



# THE JOURNAL OF BIBLICAL SOUL CARE

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

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## Editorial: One-Year, Three Issues, and International Participation

Greg E. Gifford<sup>1</sup>

We are at the one-year mark of the *Journal of Biblical Soul Care*! Two years ago, the editors and I sat down to formulate a plan to make upstream contributions to the field of biblical counseling/soul care. Since that point, we have published one volume and three editions of the *JBSC*. It has entailed a team of ten different authors and reviewers, along with an editorial team of eight people.<sup>2</sup> We have approached our goals for subscribers, and have generated momentum for “Reviews” and “Responses.” In addition, we have a healthy amount of authors waiting in the wings to publish their own work. The Lord has surprised us in this important work as it seems as if the *JBSC* has met a need of our field.

What also has surprised me is the international participation that we are beginning to see. In fact, Darryl Burling is an international author who currently teaches in New Zealand. He writes an article in this edition, and is arguing for the nature of the covenant of marriage. Burling also demonstrates how marriage is a covenant, but that marriage terminology of a covenant requires clarification and is “an overstatement.” I think you will find his work to be helpful and stimulating to the language that so frequently surrounds marriage.

Ed Wilde and Ken Schultz have both made contributions within their specific subjects. Wilde’s work in regard to common grace and counseling could not be more pertinent to the field of soul care, and the blurring lines of what a person means by “sufficiency of Scripture.” Wilde’s title is very telling, and perhaps the table he has developed to elucidate his article is will be something that educators can use for years to come? Ken Schultz has argued for the dangers of people with categorizing sin and particularly when one seeks to change in their common, sinful categories. Schultz expounds clear texts to demonstrate that what takes place in group counseling environments could, in fact, bring about greater damage than it could help. Schultz raises legitimate concerns.

Finally, we look to the future of our Spring edition. As the managing editor, I have diligently pursued international authors as I do not want the *JBSC* to be an American effort. The upstream conversation within soul care is burgeoning, and I want to rally all of the resources I can to equip educators for this important task so expect the Spring edition to introduce more names to you. Moreover, we have started to receive requests for books to be reviewed. We will review these works, and seek to provide a space in which critical comments are not unloving comments. All of these are a means to advancing scholarship for the biblical care of souls within higher education. May God be honored in so doing!

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<sup>2</sup> You can download the past volumes of the *JBSC* here: [www.masters.edu/jbsc](http://www.masters.edu/jbsc)

# ARTICLES

## Why Common Grace Is Not Enough For Christians Who Counsel

Ed Wilde<sup>1</sup>

### Part Two

In the first half of this essay, I argued that the fundamental “psychological”<sup>2</sup> trouble with human beings derive from the Fall, the breach between God and man. At that time, human identity became fundamentally disordered.<sup>3</sup> This is an objective fact which controls all aspects of human existence. As Lintz argues, the disordered identity creates in a human being a series of basic unmet desires which cannot be met in this world outside of the restoration available to us in God.<sup>4</sup> To take the most basic, we are under a sentence of death. We therefore desire life which cannot be obtained. We create idols to somehow “satisfy” or placate that desire. The idolatrous desire further distorts human identity.

God pronounced man under a sentence of death. Based upon the biblical usage, we understand this death to entail two distinct, but not separate, aspects: a first and second death. The first death is the death of the body. It comes to all human beings. It entails the physical decay of the human body along with the decay of the physical creation.

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<sup>2</sup> Please see the discussion of the word “psychology”, footnote 5.

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting how this concept of self, of identity is understood to lie at the heart of human psychological troubles, and yet even self-professed Christian psychologists fails to see the importance of this as a matter of redemption: "The 'self' is a central construct in psychology; much has been written about the nature and development of the self. For counselors, helping counselees to form a healthy self is an important task in the counseling process....This leads to the question, what is the self? For the Christian, the self, or the core of the person, was created by God in his image (Gen. 1:26-27). Theologians, philosophers and biblical scholars have written volumes on the *imago Dei*." Elisabeth A. Nesbit Sbanotto, *Skills for Effective Counseling: a Faith-Based Integration*, Christian Association for Psychological Studies (CAPS) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 35. They see the importance and admit the fact and yet fail to see the implication: You, "have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator." Col. 3:10 (ESV). How could that fact not be the center of a counseling methodology which acknowledges the "image of God" and the importance of self perplexes me.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Lints, *New Studies in Biblical Theology*, vol. 36, *Identity and Idolatry: the Image of God and Its Inversion* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 86-87.

The second death begins in this life with one's "spiritual" death<sup>5</sup> and follows to completion upon the first death for all those who die in a state of unrepentant sin.<sup>6</sup> It is thus not universal. For those who come to eternal life, there is a reversal of both the first and second death.

Corresponding to these two deaths is God's gracious relationship to the human body and spirit. The entire human was created to be in right relationship with God. Being under the judgment of God and living in a world under the judgment of God causes the array of our "psychological" problems.

One thing to note is that the first death of death did not follow instantaneously upon the pronouncement of judgment.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, we note that the conditions in creation are not as uniformly evil as they might be. The alleviation of God's wrath as experienced during the time of our first death, that is the time in which we as human beings live upon the world, is the result of God's "common grace."<sup>8</sup>

This portion of the essay will explore the doctrine known as "common grace" as it relates to the question of psychology broadly, and specifically in relation to counseling.

I will end with a proposal for how biblical counseling can evaluate truth claims for psychology (and the related fields of sociology and anthropology) in a manner consistent with Protestant commitments to the supremacy and sufficiency of Scripture.

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<sup>5</sup> "By Sin an entry being made for Death. Rom. 5:12. they became subject to the separating of the Soul from the Body, which is Bodily Death; and of both from God, which is Spiritual Death".

James Usher, *A Body of Divinity: Or, the Sum and Substance of Christian Religion*, Eighth Edition. (London: R. J.; Jonathan Robinson; A. and J. Churchill; J. Taylor; J. Wyatt, 1702), 180.

<sup>6</sup> "For just as he spoke of a first and a second resurrection, so also is there a first and a second death. The first death is physical and results in the separation of the soul and the body. The second death ... is spiritual and is caused by sin. Of this death also the Lord spoke: "Do not fear those who kill the body; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." 28 COMMENTARY ON THE APOCALYPSE 20.4-8." William C. Weinrich, ed., *Revelation, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 335. We can also speak about being "spiritually" dead in the sense that while alive in this world, one is subject to estrangement from God – which results in numerous ills to the human being, include the noetic effects of sin which is discussed at length in the first half of this essay.

<sup>7</sup> "Disease is a symptom of death. Disease is the path to death. And death is the only disease of our life. And we have to admit that death is not something we can cure. Even though in Silicon Valley, they're bold enough to think they can." Bryan Walsh, "The Chinese Buddhist Billionaire Who Wants to Fix Your Brain," *medium.com* (blog), July 3, 2018, <https://medium.com/s/futurehuman/the-chinese-buddhist-billionaire-who-wants-to-fix-your-brain-4a99d14428ba>.

<sup>8</sup> I will use the phrase "common grace" since it is the phrase commonly used to discuss this doctrine. However, as John Frame notes, the title of this doctrine is not without question:

We have seen that although God directs his goodness and love especially to believers, there are also senses in which God's goodness and love are universal. "The Lord is good to all." (Ps. 145:9), and he loves even his enemies by sending them rain and sunshine (Matt. 5:44-45). So many have thought that the said made be said of grace, that there are forms of divine grace that God gives to the nonelect.

To my knowledge, Scripture never uses *hen* or *charis* to refer to his blessings on creation generally or on nonelect humanity. So it would be perhaps better to speak of God's common goodness, or common love, rather than his common grace. The word *grace* in Scripture tends to be more narrowly focused on redemption than *goodness* and *love* though the latter terms also have rich redemptive associations.

John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2013), 246.

## The Inference of Common Grace

Common grace is an inference based upon the paradox created by the tension between the doctrine of total depravity and the experience of human flourishing:

So we are placed on the horns of a dilemma, a paradox that, as Murray said, poses “very insistent questions,” a riddle that, as Kuyper said, seems “in itself insoluble.” We cannot deny what the Bible teaches about man’s total depravity and need for the Spirit’s regenerating power in order to submit to God’s truth. Therefore, we cannot deny that a radical spiritual antithesis places Christian thought and non-Christian thought in diametrical opposition to each other. Yet we cannot dismiss the testimony, not only of our experience but also of Scripture itself, that people dead in sin in fact *do good, love others, and know truth*.<sup>9</sup>

There is a second stage of conflict between the judgment of Genesis 2:17 and 3:14-19 and the continued existence of human beings, and even a degree of human flourishing.

We stop here to acknowledge that all human sorrow and suffering flows directly from sin, its productions and its punishments. First, we suffer from our own sin. Second, we suffer from the sins of others. Third, we suffer due to the effects of sin more generally: the futility of the creation, death, disease, et cetera. In short, we are broken, rebellious people living in a creation under a curse. In such circumstances it is no surprise that we suffer what is now commonly called “mental illness” (which includes both that which is and that which is not physiological illness).<sup>10</sup>

Broken (an irrational heart lodged in a dying body) people in sinful rebellion against God (and thus at war with one-another) trying to scrape by on a cursed planet should not long last --especially when God has decreed death in no uncertain terms. But when we look about us, we human have continued to exist. We have stood on the moon and looked at the ocean's floor. We have built astounding buildings, written beautiful plays, and organized our efforts across generations. We have not disappeared; far from it from. How then can we balance God's judgment and our existence – even flourishing?

There are a few ways in which one can resolve this paradox. First, we can bracket the effects of the Fall. Rather than understand the Scripture to teach a radical derangement of the human heart, we can bracket the effects of the Fall to some sort of “spiritual” category. While we may not be able to rightly enjoy God (and will be eventually damned), the intellectual capacity of humanity remained

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<sup>9</sup> Dennis E. Johnson, “Spiritual Antithesis: Common Grace, and Practical Theology,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 64, no. 1 (2002): 76.

<sup>10</sup> I dislike the phrase “mental illness” because it confuses disparate problems under a common label, the phrase is ambiguous. First, the phrase is used to describe diseases (typically) of the nervous system which affect cognition and emotion. Second, it is used to describe habitual sin. Third, it is also used to describe the confluence of sin and physical disease. My problem with the phrase is not that I deny the real existence of physical states which lead to confusion or delusion; such things I readily affirm. I merely reject the confusion created by sloppy language.

essentially the same before and after the Fall. Thus, human advancement presents little challenge.<sup>11</sup> Second, one could deny human ability. Finally, one could posit the full judgment of God coupled to a limited reprieve: this is the solution of common grace.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Limitation and Purpose of Common Grace**

Since human ability and human depravity coexist on this side of the Fall, orthodox protestant theologians—at least since Calvin has argued for God’s goodness to an unbelieving world exhibited in the form of “common grace.” This “common grace” is of tremendous importance for the history of humanity, “The effects produced by common grace, or this influence of the Spirit common to all men, are most important to the individual and to the world.”<sup>13</sup>

Having pronounced judgment in Genesis 3, God delays the full execution of the judgment; but a reprieve is not a pardon. Life still persists on the planet; human beings have not exterminated the race; eternal death is not upon all humanity; the final judgment has not come—but it will.

The writer of Hebrews tells us, “[I]t is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Heb. 9:27). He continues, for those who persist in rebellion, there is “a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury that will consume the adversaries” (Heb. 10:27). Paul begins his explanation of the Gospel in Romans 1 with the proposition that judgment is coming, “[T]he wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness” (Rom. 1:18).

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<sup>11</sup> This strategy seems lie to behind much of the conflict between Biblical Counseling and other Christian schools of counseling and psychological understanding.

<sup>12</sup> Common grace is not the only method for positing some form divine assistance. "So a Wesleyan may understand psychotherapy as a means of grace in which the grace of God is mediated to the patient through the therapeutic situation [citation], wooing them toward love of self, other, God, and all of creation." Earl D. Bland and Brad D. Strawn, eds., *Christianity and Psychoanalysis: a New Conversation* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2014), 73. Eric Johnson has a theory of something called "creation grace". John Coe argues, "According to the Old Testament sage, if a person is honest and open to reality, that reality will inform the person regarding the fact that there is an extrenal world created by God that can be known and its dynamic structures discovered (natural law and the human psychological dynamics)." John H. Coe and Todd W. Hall, *Psychology in the Spirit: Contours of a Transformational Psychology*, Christian Worldview Integration Series (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2010), 133. These theories all operation quite differently than "common grace" which is an overt work of the Holy Spirit, as explained herein. These other theories operate by bracketing the effects of the Fall in some manner and thus contend that something is left over from Eden. " One option is to envision therapy as analogous to natural processes that God, in his transcendent wisdom, created a priori as available methods for the healing of psychological and relational infirmities. In other words, these healing processes were created ex nihilo, and humans have discovered their efficacy as a means of therapeutic healing -- not unlike the discoveries of penicillin or the polio vaccine." Earl D. Bland and Brad D. Strawn, eds., *Christianity and Psychoanalysis: a New Conversation* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2014), 30. While a rebuttal of these various theories goes beyond the scope of this paper, it must be noted that none of them are consistent with the doctrine of common grace. If they hope to claim theological coherence and validity, they will need to make their stand on some other ground. To date, I have read nothing which has made an adequate Scriptural case for these theories.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 670.



The delay in God's final decree does not mean that judgment is not coming; rather, it means that God in his mercy and goodness is giving space for repentance:

Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? <sup>5</sup> But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed (Rom. 2:4–5).

Peter explains, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance (2 Peter 3:9). That patient goodness and mercy of God lies at the heart of common grace. Gerald Bray gets to the heart of what is taking place here:

God's willingness to preserve the fallen spiritual creatures in spite of their rebellion is matched by his desire to keep the human race in being. This is a mystery that can only be explained only by his deep love for his creatures. Looked at in a purely rational light, it would not have been surprising if God had decided to wipe us out and start again.<sup>14</sup>

Abraham Kuyper explains that common grace was given both to preserve the church and to exhibit God's broader purposes:

In the *fourth* place, the blessing of the new situation was intended not only for God's church, but for *everything that is human*, indeed for the *animal kingdom*. It was not that the church was saved in order to abandon everything outside the church to general ruin. But the grace shown here extends to the entirety of human life. Most surely the purpose was so that the God's church could find a place to set its foot, and also so that the church of the new covenant would gather together believers from all peoples and nations. But its purpose was also so that in a proper sense God the Lord would continue his work in that broad sphere of human life, not unto the saving of souls but no less unto the praise and glory of his great name.<sup>15</sup>

So as we consider the doctrine of common grace, we need to understand the basis of the claim: God brought judgment upon human beings, and thus upon all creation (Rom. 8:20). Yet, in his goodness and mercy, God spared the full immediate implementation of that judgment upon human beings: (1) to permit time for repentance; (2) to give space for the existence of the church; (3) generally for his glory and praise.

Thus, when we consider common grace, we must be careful how we understand its extent. Since the extent of common grace entails an inference as well as exegesis (as we will see when we

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<sup>14</sup> Gerald Lewis Bray, *God Is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2012), 473.

<sup>15</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World*, Collected Works in Public Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press :, 2016), 107.

look at Calvin's initial statement of the doctrine), we must be careful not to over-claim, or to claim such things as would be inimical to God's glory for common grace.

### **Common Grace is an Operation of the Holy Spirit**

Since all the world lies under the judgment of God, only God himself can withstand and withhold the scope and effect of that judgment; accordingly, it has been the position of orthodox protestant theologians that common grace is an operation of the Holy Spirit (as will be demonstrated herein, and is apparent from the inference that it is a temporary mitigation of God's judgment). Charles Hodge asks what would be the case if the Holy Spirit were not the agent working upon all mankind:

The effects produced by common grace, or this influence of the Spirit common to all men, are most important to the individual and to the world. What the external world would be if left to the blind operation of physical causes, without the restraining and guiding influence of God's providential efficiency, that would the world of mind be, in all its moral and religious manifestations, without the restraints and guidance of the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup>

Of particular importance for our consideration is his observation that the Spirit effects all that is good in humanity, "All the decorum, order, refinement, and virtue existing among men"<sup>17</sup> is the result of the Spirit's work as Hodge notes, if we do not make the Spirit the proprietor of common grace, then we are left with deism, "According to the mechanical theory, adopted by Deists, Rationalists, or (as they are often called in distinction from Supernaturalists) Naturalists, there is no exercise of the power of God on the minds of men. As He leaves the external world to the control of the laws of nature, so He leaves the world of mind to the control of its own laws."<sup>18</sup>

Just as I fear that many Christians have effectively a Pelagian view of the Fall, in their effort to preserve secular theories of the human mind; I fear that many Christians have a Deist's view of science and history so as to "plunder the Egyptians." As I will make clear below, I do not presume for a moment to that unbelievers do not make correct and true observations about human beings. However, we must realize at all points, that such ability is a good gift of God; not a bare operation of some laws invested in the creation and operating by their own continued strength.

### **Common Grace Permits the Orderly Functioning of Nature**

In Genesis 3:18-19, God pronounces a judgment upon the ground and upon human bodies. In Romans 8:20, we learn that this futility extends to the creation (Eccl. 1:2). And yet, the world is not dissolved and destroyed.

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 670.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 671.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 658.

Jesus tells us that the rain and sun comes to all, the “just and the unjust” (Matt. 6:45). There is an order to nature which does good to all humanity and all nature (Gen. 9:9-10; Jer. 33:20; God’s covenant with day and night). This orderly functioning of nature is an affirmative act of God’s goodness. Vern Poythress explains that the “laws” of nature are affirmative acts of God in space and time:

In addition, let us remember that we are speaking of real laws, not merely our human guesses and approximations. The real laws are in fact the word of God, specifying how the world of creatures is to function. So-called “law” is simply God speaking, God acting, God manifesting himself in time and space. The real mistake here is not a matter of divinizing nature, but of refusing to recognize that the law is the law of God, nothing less than God speaking. We are confronting God.<sup>19</sup>

When we come to nature and make observations of regularity, we are seeing what God is doing. The fact that there is continued goodness in the creation tells us that God is being good to us. God has subjected the creation to futility; the ground will produce thorns; human bodies will grow will, be subjected to decay, and will die. But God does not permit the creation to exhibit the full extent of his wrath. One day the world will be “burned up and dissolved” (2 Pet. 3:10), but that day is not yet come.

This is a critical element of God’s common grace as it pertains to the field of ‘psychology’. Were it not for the regularity and comprehensibility of the creation, no one would ever be able to observe the firing of neurons nor study how many chunks one can hold in short term memory.

God causes the world to persist and to be livable and comprehensible. The underlying structure and functioning of the world is God’s doing (Heb. 1:3).

### **Common Grace Restrains Sin**

Genesis 3:16 hints at conflict between human beings. Genesis 3:12, already exhibits blame-shifting, the willingness to press another human being into God's judgment. Genesis 4:8 brings us to the first murder. Genesis 4:23 brings us to Lamech who threatens evil upon others. Without the restraint of the Spirit, the world became so wicked that, “Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence.”<sup>20</sup> Gen. 6:11. The evil of the world became so great that God found it necessary to “to make an end of all flesh (Gen. 6:12).

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<sup>19</sup> Poythress, Vern S.. *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Kindle Locations 329-332). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

<sup>20</sup> Just a note here: While I am not a pacifist (as much as I long for such a world), I do see that many Christians are far too sanguine about violence. I remember a review of a movie from nearly 30 years ago, where the reviewer said that while he liked the movie, he had to wonder about a culture that found the deaths of so many human beings “entertainment.” Another note, “From 2010-2014, an estimated 25% of global pregnancies (including spontaneous miscarriages) ended in abortion.” “Worldwide Abortion Statistics,” *Abort73.com* (blog), n.d., [http://www.abort73.com/abortion\\_facts/](http://www.abort73.com/abortion_facts/)

As a result of this flood, only eight human beings remained alive. Yet, even after God had purged humanity, God observes, “the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (Gen.8:21). Unless God had acted at that time to forcibly restrain sin, humanity would have quickly destroyed itself.<sup>21</sup> However, Scripture records many instances where God intervened to prohibit sin. See, for example, Genesis 12:17-20, 20:3.

Abraham Kuyper posits that common grace fundamentally changes and is clearly established with the Noahic covenant:

The fixed historical starting point for the doctrine of *common grace* lies in *God's establishment of a covenant with Noah after the flood*. In the past, inadequate attention has been paid to this significant and decisive event.<sup>22</sup>

Kuyper sees that God at this point intervenes in a particular manner to restrain sin:

But through the increase of common grace, sin will be restrained with bridle and rein, so that sin will never again before the end of the world develop into such gruesome, hellish outburst and tyranny. If after the flood the earth had become less hellish than earlier, this is not because the sinner has essentially improved. Before and after the flood the sinner is just as evil in the core of his being. But the difference lies in this, that the restraining power proceeding from common grace against sin, has become increased from God’s side after the flood. The beast within man remains just as evil and wild, but the bars around its cage were fortified, so that it cannot again escape like it used to.<sup>23</sup>

## **Common Grace Has Permitted Some Understanding of the World**

The continued operation of nature and the restraint of sin are uncontroversial in the debate among Christian counselors over the scope and nature of common grace. It is the scope and nature of our understanding of the world—particularly the human heart—which leads to the disagreement.

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worldwide\_abortion\_statistics/ (accessed February 3, 2018). That means that most human beings die by violence inflicted at the insistence of one’s mother.

<sup>21</sup> It takes little knowledge of history to realize how easily such an end could come. Human beings have shown the utmost diligence in learning how to destroy one-another. Were it not for a supernatural grace, how could we still survive? What has kept North Korea, China, the Russians, the United States from not destroying all life?

<sup>22</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World*, Collected Works in Public Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press: 2016), 10. This is a practical point for much of the discussion about common grace. Mr. Kuyper is often thrown about with little analysis of the content of this statement nor an understanding of his doctrine. In a later place, Kuyper modifies this explanation and gives room for a more limited form of common grace prior to Flood.

<sup>23</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World: The Historical Section*, ed. Jordan J. Ballor, Melvin Flikkema, and Stephen J. Grabill, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman and Ed M. van der Maas, vol. 1, Abraham Kuyper Collected Works in Public Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; Acton Institute, 2015), 26.

We can start with objective observations about the physical world. Everyone can only acknowledge that human beings have and do observe and describe the physical world; we can predict future events based upon past observation. Cain tilled fields; Abel cared for sheep (Gen. 4:2). That requires a high degree of sophistication in understanding the operation of the natural world. Jubal learned of musical instruments (Gen. 4:21). Tubal-Cain begins metallurgy (Gen. 4:22). At the very earliest stage of human life outside the Garden, we see human beings able to understand their world. As Solomon writes, “It is the glory of a king to search out a matter (Prov. 25:2). Solomon studied and understood many things about the physical world, plants and animals (1 Kings 4:33).

This history of investigation and understanding, which we typically call “science” has been a great blessing in many respects. Much of the investigation has been undertaken those who are not believers.<sup>24</sup>

In matters of counseling, we can acknowledge that there are physiological aspects of human life which can be seen and understood. These observations will include much of what falls within the discipline of “psychology.” The physiological functions of the nervous system are as open to observation as the accretion of crystal. Likewise, we can observe the functioning of the senses and memory. We can test short term memory. We can study the physiological basis of sensory perception. We can learn that certain optical illusions are the result of training in observation.

This ability—even in unbelievers—is work of the Spirit of God, albeit not a saving work; as John Calvin explains:

*16. Human competence in art and science also derives from the Spirit of God*

Meanwhile, we ought not to forget those most excellent benefits of the divine Spirit, which he distributes to whomever he wills, for the common good of mankind. ... It is no wonder, then, that the knowledge of all that is most excellent in human life is said to be communicated to us through the Spirit of God. Nor is there reason for anyone to ask, ... But if the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other like disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance. For if we neglect God’s gift freely offered in these arts, we ought to suffer just punishment for our sloths. ... For with the greatest truth Augustine teaches that as the free gifts were withdrawn from man after the Fall, so the natural ones remaining were corrupted.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> “Yet at the same time, the Church Fathers, even those who were most negative against false religions, gratefully assimilated much of truth and value from pre-Christian pagan culture.” Douglas F. Kelly, *Systematic Theology: Grounded in Holy Scripture and Understood in the Light of the Church* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2008), 206. And, as Van Til notes, such beneficial work is done by means of first “borrowing” aspects of a Christian worldview: “Why do you object when I account for the non-Christian’s scientific accomplishments by virtue of the fact that in spite of his principle of Chance, he is borrowing, without recognizing it, the Christian ideas of creation and providence?” Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company: Philadelphia, 1955). Such borrowing, I suppose, should be considered an aspect of common grace.

<sup>25</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* & 2, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 275.

## Common Grace Permits the Exercise of Wisdom Outside of Salvation

Wisdom as a matter of practical living is not limited to supernatural revelation. For instance, Solomon was wiser than Ethan, Mehan, Darda, et cetera (1 Kings 4:33). If there were no wisdom outside of special revelation, then this comparison would be nonsensical. However, the presence of such wisdom is still a work of the Spirit (even if not direct supernatural revelation).

Calvin explains that even such things as virtue and wise conduct can be an operation of the Spirit granted to humanity to permit the preservation of life:

### *4. Uprightness is God's gift; but man's nature remains corrupted*

nevertheless the problem has not yet been resolved. For either we must make Camillus equal to Catiline, or we shall have in Camillus an example proving that nature, if carefully cultivated, is not utterly devoid of goodness.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, I admit that the endowments resplendent in Camillus were gifts of God and seem rightly commendable if judged in themselves. But how will these serve as proofs of natural goodness in him? Must we not hark back to his mind and reason thus:<sup>6</sup> if a natural man excelled in such moral integrity, undoubtedly human nature did not lack the ability to cultivate virtue? Yet what if the mind had been wicked and crooked, and had followed anything but uprightnes? And there is no doubt that it was such, if you grant that Camillus was a natural man. What power for good will you attribute to human nature in this respect, if in the loftiest appearance of integrity, it is always found to be impelled toward corruption? Therefore as you will not commend a man for virtue when his vices impress you under the appearance of virtues, so you will not attribute to the human will the capability of seeking after the right so long as the will remains set in its own perversity.

Here, however, is the surest and easiest solution to this question: these are not common gifts of nature, but special graces of God, which he bestows variously and in a certain measure upon men otherwise wicked. For this reason, we are not afraid, in common parlance, to call this man wellborn, that one depraved in nature. Yet we do not hesitate to include both under the universal condition of human depravity; but we point out what special grace<sup>7</sup> the Lord has bestowed upon the one, while not deigning to bestow it upon the other. When he wished to put Saul over the kingdom he “formed him as a new man” [1 Sam. 10:6 p.]. This is the reason why Plato, alluding to the Homeric legend, says that kings’ sons are born with some distinguishing mark.<sup>8</sup> For God, in providing for the human race, often endows with a heroic nature those destined to command. From this workshop have come forth the qualities of great leaders celebrated in histories. Private individuals are to be judged in the same way. But because, however excellent anyone has been, his own ambition always pushes him on—a blemish with which all virtues are so sullied that before God they lose all favor—anything in profane men that appears praiseworthy must be considered worthless. Besides, where there is no zeal to glorify God, the chief part of uprightnes is absent; a zeal of which all those whom he has not regenerated by his Spirit are devoid. There is good reason for the statement in Isaiah, that “the spirit of the fear of God rests” upon Christ [Isa. 11:2 p.]. By this we are taught that all estranged from Christ lack “the fear of God,” which “is the beginning of wisdom” [Ps. 111:10 p.]. As for the virtues that deceive us with their vain show, they shall have their praise in the political

assembly and in common renown among men; but before the heavenly judgment seat they shall be of no value to acquire righteousness.<sup>26</sup>

As Calvin explains here, God, for his own good purposes, will engender a better apprehension and behavior in one man than another. While all men are depraved and would be utterly so but for God's restraint, some men exhibit remarkable characteristics. These of a "nobler" nature are so due to peculiar operation of the Spirit of God.

When we consider this light of the purpose of common grace, we can easily conclude that such men and women are necessary for the perpetuation of human existence—indeed without such people we would have doomed ourselves. We get Charles Manson and Abraham Lincoln; we get Hitler and Churchill. That is Calvin's point.

### **Does Common Grace Get Us an Operative Psychology of the Human Heart?**

No.

Let us consider this matter carefully. Common grace is given to ameliorate certain effects of the Fall. The primary effects of common grace have been to limit the effects pronounced in Genesis 3:14-19. If the ground will be in rebellion, we will learn how to work it. If our bodies will decay, we will learn how to slow that decay. If human beings will be in conflict, there will be restraints upon those conflicts.

But common grace, for all its beauty, never once reverses any effect of the Fall nor does common grace reach to spiritual death or the second death. Common grace does not even stop the effects of the first death. You will die despite the wonders of medicine. You may be killed by a murderer or in a war, despite the restraint of sin. Droughts may come despite our technological prowess. Wise men act like fools. The noetic effects of sin persist. While common grace permits an understanding of some aspects, it does not reach to the heart of the human condition, "Calvin rightly draws a strong distinction between perceiving inferior things and heavenly things. Unregenerate

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John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* & 2, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 293–294. Due to the difficulty of some of Calvin's references, I have retained Battles' footnotes:

<sup>26</sup> b Edition of 1539

<sup>5</sup> Catiline's evil nature is described by Sallust, *The War with Catiline* iii. 5; LCL edition, pp. 8 ff. He was assailed by Cicero, and was held up to reproach, while Camillus, the noble but unrewarded patriot, was celebrated with praise by Horace, Vergil, and Juvenal. Cf. Augustine, *City of God* II. xvii, xxiii; III. xvii (MPL 41. 61 f., 96 f.; tr. NPNF II. 32, 37, 54).

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *Against Julian* IV. iii. 16 ff. (MPL 44. 774 ff.; tr. FC 35. 179 f.).

<sup>7</sup> On the expressions "*speciales Dei gratias*" ... "*specialis gratiae*," cf. II. ii. 17, notes 63, 64; II. iv. 7, note 13; and above, on Camillus, in this sec. 4. Those special endowments that make possible admirable and heroic actions by nonelect persons are by Calvin referred to God's special grace. ° edition of 1559 p. paraphrase, designates a Scripture quotation or near-quotation, not conforming fully to any as yet ascertainable source; many of these are in *oratio obliqua*.<sup>8</sup> Plato, *Cratylus* 393 f. (LCL Plato VI. 38–45).

human nature can certainly be helpful in the former but not in the later.”<sup>27</sup> This is why the ultimate question of human psychology trouble is crucial to the understanding of biblical counseling: if the ultimate trouble with human nature lies in our objective relationship with God and the fact of being under a sentence of death, then nothing in unregenerate nature will be able to rightly perceive that trouble or nor provide any solution.

## The Trouble with Equivocation

Since psychology as a discipline concerns the understanding of the human being as a psychosomatic being,<sup>28</sup> it necessarily partakes of matters which are properly the subject of human observation (the human body), and those matters which are substantially more problematic, if not impossible: the consciousness of the human being, the subjective mental experience.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, as will be detailed more below, human beings cannot see clearly what is wrong with man nor how to resolve that problem.

Yet, psychology claims to be a science based upon observation:<sup>30</sup> “In an era of evidence-based practice, all mental health professional must be up-to-date on the science behind clinical interventions.”<sup>31</sup> “Yet psychology, as a science, rigorously attempts to rely on observable data in developing and evaluating theories.”<sup>32</sup> “But Christian psychologists will have as a second important

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<sup>27</sup> Douglas F. Kelly, *Systematic Theology: Grounded in Holy Scripture and Understood in the Light of the Church* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2008), 207.

<sup>28</sup> “Since Scripture presents a person as a unified yet complex self, the designation ‘complex unity’ is preferred. The material (body) and immaterial (soul/spirit) function together in one person, embracing both unity and diversity.” John MacArthur, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2017), 424.

<sup>29</sup> We cannot simply move from neurological observation to an understanding of the subjective conscious state. Octavio S. Choi, “What Neuroscience Can and Cannot Answer,” *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law Online* 45, no. 3 (September 2017): 278-85. Moreover, there is the fact that as a Christian, I cannot posit that the soul is reducible to the body. Yet, Moes & Tellinghuisen, professing Christians and professors of psychology at Calvin College present evidence of the degree to which human consciousness is affected by the brain, and the need to be careful to not discount the body when understanding the human being. Paul Moes and Donald J. Tellinghuisen, *Exploring Psychology and Christian Faith: An Introductory Guide* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2014), 49-61. “As we have seen, the heart is the non-material, non-observable inner life of the human being when alive bodily.” Jay Edward Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resource Library, 1986), 116.

<sup>30</sup> Moes and Tellinghuisen explain that Christian psychologists rely upon a “methodological naturalism”: They are not actually deists, but they pretend to be deists when they perform experiments. Paul Moes and Donald J. Tellinghuisen, *Exploring Psychology and Christian Faith: An Introductory Guide* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2014), 24.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Plante, “Levels of Explanation of Approach,” in *Counseling and Christianity: Five Approaches*, ed. Stephen P. Greggo and Timothy A. Sisemore (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 69.

<sup>32</sup> David N. Entwistle, *Integrative Approaches to Psychology and Christianity: An Introduction to Worldview Issues, Philosophical Foundations, and Models of Integration* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004), 137.



goal to investigate human beings empirically in a manner common to contemporary psychology, and to practice such research in conformity with their broader commitments.”<sup>33</sup>

I chose these three quotations because the professing Christians who offered these observations come from fundamentally different schools of psychology. What they each have in common is a commitment to empirical observation from no more than a Deistic perspective as a fundamental tool of caring for the human soul; and then based upon such observation to determine theories and methods for treatment. The work of unbelievers about human nature, purpose and the means for effecting change first come from the position of an unbeliever.<sup>34</sup> The observations may be squared or correlated in some manner with the Scripture. But the movement is from the observation is “scientific” and true; and while the Scripture may provide some framework or touchstone, it is not directly helpful to understanding and addressing the human need.

When they operate in this manner, they are little different than unbelievers. Erickson explains that “Psychology endeavors to establish what is demonstrably true in human behavior . . . Religion, on the other hand, elaborates on what feels profoundly true, even though it is not demonstrable.”<sup>35</sup>

Biblical Counseling does not deny that unbelievers can make observations accurate observations. For example, I came upon this in an article I am reading for work, “Wolf and colleagues found that 81% of adults who were abused in childhood could be distinguished correctly from non-abused controls because of differences on 11 items on the schizophrenia (Sc) scale.”<sup>36</sup> I am not surprised by the finding, nor do I have any reason to doubt the finding. While such an observation may be true, it does not tell may (1) what has actually taken place in the heart of these people;<sup>37</sup> (2) since a secular explanation will be made without reference to sin, to God, to the human heart (as understood

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<sup>33</sup> Robert C. Roberts and P.J. Watson, “A Christian Psychology View,” in *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views*, ed. Eric L. Johnson (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2010), 164.

<sup>34</sup> “Rather than accepting any of the four models entirely, it may be better to adopt an eclectic approach, taking the best features of each of the four models. Crabb (1977, 47–52) speaks of “spoiling the Egyptians,” referring to the Old Testament account of the Israelites taking gold and other precious materials from Egypt and leaving the leeks and onions behind. Perhaps we as Christians should make use of those psychological concepts that are useful and compatible with Scripture and leave behind those that conflict with our faith.” Paul D. Meier M.D. et al., *Introduction to Psychology and Counseling: Christian Perspectives and Applications*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1991), 29.

<sup>35</sup> Erick H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1962), 21.

<sup>36</sup> Bethany L. Brand, Gregory S. Chasson, Cori A. Palermo, Frank M. Donato, Kyle P. Rhodes and Emily F. Voorhees, “MMPI-2 Item Endorsements in Dissociative Identity Disorder vs. Simulators,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law Online* March 2016, 44 (1) 63-72 [63-64].

<sup>37</sup> As Adams writes, we must not read such findings as proving a “deterministic” theory of human development. “Christians do not accept the deterministic views of psychologists and psychiatrists, who think that early socialization or early environmental conditioning so fixes the course of his life that all of a child’s future behavior is virtually determined by those forces.”

Jay Edward Adams, *The Christian Counselor’s Manual* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973), 139. Human beings are not determined robots; but this does not mean that our environment has no affect upon us. One of the most remarkable things about a Scriptural basis for soul care is that it requires us to consider all of the aspects of human life from the bodily to the spiritual. A great fault of most secular psychology is its tendency to be reductionistic.

biblically), the explanation will be fundamentally wrong; (3) the explanation cannot tell me what a person should be, nor (4) how the Word of God and the Spirit God can transform the human heart.

Thus, a commitment to “methodological naturalism” leads to the goals and observations which are very difficult to square with anything which would have been recognizable to Peter, Paul or James:

Addressing Jake's spiritual needs and perhaps feelings of alienation are important too. Jake may feel distant from his faith tradition and from God for a variety of reasons, including his losses and stresses in life and his conflictual relationships with his parents, or perhaps from feeling like God has not blessed him in the ways that he expected.<sup>38</sup>

Or, “The Christian Psychologist will want to know how one become poor in spirit, a peacemaker and so on. What is the therapy for those who are not?”<sup>39</sup>

These sorts of observations are fundamentally misguided.

So, if one denies that such observations are wrong—how then can I say that other “psychological” observations are correct? How can psychological provide insight when it comes to teaching methodology (is it better to take notes on a computer or by longhand?) and yet say that psychology for purposes of counseling can be utterly damaging to one’s soul? How can a theory of vision be correct and Jung be wrong?

The fault here lies in an equivocation: Equivocation is a logical error of mistaking a common reference for a common identity: If I have two friends both named “John,” I cannot impute the birthdate, shoe size or hair color of John 1 to John 2 simply because they have the same name. Likewise, the fact that an observation about effects of sleep on learning ability is an aspect of observational psychology does not mean that Freud's observations about “hysterical” women in Vienna should be given equal validity because it is also called “psychology.”

But the problem is even more troublesome. Consider the human under observation: We can observe the environment to some extent; we can observe the human body to some extent; we can observe the behaviors exhibit to some extent; we observe the reports of internal consciousness to some extent (and all the problems and arguments have centered around this issue in the history of psychology).

There will some patterns because human beings learn; because human beings have habits; because sin begets sin and it forces human beings into patterns; and because sanctification itself shows certain movement and progression (2 Pet. 1:5-7). The patterns and learning which are common to human beings are common due to the operation of the Holy Spirit in restraining sin and permitting a certain level of human cultural functioning to permit the continued existence of human beings.

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas Plante, “Levels of Explanation of Approach,” in *Counseling and Christianity: Five Approaches*, ed. Stephen P. Greggo and Thimothy A. Sisemore (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 73.

<sup>39</sup> Robert C. Roberts and P.J. Watson, “A Christian Psychology View,” in *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views*, ed. Eric L. Johnson (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2010), 164.

However, we cannot draw a line from a psychology which observes the body to a psychology which observes the entire human being and equate one-with-the other. There is a categorical difference between the functioning of the body and the functioning of the soul.

### **What Cannot Be Observed**

As a practical matter, we simply cannot observe every environmental and physical variable which effects the human being. Even if we discount all spiritual effects, we are left with an impossible number of variables to consider as an input to the human being. Then when we consider the output, the thoughts, affections and behaviors, we are left with an equally impossible number of variables. This, however, is a limitation on psychology as a science which is apparent to even a materialist.

The materialist position is peculiarly problematic when it comes to questions of psychology, because the materialist position cannot adequately address the problem of a mind, “Materialism as a metaphysical perspective fails on countless levels. Nowhere is that failure more clear than in the understanding of the mind and the brain.”<sup>40</sup> And yet, for psychology to be a science and to hold to determinism one then necessarily must hold to positions which are directly contrary to reality.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, if we are going to take the Christian worldview seriously, we must understand that there is a great deal which a materialist cannot see and which no experiment or observation can ever understand:

Cornelius Van Til (1955), the noted Christian apologist, argues that true knowledge is possible only in its relationship to God, and without the existence of God true knowledge is an epistemological absurdity. Van Til (1956) states: “Our argument for the objectivity of knowledge with respect to the universe can never be complete and satisfactory unless we bring in the relation of both the object and the subject of knowledge to God. We may debate endlessly about psychological problems without fruitage if we refuse to bring in the metaphysical question of the nature of reality” (p. 60). Without the objective truth of God’s revelation, we are trapped in the phenomenalism which has characterized Western thinking since Kant. The Christian counselor’s advantage is that he has revealed in the Scriptures the objective truth about reality and man’s relation to it.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Michael Egnor, “The Representation Problem and the Immateriality of the Mind,” *Evolution News* (blog), February 5, 2018, accessed March 23, 2018, <https://evolutionnews.org/2018/02/the-representation-problem-and-the-immateriality-of-the-mind/>.

<sup>41</sup> “So too the humanistic psychologists have said some very beautiful and true things about man, but there is no foundation for what they say. We can go one step further: there is a foundation, but it contradicts what they are trying to build.” William E. Wood, “When Is It ‘Too Late’ to Change?,” ed. Jay E. Adams, *The Journal of Pastoral Practice* 9, no. 1 (1987): 40–41.

<sup>42</sup> Gary G. Plumlee, “A Questionable Union: Adlerian Theory and Pastoral Counseling,” ed. Jay E. Adams and Howard A. Eyrich, *The Journal of Pastoral Practice* 3, no. 4 (1979): 32–33.

## What Common Grace Cannot Do

Any counseling psychology must address Anthropology, Teleology and Methodology (ATM).<sup>43</sup> Common grace was not given to explain or understand such things. Common grace was given to permit the continued existence of the world, and to gain space for special grace to open the eyes of the spiritually blind. But common grace cannot and will never provide a right understanding of man, of man's chief end, nor how to care for man.<sup>44</sup> That is the purpose of special revelation (and special grace, if you will).

Yes, without question, common grace may provide some alleviation of the pains of this life -- but only in part and only for a short time. It cannot provide any remedy to the true cause of our “psychological” ills, because such ill is caused by our rebellion against and separation from God.

There is a general epistemological trouble which results from the Fall, and that issue deserves its own analysis. For purpose of this paper, I am going to bracket that problem and address the question of what a methodological naturalism in psychology necessarily misses.

If we are going to understand human beings correctly, we will need to properly consider human beings as they are in relationship to God—and particularly as human beings exist in rebellion or in covenant with God. I have read any number of books on psychology and counseling which address the question from any number of integrationists positions.<sup>45</sup> I could cite them here at length, but I think it

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<sup>43</sup> These questions cannot be rightly addressed without reference to God. What a human being is what a human being in relation to God. The purpose of the human being is defined by God. The means for transforming a human being are in relationship to God. 2 Cor. 3:18.

<sup>44</sup> Psychiatry offers differing explanations and solutions for resolving these anxieties; biblical religion clearly associates this sense of alienation with sin, and reconciliation with divine for givenness.

Scripture reveals the complex factors of response and revolt that explain secular man's vacillation between a bold resort to naturalism and his daily dilution and compromise of it. The Bible sets forth the cognitive levels of experience wherein God maintains a revelational initiative, and it discloses at the same time man's oblique and broken response to that divine confrontation. But man stands in relationship to God not only in Scripture. Man's being has a significance surviving the climactic end-time through its anchorage in divine creation and providence. His every thought and act has general revelation as its background. However idiosyncratic and idolatrous his behavior, his experience presupposes this actual though violated revelation of God. If man made for God will not live by the truth of God, he will nevertheless venture on his own to invest his life with sense and security by serving false gods. Without some conceptuality that deciphers his place in the whole of things, man cannot survive meaningfully. To escape the shattering emptiness of a life unyielded to the living God he resorts to idolatry in his quest for an unconditioned ultimate that will give direction to his existence and hopefully assure his destiny. His frantic self-striving to invest existence with meaning and security is an idolatrous response to God's revealed purpose for mankind. The objective givenness of man's life-situation is such that the real choice facing human experience is a choice not between man's valuelessness and value, but between spurious and genuine values. If his human postulations strip him of personal meaning and worth, he will breach them in deference to a haunting intuitive sense of his role in the real world. Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 149–150.

<sup>45</sup> “In his analysis of current state of integration, Brian Eck identified twenty-seven models of integration.” David N. Entwistle, *Integrative Approaches to Psychology and Christianity: An Introduction to Worldview Issues, Philosophical Foundations, and Models of Integration* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004), 163; Siang-Yang Tang, “Integration and Beyond: Principled, Professional, and Personal,” in *Integrating Psychology and Theology*, ed. Al Dueck (Pasadena: Fuller Seminary Press, 2006), 360 (“[T]here are four basic approaches academically”).

fair to say that Christians who are working in the area of psychology and counseling acknowledge that our state is profoundly affected by the Fall.

Yet, having said that, it is apparent that they understand the implications of truth when it comes to making psychological observations or in providing counsel. They (and I know this is a generalization) will point to some finding of an academic psychologist say here is a fact of common grace, we must bring this fact in and use it for our good.

But let us consider what the research has discovered. First, when we look at human beings who live in rebellion against God, we are examining cursed creatures who are not in their proper “environment” to use Jay Adam’s apt description. To examine a human being in rebellion against God is akin to examining a fish on land: yes, you see things, but you will completely misunderstand fish if you think that you are examining anything “normal.”

Thus, it is not surprising when Professor Warren Brown of Fuller Seminary writes,

Finding resonance between Christian theology and modern neuroscience is challenging, particularly with respect to views of human nature. It is increasingly difficult to hold a traditional Christian view of persons in a world of modern neurobiology, cognitive science and neuropsychology.<sup>46</sup>

In fact, the problem of man is even more profoundly difficult that we are examining human beings in the wrong environment: we are not merely fish out of water, we are cursed fish in rebellion against the source of life: we are like fish who are out the water and who hate the water.

Yes, all sorts of scientists and psychologists and sociologists see all sorts of things accurately, but they cannot see a human being in relation to God.<sup>47</sup> The necessary methodological naturalism requires pretending that human beings are bare objects without interaction from God (or even any other non-physical being). This methodology means that what they see is wrong, because they cannot see the whole picture. Ambrosiaster commented upon Paul’s line “The foolishness of God is wiser than man” (1 Cor. 1:25) as follows:

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<sup>46</sup> Warren Brown, “Resonance: A Model for Relating Science, Psychology, and Faith,” in *Integrating Psychology and Theology: Research and Reflections*, ed. Winston Gooden (Pasadena: Fuller Seminary Press, 2006), 305. And by the way, I am aware of what Mr. Brown means by the divergence. There is another fundamental flaw in this way of thinking, which I cannot address at length here. But the mistake is akin to the atheist who thinks that proof that temperature difference in two locales leads to air movement disproves God makes the wind blow (Ps. 147:18).

<sup>47</sup> “In the first chapter, attempting to reconcile theology with psychology, Brien makes this interesting statement: “The seeming antagonism between theology and psychology is not based on the psychological discoveries themselves. It is based on the interpretations of these discoveries which are influenced by psychologists’ educational and religious backgrounds and personal values” (page 13). His evaluation of the interpretations of the discoveries is absolutely correct, but he does not go far enough. It is also true that the antagonism between theology and psychology is based on the presuppositions of psychology, the psychological anthropologies proposed, and the goals of those psychological studies. When one understands theology correctly, it is readily seen that these ‘psychological discoveries’ are not really new truths but are only examples of biblical truth about human behavior or faulty human reasoning.” Robert D. Smith, “Review of You Are What You Think by Robert C. Brien,” ed. Jay E. Adams, *The Journal of Pastoral Practice* 8, no. 3 (1986): 55.

Rather he is saying that since God’s way of reasoning is in accord with things of the spirit, it confounds the reasoning of this world. It is wiser than human reasoning, because spiritual things are wiser than carnal ones. Spiritual things do not exist through carnal ones, but the other way around. *Therefore, carnal things are understandable in relation to spiritual ones.* Similarly, what belongs to heaven is stronger than what belongs to earth.<sup>48</sup>

The perspective gained by a human being without immediate reference to the God’s reasoning will always be flawed—particularly when it comes to human psychology—because the information is in the wrong context. The things observable by common grace can only be rightly understood in connection with the context provided by special revelation.

The blindness of man—even with the benefits of common grace—is so profound that a human being without supernatural aid is unable to see that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God when Jesus was standing right before him (1 Cor. 2:8; Matt. 16:17). When Jesus healed a man with a withered hand, the Pharisees and the Herodians conspired on how to kill Jesus (Mark 3:6).

Moreover, common grace does not overcome the willful blindness to the barest facts of God (Rom. 1:18-25). Yes, the integration position tries to reincorporate those facts and add that data back into their observations. However, that is fundamentally insufficient to address the problem.

The correlation between some particularly environmental experience (say being adopted at the age of six after three years in foster care) and later behavior is not solely a matter of “psychological” forces and changes in brain function. Such things can be observed, but there is much that can never be seen by normal “psychological” investigation. How can these events even be correctly understood without reference to sin, being sinned against profoundly, suffering the effects of sin generally, and one’s own sin response? I have looked through the DSM-V and have thus far been unable to find the category of sin.

Moreover, methodological naturalism cannot see the effects of God. Consider the folly of Rehoboam in 1 Kings 12. One could understand this story in terms of economics, politics, and some sort of personal psychology driving Rehoboam. But all such explanations would miss what really took place:

So the king did not listen to the people, for it was a turn of affairs brought about by the LORD that he might fulfill his word, which the LORD spoke by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam the son of Nebat. (1 Kings 12:15; see, e.g., Is. 19:14)

God was an actor in this event; but Professor Warren would never be able to see that from the position of any cognitive science. Where in neurobiology can we see God working in me “both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). I have read volume upon volume of psychology and have yet to read,

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<sup>48</sup> Gerald Lewis Bray, ed., *1–2 Corinthians, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 16; emphasis added.

Transgression speaks to the wicked  
deep in his heart;  
there is no fear of God  
before his eyes. (Ps. 36:1)

### **Common Grace Cannot See the Purpose of Man**

The chief end of man cannot be known without the special revelation of God. The telos, the end of man can only be known by special revelation of God.<sup>49</sup> When a psychologist without reference to God seeks merely to alleviate some discomfort (and not that alleviating suffering is wrong per se), he may easily have missed the point. Where repentance was need (Ps. 32:3), emotional relief was prescribed (Is. 22:12-13).

And I am not saying that every trouble requires repentance. What I am saying is that any psychology which does not *begin with* the relationship between God and man, can never understand that the purpose of man is the worship of the true God. Indeed, a psychology which merely seeks to give a psychological peace to a man at war with God is a hateful thing (Amos 4:9).

### **Common Grace Cannot Provide a Proper Remedy for Man's Distress**

A counseling psychology must have an anthropology, a teleology and a methodology. The method's will be prescribed by the nature of man and the end which we seek to achieve. All non-biblical methodologies have a common aim in their methodology a subjective transformation of the "counselee" (if you will):

There are about 400 varieties of psychotherapy. Although the methods are diverse, all psychological approaches have a common perspective: They seek to solve psychological problems by modifying people's behavior and helping them obtain a better understanding of themselves and their past, present, and future.<sup>50</sup>

Compare that methodological aim with this perspective by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

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<sup>49</sup> "Of course, try as it might, the science of psychology will never explain the purpose and meaning of human existence. Such questions go beyond the level of the science of psychology to engage the field of theology. To expect that the science of psychology might reveal the answers or even that the scientists who study psychology could comment accurately about such questions is a misunderstanding, not necessarily of science, but of the levels of explanation we can have for certain questions in life. Ultimately, the questions of human existence are theological questions for the Christian, grounded in faith and the Word of God. Ideally, the explanations of science and the Christian's understanding of the Bible should complement one another." Paul D. Meier M.D. et al., *Introduction to Psychology and Counseling: Christian Perspectives and Applications*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1991), 33.

<sup>50</sup> Robert S. Feldman, *Essentials of Understanding Psychology*, eleventh ed. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education, 2015), 486.

The Bible is God's book, it is a revelation of God, and our thinking must always start with God. Much of the trouble in the Church today is due to the fact that we are so subjective, so interested in ourselves, so egocentric. That is the peculiar error of the present century. Having forgotten God, having become interested in ourselves, we become miserable and wretched, and spend-out time in 'shallows and in miseries.' The message of the Bible from beginning to end is designed to bring us back to God, to humble us before God, and to enable us to see our true relationship to Him.<sup>51</sup>

To bring us into this new and developing relationship to God, the Scripture prescribes a complete manner of life: It brings us into new objective relationships with others (from family to work), places into a new family, where we have new identity; indeed, it makes us a "new creature" (2 Cor. 5:17). It involves thinking, singing, praying, eating, sleeping, et cetera. It also entails things like medical care (as a benefit of common grace). It sets forth a matrix of relationships, beliefs, affections, behaviors in which the "I" is no longer the center of the world, but Christ is the center. The Scripture holds that only when the "I" is humbled, may the human being be truly happy (Is. 66:2).

Indeed, it is such a comprehensive and efficacious mechanism for care of a human being, it is bizarre that any Christian would think this an ineffective way to address problems and that somehow, we need to ask advice of those who hate God to help. And yet, Christians write sentences such as "Spiritual issues arise frequently in psychotherapy. ... Many psychologists have observed that clients do not separate moral from religious issues but tend to intertwine them. ... In short, one cannot separate psychotherapy from spirituality, either in theory or practice."<sup>52</sup>

One's relationship with God is not simply some additional "spiritual issue" which is intertwined with psychotherapy. The Godward relationship is the defining characteristic which determines all other aspects of one's life: nothing else will suffice.<sup>53</sup> This is the distinguishing mark of Biblical Soul Care. What one is with respect to God predominates over all other concerns. This

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<sup>51</sup> D.M. Lloyd-Jones, *God's Ultimate Purpose: an Exposition of Ephesians 1:1 to 23* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 13. That God has provided an all sufficient remedy for "psychological" troubles has not been doubted, until the rise of "modern psychology". For example, "Do you see how it is possible to find in Scripture a remedy appropriate to every trouble afflicting the human race and go off healed, to dispel every depression that life causes and not be brought low by any circumstance befalling us?" John Chrysostom, Homily on Genesis (Homily 29), quoted in David T. King, William Webster, *The Writings of the Church Fathers Affirming the Reformation Principle of Sola Scriptura*, vol. 3, of *Holy Scripture: The Ground and Pillar of Our Faith* (Battleground: Christian Resource, Inc., 2001) 306. Or, ". And then doubt not of your physician's skill or care. It is his peculiar glory, that never any patient miscarried under his hand, though such was their condition that they were utterly incurable by any other." William Spurstowe, *The Spiritual Chymist* (E.T. for Simon Miller: London, 1668), 90-91.

<sup>52</sup> Neil T. Anderson, Terry Zuehlke, and Julianne Zuehlke, *Christ-Centered Therapy: The Practical Integration of Theology and Psychology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 2000), 47.

<sup>53</sup> "Countless strategies have been developed and implemented in an effort to conquer human sinfulness. Education, social programs, psychological methods, genetic engineering, and other similar efforts have all failed in this quest." R. Stanton Norman, "Human Sinfulness," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 385.



relationship with God cannot be established upon any other basis beyond that given Scripture (the Word of God and the Spirit of God).

As stated in the first half of this essay, the cause for psychological ill stems from the breach between God and man. When man, without fundamental reference to God's special revelation, attempts to remedy the effects of that breach, man has engaged in profound foolishness. Even a temporary alleviation of psychological pain achieved through drugs or mindfulness or whatnot is no real value. In fact, suffering can often be used by God as a good gift—and the difficulty of life may drive one to repentance. But, since non-biblical psychologies cannot rightly understand what a human being is nor know the chief of human beings, it cannot prescribe the correct means for caring for the suffering human being.

Indeed, there is nothing in such a psychology which can escape the pronouncement of God upon their work, “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (1 Cor. 1:20). The psychologist who is trying to remedy the effect of the fall upon the heart of man without making recourse to the God who has cursed man, is in rebellion against God.<sup>54</sup>

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge (Prov. 1:7, 9:10). What wisdom is there without the Lord. How can a methodological naturalism provide wisdom to care for the human soul? (Ps. 14:1).

## **What Then Do?**

Admittedly, this essay is not exhaustive. In fact, it likely raises more questions than it answers. And, if I were to take a contrary position, I could easily raise, “Yes, but” objections. Moreover, I am certain my brothers and sisters in Christ who disagree with me on certain points will believe I have given such short shrift to their positions as to distort them. I acknowledge these short comings and ask for your indulgence in perhaps a longer dialogue in the future.

What I wish to affirm is this: Common grace is a great wonder of God. However, common grace does not and cannot address what are commonly called “psychological” problems. Yes, unbelievers can make accurate observations about human beings and may even be able to provide some emotional and physical relief. This is not denied. I am particularly thankful for medical help.

However, common grace was never given to see into the true trouble with human beings: the breach between God and man. Common grace can therefore not see the truth about man, what we are and why we suffer; nor can it see our end and purpose. Common grace can therefore never help to prescribe a remedy for that fault.

And so we have a situation where there are benefits of common grace, which biblical counselors can and should avail themselves. However, there are other propositions of “secular

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<sup>54</sup> "Given the incredible diversity of Christian groups, we must also suspect that a great deal of the 'wisdom' we hear even in the church must be all too human. Just because a minister says something from a pulpit and mentions a few words from the Bible does not mean that he or she truly has the mind of God." Kenneth Schenck, *1 & 2 Corinthians: A Commentary for Bible Students* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2006), 47.

psychology” which are both antithetical to the Scripture and for which we there is no basis in common grace to assert. How do we sort out the matter?

The critics of nouthetic counseling forget (and perhaps even those who like our opposition to secularist thought forget) that Jay Adams spoke from the beginning of a legitimate role for psychology. Right from the introduction of *Competent to Counsel* the door was open for a properly constructed relationship between secular psychology and biblical counseling:

First, I am aware that my interpretations and applications of Scripture are not infallible. Secondly, I do not wish to disregard science, but rather I welcome it as a useful adjunct for the purposes of illustrating, filling in generalizations with specifics, and challenging wrong human interpretations of Scripture, thereby forcing the student to restudy the scriptures.

Biblical counseling has never developed in any detail what that properly constructed relationship would look like or do. We have been busy establishing and defending where we stand.<sup>55</sup>

Here, I would like to propose a structure for beginning to discern the aspects of psychological research which can be rightly considered the fruit of common grace—and thus utilized—and those matters for which there is no warrant to claim as a benefit of common grace:

I propose three categories of information which move from information most accessible to common grace to information which cannot be known by common grace.

Table 1: Three Categories Accessible to Common Grace

Common Grace	Special Revelation
<p><b>Category One:</b> <i>Observations The physical environment; including the human body. This includes study of the nervous system, functioning of the senses, et cetera.</i></p> <p><i>Information from this level is often leveraged as an attack upon the Biblical Counseling position as unscientific for "refusing" information learned here.</i></p>	

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<sup>55</sup> David A. C. Powlison, “Crucial Issues in Contemporary Biblical Counseling,” ed. Jay E. Adams, *The Journal of Pastoral Practice* 9, no. 3 (1988): 74.

<p>Common Grace is most effective here. Common grace does permit one to see the environment, the understanding is limited by the failure to take God's creation and providence into account. However, due to the ability of unbelievers to 'borrow' from Christian presuppositions, reasonably accurate observations.</p> <p>Thus, human physiology can be observed and reported. This area of "psychology" (neuropsychology, the operation of senses, et cetera) can be utilized with the normal sort of skepticism necessary for review of any scientific work</p>	<p>Special Revelation: Informs us of the fundamental nature and existence of the physical environment, but does not provide much detail. We know that it is the creation of God and maintained by providence, but the mechanics of the operation are not treated in detail. This is the place where Special Revelation offers the least information and common grace the most.</p>
<p><b>Category two:</b></p> <p><i>Social science observations. With a markedly lesser degree of reliability, social scientists can make observations of patterns in human behavior and reported internal psychological states. Thus, we can see that people under certain circumstances, and/or with certain physiological conditions, will have a tendency to display certain behaviors and/or expressions.</i></p>	
<p>Common grace makes it possible to observe patterns. However, there are serious limitations on the usefulness of such information.</p> <p>These observations are fundamentally limited by (1) the inability to observe the internal workings of the human heart (observations of neurology and one's self reported subjected experience are of some value, but cannot correlate to the depth of the human heart); (2) these observations are fundamentally limited</p>	<p>Special revelation is critical at this stage, particularly in any attempt to "make sense" of social science observations. Understanding the deceitfulness of sin, for instance, may help to make an observation understandable.</p> <p>The biblical counselor can use such observations as data points: for example, a study may suggest a line of inquiry; knowing that there is not a determinative relationship between one environmental circumstance</p>

<p>in that they cannot include the effects of the Godward relationship of the human being (observations which are commonly accounted as "the psychology of religion" are limited to objective observations and cannot provide information about the working of God); (3) these observations cannot take into account the effects of the "flesh" and the Spirit (this is related but not perfectly coextensive with point (2)).</p>	<p>and a future manner of life -- even if there is a positive tendency toward a certain outcome.</p>
<p><b>Category 3:</b></p> <p><i>This category consists of what most people mean when they say "psychology". Here we find theories which concern the matters are both (1) inaccessible to common grace and (2) involve explicitly theological anthropology, teleology and methodology for change (ATM). These are the aspects of human life which are most directly affected by the breach between God and man.</i></p> <p><i>While this category may make reference to elements of category 1 &amp; 2, it goes further and assigns values. This aspect specifically concerns "spiritual" concerns: matters of sin and sanctification, the action of God (and even evil spirits) upon human beings: these are precisely the matters which the Scripture claims as for its authority.</i></p> <p><i>When biblical counselors reject "psychology", they are referring primarily to information from this category.</i></p>	

<p>Common grace is least valuable at this stage. Common grace was not given to heal the primary aspects of the Fall.</p>	<p>Special Revelation is needed for work here</p> <p>First, this concerns anthropology: What constitutes a human being: this is beyond observations concerning the human body and human behavior. It consists of the "manishness of man" to use Francis Schaeffer's phrase. This concerns the human heart: the spiritual aspects of humanity and in particular human interaction with God.</p> <p>Second, this category concerns teleology: what is the purpose of being human. For instance when a psychologist speaks of what is "healthy" for human sexuality, the psychologist is speaking to what is the purpose of a human being. The purpose of a human being cannot be known by observations, since, as Jay Adams notes: we are living in an abnormal environment under abnormal conditions (being on this side of the Fall).</p> <p>Third, this concerns methodology: those things which are necessary to change the direction of the human heart.</p>
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## An Understanding of the Limiting Factors in Problem-Specific Support Groups

Ken Schultz<sup>1</sup>

### Should I Join A Support Group or See A Biblical Counselor?

Sometimes life presents problems too difficult for people to handle on their own. The widow who sunk into loneliness left by the recent passing of her husband of 56 years. The parent who feel betrayed by rebellion of a child. The person who can't overcome his addiction. The middle-aged man who has been defeated by pornography nearly all his life. The mother whose anger and bitterness creates a contentious home. And the list of personal struggles could fill the remainder of these pages. Instead of ignoring these people and problems, the caring Christian must ask—Who will help these people in their time of deepest need? What relationships and resources can they count on to help those with very real hurt?

Some people believe a support group is what is needed to heal from hurt because the healing comes from those who can relate to them as share common hurtful experiences. However, I will show biblically, that the concept and approach of healing through problem-specific support groups is limiting when compared to a biblical counselor's ability to help anyone, no matter what the problem is.

The unifying principle for a support group is the specific problem common among the group, the group is bound by similar problems and mutual experiences. In fact, Merriam-Webster defines a support group as, "a group of people with common experiences and concerns who provide emotional and moral support for one another."<sup>2</sup> The definition answers this simple question: Why are there so many kinds of support groups? Upon perfunctory consideration of this unifying principle, the answer is

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<sup>2</sup> "Support Group," Merriam Webster Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/support%20group>. Accessed 7/2/2018. Key Terms: *Biblical Counseling*: I espouse to a brand of Biblical Counseling promoted by the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC). For a formal definition, I cannot improve upon that which is provided at the Faith Lafayette website. *Biblical Counseling* is the process where the Bible, God's Word, is related individually to a person or persons who are struggling under the weight of personal sin and/or the difficulties with suffering, so that he or she might genuinely change in the inner person to be pleasing to God. *Support Group*: I use the Merriam-Webster definition—a group of people with common experiences and concerns who provide emotional and moral support for one another. *Counselee*: Is used synonymously with sufferer/struggler/weak throughout this document, meaning a person who needs help with a given problem.

clear—there must be! Since support groups are unified by the kinds of problems each person experiences, then each kind of problem needs its own group. Alas, an opiate addict would not benefit by being with a support group of alcoholics as he would among his fellow opiate addicts. The sheer popularity of support groups bears out the reality that people like to relate with those who are experiencing the same kinds of troubles.<sup>3</sup> The following exposition will show that *Christian* support groups are not exempt from my premise because Christians especially should see a biblical counselor instead of joining a problem-specific support group for help and hope through their problems.

Someone who has an affinity to share their problems might balk at the apparent deficiencies of a biblical counselor. As a seasoned biblical counselor, I have heard my counselees bemoan hopelessly, “You just don’t understand what I’m going through,” or “I hope you experience this, so you know what I’m feeling.” The underlying sentiment with such statements is that the biblical counselor who hasn’t experienced exactly what the counselee has, is insufficient to help said counselee. Truthfully, these condemnations might hold water if the Bible supported a problem-specific approach to burden one another’s burdens—but it doesn’t. I humbly submit, that the biblical counselor can offer better help to the sufferer than a support group, even though he has not experienced the same kinds of problems as his counselee. When this basic premise is established then one begins to see the limitations of support groups compared with biblical counseling—even support groups that carry a “Christian” label.<sup>4</sup> So, “Should I join a support group?” This article will politely answer, “No, see a biblical counselor instead.”

The following exegesis will reveal that the biblical counselor can provide help and healing to anyone, no matter what the problem might be. Moreover, you will see that biblical counseling provides God’s kind of burden bearing, offering the very best kind of support for the hurting person. The following exposition will show precisely the people, nature, content, and goal of biblical counseling, thereby illuminating the limiting nature of support groups.

### **The Sufferer Needs the Right Kind of People (Rom 15:1-6)**

In a support group methodology, the popular adage “(any) misery loves company” becomes even more narrow to teach that “only specific miseries love specific company.” However, I suggest that “universal misery needs biblical counseling.” In other words, suffering is suffering, no matter what the specific problem is. For example, the believer must model Christ’s suffering even though he

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<sup>3</sup>Support groups built upon specific problems is especially noted within the Anonymous programs. Overeaters Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous share a very similar 12 Step methodology, yet they are distinguished by the kind of problem for which one seeks help. You can compare them here: <https://oa.org/newcomers/how-do-i-start/program-basics/twelve-steps/>; [https://na.org/admin/include/spaw2/uploads/pdf/litfiles/us\\_english/Booklet/NA%20White%20Booklet.pdf](https://na.org/admin/include/spaw2/uploads/pdf/litfiles/us_english/Booklet/NA%20White%20Booklet.pdf); [https://www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/smf-121\\_en.pdf](https://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/smf-121_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>There is no shortage of Christian-based support groups and programs, many of which use the 12 Step Method. A problem with such integrated models is the adherence to a secular approach to problems, replete with secular terminology. I refer you to Dr. Mark Shaw’s book *The Heart of Addiction* (Focus, 2008) to illumine the need for believers to understand the importance of biblical terminology and its association with unbiblical problem solving.

or she certainly will not suffer in the specific manner as He did as most Christians will not be unjustly crucified (1 Pet 1:21-22).

The Book of Romans highlights the kind of relationships that sufferers need—the *strong* sacrificially helping the *weak* (Rom 15:1; NKJV). Paul emphasizes the kind of cooperation that ought to exist between those who are weak and strong, then encourages the Roman believers to be very intentional in the help of one person to another, “we then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak” (v.1). In providing this relationship, he describes well what is often true of the relationship between biblical counselor and counselee/sufferer (vv. 1-3)—a strong person bearing the burdens of a weaker, often suffering person.

The two kinds of people represented here were identified previously in Romans, where Paul charges the more spiritually mature (strong) to be loving instead of condemning to those who are less spiritually mature (weak) in the faith (Rom 14:1, 22-23). The spiritually strong should not cause disputes with the weak by judging them in three specific veins of life. First, the strong are not to condemn the weak for what they eat. Second, they are not to condemn them based upon how another’s servant serves his master. Third, the strong are not to condemn the weak based on which day of the week the weak esteems (Rom 14:1-6). Paul summarizes this point by stating that the stronger brother who usually condemns the weaker brother for these things, ought to instead do everything out of love for him (v. 15). Undoubtedly, the Apostle is extremely concerned about how the two groups interact with one-another, so much so, that he continues writing about their relationship in chapter fifteen.

The first category of people described in this passage is *strong* believers, of whom Paul includes himself by using the first-person plural designation *we*. The Greek word Paul uses here to identify the strong believer is *dynatos*, meaning “being capable or competent, pertaining to issues of faith.”<sup>5</sup> The strong are “the ones who hold the key to the solution of the problem. If the strong are interested simply in maintaining their own position, the gulf between the two groups will not be narrowed.”<sup>6</sup>

Conversely, Paul titles the second group of people as *weak*, using the negative form of the word used for the strong (*adynatos*); meaning “lacking capability in functioning adequately.”<sup>7</sup> The two terms Paul uses here to identify these two groups are the same words used in chapter 14, which strengthens the truth he is addressing the same two categories of people in chapter 15. The opposing terms alone define well the differences between the two groups—one can bear weaknesses, while the

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<sup>5</sup>Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (BDAG) (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 264. Most likely, this pertains to spiritual, rather than physical weaknesses; otherwise Paul would have used the other form of the word, δύναιμις.

<sup>6</sup>Everett F. Harrison, *The Book of Romans*, in vol. 10 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 151.

<sup>7</sup>BDAG, 22.



cannot bear his burden autonomously. Therefore, the weak brother needs the strong and the strong has an obligation to help the weak by carrying his burdens.

The best help for the struggling believer comes through the conduit of a stronger believer. When the sufferer goes outside the believing community, he immediately circumnavigates God's best intentions for his ultimate help and hope. The potential for an amalgamation of various beliefs held by different people within a support group setting is great and may not allow for the strong believer helping the weak believer idea God demands here. Although support programs often cite a "higher power," the sufferer does not have to believe in a Deity per se to be helped.<sup>8</sup> According to Overeaters Anonymous documents, the atheist or agnostic can define their higher power as the support group itself. This amalgamized methodology should alert the believer to another approach. The believing sufferer should want God's best for him, which is believers helping believers—anyone else is limiting.

### **Sufferers Need the Right Kind of Relationships (Rom 15:2-3)**

As stated previously, it is the duty of strong believers to bear the weaknesses of the weak ones because they are positioned by God to help those who are unable to help themselves. The mandate comes from a hapax legomena term *asthenēma*, meaning *weakness*.<sup>9</sup> For whatever reason, the weaker believer in Rome needs help to become stronger and Paul appeals to the stronger believer to help him accomplish this strengthening. Once the relationship converges, there are some expectations for the kind of relationship that ought to exist between them.

In fulfilling his mandate to bear the weaknesses of the weaker brother, the strong believer needs to be selfless, never helping for his own personal benefit; rather existing for the benefit of the weak brother (Rom 15:1). The problem of the weak might be sin, which the strong believer has an obligation to lovingly address (Gal 6:1). However, it may be a matter of spiritual immaturity that needs to be built up within the weak believer (Rom 15:2)—the matter about which this passage specifically addresses. Douglas Moo summarizes well the character and burden-bearing role of the strong believer in the life of the weak believer:

This does not necessarily mean that the "strong" are to adopt the scruples of the "weak." But what it does mean is that they are sympathetically to "enter into" their attitudes, refrain from criticizing and judging them, and do what love would require toward them. Love demands that

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<sup>8</sup>See the Overeaters Anonymous document "What If I Don't Believe In God?" here: <https://oa.org/files/pdf/What-If-I-Don't-Believe-in-God.pdf>. The material in this document poses significant problems for the believer who seeks help for his problem, after he analyzes the biblical data presented in this article.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid. 142. Although *weakness* is preferred here and the NASB, translations render this word variously, *infirmity* (KJV), *failings* (INT).

the “strong” go beyond the distance implied in mere toleration; they are to treat the “weak” as brothers and sisters.<sup>10</sup>

Paul teaches in a straightforward manner that the strong have an obligation to help the weak yet appeals to the example of Christ to motivate the strong into fulfilling this obligation (Rom 15:3). Paul urges the strong to imitate Jesus’ example of selfless service for the sole purpose of another person’s strengthening. Jesus did not go to the cross for his own interest; rather he took upon himself the reproaches rightly designated for the Father. Moo supports this interpretation by suggesting that “the reproaches or insults of the people that were directed at God fell on himself instead.”<sup>11</sup>

As the strong believer bears the inabilities of the weak, he must do so with the desire to see that person grow in biblical maturity. Notwithstanding the weakness, the weak still has the mandate to become complete in Christ (Col 1:28). Robert H. Mounce suggests two important goals: “The goal is to help them develop into more mature Christians (Rom 12:2). The goal is the benefit of the one in greatest need of help” (cf. 1 Cor 10:24, 33).<sup>12</sup> These are quintessential goals of any discipleship plan and must always be present in formal biblical counseling; in fact, it is a leading local church ministry through which one can practice this passage. We turn our attention to Paul’s hard work for the Colossian believers to further enhance the nature of the counseling relationship, emphasizing the determination required on the part of the strong believer.

### ***Ministry to sufferers requires hard work (Col 1:24-29)***

One other biblical passage highlights a necessary component for helping others in times of crisis. The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Colossae to solidify the young believers in their faith in Christ. This section in Colossians follows Paul’s treatise on assuring the Colossians of their eternal glory based on their faith in Christ (Col 1:3-5). Furthermore, Paul boldly proclaims the preeminence of Christ over all things by articulating many important doctrinal truths proving His status. Generally, Paul teaches the Colossians that Christ’s unsurpassing identity has direct bearing on them because He is preeminent over His body—the church (vv. 9-18). Paul then connects Christ’s sacrificial work in the lives of the Colossians to his very own sacrifice for them (vv. 9-29).

Using some very compelling terminology, Paul engaging the Colossian believers to let them know of what his sacrifice for them entailed. He writes that he has “sufferings (*pathēma*) for you”

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<sup>10</sup>Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 866.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 868.

<sup>12</sup>Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Romans*, The New American Commentary, vol. 27 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1995), 259.

(Col 1:24)—yet rejoices in them. Paul experienced misfortunes and afflictions for the Gospel’s sake—sufferings Christ predicted would happen to him (Acts 9:16). Nevertheless, from Paul’s perspective here, he went through these things for the benefit of the Colossian believers. In fact, Paul saw this responsibility as a “stewardship from God” (Col 1:25), indicating that he took his role as a minister very seriously and his willingness to suffer for it clearly enforces that thinking.

Paul also writes that he labored (*kopiaō*) for the Colossians (v. 29). Peter T. O’Brien cites that this word was used “in secular Greek of ‘a beating,’ ‘weariness,’ ‘exertion,’ and was the proper word for physical tiredness induced by work.”<sup>13</sup> Paul quickly follows “labor” with “striving” (*agōnizomai*), which is used here of a generic struggle.<sup>14</sup> These two terms together, along with Paul’s struggles mentioned previously, provide a comprehensive outlook into his hard work for the people of Colossae—one cannot claim that Paul was lax or indifferent in his ministry for the Lord. Furthermore, Paul qualifies his hard work. Even though he put a lot of individual effort into his ministry of the word, he also knew his efforts were the manifestation of God working through him (v. 29). In other words, Paul could have completely exhausted himself for the Colossians, but if God did not work mightily through him, then his efforts would have been in vain. Paul was a willing conduit, being used of God for the benefit of the Colossians.

The biblical counselor must be ready to put in the hard work necessary to strengthen the weaker believer. Some support groups, and nearly all Anonymous Programs integrate a “sponsor” methodology to help one another between scheduled group sessions. The weaker person can call the sponsor anytime should he be tempted to overeat, drink, use drugs or whatever his problem might be. The sponsor will either talk to him over the phone or show up in person until the temptation has waned.

The biblical counselor is not a sponsor, but this passage demands that he go the extra mile to provide the most help to his counselee. Since many biblical counselor minister within a local church setting, he has the benefit of the broader church ministries to help him carry the weaker person’s load. When comparing the sponsor-based approach with biblical counseling, the goal of change must be emphasized. The goal in biblical counseling is for the weak brother to grow/mature (change), being free from the counselor one day. Therefore, the biblical counselor will put in more time and effort on the front end but should subside over time as spiritual growth occurs and his problems are handled biblically.

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<sup>13</sup>Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 44 (Nashville: Nelson, 2000), 90.

<sup>14</sup>BDAG, 17.

### ***Biblical counseling relationships must include everyone (Col 1:28)***

The reader of Colossians might ask, “What was the content of all of Paul’s effort?” He succinctly answers this for the reader—the truths of Christ (Col 1:28), which he “preached (*katangelō*) to every man in all wisdom,” thereby, disseminating the truths of Christ for all to hear.<sup>15</sup> Paul proclaims Christ with two specific elements. The first element of Paul’s preaching is a “warning (*neutheteo*)” to the Colossian believers that they not stray from what they have come to know is true.<sup>16</sup> The second element of Paul’s preaching is “teaching (*didaskalos*)” as he brought forth the general truths of Jesus Christ to the Colossian believers.

It makes sense that Paul worked hard for the Lord because his preaching was comprehensive. Four times in verse 28, Paul uses the word, “all/every (*pas*).” In one instance, it modifies the amount of the wisdom that he proclaimed to the Colossians, which included all that he knew of Christ and whatever wisdom was revealed to him. Although the comprehensive wisdom is important, in this verse, Paul is emphasizing the comprehensive nature of his audience because he refers to *every man* three times. He is very concerned that the Colossian believers know he preached to everyone, without exception and that the task was extremely laborious.

The Apostle Paul expresses that one’s hard work in the Word will have an impact on others. Paul had a specific goal in mind for every man—that each one becomes mature (*teleios*) in Jesus Christ (Col 1:29). Moo defines *teleios* in this verse as “the quality of being so wholehearted in one’s devotion to the Lord that one can be said to be blameless in conduct.”<sup>17</sup> R. C. H. Lenski agrees that *perfect* in this verse is equated with spiritual maturity: “each and every believer is to stand forth so that all may see him as one who is spiritually complete and mature.”<sup>18</sup> Everyone’s spiritual maturity represents the culmination of all of Paul’s hard work in preaching to everyone through warning and teaching. Paul’s love for the Colossian believers was the motivating force behind his ability to having endured the hard work of the ministry. Likewise, counselors should put in the hard work of counseling out of a genuine love for people. As the counselor matures in his love for his counselee, then he will be able to endure the hard task of biblical counseling.

### ***Colossians 1:24-29 Applied to Biblical Counseling Relationships***

Biblical counseling brings challenges of all shapes and sizes, unlike a support group that focuses on one kind of problem. Although the biblical counselor will see plenty of problems like marriage struggles, anxiety, or anger, some problems seem more complex on the surface. In fact, some challenges come in the form of the problem itself, including bi-polar disorder, addictions, or

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<sup>15</sup>BDAG, 515.

<sup>16</sup>Douglass J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and Philemon*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 160.

<sup>17</sup>Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and Philemon*, 161.

<sup>18</sup>R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing 1964), 82.

schizophrenia. Consequently, the biblical counselor might also consider a counselee's problem so challenging that he might consider he has an excuse for relinquishing his responsibility to bear the Scriptures into the life of this counselee. The counselor must avoid the temptation to shirk his responsibility by recommending a support group to ease his own workload.

Biblical counseling challenges also come in the kinds of people that seek help. Some counsees might have a personality quirk, are argumentative, or apathetic, especially if he is convinced a support group is what he needs. He may think, "This kind of problem or person is beyond the scope of my responsibility and ability." However, the counselor must look to the Apostle Paul's hard work to make sure *every man* is complete in Christ—he must not refer the counselee to a lesser brand of help. The easier remedy of attending weekly support groups that focus on talking and listening is certainly less work that the counselor and counselee would see in a biblical counseling setting.

### **The Content of Biblical Counseling Relationships (Rom 15:4-5)**

From where is the stronger person supposed to glean his ability to bear the weaker person's weaknesses? Towards where does the strong direct the weak? From what source do the strong and weak person glean their hope that they can really accomplish this burden-bearing task? One might reasonably conclude that the stronger person's ability to help the weaker person rests within himself—after all, he is the stronger believer. When one person helps another based solely upon a shared experience, then the logical conclusion becomes, "I can help you because of what I've been through—I can relate. No one understands like I do. No one can help you like I can." This speaks clearly to the essence of support groups, based upon the definition cited earlier. The sufferers hope rests in the other people of the group as they work themselves through the program, sometimes encompassed in twelve steps. Consequently, they believe they need these people, sometimes, for the remainder of their life because shared experiences is the primary content within a support group.

Paul might be the epitome of a strong believer, but even he relied on a source outside of himself to help the weak. Simply put, Paul had the Scriptures which enabled him to learn what was needed to become stronger (Rom 15:4). Paul states rather succinctly the very purpose for the Scriptures he had at that time was for his education and, within this context, learning how to help the weaker person. Rather than hoping the weaker person can "pull up his bootstraps and get it done," or reply on Paul the person, he emphasizes the Scriptures are paramount to one's spiritual growth and will move them from weak to strong. Therefore, the strong and the weak must not neglect the content of the believer's strengthening—the Bible. Moreover, he must not refer the weak to a lesser brand of support that is not biblically driven.

Moreover, Paul identifies the fact that the Scriptures provide two important, necessary elements that will help both the strong and the weak to endure the process of moving towards spiritual maturity (v. 4). The first element is *patience*. The stronger believer will need a heavy dose of this, especially in a situation when someone has complex issues. The counselor will be challenged to bring the Scriptures to bear on the weaker brother's life and it will take time to develop questions to expose the specific problem. A counseling situation is challenging enough and takes a lot of time; however, the

biblical counselor must always be grounded upon God's Word, avoiding the temptation to fall into a mode of practicing talk-therapy. The strong, biblical counselor can also fall into the trap of overemphasizing extra-biblical materials, while neglecting the Scriptures as the primary content of maturing the weaker believer.

The weaker brother (counselee) will also need the patience the Bible gives because he has multiple, personal obstacles on his path to help. Potentially, if he is dealing with a sin issue, he has a lifetime of unbiblical thinking and desires, having manifested themselves into ungodly behaviors, bringing him to the point of needing counseling. The strong has an obligation to uphold the weak in areas unrelated to sin, which is normal for most counselees but the counselor and counselee in this situation will need to put forth the effort necessary for overcoming whatever excuses keep him from the Bible. Certainly, this will require significant patience by both parties.

For example, the weaker brother might not have a current discipline of personal Bible reading. Part of the spiritual development of this weaker brother must include helping him develop a daily devotional time in the Word. For many immature believers, this practice is like a fish swimming upstream against a strong current. It will take time and time requires patience. Since the Scriptures are patient, then the strong and weak believer will benefit significantly from it as they forge this important discipline.

The second helpful element the Scriptures contain is *comfort (paraklēsis)*. Along with patience, the weaker brother will need encouragement from the Scriptures to attain victory over his problems, no matter how many or how difficult. The strong believer needs to "meditate his comfort and encouragement by speaking through his Word to the hearts of receptive believers."<sup>19</sup> The patience and comfort of the Scriptures provide strong elements into the counseling room for God-honoring, effective burden bearing to take place. Even the most sincere, comprehensive support program is empty when it lacks biblical content.

### ***The Scriptures bring genuine hope to the weak.***

When a support program lacks biblical content, it lacks the genuine hope needed for the edification of the weak. In fact, both the counselor and counselee will need a lot of hope because the process will be difficult, trying the patience and comfort of all parties involved. Nevertheless, Paul makes a logical argument by identifying their ultimate source of hope comes through the Bible (v. 4). Since the Scriptures will teach the strong how to help the weak become stronger, and since the Scriptures are patient and comforting, it only makes sense that the Scriptures provide the hope necessary to bring about the necessary changes. The counselor will need to continually direct the counselee to the Scriptures for the hope he will need to solve his problems, which also applies to the counselee who manifests as single problem or several, multi-layered issues.

The Scriptural hope for problems necessitates the need for biblically-based solutions. The weak believer might be prone to seek out so many other sources for hope, including support groups, the

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<sup>19</sup> Mounce, *Romans*, 260.

utilization of coping mechanisms, medications, talk therapy, or latest self-help book offered by the secular masses. None of these provide the kind of hope and help as do the words of Scripture. If for no other reason at all, it is a desire for hope in the Scriptures that should motivate the counselor to help the counselee get beyond the superficial and deal with the depths of the depravity of man.

### ***The Scriptures provide genuine conviction to the weak (Heb 4:12)***

Certainly, Romans fifteen has much to offer biblical counselors but it does not stand alone among other significant passages that speak to the issue at hand. The biblical counselor will be equipped further in understanding the Bible's full potential for counseling in accordance with the author of Hebrews (4:12). When it comes to problems, whether sin or non-sin based, the Bible will be the primary source from which the counselee will glean his hope and the help for which he seeks. This approach might seem counterintuitive given the nature of secular approaches, yet Hebrews 4:12 will prove that only the Bible's unique qualities will bring to light the intentions of the sufferer's heart. Therefore, those with any kind of problem would be wise to be sure, somehow, that the Bible is the source of their spiritual growth.

### ***What Scripture is to the weak***

The writer of Hebrews desires the readers to understand well, among other truths, the perfect sacrifice and the High Priestly role of Jesus Christ. The reader of Hebrews is reminded of many of the people, places, culture, and religious liturgy that figured prominently within the history of God's people, Israel. Moreover, God desired for Moses and his people to enjoy the rest that would be afforded them in the promised land, yet the Israelites were rebellious and disobedient toward God, which was based on unbelief (Heb. 3:16-19). Consequently, they did not immediately benefit from rest in the Promised Land, enjoying freedom from trials in the wilderness (v. 9). Even though the Israelites forfeited the blessing of rest through their disobedience (Heb 4:6), the writer of Hebrews assures all believers of God's promise for a future rest, having been fulfilled in the person, Jesus Christ (Heb. 4:1-10).

The immediate context of the verse under examination reveals that the future rest calls for obedience today (v. 11). Just as the Israelites fell short of their wilderness rest through disobedience, this verse teaches believers today must obey God as they wait to enter the rest still to come. This truth begs the question, "How do I know what is expected, so that I can obey God before I enter His rest?" The answer is given in the subsequent verse—the verse that is the focus of this point (v. 12). The exegesis will conclude with some specific ways in which the truths of this passage has direct implications for the counselee who needs to change, rather than simply participate in a talk/listen support group therapy.

Hebrews 4:12 provides the counselee with the means for obedience to God—his Word (*hologos tou theou*). This specific genitival construction is used in multiple places in the New Testament, especially in the writing of the Apostle Paul (Rom 9:10; 1 Cor 14:36; Titus 2:5) and enforces the truth

that the words provided originate from God, himself. They belong to him and were given by him. In this context, the author of Hebrews is referring to the fact of God’s promise of rest to the Israelites was sure because it originated from him.

Likewise, the promise of a future rest for all believers is sure—it will come to pass because this promise also originated from God. Similar logic exists within the primary verse for the doctrine of inspiration of Scripture (2 Tim 3:16-17). How is it that the Scriptures are profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness? It is these only because it originates from God. Specifically, they are God-breathed. Similarly, the Word of God in this Hebrews verse has three important intrinsic qualities that should manifest themselves into action.

### ***The Bible is Alive!***

The first intrinsic quality is described by the term *living* (*zaō*), which is at the beginning of the verse in the Greek, serving in the first predicate position, concretely describing the Word of God.<sup>20</sup> The verbal adjective gives animation to the subject of the sentence, which is the word of God. Therefore, one can be assured beyond a shadow of a doubt that God’s word it is not dead. Leon Morris says that *living* (along with *active*) is the “dynamic quality about God’s revelation. It does things.”<sup>21</sup> The specific actions of this living word will be brought to light later in this verse. but the opening of the verse emphasizes the vigor of the spoken and written word of God.

### ***The Bible Does Things!***

The second essential quality of the word of God is its *activeness* (*energēs*), being effectual or able to bring about its intended purpose.<sup>22</sup> The word of God is alive, but it is not stagnant. The New Bible Commentary states the effectual end to which the word of God brings the reader as it “achieves the purpose for which it is uttered by God.”<sup>23</sup> The two terms *living and active* together forges a firm image in one’s mind about the word of God as alive and effectual.

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<sup>20</sup>Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 618.

<sup>21</sup> Leon Morris, *Hebrews*, in vol. 12 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 44.

<sup>22</sup>BDAG, 335.

<sup>23</sup>D. A. Carson, *Hebrews*, *The New Bible Commentary*, 21<sup>st</sup> Century ed. (Leicester, England: Intervarsity Press, Logos Research Systems, 1994), n.p.



## ***The Bible Convicts and Comforts!***

The third intrinsic quality of the word of God as being *sharper than any two-edged sword*. Actually, the term *sharper* is two words in the Greek, meaning literally “beyond sharp (*tomōteros hyper*).” The qualitative word, *hyper*, marks the sharpness of the word of God as surpassing the degree of any sword someone could yield. The writer alludes to the sword as a metaphor in order to draw the reader to an understanding of the abilities of the word of God. The word of God is indeed sharp, and the metaphor is further enhanced and applied when the end of the verse is brought into view. The sword was a common implement, known throughout the Roman Empire by citizens and government officials because it served as the primary weapon for the Roman military.<sup>24</sup> The first century recipient of these words in the book of Hebrews would clearly understand this metaphor because a literal sword is sharp, and it pierces.

Although the metaphor is similar in some ways, there is one major difference between the literal sword and the word of God—the word of God can pierce to places an actual sword cannot. The Bible is the primary weapon in the biblical counselor’s arsenal and must be used at every counseling turn. With the help of a biblical counselor, the sufferer who manifests any kind of problem must come to thoroughly read and apply it because it is a truly unique resource.

The sufferer must consider that there is no other content offered by support groups, 12-step or other, that originated from God. This is only true of the Bible. Most likely, this is a moot point to the secularist, but it should motivate the believer to tap into that which God has given to him. The benefit to the believing sufferer is limited when it lacks the object of God’s breathed-out effort. There are some encouraging things the Word of God will do for the believer.

### ***What Scripture does for the weak***

Hebrews 4:12 compares God’s word to a sword. A literal two-edged sword is designed for cutting and in battle, “in skilled hands, [it] could lop off heads and limbs.”<sup>25</sup> The term, two-edged sword clearly defines the weapon as having dual, equally sharp sides coming to a point on the end. The sword is sharp on two sides and is designed to function in a certain way. It has uses. The sword accomplishes nothing if it is idle. Likewise, the word of God is alive, effectual, sharp and it is not designed to remain idle. It is designed to function in a certain way. The word of God has two uses described in this verse.

The first use of the word of God is as a penetrator (*diikneomai*). A sword penetrates/pierces into which it is thrust because that is how and why it was intentionally designed. The point of the

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<sup>24</sup>The Ancient History Encyclopedia, “Gladius Hispaniensis,” published April 28, 2011, accessed October 4, 2014, [http://www.ancient.eu/Gladius\\_Hispaniensis](http://www.ancient.eu/Gladius_Hispaniensis).

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

sword pierces that into which it is plunged, while the two sharp edges cut and divide the flesh in two. In a similar way, the word of God pierces into the immaterial constitution of a human being, dividing the *soul and spirit, and the joints and marrow*. John Phillips wisely observes the use for God's word in this division, "God's Word cuts right through all profession of faith, stripping away that which is merely natural from that which is truly spiritual."<sup>26</sup>

A second use of the word of God is as a *discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart*. Discerning is a significant deviation from the picture of the sword thus far because both a literal sword and the word of God penetrates and divides, but only the Bible is able to weigh one's thoughts and desires. There is no correlation to a literal sword—it is here that the author of Hebrews makes a strong break from the metaphorical use of a sword.

Other Scripture refers to the concept of the believer to dissect the Bible, which enhances the point that the writer of Hebrews makes. Paul charged Pastor Timothy to be a diligent student of the word of God (2 Tim 2:15). Both Timothy and the counselor/counselee can be encouraged, knowing that he can be "approved by God" when he is diligent in dissecting the Word. Moreover, the counselee will then know the difference between truth and "profane babblings" when he rightly dissects the Bible (v. 16). Consequently, the counselee will know what is unholy and once he has identified what is unholy, he can honor God by ceasing from it and turning his attention to that which is holy. Therefore, Hebrews 4:12 and 2 Timothy 2:15 emphasize the need for hard work and diligence to dissect the Word, which should result in godly attitudes and actions.

The *discerning (kritikos)* is a recognizable term within the Roman judicial realm, as a judge would pronounce a final verdict based on the evidence having been presented. Jesus knew this well, based on his own experiences of having been moved from trial to trial, during the night before his crucifixion, and having Pilate render a final decision based on the appeal of the Pharisees and citizens (Matt 27:15-26). Like a judge, the Bible stands as the final arbiter on the intentions of one's heart, rendering the person guilty or innocent of violating its standards. The Bible will be able to have its judicial reckoning based on the depth of its penetration. Therefore, a key element of this use of God's word is just how deep it penetrates—to the immaterial *heart*, which is the innermost aspect of man.

God uses the writer of Hebrews to verify what the Old Testament states rather succinctly in that one should "guard your heart, for out of it flow the issues of life" (Prov 4:23). Moreover, Jesus taught this principle to the Pharisees who were concerned that he and his disciples were defiled because they did not cleanse their hands before eating a meal. Yet, Jesus corrects them that, "those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man" (Matt 15:18). Hebrews 4:12 helps the believer to know that he must turn to the Bible to cultivate the heart towards godliness.

Again, many resources are at the disposal of the person who desires help for a specific problem in his life, including a support group for nearly any kind of problem. Other entities like government subsidized programs or private practitioners provide counseling services for those in need. Often these resources are armed with talk therapy, prescription pads, or coping mechanisms that do not deal with root problems nestled deeply within the heart. None of these can do what the Bible can do, which is to

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<sup>26</sup>John Phillips, *Exploring Hebrews* (Chicago: Moody, 1977), 78.

expose the thoughts and intentions of the sufferer's heart. John MacArthur expresses well how all other avenues for dealing with the heart fall short of what the Bible can do:

God's word is the perfect discerner, the perfect *kritikos*. It not only analyzes all of the facts perfectly, but all motives, and intentions, and beliefs as well, which even the wisest of human judges or critics cannot do. The sword of His Word will make no mistakes in judgment or execution. All disguises will be ripped off and only the real person will be seen.<sup>27</sup>

A literal piercing of a literal sword is painful and so should be the word of God as it penetrates the depths of the immaterial aspect of the human constitution. It should bring about conviction in the heart of the problem-filled person, yielding change. A support group that is a judgment free zone, armed with solely a listening ear or a shoulder to cry upon, misses the important element of change brought about by the convicting work of God's word.

Moreover, the writer of Hebrews drives home the concept of the sword with a terse statement about the issue of obedience to God's word, "And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things *are* naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we *must give* account" (Heb 4:13). All people must give an account to God for things done during their life. Everything will be revealed to him. No doubt this accounting is relative to the piercing of the word of God into the heart of the person, requiring a response on his own behalf. Gene Smillie rightly observes that "the one who hears the Word is exposed by it, stretched out and laid utterly naked before the eyes of the one to whom, in turn, the hearer must now respond with a word of his own."<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, applying Smillie's biblical sentiments, the believer who has problems needing help must be able to glean from the Word of God, so he can benefit from its penetrating ministry. Since only the Word of God can do this, then the biblical counselor must competently impart the Scriptures to the counselee and the counselee must be willing to receive it. When this happens, the sufferer is helped in the very best possible way, making any other form of help pale by comparison.

Returning to Romans 15, *patience* and *comfort* are not only indicative of the Bible, but are also two realities of God, himself (Rom 15:5), thereby giving the stronger and weaker believer additional content for spiritual growth. The patient and comforting Scriptures were penned by the very breath of a patient and comforting God, both of which will enable the weak person to break the bonds of his struggles and become stronger. These are tremendous resources at the disposal of all believers—resources that are far too often ignored or minimized, whether intentionally or not, especially in the realm of a support group method. The strong and weak believer must move from whatever other resources are vying for their hope and ability and turn towards the two divinely enabling resources that were true for the Roman believers in the first century.

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<sup>27</sup> John MacArthur, *Hebrews, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1983), 105.

<sup>28</sup>Gene R. Smillie, 'O Logoos Tou Theou' in Hebrews 4:12-13," *Novum Testamentum* 46, no. 4 (2004): 358-59.

## **Sufferers Should Pursue the Right Goal (Rom 15:5-6)**

The weak person who has a problem for which he seeks biblical counseling should benefit greatly from the help of a stronger believer. As the stronger person bears the weaker person's load, using the Scriptures, the weaker can overcome the problems in his life. However, this is not the main goal that Paul has in mind. As the two people work together, the ultimate goal is unity through like-mindedness in Christ (Rom 15:5). Actually, the differences between the strong and weak brother creates a gulf between them, which is a problem in many ways as Paul explained in chapter fourteen. Disunity was a major problem in Corinth (1 Cor 1:10-13) and Paul corrected the believers there in a plain manner (2 Cor 7:8).

Likewise, in Romans, Paul is dealing with the separation between the spiritual "haves" (strong believer) and the spiritual "have-nots" (weak believer). Therefore, his ultimate concern is that the strong and weak would be united despite the spiritual chasm that exists between them. He stresses this concern by admonishing the strong to uphold the weak to bridge the gap that exists between them so that they can, "with one mouth, glorify God" (Rom 15:6). Believers have an obligation to glorify God together, despite "levels" of spiritual maturity.

A support group has differing goals. Feeling better. Completing steps. Reliance upon a program. Continual meetings. Living in a state of recovery rather than experiencing complete change. Although honorable, anything less than biblical change into Christlikeness is an undesirable goal for the believer in Jesus Christ.

### **Biblical and Practical Summary**

The counselee does not need to deal with his problem all by himself, but he needs something more substantive than what a typical support group can provide. Actually, as the Bible showed, he is unable to do it on his own. He has the resource of his stronger brother in Christ that should have competent, strong believers to help him carry his burden. The strong, biblical counselor is required to bear with the sin-based and non-sin-based weaknesses of the counselee, guiding him in the word towards biblical expectations and godliness.

Certainly, the weaker brother should expect grace and kindness from his biblical counselor, which is what is often expected in a traditional support group setting. The strong believer should demonstrate Christ-like love and compassion for the hurting and through God's word, pointing him to God's source for growth and change.

The local church should expend some effort into promoting biblical counseling as a formal ministry instead of outsourcing the weaker brother to support groups. The logic holding together the passages used in this essay is the fact of the person who manifests even the most challenging problem will receive his best help from a biblical counselor. The universal application of these passages trumps the use of problem-specific support groups to help people become strengthened through their struggles. Moreover, the Bible is necessary for his spiritual strengthening, especially in the area(s) for which he sought counseling.

God still requires the counselee to grow spiritually, according to the Bible, no matter what kind of problem he manifests or what kind of burdens he is unable to bear on his own. Most public support groups are missing this important element, relying instead solely upon the compassion of his fellow man. The counselor's desire should model Paul's desire for *all* believers to grow spiritually, motivating him to do the hard work of ministering to those who manifest even the most difficult counseling issues. Undoubtedly, this will require hard effort, but it will model the Apostle Paul's labor for the spiritual growth of the Colossian believers.

The biblical counselor must use the Bible to bring about the changes necessary in the counselee's life (Heb 4:12). John Phillips writes about how this verse applies to problems in life:

It is only the word of God brought to bear upon the issues of life which can reveal what is carnal and what is spiritual. It is a discernor, a critic of the thoughts and intents of the heart. As we read the word of God it probes into the inner recesses of our being and explores all of our motives.<sup>29</sup>

The counselee who has a problem must do everything within his power to allow the word to pierce his heart, revealing his intentions. He must do so with a measure of urgency, knowing he must one day give an account to God. Through all of this, the counselor must encourage the counselee to be a competent "Berean" who "searches the Scriptures" (Acts 17:11). No matter the extent of one's problem, he will need do the hard work of knowing God's word—being a Berean. The biblical counselor must be equipped to be able to bring the Scripture to its effectual manifestation in the life of the person who needs help.

Truly, the biblical counselor will serve God well as he remains convinced of the Bible's ability to help those in need, no matter what or how dire the problem. And the burdens which bury the counselee into the depths of despair will soon be lifted as the stronger biblical counselor comes alongside him, armed with patience and the bible, able to carry him through, no matter what the specific issue is. Moreover, as the sufferer becomes aware of the limitations of a support group, he can take hope as he is helped God's way through the Biblical Counselor.

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<sup>29</sup> Phillips, *Exploring Hebrews*, 78.

## Marriage: More Than a Covenant

Darryl Burling<sup>1</sup>

Marriage counseling depends heavily on our understanding of the purpose of marriage. Our understanding of the purpose of marriage is tied directly to how we would define marriage. Yet, while there are many books on marriage and marriage counseling available today there is a lack of clarity about what marriage is and its purpose. Most discussions about divorce and remarriage argue for a definition of what marriage is, but often don't consider its purpose.<sup>2</sup> Other treatments of marriage consider the purpose of marriage but fail to define marriage.<sup>3</sup> Yet, despite this, there is an emerging consensus among scholars that marriage should be defined as a covenant.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, the word of God places significant stress on the place of covenants throughout (Gen. 9, 12, 15, 17, Ex 19-23, 2 Sam 7, Jer. 31:31, Luke 22:20, 1 Cor. 11:25, etc.) and the New Testament is named after the new covenant. So, scripture clearly affirms the place of covenants in marriage (Prov. 2:16-17, Jer. 31:32, Ezek. 16:8, Hos 2:18-22, Mal 2:14-15). However, while marriages are established with the creation of a covenant, the argument that marriage *is* a covenant is at best an overstatement.

One problem calling marriage a covenant is the confusion over what exactly constitutes a covenant. Most scholarly definitions of covenants tends to fall somewhere on a spectrum. On the one hand is the definition given by ancient near eastern (ANE) scholars, which tends to emphasize the structure of a covenant based on ANE sources,<sup>5</sup> and the other tends toward a more theological persuasion, which prefers broader definitions such as “the basic relationship

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Devin Hudson, “Covenant as a Framework for Understanding the Primary Divorce and Remarriage Texts in the New Testament.” Ph.D. Dissertation. (Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage: What if God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> See for example Gordon Hugenburger, *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1994), John K. Tarwater, *Marriage as a Covenant: Considering God's Design at Creation and the Contemporary Moral Consequences* (Lanham, MD: University of America Press, 2006), Andreas J. Köstenberger and David W. Jones, *God Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 73-79.

<sup>5</sup> Delbert Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 1969), G. E. Mendenhall, “Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition,” *The Biblical Archaeologist*, XVII (1954) 3, 50-76.

between the God of Israel and His people.”<sup>6</sup> Between these positions is a range of possibilities often laden with conjecture and vagueness.<sup>7</sup>

Because marriage was instituted by God before the fall, there are inherent assumptions about the purpose and nature of marriage that predate the fall. Therefore, while the fall had extraordinary impact on marriage, these do not change the purpose of marriage, any more than the fall changes God’s objective intention for male and female roles. The fall has catastrophic impact in the nature of the image of God in man and therefore has significant impact on the way men and women live out the marriage relationship.

By defining marriage as a covenant, the pre-fall purpose of marriage as a relational union<sup>8</sup> is undermined and is replaced with a notion that has become a complex theological concept that is not well understood, leading to confusion about the purpose and nature of marriage, which impacts our ability to minister to those who are struggling with marital difficulties. The position of this paper is that though man’s corruption has undermined the full realization of what God intended marriage to be, the original purpose and intended nature of marriage has not changed from before the fall to today.

Therefore, this paper argues that the dominant definition of marriage as a covenant<sup>9</sup> is an overstatement and that while a covenant is necessary to institute marriage, what it institutes is in fact a union in which two parties agree to operate to provide stipulated benefits to each other.

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God, Part 1*. Vol. 4. trans. by G.W. Bromiley, ed. by G.W. Bromiley, T. F. Torrance (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 22. It should be noted that some theologians lean more heavily on ANE scholarship for their understanding of a covenant than others do, so this is not a generalization of the individuals in these disciplines, but simply a spectrum upon which definitions can be observed.

<sup>7</sup> Relevant to the discussion of this paper, John Tarwater asserts that “God becomes the guarantor of the covenant.” Tarwater, *Marriage as a Covenant*, 39.

<sup>8</sup> I use the term relational union to describe what I will argue the covenant creates. The idea that marriage is a union is not a recent development, and in fact is often inadvertently argued for by those who hold to marriage as a covenant. A full articulation of what exactly constitutes a relational union is outside the scope of this paper, and is part of the dissertation I am currently working on. It should be noted that often authors speak of a “covenant relationship” to refer to something analogous to what I refer to as a union.

<sup>9</sup> As seen in Hudson, “Covenant as a Framework” as well as David W. Jones and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), and Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi*, repr. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 20014).

## What is a Covenant?

While many discussions of covenants begin with a discussion of the meaning of the word ברית, there is too much lexical ambiguity to make this a fruitful exercise.<sup>10</sup> However, etymology is less important than the structure and purpose of a covenant as reflected in its usage.<sup>11</sup> Yet, while there is a solid body of literature that explains the ANE structure of a covenant,<sup>12</sup> there is a surprising lack of documentation explaining the purpose of covenants. That is to say that there are historical circumstances that lead to the creation of specific covenants, but the question of why covenants exist at all is largely unasked, and unanswered.<sup>13</sup> This neglect begs the question; if the structure of covenants is so clearly attested in the ANE, what necessitated such structure? In this section I will endeavor to argue that the purpose of a covenant is bound up with the fall by showing that the introduction of sin necessitates covenants. In other words, the structure of a covenant suggests that sin, or more specifically, the distrust caused by sin between parties necessitates covenants.<sup>14</sup>

## The Nature of a Covenant

Noel Weeks notes that covenants are historical writings written to produce “a motivation for obedience.”<sup>15</sup> This historical account serves as a reminder and motivates by recounting the

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<sup>10</sup> See for example René Lopez, “Israelite Covenants in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Covenants (Part 1 of 2)” in *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal Volume 9*, (2003): 94ff. Other examples include Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, and John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 202ff; Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum. *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 132-133. These are by no means exhaustive. While some don't spend much time on the debate e.g. Paul Kalluveetil. *Declaration and Covenant: A Comprehensive Review of Covenant Formulae from the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East*, *Analecta Biblica* 88 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1982), 4, Barth, *Church Dogmatics* vol 4 part 1, 22, almost all note the debate and move on.

<sup>11</sup> Gentry and Wellum add, “Extensive studies of the etymology or origin of the word *bērit* have not been particularly illuminating as to its meaning.” Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 132–133.

<sup>12</sup> See especially Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea*, and Mendenhall, “Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition,” along with other previously cited works.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Noel Weeks, *Admonition and Curse: The Ancient Near Eastern Treaty/Covenant Form as a Problem in Inter-Cultural Relationships*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 407 (London; New York: T & T Clark International, 2004) provides historical background demonstrating the universality of covenants and contracts throughout Mesopotamia, the Hittites, Egypt, Syria and Israel, and others make statements with undeveloped implications (e.g. Bavinck) but for the most part, the necessity for covenants is entirely undeveloped.

<sup>14</sup> This suggestion might seem innocuous, but it has far reaching implications. This paper explains one implication this has on our understanding of marriage, but the implications also extend to an understanding of God's overarching redemptive plan which then flows in to hermeneutics, and salvific themes including ecclesiology and eschatology. It is surprising that little to no documentation exists to explain the purpose of covenants.

<sup>15</sup> Noel Weeks, *Admonition and Curse: The Ancient Near Eastern Treaty/Covenant Form as a Problem in Inter-Cultural Relationships*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 407 (London; New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 11, 143.



formalized details that may or may not be written but which tends to be ratified by an oath and one or more other ceremonial elements intended to “serve as non-literary reminders of the transaction.”<sup>16</sup> Such non-literary reminders may include a stipulation to deposit the text somewhere in order that it may be read at regular intervals,<sup>17</sup> or signs such as circumcision or ongoing sacrifice.<sup>18</sup>

Behind the acts and components of a covenant is the expectation that without such a framework one or both parties would not be obliged to act in accordance with the terms. In other words, one party cannot simply trust the verbal statements of the other party. Additional motivation and clarity is necessary for compliance. The form of the covenant stems from the assumption that without such motivation, disobedience will be the default outcome. Therefore, the covenant engages the participants more fully than merely using words by taking oaths. recognizing the deities of each party (which the parties seek to please or placate) and opening themselves to curses for a failure to keep the stipulations, and even physical acts at the time of the creation of the covenant. The effect of these components is to heighten the commitment of the participant(s) to the particular outcome(s) stipulated in the covenant declaration.

Despite the spectrum of definitions of covenants (between the more empirically driven ANE definition and the broader theological definition), there is a high degree of agreement that central to the covenant is the notion of an oath. Horton provides a preliminary definition, saying “a covenant is a relationship of ‘oaths and bonds’ and involves mutual, though not necessarily equal, commitments.”<sup>19</sup> Before he describes the components of a covenant, Hillers states that a treaty (i.e. covenant) is “essentially an elaborate oath.”<sup>20</sup> Bavinck asserts that a covenant “is characterized by three factors: an oath or promise including stipulations, a curse for violation and a cultic ceremony that represents the curse symbolically.”<sup>21</sup> Gentry and Wellum define a covenant on the basis of the presence of an oath<sup>22</sup> and Tucker argues that “there are many indications from the OT, as well as from the Near East generally, that a covenant could also be called an oath.”<sup>23</sup> Kalluveetil concurs that a covenant “generally implies oath,”<sup>24</sup> though he proposes “this may mean that oath is not always the sine qua non element of a pact, other acts

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>17</sup> Hillers, *Covenant*, 35.

<sup>18</sup> Weeks, *Admonition and Curse*, 144.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 10.

<sup>20</sup> Hillers, *Covenant*, 28.

<sup>21</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:193.

<sup>22</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 130; “The same word [b<sup>c</sup>rit] is used in Scripture for a wide diversity of oath-bound commitments in various relationships.” Also Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, and John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 193.

<sup>23</sup> G. M. Tucker, “Covenant Forms and Contract Forms,” *Vetus Testamentum* 15 no 4 (Oct 1965): 488.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Kalluveetil, *Declaration and Covenant: A Comprehensive Review of Covenant Formulae from the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East*, *Analecta Biblica* 88 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1982), 5.

could constitute a covenant.”<sup>25</sup> In line with this, Hugenberger argues that even though ANE marriage covenants don’t always stipulate an oath, “it appears unwarranted to assume from the omission . . . in marriage documents that a ratifying oath was necessarily lacking in actual practice . . . in point of fact, a considerable number of marriage contracts do include an oath.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, while it may not always be written, an oath is likely still present.<sup>27</sup> As we consider the use of an oath, in the following paragraphs, it is because it is generally agreed that an oath, whether written or not, is a common component, if not the central component of ANE covenants.

An oath is “the ensuring of the fulfilment of moral obligations.”<sup>28</sup> Kalluveettil states that the oath in the Abimelech-Abraham covenant (Genesis 21) “serves to guarantee the observance of the stipulations and this is the main concern of political treaties.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, an oath seeks to provide a high level of commitment, or a guarantee on the part of the swearer that the stipulations will be met. An oath achieves this by elevating the verbal commitment above the commitment that is inherent in the character of the one making the statement. This additional verbal commitment is intended to arouse the volition of the one making the oath so as to ensure a higher volitional engagement to meet the commitment which the oath makes than would be present without the oath. In other words, an oath seeks to bind the relationship between the verbal commitment and the volitional engagement of the one making the oath.

The use of an oath only makes sense if there is a risk of a disconnect between the integrity of this verbal commitment and the volition of the one making the commitment. If there is no question that the moral obligations being committed to will be met, then there is no need for an oath. If the character of the one making the oath is beyond dispute, then no oath is necessary and therefore no covenant is necessary.

However, if either of the parties believe that the behavior or character of the other party suggests they may not keep their word, then a higher form of assurance is necessary. An oath or covenant is the primary tool found in scripture (and in the ANE) to arouse a higher degree of diligence to comply with the verbal commitment. The only reason either party would believe that

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<sup>25</sup> Kalluveettil, *Declaration and Covenant*, 9, 20. Kalluveettil’s argument doesn’t negate the purpose or need of an oath in a covenant, only its form. His broader point is that other elements (e.g. curses, the witnesses of dieties, or repetitive obligations) are sometimes effective to maintain the covenant without an oath.

<sup>26</sup> Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi*, repr. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 20014), 187. Though Hugenberger’s book is directly related to marriage, his study of covenants in this book is widely cited by authors discussing covenants generally. In this citation, Hugenberger is arguing that an oath is a part of marriage and therefore marriage constitutes a covenant.

<sup>27</sup> Kalluveettil, *Declaration and Covenant*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Immanuel Gustav Adolf Benzinger, “Oath” in Samuel Macauley Jackson, ed., *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge: Embracing Biblical, Historical, Doctrinal, and Practical Theology and Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Biography from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1908–1914), 208. As is the case with covenants, many definitions of an oath explain what it is, but not why it is necessary. The purpose is merely assumed.

<sup>29</sup> Kalluveettil, *Declaration and Covenant*, 10.

the behavior or character of the other party creates a risk to not keep their word is if sin present.<sup>30</sup> In other words, if there were no moral corruption, all that would be necessary is a simple statement of commitment by one party and assurance would be based on the character of the one making the promise, and this statement would be met with trust by the other party. No oath or covenant, let alone a curse for breaking the oath or covenant would be necessary because without moral corruption, there would be no sufficient cause to break the covenant and therefore no risk to mitigate. No motive for obedience would be necessary.

However, it is not merely the influence of sin on the one making the oath, but the influence of sin on either party necessitates an oath as I will demonstrate.

### **Why Does God make Univocal Covenants?**

One might be inclined to object that, if a covenant is only necessary because of the influence of sin, then why does God need to make covenants with man? After all, God is faithful and true in all His ways (Deut 32:4, Ps 89:8, Rev 19:11, 22:6). Why would a faithful God need to create a covenant? Indeed, this is a valid question and it points out a simple and important point: we agree that God's character establishes the reliability of His statements. God doesn't need to make covenants or oaths in order to heighten His volition to bring about what He says (Eph 1:11). His commitment is guaranteed by His character. Therefore, why does God need to make covenants at all?

We can answer this by examining the first occurrence of the word ברית or "covenant" in the Bible in Genesis 6. Genesis 6:5 sets the context for God's declaration to Noah by noting that man's wickedness was "great on the earth and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." In light of this, God decides to "blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land... for I am sorry that I have made them" (6:7).<sup>31</sup> God also anticipates a later covenant that He will make with Noah when he says, "I will establish My covenant (ברית) with you" (Gen 6:18).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> One may be inclined to argue that an oath is necessary if the individual is finite since circumstances outside their control may prevent them from achieving the undertaking they commit to. However, any commitment given is always bound by the volition of the one making a commitment not by the circumstances. The one making a commitment is expected to account for circumstantial risks that can be foreseen and mitigate them as part of their commitment. But in the case that they cannot foresee risk (e.g. natural disasters), they are not generally held to the oath. In modern contracts, such unforeseen circumstances necessitate the insurance industry because it is recognized that the parties to the contract cannot prevent such events from taking place and cannot be held responsible for them. In short, an oath binds the relationship between the commitment and volition of the individual making it. No human oath could justly bind someone to an event absolutely.

<sup>31</sup> Note that God doesn't make a covenant to carry out this course of action (or any other course of action prior to this point), He simply decides and acts. God's actions are driven purely by His character.

<sup>32</sup> Some theologians argue that Gen 6:18 refers to an existing covenant that God will incorporate Noah into. On this view see the discussion Williamson's discussion, P. R. Williamson "Covenant." edited by T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner. *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 420ff.

Prior to the flood Noah along with the people he lived among had no reason to believe that there may be an interruption in the normal pattern of life. Scripture recalls that Noah was a preacher of righteousness (2 Peter 2:5), yet only himself and 7 others were saved, suggesting that others alive at the time didn't consider his preaching to have a foundation. The cause of the flood is recorded in Genesis 6:5-7, when God "saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth." The devastation of the flood was a result of the righteous judgement of God upon his sinful and rebellious creatures.

Since God had never judged the world in this way before, the flood and its devastation may have created doubt in the mind of Noah (and/or his descendants) about the certainty of the continuity of life. After all, as a preacher of righteousness (2 Pet 2:5), Noah would be aware that man had fundamentally not changed and that the world would again become corrupt. The possibility of doubt is important because certainty is necessary for the fulfillment of the dominion mandate of Genesis 1:26-27. If man had no assurance that God would restrain future judgment the continuity of man's labor and meaning may be undermined.<sup>33</sup> To ensure man could prosper and build with purpose and meaning, God provided assurance through the Noahic covenant that similar judgements would be restrained (Gen 8:21-22). The rainbow was given as a sign to remind Him of this covenant (Gen 9:13-17), and provides the basis of meaningful life and covenants (Jer 33:20-21, 25-26).<sup>34</sup>

Clearly it is not necessary for God to remember the covenant since "*God fully knows himself and all things actual and possible in one simple and eternal act.*"<sup>35</sup> Further, God always acts in accordance with His will (Eph 1:11).<sup>36</sup> God eternally knows about His covenant and always acts with integrity, so why would He need a reminder? The answer is in the cause of the flood. Man's corruption brought about God's decision to wipe man out, and man's corruption will continue. Since the covenant is stated in anthropomorphic terms—as if God needs reminding, the reminder is not due to forgetfulness, but a plea by God for patience due to His hatred of sin which may incite Him to destroy man once again.

More centrally, Noah, a righteous man (Gen 6:9) recalled the former corruption and likely realized that the same corruption lived on in him and his sons. Therefore, what guarantee did he have that the Lord wouldn't bring another flood to destroy the earth? Thus, the Noahic

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<sup>33</sup> This is particularly important for Noah who is commanded with the same command as Adam (compare Gen 1:28 and 9:7), but not only does Noah have awareness of good and evil, which Adam did not, but he is also now aware that God will judge sin, and that there are certain limits to God's toleration of evil. At this point Noah has no clarity about the boundaries of that toleration, nor does he have clarity about why God would continue to offer man grace, being evil. The grace offered in Christ (Rom 3:25) is only a hint at this point in redemptive history. So, as Noah looks ahead, the destruction of everyone and everything he knows would weigh upon his mind as he considers how (or even whether) to plan for the future.

<sup>34</sup> Gerald L. Keown. *Jeremiah 26–52*. vol. 27 (Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas: Word, 1998), 174.

<sup>35</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 190.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

covenant is not merely a reminder to God that he should not destroy mankind again, but “a pledge for the future,”<sup>37</sup> a promise “accommodated to our need of simple reassurance.”<sup>38</sup>

However, simply stating that the covenant was given for man is not enough. Why does man need assurance? Can man not simply trust God? It is at this point that we find the influence of sin is a factor that creates a need for God to create a covenant with His creatures. Paul answers in Romans 1:21 that “even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.” The nature of sin is an exchange of God for something less, and this exchange impacts man’s thinking. In other words, “since we know that human beings have willfully turned from God, their rebellion has not only moral and spiritual but epistemological consequences.”<sup>39</sup> The greatest epistemological impact of sin is seen in our thoughts of God. Stephen K. Moroney explains, “the noetic effects of sin generally are expected to be most evident in the knowledge of God.”<sup>40</sup> Moroney summarizes saying, “Human self-centeredness distorts human thinking.”<sup>41</sup> In our context this means that man needs an assurance because sin will distort our belief of the character of God, specifically God’s truthfulness and faithfulness. The physical sign serves as a public reminder of a fixed covenant to help man to trust God to keep His promise.

We can summarize the purpose of the oath given in Genesis 9:13 not on the basis of any defect in God, but on the basis of the influence of sin in man. First, were there no sin, there would be no need for a covenant at all as man wouldn’t have incited God to blot him out from the earth (Gen 6:5, 12). Second, God provides a covenant to provide an additional level of assurance to sinful man that He life will continue, which was necessary because man is prone to corrupt the knowledge of God’s faithfulness.<sup>42</sup> The need for a covenant was introduced by man’s own corruption and the ensuing distrust of God this creates, and the sign of the covenant is necessary to remind man of God’s faithfulness. This reasoning extends to every univocal covenant God makes with His sinful creatures. The oath is necessary because of the introduction of sin and its influence. Since covenants are dependent upon an oath and an oath is necessary

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<sup>37</sup> Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*. Word Biblical Commentary. (Dallas: Word, 1998), 196.

<sup>38</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 110.

<sup>39</sup> Stephen K. Moroney, “How Sin Affects Scholarship: A New Model”, in *Christian Scholars Review* 28 no 3, (Spring, 1999), 443.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 442.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 443.

<sup>42</sup> Evidence of this corruption is found throughout the Bible and in human experience since. However a classic example is the creation of the golden calf in Exodus 32 of which Aaron declares, “This is your God, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.” Aaron’s calf is a corruption of the spiritual nature of God (John 4:24) of whom they were commanded not to make an idol or any likeness (Ex 20:4). According to the author of Hebrews, this is also the point of the covenant with Abraham, to provide a second layer of confidence for Abraham (Heb 6:13-18).

because of sin, we can conclude that covenants are necessary only because of the influence of sin on one of the two parties.

Bavinck seems to recognize this. While arguing that covenants were in use by man long before the covenants God made with Noah, Abraham and Israel, he states, “This is also why the word [covenant] does not yet occur in Genesis 3:15. Only when covenants were needed in a sinful and deceptive human society for the defense or acquisition of any good could the value of a covenant be appreciated and religion be regarded from this point of view”<sup>43</sup> It is unfortunate that Bavinck did not develop this reasoning further.

### **Marriage as a Covenant?**

If a covenant is only necessary because of sin, and marriage was instituted prior to the fall, it is inaccurate to think of marriage before the fall as a covenant. Since a covenant is necessary only where one of the parties is influenced by sin and neither Adam nor Eve were influenced by sin, there was no need for them to make a covenant. The fidelity of the first marriage was dependent upon the character of the parties, of which there was no question and therefore no risk to mitigate through a covenant. Therefore, marriage did not exist as a covenant in the garden.<sup>44</sup>

There are several works that argue for marriage as a covenant, but none of these consider the necessity for covenants. In his Ph.D. Dissertation “Covenant as a Framework for Understanding the Primary Divorce and Remarriage Texts in the New Testament” Paul Hudson doesn’t list covenantal dependency on sin as an objection to recognizing marriage as a covenant.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Gordon Hugenberger doesn’t consider the connection between sin and covenants in his objections.<sup>46</sup> Both works argue for marriage as a covenant based on the form and usage of covenants in the ANE, but neither work considers the overarching purpose or benefit of covenants in society when they consider their position.

Hugenberger argues that the “bone of my bones” formula in Gen 2:23 is “covenant-forming.”<sup>47</sup> Aside from the lack of distrust, the lack of an oath in Gen 2:23-24 would seem to undermine this thesis as others have argued.<sup>48</sup> Hugenberger’s response is that though many ANE marriage documents don’t include an oath this doesn’t mean an oath is not included. However,

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<sup>43</sup> Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, and John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 203.

<sup>44</sup> The language “marriage as a covenant” is unclear, but this usage follows that used by scholars proposing this position.

<sup>45</sup> Paul Devin Hudson, “Covenant as a Framework for Understanding the Primary Divorce and Remarriage Texts in the New Testament.” Ph.D. Dissertation. (The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004). This suggests that Hudson didn’t come across this argument in his research, which is consistent with my own research.

<sup>46</sup> Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant*, 168ff.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>48</sup> See Hudson, “Covenant as a Framework,” 16-19.

he also recognizes that the “bone of my bones” formula in other passages indicate “some notion of kinship is in view”<sup>49</sup> and this would seem to be a better explanation of the formula than to say it is covenant-forming. On the basis of the discussion in this paper, Hugenberger, Hudson, Köstenberger and others who see marriage as a covenant would need to explain why a covenant is necessary before the fall.

Further, if we follow Bavinck’s understanding that a covenant “is characterized by three factors: an oath or promise including stipulations, a curse for violation and a cultic ceremony that represents the curse symbolically,”<sup>50</sup> we find all three of these are missing from Genesis 2:23-25.<sup>51</sup> Instead, Eve was designed expressly for the purpose of being Adam’s corresponding helper and assumed to be such by Adam. The first marriage then, wasn’t constituted on the basis of a covenant, but as an institution initially free from both the presence and the need of a covenant since both parties were free of the influence of sin.

Therefore, we can conclude that due to the lack of sin and distrust, covenants in general were not necessary before the fall. Beyond this, the language of Genesis 2:23, though perhaps formulaic,<sup>52</sup> does not provide enough evidence that Genesis 2:23 is covenant forming, nor that the first marriage was instituted through a covenant. Therefore, whatever marriage is, it cannot be equated with a covenant either before or after the fall. Rather, we should conclude that after the fall a marriage is necessarily instituted by way of a covenant in order to solemnize the marriage, and to heighten the volitional commitment of the couple to maintain the requirements of biblical marriage.

### **The Nature of Marriage in Genesis 2:24**

But, if marriage is not to be equated with a covenant, then what is it? How should we regard marriage? What is the nature of the relationship that the covenant inaugurates? Genesis 2:24 indicates that the author understood marriage to be a life-long institution. Leaving one’s father and mother to be joined to a wife indicates a new unit has been created by this institution. The husband is “to leave” his father and mother. Victor Hamilton points out that this word (נָטַח) is often translated “forsake” and is used to describe Israel’s rejection of her covenant relationship

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<sup>49</sup> Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant*, 230.

<sup>50</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:193.

<sup>51</sup> Hillers lists six components that were typical in treaties (Hillers, *Covenant*, 29), while Mendenhall, (“Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition”), suggested there may be as many as nine aspects of covenantal structure. While the number is debated, the point here is that the best argument for a covenant in Genesis 2:23 does not carry some of the central components such as stipulations or oath, and certainly doesn’t have the full structure of a covenant. Further, a curse for disobedience is common in covenants, and it is difficult to see how any curse could be justified or justly invoked in any pre-fall covenant.

<sup>52</sup> Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant*, 230.

with Yahweh.”<sup>53</sup> This is contrasted with “to cling” used in the context of Israel’s relationship with the Lord (e.g., Deut. 10:20). The selection of these verbs indicates the permanence of the relationship.<sup>54</sup>

The use of the perfect tense throughout this verse (קָבַץ, to cling, and הָיָה to be or become, are both in the perfect tense) is also important. These two verbs continue the aspect of the imperfect verb “to leave”<sup>55</sup> (יָצָא), indicating that the leaving of parents is a characteristic of the relationship between a son and his parents after his marriage, in which “the young man’s primary affections typically transfer from his parents to his wife.”<sup>56</sup> At the same time, the verbs “to cling” and “they become” are perfective, indicating completeness of action rather than something that the couple does or becomes over time. The leaving of parents contrasted with the cleaving to his wife indicates a contrast in these relationships. One is significantly less permanent and primary than the other. Therefore, at this point of the declaration, the couple is married, and we could regard the sentence as meaning, “the man leaves his father and his mother and is joined to his wife and they are one flesh.”<sup>57</sup> The perfect aspect is not merely a statement that a marriage has taken place but an indicator of the nature of the relationship. They are customarily “one flesh” in the present from that point forward regardless of sexual intimacy or any other circumstance.

Keil and Delitzsch reflect on the contrast between the relationship with parents and the relationship with spouse. “By the leaving of father and mother, which applies to the woman as well as to the man, the conjugal union is shown to be a spiritual oneness, a vital communion of heart as well as of body, in which it finds its consummation. This union is of a totally different

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<sup>53</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 181. Hamilton lists several instances where the Old Testament uses this word in this context.

<sup>54</sup> Hamilton, concludes “Already scripture has sounded the note that marriage is a covenant rather than an ad-hoc, makeshift arrangement.” However to suggest that the selection of these words indicate a covenant has been made is simply a reading of post-fall texts into this earlier text. It would be more accurate to relate the covenant God made with Israel to the permanence of marriage rather than determining the permanence of marriage on the basis of the permanence of a later covenant. Wenham appears to agree with Hamilton, “To use the terms ‘forsake’ and ‘stick’ in the context of Israel’s covenant with the Lord suggests that the OT viewed marriage as a kind of covenant.” However, he recognizes the point regarding permanence and comments, “This phrase suggests both passion and permanence should characterize marriage.” Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1998), 71. This latter point of permanence is stronger than any argument for a covenant and reading a covenant into Genesis 2:23-24 is anachronistic.

<sup>55</sup> Robert B. Chisholm. *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 99.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>57</sup> Chisholm, *From Exegesis to Exposition*, 99. I have modified the final verb (Chisholm translates it “they become one flesh”), but this is otherwise the same as Chisholm’s own translation. Note that Waltke and O’Connor translate it “and be united to his wife.” See Bruce K. Waltke and Michael Patrick O’Connor. *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 145. The significance of this is that the entry point to marriage is not on the basis of physical intimacy, but on the basis of the commitment to join together. This may be reflected in the Israelite betrothal period which necessitated divorce to break (Matt 1:18-19).



nature from that of parents and children.”<sup>58</sup> The contrast between the two relationships in Genesis 2:24, and the perfective verbs in the second half of the verse indicates that the focus in the second half of the verse is not on the creation of the marriage but on the nature of the marriage.

The husband and wife are joined as “one flesh.” Therefore, rather than describing marriage as a union, it is better to see the nature of marriage as that of a union between a man and a woman. This is consistent with the nature of marriage in the pre-fall state and with the nature of the state of Adam and Eve where there was no need for an oath or a ceremony or covenant. The couple simply recognized that God intended them for each other and committed to form a union. Their character was sufficient to guarantee the success of their commitment to the union without necessitating a covenant.

Marriage prior to the fall, without reference to a covenant is a union of a man and a woman made in the image of God. If the nature of marriage before the fall was a union, the nature of the marriage after the fall should also be considered a union. Yet, after the fall, the intended permanency of marriage and the introduction of sin creates the need to heighten the commitment of each party to the union, necessitating a covenant.

God’s intentionality in this first marriage is evident in the account of the creation of Eve. God created a wife for Adam who corresponded to him,<sup>59</sup> not only being made in the image of God, but who was fit for union with Adam. Thus, God literally creates the union of a man and a woman who corresponds to him. Christ affirms that God joins a couple in marriage when he states, “What God has joined together, let no man separate” (Matt 19:7). God joined this couple, creating a union, which was inaugurated in the garden without a covenant as an act of God.

### **Where Covenants come into Marriage**

Having argued that the pre-fall notion of marriage was not fashioned around a covenant, we must affirm that the Old Testament clearly creates a connection between marriage and covenant. After briefly considering the connection between covenants and marriage in passages such as Malachi 2:14, Proverbs 2:17, Isaiah 54:5-6, Jeremiah 31:32, and Hosea 1-2 Hudson concludes, “one can argue that the use of the word ‘covenant’ in these specific incidents and the repeated analogy of Yahweh as the faithful husband of adulterous Israel support the understanding of marriage in covenant terms.”<sup>60</sup> Hugenberger is more explicit identifying

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<sup>58</sup> Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 56–57.

<sup>59</sup> Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 666. Wenham translates this, “a helper matching him” Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 68.

<sup>60</sup> Hudson, “Covenant as a Framework,” 31. Of course Hudson is building his thesis on the basis that Gen 2:24 represents marriage as a covenant, which I have argued against. Hudson’s clearest explanation of his

“marriage in the Old Testament as a covenant.”<sup>61</sup> We can agree with Hudson, Hugenberg and others who see a connection between marriage and covenants, but it is necessary to modify their conclusion since it is inaccurate to regard marriage as equivalent to covenant in Genesis 2:24. There is more to marriage than a covenant.

The first marriage was not instituted through a covenant, but the fall created a need to institute marriage through a covenant. The marriage covenant seeks to ensure an appropriate relationship between the verbal commitment and volition of the parties to create and maintain a union. In other words, prior to the covenant, the union of Adam and Eve came about by the intentional creative act of God<sup>62</sup> and was maintained by the purity of the character of each of the parties of the union. There is no risk to the union so long as the character of the two parties is free of corruption, but once the flesh of mankind was corrupted through the fall, there is great risk to the marriage union.

In the fall, man did not lose his understanding of good, but he gained first-hand knowledge of evil, which corrupted his emotions and thinking. This division between knowing the good we should do and our inability to think, feel and act in accordance with the good destroys the integrity of the relationship between verbal commitment and volition. “Sin causes man to assume the role of God and to assert autonomy for himself apart from the Creator. The most all-encompassing view of sin’s mainspring, therefore, is the demand for autonomy.”<sup>63</sup> This autonomy is first “a violation of the Creator-creature relationship”<sup>64</sup> (Mark 12:30) and therefore rejects God as God and exchanges God for something created (Rom 1:21). This exchange disorders every aspect of man’s existence and requires the re-ordering of every aspect of our life. Stephen Charnock stated, “Sin disorders the frame of the world.”<sup>65</sup> As a disordering force, sin impacts not only our relationship with God, but also relationships between every human and every other creature since it corrupts the good desires that God has placed in humankind, desires that are intended to be fulfilled in accordance with God’s own purpose.

When man becomes autonomous, the rejection of God’s purposes and their replacement with the purposes of a creature (normally the individual actor) means desires are directed to forbidden ends (e.g. the desire for someone who is not one’s spouse) or the desire is corrupted by

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understanding of the connection between marriage and covenant is found in a footnote when he says, “marriage should be understood in terms of covenant” (15 fn1)

<sup>61</sup> Hugenberg, *Marriage as a Covenant*, 168.

<sup>62</sup> I have left the phrase an act of God, but I believe a better term would be declaration of God. That is to say that God declares a couple to be a union at a specific point and time.

<sup>63</sup> John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 453.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Stephen Charnock, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; W. Robertson; G. Herbert, 1864–1866), 365.

degree (e.g. the desire for sex grows so as to overwhelm other good desires).<sup>66</sup> Thus, the desire and volitional commitment to maintain or be in a God-ordained union with another human being is easily overshadowed by these corrupt desires. Therefore, these corrupt desires necessitate a greater solemnity be given to the inauguration of the marriage union in order to mitigate the risk of dissolving the union that God creates between the couple.

There are two reasons behind this need. Just as Noah required the assurance from God that He would not repeat the flood, so too each spouse needs assurance from the other that the partner will commit to the union knowing that their partner will sin against them. My wife's oath to me that she would be my wife assures me that my failure and our joint circumstances will not be a cause for her to abandon our union. The other reason for the marriage covenant is to assure my spouse that I am aware of my own sinful corruption and that though my corrupt desires may tempt me to abandon the union (Jas 1:14), my oath is a commitment to our union despite my corruption. When I made my oath to my wife it is given with the full knowledge that I am committed to our union even when I sin against God and against her. The nature of a marriage covenant is a commitment to a union together, in full knowledge of the sinful state in which the two of us live. The covenant is not the marriage, but due to the corruption of sin, the union is necessarily inaugurated by a covenant.

Further, as per many covenants in Israel, the covenant is made before God<sup>67</sup> and God serves as a witness to the covenant that inaugurates the union (Mal 2:14).<sup>68</sup> The purpose of a witness, whether a symbol (e.g. a stone as in Josh 24:27) or a person, is to provide both a reminder to the parties of the covenant, and in the case that one of them breaks the covenant, the witness functions to accuse the transgressing partner.<sup>69</sup> God therefore, acts both as the creator of the union (Matt 19:6) and a witness should one of the two parties of the union violate their oath to maintain the union.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Modern English translations often try to discriminate between good and bad desires by substituting "desire" for "lust" (e.g. Matt 5:28, Jas 1:14 NASB), but the Greek text doesn't make this distinction recognizing that desire is good or evil in accordance with the degree of corruption evident in the desire. Hence a desire for one's wife is not evidence of heart corruption, but desire for another woman is.

<sup>67</sup> Köstenberger, *God, Marriage and Family*, 73. See also Kalluveetil, *Declaration and Covenant*, 63-64 and Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant*, 28. There are some who hold that marriage has three parties, the husband, the wife and God. However, these and other scholars prefer to regard God as a witness to the covenant. As the one who creates or declares the union, this makes sense and also helps us understand Malachi 2:14 in which God calls himself a witness "between you and the wife of your youth... she is your companion and your wife by covenant." Several other covenants between people (e.g. Genesis 31:50, Judges 11:10, see also 1 Samuel 20:12, Jeremiah 42:5, Micah 1:2) were created in the Old Testament where God is called as a witness indicating that making an oath before God was a fairly standard routine in Israel.

<sup>68</sup> Divine witnesses are a common component of ANE covenants. See Hillers, *Covenant*, 29.

<sup>69</sup> Timo Veijola. "The Witness in the Clouds: Ps 89:38." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107, no. 3 (1988): 417. See also Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 414.

<sup>70</sup> This does not mean that God is a guarantor of the covenant as Tarwater and others assert. See Tarwater, *Marriage as a Covenant*, 39.

## Implications for Marriages and Counseling

### Defining Marriage

Having argued as we have, we are now in a position to offer a definition of marriage. *Marriage is a union, which in a post-fall world, is necessarily inaugurated with a covenant.* If this definition of marriage is accepted, it has a significant impact on the way we approach marriage and marriage counseling. Space does not permit to document these thoroughly here, and the full answer to this question awaits a future paper,<sup>71</sup> but a few examples will be given in brief.

First, the New Testament draws connections to union with Christ and marriage in at least three places providing scope for fruitful study.<sup>72</sup> A fuller understanding of union with Christ, therefore will provide a much richer understanding of the marriage union. This provides an opportunity for significant theological weight and relational insight into both marriage and union with Christ.

For pre-marriage counseling, knowing that by getting married the couple is creating a union helps orient the couple to the nature of marriage. Too much pre-marriage counseling focuses on roles and responsibilities without considering the nature of a union. Of course, roles and responsibilities are important, but they do not constitute the core of a marriage, only the functions within the marriage. This is where the previously mentioned consideration of union with Christ is necessary, and particularly its implications based on Ephesians 5:22-23. Further, when creating marriage vows, each party should be aware of the two-sided nature of the vows: vows are made to commit to the union regardless of the other person's sin and regardless of my sin. While both aspects need to be emphasized, there should be additional emphasis placed on the commitment I make in full knowledge of my sin, and that the purpose of this commitment is relentless permanence.

ANE covenants could be entered into at the behest (or even by force) of one party, or voluntarily. Either way, the purpose was to have each party commit to be loyal to the other.<sup>73</sup> The same is true in marriage. My vow is not a contract to union on the basis of certain conditions the other person must meet, but a commitment to the union *regardless* of transgression of vows and sin against each other. The desire behind the marriage vow is not to bind the other person to us, but to voluntarily bind ourselves to a union with the other. Therefore, in marriage counseling, each party should be reminded (or taught) that their commitment to the union was a commitment to give, not to receive. This means regardless of how their spouse behaves, they are to remain committed to the union. This means not just living together, but genuinely uniting ourselves with the other. This magnifies the importance of being bound with unbelievers (2 Cor 6:14).

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<sup>71</sup> See note 7, above.

<sup>72</sup> Romans 7:1-4, 2 Corinthians 11:2, and Ephesians 5:22-33 are clear examples, but many other passages are important to consider such as 1 Corinthians 6:15-20 and Revelation 19:7-10.

<sup>73</sup> In suzerain treaties, more emphasis was placed on the obligation of the vassal than on the suzerain, but typically the essential obligation is that of loyalty. See Hillers, *Covenant*, 33.

If marriage is considered a covenant there may be the tendency to think in terms of role-based obligations to the other person since covenants emphasize obligations. But marriage is more than a covenant and the intention of the covenant is to create a union, not mere obligations. Counseling must go beyond merely doing what is necessary to uphold our own obligations and focus on the heart of each spouse for the other. Those who are married should be instructed to concentrate on maintaining the union, which will often require more of them than just meeting obligations. This will require a heart radically devoted not only to the Lord, but also to their spouse. Such loyalty<sup>74</sup> is difficult to acquire, and requires significant mortification of the flesh.

Finally, marriage should not be thought of as existing for the purpose of sanctification.<sup>75</sup> If marriage was instituted before the fall, then the primary purpose of marriage cannot be sanctification since prior to the fall there was no need for sanctification. Adam and Eve existed in a state of innocence. Hoekema argues this as an implication of Genesis 1:31 when he says, “Man, therefore, as he came from the hands of the Creator, was not corrupt, depraved, or sinful; he was in a state of integrity, innocence, and holiness.”<sup>76</sup> It is almost universally accepted that this state continues until Genesis 3. Since marriage was instituted during this period of innocence, the purpose of marriage cannot have originally been sanctification.<sup>77</sup> Certainly marriage reveals our need for sanctification and requires a greater concentration on sanctification in order to maintain the union. However, marriage is a union, which implies additional purpose and direction than sanctification. Therefore, sanctification as a purpose of marriage flattens marriage into a tool for Christlikeness. However, the connection between union with Christ and marriage suggests marriage carries an ontological significance of its own. This significance is lost if the purpose of marriage is sanctification.

The marriage union points to similar unions found in scripture, specifically the union between the members of the godhead and the union between Christ and His church. These unions carry significant theological and teleological meaning, which is likely inherent in the marriage union. It remains for a future study to examine the implications of this union on the nature of marriage, and any resultant implications on marriage and marriage counseling.

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<sup>74</sup> Loyalty is a central concern of covenants. See Hillers, *Covenant*, 33.

<sup>75</sup> Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage: What if God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 11. This concept is foundational to books such as Leslie Vernick’s *How to Act Right When Your Spouse Acts Wrong* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2001).

<sup>76</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 15.

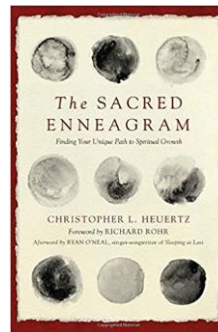
<sup>77</sup> The purpose of marriage in the entire Old Testament cannot have been sanctification since that would require a model of sanctification in the Old Testament that could take place without the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. The primary model of holiness in the Old Testament is found in the stipulations of God’s covenant with Israel that placed requirements on them to be set apart from other nations. These stipulations affect how the nation is governed and how individual Israelites were to identify themselves and conduct themselves. According to the New Testament these laws are unable to change (Col 2:23) hearts and thus they ultimately served to reveal the sinfulness of man (Rom 3:20).

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## REVIEWS

### A Review of Christopher Heuertz's *The Sacred Enneagram*

By Jeff Miller<sup>1</sup>



Have Christians in our western ‘pop’ psychology culture become enamored with personality assessment tools? The industry of personality tests has sky-rocketed over the past decades. If you are reading this review, you have likely taken one or more of these personality tests, which confirms the widespread impact of this industry’s growth. The essential craze around these personality tools is geared towards having instant scientific results, evaluating us for who we are and what makes us tick in life. In the midst of the clamoring, especially over new teaching, we should be mindful of protecting our heart (Prov. 4:23) and we should be drawn back to what Paul writes in Second Timothy. We (including myself) should not be given to the “itching of ears” and “accumulating for ourselves teachers to suit our own passions.” (2 Tim. 4:3) Nor should we look for or devise shortcuts in sanctification that lean away from a dependency of the Spirit to do His work in us. God desires to do a work in us until the day of our glorification (Phil. 1:6). It is for this reason among others, that an extra-biblical secular devised tool such as an Enneagram may hinder our sanctification versus growing us to be more like Christ. You may be thinking – “Are personality tests really a concern?” If so, it is my hope that you would consider a few biblical principles with me.

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## A Brief History

The origin of the Enneagram is a bit murky. Regardless of whether it has its ancient origins in Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, or Islam... Heuertz seems to be confident in the modern renewal which began in the 1900's by George Ivanovich Gurdjieff, an Eastern Orthodox priest. Gurdjieff was born in a Russian city (Alexandropol – now Gyumri, Armenia) and grew up in Kars (now in Turkey).<sup>2</sup> Then the Enneagram cycled through a number of other teachers and trainers before a Chilean Gestalt psychologist Claudio Naranjo is credited for bringing the Enneagram to America in 1970, teaching it in his backyard in Berkley, CA.<sup>3</sup> The first Enneagram book published in the West came out in 1984.<sup>4</sup> But it would take some more time before it would be accepted in conservative Christian circles.

In previous decades the Enneagram had primarily been used by Catholic priests at spiritual retreats and had **not** made inroads into the Protestant Evangelical church. However, recently (especially in the last 3-4 years) the Enneagram has begun to become more accepted among Evangelicals, even among some “conservative” Evangelicals. Now, a simple online search for books will quickly render a number of recent titles that have been published by **IVP** and **Zondervan**:

- *The Road Back to You: An Enneagram Journey to Self-Discovery* by Ian Morgan Cron & Suzanne Stabile, Oct. 4, 2016. (IVP)
- *Mirror for the Soul: A Christian Guide to the Enneagram* by Alice Fryling, August 15, 2017. (IVP)
- *The Sacred Enneagram: Finding Your Unique Path to Spiritual Growth* by Christopher Heuertz & Richard Rohr, Sept. 5, 2017. (Zondervan)
- *The Path Between Us: An Enneagram Journey to Healthy Relationships* by Suzanne Stabile, April 10, 2018. (IVP)

Additional titles from other publishers (not exhaustive but note the published dates):

- *The Enneagram: A Christian Perspective* by Richard Rohr & Andreas Ebert, Sep 1, **2001**
- *The Complete Enneagram: 27 Paths to Greater Self-Knowledge* by Beatrice Chestnut, Jul 31, **2013**
- *Self to Lose - Self to Find: A Biblical Approach to the 9 Enneagram Types* by Marilyn Vancil, Jun 3, **2016**

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher Heuertz and Richard Rohr, *The Sacred Enneagram: Finding Your Unique Path to Spiritual Growth* (Zondervan), 2017, 45-47.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Heuertz and Richard Rohr, *The Sacred Enneagram: Finding Your Unique Path to Spiritual Growth* (Zondervan), 2017, 46-47.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

- *The Modern Enneagram: Discover Who You Are and Who You Can Be* by Kacie Berghoef & Melanie Bell, Feb 28, **2017**
- *Enneagram: The #1 Made Easy Guide to the 9 Types of Personalities. Grow Your Self-Awareness, Evolve Your Personality, and Build Healthy Relationships. Find the Strength for Life's Challenges* by Tina Madison, Jul 7, **2018**

Publishers are clearly seeing a market in publishing more titles on the Enneagram. In other words, people are buying these books and particularly - “Christians” are readily buying these books. Why would Evangelicals fall for such mystical spiritualism? Christopher Heuertz says, “I sort of wonder if the evolved evangelical is getting a little worn out from the same old literal Bible study interpretations of stuff.”<sup>5</sup>

The Enneagram is not just taken ‘hook, line & sinker’ in the book variety but there are also popular Christian websites and blogs that are hailing this as an ingenious tool for spiritual growth such as ChurchLeaders.com<sup>6</sup> for pastors and others in leadership. One such ‘ordained minister’ – Joanna Quintrell says, “It’s a tool for transformation. The Holy Spirit uses that tool to bring God’s healing.”<sup>7</sup> Additionally, a New York pastor who co-edited a *book published by Crossway* says, “The Enneagram is a tool that can turn the light of a matchstick into a torch. A torch light is still imprecise, but it provides a wider grasp of the terrain, can expose uncharted ground we need to explore, and keeps us from going down destructive paths.”<sup>8</sup>

Conservatives are interested in using the Enneagram. Enneagram author and conference speaker, Ian Morgan Cron suggested that it’s not just “progressive” Christians but conservative evangelicals are completely fine with it as well.<sup>9</sup> Michael Sciretti Jr. is a Baptist and has spent years teaching about, and guiding students through, the Enneagram.<sup>10</sup> Sciretti Jr. says, “it can be

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Merritt, “What is the ‘Enneagram,’ and why are Christians suddenly so Enamored by it?” <https://religionnews.com/2017/09/05/what-is-the-enneagram-and-why-are-christians-suddenly-so-enamored-by-it/>, Sept. 5, 2017 (Accessed Aug 20, 2018)

<sup>6</sup> Joshua Pease, “4 Surprising Reasons the Enneagram Test Made Me a Better Leader”, <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/291345-enneagram-josh-pease.html>, Nov. 23, 2016 (Accessed Aug. 20, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Anne Abbott, “A Dangerous Practice”, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2012/01/31/a-dangerous-practice/>, Jan. 31, 2012 (Accessed, Aug. 20, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> John Starke, “An Evangelical’s Guide to the Enneagram”, <https://vineyard-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/An-Evangelicals-Guide-to-the-Enneagram-Christianity-Today.pdf>, (Accessed Aug. 20, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Emily Miller, “Are you my type? The Enneagram catches on with Christians”, <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/865663902/Are-you-my-type-The-Enneagram-catches-on-with-Christians.html>, Oct. 3, 2016 (Accessed Aug. 20, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Jeff Brumly, “Types of Christians drawn to Enneagram growing”, <https://baptistnews.com/article/types-of-christians-drawn-to-enneagram-growing/#.W44fKuhKiUm>, Oct. 11, 2016 (Accessed Aug 20, 2018).



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such a powerful tool to Christians already hungry for growing in their spiritual lives.”<sup>11</sup> However, this is only one – there are many more conservatives.

If you are still not convinced that the Enneagram is making its way to an Evangelical church near you, consider the final two examples.<sup>12</sup> Susanne Stabile is an internationally recognized Enneagram Master who has conducted over 500 Enneagram workshops over the past 25 years including many at Baptist churches. Also, Susanne is scheduled to hold a workshop at a Sovereign Grace Church in downtown Los Angeles near the Staples Center on September 21-22, 2018.<sup>13</sup> Second, Nina Barnes, the Dean of Spiritual Formation & Leadership at University of Northwestern – St. Paul (nicknamed ‘The Billy Graham School’) gives a hearty referral. Barnes gave her recommendation on the cover of the book *The Sacred Enneagram*, calling it a “powerful way forward in... spiritual formation.” Let’s look more closely at the book as it is written.

### **Dangers of *The Sacred Enneagram* – A Critique**

**First**, as the sub-title of this book suggests: *The Sacred Enneagram: Finding Your Unique Path to Spiritual Growth* (my emphasis) that we are to find our own path. This should be an immediate red flag for all who want to be more like Christ. Pursuing the results of a personality test would only deter the Christian from his true pursuit of Christ through the Word of God! It turns out the author of this book is a universalist, believing that ‘all paths lead to God.’ He says, “...we know that truth isn’t confined to any one tradition. It’s not a scandal to affirm that divine love reaches towards all of us, wherever we are, and regardless of our response to it.”<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Heuertz would have us believe that this device connects us to God when he says, “the Enneagram offers a sacred map for our souls; a map that, when understood, **leads us home to our true identity and to God**”<sup>15</sup> (emphasis added). There is only one biblical model of salvation and sanctification – which is the one given by Scripture. Christ says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6) Furthermore, sanctification is clearly expressed in Scripture and it has nothing to do with ‘knowing your number.’

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Additionally, Heath Lambert’s “Truth in Love” podcast on personality tests also gives a helpful overview. He notes that the industry of personality tests is a billion dollar industry: <https://biblicalcounseling.com/2018/08/til-168-personality-tests/>

<sup>13</sup> Her speaking schedule is published here on the ministry’s webpage: <https://www.lifeinthetrinityministry.com/ltn-events/>.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Merritt, “What is the ‘Enneagram,’ and why are Christians suddenly so Enamored by it?” <https://religionnews.com/2017/09/05/what-is-the-enneagram-and-why-are-christians-suddenly-so-enamored-by-it/>, Sept. 5, 2017 (Accessed Aug 20, 2018)

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Heuertz and Richard Rohr, *The Sacred Enneagram: Finding Your Unique Path to Spiritual Growth* (Zondervan), 2017, 26.

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**Second**, a significant concern from a Christian perspective is **the shape of the diagram**. The diagram at the center of this personality test looks like a pentagram, an occult-ish symbol. The term “Enneagram” is said to come from two Greek words “*ennea*” meaning “nine” and “gram” meaning diagram.<sup>16</sup> The diagram includes a circle with nine points based on three triads which represents the author’s anthropology. Of course, the author down-plays the significance of this concerning symbolism by accentuating all walks of faith lead to God. If these issues are insignificant to you and the Enneagram is still of interest, this book – *The Sacred Enneagram* – entails numerous more concerns.

**Third**, among many other non-biblical teachings are the chapters teaching **trichotomy**. We believe Scripture clearly teaches that we are 2 parts (dichotomy). This becomes abundantly evident when Heuertz begins discussing the triads found within the Enneagram in chapter 4 and following.<sup>17</sup> He goes through the idea of having three sections: body, heart, and head. Then Heuertz makes an effort to tie these to Scripture in Deut 6:5 and Mat. 22:37 which mention: heart, soul and mind. The counseling implications within trichotomy as an integrationist would be to farm out each area to different ‘owners’ (i.e. spirit belongs to the minister, physical body belongs to the medical doctor, but the soul belongs to the psychologist). However, the Bible teaches that we have an “inner” man and an “outer” man (2 Cor. 4:16); we are made of two parts, a soul/spirit/heart and the physical body. Another helpful passage for clarity on this is Matthew 10:28, “And do not fear those who kill the **body** but cannot kill the **soul**. Rather fear him who can destroy **both soul and body** in hell.” (emphasis added)

**Fourth**, is the amount of time and energy that is spent on the ‘**wounded inner child**,’ which has also been popular in earlier forms of psychology. Expending great effort in having the inner child help find our way “home” he emphasizes, “It is the ego’s yearning to return to its essence. It is the soul’s desire to reconnect with its original righteousness.”<sup>18</sup> Now, we begin to see even more of Heuertz’s anthropology. He believes that we are inherently good. But the Scriptures tell us that our “hearts cannot be trusted” for “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9)

**Finally**, the issues addressed within this book collectively lead to an approach of being **needs based**, which is most vividly obvious in the sub-titles for the nine different types. This ‘needs based’ theology develops undesired outcomes and unbiblical approaches at the least. For starters, each time we remind ourselves (and others) of our number – we are announcing what we “NEED to be...” whatever the specific need is emphasized when taking the exam. Also, we want to know what the number or type another is - so we can know what prominent needs they might have. From the author’s perspective - the purpose of knowing your Enneagram number is to know your ‘true self’ and to be closer to God. Assigning an Enneagram number distances ourselves from the responsibility of acknowledging our sin and repenting of it. Ultimately, the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Heuertz and Richard Rohr, *The Sacred Enneagram: Finding Your Unique Path to Spiritual Growth* (Zondervan), 2017, 90.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 110-11.

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Bible gives us direction on how we are to be closer to God and be in right relationship with each other (1 John 1:9; Heb. 3:13, 10:24). Becoming more like Christ includes denying oneself (Mat. 16:24) and considering others (Phil 2:3), instead of being all about my kingdom and my needs. There are more concerns – but this is not meant to be an exhaustive treatment of what the book offers on the subject. Here are some concluding remarks.

### **Conclusion: Why Scripture is the Better Choice**

We must “not turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.” (2 Tim. 4:4) Rather we know that “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (Heb. 4:12) Why would we want to pretend that we know a better way to be closer to God or how to be more like Him – other than being in God’s Word and responding in obedience to His Word by the Holy Spirit who leads us in the process of conforming to be more like Christ?

Personality tests such as Myers Briggs and the Enneagram assume that personality is fixed. Any diligent study of observing people will verify that people change, even at the heart of who they are. Ezekiel 36:26 says that He is able to give a NEW heart and a NEW spirit – changing them from within. I know some individuals who were extreme introverts in their youth but are now extroverts in the way they enjoy life. People change as they surrender in obedience to Christ and pursue Him, or the lack thereof. Christians are to be more focused on being Christ-like than identifying with the newest cleverly devised tool that tells us why we do what we do. We need more who will be a beacon of hope in sharing the sufficiency of Scripture – especially when it comes to knowing who we are and why we do what we do (Anthropology) and how we can better know God (Theology Proper) and in how to please and honor Him (Sanctification). Furthermore, Scripture does not call us to know our personality type for increased sanctification, but we are to know Christ and pursue Him, which will increase our character. Personality tools may not be wrong or sinful, in and of themselves, but are they detracting from the effort and energy we should be using to become more like Christ? There is no better tool to become more like Christ than the Bible – and this is our main goal! (1 Cor. 10:31) It would be better for us to say with David...

<sup>23</sup> Search me, O God, and know my heart!

Try me and know my thoughts!

<sup>24</sup> And see if there be any grievous way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting!

(Psalm 139:23–24)