

# PRESUPPOSITIONALISM, COMMON GRACE, AND TRAUMA THEORY

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## 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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup>

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

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> 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

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<sup>4</sup> Scripture quotations are from the *English Standard Bible* unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

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

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

<sup>8</sup>David 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.”<sup>10</sup> Antithesis is an important part of Van Til’s presuppositional approach and by it he means, “the contrast between Christian and non-Christian thought.”<sup>11</sup> This was also important to Jay Adams.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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

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

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

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> 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](http://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.<sup>14</sup>

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.”<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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:<sup>17</sup>

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

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

<sup>15</sup> “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.

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

<sup>17</sup> 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?<sup>18</sup>
- Sparring: How does the system promote and defend itself?<sup>19</sup>

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

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

<sup>18</sup>This S was suggested by Dr. Jenn Chen.

<sup>19</sup>I 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.<sup>20</sup>

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."<sup>21</sup> Philosophies desire to understand the world and therefore "construct theories that are synoptic, descriptively accurate, explanatorily powerful, and in all other respects rationally defensible."<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup>

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

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

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

<sup>22</sup> Britannica, "epistemology," accessed July 11, 2023.

<sup>23</sup> "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](#).

<sup>24</sup> 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."<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup>

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

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<sup>25</sup> 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>.

<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup>

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

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<sup>27</sup> Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 165.

<sup>28</sup> 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.”<sup>29</sup> It must be added that historical, presuppositional biblical counseling has not believed this.

According to Kuyper and Bavinck what is common grace?<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup>

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

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

<sup>30</sup> 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.

<sup>31</sup> 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?<sup>32</sup>

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.<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup> 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.”<sup>35</sup> There is no neutrality.<sup>36</sup>

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.”<sup>37</sup>

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

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

<sup>34</sup> 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>

<sup>35</sup> Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 102.

<sup>36</sup> 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).

<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup>

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.”<sup>39</sup>

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

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<sup>38</sup> 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.

<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup>

For many, trauma has become the “Grand Unifying Theory,” the missing link to understanding humans.<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup>

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.”<sup>43</sup> Hence, we are not responsible for our responses to life. Others are more cautious.<sup>44</sup>

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

<sup>40</sup> I first read this question posed by someone on Facebook.

<sup>41</sup> 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.

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

<sup>43</sup> Van der Kolk, 3.

<sup>44</sup> 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].<sup>45</sup>

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

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

<sup>46</sup> 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).<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup> 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

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<sup>47</sup> Karl A, Schaefer M, Malta LS, Dörfel D, Rohleider 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.

<sup>48</sup> "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.<sup>49</sup> 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.”<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> 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.

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

<sup>51</sup> 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.<sup>52</sup>

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.<sup>53</sup> 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

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<sup>52</sup> 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>.

<sup>53</sup> Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 264-5.

psychological methodologies like EMDR and teaching breathing techniques to the anxious.<sup>54</sup> Seemingly growing out of Bavinck's views, they argue that these are common grace discoveries.<sup>55</sup> 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.<sup>56</sup>

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.<sup>57</sup>

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

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<sup>54</sup> 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](https://open.spotify.com/episode/1vChOhQsYTJkYRRXhUwr8p).

<sup>55</sup> 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."

<sup>56</sup> 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>.

<sup>57</sup> 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?<sup>58</sup>

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

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<sup>58</sup> 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.<sup>59</sup> 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,

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<sup>59</sup> 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.”<sup>60</sup> 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.<sup>61</sup>

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.

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<sup>60</sup> 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/](http://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2011/10/20/crucial-issues-in-contemporary-biblical-counseling/), accessed February 14, 2024.

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