro, New Growth Press, 2010), 242. This article was originally published in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 1988.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 241-242.

<sup>42</sup> David Powlison, *Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies)*, *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* (Volume 25, Number 2, 2007), 276.



incorporating outside material that aids Scripture in soul care.<sup>43</sup> They say that counseling “tools and methods may be derived from secular approaches,” adding that, “These tools and methods *enhance* our ability to minister the truth of God’s word.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, common grace insights and the methods provided by secular theories play an essential role in their theory and practice. Second, the CIBC position states that a distinction can be made “between an approach’s worldview and its methods.”<sup>45</sup> Yet, that is to deny a foundational principle of biblical counselors that “We must continue to reject secular categories from a self-consciously presuppositional standpoint.”<sup>46</sup>

The reader may decide whether the CIBC’s perspective is preferred over biblical counseling. My point is to show that their view *is* a departure from biblical counselors in every generation. We have said that we may learn from the psychologies by being provoked back to Scripture. Yet, in no way have biblical counselors described outside information as *necessary* to add to the comprehensive nature of special revelation for the task of soul care. Nor have true biblical counselors ever separated an ideological foundation from a methodological approach in the counseling room. Paradigmatic ideas about human problems and their corresponding solutions are encoded into the techniques utilized in the counseling room. Those techniques have necessary aims associated with the worldview of each counseling theorist.<sup>47</sup>

### Common Grace Insights

One can understand that rain would be described as common. Psychological *insights* labeled as “common,” however, is self-defeating. The biblical counseling movement has not been opposed to the doctrine of common grace, but what the clinically informed considers to reflect God’s common grace is another question entirely. What is intrusive to biblical counseling is a

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<sup>43</sup> I recognize the SEBTS paper, “What is Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?” attempted to rectify a contrary position from what was clearly expressed in the Southeastern Theological Review as required, necessary, wise, inevitable, and good stewardship to integrate. It is clear to me that the framework presented in the journal by all SEBTS faculty is a paradigm which seeks, out of necessity and ethical obligation of good stewardship, to find common grace insights that add an essential component to their counseling theory.

<sup>44</sup> Brooks, et.al., 5.

<sup>45</sup> Brooks, et.al., 6.

<sup>46</sup> Powlison, “Crucial Issues,” 242.

<sup>47</sup> In short, this is why Freud was different than Rogers, who was different than Skinner. Rogers did not implement positive and negative reinforcement nor did Skinner employ active listening because each knew that the methods were tied to the worldview of the theorists. Only in the last thirty or so years has the secular world moved toward eclectic acceptance of different counseling methodologies primarily for pragmatic reasons. Christians in integration began to follow that pattern (See Jones and Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies*, ch.9). Now we see some who claim biblical counseling following that pattern of eclectic and pragmatic rationale that one can separate the ideological grounding of a technique from the technique itself. Word association assumes the reality of the id, ego, and super ego. CBT assumes the primacy of cognition, dismissing the heart faculties of the inner man as always active. Active listening assumes incongruence and the need for self-empowerment. EMDR assumes trauma is encoded in the viscera.

proposal to accept secular humanistic psychological methodologies as a form of revelation under the banner of common grace.

The theological category that integrationists have traditionally used is general revelation as a covering to smuggle empty philosophies in the form of secular counseling psychologies.<sup>48</sup> Now, clinically informed counselors offer “common grace” as theological rationale to accept the same empty philosophies clothed in methodological garb. While the vetting of outside information by the clinically informed counselor is an improvement from the broad acceptance of historic integrationists, they are not simply being provoked by the observable information from the psychologies back to the Scriptures to formulate their counsel, as biblical counselors have argued. Rather, they articulate that the secular techniques can be implemented because the methods are not “tainted” by their philosophical worldview.

Counseling methods are not neutral. Revelational epistemology serves as a guardrail against incorporating secular philosophy into Christian discipleship and sanctification, which is why biblical counselors hesitate to accept methods as if they are neutral and untainted. Kristin Kellen, promoting the clinically informed view, noted, “I’ll add a thought briefly, though, and that is the *necessity* of understanding common grace truths/realities in order to properly understand special revelation truth. Common grace gives a richness, clarity, and dimension to what God has revealed in his word.”<sup>49</sup> Is a proper understanding of special revelation necessarily dependent upon common grace? Does this raise questions regarding the illuminating work of the Spirit, the Scripture’s perspicuity, or continuing revelation?

There ought to be a level of discomfort in granting a blank check to psychological research claimed to be “empirical,” as if it is revelational knowledge granted by the Spirit for the purpose of sanctification. Neither psychology nor psychiatry has a credible resume of reliability. Furthermore, the epistemological ground upon which secularists operate is distinct from Christian thinking, which is why we must not accept their methods as if they are neutral. Leaning on Van Til, Powlison helpfully warns against this flawed epistemological framing here:

An ambiguously defined, non-Calvinist version of ‘common grace and/or general revelation’ (the terms are often used interchangeably and as a catch-all) provides the rationale for importing the concepts, practices, and professional structures of the modern psychologies into professing Christian contexts. Van Til described and criticized “The popular notion of

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<sup>48</sup> See Sam Stephens, “General Revelation: A Decisive Doctrine for the Biblical Counseling Movement” at <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/articles/general-revelation/>

<sup>49</sup> Kristen Kellen, “SEBTS Counseling Professors Round Table: As It Is and As It Could Be,” in *The Southeastern Theological Review* (15:1, Spring 2024), 80.

common grace [which says that there is a neutral field of operation between Christians and non-Christians] (*Common Grace and the Gospel*, p.24). That ‘popular notion’ has largely defined the point of view and agenda of the Evangelical psychotherapy movement that has dominated seminaries, Christian colleges and graduate schools, the Christian publishing industry, and the Christian counseling culture since the early 1970s. Under the banner of ‘integrating Christianity and Psychology’ (or ‘Theology and Psychology’), the notion that personality theories, psychotherapies, psychological research, and mental health professions are epistemologically neutral, scientific-medical activities has deeply permeated Evangelical culture.<sup>50</sup>

### **Common Grace Insights: *Implemented***

According to biblical counselors, secular data can be divided into two categories: descriptions and prescriptions or observations and interpretations. Descriptions are often considered merely observations of presenting problems, but prescriptions occur when a counselor begins to use techniques infused with secular counseling philosophies to understand or treat the counselee's problems. Explanations often masquerade as observations when they are interpretations of human problems. Methods are prescriptions inevitably infused with secular interpretations. The clinically informed counselors seem to have conflated these two categories and disregarded the interpretative nature of the secular prescriptions. By asserting that techniques are merely descriptive, they claim secular methods may be utilized without importing the underlying empty philosophies that constitute the entire framework.

The clinically informed approach is a departure from biblical counseling not only in their acceptance of clinical descriptions and prescriptions in the forms of methods and techniques, but also by their insistence that psychological techniques need to be added to counseling practice. Brooks describes it this way: “A formal rejection of common grace insights for counseling cannot be sustained in the actual practice of counseling, thus *necessitating* a ‘theologically robust theory’ of integrating material from the Scriptures and other domains of knowledge.”<sup>51</sup> The concerning part is biblical counselors have articulated that methods are not simple observations, but prescriptions based on worldview interpretations. These categories are abandoned by the clinically informed

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<sup>50</sup> David Powlison, “Calvinism and Contemporary Christian Counseling,” in *The Practical Calvinist: An Introduction to the Presbyterian and Reformed Heritage*, ed. Peter A. Lilliback (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Publications, 2002), 498.

<sup>51</sup> Brooks, “Everybody Integrates: Biblical Counseling and the Use of Extrabiblical Material,” in *The Southeastern Theological Review* (15:1, Spring 2024), 12.

counselors utilizing common grace insights as a theological covering for their functional integration.<sup>52</sup>

Observations may inform, but in the case of clinically informed counselors, prescriptions are implemented. This is a key difference from what Powlison articulated. He encouraged biblical counselors to be informed and stimulated by secular psychologies—not for the purpose of implementing those methods because he viewed them as “major competitors with the church.”<sup>53</sup> He encouraged stimulation that would provoke us back to Scripture in order to better grasp what theorists were seeking to understand as they are “always learning and never able to come to the full knowledge of the truth.”<sup>54</sup>

### **Common Grace Insights: *Moral Imperative***

The claim of the clinically informed goes further than merely encouraging the adoption of what is labeled as “common grace insights.” A moral imperative is constructed by their warning to those who reject the new form of integration. Brooks states regarding counseling, “This task *requires integration*—the placing together of material from multiple domains into a coherent, workable schema.”<sup>55</sup> The consistent language of *necessary*, *required*, and *must* implies the moral nature of adopting or rejecting secular ideas that are so called common grace. Brad Hambrick offers a summary of their claim, “Nonetheless, we integrate for three reasons: 1. It is wise... 2. It is good stewardship... 3. It is inevitable.”<sup>56</sup> The combination of these reasons classifies any person who rejects extra-biblical and competing secular ideologies as foolish, poor stewards, and incompetent because “. . . ignoring any of them will lead to a less helpful and possibly harmful, counseling.”<sup>57</sup> Hambrick adds, “In our care and love for our neighbor, it is an ethical imperative to care for them well . . . We must integrate well.”<sup>58</sup>

If the Christian counselor does not integrate, then the implication is that the counseling is immoral, harmful, and unethical. This approach becomes a shaming tool, as if to say that Christians who do not implement secular “common grace insights” are either ignorant (uninformed), lacking the

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Powlison, “Crucial Issues,” 242

<sup>54</sup> 2 Timothy 3:7. The whole context of 2 Timothy 3:1-9 is instructive.

<sup>55</sup> Brooks, “Everybody Integrates,” 12.

<sup>56</sup> Hambrick, “SEBTS Counseling Professors Round Table: As It Is and As It Could Be,” 79. Hambrick seems a bit inconsistent in his recent article “What I Mean by Clinically-Informed Biblical Counseling,” posted May 7, 2025. See <https://bradhambrick.com/clinicallyinformed/>

<sup>57</sup> Brooks, et.al., 4. Equating special revelation, natural revelation, and what is categorized as common grace on the same level of revelational knowledge is a concerning change from a biblical counseling perspective.

<sup>58</sup> Hambrick, “SEBTS Counseling Professors Round Table: As It Is and As It Could Be,” 81.

compassion of Christ to care for counselees, or deliberately intending to harm their counselees. However, syncretizing clinical ideas and methods with Christianity is not a moral high ground. While the suggested “ethical imperative” to integrate may have an “appearance of godliness,” the human precepts and teachings “are of no value in stopping the indulgences of the flesh.”<sup>59</sup> Secular counseling psychologies are not complementary to Scripture, but history demonstrates they are major philosophical competitors to a biblical framework.

### **Common Grace Insights: *An Example***

Biblical counselors have been consistent through the years warning against the implementation of clinical methods. The clinically informed counselor departs from the biblical counseling position as they promote a pragmatic framework to choose a “method of engagement that is most helpful for the client in the moment, following wisdom and discernment given by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>60</sup>

One example that reveals the pragmatic approach of the CIBC is their use of CBT. I appreciate that these practitioners want to reject the “unbiblical anthropology” of CBT, yet CIBC advocates for the implementation of strategies for thought change that “have emerged out of CBT, which counselors may then *employ* to effect godly change . . .”<sup>61</sup> The implementation of CBT by CIBC is a clear demonstration of departure from a biblical counseling perspective.

Consider Brooks’s 2019 dissertation, which was written from a biblical counseling perspective before his views changed to what they are now. Brooks answered the question, “Does second-wave cognitive behavioral therapy reflect a heart psychology in agreement with that of Reformed theology?”<sup>62</sup> He offers several concluding statements regarding CBT, which may be summed up in an emphatic, “no”:

- “Any attempt to make Reformed theology support CBT demonstrates a shallow understanding of the heart psychologies espoused by Reformed theologians.”<sup>63</sup>
- “. . . cognitive primacy is false and CBT is inconsistent with biblical anthropology.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> 2 Timothy 3:5 and Colossians 2:22-23.

<sup>60</sup> Brooks, et.al., 5. I do have several questions about this statement regarding its “client-centered” focus and how the Holy Spirit guides if not by his word. The sentence is unclear on exactly which direction the clinically informed would take the details in question.

<sup>61</sup> Brooks, et.al., 7. In my view, the practice and promotion of CBT contradicts Paul’s distinction between fleshly weapons and divine weapons as described in 2 Corinthians 10:3-6.

<sup>62</sup> Nathanael J. Brooks, “Love the Lord with All Your Heart: The Defective Heart Psychology of Second Wave Cognitive Behavioral Therapy” (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 210-211.

- “Reformed theology demonstrates the defective nature of such a system [CBT].”<sup>65</sup>
- “Any argument that describes CBT’s heart psychology as consistent with biblical anthropology demonstrates a woefully deficient understanding of what actually constitutes biblical anthropology.”<sup>66</sup>
- “Additionally, Christian integrationist attempts to Christianize CBT have been demonstrated as critically flawed. CBT’s methodology neither affect vertical nor horizontal change, for it ignores the existence of the soul and endorses the untrue position of cognitive primacy.”<sup>67</sup>
- “A significant dilemma exists for those who argue that the ‘key assumptions’ of CBT are ‘consistent with Christian theology and biblical anthropology.’”<sup>68</sup>
- “Theologically speaking, insisting upon the autonomy of heart functions [as CBT] is is Pelagian to the core.”<sup>69</sup>
- “CBT thus stands in opposition to two central facets of biblical anthropology—the existence of the soul and the fact that man’s thinking, feeling, and acting is a product of the orientation of his heart.”<sup>70</sup>
- “. . . insistence that CBT makes explicit the process of sanctification errs terribly by assuming that a theory which ignores the existence of a moral nature can detail how the moral nature is changed.”<sup>71</sup>
- “Reformed theology highlights the incompatibility of second-wave cognitive therapy with the biblical view of the heart and its functions.”<sup>72</sup>
- “The Reformed tradition insists that transformation in the human person occurs not on the level of the functions or faculties, but in the heart . . . CBT as a system therefore cannot be a means of sanctification when its heart psychology is indifferent towards the existence of the organ that must be sanctified.”<sup>73</sup>

It is important to note that Brooks did not offer Jay Adams or Wayne Mack as a biblical counseling perspective by which to measure the validity and usefulness of CBT. Rather, he utilized the heart psychology of Reformed theology represented in the work of third generation biblical counselor Jeremy Pierre as the biblical counseling view.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 155-156

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 6. Jeremy Pierre, “Trust in the Lord with All Your Heart: The Centrality of Faith in Christ to the Restoration of Human Functioning” (Ph. D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010). This dissertation was adapted into *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life* by Pierre.

Biblical counselors agree with Brooks's conclusions regarding CBT in his dissertation, especially when he says, "The Reformed tradition thus highlights the defective nature of CBT's heart psychology, defects that cannot be remedied by attempting to wed CBT with Christianity."<sup>75</sup> What should be clear is that biblical counselors have *not* changed their view on CBT. However, Brooks has certainly changed, advocating a clinically informed view that he once rightly described as "integrationists" who use "Christianized CBT" by "stripping the system of its secular trappings and replacing them with the tenets of a Christian worldview."<sup>76</sup> This is another demonstration of the clinically informed counselor's departure from the biblical counseling perspective.

### **Common Grace Insights or Psychological Hype?**

While there are vague attempts to qualify restrictions on extra-biblical material that contradicts Scripture, the clinically informed counselors do not delineate what would (or would not) qualify as legitimate "common-grace insights." Are we to accept everything as common grace that psychology or psychiatry deems empirical? However, the posture toward secular theories, and eagerness to accept them, is not made with the distinctive nature of a Christian presuppositional approach. "We must know," Powlison said, "that God's way is qualitatively different from everything else available in the bazaar of options, of other counsels, other schemes, other practices, and other systems."<sup>77</sup>

The litmus test for common grace insights must be greater than pragmatism. Not everything branded as "empirical" or "scientific" deserves such a label. Are we being encouraged to accept counseling methods, under the guise of common grace, to be implemented as Christian approaches to soul care when they are deemed *empirical* by the low bar of social science?<sup>78</sup> Biblical counseling should not surrender its commitments to sufficiency in favor of illusions masquerading as knowledge fit for accomplishing sanctification.

If there is one thing the history of psychology and psychiatry have taught us is that scientism cloaked in hype and vigor appears in the moment as strides in scientific progress. I find it most

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<sup>75</sup> Brooks, "Love the Lord with All Your Heart," 155-156.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>77</sup> David Powlison, "Affirmations & Denials: A Proposed Definition of Biblical Counseling," in the Journal of Biblical Counseling (Volume 19, No. 1, Fall 2000), 19.

<sup>78</sup> Brooks et al, *What is Redemptive Counseling*, 7.

intriguing that Christians are wanting to pitch their tent toward the modern psychologies when the discipline has always had, and continues to face, a crisis of credibility.<sup>79</sup>

If we were to apply the concept of common grace insights to the therapeutic history of modern psychology and psychiatry, there is a motley crew of scandalous therapeutics that Christians would have adopted under the guise of “common grace.” Powlison was right to acknowledge that “mental health professionals are groping in the dark,” and the trash bin of discarded and disgraced therapies proves it.<sup>80</sup>

The track record of modern psychology is less than stellar, to put it mildly, with illusions of evidence-based practices, pseudoscience parading as therapy, and scientism promoted as cures.<sup>81</sup> Phrenology, blood-letting, spinning chairs,<sup>82</sup> lobotomy, eugenics,<sup>83</sup> humoral theory,<sup>84</sup> chemical imbalance theory,<sup>85</sup> psychoanalysis, Person-Centered therapy, etc. Each of these approaches enjoyed their heyday, accepted as “scientific” in their time, yet these practices are mocked, questioned, and forgotten today by modernists. It is not hard to fathom that with the current framework of the

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<sup>79</sup> See Jon Jureidini and Leemon B. McHenry, *The Illusion of Evidence-Based Medicine: Exposing the Crisis of Credibility in Clinical Research* (Mile End, South Australia: Wakefield Press, 2020). Owen Whooley, *On The Heels of Ignorance: Psychiatry and the Politics of Not Knowing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019). Joanna Moncrieff, *Chemically Imbalanced: The Making and Unmaking of the Serotonin Myth* (Gloucestershire: Flint, 2025). Allan V. Horwitz, *DSM: A History of Psychiatry's Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021). Andrew Scull, *Psychiatry and Its Discontents* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019). Andrew Scull, *Desperate Remedies: Psychiatry's Turbulent Quest to Cure Mental Illness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2024). Michael Scheeringa, *The Trouble with Trauma: The Search to Discover How Beliefs Become Facts* (Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2022). Michael Scheeringa, *Analysis of Body Keeps the Score: The Science that Trauma Activists Don't Want You to Know* (Independently Published, 2023). Stephen Hupp and Cara L. Santa Maria, eds., *Pseudoscience in Therapy: A Skeptical Field Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023). I am including the prominent practices of CBT, trauma-informed, and EMDR which also have major questions of scientific credibility.

<sup>80</sup> Powlison, *Cure of Soul*, 282.

<sup>81</sup> “The validity of this new paradigm [evidence-based medicine], however, depends on reliable data from clinical trials and because the data are largely, if not completely, manipulated by the manufacturers of pharmaceuticals, evidence-based medicine is an illusion.” From Jon Jureidini and Leemon B. McHenry, *The Illusion of Evidence-Based Medicine: Exposing the Crisis of Credibility in Clinical Research* (Mile End, South Australia: Wakefield Press, 2020), 7. Also see Ben Goldacre who reports that 90% of published clinical trials are sponsored by the pharmaceutical industry. Ben Goldacre, *Bad Pharma: How Drug Companies Misled Doctors and Harmed Patients* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), 172.

<sup>82</sup> Consider Benjamin Rush, known as the “father of American psychiatry.” Biological psychiatrists Edward Porter describes Rush this way, “He was one with his European colleagues in seeing the brain as the basis of mental illness. . .” Porter goes on to say that “Benjamin Rush was convinced that ‘the cause of madness is seated in the blood vessels of the brain.’” See Edward Shorter, *A History of Psychiatry: From the Era of the Asylum to the Age of Prozac* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 15-17, 27.

<sup>83</sup> Ikkos, George, Thomas Becker, Giovanni Stanghellini, Francesca Brencio, Alastair Morgan, and Paul Hoff. “An Emil Kraepelin Centenary: Psychiatry's Long 20th Century, 1899–2026 and After.” *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 2025, 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2025.10491>.

<sup>84</sup> I lament that Puritans largely accepted the humoral theory, not as a psychological theory as much as a medical explanation. In so far as the Puritans were right regarding the application of Scripture to the human predicament, history has demonstrated they were misguided in relation to the humoral theory and I pray we learn from their error.

<sup>85</sup> See Joanna Moncrieff, *Chemically Imbalanced: The Making and Unmaking of the Serotonin Myth*. (Cheltenham: FLINT, 2025).



clinically informed approach, Christians would have been encouraged to employ these practices as common grace insights sourced from God as some form of useful revelation.

Psychological hype and the language of neuroscience, past or present, does not make a technique theologically or psychologically “robust.” Currently, trauma-informed theories, Attachment Theory, Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI), CBT, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT), and others have received a stamp of approval from clinically informed counselors based on scientism and empirical hype. However, critics abound regarding the scientific credibility of each of these theories.<sup>86</sup>

It is difficult to believe, based upon the reams of critical literature flowing from the fields of psychiatry and psychology, that Christians can study the discipline and consider the findings useful for spiritual transformation as common grace insights when experts in these fields are acknowledging an extreme crisis of credibility. I would caution clinically informed practitioners to be more careful, discerning, and judicious about what passes as credible in social science research and psychiatric medicine, especially before labeling it as common grace having some form of divine origin. Charles Spurgeon provides appropriate words of caution: “The sacred word has endured more criticism than the best accepted form of philosophy or science, and it has survived every ordeal.”<sup>87</sup>

### **The Aim of Biblical Counseling is Sanctification**

One of the clearest tenets of biblical counseling in comparison to other approaches to counseling (Christian or otherwise) is that the aim of counseling is sanctification. The clinically informed approach has maintained that this is also their aim. However, their stated practice brings this distinguishing characteristic into question. There are at least two concerns with the clinically informed approach that compromises their stated belief. First, their prescription of the means to accomplish sanctification in the believer does not comport with a biblical understanding of change in the inner man that is pleasing to God. Second, their promotion of civic righteousness as a worthy

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<sup>86</sup> See Michael Scheeringa, *The Trouble with Trauma*. Michael Scheeringa, *Analysis of Body Keeps the Score*. Hupp and Santa Maria, eds., *Pseudoscience in Therapy*. T.J. Johnsen, and O. Friberg, “The Effects of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy as an Anti-Depressive Treatment is Falling: A Meta-Analysis” in *Psychological Bulletin* (May 11, 2015). Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/bul0000015>

Jon Jureidini and Leemon B. McHenry, *The Illusion of Evidence-Based Medicine: Exposing the Crisis of Credibility in Clinical Research* (Mile End, South Australia: Wakefield Press, 2020). Owen Whooley, *On The Heels of Ignorance: Psychiatry and the Politics of Not Knowing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019). Joanna Moncrieff, *Chemically Imbalanced*. Allan V. Horwitz, *DSM: A History of Psychiatry's Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021).

<sup>87</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *The Greatest Fight in the World: The Final Manifesto*. (United Kingdom: Christian Focus, 2014), 46.

aim of counselors differs on major points with spiritual righteousness. Both their view of sanctification and civic righteousness, while being articulated with theological terms, represent a deviation from the practice of biblical counseling.

### **Faith Comes by Hearing**

According to the clinically informed/redemptive counseling perspective, “Redemptive counseling as a term therefore speaks to the redemption of the person and the redemption of common grace tools that may be used to aid in that redemption.”<sup>88</sup> While one can appreciate their desire to make redemption the overall goal of their counseling system, the anomaly that creates a stark move away from biblical counseling is the addition of “common grace insights” as a means of redemption (i.e., sanctification). Common grace insights as a “practice of *necessity* involves using material not explicitly taught within the pages of Scripture.”<sup>89</sup> As a reminder, these “tools and methods may be derived from secular approaches . . . These tools and methods *enhance* our ability to minister the truth of God’s word.”<sup>90</sup> These sentiments demonstrate a critical departure from the way biblical counselors have explained the means of sanctification (John 17:17).

When clinically informed counselors claim that secular tools and psychological theories may be employed to advance sanctification in the believer's life, the power of the Holy Spirit to sanctify the believer is called into question. We are justified by faith, a point I think both biblical counselors and clinically informed counselors agree on. However, we are also sanctified by faith. The apostle Paul says in Colossians 2:6, “Therefore, as you have received the Lord Jesus Christ, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” The Spirit produces faith, not by secular strategies or worldly wisdom, but “by hearing and hearing by the Word” (Romans 10:17). The whole work of salvation—from justification to glorification—is credited to God according to His Word and Spirit, so that no one may boast.

In order for believers to grow in sanctification, which is the aim of counseling, biblical counselors must wield the Spirit’s sword—the Word, which is God’s divinely sanctioned means to accomplish His work of sanctification. Conformity to Christ happens as a work of the Spirit by the

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<sup>88</sup> Nate Brooks, Tate Cockrell, Brad Hambrick, Kristen Kellen, and Sam Williams, *What is Redemptive Counseling/Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?*, from footnote 1 page 1. Retrieved December 5, 2024: <https://www.sebts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/What-is-RCCIBC.pdf>

<sup>89</sup> Brooks, “Everybody Integrates,” 12.

<sup>90</sup> Brooks, et.al., 5. Also see page 7: “RC/CIBCers likewise affirm that specific tools that emerge from secular psychological theories may be filled with biblical content and employed to advance sanctification in the life of their counselees.”

Word, not a work of the Spirit utilizing worldly tools that do not accomplish faith. Faith comes by hearing the Word instead of hearing sage advice that has passed the test of pragmatism. Therefore, sanctification is a work of the Spirit by the Word, and no other human means can accomplish this divine work in the heart of a believer.

As mentioned previously, Brooks once articulated a biblical counseling position acknowledging CBT's "Inability to Affect Sanctification."<sup>91</sup> Now he joins the clinically informed approach in their departure from biblical counseling as they espouse a version of sanctification which incorporates "strategies" from CBT to accomplish heart change. "Some empirically validated strategies," they argue, "have emerged out of CBT, which counselors may then employ to effect godly thought change by the power of the Holy Spirit who provided those tools through his common grace."<sup>92</sup> Expanding beyond the use of CBT, Kellen argues for the implementation of secular methods like the psychotherapeutic treatment, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) in this way, "So we can use secular methods, within a biblical framework and *paired* with biblical teaching, in such a way that they lead toward sanctification, and in so doing, they are oriented toward God's glory and the counselee's conformity to Christ."<sup>93</sup>

One of these two things must be true. Either parts of counseling within the clinically informed framework do not accomplish sanctification (which seems to be the case with their promotion of civic righteousness as a valid aim of counseling) or they expand the means of grace by which sanctification occurs beyond the work of the Spirit and the Word. If the former is true, then that expanded aim is a departure from biblical counseling. If the latter is true, then they are functionally altering the means of sanctification to say that the Spirit changes the hearts of individuals through a man-made strategy, technique, or wisdom outside of the Word received by faith.

### **Working Toward Civic Righteousness**

Civic righteousness is defined by CIBC as "righteousness that benefits society and people in the society without being of moral acceptance before God."<sup>94</sup> This aim makes sense if a counselor is

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<sup>91</sup> Brooks, "Love the Lord with All Your Heart," 180.

<sup>92</sup> Brooks, et. al., *Redemptive Counseling*, 7.

<sup>93</sup> Kellen, "SEBTS Counseling Professors Roundtable: As It is and As It Could Be," 75.

<sup>94</sup> Brooks, et.al., 8.

operating under the jurisdiction of the state. Biblical counselors acknowledge, and prefer, that unsaved individuals act in civility—doing social good rather than evil. Acknowledging that social good exists is vastly different than promoting it as an acceptable way to live before a holy God. Biblical counselors, however, operate under the authority and mission of the church, aiming for a person to see themselves rightly before God. The purpose of the ministry of the Word is discipleship, rather than mere contentment with cleaning the outside of cups.<sup>95</sup>

Theologian John Frame has been used to advance the concept of civic righteousness from the CIBC perspective. There is a difference between acknowledging the existence of civic righteousness and adopting civic righteousness as a proper goal for biblical counselors. Frame's *recognition* of acts that may be "good for society . . . without being good" is being confused as a permission to pursue civic righteousness as a proper aim of biblical counseling.<sup>96</sup> An act by an unbeliever may be a social good, but it is not genuinely good before a holy God. Biblical counselors, as ministers of the Word, prioritize our duty to help counselees discern good and evil in all aspects of their life—problems and solutions—from God's perspective.<sup>97</sup>

I affirm that the Holy Spirit is at work restraining sin in a way that enables civic righteousness to occur. However, the Spirit's work is one of restraint rather than an active empowerment to accomplish spiritual good in an unbeliever. In fact, the primary work of the Spirit is to testify of Christ and convict unbelievers of sin.<sup>98</sup> It is difficult to conceive of the Spirit accomplishing a work of empowerment for civic righteousness within individuals that does not glorify Christ. It is my opinion that the clinically informed approach broadens the work of the Holy Spirit as if he is empowering earthly and temporal good.

Neither the church nor her counselors should be content for a person to gain the world but lose his own soul. Ambassadors of Christ would be hard-pressed to let the rich young ruler walk away thinking himself good before God (Matthew 19:16-26; Psalm 16:2). Biblical counselors are to be ministers of reconciliation, rather than ministers of civic righteousness. I have no doubt that redemptive counselors want to reflect the compassion of God toward their counselees, but contentment with civic righteousness as a primary aim seems to fall short of the mission of disciple-making our Lord left to us (Matthew 28:18-20; Colossians 1:28-29).

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<sup>95</sup> Matthew 23:25. Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocrites warning against the cleaning of the outside of the "cup" (i.e. their lives) when the inside is full of selfish greed.

<sup>96</sup> Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 246-248.

<sup>97</sup> Hebrews 5:14

<sup>98</sup> John 15:26.

## Conclusion

A clinically informed approach belongs to the spectrum of Christian counseling approaches. However, it is not aptly called biblical counseling as defined by key tenets promoted in the first, second, and third generation of biblical counselors. The clinically informed position does not represent a clear delineation of new territory; rather, it creates a blurring of the distinctions between traditional integration and biblical counseling. The semantic mysticism allows established practices from integrated counseling approaches to be rebranded and practiced under the label of biblical counseling.

Innovation in biblical counseling is not the importation of new secular philosophies upon which to build one's counseling system, but a commitment to apply the ancient truths of Scripture to progressive and modern times. Powlison strikes this balance when he said, "Whatever changes and development needs to occur within the biblical counseling movement must occur only on the foundation already laid: biblical categories of thought generating biblical methods of ministry."<sup>99</sup> The truths of Scripture provide a better explanation of human life and problems than any other man-made system. The methods of Scripture offer true hope and remedy that will not put us to shame.

Growth and development of our thinking and practice of counseling is a worthy pursuit. It is strenuous, but it can lead to more precision in our language and practice of counseling. However, we must not confuse that task of refining as a journey toward intellectualism, innovation, or mere sophisticated credibility by adopting clinical language and methods. What may appear as progress and development is a temptation towards professional sophistication through the syncretistic sanitizing of psychological principles. Yet, this is a trajectory that has proven historically to demote the private ministry of the word in favor of clinical professionalism as the preferred means to care for souls.

The church—not the clinic—is the God-ordained context for counseling. The Scripture has comprehensive internal resources to build a Christian system of care that is practiced methodologically tethered to the church's stated doctrine. The worldview of modern secular psychologies is not neutral or complementary to the Christian faith.<sup>100</sup> Therefore, implementing secular methods surrenders sound Christian theology making it subservient and malleable to the therapeutic rather than the anchor for ministry practice. We may be stimulated and provoked by

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<sup>99</sup> Powlison, "Crucial Issues," 243.

<sup>100</sup> Haldeman, ed., *The Case Against Conversion "Therapy."*

secularists back to the context of Scripture, but we must not implement their worldview-laden techniques. The aim of biblical counseling is sanctification which happens by the Spirit and the Word because we are not perfected by the flesh (Galatians 3:3). May this controversy press us all to apply the whole counsel of Scripture more precisely and consistently to the praise of Christ and the good of those we serve.

The clinically informed approach is to biblical counseling the way a zebra is to a horse. There are similarities in appearance. Both are attempting to be distinctly Christian in their counseling, but there are defining characteristics and stripes that make the clinically informed perspective a different species altogether. The lack of credibility within psychology and psychiatry is rightfully being exposed. We would be moving backwards in the movement if we postured ourselves toward secular psychologies for counseling insights instead of rooting ourselves in the firm foundation of Scripture—the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever (Isaiah 40:8).

# Generational Trauma, Epigenetics, and Biblical Hope

Austin Collins<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The debate over “nature vs. nurture” has long influenced research trends in the disciplines of both biological and social sciences. At the center of this debate lie questions of responsibility, culpability, prognosis, and intervention. If human behavior is simply the byproduct of inheritance, genetic factors, and other unchosen, yet determinative factors, how should counselors treat various maladies, especially those which arise from one’s fundamental constitution? And where should blame for poor behavior be assigned? Alternatively, if behavior results from environmental factors, parenting, and traumatic experiences, how should we understand the effects and functions of hereditary traits?

Redemptive counselors (also known as Clinically-Informed Biblical Counselors) have sought to bridge this dichotomy, expressing sympathies with the historic biblical counseling movement’s<sup>2</sup> focus on Christ-empowered heart change while attempting to integrate the Scriptures with scientific research on epigenetics, familial trauma, neuroscience, and developmental psychology.<sup>3</sup> Claiming that common grace provides theological justification for incorporating secular approaches into biblical counseling, redemptive counselors “disagree [with historic biblical counselors] that all methods emerging from secular psychotherapy are by necessity tainted by their worldview.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Austin Collins is the Serve Pastor at First Baptist Church Jacksonville, a certified biblical counselor with ACBC, and is currently pursuing a PhD in Applied Theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

<sup>2</sup> Ernie Baker defines “historic” biblical counseling as those who follow closely in the footsteps of Jay Adams and David Powlison in maintaining a Van Tillian presuppositional approach to analyzing and employing counseling methodologies. Ernie Baker, “Presuppositionalism, Common Grace, and Trauma Theory,” *The Journal of Biblical Soul Care* 8, no. 1 (2024): 64–89.

<sup>3</sup> Nate Brooks et al., “What Is Redemptive Counseling/Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?,” Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2024, <https://www.sebts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/WhatIsRCCIBC-1.pdf>; Sam Williams et al., “SEBTS Counseling Professors Roundtable: As It Is and as It Could Be,” *Southeastern Theological Review* 15, no. 1 (2024): 73–86; Steve Midgley, *Understanding Trauma: A Biblical Introduction for Church Care* (Surrey, UK: The Good Book Company, 2025), 103–13; Curtis Solomon, *I Have PTSD: Reorienting after Trauma* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2023), 24–29.

<sup>4</sup> Brooks et al., “What Is RC/CIBC?,” 6.

One redemptive counselor, Kristin Kellen, associate professor of biblical counseling at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, asserts, “If we already do integration by default, then there’s an imperative to do it well, not haphazardly. In our care and love for our neighbor, it is an ethical imperative to care for them with excellence.”<sup>5</sup> To illustrate her claim, Kellen authored an article titled “Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1)” in the Spring 2024 issue of the *Southeastern Theological Review*, aiming to show that “through Christ, and only through Christ, generational sin and struggles can be resolved.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, throughout the article, Kellen bases her understanding of “generational trauma” not on scriptural anthropology, but on biological and social sciences. Furthermore, she commits numerous hermeneutical errors which undermine the authority of the Scriptures, allowing room for her reliance on secular psychological findings. Her approach to integration functionally sidelines scriptural methodology for secular approaches to counseling, even while claiming to place Christ at the center.

While Kellen correctly identifies Christ as the ultimate solution to generational dysfunction and intergenerational trauma, her approach raises significant theological and scientific concerns. Her conflation of scientific correlation with biblical causation, combined with her misinterpretation of key biblical texts regarding individual responsibility and generational consequences, reflects an underlying assent to biological and social behaviorism. This commitment fundamentally undermines biblical anthropology and the sufficiency of Scripture by diminishing human moral agency and failing to address the heart as both the locus of generational dysfunction and the subject of Christlike transformation through biblical methods.

### **A Brief Summary of Kellen’s Article & Argument**

Kellen’s article draws from the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 the thesis, “Proper counseling, then, particularly for generational dysfunction must point towards Christ for redemption.”<sup>7</sup> She defines “generational dysfunction” as “the influence of past generations [that faced] difficulties that had a lasting impact on their children, grandchildren, and others to come.”<sup>8</sup> She then walks through three distinct sections before drawing conclusions about Christ and the

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<sup>5</sup> Williams et al., “SEBTS Counseling Professors Roundtable,” 81. For a brief critique of this argument, see Austin Collins, “Psychological Charlatans and Common Grace,” in *A Call to Clarity: Critical Issues in Contemporary Biblical Counseling*, ed. Heath Lambert (Jacksonville, FL: First Baptist Church Jacksonville, 2024), 63–64.

<sup>6</sup> Kristin L. Kellen, “Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1),” *Southeastern Theological Review* 15, no. 1 (2024): 47.

<sup>7</sup> Kellen, “Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1),” 47.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



counselor's role in providing help and hope to those dealing with generational dysfunction. The first section consists of a brief exposition of the incipit of Matthew 1:1. In the second section, Kellen describes modern generational dysfunction as "modern-day parallels [to the scriptural examples]. Conflict and sexual sin abound, poor communication is almost universal, and parental failure is commonplace."<sup>9</sup> She examines research on substance use disorders, trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACE), and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Notably in this section, Kellen cites scientific studies related to epigenetic transmission and genetic inheritance as they relate to behavioral outcomes in children of traumatized parents.<sup>10</sup> Finally, Kellen offers her insights from case experience in working with traumatized and dysfunctional families.<sup>11</sup> She concludes by stating, "Jesus is the only answer for generational dysfunction. He is the only healer, he is the only deliverer, and he is the only hope. Outside of Christ, there is no hope of change."<sup>12</sup> While biblical counselors would heartily agree with Kellen's conclusion, her hermeneutic and underlying presuppositions do not logically lead to this conclusion. Instead, her argumentation of generational dysfunction and how the Bible brings about hope for the hurting contains significant theological and methodological errors.

### **A Biblical & Theological Critique**

Kellen's first error comes from interpretative and hermeneutical fallacies she commits in dealing with the text of Matthew 1:1-17. First and of most concern, Kellen explicitly performs eisegesis, imposing her own agenda onto the text without providing exegetical warrant: "Though this article has already drawn out the connection between Abraham and David and the covenants that Jesus came to fulfill, this is not the primary focus. Instead, the focus is on generational dysfunction."<sup>13</sup> Kellen disregards authorial intent by using the biblical text to further her own ideas about generational dysfunction. One can agree with Kellen that generational dysfunction is rampant throughout the Abrahamic lineage, but proper biblical exegesis seeks to understand the author's intended purpose for including what he says and how he says it.<sup>14</sup> Only after establishing authorial

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>11</sup> Kellen, "Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1)," 54–55.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>14</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 29; Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2010), 130–40.

intent can one draw contemporary implications and applications, but these must flow directly from exegesis.<sup>15</sup> This critique illustrates how Kellen subtly positions herself as the starting point for determining the meaning of the text for counseling rather than submitting to the text of Scripture as her authority for counseling methodology.

#### Authorial Intent & Faults with Kellen's Hermeneutic

To establish her interpretation, Kellen cites Charles Quarles' commentary on Matthew throughout her initial exegesis.<sup>16</sup> Yet, Quarles (a fellow professor at Southeastern Seminary) is the only commentary that Kellen directly interacts with in her paper. Far from critical scholarly work, Kellen's citation of a single source as the authoritative interpretation of Matthew, regardless of the commentator's reputation or caliber, gives one pause when receiving her exegesis as thorough.<sup>17</sup> She cites Quarles' assertion that Matthew's use of the term "βιβλος γενέσεως (book of genealogy)" refers not simply to the genealogical list and birth narrative that follows immediately in Matthew 2:17, but to the entire Gospel account.<sup>18</sup> He ties this reference to the LXX use of the term in Genesis 2:4 and 5:1 which both include creation accounts followed by extensive narratives. Thus, Quarles understands Matthew to be referencing these usages to signal that Matthew 1:1 stands basically as a

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<sup>15</sup> J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-on Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 195–204; Daniel M. Doriani, *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1996), 164–67.

<sup>16</sup> Charles L. Quarles, *Matthen*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Thomas R. Schreiner, and Andreas J. Köstenberger, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> Contrary to her claim in the opening paragraph that she will "exegete the verse." Kellen, "Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1)," 47. Further, she claims she will "highlight several assertions that connect the nation of Israel and the modern church." Yet the *only* assertion that Matthew makes in 1:1 is that Abraham and David are ancestors of Jesus. It mentions nothing of the familial dysfunction they experienced. These asserted connections are Kellen's own, yet she fails to establish her claim from her exegesis that Matthew intended to bridge the nation of Israel and the modern church by highlighting generational dysfunction as the connector between the two. Rather, Matthew intends to show by his mention of Jesus as the son of Abraham and David that the nations will be blessed through Christ, and he will rule over his people. The connection to the church comes through the church's establishment in Christ's fulfillment of the covenants and the inauguration of the New Covenant. For arguments to support this claim, see Stuart K. Weber, *Matthen*, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 1:16; Stephen J. Wellum, "Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants," in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2006), 103, 109–13; Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 61–100; Jason S. DeRouchie, "Father of a Multitude of Nations: New Covenant Ecclesiology in OT Perspective," in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2016), 7–38.

<sup>18</sup> Quarles, *Matthen*, 106.

title for the Gospel and points to Jesus being the start of the New Creation.<sup>19</sup> Yet this viewpoint is not without significant scholarly controversy and thus becomes a precarious point on which to build a full-fledged interpretation of the verse.<sup>20</sup>

Kellen follows Quarles in this point and attempts to connect Matthew's genealogy to the opening of John's Gospel (1:1-4), which proclaims Christ as the beginning of creation, just as Matthew asserts Jesus is the beginning of a New Creation who will redeem and restore the sins of past generations.<sup>21</sup> Yet, her exegesis does not follow. If Matthew truly was attempting to show that Jesus is the *genesis* of a New Creation, why would his genealogy not include Adam? Why does he begin with Abraham who comes twenty generations after Adam (generations also filled with dysfunction and in need of redemption)?<sup>22</sup> This should signal to the reader that, while it may be present, Matthew is not pressing the New Creation motif alleged by Kellen.

Obviously, Matthew has other goals for structuring and bookending his genealogy as he does. Here, Kellen backtracks because it is "clear to any reader that Matthew is asserting Jesus is the Messianic King."<sup>23</sup> Matthew sets up Jesus as the king who comes to fulfill both the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. As the long-foretold Messiah, Jesus comes to bless the nations as Abraham's seed (Genesis 12:7, Cf. Galatians 3:15-16) and ascend David's throne (Cf. Psalm 2; 110:1).<sup>24</sup> The

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<sup>19</sup> Quarles, *Matthew*, 107.

<sup>20</sup> For brief arguments in favor of "βίβλος γενέσεως" referring primarily or only to the birth narrative of Matthew 1-2, see Craig L. Blomberg, "Matthew," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 2–3; J. Knox Chamblin, "Matthew," in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995), 725; Richard B. Gardner, *Matthew*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991), 29; John MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1985), 3.

<sup>21</sup> A point which commentators, including Quarles, do not make. Kellen commits an equivocation fallacy. John's term translated "beginning" is "ἀρχή" which BDAG defines as "beginning, origin in the absolute sense" whereas BDAG defines "γένεσις" as "an account of someone's life, history, life." While similar, these terms are employed by these authors for vastly different theological assertions. John points to Christ's eternal deity and creational power, whereas Matthew emphasizes the covenantal fulfillment and royal lineage of Christ. Kellen's conflation of the terms to suggest that both gospels are attempting to make the same theological point about Christ, when in reality, they are emphasizing various aspects of Christ. Kellen's equivocation violates the semantic distinctions of the terms and leads to a misreading of each Gospel's unique themes. William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 138, 192.

<sup>22</sup> What's more, Kellen misses the perfect opportunity to link this New Creation motif she sees to a biblical anthropology – that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17). Yet were she to do so, she would contradict her own biological determinism she espouses later in the article by her misunderstanding of epigenetics.

<sup>23</sup> Kellen, "Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1)," 49.

<sup>24</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 22:53; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 20–21; Gardner, *Matthew*, 29.

purpose, therefore, of Matthew's genealogy is to establish Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament promise and the hope of all nations.

While Kellen would agree with this,<sup>25</sup> she makes a fatal hermeneutical error at this point by failing to allow Matthew's primary authorial intent to drive her interpretation of this passage. Instead, she overlays modern psychological trauma theory onto her recounting of the stories of Abraham and David, forcing their connections to contemporary life where the biblical author has no wish to do so.<sup>26</sup> She provides no hermeneutical framework that appropriates her modern addiction and trauma connections from the Abraham/David accounts. This was not Matthew's purpose in presenting the genealogy of Jesus by focusing on Abraham and David. Matthew's structure of his genealogy provides readers with his intent, and that intent should drive the interpretation *and* application of the text.

Matthew denotes Jesus as the son of Abraham to signal the universal blessing to the nations that Jesus would bring (Genesis 12) through the salvation he offers to both Jew and Gentile (Cf. Micah 4:2, Romans 1:16). In fact, his inclusion of Gentile women in his commentary point to this exact understanding.<sup>27</sup> He denotes Jesus as the son of David to inaugurate him as the King of the Jews (Amos 9:11-12). Historically, genealogical accounts were used to establish legitimacy and identity for the readers.<sup>28</sup> Matthew, writing to a primarily Jewish audience, includes his genealogy of Jesus to establish his claim that Jesus truly is the Jewish Messiah of Old Testament prophecy.<sup>29</sup>

Crucially, Matthew himself provides his reader with the clue to understand the structure and purpose of Jesus' genealogy. He constructs the genealogy on Hebrew gematria based on David's name.<sup>30</sup> Thus, David becomes the exemplar, not the failure. Christ will do all that David did (such as

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<sup>25</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 22:53.

<sup>26</sup> Kellen, "Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1)," 52–53. In this section, Kellen attempts to parallel the dysfunction that results from "substance use disorder" (a DSM-5 label) to the stories of conflict just discussed in the lines of Abraham and David. Ironically, none of the generational dysfunction in the stories of Abraham nor David result from drunkenness. Furthermore, the Bible has much to say about drunkenness (Prov 20:1, 30; 21:17; 23:20; 23:29-35; 31:4-7, Isa 5:11, Rom 13:13, 1 Cor 5:11; 6:10, Gal 5:21, Eph 5:18, 1 Pet 4:3). Why does Kellen not lean upon these verses to demonstrate the destruction wrought by alcohol (and other substances) abuse? Again, this points to Kellen's misuse of the Scripture for her own purposes.

<sup>27</sup> Quarles, *Matthew*, 115.

<sup>28</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 47.

<sup>29</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 22:34.

<sup>30</sup> Gematria is the ancient practice of assigning numerical values to names. In Hebrew, the consonants for "David" (דָּוִד, DVD) correspond to 4+6+4 which adds up to 14. Matthew structures his genealogy into three sets of 14 generations from (1) Abraham to David, (2) David to the Exile, and (3) the Exile to Christ (Matt 1:17). By doing so, Matthew makes explicit that Jesus' descent from the line of David is the focal point of the genealogy. Blomberg, *Matthew*, 22:53; Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 25.

being a man after God's own heart, 1 Samuel 13:14), and more. True, he will succeed where David sinned; he will follow his Father's will perfectly (Matthew 26:39, Hebrews 4:14-16). But Matthew is at pains not to show that David or Abraham was faithless or created tumultuous (or even genetically heritable) generational dysfunction. Rather, the Bible judges the kings who succeeded David based on their conformity to David's character and behavior. A faithful king "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as David his father had done" (1 Kings 15:11).

Furthermore, if Matthew had intended his genealogy of Jesus to highlight that Christ is the solution to generational dysfunction, why then did he neglect to include wicked kings such as Ahaziah (2 Kings 8:25-29), Jehoash (2 Kings 12:1-21), and Amaziah (2 Kings 14:1-22)? Certainly, including these names for his readers to recall their nefarious deeds would have underscored a focus on generational dysfunction that Kellen tried to find. Yet, Matthew instead purposefully focuses on the greatness (rather than scandals) of David as the covenant king and ancestor from which the Messiah shall come.<sup>31</sup> Matthew's desire is to show that Jesus Christ of Nazareth is this Messiah.

Moreover, why did Kellen not include a discussion of Tamar (Genesis 38, Matthew 1:3) to draw out her point of generational dysfunction? If, according to Kellen, Matthew was seeking to point to Jesus being the hope of generational dysfunction, surely Kellen should have mentioned the generational dysfunction in the story of Judah's incestuous encounter with his daughter-in-law? Jesus, being the Lion of Judah (Gen 49:9-10, Rev 5:5), has "generational dysfunction" built into this title, yet Matthew does not choose to comment on this sinful encounter in his genealogy. Why does Kellen not draw out this story in her article?<sup>32</sup> Quarles himself does not seek to draw the same conclusions concerning generational dysfunction as Kellen. It would have provided greater evidence for her argument! This is quite confusing – Kellen's hermeneutical outlook is backwards: she highlights the generational dysfunction of Abraham and David which Matthew actively suppresses by his genealogical arrangement and their tie-in as the fathers of Jesus. Simultaneously, she overlooks Matthew's explicit inclusion of women in his genealogy (something striking and uncommon in Jewish genealogy practice<sup>33</sup>) that one could say actually points *to* the restoration Christ

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<sup>31</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 49–51.

<sup>32</sup> Perhaps because she read in Quarles' commentary, "The inclusion of four gentile women in the genealogy confirms that Jesus is the son of Abraham, the promised seed in whom all nations will be blessed, even Canaanites, Moabites, and Hittites. These great themes will permeate the entire Gospel." Quarles, *Matthew*, 115.

<sup>33</sup> Weber, *Matthew*, 1:17.

brings to generational dysfunction.<sup>34</sup> This, again, exposes that Kellen has imposed her own agenda upon Matthew's text.

### Shifting Authority

While subtle, this hermeneutical technique of shifting the main point from the author's intent to the reader's response sets one at the precipice of a slippery slope. Conforming a text to one's agenda places the individual, not the Scripture, as the final authority. Seeing a truth contained in the text is different from recognizing what the text's primary purpose is as determined by the biblical author. Furthermore, it relegates the applicational use of the text to the reader's purpose, allowing for the twisting of Scripture to suit the reader's situation or personally desired application (cf. 1 Timothy 6:20-21, 2 Peter 3:16).<sup>35</sup> A hermeneutical approach like Kellen's fundamentally erodes the power of the Scripture in the counseling room and places the authority into the hands of the counselor who becomes the arbiter of the text's meaning rather than its appropriate application to a counseling situation.<sup>36</sup> Yet, this drains the power of the Scripture to speak into the lives of counselees as God has intended.<sup>37</sup> If this hermeneutical approach characterizes one's counseling approach, one may be tempted to seek counterfeit solutions for complex counseling presentations.<sup>38</sup> Instead, biblical counselors must seek to "rightly handle the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15) by

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<sup>34</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 23.

<sup>35</sup> Adams warns against following this route of application: "That is the fundamental problem of all counseling systems: counselors are out to change others, but they can't agree on what the end product should be like. The fundamental question is, 'Change people – into what?' It is a question of standards." Jay E. Adams, *How to Help People Change: The Four-Step Biblical Process* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 59.

<sup>36</sup> Frame notes, "That fact suggests to me that the exegesis of specific texts is more fundamental than the truth of any broad theological principle. That is, the exegesis determines the principle, rather than the other way around. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 3:220.

<sup>37</sup> Adams takes up this argument by reminding counselors that counseling problems must be defined by scriptural definitions if the Scriptures are to provide any hope for change. See Jay E. Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling: More than Redemption* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), 143–46.

<sup>38</sup> "A refrain at conferences of Christian psychologists is, 'We have Ph.D.s in psychology but Sunday school understandings of the Bible and theology.'" David Powlison, "Ready to Speak, with Gentleness and Fear," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 12, no. 2 (1995): 7; See also Heath Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling: The Doctrinal Foundations of Counseling Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 59; David Powlison, "A Biblical Counseling View," in *Psychology & Christianity: Five Views*, ed. Eric L. Johnson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 245; Stuart W. Scott, "A Biblical Counseling Approach," in *Counseling and Christianity: Five Approaches*, ed. Stephen P. Greggo and Timothy A. Sisemore, with Thomas G. Plante et al. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 158.

allowing the Scriptures to both *interpret* and *determine which application to use* to solve the counselee's problem.<sup>39</sup>

By making this theological move, Kellen can go on to defend her belief that “common grace observations, sometimes articulated in terms of ‘scientific observations,’ [are] necessary to understand people and their problems, to which we then apply Scripture.”<sup>40</sup> Here, Kellen steps completely out of the historic biblical counseling movement.<sup>41</sup> By claiming that scientific observations are *necessary* to understand people, she is simultaneously claiming that God has not provided sufficient material in his Word for dealing with counseling problems. While she might claim that *solutions* to problems that people face should come from scriptural application (which she ends up denying by her reliance upon psychological interventions),<sup>42</sup> her dependence upon common grace insights to even ascertain the problem places epistemological primacy (or at least equivalence) on common grace psychological findings over the Bible.<sup>43</sup> Powlison warned three decades ago about this exact concern for integrationists:

When their grasp of the Bible proved disappointing in the face of human sin and suffering, psychology stepped persuasively into the gap. Psychology's abundance of hitherto unrecognized [insights] made psychology's theories and techniques – its distorting glasses and fun-house mirrors – seem wonderfully persuasive.<sup>44</sup>

In this case, the Bible becomes merely a supplement to the vast array of secular anthropological discoveries. But scientific data, while illustrative, cannot and should not define the bounds of problem/solution sets.<sup>45</sup> Rather, the Scriptures provide the criteria, language, and categories for diagnosing and solving man's problems.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual: The Practice of Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973), 103–11.

<sup>40</sup> Williams et al., “SEBTS Counseling Professors Roundtable,” 80.

<sup>41</sup> Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 29–30, 73.

<sup>42</sup> Williams et al., “SEBTS Counseling Professors Roundtable,” 81.

<sup>43</sup> T. Dale Johnson, “Future Hope and the Folly of Fig Leaves,” in *Sufficiency: Historic Essays on the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Kansas City, MO: Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, 2023), 118. What's more, were Kellen to claim that solutions to problems can be found in the Scriptures would mean that the Scriptures must also provide a description of the problem. The Scriptures are sufficient not only to cure, but to diagnose souls.

<sup>44</sup> David Powlison, “Critiquing Modern Integrationists,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 9, no. 3 (1993): 32.

<sup>45</sup> 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), 31.

<sup>46</sup> David Powlison, “The Sufficiency of Scripture to Diagnose and Cure Souls,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 23, no. 2 (2005): 2.

## Human Agency and Responsibility in the Bible

Kellen draws from Matthew 1:1 alone to focus on Christ's redemption from generational dysfunction, but the Scriptures are filled with other teachings on how the generations interact and how the consequences of sin affect one's family members. The Bible sets up a careful tension between individual responsibility and generational consequences.<sup>47</sup> In Exodus 34:7,

The Lord passed before [Moses] and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

Here, the Scriptures teach that while children are not held responsible for their parents' sin, nevertheless, sins that parents commit will have lasting repercussions on the lives of their children.<sup>48</sup> But what is crucial is that the reception of ill effects in no way necessitates a sinful response on the part of the children.<sup>49</sup> Rather, as Ezekiel 18:20 states, "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself." Kellen's essay fails to systematize passages like this into her understanding of the issue of "generational dysfunction." A key distinction must be made between the traumatized son responding in a sinful way to his father's sin and learning to suffer for righteousness sake (1 Peter 3:13-14).

Dysfunction in the family does not arise from parents passing on any physically hereditary material that would cause the child to sin.<sup>50</sup> Sin, as Jesus goes to great lengths to make clear, is *always* a volitional desire that leads to improper thoughts, wicked behavior, or ungracious speech (Mark 7:15-23, Luke 6:43-45; 11:39-41). Lou Priolo helpfully summarizes this presupposition of biblical counseling: "Apart from organically caused factors, all of man's voluntary thought and behavior is moral, for which man is responsible before God and neighbor."<sup>51</sup> The burden of proof rests upon

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<sup>47</sup> While this distinction must be made, the Bible continues to teach throughout that man is morally accountable for one's volitional responses to the environment. Lou Priolo, *Presuppositions of Biblical Counseling: What Historical Biblical Counselors Really Believe* (Conway, AR: Grace & Truth Books, 2023), 7.

<sup>48</sup> Douglas Stuart, *Exodus*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 2:717.

<sup>49</sup> Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, 174.

<sup>50</sup> Critically, one must understand that one's sin nature does not arise from organic heredity but from original sin (Rom 5:12-21). Because sin is spiritual, it requires a spiritual cure. Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 142.

<sup>51</sup> Priolo, *Presuppositions of Biblical Counseling*, 38-43. Priolo mentions blunt force trauma, cerebral meningitis, and brain tumors as examples of organic factors.



Kellen to show that organic, epigenetic factors determine behavioral *causation*. As of the time of writing, these studies in humans are correlational at best.<sup>52</sup>

Biblically, responsibility for sin rests not between the generations nor on biological determiners but on individual response. Kellen notes, “my parents [sic] thumbprints are all over me as a person.”<sup>53</sup> Yet habituation acquired as a child is never determinative.<sup>54</sup> Rather, through mind renewal initiated by the Spirit (Romans 12:2, Ephesians 4:23), one can repent of and put off entrenched patterns of sin and replace them with godly behaviors that bear much fruit (Galatians 5:16-24).<sup>55</sup> The reverse can also be true. Godly parents who seek to raise their children to follow the Lord are given no guarantees their children will repent and believe the gospel. In fact, the Bible illustrates this principle in the lives of Saul and Samuel. Saul was a wicked king who is portrayed as a poor father (1 Samuel 20:30-34), but his son Jonathan is upheld as virtuous and celebrated as a righteous man (1 Samuel 14:45, 2 Samuel 1:25-27; 9:7). On the other hand, Samuel was a prophet, priest, and judge – a man who was well-acquainted with the Scriptures and no stranger to the Lord (1 Samuel 1:26; 3:19-21; 7:15). However, his sons were so wicked that Israel demanded his sons not rule over them after his death (1 Samuel 8:1-5). Both examples prove that neither righteousness nor dysfunction between generations is destined or inevitable. Rather, each shows that one’s heredity is nondeterminative for righteous or sinful living.

Thus, what is needed for true change is to have one’s heart regenerated by the Lord (Ezekiel 36:26-27).<sup>56</sup> Biblical anthropology situates agency in the heart (Proverbs 4:23, Luke 6:45).<sup>57</sup> Dysfunction and trauma stem from sinful desires wreaking havoc in families. Inordinate, idolatrous,

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<sup>52</sup> Blerida Banushi, Jemma Collova, and Helen Milroy, “Epigenetic Echoes: Bridging Nature, Nurture, and Healing across Generations,” *International Journal of Molecular Sciences* 26, no. 7 (2025): 3075. Furthermore, God’s infallible Word will never be disproven by man’s scientific endeavors.

<sup>53</sup> Kellen, “Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1),” 54.

<sup>54</sup> Adams, *The Christian Counselor’s Manual*, 137–40; Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), 184–92. Habituation plays a critical role in sanctification as the renewed spirit wars against the sinfully habituated flesh, but the flesh cannot defeat a spirit that is submissive to Christ (Romans 6:6-18). As will be mentioned below, biological changes arise from one’s sin and entrench the flesh in sinful habits and patterns. But since Scripture teaches that the heart is the agent of the person and not the body, these habits and patterns can be put off, and as the Spirit works through the Word, new habits and patterns of godliness can be put on.

<sup>55</sup> Greg E. Gifford, “Jay Adams’ Teaching of Habituation: Critiqued, Revisited, and Supported,” in *Whole Counsel: The Public and Private Ministries of the Word: Essays in Honor Jay E. Adams*, ed. Donn R. Arms and Dave Swavely (Memphis, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2020), 129–46; Adams, *The Christian Counselor’s Manual*, 171–216.

<sup>56</sup> Adams, *What about Nouthetic Counseling?*, 65–67; Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 315–20; Jay E. Adams, *Sanctification and Counseling* (Memphis, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2020), 15–27; Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 281–87, 297–303; Priolo, *Presuppositions of Biblical Counseling*, 59.

<sup>57</sup> Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 119–24; David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition through the Lens of Scripture* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2012), 129–32; Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), 60–68.

or simply sinful desires of the heart lead to conflict, trauma, and pain (James 4:1-4).<sup>58</sup> This sin arises not from the body, but from the heart (James 1:14-15).<sup>59</sup> The Scriptures place the responsibility for sin on the individual and locates sin in the heart, not in the gene pool.<sup>60</sup>

Kellen's exegetical faults and her lack of systemization with the rest of Scripture generates numerous problems for her use of Matthew 1:1 to support her argument for the integration of modern psychological trauma theory. Her misunderstanding of biological science also undermines her claim that only Christ can cure generational dysfunction.

### A Scientific Critique

While Kellen's hermeneutical methodology sets herself as the authority for biblical interpretation, she looks to science to substantiate her thesis. Ironically, recent scientific findings condemn her claims. Kellen's engagement with scientific studies betrays not only her misuse of sources, but also a complete misinterpretation of the current data, biological mechanisms, and the epistemological underpinnings of the contemporary biological paradigm and a Christian view of science.

#### Misusing Scientific Sources & Misunderstanding Scientific Findings

The second section of Kellen's article deals with generational dysfunction as understood in modern, psychological terms. She mentions the case of substance use disorder, noting that children of parents who battled addiction have higher rates of substance use disorder themselves. She correctly claims, "Regardless of whether or not there is an underlying genetic or physiological predisposition, the fact remains that children learn maladaptive coping behaviors based on what they

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<sup>58</sup> Jay E. Adams, *A Thirst for Wholeness: How to Gain Wisdom from the Book of James* (Woodruff, SC: Timeless Texts, 1988), 104–10; Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, 176–212; Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, 69–70; Heath Lambert, *The Biblical Counseling Movement after Adams* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 77–80. For two excellent overviews of the concept of idols of the heart and how desire affects motivation and behavior, see Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes*, 145–62; David Powlison, "Idols of the Heart and 'Vanity Fair,'" *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 11, no. 2 (1995): 35–50.

<sup>59</sup> Adams, *A Thirst for Wholeness*, 28–35; Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 221–23; See Adams' assertion that counseling problems must be understood biblically in Jay E. Adams, *The Use of Scripture in Counseling* (Memphis, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 1975), 19–21.

<sup>60</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Hebrews, James, I & II Peter, and Jude*, *The Christian Counselor's Commentary* (Memphis, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2020), 166–68.

are exposed to.”<sup>61</sup> This understanding aligns with a biblical view of agency coupled with the effects of environmental temptations on individuals.

However, this creates a problem for Kellen. If she believed in the sufficiency of Scripture, she would not need science to support her claim. Biblical counselors could simply take her exegesis of Matthew 1:1 as authoritative and not require further scientific evidence to back up the claim. To a biblical counselor, scientific discoveries can be helpful, but it is neither authoritative nor necessary.<sup>62</sup> Not only that, but the Bible also provides parenting principles to teach us that when we parent our children in a godly way, things might turn out well for them and the converse is also true (Exodus 20:12, Deuteronomy 6:6-7, Ps 78:5-7, Proverbs 1:8-9; 4:1-4; 14:26; 20:7; 22:6, Ephesians 6:4). For example, Proverbs 31:2-9 shows King Lemuel speaking to his own son about the dangers of alcohol. Biblical wisdom – from general parenting principles to specific warnings about alcohol's familial destruction – addresses what psychology now categorizes as Adverse Childhood Experiences, demonstrating Scripture's sufficiency without requiring modern scientific validation.

Yet, immediately following this example, Kellen jettisons biblical anthropology for a behavioristic and biologically determined view of man.<sup>63</sup> Kellen references the field of epigenetics as a source for understanding human behavior and reactions to trauma. To see how Kellen's use of epigenetics is problematic, one need only understand basic cellular biology and genetics.

Human cells contain DNA that serves as an instruction manual to produce proteins. Sections of DNA which code for specific proteins or other cellular components are called genes. Using an incredibly complex biomechanical process, cells “read” (known as transcription) the instructions of these genes and then “construct” (known as translation) proteins from the building blocks of amino acids.<sup>64</sup> Proteins then perform all major roles in the cell such as catalyzing chemical

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<sup>61</sup> Kellen, “Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1),” 52. While Kellen is careful to use language of “predisposition,” as will be demonstrated below, the scientific evidence she cites would prefer her to use “determination.”

<sup>62</sup> Adams, *What about Nouthetic Counseling?*, 31, 71; Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 73.

<sup>63</sup> Kellen cites Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score* as evidence for her claim that “research has shown that trauma can have lasting effects on the brain and nervous system by altering stress response systems, influencing emotional regulation, and changing cognitive processing” (Kellen, 53). Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Broadway, NY: Penguin, 2015). For a scientific critique of van der Kolk's book, see Michael Scheeringa, *The Body Does Not Keep the Score: How Popular Beliefs about Trauma Are Wrong* (Independently published, 2024). For a critique of van der Kolk's book from a biblical counseling perspective, see Francine Tan, “A Critical Evaluation of Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score*,” *The Journal of Biblical Soul Care* 7, no. 2 (2023): 26–61. Tan clearly demonstrates that biblical anthropology and van der Kolk's somatic traumatic memory are incompatible and antithetical to one another. Biblical counselors cannot have both.

<sup>64</sup> This is what is known as the “central dogma of molecular biology.” F. H. C. Crick, “On Protein Synthesis,” in *Symposia of the Society for Experimental Biology, Number XII: The Biological Replication of Macromolecules*, ed. F. K. Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 138–63.

reactions for metabolism, breaking down toxins, responding to environmental stimuli, producing chemicals and hormones, maintaining homeostasis, granting physical structure to the organism, and much more.<sup>65</sup>

Epigenetics refers to modifications to a creature's genome that regulate genetic expression.<sup>66</sup> In response to various environmental factors, cells can modify molecular sites on DNA (without altering the DNA sequence itself) in order to promote or repress the transcription of certain genes.<sup>67</sup> As a result, a cell will produce more or less of a protein which will in turn have an effect on the cell's biological function in the organism. Thus, any claims regarding epigenetics by counselors in relationship to human behavior must immediately distinguish between causation or correlation since genetic expression relates closely with biological mechanisms for behavior.<sup>68</sup> The distinctions between causation and correlation in the counseling room is critical.

Kellen's discussion of trauma theory displays a fundamental understanding of biological science, causation, and experimental design. She cites a 2018 review as evidence that:

...if a parent or grandparent experienced a traumatic event such as war, violence, abuse, or a natural disaster, the impact of that trauma may be transmitted to their children or grandchildren through epigenetic changes, modifications to gene expression without altering the underlying DNA sequence. These changes can affect how genes related to stress response, emotional regulation, and mental health are expressed...<sup>69</sup>

However, the review she cites plainly states:

The state of the science in relation to human offspring at present is that, whereas some neuroendocrine and epigenetic alterations have been documented in connection with maternal and paternal trauma exposure and PTSD, studies have not yet conclusively demonstrated epigenetic transmission of trauma effects in humans.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Summary information for this paragraph taken from the author's own undergraduate background in molecular biology and biochemistry as well as Lauren Dalton and Robin Young, *Fundamentals of Cell Biology* (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University, 2024), 64–116.

<sup>66</sup> Carrie Deans and Keith A. Maggert, "What Do You Mean, 'Epigenetic'?", *Genetics* 199, no. 4 (2015): 887–96.

<sup>67</sup> Cath  rine Dupont, D. Randall Armant, and Carol A. Brenner, "Epigenetics: Definition, Mechanisms and Clinical Perspective," *Seminars in Reproductive Medicine* 27, no. 5 (2009): 351–57.

<sup>68</sup> For example, in the field of oncology, studies on epigenetic modifications are proliferating rapidly as these irregularities in genetic expression appear to play a role in carcinogenesis: R Kanwal and S Gupta, "Epigenetic Modifications in Cancer," *Clinical Genetics* 81, no. 4 (2012): 303–11.

<sup>69</sup> Kellen, "Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1)," 53.

<sup>70</sup> Rachel Yehuda and Amy Lehrner, "Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma Effects: Putative Role of Epigenetic Mechanisms," *World Psychiatry: Official Journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA)* 17, no. 3 (2018): 252.

What Kellen presents as definitive, the cited article views skeptically. In fact, numerous scientific reviews and studies are cautious about linking epigenetic changes to the causation negative mental health outcomes.<sup>71</sup> At best, there is a *correlation* between epigenetic changes and intergenerational trauma or generational dysfunction, but no *causal* pathology has been established.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, expression of a particular gene that might be linked to trauma transmission happens in a mosaic of thousands of other biological functions. While it is true that some genetic mutations or regulatory abnormalities can have more profound impacts on the body than others (for example, the single base-pair substitution that leads to sickle cell disease<sup>73</sup>), there have been no definitive studies which demonstrate a determinative role in epigenetic regulation and one's mental (i.e. immaterial, or heart) response to trauma.

There are numerous reasons why scientists have been skeptical about attributing epigenetic changes to mental health. First, all replicable experiments on epigenetic modification have been performed in model organisms, but not humans. To date, there are no controlled or replicable protocols for testing epigenetic effects on human behavior.<sup>74</sup> Second, mammals undergo two separate "resets" of epigenetic modification, the first *in utero* and the second during germ cell

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<sup>71</sup> One review notes the opposite can occur: "prenatal stress does not necessarily predispose individuals to problematical development, but rather increases sensitivity to both adverse and supportive postnatal contexts. Thus, prenatal stress may actually foster positive development if paired with supportive and caring postnatal environments." Sarah Hartman, Jay Belsky, and Michael Pluess, "Prenatal Programming of Environmental Sensitivity," *Translational Psychiatry* 13, no. 1 (2023): 161.

<sup>72</sup> For other studies that express this skepticism see Ewan Birney, George Davey Smith, and John M. Greally, "Epigenome-Wide Association Studies and the Interpretation of Disease-Omics," *PLoS Genetics* 12, no. 6 (2016): 1–9; Bernhard Horsthemke, "A Critical View on Transgenerational Epigenetic Inheritance in Humans," *Nature Communications* 9, no. 1 (2018): 2973; C. Murgatroyd et al., "Effects of Prenatal and Postnatal Depression, and Maternal Stroking, at the Glucocorticoid Receptor Gene," *Translational Psychiatry* 5, no. 5 (2015): e560; S. V. Sotnikov et al., "Bidirectional Rescue of Extreme Genetic Predispositions to Anxiety: Impact of CRH Receptor 1 as Epigenetic Plasticity Gene in the Amygdala," *Translational Psychiatry* 4, no. 2 (2014): e359.

<sup>73</sup> M. A. Bender and Katie Carlberg, "Sickle Cell Disease," in *GeneReviews*, ed. Margaret P. Adam et al. (Seattle, WA: University of Washington, Seattle, 1993).

<sup>74</sup> While there have been studies in human populations, (see, for example, Nader Perroud et al., "The Tutsi Genocide and Transgenerational Transmission of Maternal Stress: Epigenetics and Biology of the HPA Axis," *World Journal of Biological Psychiatry* 15, no. 4 (2014): 334–45; Bastiaan T. Heijmans et al., "Persistent Epigenetic Differences Associated with Prenatal Exposure to Famine in Humans," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 105, no. 44 (2008): 17046–49; Rachel Yehuda et al., "Holocaust Exposure Induced Intergenerational Effects on FKBP5 Methylation," *Biological Psychiatry* 80, no. 5 (2016): 372–80; A summary of findings can be found in Nagy A. Youssef et al., "The Effects of Trauma, with or without PTSD, on the Transgenerational DNA Methylation Alterations in Human Offsprings," *Brain Sciences* 8, no. 5 (2018): 83.) these populations have all experienced singular events (the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda, the Holocaust, and the Dutch Hunger Winter) that make controlled, replicable experiments nigh-impossible. Furthermore, subjecting humans to induced trauma violates biblical and ethical standards for experimentation. Thus, studying how trauma affects epigenetic change in humans is extremely difficult outside of surveys and post-traumatic blood draws. Studies also almost always have low sample sizes.

proliferation.<sup>75</sup> These resets provide opportunities to erase any deleterious epigenetic modifications that may result from trauma exposure and be passed between generations.<sup>76</sup> Third, while some studies show stronger connections between epigenetic modification and physiology, such as metabolic rates,<sup>77</sup> these focus on *physical* health but say little to nothing about *mental* health or behavioral outcomes.<sup>78</sup> Finally, as one review notes, “It is important to acknowledge that not all individuals who are exposed to trauma and stressors develop adverse outcomes. As such, there is an important need for studies to incorporate and understand the factors that may buffer the development of adverse outcomes in response to trauma or stressor exposure.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, environmental factors, such as parenting or religion, can stall or even reverse some of the effects wrought by epigenetic dysregulation due to trauma.<sup>80</sup> With all of these factors in mind, one can see how difficult it is to establish any sort of causal link between trauma exposure, epigenetic modification, and genetic expression that leads to adverse mental health outcomes.

For all these reasons, Kellen’s deference to scientific hypotheses concerning mental and behavioral health in relation to trauma is completely unfounded.<sup>81</sup> Ironically, the Scriptures (and following suit, historic biblical counselors) are clear that the heart is always primary over the body in matters of *moral responsibility*.<sup>82</sup> As Adams notes, “Behavior is responsible conduct.”<sup>83</sup> Bodily changes can proceed from the heart’s moral response to environmental distress. Furthermore, biblical counselors affirm that bodily effects of sin, such as trauma, can play a role in temptation, but they

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<sup>75</sup> Edith Heard and Robert A. Martienssen, “Transgenerational Epigenetic Inheritance: Myths and Mechanisms,” *Cell* 157, no. 1 (2014): 95–109.

<sup>76</sup> Gary Felsenfeld, “A Brief History of Epigenetics,” *Cold Spring Harbor Perspectives in Biology* 6, no. 1 (2014).

<sup>77</sup> Heijmans et al., “Persistent Epigenetic Differences Associated with Prenatal Exposure to Famine in Humans.”

<sup>78</sup> Sumra Komal, Li-Rong Zhang, and Sheng-Na Han, “Potential Regulatory Role of Epigenetic RNA Methylation in Cardiovascular Diseases,” *Biomedicine & Pharmacotherapy* 137 (2021): 111376; Elmar W. Tobin et al., “DNA Methylation as a Mediator of the Association between Prenatal Adversity and Risk Factors for Metabolic Disease in Adulthood,” *Science Advances* 4, no. 1 (2018): eaao4364.

<sup>79</sup> Andie Kealohi Sato Conching and Zaneta Thayer, “Biological Pathways for Historical Trauma to Affect Health: A Conceptual Model Focusing on Epigenetic Modifications,” *Social Science & Medicine* 230 (2019): 79.

<sup>80</sup> A recent study has shown that previously assumed connections between DNA methylation and genetic expression associated with depressive symptoms are more complex than a simple 1:1 correlation between epigenetic change, gene expression, and symptomatology. Patricia A. Handschuh et al., “Summer and SERT: Effect of Daily Sunshine Hours on SLC6A4 Promoter Methylation in Seasonal Affective Disorder,” *The World Journal of Biological Psychiatry*, 2025, 7–8.

<sup>81</sup> “What God has said about human nature, our problems, and the only Redeemer is true. His truth is reliable. What the Bible says about people will never be destroyed by any neurological or genetic finding... But biopsychiatry cannot explain, nor will it ever explain, what we actually are. All people *are* in the image of God and depend on God body and soul.” Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes*, 244.

<sup>82</sup> Rich Thomson, *The Heart of Man and the Mental Disorders: How the Word of God Is Sufficient*, 3rd ed. (Sugar Land, TX: Biblical Counseling Ministries, Inc., 2022), 1:123–48; A. Craig Troxel, *With All Your Heart: Orienting Your Mind, Desires, and Will toward Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 106.

<sup>83</sup> Adams, *The Christian Counselor’s Manual*, 116.

deny that the heart is at any point finally subject to the body's infirmity.<sup>84</sup> Thus, from a scriptural perspective, any scientific finding about trauma and bodily modification that removes personal culpability or subordinates the heart's volition to physical responses is immediately suspect and must be reanalyzed using biblical presuppositions.<sup>85</sup>

Even if, for argument's sake, Kellen is correct that a traumatic event can change body chemistry, how should a biblical counselor provide help to such an individual? Biblical counselors would affirm that chemistry changes as a result of the heart's reaction.<sup>86</sup> In modern terms, material molecular reactions and neurotransmission stem from the immaterial heart's desires and beliefs.<sup>87</sup> These chemical changes then drive physical behavior.<sup>88</sup> Sometimes this might be a split-second reaction – a testament to God's design of our bodies to respond to events like real, imminent danger – but the physical, habituated response is still mediated by the heart.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, if sinful behavior appears to result from split-second reactions to the environment – for example, a previously traumatized individual having a violent outburst induced from a door slamming – this physical reaction is a habituated response *preconditioned by the heart's unbelief or rebellion* prior to the incident.<sup>90</sup> Simply put, there is a substantial difference between influence and determinism from chemicals in the environment.

The great hope of the Scriptures is that sinful habits can be put off and godly habits can be put on through nouthetic confrontation and the spiritual disciplines.<sup>91</sup> According to Adams, the purposes of the Scriptures are to elicit this kind of change.<sup>92</sup> But to leave counselees requiring a medical miracle or genetic therapy in order to respond biblically to trauma, in all practicality, moves

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<sup>84</sup> Thomson, *The Heart of Man and the Mental Disorders*, 1:140. Thomson writes, "The point is abundantly clear in Scripture. If man's inner spirit can endure his physical infirmity – and it can (Prov 18:14) – and if God will not allow the believer to be tempted beyond what he is able in Christ to endure – and He will not (1 Cor 10:13) – then a believer's material body and brain cannot compel his immaterial heart to entertain or to communicate wrong thoughts, words, or actions, nor can his brain and body generate within him the unique heart consequences which issue from those sins: a sense of guilt, apparently uncaused fear, and a desire to flee when there is little or no reason to do so."

<sup>85</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003), 27.

<sup>86</sup> Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, 112.

<sup>87</sup> For an in-depth examination of this phenomenon and critique of the naturalist, trauma-informed approach, see Greg E. Gifford, "Does the Body Keep the Score? Biblical Counseling and the Body," *The Journal of Biblical Soul Care* 8, no. 1 (2024): 41–63.

<sup>88</sup> Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 96–97; Thomson, *The Heart of Man and the Mental Disorders*, 1:123–48.

<sup>89</sup> Brian A. Mesimer, "Rehabilitating Habituation," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 34, no. 2 (2020): 53–79.

<sup>90</sup> Jay E. Adams, *The Practical Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling* (Memphis, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2020), art. Body; Gifford, "Jay Adam's Teaching of Habituation."

<sup>91</sup> Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 44–52; Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, 191–216; Mesimer, "Rehabilitating Habituation," 60–67.

<sup>92</sup> For Adams argument and step-by-step process on nouthetically confronting and training counselees in righteousness see Adams, *How to Help People Change*.

the hope from Christ to the doctor. While Kellen, and this author, would affirm that Christ can work any miracle he desires – genetic, medical, or spiritual – the Bible does not promise that all physical afflictions will cease this side of heaven. But it does promise victory over sin (Romans 8:10-11). Yet, according to Kellen’s understanding of inherited trauma, at best we can only mitigate the effects of temptation or sin. There remains little hope for the sanctifying work of the Spirit who changes hearts (but does not promise to change bodies before the eschaton). There is nuance here: at the resurrection, both body and soul will be perfected and glorified, so in this sense, Christ is truly the only hope. The Bible everywhere promises that our spirits can grow *now* in righteousness, maturity, and holiness, regardless of bodily affliction or past experience (2 Corinthians 3:18; 4:16-18).<sup>93</sup> But the counselee’s growth always comes directly from the means of grace – the spiritual disciplines – and through participation in the body of Christ, not from psychological interventions as Kellen espouses.<sup>94</sup>

But redemptive counselors (Kellen included) believe:

The Bible affirms that what we think about is important, both for righteousness and for our well-being. Scripture gives us some strategies for changing our thoughts (Phil 4:8): memorization of God’s Word (Ps 119:11), the use of mnemonic devices such as acrostics (Ps 25, 34, etc.), and biblical meditation (Ps 119:15). However, because the Bible was not written to be a comprehensive manual on every manner by which thoughts may be changed, observation and research may uncover for us additional strategies to effect lasting thought change, particularly when they do not contradict Scripture. Some empirically validated strategies have emerged out of CBT, which counselors may then employ to effect godly thought change by the power of the Holy Spirit who provided those tools through his common grace.<sup>95</sup>

This creates a conundrum for historical pastoral practice. Without the modern advent of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), were Christians left without sufficient tools for thousands of years as they sought to “renew the spirit of [their] mind[s]” (Ephesians 2:23)?<sup>96</sup> By asserting that CBT has discovered strategies unforeknown (or at best, lost) to believers in the past, redemptive

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<sup>93</sup> Consider Job’s response to traumatic events and bodily affliction (Job 1:6-2:10).

<sup>94</sup> T. Dale Johnson, *The Church as a Culture of Care: Finding Hope in Biblical Community* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2021), 143–57; Tony Loseto, “Tools of the Trade: Spiritual Disciplines in Biblical Counseling,” in *Anchored in Truth: Reflections on Biblical Counseling*, ed. Chris Chumita (Elyria, OH: Soul Doctor Publications, 2025), 251–67. In effect, Kellen sees Christ mediated and applied through psychological methods, rather than through biblical means.

<sup>95</sup> Brooks et al., “What Is RC/CIBC?,” 7.

<sup>96</sup> Adams and Lambert sound a resounding, “No!” Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 16; Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 43, 84.



counselors have effectively claimed that the scriptural techniques outlined were insufficient for change.<sup>97</sup> This position is a complete denial of the historic biblical counseling position of the total sufficiency of Scripture.<sup>98</sup> To claim that the Bible is insufficient for changing the “thoughts and intentions of the heart” is a direct contradiction of, or at best, a dulling of “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:17, Hebrews 4:12).

Instead, the Lord’s call to people experiencing dysfunction due to sin is:

“Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live” (Ezekiel 18:30-32).

From a biblical perspective, there is much hope, for the Lord provides the new heart required for repentance. He does not promise a change in *body*, but a change in *spirit*: “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (Ezekiel 36:26-27). The Lord holds out repentance and heart transformation as his method for seeing true change. With this, Kellen would agree. But her understanding of biological factors sets up a roadblock for some counselees who feel victimized by their lineage, their genetic inheritance, or epigenetic modifications brought on by experiencing trauma. There is no escape from biology. And if biology is causative, then there is no escape from sin this side of glory apart from biological intervention.<sup>99</sup>

If counselors communicate to their counselees that their temptations or sins stem from biology, either from inheritance, from trauma, or from chemical imbalances, rather than from desires of the heart that can be transformed and idols that can be cast down, the hope of the gospel

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<sup>97</sup> Yet historical studies into patristic and Puritan pastoral theology and soul care contradict redemptive counselors at this point. See Mark Deckard, *Helpful Truth in Past Places: The Puritan Practice of Biblical Counseling* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2009), 9–16; Thomas C. Oden, *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 12–13, 17–24; Andrew Purves, *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 1–8. Of note is Oden’s study. While Oden himself was a liberal and was not opposed to psychotherapy (and by theoretical extension modern secular psychological interventions) as a whole, he was skeptical of psychology’s success or superiority in providing the help Christians needed or desired. Instead, he harkens back to Gregory the Great’s *Book of Pastoral Rule* as a biblically based forerunner to many of the therapeutic interventions popular in the mid-twentieth century.

<sup>98</sup> See Mack’s standard definition for the sufficiency of Scripture in counseling as historic biblical counselors understand it in Wayne A Mack, “The Sufficiency of Scripture in Counseling,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 9, no. 1 (1998): 82.

<sup>99</sup> And counselors who prescribe biological interventions are doing so illegitimately since this is being done outside of the scope of the practice of medicine.

evaporates from the counseling room. The Lord's solution in this life is to effect change through the primacy of the heart directing the body, not the reverse.

Additionally, Kellen's confusion about epigenetic mechanisms lacks support, as no evidence or identified pathology links a specific traumatic event to epigenetic changes. Studies show biological after-effects, but causal mechanisms remain elusive.<sup>100</sup> Thus, for Kellen to claim, "These changes can affect how genes related to stress response, emotional regulation, and mental health are expressed, potentially increasing the risk of mental health disorders" makes absolutes where scientists only recognize correlations at best.<sup>101</sup>

In the only places where we have hard evidence of harmful effects of epigenetic expression, there are physical effects on the body (such as Prader-Willi syndrome) and gene expression that results in medically treatable, physiological conditions.<sup>102</sup> But these physical maladies are fundamentally different from behavior or psychological issues. Biologically measurable changes in the body, such as increases or decreases in metabolic rates, are not necessarily causative of cognitive processes.<sup>103</sup> Utilizing these scenarios builds her case if, and only if, Kellen is willing to claim that moral behavior results directly from the body without the heart as an intermediary. However, such a claim would align her, at least partially, with behaviorism or biological determinism.

While this might not be her intention, it is a reasonable implication. Instead, grounding her anthropology in biblical foundations might enable Kellen to recognize the inherent limitations present in these studies. Very few of the studies consider one's belief in God as a contributing factor in response to trauma.<sup>104</sup> The first question that any biblical counselor would ask of the participants

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<sup>100</sup> Yehuda et al., "Holocaust Exposure Induced Intergenerational Effects on FKBP5 Methylation"; "This inherently limits the ability to determine causality, as human studies are often influenced by numerous confounding variables. Environmental factors such as diet, socioeconomic status, education, social support, and concurrent life stressors can all influence epigenetic marks, making it difficult to attribute any observed epigenetic difference solely to an ancestral trauma." Banushi, Collova, and Milroy, "Epigenetic Echoes," 10–11 Simply put, due to the sheer number of variables in human life, it is simply impossible to make any claims of causality for complex human behavior based on simplistic observation of epigenetic modifications.

<sup>101</sup> Kellen, "Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1)," 53.

<sup>102</sup> Douglas C. Bittel and Merlin G. Butler, "Prader-Willi Syndrome: Clinical Genetics, Cytogenetics and Molecular Biology," *Expert Reviews in Molecular Medicine* 7, no. 14 (2005): 1–20.

<sup>103</sup> In fact, one recent study has shown the opposite to be true. Dealing with one's anorexia leads to changes in brain structure. Tatiana Stratton et al., "Transient Patterns of Advanced Brain Ageing in Female Adolescents with Anorexia Nervosa," *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 225, no. 5 (2024): 499–505.

<sup>104</sup> Interestingly, one study that did investigate religion/spirituality's effect on trauma shows that "positive religious coping (using one's religion or spirituality to cope with stressful life situations)" actually appears to *decrease* long-term biological impacts of hardship. Alexandra E Shields et al., "Stress and Spirituality in Relation to HPA Axis Gene Methylation among US Black Women: Results from the Black Women's Health Study and the Study on Stress, Spirituality and Health," *Epigenomics* 13, no. 21 (2021): 1127. If the body were to keep the score, it appears the body may forget over time if Christ is involved.

in these studies is, “Are you a Christian?”<sup>105</sup> One’s worldview must inevitably shape one’s response to trauma, whether in their own life or in relationships with others.

### Epigenetic Transience

One of the strongest arguments against Kellen’s position on epigenetic modifications and trauma inheritance is the universally acknowledged plasticity of genetic regulation.<sup>106</sup> Some epigenetic modifications are transient.<sup>107</sup> This means that while environmental stressors may modify gene expression through epigenetic mechanisms (such as DNA methylation, histone modifications, and ncRNA regulation), studies have shown that epigenetic changes can be reversed or mitigated. Furthermore, establishing a direct link between epigenetic transmission and trauma has proven to be an elusive task.<sup>108</sup> Simply put, too many environmental factors outside of the researcher’s control prevent definitively proving that epigenetic changes in F1 generations result directly from trauma experienced by the F0 generation.<sup>109</sup> However, as stated above, historic biblical counselors would not be surprised that the body is affected by the heart’s response to the environment. They would simply want to clarify and emphasize that the heart’s response was always *a priori* any biological changes that elicit behavior.

In fact, a common critique of overemphasizing the role of epigenetics in intergenerational trauma is the significant role of culture, society, and environment in behavioral modification and genetic regulation. Experiments have shown that parental interaction can up- or down-regulate genetic expression. For example, mother and child contact correlates to adult stress responses later in life.<sup>110</sup> A mother rat engaging in licking or grooming of her pups results in positive genetic

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<sup>105</sup> A study that specifically included Christians showed that “observed behavior in these religions [Christianity, Islam, Hinduism] reflects the potentials for the DNA methylation process that may signal appropriate gene expression, improve cellular activities and optimize health outcomes.” Laurens Holmes et al., “Implication of Spiritual Network Support System in Epigenomic Modulation and Health Trajectory,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16, no. 21 (November 2019): 9–10.

<sup>106</sup> For a study which demonstrates that stress gene regulation can be modified by environmental factors, see Sotnikov et al., “Bidirectional Rescue of Extreme Genetic Predispositions to Anxiety.” Whether these genetic factors play a role in human anxiety is still uncertain (though this author would reaffirm the biblical anthropology argued above which claims that genetic regulation and physiological response is downstream of the heart).

<sup>107</sup> Conching and Thayer, “Biological Pathways for Historical Trauma to Affect Health,” 76.

<sup>108</sup> Yehuda and Lehrner, “Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma Effects,” 252.

<sup>109</sup> Horsthemke, “A Critical View on Transgenerational Epigenetic Inheritance in Humans.”

<sup>110</sup> Murgatroyd et al., “Effects of Prenatal and Postnatal Depression, and Maternal Stroking, at the Glucocorticoid Receptor Gene.”

expression related to an induced stress response.<sup>111</sup> Another study indicated that DNA methylation in the stress-response pathway is an unstable biomarker for ACEs and trauma exposure.<sup>112</sup> These studies show that culture, society, and parenting play major (possibly even *more* formative) roles in the subsequent generation's response to trauma.

But Kellen assumes from a single study on epigenetic transmission and inherited trauma that generational patterns of dysfunction in families must have a correlating biological mechanism underlying this transmission. This places Kellen dangerously close to the outworkings of behavioristic (even evolutionary) presuppositions, raising questions about her underlying epistemology. Again, she backpedals at this point and states, "In sum, whether the influences are physiological, relational, or emotional, healthier families lead to healthier children; unhealthy families lead to unhealthy children."<sup>113</sup> The Bible (and biblical counselors) would heartily agree with this statement. However, her claim is *non sequitur* from her prior assertions of genetic determinism regarding what biblical counselors classify as moral behavior – "stress response, emotional regulation, and mental health."<sup>114</sup> Kellen must either accept a form of biological determinism predicated upon epigenetic modification and transmission or reevaluate her epistemology to align with a biblical anthropology that better accounts for scientific evidence.<sup>115</sup> Biological modifications are ultimately nondeterminative of behavioral outcomes, and rehabilitation can alter body chemistry.<sup>116</sup> Genetic influences might predispose someone towards a particular temptation, but the heart controls the person and holds responsibility towards God and his Word.

Simply put, the scientific evidence does not substantiate Kellen's claim that epigenetic modification plays a definitive role in the transmission of trauma. Man's response to trauma remains solely in the realm of the heart, for which the Scriptures provide all that is needed for lasting change.

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<sup>111</sup> Ian C.G. Weaver, "Epigenetic Programming by Maternal Behavior and Pharmacological Intervention: Nature versus Nurture: Let's Call the Whole Thing Off," *Epigenetics* 2, no. 1 (2007): 22–23.

<sup>112</sup> This study also concluded that religiosity and spirituality in populations "may modify the biological impact of childhood financial hardship by attenuating *NR3C1* DNAm, and suggests that certain sources of adversity and stress may only have a lasting biological impact in those without resources for resiliency to deal with these sources of stress." Shields et al., "Stress and Spirituality in Relation to HPA Axis Gene Methylation among US Black Women," 1728–29. A biblical counselor should interpret this to mean that hope in the gospel can actually produce *somatic* changes (as well as heart transformation) that lead to better outcomes.

<sup>113</sup> Kellen, "Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1)," 54.

<sup>114</sup> Kellen, "Generational Dysfunction and Fulfillment in Christ (Matt 1:1)," 53.

<sup>115</sup> Along with the resulting entailments of the removal of responsibility and the requirement of medicine to treat what the Bible ascribes to the heart. Furthermore, she must accept this position *against* the scientific evidence itself.

<sup>116</sup> Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, 112.

## Conclusion

Kellen is right that Christ provides the only hope for trauma and generational dysfunction. However, her view of the biological underpinnings of trauma experience and response is faulty from both a scientific and scriptural standpoint. The hope of Christ she proposes is ultimately only eschatological. But the Bible calls counselors to point people to the Word *today* that they might grow in holiness and sanctification (Hebrews 3:12-15). Kellen's eisegesis of Matthew 1:1 coupled with her attempts to map modern psychological trauma theory onto the Scriptures undermine the authority of the Scriptures and allow room for her psychologically influenced anthropology to creep in. Yet by doing so, the Christological solution she proposes helps neither the biblical man, who becomes victim to biology, nor the psychological man whose hearts stand in antithesis to Christ.

Kellen's article demonstrates the failure of redemptive counseling to responsibly incorporate scientific findings into an overall biblical counseling system that places the Scriptures as the ultimate authority for grounding truth claims, the standard for evaluating scientific data, and the sufficient means for sanctification in the lives of counselees. Kellen does not take into account the resultant practical pastoral implications were epigenetic determinism true. Church discipline for unrepentant counselees dealing with trauma unbiblically would stall since fault and blame are thrown up in the air. Accountability would be reduced to ensuring that counselees take their medications.

Biblical counselors, instead, by adhering to a scriptural anthropology, submitting to the Scripture's authority, relying on its sufficiency, and offering scriptural hope of Christ can truly help those whose lives have been devastated by trauma. While biblical counselors will need to address epigenetic research in depth as the field develops further, a biblical anthropology provides the God-designed backdrop for assessing scientific claims. By knowing and clinging to God's creational anthropology revealed in the Scriptures, biblical counselors are more than equipped to help those scarred by trauma through the nail-scarred hands of Christ.

# The Need for Clarifying Common Grace within Biblical Counseling<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Samuel Stephens<sup>2</sup> and Dr. Francine Tan<sup>3</sup>

Over half a century ago, Jay Adams, the founder of the modern biblical counseling movement (BCM), brought theological clarity to key biblical doctrines that were frequently misunderstood and misused by Christian counselors as they sought to advance the integrationist agenda.<sup>4</sup> Adams acted as a prophet on the wall as he warned against the attempt of justifying the use of secular sources in the theology and methodology of counseling.<sup>5</sup> Early in the integrationist project, general revelation was the theological category *du jour* in providing biblical permission for the utilization of secular knowledge within Christian counseling models. In time, biblical counselors successfully defended this doctrine from misunderstanding and misuse by integrationists.<sup>6</sup> However,

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<sup>1</sup> This article has been adapted from a chapter in a larger book soon to be released by Kress Publishing entitled *A Theology of Soul Care: Essays in Biblical Counseling* edited by Nicolas Ellen, Stuart Scott, T. Dale Johnson, Jr., and Josh Stephens. Permission has been granted by the publisher to adapt this chapter for inclusion in the *Journal of Biblical Soul Care*.

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<sup>4</sup> For critiques of integrationists' efforts, see David A. Powlison, "Which Presuppositions? Secular Psychology and the Categories of Biblical Thought," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 12, 4 (December 1984): 270–78; Michael Scott Horton, ed., "Integration or Inundation?" in *Power Religion: The Selling out of the Evangelical Church?* (Chicago: Moody Pr, 1992); Jay E. Adams, *A Call for Discernment: Distinguishing Truth from Error in Today's Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Timeless Texts, 1999); Heath Lambert, et. al., *Sufficiency: Historic Essays on the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Kansas City, MO: Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> For an example of a warning against neo-integrationists in the BCM, see Heath Lambert, "Priests in the Garden, Zombies in the Wilderness, and Prophets on the Wall: The Current State of the Contemporary Biblical Counseling Movement," First Baptist Church Jacksonville, *First Thoughts* (blog), May 13, 2024, <https://fbcjax.com/first-thoughts/priests-in-the-garden-zombies-in-the-wilderness-and-prophets-on-the-wall-the-current-state-of-the-contemporary-biblical-counseling-movement/>.

<sup>6</sup> For example, see Heath Lambert et al., *Sufficiency: Historic Essays on the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Glenside, PA: Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, 2016).

in more recent discussions, common grace has emerged as a new biblical doctrine used in a barrage of attempts to incorporate secular knowledge (i.e., man’s wisdom) into traditional biblical counseling—an approach rooted in the sufficient Word of God.<sup>7</sup> It is purported by some counselors, albeit erroneously, that common grace gives biblical credence to the idea that God’s goodness in the world includes the discoveries of modern men, particularly theories abounding in the fields of psychology, psychiatry, and neuroscience. It is alleged by the same that Christians who either outright reject or are skeptical of such psychological discoveries are also dismissive of God’s grace and goodness.<sup>8</sup> However, years prior to the emergence of this current iteration of a perennial error, Adams spoke on the limits and scope of common grace. He noted, “Certainly, in His [common] grace, God does good to all men. Despite their sin, He restrains them from becoming as bad as they might and enables them *in part* to discover facts about the world in which they live. But these discoveries are distorted by man’s limitations and rebellion and are certainly not inerrant or inspired, as revelation always is [emphasis added].”<sup>9</sup>

Some may be tempted to leave the door cracked open for the “discoveries” of unregenerate theorists that seem to “help” people with their spiritual problems.<sup>10</sup> Such theories and methods lure

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<sup>7</sup> See Brad Hambrick, “Southeastern Theological Review: SEBTS Counseling Professors Roundtable: As It Is and As It Could Be,” *Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary* 15, 1 (Spring 2024); Nate Brooks et al., “What Is Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?” (Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, July 8, 2024), <https://www.sebts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/What-is-RCCIBC.pdf>; Nate Brooks, “‘I Never Reconcile Friends’: The Complementarity of Scripture and Common Grace for Counseling,” *Southeastern Theological Review* 16, 2 (Fall 2025): 35–45.

<sup>8</sup> The claim is that since believers have an obligation to offer the best care possible, it makes sense that they would use outside insight, research, knowledge, or interventions to inform their practice of soul care. The authors will get into more detail about such claims later in this article.

<sup>9</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Sanctification and Counseling* (Memphis, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2020), 140-1. Often the idea of man’s ability to understand facts has been overshadowed by an equally important proposition that man’s understanding is fundamentally distorted and impacted by the Fall. Adams also writes, “Systems designed to do (apart from the Scriptures) what the Scriptures themselves claim to do are not the product of common grace. This theological language cover is but another of Satan’s distortions.” Jay E. Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling: More than Redemption*, The Jay Adams Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resource Library, 1986), 9.

<sup>10</sup> These terms are placed in quotes to point out that the authors believe that such pursuits should be considered neither discoverable nor helpful.

many counselors away from biblical sufficiency through anecdotes of efficacy or research studies that suggest there are neurobiological markers or causal links behind various forms of psychological distress. One would expect the psychologies to present paradigms of explanation supported by hard evidence concerning the nature and cause of mental disorders, the relation of mental disorders to physical illness, and treatments for such disorders. In reality, neither quantitative evidence nor a track record of reliable scientific research supports these endeavors to date.<sup>11</sup>

As common grace provides context and explanation for the tension felt between total depravity and human flourishing, its complexity relating to the nature and function of biblical counseling fundamentally deals with the legitimacy and applicability of the knowledge of unregenerate men. Are non-believers capable of possessing wisdom and insight about man's purpose, spiritual distress, and remedies for matters of the heart? If so, by what measure or standard is the veracity of secular theories and the knowledge determined and tested? Currently, there are ongoing debates between counselors regarding the limit and scope of common grace for these very reasons.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, instead of biblical counselors debating with those outside of the BCM (where such debates typically occurred in the past), these points of difference and quests for clarity are taking place between those who are claiming to operate *within* the BCM.<sup>13</sup> Neo-integrationists

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<sup>11</sup> For example, while DSM-III listed 265 disorders (most of which still exist in DSM-V largely unaltered), we know that most of these were established on the basis of scant and largely inconsistent research. As the Chairman of DSM III, Robert Spitzer, put it, "For many of the disorders that were added, there wasn't a tremendous amount of research, and certainly there wasn't research on the particular way that we defined these disorders." See "Unrecognised Facts about Modern Psychiatric Practice" (Council for Evidence-Based Psychiatry, 2014), 7, <https://cepu.org/>. See also Joanna Moncrieff, *Chemically Imbalanced: The Making and Unmaking of the Serotonin Myth* (Cheltenham: FLINT, imprint of The History Press, 2025).

<sup>12</sup> See "The Sufficiency Statement," December 1, 2024, <https://sufficiencystatement.com/>.

<sup>13</sup> A few examples of these include Beth Broom, "Our Ministry Philosophy," Christian Trauma Healing Network, accessed January 20, 2024, <https://christiantraumahealingnetwork.org/about/>; Jason Kovacs and Kevin Stratton, *Trauma-Informed Care and the Church*, Podcast (Indianapolis: Gospel Care Collective, 2023), <https://www.gospelcarecollective.com/gospelcarepodcast/>; Nate Brooks, "The Bible Keeps Record of Trauma. But Is It Trauma Informed?," Christianity Today, November 4, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/november-web-only/bible-trauma-informed-christian-counselor.html>; "Our Philosophy," Metroplex Wellness & Counseling, May 10, 2024, <https://www.metroplexcounseling.com/philosophy/>. For an example of eclecticism in practice, Metroplex Wellness and Counseling offers what they call a holistic approach to mental health treatment that includes wellness pathways, enneagram coaching, brain gauge cognitive assessment, micro-current neurofeedback therapy, and more.



claim that since we are embodied souls and the relationship between the physical body and immaterial soul is complex, we should readily embrace new discoveries that illuminate the etiology of body-soul problems as well as various psychosomatic interventions as part of a “holistic” approach to biblical counseling.<sup>14</sup>

The Spring 2024 issue of the *Southeastern Theological Review* features articles written by professors of a clinically informed biblical counseling program. One of the professors, Brad Hambrick, proposed that believers integrate secular knowledge into their counseling system because “it is good stewardship of common grace: God grants wisdom and insight to the just and unjust, the redeemed and unredeemed; therefore, we should be willing to learn from both.”<sup>15</sup> In the same journal another counseling faculty member, Kristen Kellen, claimed, “[There is a] necessity of understanding common grace truths/realities in order to properly understand special revelation truth. Common grace gives richness, clarity, and dimension to what God has revealed in his word.”<sup>16</sup> Both of these articulations of common grace in relation to biblical soul care betray a faulty understanding of the doctrine that has major implications for the sufficiency of Scripture in

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Notice that this is different from a trichotomous approach of delegating the problems of men to the various experts (e.g., the biological issues to the physician, the psychological issues to the psychiatrist, and the spiritual matters to the pastor).

<sup>14</sup> For this chapter we are using the term *neo-integrationists* to describe those who identify as biblical counselors (many of whom operate within biblical counseling circles), but in theory and practice present a modified version of classic integrationism. Other terms that identify these counselors include Redemptive Counselors, Clinically Informed Biblical Counselors, and Holistic Biblical Counselors, among others. See Nate Brooks et al., “What Is Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?” (Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, July 8, 2024), <https://www.sebts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/What-is-RCCIBC.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Brad Hambrick, “Southeastern Theological Review: SEBTS Counseling Professors Roundtable: As It Is and As It Could Be,” *Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary* 15, 1 (Spring 2024): 79. Hambrick provides two other reasons for integration: 1) It is wise: We should seek to learn from those who excel in their work, even when we disagree with their presuppositions and need to redemptively recontextualize their work; and 2) It is inevitable: We are strongly influenced, for better and worse, by the sources of knowledge around us; therefore, it is better to be intentional about filtering those influences than pretending we are impenetrable.” The authors of this chapter question just how the concept of wisdom could be applied, however, to those who are unregenerate. For details on central affirmations of Southeastern’s program see, “Central Affirmations of Southeastern’s Biblical Counseling Program” (Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, n.d.), [https://catalog.sebts.edu/mime/media/26/565/SEBTS\\_BiblicalCounselingAffirmations.pdf](https://catalog.sebts.edu/mime/media/26/565/SEBTS_BiblicalCounselingAffirmations.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Brad Hambrick, “Southeastern Theological Review: SEBTS Counseling Professors Roundtable: As It Is and As It Could Be,” *Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary* 15, 1 (Spring 2024): 80.

counseling. In brief, if we give assent to the arguments made by such neo-integrationists, then nearly any adoption of secular counseling theory or methodology can be justified under the theological category of common grace as long as such theories or methods can be characterized as helpful, scientific, and evidence-based and do not seem to contradict Scripture. So, does the way clinically informed biblical counselors describe and apply common grace faithfully represent the doctrine, and does it grant epistemological permission to supplement Scripture with human insights into the immaterial nature of man?

To answer these questions and more, one must begin with a clear definition of common grace. We define common grace as *God's non-salvific yet kind posture towards all mankind, displayed in the delay of final judgment, the restraint of sin's full impact on the earth, and the bestowal of temporal gifts for the providential preservation of the world; thus, the doctrine remains an expression of God's communicable attributes of kindness and goodness to all men.*<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, mankind is a beneficiary of God's goodness; however, this doctrine does not grant epistemological permission to integrate secular knowledge with God's sufficient Word for soul care since all human epistemological endeavors are derivative of God's revelation and wisdom.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the goal of counseling is sanctification, and sanctification cannot be supplemented or achieved by man-initiated insights or discoveries. For this article, we argue that biblical counseling does not rely on the notion of common grace insights for sanctification, nor does common grace grant believers permission to integrate secular knowledge with Scripture because this doctrine is about God's universal goodness in preserving life until the time of judgment—not about providing a body of knowledge outside Scripture for counseling derived from man's sin-corrupted intellectual endeavors. We will seek to defend this thesis by

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<sup>17</sup> See Psalm 145:9; Ezekiel 18:23; 33:11; Matthew 5:44-45; Luke 2:14; Acts 14:16-17; and Romans 2:4, 14.

<sup>18</sup> For an exegetical treatise on revelational epistemology, see George Zemek, "Exegetical and Theological Bases for a Consistently Presuppositional Approach to Apologetics" (Doctoral dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1982), [https://veritasdomain.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/zemek\\_apologetics.pdf](https://veritasdomain.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/zemek_apologetics.pdf).

addressing the ways this doctrine has been addressed at various times in history and bringing further explanation behind our definition of common grace so that biblical counselors can appropriately grasp its limitations and scope as it relates to the task of soul care and counseling. We will conclude the article with implications that this doctrine has on biblical counseling when misunderstood or misapplied.

### **Theological and Historical Development of Common Grace**

To have a counseling system that is distinctly Christian requires precision for the doctrine of common grace because where its limits and scope are defined will determine the possibility and extent of utilizing secular knowledge in counseling. Historically, Reformed theologians sought to address this doctrine within their particular contexts and often articulated different emphases regarding the purpose and operations of common grace in the world. For instance, John Calvin reacted against Roman Catholic doctrines of sin and grace with common grace as a fundamental and crucial step in his argument against the Pelagian or semi-Pelagianism of his day.<sup>19</sup> Abraham Kuyper sought to answer the question concerning the value of non-Christian culture, science, and philosophy with this doctrine.<sup>20</sup> More recently, Cornelius Van Til developed a reconstructivist view

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<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that the subject of common grace in Calvin's thought has generated a number of divergent interpretations among scholars. First, there are interpreters who argue that Calvin's theology elicits a fairly detailed doctrine of common grace, with some writers linking this doctrine to Calvin's treatment of the gospel-offer question. Second, there are those who argue that Calvin's thought only sets forth this doctrine in an embryonic form, being left undeveloped, informal, and/or on the periphery of his theology. Third, a few writers maintain that any notion of common grace that might seem to be present in Calvin's thought constitutes a gross inconsistency in the Reformed thinking and perhaps even reveals that Calvin was given at times to flagrant contradictions. See J. Mark Beach, "Calvin's Treatment of the Offer of the Gospel and Divine Grace," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 22 (2011): 55–76; Richard Arden Couch, "An Evaluation and Reformulation of the Doctrine of Common Grace in the Reformed Tradition" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1959); Walter Campbell-Jack, "Grace without Christ? The Doctrine of Common Grace in Dutch-American Neo-Calvinism" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1992).

<sup>20</sup> Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) was a Dutch theologian, statesman, and journalist who led the Anti-Revolutionary Party, an orthodox Calvinist group, to a position of political power and served as prime minister of the Netherlands from 1901 to 1905. His three-volume, 1700-page study on *De Gemeene Gratie* (Common Grace) is the lengthiest formulation of this doctrine to date among Reformed theologians.

of common grace, which has become a key feature in presuppositional apologetics.<sup>21</sup> These examples demonstrate the nuances of common grace in historical theology as it pertains to the nature, benefits, purpose, and means through which this doctrine operates. So, while every instance of the doctrine of common grace in church history's literary corpus cannot be covered in this brief article, for the purpose of this discussion, it is important to point out that even among like-minded biblical counselors, there are some fine distinctions in how we would define common grace.

### **Common Grace in Biblical Counseling**

As we narrow our focus to the contemporary field of biblical counseling, there are figures who hold to a faithful biblical counseling position who help us by providing clarity on this doctrine while upholding the sufficiency of Scripture. Among them, Heath Lambert, senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida, and former executive director of the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC), has understood common grace as “the good kindness of God that he shows to all people regardless of whether they have experienced the salvation that comes through Jesus Christ.”<sup>22</sup> Lambert goes on to describe three categories of God's common grace to believers and unbelievers—divine moral provision, divine physical provision, and divine intellectual provision.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, Marshall Adkins, Assistant Professor of Biblical Counseling at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, has a working definition of common grace that affirms it as “God's

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<sup>21</sup> Van Til wanted to provide a “third way” to think about the common grace problem: “Going off to the right by denying common grace [as with Hoeksema] or going off to the left by affirming a theory of common grace patterned after the natural theology of Rome [as in some of Kuyper's formulations] is to fail, to this extent, to challenge the wisdom of the world.” (Cornelius Van Til and K. Scott Oliphint, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, Second Edition, including the complete text of the original, 1972 edition (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Pub, 2015), 168. See also an upcoming Ph.D. dissertation from Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary by Marshall Adkins entitled “*God is Man's Environment*”: *The Van Tillian Foundation of Biblical Counseling*.

<sup>22</sup> Heath Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling: The Doctrinal Foundations of Counseling Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2016), 67.

<sup>23</sup> Heath Lambert's recent book *Biblical Counseling and Common Grace* provides a more detailed treatment of the topic in comparison to the chapter on common grace from *A Theology of Biblical Counseling* with the three lenses to evaluate the role of common grace in counseling methodology: the lens of assumption, the lens of analysis, and the lens of authority (Heath Lambert, *Biblical Counseling and Common Grace* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherds Press, 2023), 81.

non-saving and undeserved kindness toward all people that includes his delay of final judgment, restraint of sin and evil, provision of external blessings, and providential preservation of the world.<sup>24</sup> Unlike Lambert's three categories of divine provision, Adkins' working definition of common grace does not allow for any divine endowment of moral or intellectual gifts. Rather, cognition is defined as a creational endowment according to the structural aspect of being an image bearer of God. Though articulations vary slightly, all aligned with historic biblical counseling agree that, in exploring this doctrine, there is a distinction between the blessing of intellectual abilities and the use or outcomes of applied intellect in epistemology. This is because non-believers, by their own efforts, are fundamentally unable to use any gift from God—including physical life and health—properly or for its intended end (i.e., the glory and worship of God). In other words, human reasoning does not constitute an epistemological category for spiritual matters within the doctrine of common grace.

Biblical counselors, as opposed to neo-integrationists, have consistently maintained the following tenets that help keep this discussion on track.<sup>25</sup> First, the end-goal and purpose of all *truly* Christian and biblical counseling is sanctification. Second, God has provided in Scripture, and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the only authoritative and sufficient resource for all believers to live in a manner that is holy and pleasing to God (2 Peter 1:3). Third, there is no body of knowledge outside of Scripture that is *necessary* for counseling.<sup>26</sup> These three key tenets, among

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<sup>24</sup> Marshall Adkins, "Revisiting the Doctrine of Common Grace," (Webinar, March 2024).

<sup>25</sup> For more key tenets, see Lou Priolo, *Presuppositions of Biblical Counseling: What Historical Biblical Counselors Really Believe* (Conway, AR: Grace and Truth Books, 2023).

<sup>26</sup> Dr. Keith Evans aptly asked: "What resources can we incorporate into counseling before it becomes integration?" To which he answered, "The elements of biblical counseling are clear: the reading and application of Scripture, prayer, compassionate presence, being quick to listen, speaking truth in love, offering words that build up and give grace, and doing all this under the oversight of the church. These are the essential building blocks of biblical soul care. The *circumstances* of counseling—shaped by wisdom, culture, and the light of nature—will vary, and they need not threaten our commitment to faithfulness. Scientific and medical interventions, when received with thanksgiving, may have a rightful place in personal care. But that place is in the domain of medicine—not in the foundational methodology of pastoral care and counseling." For more, see Keith Evans, *The Use of Extra Biblical Methods in Counseling: Elements and Circumstances* (Kansas City, MO: Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, 2025).

others, are held in agreement among traditional biblical counselors and point to why we would all disagree with Hambrick's statement that "God "grants" wisdom and insight to the just and unjust, the redeemed and unredeemed," which is an outright denial of biblical anthropology because no one seeks after God, no one does good, the natural man cannot understand the things of God, and non-believers will keep on seeing but will not truly perceive spiritual things (Isaiah 64:6; Romans 3:9-23; 1 Corinthians 2:14; Matthew 13:13-15).<sup>27</sup>

### Common Grace Complexities

Of course, we recognize that the tension between common grace and the noetic effects of sin is something that we continue to wrestle within the BCM.<sup>28</sup> Another tension that requires clear thinking and careful biblical study is the fact that the *imago dei* is inherently structural which suggests that humans (whether regenerate or not) have the capacity for rational thought. Man can think critically, and he possesses memory, imagination, creativity, and language skills.<sup>29</sup> Due to this substantive view of the *imago dei*, even unregenerate people can display varying levels of intellectual ability, cultural achievements, and various social (e.g., medical or technological) advancements.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Brad Hambrick, "Southeastern Theological Review: SEBTS Counseling Professors Roundtable: As It Is and As It Could Be," *Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary* 15, 1 (Spring 2024), 79.

<sup>28</sup> So, we are placed on the horns of a dilemma, a paradox that, as Murray said, poses "very insistent questions," a riddle that, as Kuyper said, seems "in itself insoluble." We cannot deny what the Bible teaches about man's total depravity and need for the Spirit's regenerating power to submit to God's truth. Therefore, we cannot deny that a radical spiritual antithesis places Christian thought and non-Christian thought in diametrical opposition to each other. Yet, we cannot dismiss the experience of non-Christians being virtuous, intellectually gifted, and sometimes even exercising discernment better than Christians. See Dennis E. Johnson, "Spiritual Antithesis: Common Grace, and Practical Theology," Westminster Seminary California, *The Paradox of Common Grace* (blog), n.d., 76, <https://www.wscal.edu/resource/spiritual-antithesis-common-grace-and-practical-theology/>.

<sup>29</sup> Three views have been offered to answer the question of how exactly man is made in the image of God: substantive, functional, or relational. The author takes the substantive view that the image of God is part of man (i.e., ontologically, volitionally, intellectually, emotionally, relationally, and functionally bearing the image of God); it is not just something that he does. See MacArthur, *Biblical Doctrine*, 412; Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans [u.a.], 1986); G.C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God (Studies in Dogmatics)* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1962).

<sup>30</sup> Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*; Dennis E. Johnson, "Spiritual Antithesis: Common Grace, and Practical Theology," Westminster Seminary California, *The Paradox of Common Grace* (blog), n.d., <https://www.wscal.edu/resource/spiritual-antithesis-common-grace-and-practical-theology/>.

Correspondingly, the doctrine of total depravity means that original sin corrupts every aspect of human nature, including cognitive abilities.<sup>31</sup> The ultimate result of noetic effects of sin is that man will use his mind in pursuit of sin (Mark 7:20; Matthew 15:19; Romans 8:5; Ephesians 4:17). In fact, Scripture describes the unregenerate man's mind as "darkened in their understanding," "suppresses the truth in unrighteousness," "hostile in mind," "alienated from the life of God because of ignorance," and this is why "God has made foolish the wisdom of the world" (Ephesians 4:17-19; Colossians 1:21; Romans 1:18; 1 Corinthians 1:20b). So, if man's ongoing cognitive ability stems from bearing God's image, yet his mind remains opposed to God and His truth, then the question persists: Is knowledge from unbelievers useful for soul care?<sup>32</sup>

While this article cannot answer all of the tensions presented with the debates surrounding common grace, we propose that biblical counselors ought to pay close attention to how we define the scope of common grace and make a few qualifications to the traditional Reformed view of common grace as it pertains to epistemology. As noted earlier, our definition of common grace is God's non-salvific yet kind posture towards all mankind, displayed in the delay of final judgment, the restraint of sin's full impact on the earth, and the bestowal of temporal gifts for the providential preservation of the world; thus, the doctrine remains an expression of God's communicable

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<sup>31</sup> The term "noetic" is taken from the Greek word *nous* which refers to the mind. Thus, the noetic effects of the fall are the ramifications of sin on man's cognitive abilities. Total depravity has often been misunderstood. Negatively, the concept does not mean: 1) that every human being is as thoroughly depraved as he or she can possibly become, 2) that unregenerate people do not have a conscience by means of which they can distinguish between good and evil, 3) that unregenerate people will invariably indulge in every conceivable form of sin, or 4) that unregenerate people are unable to perform certain actions that have relative goodness, which corresponds with what Jesus said: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children..." (Matt 7:11). Total depravity, then, means that the impact of sin on the person covers three related concepts: 1) the pollution and corruption of all aspects of a person, 2) the complete inability of a person to please God, and 3) universality, in that all are conceived and born as sinners. See Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 150; MacArthur, *Biblical Doctrine*, 467.

<sup>32</sup> While cognition is a creational endowment included in the substantive view of being an image bearer of God, this view still does not sufficiently account for the variation in people's cognitive ability as well as other physical talents. Also, variation in cognitive ability is not an expression of the degree of *imago dei* (otherwise, someone who is cognitively impaired or has any kind of physical disability would be less of an image bearer). This is why intellect/cognition is not merely part of the substantive view of man as an image bearer; intellect, talent, artistic, or physical abilities are also considered as God's gifts/blessings that are given to people at their creation under common grace. This view is not the same as an ongoing empowerment or work of the Spirit inciting unregenerate people with these gifts or blessings.

attributes of kindness and goodness. In this definition, we have sought to make clear that common grace should *never* be understood in terms of positive contributions made by unregenerate men through discoveries, insights, or “good deeds.” This is because the doctrine of common grace is about God’s character and attributes, not the outcome or results of man’s use of God’s gifts.<sup>33</sup> The ontological chasm between God and man means that crediting human intellectual outcomes to common grace blurs the Creator-creature distinction and undermines God’s glory, goodness, and kindness toward the rebellious. Furthermore, common grace does not endow unbelievers with the ability to uncover spiritual truth about God or the world beyond what is revealed in creation (suppressed in unrighteousness) and in Scripture.

### Common Grace Benefits

In particular, God’s common grace provides mankind with three benefits that we point out in our definition.<sup>34</sup> Firstly, it allows for the delay of final judgment to afford sinners time to hear the gospel so that they might be repent and be saved (Ezekiel 18:3, 32; 2 Peter 2:5; 1 Timothy 4:10).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> For instance, Picasso’s art could be understood as a positive contribution made by an unregenerate man due to the use of God’s gifts, but his work should not be understood this way according to God’s standards. Rather, his creativity is evidence that God is good and has given us good gifts (including the artistic ability of some) to enjoy His goodness.

<sup>34</sup> MacArthur, *Biblical Doctrine*, 488. Some Reformed theologians have held that “natural benefits accrue to the whole human race from the death of Christ, and that in these benefits the unbelieving, the impenitent, and the reprobate also share” (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 432; Geerhardus Vos and Richard B. Gaffin, *Reformed Dogmatics: A System of Christian Theology*, Single volume edition (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2020), 4:12-15; Van Leeuwen, “Herman Bavinck’s ‘Common Grace.’”). 1 John 2:2 “and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for *those of the whole world*” is often referenced to substantiate this view that there are secondary and indirect benefits on mankind indiscriminately as a result of the redemptive, atoning work of Christ. For more on a critique of the multiple intentions view of the atonement of Christ, see Michael Riccardi, *To Save Sinners: A Critical Evaluation of the Multiple Intentions View of the Atonement* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2023). But for the purpose of this paper, the author agrees with MacArthur’s three benefits of common grace (restraint of sin, temporal blessings, and free offer of the Gospel to all), and the divine intention for the atonement does not include natural benefits for the reprobate. Scripture testifies that the divine intention for the atonement was to save sinners (Luke 19:10; John 3:16–17; 12:46–47; 1 Tim 1:15; 1 John 4:14), to satisfy divine wrath (Heb 2:17), to take away sin (1 John 3:5; cf. John 1:29), to impart spiritual life (John 6:51; 10:10; 1 John 4:9), to free captives from slavery (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45; Heb 2:14–15; 1 Tim 2:6), to rescue from evil (Gal 1:4), to impute righteousness (2 Cor 5:21), to impart adoption (Gal 4:5), to sanctify His people (John 17:19; 2 Cor 5:15; Eph 5:25–27; Tit 2:14; Heb 13:12; 1 Pet 2:24), and to glorify us and bring us into the presence of God (Heb 2:10; 1 Pet 3:18).

<sup>35</sup> Calvin’s conception of common grace also includes the free offer of the gospel to all mankind. Calvin portrays God as genuinely offering salvation to all sinners, this being an expression of divine love, but it is not for us to know why God doesn’t choose to convert all to whom that call of salvation comes. Calvin is content to leave this “unresolved.” He does



Secondly, it temporarily restrains sin and works against sin's damaging effects through the conscience, which enables sinners to understand the difference between right and wrong (Romans 2:15), the authority of parents (Proverbs 2:1-5), and the institution of civil government to maintain order in human society. In any case, common grace cannot reverse the curse of sins. For example, the body will decay despite medicine or technological advancement to slow that decay. Instead, it should be emphasized that all things fall under God's providential preservation of the created world until the culmination of redemptive history. Lastly, common grace enables unbelievers to enjoy *temporal* gifts in this life (Psalm 50:2; 104:14-15; Matthew 5:45; Acts 14:15-17; 17:25). Such gifts include physical blessings in the sphere of creation including the rain and sunshine (Matthew 5:45; Psalm 104:14-15), the possibility of rational thought, and physical abilities (Exodus 31:2-11; 35:30-35; 2 Chronicles 2:13-14; Ecclesiastes 1:16; Psalm 73:3-4; James 1:17).<sup>36</sup> These are *temporal* in the sense that they do not have any spiritual or eternal value or good, and they are given to mankind on this side of heaven as an expression of God's universal benevolence and kindness.

The expression of God's provision in these blessings points towards the kindness of God for all mankind to repent and place their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Ultimately, this is the central purpose and goal of common grace as a servant of special revelation.<sup>37</sup> As the apostle Paul explained in Romans 2:9, "Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" In

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not allow God's will of decree to trump his will of precept. See Beach, "Calvin's Treatment of the Offer of the Gospel and Divine Grace"; Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John Thomas McNeill, *The Library of Christian Classics* (Louisville, Ky. London: Westminster John Knox Press, 20).

<sup>36</sup> It may be argued that man's capability of rational or moral thought should be associated more with the doctrine of the *imago dei* than common grace. Either way, it is important to note, as the authors here do, that the effects of the Fall do negatively impact the inner workings of the heart of man.

<sup>37</sup> For instance, Lambert talks about all the good gifts of common grace as being "the servant of God's special revelation in Scripture. Its purpose is to lead us to the Scripture so that we can access God's infinite and special revelation to his people." See Heath Lambert, "Priests in the Garden, Zombies in the Wilderness, and Prophets on the Wall: The Current State of the Contemporary Biblical Counseling Movement," First Baptist Church Jacksonville, *First Thoughts* (blog), May 13, 2024, <https://fbcjax.com/first-thoughts/priests-in-the-garden-zombies-in-the-wilderness-and-prophets-on-the-wall-the-current-state-of-the-contemporary-biblical-counseling-movement/>.

all the scriptural data, the doctrine of common grace only pertains to God's act of giving gifts (e.g., natural abilities of intellect, physical and artistic abilities, and material blessings, etc.) and restraining sin and delaying judgment, and has nothing to do with what man does with any such abilities.<sup>38</sup> This is because non-believers are unable to steward God's grace to worship and glorify God (1 Peter 4:10; Matthew 24:45-51).<sup>39</sup> Since the Fall, man has done with his intellect what he has also done with the rest of his life, using the good gifts from God for his own temporary benefit, all the while refusing to acknowledge the One in whom "we live, and move, and have our being" (Romans 1:21; Acts 17:28a).

Another clarification of common grace involves God's sovereignty in His creation, also known as providence. This means that God is involved with all created things in such a way that He keeps them existing and maintains the properties with which He created them, He governs all creatures, actions, and things, and He directs them to accomplish His purposes to the praise of His glory.<sup>40</sup> God preserves and providentially directs all things to accomplish His purposes (Job 42:2), and any relatively good outcome or progress that is accomplished by mankind falls under God's sovereign rule over His creation and not in man's ability (Psalm 103:19; Ephesians 1:11; 1 Corinthians 15:27). For example, the intellect of J. Robert Oppenheimer is a gift from God, but his use of the gift to create the atomic bomb is under God's sovereignty and providence, not the purview of common grace. Another example is found in lobotomy, which was a method used to

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<sup>38</sup> The outcome of any such provision best fits under the category of God's sovereignty and providence. Of God's sovereignty and providence, see Arthur W. Pink, *Sovereignty of God - Unabridged HC* (New Jersey: Reformed Brothers Books, 2001); John Piper, *Providence* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2020), 30. The word *providence* is built from the word *provide*, which has two parts: *pro* (Latin "forward," "on behalf of") and *vide* (Latin "to see"). So, in reference to God, the noun *providence* means "the act of purposefully providing for or sustaining and governing the world."

<sup>39</sup> In Matthew 24:45-51, the evil slave represents an unbeliever who refuses to take seriously the promise of Christ's return. Though he is an unbeliever, he is nonetheless accountable to Christ for the stewardship of his time. Jesus was teaching that every person in the world holds his life, natural abilities, wealth, and possessions in trust from God and must give an account of how all these gifts are used for the glory of God.

<sup>40</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England: Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press ; Zondervan Pub. House, 1994), 315, 333.

sever brain tissue in the treatment of severe psychiatric disorders. It offered much hope to the masses at the time, was considered by many as the height of medical progress and even won Portuguese neurologist António Egas Moniz a Nobel Peace Prize in medicine in 1949. But this horrific and dehumanizing psychosurgery has since been denounced in the public imagination between the guillotine and straightjackets.<sup>41</sup>

Discoveries, advancements, or scientific breakthroughs at one point in time may be reversed or judged as harmful to those they were intended to help. Because Psalm 16:2 states, “You are my Lord, I have no good apart from you,” non-believers are unable to apprehend what is truly good or do what is truly good if they do not acknowledge that God is the ultimate source of goodness (Romans 3:12b; Isaiah 64:6). For this reason, believers are certainly not at the mercy of the next intellectual endeavor of unbelievers for the care of souls—since they have been given the words of eternal life (John 6:68). Therefore, believers must maintain the doctrine of common grace as a manifestation of God’s communicable attributes of goodness and kindness, and this doctrine must not be misapplied to the contribution of men through their intellectual endeavors.

### **A Scriptural Paradigm**

Besides maintaining a biblical definition of common grace, counselors ought to tether their theology to the texts of Scripture instead of their own experiences.<sup>42</sup> In other words, in one’s

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<sup>41</sup> Jeffrey A. Lieberman, *Shrinks: The Untold Story of Psychiatry* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2015), 10. Lieberman, who served as president of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) from May 2013 to May 2014, noted that the history of psychiatry has always been a search to answer the question, “What is mental illness? Where does it come from? What do we do with it?” and the field “has always been susceptible to ideas that are outlandish or downright bizarre: the deplorable insane asylums, the fever therapies, the induced comas, the lobotomies.” Consider also Julius Wagner-Jauregg, a preeminent Austrian psychiatrist, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1927 for the development of malaria therapy for the treatment of neurosyphilis, or general paresis of the insane. Wagner-Jauregg exposed patients to malaria-infected blood to supposedly cure or alleviate general paralysis.

<sup>42</sup> Key passages that are used to substantiate the doctrine of common grace typically include Matthew 5:45; Luke 6:35-36; Acts 14:16-17; and Psalm 145:9.

hermeneutical endeavor to derive clarity on any particular doctrine, the clearest text in Scripture must govern the less clearer texts to formulate one's theology.<sup>43</sup> The epistemic paradigm of Romans 1:18–32, which is one of the clearer texts of Scripture that accounts for the noetic effects of sin and the intellectual abilities of the unregenerate, should be revisited in order to biblically maintain the spiritual distinction between believers and unbelievers in one's understanding of the doctrine of common grace.<sup>44</sup>

In this passage, man's universal problem is that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men (Romans 1:18a), which is why every person is without excuse.<sup>45</sup> This is because the unrighteous suppress the truth of God (v. 18), refuse to believe that which has been revealed to them (v. 19), are without excuse (v. 20), refuse to honor or give thanks to their Creator (v. 21), are futile in their thinking (v. 21), are fools who profess to be wise (v. 22), are prone to idolatry (v. 23), are given to various lusts that dishonor their mortal bodies (v. 24), exchange the truth of God for a lie (v. 25a), worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator (v. 25b), are given over to degrading passions (v. 26-27), have a depraved mind (v. 28a), are filled with all unrighteousness (v. 29), are haters of God (v. 30), are without understanding (v. 31), and

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<sup>43</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching*, 1st paperback ed (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1998); Abner Chou, "A Hermeneutical Evaluation of the Christocentric Hermeneutic," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 27, 2 (2016).

<sup>44</sup> The overarching theme of Romans is the righteousness that comes from God: the glorious truth that God justifies guilty, condemned sinners by grace alone through faith in Christ alone. Chapters 1–11 present the theological truths of that doctrine, while chapters 12–16 detail its practical outworking in the lives of individual believers and the life of the whole church. This passage is in the sectional context of 1:18 to 3:20 whereby the apostle Paul expounds on the need for God's righteousness because every person is under the just condemnation of God (the unrighteous Gentiles in 1:18-32, the unrighteous Jews in 2:1-3:8 and the unrighteous mankind in 3:9-20). See Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1996); C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004); Daniel M. Doriani, *Romans, Reformed Expository Commentaries* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2021).

<sup>45</sup> While this passage has been recently used to justify the place of natural theology in the church, the context of this passage must be interpreted considering its immediate context—the wrath of God is revealed from heaven (v. 18a), not the usefulness of the natural man's reasoning. For more, see Jeffrey D. Johnson, *Saving Natural Theology from Thomas Aquinas* (New York, NY: Free Grace Press, 2021); Michael Sudduth, *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology (Routledge Philosophy of Religion Series)* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016).

give hearty approval to those who practice things that are worthy of death (v. 32). With this biblical description of the condition of mankind, it is evident that the noetic effects of sin distort one's intellect so that evil appears as good and good as evil (Isaiah 5:20), and a person is both intellectually and morally corrupted by the dominion of sin. Nonetheless, the name *homo sapiens* that we have given to describe mankind, meaning "the wise thinking creature," is often how we view ourselves. Certainly, this does not mean that individuals do not have any intellectual capacity,<sup>46</sup> but Scripture's assessment of man is that the intellectual bent and ambition of human beings operate as mechanisms to actively suppress the truth of God, and they suppress the truth in *unrighteousness*.<sup>47</sup> Due to the suppression of God's truth in unrighteousness, man's knowledge of everything else in creation is subjected to error, misinterpretation, and misuse (Job 12:25a; Deuteronomy 28:29a). It would be erroneous to place greater weight on man's fallible reason and life experiences than God's inerrant revelation. Man's temptation is always to elevate human knowledge to the level of God's revelation so that he can refashion a god of his own making (Psalm 50:21). Like the use of general revelation by earlier integrationists, it would be a mistake to categorize human knowledge under the doctrine of common grace since God does not reveal truth or insights that are necessary for the care of souls through man's intellect.

In God's wisdom, He restrains sin to some extent and graciously blesses all people without distinction until the culmination of redemptive history when Christ returns to rule and reign (2 Peter

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<sup>46</sup> Sometimes, non-believers can demonstrate common sense, analysis, and affirmation of various facts. Even so, these individuals do not see *properly* due to the noetic effects and their unregenerate state. For examples, see Robert Whitaker, *Anatomy of an Epidemic: Magic Bullets, Psychiatric Drugs, and the Astonishing Rise of Mental Illness in America*, Paperback edition (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 2015); Horwitz, *DSM*; Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* (Washington, D.C: Regnery Publishing, 2021); Abigail Shrier, *Bad Therapy: Why the Kids Aren't Growing Up* (New York: Sentinel, 2024).

<sup>47</sup> Some modern schools of philosophy are even now catching onto this truth that the Bible had already made clear — the will is the great engine of the intellect. The conceit of the modern age was the belief that the intellect is neutral because human beings were viewed as basically good or morally neutral. That worldview saw ignorance as the great enemy and enlightenment as the answer. Enlightenment cannot be the answer, however, because the will drives the intellect. See Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*; John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (P&R Publishing, 2015).

3:13; Revelation 21:1-4). This means that any positive contribution made by unregenerate men belongs solely to God's universal benevolence to men, and men do not participate in generating anything necessary for soul care. Anthony Hoekema aptly noted that, "if God did not restrain sin in the unregenerate world, this earth would be like hell... Belief in common grace [should not] be used as an excuse for softening the antithesis between a Christian worldview and a non-Christian one, or toning down of biblical teaching on the depravity of man, or an absolute necessity of regeneration."<sup>48</sup> In other words, when we look at the biblical defense of the epistemological and ethical antithesis between believers and non-believers, we ought to maintain this spiritual distinction and recognize that there will not be any *necessary* discovery from unbelievers for the care of souls. This is because counseling is by its very essence spiritual (1 Corinthians 2:14), and since God has given us everything we need for life and godliness, Scripture offers us a comprehensive counseling system (2 Peter 1:3). For this reason, Heath Lambert's exhortation on the supremacy and sufficiency of Scripture in our counseling system is worth heeding:

I am ready to promise that eternity will reveal countless counselees who would gladly trade their time engaging such therapies, regardless of any common grace value they may hold, for time spent lingering over the Word of God... Common grace never stops being a servant. Common grace does not and cannot supply the strategy or content of counseling conversations. That role is reserved for special grace, and the *Holy Scriptures are alone sufficient* for that (emphasis mine).<sup>49</sup>

### **Implications for Misunderstanding and Misapplying Common Grace**

Without the scriptural parameters for this important doctrine, one is exposed to a slippery slope that ultimately conflates the expression of God's universal benevolence to men with the discoveries of men about mankind and the world. Instead of being beneficiaries of God's common

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<sup>48</sup> Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 199–200. In fact, this is why Calvin's view of common grace grew out of a recognition of the depravity of man.

<sup>49</sup> Lambert, *Biblical Counseling and Common Grace*, 74, 81.

grace, mankind could be wrongly perceived as contributing towards or producing insights as a result common grace regarding the potential utility of secular knowledge (i.e., “common grace-truths or common grace-insights” used in soul care). The implications of misapplying this doctrine include redefining the nature of counseling and undermining the sufficiency of Scripture for soul care.

When biblical counselors redefine the nature of counseling from being conformed into the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18; Colossians 1:28-29; Romans 8:29) to a form of holistic and wellness care—essentially a healthcare approach that considers a person’s physical, emotional, social, psychological, and spiritual needs—they are also redefining the very nature of sanctification.<sup>50</sup> For instance, Kellen argues that biblical counselors “can use secular methods, within a biblical framework and paired with biblical teaching, in such a way that they *lead toward sanctification*, and in doing so, they are oriented toward God’s glory and the *counselee’s conformity to Christ*.”<sup>51</sup>

In a position paper, entitled “What is Redemptive Counseling/Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling,” the authors likewise claim that “specific tools [which] emerge from secular psychological theories may be filled with biblical content and employed to advance sanctification in the life of their counselees.”<sup>52</sup> Note that these authors assert that pagan theories and methods can be baptized into Christian thought and be employed for the purpose of sanctification. However, what does Scripture lack for the purpose and scope of sanctification and how can God’s wisdom be syncretized with man’s wisdom which is earthly, natural, and demonic?<sup>53</sup> If the counselee has physical health concerns, counselors should and must refer them to receive proper medical treatment for those issues. To create a new category of holistic or psychological wellness care that

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<sup>50</sup> Madineh Jasemi et al., “A Concept Analysis of Holistic Care by Hybrid Model,” *Journal of Palliative Care* 23, 1 (2017): 72, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5294442/pdf/IJPC-23-71.pdf>.

<sup>51</sup> Emphasis added. Kristin Kellen, “Southeastern Theological Review: SEBTS Counseling Professors Roundtable: As It Is and As It Could Be,” 75.

<sup>52</sup> Brooks et al., “What Is Redemptive Counseling / Clinically Informed Biblical Counseling?,” 7.

<sup>53</sup> See James 3:15

straddles the fence between physical (outer man) and spiritual (inner man) is to provide a form of care that is neither truly physical nor spiritual.<sup>54</sup>

More importantly, if believers provide mere coping mechanism to their counselees, they would be like the false prophets in Jeremiah's time who "healed the brokenness of people superficially, saying 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14). This is because only the ministry of the Word through the Holy Spirit can provide true peace to the vexations of one's soul, and the syncretism of secular interventions with Scripture will hinder the believer from depending on and trusting in God.<sup>55</sup> When an individual experiences spiritual distress, he should and must turn to God who alone is powerful to save and sanctify (Psalm 42:5, 11), but when biblical counselors provide temporal remedies to assuage one's spiritual distress, men will end up finding their hope and help in themselves instead of God. They end up trading in the eternal weight of glory for relief from the light momentary affliction that God ordains for our good and His glory (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Additionally, in cases where non-believers accurately observe the importance of sleep, diet, or other factors that can exacerbate physical health issues or expose spiritual problems, believers do not need to smuggle in piecemeal truisms into their counseling system. This is because when unbelievers affirm true things on occasion, they only do this through what Van Til termed as "borrowed capital."<sup>56</sup> Consider Solomon's words in Ecclesiastes 8:17b: "Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, 'I know,' he cannot discover." This means that unregenerate men cannot see, know, and understand the purpose and problems of men; hence, they cannot provide a proper remedy for the spiritual distress of men. So,

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<sup>54</sup> For more, see Greg E. Gifford, *Lies My Therapist Told Me: Why Christians Should Aim for More than Just Treating Symptoms*, First edition (New York, NY: Broadside Books, 2025).

<sup>55</sup> For a brief article on the Lord's sanctifying purposes through suffering, see Francine Tan, "Suffering Is God's School of Sanctification," Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, November 13, 2025, <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/articles/suffering-school-of-sanctification/>.

<sup>56</sup> John M. Frame and Cornelius Van Til, *Cornelius van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1995).



why would believers unmoor themselves from the sufficiently comprehensive system of care, availed in the spiritual resources of God (the Word, the Spirit, the Church, and the power of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ), for fallible ideas or methodological trinkets that are quasi-salvation that will never satisfy?

The ultimate result of counselors embracing a classic integrationist epistemology along with casting a wide net for what is considered “helpful,” “useful,” and “effective,” is an overtly pragmatic and eclectic approach to counseling that necessarily dilutes and downgrades the view of Scripture’s sufficiency.<sup>57</sup> To be even more exact, any downgrading or diluting of the sufficiency of Scripture is, in theological and practical fact, an outright denial of this doctrine. Lambert brought a helpful appraisal about this point in his consequential essay. He stated, “The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture does not admit degrees. It does not exist on a continuum of extreme to subtle. Like most doctrines, it is either true or not.”<sup>58</sup> Obviously, the sufficiency of Scripture has never been articulated as something that requires Scripture to be exhaustive. Those who would make such claims not only miss the point of biblical counseling, but they also deviate from the position of the BCM, as expressed by David Powlison. He explained that the Christian faith contains *comprehensive internal resources* to enable us to construct a Christian model of counseling whereas secular psychologies do not have *a vital external contribution* in the development of a believer’s counseling system.<sup>59</sup> So, when the Bible is relegated to a supplemental resource which aids in the work of sanctification, it can no longer be seen as sufficient. Its authority now becomes either equal to man’s wisdom or it remains in

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<sup>57</sup> For examples of eclectic approach to counseling, see Francine Tan “The New Eclecticism: A Comprehensive Appraisal of the Contemporary Paradigm of Trauma,” PhD diss., (Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2025).

<sup>58</sup> Lambert, “Priests in the Garden, Zombies in the Wilderness, and Prophets on the Wall: The Current State of the Contemporary Biblical Counseling Movement.”

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

the background as a mere evaluative lens to the superior information found in the social sciences.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, misunderstanding and misapplying the doctrine of common grace in biblical counseling will lead to a redefinition of the nature of counseling from sanctification to a form of pseudo healthcare, and subsequently, a denial of the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture.

## Conclusion

We affirm that common grace is a biblical doctrine that should be embraced by biblical counselors. This doctrine expresses that mankind benefits from God's universal goodness, and that is something for which people should give thanks. However, when rightly articulated and understood, this doctrine does not grant believers permission to integrate secular knowledge with Scripture or to rely on so-called "common grace insights" for sanctification. It does not provide a body of knowledge outside Scripture for counseling derived from man's sin-corrupted intellectual endeavors. Those who advance this flawed argument are unintentionally syncretizing God's truth with human foolishness. The counseling system they promote, rooted in such syncretism, represents a departure from historic biblical counseling. From its inception, the BCM has not ignored how and where this doctrine fits into our philosophy and methodology of counseling. We must continue to contribute to the literature that helps all Christians who counsel develop a proper understanding of related concepts—such as "extra-biblical," "discoveries," and "insights"—while holding firm to a clear stance on Scripture's sufficiency for the ultimate goal of biblical counseling: sanctification. Any

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<sup>60</sup> Integrationists within the fields of Christian counseling and Christian education have theoretically and practically rejected sufficiency for decades. Neo-integrationists are making the same arguments today. See Mark R. McMinn and Clark D. Campbell, *Integrative Psychotherapy: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007); William R. Yount, *Created to Learn* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2010); Stanton L. Jones and Richard E. Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Approach*, 2nd ed (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2011); Megan Anna Neff and Mark R. McMinn, *Embodying Integration: A Fresh Look at Christianity in the Therapy Room*, *Christian Association for Psychological Studies Books* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2020).

articulation by counselors that affirms the necessity of resources, knowledge, insights, discoveries, and the like for sanctification is misguided and should be rejected by faithful biblical counselors.