

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

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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)² 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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² *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.”³ 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 integrationism . . . seeks to appropriate and evaluate secular psychological theory in an eclectic manner under the guidance of Christian ‘control beliefs.’”⁴ Clinically informed counselors desire to employ a “theologically robust theory of integration,”⁵ albeit one that is more attentive theologically than historic integration.⁶ 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.”⁷ 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.⁸ 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.

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

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

⁵ 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.

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

⁷ Powlison, “Critiquing Modern Integrationists,” 28.

⁸ 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.⁹

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,¹⁰ rather than simply using a new phrase to describe the distinct and incompatible practice proposed by the CIBC.¹¹

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.”¹² I was witnessing what Powlison had been observing for years, that “the psychologists seem more biblical and the biblical counselors seem more psychological.”¹³ My concerns were best

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.

¹² 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/?srltid=AfmBOoqxEs4Jmbrj-A_mqLN3fPQjzPoEGTpXgUd-LG1gN6aS0vboYGVE

¹³ 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.”¹⁴ 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 20th 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.¹⁵ As Thomas Oden observed, “the theologians sat at the feet of the psychiatric Gamaliels and seemed to like it.”¹⁶

I trust that the thought leaders of the clinically informed approach do not intend the same trajectory we have witnessed since the early 20th century.¹⁷ 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.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ 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).

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

¹⁷ 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 Counseling¹⁸

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.”¹⁹ 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.”²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.”²² 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

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

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

²⁰ Powlison, *Crucial Issues*, 243.

²¹ 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.

²² 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.²³

Second, the approach confuses a call for the church to ‘send’ missionaries into the mental health complex as servants of the state.²⁴ 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.”²⁵ 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).²⁶

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.²⁷

²³ 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*.

²⁴ 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).

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

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

²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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,

²⁸ 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.”²⁹

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,”³⁰ the clinically informed approach claims that the Scriptures, “have everything necessary to **evaluate** common grace tools.”³¹ 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.”³² 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.”³³ The clinically informed counselors claim their, “. . . practice of *necessity* involves using material not explicitly taught within the pages of Scripture.”³⁴ 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 . . .”³⁵ 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,

²⁹ Powlison, “Cure of Souls,” 276. Emphasis original

³⁰ Ibid.

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

³² Brooks, “Everybody Integrates,” 19. Emphasis added

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

³⁴ Brooks, “Everybody Integrates,” 12.

³⁵ 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.³⁶ 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.”³⁷

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.”³⁸ 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

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

³⁷ Brooks, et.al., *What is Redemptive Counseling*, 6.

³⁸ Powlison, “Critiquing Modern Integrationists,” 24.

counselors. Rather, these tools and methods provide additional ways of engaging the human person that are not explicitly spoken of in the text of scripture.”³⁹ 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.”⁴⁰

I am gravely concerned that we are returning to the psychological faddism born in the 20th 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 nou�etic counseling must be maintained . . . Secular psychologies remain major competitors within the church.⁴¹

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.”⁴² Yet, clinically informed proponents repeatedly describe the *requirement*, *necessity*, and *inevitability* of

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

⁴⁰ 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.

⁴¹ Ibid., 241-242.

⁴² 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.⁴³ 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.”⁴⁴ 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.”⁴⁵ 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.”⁴⁶

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.⁴⁷

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

⁴³ 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.

⁴⁴ Brooks, et.al., 5.

⁴⁵ Brooks, et.al., 6.

⁴⁶ Powlison, “Crucial Issues,” 242.

⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ 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.”⁴⁹ 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

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

⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰

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."⁵¹ 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

⁵⁰ 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.

⁵¹ 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.⁵²

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.”⁵³ 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.”⁵⁴

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.”⁵⁵ 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.”⁵⁶ 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.”⁵⁷ Hambrick adds, “In our care and love for our neighbor, it is an ethical imperative to care for them well... We must integrate well.”⁵⁸

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

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Powlison, “Crucial Issues,” 242

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

⁵⁵ Brooks, “Everybody Integrates,” 12.

⁵⁶ 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/>

⁵⁷ 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.

⁵⁸ 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.”⁵⁹ 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.”⁶⁰

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 . . .”⁶¹ 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?”⁶² 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.”⁶³
- “. . . cognitive primacy is false and CBT is inconsistent with biblical anthropology.”⁶⁴

⁵⁹ 2 Timothy 3:5 and Colossians 2:22-23.

⁶⁰ 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.

⁶¹ 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.

⁶² 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).

⁶³ Ibid., 205.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 210-211.

- “Reformed theology demonstrates the defective nature of such a system [CBT].”⁶⁵
- “Any argument that describes CBT’s heart psychology as consistent with biblical anthropology demonstrates a woefully deficient understanding of what actually constitutes biblical anthropology.”⁶⁶
- “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.”⁶⁷
- “A significant dilemma exists for those who argue that the ‘key assumptions’ of CBT are ‘consistent with Christian theology and biblical anthropology.’”⁶⁸
- “Theologically speaking, insisting upon the autonomy of heart functions [as CBT] is is Pelagian to the core.”⁶⁹
- “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.”⁷⁰
- “. . . 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.”⁷¹
- “Reformed theology highlights the incompatibility of second-wave cognitive therapy with the biblical view of the heart and its functions.”⁷²
- “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.”⁷³

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.⁷⁴

⁶⁵ Ibid., 211.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 211.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 212.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 178.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 179.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 155-156

⁷¹ Ibid., 181.

⁷² Ibid., 13.

⁷³ Ibid., 181.

⁷⁴ 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."⁷⁵ 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."⁷⁶ 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."⁷⁷

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?⁷⁸ 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

⁷⁵ Brooks, "Love the Lord with All Your Heart," 155-156.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 2.

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

⁷⁸ 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.⁷⁹

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.⁸⁰

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.⁸¹ Phrenology, blood-letting, spinning chairs,⁸² lobotomy, eugenics,⁸³ humoral theory,⁸⁴ chemical imbalance theory,⁸⁵ 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

⁷⁹ 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.

⁸⁰ Powlison, *Cure of Soul*, 282.

⁸¹ “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.

⁸² 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.

⁸³ Ikkos, George, Thomas Becker, Giovanni Stanghellini, Francesca Breonio, 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/bj.p.2025.10491>.

⁸⁴ 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.

⁸⁵ 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.⁸⁶

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.”⁸⁷

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

⁸⁶ 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).

⁸⁷ 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.”⁸⁸ 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.”⁸⁹ 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.”⁹⁰ 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

⁸⁸ 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>

⁸⁹ Brooks, “Everybody Integrates,” 12.

⁹⁰ 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."⁹¹ 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."⁹² 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."⁹³

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."⁹⁴ This aim makes sense if a counselor is

⁹¹ Brooks, "Love the Lord with All Your Heart," 180.

⁹² Brooks, et. al., *Redemptive Counseling*, 7.

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

⁹⁴ 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.⁹⁵

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.⁹⁶ 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.⁹⁷

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.⁹⁸ 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).

⁹⁵ 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.

⁹⁶ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 246-248.

⁹⁷ Hebrews 5:14

⁹⁸ 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."⁹⁹ 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.¹⁰⁰ 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

⁹⁹ Powlison, "Crucial Issues," 243.

¹⁰⁰ 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).