

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

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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>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.