COMMON GRACE, KNOWING PEOPLE, AND THE BIBLICAL COUNSELOR

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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

[2] This 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.

[3] Dennis 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

[4] It 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.
[5] Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022), 27.
[6] Wayne Gruden, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 671.
[7] Sam Storms, "The goodness of God and common grace," *The Gospel Coalition,* https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/goodness-god-common-grace/
[8] Louis 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

[9] For 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 the 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 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—whoever 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.