

RESPONSES

A RESPONSE TO FRANCINE TAN'S CRITIQUE

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Editor Note: In our original Spring 2025 issue, the JBSC editorial team mistakenly published a response by Dr. Edward Welch that was not intended for publication. We have removed that article and replaced it with the revised response that was intended by him to be included.

This is a response to Francine Tan's article, "Common Grace in Debate: A Response to Edward T. Welch's 'Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor.'"²¹⁸

My article came out of a requested presentation and article from a recent ACBC symposium.²¹⁹ I was asked to do something on common grace. I understood my assignment to be what we can actually learn from others, especially unbelievers, though I might have misinterpreted the request. Either way, Abner Chou had been assigned to present a theology of common grace and biblical sufficiency.²²⁰ I did not want to duplicate that work or include a long prolegomena on common grace. The antithesis was well covered.

My Topic

My interest was "to consider observations made without the ostensible aid of Scripture, and their possible utility for pastoral care and counsel." I

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²¹⁸ Francine Tan, "Common Grace in Debate: A Response to Edward T. Welch's 'Common Grace, Knowing People, and the Biblical Counselor,'" *Journal of Biblical Soul Care* 8:2 (2024).

²¹⁹ JBSC, 8:1, 2024

²²⁰ JBSC, 8:1, 2024.

pursued this for two reasons. One is that I hoped to identify a biblical category that is assumed but overlooked. Another is that I wanted avoid the focus on unbelievers and place it more on us and our own observations that we make with the naked eye, which is a skill we share with unbelievers. My method stretched the intent of the JBSC in that I tried to be personal and concrete.

When you talk about sharing skills with unbelievers in the JBSC you have some explaining to do, so my article does touch on how human depravity is not the entire story with unbelievers. Something “good” persists, and this exists apart from the regenerative work of the Spirit and the light of Scripture. It is good in that you can detect their connection to their creator and they make contributions to life on earth. It is good in that you can have a genuine point of contact with unbelieving neighbors. Those neighbors can be friends who you enjoy, appreciate, see relational and vocational skills in, and admire. This does not deny the radical transformation that believers experience in Christ. It is simply to say that this transformation makes us uniquely capable of having relationships with people who are different from ourselves. All this could be nuanced and developed, but my interests were in what we as believers observe, so I moved on, with the expectation that I was making ordinary comments, which, if denied, would have implications in daily life that I cannot even imagine.

Tan’s Basic Critique

Tan’s prominent concerns, as I understand it, are my sloppiness with the doctrine of common grace, and my elevation of personal experience/observation over Scripture.

On the first issue, I essentially agree with Francine Tan’s general comments about common grace. Her comments review how we are presuppositional creatures. Our presuppositions affect the data. This is axiomatic in both the church and the world, especially since Thomas Kuhn’s, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. But, as I mentioned in my article, assumptions skew some data more than others. They blind irregularly, which means that we consider observations with different worldviews on a case-by- case basis. I agree with Tan’s comments on common grace, but they are incomplete and don’t reach toward the interests of my article.

Regarding sloppiness, I see such things in myself, but I don't think this is highly relevant to the article. There are places where, from my perspective, her critique is a bit demeaning and unnecessary. There are other places where she suggests that I am inconsistent and say two different things. I believe, however, that I am clear on the important matters, and the category of common grace is, by nature, populated by apparent contradictions, paradoxes, mysteries and complexities.

The second issue—the charge that I place empirical data over Scripture—is a significant one. This is simply not true. My article, I think, is clear.

“When secular theories are incorporated into our counsel, the doctrine of sin is the first one to suffer, and when the doctrine of sin is minimized the gospel of Jesus Christ itself is lost. God’s words are our treasure and we love them. Mere human insights do not and should not stir the heart in the same way, and they do not have the prominence of the mystery ‘set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him’” (Ephesians 1:9-10).

“This places common grace within the larger context of Scripture and subordinates it to Christ.”

“The caution in all this is that we do not fall in love with our observations. Though useful and important, they live under Scripture and under Christ.”

“God’s words are the food that sustains us. Christ is the Word who sustains us. Christ is the one who unites all things in himself. Through God’s words and the Word we see more, both the visible and the invisible.”

Tan overlooks these because she identifies them as “incongruent” (p.93) with my “true position,” which she identifies as less than biblical. Then she summarizes some of her critique under the heading, “Elevating Experiences over God’s Special Revelation,” or, makes comments such as “Welch readily embraces trauma informed resources,” or “To cherry pick best practices is to accept the entire secular system.”

In my writing I prefer to use words that are accessible, so I don't include Van Til's distinction between the metaphysical and the epistemological in this section, and I did not use antithetical. I do, however, try to use words intentionally, as does the JBSC. My article does not elevate experience over Scripture and Christ. I do not embrace trauma informed resources, as though they are objects of deeply held affection. If you reread that section of my article, I think you would find her language misleading and inaccurate. The comment about cherry picking sounds like a quote that is used to paint someone in integrationist colors.

My working hypothesis is that these are assumptions about me that precede the article. Over the past decade, attendees from ACBC conferences have casually mentioned that they were surprised to hear I was an integrationist. The actual sources for this weren't clear, the reasons for it were also unclear, but the designation was. As someone who has always taught that I want biblical rationale for every counseling moment, it seems odd to be counted among that group, and it leaves me wondering what are the bona fides for inclusion within biblical counseling. I hope this doesn't sound like sour grapes on my part. My point is that being a believer does not protect us from misunderstanding another believer.

Does Experience Matter?

This is the question that my article tries to address. Tan's concerns to protect biblical sufficiency against the Trojan horse of common grace seem to dismiss the category of personal, life experience, i.e., things you learn as you have spent time studying anything, such as how to help people. If I follow what she says, experience is a signal that reveals one's underlying, sub-biblical epistemology. Experience, instead, should be limited to your facility with Scripture. Using this logic, the best counselors are those who know lots of Scripture and have good character. This, I think, is reactionary and out of step with the nature of biblical wisdom. When I have observed biblical counseling in which there are two counselors, both counselors can have access to similar Scripture and walk with integrity before Christ, but counselees typically look to the more experienced counselor, even when the counselors are similar ages. Counselees have good reasons for these instinctive preferences.

I thought all of us would say that life experience matters. It is a feature of biblical wisdom. I also thought that we would agree that the resident NT/OT prof is not necessarily the person who could be the most helpful pastoral counselor. Does ACBC disagree? I think that you agree but prefer to do that with significant qualifications and nuances. If so, I wonder if the nuances keep us from ever getting to these other questions.

With this distrust of experience in mind, I am unclear if we have any use for a question such as, “What has been helpful?” Yes, we lead with “What is true?” Yet without a way to assess the benefit of our care, we can rest in being theologically correct yet pastorally foolish. Much of my own growth comes from saying things that are true but unhelpful, and then reckoning with why they were unhelpful. This is not placing experience above Scripture. It is a humble approach to ministry in which we acknowledge that we can misunderstand the person or misapply Scripture.

How Do We Know the Person?

This is the related question because it grows through experience earned by skillful listening. Is Scripture all we need to know people, or, especially, in counseling and pastoral conversations, are there other ways of knowing. For example, we can preach or teach in a very different culture, without knowing one person in the room, and the hearers can be deeply known. Yet, as we spend time in that culture, and know the stories of individual people, we have fuller and useful knowledge. Marriage and all good relationships follow the same pattern.

Scripture shapes everything we know, and Scripture points us to the need for careful knowing and careful observations. Compassion alone makes this necessary. Then Scripture sends us out, in faith and love, with an awareness of humanity’s dark lineage, a knowledge of our greatest need, a rough idea of a person as the fusion of body and soul, and much more. From there, we study people and know them uniquely. How do we do that? In a similar way that we study other features of creation—we work at it, and we get help because this task is more important than knowing the best time to trim hydrangeas, no matter how important hydrangeas might be. I have often cared for someone with a complex struggle, and with each conversation, I knew a little more,

and then a little more, and then I read something on that struggle, and then I spoke to colleagues, and then tracked down those who had a similar struggle. Through that process, compassion grows and pastoral care becomes more proficient and helpful. Can they grow apart from this process?

Here again, I thought that this was what all pastors and counselors thought and did, and I still think that. I was trying to take that important process of knowing people and elevate the category rather than leave it implicit.

Lesser Matters

Tan's article touches briefly on other issues. These are matters for another day, so I will only mention them.

Science. One issue regards the nature of science. When the topic is how we make observations, it naturally extends into more formal science. My perspective, in very broad strokes, is that I appreciate careful observations by ordinary people, and I am suspicious when more formal science makes bold new claims. For most formal science, "conclusive" is a hope rarely achieved. To wait for scientific proof of changes, especially in the human brain, is to wait indefinitely because that standard cannot be met outside of a laboratory in which you can manipulate variables.

Tan writes that I draw scientific conclusions about brain contributions to depression when the science is not conclusive. She is accurate. But that doesn't leave me waiting for conclusive results or defaulting to sin as an explanation. Instead, armed with a biblical understanding of the body I go out and try to learn more. Since depression, in my experience, is not monolithic, I do not expect one theory to fit everyone, but I have found that some depression has much in common with people I have known who have had verifiable brain differences. Depression often acts like a physical weakness.

The nature of wisdom. Another related issue emerges because the discussion of common grace and biblical sufficiency tend to go together. That is, if the Bible is sufficient, then we don't need other ways of knowing. This is a larger matter about the nature of wisdom.

Scripture gives us everything we need for life and godliness, but it can't and won't supply all the details. It can't, of course, because that is impossible. There is no book that could equip us for every person and give us the steps to follow in every situation. It won't because, from my perspective, that is not God's way. Some things are simple and clear: say no to adultery in thought and act. Other things are complicated and less clear. What if a neighbor's dog attacked your dog, with nasty consequences, and the neighbor hasn't said anything about it. Well, you get advice. But what happens when ten wise people tell you ten different things. Then you say, "I am poor and needy, Jesus, help, because I have to do something soon." Then you ... I don't have any idea what the next step would be. Wisdom is hard fought. The Lord seems to like us to squirm, struggle, pray, read, ask more advice, and then take hard steps that are less clear than we thought and trust that he is sovereignly with us even if things seem to go sideways. And, to go back to the adultery decisions, the simple and clear part is just the start. The wisdom-less scripted-creative-and-by faith part of pastoral has now begun, which includes experience.

Priorities. Another small issue is how we prioritize our concerns. For example, Tan is quick to raise concerns about avoiding blame when people hear that there is a physical feature to their struggles. She must be in a setting that sees such things. I think that such things are possible, but I rarely witness this in my own counseling and pastoral care, so I believe that we can certainly blame, but I tend to see people blaming other people more than blaming their brains.

Differences in Apologetic Method

Differences large and small enter into our apologetic method. We all make choices in how we talk with those who disagree with us. Those choices are not necessarily right or wrong. Embedded in my article are some of those values that inform my ministry decisions.

In my conversations with thoughtful integrationists, I find that the issue is not their confusion about common grace. Instead, they often assume a tri-partite view of the person, which means that the spirit must have God for salvation and the soul must have psychology for healthy emotions, thinking and relationships. The Bible, of course, contributes as it can, but it is best left

for life outside the therapeutic hour. In response, I have tried to offer another biblical perspective on the person, but that, too, left people underwhelmed.

What seemed meaningful to some integrationists was to illustrate how Scripture led to a deeper understanding of people and provided a more profound way to help. They assumed that Scripture said nothing about real help for modern diagnoses, and those who tried to use Scripture were simplistic, sometimes harmful and likely unethical. With such low expectations, a test run in which Scripture shows its counseling capacities can be a surprise. Better still is when we offer Scripture in a way that helps troubled counselees and troubled counselors. I had a conversation with a Christian psychologist after I wrote a book about shame and gave him a copy. He quickly wrote back, “This is exactly what I hoped I would do when I entered graduate school. But I was never equipped to do it.” He saw that Scripture spoke with a depth that secular theories never could and was excited by it. He also thought that it was probably too late to learn such things.

This is to say that we all make choices about how to bring Jesus to the world around us. My preference is to speak with humility and respect, listen to why those who disagree do what they do, surprise low or stereotypical expectations if possible, and illustrate how the gospel of Christ goes absolutely everywhere, reaching eternal matters that are outside the capacity of therapeutic care, and it is stunning.

I genuinely appreciated the invitation to the ACBC symposium. Having now come to the end of the process that began with the symposium and ends with the JBSC critique, I am blessed by the interest JBSC and ACBC have in my responses.

Ed Welch
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