

# THE DANGERS OF ECLECTICISM IN BIBLICAL COUNSELING<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

William James (1842–1910), known by historians as the “father of American psychology,” popularized the American philosophy known as pragmatism. This philosophical outlook deals not so much with the idea of being pragmatic (in the sense of dealing primarily with practical considerations over theoretical ones) as it seeks to reinterpret the enterprise of philosophy altogether. The *search* for truth, which had been the endeavor of philosophers from antiquity is now abandoned for the *construction* of truth based upon relativistic and utilitarian grounds.<sup>3</sup> In a 1907 lecture entitled “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth,” James endeavored to delegitimize *a priori* conceptions of truth and knowledge, and instead couch epistemology exclusively within the realm of the experiential.

Pragmatism, on the other hand, asks its usual question:

“Grant an idea or belief to be true,” it says, “what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone’s actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experience will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth’s cash-value in experiential terms?” The moment

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<sup>3</sup>To the reader it may seem to be an argument based on semantics, but moving from a *search* for truth to a *construction* of truth has major implications in the history of ideas. It will be my contention that such re-imaginings of truth represent “deceptive philosophies” (cf. Colossians 2:8) that should be soundly rejected by the church and have been detrimental to the church’s work regarding soul care.

pragmatism asks this question, it sees the answer: *True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those we cannot.*<sup>4</sup>

While James may not be a household name to many Christians, he is not alone in embracing this philosophy to the detriment of American society (and by extension Western thought) at large. Both Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. (1841–1935) and John Dewey (1859–1952) espoused and embraced the philosophy of pragmatism, which left a lasting mark on American life in the realms of legal jurisprudence and educational theory.<sup>5</sup> The thread that unites each of these thinkers, and many more besides, is not only an adherence to a morally relativistic epistemology but a commitment to and fascination with modern psychology.<sup>6</sup>

James, Holmes, and Dewey operated mainly outside of the church; however, even as early as the late eighteenth century, liberal theology and secular philosophies imported from Europe began to impact pastors and theologians in America. Many began to drift from biblical and orthodox doctrines, in favor of emphasizing existential “virtue and comfort” as essential aspects of Christian

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<sup>4</sup>William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907) as quoted in Louis Menand, *Pragmatism: A Reader* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 115–116. This work is a collection of lectures delivered by James from 1906–1907. He dedicates these lectures to British empiricist, social philosopher and proponent of utilitarianism, John Stuart Mill.

<sup>5</sup>Both Holmes and Dewey are considered key figures during the Progressive Era, which traversed the late nineteenth into the early part of the twentieth century. This period was marked by major social, economic, and political reform and upheaval. Holmes served as an associate justice to the Supreme Court from 1902 until 1932 and is known for championing an approach to legal jurisprudence (a type of judicial pragmatism) that interpreted the Constitution of the United States as a living document that should best be understood and applied with contemporary contexts. Dewey, a psychologist and educational theorist, soundly rejected objective conceptions of truth and instead promoted a type of social-constructivist epistemology where the student would have a hand in bringing meaning through the lens of their own personal investigation and experience. Of special note, Dewey was an avowed humanist and was an original signatory of the Humanist Manifesto (1933). “Humanist Manifesto I,” American Humanist Association, accessed April 21, 2025, <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto1/>.

<sup>6</sup>Metaphysically and theologically, an “open system” refers to a Christian worldview in which Creator and creature maintain their distinctiveness but relate to one another. A closed system is a naturalistic worldview which does not give credence to the former and exalts the latter. The outworkings and shifts from an open to closed system and the impacts of such shifts in the realm of psychology into the modern era can be traced by Paolo Lionni’s work. Paolo Lionni, *The Leipzig Connection: The Systematic Destruction of American Education* (Sheridan, Oregon: Heron Books, 1973).

ministry.<sup>7</sup> By the dawn of the twentieth century, American intellectuals were flocking to hear German and French psychiatrists give lectures on a new modern psychology. The Progressive Era brought social-scientific insights into the pews and, according to church historian E. Brooks Holifield, “theology finally became therapy” and ushered in a new psychological age for the church.<sup>8</sup> Now, nearly a quarter of the way into the twenty-first century, one can find that psychological counseling has become ubiquitous not only culturally, but even within the Christian church.<sup>9</sup> The philosophy, history, and impact of pragmatism is important to know because it provides a necessary backdrop for understanding why counseling psychology is thought of as an exercise in eclecticism. Eclecticism, from the Greek *eklektiko*, meaning “picking out, [or] selecting what appears to be best,” relates to its philosophic parent, pragmatism, in that qualities like truth and morality become peripheral (if not completely disposable) concerns, while the most important considerations deal with personal autonomy, utility, and effectiveness (based on personal perception). In essence, eclecticism provides the rationale for counselors and clients to choose what *they* believe is helpful to them from a broad range of methodologies and theories.<sup>10</sup> With hundreds of psychotherapies to choose from, clients care less about *why* various therapies (each claiming to be scientifically and empirically based) conflict or contradict at crucial points, than *how* the therapy will “work” or “help” meet their needs.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1983), 97.

<sup>8</sup>Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care*, 193. For an examination of this drift in Protestant denominations see, Samuel Stephens, *The Psychological Anthropology of Wayne Edward Oates: A Downgrade from the Theological to the Therapeutic* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2020), and T. Dale Johnson, Jr., *The Professionalization of Pastoral Care: The SBC's Journey from Pastoral Theology to Counseling Psychology* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2020).

<sup>9</sup>While modern psychology took a foothold in the West in the twentieth century, shame-based societies in the East have been slower to adopt counseling due to cultural stigmas surrounding “mental health” problems. This, however, is changing as counseling theories are being imported into many countries around the world via international students coming to study in the United States and the advocacy from globally influential groups such as the World Health Organization (WHO) which produces the International Classification of Diseases (ICD). While the ICD-11 covers a comprehensive list of known diseases, it also covers a wide-ranging list of behavioral “mental, behavioral, and neurodevelopmental disorders” that find a counterpart in the DSM. See World Health Organization, “International Classification of Diseases,” 11th revision, accessed April 21, 2025, <https://icd.who.int/browse/2025-01/mms/en#334423054>.

<sup>10</sup>“Eclectic.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, accessed April 21, 2025, <https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/eclectic>. See also, Abigail Shrier, *Bad Therapy: Why the Kid's Aren't Growing Up* (New York: Sentinel, 2024).

<sup>11</sup>David Powlison noted that it is actually more accurate to refer to the field of psychology as the

Additionally, secular and state-licensed counselors who make a living marketing and promoting therapeutic services to an ever-growing clientele find that it is more advantageous to provide a broad selection of options rather than limit services, which may restrict their clientele. Yes, one can still find counselors who are credentialed to utilize particular therapies (e.g., Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Eye Movement and Desensitization and Reprocessing, etc.), but in many cases, these are promoted in conjunction with other therapeutic services and marketed as “holistic” care.<sup>12</sup>

Eclecticism does not represent a systematic, standardized approach to counseling. Due to the fact that there is a lack of a cohesive worldview that unites various psychotherapeutic practices, tools, methods, and theories which are inherently divergent in their original contexts, one would wonder why Christian counselors would consider approaching counseling in a similar way as the secularist.<sup>13</sup> Sadly, many Christians are more influenced by pragmatic and eclectic thinking than we would like to admit. So, this poses the key question this article will seek to answer: What are the dangers of eclecticism in counseling for the Christian, and why should we avoid being eclectic in favor of adhering to a biblical approach in our counseling theory and method? I contend that eclecticism poses a grave threat to the work of the biblical counselor and to the absolute truth claims of the Christian faith in that it functionally assumes that psychology is morally neutral, it results in a religious syncretism, and it diminishes the Christian gospel.<sup>14</sup> I will demonstrate this by outlining these three dangers

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“psychologies” due to the fragmented and conflicting counseling theories that it represents, thus revealing a conundrum and irony in the conception of the psychologies as “social science.” See David Powlison, “Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies),” in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 25, no. 2 (2007): 5–36.

<sup>12</sup>The term “holistic” is widely used among many within the current clinically informed biblical counseling (CIBC)/neo-integrationist movement. While it is difficult to pin down one clear definition, typically it describes the allowance for using a plethora of eclectic methodologies to affect changes in different, yet related, areas at once. A great example of this can be found in the philosophy of the Christian counseling group Metroplex Wellness and Counseling which “offers a holistic approach to mental health treatment in that we combine modalities that address the interconnected spheres of the spiritual, mental, emotional and physical needs of those we are privileged to serve.” Such wide-ranging modalities include Enneagram coaching, brain gauge cognitive assessments, use of a Zyto scanner, and micro current neurofeedback. <https://www.metroplexcounseling.com/philosophy/>.

<sup>13</sup>See Gerald Corey, *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, 11th edition (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2016).

<sup>14</sup>Additionally, it deemphasizes Scriptural categories of thinking and living and ignores vital

of eclecticism in counseling in the hopes of encouraging Christians to hold fast to their confession and what they have learned from the sacred and sufficient Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:14–17; Hebrews 10:23–25).

## ASSUMING MORAL NEUTRALITY

The first danger of eclecticism is the belief that counseling systems and methods are (or at least can be) morally neutral and thus “fair game” in terms of adoption or integration. The idea here is that even though a particular theory or method may be structured or intended to promote some ungodly goal by some ungodly means, such theories and methods can be “redeemed” when the practitioner who wields them is himself godly. This has been the argument of integrationists since the early days of that project in the mid-twentieth century. While “plundering the Egyptians” sounds like a legitimate way to make use of pre-existing tools and concepts, the assumption of moral neutrality is wrong-headed and naive.

One model that has helped me think through the feasibility of eclecticism, in the form of counseling integration, is a proposal from a biblical counselor for what a responsible model for integration could look like. Douglas Bookman’s proposal seeks to answer the question:

How can the individual who is committed to the Bible as the Word of God, and who is determined to help people as effectively as possible (and who suspects that there is some help to be found in the discipline of secular psychology) fashion a working schema of integration that will enable him or her to honor both his or her allegiance to Scripture and his or her commitment to helping others?<sup>15</sup>

Central to his investigation, Bookman examines the areas of ontology, axiology (ethics), and methodology. Essentially, he wants his reader to consider the possibility of whether integration *can* occur, if it *should* occur, and, assuming

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realities of a biblical worldview, among others.

<sup>15</sup>Douglas Bookman, “The Scriptures and Biblical Counseling,” in *Introduction to Biblical Counseling: A Basic Guide to the Principles and Practice of Biblical Counseling*, (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1994), 63–97. The reader might find it odd that a biblical counselor devoted to the sufficiency of Scripture would construct such a model, but Bookman’s point here is to demonstrate the impossibility of integration altogether.

the first two are answered in the affirmative, *how* it could occur. Unfortunately, eclectic Christian counselors often assume that an integration of opposing systems is possible and simply begin with how to go about putting theory into practice without first considering the moral implications that should precede any attempt at integration.<sup>16</sup>

Ethics and morality should be the foremost concern for all Christians regardless of the sphere or field in which they operate.<sup>17</sup> But how do we think about applying this lens conceptually? According to Bookman's perspective, we should consider that just because something *can* be done doesn't make it biblically ethical or moral by default, nor does it mean that a thing *should* be done at all. This being the case, a morality test must be applied to any and all secular counseling theories or methods considered for adoption, utilization, or implementation (either in whole or in part) by biblical counselors. This test addresses whether any intrinsic need or deficiency in Christian theology (i.e., according to the Scriptures) exists that only the modern psychologies can ameliorate.<sup>18</sup> In other words, counselors must conclude if there is something from within the wide-ranging, often conflicting, and ever-changing menagerie of psychotherapies that is *necessary* for the task of soul care. By the very nature of the philosophy and practice, eclecticism answers this question with a resounding, "Yes!"

What are the implications for laying aside a solidly biblical moral evaluation of theories and methods? For one, let us assume (and this is a huge assumption) that an integrationist (i.e., eclectic) Christian counselor could approach some secular counseling theory and be able to weed out any of its unbiblical worldview commitments along with all of its faulty methods and goals before incorporating any parts of that theory in their counseling. Even *if* this could be done, to carry out an eclectic approach responsibly, the Christian counselor would need to protect the integrity of the Scriptures and continue to preserve and define the moral weight of the counsel. Additionally, the integrationist would need to ensure that their counselee, student, or any other individual directly impacted by their eclecticism (or their followers) would have the same level of discernment and

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<sup>16</sup> In other words, orthodoxy must precede orthopraxy.

<sup>17</sup> Samuel Stephens, "Christian Ministry and the Mental Health Counseling Complex: Understanding Missions, Counseling, and Biblical Structures of Care," *The Journal of Biblical Soul Care* 8, no. 2 (2024): 8:2, 21–44.

<sup>18</sup> Credit for this is given to Sid Galloway.

moral awareness as they have.<sup>19</sup> All of this would have to happen in order to protect all parties from error and maintain biblical goals and aims in view. Of course, the possibility is far-fetched because of the reality that secular counseling theories and methods actually *do* carry moral weight, and these stand in stark contradiction to biblical wisdom and a Christian worldview (1 Corinthians 1:18–2:16). Such a worldview firmly rejects the possibility of bifurcating the secular from the sacred. As Jay Adams put it, “All of life is sacred; none is secular. All life is God-related; none is neutral. Systems, methods, actions, values, attitudes, and concepts are all either God-oriented or sinful. None are *neutral*.”<sup>20</sup> Of course, each counseling theorist representing the major waves of psychotherapy carries with him a set of beliefs about how the world (and people) operates, and so it is incumbent upon every biblical counselor to be aware of such commitments and counter them...instead of adopting them.

## COMMITTING RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM

The second danger of eclecticism in biblical counseling is that of committing religious syncretism. What is syncretism, and how does it relate to eclecticism? As was described earlier, eclecticism is the general practice of borrowing or selecting what is perceived to be the best elements from various sources in order to bring them together for a certain purpose, with the idea of improving upon that purpose.<sup>21</sup> While syncretism has a longer history, initially related to the bringing together of distinct warring people groups against a common enemy, it is now generally understood as “the combination of different forms of belief or practice.”<sup>22</sup> *The New Dictionary of Theology* defines syncretism as “the process of borrowing elements by one religion from another in such a way as not to change

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<sup>19</sup> Arguments like this have been made in the past from early integrationists. For a summarized treatment of this see David Powlison, “Critiquing Modern Integrationists,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 11, no. 3, (1993): 24–34.

<sup>20</sup> Jay Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling: More than Redemption* (Nashville: Zondervan, 1979), 43. Later on, Adams notes that God is man’s environment. This is the most fundamental metaphysical assumption of reality that the Bible provides for Christians to assume.

<sup>21</sup> At times throughout the essay, I will make mention of eclectic counselors, in this I am referring to Christian counselors who practice integration. This would also include clinically informed counselors and redemptive counselors.

<sup>22</sup> “Syncretism.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, accessed April 29, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/syncretism>.

the basic character of the receiving religion.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, the distinguishing mark of syncretism is the focus on religion and the content of religious belief and practice.

The reader may wonder why this religious syncretism would constitute one of the dangers of *counseling* eclecticism. What does counseling have to do with religion anyway? According to one author, everything. Paul Vitz, emeritus professor of psychology at New York University, authored *Psychology as Religion* in 1977.<sup>24</sup> In this text, Vitz analyzes and unmasks the pursuits of counseling psychology as not being an enterprise of the social sciences, but as an established religion with its own rituals, liturgy, clergy, and theology.<sup>25</sup> For instance, Vitz speaks of the “religion of selfism,” which is the culmination of assertions and assumptions from the self-psychologies highlighting secularism, self-esteem, and human potential.<sup>26</sup> He openly criticizes such stances as idolatrous and shows the inherent incompatibility of the counseling psychologies with the confessions of biblical Christianity:

It should be obvious—though it has apparently not been so to many—that the relentless and single-minded search for glorification of the self is at direct cross-purposes with the Christian injunction to lose the self. Certainly Jesus Christ neither lived nor advocated a life that would qualify by today’s standards as “self-actualized.” For the Christian, the self is the problem, not the potential paradise.

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<sup>23</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright, eds., “Syncretism” in *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1988), 670. It may be the intention of the borrowing religious group to maintain internal coherent beliefs and structures inherent to their system, but when such borrowing occurs, especially in the context of religion, such safeguards cannot be guaranteed.

<sup>24</sup> The second edition was published in 1995 and is still currently in print.

<sup>25</sup> Vitz is far from the only critic who has compared modern psychological practice in religious terms. Authors from a diverse range of backgrounds have levied this same criticism, albeit not always as directly. See also, Richard Ganz, *Psychobabble: The Failure of Modern Psychology and the Biblical Alternative* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993); Joyce Milton, *The Road to Malpsychia: Humanistic Psychology and its Discontents* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002); Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*, 40th anniversary edition (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2006); Anne Harrington, *Mind Fixers: Psychiatry’s Troubled Search for the Biology of Mental Illness* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019); Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020); Shrier, *Bad Therapy*.

<sup>26</sup> Paul C. Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 32–33. Vitz particularly excludes experimental psychology, behaviorism, and psychoanalysis and focuses instead on the “third wave” psychologies which were focused on the concept of self and personality (xvii). This does not mean, however, that the first two waves of psycho-theories should not be criticized as well.

Understanding this problem involves an awareness of sin, especially the sin of pride; correcting this condition requires the practice of such unself-actualized states as contrition and penitence, humility, obedience, and trust in God.<sup>27</sup>

Interestingly, a leader in Christian integrationism agrees with Vitz's criticism that counseling psychology promotes spiritually harmful values, yet he falls short of identifying it as a rival religion to Christianity. In his 1988 book, *Can You Trust Psychology?*, Gary Collins devotes an entire chapter to the question, "Is psychology a new religion that competes with Christianity?" As is typical with integrationist literature, readers rarely receive direct answers to such introspective questions. While Collins does conclude that "many today bow at the words of Freud, Jung, Rogers, Ellis, Satir, Erhard, or whoever is the latest psychological guru," he concludes the chapter with warning against dismissing psychology outright "because some people have a distorted view of its value" and instead that Christians should "evaluate its findings, learning from them and make use of psychology's insights when they are consistent with Scripture."<sup>28</sup> When the psychologies are considered as a rival religion, instead of a helpful adjunct, to the Christian religion, then the entire eclecticism project for the Christian becomes suspect. Perhaps this is why many are hesitant to consider the inherent religious nature of counseling psychology.

Unfortunately, recent history has proven that a theological downgrade stemming from syncretistic efforts by Christian counselors has already deeply affected the integrity of truly biblical counsel, resulting in something that carries the flavor of religious counsel, *without* the distinction of it being Christian.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Vitz, *Psychology as Religion*, 126.

<sup>28</sup> Gary Collins, *Can You Trust Psychology?* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1988), 100–102. Of course, the perennial issue with integration and the consistency of truth claims needs to be addressed. Can theories continue to operate as designed when they are eclectically "plundered" for eclectic purposes? Should individual aspects of these theories (and their inherent truth claims) be considered apart from the worldview that the whole theory promotes? If "aspects" of the theory are unbiblical, but other "aspects" seem to be biblical, what does that mean for the entirety of the theory as intended by the theorist? Regardless, in an earlier work, Collins made a much clearer conclusion regarding the religious nature of psychology. He stated, "Every individual and every science has an underlying belief system that might also be termed a religion. Some of these beliefs are theistic; others are not." See Gary Collins, *The Rebuilding of Psychology: An Integration of Psychology and Christianity* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1977), 96.

<sup>29</sup> For an overview of these concerns from biblical counselors who seek to hold firm the essential tenets of biblical counseling, see Heath Lambert, ed., *A Call to Clarity: Critical Issues in Contemporary Biblical Counseling* (Jacksonville: First Baptist Church, 2024); and Lou Priolo, *Presuppositions of*

## SYNCRETISM'S EFFECTS WITHIN MODERN INTEGRATION

Within the modern integrationist movement, there has been major theological shifts leftward that have come as a result of holding to theological ambiguous positions and open eclecticism. Early writings from the likes of Gary Collins, Clyde Narramore, James Dobson, and Larry Crabb, while arguing for the eclectic use of modern psychological principles and practices, still maintained a relatively high view of Scripture.<sup>30</sup> For instance, in his book *The Psychology of Counseling*, Clyde Narramore dedicated an entire chapter to the use of Scripture in counseling. Narramore noted, “The Bible is not merely a bland background or lace cap for scientific discovery. It is the glorious authority for life itself. It not only sets forth the only hope of our redemption and life eternal through Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, it is the glorious manual and guide book [sic] of our daily lives.”<sup>31</sup>

Fast forward fifty years to the publishing of a foundational integrationist text entitled *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal*, written by well-known and lauded Christian counselors Stanton Jones and Richard Butman, and one will find a very different take on the Scripture’s role in counseling. Within the nearly 500-page tome, the key words “Bible” and “Scripture” do not make a substantive appearance.<sup>32</sup> This volume illustrates how clear appeals to the authority of the Bible have been replaced by vague concepts such as “faith-based,” “spiritual,” and “Christian values” that are rarely capitalized upon or more deeply explicated. Not only is *Modern Psychotherapies* void of any discussion about the use of Scripture in counseling, but it also includes seemingly contradictory

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*Biblical Counseling: What Historical Biblical Counselors Really Believe* (Conway, Arkansas: Grace and Truth, 2023). The overwhelming concern of biblical counselors (in some texts referred to as “traditional” or “historical”) is not that eclectic Christian counselors would forsake the faith, but that the faith they represent in their counseling will no longer be represented by biblical Christianity.

<sup>30</sup>This does not mean that these integrationists were any less wrong in their attempts to improve upon the art of counseling by insisting that eclecticism was necessary.

<sup>31</sup>Clyde Narramore, *The Psychology of Counseling: Professional Techniques for Pastors, Teachers, Youth Leaders, and All Who Are Engaged in the Incomparable Art of Counseling*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 239. Of note, following this chapter, Narramore provides an appendix dedicated to selected Scripture references for use in counseling which spans 16 pages!

<sup>32</sup>Stanton Jones and Richard Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011), 491. The author did not review each page of the book, but did refer to the subject index in which neither term appears.

statements. For instance, the authors suggest that Christian ministry operates from the Bible, but at the same time they argue for the utilization of a plethora of secular authorities for counselors who wish to be distinctly Christian as well.<sup>33</sup> In a chapter entitled, “Christian Psychotherapy and the Person of The Christian Psychotherapist,” they argue:

A counselor is not thoroughly Christian merely by virtue of being anti-Freudian or antibehavioral, but we would also argue that a counselor is not thoroughly Christian merely by virtue of throwing around a few Bible verses. None of the existing counseling theories, religious or nonreligious, adequately plumb the depths of the complexity of human character and of the change process. Likewise, *no one approach* to studying the ‘calamities of the soul’ seems to grapple adequately with the wide variety of biological, psychosocial, and sociocultural variables that can lead to the development of mental illness. So there are *many theoretical options* open to counselors who desire to be distinctly Christian in what they do [emphases mine].<sup>34</sup>

While Jones and Butman point out various character traits and commitments that Christian therapists and clinicians should have, including a call to personal holiness, such conclusions cannot help but be influenced by the syncretism they embrace. In this case, the personal holiness embraced by the clinician and expected from the client amounts to “being attuned to the ‘mystical’ aspects of our faith” and a “spiritual and psychological maturity.”<sup>35</sup> To close out the illustration of the theological downgrade within the modern integrationist movement, one can turn to the works of authors including Mark McMinn, Megan Anna Neff, Mark Yarhouse, and others. One text in particular, *Embodying Integration*, written by McMinn and Neff and published in 2020, provides the most egregious examples of the stark contrast in tone from the eclectic counselors of the 1960s and 1970s. This “fresh look” at conceptualizing the integrationist counseling task not only reimagines soul care as an existential practice of “creating space” in order to

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<sup>33</sup> This demonstrates yet another complicating factor in trying to maintain a balance between two different aims. Jones and Butman even admit that they must “put unusual efforts into making our work [as psychologists within the mental health field] an extension of the Christian faith and of God’s redemptive activities in the world,” (460).

<sup>34</sup> Jones and Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies*, 459–60.

<sup>35</sup> Jones and Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies*, 474–475.

empathize with the feelings and emotions of the client, but also affirms the idea of man's innate goodness, approving of pluralistic religious counseling, questioning the penal substitutionary atonement of Christ, and reconfiguring the main focus of counseling towards validating the human experience, personal process, and reality perceptions of the client. They state, "Expanding our worldviews and our narratives is a natural byproduct of humbly being in conversation with those familiar with an alternative story. This is the process by which critical wisdom develops."<sup>36</sup> What McMinn and Neff call "conversations," this author calls eclecticism and overt religious syncretism, and it leads to the place where wisdom is no longer sourced from God's special revelation.<sup>37</sup>

## SYNCRETISM'S EFFECTS WITHIN NEO-INTREGATION<sup>38</sup>

In his 2024 essay entitled, "Six Crucial Confusions of the New Integrationists," Heath Lambert identifies this burgeoning movement of Christian counselors who seek to situate themselves between modern integrationists and biblical counselors. The thought-center for these neo (or new) integrationists is at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina where they refer to themselves as clinically informed biblical counselors or redemptive counselors.<sup>39</sup> Southeastern describes the effort of clinically informed biblical counseling as

<sup>36</sup> Megan Ann Neff and Mark McMinn, *Embodying Integration: A Fresh Look at Christianity in the Therapy Room* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2020), 17. Neff mentions that her exposure to "alternative views of atonement, sanctification, suffering, and sin" helped her become more spiritually resilient (7). She later states, "A more flexible understanding of atonement might have helped me experience my patient's sin differently" (162).

<sup>37</sup> Neff and McMinn, *Embodying Integration*, 107. The result of abandoning Scripture is spiritual blindness and foolishness. In this "fresh look" at Christianity in the therapy room, the authors state, "It may be shocking to suggest that theology is not enough, but consider again the book you are reading . . . we are trained as mental health professionals, not theologians."

<sup>38</sup> This is a burgeoning field that is just now growing in published works, so a timeline for the neo-integrationists/clinically informed biblical counselor literature will not be as extensive as that within the modern integration camp.

<sup>39</sup> Heath Lambert, "Six Crucial Confusions of the New Integrationists," in *A Call to Clarity: Critical Issues in Contemporary Biblical Counseling* (Jacksonville: First Baptist Church, 2024), 149. See also, *Southeastern Theological Review* 15, no. 1. Key individuals associated with this movement include (but are not limited to) Nate Brooks, Brad Hambrick, Eliza Huie, Kristin Kellen, Sam Williams, Michael Gembola, Jonathan Holmes, Rebekah Hannah, and Jason Kovacs. For examples of organizations that align with the clinically informed biblical counseling paradigm see the Christian Counseling Center Collaborative at <https://ccccollab.com/>.

“sometimes facilitating application of biblical truths” to the lives of counselees through insights that the social sciences provide in assisting the counselor in “understanding and counseling a person’s mental condition.”<sup>40</sup> Thankfully, the counseling faculty at this seminary (similar to other Christian counseling organizations that claim a similar designation) still articulate and laud Scripture as being “necessary for understanding people” and as the “primary ‘sourcebook’” for counseling.<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, these stances (even down to the language) are similar to those of early modern integrationists.<sup>42</sup>

There are substantive differences between neo-integrationists and biblical counselors. In one such contrasting view relating to the issue of the usefulness of social scientific/psychological insights, biblical counseling organizations such as the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors outright deny that “the findings of secular psychology make any essential contribution to biblical counseling.” While their membership covenant does state that secular psychological research and observations “may provide” some level of helpfulness to the counseling task, they also point out that due to the noetic effects of sin, all interpretations of such efforts by psychologists “leads to misunderstanding.”<sup>43</sup> This constitutes a critical difference between biblical counselors and neo-integrationists. Consistently, the former group frames any helpfulness found in the social sciences with the realities of the noetic effects of sin (among theological realities). The latter group rarely does this, preferring instead to optimistically endorse the eclectic use of secular

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<sup>40</sup> “Central Affirmations of Southeastern’s Biblical Counseling Program,” Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, accessed April 30, 2025, [https://catalog.sebts.edu/mime/media/24/565/SEBTS\\_BiblicalCounselingAffirmations.pdf](https://catalog.sebts.edu/mime/media/24/565/SEBTS_BiblicalCounselingAffirmations.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> “Central Affirmations,” Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. The use of the word “primacy” is an inadvertent way to limit Scripture’s authoritative and comprehensive nature for the counseling task and open the door to other “authorities.”

<sup>42</sup> More academic work should be done to compare and analyze the writings of the modern integrationists of the 1960s–1980s with those of the neo-integrationist of the 2020s. Regarding the findings of secular psychology, Jay Adams, the founder of ACBC, has always distinguished research psychology from counseling psychology. In this particular statement from ACBC, the former is being addressed. Psychology applied towards counseling is always rejected as illegitimate.

<sup>43</sup> “Membership Covenant,” Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, accessed April 30, 2025. <https://biblicalcounseling.com/about/beliefs/positions/membership-covenant/>. The membership covenant ends with the clear statement that counseling psychology is “in competition” with biblical counseling and any attempt at integration with “faith once for all delivered to the saints” cannot happen. This can be viewed as an implicit admission of the quasi-religious nature of counseling psychology. See also Jay Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling: More than Redemption* (Nashville: Zondervan, 1979), 278–279.

theories and methods thus leaving them more vulnerable to the compromising dangers of syncretism. Additionally, they rarely acknowledge the inseparability between a method and its corresponding worldview. Therefore, the posture of clinically informed biblical counselors emphasizes the helpfulness of the modern psychologies and typically legitimizes the mental health complex as opposed to casting a cautious eye on them as being derived from warped anti-Christian worldviews.<sup>44</sup>

Regarding a call to critical thinking in the “redeeming” of psychology, Powlison noted, “Compromising syncretism *only* sees the good, and does not produce redemption. There is wrong in Psychology as in all other mixed cases. When mastered by redemptive purposes, constructive criticism will always engage wrong by offering something better [emphasis mine].”<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, syncretism has resulted from the efforts of the eclectic biblical counselor when they continue to express confidence and meaning from clinical and psychological principles and insights at the expense of the Scriptures. Examples of this include assertions made by clinically informed biblical counselors such as Nate Brooks in his 2022 commencement address at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina. Brooks stated, “Indeed, the Scriptures were not written to give humanity the full knowledge of what God intended to reveal to man about man. When we consider the discipline of counseling, there is much the Scriptures do not reveal.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Lambert identifies this posture as a “nuanced fascination” with what the social sciences provide. See Heath Lambert, “Priests in the Garden, Zombies in the Wilderness, and Prophets on the Wall,” in *A Call to Clarity: Critical Issues in Biblical Counseling* (Jacksonville: First Baptist Church, 2024), 10. There are many examples of this but a couple of good examples include the following: David Murray and Tom Karel, *The Christian’s Guide to Mental Illness* (Nashville: Crossway, 2023); and Helen Thorne and Steve Midgely, *Mental Health and Your Church* (The Good Book Company, 2023). For a critical analysis of Murray’s book see, T. Dale Johnson Jr. host, and Samuel Stephens, *Truth in Love*, podcast, episode 464, “A Christian’s Guide to Mental Illness,” <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/podcast-episodes/a-christians-guide-to-mental-illness/>.

<sup>45</sup> David Powlison, “How Does Scripture Teach Us to Redeem Psychology,” the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 26, no. 3 (2012): 19. While the neo-integrationist has appealed to the phrase “redemptive counselors,” possibly in the ways that Powlison spoke of here, their current arguments lack any substantive criticism (if offering criticism at all) because such critical analysis is seen as uncompassionate, mean-spirited, and close-minded.

<sup>46</sup> Nate Brooks, “Herman Bavinck, Patron Saint of Biblical Counselors: How an Old Dutch Theologian Helps Us Make Sense of Biblical Sufficiency” (Charlotte: Reformed Theological Seminary, 2022), <https://rts.edu/resources/herman-bavinck-patron-saint-of-biblical-counselors/>.

Additionally, another promoter of the clinically informed approach, Eliza Huie, has spent years promoting trauma-informed therapies to Christians.<sup>47</sup>

Sadly, contemporary understandings of trauma are based more on Neo-Freudian frameworks than scientific fact, no matter how much one appeals to the seductive allure of neurological or scientific explanations.<sup>48</sup> In her most recent work, *Trauma Aware: A Christian's Guide to Providing Help and Care*, Huie commits the kind of syncretism that Powlison warned against nearly a decade ago.<sup>49</sup> She does this by borrowing extensively from clinical theories and resources while both assuming and presenting such tools as being scientifically supported.<sup>50</sup> In the last section of her book, one where she seeks to set the larger discussion of trauma in a theological context, she discusses the helpfulness of adaptive information processing and how it explains the way the brain processes, organizes, and holds memories. She notes:

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<sup>47</sup> Huie is one of the most vocal proponents within the neo-integrationist camp of trauma-informed therapies. See Eliza Huie, *Speak the Truth*, podcast, “Episode 59: What is EMDR Therapy,” 25 May 2020. On her personal website, she refers to herself as “clinically competent” which means that she seeks to bring a “well-rounded approach that offers experience and expertise in addressing clinical matters including trauma, abuse, suicide prevention, cultural issues, and various mental health diagnosis.” Eliza Hui, <https://www.elizahuie.com/>. Interestingly, there are many within the secular psychologies that openly challenge the scientific validity and claims of EMDR as an evidenced-based therapy as well as challenging popular notions of trauma. See Roger McFillin, *Radically Genuine*, podcast, “Episode 175: Is EMDR a Revolutionary Psychotherapy or Pseudoscientific Sham?” March 6, 2025; and Michael Scheeringa, *The Trouble with Trauma: The Search to Discover How Beliefs Become Facts* (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2022).

<sup>48</sup> The hierarchy of sciences places “hard” sciences near the top in terms of operating by principles of the scientific method and the likelihood that outcomes will be less biased due to tighter controls. The “hard” sciences are set in contrast to the “soft” sciences, which do not operate by the same principles and have positive outcomes in research studies at five times the rate of hard sciences. Daniele Fanelli, “‘Positive’ Results Increase Down the Hierarchy of the Sciences,” *PLOS One* 5, no. 4 (April 2010): e10068, <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0010068>. It is not the purpose of this essay to delve into this topic, but there have been helpful biblical resources that expound on the issue with trauma (with all of the myths associated with it), the most recent being an extensive and comprehensive dissertation. See Francine Tan, *The New Eclecticism: A Comprehensive Appraisal of the Contemporary Paradigm of Trauma*, (PhD diss., Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2025).

<sup>49</sup> One can skim the endorsements for the book to see that they are provided exclusively by neo-integrationists, some of which have disavowed biblical counseling outright.

<sup>50</sup> A quick review of the endnotes will show two main sources of support to Huie’s claims. The first are authors such as Judith Herman, Bessel van der Kolk, and Viktor Frankl (all of whom merely theorized about trauma and whose popular theories do *not* stand up to hard scientific scrutiny). The second includes studies from the fields of psychoanalytic psychology and neuroscience.

The AIP theory explains that our brains adapt based on the situations we experience. Essentially this means that as we go through experiences, our brains take in everything about the situations, including the sensory information . . . gathered during the experience. That data is then encoded in our brains as memories, which we will then use as we engage future situations. Think of it as a filing system in your brain. Much like files on a computer, when organized properly, they can be out of sight but retrieved as needed . . . The next time you experience something similar, your brain pulls that memory—with the sensory information—and adapts your behavior accordingly, based on what we learned.<sup>51</sup>

Under the guise of scientism, Huie (and other eclectic Christian counselors) equates the operations of the most complex (and unknown) organ in the body to that of a filing system on a desktop computer.<sup>52</sup> The pragmatic usefulness of such theories such as AIP (a core tenet of EMDR), Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) Assessments, bilateral stimulation, finger-tapping, box breathing, and others seems to outweigh any need to support their use with empirical or objective scientific evidence or to demonstrate that such practices are biblically necessary to work towards the central end of biblical counseling, that of personal sanctification and holiness.<sup>53</sup>

## DIMINISHING THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL

Even while its fascination with worldly wisdom is marketed as Christian, eclectic Christian counseling more often contributes to spiritual confusion. Such counseling avoids inquiring into or making use of clear and unambiguous counseling modes and means that are prescribed in Scripture and often lack

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<sup>51</sup> Eliza Huie, *Trauma Aware: A Christian's Guide to Providing Help and Care* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 2025), 257.

<sup>52</sup> J.P. Moreland, *Scientism and Secularism: Learning to Respond to Dangerous Ideology* (Nashville: Crossway, 2018).

<sup>53</sup> While I appreciate that Huie seeks to address theology, it is clear from considering her work as a whole (and examining to what extent she seeks to study and apply Scripture) that the main thrust and weight of the argument hinges on neuropsychological explanations framed by mental health concepts and terms. All of these combined tend to cloud (not clarify) the nature of the help and care that Huie is proposing to offer.

anything uniquely Christian. This leads to the final danger of eclecticism, which is that the ultimate good that can be offered to anyone, the person of Jesus Christ, is diminished, and in its place is a gospel of emotional, mental, and holistic wellness.

Eclectic counseling focuses on what is deemed “helpful” or “good” to the counselee as opposed to turning to the Bible to provide meaning and definition for these standards.<sup>54</sup> There are, of course, times when what the counselee sees as good and what the Bible says is good are the same; however, much of modern therapy (secular and Christian) focuses on the alleviation of all suffering, difficulty, or hardship to the detriment of godly aims and goals such as endurance, faithfulness, obedience, and trust in God.<sup>55</sup> When the aims and goals of *truly* Christian counseling are lost, and the biblical counselor is reduced to a “service provider” for a paying client, there is a heightened temptation towards pragmatic and eclectic ends. But what are those ends? What is the good that we are working to as Christians who counsel?

In *Seeing with New Eyes*, David Powlison captured the aims of true biblical Christian counseling:

Every theory defines or assumes an ideal of human functioning by which problems are named and solutions are prescribed: right and wrong, value and stigma, true and false, good and bad, sound and defective, healthy and pathological, solution and problem . . . The Bible’s truth competes head-to-head with other models. God speaks a truth that is intended to make sense of us and change us . . . we [Christians] define change as turning to a Person whom we trust, fear, obey, and seek to please. Instead of letting the goal of “health” cue our system to a medical metaphor, we set the goal of being transformed into the likeness of this Person with whom we live in relationship.<sup>56</sup>

This quote correctly articulates the nature, methods, and goals of biblical

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<sup>54</sup>At the start of my graduate biblical counseling classes each semester at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, I often write the question, “What is help?” on the whiteboard. My intention is to get my students thinking about this idea biblically, not pragmatically.

<sup>55</sup>Vitz, *Psychology as Religion*, 139–144.

<sup>56</sup>David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition Through the Lens of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003), 3–4.

counseling and helps to demonstrate how Christian counsel from the Scriptures cannot be integrated with worldly philosophies in the guise of helpful techniques and psychological theories, no matter the intention. Christian counselors desire that their counselees grow in the knowledge of God and walk in his ways, and it is through the “sacred writings” that both wisdom for salvation can be attained and one may be “adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:14–17; Colossians 1:9–12). However, due to their eclecticism, both the integrationist and clinically informed biblical counselor get righteousness wrong when they downplay the consequences of personal and corporate sin, which in turn focuses efforts on counseling to other ends.

Kristen Kellen asserts that the Lord created people to “flourish,” a concept that her colleague at Southeastern Seminary, Brad Hambrick, calls “functional living.”<sup>57</sup> In the same article, Kellen clarifies her stance on human flourishing to include people growing in Christlikeness and living for the glory of God, goals that any biblical counselor should embrace. She immediately follows up by noting, “I wouldn’t say that means every session must be evangelistic or that we cannot do anything to alleviate suffering, even for an unbeliever. After all, as Mike Emlet has said, the relief of suffering is a kingdom agenda; it gives us a foretaste of the coming redemption.”<sup>58</sup> Along the same lines, Hambrick goes on to say that the redemptive counselor should “reinforce [the counselee’s] pursuit of healthiness with a pursuit of holiness. . . .”<sup>59</sup> These thoughts, when taken together, offer an accurate depiction of neo-integrationist thinking. While there are points made that can be affirmed as biblical, these are interwoven with commitments that obfuscate the gospel message.

<sup>57</sup>“SEBTS Counseling Professors Roundtable: As it Is and As it Could Be,” *Southeastern Theological Review* 15, no. 1 (2024): 74. Hambrick notes that he has found it best to move beyond the “narrow” role of teacher as a counselor in favor of viewing his role as more of an “ambassador” who embodies God’s concerns. Hambrick’s posture here has become more popular in biblical counseling circles.

<sup>58</sup>“SEBTS Counseling Professors Roundtable,” *Southeastern Theological Review*, 75. It is arguable, if not outright incorrect, to assume that the relief of temporal suffering is a kingdom agenda. While the care for the poor and ministry to the downtrodden of all sorts is supported by Scripture, one must not forget the particular and primary thrust of soul care and counseling. Jesus himself taught and modeled for us what the appropriate concerns are for the Christian seeking to disciple and counsel. See Sean Perron, *The Counseling Methodology of Jesus Christ in Johannine Literature*, diss. (Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2023); and Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Nashville: Zondervan, 1970), 67ff. Adams noted, “Any such counseling that claims to be Christian surely must be evangelistic. Counseling is redemptive” (67).

<sup>59</sup>“SEBTS Counseling Professors Roundtable,” *Southeastern Theological Review*, 75.

There is nothing from the counseling psychologies (in part or whole) that contributes to sanctification because these worldview-laden tools deny the realities of sin, justification, and the like. With this in mind, one wonders to what end these tools are being applied. Further, any counseling that does *not* clearly and regularly present the gospel of Jesus Christ through biblical instruction, admonition, encouragement, etc., by biblical means with the expressed intention of seeing the lost soul saved or seeing the saved soul sanctified is *not* Christian. From a biblical counseling perspective, Marshall Adkins, speaking on this topic noted, “If you’re making civic righteousness the goal of counseling, that’s doing something very different than biblical counselors have done . . . This is borrowing techniques from other therapeutic frameworks to aim at some other goal than God’s goal of sanctification for His glory.”<sup>60</sup> By civic righteousness, Adkins is giving a name to the “good” ends that clinical informed counselors work towards using the world’s wisdom by “redemptively contextualizing their work.”<sup>61</sup> Of course, the history of pastoral counseling shows us that even with good intentions, seeking to accomplish this is a fool’s errand and will not lead to the gospel being proclaimed in the ways God intends.

## CONCLUSION

The tragic irony of eclecticism is that in its attempt to promote utility over truth based on subjective ideas of what is helpful, it ultimately proves that it cannot escape the reality for the very thing that it inherently dismisses . . . that being a standard of absolute truth. What is helpful, what is true, and what is right are all dependent upon the eclectic counselor “choosing” the “best” or most “useful” technique for the occasion while simultaneously neglecting (and sometimes) denying the very thing necessary for help which is the standard of

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<sup>60</sup> T. Dale Johnson Jr., host, and Marshall Adkins, *Truth in Love*, podcast, episode 509, “Civic Righteousness and Biblical Counseling,” March 24, 2025, [https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/podcast-episodes/civic-righteousness-and-biblical-counseling/?srsltid=AfmBOorOm1GeX1IyaDiDffCKWbRjqmCXbEIaRBUg\\_IOOyUJhdW-yJwY](https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/podcast-episodes/civic-righteousness-and-biblical-counseling/?srsltid=AfmBOorOm1GeX1IyaDiDffCKWbRjqmCXbEIaRBUg_IOOyUJhdW-yJwY). Adkins and Johnson are not doubting the salvation or faith of the neo-integrationist, but do question their methods, means, and goals.

<sup>61</sup> “SEBTS Counseling Professors Roundtable,” *Southeastern Theological Review*, 79. See also, Samuel Stephens, “Christian Ministry and the Mental Health Counseling Complex: Understanding Missions, Counseling, and Biblical Structures of Care,” *The Journal of Biblical Soul Care* 8, no. 2 (2024): 21–44.

truth as expressed in the Bible.<sup>62</sup> It is inescapable that we must live by a standard, everyone does, but it is incumbent upon Christians to intentionally live by God's Word.<sup>63</sup> Eclecticism has been demonstrated to be a self-defeating practice for the Christian counselor in that it betrays a trust in worldly wisdom to achieve God's ends, results in a religious syncretism that diminishes markers of truly biblical counseling, and, worst of all, diminishes the centrality of the gospel.

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<sup>62</sup> Credit for this thought is given to my colleague and friend, Will Richardson.

<sup>63</sup> Jared Longshore, ed., *By What Standard? God's World . . . God's Rules* (Care Coral: Founders Press, 2020).