

THE JOURNAL OF BIBLICAL SOUL CARE

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

Articles by
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Published by the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors

www.biblicalcounseling.com

5401 North Oak Trafficway
Kansas City, Missouri
64118, USA.

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-967495-08-5
ISSN: 3069-3578

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This journal provides a means for advancing scholarship within higher education in the historical, instructional, and practical areas of biblical soul care in an academic forum. We aim to facilitate profitable interaction among scholars through articles, critical book reviews, and reader responses. We stand on the shoulders of generations of men and women whose commitment to the Word of God and care of souls has laid the groundwork for a resurgence of biblical soul care. The *Journal of Biblical Soul Care* reflects our dedication to the sufficient Word of God and its ability to speak into the complexities of human nature and experience.

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Editorial

THE BATTLE FOR BIBLICAL COUNSELING

Dr. Greg E. Gifford¹

In the mid-70s Harold Lindsell wrote an exposé of the biblical case for inerrancy: *The Battle for the Bible*. It is a chronicling of the degrading of institutions, organizations, churches, pastors, and faculty who no longer confessed full inerrancy of Scripture. As uncouth as it may seem, Lindsell used names. In a shocking and provocative way, Lindsell articulated the slippage that was occurring on biblical inerrancy and helped instigate the Chicago Statement for Inerrancy that would become a confession of sorts for Protestant churches.

Similar fracturing has happened in biblical counseling.

As of the past month, we have watched the biblical counseling movement come to a head, one that is slowly defining itself. Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary published the *Southeastern Theological Review* (Spring 2024) with some very provocative articles. Particularly, Dr. Nate Brooks (former author for the *JBSC*, notably) wrote an article entitled, “Everybody Integrates: Biblical Counseling and the Use of Extra-Biblical Material.” This SEBTS journal volume, to include Brooks’ article, prompted Heath Lambert to publish a long-form video and online article response.² To say the least, conversations have helped formulate what is biblical counseling and who is a biblical counselor.

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² “Six Crucial Confusions of The New Integrationists | First Baptist Church Jacksonville,” May 20, 2024, <https://fbcjax.com/first-thoughts/six-crucial-confusions-of-the-new-integrationists/>.

Lambert answers Brooks' claims to still be practicing biblical counseling by highlighting that the *Southeastern Theological Review* article is a new type of integrationism, or neo-integrationism. This moment has been coming for some time, however. Yet, the claim to who is a biblical counselor and who is not a biblical counselor are not the thrust of the matter. The greater concern is, "who is depending on the Scripture alone to counsel?" versus "Who is adding to the Scripture to do the work of counseling?" Call it biblical counseling, nouthetic counseling, nouthetic confrontation, or Christian counseling, the sufficiency of Scripture is at stake. This is the battle for biblical counseling—the battle for the application of the sufficiency of Scripture.

What do the definitional battles of biblical counseling have anything to do with *The Journal for Biblical Soul Care*? This journal is committed to forging those definitions with the absolute sufficiency of Scripture and thus, the application of that doctrine to counseling. "Let God be true and every man a liar" (Romans 3:4). The battle for biblical counseling is a battle for the sufficiency of Scripture applied to counseling. And that battle is worthy—for Christ and His church. The wisdom of God will always be wiser than men, and these definitional battles will again prove that to be true. A journal is a place for collegial disagreement and professional critique, while still possessing warm appreciation for the one being critiqued.

The *JBSC* is carving another definitional battle, one that I'm not sure we've arrived at with clarity as a movement. What is this battle? *Common grace*. You are preparing to read a diverse set of published and esteemed authors say very different things about common grace, to include whether the phrase, "common grace" should be jettisoned altogether. Abner Chou anchors his structure for common grace in Genesis 9 and Ed Welch anchors his definition of common grace in theology and counseling experience. My paper is regarding the role of the body and the soul, especially after trauma. Ernie Baker's paper is the demonstration of what this looks like in counseling application.

For the discerning reader, you will sense that this edition of the *JBSC* started the conversation but didn't arrive. Some of our perspectives (i.e., Chou's and Welch's) are on opposite sides of the spectrum. I take this to mean that we are not there, yet. However, we are getting closer. Common grace cannot

be the legitimizing of all things for all time, but what are the delineations? That is where this *JBSC* edition will help. I suspect that common grace and epistemology or common grace and anthropology will be the next aspects to tease out.

As you read this edition, rejoice. Iron sharpens iron. Gone are the days of three men in the entire world who were writing about biblical counseling in an *ex cathedra* capacity. We now have colloquiums, journals, and online platforms that are strengthening our theology and practice. Moreover, there will be lines that are drawn—to the exclusion of some—but this is a healthy process. We want educated men and women to vet their ideas through the Scripture and the wisdom of others. These battles can be friendly, but are battles nevertheless. Common grace must be settled as quickly as possible for the sake of biblical counseling, but more for the sake of our view of the Bible.

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

COMMON GRACE AND THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

Abner Chou¹

INTRODUCTION

In Matthew 4, Satan tempted Christ to jump from the pinnacle of the temple, citing that the angels would not allow the Son of God to strike His foot on a stone. Christ rebuked the devil, declaring that one should not put God to the test (Matthew 4:6). The retort did not condemn Satan for misunderstanding God’s promise, but for misusing it. The Lord’s retort declared that Satan was not alone in misusing God’s Word. In quoting from Deuteronomy 6:16, Christ implied that Israel had been equally guilty of the same faulty logic as they appealed to God’s promise of provision to demand a miracle from Him (Exodus 17:1-7; cf. Deuteronomy 6:16).² These examples, from a hermeneutical perspective, illustrate that not every logical inference from revealed truth is valid. Scripture and its doctrines can be misapplied,³ which is why Scripture does not merely provide a list of doctrines in a vacuum but framed within the author’s intent. In such a context, the author not only explained the substance of the doctrine but established the logic of how these truths can and cannot be used. Theology done rightly embraces all that the Scripture says, articulating not only the content of doctrine but also the rationale of that truth.

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² J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 166.

³ An example of such logic concerns the sovereignty of God. Some might contend that God’s sovereignty over people’s conversion (cf. Eph 1:3-6; 2 Cor 4:6) renders evangelism unnecessary. However, that is not the logic of Scripture which contends that divine election drives perseverance in the work of ministry (cf. Acts 18:9-10).

This is the matter at hand with the topic of common grace. The doctrine itself is a beautiful truth, declaring God's universal goodness and kindness to all people without exception. That God displays in this life patient benevolence upon even those who forever will hate His Son testifies to the wonder of His magnanimity.⁴ But like any truth of Scripture, the extent of this generosity and its implications can be taken in the wrong direction. Like with the doctrines of general revelation and knowledge,⁵ common grace can be used to undermine the sufficiency of Scripture. Because of such misconceptions, it is important to delve into the truth of common grace from an exegetical perspective. From there, a survey of the ecclesiastical discussion on the matter can illustrate the needed epistemological considerations to ensure that common grace does not undermine the sufficiency of Scripture.

EXEGETICAL DERIVATION

As will be discussed, a tenacious and nuanced discussion swirls around the subject of common grace. Particularly in Reformed circles, there is debate concerning the needed limitations of the doctrine (so as not to contradict total depravity) and the balance of not making the doctrine so limited that it is denied altogether.⁶ To assess all the objections, distinctions, and qualifications posed over the years requires great discernment, one that comes from Scripture. Only the Word of God can rightly evaluate what is right or wrong in people's formulation of the doctrine. The need for such biblical discernment already illustrates the absolute sufficiency of Scripture. Man's reasoning did not produce a perfectly circumspect articulation of the doctrine. Rather, it facilitated controversy that can only be resolved by Scripture itself. Scripture does not depend upon man's reasoning, rather man's reasoning depends upon Scripture for answers.

While many passages discuss the doctrine of common grace, one text

⁴John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2017), 488.

⁵See Abner Chou, "The Queen of the Sciences: Reclaiming the Rightful Place of Theology and Creation," *The Journal of The Math3ma Institute* (March 1, 2022): 5–12.

⁶Henry Vander Kam, "Some Comments on Kuyper and Common Grace," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 2, no. 1 (1986): 60.

organizes the entire concept: the Noahic covenant as presented in Genesis 8-9. The biblical theological context and design of the Noahic covenant establishes it as a framework for common grace. The Noahic covenant is the first official covenant to appear in Scripture (cf. Genesis 8:20-9:19) and is established in the context of not only the flood but thereby a renewed creation. While God's intention with the global flood most certainly included His wrath against sin (Genesis 6:7), He also used the flood to renew a world where sin was restrained. Such an idea was already introduced with Noah, whose name means "rest," alluding back to the rest found in the Garden of Eden (cf. Genesis 2:15).⁷ Noah's father Lamech had prayed for God to grant mankind rest from the toils against the cursed ground, and the flood was in part God's answer to that request.⁸ Moses' narration of the flood affirms this, as the progression of the flood parallels the original creation account in numerous ways. At one point, God caused a wind (*ruach*, רֻאֵחַ) to pass over the earth (Genesis 8:1) just as the Spirit (*ruach*, רַוחַ) hovered over the waters (Genesis 1:2). At that moment, the water had risen above the mountains such that there was sky and sea (Genesis 7:19), just like on the second day of creation (Genesis 1:6). Afterwards, dry land appeared (Genesis 8:13) just as it did on the third day of creation (Gen 1:9). Following this, God commanded that Noah, his family, animals, creeping things, and swarming things to come out of the ark onto the land just as these creatures were formed on the sixth day (Genesis 1:24-28). God also blessed Noah with the command to be fruitful and multiply just as He did with Adam originally (Genesis 1:26-28). The entire progression of the flood narrative mirrors God's original creation, demonstrating that while the flood judged the world, it also worked to reset the world. In this context, the Noahic covenant was put in place to govern the very operation of this restored creation.⁹ Thus, the covenant was designed to be the framework of *common grace*, for it regulates God's goodness throughout the entire created order to all humanity.¹⁰

⁷ In setting man in the garden (Gen 2:15), God actually caused Him to rest there (יָשַׁבְתָּ). The root word is the same as the term Noah.

⁸ K. A. Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 317.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 397.

¹⁰ This is not to say that God's mercy and grace did not exist prior to the Flood. Instead, what is formally known as common grace, the articulation of a certain exercise of God's grace, is what is in view here.

The structure of Genesis 8:20-9:17 is chiastic, breaking down into three parts. While the beginning (Genesis 8:20-22) and end (Genesis 9:8-16) of the text discuss God's restraint of the destruction of the world, its center deals with the continuation of certain blessings for man (Genesis 9:1-7). With such structure, the passage presents two major ideas, curbing judgment and continuing goodness, which are in fact two major pillars of common grace.¹¹ The Noahic covenant truly provides the conceptual outline for the doctrine.

In the first section of the passage (Genesis 8:20-22), God declared to Himself that He would never repeat the global flood again.¹² Part of common grace is restraining the onslaught of God's total judgment, providing time for God's redemptive historical plan and the accomplishment and preaching of the gospel. At the same time, within these verses, the Lord also expressed that common grace does not transform man's heart since "the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Genesis 8:21). Only special grace can work within a man and affect such change. Instead, common grace holds back the severity of the situation by external means. Genesis 8:22 articulates that God restrains global judgment not by some improvement to man's intellect or righteousness but by ensuring means outside of man, the seasons, are put in place so that there is mitigation of sin's consequences.

In the second section of the passage (Genesis 9:1-7), God declared that in spite of the Fall, man can still experience certain benefits. God blessed Noah, giving him the command "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Genesis 9:1). While such a blessing mirrors what was given at creation, it is not identical to what was originally stated. In the original mandate, God also commissioned man to subdue and have dominion over the creatures of the earth (Genesis 1:28). These commands are absent from what God commanded Noah.¹³

¹¹ William D Dennison, "Van Til and Common Grace," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 9, no. 2 (1993): 228.

¹² Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 136-17.

¹³ P. J. Harland and James McKeown, *Genesis*, The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 64. Though some may argue that the text assumed the inclusion of the command for dominion, several arguments counter such an idea. First, qualifications on all the mandates of creation are present in this chapter (cf. Gen 9:2-6) so it is consistent to see this happening in this case. Second, Gen 9:2 repeats the language of Gen 1:28b concerning the beast, birds, creeping things, and fish without repeating the language of Gen 1:28 concerning having dominion. That is not merely an omission but a deliberate modification

Just as sin persisted past the Flood in the hearts of man (see above), so sin did not allow man to enjoy the fullness of what was originally promised. This not only anticipated the final Adam who would have such promised dominion (cf. Hebrews 2:8-9) but also limits the extent of what common grace recovers. Common grace does not allow one to experience all that was intended in creation. Man can reproduce and experience the wonder of the world as he fills the earth, but his ability to grasp, manipulate, and control creation is curtailed. This observation will play an important role in resolving the tensions that arise as the doctrine of common grace was discussed in church history.

Just like God restrained sin through means external to man, so He allowed man to enjoy certain benefits of creation also through external means. Animals would fear man (Genesis 9:2), become food for him (Genesis 9:3), and there would be government to help maintain the preservation of life (Genesis 9:4-6). However, government would preserve life by sometimes taking life (Genesis 9:6). To accentuate the tragic irony of this reality, right after instituting capital punishment, the Lord reiterated that Noah and his family should be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 9:7). The ability of man to be productive and procreate was now in a context of sin and death. It underscores that any notion of man's continued enjoyment of creation was tainted due to sin.

In the final section of the passage (Genesis 9:8-19), the Lord took the declaration He made to Himself at the beginning of the passage (cf. Genesis 8:20-22) and made it known to all creation. In doing so, God defined the commonness of common grace. The covenant is with Noah and his sons, all mankind (Genesis 9:8) for all generations (Genesis 9:9), and all animals (Genesis 9:10).¹⁴ All creation experiences God's restraint of their destruction (9:11) as well as the sign of God's covenant (Genesis 9:12-17). Common grace, like general revelation, is intrinsically accessible to all.

In establishing the Noahic covenant as a regulator over the renewed post-Flood creation, the treaty became the foundation for all subsequent of the quotation. Third, such a deliberate modification is affirmed by the rest of Scripture as the term ְּנָסָר is predominantly reserved not for mankind in general but the Messiah and those in Him (Num 24:19; 1 Kgs 4:24; Ps 72:8; 110:2).

¹⁴ Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, 408-9.

discussions of common grace in Scripture. Just as God revealed His restraint of global judgment so that redemptive history could continue (Genesis 8:20-22), so Paul called this era God's kindness which should lead to repentance (Romans 2:4). Peter labeled it God's patience which allowed the elect to come to Christ (2 Peter 3:9, 15). Just as God allowed man to continue to experience a certain joy in this world (Genesis 9:1-7), so Scripture frequently comments on the goodness of God to all (Psalms 104:14-15; 106:1; Mark 10:18; Acts 14:15-17; 17:25; 1 Timothy 4:4). Just as God controls the weather to ensure balance in this world (Genesis 8:22) so the rain falls on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45). Just as God restrained evil and judgment for all creation via external means (Genesis 9:8-19), so Scripture expounds upon the topics of government (Romans 13:1-5) and family (Proverbs 2:1-5; 19:18). Scripture adds that conscience is found in every man, restraining the intensity of their wickedness (Romans 2:15).

Five major observations can be made based upon this brief exegetical and biblical theological presentation of common grace. First, common grace deals with the restraint of evil and delay of final judgment, opportunity for God's plan of redemption to progress, and continuation of man's access to the benefits of creation. Second, common grace primarily works externally to man through fear of animals, providential control of the weather, sun rising or setting, or government and parenting. Conscience is the sole exception to this mechanism, but even that does not enhance man's intellectual capabilities but only curtails the degree of the effects of his total depravity (Romans 2:15). Third, as such, common grace works pragmatically and limitedly on the physical level as opposed to the spiritual or immaterial level.¹⁵ Fourth, consistently, common grace does not transform the heart of a man, which remains totally wicked post-Flood (Genesis 8:21), but exposes that sin has marred man's existence, particularly in the workings of his inner man (Genesis 8:21). Finally, common grace is for all as all are exposed to sunrise and sunset, rain, conscience, and even societal authority structure. Thus, specialized discoveries about creation are not inherently common grace. Based upon the above observations, common grace at best facilitates these discoveries by

¹⁵ Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (2nd Ed.) (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 402-3. See also John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray: Lectures in Systematic Theology*, Reprint edition. (Banner of Truth, 1991), 2:113. Murray states that "common grace provides the sphere of operation of special grace" (2:116).

providing a world where discovery can take place. But common grace does not empower man internally to make these discoveries much less verify their discoveries whether that be on a natural or spiritual level.

That being said, the commonness of common grace highlights the expansive and wondrous nature of the doctrine. Its universality is a reminder that God's grace is working in every part of human existence, restraining evil and allowing man, in God's great patience, to experience a taste of His goodness even in a fallen world.

ECCLESIASTICAL DISCUSSION

The ecclesiastical discussion on common grace highlights the need for the fine exegetical nuancing discussed above. In surveying the discussion of common grace in church history and particularly in Reformed theology, it is important to note that the prominent formulation of the doctrine came about relatively recently.¹⁶ Though Calvin commented on the topic,¹⁷ it was only in the 19th century that theologians like Bavinck and Kuyper continued the development of the doctrine, which further ensued with individuals like Van Til.¹⁸ This does not illegitimatize the concept since, as Vander Kam rightly points out, there is the progress of doctrine, where certain truths receive attention at certain times after the working out of their theological prerequisites.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the recent nature of the focused development of common grace points out that the doctrine is not a monolithic concept but still under discussion. As Van Vliet observes,

What Cornelius Van Til calls the “common grace problem” has

¹⁶ Vander Kam, “Some Comments on Kuyper and Common Grace,” 53–55.

¹⁷ Herman Bavinck, “Common Grace,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 24, no. 1 (April 1989): 36; *Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion*. (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), sec. 2.2.12-17. Calvin commented on common grace as a manifestation of God’s providence by which He sustains the created order so that man can experience some level of goodness. Because such experience comes from God’s intervention, such goodness comes not from human achievement or ability but God’s mercy.

¹⁸ Vander Kam, “Some Comments on Kuyper and Common Grace,” 55; Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 2nd edition. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2015).

¹⁹ Vander Kam, “Some Comments on Kuyper and Common Grace,” 55.

received considerable attention in the theological discussions of, especially, the first half of the twentieth century. Beginning with an exhaustive (three volume) attempt by Abraham Kuyper to interpret all the implications of this doctrine for the individual and for society and through the various refinements of the Amsterdam School to the suggested overhaul by Cornelius Van Til, the doctrine remains an unsettled one upon which there is no mutual agreement.²⁰

Three historical discussions illustrate the tensions theologians faced in articulating the doctrine, not only showing the need for exegetical precision but also informing the discussion of common grace and the sufficiency of Scripture.

CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH

The first historical illustration deals with the discussion of common grace, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), and the advent of the Protestant Reformed Church of America (PRCA). In 1924, facing controversy about the articulation of common grace, the CRC adopted three points concerning common grace. First, God had a favorable attitude towards all men in general, sending rain on the just and the unjust. Second, God restrains the breaking out of total depravity by the general operation of the Spirit. Third, those who are unregenerate have the ability to do civic works that are good.²¹ On the one hand, these three assertions generally correspond to the exegetical analysis above, and for this reason, were not objectionable in and of themselves to the denomination.

On the other hand, the issue was what was missing from the CRC's three points. Some in the denomination, including Herman Hoeksema and Henry Danhof, were concerned that the statement omitted certain qualifications emphasized in Scripture. In discussing the first point, these men, while

²⁰ Jan Van Vliet, "From Condition to State: Critical Reflections on Cornelius Van Til's Doctrine of Common Grace," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 61, no. 1 (1999): 73.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 75–76.

acknowledging that God's benevolence was certainly upon the just and unjust, argued that such mercy did not indicate His favor. This accords with the presentation of the Noahic covenant which emphasized God's displeasure with man and that his heart was still perpetually evil (Genesis 8:21). Regarding the second point of CRC's statement, while recognizing God's restraint on sin, they argued that God not only restrains by His intervention but specifically by placing external means which force conditions that hold back sin and disaster. This too harmonizes with the stress of the Noahic covenant which speaks of the external means of regular seasons (Genesis 8:22), fear of man in creation (Genesis 9:2-3), and government (Genesis 9:6-7). Concerning the final point of the denominational statement, the objectors contended that while people can make practically useful products, that is not the same as pleasing God. This too is found in Genesis where the emphasis is upon man's physical activity which does not relate to spiritual teleology. In fact, since subjugating and having dominion over the earth are removed from man's purview, common grace only supports a limited kind of activity for man, and it is impossible for him to obey the original divine mandate. Such truth maintains the reality that every intent of man's heart is wicked (Genesis 8:21).

In sum, the opposition acknowledged the observations found in the CRC's three points but were highly concerned over what the statement did not properly limit, omissions which could lead to a denial of total depravity, undermine the doctrine of predestination, and erode the antithesis between the depraved world and God and the truth.²² These concerns were grounded by Scripture itself, a reminder of the need for precise formulation not only to the content of what Scripture claims but the bounds and purpose it establishes by context. To be clear, those who espoused the doctrine of common grace did not desire to undermine the other truths listed above. Nonetheless, as will be soon discussed, those in opposition were troubled by not only where this lack of precision *could* take one's theology but where historically it *already had*. It illustrates that careful formulation of common grace was so necessary that even new denominations (PRCA) began because of it.

²² Dennison, "Van Til and Common Grace," 75-77.

VAN TIL

The second illustration pertains to Van Til's interaction with Bavinck and Kuyper on common grace. As noted, though Calvin had commented on the matter, it was Bavinck and Kuyper who gave the doctrine a full articulation, the latter writing a massive three volume tome on the matter.²³ What compelled these Dutch theologians to contemplate this issue was their zeal for the sovereignty of God. Because they so thoroughly believed in God's reign over every aspect of creation, they sought to relate why man was not as bad as he could be with the exercise of God's power over the world.²⁴

However, Bavinck's and Kuyper's articulation of the doctrine received some pushback from several individuals, including Kuyper's protege, Van Til. The main contention revolved around the relationship between common grace and total depravity in two ways.²⁵ First, opponents argued that any notion of common good diluted the depth of human depravity. If man could do something "good," that lessened the definition of true "goodness," which is what pleases God. While advocates of common grace qualified such goodness as civic as opposed to that which proceeds from true faith, an additional problem occurred as such good was attributed to the Spirit's work, which made it seem that these works actually had a component of true goodness.²⁶ If man can do anything remotely "good," that diminishes the depth of total depravity and man's inability.

Second, Van Til contended that his mentor's viewpoint on common grace limited the breadth of total depravity. Kuyper accounted for why believer and unbeliever could make the exact same observation by contending that common grace preserved their metaphysical state even if their epistemology is fallen.²⁷ For Van Til, such a distinction compromised the full extent of the fall

²³ John Bolt, "Common Grace, Theonomy, and Civic Good: The Temptations of Calvinist Politics," *Calvin Theological Journal* 35, no. 2 (November 2000): 217. Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World*, ed. Jordon J. Ballor and Melvin Flikkema, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman and Ed M. van der Maas, 3 vols. (Lexham Press, 2020).

²⁴ Vander Kam, "Some Comments on Kuyper and Common Grace," 55–57.

²⁵ Bolt, "Common Grace, Theonomy, and Civic Good," 217.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Nathan D Shannon, "Christian Cultural Defeatism in the Arts: The Theology of a Common Grace Misstep," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 11, no. 4 (2017): 404; John Frame, "Van Til on

and thereby a consistently Reformed formulation of common grace. After all, Kuyper's argument was strikingly similar to Roman Catholic and Arminian theologies, which believe that common grace allows man to correctly use reason and observation.²⁸ But Van Til contended that the Reformed tradition did not start with same foundation as Roman Catholic and Arminian systems. Catholic and Arminian conceived of common grace based upon a denial of total depravity, arguing that common grace to a degree preserved man's goodness. However, the Reformed thought about common grace began with the affirmation of the doctrine of total depravity. This meant a Reformed articulation of common grace required its own formulation, distinct from those other theologies.²⁹

In resolving the supposed discrepancy between common grace and depravity, Van Til made the following observations. He began his discussion with the proposition that scientific investigation is either conducted on Christian or non-Christian presuppositions.³⁰ Returning back to the question of why believers and unbelievers can seemingly make the same observation, Van Til retorted that they in fact do not. While Kuyper thought the unbeliever can make an observation without rejecting God *per se*, Van Til argued that the unregenerate always rejected God (even if unconsciously). The unbeliever sees scientific data as purely isolated fact with no ground or purpose in God and the supernatural. But the believer must see such scientific data as an inherent part of the work of the triune God, with its grounding and purpose inseparable from that reality. So while in form believer and unbeliever may appear to say the same things, in substance the entirety of their claim is utterly different. This is why even "good" deeds are filthy rags and rebellion (cf. Isaiah 64:6), and why unbeliever's observation will be skewed in the end.

²⁸ Antithesis," *Westminster Theological Journal*, no. 57 (1995): 88–89.

²⁹ Dennison, "Van Til and Common Grace," 226.

³⁰ Ibid., 227. Unlike Hoeksema and Danhof, he did not reject common grace, but he recognized that Kuyper's and Bavinck's formulation required some modification. As such, he recognized that his mentor certainly did not deny total depravity but that his discussions of common grace assumed this. See Vander Kam, "Some Comments on Kuyper and Common Grace," 58. So what was required was a greater consistency in how the doctrine of common grace was articulated and applied in light of reformed hamartiology. This is why Shannon argues that Van Til did not disagree with Kuyper on the topic itself but only on its application. Shannon, "Christian Cultural Defeatism in the Arts," 402.

³¹ Van Vliet, "From Condition to State," 76.

For Van Til, this was the problem of Kuyper's distinction between the metaphysical and epistemological. Kuyper made that distinction in order to argue that "at the beginning of the road, the tree of science is common to all."³¹ But Van Til countered that this was Kuyper's problem. Science can only be done either from believing or unbelieving presuppositions, and Kuyper, by using common grace to grant man innate ability, shifted what was merely "common" to all people to that which was morally neutral.³² This legitimized human observation, which in turn was why, in the formulation of common grace, human observations seemed to encroach on the true good that pleased God and why there was confusion about the nature of "good" in the first place. Van Til argued that his mentor, in making these shifts, had made common grace inadvertently undermine the noetic effect of the fall.

Instead, Van Til argued that there should be no division between the metaphysical and the epistemological as they are all part of the interpretative act and affected by the Fall.³³ Man may share *common* rational faculties because they are all made in the image of God, but that does not mean that these faculties are *neutral* much less correct. Van Til used the analogy of a buzz saw cutting in the wrong direction to illustrate this idea. In cutting in the wrong direction, the buzz saw still operates but with wrong purpose and result. In the same way, people have reason and can make observations, but fallen reason and observation will operate with the wrong purpose and result. Depraved man will take their reason and observations and utilize them for purposes that suppress the truth in unrighteousness. Human depravity can even distort what they see as they are selective with the data of their observations (cf. Isaiah 6:9; 29:1-10). Even observations and interpretations that are legitimate are only that way because people borrowed from the truth, and thus, these ideas are not valid because man-made science or reason declares it so, but because they agree with the truth of divine revelation.³⁴

So it may appear that people may share the same observation, but in the full

³¹ Ibid., 77; Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopaedie Der Heilige Godegeleerdhe* (Kampen, The Netherlands: J. H. Kok, 1909), 2:116.

³² Shannon, "Christian Cultural Defeatism in the Arts," 404.

³³ Frame, "Van Til on Antithesis," 88-89.

³⁴ Such borrowing of Christian presupposition happens often in western science due to its history of development. Such borrowing though is not common grace for it is not *common* to all.

context they are worlds apart. To be sure, the reasoning of the unregenerate and the regenerate are operating but in completely different ways. This is especially the case since creation is not neutral but general revelation, which declares not merely isolated data but the glory of God (cf. Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1:20-21). If man is merely making physical observations to the exclusion of God's glory, he is actively rejecting part of what should be truly observed. That is why unbelief is not merely poor observation of data but the repudiation of God.³⁵

By giving fuller expression to Paul's declaration of man's constant act of suppressing the truth in unrighteousness (cf. Romans 1:18), Van Til guarded against common grace undermining total depravity. Though his explanation was sorely missing Scripture,³⁶ it actually abides by the exegetical data that common grace is God's intervention of the physical creation outside of man as opposed to preserving or enhancing man's internal abilities. Because of this, while common grace preserves the world and restrains sin such that man can experience the bounties of creation,³⁷ the unregenerate cannot contribute to or discover the actual truth of this creation. He may be a great artist, scientist, or teacher (from the world's standpoint) but the nature and effect of that are confined. This affirms man "filling the earth" per the Noahic covenant. Man may experience the goodness of physical creation but without the ability to fulfil his role to truly subjugate it to God's glory. Man does not discover truth, but only at best learns to better enjoy and manipulate that which pertains to physical pragmatics, benefits, effects, or operations.³⁸

A great deal of attention has been given to Van Til for good reason as he provides helpful qualifications on the discussions of common grace. In sum, historically, common grace has always been in tension with total depravity.³⁹ Though exegetically common grace primarily concerned what occurred in the physical realm outside of man, theologians had extrapolated beyond those bounds to include man's internal or metaphysical constitution. Van Til

³⁵ Shannon, "Christian Cultural Defeatism in the Arts," 406.

³⁶ Van Vliet, "From Condition to State," 89.

³⁷ This may be what Berkhof means when he states that common grace "promotes the development of science and art." See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th rev. and enl. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1941), 434.

³⁸ Dennison, "Van Til and Common Grace," 236.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

reinforced that since creation is not merely just a series of facts but general revelation declaring God's glory, science can only be done in unbelief or belief. Common grace does not enable the unbeliever to do science like a believer for it does not transform the unbeliever (cf. Genesis 8:22). Rather, common grace preserves the world, restraining the consequences of sin, so that both believers and unbelievers can engage in it.⁴⁰ While what they discover may be reasoned, it does not mean it is right (since the unbeliever suppresses truth in unrighteousness) and is far from revelatory. Such discoveries facilitated⁴¹ by common grace can only pertain to the natural and not supernatural/spiritual effects for that is the realm common grace operates in. As Genesis originally established, common grace is external to man, restrains sin, and pertains only to physical creation.

THE JANSSEN CASE

A major impetus behind these Reformed discussions about common grace was the third historical illustration of the Janssen case. In 1920, Dr. Ralph Janssen, professor of Old Testament at Calvin Seminary, raised issues concerning the relationship between reason and revelation. In essence, Janssen's position was that scientific reason and discoveries should influence the interpretation of revelation.⁴² His opponents claimed he had bought into higher criticism, especially as he tended toward naturalistic explanations of the supernatural.⁴³ Janssen argued that based upon common grace, man should appreciate the sciences such that their discoveries should inform Scripture.⁴⁴ This of course is why the entire discussion about common grace occurred.

Several points are of note. First, that incomplete formulations of common grace can lead to problems is not merely a theoretical possibility but a historical actuality. Second, it is fascinating that both Janssen's opponents and

⁴⁰ Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 2:113.

⁴¹ Notice the wording is not empower for common grace does not give people the ability to make proper discoveries as Van Til discussed.

⁴² David E Holwerda, "Hermeneutical Issues Then and Now: The Janssen Case Revisited," *Calvin Theological Journal* 24, no. 1 (April 1989): 11.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 26–27.

supporters cite Bavinck and Kuyper. The latter cite their view on common grace while the former cite their view on revelation and total depravity.⁴⁵ In the end, the problem was not with Bavinck's and Kuyper's view on common grace (though some disagreed and others, like Van Til, modified it), but with the blatant contradiction of Janssen's view to Bavinck's and Kuyper's view on revelation and total depravity. Third, the fault in Janssen's logic was that he used common grace and reason in the wrong direction. He believed science, supported by common grace, flowed into and informed revelation whereas Bavinck viewed science as the translation of God's grace with special revelation directing general revelation and knowledge.⁴⁶ Fourth, that Janssen's teachings were struck down provides historical precedent that the Reformed tradition did not support common grace to prop human knowledge and reason to be on such a level with Scripture or to have such bearing on life and godliness.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL DELIBERATION

The Janssen case illustrates that common grace, incompletely defined, can be used to undermine the sufficiency of Scripture. Four important observations, exegetically derived and brought forth in ecclesiological discussion, can help prevent such misapplication:

1. Common grace does not inherently deal with the category of knowledge. In Scripture, common grace pertains to the restraint of sin and judgment in physical creation (cf. Genesis 8:20-22; 9:8-19). This may allow for a world of discovery but cannot be equated with the discoveries themselves.
2. Common grace does not empower the obtaining of knowledge. The primary framework of common grace found in the Noahic covenant dealt with factors outside of man including weather (Genesis 8:22; cf. Matthew 5:45), government (Genesis 9:6; cf. Romans 13:4), and fear of man in animals (Genesis 9:2-3). Such external elements do not sharpen the heart or mind of man, which the Noahic covenant established to

⁴⁵ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 32.

be completely bent upon evil continuously (Genesis 8:21). At most, conscience can be considered a common grace that affects man internally, but even then it is a restraint and not an empowerment.

3. Common grace does allow one to experience this world. Just as the Noahic covenant still commissions man to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Genesis 9:1), so man experiences God's goodness in this creation. However, such experience must be carefully defined. For both regenerate and unregenerate, such experience is confined to physical creation and is further qualified in two ways. First, he cannot experience such benefit to its full degree quantitatively as the original creation mandate was abridged. Man can still experience creation but does not have true mastery over it. Second, because of this and the noetic effect of sin, the quality of such experience is warped as man suppresses the truth in unrighteousness. Thus, while common grace facilitates man to experience physical benefits in creation, it acknowledges that man cannot have true grasp of these blessings and will skew their nature.
4. The realm of common grace should be contrasted with the reach of Scripture. Common grace pertains to the physical realm of this world whereas Scripture reveals the totality of human nature and experience, natural and supernatural. Because of this, common grace is inadequate to handle problems that are non-material, and the observations facilitated by it, while having potentially pragmatic benefits, cannot either resolve the matter of glorifying God. Only Scripture has jurisdiction to genuinely define and deal with issues that are non-material from their origins to their ends of pleasing God.

Scripture establishes three categories of information: special revelation, general revelation, and knowledge with special revelation having the greatest specificity and influence over the rest.⁴⁷ There is a proclivity to equate one's knowledge with general revelation, and then in turn elevate this to the level of special revelation. This confuses what man derives versus what God discloses, what specialties observe versus what creation collectively reveals, and what man partially thinks versus what God has authoritatively established. The

⁴⁷ Chou, "The Queen of the Sciences," 4-11.

above observations attempt to prevent such misapplication of common grace by reminding one of the limits of common grace in contrast with the total reach of Scripture.

CONCLUSION

The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture does not merely compel people to consult the Scripture on matters of life and godliness. That is a legitimate practical consequence, but not its point. Rather, the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture is the function of *sola Scriptura* in epistemology. Scripture is the clear divine revelation of the total reality of this world, both natural and supernatural, and so is not defined by the created order but is the definition of it. Because Scripture is the expression of how God designed the world, the framework of all reality, it dictates how this world should be seen, not the other way around. Observations about this world serve as an illustration of what Scripture declares and not its interpretation.

The point then of the sufficiency of Scripture is to keep the Scripture in its proper place as the pinnacle of human epistemology, and the above considerations ensure that common grace never subverts that. After all, common grace is a beautiful doctrine, a demonstration of God's lavish goodness. Common grace is the reminder that God is immensely good to the unbeliever, pouring out His mercy to him every second of his earthly existence. Even more, for the believer, common grace is a reminder that all the saints will ever know is God's grace, having common grace in this life and special grace that extends to the life that is to come. No one can question God's goodness because of common grace, and the same Scripture that presents the splendor of this doctrine establishes its proper place. The qualifications made above are not manmade but established by the Scripture itself. Common grace has never been in competition with Scripture. For Scripture is the very epistemic grounds of common grace, making it entirely self-defeating for common grace to erode Scripture's sufficiency. Thus, it is incumbent upon believers to apply doctrine the way the Scripture has dictated so that the beauty of that doctrine may shine the way it was intended.

COMMON GRACE, KNOWING PEOPLE, AND THE BIBLICAL COUNSELOR

Edward T. Welch¹

INTRODUCTION

Biblical counselors always bring extrabiblical information to their care and counsel. We borrow the insights and observations of others, what seemed to help our most recent counselee, the struggles and strengths of our closest relationships, and endless other sources, all that come without proof texts. These are crammed—both intuitively and intentionally—into the hundreds of decisions we make during any one counseling conversation.

Some of these observations are useful—when an addiction has been discovered rather than confessed, assume that a covert life persists. Some observations are inappropriately generalized—one person finds a homework assignment very helpful and you expect everyone to find it helpful. Some observations are accurate—your teen is hiding something from you—but your interpretation is not—he was hiding a Christmas present, not a stash of drugs.

The purpose of this article is to consider observations made without the ostensible aid of Scripture, and their possible utility for pastoral care and counsel. These three illustrations remind us that observations must be made carefully and cautiously, and they are often accompanied by interpretations that reveal our hearts. Yet these qualifications do not dismiss the category of human observations. The conclusion here is that these observations are authorized by Scripture and contribute the raw material for compassion and

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wise care. A way to begin is through the theological category of common grace.

COMMON GRACE AND CONTINUING GRACE

Common grace owes its existence to the doctrine of sin and its incomplete description of the human condition. Our depravity extends everywhere—to our relationships with people and God, our intellect, our emotions. “The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:4). Yet it is also obvious that unbelievers still see many things. They do not know that God is love, but they can love family and neighbors. They do not know the Truth, but they can make wise observations,² and they can speak the truth about events they witnessed.

Both the good and the beautiful can be found in unbelievers. They still reflect a connection to their creator. To attribute those acts to grandiosity, manipulation or selfishness “we run the risk of intellectual arrogance, a defensive isolation from the culture in general and the academy in particular,”³ not to mention how it makes a genuine relationship with our neighbors almost impossible. It is the presence in unbelievers of the good, and even the wise, that leads us to the door of common grace.

Once we enter, the doctrine has special interest in where sin and its consequences are restrained in unbelievers. Biblical counseling watches this doctrine closely because it has been used as theological rationale for inviting secular observations and theories into Christian care and counsel. This remains a prominent concern and will continue to be one. When secular

²This essay will not qualify words such as wise or good in reference to unbelievers—e.g., “a kind of wisdom,” or “limited good”—as Scripture itself does not typically qualify these words when referring to unbelievers (Rom 2:14, Matt 2:16, Matt 7:9-11). Calvin speaks of the work of unbelievers as “adorned and invested with admirable gifts from its Creator” (Institutes of the Christian Religion, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.html>, 222).

³Dennis E. Johnson, “Spiritual antithesis, common sense, and practical theology,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, 63 (2002) 77. Dennis’ article takes seriously the spiritual antithesis between believers and unbelievers while also he also argues that this antithesis is not the only vantage point of Scripture.

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.⁴ 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, yet it does not eliminate how believers share in common grace with unbelievers. The doctrine of common grace listens to unbelievers who "unless and until proven otherwise ... are also seeking the good, as they understand it."⁵ Common grace begins with a question. What persists of God's image in all humanity after the fall? Or, what can human beings see without the lens of Scripture? Then we are met with definitions such as "the grace of God by which he gives people innumerable blessings that are not part of salvation,"⁶ and "all gifts that humans use and enjoy naturally."⁷

Berkhof, following Kuyper, adopts this perspective when he identifies layers of grace:

- (1) Universal Common Grace, a grace that extends to all creatures;
- (2) General Common Grace, that is a grace which applies to mankind in general and to every member of the human race; and
- (3) Covenant Common Grace, a grace that is common to all those who live in the sphere of the covenant, whether they belong to the elect or not.⁸

What follows will view common grace as relevant to "every member of the human race." Whatever has been retained by humanity after the fall, we all share in it. That opens the discussion to what we ourselves, without the obvious

⁴It is worth noting that the older secular theories of Rogers, Freud, Jung and others were also concerned about importing perspectives from those who were "unbelievers." The pragmatic models that are more common today lend themselves to absorbing eclectic pieces of information.

⁵Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022), 27.

⁶Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 671.

⁷Sam Storms, "The goodness of God and common grace," *The Gospel Coalition*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/goodness-god-common-grace/>

⁸Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 434–435.

aid of Scripture, have observed and found useful. This entry point will affect the tone of what follows. It will delay a discussion of the antithesis between believer and unbeliever, and the incompatibility of light with darkness. It will lead with a point of contact. Like unbelievers, we ourselves make observations about our world and people, which are not specifically identified in Scripture.

The Image of God in us is certainly different after the fall, but, contrary to what we would expect, life persists. Work continued, people entered into marriage, critical abilities and skills of observation continued seemingly unabated, civilizations arose. The book of James simply says that we are all, still, “people who are made in the likeness of God” (James 3:9). James finds no need to qualify “likeness” as ruined or defaced. With this in mind, common grace can be understood as *continuing grace* and *earlier grace* that comes from both our created connection to God, and his commitment to preserve life and love on earth, even among those who reject him. The nature of God can still be seen in creation and in humanity.

What changes at the fall is that we become blind to God. Adam and Eve see nakedness in each other; they are less aware of their nakedness before God. They immediately cover themselves from the eyes of the other person, but it takes a direct visit from the Lord for them to know that their hiding is from *his* eyes. If God is out of sight, He is out of mind. Within a generation or two humanity loses the awareness of God’s presence, and we generate idols. Later, God is not even recognized when He appears in the flesh. Unbelievers are unable to see God clearly. Yet, much is retained. Humanity bears the imprint of God’s laws on their hearts and often follows them (Romans 2:14-15), and humanity can still see and understand the world and people, at least in part.

LISTEN AND LOOK

Quietly embedded in our humanity is God’s original call, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 2:28), which is accompanied by the abilities to carry it out. This work continues after the fall with Cain, Abel, the eventual growth of cities and the finer points of culture, and it is renewed with Noah and his descendants. Without Scripture to clearly guide

fallen humanity, and without Spiritual renewal, life continued. People were able to study the world around them in a way that they could grow food, hunt for food and discover minerals that could be fashioned into tools and musical instruments. They could also learn something about how relationships work, given that there were long lasting relationships within families and clans, and children received care. In short, humanity is able to study both the world around us and *the people* around us. We are called to study creation in order to subdue it; we are called to study people in order to love them. We will not find the details of either process in Scripture because that would be contrary to the way God has called us into a partnership. Rather than give us a manual of specific instructions, we watch him in action, then he sends us out to study, understand and bless both creation and people.

We cannot list all the extant human capacities that persist in order to carry this out, but there are hints of some of them in the wisdom literature. Wisdom has a broad reach. At the low end it is “skill and intelligence” that can take wood, bronze, wool and other parts of creation and create something that is both beautiful and useful (Exodus 36:1). These skills are gifts from God that he also gives to artisans outside Israel (e.g., 2 Samuel 5:11).

As we move higher, wisdom includes observations about people, relationships and money. For example, avoid people who prefer secrets and stealth, untamed desires will be the death of you, tooting your own horn will bring you down rather than up, humility is better than arrogance, be generous with family and neighbors. This approach does not lead with “thus saith the Lord,” at least not the way you might find in certain expressions of God’s law. Rather, it asks us to both “listen” and “look.”

“Look around,” says Wisdom, “what do you see? Notice that young man. He is a victim of his own desires. He is following those desires in order to get quick money or sex outside the bonds of marriage. Watch. Watch carefully. His pleasure might last for an hour or a little longer, but look further down the road and you will see that it does not go well. The house of forbidden pleasure is actually a grave.” We listen to God’s words; we also look around us. When we look, we certainly remember that the ground of true and full wisdom is the fear of the Lord. Yet we are looking in a way that yields common observations

that are available to anyone who looks carefully at humanity.

Though secular observations are not the focus of this essay, one implication of this *seeing* is that our interest in useful observation will be just that—we will be looking for grounded observations rather than the theories that explain them. This would seem to interfere with Van Til’s insistence that all observations are interpreted through either covenantal or idolatrous assumptions: there are no “brute facts” or mere observations. Yet, in a similar way that we do not usually approach our unbelieving neighbors primarily as sinners, we are not compelled to emphasize how facts are interpreted in all situations. Some secular observations are more skewed by their assumptions and some less so. Common grace gives us points of contact.

For example, dreams have held our interest throughout human history. Today, we broadly agree that dreams appear during REM sleep, which is a necessary phase for healthy sleep. We also agree that they can be provoked by events of the day, worries and desires, and they are typically odd and inscrutable. But there are secular discussions about dreams that give confident interpretations and identify the precise meaning of recurring motifs.⁹ When you read these, you quickly believe you are a second-rate counselor who is missing something important. The reality is that there are observations, and there are theories about these observations. Theories of dreams are dependent on a larger theory of the person.

At the level of theory, all secular theories receive at least two biblical critiques: (1) they devise a view of the person apart from God in which independence and self-care are the goal rather than the problem, and (2) they are reductionistic in that they base their theories on an incomplete vision of humanity. For example, they see the influence of past victimization but not what comes out of the heart. They see the influence of families but not the quieter influence of the world and the devil. While biblical counseling notices these weaknesses, we also want to be alert to the observations that contribute to their construction.

Careful observations were part of the wisdom traditions that existed outside

⁹For example, Irving Yalom, *Love’s Executioner* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

of Israel and throughout the Ancient Near East (e.g., Acts 7:22). “Ancient Israel’s sages had no qualms incorporating the wisdom of other cultures,”¹⁰ and it is worth noting that gentile sages were spoken about with respect, in contrast to how the Old Testament prophets spoke about Israel’s own priests and prophets.¹¹ The world around Israel had systems of morality, justice and civic good that were credible expressions of how life works. What they could not see was the Creator behind his creation, and the Recreator who reclaims and remakes.

DISCERNMENT

Careful observations, however, are not always reliable. Some people observe with more clarity and insight, others less. All observations, by believers or unbelievers, are reviewed on their merits, and they rarely rest on one person’s acuity but take time to establish and receive confirmation. So we proceed carefully. Within common grace, discernment is the order of the day.

Discernment is, first, our honed ability to distinguish right from wrong. It appears immediately in the Garden where it listens to the Lord: one tree is death; all else is life. Here discernment is straightforward and clear. “Do as you are told.”

Discernment then considers how to apply the command to love. For example, there is a trial-and-error feature to love, as everyone who has bought Christmas presents will attest. Some presents are received with a keen sense of the love behind them; other presents might appear selfish. In other words, we learn how to love by observing how different forms of love are received. We also discern that you love family differently than neighbors or differently than an enemy who insults you, and you love an enemy who insults you but defend against one who is trying to kill you. Mature discernment considers

¹⁰ W. P. Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible’s Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 3. I agree with Brown and many other Old Testament scholars that some of the material in Proverbs was already present and part of common knowledge by the time it was incorporated into the canon.

¹¹ In Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity), 17.

circumstances, motives, other relevant Scriptural principles, and personal experience with ways of loving and their effectiveness.

As discernment grows, it is not always definitive in its conclusions. For example, it evaluates the validity of general observations. Do poverty and disgrace always come to those who ignore instruction (Proverbs 13:18)? It depends. It depends on the nature of the instruction being ignored. It depends on the person's innate abilities. But, yes, generally speaking, to ignore instruction will take you down some lonely, painful and financially risky paths. It will not always follow that path precisely—"always" is a rare find when we are examining or "looking" at human behavior and its consequences—but patterns observed through careful observation will probably hold true more often than not.

Discernment also recognizes that we have reasons for what we observe. For example, if we consider the merits of psychiatric diagnoses, and you have a recent experience with someone in your church who believes he was rescued by a diagnosis, you will see them as a problem. If you have seen someone profit from a diagnosis in a way that allows Scripture the opportunity to go even deeper, you will argue for their usefulness. Both perspectives have merit, but for profitable discussion the interlocutors must reveal their biases.

Carefulness and humility—for common grace observations to have value, these will be their hallmarks. Observations are corroborated by others and held loosely, knowing that every useful observation generates new questions and will receive future refinements.

SEEING AND KNOWING PEOPLE

Now to some specifics. What useful observations do we make—do *I* make—with unaided eyes? This can be reframed as knowing people.

As a Puritan once put it, the pastor must study two books, not just one. Certainly, he must know the book of Scripture . . . He must also be a master in reading the book of the human heart. He must

know men no less well than he knows his Bible.¹²

The rationale for knowing people comes from how life works in God's house. There we are known by God, who takes pleasure in our pleasure and is compassionate in our pain. We, in turn, imitate his love as we rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Both responses are dependent on us knowing a particular person.

In biblical counseling, we sometimes refer to this as *case wisdom*. A more common word would be *experience*. Experience begins with knowledge of a particular person. As we understand a person who weeps over the loss of a parent, we have *some* experience that we bring to the next person who goes through a similar loss. We observe, for example, that such grief has no terminus short of heaven. With this in mind, our care and our words are better suited to a particular person. When we meet the *next* person who has gone through such a loss we bring even more experience. We anticipate what they are feeling and what will help. This is a process that is available to "every member of the human race." Wisdom depends on it.

My marriage follows this tradition in common grace. Over the years I have tried to pay attention and know my wife. What does she like to do? When do I take her out for a meal? What are ten amazing strengths she has that I didn't see before we were married? When has she had enough of my attempts to touch her, nonstop? These insights are all authorized by the divine call to love her, but they came from studying *her*, not the Gospel of John.

My own awareness of depression follows a similar pattern. It began with my father who had bouts of depression through most of his life. With my common-grace-eyes I saw guilt, failure before God, vows to talk to more people about Jesus, some somatic complaints, angry outbursts directed against himself rather than other people, and eventual hospitalizations. Anyone in our house could have seen the same things.

After I married, my father's sister, my aunt, came to live with us because her own depression had left her unable to care adequately for herself. Her

¹² James I. Packer, "Ministry of the Word Today," *Westminster Magazine*, 2:4 (Spring 2022), 26.

complaints were largely somatic—she was certain that she was going to die. These symptoms took the lead in her depression whereas my father led with guilt, but they often read from the same script. She also mentioned that her mother, who died before I was born, was “very anxious,” which was remarkable given my aunt’s high levels of anxiety. Living with two depressed people does not make an expert, but I began thinking about patterns in depression.

The ability to “look,” or read the person, benefits from at least three related skills that remain largely intact after the fall: (1) to describe someone effectively, (2) to identify connections, correlations and patterns within a person, and (3) to know when it is legitimate to generalize those patterns to a larger group. These skills are distributed throughout humanity, with some people being more capable than others.

See and describe what is especially important. To describe a person effectively means that the person feels known in ways that are helpful. Notice that this leads to different questions than those about knowing Scripture. Instead of asking, “Is this orthodox?” or “What does this text of Scripture mean?” the questions are, “Is this what it is like for you?” “Is this a fair way to describe what you are saying?” This skill means that you, as the counselor or observer, can hear large amounts of information from a person and then draw out those things that are most important, to which a person responds, “yes, that captures it.”

Seeing connections, correlations and patterns in a person. A related skill is prominent in Proverbs and usually appears as an implicit or explicit “if ... then” “If a ruler listens to falsehood, [then] all his officials will be wicked” (Proverbs 29:12). If we care about another person in a similar way that we care about ourselves, then relationships prosper. These observations can be cause and effect relationships—“if you drink in the evening, then you will feel miserable in the morning.” Or they can identify behaviors that correlate or travel together. When you see one, you expect to find the other. If a person tends to be a compulsive checker, then they are also likely to believe they have committed an unpardonable sin.

Seeing patterns in a group. We accrue wisdom when these individual patterns

can be generalized to others.¹³ An individual's pattern does not necessarily identify a group's pattern. For example, one morning I had a powerful devotional time in a particular passage and was eager to pass it on to everyone I saw that day. "If you read this, then your life will change," or something close to that. The problem was that the next three people I saw, all growing believers, were unmoved by the passage.

In my experience with depression, my small sample size suggested some commonalities that were waiting to be confirmed with further experience before I could expect to find those patterns in other people. For example, I saw that depression can come and go for no apparent reason, a genetic link is worth considering, medication (both were taking anti-depressants) is not always helpful, and reason alone cannot correct the strong sense of doom. Years later, after reading books and articles by unbelievers and having seen many more depressed people. I still see those initial connections and they have become part of larger patterns that informed my recent care for a sixty-year-old depressed man. During our time together he could barely find words for his confusion and pain. He was persuaded that a fruitful life was over and he was ashamed of his emotional immaturity. Into this chaos I was able to give him more words that highlighted his simple faith in the midst of an overwhelming storm. The words came from past experience in "seeing" depression. In response, he cried tears of relief, even joy. He was no longer isolated and left to his own self-condemning thoughts. Another person was able to witness his faith, which he assumed had vanished. The words I offered were shaped by both a biblical view of the person and years of having looked at depression.

Common grace observations cannot lay claim to deep insights into our humanity. That is reserved for those to whom God has opened his heart in Scripture. But it should be no surprise that the world can and does try to enter into people's struggles and know people. They can listen and see important patterns in families and relationships. Whereas the church can lose interest in knowing people after having made a moral assessment, the world will keep at it. A theology of common grace should not be surprised by this, but, at the same time, we should be challenged and perhaps reproved by it. There

¹³ In biblical studies, this movement from single observations in a text to seeing themes in Scripture is called theology.

are consequences when a person is known well. As a general rule—that is, as a pattern I have observed and other people have acknowledged—whichever knows the person best often wins the person.

COMMON GRACE AND TAXONOMY

The patterns I see in depression are useful *for me* in helping people. Some patterns go more public and become syndromes or diagnoses. Paul Broca's observations about aphasia and its connection to damage in the frontal lobe of the brain have become a universally accepted communication disorder named Broca's aphasia. Medical diseases and disorders begin as tentative observations about congregating symptoms in a particular person. They go public as legitimate diagnoses when other observers verify those patterns. Psychiatry, too, has worked to find patterns and clusters. Its first official attempt to identify disorders was heavily influenced by psychoanalytic thought, but subsequent attempts put a higher priority on "looking." Patterns were named as they held up under scrutiny.

We now have the 5th large scale revision of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM). The classifications of disorders have been critiqued both inside and outside the psychiatric community in part because the cluster of symptoms do not follow traditional medical patterns. You can have more or less of many psychiatric disorders. You can also have some symptoms that cluster together in one presentation of the disorder and have an overlapping yet different cluster of symptoms in another presentation of it. Such is the taxonomy within modern psychiatry. The goal is to identify patterns of behavior, and there remains much to do.

The question is, has this classification been useful? Not, has it risen to become the *sine qua non* of care and counsel, but has it been useful or helpful? Consider two disorders that currently receive significant attention: Autism Spectrum Disorder and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

AUTISM SPECTRUM

I first encountered the label during college. I understood it to be an uncommon problem among children who needed institutional care. Bruno Bettelheim's book, *The Empty Fortress*, was an important attempt to humanize infantile autism, but I had not known anyone who was autistic or had autism within their families, so the work was interesting but not useful. Autism also appeared as a feature of schizophrenia, but that work too seemed remote and incomplete.

In 1985 I was asked to see a pastoral intern who was on the cusp of being excommunicated. He was identified as blatantly and incorrigibly selfish. As we met, he was more open than I expected given the charges against him, perhaps naively so. There were no attempts to cover up or make himself look better. He understood the charges against him but never tried to defend himself. He simply did not seem prone to personal angst. His memory was excellent, which led to high grades in school. The mathematical nature of Greek and Hebrew made them a unique pleasure for him. He was odd and relationally unsophisticated but not marked by blatant selfishness. The matter seemed more hard-wired than heart-wired. Charges were dropped.

I saw brain-related overtones in this young man because I had spent two years working with people who were brain-compromised and had opportunities to see how the ability to read social situations is among the early abilities affected. This is not to say that the pastoral intern was brain-injured. It is simply to say that the brain mediates how well we can accurately know others. My non-Christian colleagues from those years would have seen this immediately.

Meanwhile, the category of autism had worked its way free of schizophrenia and the 1987 revision of the DSM-III included "autistic disorder" as a separate category. In 1994, DSM-IV included Asperger Syndrome, which reframed autism as a spectrum. Sometimes it takes words to help us see, and, once seen, we see the phenomena everywhere. That is a problem with expanding diagnoses, but it is also a signal that the words are identifying something.

One other separate stream in this literature is Daniel Goleman's book,

Emotional Intelligence, published in 1995. Goleman was especially interested in the impulsivity and predictions of success and failure in which people with high IQ can flounder and those with modest IQ succeed. Although he did not connect his work with the autism spectrum, emotional intelligence is now a prominent lens that helps us understand the autistic experience.

This enlarged classification of autism spectrum helps us to see. Where before we might have noticed “nerds” who were smart and odd, now we see confusion during social interactions and, as a result, associated anxieties in social situations, over sensitivity or under sensitivity in one or more of the senses, a preference for predictability, and an intense focus on something other than human beings. Notice how casual and uninformed observations can denigrate and marginalize, whereas fuller descriptions, gathered through common grace observations, yield patience, which is a prominent feature of love.

POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

The autism spectrum has become part of everyday language, PTSD even more so. My own experience in helping those with PTSD had its beginnings in seeing dissociation.

In the mid-1980’s I heard a few secular and Christian therapists talk about multiple personality. I had not seen it myself, and I was suspicious that only a few therapists were seeing it everywhere. Then I watched a fifty-two-year-old woman disappear, as if the engine room that stoked her mind had suddenly stopped.

“You seem quiet today.” That was all it took to watch her become unresponsive. She eventually returned but not as same person who left. This was my introduction to dissociation.

Then came the “If … then” inferences. If I ask her about the past, then she will dissociate. If I stay in the present, then she will usually stay present. If I can have her talk more, then she is more likely to stay present. I soon

began to see other people who shared similar difficult pasts and dissociative reactions. Patterns suggested themselves. For example, various personalities might emerge from women who have been sexually violated or traumatically oppressed. Among those personalities are a few constants: guilt, shame, anger, fear and misery. These occasionally have their own names. Some are frozen in time at the age when the trauma occurred. And all these experiences swirl around together, at the same time.

Then I read Judith Herman's book, *Trauma and Recovery*,¹⁴ whose observations were similar to my own, but she brought more focus and experience, which allowed her to see things I had not yet identified. Bessel Van der Kolk's follow up to Herman's book, *The Body Keeps the Score*,¹⁵ took special interest in how the body responded to trauma. His observations have prompted me to ask more questions about present physical experiences and how people try to manage those experiences.

Were the observations in these books necessary to my own formation? They were not life itself, but they were helpful. We could ask the same question about my own observations. Were they necessary? Perhaps not, but they were important. I better understand people who once had no words to describe their inner worlds. As another general rule, if we cannot find words to identify a problem, we will not notice Scripture's response. The better we understand a person, the more meaningful the entrance into Scripture.

COMMON GRACE AND HELPFUL FRAGMENTS

Given that my own “looking” and knowing people has been useful, I expect that unbelievers will make worthy observations too. Biblical counselors read broadly not simply to critique the work of unbelievers but also to take away a provocative idea or a methodological trinket that will be reshaped and incorporated into our growing store of wisdom. It is analogous to a pastor’s interest in growing as a preacher through if-then observations and engagement

¹⁴ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery, The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992, 1997, 2015).

¹⁵ Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014).

with people of all stripes who have studied effective communication. These fragments are difficult to identify because they are quietly absorbed into our counseling wisdom, but we all accumulate them.

Here are a few that I notice in my own care and counsel:

- Have a short, accessible phrase for addicts—or anyone—that can quickly bring them back to spiritual reality. (Thank you AA).
- When reviewing a person's outbreak of anger, move slowly through the story in order to help the person see. (From a young man who was in a court-appointed anger management program).
- When the person seems frustrated during your time together, stop, talk about it. “Process it.” When in doubt, present struggles are given priority. (From multiple sources).
- When a behavior is identified as sin, the conversation is not necessarily over. For example, to pursue porn is sinful. But, porn can also have different purposes. It can be about power, pain, isolation, shame, anger. Each one would be accompanied by a distinct way of helping. (Jay Stringer's book, *Unwanted*,¹⁶ discusses this).
- “Love cushions the fall.” It might not always heal but it always helps. (Kay Jamison mentions this in her memoir of bipolar, *An Unquiet Mind*¹⁷).
- “Be careful with advice.” This is one of a growing list of cautions about what to say and what not to say to grieving people. (Nancy Guthrie has much to say here, yet I have especially learned this and other ways to help grieving people by simply asking them what has been helpful and hurtful, and through my many missteps).
- Stay current with questions to ask those who have suicidal thoughts.

¹⁶ Jay Stringer, *Unwanted: How Sexual Brokenness Reveals Our Way to Healing* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2018).

¹⁷ Kay Jamison, *A Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

(We will add *more* questions, about a church community, legalistic guilt, shame, and other matters connected to Christ and him crucified, but we will not ask fewer.)

- “Introvert” and “extrovert” are used often because they help us know people. The words can be traced to Carl Jung but are now in the public domain. They have since been used to navigate marital differences and guide vocational decisions. Recently, a friend, prominent in ministry, now retired, described himself as an introvert. I was immediately both saddened and inspired as I remembered all the times he pushed himself into public hospitality and public ministry. It all seemed so natural, but it was all arduous work that I now see contributed to depressive swoons and panic attacks. I wish I had seen this earlier.

Is all this an accumulation of incompatible parts? Common grace pieces—observations—inserted into the care of souls, untethered from biblical categories? No. Most observations and theories about people, if they have any popularity and endurance, have inklings of larger truths. For example, they assume that love and hospitality can be hard work. My introvert friend knows that. They assume that life and love are good. Kay Jamison knows that. Loving relationships help everything. Love is not a cure for our various hardships, but it lightens them. When we live in God’s house, we reshape and reorganize all human observations, both our own and other’s, and bring them under Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

This article assumes as valid the thriving literature about worldview and its impact on the details of human observations. Worldview and basic assumptions *do* make a difference, and parts are *not* interchangeable. It also assumes that humanity’s skills of observation are important in knowing people.

The danger of minimizing our observations? Without them, people are less known and we will be less helpful. Without them, our compassion falls short because we miss the complexity of human experience. Without them

we do not carefully examine our intuitive though sometimes inaccurate observations, and we are less aware of how we fail to distinguish between our common sense observations and special revelation. Biblical counseling listens to Scripture, and it listens to people.

This particular walk within common grace took a less traveled path. Rather than focus on worldview, it worked in personal experience and what is actually seen. Moreover, it considered what *I* actually observe as a step to consider what *you* actually observe. All those observations contribute to what we call science, with its strengths and limitations. They are dependent on many different abilities such as memory, facility with language, conceptual and abstract skills. I identified three in particular: describing people effectively, seeing genuine cause and effect relationships and seeing if these connections hold true in others. Entwined with these skills is humility, which holds observations loosely and seeks confirmation from the community. These skills are not dependent on special revelation but are distributed throughout humanity. Both Christians and non-Christians can excel in them, lack them or squander them in their pride.

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. Packer's words about the book of Scripture and the book of the human heart are helpful for ministry, especially when ministry misses how love compels us to know people better. Yet these are not two separate categories.

Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. (Ecclesiastes 12:13)

The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. (Galatians 5:6, NIV)

I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. (1 Corinthians 2:2)

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.

DOES THE BODY KEEP THE SCORE?

Biblical Counseling and the Body

Greg E. Gifford¹

The body keeps the score: If the memory of trauma is encoded in the viscera, in heartbreak and gut-wrenching emotions, in autoimmune disorders and skeletal/muscular problems, and if mind/brain/visceral communication is the royal road to emotion regulation, this demands a radical shift in our therapeutic assumptions.

—Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*

INTRODUCTION

Traumatic experiences seem to shape a person in unpredictable ways. Trauma seems to change worldviews, deteriorate trust, affect relationships, and incite various ways a person might deal with hardship: violence, escapism, and substance abuse to name a few. Of note, trauma has been debated regarding its nature since at least Herman Oppenheim, Karl Bonhoeffer, and Sigmund Freud in the early 20th Century. The idea of trauma had more to do with physical injury, which is why traumatic responses, to include PTS/D, was originally termed *Kriegsneurose* (i.e., “shell-shock”).² Studying trauma started more akin to studying those who had experienced a concussion, with physical-only triggers.³ Now, treatment for trauma-instigated problems has evolved

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²Hermann Oppenheim, *Textbook of Nervous Diseases for Physicians and Students* (London: Otto and Schulz Company, 1911), 814, FN1.

³Cf. Greg Gifford, “Helping Marriages Though PTSD,” ACBC Essays, Vol. II, 2019. In

from physical-only triggers to physical-only responses.

Trauma has morphed quite dramatically to include, as Bessel van der Kolk says in *The Body Keeps the Score* (BKS), anything that, “is unbearable and intolerable.”⁴ The BKS position holds that trauma can be physical and non-physical: sexual molestation, combat, physical violence, abuse, witnessing family abuse, or exposure to PTSD symptoms, to name a few.⁵ Thus, trauma as a phenomena is nearly impossible to objectively identify. In other words, the answer to “What is not traumatic?” remains elusive. The trauma conversation has come full-circle, starting with physical trauma by Oppenheim, to Freud’s immaterializing trauma, to non-physical triggers with body-first effects as demonstrated by van der Kolk.⁶

The anthropology of the BKS position holds that the body is indeed the keeper of the effects of trauma.⁷ This means, practically, that the body—to

that paper the author demonstrates the origination of the conversation of PTSD moving from purely physical triggers to form as traumatic to Hermann Oppenheim, Schuster, Karl Bonhoeffer, Hugo Liepmann and Karl Birnbaum. Bernd Holdorff, “The Fight For ‘Traumatic Neurosis’, 1889-1916: Hermann Oppenheim and His Opponents in Berlin,” ed. Tom Dening, *History of Psychiatry* 22, no. 4 (2011): 471. Table 2. Diverse concepts of traumatic neurosis (war neurosis) in the Berlin debate of February 1916: “Oppenheim: Paralyses through loss of memory pictures for movements (akinesia, amnestica, and reflex paralysis), similar to diaschisis due to molecular alterations. Schuster: psychogenesis and endogenous factors were most important. Somatogenesis was subordinated, but for both an identical material basis as long as this substantial damage remains unknown. Bonhoeffer: the biological effect of emotion of fright on motility and vasomotor functions becomes fixed in individuals with suitable psychological disposal, under the influence of affects and imagination with the consequent development of well-recognized hysterical features. Liepmann: initial material changes after the first wave of affect, following their own physiological-biological laws, followed by secondary psychological effects. The second impact is indirect (ideogenic), mediated by psychological processes. Birnbaum: (1) emotion- and fright neuroses with their continuous pathological fixation of the affect expressions; (2) hysterical states with their characteristic dissociative and suggestive appearances; and (3) traumatic neurosis of Oppenheim, due to extensive nerve irritations, causing molecular changes. Lewandowsky: no brain-physiological concept of traumatic neurosis; his approach was exclusively psychogenetic” (471-72).

⁴ Van der Kolk, Bessel A. 2014. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Viking, 1.

⁵Ibid.

⁶ Oppenheim, *Textbook of Nervous Diseases for Physicians and Students*, 1193. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVII (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 214.

⁷“The body keeps the score: If the memory of trauma is encoded in the viscera, in heartbreak and gut-wrenching emotions, in autoimmune disorders and skeletal/muscular problems, and

include the brain, nervous system, and autoimmune responses—are directly affected and fundamentally changed by trauma. To effectively help those who have been traumatized, according to van der Kolk, one must “engage the entire organism, body, mind, and brain.”⁸

In response to the BKS position, biblical counselors must ask the question, “According to the Bible, can the body actually keep the score?” If the body keeps the score, what score does the body actually keep? It is the conclusion of this essay *that the body only causes physical responses and can only influence immaterial responses—of note, the body never causes immaterial responses.*

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that, according to Scripture, the physical body does not cause immaterial responses (IR’s), but may encourage or solicit immaterial responses. The soul, vice-versa, may cause material and immaterial responses and/or encourage material and immaterial responses. This will be demonstrated in analyzing key passages of Scripture that demonstrate the body-soul dynamic regarding causation. Once biblical anthropology has been revisited in this paper, the BKS position will be evaluated in light of those conclusions. The scope of research will be within the Bible and consultation of the BKS position, as defined by Bessel van der Kolk.

KEY DEFINITIONS

According to the Scripture, the primary understanding of the body is depicted with either the term **בָּשָׂר** (i.e., “basar”), **גְּוִיָּת** (i.e., “gewiyat”) or **גֵּשֶׁם** (i.e., “geshem”) in the Old Testament.⁹ The difference is that *basar* references “skin” both of people and animals (Psalm 102:5; Genesis 2:21).¹⁰ Whereas, *gewiyat* and *geshem* refer the outer person of the body as seen in Genesis 47:18,

if mind/brain/visceral communication is the royal road to emotion regulation, this demands a radical shift in our therapeutic assumptions” in van der Kolk’s *The Body Keeps the Score*, 86.

⁸ Ibid., 52.

⁹ Another option to review would be that of **שָׁבֵן**, which literally is translated as “body” in Leviticus 18:12-13, 20:19, 21:2; Psalm 73:26; Micah 3:2, and Proverbs 5:11.

¹⁰ William Lee Holladay and Ludwig Köhler, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 51.

Judges 14:8, 1 Samuel 31:10, Ezekiel 1:11, and Daniel 3:27-28, 4:33, 5:21. The OT offers the semantic difference of both the skin from the “living human body.”¹¹

In the New Testament, the ideas are like the OT with “σῶμα” (i.e., “soma”) referring to the outer person, often translated as “body.” *Soma* is translated as “body” approximately 138 of its 142 uses in the NT. The term σάρξ is used 147 times in the NT but is often referring to the flesh that covers the physical body rather than the totality of the body itself.¹² Thus, the term body is a reference to the physical human body—whether living or dead—and this paper will use *body* in this biblical form. Furthermore, when referring to the flesh (i.e., *sark*/*basar*), the term flesh will be employed to differentiate between body and flesh.

Next, the key phrase of “material response” (MR) necessitates clarification. For this phrase, this essay will use MR to describe a response that “has a material existence.”¹³ Material existence must be present to demonstrate observability in both causation and symptom, otherwise it would be impossible to determine the body’s role. For instance, an allergic reaction to a food would be evidenced in symptoms (material existence) that were caused by a food (material existence). For a person to respond to a physical/material stimuli like that of food with an immaterial response, like anger, is an inherently different claim. According to the Bible, the physical can cause a MR, as will be demonstrated.¹⁴

¹¹ Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 156. Of note, dead “gewiyat” of Saul and his sons are removed from the walls of the city of Beth-Shan (1 Sam. 31:10, 12). Or Nahum warns Ninevah of the dead “gewiyat” of the judgment of God against this city (Nahum 3:3). A body can ontologically be a living or dead body.

¹² Cf. 2 Corinthians 7:1, 5; Ephesians 2:3; Colossians 2:5; Hebrews 9:10; 1 Peter 3:21. Thus, the term σάρξ is often translated as “flesh” rather than “body.” Of this term, perhaps the clearest differentiation is Colossians 2:11, which says, “ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός,” or “by the removal of the body of the flesh.”

¹³ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/physical>. Accessed 16 May. 2023, s.v., “physical.”

¹⁴ See the note under the key term “cause” for clarity on how the author is employing the term “causative.” Furthermore, it must be noted to claim the body can cause immaterial responses inherently lacks verifiability and is speculative, at best. As a non-basic belief, the claim of the body causing immaterial responses is both unverifiable and also not supported in the Scripture. Consequently, this position will be unverifiable and not supported in Scripture making it untenable as an anthropological category.

The term “influence” will be used by the author in its modern understanding to represent, “to affect or alter by indirect or intangible means.”¹⁵ The body, as will be demonstrated, is influential in certain ways, both in material and immaterial ways. This is to say, it affects by indirect or intangible means. However, this prevents causative language or an understanding of the body as being the source of the material or immaterial response. The Bible will clearly demonstrate that the body does not cause immaterial responses, but only influences them.

What is an “immaterial response” (IR)? According to the modern understanding and vernacular, IR represents “not consisting of matter.”¹⁶ A synonym could be *incorporeal* or *nonphysical*. Please note, I am not claiming that the material and immaterial are wholly distinct and disconnected. Rather, the claim is that MR and the IR are different.¹⁷

Causation is “when the first event (the cause) brings about the other (the effect).”¹⁸ The Bible does not ascribe causal stimuli to the body for IR’s. Causation necessitates or predicts with high probability a response will follow a stimulus. “Causation” reflects the assumption that the first event brings about with high probability the other event. In this way, a “cause-and-effect” relationship can be used synonymously with *causation*, *which is what is meant when referencing the body “keeps the score” in this essay*.

¹⁵Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/influence>, Accessed 16 May, 2023, s.v. “influence.”

¹⁶Ibid., s.v. “immaterial.”

¹⁷This distinction is not to be confused with separability. The Bible supports the position of a psychosomatic unity from the outer and inner man. See 2 Corinthians 4:16-18; Psalm 32:3-4; Psalm 73:26. Also see Anthony Hoekema’s term, “psychosomatic unity,” in *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdman’s, 1986), 217. Christopher Hitchcock, “Probabilistic Causation,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2021. (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2021), accessed May 17, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/causation-probabilistic/>. Katherin A. Rogers, “Hume on Necessary Causal Connections,” *Philosophy* 66, no. 258 (October 1991): 517-521.

¹⁸“Causation,” Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023. May 6, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/causation>. It is not within the scope of this paper to determine the different

THE BODY CAUSES MATERIAL RESPONSES

In the book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, a position is put forward regarding the causative nature of the body. Van der Kolk says,

The body keeps the score: If the memory of trauma is encoded in the viscera, in heartbreak and gut-wrenching emotions, in autoimmune disorders and skeletal/muscular problems, and if mind/brain/visceral communication is the royal road to emotion regulation, this demands a radical shift in our therapeutic assumptions.¹⁹

Pointedly, the reader must ask, “What does the body cause according to the Scripture?” Causation and “keeping the score” are the interchangeable terms that van der Kolk has offered. So, what score does the body keep? The Scripture includes the following categories for the jurisdictional responsibilities of the body: (1) physical life, (2) physical health, (3) physical cravings, and (4) sensory functions. The body does keep the physical score in MR’s, as will be demonstrated.

PHYSICAL LIFE: THE BODY AND BIRTH

The beginning of physical life starts with the formation of the body in the womb of the mother. The Scripture uses significant language to speak of God’s active role in formation during the gestation process: “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb” (Psalm 139:13), He “made you and established you” (Deuteronomy 32:6), He created the body and spirit (Zechariah 12:1), and gives “who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it” (Isaiah 42:5). Jeremiah was called by God in the womb before God “formed” him (Jeremiah 1:5). The body corresponds to existence and physical life.²⁰ Preceding the creation of the physical body, a

¹⁹ Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 12-13.

²⁰ This view is also known as Creationism, which says, “... that God creates *ex nihilo* a fresh soul for each human individual at or after its conception” in F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 433. “The Biblical belief that ‘God created all things out of nothing, by the word of His

person was not yet existent.

Physical life begins at the formation of the soul *and the body*. God breathes life into Adam after forming his physical body (Genesis 2:7) indicating physical, human life has now been created. Life beginning and coming into existence are evident in texts such as the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist. The angel of the Lord told Zechariah: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John” (“γεννήσει νιόν σοι καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰωάννην,” Luke 1:13). Future tense use of *γεννήσει* and *καλέσεις* both indicate this has not occurred, John *will be born* and his existence is future tense. Jesus speaks of his own eternality by saying, “Before Abraham was, I am” (πρὶν Αβραὰμ γενέσθαι ἐγὼ εἰμί,” John 8:58). There was a time before Abraham, and Jesus was existent in that time. The Jews clearly understood this to be a claim of superiority to Abraham and concurrently, Jesus’ deity as evidenced in their response (John 8:59).²¹ A person does not exist before their body is created and the creation of the body inaugurates existence, to include physical life.

PHYSICAL DEATH

If the body is the source of physical life, its death is the end of physical life resulting in physical death. Death is present in the earliest parts of Scripture as a consequence of sin. The warning of eating the tree of knowledge of good and evil is that Adam and Eve would “surely die” (Genesis 2:17) and they did (Genesis 5:5). The Scripture teaches that when a person dies, their soul continues to exist but their body ceases to be alive for a period of time.²² “We know that while we are at home in the body [i.e., “σωμα”] we are away from

power, in the space of six days, and all very good” (Shorter Catechism). This doctrine of creation* is often referred to as creation *ex nihilo* (“creation out of nothing”) in Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Belfast; Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002), 117.

²¹ Other evidences are seen in the promise of Isaac (Genesis 17:16) and Samuel (1 Samuel 2:21) where both births were foretold and fulfilled in the future.

²² Paul further illustrates this in Philippians 1:20 when he says, “As it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death [“εἴτε διὰ ζωῆς εἴτε διὰ θανάτου”]. It is either life “in the flesh” or death as a consequence of the “flesh” (i.e., “σαρκί”) being separated from the soul.

the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:6). Paul sees that the cessation of physical life is the moment of the physical body expiring. When Jesus “yields His spirit” (Matthew 27:50), it was at the moment of the separation of his body from his human soul (cf. John 10:18).

For the Christian, physical death is analogous to sleeping. First Thessalonians 4:13-15 uses the term “sleeping” (i.e., *κοιμάω*) to reference the believer is “sleeping.” The believer exclusively can be the “dead in Christ” (4:16; 1 Corinthians 15:18, 23) who are said to merely be “sleeping.”²³ The authors of Scripture understood physical death to represent the moment of physical life leaving a person’s physical body, and for the Christian, to sleep.²⁴

One last role of the body in death is to note the body is not the person after death. In other words, the person exists apart from their body. In the instances of Joseph’s death (Exodus 13:19), King Saul’s death (1 Samuel 31:1-12), Jesus’ death (Mark 15:43), John the Baptist’s death (Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 9:24-28), and others, each are mentioned as their bodies being impersonal. For instance, the phrase, “their bodies” or “their bones” are used. This further indicates life exists after the cessation of physical life in the physical body. The body of a person ceases to exist, but the person is not only their body.²⁵

PHYSICAL HEALTH: PAIN AND SICKNESS OF THE BODY

The next aspect of the role of the body is the effects of sin on the body regarding pain and sickness. From the promise of the curse of sin, the body has been affected with pain via childbirth (Genesis 3:16) and pain in work

²³ To see those who “die in the Lord” (Rev. 14:13) or those who are “dead in Christ” (1 Thessalonians 4:13) would be appropriate in either case (Also Cf. Acts 7:60).

²⁴ Physical life, spiritual life, and eternal life are varying “lives” spoken of in the Scripture. However, there are known ethical issues of when that cessation of physical life has occurred. For a good resource on the cessation of physical life see Wayne Grudem, *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), Chapter 24.

²⁵ This has further consequences as one considers the body of a person is not the person, themselves. This understanding is paramount to understanding physical existence and dignity in human existence. For instance, because the body is not the totality of human existence, this prevents less human dignity for those with amputations and less “physical body.” In this way, by understanding the difference between personhood and body, a Christian maintains the dignity of all human life despite the physical body of that person.

(Genesis 3:17). Pain is promised to be removed in the New Heaven and Earth (Revelation 21:4) but is present for varying reasons until then.

Sickness in the physical body is present as seen in God removing the Egyptian sickness (i.e., Deuteronomy 7:15) for Israel, Hezekiah getting sick (2 Kings 1:2), the woman with the blood issue (Luke 8:43-48), Peter's mother-in-law (Luke 4:38-39), and the miraculous healings of the apostles in Acts 19 where the “sick” had their “diseases leave them” (19:12).²⁶ According to the Scripture, the body receives physical pain, sickness, and illness.

PHYSICAL CRAVINGS OF THE BODY

Physical cravings correlate to the functioning of the physical body.²⁷ These physical cravings seem to include but are not limited to hunger (Matthew 4:2; 1 Corinthians 4:11), thirst (Exodus 17:3; John 19:28), tiredness (John 4:6; (Revelation 2:3), and sexual expression/desire (1 Corinthians 7:2, 9-10). To suggest the body has *cravings* is consistent with the use of *soma* within the Scripture. Note, these physical cravings are neither inherently good nor bad but are simply part of the functioning of the human body.²⁸

In each of these instances, a physical craving—hunger, thirst, tiredness, sexual craving—has an organic genesis in the body. Although these physical

²⁶ For further study on the use of πυρετός see Matthew 8:15, Mark 1:31, Luke 4:38-39, John 4:52, and Acts 28:2. In each instance πυρετός is used to describe physical illness of the physical body. Furthermore, νόσος is used to describe illnesses that are entirely physiological (Matthew 4:23; Matthew 4:24; Matthew 8:17, 9:35, 10:1; Mark 1:34; Luke 4:40, 6:18, 7:21, 9:1; Acts 19:12).

²⁷ Of note, Galatians 5:16 says, “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” The physiological σάρξ and the body of flesh representing the old man in Adam (Romans 5:12) are different. The desires of the σάρξ lead to the works of the σάρξ as evidenced in verses 19-21. But these are different from physical cravings and physical appetites of the body/flesh. Furthermore, ἐπιθυμία (i.e., desire) does not equate to physical craving in Galatians 5:16. According to R. Jewett, “the flesh is Paul’s term for everything aside from God in which one places his final trust” in F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1982), 243.

²⁸ This statement warrants clarification. The Bible does not condemn these cravings inherently, rather it assumes them and then guides the expression of them. For a person to crave oxygen does not necessitate sinful action, but the way oxygen is pursued can become sinful, for instance. Thus, for a person to be described as “their god is their belly” (Philippians 3:19) is the ultimate expression of physical cravings leading and dominating one’s life.

cravings can become idolatrous, like that of the false teachers in Philippi (Philippians 3:19) or the divisive individuals in Rome (Romans 16:18), a physical craving is not inherently sinful. It is only a physical craving of the physical body.²⁹ These physical cravings are part of the rightful and good function of the physical body.

SENSORY FUNCTIONING AND PROBLEMS OF THE BODY

Then the Lord said to him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?
—Exodus 4:11

Due to the functioning of the physical body, the body also possesses certain functions of sensory operations. These functions correspond to seeing (Genesis 27:1; John 9:6), which can also possess a problem of the functioning of the eyes as demonstrated in blindness. Blindness is a functioning of physical eyes that is not always caused by IR’s but may be caused by an IR (which is what the disciples assume). Jesus said of the blind man in John 9, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him” (v. 3). There is a working assumption that some MR’s are cause by IR’s in the Scripture.³⁰

The function of hearing is an aspect of the physical body where the physical ears process sounds to discern information (Genesis 23:10; Exodus 24:7). To fail to hear is the physical response of deafness. Levitical law protects the deaf (Leviticus 19:14), Jesus heals the deaf (Mark 7:37), and the Jesus testifies to being the Messiah through the healing of the physically deaf (Luke 7:22).

Other sensory functions of the body are touch (Luke 8:46), speaking/muteness (Exodus 4:14; Luke 1:22), smell (Genesis 27:27; 1 Corinthians 12:17), taste (Exodus 16:31; Colossians 2:21).³¹ Each of these functions are

²⁹ This seems to be the misuse of the Corinthian understanding of physical cravings when they were legitimizing their sinful physical cravings in saying, “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food” (1 Corinthians 6:13).

³⁰ This thought will be later addressed under the section, “The Soul as the Originator of IR’s and the Body as Receptor.”

³¹ In 1 Kings 18:27, Elijah even mocks Baal’s lack of response with a consideration that he is

either assumed or stated “as-is” in the Scripture, specifically that they possess a physical component. Touch assumes physicality. Taste assumes physicality. In that way, the body is the originator of these varying sensory functions.

What the reader can take away from these aspects to the functioning of the body is that the body does function physically with MR’s, but in none of these instances does the body possess causation of IR’s. The IR is a result of the soul responding. As the reader will see, the body causes the MR’s but not IR’s. However, the soul causes both IR’s and MR’s.

THE BODY CREATES THE TRIAL TO WHICH A SOUL RESPONDS

There are instances of physical sicknesses that elucidate soul responses throughout the Scripture. Hezekiah is told that he will die and weeps bitterly, appealing for God to preserve his life (Isaiah 38:3). The Lord relents of the sickness and delivers Hezekiah, of which Hezekiah says, “Restore me to health and make me live” (Isaiah 38:16b). The body was failing and Hezekiah responded by “weeping bitterly.” It must be noted that the body did not cause the weeping, but as response to knowing his body would fail, sadness overcame him. Sadness, of note, is the response of his soul.³² God did ultimately heal Hezekiah, but Hezekiah’s body created the physiological trial (i.e., MR) to which his soul responded in sadness (i.e., IR).

In the death Lazarus wherein Jesus said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (John 11:4), there is a glimpse of the role of illness to the physical body. It creates opportunities to respond to sickness in a way that glorifies the Lord. The body creates the trial to allow the soul to respond in a way, “to show

“relieving himself,” which is another human functioning.

³² While the reader is not told the exact nature of Hezekiah’s sadness, “Josephus says, the reason why he wept so sorely was that being childless, he was leaving the *kingdom* without a successor. How often our wishes, when gratified, prove curses! Hezekiah lived to have a son; that son was the idolater Manasseh, the chief cause of God’s wrath against Judah, and of the overthrow of the kingdom (2 Kings 22:26, 27)” in Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 471.

that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Corinthians 4:7). The body elicits the soul's response but does not cause IR's.

The body of Paul is used by God to prompt humility. 2 Corinthians 12 Paul identifies a "thorn in the flesh" (*σκόλοψ τῆς σαρκί*) that is used by God to prompt the soul's response of humility. If one interprets this as a physical body problem, such as eyesight (Galatians 6:11), then the physical pain is a means of producing a clear response of the soul.³³

Second Corinthians 4:7-10 provides an understanding of how Paul is facing physical mistreatment and pain in his own body.³⁴ To establish "jars of clay" as a reference to his human body is demonstrated in his description of affliction.³⁵ They are "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies" (v. 10). Through the persecutions Paul has faced, he carries in his *soma* the death of Christ. This is purposeful because it is in weakness of the *soma* that the life of Christ is demonstrated. Paul reiterates that his *sarx* and his *soma* are both being afflicted so the life of Jesus would be demonstrated (v. 10-11). The physical trials he endures are to help "produce an eternal weight of glory" (v. 18). Paul understood his body was temporal (v. 16), but the trial of his body was producing an eternal reward (v. 18).

From this one can discern that the body creates the trial (*πειρασμοῖς*; James 1:2) to which the soul responds. The body creates a pressured circumstance by which one's faith is tested, and to which a person's soul responds. Whether it is aging (Genesis 18:11-12), affliction (2 Corinthians 4:10), a thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7), blindness (John 9:3) or some combination of these, the body creates a trial by which and to which the soul responds. Due to the fact

³³ Although a clear understanding of this thorn is hard to discern, the use of "σαρκί" in 2 Corinthians all refers to the flesh, body, or old nature. There are strong suggestions of the flesh meaning the physical body or a physical representation as seen in 2 Corinthians 1:17, 4:11, 5:16, 7:1, 7:5, 10:2-3, 11:18, and 12:7.

³⁴ Cf. 2 Timothy 2:20-21: "Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work."

³⁵ "Picturing himself as an ordinary, everyday utensil conveying an invaluable treasure is as striking an image as Paul's picture of himself as a defeated but joyous prisoner marching in God's triumphal procession (2:14)" in David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 220.

that cognition, volition, desires, and affections are sourced in the soul, the body is the receptor of the soul's responses to the physical trial the body has created.³⁶ Craig Troxel offers a helpful synopsis:

The heart is the governing center of a person. When used simply, it reflects the unity of our inner being, and when used comprehensively, it describes the complexity of our inner being—as composed of mind (what we know), desires (what we love), and will (what we choose).³⁷

As biblical counselors, one acknowledges the spark of cognition, desire, and will is sourced in the heart. Thus, the body may incite but does not cause, which warrants the question of bodily damage that may occur.

A BODY MAY BE DAMAGED BUT STILL DOES NOT CREATE AN IMMATERIAL RESPONSE

Of note, sensory problems may be a result of body damage. Sensory issues such as hallucinations, of which Rhoda was accused of in Acts 12:12-18, misperceptions (Luke 24:36), and faulty functions of the body (John 9:3ff) do not create or cause immaterial responses (IR's). Rather, these faulty or damaged senses may only incite IR's. A person is still choosing, thinking, and desiring according to their soul even when their body fails them.³⁸ David acknowledges “there is no health in my bones because of my sin” (Psalm 38:3). Or that his strength is dried up and his bones wasted away (Psalm 32:3-4) because of the soul's influence on his body, not the converse. A body can, in this way, encourage an IR but does not cause one—even if that body is

³⁶ Cf. 2 Samuel 16:7; Proverbs 4:23; Matthew 12:34; Mark 7:23-25. Consider the body creating the trial of pain. In this way, pain is material but the soul responds creating an influence on the body.

³⁷ Craig A. Troxel, *With All Your Heart: Orienting Your Mind, Desires, and Will Toward Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 21.

³⁸ In fact, numerous examples exist of those who have body problems and yet still believe accurately. The woman who had an issue of blood, still believed Jesus could heal her (Luke 8:43-48). A blind man cries out for Jesus to heal him and acknowledges is Davidic lineage (Luke 18:38). Furthermore, the瘫痪者 in Luke 5:17-36 demonstrates faith, along with his friends. One could say that the physical body is damaged by is still does not create or prevent IR's.

damaged or lacking function in some way.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE BODY ON IMMATERIAL RESPONSES

Jesus uses the strongest language, perhaps in the entire Scripture, to describe the role of the body in inciting IR's. Jesus says, “If your right eye causes you to sin” (“εἰ δὲ ὁ ὄφθαλμός σου ὁ δεξιὸς σκανδαλίζει σε”) or if your right hand “causes you to sin” (*σκανδαλίζει σε*) then tear it away or cut it off. The phrase “causes you to sin” is reiterated here and in Matthew 18:6, 8, and 9. It literally means to “to cause to be brought to a downfall, *cause to sin*.³⁹ In an isolated context, Matthew 5 and 18 both seem to suggest that a person can be caused to sin but Paul reminds the believer that they are not a slave to sin (Romans 6:1-6).⁴⁰ Jesus is saying that the body can cause a stumbling block or enticement to sin, which explains Matthew 6:22-24 aptly in seeing the role of the “eye” in affecting the “body” toward light. Meaning, in Matthew 6:22-24, the body encourages one toward IR's that are God-honoring.

Part of the call of sanctification is to leverage one's “mortal body” (literally, “θνητῷ ύμῶν σώματι”) toward Christlikeness. While the body entices one to obey the body's “passions” (Romans 6:12), the believer understands sin is no longer able to have dominion in their body (Romans 6:13; Ephesians 2:3). Nevertheless, the body has passions that must be resisted. Paul says he “disciplines his body” (1 Corinthians 9:27) for longevity in ministry and usefulness as a minister of the Gospel. The body can pull one from IR's that honor God, which is why the “deeds of the body” must be put to death (Romans 8:13). This is perhaps the essential understanding of self-control, to deny oneself the physical and spiritual cravings and subject them to the Lordship of Christ.⁴¹

³⁹ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 926.

⁴⁰ While the believer is not a slave to sin, the unbeliever is characterized as being enslaved to the “passions of our flesh” (Ephesians 2:3).

⁴¹ Self-control is “restraint of one's emotions, impulses, or desires, self-control” in William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 274. Titus 2:11 says the grace of Jesus Christ “training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.”

In the end, the body does indeed entice and influence IR's but does not cause IR's. These IR's can be both toward greater Christlikeness (Matthew 6:22-23; 1 Timothy 4:7-8) or toward sinfulness (Matthew 5:29-30). The body, though, does not cause the soul to respond in any form or fashion. In sum, it can be stated as follows:

1. The body does cause MR's,
2. Bodily problems influence MR's and IR's, and
3. Bodily problems do not cause IR's.⁴²

Now, in light of the above, this essay will consider the source of IR's according to the Scripture and the implications for trauma and body keeping the score (BKS) anthropology.

THE SOUL AS THE ORIGINATOR OF IMMATERIAL RESPONSES AND BODY AS RECEPTOR

According to the Bible, the soul keeps the score. That is to say, the inner person is the source of cognition (Jeremiah 17:10; Colossians 3:2), desire (1 Samuel 23:20; Psalm 20:4), and volition (Joshua 24:15; Ruth 1:16) not to mention other functions of the soul.

The Scripture is replete with examples of the functioning of the soul that animates the body.⁴³ Consider the following examples of the function of the soul. The soul abhors (Leviticus 26:15), loves (Deuteronomy 6:5), is vexed (Judges 16:16), embittered (1 Samuel 22:2), lives (1 Samuel 25:26), desires (1 Kings 11:37), troubled (Psalm 6:3), experiences turmoil (Psalm 42:5), hates (Isaiah 1:14), delights (Isaiah 42:1), yearns (Ezekiel 24:21), experiences

⁴² Remember, material responses are “MR” and immaterial responses are “IR.”

⁴³ Of note, the term “soul” is used interchangeably with “inner man, heart, or spirit.” This is because the Scripture does not delineate between the difference of spirit, soul, heart, or inner man. In quoting the Shema, Jesus demonstrates this: “And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). Furthermore, it is beyond the scope of this paper to establish the dichotomy or complex unity positions of the inner and outer man. For more information on this, see John 12:27, 13:21; Matthew 10:28, 2 Corinthians 7:1.

sorrow (Matthew 26:38), experiences awe (Acts 2:43), can be unsteady (2 Peter 2:14), and longs (Revelation 18:14).⁴⁴ The soul, is seen as the source of these functions according to the Scripture.

In light of the function of the soul, one must acknowledge it is the soul that keeps the score. Its “scorekeeping” necessitates the soul possessing ultimate value (Matthew 16:26), the possibility for redemption (Psalm 55:18; Acts 2:47; 1 Peter 1:9), and continuing to exist after a person has physically died.⁴⁵ The parable of Lazarus and the rich man provide insight to the functioning of the soul after death (Luke 16:19ff). In the story, both Lazarus and the rich man physically die—which necessitates the cessation of the body’s functioning (2 Corinthians 5:8). Furthermore, the rich man demonstrates cognition (v. 24), reasoning (v. 27), and the ability to recollect his brothers (v. 28) all while not possessing a body. Perhaps angels could also serve as an example of the soul, since angels are non-corporeal but have a will (Hebrews 1:6), intellect (2 Samuel 14:20), and emotions (Luke 15:10)?⁴⁶

Since in these instances we see the functions of the soul continue to occur after physical death, it again reiterates that the soul is the source of these IR’s and functions. If these functions occur after the cessation of the physical body, then it reiterates that the physical body is not the source of these functions. How then does this understanding of the soul correlate to the BKS anthropology?

BKS CRITIQUE

One of the key components of the BKS anthropology is that trauma is

⁴⁴ These passages are instances of the OT use of “נפשׁ” or the NT use of the term, “ψυχή.”

⁴⁵ Though, arguably, the soul is not a reference to spiritual salvation but salvation of life in Psalm 55:18. Furthermore, the body will experience the effects of redemption in the resurrection of the dead, but the soul never ceases to exist (Job 14:14; John 11:23-24; Romans 8:23-24; 1 Corinthians 15:35-54).

⁴⁶ This does not begin to address the functioning of God the Father and Spirit who both possess spirituality, without corporeality, and maintain perfect personhood. If the reader is not satisfied with the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man, the transfiguration is also another example of non-corporeal Moses and Elijah communicating with Jesus (Matthew 17:3). It must be understood that these soul responses continue after the failure of the human body according to the Scripture.

“encoded in the viscera” or “after trauma the world is experience or with a different nervous system.”⁴⁷ This anthropological understanding is faulty for two primary reasons. First, trauma is often non-physical, meaning there were no physical damages to the body. Second, the body actually receives the interpretation of the soul to the traumatic event. Let biblical counselors now consider these two primary points of anthropological disagreement.

First of all, trauma is interpretive. I have stated this since 2017 and will continue to remind biblical counselors that the trauma a person experiences necessitates inner person interpretation to discern how one should respond.⁴⁸ The American Psychiatric Association defines trauma as, “an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster.”⁴⁹ While I am not disagreeing that these instances are indeed traumatic, I am demonstrating for them to elicit an “emotional response” the soul must interpret the circumstances. Furthermore, the emotions are soul responses (Matthew 26:38). Thus, the body responds to the soul’s interpretation of the incident that is perceived as traumatic in the first place.

The BKS position blurs the understanding of the source of trauma between material and immaterial while unwittingly including trauma sourced in matters of the soul. For instance, van der Kolk opens the book describing the carnage of the Vietnam War with two veterans he interviewed—Tom and Alex.⁵⁰ Tom and Alex were in the same platoon and through their time in the military grew close in friendship. They spent free time together and slowly developed a friendship. Yet, Alex died in an ambush on their patrol. Tom is said to have seen Alex’s dead body face down in the mud. This led Tom to a time of rage against the Vietnamese people where he would, out of revenge, go to a neighboring village and kill children, a farmer, and rape

⁴⁷ Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 52, 86.

⁴⁸ Cf. Greg E. Gifford, *Helping the Family Through PTSD* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017).

⁴⁹ “Trauma.” n.d. [Https://Www.Apa.Org](https://www.apa.org). Accessed May 31, 2023. <https://www.apa.org/topics/trauma>. Or see Psychology Today’s definition of trauma: “Trauma is a person’s emotional response to a distressing experience. Few people can go through life without encountering some kind of trauma. Unlike ordinary hardships, traumatic events tend to be sudden and unpredictable, involve a serious threat to life—like bodily injury or death—and feel beyond a person’s control” in “Trauma,” n.d., accessed May 31, 2023. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/trauma>.

⁵⁰ Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 12-13.

a Vietnamese woman.⁵¹ Note, Tom was not blown up, shot, physically tortured, or starved as a prisoner of war. There is no stated damage to Tom's body. No, Tom responded to the death of his friend in a fit of sinful rage (cf. Ephesians 4:31). Tom interpreted the death of his friend in a certain way (soul as originator of IR's) and then responded to this interpretation of Alex's death with complicating sinful responses (the body murdered those in the neighboring village because of his soul's response in anger). Van der Kolk goes on to say, "deep down many traumatized people are even more haunted by the shame they feel about what they themselves did or did not do under the circumstances."⁵² I have no disagreement with this claim, but it further demonstrates that trauma is highly interpretive.

Why does this matter? Because the BKS position omits the soul as the originator of the interpretation of the trauma and thus leaves out a core anthropological component. *The soul keeps the score, and the body is responding to the tallying of that score.* In so attributing to the body as keeping the score, Van der Kolk omits the role of the soul as the scorekeeper. A person's rationality, cognition, desire, memory, shame, and guilt are not body issues—they are soul issues. The body is affected by the soul, as will be mentioned below, but the soul is the originator and the body the receiver of the soul's interpretation when responding to trauma. The interpretive nature of means that in order for trauma to have a negative effect, trauma must first pass through the interpretive lens of the soul. Once the soul has experienced, reasoned, regretted, desired, felt shame and/or some other combination, then would a person then be "traumatized." Van der Kolk says, "Being traumatized means continuing to organize your life as if the trauma were still going on—unchanged and immutable—as every new encounter or event is contaminated by the past."⁵³ The BKS position fundamentally misses the interpretive nature of trauma when putting forward the BKS anthropology, yet uses examples like Tom and Alex to show that trauma is highly dependent on how one interprets their original trauma.

Secondarily, the BKS position neglects that the body receives the interpretation of the soul to trauma. While using overt biological language,

⁵¹ Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 13.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 52.

van der Kolk states that, “Danger is a part of life, and the brain is in charge of detecting it and organizing our responses. Sensory information about the outside world arrives through our eyes, noses, ears, and skin.”⁵⁴ He goes on to state that the amygdala “receives from the thalamus faster than the front lobes do, it decides whether incoming information is a threat to our survival even before we are consciously aware of the danger.”⁵⁵ Van der Kolk emphasizes the body’s role in responding to trauma, but omits the role of the inner person. He presents a body-first anthropology.

Van der Kolk then states that the amygdala is like a smoke detector that releases hormones in a person’s body when it senses danger. “While the smoke detector [i.e., the amygdala] is usually pretty good at picking up danger clues, trauma increases the risk of *misinterpreting* whether a particular situation is dangerous or safe *emphasis mine*” [emphasis mine].⁵⁶ How does one’s body interpret? Through the soul! Cognition, rationality, desire, emotion, and other critical functions are not bodily functions. They are functions of the soul. In this way, the BKS position has confused its own anthropological suggestions. If trauma were entirely of biological origins, like an explosion, then two people would experience the same traumatic moment, and both would interpret it as traumatic. This is the Achilles heel of the BKS position: *the body is responding to the soul’s interpretation of the potentially traumatic event.*⁵⁷ If the reader understands what the BKS position is teaching, it is claiming that the body is “automatically triggered” or that there are “preprogrammed escape responses.”⁵⁸ Speaking of the body as the one who keeps the score, van der Kolk says, “When the old brain takes over, it partially shuts down the higher brain, our conscious mind, and propels the body to run, hide, fight, or, on occasion, freeze.”⁵⁹ Yet, the body is responding to the soul’s interpretation because cognition does not reside in the body, per Scripture. Even van der Kolk’s own description suggests a lack of clarity as he interchangeably uses “brain” and “conscious mind,” which are inner and outer man realities.

⁵⁴ Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 60.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 61.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 61-62.

⁵⁷ It will be demonstrated that there are physical/bodily problems that can contribute to misinterpreting circumstances, but the soul is still the one that must choose (i.e., volition) to not trust the body’s stimuli.

⁵⁸ Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 54.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

These two areas of disagreement lead one to reject a BKS anthropology in sum, but what of the seemingly accurate deductions of the BKS position?

BKS SEEMINGLY ACCURATE SURFACE-LEVEL DEDUCTIONS

Ed Welch noted, “It is Van der Kolk’s work on the body that especially gets us thinking.... Here is a place in which we are prepared to hear more because we are embodied people and we want to understand more of how body and brain functions and dysfunction affect our daily lives.”⁶⁰ I agree that the desire to understand the complicated body the Lord has created draws one to consider the BKS position, especially since there are considerations that seem to be right and comport with the Scripture.

For instance, the Scripture clearly teaches that the body is affected by the soul (Psalm 31:9). As biblical counselors, it is clearly understood the psychosomatic relationship of the body and the soul. This includes not only of sin (i.e., Psalm 32:3-4) but also proper fear of the Lord. One’s body is affected by their soul through the sin of the soul, and the body is also affected by the fear of the Lord, occurring in the soul. David’s confession reminds the reader that his sin is drying up his physical strength (Psalm 32:3-4). Yet, the Scripture also teaches that for one to fear the Lord, it is “healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones” (Proverbs 3:8, 4:22, 8:35, 21:21).⁶¹ Asaph says, “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:26). Van der Kolk seems to pick up on the effects of trauma to the body in ways that are helpful from the surface level, but still falls short of a complete understanding of body and soul as found in the Scripture. More accurately, the Scripture affirms that it is possible to have a bodily effect from the soul both for health and pain. Van der Kolk sees the body as damaged and thus the body needs the treatment, even when there is indeed no evidence that the trauma was of bodily etiology.⁶²

⁶⁰ Ed Welch, “Trauma and the Body: An Introduction to Three Books,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 33, no. 2 (2019): 61–83.

⁶¹ In fact, multiple commands of Scripture are linked with physical well-being. This includes the promises for Israel to abide by the commands of Moses to “live long” in the promised land (Deuteronomy 32:47) to the ten commandments in which honoring mother and father promotes “that your days may be long” (Exodus 20:12).

⁶² “This explains why it is critical for trauma treatment to engage the entire organism, body,

This is not to even mention the judgments of God on a person's body as a result of sin. The men of Sodom are struck with blindness because of their perversion (Genesis 19:11), Uzziah experiences leprosy of the body because of his pride (2 Kings 15:5; 2 Chronicles 26:16), Israel is reminded that disobedience to Yahweh could bring pestilence (Leviticus 26:25), Paul reminds the Corinthians some are sick because taking the Lord's Supper unworthily (1 Corinthians 11:30), and John says there is a sin unto death (1 John 5:16). While not all bodily ailments stem from the discipline of the Lord, some indeed do. Van der Kolk has no category for this.

To say the body is affected by the soul is somewhat old hat for biblical counseling. Jay Adams said in 1979 that "Man's earthiness must be kept in mind at all times when counseling"⁶³ or "It is plain Scriptures never represent all sickness as the result of immediate sin or even sinful patterns of life."⁶⁴ This statement is not news for most in biblical counseling. What van der Kolk has done is shift the focus from the soul to the body in counseling, yet Scripture encourages the counselor to keep the soul as the primary focus. The soul is the scorekeeper, after all, not the body.

In fact, because the soul and body are interconnected, a biblical counselor should treat soul matters and watch the way those matters affect the physical body. By this point, most have counseled the insomniac on how to roll their cares onto the Lord (1 Peter 5:6-7). For the guilty and shameful person struggling with depression, turn to God's plans for their life—whether through repentance or biblical thinking (Psalm 32:3-4; Philippians 4:6). From a focus on sanctification to general health, the Scripture teaches that the soul is the scorekeeper, and the body is the receptor.⁶⁵ BKS has reversed the order, making the body the source.

mind, and brain," van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 52.

⁶³ Jay Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973), 106.

⁶⁴ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 108.

⁶⁵ See "The Soul as the Originator of Immaterial Responses and Body as Receptor" above. If cognition, desires, volition, affections, and so forth are all inner person realities then one must see that the soul is the originator of many of the health and hurts of the body. Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, "Our faith teaches something very different. For the corruption of the body, which is a burden on the soul, is not the cause but the punishment of Adam's first sin. Moreover, it was not the corruptible flesh that made the soul sinful; on the contrary, it was the sinful soul that made the flesh corruptible" (299; Chapter 3, Book 14).

To necessitate physical treatment, without an emphasis on the soul-first anthropology taught in Scripture, as the BKS does, is to imbibe faulty anthropology and consequently, methodology. Van der Kolk's statements like "This explains why it is critical for trauma treatment to engage the entire organism, body, mind, and brain"⁶⁶ show us the shift from soul as scorekeeper to body as scorekeeper. This is erroneous, not to mention the body treatments that van der Kolk offers are often quasi-scientific treatments, such as Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) and Yoga.⁶⁷ When studying neurofeedback as a remedy, van der Kolk cannot describe what is causing the brainwaves to act as they do, only what the brainwaves are doing.⁶⁸ Unfortunately, the BKS position asserts biological etiology only to fail again to demonstrate what in the body has been the problem while recommending speculative physiological treatments. Van der Kolk further perpetuates psychiatry's "lack of validity" per the words of Thomas Insel, the former director of The National Institute of Mental Health.⁶⁹ Not to mention, he spends the entire book citing the body keeps the score only to start the "Paths to Recovery" section by a person owning the imprints of trauma on their "soul." Chapter 13 is titled, "Owning Your Self."⁷⁰

It seems that the anthropological assertions of van der Kolk are often undermined by a lack of clarity on the true nature of people. While surface-level observations initially seem true, the Bible offers a more robust understanding of people as soul-first rather than body-first. And if there are unknown physiological problems, as there often are in response to trauma, a person should seek medical help from medical doctors. This has consistently been the message of biblical counselors because it is the message of the Bible.

⁶⁶ Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 52.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 248, 263. Of practicing EMDR, Welch notes, "The pragmatist in Van Der Kolk is on display here. He is driven by what could help—even if he doesn't know why it helps. ... My own experience is that Scripture brings the coherence that is sometimes claimed for EMDR, and the riches of the Word and prayer make this technique less compelling." Welch, "Trauma and the Body: An Introduction to Three Books," 82. I agree but would add that EMDR is speculative at best, and silly at worst.

⁶⁸ Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 309.

⁶⁹ Thomas Insel, "Transforming Diagnosis," *The National Institute of Mental Health* (blog), April 29, 2013, <http://psychrights.org/2013/130429NIMHTransformingDiagnosis.htm>.

⁷⁰ Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 204.

CONCLUSION

As has been demonstrated, the body is a complex gift to man that provides life, functioning, health, and other contributions to mankind's existence. The soul is that of utmost value, and it is the soul that will never cease to exist. "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?" (Matthew 16:26). In summation, *that the body only causes physical responses and can only influence immaterial responses—of note, the body never causes immaterial responses*. In this way, the body does not keep the score, the soul does.

For the biblical counselor, the anthropological clarity of the soul as scorekeeper brings a few implications worth noting. First, the murkiness of the effects of trauma are clarified as a physiological effect with a soulical etiology, it allows for the counselor to stay in the Word. It is the Bible that is perfect, "reviving the soul" (Psalm 19:7). Trauma is complicated, but biblical counselors who are good listeners will be able to take the authoritative Scripture and be of significant help to those who have experienced trauma. Those with trauma related problems, need the Scripture, not Yoga.

Second, the sufficiency of Scripture is again affirmed. God has provided all that one needs for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3-4), and the soul is outfitted for every good work through the Scripture (2 Timothy 3:17). BKS anthropological positions will come and go, but the superiority of the Scripture to speak into the soul of mankind is here to stay. The biblical counselor confesses with Peter, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

And finally, there is a place for genuine body problems for the biblical counselor—those of non-sin related etiologies (John 9:3) and those of sin-related etiologies (1 Corinthians 11:30). If Tom were to meet with a biblical counselor, he could hear something that the BKS position cannot offer: forgiveness for his sin through the work of Christ on his behalf.⁷¹ Tom sinned against the Vietnamese people and thus his body was affected by his sin. What should Tom do? Submit to Jesus as Lord and repent of the ways he has perpetuated trauma to others. In so doing, Tom will then get to experience

⁷¹ Recall that Tom was Van der Kolk's opening Case Study, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 12-13.

a peace that truly does pass all understanding from the God of all peace (2 Corinthians 1:3; Philippians 4:7, 9).

Biblical counselors, be encouraged, the soul keeps the score. And God is the keeper of the soul.

*“The Lord will keep you from all evil,
He will keep your soul.” (Psalm 121:7)*

PRESUPPOSITIONALISM, COMMON GRACE, AND TRAUMA THEORY

*Ernie Baker*¹

INTRODUCTION

Historically biblical counseling has flowed out of the springhead of a presuppositional approach to Scripture. Jay Adams states this clearly when he said in the introduction to *Competent to Counsel*, “This baptizing of secular anthropological views which has frequently characterized much that has been called Christian Counseling, must be rejected. Instead, Christians must get back of these views and understand their basic antichristian presuppositions.”² Then in a footnote he adds, “Dr. Cornelius Van Til... has shown the importance of presuppositional analysis. He has demonstrated that at the bottom, all non-Christian systems demand autonomy for man, thereby seeking to dethrone God.”³

Cornelius Van Til was a Dutch Reformed theologian who was a founding faculty member of Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, where he taught systematic theology. He also was the originator of a system of apologetics known as Presuppositional Apologetics that has had a profound influence on biblical counseling and systematic theology as a whole.

What Van Til meant by presuppositions is that there are beliefs that govern beliefs. For Christians there are ultimate presuppositions that govern our views on everything. For example, Romans 11:36 says, “For from him and

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²Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1970), xxi.

³Ibid.

through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.⁴ The most basic belief of all beliefs is the existence and dominion of the triune God and everything is from him, through him and to him.

In this essay, I will endeavor to approach the issue of trauma counseling from a consistently presuppositional approach since that is the heritage of historic biblical counseling.⁵ My presuppositional lens allows me to ask what the theorists of the world are seeing (albeit distorted because of the effects of sin) but then reframe it biblically. I believe this is the stream of Jay Adams and David Powlison even though their personalities approached this differently. I will seek to demonstrate that a biblical presuppositional lens, and its view of common grace, can guide us as we evaluate trauma-informed theory.

As a first step, let's clarify what is meant by "common grace." The doctrine simply stated is, "God's restraint of the full effects of sin after the Fall, preservation and maintenance of the created order, and distribution of talents to human beings."⁶ As you will see later, there are implications for a Christian counseling system depending on which view of this crucial doctrine you believe.

Van Til had a specific view of common grace as part of his apologetic approach. There are other views though with which he disagreed. For example, He thought that Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck (Kuyper's student) went too far to the left allowing for Roman Catholic rationalism.

Professor Scott Oliphint of Westminster Seminary describes Van Til's approach to common grace as follows:

Van Til wants to provide a "third way" to think about "the common grace problem": Going off to the right by denying common grace...or going off to the left by affirming a theory of common

⁴ Scripture quotations are from the *English Standard Bible* unless otherwise noted.

⁵ Please also see the author's book, *Biblical Counseling and the Psychologies* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press 2024) in the "Critical Issues in Biblical Counseling" series. It evaluates trauma theory in a practical way using a case study.

⁶ Vincent Bacote, *Wisdom and Wonder, Common Grace in Science and Art*, foreword (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian's Library Press, 2011) 26.

grace patterned after the natural theology of Rome [as in some of Kuyper's formulations] is to fail...to challenge the wisdom of the world.⁷

Along with Jay Adams, David Powlison was also influenced by Van Tillian presuppositionalism and he taught us to evaluate the psychologies as philosophical belief systems. This must be kept in mind when looking at the thinking behind trauma counseling. Powlison noted,

A biblical view of presuppositions provides a sharply distinct alternative to any and all forms of secularist thinking. It provides a truly coherent rationale for science. It provides a solid, biblical, theoretical foundation for counseling people. It accounts for and appreciates the insights of psychology without losing sight of the pervasive distortion within each insight.⁸

In another place he wrote,

But it is a matter of thinking Christianly—comprehensively and coherently—about why people do what they do. Thinking biblically is practical theological work, bringing to bear “the whole of Scripture” in a fresh way. Such work builds on the wisdom of practical theologians through the ages. For example, Augustine’s seminal analysis of false and true loves has abiding relevance. So do Calvin’s discussions of how secular wisdom misfires when it comes to making sense of our desires. And these works demand that we reason afresh. The questions at stake are today’s questions, never before asked in quite this way, never before answered in the ways they need answering. It takes hard and careful thought about information, questions, points of view, and controversies that have arisen only in the past 150 years. It calls for pointing out cases of misinformation and disinformation that claim the mantle

⁷K. Scott Oliphint, *Common Grace and the Gospel* by Cornelius Van Til, edited by K. Scott Oliphint (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), viii.

⁸David Powlison, “Which Presuppositions? Secular Psychology and the Categories of Biblical Thought,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 12, No. 4 (1984): 270-278.

of science and truth.⁹

To think with biblical presuppositions implies antithesis. We see things differently through a biblical lens because of the absolutes we believe. As Francis Schaeffer would say, “Absolutes imply antithesis.”¹⁰ Antithesis is an important part of Van Til’s presuppositional approach and by it he means, “the contrast between Christian and non-Christian thought.”¹¹ This was also important to Jay Adams.¹² We are admonished by Scripture to not be conformed to the world’s way of thinking but to have transformed minds (Romans 12:2; see also Psalm 1). We must think Christianly, that is, biblically, and evaluate truth claims through clear theological lenses.

DESCRIBING TRAUMA

Now that it is clear that our approach will be through the lens of biblical presuppositions, we ought to define trauma. Bessel van der Kolk is considered by many as the main spokesperson for trauma theory. In his blockbuster book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, he describes trauma but does not define it:

Trauma, by definition, is unbearable and intolerable. Most rape victims, combat soldiers, and children who have been molested become so upset when they think about what they experienced that they try to push it out of their minds, trying to act as if nothing happened....Soldiers returning home from combat may frighten their families with their rages and emotional absence....Having been exposed to family violence as a child often makes it difficult to establish stable, trusting relationships as an adult.¹³

⁹David Powlison, “How Does Scripture Teach Us to Redeem Psychology,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 26, no.3 (2012), 9.

¹⁰ Francis Schaeffer, “The God Who Is There,” in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer* (Wheaton, Crossway, 1983) Vol. 1: page 7.

¹¹ Brian Morley, *Mapping Apologetics* (Downers Grove, Ill:2015), 86.

¹² See Jay Adams, *A Call to Discernment*. As of the writing of this paper this work is about to be released again. It is needed! He discusses antithesis on pages 16-21.

¹³ Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2014), 1-2. A basic premise of the book is that our body stores trauma in a primal part of the brain. Responses then are visceral. I will have more to say about this book later but for now please note the influence of secular evolutionary theory and allow me to recommend a thoughtful review. www.firstthings.com

A helpful definition though is from Darby Strickland's article:

The word *trauma* refers to the emotional, spiritual, and physical disruptions that occur when a person is overwhelmed by extreme suffering.... People use the word *traumatized* to describe a person severely impacted by a terrible event—such as rape, a natural disaster, or a car accident. An event rises to the level of a traumatic experience when it is sudden and unpredictable, involves a threat to life or a profound violation of trust. The word *traumatized* also describes a person overwhelmed after a series of experiences—such as childhood abuse, war, or domestic violence.¹⁴

A typical definition of what it means to be “trauma-informed” is “to recognize the prevalence and impact of trauma among people and to understand the signs, symptoms, and paths for recovery.”¹⁵ This terminology has become important because many are turning to paradigms of trauma as an explanatory lens for the various phenomena that their clients experience in connection with traumatic events.

From a biblical perspective we will think in terms like deep affliction or horrendous suffering. In Scripture, calamity, crisis, shocking unexpected events, betrayal, injustice, and sudden grief or loss are all portrayed.

To accomplish addressing common grace and seeing deep affliction (trauma) with presuppositional eyes we will use 7 lenses. Six of these were taught by Dr. Powlison and the 7th was suggested by Dr. Jennifer Chen.¹⁶ These 7 lenses tell us some of the presuppositions on which we can build a counseling system. Our presuppositional eyeglasses to look at trauma theory and therapies will be:¹⁷

[com/article/2021/10/by-our-wounds-we-are-healed](https://www.smiauthority.org/article/2021/10/by-our-wounds-we-are-healed).

¹⁴ Darby Strickland, “Foundations of Trauma Care for Biblical Counselors,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 36:2 (2022), 26.

¹⁵ “What Does It Mean To Be Trauma Informed?” SMIAuthority.org, accessed 6/3/2023, What does it mean to be trauma-informed? - SMI Adviser. “SMI” means serious mental illness and this site is administered by the American Psychiatric Association.

¹⁶ Jennifer Chen has her doctorate in Psychology but also an MABC (Master of Arts in Biblical Counseling).

¹⁷ Please see *Scripture and Counseling, God’s Word for Life in a Broken World* (Zondervan) and *What*

- Source of Authority: What is the epistemology of the system?
- Sin: What is the etiology of the problem?
- Salvation: What is the solution to the problem?
- Sanctification: What methodologies should we use?
- Support systems: Who teaches this view and provides care?
- Servants of the system: What is the role of the counselor and who vets the counselor?¹⁸
- Sparring: How does the system promote and defend itself?¹⁹

You can see these categories in David Powlison's "Theology and Secular Psychology" syllabus course description.

A 'psychology' is a complex creature. It involves a set of observations about people. Such descriptions of human life communicate what is deemed significant. They reflect the focusing power of a theory, as well as the blinkering effects of a theory. A psychology proposes an interpretive system that explains why people are the way they are. A set of categories and labels embodies those interpretive categories. A psychology often proposes norms and ideals of human functioning, standards against which diagnoses are made and towards which therapies aspire. It typically generates a set of counseling practices, methods designed to facilitate change in beliefs, behaviors, feelings, attitudes, values, and the like. These ideas and practices inhabit an institutional and professional system where a practitioner first receives training and then delivers the goods: an undergraduate department and graduate school, a psychiatric hospital, a clinic, a private practice, a support group, a self-help book, a church. A 'psychology'—and there are many of them, creatures of time and place, of the aspirations of their creators, of the worldview of their sociocultural surround—is not an impersonal abstraction. Psychologies are believed and taught by persons; psychotherapies are done by persons. A psychology

Happened in the Garden (Kregel) where this criterion is used in varying ways to evaluate the psychologies.

¹⁸This S was suggested by Dr. Jenn Chen.

¹⁹I am also hoping these criteria will help readers be discerning with other worldviews and especially reading literature on counseling.

proposes a system of truth and ministry, and it must be evaluated as such. Psychologies are most like practical theology.²⁰

Let's now unpack each of the seven lenses that help us understand trauma theory and then reframe it through biblical presuppositional eyeglasses. First, we will ask questions about the epistemology of the system.

SOURCE OF AUTHORITY: WHO OR WHAT GETS QUOTED?

Every counseling system has an epistemology. Epistemology is, "the study or a theory of the nature and grounds of knowledge especially with reference to its limits and validity."²¹ Philosophies desire to understand the world and therefore "construct theories that are synoptic, descriptively accurate, explanatorily powerful, and in all other respects rationally defensible."²²

Looking at trauma through a secular lens, the researchers would base their opinions on research studies such as the Adverse Childhood Trauma (ACE) study. This study, done by Dr. Robert Anda and Dr. Vincent Felitti surveyed between 1995-97 over 17,000 adults about their exposure to ten categories of abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction during their childhood. Using the survey, physical exams and an ongoing tracking of adults' health showed a strong correlation between childhood trauma and poor health outcomes decades later.²³

Another significant ingredient to a secular epistemology is the plethora of studies that have been done studying the impact of trauma on the brain.²⁴ This will be discussed later.

²⁰ David Powlison "Theology and Secular Psychology" (syllabus, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1995). I only have a hard copy of this syllabus.

²¹ Merriam-Webster, "epistemology," accessed July 7, 2023, [Epistemology Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster](#).

²² Britannica, "epistemology," accessed July 11, 2023.

²³ "History of Trauma-Informed Care and Education," [ohioleadership.org](#), Accessed May 28, 2023, [ohioleadership.org/storage/ocali-ims-sites/ocali-ims-olac/documents/History-of-Trauma informed care and education](#).

²⁴ I will comment more on this under the S of sin where etiology will be explored.

What is a Christian's epistemology? Dr. Oliphint says, "Learning to think biblically is a lifelong task; it is the warp and woof of what it means to love God with all of our mind. Van Til gives us tools that too few in the church have given, so that the task of thinking biblically can be, rather than a burden, a sanctifying delight."²⁵

To think biblically there is some important theology that we must be committed to first. As Christians we believe distinct things about the nature of the Bible. I would like to review two.²⁶

First, Scripture has magisterial authority. The only true and living God, Creator of heaven and earth, who sits above the heavens gave His word through human authors. We believe He gave the very words (inspiration) and that anything in this Word is without error, is authoritative over any area (inerrancy). It is the word of the King. He is The Majesty and has spoken so His Word has magisterial authority. If He gives a ruling on a subject, then we know the opinion of THE King (Jeremiah 33:2). This is refreshing in a world of confusing theories!

Secondly, this word also has inherent sanctifying power to change lives because it is living (John 17:17). If an individual will apply this powerful Word to his life even the most stubborn, deeply rooted issues can be dealt with (James 1:21-25). It is the depth of a person's biblical belief system that will help him survive trauma.

It is important to comment on the sanctifying power of the Word. It is easy to turn toward psychological methodologies and believe we must integrate with secular sources when it is not believed that Scripture has enough resources. Historical biblical counseling has from the beginning maintained, based on biblical and theological grounds, that the beautiful, majestic, sanctifying Word of God has more than enough resources to accomplish the goals of

²⁵ K. Scott Oliphint, "How to Read Van Til's *The Gospel and Common Grace*," Westminster Theological Seminary, September 10, 2015, <https://faculty.wts.edu/posts/how-to-read-van-tils-common-grace-and-the-gospel>.

²⁶ It would be important to note that this is a phrase that The Master's University uses to describe how the various departments endeavor to look at their discipline through the eyeglasses of Scripture.

biblical counseling.

There are other important epistemological questions being raised, however. How much authority does science have? How much authority do psychological methodologies have or should they have? Does science play a primary, secondary, or tertiary role in my counseling? How should we think about the neuroscience research related to trauma and how does a biblical counselor use it? Van Til spoke to these issues. As one example, in a context discussing science he says,

Surely the witness to the God of the Scriptures must be presented everywhere. It must be...presented with wisdom and with tact. But it must be presented. It is not presented, however, if we grant that God the Holy Spirit in a general testimony to all men approves of interpretations of this world or of aspects of this world which ignore Him and set Him at naught.²⁷

As the journey continues to demonstrate that a biblical presuppositional lens, and its view of common grace, can guide us as we evaluate trauma-informed theory, we must raise questions surrounding common grace and the views of the Neo-Calvinists Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. This discussion is under this first heading concerning epistemology because the way common grace is viewed impacts where help is derived to interpret problems and results in influencing your methodology. It would seem in Bavinck's view, there will be more options of resources that God has allowed humans to discover in the psychologies and that a Christian counselor should use.²⁸

Dr. Brian Morley, an expert in understanding views on apologetics stated, "I'm very interested in the outcome in discussions about counseling. I can definitely see how it's relevant to the questions of whether knowledge

²⁷ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 165.

²⁸ I find it interesting to think about the connection between Bavinck's view and how that connects to the views of John Coe in, "Why Biblical Counseling Is Unbiblical" (The Evangelical Theological Society, 1991) and J.P. Moreland's arguments in, "How Evangelicals Became Over Committed to the Bible and What Can Be Done about It" (Evangelical Theological Society, 2007). The arguments sound at least similar to me.

from non-biblical sources could be used. The broader view [Kuyper and Bavinck] seems to fit with the two streams of knowledge view, for example, of insights in Proverbs (i.e., where lessons seem to be drawn from observation and presented as authoritative). The conclusion is that knowledge from observation is just as relevant as biblical knowledge.”²⁹ It must be added that historical, presuppositional biblical counseling has not believed this.

According to Kuyper and Bavinck what is common grace?³⁰ In the introduction to *Wisdom and Wonder, Common Grace in Science and Art*, it is defined this way:

“How does the world go on after sin’s entrance and how is it possible that ‘good’ things emerge from the hands of humans within and without a covenant relationship with God?” Common grace is God’s restraint of the full effects of sin after the Fall, preservation and maintenance of the created order, and distribution of talents to human beings.³¹

These Neo-Calvinists are endeavoring to wrestle with the thorny questions of how the world cannot only survive the effects of sin but also thrive with advances in the sciences. The answer to both is the restraining work of the Holy Spirit upon sin. John Murray described the issues surrounding common grace this way:

How is it that men who still lie under the wrath and curse of God and are heirs of hell enjoy so many good gifts at the hand of God? How is it that men who are not savingly renewed by the Spirit of God nevertheless exhibit so many qualities, gifts and accomplishments that promote the preservation, temporal happiness, cultural progress, social and economic improvement of themselves and others...How is it that this sin cursed world

²⁹ Private correspondence, Brian Morley is the author of *Mapping Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

³⁰ Please note that John Frame even questions the term “common grace.” See John Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 246.

³¹ Vincent Bacote, *Wisdom and Wonder, Common Grace in Science and Art*, 26.

enjoys so much favor and kindness at the hand of its holy and ever-blessed Creator?³²

Bavinck's view of the doctrine of common grace is controversial though and has implications. Because of his view of common grace Herman Bavinck could say this about geology:

It is of some importance also to focus our minds for a moment on the facts and phenomena that have been brought to light by geological research. No one has any objection, no one *can* have any objection, to the facts advanced by geology. These facts are just as much words of God as the content of Holy Scripture and must therefore be believably accepted by everyone. But these facts must be rigorously distinguished from the exegesis of these facts that geologists present.³³

He does go on to give qualifying statements about how the “facts” are interpreted. But Van Til who understood Bavinck's position well would say there are no brute facts.³⁴ He thought there is too much wiggle room for rationalism and therefore not enough understanding of the effect of sin. Van Til further cautions that, “there is no single territory or dimension in which believers and non-believers have all things wholly in common.”³⁵ There is no neutrality.³⁶

John Frame, a student of Van Til's, would also say about Bavinck's statement concerning geology that there are no brute facts: “There is no such thing as ‘brute fact’ by which fallen man can seek to validate his interpretation over against God's.”³⁷

³² John Murray, “Common Grace” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol.2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 93.

³³ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 501.

³⁴ See Cornelius Van Til's article titled, “Common Grace” in the *Westminster Theological Journal*. <http://files1.wts.edu/uploads/images/files/WTJ/CVT%20-%20Common%20Grace,%20pt%201.pdf>

³⁵ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 102.

³⁶ Please see Edward Wilde's excellent articles, “Why Common Grace Is Not Enough for Christians Who Counsel,” Parts I and II, *The Journal of Biblical Soul Care*, 1:2 and 2:1 (2018).

³⁷ John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, (Phillipsburg, NJ, P&R, 1987), 28.

It seems that Bavinck's statement about geology also reveals a view of epistemology where the "facts" of science have the same authority as Scripture. Most importantly what does Scripture say? In the end (or should I say, "for the beginning") what Scripture says is the most important. We cannot quote chapter and verse of Bavinck, Van Til, Adams or Powlison as if they are canonical.

How would a biblical, presuppositional view of common grace then interpret what is being observed by trauma theorists? First, I can look at the literature, listen to the presentations and ask myself, "what are they seeing?" (Keeping in mind that in Van Til's view their vision is distorted). And then ask, what is that biblically? I have profited by listening to trauma presentations and reading the literature and then thinking it through with what I hope is biblical discernment.

What are they seeing? Here are some common topics that are observed with those who have been through traumatic events. These then develop into counseling categories.

- Guilt: "It's my fault that the abuse happened," "I should've been able to do something."
- The need for community: change happens in community, support happens in community
- Sleep is a significant issue.
- The need to forgive abusers.
- Flashbacks
- Depression
- Substance abuse

Methodologies are then developed to address these common categories. We can also develop biblical methodologies to address these common areas.

But to be most consistent with our worldview we should start with Scripture and ask, "how does scripture address extreme suffering?" What examples do we see in Scripture of godly people responding to crisis and processing crisis? How does God want us to think about trauma?

We must start here because this is the inspired word of God and is His Word on the subject. It has become clear to me that “context is king” if we desire Scripture to sing. When we understand the context in which the principles of Scripture unfold, we see how wise and relevant to current discussions they are.

The writers of Scripture were inspired by God to write in the midst of captivity or impending siege. The captivities of that time were astonishingly brutal events involving rape, burning, slaughter, and slave caravans. I am thinking of passages in Isaiah that are rich in relevance and need to be mined and applied with creativity. They also wrote in the midst of relational brutality and betrayal. I am thinking of the Psalms and how David laments his relational woes.³⁸

How do people respond to affliction biblically? They respond with anguish and pouring out their hearts before God along with asking questions. They struggle with sleep. They are tormented in mind/soul and express deep wounding by others. Psalms 42 and 43 are classic examples of this and may have been written by the Sons of Korah possibly during the Babylonian Captivity. We now move to the source of the problem.

SIN: WHAT IS THE SOURCE OF THE PROBLEM?

Our next presuppositional lens asks the question, “what is the source of the problem?” Edward Wilde, in his excellent article concerning common grace, describes the permeating impact of sin. After discussing the effects of sin related to death, and impacts on the body, including the central nervous system, he says, “The Fall of Adam caused comprehensive damage to the human heart: the cognition, affections, behavior, volition and identity of man was fundamentally distorted. This ‘psychological’ damage, coupled to a body... leads to the range of ‘mental health’ and ‘psychological’ troubles.”³⁹

As we dive into this section on etiology, we must be wary from a

³⁸ An interesting survey of the context of Psalms yielded the fact that 2/3's of David's Psalms were about relational tensions like betrayal and threats of death.

³⁹ Edward Wilde, “Why Common Grace Is Not Enough for Christians Who Counsel,” *Journal of Biblical Soul Care*, 1:2 (2018), 64.

presuppositional perspective of saying there are areas of research that are not permeated by sin (Ephesians 4:17-18). As humans study trauma, we must keep in mind that broken people are studying other broken people through imperfect scientific means. The Fall impacts everything.

The source of the problem in a secular system is trauma. But, if you remove original sin and replace it with original trauma, what would be gained and what would be lost? I believe false doctrine would be gained and all would be lost.⁴⁰

For many, trauma has become the “Grand Unifying Theory,” the missing link to understanding humans.⁴¹ This was confirmed for me as I listened to hours of trauma training and heard that “Adverse Childhood Experiences” are what lead to so much substance abuse. It all crystallized though when seeing one slide that had trauma in the middle and emanating out from it in all four corners of the slide were behaviors and reactions like panic attacks, flashbacks, substance abuse, and depression. In other words, trauma was the central unifying theme.⁴²

For some within the secular trauma world etiology is totally physical therefore counselees are not responsible. Van der Kolk states this clearly, “We now know that their behaviors are not the result of moral failings or signs of lack of willpower or bad character—they are caused by actual changes in the brain.”⁴³ Hence, we are not responsible for our responses to life. Others are more cautious.⁴⁴

From a biblical perspective, trauma happens because sin-cursed people on a sin-cursed planet hurt one another. As sin-cursed people everything about

⁴⁰ I first read this question posed by someone on Facebook.

⁴¹ I heard this term first in a class with David Powlison where he commented that the psychologies had given up on one grand unifying theory of what is wrong with humans. This terminology is also in *Counseling the Hard Cases* by Heath Lambert and Stuart Scott.

⁴² Lori Beyer, “Creating Cultures of Trauma Informed Care” given February 3, 2016. Educational video, 48:45. www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaqLleg4Kqg. This was a formal, educational presentation for continuing education units.

⁴³ Van der Kolk, 3.

⁴⁴ To get a sense of varying perspectives on human responsibility and how change happens see, Edward Welch, “Trauma and the Body: An Introduction to Three Books,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 33:2 (2019): 61-83.

us is impacted. My brain, nervous system, and inner person are all impacted by sin. We are all disabled.

In addition, it would be important to note that it is clear from Scripture that we live out of the wants and desires of the heart. The fruit, or reactions, to life come from a central place called the heart (Proverbs 4:23). These intense experiences are drawing out what is already on the inside. Historically, biblical counseling has said that our body cannot make us sin. Powlison has stated it succinctly:

No doubt, the strengths and weaknesses of our bodies matter: God has made each of us to live as a physically-embodied creature. No doubt, the vast host of environmental influences for good or bad matter: God has placed each one of us to live as a situationally-embedded creature. Bravo that research should seek to trace the innumerable significant variables that influence us as thinking, feeling, moral beings. These influences variously affect us: tempting us to turn to the dark side or encouraging us to live in the light of faith working through love.... These influences describe the God arranged stage on which you and I make the choices that define our lives and character. All of us should want to know about factors that exert influence. But research into these factors cannot finally account for the decisive person. Though each of us lives within a world of influences, our obedience or disobedience to God's two great commandments is not determined by those influences. It is out of the heart that both wisdom and folly spring.

It has become a cultural reflex to assign final cause significance to experiences in personal history [like trauma, my note].⁴⁵

Another question related to etiology is how would a presuppositional view of common grace process neuroscience research and findings?⁴⁶ We must be careful here because our presupposition of inerrancy assumes biblical

⁴⁵ David Powlison, "How Does Scripture Teach Us to Redeem Psychology," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 26:3 (2012), 7.

⁴⁶ I am not a neuroscience researcher so have relied upon friends who are experts in neuroscience who have guided me in the writing of this section.

authority over any area of science. Keeping this in mind we can wrestle with the science. Here are a few brief thoughts. It is now generally accepted that there is evidence that the brain is impacted by prolonged stress (for example combat survivors).⁴⁷ There are systems in the brain that work together and show difference in brain scans in large, controlled group studies and these studies have been repeated. It must be clarified though that knowing exact details of brain impact is not possible because of the limitations of scans and other factors. It must also be clarified that it is not just one area (e.g. the Amygdala). We must always factor in individual personhood as well. Who were they before the prolonged stress? How did they process stress at other times in life? What did this individual's brain look like before the prolonged stress (remember that the testing is a composite of large groups and not any individual brain). What is going on in the worship of his heart? Humans are much more than a brain so let's be careful not to be reductionistic.

Knowing that something is happening in the brain leads to an important question. Is the person damaged forever? According to Scripture and science, the answer is no. Praise God. We believe that living by truth can change the way a person processes life and therefore can have an impact on what is happening in the brain. My biblical presuppositions tell me that believers can "be renewed in the spirit of [their] minds" (Ephesians 4:23). Neuroscience has also realized there is plasticity so humans are not stuck.⁴⁸ The brain is malleable.

This information informs us as biblical counselors. If we know a counselee has been through severe affliction, and are aware of the literature, we can be more patient and loving. Is it necessary that we know this information to be an effective biblical counselor? I believe the answer is no, especially if

⁴⁷ Karl A, Schaefer M, Malta LS, Dörfel D, Rohleder N, Werner A, "A meta-analysis of structural brain abnormalities in PTSD," *Neurosci Biobehav Rev.* 2006;30(7):1004-31. doi: 10.1016/j.neubiorev.2006.03.004. Epub 2006 May 26. PMID: 16730374.

⁴⁸ "It is defined as the ability of the nervous system to change its activity in response to intrinsic or extrinsic stimuli by reorganizing its structure, functions, or connections after injuries, such as a stroke or traumatic brain injury (TBI)." Matt Puderbaugh, Prabhu D. Emmady, "Neuroplasticity," National Library of Medicine, National Center for Biotechnology Information (May 1, 2023). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK557811/>, accessed February 14, 2024. From a human perspective there are limits to plasticity because of situations like traumatic brain injury.

I am already a loving and patient counselor and give people time to process truth and change (Ephesians 4:1-3). We also believe the Holy Spirit could change someone instantly if He so desired. In addition, because we believe in the penetrating power of the word of God (Hebrews 4:12), we even believe the Lord can work in the “mind” of the individual even if the brain is not functioning properly.

As presuppositional biblical counselors we must also keep in mind that all research has biases, and that worldview impacts even the way studies are designed.⁴⁹ There is no neutrality.

From a presuppositional perspective, absolutes require antithesis (as noted earlier). We have a clear view of etiology and therefore must be wary of incorporating secular models into our model of counseling. In a section discussing how human nature is interpreted, Powlison warns, “No counseling model whose genes contain secular DNA ever gets motivation theory straight. It is clear that every heart (at every moment, in every circumstance) is either actively serving lies and lusts or is actively loving the Lord God of truth.”⁵⁰ Powlison also states:

What goes on in your body has an influence. When you experience allergies or sleepless nights, premenstrual hormones or chronic pain, Asperger’s or Alzheimer’s, your mood, thinking and actions are affected. You’re tempted in different ways than when you feel fine. Similarly, it’s obvious that each of us comes wired from birth with a different temperament. Some people are more prone to anger, others to anxiety, others to getting discouraged, others to pleasure-addictions, and so forth. Our bodies affect us in many ways.... But does the body give the decisive, underlying explanation for their personal problems? No, no more than it gives the decisive explanation for their good and loving choices. The body is a contributory factor, an influence. It’s not the final cause of either your faith or your idolatry.⁵¹

⁴⁹ I found Van Til’s comments related to “Witness bearing in the laboratory” helpful. In the Oliphint edition of *Common Grace and the Gospel* see pages 164-166.

⁵⁰ David Powlison, “Vive la Difference!” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 28:1 (2014), 4.

⁵¹ David Powlison, “Sane Faith in the Insanity of Life: Part 3,” CCEF, June 1, 2009, <https://>

Yes, the researchers of the world are correct in seeing that trauma (severe affliction) has a dramatic influence on people. The Bible also describes the dramatic impact of life on humans. In fact, original sin has had a dramatic impact on all of us and this is compounded by life and what others do. What's the answer?

SALVATION: WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

As we continue our presuppositional journey we must ask what the solution is. Let's look through the secular trauma lens first.

An impression you receive from listening to the trauma presentations is the “good news” has finally been found. They have finally figured out why humans have so many problems. They have finally figured out why there is so much substance abuse. From their perspective, at least part of the mystery of mass shootings has been realized because “the abused become abusers.” This hope has led to the enthusiastic embrace of trauma theory by many. Again, Dr. Powlison helps us think biblically, i.e., presuppositionally:

That's why every sort of treatment or therapy involves taking some responsibility for your life. It's odd, when you think about it. According to the therapeutic outlook, you have no real responsibility for causing your problems. Your syndrome, disorder, or disease was caused by genetics, hormones, or how people treated you. But you are given final responsibility for solving what's wrong. You can get a grip; you can make better choices; you can choose to heal; you can change your self-talk. Here's the logic: “You are definitely NOT a sinner. But you definitely ARE your savior.”

God sees things the other way around. You definitely ARE a sinner, and you are definitely NOT your Savior. When this merciful Father gets a grip on you, you take hold of him. As the patient Spirit changes you, he enables you to make more loving choices. Because the good Shepherd restores your soul, you flourish. This

most personal God teaches you how to talk with him, so you stop talking to yourself so much.⁵²

What is the solution biblically? Van Til summarizes the issues well, “Only if common grace is Christ-centered and biblically constructed” can we properly speak of common grace that is biblical.⁵³ Even though he respected Kuyper and Bavinck in other areas, Van Til did not believe their views of common grace were biblically constructed.

Praise God that we have a Savior who can relate to our trauma. Isaiah 53 clearly pictures a broken Savior, who is broken by humans who are broken by sin. Our ultimate brokenness is our relationship with our Creator though. You must enter into relationship with this God through the person of Jesus Christ (John 14:6). When we repent of our sin, He sets the captives free and heals the brokenhearted (Isaiah 61:1). We have a whole new potential for change because of the power of the gospel which is the true good news. Embedded in the gospel is the power to change lives, and it will (Philippians 1:6). How does this change happen? A biblical presuppositional view of change will be different than that of other systems.

SANCTIFICATION— HOW DO PEOPLE CHANGE? WHAT ARE THEY BEING CHANGED TO?

One of the most interesting discoveries while doing research on trauma theory was to realize the plethora of models of change being utilized under the banner of trauma therapy. To help those suffering from flashbacks, anger, poor sleep, and panic attacks, various methodologies are utilized. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (Aaron Beck), Cognitive Processing Therapy (Patricia Resick), Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing, aka EMDR (Francine Shapiro) are some of the most common.

Some who identify as biblical counselors are advocating for the use of

⁵² David Powlison, “Sane Faith in the Insanity of Life: Part 3,” CCEF, June 1, 2009, <https://www.ccef.org/sane-faith-insanity-life-part-three>.

⁵³ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 264-5.

psychological methodologies like EMDR and teaching breathing techniques to the anxious.⁵⁴ Seemingly growing out of Bavinck's views, they argue that these are common grace discoveries.⁵⁵ Here are a few brief thoughts. First, equating breathing exercises as a psychological methodology that is in the same category as EMDR seems to be a category error. These are not the same. Humans were taking deep breaths when anxious long before psychology incorporated this into therapies for treating anxiety. Secondly, EMDR is a method that grows out of a particular anthropology and is controversial even in the secular world.⁵⁶

From a biblical presuppositional perspective our goal is to see those who have been through intense suffering become God glorifiers who worship the true and living God even through their pain. This would make them Christ like (Romans 8:28-29). Is it possible for a person who has been through severe trauma to live a spiritually healthy, God glorifying, growing in Christlikeness life? Yes, and amen!

This is where the doctrine of sanctification shines! We can be thankful for the doctrine of progressive sanctification. Biblically this is progressive growth and change toward Christ likeness that glorifies God (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Because presuppositional biblical counselors believe in the magisterial authority of Scripture and its sanctifying power, they do not believe that Scripture is deficient to help. It seems that the deficiency is knowing how to think deeply about applications and creatively helping counselees do so.⁵⁷

What do we see writers of Scripture do to deal with their trauma? One of the main things you see is the importance of intense prayer (Psalm 62). What does prayer do? It expresses dependence on God. I am saying to my soul that I am

⁵⁴ Eliza Huie, "What Is EMDR Therapy?" May 24, 2020, in *Speak the Truth*, Produced by Eliza Huie, podcast, 31:22, open.spotify.com/episode/1vChOhQsYTJkYRRXhUwr8p.

⁵⁵ I posed the question earlier concerning John Coe and J.P. Moreland. Here I am wondering about the connection with Larry Crabb's approach of "Spoiling the Egyptians."

⁵⁶ See The Biblical Counseling Coalition's statement on the use of EMDR by biblical counselors: <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2021/12/16/bcc-statement-on-emdr>.

⁵⁷ I distinctly remember David Powlison connecting methodology with epistemology in class. He stated that you can tell what a counseling system believes the problem is by the methodology they employ.

not alone and cannot handle this on my own. I am entering into relationship with God, and this is healthy because we are made for relationship with God. Let's help counselees do so.

Biblically, the writers of scripture express the importance of a disciplined mind that trusts Yahweh. Isaiah 26:3-5 is written on the cusp or in the midst of the Assyrian Captivity with all of its horrors. How can we help counselees creatively apply these verses to life?

Biblically, the writers of scripture express the importance of hope in God. How do we help those having flashbacks hope in the Lord? Let's think creatively to help counselees do so. See Isaiah 40:31.

Biblically, the writers of scripture articulate their beliefs about the character of God—often through metaphors. He is their rock, fortress, and refuge (Psalm 18:1-3). Why is this important? These truths remind us of God's character and who He desires to be for us in times of intense suffering. These also warn us that it is a normal temptation under intense, deep affliction to turn to false rocks and fortresses. How do we creatively help a counselee turn to the Lord as a refuge rather than the bottle or drugs?

Biblically, the writers of scripture worship through song. Why is this important? Worship through singing helps direct our minds upward and off the circumstances. Singing truth helps us to think theologically about life. Music soothes the soul as part of God's design.

Biblically, the writers properly question God. They ask why questions (Psalm 42). Why is this important? God allows us to ask why. He expects us to ask why. This is part of our dependence on God. This helps us process the circumstances and helps us articulate pain (lament).

Biblically, the writers of scripture while undergoing intense suffering, believe that God is up to something good. They fight with their souls to believe the promises of God concerning His providence (Psalm 28).

While secular researchers are seeing many true things, they are not seeing

the whole thing and they do not have a godly vision for the purpose of intense suffering. They also do not have resources that have magisterial authority and sanctifying power!

Another resource that secular models do not have is the local church. Our biblical presuppositional lenses tell us that the local church is a top priority in the care for the traumatized.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Every secular counseling theory has networks of researchers and clinicians who teach and support the theory and do their “ministry” in a clinic. It has been amazing to see how popular trauma counseling and being “trauma-informed” has become. This is a bit of hyperbole, but it seems like the whole culture, even the world, is supporting this idea. On a ministry trip to East Africa, one of the first questions I was asked by my class was concerning van der Kolk’s book.

According to the New Testament the scene of ministry is the local church, not a clinic. What then is the role of the church with helping those who have been through traumatic events? In today’s world many would say little to no role. Some would say that churches are ill-equipped and may do harm.

The local church is an amazing organism though that can be used by God to help those who have been through intense, sudden affliction. Scripture calls us to care about widows and orphans and that God cares for the oppressed (Psalm 146; James 1:27). It is “true religion” and godly therefore to do so. It is clear that shepherds are called to care for the flock (I Peter 5:1-4). The answer is not for the church to ignore or refer out those who have been through trauma but to get appropriate training and move into ministry (Ephesians 4:12).

Many wonderful stories could be told of how the Lord has used His local churches to give support, hope, and help grow those who have gone through intense affliction. Who are the equipped people though who can do ministry

in these local churches? Our biblical presuppositional lenses make clear who they are.

SERVANTS OF THE SYSTEM

It is clear that every counseling system defines the role of the counselor and the tools they use. As stated above, there are numerous counseling approaches in the secular world for dealing with trauma so therefore the role of the counselor is different in each model. As biblical counselors the question for us then is, what do we see explained and modeled in Scripture as the role of a counselor and the tools they use?⁵⁸

Much has been written on the role of a counselor from a biblical counseling perspective. Most often we have described ourselves as disciplers, or shepherds (I Peter 5:1-5). Paul was concerned to see “every man” grow in Christ likeness and therefore seemed to be interested in working with individuals not just public preaching (Colossians 1:28).

These disciplers are ministers of the Word because that is the means of sanctification (John 17:17). Their methodology is to include helping sufferers through the application of Scripture to their lives. This is the pattern we see all through Psalm 119. The objection may be raised, “But what about all the helpful research on trauma and the methodologies that have been developed?” Does a presuppositional biblical counselor need to use research as part of their discipleship tools?

To help myself with this question I picture a funnel. I only have an hour when meeting with counselees so what words should come dripping out the bottom of the funnel during those precious minutes? A lot of shaping information has gone into the top of the funnel. For example, I know a lot about the background of Bible books. I have studied Greek and Hebrew and often have translated the passages we are using in the session. As a student of history, I am often thinking about things related to history. I have also

⁵⁸ It is beyond the scope of this paper to explain what the role of the counselor is the many therapeutic models utilized in the mental health world.

read quite a bit about neuroscience. During my formal training I took a lot of theology courses and they have had a shaping influence on my life. By the grace of God, I have traveled to many countries and had some amazing cultural experiences. In addition, there is my own relationship with the Lord that shapes the way I think about human struggles. Lastly, I have learned from working people as they wrestle through issues. All of these ingredients have gone into the top of the funnel and have shaped my thinking and my soul. But when it comes to the actual words that drip out the bottom during counseling, it is my calling to make sure they are primarily Bible words. The Bible is my authority, my calling, my specialty. What I know may shape the type of questions asked or even how I speak Bible truths. But when direction is being given for dealing with life, I should point them to Scripture. All of the extra information may permeate my thinking in that it shapes what I say but the words coming out need to be Bible saturated.

SPARRING: HOW DOES THE SYSTEM DEFEND ITSELF?

Lastly, all systems of thought defend themselves. They enter into the arena of ideas and spar with other worldviews. It is clear that *The Body Keeps the Score* is an apologetic for various methodological approaches and even deeper for a worldview. It would be important to note that not everyone in the secular world has accepted the secular trauma apologetic though and there are numerous evaluations each defending their own system.⁵⁹ Even this article is an apologetic for a worldview, a biblical presuppositional perspective on trauma theory.

CONCLUSION

A consistently presuppositional approach helps us look at the theories of the world through biblical eyeglasses. This has been the pattern of historic biblical counseling. We start with assumptions about humans and the Triune God,

⁵⁹ Parul Sehgal, “The Case Against the Trauma Plot,” *The New Yorker*, December 27, 2021, is just one example. Another is from a psychiatrist, Michael Scherringa who wrote, *Analysis of The Body Keeps the Score, the Science That Trauma Activists Don’t Want You to Know*.

who is Creator of heaven and earth. As we look at the theories through biblical lenses, we can evaluate them and ask, “what are they seeing biblically?” But we keep in mind that their worldview has biases because of the effect of sin. We can also, starting with the Bible ask, “how do people in Scripture respond to and deal with trauma?”

We have also seen that Van Til, and others have raised concerns about Kuyper’s and Bavinck’s views of common grace and that these views have implications. While desiring to keep an open door to common grace to allow for amazing scientific discoveries we also realize that humans do not see clearly even though making these discoveries. David Powlison argued that we must be “radically biblical.”⁶⁰ He clearly stated:

God is the expert when it comes to people, and He has spoken and acted to change us and to equip us to help others change. Secularists have a twisted and blinkered perceptiveness that can only be useful to biblical counselors as it is radically reinterpreted according to the counseling methodology revealed in Scripture.⁶¹

Therefore, to adopt Bavinck’s broader view of common grace for biblical counseling, that would potentially allow for the use of secular methodologies for trauma victims, is inconsistent with the stream of historic biblical counseling that has flowed through Adams and Powlison.

Scripture is sufficient not only because it says it is but also because it demonstrates that we have a complete counseling system. These presuppositional lens help us to see and evaluate the claims of secular approaches to trauma and give us biblical confidence to help those who have gone through deep affliction by constructing a complete counseling system. If we have a complete counseling system, there is no need to syncretize with other belief systems.

⁶⁰ David Powlison, “Crucial Issues in Contemporary Biblical Counseling (Excerpt),” Biblical Counseling Coalition, October 20, 2011, www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2011/10/20/crucial-issues-in-contemporary-biblical-counseling/, accessed February 14, 2024.

⁶¹ John MacArthur and Wayne A. Mack, *Counseling: How to Counsel Biblically* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc, 2005), 247-248.



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