



THE JOURNAL OF BIBLICAL SOUL CARE

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

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This journal is dedicated to the generation of men and women whose commitment to the Word of God and care of souls has laid the groundwork for a resurgence of biblical soul care. *The Journal of Biblical Soul Care* is a reflection of your dedication to the sufficient Word of God and its ability to speak into the complexities of human nature and experience. The editorial team desires to promote Christian scholarship in the wake of your effective reorganization and apologetic of biblical soul care.

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Editorial: “Education without Experience” and Considerations for Faithfulness

Greg E. Gifford¹

Four volumes ago, I highlighted the burgeoning interest in biblical counseling:² Seminaries, Universities, Bible Colleges, churches, coalitions, publishers, and others are interested in the movement of biblical soul care. What are we seeing? A proper emphasis on education in the sufficiency of Scripture (SoS) and the out workings of the SoS to the application of human lives. Education, training, publications, and the pursuit of an academic discipline are the order of the day. What a joy that students are interested in learning *truly* biblical soul care. What is the net result? Many have education without experience.

In Stan Jones and Edward Butman’s *Modern Psychotherapies*, we have a few anecdotes of how they arrived at their current teaching positions and practices. They provide a synopsis of their interaction with Jay Adams during their tenure as a graduate student. Here is a snapshot:

While in graduate school, one of us spoke to Jay Adams, a well-known writer in the field of Christian counseling. Asked if he had any words of guidance for Christians studying psychology, Adams responded, in essence, “Drop out of graduate school. If you want to serve God as a counselor, you can only do so by going to seminary, studying the Word of God rather than the words of men, and becoming a pastor. Neither of us took Dr. Adams’s advice.”³

Biblical soul care has emphasized the proper order of this recommendation: “study the Word of God.” Handfuls of institutes of higher education have initiated degree programs for this effort, but what of “becoming a pastor”? Is it possible that we are

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² Greg E. Gifford, “Editorial: Introduction, Purpose, and Overview,” *Journal of Biblical Soul Care* (Fall 2017; Vol. 1), 9.

³ Stanton Jones, and Richard Butman. *Modern Psychotherapies*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1991, 18.

creating a sphere in which the work of a minister has become normative for a non-minister?² Part of the wisdom of Jay’s advice is not that we would “become pastors” per se, but that we would engage in the ministerial work of biblical soul care as a pastor would.

Key Ingredients of Pastoral Care

Spiritual Endorsement

Integral to the work of a pastor is that he is called by Scripture to be a man of moral character. Titus 1:6-9 is a case study of identifying those that are “above reproach, the husband of one wife” and a cluster of other character qualifications. Sound doctrine and “holding fast to the Word” are essential skills and convictions of the elder. But part of this effort to appoint elders is that Titus would identify those who meet these criteria, the same command given to Timothy in 1 Timothy 3:1-7.

Identifying elders is part of establishing eldership in a local church. This spiritual endorsement, we could say, is ground zero for biblical leadership in the church. Yes, character and an aptitude to teach the word (1 Tim. 3:2b) are essential but the recognition and affirmation of those by the local church provides a basis for this leadership. Spiritual endorsement is a necessary part of the work of a pastor someone is endorsing the qualifications have been met of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

It is this spiritual endorsement that the field of biblical soul care must vigorously pursue in order to protect future faithfulness. Let us say it another way: what measures does our field currently possess to suggest a person is *unfit* to be a biblical counselor?³ Only a few exist within the entire field, meaning one or two measures out of thousands who would claim to be biblical counselors.⁴ This spiritual endorsement is quintessential to pastoral ministry – and the ministry that is pastoral in nature. Soul care is pastoral in nature, and it must find a way to ensure there are proper amounts of spiritual endorsement for its practitioners.

⁴ Of note, the ACBC Certification process has sought to mitigate this problem by the requirement of a pastoral endorsement of each candidate or counselor. This, in my estimation, is one part of the overall solution. “Biblical counselors will place themselves under the leadership of a church and pursue the accountability of that leadership as it relates to their life, doctrine, and counseling practices.” This statement was taken from ACBC’s Standards of Conduct that can be found at [biblicalcounseling.com](https://biblicalcounseling.com/about/beliefs/positions/standards-of-conduct/#church), “Standards of Conduct,” accessed August 11, 2021, <https://biblicalcounseling.com/about/beliefs/positions/standards-of-conduct/#church>.

Practice and Experience

With endorsement, there must be practice. How is it that Timothy is to appoint the elders of Ephesus? It's by appointing those with known character traits and skills. But how are those skills and character traits evidenced? In practice. The work of a pastor does start with a ministerial calling or desire to be an elder (1 Tim. 3:1). Yet, that desire alone isn't proper grounds for eldership. A man may legitimately aspire to pastoral ministry, but it takes affirmation from observed practice for the biblical qualifications to be met.

You do not know if a man is "apt to teach" without witnessing their teaching. You do not know if a person is "sober minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome" without observing their lifestyle and practice. Practice is a sure-fire way to understand a person's qualifications to be a pastor.

Biblical counseling must also have practice as an important part of evaluation for a person's qualifications to be a biblical counselor. Do those with no experience in practice or no spiritual endorsement pose dangers to the biblical counseling movement? Emphatically, *Yes!* This counselor may not be qualified to counsel. They may not be faithful in counseling. Worse yet, they may ineffectively counsel or teach counseling.

Because of the burgeoning of training in biblical counseling, we have not policed the practice of biblical counseling as effectively as we should. There are those that practice biblical counseling but have no authority, nor endorsement for their ministry. This is not good. However, it can be easily remedied as I will demonstrate.

Resultative Wisdom of Faithful Practice

One more key ingredient is that there is a resultative wisdom in faithful practice. Knowledge is what biblical counseling is currently offering but wisdom is what it must demand of its practitioners. Both are necessary for the advancement of faithful counseling in the church.

Knowledge is advanced through right theological training. It is what seminaries, universities, churches, non-profits, and training centers across the world are doing right now. But wisdom is the application of that theological knowledge to a counselee in this context. Knowledge alone, without the corresponding wisdom cultivated through practice, will be injurious to the biblical counseling movement.

Yet, the grounds for wisdom are not the classroom but the counseling room. It is through the practice of biblical counseling that one actually becomes a wise, biblical counselor. You can have a medical doctorate but no patients, thus you are not a practicing doctor. And you can have training in biblical counseling but not be a practicing biblical counselor. This practice and faithfulness in it as recognized by spiritual endorsement is essential to the movement of biblical counseling.

What Jay shared with Jones and Butman is not only a call to theological education (and it *is* a call to theological education!) but it is a call to pastoral practice. Not that all would be pastors but that those engaging in pastoral work would do so as a pastor would—spiritual endorsement, practice and experience—thus gaining the resultative wisdom of such a practice.

A Way Forward

If education with experience is our current predicament, let me offer a few considerations for a way forward.

Firstly, those that are trainers, professors, and teachers of biblical counseling must submit themselves to a local church in two ways: as a member and as receiving endorsement for their counseling practice. If a person is to teach biblical counseling, how is it possible that they have no spiritual authority overseeing their pastoral work? That is truly not desirable. Rather, the leaders of the movement—they must be the ones who are submitting to spiritual authority and working with spiritual authority to practice in their counseling. This is not to say that every homework assignment they write to a counselee must get elder approval but that these leaders in the movement must have spiritual endorsement to be counseling. Without this endorsement, a biblical counselor is functionally rejecting what they are teaching their counselees of the importance of spiritual leadership and accountability. Furthermore, it lacks accountability for the practice of biblical counseling. To be a teacher, professor, trainer of counselors, and so forth, a person must have spiritual authority and endorsement of their practice.

Secondarily, theological training is absolutely required for those engaged in biblical counseling as counselors and trainers. This theological training is the basis of qualifications regarding knowledge (Rom. 15:15) but also the basis of wisdom. One cannot be truly wise apart from biblical knowledge. Pastoral calling requires an aptitude to teach sound doctrine (Tit. 1:9). The pastoral work of biblical counseling whether one is a pastor or not will always require theological education.

Thirdly, consider a re-evaluation of a biblical counselor after a set time of observing their practice:

- Do counselees receive their teaching and respond to it with excitement?
- Does it seem God is using them to restore people to greater Christlikeness?
- Do they have more counselees that “drop out” of counseling than those that complete counseling and grow through it?
- Are they adversarial with former counselees?
- Is there demonstrative spiritual growth in their life?
- Does their counsel match the doctrine and wisdom from Scripture?
- Has their counseling wisdom proven effective?

Fourthly, there are trainers for new counselors but no trainers for existing counselors. There is no reporting mechanism for current counselors. No case reports, so to speak. Consequently, a great cliff exists where a person is trained and perhaps certified as a biblical counselor only to drop off from any accountability to their practice. By instituting trainers and managers of existing counselors, this issue can be addressed. Existing counselors would need to go through a re-evaluation periodically of their faithfulness as demonstrated in practice.

Fifthly, the leaders of the biblical counseling movement must be those with all these qualities: men and women who have spiritual endorsement, proven and faithful counseling experience, robust theological education, and accountability for their own counsel. It is disingenuous to have trainers as those who were once counselors, pastors, and ministry workers who no longer practice and are no longer under spiritual authority – or perhaps never have practiced. To achieve this end, institutes of higher education, training organizations, and counseling centers should adopt a model of differentiating between the counselor and the trainer of counselors. The counseling trainer and the counselor. In this differentiation, a great preservation of this movement will be offered.

Sixthly, peer review is necessary and must become normative by well-meaning publishers in biblical counseling. By subjecting an author’s resources to peer review, it will enable the author to balance their hypotheses and their experiences to that of others. Due to the practical theology of biblical counseling, wisdom is of utmost value. But wisdom in isolation is not wisdom – it is an opinion. Peer review will strengthen the methodological suggestions by vetting them with dozens of years of wisdom with other experts. And it will form credibility within the ranks. These publications are

necessary, but haste in publishing them will only serve to undermine our effectiveness as a movement overall. Peer review is necessary

I would imagine that some of the most experienced biblical counselors in our ranks would be those that are not teaching at our conferences. Nor do they desire to teach at our conferences. They are not writing and publishing biblical counseling materials, nor do they desire to write and publish biblical counseling materials. They are educated in the Scripture and faithfully practicing that Scripture in their local church underneath spiritual leadership. And they have done so for years. Education without experience is solvable. And for faithfulness to the trustworthy Word and faithful application of that Word, we can solve it; we must solve it.

Volume 5.1

We are entering into our fourth year of the *JBSC* and counting. This journal has from day one been dedicated to the upstream conversations within biblical counseling and intended to provide a space for those within higher education to steer the downstream conversations in the counseling room. I think you will find direction in this current volume. Taylor Wright provides a thoughtful and theological evaluation of Existential-Humanistic psychotherapy (EH). His insights help expose the teleological assumptions of EH while providing a thoroughly anthropological evaluation of EH. Wright's insights will sharpen your understanding.

Ed Wilde again has provided us with considerable truths with which we must address; namely, the place of extra-biblical data and observational data. Wilde says that those in the BC movement have "behaved as the dreaded integrationist without admitting to this fact" (40). Wilde's proposal for "knowledge translation" is beyond intriguing. It demands a response.

Sam Stephens has provided a summary of the challenges that biblical counseling faces through the professionalization of the pastorate. Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) was a trojan horse to pastoral ministry and derailed the genuine care of souls who are qualified for that care. Stephens combines historical and theological cases to prove his thesis.

And finally, Brian Sayers writes to advance an ever-pervasive topic of grounds for divorce and its proper, biblical grounds. Sayers provides a survey of Old and New Testaments to provide what may be seen as grounds for divorce: abuse, neglect, and pornography. I have no doubt his article(s) will challenge you.

The “Review” and “Response” Categories have been left in the journal as a reminder of these opportunities for further advancement. We still need incisive reviews and responses that “sharpen iron.”

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

1 Timothy 1:17

ARTICLES

To Be Or Not to Be, Or to Become?: A Theological Analysis of Existential-Humanistic Psychotherapy

Taylor H. Wright¹

In the last few decades, authenticity has become an in-season spiritual fruit. This desire is not new. Its origins stem from the adoption of existential and humanistic philosophies. When Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) pronounced God’s death, a major philosophical crisis for naturalistic and God-less Western societies began. They asked, “Where can meaning be found?” Existential-Humanistic approaches to psychotherapy came on the heels of 20th century existential-humanistic philosophies. These approaches purposed to help people whose worldview rejects meaning by helping them create their own meaning. Do EH approaches to psychotherapy accomplish their purpose? If these approaches can give meaning, is the meaning they offer worth having? Is it a meaning that can withstand death? In this essay I will be evaluating what has been termed the Existential-Humanistic (EH) approach to psychotherapy. I will begin by analyzing the system and its proposed method of change. After this I will offer a Reformed theological analysis of the system followed by concluding with some implications of the analysis for counseling.²

Existential-Humanistic Psychotherapy’s System and Method

Psychologists Stephen F. Butler and Hans H. Strupp (1921–2006) argued in 1986 that there is no place for considering psychotherapy to be a medical profession, for the work of a psychotherapist is inseparably ground within an “interpersonal (social-

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² I would like to thank Dr. Nathanael J. Brooks of Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte for his instruction in theology and counseling and for his help editing this paper.

symbolic) context” and “cannot be reduced to a set of disembodied techniques because techniques gain their meaning and, in turn, their effectiveness from the particular interaction of the individuals involved.”³ For the EH psychotherapist, this idea should not be understated.⁴ EH therapy is a humanistic therapy.⁵ Humanistic therapies include various other approaches, such as person-centered, emotion-focused, and existential meaning-making, and therefore share similar ideas of what matters in counseling.⁶ What matters could be summarized as “the centrality of a genuinely empathic and prizing *therapeutic relationship*,” “promotion of in-therapy client *experiencing*” which should be “stimulated” by the therapist since “clients are viewed as meaning-creating, symbolizing agents;” a focus on “survival, growth, personal agency, and the creation of meaning;” and being cognizant that every human

³Stephen Butler and Hans Strupp, “Specific and Nonspecific Factors in Psychotherapy: A Problematic Paradigm for Psychotherapy Research,” *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training* 23 (1986): 33. While this argument is an analysis of psychotherapy as medicine, it should be noted that it does not strictly contradict a common factors approach to psychotherapy. While they reject the null hypothesis, they do effectively advocate for common factors by defining psychotherapy as “the systematic use of a human relationship for therapeutic purposes” (36). Further, the authors go on to state, “The first postulate is that the purpose of psychotherapy research is to understand how one person (the therapist) influences or fails to influence another person (the patient) within a therapeutic context. Therapeutic context, in turn, can be further defined as a particular interpersonal context in which one person (the patient) seeks some benefit from another (the therapist). Implicit in these statements is the assumption that it is the therapist, not ‘the therapy,’ which is the instrument of this beneficial influence” (37) which is remarkably similar to Heath Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling: The Doctrinal Foundations of Counseling Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 13, who defines counseling as “a conversation where one party with questions, problems, and trouble seeks assistance from someone they believe has answers, solutions, and help.” For a study which showed no difference between Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Person-centered Therapy, and Psychodynamic therapy, see William Stiles et al., “Effectiveness of Cognitive-Behavioural, Person-Centred, and Psychodynamic Therapies in UK Primary-Care Routine Practice: Replication in a Larger Sample,” *Psychological Medicine* 38 (2008): 677–88. For a study which considered the importance of empathy for psychotherapeutic success, see Robert Elliott et al., “Therapist Empathy and Client Outcome: An Updated Meta-Analysis,” *Psychotherapy* 55.4 (2018): 399–410. Such empathy is a fundamental common factors element identified by psychotherapists.

⁴Lynne Angus et al., “Humanistic Psychotherapy Research 1990–2015: From Methodological Innovation to Evidence-Supported Treatment Outcomes and Beyond,” *Psychotherapy Research* 25 (2014): 3, “The incorporation of more humanistic principles of practice has been fuelled by systematic research in the investigation of key processes of change, particularly in HP treatment approaches.”

⁵While I will not explore the philosophical roots of EH therapy, existentialism is usually traced to Kierkegaard. Andrew B Torrance, “Beyond Existentialism: Kierkegaard on the Human Relationship with the God Who Is Wholly Other,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16.3 (2014): 295–312, argues that Kierkegaard has been misread by most commentators. This is because they read him as an existentialist, but his emphasis upon the incarnation and union with Christ as necessary for salvation prevents him from so being. He writes on 304, “Grace, for Kierkegaard, does not simply perfect our natural state; it redefines it.”

⁶For an early approach to existentialism in psychotherapy, see Paul Tillich, “Existentialism and Psychotherapy,” *Pittsburgh Perspective* 1.2 (1960): 3–12.

is unique and not reducible to a label.⁷

Rooted in existentialist philosophy, EH therapy is subjective because a client must choose and make choices “to confront the truths of existence.”⁸ This is because EH offers counsel for “two basic questions: ‘What does it mean to be fully human?’ and ‘How does that understanding illuminate the vital or fulfilled life?’”⁹ A client’s ultimate source of change is found within himself (i.e., his free yet responsible will), but the client needs the therapist to realize this latent potential.¹⁰ Stated another way: change does not come through following a strict process resulting in a guaranteed outcome but by engaging in the various realities of a person’s life experiences and finding options within that person’s life. EH therapy is a reaction to impersonal, “one-way mechanistic causal models, as opposed to complex nonlinear self-organizing processes.”¹¹ The point is this: a common factors approach to psychotherapy is more jarring to second wave CBT than EH therapy.¹² This is because “E-H therapy places a

⁷Angus et al., “Humanistic Psychotherapy Research 1990–2015,” 2, emphases original.

⁸Irvin D. Yalom, *Love’s Executioner and Other Tales of Psychotherapy* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), xiii; see James W. Woelfel, “Enduring Legacy of Existentialism,” *Encounter* 35.3 (1974): 243–61, for a summary and defense of existentialism as a valuable philosophy.

⁹K. Schneider, J. Pierson, and J. Bugental, eds., *The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology: Theory, Research and Practice*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015), xvii, cited in Angus et al., “Humanistic Psychotherapy Research 1990–2015,” 1. Note here the push back against nihilism. When Nietzsche pronounced God dead, he did so understanding the nihilistic implications; existentialism here seeks to find meaning in a meaningless world. Just what is a “vital” life or a “fulfilled life” in a nihilistic system?

¹⁰See Carl R. Rogers, “The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change,” *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training* 44.3 (2007): 240–48, in which Rogers argues that his person-centered therapy essentials are actually common factors of all approaches to psychotherapy. Jeanne Watson, “Reassessing Rogers’ Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Change,” *Psychotherapy (Chicago, Ill.)* 44 (2007): 268–73, seeks to evaluate Rogers’s proposals for his common factors by arguing for the need also of guidance from a psychotherapist and argues the need is to find the “optimal ratio” between Rogers’s factors and guidance in psychotherapy, meaning she is arguing that “specific techniques” (271) are necessary.

EH therapy is, per Kirk J. Schneider and Orah T. Krug, “Existential Humanistic Psychotherapies,” in *Essential Psychotherapies: Theory and Practice*, ed. Stanley B. Messer and Nadine J. Kaslow, 4th ed. (New York: Guilford, 2020), 265, aimed at individual freedom, not “caprice or licentiousness, or even truth in the unqualified sense,” but “the capacity for choice.”

¹¹Angus et al., “Humanistic Psychotherapy Research 1990–2015,” 2.

¹²For an introduction to psychotherapy, common factors approaches, and the current psychological research, see Bruce E. Wampold, *The Basics of Psychotherapy: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed., Theories of Psychotherapy Series (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2019). A major emphasis of Wampold’s throughout this book is that no particular theory of psychotherapy has proven to be better than any other in every case. Some research he cites highlights particular therapies as beneficial for particular problems.

premium on factors that are held in common across the different therapies.”¹³ To appropriate Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987), former professor of systematics at Westminster Theological Seminary, there are no brute facts in the EH psychotherapy system, only persons who experience.¹⁴

Two Key Terms: Presence And Meaning

As an intensely individual therapy,¹⁵ EH emphasizes “presence” as the chief instrument, *and* as the chief ground to bring about the individual’s change, *and* as the chief *telos* of counseling.¹⁶ Therefore, to understand EH therapy, one must understand this concept of presence. Presence in EH therapy is more vaguely “the holding and illuminating of clients’ moment-to-moment experience.”¹⁷ A slightly more concrete

¹³Schneider and Krug, “Existential Humanistic Psychotherapies,” 262. This is claimed despite having research barriers. One such barrier is obtaining funding for studying effectiveness. Studies such as Barry A. Farber, Jessica Y. Suzuki, and David A. Lynch, “Positive Regard and Psychotherapy Outcome: A Meta-Analytic Review,” *Psychotherapy (Chic)* 55.4 (2018): 411–23; Robert Elliott and Ben Shahar, “Emotion-Focused Therapy for Social Anxiety (EFT-SA),” *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies* 16.2 (2017): 140–58, and Rhonda Goldman, Leslie Greenberg, and Lynne Angus, “The Effects of Adding Emotion-Focused Interventions to the Therapeutic Relationship in the Treatment of Depression,” *Psychotherapy Research* 16 (2006): 537–49, are thus more than tangentially related to EH therapy in that EH has more in common with person-centered and emotion-focused therapies. Yet, as Godfrey et al. conclude in “Investigating the Active Ingredients of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and Counselling for Patients with Chronic Fatigue in Primary Care: Developing a New Process Measure to Assess Treatment Fidelity and Predict Outcome,” *The British Journal of Clinical Psychology / the British Psychological Society* 46 (2007): 253–72, all such studies on effectiveness are questioned in the light of common factors approaches to psychotherapy, for “A possible explanation for how different prescribed techniques can be so alike in practice, is that the theoretical language used by each brand name masks processes that are in fact quite similar” (266). While some would say this means they are equally right, it is just as fair to claim they are equally wrong. See Angus et al., “Humanistic Psychotherapy Research 1990–2015” for a meta-analysis of EH studies. They also lament the lack of influence humanistic psychotherapy has in comparison to CBT on 11.

¹⁴Carl Michalson, “Existentialism Is a Mysticism,” *Theology Today* 12.3 (1955): 359, “Not that man *is* the truth about being, but that man’s quest for the truth begins where a man is, inside his own skin, up against the conditions of life which describe his perimeter. Not that man is the last word about the meaning of life but that he is the most accessible and the most revealing clue to the meaning and that such meaning is most apt to come to him as a man *en route*.” Emphases original.

¹⁵Yalom, *Love’s Executioner*, xv, “The human being either asserts autonomy by heroic self-assertion, or seeks safety through fusing with a superior being....”

¹⁶Schneider and Krug, “Existential Humanistic Psychotherapies,” 266–79. On 266, “Presence not only forms the ground for E-H encounter, but it is also the therapeutic method and culminates in its goal.” A couple pages earlier, on 264, Schneider and Krug call “presence” the “*sine qua non*” of EH therapy. To what degree a study like Gerhard Andersson et al., “Guided Internet-Based Vs. Face-to-Face Cognitive Behavior Therapy for Psychiatric and Somatic Disorders: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” - 13.3 (2014): 288–95, suggests for the importance of face-to-face presence is a different story.

¹⁷Schneider and Krug, “Existential Humanistic Psychotherapies,” 263.

definition would be to call presence an awareness that “reconnects people to their pain” and “attunes people to the opportunities to transform or transcend that pain.”¹⁸ Perhaps the simplest definition might be “attention, choice, and freedom” within one’s environment.¹⁹ This notion of presence has to do with EH therapy’s focus upon the present moment and current experiences (i.e., *presence* within the *present*).²⁰ Having this presence determines a patient’s truly spontaneous ability to change, not a man’s ability to produce new results in the present situation from old trainings in a deterministic manner.²¹ This instrument, ground, and *telos* presence is reflected in therapy when patients “achieve an awareness of self, and reformulat[e] or synthesiz[e] their subjective experience and feelings to promote problem resolution.”²² Presence must be geared not towards mere “intellectual or behavioral or physiological change” but a “sense of agency or personal involvement that core change requires.”²³ Presence is meant to enable people to respond to one’s experiences rather than persist as a victim of one’s circumstances.

Presence is tied to the therapeutic relationship and utilized by the therapist.²⁴ Presence is directly related to the Rogerian idea of congruence (i.e., its intrapersonal

¹⁸Schneider and Krug, “Existential Humanistic Psychotherapies,” 280.

¹⁹Schneider and Krug, “Existential Humanistic Psychotherapies,” 281.

²⁰Irvin D. Yalom, *The Gift of Therapy: An Open Letter to a New Generation of Therapists and Their Patients*, Reissued. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2017), terms this the “here-and-now” and discusses it primarily from 46–89.

²¹Contra Robert Epstein, “Skinner, Creativity, and the Problem of Spontaneous Behavior,” *Psychological Science* 2.6 (1991): 362–70, who, on 369, suggests his desire to see “isms” die, and contra Leslie S Greenberg and Juan Pascual-Leone, “A Dialectical Constructivist View of the Creation of Personal Meaning,” *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 14 (2001): 165–86, who see all human choices as response to circumstantial input. On 179 they write, “Emergence of new meaning is facilitated by vivid evocation in therapy of emotionally laden experience, which brings emotions into contact with reflective processes.” I would note the similarity in a deterministic response to a circumstance interpreted through one’s emotions and a wrestling with the givens of reality to make a choice.

²²Jeanne Watson and Danielle Bedard, “Clients’ Emotional Processing in Psychotherapy: A Comparison Between Cognitive-Behavioral and Process-Experiential Therapies,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 74 (2006): 157; This study and the following: Jeanne Watson et al., “Comparing the Effectiveness of Process-Experiential With Cognitive-Behavioral Psychotherapy in the Treatment of Depression,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 71 (2003): 773–81, sought to show how PET can be more effective than CBT. It should be no surprise that PET fared better in situations involving emotions.

²³Schneider and Krug, “Existential Humanistic Psychotherapies,” 280. The original reads: “As previously indicated, the core of E-H change processes is presence. Without presence, there may well be intellectual or behavioral or physiological change but not necessarily the sense of agency or personal involvement that core change requires.”

²⁴Humanistic therapy research claims that “the collaborative nature” and “the authentic personal relationship is fundamental to effective practice.” See Angus et al., “Humanistic Psychotherapy Research 1990–2015,” 10.

and interpersonal elements). It is marked by a level of honesty and open communication (i.e., “authenticity”²⁵) for all humanistic practices. EH therapy expands the idea of congruence with elements of time and finitude.²⁶ Presence in other words is more than personal relationships and reflective meditation.

To illustrate this, psychologist William R. Miller writes from an experiential angle. He expresses his desire to find a principle which can explain why people get better in brief interventions as well as long ones. His answer is love, which he defines through a popular yet skewed definition of the Greek word *agape*.²⁷ He then casts this *agape* in Rogerian psychotherapeutic terms of patience, selflessness, acceptance, hope, and positive regard, and thus makes *agape* a skill to be developed.²⁸ Presence, at least in the interpersonal sphere, involves a psychotherapeutic love.

If a patient can develop presence to a sufficient degree, then a person will be enabled to respond to their experiences. For a person’s presence to grow, they must wrestle with their resistance towards present circumstances and circumstantial responses.²⁹ As they grow, a person “[chooses] rather than [succumbs] to the paths that

²⁵CONCISE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY, s.v. “Authentic” defines the word as “of undisputed origin or veracity; genuine.”; MERRIAM-WEBSTER’S COLLEGIATE THESAURUS, s.v. “Authentic” defines the word as “worthy of acceptance because of accuracy” or “being exactly as appears or is claimed.”

²⁶Greg Kolden et al., “Congruence/Genuineness: A Meta-Analysis,” *Psychotherapy* 55 (2018): 424-33; Schneider and Krug, “Existential Humanistic Psychotherapies”, cover the intrapersonal on 268-272 and the interpersonal from 272-275. Both are said to be opposed by “resistance” or “protection” (275-278).

²⁷See NIDNTE 1, s.v. “ἄγαπᾶν (Agapaō)” for a more elaborative and exegetically sound approach to the word.

²⁸William R. Miller, “Rediscovering Fire: Small Interventions, Large Effects.,” *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors* 14.1 (2000): 6-18. On 15 he writes, “One might hypothesize, for example, that clients who are initially motivated for change would be better prepared to respond to loving encouragement that assumes personal autonomy, choice, and responsibility for change,” which clearly recasts the entire notion of biblical love, which cannot be subsumed under the single term *agape*. Miller is not searching to present biblical love, but a modern interpretation of self-sacrificial love which ends up sounding like a Rogerian love.

²⁹Carol S. Dweck and Ellen L. Leggett, “A Social-Cognitive Approach to Motivation and Personality,” *Psychological Review* 95.2 (1988): 256-73, seek to understand how people’s different responses to problems affect their growth. On 258-259, they write, “To conclude, the Diener and Dweck research suggests that whereas helpless individuals appear to focus on their ability and its adequacy (or inadequacy), mastery-oriented ones appear to focus on mastery through strategy and effort; whereas helpless individuals appear to view challenging problems as a threat to their self-esteem, mastery-oriented ones appear to view them as opportunities for learning something new.” In my interpretation, there is similarity between this concept of approaching difficulties through effort towards a goal and EH’s counsel of approaching issues through wrestling with one’s choices. That being said, Schneider and Krug, “Existential Humanistic Psychotherapies,” 259, state that personality and understanding it are “limited” because what matters in EH is “[living] an experience,” not “[experiencing] a personality.”

beckon them, [developing] a sense of life meaning” which in turn leads to “revitalization” or “intentionality” all of which is further related to a patient’s “attitude” towards their “inmost aspirations, sensibilities, and values” and their willingness to risk loss or gain.³⁰ To summarize, a man gains meaning from his person and whole life experience. EH therapies seek to counsel a patient to be present within their whole life experience so that he can respond to his whole life experience. The person who thus develops presence-and-response will in turn generate meaning and purpose.³¹

Theological Analysis

To summarize, EH therapy sees the solution to individual people’s problems as needing to gain presence through therapeutic interactions to make responsible choices and thereby to create meaning. I will analyze EH therapy theologically in the reverse order of this summary.³²

Meaning

Within EH psychotherapy therapy is a dialectic, or tension, between impersonal materialistic monism and a sense of something more, spiritual, personal a subset of

³⁰Schneider and Krug, “Existential Humanistic Psychotherapies,” 278. Again, I ask, what do attitudes and aspirations matter at all, not just ultimately, if the world is ultimately meaningless?

³¹Note that Yalom, *Love’s Executioner*, xiii, rejects the existence of ultimate purpose.

³²See the critique of existentialism in George M Johnson, “Existentialism and the Christian Faith,” *Foundations* 3.1 (1960): 53–63; for discussion of relating philosophy and theology, see Leroy T. Howe, “A Preface to Theological Philosophy,” *Heythrop Journal* 13.1 (1972): 54–62. Such a discussion is important given EH therapy is grounded in existentialist and humanist philosophies. For a pluralist’s internal critique of the pluralist project, where theology is defined in existentialist terms, see George V. Karuvelil, “Absolutism to Ultimacy: Rhetoric and Reality of Religious ‘Pluralism,’” *Theological Studies* 73 (2012): 55–81. For a then-contemporary review of Tillich’s thought and a push for existentialism and theology blended, see James Calvin Keene, “An Existential Theology,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 10.1 (1952): 56–73. I will be arguing against such a position, that existentialism contains some common-grace-gifted truths but ultimately comes up short and thus a syncretistic enterprise with existential thought is to be rejected. While I find his statement in review of Tillich: “Theology is meaningful and of value only as it relates to life” (58) to be well said, I believe the implication is theology which is not immediately practical for man’s modern problems is not of use, and to this I object. For a discussion of how Eastern Orthodoxy is a proper Christian existentialism ground in Palamism, see Maximos Metr. Aghiorghoussis, “Christian Existentialism of the Greek Fathers: Persons, Essence, and Energies on God,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 23.1 (1978): 15–41; For a Roman Catholic critique of existentialism, see George H. (George Henry) Tavad, “Christianity and the Philosophies of Existence,” *Theological Studies* 18.1 (1957): 1–16.

what theologian Michael Horton has called supernatural naturalism.³³ Outside of its research, EH rejects the materialist presuppositions of other psychological schools. They reject these presuppositions as leading to understanding people as machines living linear lives. EH psychotherapies believe that for a strict linear model of counseling to work, every person would need to live the same experiences. EH psychotherapy rejects this linear model: what helps one person, will not help another. This is because each person has unique experiences, and therefore each person breaks the materialist monist mold. It is this individual uniqueness which EH says enables the creation of meaning out of meaninglessness. It is this individual uniqueness that reveals each person's need for a personal, individual approach to counseling.³⁴ To illustrate, EH therapists help clients flip through their choose-your-own-adventure book when the client fails to progress.³⁵ When a client falls into an analysis or decision paralysis, they cease growing presence. The EH therapist helps the client to determine their available choices so that the client can escape a rut in life.

But this is not solving the problem: the problem is a lack of an objective meaning, and objective meaning requires a referent outside the subject.³⁶ Only God can provide such an objective standard and meaning because he is not the individual and therefore, he can determine meaning in accordance with his own being, aseity, and creator rights (i.e., the Creator-creature distinction). He is the meaning, and all other meanings are subsumed under his ultimate existence because he has created them and thereby determined their meaning (cf. Gen 1:1; Rom 11:36; Col 1:16; Heb 2:10). Apart from God, subjective meaning in EH therapy is a subset of meaninglessness; true and ultimate meaning cannot be derived from ultimate meaninglessness—the nature of ultimates. This is not to deny that individuals can take great pleasure in their choices and have life-and-meaning enriching experiences. The problem is that EH therapy misunderstands these life enriching experiences with origin. A person's experiences bring joy not because of the sum total of all meaning, but because they are

³³Michael S. Horton, "The Gospel in a Secular Age" (Lecture presented at the Harold O. J. Brown Lecture Series, Charlotte, NC, 19 February 2019). He argued that the main mindset among post-Enlightenment people has been essentially materialistic pantheism. See Michalson, "Existentialism Is a Mysticism."

³⁴Commenting on psychological approaches that focus on DSM labeling, on "Existential Humanistic Psychotherapies," 265, Schneider and Krug write, "Such approaches are considered valid only to the extent that they resonate with the living, evolving individuals to whom they are applied."

³⁵For those who don't know, a choose-your-own-adventure novel is a second-person story that involves the reader making choices as to what story he reads. At the end of a passage of narrative, the reader must select either page A or page B to read what happens next based on his decision.

³⁶Such was Vassady's critique of Sartre's atheistic existentialism in "A Theology of Hope for the Philosophy of Despair," *Theology Today* 5.2 (1948): 158–73.

derived from ultimate meaning—whether one believes in ultimate meaning or not. Such an issue is found in attempts to blend existentialism/EH therapy with Christianity.³⁷ If meaning is to be objective, challenged beliefs and options are little more than a reductionism, a coping mechanism for present struggles.³⁸ Therefore counselees need instruction in truth to find truth. Meaning must be correlated to truth; deceitful or illusory meaning is false. Falsehoods are enslaving and not of freedom (cf. John 8:32–47).³⁹ If one is to live a meaningful life, a fulfilling life, one must walk in truth.

Choices

If truth is the arbiter of meaning, then making seemingly fulfilling choices is unfit to create life meaning. EH therapy understands choice-making to be a spiritual enterprise.⁴⁰ If a client can make new and more authentic choices—become more spiritual—then they will have access to a more fulfilling life in the face of ultimate meaninglessness.⁴¹ But in the words of Solomon, this, too, is vanity. Ecclesiastes

³⁷James A. Saunders, “Cognitive-Existential Family Therapy: A Proposed Theoretical Integration Model for Pastoral Counselors,” *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 69.1 (2015): 34–39.

³⁸Contra Frederic H. Peters, “Existential Anxiety and Religiosity,” *Critical Research on Religion* 7.3 (2019): 275–91.

³⁹Young-Taek Hong, “Existential Concern and Pastoral Counseling,” *Korean Journal of Christian Studies* 101 (2016): 258, “Thus the existentialism encourages people to move from false faith to authenticity. Change in psychotherapy is viewed as discarding the defensive and inauthentic beliefs and behaviors that obstruct authentic growth process....To help a client reexamine and clarify her values and philosophical or religious perspectives in life leads her to viewing the problems and the life in a different way.”

⁴⁰Schneider and Krug, “Existential-Humanistic Psychotherapies,” 279–80. For an understanding of spirituality as something available to the secular/non-religious, see R. Scott Webster, “An Existential Framework of Spirituality,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 9.1 (2004): 7–19, which defines spirituality as simply: “engagement with the meaning of one’s life” (7).

⁴¹Russell F. Aldwinckle, “How Did Existentialism Become Atheistic,” *Review & Expositor* 51.1 (1954): 29–47; Gordon R. Lewis, “Augustine and Existentialism,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 8.1 (1965): 13–22, argues that Augustine was not an existentialist, though he did affirm certain existentialist principles of the importance of man’s personal experience. Johnson, “Existentialism and the Christian Faith”, argues that Christianity and existentialism are not fundamentally opposed because existentialism is more like a mental tool which helps one to live out that which he believes. See also Helmut Kuhn, “Existentialism: Christian and Anti-Christian,” *Theology Today* 6.3 (1949): 311–23, who makes similar arguments for general existentialism, but existentialism proper, he says, “is thought which endeavors to become self-authenticating by including the trial of suffering within its own domain. This thought begins with a negation. It denies reason’s power to provide meaning. But since we cannot live without meaning, the result is despair. Such is the trial of suffering for the thinking mind. No thought is authentic unless it has traversed despair, the Existentialist claims, and he offers himself as an expert guide through those bleak regions.”

describes life under the sun and its fleetingness or meaninglessness.⁴² On one level, this is the existentialist nihilist's book,⁴³ but the book is crying out for, or rather instructing to acquire, meaning and purpose in God (3:1 15; 5:1 7; 8:1 17; 12:9 14), not human experience (1:12 18 rejects meaning in having wisdom; 2:1 11 rejects meaning in pleasure; 2:12 17 rejects meaning in wise living; 2:18 23 rejects meaning in work; 5:8 6:9 rejects meaning in wealth; etc.). As Ecclesiastes 1:2 11 emphasizes, life on the earth continues as it has been, yet no meaning is ever derived from human activity (1:3 4) or its processes. With the fleeting passage of time, one's choices will be forgotten upon the earth; searching for meaning in that which will be forgotten is a dead end path (1:11). Someone can make all the choices they want, yet "All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full" (1:7).⁴⁴ No choice can change this circuitous process: "Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'? It has been already in the ages before us" (1:10). EH therapy seeks to undo the vanity of a godless world by making meaning out of this nothingness, and its endeavors according to Ecclesiastes, are all for nought. The issue: EH therapy seeks meaning "under the sun" rather than in the new creation of Christ's resurrection.⁴⁵

There is much to be praised in EH therapy's recognition of the need for humans to make choices given their limitations; humans are bounded, not limitless. Recognizing humanity's finiteness requires humility. But finitude exacerbates meaninglessness. Choice is not a key to freedom, only an array of options; what does it matter in the face of fear to be cowardly or brave? They are but two options. Subjective meaning can make one more ambitious, but subjective meaning cannot provide hope for obtaining meaning. In EH understanding, the end is still the same: final nothingness in death. There is nothing beyond death to hope in or for. In EH, a person's choices determine what a person is. Before he makes choices, he is nothing,⁴⁶ and in the end he returns to nothing.

Yet the scriptures affirm that man is made in God's image even from the womb

⁴²On the meaning of Ecclesiastes's "vanity" or *hebel*, see Gordon H. Johnston, "הָבֵל (Hābal)," *NIDOTTE* 1:1003 5; Belcher, Richard P., *Ecclesiastes: A Mentor Commentary*, Mentor Commentaries (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 2017), 72 75, understands the word to mean meaningless without reference to fleetingness; I see the two as intrinsically related concepts in Ecclesiastes. My view agrees with John D. Currid, *Ecclesiastes: A Quest for Meaning?*, 2015, 5 18.

⁴³Peter sees Ecclesiastes as a most fitting book for theist/atheist dialogues given its focus upon the meaningless of life and its anthropological focus in C. B. Peter, "In Defence of Existence: A Comparison Between Ecclesiastes and Albert Camus," *Bangalore Theological Forum* 12.1 (1980): 26 43.

⁴⁴All scripture citations are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

⁴⁵Harry R. Boer, "Meaninglessness and the Book of Ecclesiastes," *Reformed Journal* 2.8 (1952): 11 14.

⁴⁶John MacQuarrie, "Existentialism and Religion," *Bangalore Theological Forum* 9.1 (1977): 1 12.

and that God knows all of a man's days before he comes into existence (Gen 1:26-31; Ps 139). Therefore the meaning of man, the purpose of man, and man's created value is not dependent upon man's choices. For human choices to matter, they must be grounded in God's sovereignty, such that God's divine prerogatives and human responsibility are maintained (e.g., Prov 16:9; Acts 4:27-28). Sovereignty and providence establish a context for meaningful human choices. If human choices are not guided by divine predetermination (i.e., libertarian free will limited or not), then human choices only become meaningful under certain conditions (e.g., if those decisions are used to know God, to do something for God, or are used to pronounce judgment).⁴⁷ But under a soft-determinism, all choices matter, for every choice bears responsibility (which EH desires) and no choice happens at random, without purpose, without the personal (i.e., chance and fatalism). A paradoxical relationship between divine sovereignty and human will results in meaning inherent to every human life, thought, and decision. Humans need not create their own purpose.

Yet, even for the humility in EH's assertions, that man can bring about important growth by his own willpower carries pride. A true recognition of man's finiteness should lead one to recognize that man's change is outside of his ability to choose. Man certainly may will himself to go down either the left or right fork in the road of life, but man's will cannot change his own heart so that he will glorify God. If truth is to be found in God's ultimate existence, and if walking in truth is how we bring glory to God and align ourselves with ultimate meaning, then choosing the left or right fork means nothing if it is not directed towards God's glory with a pure heart. EH's denial of original sin and its noetic effects means that EH sees man's problem of finitude all while failing to comprehend man's finitude in volition.⁴⁸ Man's finitude exists both by his creaturely nature and by sin, and sin requires God's gracious intervention and forgiveness. Man does not need new choices to be free. He needs freedom from slavery to sin and death to be free (Rom 8:2-8; cf. Rom 6:1-23).⁴⁹ If a man is enslaved, then man cannot change himself. God must liberate, change, and redeem him by his grace (Eph 2:1-10). Choices can only cooperate with God's ongoing work of

⁴⁷How much worse if there is no divine to reach by one's choices!

⁴⁸EH psychotherapies recognize that any particular individual's choices are limited by their personal circumstances. The point here is that sin prevents man from changing his heart unto God who provides meaning. One choice may seem better than another and may seem to promote more meaning, but this is only true insofar as that meaning is derived from God.

⁴⁹Romans 6:1-23 discusses moving from slavery to sin to being slaves of righteousness (6:19) but an underlying notion of this slavery is that it is also a freedom from sin (cf. 6:20; 7:4-6; 8:2-8). Martin Luther, "Bondage of the Will," in *Career of the Reformer*, ed. Philip S. Watson, trans. Philip S. Watson and Benjamin Drewery, American Edition., vol. 33 of *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 3-295.

sanctification (Phil 2:12-13) and cannot generate change.

A further problem is that EH must establish what the fulfilling life—a moral category—is apart from God, which it does by turning to culture. EH psychotherapy's goal is not wiser but freer choices, unhindered by presuppositions, dogmas, rigid codes, or anything limiting (cf. John 8:32). The client determines where freedom lies (with the help of the therapist). What justification is there for this concept other than imbibing the pluralist and relativist zeitgeist? For EH therapy, the act of one's choosing makes it so, but this presumes one can choose freedom rather than alternative slaveries.

If death is man's great limiter (Heb 2:14-18, especially 2:15),⁵⁰ then man does not need more choices. Increasing choices leads only to avoiding the inevitability of death. Instead, people need the option of life, a point with which EH psychotherapy would agree. However, theologically speaking, man always chooses sin and death when left to his own choices (Rom 6:23). Giving a man thirty more ways to choose sin does not solve the actual problem that he follows sin. Man needs a radical heart change brought by redemption from slavery that enables him to choose differently from whatever he has chosen before (though cf. Rom 7:7-25).⁵¹ This new option, to reuse the fork in the road analogy, is the option to choose between the path of righteousness and life over wickedness and death (cf. Ps 1). This is not something that can be solved by adding Christ into existentialism.⁵² EH therapy leaves freedom to a person's choice, but there

⁵⁰For existentialist musings on death, see William F. Lynch, "Death as Nothingness," *Continuum* 5.3 (1967): 459-69; Richard Hinners, "Death as Possibility," *Continuum* 5.3 (1967): 470-82. In the former, his reflections are geared towards how much man struggles when he fails to think well about death. Peter-Paul Verbeek, "Designing the Human Condition: Reflections on Technology and Religion," *ET Studies* 1.1 (2010): 39-52, discusses three approaches to technology in an existentialist framework: the instrumental, the substantive, and the constitutive. He argues that human existence is "technologically mediated" (4). He argues technology is constitutive and changes the way man understands death. For a pastoral reflection upon death, read William M Lawbaugh, "Existential, Theological, and Psychological Concepts of Death: A Personal Retrospective," *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 59.1-2 (2005): 17-27.

⁵¹I understand Rom 7:7-25 as referring to believers who continue struggling with sin. For an opposing view, see Herman N. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 126-30.

⁵²For such attempts, see Saunders, "Cognitive-Existential Family Therapy"; Hong, "Existential Concern and Pastoral Counseling." Hong argues on 263 that pastors must not be authoritative in matters of sin, yet a pastoral counselor who is following truth must defer in all matters to the word of God. The pastor has authority because the word of God has authority and his office is recognition of God's calling for him to exercise authority. There is not an issue with understanding a person's whole story, nor with understanding how the pastor functions as a representative for Christ within the Christian community, but it is precisely in this area of authority that the pastor is more than a healing presence or a therapeutic relationship. The pastor presents to congregants the way of life and death,

is only one real decision: Christ or something else. Freedom is either in Christ alone or it is not (John 14:6). EH psychotherapy argues that meaning comes from freedom, but if meaning is found in truth, as argued above, then freedom must be found in truth (John 8:32-47, esp. 32, 34, 36, 43-45). Conversely, slavery is found in lies and deception (cf. 2 Tim 2:24-26). EH therapy seeks to confront anxiety and the fear of death (i.e., the truths of existence) with meaning and choices. It wants death to be motivation to live more fully now since death ceases meaning. However, the proffered solution is ultimately an avoidance of death rather than responding fully to its reality. They offer the option of life up until death, not life from death.

Presence

Developing presence in EH therapy is at the heart of its therapy; an individual needs it to make choices and meaning. A therapist's task is to cultivate it. Growing in meditation and reflection upon one's life and nature are noble endeavors, and understanding presence as a skill to be developed is also praiseworthy.⁵³ R. H. Martin⁵⁴ agreed that what makes theological truths valid is a "participative experience" in the divine, or the subjective and existentialist aspects of religion is what makes its claims true.⁵⁵

But presence by itself is an insufficient instrument, ground, and *telos* for acquiring enlivening meaning and choices. As argued above, objective meaning is found in God and human choices have meaning because of God's foreordaining (i.e., the ground of meaning).

If these propositions are true, then presence ascertains meaning (i.e., it does not create it). Ascertaining objective meaning enables living in light of that meaning. To live in light of this meaning is wisdom (cf. Prov 1:7; 3:5-8).⁵⁶ Presence alone cannot

and counselees would do well to heed these warnings. A more balanced combining of the two can be seen in Charles W. Stewart, "Existential Dimension in Pastoral Theology," *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 15.1 (1961): 40-41, but it is perhaps because his words are few that there is little to argue against and much to agree with.

⁵³I would argue Calvin is doing something analogous in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 1:33-38.

⁵⁴Renwick Harper Martin held a doctorate, serving as president at Geneva College (1916-1920), and he was president of the National Reform Association and a minister in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America in the early to mid-20th century.

⁵⁵R. H. Martin, *The Day: A Manual on the Christian Sabbath* (Pittsburgh, PA: National Reform Association, 1933), 1-2.

⁵⁶Jeffrey Morgan, "Grace and Christianity's Requirement: Moral Striving in Kierkegaard's Judge for Yourself!", *Heythrop Journal* 55.5 (2014): 916-26.

guarantee wisdom; wisdom has a source (Jas 1:5) and must be studied (2 Tim 3:14-17) to find meaning and freedom—salvation—in the person of Jesus Christ (John 5:39; 14:6). It is presence in the truth that shapes a man and brings understanding (i.e., the instrument; cf. Prov 1:7; John 17:17).

One can have and develop presence in falsehoods, but such presence will not bring understanding (cf. Ps 1; Prov 1⁵⁷). And since truth is something external to man, not within himself, man needs more than an increase in his own presence. Man needs God's presence through Jesus Christ, Immanuel, unto the Triune God (John 1:12-14, 18; 14:8-11). Man obtains God's presence by being drawn into Christ (John 6:44) and by running headlong into Christ (Matt 11:25-30). Meaning is not found or produced when counselees have more options or have better options or have better understanding of their options. Counselees need one option⁵⁸ to find meaning: the life of the Son of God living inside of them and conforming them to himself (i.e., the *telos*; Gal 2:20; Rom 8:28-30; 2 Cor 3:18).

Counseling Implications Of The Theological Analysis And Conclusion

The existentialist recognizes the abyss of death and how a man responds to the brink determines his life: authentic or inauthentic. The EH therapist brings his counselee, nervous about the brink, to the cliff, and challenges them to face it head on and with thrill. Death does in fact reconcile a man to the reality of his mortality. EH psychotherapy is keen to observe this. But if death is only a spur to live life more fully, then: "Let us eat and drink, for *tomorrow* we die" (Isa 22:13; 1 Cor 15:32; cf. Luke 12:19; emphasis mine). But as Christ says, "Fool! *This night* your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (Luke 12:20; emphasis mine). Man does not know when death comes for him (Mark 13:32; Matt 24:36; 25:13). And death is

⁵⁷This could be described as biblical versus unbiblical meaning, but this distinction could be vague. I think a better comparison comes in the distinction between the way of the righteous versus the way of the wicked. While one could argue that the way of the righteous leads to biblical meaning and the the way of the wicked leads to unbiblical meaning, the very notion that there is a way of wickedness is a biblical idea, and EH would not make distinctions between right and wrong. While Christian theology would argue that biblical equates with truth, near the heart of EH's issues for counseling application is that it rejects objective truth in favor of a more robust subjective truth. To say that there is biblical meaning in EH does not mean that the biblical meaning is true meaning, only a meaning derived from the Christian Bible, and thus one of many options. The distinction necessary here is that between right and wrong.

⁵⁸This is not to deny that God's election, call, regeneration, and his giving of faith and repentance come outside of his own sovereign decree. Following man's renewal by the Holy Spirit, he does begin exercising his volition to choose Christ and to choose life because of the holy Spirit working inside of him.

the last enemy (1 Cor 15:26; Isa 25:6-26:6), an enemy no mere man can conquer (Heb 2:14). Man's rebellion and sin, his one trespass, ushered in death (Gen 3:19; Rom 5:18). The dread, despair, and anxiety of death is meant for a person not to exhilarate himself but to turn to God for life (i.e., repentance; Matt 6:25-34; Luke 12:22-34; Acts 2:37-38; 1 Pet 5:6-11) through Christ who suffered death in the place of the unrighteous (2 Cor 5:21; Heb 12:1-2). It is when Christ returns that he will swallow up death forever (1 Cor 15:1ff, esp. 15:50-58). Counsel which does not tell a person to live life based on the eschatological reality broken into the present age and the foretaste of the life to come but to live in the life of the present age which is dying and passing away (1 Cor 7:31) has missed the mark. Counselees will be unprepared for the life to come because they have been too focused on life in the here and now, living this life to the fullest rather than living for the life to come. EH therapy examines the present moment in light of death and says, "Live free." Christianity recognizes: 1) God's provident hand and his redemptive works in history and says, "God sets you free. Live now in light of this," and 2) Christianity looks forward to the future freedom, eternal life after death, and says, "Live now in light of this."

A person who grows in presence may come away with the examined life worth living (i.e., the authentic life, or "being true to yourself"), but he is unprepared (cf. Matt 25:1-13) and his authentic living only leads to dying. EH therapy rightly recognizes people are not the sum of their past environment, behavior, or biology. It rightly recognizes that people cannot fulfill their purpose or live rightly by assenting to true propositions (Matt 7:21-23; Jas 2:19). It rightly recognizes that people are finite. But for all it gets right, EH therapy fails to recognize that true and lasting eternal change is not a choice but a divine grace (Eph 2:8-9; Phil 2:12-13). Mere authenticity is not meaning, let alone living authentically according to one's own standards. True authenticity is found in honesty, humility, and passion, in being what one is designed to be. What a counselee needs to know is Christ's authentically human life. Christ lived in the perfect presence of the truth, unstained and unclouded by sin's presence which has marred and killed humanity. Christ's perfect meritorious righteousness has accomplished man's salvation, freely offered in the gospel. It is Christ's authentic life, his being the fullest and truest human being, that enables a man to live an authentic, humble, and dependent life (cf. 2 Cor 5:21). Christ is the image of authentic humanity. Man must become like him to find freedom, truth, and meaning.

Christians need not cling to some doctrine of "becoming-over-being" because in Christ, Christians become something new in Christ, are becoming more like him by the in-working of the Spirit, and one day will become as he is (2 Cor 3:18; 5:14-19; Rom 8:29; 1 John 3:2). Instead of seeking to make one's self in their own image, counseling

should direct counselees how to be made into Christ's image. Counselees need to be directed according to the past, present, and future of God's work in Christ, not merely toward present opportunities. People should live authentic lives, but authenticity is not enough; one can be authentically wicked. Counsel which does not distinguish between righteous and wicked authenticity will only lead a counselee over the cliff to eternal death. A more comprehensive counseling would make its aim living a grace-enabled, authentic, resurrected life, lived out in faithfulness (Matt 25:21, 23; Luke 19:17; 1 Tim 2:2). For in Christ, man is not brought to the brink of death, but man has died (Rom 6:6-8; 7:4; Col 2:20; 2 Tim 2:11), overcome death, passed over death, and come into new life (1 John 3:14). Death need not be feared anymore and life can be lived in peace, for

[We], who were dead in [our] trespasses and the uncircumcision of [our] flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him (Col. 2:13-15).

The Manner in Which a Biblical Counselor Should Interact with Secular Psychology

Ed Wilde¹

The Task of the Biblical Counselor is to Labor to Fulfill the Mission of the Church

Our Lord left his church a final command, “Make disciples.” (Matt.28:19).² We are to teach others to observe all that the Lord has commanded. The end of this work of discipleship will be to

¹ Ed Wilde is an Adjunct Professor at The Master’s University. He may be reached at ewilde@masters.edu. *Preface:* In two prior essays I contended that common grace does not provide a sufficient basis to receive the work of psychologists without question under the rubric of “All truth is God’s Truth.” I concluded my evaluation with a three-tiered grouping of psychological work, and general directions on how the work of various psychologists could be used.

Beginning with this essay, I wish lay-out a detailed theological basis upon which we biblical counselors can interact with non-biblical psychologies. As I will eventually demonstrate, psychology is first a theological enterprise before it is a “science” (of any sort whatsoever).

What I will propose is that we uncover the theology which supports and makes various psychological theories and observations possible. And, only by being conscious of the theology which underscores a particular psychology will we ever be able to properly evaluate or make use of non-biblical psychologies.

Due to the difficulty and the danger of falling into error when making use of concepts and precepts which have their grounding outside the Scripture (indeed the history of the Church is, in part, the history swallowing errors which seemed perfectly reasonable at first), we biblical counselors could simply reject all non-biblical considerations. However, I believe such a blanket prohibition would lead us into other mistakes: not because the Scripture is deficient or dangerous, but because we are limited and prone to error.

Thus, I will first need to make a general case that the use of non-biblical work is necessary to complete our task of making disciples: First, we need extra biblical knowledge to understand the Bible. Second, we use extra biblical knowledge to understand human beings. Indeed, even the most ardent non-integrationist sola scriptura counselor relies upon concepts and knowledge which were gained from outside the Scripture for the purpose of being effective counselors.

Having, I hoped, made a case that we should consider non-biblical sources of knowledge, I will end with the insistence that even the most basic “scientific” knowledge is at base theological. This will be a prolegomena to the rest.

² “[T]he command to make disciples is the primary command, while the commands to baptize and teach are ways of fulfilling the primary command.” Barclay Moon Newman and Philip C. Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 886.

Equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

(Ephesians 4:12-14). Thus, the beginning and the end of this command will be measured by and filled up with the Word of God. However, the pressure will always be in an opposing direction: It will always be easy to be “conformed to this world,” but our ministry is push in the other direction, to apply the word of God so that one is “transformed by the renewal of [the] mind.” (Rom. 12:2)

While affirming the absolutely necessity for the sovereign work of the Spirit, we must stand in humble amazement that our God has determined that the Word will be brought by the children of Adam. That Word, communicated in the context of the Church is used by the Spirit to transform the human heart and life. Even the very fact of the text of our Bible’s is a testament to the fact that Word of God is communicated by a human agent.

Think of the thunderclap in this clause, “The word of the LORD that came to Hosea ...” (Hos. 1:1). And then he in turn says, “Hear the word of the LORD, O children of Israel.” (Hos. 4:1) For us, the Word of the Lord does not come in initial revelation (Ex. 20:18-19), but by written words preserved and protected for generations upon generations.

Holding such a precious treasure, we must not “tamper with God’s word.” (2 Cor. 4:2) If we “go beyond what is written” (1 Cor. 4:6), we will see our labor burnt up as wood, hay, straw, “for the Day will disclose it.” (1 Cor. 3:12)

The faithful application of this Word does not come without the gravest undertaking on our part. The treasures of the Word are not gleaned by causal consideration, nor even the reading of commentaries or other sermons (as useful as such things may be). The Word must first act upon us before we can communicate it to another. We proclaim the Word, and we also testify to it. Were it otherwise, congregations could pay actors to read sermons³ (and the history of the Church has made us unfathomably wealthy in sermons!), but there would be no reason to hire pastors. Our counsel could be dispensed by the numbers. One could easily create an app to dispense “biblical wisdom” at a click: “I am depressed.” The app could respond, “Here is a counsel from Philipians 4. Now memorize these verses.”⁴

³ The work of preparing and developing a sermon and the work of counseling are largely the same process.

⁴ This has been a criticism leveled against Biblical Counseling, that it is merely dispensing a verse without counsel. And while that is not the aim of our work, it has too often been true of the work which has

But our labor as biblical counselors to bring this Word to others which has first worked in us. It is then communicated with the fellowship of the saints.

To understand the Scripture is not merely to understand a book. The Bible is not Aristotle. To understand the Scripture is to come to know the Triune God. Here we (I included) must make a confession. Too often we come to the book not to know God but to know about God⁵. We come to the Book and treat God as the object of our study, when God is the one who knows⁶. We do not interrogate God, God interrogates us. Only in this relationship do we even begin to know ourselves:

Again, it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself.⁷

When we counsel, we must bring others to know themselves as they are in relationship to God. Here in the breach between God and Man comes all human sorrow. This breach is only remedied in restored relationship. But this relationship is only restored in Christ and in the Church:

That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. (1 John 1:3-4.)⁸

been done in the name of Biblical Counseling. Such truncated and distorted forms of counseling have been one reason people look for methodology (and more) from other psychologies. In these cases, the Scripture then becomes a proof-text for Rogerian or CBT or whatnot.

⁵ The devil hath a greater knowledge of God's being than any man upon earth, but since he is a rebel to his will, he is not happy by his knowledge. It must be such a knowledge as leads to eternal life, and hath a necessary and infallible connection with it, as the effect with the cause, which is not between a speculative knowledge and salvation. It must be therefore such a knowledge which descends from the head to the heart, which is light in the mind and heat in the affections; such a knowledge of God as includes faith in him.

Stephen Charnock, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, vol. 4 (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; W. Robertson; G. Herbert, 1864-1866), 10.

⁶ This matter of knowledge, both human and divine, will occupy our consideration in the next essay.

⁷ 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), 37.

⁸ "First, it is through the proclamation of the incarnate Word of life that John envisions the accomplishment of his purpose of bringing his readers to fellowship with him and other eyewitnesses. As Eichler observes, "[To] 'have fellowship' with one another and with Christ (1 Jn. 1:6f.) is to 'know' him (1 Jn. 2:3) and to 'abide' in him (v. 6)." ³⁹ This fellowship's basis, then, is in the apostolic preaching of the historical Jesus as well as the readers' response of faith in the subject of that proclamation." Daniel L. Akin, 1, 2, 3 John, vol. 38, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 56-57. "John extends an invitation to his readers to fellowship with him and with God. The English word "fellowship" might connote little more than coffee and donuts after church, or the large room in the church building

our work of making disciples if we reject every contention, theory, thought, book, et cetera of unbelievers.

Even a translation of the Bible into English made by the most pious of all scholars will rely upon the work of unbelievers. Our commentaries rely upon historians and archeologists. The work of sociologists has been of great help to understand place, setting, and meaning of the Scripture and the life of those to whom it was addressed. Should we reject all of it?

Even our English language has been shaped by unbelievers and language is not a wholly neutral device. Our customs will shape the way in which we understand evidence. If you wish to see how easily our cultural predilections and our history of reading can be brought into the text, which causes to see something which is not there and to miss something quite plain in the text, consider the discussion of Bailey in *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes*, on our understanding of the matter of *calling* and *state*:

²⁰ Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. ²¹ Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.)

(1 Corinthians 7:20-21) The RSV uses the word “state” in verse 20, rather than “condition.” In verse 24, Paul concludes:

²⁴ So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God. 1 Corinthians 7:24 (ESV.)

The default position, and I will confess to this of myself, is to read as an “economic man”⁹ (as Philip Rieff dubbed the default 20th Century Westerner), is to understand this verse as counseling to stay in one’s *economic* status, because our “calling” is our *vocation*.¹⁰ If you’re

where potluck dinners are held. But the Greek word translated “fellowship” means having not only a close relationship but also an association based on common interests and purposes. John invites his readers to enter into a relationship with God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, by embracing God’s redemptive purposes for the world in general and for individual lives in particular, as Jesus revealed them.” Karen H. Jobes, 1, 2, & 3 John, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 53.

⁹ Britannica, s.v., “Sigmund Freud,” <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sigmund-Freud/Psychoanalytic-theory>.

¹⁰ To test this hypothesis, I did a quick internet search and found a number of references and sermons all quite orthodox which took “calling” as economic position. That this reading is not of recent vintage and that it is a common understanding, here is an example from Puritan Geroge Swinnock, from *The Christian Man’s Calling*, “Many a one hath breathed out his last in the midst of his labour: his life and his labour have

a slave, stay being a slave. The trouble is that my cultural assumption about the text finds something which is not there.

This does not mean that the Scripture has different meanings to different people, nor that we need some particular background to understand the scripture. I am making precisely the opposite point: I do not want anyone's culture read into the text; I want to know the text first on its own terms".

Indeed, the nuance which is in play here is the *historical*, in *historical-grammatical* interpretation. What I have done in reading calling=vocation is to import my own history, my own culture into the text, rather than reading the text in its own historical context.

Tripped up by an unnecessary and inaccurate assumption which I have imported from culture. Thus Bailey, beginning with a different cultural context than the "West", explains the passage as follows:

If you are caught in slavery, try to get free. If you are free do not become a slave. Yet, if you are caught in this (horrible) institution you can yet find and carry out *assignment*. You can exercise your *gift* and respond to your *call*. If you are a slave do not look wistfully at me with my freedom and privileges of Roman citizenship and say, "Of course the Lord can use *him*. But I am a slave *I can do nothing!*" Don't forget your *calling*, and you *never imagine that there is no calling for you because you are a slave*.¹²

And so "calling" is not your job: it's your assignment from the Lord.

The point of this consideration is that we cannot just "read" the Bible from a completely objective position and understand it without help. We do not come into the world with sufficient information to understand everything in our world, nor are we ever completely objective. We need the sight of other people to become objective.

Our understanding of the text of Scripture is informed by a great many disciplines and people; moreover, even the most sanctified saints have been infected with the errors of their time and place.¹³

ended together. 'Let every man abide in the calling whereto he is called,' saith the apostle, 1 Cor. 7:24." George Swinnock, *The Works of George Swinnock, M.A.*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; G. Herbert, 1868), 44.

¹¹ As I will soon, however, it has to be applied into a particular culture.

¹² Kenneth E. Bailey, *Paul through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2011), 219.

¹³ This should breed caution and humility in our present age. "Except among those whose education has been in the minimalist style, it is understood that hasty moral judgments about people in the past are form of injustice. But one may forget that hasty intellectual judgments are equally deplorable." Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 253.

But coming to an understanding of the Scripture myself is only the first half of the work in providing counsel. The physician's knowledge does good before it is put to use. I come to my doctor not to admire a medical degree but to obtain the applied benefit of that knowledge. To counsel we must "g[i]ve the sense, so that the people [may understand] the reading." (Nehemiah 8:8.)

When someone comes to a biblical counselor, they come not merely because you have knowledge, but they come to receive the benefit of that knowledge, for you to apply that knowledge.

So far, I believe that my readers will be in agreement with this being within the scope of what we may consider as biblical counseling. But what of the exegesis of human beings? If we rightly use the work of unbelievers to understand the Scripture, can we use the work of unbelievers to understand the person whom we are counseling?

Cunning, Craftiness, and the Exegesis of the Human Heart

Without question, the Scripture contains a fortune of resources to understand the nature and functioning of the human heart. I can say without reservation, that the depths of the Scripture have not been plumbed in this respect. I also say that our preaching and our counseling have been hampered by our own ignorance of this aspect of the Scriptures.

But at least as often has been the fault of speaking without the knowledge of the one who listens. Why do you think we ask questions and take a history:

The pastor must keep in view that he is to preach to those who *hear him*, and not to those who, from their situations, cannot hear him; and in this respect a sermon differs from a religious treatise printed and published. How often is this fact overlooked in the ministry! How often are sinners reprov'd for particular sins, and violated scolded at by pastors, when the sinners are not in the congregation, but far removed from it! How often are errorists and heretics solemnly admonished, when they are not present to hear the admonition! While the wrong doings and the lamentable condition of those who are before the eyes of the preacher, are unattended to, and a 'generation of vipers' is left to encircle him in all the twistings of Pharisaical formality, self-righteousness and hypocrisy!¹⁴

Or, if we do address the right topic, we address without any understanding of how human beings function or how information should be presented so as to have sense.

¹⁴ Rev. James Spencer Cannon, D.D., *Lectures On Pastoral Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1853), 135.

Too often preaching and counseling treat human beings as if the sole trouble facing the constantly erring believer is that there is a lack of data and we need merely shovel word-studies down their gullet and they will become as Enoch who walked with God; they will be as devout as Daniel in the Babylon.

How many sermons have we heard on Colossians 3:5, to mortify our sins, which consisted in 15 minutes demanding that we must stop and 35 minutes of word studies and this history of Greco-Roman sexual deviancy? Preaching “to the heart” consists of shouting in a weirdly affected manner. We then stand back in amazement that nothing has changed, and so we blame the wickedness of the congregation and not the weakness of our “giving sense.”

Should you look above and below verse 5, you would see a wealth of exegesis of the human heart and how mortification is an interactive system of meditation, affections, and practices, both alone and in society. There is human effort, attention, singing; and the work of the Spirit confirming us to Christ. The too-often given “counsel” from verse 5 fails because it neither understands the text nor the one to whom we are speaking. In short, by ignoring the depths of the Scripture in its understanding of the human heart, we misrepresent and misapply the Scripture.¹⁵

We also must concern ourselves with the particular people to whom we speak. Indeed, you do so intuitively. When you teach to children, I seriously hope you consider your vocabulary and their ability to attend to our words. But when we speak to adults we can ignore these particular people before us. If we are counseling, we may talk right over the counselee, if the counselee does not say, “I don’t understand.”

And even if we use vocabulary and concepts fit to the one who hears, have often have we considered the way to present information? Why should we refuse to consider the way in which the Scripture is designed to pick the lock on shuttered human heart?

Have you ever wondered why the Bible is primarily stories and poems? Being products of our own time, place, culture, and education, we think that instruction should be a matter of express instruction, like a recipe or a manual; at least a textbook. Since the primary means of training a pastor is years of college and graduate education which emphasize in learning in a like manner, the putative counselor, preacher comes to think all information should be dispensed like the textbook and lecture.

¹⁵ There is a parallel to consider. A preacher today would use the work of a sociologist to understand Peter’s discussion of slavery in 1 Peter 2. Would a first century counselor be allowed to use that same research (assuming a first century sociologist had done the work) to counsel that same slave?

The Scripture does contain express instruction: Love one another. But it also contains the Song of Solomon. And even the command to love comes in a personal letter, in a story. Moses ends Deuteronomy with a song.

The impoverished education of the North American evangelical results in blindness to the Scripture – and thus, a misunderstanding of both what it is we are to teach and the nature of the one to whom we are speaking. How often have we heard sermons where a duly educated seminarian torments a Psalm trying to force it into an exegetical paper proper for seminary. When you hear Joel 1:10

*The fields are destroyed,
the ground mourns,
because the grain is destroyed,
the wine dries up,
the oil languishes.*

The text does not merely state that God will send a famine. The text means horror and fear and sorrow. It means I am going to die, and there is nothing I can do to avoid a lingering, harrowing death. If the sermon does not convey horror, it has not actually given meaning to this text.

Think this through: The text is a call to repentance. The text includes poetry which is meant to change the affections of the hearer, so that the hearer will have a horror of judgment and thus a horror of sin and thus understand what is meant by the command, “[R]end your heart and not your garments.” (Joel 2:13) Think of what is intended by this language: it meant to bring you to such a state of fear and sorrow that you would tear your own heart. But we settle a dull, shallow, “You must do more make an outward show of repentance.” But the somewhat better counselor, when encouraging repentance may insist on actual repentance. But the language of this book is to meant to create such repentance.

The Scripture has an implicit and explicit understanding of the human heart. It not merely provides tools for exegeting the human heart, it likewise provides examples of appealing to the human heart. We too often simply do not understand the Scripture, how the Scripture works, nor how to convey this information with fidelity to the human being seeking counsel.

These means of conveying information to the human being through poems, stories, letters, and direction command are matched by the nature of the human heart. We are intuitively affected by stories. Teenagers are mad about verse set to music – even very bad verse set to music has a profound effect. Don’t you see that these lessons which come

merely from the structure of the Biblical text are a key to the functioning of the human heart?

Don't you see how these effective techniques are persuasive?¹⁶

Our limping sermons and ineffective counsel result in part from a defective education (and not all education needs be formal). The education supplied must be supplied from somewhere.

How then am I to gain the education necessary to understand the Bible as literature, as poems and letters and stories?

If I read Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* to learn from an unbeliever how better to understand the narrative forms used in the Bible have I sinned? If I follow the instruction T. David Gordon in *Why Johnny Can't Preach* and conclude that I might want to read Shakespeare or Robert Frost so I could learn something about the manner in which language works, have I fallen into sin? What if I learn to construct a sentence by listening to Churchill?

Should we conclude that all things beyond the scope of the Text are cunning and craftiness, and that to give consideration to any non-biblical understanding is to be taken "captive by philosophy and empty deceit"? (Col. 2:8) Let us put a point on the question for counselors. If I can use non-biblical sources to understand the mechanics and content of the Bible (and we should and do), is it sin to use non-biblical sources to understand human beings?

No.

Before you toss me into the fires for syncretism and reject me as an "integrationist," show me the courtesy of a hearing.

First, let me give you an example from an unimpeachable source. This is a relatively random example from the Puritans, whom J.I. Packer referred to as the spiritual redwoods

¹⁶ I hasten to add that I am not saying that the Spirit's work is constrained by our inability; nor do I contend skill in speaking-well can keep the sovereignty of God from achieving the planned ends. Charles Spurgeon was converted through the sermon of a remarkably unskilled preacher. This proves that even poor sermons can achieve miraculous ends:

Meditate on the Wisdom of God. He is called 'the only wise God,' 1 Tim. 1:17. His wisdom shines forth in the works of providence; he sits at the helm guiding all things regularly and harmoniously; he brings light out of darkness; he can strike a straight stroke by a crooked stick; he can make use of the injustice of men to do that which is just; he is infinitely wise, he breaks us by afflictions, and upon these broken pieces of the ship, brings us safe to shore; meditate on the wisdom of God.

Thomas Watson, "A Christian on the Mount, or a Treatise Concerning Meditation," in *Discourses on Important and Interesting Subjects, Being the Select Works of the Rev. Thomas Watson*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh; Glasgow: Blackie, Fullarton, & Co.; A. Fullarton & Co., 1829), 20 But that does not mean we should about created new crooked sticks.

for their stature among Christians⁷. By random, I mean that similar instances of references to secular sources⁸, often ancient Greek and Roman writers, is a commonplace among the well-educated Puritan pastors:

The Greek tragedian brings-in one as heightening his misery, and crying out, “Woe is me!” “But why,” saith he, “ ‘Woe is me,’ when we suffer nothing but what is incident to all mortals?” did we but in time of need revive this upon our thoughts, it would much alleviate our grief and obviate all heart-disquietment.¹⁹

This paragraph comes in a sermon by Dr. Jacombe, “How Christians May Learn in Every State to be Content.” The sermon may be found in the Cripplegate “Lectures” of the Puritans. Now let us consider the argument in which this quotation is found. Our pastor is noting that in our discontentment springs, in part, from a belief that our grief is unique. Yet, when we see that our sorrows and troubles are common, it can help us be reconciled to our condition:

This is to be thought of: be the estate what it will, it is but common. Whatsoever your troubles are, you have many sharers and companions therein. The prophet fancied he was left alone, which made him the more froward in his condition; but God told him, he had reserved some thousands in Israel, who had not bowed their knees to Baal. (1 Kings 19:14, 18.) And so some in their trials are apt to think they are alone, their case is singular, none so crossed, so afflicted as they; when, God knows, there are many thousands who drink of the same cup. “There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man,” (1 Cor. 10:13.) “Knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world.” (1 Peter 5:9.) If

⁷ “California’s Redwoods make me think of England’s Puritans, another breed of giants who in our time have begun to be newly appreciated. Between 1550 and 1700 they too lived unfrilled lives in which, speaking spiritually, strong growth and resistance to fire and storm were what counted. As Redwoods attract the eye, because they overtop other trees, so the mature holiness and seasoned fortitude of the great Puritans shine before us as a kind of beacon light, overtopping the stature of the majority of Christians in most eras, and certainly so in this age of crushing urban collectivism, when Western Christians sometimes feel and often look like ants in an anthill and puppets on a striJ. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 11–12.

⁸ The instances of the Puritans making use of observations and examples from pagans is remarkable. Certainly no one can accuse this time in the Christian Church for being weak on their belief in Scripture. By way of another “random” example, “For it is better to bear wrong, than to do wrong a great deal; If they wrong you, if your heart can submit, you are in a better condition than they, because it is better to suffer, than do wrong. I remember it is said of Socrates, that being very patient when wrong was done to him, they asked him how he came to be so? Saith he, If I meet with a man in the street that is a diseased man, shall I be vexed and fretted with him because he is diseased? Those that wrong me I look upon them as diseased men, and therefore pitie them.” Jeremiah Burroughs, “Sermon X,” in *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (London: W. Bentley, 1651), 115–116. This particular book is one I have often used in counseling.

⁹ James Nichols, *Puritan Sermons*, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, Publishers, 1981), 559. The quotation itself comes from Euripides).

this was but considered by persons under afflictions, their spirits would not be so disturbed as they are. When it is but with me as it is with others, why should not I be content? “Men will quietly submit to that which is the lot of others as well as their own.” *Ferre quam sortem patiuntur omnes nemo recusat.* The Greek tragedian brings-in one as heightening his misery, and crying out, “Woe is me!” “But why,” saith he, “‘Woe is me,’ when we suffer nothing but what is incident to all mortals? did we but in time of need revive this upon our thoughts, it would much alleviate our grief and obviate all heart-disquietment.”²⁰

There is in this short discussion of contentment for a Christian a distinctly biblical understanding of our trouble as being “common to man.” Jacombe finds this principle in the Scripture and makes the observation from human experience which expects that his reader will agree. He then brings the observation of a Greek poet filtered through the work of a Greek Moralist.

Would we call Dr. Jacombe an “integrationist”? Would we say he compromised biblical anthropology and methodology of discipleship? No. Dr. Jacombe is making the point the sorrows and trials of a Christian have much in common in all people. Thus, a citation to unbelievers proves up the point that our sorrows and troubles, our temptations, are “common to man.”

Or what of our common work among missionaries. When one travels to a new country to engage in ministry, would it be wise to learn the language of the people who live there? Yes. Well what of culture? Yes, again. Indeed, a failure to understand the culture can cause one to fail miserably in the task, not because the Gospel is not sufficient, but because the minister has never accurately communicated the Gospel to the hearers.

I recall a lesson from a professor in college who told us of a politician who traveled from one country to another. The politician made a hand gesture which meant something positive in his home country, and meant ... something quite different to those attending his speech.

Such things as language and culture could be learned from an unbeliever, yes? If I read a book on Chilean culture written by an atheist who happens to be the most insightful Chilean have I sinned?

Consider for example the human body. Although our understanding as biblical counselors leaves a great deal to be desired on this point, we will all concede that human beings are not merely purely spiritual processes without bodies. Our bodies are not mere appendages to a mind, something which we can be put on and taken off with no

²⁰ James Nichols, *Puritan Sermons*, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, Publishers, 1981), 559.

consideration. Our flesh is not mere clothing to be discarded at will. Our Risen Lord has “flesh and bones.” (Luke 24:39)

It is a topic for a different essay, but an excessive Cartesian Dualism is profoundly anti-biblical²¹. And if you are tempted to find this acceptable, consider just this practical ministerial problem. If you contend the spirit is all and the body is unimportant, how then does your theology differ from the one who claims they have a female soul in a male body? You see, you don't differ from the transgender expressivist, except as a matter of aesthetics.

The body matters to biblical counseling. We must understand the body to do our job well.²² To gain an understanding of the body, of the effect of medication, the functioning of senses, and so on, we will need to rely upon the work of scientists: psychologists who study perception and senses, physicians who treat diseases, et cetera. We can and should use this work.

I do not believe I stepped beyond the line into error by concluding that a biblical counselor can utilize the resources of non-Christians to learn general information about culture and physiology.

But what I want to know something more particular than common expectations for marriage and family among Nigerians, or the effects of Xanax on women over the age of 45?

What if I would like information about women who have been sexually trafficked or the long-term effects of being taken from the family of origin and adopted? If there are general patterns for entire cultures, are there general patterns for subcultures? Would it be useful to know whether adopted children have more trouble forming lasting friendship, or trusting parents, than non-adoptive children? Would it be useful to have some sort observational data on the effects of remarriage upon children, even if that data only gives me percentages and outcomes?

In fact, don't we teach people that the manner in which we raise our children has an effect even if it is not absolutely determinative? Why would we deny that the nature of one's childhood, a background in a warzone or a pastoral countryside would have an affect on the nature of one's thinking and acting as an adult? Again, not in a deterministic way, but as an influence.

²¹ The Greek phrase, “soma-sema” , the body is a tomb, comes to mind. See, e.g., Christian Irigaray, *Soma Sema: The Body as a Prison for the Soul*,

https://www.academia.edu/33117741/Soma_Sema_The_Body_as_a_Prison_for_the_Soul

²² I make the following observation concerning common grace. As the effects of the Fall have worn down the quality of the human body through generations of genetic entropy, the quality of human medical understanding has progressed. I propose that we “need” our substantially greater medical knowledge to remain in place as a species. While human beings obviously fell to disease and danger, the normal functioning of the human being was greater in the past. Again, this is to raise a matter which we cannot address here. But I suggest that you start reading here: <https://crev.info/?s=genetic+entropy#>

What then of observational psychology? Again a case can be made that observations will be useful to help us understand the Scripture and the human being. We now understand the reference that the “sun stood still” (Joshua 10:1-11) means that the earth stopped turning (or perhaps it was some other miracle; it could be that sun rise occurred as expected in the British Isles while the day continued at Gilgal).

Contemporary studies of habit and habit formation make sense of biblical commands (and allow us to evaluate the practical counsel of earlier believers). Indeed, when we understand more clearly how habits are formed, it can help us to understand the nature of counsel and homework we give to counselees. The contemporary research does not change anything which is already in the text, but it helps us to understand what was said in brief by Paul so that we can better apply it today’s Peter.

Thesis one: Observational data from secular psychologists may be of use to helping us understand human beings. That knowledge may help us to provide better counsel.

Let me consider this issue from two different perspectives. Secular psychologies, both observations and theories, (1) may help with understanding the human being to whom we are speaking; (2) may present considerations of human conduct and understanding which we may not have considered.

Understanding the Person Before Us

When we first meet a new counselee, the first step is to take a *history*. We seek to know the person before us. It matters to us whether the person is five or fifty; it matters whether this is a man or a woman; married or single; in prison or never had a parking ticket; and so on.

The historical background of this particular human being matters for two reason: (1) so that we can properly understand what they mean when they speak; and (2) so we know how to properly speak to them. The information in-and-out of the human being depends upon the personal history of that human being.

In German, the sound “gift” means “poison”; in English, “gift” means well, a *gift*. A friend told me the story of his father who lived in the States and had a dear friend in Germany. For Christmas he sent some presents to his friend’s children. On the outside of the box he wrote the word *gift*.

It matters what language what one speaks; it matters when one speaks:

Now we take it for granted that the physician is wise to take the patient’s history and that the chairman of the board must review the past year in his annual report. To have not only the knowledge of the sense of history is deemed an asset in practical life. This sense detects the likeness and difference under the façade and the names of things. To take a crude example, someone who ‘sees’ the same objects when he

reads the words, *coat*, *hat*, and *shoe* in a book about ancient Greece and again in a book about colonial America lacks the sense of history.²³

We take a history of the counselee so that we can understand what they mean when they speak, so that we can begin to “understand” their behaviors and thoughts. We need their history to know how to speak to them.

For example, when Joseph’s brothers appear in Egypt, Joseph carefully tests the men to understand who they are at that time. (Gen. 42-44). Jesus speaks differently to the Samaritan woman (John 4), than he does the unrepentant Pharisees (Matt. 23). Paul’s preaching is fit to his audience: compare Acts 13:13-43; Acts 17:16-31.

When we take a history of the counselee, we are do so for the purpose of knowing how to understand and how to speak to them. Consider the nature of our evaluation: Based upon our personal experience and our education we make an evaluation.

Scripture tell us that we must make this evaluation if we are to be of use:

And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. 1 Thessalonians 5:14.

It is easy to misunderstand a person suffering from depression as being “idle,” or a person who is profoundly frightened and hurt to be angry. Someone who is foolish may be been wrongfully instructed. There are any number of variations which may come into play.

If we are presented with a counselee who has suffered severe abuse, we know that we should take their suffering and trauma into account in our interaction. At this point, fill in whatever sort of background you could imagine.

Without question, our personal experience will be an insufficient basis upon which to make evaluations of all potential effects which a counselee’s personal history may have upon the counselee: none of us will live long enough, nor know enough people to truly know what all effects a background could have upon a counselee.

Therefore, we must rely upon the experience of others to help understand the counselee’s present and past. That is why we have training, why we require mentorship in counseling.

You are engaged in “psychology” of the same sort which any “psychologist” is involved when considering people. You have a theory of human conduct, you have theories about how the past affects the present, and so on.²⁴ Moreover, without question, your

²³ Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 246.

²⁴ To be fair, the academic psychologist would say you are merely exercising “common sense,” and that psychology is a superior form of knowledge. See, e.g., Lester M. Sdorow, Cheryl A. Rickabauagh, and Adrienne J. Betz, *Psychology*, 8th ed. (United States: Academic Media Solutions, 2019), xv.

psychology has not been formed solely from Scripture. Your personal psychological theories have been formed by what you have been taught, by the stories you have learned²⁵, by the explanations of your friends.

Before you run past this point, note carefully that you do this all the time. Someone tells you about an uncomfortable interaction with a mutual friend. You provide practical advice: Well, you need to remember she just lost her mother to a stroke. Or, he always gets excited over a new idea, but he'll calm down in a day or two. You are right there doing "psychology." You are making deductions about another human being. Moreover, these deductions are not strictly Scriptural. These are based upon your education and experience.

What I will be proposing is that we become more conscious and deliberate in how we form these psychological conclusions.

Let me give you two examples which were not based upon Scripture and which were learned from a specifically Christian background²⁶. I found these observations to be true in practice to and to help me understand better circumstances with which I was confronted.

I had a friend who had worked as a substance abuse counselor for a decade. He made this observation: We mature by being faced with painful circumstances and learning how to respond to the pain or difficulty. By learning to "deal with" troubles, we grow-up. Substance abuse most often begins in adolescence. So let us assume a 15-year-old who becomes addicted to alcohol. He drinks his way through the movement from childhood to adulthood. Finally at 35 he stops drinking. This man has a 35-year-old body, but he lacks the last 20 years of maturation. This man will be different in fundamental ways than his twin brother who never drank alcohol.

I have found this thesis to be remarkably useful.

Another observation from a friend: Based upon studies in which he had participated (he was getting his graduate degree in psychology) he saw that people fundamentally organized information based upon their "team." Even a wholly arbitrary division of people in red and blue teams led to this effect. He explained that one interpreted raw data through the perspective of their "team". One would more favorably remember and evaluate one's own team and would think worse of the opposing team based upon wholly arbitrary assignment to a team. I have seen this observation proved true in multiple circumstance.

²⁵ As a practical matter, you would gain a more accurate understanding of human nature from reading Tolstoy than Freud.

²⁶ This list could be easily expanded. Take a look at Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011) on the matter of cognitive bias, or the work of "pick-pocket" Apollo Robbins on perception and memory.

Imagine the usefulness of this observation when evaluating the testimony of witnesses in a church conflict.

I can propose any number of other observations which are not explicitly referenced in the Scripture, and which would be very relevant to helping us exegete a counselee and explicate the Scripture to that counselee.

What about studies concerning the plasticity of memory; and how memory formation differs depending upon the age of the person remembering. Research on cognitive bias, or the manner in which gut bacteria affect mood and may contribute to depression? Would not such information be quite useful in any number of circumstances?

If it were possible to access such information, and I simply refused to consider the experience of other human beings would that be wise? Should I ever consider the substance of psychological evaluations of 325 people who were sexually abused as children when it comes to counsel someone who was sexually abused as a child? After all, I rely upon some offhanded observation from a friend in high school or my grandmother, but I reject perhaps better-founded observations because they were published as a study?²⁷

As you will see, I by no means contend that we should uncritically accept all studies. There are tremendous difficulties involved in psychological studies from the way in which studies are conducted to the theology which permeates such studies. In what follows, I am going to suggest tools to make such evaluations.

What I propose at this point is that we necessarily rely upon the experience and observations of other human beings. It was what we necessarily do all the time already. But rather than pick up our data and conclusions at random, I contend that we should be more selective and deliberate about the way in which we use data. My contention is that by failing to be explicit and conscious of our use of information and theory, we have been constructing practices and giving counsel which may have been inconsistent with our commitment to biblical principle and being thoroughly biblical in content.

When we look back through this history of the Christian Church we can see many times where sound theologians incorporated principles from their broader culture without realizing that they were reading into the text (as in the example of “calling,” given above); or

²⁷ I don't wish to overstate this proposition. Any scientific discipline which requires deception as primary aspect of its experimental regime is problematic. Moreover, there is the replication crisis which has made a mockery of psychology as a reliable scientific discipline. See, e.g., David Adam, “A Solution to Psychology's Reproducibility Problem Just Failed Its First Test,” *Science*, May 23, 2019, <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2019/05/solution-psychology-s-reproducibility-problem-just-failed-its-first-test>; Ed Yong, “Psychology's Replication Crisis Is Running Out of Excuses,” *The Atlantic*, November 19, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/11/psychologys-replication-crisis-real/576223/>.

incorporating “common sense,” or “just the way things are,” the unarticulated prejudices and beliefs which we hold on any number of matters.

You see, too often we have been behaving as the dreaded integrationist without admitting to this fact.

Rather than thoughtlessly integrate data, we should examine and inquire. It’s like this: While walking through a field, we may come upon berries or roots. Some of these berries may be poisonous; the roots need to be cleaned. However, we have been tossing berries into our basket and gnawing upon unwashed carrots.

Some of those observations and evaluations will be based upon people we don’t know. It could be quite useful to carefully consider the “findings” of accumulated observations made by non-Christians. And since it would be useful, we should learn how to do so profitably.

At this place, I wish to underscore a distinction between what I propose and that which typically constitutes integration: A particular ‘school’ of psychology comprises a set of presuppositions and a theoretical means to seek for and process information.²⁸ Even the most basic forms of physiological observations concerning the functioning of the human body is (psychology at its most “scientific”) is a complex of presuppositions and theory – it comprises a sort of theology. When we think of more developed schools of psychology such as Rogers or CBT or a fully medical psychiatry, we are being confronted with full-fledged theologies and philosophies well-before we have any results or observations.

The danger of integration is not some experimental observation per se but rather the importation of presuppositions and theories, the importation of a non-biblical theology into our counseling.

I am not proposing that we eat the meat and spit-out of the bones of Rogerian psychology, or some such. The epistemology, the anthropology, the methodology, and the teleology of Rogerian psychology is profoundly inconsistent with biblical theology. I am not proposing that we uncritically receive information – and certainly caution against importing the process for obtaining and understanding information used by non-biblical psychologies.

An analogy may help. Many religions involve a priest or shaman ingesting some drug or poison. The one under the influence of such poison was believed to be under the influence of a god or spirit. We could observe the person so poisoned, we could describe

²⁸ Biblical Counseling is explicit on this point: “The conclusions in this book are not based upon scientific findings. My method is presuppositional.” Jay Edward Adams, *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1986), xxi.

what they said or did – without believing the alleged cause (possession of a spirit) or the meaning (prophecy).

Thesis two: Even erroneous theories of human nature may be helpful because it will force us to clarify our theology.

But I wish to go further. I contend that even faulty concepts or dangerously wrong concepts can be use of when understood properly. Other observations may be quite helpful in focusing our attention and helping us to ask other questions about the Scripture. Harold O.J. Brown develops the case that the constant interaction of the Church with heresy was critical to the development of orthodoxy.²⁹ It was the denial of the Son’s divinity that led to the articulation of how there could three-persons and one-God.

Likewise, the observations, questions, denials of those who are not operating within a Scriptural framework can be useful for helping us to consider more fully what we in fact believe, why we counsel as we do, and so on.

Matters Which We Have Not Considered

Consider something called, “Terror Management Theory.” Hebrews 2:15 asserts that fear of death makes human beings slaves. The writer of Hebrews does not develop this thesis, and biblical commentaries have very little to say. However, it is a remarkable psychological assertion. I have pondered this proposition for years.

In my reading, I came across Terror Management Theory, a secular psychological theory which asserts that fear of death has a profound effect upon human thought and behavior. There is a great deal of observational data which supports this assertion.³⁰ By carefully and critically evaluating the work of these psychologists, we have an opportunity to gain a fuller understand what is referenced in passing in Hebrews 2:15. I am not saying to absorb this theory naively, nor uncritically. Indeed, there is a great with which I disagree when it comes to their work, because I have data (from the Scripture) which they do not consider rightly.

Having heard of Terror Management Theory, consider what is going on in Hebrews 2:14-15 & Joel 1:10. Fear of death appears to result in a certain cross-cultural pattern of

²⁹ Harold O.J. Brown, *Heresies* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1989). At the time of my final proof-read of this paper, I came across this quotation from a legendary investor:

“If you do that all the time, if you're looking for disconfirming evidence, and putting yourself on the grills, that's a good way to help remove ignorance.” Charlie Munger.”

<https://twitter.com/JuliaLaRoche/status/1367821025140965377> In the same way, confronting opposing or even false views, forces us to think our positions and can help us remove errors in the act of confronting error.

³⁰ Start with Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Thomas [11197806796048842xmlmarcxml](https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119780679.ch04) Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (New York: Random House, 2015).

behavior and thinking. How does that pattern work so as to enforce enslavement to sin? How then does Joel 1:10 function? How does my counseling, my preaching work when it comes to calls to repentance and fear of death? Is it something I should even consider?

I am not saying that the theory answers all the questions. I am saying that the theory raises questions and forces us to think through our theology and counseling.

What I hope is that by interaction we can more fully develop the theology and practice of biblical counseling. The matters which concern the contemporary psychologist are the matters which confront us today in ministry. There are questions and situations which we must face which were not faced in this manner, nor in this force by previous generations. Indeed, the world we confront in 2021 would have been inexplicable to the first generation of biblical counselors (I am not speaking of their ability to bring the Scripture to bear upon the world, but rather the world they would confront).

As explained by John Frame, this is the task of theology:

The only term I know that is broad enough to cover all forms of biblical teaching and all the decisions that people make in their lives is the term application. To apply Scripture is to use Scripture to meet a human need, to answer a human question, to make a human decision. Questions about the text of Scripture, translations, interpretation, ethics, Christian growth—all these are fair game for theology. To show (by word or deed) how Scripture resolves all these kinds of questions is to apply it. So I offer my definition of theology: theology is the application of Scripture, by persons, to every area of life.³¹

This means that theology is not a static endeavor. While there are a great many matters which have been found and settled by those before us, there are new matters which we must face today. To do this work, we will need to understand the intellectual world in which we live.

But this does not mean that I am favoring syncretism or integration. I am in fact very skeptical and cautious about information from non-biblical sources. Too much of what passes for Christian psychology is merely seeking therapeutic ends while trying to either maintain some veneer of Christianity or to use Christian theology and Scripture as just one more grab-bag for an eclectic system. The ends of our therapeutic culture are not the ends of biblical discipleship.

³¹ Frame, John M., *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief*. P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition. Chapter 1; David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 34 (“theology seeks to articulate the content of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the context of a particular culture.”).

How Then Do We Avoid Error?

First off, I am not advocating that every or even most biblical counselors undertake the role of interacting critically with secular psychology. This is not a matter of elitism, but rather as a matter of necessary practice.

When we train pastors at the level of a ministerial degree, we limit the nature of what we expect of them. One can be a wonderful pastor without considering Akkadian cognates or a comparison of Moulmann and Aquinas on the impassibility of God. But, when they come to PhD work, we expect to them to read and be familiar with those ideas which were deliberately avoided for the M.Div.

This is a difference in function, not ability. I know many men and women who have the intellectual capacity to pursue a PhD, but also lack the time, money, inclination.

This is illustrated nicely in my work as an attorney. I have known plenty of secretaries and paralegals who were more intelligent and who had better judgment than many attorneys. I have had greater admiration for house painters than professional academics.

Another analogy from the legal profession could help acquit me of the charge of snobbery: Most of work is at the level of the “trial court”. This is where parties come before a judge for justice. We deal with the facts as we can find them and the law as it stands. Trial Court judges not easily persuaded by arguments of the law should be. If there is a place where the law should change, such this or that law contradicts the general principles of constitution, the trial court judge is likely unmoved. But when we take the case to the appellate court, such questions become relevant. And if we take the case to the Supreme Court, such questions of what the law should be are of sole importance. I have taken a case from trial court to Supreme Court and the considerations changed at each level. Likewise, the same judge could in a career move through all levels of the court.

It is not a question of ability at each of these levels but of function.

Likewise, most biblical counselors will not have the time, training, or inclination to carefully interact in a fruitful manner with secular psychologies. And, without being properly prepared for this task, by sufficient knowledge of Christian theology, the secular psychology, and the means to consider the issues of both, the results are likely to be a mess for both the counselor and their counselees.

So, the first way to avoid error is simply to avoid the project. Not everyone is called to every task, and that is good for the church. James 3:1.

Second, avoid naively believing science and “common sense” are not first theology.

Demonstrating and examining the theology which underscores psychology, beginning at observations of “wisdom” and even “hard scientific fact” will be the primary task of this project. And by engaging in the task of working out the theology which underscores other psychologies, we will necessarily further develop the theology which underscores the practice of biblical counseling. The ultimate goal of this project is not merely to engage in the academic exercise of exposing the theology of various psychologies, but rather to further articulate the biblical counseling as it seeks to provide effective counseling in the current environment.

In this introduction to the whole, I wish to just prove up the point that even the most basic common sense and scientific observations are built upon at least an implicit theology. In fact, the implicit theology often runs counter to the explicit philosophy espoused by the scientist.

Common Sense and Wisdom are not So Easily to Find

There is an argument, advanced by some, that wisdom is present beyond the Bible and that we need merely identify and appropriate this wisdom. Often this goes by the motto, “All truth is God’s truth.” True enough; but also unhelpful.

If things in the universe came with a label attached which said “true” or “false,” then we could wander about as children and pick up all the true things and use them as truth. But that is not how the postlapsarian exists. Roses bear thorns and truth is not always apparent.

This “all truth” theorem finds its basis in an appeal to common grace. However, as I have demonstrated in the prior two essays, there is no basis from common grace to support a wholesale appropriation of assured results of modern academic or clinical psychology broadly stated. I proposed a three-tiered structure of various types of psychology, ranging from physiological, sociological observation, and finally clinical theories and practice. I proposed varying degrees of use we could make of this work.

Sometimes this concept is advanced without an explicit appeal to common grace, and more upon a vague sort of “wisdom” appeal. This “wisdom” appeal is based upon the example of Solomon who unquestionably interacts with traditional wisdom from Egypt in the book of Proverbs.³²

³² See discussions regarding the Proverbs of Amenemope, and Prov 22:22-24:22. See, e.g., “Discovery and Debate Over the Relationship to Proverbs” Richard Halloran, “Amenemope, Instruction of,” ed. John D.

This interaction of Solomon with non-Israelite wisdom has been raised specifically as a point in the discussion of the “integration” of biblical counseling and secular psychologies. John Hilber, having reviewed the use of “foreign” sources of wisdom in the drafting of his proverbs, made the following conclusions:

The implications of these examples for the question of integration in counseling are significant. First, some situations call for expertise from specialists within the covenant community, namely, professional counselors. Second, wisdom is creative and often unconventional. Methods of counseling intervention are not limited to those techniques that can be derived explicitly from Scripture. Third, the use of the Bible in counseling is not mandatory in order for the counseling to be “biblical.”³³

The argument that Solomon’s usage justifies any usage I determine to make is problematic, because it presumes that I have the wisdom of Solomon so as to know what and how to proceed. Here is selection from another Egyptian sage, what should a wise Christian do with this?

Trust not a brother, know not a friend,
 Make no (5) intimates, it is worthless.
 When you lie down, guard your heart yourself,
 For no man has adherents on the day of woe.³⁴

Do I accept it? Do I reject it because it contradicts the Bible elsewhere? If I reject it because it contradicts the Scripture, then what do I do with propositions which are ambiguously related to Scripture? I must have some measure upon to judge the offering. The proverbs of the Egyptian sage did not come with a tag which read “truth”. Rather, I must have the capacity to evaluate the offering which lies outside of the offering.

John Coe, professor at Biola, takes a different angle of the issue by noting Solomon refers to ants in Proverbs 6:6-8. The lowly ant is held up to the sluggard as an example of how to live. Coe explains:

Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016);” Rowland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, vol. 22, *Word Biblical Commentary*, “Excursus on the Book of Proverbs and Amenemope” (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 290; John W. Hilber, “Old Testament Wisdom and the Integration Debate in Christian Counseling,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (1998): 411.

³³ John W. Hilber, “Old Testament Wisdom and the Integration Debate in Christian Counseling,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (1998): 420 (fn. omitted).

³⁴ Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: Volume I: The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 136.

Though the sage elsewhere acknowledges the Scriptures as a source of wisdom (Prov. 29:18), here he informs us that his own reflections and observations were sufficient to gain this piece of practical and moral wisdom. In fact, this pattern seems to fit well with many of his proverbs which do not explicitly depend upon the *Torah* or some further divine revelation. Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that the sage's peculiar task, in contrast to the priest and prophet, *involves keenness in observation and reflection for interpreting natural, particularly human phenomena*. His reflections result not only in the theoretical and technological knowledge for the natural sciences, but especially in moral knowledge for the human sciences (*viz.* the *Proverbs*). In the above case the sage, on the basis of observation and reflection, discovers that laziness leads to financial ruin and self-injury.

The sage, then, is convinced that by observing and reflecting upon the ordering structures particularly of the human situation he will discover quasi-causal laws which govern the human situation. From these observations he claims to receive instruction and wisdom for living, hence, moral knowledge.³⁵ [Emphasis in the original].

On its face, this is a strong argument. But it is a strong argument because it contains an unstated premise. Like the example of the Egyptian proverbs, Solomon already has a standard to measure wisdom. Coe seeks to circumvent that premise by arguing that it came about by the “sage ... reflecting.” But such an argument is a specious. Reflecting is just an action, it does not contain a standard by which to measure. Reflecting is an inherently empty task and contains no more than was added to the reflection. It is like saying that stirring creates a cake without reference to the ingredients which one stirs. The stirring does nothing but mix what is already there. If I stir in an empty bowl, I have an empty bowl at the end. And if I stir flour and water, I have only flour and water in a different relationship to one another at the end.

This is not to say that one could not find an *illustration* by reflecting on nature. No one contests the use of illustrations. Rather, Coe is making a stronger argument that by “reflecting” wisdom is created.

Sometimes the best way to refute such an argument is to see it used in a different context. While reading *Our Mutual Friend*, I came across a scene written a century before Coe's birth which devastated Coe's argument before it was made. Solomon compares the diligent to the ant. What about bees? Bees certainly are a good example, of what?

³⁵ “Why Biblical Counseling is Unbiblical, or Speaking Psychology Gently into the Church,” Dr. John Coe, p. 20-21; from a paper read at the 1991 Evangelical Theological Society, Far West Regional Annual Meeting.

‘Thankee, sir, thankee,’ returned that gentleman. ‘And how do YOU like the law?’
 ‘A not particularly,’ returned Eugene. ‘Too dry for you, eh? Well, I suppose it wants some years of sticking to, before you master it. But there’s nothing like work. Look at the bees.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ returned Eugene, with a reluctant smile, ‘but will you excuse my mentioning that I always protest against being referred to the bees?’

‘Do you!’ said Mr Boffin.

‘I object on principle,’ said Eugene, ‘as a biped ‘

‘As a what?’ asked Mr Boffin.

‘As a two-footed creature; I object on principle, as a two-footed creature, to being constantly referred to insects and four-footed creatures. I object to being required to model my proceedings according to the proceedings of the bee, or the dog, or the spider, or the camel. I fully admit that the camel, for instance, is an excessively temperate person; but he has several stomachs to entertain himself with, and I have only one. Besides, I am not fitted up with a convenient cool cellar to keep my drink in.’

‘But I said, you know,’ urged Mr Boffin, rather at a loss for an answer, ‘the bee.’

‘Exactly. And may I represent to you that it’s injudicious to say the bee? For the whole case is assumed. Conceding for a moment that there is any analogy between a bee, and a man in a shirt and pantaloons (which I deny), and that it is settled that the man is to learn from the bee (which I also deny), the question still remains, what is he to learn? To imitate? Or to avoid? When your friends the bees worry themselves to that highly fluttered extent about their sovereign, and become perfectly distracted touching the slightest monarchical movement, are we men to learn the greatness of Tuft-hunting, or the littleness of the Court Circular? I am not clear, Mr Boffin, but that the hive may be satirical.’

‘At all events, they work,’ said Mr Boffin.

‘Ye-es,’ returned Eugene, disparagingly, ‘they work; but don’t you think they overdo it? They work so much more than they need they make so much more than they can eat they are so incessantly boring and buzzing at their one idea till Death comes upon them that don’t you think they overdo it? And are human labourers to have no

holidays, because of the bees? And am I never to have change of air, because the bees don't? Mr Boffin, I think honey excellent at breakfast; but, regarded in the light of my conventional schoolmaster and moralist, I protest against the tyrannical humbug of your friend the bee. With the highest respect for you.³⁶

You see, it is not so simple as it may seem. The “meaning” of bees or ants and the truth of Egyptian proverbs cannot be known absent some previous or extra knowledge. We contend that in use of ants in Proverbs 6, the extra came from inspiration. The wisdom was not in the world, the wisdom was found illustrated in the world.

If we are going to interact with the world and seek wisdom, we cannot expect that we will merely find it *out there*. Such a theory of wisdom owes more to pragmatism or Taoism than biblical wisdom. And as such, we cannot commend Dr. Coe on this point.³⁷

On What Ground Can We Consider Observations of Secular Psychology?

If we cannot consider observations or written conclusions – at least not without some preceding standards – how are we going to be able to make use of any observation (whether physiology or sociology) from psychology, much less any propositions or theories? Since we lack the inspiration of Solomon, how could we ever safely review Egyptian proverbs for use?

Facts are not merely about to be picked-up as so many pebbles on the beach. The very decision to look for facts, what facts to look for; the determination of the beginning and ending of a fact as a segregable unit of information; et cetera are all determined by some prior commitment.

As a practical matter, we rarely consider the nature of our knowledge. We look at the world, draw conclusions, et cetera without intensive thought on the matter. Unless and until we need to communicate with someone who operates on a different basis and with a different set of presuppositions, we do not even need to consider the nature of our knowledge.

³⁶ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*.

³⁷ I must hasten to add that none of this means that I question the intelligence (he has more degrees than I do), sincerely, nor the faith of Dr. Coe. Although we have never personally met, I can count him as a brother and still contend he has erred on this point. In fact, Dr. Coe's paper contended that his brothers had erred in a different direction. We must not avoid disagreement, because the issues involved are too great. But we also must never be unkind or disrespectful – particularly when we are dealing a brother or sister. I trust Dr. Coe will accept my critique as a desire that both of us may come closer to the truth. Indeed, his critique of biblical counseling sharpened my theology, and for that I am thankful.

The scope of commitments and the nature of knowledge is not perfectly identical between any two human beings. However, the difficulty in communicating in most instances amounts to slight “misunderstandings.” As we expand the number of differences between any two humans, the degree of difficulty increases. The task of “translation” needs to be further formalized.

We understand this need for translation when it comes to language, moving between Spanish and English, for instance. But we are also aware of the need to engage in the task of cultural translations.

What I am proposing here is the work as “knowledge translation” rather than language translation: a process by which we move between a biblical and a non-biblical worldview. To use my analogy from before, I am proposing that we should create a field guide to fungi so that we can distinguish between toadstools and mushrooms; and that we learn to wash our carrots before they go into our cake.

If we were to reject every instance of information which was not expressly derived by those holding a biblical understanding of reality, it would be impossible to function in this world. I could not drive a car, navigate to work, use the computer I used to draft this essay, et cetera. We would run afoul of the specious attack upon biblical sufficiency arguing that since the Bible does not speak of dentistry, the Bible is not “sufficient”. We don’t claim that the Bible is sufficient to understand everything which can be known concerning human beings (the Bible does not contain exhaustive knowledge).

Yet, if we unquestionably receive all “so-called knowledge” without critical analysis, we will find our souls poisoned by the rankest heresies.

The Proposal

What I am proposing is a two-step process.

First, we evaluate the theological underpinnings of the “fact” or proposition presented to use. This will be an act of translation. Rather than accepting or rejecting something uncritically, we interrogate the presuppositions and get a clear view.

Second, we then evaluate that proposition and subject it to our theological presuppositions and concerns. We are not seeking to “integrate” heterogenous information in our system. Rather, we are merely seeking to determine whether a thing is “true” in light of Scripture.

You see, we are not discarding the proposition that “All Truth is God’s Truth.” We wholly heartedly concur: truth is truth. Our concern is a more careful consistent determination of what is in fact true. We cannot simply appeal to some alleged neutral

standard which both believers and unbelievers share. Matters are not quite that simple, and as we will consider in the future, what common consensus we did share (at least in the West) is under considerable pressure.

Some Examples of How Presuppositions Effect the Content of Knowledge

Let us we perform an experiment and we consider a search for explanation which we can see with our eyes. We flip a switch; a light goes on. Since we have not utilized any mechanism which can “observe” electricity, we have no fact of electricity. And thus we conclude that some magical substance which does not move through physical space causes the light to go on when we flip the switch.

The example is obvious, because we “know” what we are looking for – electricity.³⁸ But that is the point; it is only when we know what to look for that we can find a thing. A thing which is not sought will not be found.

Or what of this example involving Jesus:

14 Now he was casting out a demon that was mute. When the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke, and the people marveled. 15 But some of them said, “He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons.”

Luke 11:14 15 (ESV). Much of the original audience for Jesus’ miracles had difficulty knowing what to make of this man. The fact of the exorcism was not in dispute – the understanding, the meaning of the event was profoundly disputed. In order to understand the event which everyone observed, one must begin with some other body of knowledge, presuppositions which underlay the observed event. Understanding those presuppositions is critical if we are to evaluate the meaning of a report from this exorcism.

How can I go about determining what there is to know about this strange circumstance? Do my senses provide sufficient knowledge? How and should expectations or presuppositions fill out my “knowledge.” Should I consult such expectations or should use some other skill? What is the beginning and ending of the “facts” at issue?

Imagine speaking to two different observers. One person says God has visited Israel in the work of this prophet Jesus of Nazareth (his Divinity being an even more difficult matter to comprehend). Today this prophet cast out a demon. A second observer says that Satan is deceiving the people through all manner of lying miracles. If we imagine a more skeptical observer we would have this report: Today a person suffering from a

³⁸ See, e.g., Encyclopedia of Renaissance Philosophy, s.v. “Magnetism in Renaissance Science,” accessed March 5, 2021, https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007%2F978-3-319-02848-4_944-1.

psychosomatic psychological delusion immediately snapped out of his self-inflicted insanity at the suggestion of a remarkably persuasive man.

The different events were the result of three different sets of presuppositions.³⁹

Consider this example drawn from psychology. A study determines that Finland is the happiest country in the world, and that some aspect of Finnish society causes this happiness.

Happiness is certainly not contrary to the Scripture or orthodox Christianity. Now consider these remarkably different understandings of happiness. The Puritan Thomas Manton writes:

Christians, a man that flows in wealth and honour, till he be pardoned, is not a happy man. A man that lives afflicted, contemned, not taken notice of in the world, if he be a pardoned sinner, oh, the blessedness of that man! They are not happy that have least trouble, but they that have least cause⁴⁰.

Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount, begins with a series of propositions of what makes a person “blessed” (supremely happy): poor in spirit, meekness, sorrow, hunger and thirsting after righteousness, being persecuted. Compare those prerequisites for happiness with this academic conclusion from John Reich, Emeritus Professor at the University of Arizona:

Based on clinical interviews and self-report measures I've initiated and studied, I believe that happiness is being aware not only of the positive events that occur in your life but also that you yourself are the cause of these events--that you can create them, that you control their occurrence, and that you play a major role in the good things that happen to you.⁴¹

I am not here to contend with Dr. Reich. What I merely mean to underscore is that Jesus and John Reich have fundamentally different understandings of what constitutes and

³⁹ Another way in which we could think of these circumstances is under the rubric of “social imaginary,” a term coined by Charles Taylor. He defines this briefly as “the way that we collectively imagine, even pre-theoretically, our social life”. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 146. As he develops this concept it comes to mean that which one could conceive to be possible. My great grandmother, an American Indian born in Texas, who taught me that if you cut your hair while the moon was waxing it would grow back better than if you cut your hair when the moon was waning. I cannot even conceive of that being potentially true, but my great grandmother could not conceive of the world operating otherwise. For her, it was simply common sense. What would John Coe do with her wise observation?

⁴⁰ Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, vol. 2, “Twenty Sermons” (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1871), 188.

⁴¹ John Reich and Ed Diener, “The Road to Happiness,” *Psychology Today*, July 1, 1994, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/articles/199407/the-road-happiness>.

causes “happiness.” Thus, when I consider the Finnish report on happiness, I need to understand the basis of what is even meant by “happiness.”

Or consider perhaps the clearer example a dinosaur bone. In recent years, much to the surprise of the paleontologists who have found them, dinosaur bones and fossils have shown up with remarkably well-preserved soft tissue. In some cases, proteins have been retrieved from the remains. That is the fact. But the meaning of the fact is a point of some contention. Does this mean that the bones are not 65,000,000 years old; or does it mean that the mechanics of tissue preservation have been wrong and that such tissue can resist the grinding of time? The answer to that question rests upon other foundations and presumptions.⁴² The bone and its tissue mean nothing as they rest in the ground, or as they rest in a crate. It is only the theory of the scientist examining the bone that creates meaning for the bone.

Thus, when we consider some proposition from academic psychology or therapy, we cannot start with the ultimate proposition. Rather, we must understand the theological cradle in which that fact was laid. To start with the wisdom of Amenemope does not help us understand what that wisdom means or even what sayings of the dead sage or even wise.

We need not necessarily shy away from consideration of the Egyptians’ learning; but also need to as wary of their words as we would a serpent in our hands.

One further example taken from theology:

The Arians and the Son is ‘Like’ the Father: The whole history of this matter can be found any competent church history. Briefly, there were those in the early church (the heretics later known as Arians) who held the Son was *like* the Father. In Greek, the pertinent word was homoiousios. The church however, at the Council of Nicea, concluded this was wrong: The Son was the same substance as the Father, homoousios.

For the average pastor busy dealing with the troubles of a congregation the difference between the two: *like* and the *same*, separated by a single letter, likely seemed insignificant. Of course the Son is like the Father, it is the nature of sons to be like fathers. But the real issue was whether the Son and the Father were of the same “ousia” (and so that I do not take a topic from which I may never return, I will leave the matter there and direct you to competent theologies). The “average” pastor would most likely not know what he was dealing with. The Arians, who supported the Son is *like* knew better. As Church historian Jaroslav Pelikan writes:

⁴² For a discussion of such issues, begin here: David F. Coppedge, “Evolutionists Gloss Over Implications of Dinosaur Tissue Remains,” *Creation Evolution Headlines*, December 22, 2020, <https://crev.info/2020/12/evolutionists-gloss-over-implications-of-dinosaur-tissue-remains/>.

In many ways Arianism was more aware of the nuances of the trinitarian problem than its critics were. It compelled them, in turn, to avoid the oversimplifications to which church theology was prone.⁴³

If an average pastor accepted the language of *like* rather than *same*, he had set his theology on a disastrous trajectory. The Arians knew what they were doing; but it took work to teach the orthodox what was at stake.⁴⁴ A similar problem presents itself when dealing with non-biblical accounts of human psychology. We need to understand precisely what we have before us.

Before we can take hold any “fact,” “conclusion,” or “study,” we first need to understand precisely the nature of what we have before us.

There is no Knowledge Before we Come to Presuppositions

Since we live inside our own thoughts, our own experience, we are constantly tempted to believe that we simply know things and see things it is just the way it is. But as we will see, even the most basic elements of observation – the pre-scientific walking around and looking at stuff – entails a massive structure of presupposition to get started. I will also contend that the reason we can generally communicate with one-another about our general observations is because all human beings must default to a biblical structure for understanding the world – even when they explicitly deny such truth.

First, Just Plain Knowledge is More Difficult than You Considered

This matter of asking even apparently obvious questions is part of question theology. The matters which I am going to raise and examine throughout this study will involve matters which seem too plain and obvious or irrelevant to even consider: For example, am I here? Are you there? Is there actually an objective reality? It is perfectly fine if such considerations are uninteresting – that was the point I was making above.

But before you dismiss this inquiry, you need to understand that such inquiry is a fundamental part of Christian theology. We live in a hostile universe, on this side of the Fall. We have been infected with bad ideas, have a heart which is untrustworthy, function

⁴³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 200.

⁴⁴ A similar sort of naivety is apparent in the relationship of contemporary Christians pastor when they interact with not merely psychology of various sorts, but the contemporary espousals of “critical theory” in its various forms. Even the supposedly well-informed make statements that are either foolish, overly simplistic, or simply cynical deceptions.

from bodies subjected to entropy at the level of the species and personally. There is very grained, precise consideration which must be done in Christian theology. If you don't believe me consider Augustine at the outset of *Confessions*

And how shall I call upon my God, my God and Lord, since, when I call for Him, I shall be calling Him to myself? and what room is there within me, whither my God can come into me? whither can God come into me, God who made heaven and earth? is there, indeed, O Lord my God, aught in me that can contain Thee? do then heaven and earth, which Thou hast made, and wherein Thou hast made me, contain Thee? or, because nothing which exists could exist without Thee, doth therefore whatever exists contain Thee? Since, then, I too exist, why do I seek that Thou shouldest enter into me, who were not, wert Thou not in me? Why?⁴⁵

These are not throw-away questions or the idle meandering of a day-dream. Augustine is working through series questions concerning the nature of God and man. Rather than run past these questions, return and seek to provide actual, cogent answer.

And as you seek to honestly answer these questions you will have to answer fundamental questions on the nature of reality. These questions cannot be answered in isolation from an entire theology. If you wish to see exactly how profound these questions can become under Augustine's remarkable intellect, turn to the final books in the *Confessions* and read on time and memory.

Above, I wrote that this work is not for everyone. There is a level of theological work which entails picking apart the foundations. If we are going to seek to knowingly interact with secular psychologies and remain faithful to the Scripture — remembering that we are doing the work of discipleship and that we are working with the human soul, while wrestling ourselves with the lingering noetic effects of sin — we had best consider the information at such a molecular level.

In the Arian controversy, the difference — seen from the wrong angle -- hinged upon a single letter of spelling. And unless one knew what was inherent in that difference in spelling, the conflict was absurd. If we ignore the elements, will miss what has happened.

So to start, I wish to just outline some of the major problems concerning knowledge itself. In the essay, "Epistemology and the Mirror of Nature," Michael Williams lists out four perennial issues concerning the nature of knowledge:

⁴⁵ Saint Augustine Bishop of Hippo, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. E. B. Pusey (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

1. *The analytical problem.* What is knowledge? (Or, if we prefer, what do we, or should we, mean by “knowledge”?) For example, how is (or should) knowledge be distinguished from mere belief or opinion? What we want here, ideally, is a precise explication or *analysis* of the *concept* of knowledge.
2. *The problem of demarcation.* There are two sub-problems here. The first concerns whether we can determine, in some principled way, what sorts of things we might reasonably expect to know about? Or, as is sometimes said, what are the scope and limits of human knowledge? Do some subjects lie within the province of knowledge while others are fated to remain in the province of opinion, or even faith? Since the aim here is to draw a boundary separating the province of knowledge from other cognitive domains, we call this the “external” boundary (or demarcation) problem. But there is also an internal boundary problem. We may wonder whether we should think of knowledge as all of a piece Or there importantly different kinds of knowledge: for example, *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge?
3. *The problem of method.* How is knowledge obtained or sought? Is there just one way, or are there several, depending on the sort of knowledge in question? (Here the problem of method interacts with the internal demarcation problem.) Furthermore, can we improve our ways of seeking knowledge?
4. *The problem of skepticism.* Given the existence of seemingly intuitive skeptical arguments, why suppose that knowledge is even possible?⁴⁶

What you must understand is that even the basic fact of knowledge cannot be brushed away if we are to be thorough theologians. We will consider this matters more directly when we come to epistemology in a subsequent.⁴⁷

There is no Science Before Theology

If one were tempted to skip theological questions, it would be at the level of hard science. Such a belief would be gravely wrong. Science is a theological enterprise well before it is any sort “neutral” knowledge.

⁴⁶ Robert Brandom, ed., *Rorty and His Critics* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 196.

These questions were raised in the context of a thoroughly secular consideration of knowledge.

⁴⁷ I will examine psychology under the four-tiered structure of Epistemology, Anthropology, Teleology, and Methodology. The last three make a neat acronym, ATM. I could offer “TEAM”, but that acronym does not follow the levels of analysis which are necessary to make this work properly. The best I could do is EAT™, which one can use if it helps!

To prove this point, I will seek support from an unlikely source. Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* provides us with the Parable of the Madman⁴⁸. A man runs into a city center searching for God, whom he will soon say is dead, “And we have killed him.” In striking metaphorical language, Nietzsche describes our predicament in trying to live in a world which is not anchored in a knowledge of God:

“Whither is God?” he cried; “I will tell you. We have killed him ---you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us?”⁴⁹

Stated differently, without a grounding in God, the basis for knowledge, ethics, life has completely lost an objective ontological basis. If there is meaning, such meaning will necessarily come from us.

And while those who have killed God may find the death of God a benefit when it comes to creating a morality which suits oneself; they may not have realized that such solipsistic world-building undermines science. Nietzsche however realizes the results, “when new unchained this earth from its sun.” In section 344 (Book 5), Nietzsche explains that before we have any “scientific” knowledge, that such knowledge first rests upon faith and theology:

In science, convictions have no right to citizenship, as one says with good reason: only when they decide to step down to the modesty of a hypothesis, a tentative experimental standpoint, a regulative fiction,¹ may they be granted admission and even a certain value in the realm of knowledge - though always with the restriction that they remain under police supervision, under the police of mistrust. But doesn't this mean, on closer consideration, that a conviction is granted admission to science only when it ceases to be a conviction? Wouldn't the cultivation of the scientific spirit begin when one permitted oneself no more convictions? That is probably the case; only we need still ask: in order that this cultivation begin, must there not be some prior conviction - and indeed one so authoritative and unconditional that it

⁴⁸ This short section is readily available from multiple internet sources. Here is a link to Kaufmann's translation, http://engage.universityresources.org/sites/default/files/courses_files/watkin/Nietzsche_-_Parable_of_the_Madman.pdf.

⁴⁹ The internet link provided citation to Kaufmann as: Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882, 1887) para. 125; Walter Kaufmann ed. (New York: Vintage, 1974), pp.181-82.

sacrifices all other convictions to itself? *We see that science, too, rests on a faith; there is simply no 'presuppositionless' science (voraussetzungslose "Wissenschaft).* [Emphasis added.]⁵⁰

The knowledge which “science” produces is based upon a set of prior commitments. And if we are going to have “science” then we must make specific commitments, specifically Christian commitments:

But you will have gathered what I am getting at, namely, that it is still a metaphysical faith upon which our faith in science rests - that even we knowers of today, we godless anti- metaphysicians, still take our fire, too, from the flame lit by the thousand-year old faith, the Christian faith which was also Plato's faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine ... But what if this were to become more and more difficult to believe, if nothing more were to turn out to be divine except error, blindness, the lie - if God himself were to turn out to be our longest lie?⁵¹

What I intend to demonstrate is what Nietzsche asserts: The most basic commitments necessary to perform what think of science, the specialist in a laboratory, performing experiments, making observations, drawing conclusions, making reports which are then communicated and received by others requires an entire range of commitments we cannot be supported without “borrowing” Christian theological commitments even when those commitments are expressly denied.⁵²

Stated differently, our ability as biblical counselors to make use of the results of scientific discovery lies in the fact that scientific discovery is simply not possible without borrowing the same presuppositions as inform Christianity. This is unsurprising because modern science has its roots in Christianity:

⁵⁰ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*(Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 200.

⁵¹ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*(Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 200.

⁵² Every single element of this analysis is a matter of intense dispute and enormous literature. I do not believe that anyone walking upon the planet has a comprehensive knowledge of all the subdisciplines which we will note in this analysis. I make this point at the outset as both a prophylactic apology for the limitations on this analysis and my knowledge.

But I will also note that it is not necessary to address every conceivable philosophical position which has been raised to understand the nature of the problems. What we need to know are the areas of dispute.

The birth of modern science is a good place to begin. Modern science arose out of a Christian mentality. Alfred North Whitehead, for example, emphasizes the fact that modern science was born because it was surrounded by a Christian frame of reference. Galileo, Copernicus, Francis Bacon, Kepler, and scientists up to and including Newton believed that the world was created by a reasonable God, and therefore we could find out the order of the universe by reason. Oppenheimer stressed the same thing: modern science could not have been born at all without a Christian milieu, a Christian consensus.⁵³

In the end, the reason we receive “hard” scientific conclusions is because those conclusions come from a realm of knowledge and inquiry which is largely consistent with Christian presuppositions.

Excursus: A Warning: We cannot guarantee that “science” will continue to maintain the same presuppositions with respect to basis for science. One of the stranger applications of critical theory is the contention that mathematics, logic, empirical observation and such are merely part of the “superstructure” (to use an older Marxist phrase) which maintains the oppressive hegemony. A consideration of this contention is far beyond the scope of this essay. I raise it here for the sole purpose of noting that while “scientific” research is still valuable for us, we should begin to consider the source of such research more carefully. As I write, I have seen multiple arguments that mathematics is racist, that rationality is oppressive, that magic is simply a different culturally means of controlling nature.

Another problem which lies here is the rhetorical weaponization of the word “science.” Consider the following language of Justice Kagan dissenting in recent Supreme Court decision concerning the state regulation of practice of religion. The Justice uses the word “science” as if science were some utterly and always objective position and to question the “science” of public health officials in an enormously complex problem (even the health considerations are from clear or scientific in any reasonable sense of the word); therefore, to deny “science” is to deny that the thermonuclear explosion in the sky which appears every morning were in fact a source of light on earth:

Yet the Court will not let California fight COVID as it thinks appropriate. The Court has decided that the State must exempt worship services from the strictest aspect of its regulation of public gatherings. No one can know, from the Court’s 19-line order,

⁵³ Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*, vol. 4 (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 5–6. Obviously, this subject is far broader and more complex than Schaeffer’s summary statement on the issue.

exactly why: Is it that the Court does not believe the science, or does it think even the best science must give way?⁵⁴

As you will notice, this use of the word “science” is a trick because it contains within it a presupposition that science is naively objective and that there are no presuppositions which undergird any conclusion made in the name of science. This is simply false.

And so (1) the presuppositions of science are under attack; and thus “science” tomorrow may not be what we consider to be “science” today. (2) The broaden use of the word “science” will be used as a means to deny differences of opinion. Both of these problems are poisoning the well of scientific knowledge, and that poison is spreading with remarkable fervor. Thus, the work of interrogating the basis for an assertion made in the name of “science” is a work which we cannot ignore.

It is to that work which we will direct our attention. We will begin with this question of how can we know at all in the next part of this article.

⁵⁴ South Bay United Pentecostal Church v. Newsom 592 U. S. (2021), Kagan, J., dissenting.

A Task Interrupted:

Why and How the Church Departed from Biblical Counseling

Samuel Stephens¹

Introduction

When I was introduced to biblical counseling, it seemed as if I had discovered some rare jewel. There were several aspects of the biblical counseling movement that captivated my attention. Classical soul care drew upon a rich heritage of faithful practice by pastors spanning centuries. The theological depth and orientation to this counseling approach emphasized the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture while framing people as image bearers of God in need of redemption. The problems that people faced did not take central stage; in fact, quite the opposite was true. One of the most precious characteristics of biblical counseling is that the person and work of Jesus Christ is given center stage.

I began to realize that for many of my years growing up in the church, I had never seen anything close as to this approach to soul care and counseling. As my paradigms for pastoral ministry and Christian care were shifting and being re-formulated on historical and biblical grounds, there was one central question that began to formulate in my mind. *Why is biblical counseling such a novel concept in theory and practice for many in the church today?*

Mis-categorizing Counseling in Principle and Practice

It is common practice in many churches today for pastors to *defer* counseling responsibility to trained professionals and *refer* struggling members of their flock to professionally, clinically-informed counselors who operate outside of the church. So, what is wrong with the defer and refer method of pastoral care and counseling? The very

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question itself reveals wrong thinking concerning the nature, purpose, and method of *genuine* Christian counseling and these misunderstandings must be addressed and corrected in order for us to see the situation clearly

The Proper Jurisdiction

The first error is a general ignorance and misunderstanding concerning the institutions that God designed to work together in achieving His will in the world. God provided three institutions in which mankind was to operate, these being the family, the church, and the government.² While this is not the place for a lengthy discussion on jurisdictional theology, it should be noted that each of these have good and proper roles and responsibilities, and while they differ, each are ordained by God to bring Him glory and honor.³ When any of these institutions either overstep the bounds or overreach in their authority, God's original design becomes frustrated and disorder abounds.

The Practice of the Ministry

The second error is that counseling has largely become viewed as a practice that belongs under the jurisdiction of the government and *not* the church. When it comes to soul care, the Bible is clear that the church is uniquely tasked with serving as the context of seeing Christians equipped for the work of the ministry, for being the body of Christ by which personal sanctification occurs and gifts are corporately exercised unto the glory of God and the good of others, and ultimately as the vehicle of obedience and fulfillment of the Great Commission.⁴

These examples of wrong thinking result in a two-pronged problem in the church that reveals that one of their greatest tasks has become interrupted. Churches have become anemic regarding their responsibility to engage the problems people face with the sufficiency of Scripture. The call of scriptural sufficiency may be incorporated in verbal

² Rob Rienow, *Limited Church: Unlimited Kingdom*, (Nashville: Randall House, 2013), 61-68.

³ The first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism states, "What is the chief end of man?" The answer to this question is, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." See, 1 Corinthians 10:31; Psalm 73: 24-26; John 17: 22, 24.

⁴ Ephesians 4:12-14; 1 Corinthians 12; Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 1:8

confessions or written statements, but the practice of sufficiency is betrayed by the defer and refer model of pastoral care and counseling. Additionally, Christians who desire to counsel God’s Word faithfully find themselves burdened and bound-up by a secular society which promotes a worldview antithetical to that of the church. Christians who attempt to engage in biblical soul care under the jurisdiction of the state, do not find a safe haven in their private practices or government-supported institutions.⁵ In fact, those Christians are under immense pressure to capitulate their biblical mandate to unapologetically counsel the truth of God’s Word under the threat of losing their professional license, and thus forfeiting their livelihood, and becoming an open target of litigation.⁶ With the reality of such pressures, it doesn’t make sense that born-again believers would send one of their own out of the church to find help from either a secular psychologist (who does not even pretend to operate from a biblical worldview) or a Christian counselor who operates within a system whose foundations are openly hostile to Christianity.⁷

Now that you know a little as to *why* biblical counseling such a novel concept for many in the church today, it is important to also ask *how* we got here.

Biblical Soul Care and the Age of Psychology

It is an ambitious task to attempt to properly treat the various developments that led to the church essentially abandoning its proper jurisdiction regarding soul care and counseling, and in fact, I won’t be able to give this the fair treatment it needs here.⁸ However, I can still provide a broad historical survey that will outline points of philosophical and theological shifts that explain how the American church got to a place where biblical counseling is considered a novel concept to many.

⁵ Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1970), 17-19.

⁶ There are many reasons why a Christian counseling outside of the church context may feel these external pressures, but many within the fields of integration practice counseling in a “faith-based” or “biblically-informed” manner, meaning that they allow their clients to direct the conversation onto spiritual matters and do not broach the subject of the Gospel unless a door is opened.

⁷ Edward Shorter, *A History of Psychiatry: From the Age of the Asylum to the Age of Prozac*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997); Richard Ganz, *Psychobabble*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993); Paul Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994).

⁸ For a more in-depth treatment of these issues see: Samuel Stephens, *The Psychological Anthropology of Wayne Edward Oates*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2020) and T. Dale Johnson, Jr., *The Professionalization of Pastoral Care*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2020).

Redefining Anthropology

One of the downgrades leading to the shift away from church-based soul care and counseling was the intentional restricting of a biblical understanding of humanity. It had been twenty years since Charles Darwin had surveyed the now-famed Galapagos Islands during his voyage, but in 1859, *On the Origin of Species*, a compilation of observations made during this trip, was finally published. This book sent shockwaves throughout the scientific and ecclesiastical communities, not because Darwin was the first to propose an origin of humanity that subverted intelligent design, but because his theory sought to explain the origin of man *solely* from a materialistic worldview. In other words, God was written out of the picture completely. The publication of *On the Origin of Species* provided explanations of life and human existence solely on materialistic grounds and pushed against the dominant Judeo-Christian ethos of the day. Darwin's radical claims were disguised through a philosophy designed to seem objectively scientific in terminology and form, but without any of the traditional hallmarks of scientific inquiry.⁹

Psychology without a Soul

In 1879, Wilhelm Wundt, a philosophy professor and founder of experimental psychology, established the first modern psychological laboratory at the University of Leipzig in Germany. Up until this point in time, psychology was considered a sub-discipline of philosophy and a sister to the “queen of the sciences,” theology. However, with the waning influence of the church in the West and an emphasis on empiricism and materialism, psychology and psychiatry sought to move out from under the realm of the immaterial and under the emerging empirical sciences. In his book, *The Leipzig Connection*, Lionni noted, “To Wundt, a thing made sense and was worth pursuing if it could be measured, quantified, and scientifically demonstrated. Seeing no way to do this with the human soul, he proposed that psychology concern itself solely with experience.”¹⁰ While many may not be familiar with Wundt, there were many who traveled from around the world to study under his tutelage. Wundt influenced the later work of early behavioral psychologists including Ivan Pavlov, J. B. Watson, and B. F. Skinner. His first American

⁹ J. P. Moreland, *Scientism and Secularism*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018).

¹⁰ Paolo Lionni, *The Leipzig Connection*, (Heron Books, 1993), 2.

graduate student was G. Stanley Hall who became the first president of the American Psychological Association as well as the benefactor and host who made it possible for Sigmund Freud to travel to America for his one and only speaking tour. Progressive education philosopher John Dewey as well as Edward Thorndike, the father of the new educational psychology, were also both heavily influenced by Wundtian psychology and paved the way for a humanistic and secular approach to education which dominated teaching schools, curriculum, and public education programs for generations.¹¹

Industrial, Professional, and Clinical: The Remaking of Pastoral Counseling

Concurrent with the major philosophical changes sweeping the intellectual landscape, the dawn of the twentieth century saw a second industrialization take hold in the United States. This brought with it a rapid expansion of manufacturing that utilized the new psychological sciences to increase factory productivity, industrial efficiency, and general worker performance. More Americans than ever were given opportunities to continue in their education and take advantage of high-skilled labor and white-collar professional careers.

Later in the century, America experienced an explosive post-World War interest in the therapeutic value and application of psychology as embattled American soldiers returned home with a host of mental health concerns.¹² The mental health field attempted to converge with traditional medical disciplines in an effort to meet the demands of this population by presenting an effective and legitimate treatment options. Along with this came a shift in the perception pastoral responsibility and purpose which seemed to echo the scientific and professional milieu in which they found themselves. In an effort to maintain credibility and relevancy, pastors had to become united with the helping professions found within secular institutions.¹³

The clinical pastoral education (CPE) movement provided the context for a professional approach to pastoral ministry. Such CPE programs involved experienced and skilled supervisors who helped pastors-in-training to deal with issues and problems faced on the frontlines of ministry. The end-goal was the “fusion of scientific understanding with Christian wisdom and concern.”¹⁴ The early leaders of CPE viewed the classical pastoral care as antiquated and outdated. In the following

¹¹ Paolo Lionni, *The Leipzig Connection*, 67

¹² Stephanie Muravchik, *American Protestantism in the Age of Psychology*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 13.

¹³ Stephens, *The Psychological Anthropology of Wayne Edward Oates*, 1-2.

¹⁴ Richard Niebuhr, et. al., *The Advancement of Theological Education*, (Harper & Brothers, 1960), 123.

decades, this pastoral training became standard in theological seminaries and thus solidified a professionalized and therapeutic interpretation of the Christian minister's role as shepherd and counselor.

By the mid to late 1900s, professional pastoral counselors, known as pastoral psychologists, were highly valued and sought after. This new and professional pastoral ministry, characterized by objectivity and scientific methodology, was further nuanced to refer to pastors who were "precisely competent to help all people become responsible participants in society."¹⁵ Pioneers in CPE understood the focus of the professional minister to be not so much concerned with biblical soul care, but rather with individual and social mental health. The task of shepherding was now concerned with "adopting an approach that prioritized the individual emotional needs of those they [pastors] interacted with."¹⁶ This therapeutic process was aimed at developing one's personality, assuaging guilt, and providing comfort in the face of dis-ease, unhappiness, and disappointment. The minister as therapist followed the mandate of an old French proverb which had for its goal, "to heal sometimes, to remedy often, to comfort always."¹⁷

Conclusion

Secular humanism and modern psychology took a firm footing within the church because a void had already been created. Decades of doubt in the inerrancy, trustworthiness, and sufficiency of the Bible *necessarily* led to another authority taking its place.¹⁸ In this article I have attempted to explain why and how a biblical approach to counseling has become a foreign concept to many within the church. While there is nothing that can be done to what has happened in the past, we have a responsibility to do something in the present. We must be aware that the church has a unique and special role and that counseling is central to that role. We must know that the world can only offer a

¹⁵ William Oglesby, *New Shape of Pastoral Theology: Essays in Honor of Seward Hiltner*, (Abingdon Press, 1969), 228-29.

¹⁶ Muravchik, *American Protestantism in the Age of Psychology*, 30.

¹⁷ Wayne E. Oates, *Pastoral Counseling*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 1974), 9.

¹⁸ Tom Ascol, "Theoretical Inerrantists," Founders Ministries, Accessed August 26, 2020. <https://founders.org/2020/06/22/theoreticalinerrantists/#:~:text=Theoretical%20inerrancy%20is%20killing%20the%20church%20in%20America.,the%20Spiritempowered%20preaching%20and%20teaching%20of%20His%20Word.>

weak and cheap imitation to soul care. We must understand that counseling techniques and theories are never neutral. We must decide if we will once again pick up the task of biblical counseling, a task that has been interrupted for far too long.

Abuse, Neglect, and Pornography as Biblical Grounds for Divorce

Brian Sayers¹

Introduction and Approach

Christians differ widely when abuse, neglect, and habitual pornography use are considered as potential grounds for divorce. Some confusion results from the various definitions and severity of those potential grounds – there is not always agreement about the presence, nature, extent, or severity of these sins. More confusion results from a failure to fully develop a biblical theology of divorce and remarriage that encompasses both Old and New Testament teaching on the topics of oppression, neglect, and sexual immorality as it relates to divorce. We will outline the nature of some Old Testament ordinances and their application in our modern context. We will then look at the Old and New Testament passages that speak to these matters of abuse, neglect, and sexual immorality as they relate to divorce and remarriage. We will see that cases of abuse, neglect, and habitual pornography use *often*, though not *always*, fall under the biblical provisions and protections of God and *may* be adequate grounds for divorce.

Marriage Ideals and Assumptions

No position taken in this paper intends to diminish the divine design and ideal of marriage as ordained and regulated by God in His holy Word. God created and designed marriage to be a permanent one-flesh covenantal relationship between one man and one woman. This relationship is supposed to be a partnership of labor in filling and subduing the earth (Gen. 1:26-28) and is designed by God to be a place of mutual love, respect, and affections (Gen. 2:18-24; 1 Cor. 7:33-34; Eph. 5:25-33) that reflects the relationship of Christ to His bride, the church (Eph. 5:25, 32). Marriages characterized by abuse, neglect, and the intrusion of impersonal third parties through pornography use do not reflect the affectionate complementarian mutuality ordained

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by God. Moreover, extreme cases potentially render a marriage relationship almost useless as a practical reflection of the union of two souls in loving companionship and cooperation in fulfilling the divine mandates of marriage. This paper hopes to move the church toward sustaining marriages that reflect the ideal rather than toward a position that undermines it.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to build a detailed position on the topic of divorce and remarriage. We begin with the basic premise that Scripture supports there being two general biblical grounds for divorce—sexual immorality (Matt. 5:31-32; 19:3-9) and desertion (1 Cor. 7:10-15). This position has historically been referred to as the “Erasmian Position,” having been thoroughly outlined by Erasmus in the early sixteenth century and later gaining broad Protestant acceptance as the view espoused by the Westminster Confession in 1648. For an articulation of this view, perhaps no work has been more widely accepted than John Murray’s timeless treatment of the issue.²

What is more purposely the topic of this paper is twofold. First, we will discuss whether some modern expressions of sexual immorality practiced today (pornography use, “online sins,” etc.) are potentially included in the reference to “sexual immorality” by Jesus in the above texts, and therefore may constitute grounds for divorce on the basis of sexual immorality, neglect or desertion. And second, we will consider whether there is a form of abuse and neglect that would constitute a kind of “desertion” that falls under the definition and description of 1 Corinthians 7 (and other texts), and that would likewise constitute biblical grounds for divorce.

The Nature of Abuse, Neglect and Pornography Use as it Pertains to Divorce

Our aim in this section is to provide a biblical definition of the concepts of abuse, neglect, and pornography. To locate relevant passages and principles in the biblical text, we must make sure there is a parallel or valid reference in the ancient text to the terms that are used in our modern context.

Abuse

² John Murray, *Divorce* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, 1974). A more recent chapter-length defense of this position by Thomas Edgar, with helpful responses to opposing arguments, can be found in H. Wayne House (with contributions by J. Carl Laney, William A. Heth, Thomas R. Edgar, and Larry Richards), *Divorce and Remarriage* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1990).

Abuse is a somewhat nebulous term and one that is used variously in secular literature, Christian literature, and civil legal codes. We are using the term abuse because it encompasses not only physical violence, but threats of violence, oppression, evil speaking, and every form of harsh, malicious, and harmful self-willed behavior. Clearly something that is so broad in its use will be hard to define succinctly.

A Brief Survey of Definitions

Much of the work defining abuse is influenced by secular culture and terminology. This ought to give us great caution in using the term and labeling behavior abusive. Strickland cautions:

To answer the question “Is it abuse?” we need to determine whether such an event is part of a much broader system of oppression ... be alert for patterns of coercion so that you can assess for oppression with the whole context of a relationship in mind ... Labeling something as abuse when it is not will do damage of a different kind...³

Moles points to biblical categories of abusive actions and effects. Namely, you see abuse through physical force (Psa. 11:5), intimidation (Psa. 34:15-16), ridicule (Pro. 12:18), isolation (Ecc. 4:12), denial and blame (Pro. 28:13), using the children (Luke 17:2), male privilege (Eph. 5:25, in the sense of abusing the position of headship and authority), economic control (1 Tim. 5:8), and coercion and threats (1 Cor. 13:4-5).⁴

Gifford provides this biblical definition of abuse:

Abuse entails physical violence (Acts 16:19), threats of physical violence (Eph. 6:9), persecution (Matt. 5:44), sexual mistreatment (Judg. 19:25), reviling (Luke 6:28; 1 Pet. 2:23), speaking evil (James 4:11), or being under the misused power of another person or group of people (Gen. 16:6; 1 Sam. 2:16; Ezra 5:12).⁵

Gifford too, however, offers more of a description of abuse than a definition. Though within these descriptions you can see very similar categories as provided by Moles, and even more biblical examples of those categories.

³ Darby Strickland, *Is It Abuse?* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2020) 25-26.

⁴ Chris Moles, *The Heart of Domestic Abuse* (Bemidji, Minnesota: Focus Publishing, 2015) 23-28.

⁵ Greg Gifford, “A Biblical Definition of Abuse,”

<https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2019/01/14/a-biblical-definition-of-abuse/> accessed January 16, 2020.

In a plenary session titled “Abuse and the Abuser” at the 2018 annual conference of the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, Dr. Dale Johnson defined an abuser as “someone who demands his wants rather than submits to his responsibilities at the expense of someone else’s dignity.”⁶ The elements of demanding behavior, failure to fulfill the responsibility of exhibiting virtue, and the denigration and humiliation of another are all present in that definition.

Roberts follows a paradigm of categories like Moles and Gifford and includes emotional abuse, coercion and threats, isolation, finances, using or harming children, sexual harm or control, physical harm, and spiritual abuse (misusing Scripture or spiritual authority as a means of control).⁷ She helpfully clarifies, “Most abusers do not practice their abusive behaviors all the time. There may be periods in which their behavior is fairly normal, and they show love and affection for their spouse and family. Most victims will testify that their abuse was *continual* (recurring) but not *continuous* (uninterrupted).”⁸

Biblical Definition of Abuse

As mentioned, it is difficult to define a term biblically when the term itself is not used in Scripture. The term “abuse,” however, is part of the cultural vocabulary and we must be able to interact with others in an intelligent way, recognizing how and where the Bible speaks of it. Taking the previous data, and recognizing they describe patterns and descriptions of parallel concepts from Scripture, we propose the following biblical definition of abuse:

*Abuse is a pattern of unloving and self-willed use of authority or strength which threatens, oppresses, or brings harm upon another.*⁹

⁶ Quote available at <https://biblicalcounseling.com/free-2018-annual-conference-resources/> accessed June 4, 2020.

⁷ Barbara Roberts, *Not Under Bondage*, (Australia: Maschil Press, 2008) 20-24.

⁸ *Ibid*, 24.

⁹ This definition is intentionally succinct but aims to capture the essence of abuse in all its forms using biblically informed terms and categories. Our local domestic violence agency (the Spokane Regional Domestic Violence Coalition; <https://endtheviolencespokane.org/>) defines abuse this way: “Physical harm, bodily injury, assault, or the infliction of fear of imminent physical harm, bodily injury or assault, sexual assault, or stalking ... of one intimate partner by another intimate partner (or one family/household member by another family/household member).” That is admittedly more thorough. Our definition above intends to include all of these forms of abuse but is simply using broader biblical terms to define them.

As previous authors have suggested, we do not believe abuse is limited to physical violence. A person can misuse authority and Scripture, demanding submission or obedience in the name of truth, and it may constitute spiritual oppression and control (spiritual abuse). Likewise, reviling others, threatening, and speaking evil against another (verbal abuse) can do untold damage to the mental and emotional state of others (emotional abuse). Note the *effect* aspect in Johnson's definition—abuse happens “at the expense of someone else's dignity.”

God opposes the proud and will bring judgment on the oppressor (Pro. 3:31-33; 6:16-19; Psa. 10). Christians must stop minimizing the pain and lasting effects of verbal and emotional abuse. The Bible clearly describes abusive behavior. Verbal abuse is referred to as harsh words (Pro. 15:1), hateful speech, dissensions, outbursts of anger (Gal. 5:20), sowing discord (Pro. 6:19), words like a sword or sharp arrow (Psa. 64:3; cf. Jer. 9:8) and destroying others with your mouth (Pro. 11:9). Emotional abuse is labeled affliction, a troubled heart (Psa. 25:16-19), a crushed or broken spirit (Psa. 34:18; Pro. 15:13, 17:22, 18:14), oppression (Psa. 10:7, 18; 73:8; 103:6; 119:134), and many other things. These forms of abuse are wicked, evil, hateful, self-willed, and oppressive. When expressed as a pattern in marriage, abuse is a practical repudiation of the vow to love, honor, and cherish another person.

Neglect

In contrast to the term abuse, the concept of neglect is arguably easier to define. Abuse itself is a form of neglect (neglect of the vows and responsibilities of marriage at the very least). Neglect can also be a form of abuse. For example, withholding food or finances from a spouse are behaviors that could cause lasting harm, if not physically then emotionally in the pattern of fear it creates over time.

Like abuse, the neglect that may constitute grounds for divorce would be habitual, abject, and have the effect or risk of lasting harm. We define neglect as follows:

Neglect is failure to fulfill one's responsibilities or failure to give sufficient attention to those responsibilities in a way that causes harm, creates the risk of harm, or incites acute fear of such harm.

Paul says neglect in providing for one's family materially is grounds to conclude that you are worse than an infidel (1 Timothy 5:8). In a passage we will revisit later, Exodus 21:7-11 refers to a former slave taken as a wife, who is given freedom from her marriage vow when her husband takes a second wife and neglects to properly provide

her “food, her clothing, or her marital rights [sexual relations].” This is a clear case of harmful neglect to provide what is due another in the relationship of marriage in which the wife is granted the rights of divorce.

Admittedly, the nature and degree of sinful neglect can be hard to define objectively. We do not mean to suggest that every kind and degree of neglect would serve as grounds for divorce. Rather, we suggest it *may* provide recourse in situations that are habitually and abjectly neglectful and unsafe.

Pornography

In this section we will not provide an extensive discussion of the nature of pornography or the habitual use of such materials. Rather, we will make general observations and conclusions regarding Jesus’ use of the term *porneia* in contexts where He is laying out grounds for divorce (Matthew 5:31-32; 19:3-9).

In both these passages Jesus uses the Greek term *porneia*. This term refers generally to sexual immorality and is often translated that way.¹⁰ Though many adherents to the Erasmian view of divorce and remarriage will cite “adultery and desertion” as the only valid grounds for divorce, the particular term Jesus chooses is not *moicheia*, the Greek term for adultery, but the more general term for sexual immorality of every kind. Two questions remain: (1) what kinds of sexual immorality are included in this general term *porneia*, and (2) does the modern phenomena of habitual pornography use fall within this general category?

Old Testament uses of *porneia* make frequent reference to prostitution, both literally and as a figurative expression of Israel’s unfaithfulness to Yahweh.¹¹ “Later Judaism shows how the use of *porneia* broadens out to include not only fornication or adultery but incest, sodomy, unlawful marriage, and sinful sexual intercourse in general.”¹² The context of Matthew’s gospel being written to a prominently Jewish audience suggests that the reader would have been familiar with the sundry laws against sexual immorality given in Leviticus 18:6-30, 20:10-21 and elsewhere. These

¹⁰ “*porneia*, (*as*), ... fornication, sexual immorality, sexual sin of a general kind, that includes many different behaviors (Mt 5:32; 15:19; 19:9; Mk 7:21; Jn 8:41; Ac 15:20; 1Co 6:18; 7:2; 2Co 12:21; Gal 5:19; Eph 5:3; 1Th 4:3)” (James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)* [Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997]).

¹¹ The *porneioō* group is mostly used for the [Heb.] root *znh* and has such senses as “to be unfaithful,” “to play the harlot.” It may be used of the prostitute or of the betrothed or married woman who proves unfaithful (Kittel, G., Friedrich, G., & Bromiley, G. W., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 1985] 918.)

¹² *Ibid.*, 919.

contexts include prohibitions against incest, sexual acts with a litany of various close relatives, adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, and even lying with a woman on her menstrual cycle.¹³ In another context we also see transvestitism condemned (Deut. 22:5),¹⁴ establishing God’s concern with maintenance of the sanctity of the sexes in the created order – a matter of no small significance today. As well, the prohibition of sons and daughters for use as cult prostitutes suggests pederasty is also sexual sin (Deut. 23:17).¹⁵

Carson suggests the term *porneia* specifically is “a larger category than adultery, and includes homosexuality and all other sexual irregularity.”¹⁶ “It is an inclusive term which refers to all sexual irregularity. For a married couple, it involves sexual marital unfaithfulness.”¹⁷ We conclude that Jesus’ use of the term *porneia* condemns every form of sexual immorality and establishes such sins as legitimate grounds for divorce. Additionally, we suggest that the lists of sexual sins are not exhaustive, but rather establish the heinous nature of these *types* of sins and are intended to be understood more generally if necessary and applicable. Romans 1:18-30 describes the creativity of sinners devolving into sexual sin of an equal or worse nature as those specifically outlined. To suggest that the Old Testament catalog of sexual sins is exhaustive denies the creative capacities of man’s depraved heart.

This leads us to consider the second question above, does the modern phenomena of habitual pornography use fall within this general category or *porneia*, and thus constitute grounds for divorce? The answer to this question is complex and likely not absolute in nature. Indeed, there is a very broad spectrum of things we might include as pornography, ranging from lustfully gazing at immodestly dressed models in a department store ad, to indulging in the morally filthy and sexually violent videos widely available online. Though lustful indulgence in either constitutes adultery in one’s heart (Matthew 5:27-28), the two are hardly equals when you consider the degree of pain and harm that may be introduced into a marriage through them.

¹³ Kaiser suggests that this act was a generally humiliating expression of dominance over the woman, and the prohibition serves to establish “the fact that God is total Lord of persons [and] that no man can claim total rights to a woman without limitations” (Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *Toward Old Testament Ethics* [Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1983] 117).

¹⁴ This passage outlines the immoral nature of intentional cross-dressing.

¹⁵ No one would suggest pedophilia of any kind is moral.

¹⁶ D. A. Carson, “God with Us: Themes from Matthew,” *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2007) 209. Cited in Andrew David Naselli, “What the New Testament Teaches about Divorce and Remarriage,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*, 24 (2019) 13.

¹⁷ D. A. Carson, *Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World: An Exposition of Matthew 5-10* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1987) 48-49. Cited in Andrew David Naselli, 13.

These questions are difficult and often very subjective in nature. Jim Newheiser references John Frame’s quotation of the PCA Ad Interim Committee on Divorce and Remarriage as one very subjective standard:

The committee would argue that masturbation and the destructive sin of pornography per se are not grounds for divorce, because they do not unmistakably break the one-flesh relationship, but if a person becomes so obsessed with them that they become a substitute for fulfilling the conjugal rights of the spouse, then they could be understood to break the one-flesh union.¹⁸

This standard, however, cannot objectively define the concepts of “so obsessed” or an “unmistakably broken” one-flesh relationship. While it would be ideal if we could reach a greater level of certainty than above, it is unlikely. We agree with the sentiment that there is a degree of obsessive lust that would constitute a break in the relationship, though we are unable to define it more specifically.

Because of the varying degrees and nature of the immoral offense, we are left to seek God’s wisdom and attempt to apply a similar standard to the one suggested in regard to abuse and neglect. Namely, the nature of the pornography use must also be habitual, abject and carry the risk or effect of harming the spouse (or children). This harm may be physical or emotional in nature, though admittedly the second is more difficult to assess than the first. We briefly saw from Exodus 21:10-11 that refusing conjugal rights is a degree of neglect that justified being freed from the marriage covenant. This certainly contains some principles that need to be discussed and fleshed out below.

That suggestion leads us logically to further study some Old and New Testament passages that are relevant to the topic at hand.

Old Testament Teachings

Before addressing applicable principles in specific Old Testament passages, we first must at least state the validity of using and applying the Old Testament law to these matters.

Hermeneutical Assumptions and Approach

¹⁸ John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008) 775, referenced by Jim Newheiser, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017) 241-2.

When the apostle Paul spoke about the entirety of inspired Scripture, he says it is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). He most certainly included the Old Testament writings in this description. What then is the design and use of Old Testament ordinances in our age as it relates to being equipped for every good work?

Some of the specific passages we shall consider forthcoming are part of the Mosaic sundry case laws. One key text in Exodus 21 outlines and delineates “rules” (ESV) or “ordinances” (NASB). These “rules” or “ordinances” are general guidelines with broader application. The Hebrew term (*mishpatim*) refers to legal judgments or decisions that are intended to be applied very much like modern case law. The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament notes about the term that it can refer to:

A case of litigation ... [or] A sentence or decision issuing from a magistrate’s court. *This is very common* [emphasis mine]. In such cases the prevalent “judgment” as rendering is entirely correct (I Kgs 20:40) ... There are also uses involving the legislative side of government ... *mišpāṭ* also designates an ordinance of law – often used co-ordinately with *hōq* “ordinance” (Ex 15:25) and *tôrâ* “law” (Isa 42:4). The Pentateuchal ordinances are *mišpāṭ* (Lev 5:10; 9:16, et al.), in fact the individual ordinances of Mosaic law are *mišpāṭ* (Deut 33:10, 21; 16 times in Ps 119).¹⁹

The *mishpatim* involve cases, sentences or decisions that result in legislative rules that outline an ordinance of law – not an exhaustive and detailed list of every violation, decision, or judgment, but a general decision grounded in moral principles and intended to be extended, legislated, and enforced as a matter of justice and righteousness.

Kaiser also explains the nature of *mishpatim* as general case law to be applied to specific cases when he says, “It is clear that what is included in this section [Exodus 21:1-23:10] are ‘judgments’ or ‘precedents’ (*mishpatim*) given for the magistrates to use in civil disputes.”²⁰ Proper use of case law involves understanding the specifics of the case in question, extracting the general moral principle that support the judgment or direction in that case, and then generalizing and extending that moral principle to other cases with similar underlying facts or circumstances. The *lex talionis* (Exodus

¹⁹ Culver, R. D. “מִשְׁפָּטִים,” *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (electronic edition), eds. R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer Jr., & B. K. Waltke, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999) 948–949.

²⁰ Kaiser, 98.

21:22-25) is an excellent example of an ordinance intended to be applied more broadly than its specifics. It is obvious that limiting its application to eyes and teeth would be ludicrous. This is the reality with all Old Testament case law. The New Testament supports this approach when Paul quotes the ordinance that “You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain” (Deut. 25:4) and applies it to the principle of proper remuneration for pastors (1 Cor. 9:8-14; 1 Tim. 5:18).

With that hermeneutical assumption established, we now turn to the consideration of specific Old Testament passages relevant to the matter of divorce in cases of abuse, neglect, and sexual immorality.

Specific Passages

Deuteronomy 24:1-4

It is appropriate to first consider the Old Testament passage referenced by Jesus in His discussion of divorce with the religious leaders of Israel in Matthew, chapter 19. Admittedly, the meaning of this text and its application to modern divorce and remarriage is disputed. That Jesus references this text necessitates harmonizing its meaning herein, though we will deal more fully with the comments and conclusions of Jesus below. We have already established that ordinances of this nature are *not* to be limited in their application to broader circumstances unless there is some warrant in the text to do so. To apply more broadly, we must identify the underlying principle in the text.

This text does not command (or commend) divorce, or even grant the right of divorce as the primary importance of the text. This law regulating divorce and remarriage assumes that divorce was practiced. The immediate aim and most narrow application of this ordinance is to prohibit remarriage to an ex-wife if she herself had remarried after a divorce – even if the second husband had died. This law actually *limits* the rights of the man who pursues divorce from his wife for the cause of “some indecency” (v. 1; Heb. *erwat dabar*). The meaning of this term is not universally agreed upon.

Some have argued the phrase *erwat dabar* means adultery or some sexual indiscretion. While the phrase could be rendered “nakedness of the thing/matter,” and thus extended to mean some form of sexual immorality, it is also used in the very

near context to refer to uncovered excrement (Deut. 23:12-14). Murray ably defends the view that this phrase does *not* mean adultery.²¹ Scipione notes,

The *erwat dabar* is a category that refers to the sinful subjective complaint/grounds of the husband. It is *unnecessary* to figure if the ground is legitimate or not or even what the phrase means precisely. Why?! Because there are *no* legitimate grounds due to Genesis and God's original intent. Thus, the phrase refers to whatever *excuse* the man used to disobey God's design as Jesus will reveal this to be hardness of heart [emphases his].²²

The text does suggest an indecency, impropriety, or undesirable quality in the wife that produces loss of favor. The text does *not* suggest that this "indecency" limits the wife's legal right to remarriage. In fact, the "certificate of divorce" would have expressly laid out or implied the legal rights of those whose marriage had been dissolved through this legal declaration, and particularly protected the woman and defined her legal rights.

Murray's footnote of Alexander refers to this text as "a stringent requisition that whoever did so [divorce] should secure his wife from injury by certifying that she was not chargeable with unchaste conduct, but divorced upon some minor pretext."²³ Again, the rights of the *husband* are subsequently limited by this ordinance, not the rights of the divorced wife, whatever else it might say.

It seems to this author that the vague and general nature of the indecency, the lack of a categorical condemnation of the woman in this context, and the ordinance's failure to limit the rights of the divorced woman all suggest that the underlying principle is designed to protect those who are potentially being divorced without just cause. It may be that the charges were grave but could not be proven, or the more likely situation where a spouse objects to something which is shameful but not adequate grounds for divorce. We appreciate the suggestion that "If Joseph had gone ahead and divorced Mary, he might have used such wording [*erwat dabar*] to minimize her public embarrassment."²⁴ God intends through this regulation to minimize the impact upon those who, while imperfect and sinful, do not deserve to be divorced and

²¹ John Murray, *Divorce* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1974), 10-11.

²² George Scipione, "Exegetical Work on Desertion as Grounds for Divorce As Listed in the Westminster Confession of Faith," unpublished paper obtained from the author, submitted to the Presbytery of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, September 22, 2017.

²³ Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Gospel According to Matthew Explained* (London: 1884), 145. Cited in Murray, 9.

²⁴ Roberts, 65.

yet must endure that painful experience of their spouse repudiating the vow to love for better or for worse. This view accords very well with Jesus' own description of why God included this regulation in the Law at all. He said, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so."²⁵ John Frame states,

God determined that a prohibition of all divorce would be, for fallen people, unbearable, and therefore counterproductive for good social order. Sin would certainly lead to divorce; the law could not be expected to prevent that. The best thing that the law could accomplish would be to regulate divorce, to mitigate its oppressiveness and maintain the rights of those cast aside.²⁶

The significant question for our purposes remains. What are the implications of this conclusion relative to abuse, neglect and abject pornography use? While our minds desire all decisions regarding divorce to be defined as a clear "black and white" matter, this is often not the case. When divorce happens for reasons not justified by Scripture, the rights of those unjustly divorced are upheld by God's law. This text is giving us guidance for how to understand and address divorce situations where there is potential disagreement about the just cause of divorce, the nature of the "indecent," or the "defiled" condition of those divorced. That makes this text, and the explanation of Jesus regarding its divine motivation and contribution to the topic, of profound importance.

Those in abusive and neglectful marriages experience varying degrees of betrayal, deception, breach of trust, legitimate fears, spiritual manipulation, emotional trauma, and even physical harm. There is often disagreement among Christians and church leaders regarding, not only facts, but the severity of these offenses. What degree of offense must be crossed for a marriage to be justly dissolved on biblical grounds? This is a difficult question. We do not suggest that a "difficult" marriage constitutes grounds for divorce. We do suggest that the line between difficult and harmful (or even *dangerous*) must be considered carefully. Pressing people back into legitimately harmful situations is contrary to the divine design of divorce regulations intended to protect people from the hardness of men's hearts.

²⁵ Matthew 19:8.

²⁶ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2008), 770. Cited in Newheiser, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage*, 190.

It is not surprising, given the underlying principle we observe here, that other Old Testament passages also speak to the protections and rights of those in relationships and marriages where neglect and abuse is present.

Exodus 21:7-11

This section contains rules (Heb. *mishpat*, Exo. 21:1) for governing the civil life of Israel. As noted previously, these “rules” or “ordinances” are judgments and decisions rendered in specific cases and designed to be understood and applied more generally to cases with parallel circumstances, consistent with the underlying moral principle that governs the specific judgment given.

This text outlines a slave being given to a master’s son as a wife. It is not stated whether this marriage was at the son’s request or for some other reason. Regardless, the son and former slave are married and the master must now consider her as a daughter. If the son subsequently takes another wife and diminishes the basic needs of his first wife (the ordinance names food, clothing and conjugal rights), then the woman is released from the marriage bond fully and freely.²⁷

This abject neglect of the wife on the part of her husband constituted grounds for divorce. This was true despite the previous status of the woman as a slave. Reasoning *a fortiori*, from the lesser to the greater, it would be logically untenable that a free Israelite woman would have been granted fewer rights under the law of God than a former slave. Thus, this freedom from the legal bonds of marriage would undoubtedly be granted to any Israelite woman suffering from the oppressive and abject neglect of her husband. Instone-Brewer documents the understanding and practice of divorce related to this text.

The law of Exodus 21:10-11 was used to apply for divorces in New Testament times by both men and women. The law was applied in two categories material neglect and emotional neglect. The material matters of food and clothing were grouped together, and emotional neglect appears to have been widened to include cruelty by both the wife and the husband. If a man or woman succeeded in showing that a partner had neglected his or her material

²⁷ Instone-Brewer observes: “There are no records of disputes among the rabbis about any of these grounds for divorce based on Exodus 21:10-11 except in matters of detail...the principles appear to have been universally accepted from a very early date.” David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 102.

or emotional needs, a divorce could be granted...the early rabbis were in agreement about the validity of all these grounds for divorce.²⁸

Neglect and abuse are overlapping categories. Refusal of conjugal rights being understood as emotional neglect is significant. Even early rabbis recognized the repudiation of the marriage vow and potential harm to the reflection of God's image that such cruelty inflicted. Instone-Brewer notes that the practical understanding and application of these principles included other forms of emotional abuse. "Cruelty and humiliation were also recognized as grounds for divorce and are related to emotional neglect in the Mishnah...It is difficult to know if wife beating would have been classed together with these acts of cruelty. It was treated like any other criminal act of assault."²⁹

Exodus 21:23- 27

Another example in the near context of Exodus 21 suggests that a person who suffered physical violence was granted certain legal rights as a result of that violence. Though the situation involves a slave (not a spouse) and the legal bond of slavery (not marriage), we believe the underlying moral principle identified in the manner outlined above warrants application to the legal bond of marriage where physical violence takes place. This passage highlights violence or physical abuse against a slave, whether male or female. In the case of permanent physical harm being inflicted the slave was given the rights to "go free." The legal bond of slavery in this case is severed in the case of permanent physical violence. Not surprisingly again, God's Law grants protection and legal rights to the oppressed and afflicted.³⁰

We would again argue *a fortiori* that this principle should be applied in the context of marriage, granting the legal right of separation and divorce for an abused

²⁸ Ibid, 110.

²⁹ Instone-Brewer, 107-108.

³⁰ The idea that Yahweh protects the innocent and pursues and punishes the oppressor is an obvious and consistent theme in Scripture. Indeed, the very redemption story of Exodus was a response from the loving covenant God to the nation crying out about the oppression of the Egyptians. God's desire to deliver from oppression was the cause of His destroying kings and nations (1 Chronicles 16:19-22). We see it throughout the Psalms (10:7, 12-15, 18; 43:1-2; 44:24-26; 55:1-3; 56:1-4; 72:12-14; 73:8, 18, 19). "The Lord works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed" (Psalm 103:6). It seems very often, however, that the church has forgotten this theme. Rather than being a means of God's protection, deliverance, and justice, they have empowered oppressors, abusers, and hateful men under the pretense of biblical principles that are intended to be understood and applied in the context of a marriage striving to live out God's ideals, rather than in one where the ideal has been torn down beyond recognition already.

spouse—even the potential release from the legal bond of marriage. Though marriage is more than a legal bond, it is certainly nothing less than that. The broader principle underlying this “rule” of case law is the right to sever legal bonds when one suffers permanent physical violence by the other party in the legal relationship.

Deuteronomy 21:10-14

This passage provides guidelines to be followed by an Israelite soldier who takes a wife from the captives of war. Note that the law requires the soldier to conduct himself with a measure of sensitivity and care after such a dramatic relational change—being “taken” in marriage by your enemy. The compassionate treatment of this marital captive must be perpetual. A woman captured in the throes of war is in the most vulnerable of positions. God’s law affords her the protections of Yahweh Himself. If subsequent to their marriage the man “no longer delights in her” he cannot mistreat her in any way. The woman is protected from further affliction. She cannot be sold as a slave or treated as one—oppressively or with brutality. The term used here (rendered “treat her as a slave” in the ESV) means “deal tyrannically with”³¹ and is rendered “mistreat” (21:14) or “deal violently with” (Deuteronomy 24:7, NAS). The ordinance states clearly that if he no longer desires to remain married he must grant her unqualified freedom from the marriage bond (21:14). The contrast is established that in a relationship that might otherwise result in abuse, mistreatment, or violence, God grants unqualified freedom and the legal right to divorce.

Deuteronomy 23:15-16

This text describes how to respond to and treat a slave who has escaped from his master. “The reference is to a slave who had fled to them from a foreign country, on account of the harsh treatment which he had received from his heathen master.”³² There is an underlying principle that suggests in certain situations, when accusations of abuse or oppression have been leveled against one in authority or one who has a legal claim to you, those to whom the lower member runs should believe and protect them.

³¹ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 679.

³² Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1996), 949. We would note, however, that there seems to be nothing in the context to *demand* that the master was a heathen and the slave was from a foreign country.

Wisdom usually requires that we hear and listen to both sides of conflict.³³ While the law clearly delineates a principle of not prosecuting others based on testimony from one witness (Deuteronomy 17:6, 19:15), the situation of a person in the lower or weaker position of strength in the relationship raises an interesting dilemma. In the case of an oppressed slave (or wife in our case) the victim *may* be the only witness. The principle of Deuteronomy 23:15-16, however, *requires* that one believe and protect them. Responsibility for telling the truth lies with the victim. Responsibility for believing the oppressed person lies with the one to whom he or she runs. One must conclude that “there is a lower bar for a reception of a refugee [from oppression] than for charges to be filed against someone.”³⁴

The application to matters of abuse and neglect should be evident. The situations are comparable enough to extract the general principle underlying the ordinance and see that it would properly apply to anyone suffering oppression and harsh treatment by someone in authority, someone in a position of relational power, or someone to whom they have a legal obligation—whether slavery as in Deuteronomy 23, or the legal bond of marriage in modern cases of abuse and neglect. The one to whom they run has a God-given moral obligation to believe and protect them.

Conclusions

What we have observed is that the Old Testament is not silent on the matter of protections for those in marriages or legal relations that involve abuse or neglect. We have explained several texts that discuss matters of abuse and neglect that are relevant and applicable to our modern context.

We now turn to the relevant New Testament passages discussing the topic of divorce and remarriage. We suggest a careful analysis of these passages present a coherent and consistent ethic in regard to biblical grounds for divorce as it relates to the topics of abuse, neglect, and sexual immorality.

New Testament Teaching

³³ Proverbs 18:17 states, “The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him.”

³⁴ Douglas Wilson, “On a Wife Deciding to Leave Her Husband,” <https://dougwils.com/books-and-culture/s7-engaging-the-culture/on-a-wife-deciding-to-leave-her-husband.html>, accessed November 6, 2019.

Our intention is not to build a full justification for the Erasmian view on divorce, but to explain and expand on it as the biblical text dictates. We will focus on the most common misunderstandings of these New Testament texts and highlight elements that have been ignored or minimized as they relate to the topics of abuse and neglect.

The New Testament Context

The teaching of Jesus in the gospels regarding divorce and remarriage always had two members of the covenant community as its primary referent—two “believers” committed to living under the stipulations of God’s law. The Apostle Paul makes this distinction in 1 Corinthians 7:10 and 7:12. When he says the principles of divorce and remarriage in verses 10 and 11 are the “instructions [from] ... the Lord,” while the principles in verses 12 through 16 are teachings that “I [Paul] say (I, not the Lord).” He then notes that the principles following apply when “any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever” (1 Cor. 7:12; and in verse 13, when “a woman has a husband who is an unbeliever”). The implication is that the previous two verses (v. 10, 11) do not have the mixed marriage of a believer and unbeliever in view. As we approach the texts in the gospels one should have this basic premise in mind.

Key New Testament Passages

Matthew 5:31-32

As noted above, we follow the common interpretation of this passage offered by others who hold to the Erasmian position.³⁵ This teaching is a corrective to the common misunderstandings of the law being promoted by the rabbis in Jesus’ day. When quoting from the Old Testament Jesus would often use the formula “it is written” (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10; 11:10; 21:13; Luke 24:46). Here we see Him using the introductory formula of “it was also said ... but I say to you” (Matt. 5:31-32). He is correcting the errant understanding and application of the Law. In other words, the rabbinical view(s) on divorce and remarriage, and of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 specifically, were incorrect. He debates the matter directly with them later (Matthew 19:3-9).

Matthew 19:3-9

³⁵ See Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible*. Or John Murray, *Divorce*.

The context clearly states the Pharisees are attempting to trap Jesus into contradicting some teaching of the rabbis (v. 3). The phrase divorcing “one’s wife for any cause” seems to reference the debated “grounds” for divorce mentioned in Deuteronomy 24 the “some indecency” passage, which is of disputed interpretation (both then and now). This topic would serve as an excellent opportunity to trap Jesus, given there were two distinct rabbinical schools of thought in His day on the matter of grounds for divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. “The school of Shammai regarded it as unchastity of behaviour, the school of Hillel as any indecency or anything displeasing to the husband.”³⁶ We have previously defended the position that the *erwat dabar* (the “indecency”) in question in Deuteronomy is “a category that refers to the sinful subjective complaint/grounds of the husband”³⁷ or “an indecency, impropriety, or undesirable quality in the wife that produces loss of favor.” As we have seen, rather than being limited to adultery (Shammai) or broadened to include just about anything unfavorable (Hillel), this view accords best with the fact that the Deuteronomy passage does not limit the rights of the woman divorced, but of the husband initiating the action due to his own (unjustified) loss of favor toward her.³⁸

In His response to their question Jesus first appeals to God’s original design and ideal for marriage, quoting Genesis 1:27 and 2:24. God’s ideal was a covenant commitment to pursuing lifelong oneness through an affectionate, sacrificial, complementarian union ultimately established by divine declaration (v. 4-6). Given that ideal, the question of what constituted valid grounds for divorce is like asking “how do I justify an unjustified action?” The Pharisees understand the implication and as an objection to this marital ideal seek to justify themselves by pointing to Deuteronomy, chapter 24, asking “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” (Matt. 19:7). Jesus, in His wisdom, acknowledges both the divine ideal and the sinful perversions and devastation that necessitated allowance and regulation of divorce.

Divorce was not part of God’s design, and therefore is a matter that always involves sin. Divorce in a sin-cursed world was inevitable, making divorce regulations necessary not by original design, but as a matter of divine mercy. We quoted Frame earlier, and repeat it here for emphasis:

³⁶ Murray, *Divorce*, 10.

³⁷ This language is from Scipione.

³⁸ This view puts Jesus in a category of His own regarding the meaning of the *erwat dabar*, rather than limiting Him to embracing the view of the Rabbinical school of Shammai, which regarded the “indecency” as unchastity of some kind, or the more liberal school of Hillel, which taught that Deuteronomy allowed divorce for almost any reason. This is as we would expect given that Jesus was correcting the contemporary teaching of His day (see Matt. 5:31-32).

God determined that a prohibition of all divorce would be, for fallen people, unbearable, and therefore counterproductive for good social order. Sin would certainly lead to divorce; the law could not be expected to prevent that. The best thing that the law could accomplish would be to regulate divorce, to mitigate its oppressiveness and maintain the rights of those cast aside.³⁹

In response to the Pharisee's attempted entrapment and self-justification, Jesus explains the divine motivation for providing the regulation of divorce. It is not a "command" as they assert, but an "allowance" due to sin. Though not part of God's original design, divorce regulations are necessary because of man's "hardness of heart" (Matthew 19:8). It becomes clear that Jesus views Deuteronomy 24 as referring to allowances and protections for those suffering an unjustified divorce. To highlight the fact, He describes that any unjustified divorce and subsequent remarriage results in adultery (v. 9). The one justifiable exception He mentions in this context is "sexual immorality" on the part of the one being divorced.⁴⁰

Jesus here teaches the divine motivation for God's inclusion and regulation of divorce—protection from the "hard heartedness" of others, who would treat their spouse unjustly. This is of profound importance, especially given that there are so few examples and regulations given in Scripture. The case of the woman who loses her husband's favor over some "indecency" and is subsequently treated woefully and unjustly (Deut. 24:1-4) provides a guideline to follow whenever the hard-heartedness of another causes a person to suffer through the painful reality of divorce. The woman in Deuteronomy 24, though she was imperfect (i.e., has some "indecency"), was nevertheless provided protections because the divorce was unjustified. Certainly, this is not the only kind of mistreatment, misjudgment, or unjustified action that the "hard-hearted" sinner will commit. This underlying moral principle of protections for those mistreated in marriage due to the hard-heartedness of their spouse must be understood and applied in a wide variety of situations. In His mercy, God provides for and regulates divorce proceedings to protect the person who is mistreated in this way by a hard-hearted spouse.

³⁹ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2008), 770. Cited in Newheiser, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage*, 190.

⁴⁰ We remind you that we are standing on the shoulders of many other advocates of the Erasmian position and see the exception clause as a valid grounds for divorce. If your spouse is committing sexual immorality, you may divorce them and remarry without fault. We also highlight again that sexual immorality in this context means any of the immoralities mentioned in the litany of sexual sins described in the Old Testament law (Lev. 18:6-30; 20:10-21; Deut. 22:5; 23:17), as well as other sins of a similar nature. See section above section regarding pornography.

Mark 10:2-12

The Mark passage is a direct parallel to the Matthew account, recording the same events with two differences of note. One key difference is the exclusion of the “exception clause.” The second difference is adding the note that the divorce leading to adultery is equally applicable for both men and women.

The absence of the exception clause should not be alarming and does not change the overall emphasis of divorce being permitted because of man’s hardness of heart. Differences in what is included or excluded in the synoptics is driven by the original audience. The original Roman audience of Mark’s gospel would not have had the cultural question of immorality being grounds for divorce. This would have been assumed and practiced in Roman culture. In contrast, the original Jewish audience of Matthew’s gospel would be well-served by the inclusion of the “exception clause” and the use of the term *porneia* (sexual immorality), referring to the litany of sexual sins outlined in the Mosaic law.

The second difference of note is Jesus’ addition that the law against unjustified divorce and the adulterous remarriage applies equally to men and women (Mark 10:11-12). While there is evidence that women were granted the right to sue for divorce in Israel, it would still have been true that the practice was more common and accepted in Roman culture. But for our purposes, it is helpful to note that the rights granted were not unequal between the sexes.

Luke 16:18

The key question again is why Luke’s account does not contain the “exception clause.” Proponents of the “no divorce, no remarriage” position argue that the absence of the exception makes the guideline in Mark and Luke the clear standard,⁴¹ while the varying interpretations of the exception clause cannot be used to negate the otherwise clear and unqualified statements in Mark and Luke. But this denies the possibility of certain details being “understood” as common knowledge,⁴² or the

⁴¹ For instance, Laney says, “Both in Mark 10:1-12 and Luke 16:18 Jesus clearly teaches that divorce and remarriage constitute adultery without exception” (J. Carl Laney, “No Divorce & No Remarriage,” in *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, ed. H. Wayne House (Downer’s Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 1990) 33-4.

⁴² One example would be “It is not lawful to carry a gun in New York City.” This is a true statement, though it would be readily understood by everyone that there is an exception for police

simple reality that not everything that can or should be said about a topic is always stated in every context. Rather, all the texts must be examined carefully and the totality of truth regarding divorce and remarriage must harmonize all the details and principles that are observed in those texts.

We suggest the broader context of the Luke passage makes use of the exception clause inappropriate. This text is part of a longer narrative in which Jesus is exposing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. Jesus was confronting their proud, self-righteous, and self-willed habits of life, which no doubt included their self-justified practice of divorce. This is not a place where you would say, “You are self-righteous and self-willed when you divorce wives unjustly (unless you do it because of their sexual immorality).” Clearly, the exception clause in this context was excluded because of the nature of the confrontation. When teaching more generally about the topic in other contexts, use of the exception would be appropriate and warranted.

1 Cor 7:10-16

This text is easily divided into two sections. The first (v. 10-11) Paul describes as instruction repeating the teaching of Jesus, which he makes clear when he says, “I give this charge (not I, but the Lord).” The matter addressed in these first two verses involve two believing spouses, a husband and wife who are both committed to living under the ordinances and accountability of the covenant community. When Paul shifts the topic (v. 12-16) by saying, “To the rest I say (I, not the Lord),” he states specifically that the matter after this introductory statement applies “if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever” (v. 12), or “if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever” (v. 13). In other words, verses 10 and 11 discuss marriage between two believers, while verses 12 through 16 discuss a mixed marriage of a believer to an unbeliever. By noting this textual detail, we should be able to avoid interpreting absolute statements intended to be applied only to marriages between two believers, and wrongly apply them to someone’s very less than ideal marriage to an unbeliever.

1 Corinthians 7:10-11 – Two Married Believers

The Apostle here (v. 10-11) expresses and applies the teaching of Jesus to members of the New Covenant community. The principle of permanence and of

officers. Similarly, if there was common knowledge and practice that sexual immorality was a valid grounds for divorce, it is not necessary to say it every time the topic comes up.

fulfilling one's vow is clear and paramount. The believing wife or husband should not "separate" from or "divorce" their believing spouse. Though different terms are used here (*choridzo* [translated "separate"] in verse ten, and *aphiemi* [translated "divorce"] in verse 11), the terms are virtually synonymous. Paul does not state the "exception" clause here not because it is invalid, but because it would have been understood by the readers. Paul's reiteration of Jesus' teaching on the topic suggests that two believers striving to follow God's law *ought* to be able to learn to live in peace with one another, making divorce both unnecessary and unbiblical.⁴³ Paul does acknowledge, however, the reality that a situation may present itself where a believer has *already* unbiblically divorced his or her spouse. In such a case he says you must "remain unmarried or else be reconciled" to one's former spouse. Because there are rights to remarry if the divorce is sought on valid biblical grounds, Paul must be referring to a divorce sought and obtained on unbiblical grounds in this situation.⁴⁴ If a Christian sued their faithful and believing spouse for divorce there would be much more to say about the matter than "reconcile or don't get remarried!"

Though this text clearly forbids divorce of two believers, we contend that anyone professing faith in Christ, but who is living in a pattern of sexual immorality or abject neglect or abuse of their spouse should be disciplined from the church for their unrepentant sin. Newheiser observes regarding the unrepentant professing believer, that,

This situation can be addressed, though, by the church's going through the process of church discipline (Matt. 18:15-20). Jesus says that if the disobedient spouse will not repent, then the person is to be treated as an unbeliever...At that point, the innocent spouse could regard himself or herself as abandoned by an unbeliever, and 1 Corinthians 7:15 would apply.⁴⁵

⁴³ Adams goes further and argues that "If a guilty spouse repents, his partner must forgive him (cf. Luke 17:3ff). Forgiveness involves not raising the matter again. It is not possible for a believer to proceed to divorce after granting forgiveness...the Scripture forbid Christians to sue one another at law (1 Cor 6:1-8)" (Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 56). We disagree with this categorical conclusion for reasons we will argue below, though we agree in general that an attitude of forgiveness is required even when reconciliation is difficult or impossible. These situations can be incredibly complex, and we are not always served well by absolute statements without context, like the one Adams makes here.

⁴⁴ Again, we believe the divorce is forbidden *unless* pursued due to a lawful exception (sexual immorality, or as we will conclude abject neglect and abuse).

⁴⁵ Jim Newheiser, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage*, 223-4. Though he is speaking of abandonment in this context, we believe the same principle would apply in cases involving lawful biblical exceptions for divorce of an unbeliever.

When the church allows professing Christians to live in unrepentant sin without admonition and discipline it abrogates its responsibility to the shepherd the flock. This abrogation is even more grievous when combined with the belief that a spouse must remain married to this unrepentant person because “they are a Christian,” though they may be causing ongoing harm and suffering from their abuse, neglect, abject pornography use, and perhaps even persistent adultery. In such cases, church leaders are not only failing to shepherd the unrepentant, but also fail to care for those suffering under the consequences and effects of their spouse’s unrepentant sin.

Another difficult question is what to do in cases where the professing believer claims to be repentant, but their repentance is unclear (when evaluated by biblical standards like 2 Corinthians 7:10-16, Psalms 32 and 51, or other texts). In these cases, the spouse sinned against is often unable or unwilling to pursue full reconciliation and restoration of the marriage relationship. The difficulty or even unwillingness to pursue full reconciliation in these cases is not the primary issue. The matters that *must* be addressed first are the seriousness of the harm done due to the gravity of the sin, and the genuineness of the repentance, reflected by an evident humility and willingness to bear up under the consequences of those sinful actions. Examples abound, as Newheiser hints at, of churches and leaders who focus their admonition and discipline on the sufferer rather than the one causing the suffering. This does not reflect the grace of our rescuing, delivering, merciful, heavenly Father.

To summarize, knowing that Jesus has expounded on the matter further, Paul addresses only briefly in verses 10 and 11 the question of potential or past divorce in the case of two professing believers. He does so with ideals in view, not the exceptional cases.

1 Corinthians 7:12-16 – Believing/Unbelieving Mixed Marriage

Paul now gives instruction regarding a classification of marriage relationships that Jesus never addressed – a mixed marriage of a believing and unbelieving spouse, indicated by the introductory phrase “I say (I, not the Lord)” (v. 12). As the gospel spread throughout the ancient world, situations would arise where one member of a marriage came to saving faith in Christ, while the other remained unconverted. The strength and character of a marriage of this nature varies greatly. Paul’s instructions here are informed by the greater cause of the gospel and the biblical ethics of the Old Testament law and provide practical wisdom for the Christian married to an unbeliever.

Because of his or her unregenerate state, the way an unbelieving spouse may live and treat their believing spouse will always fall on a spectrum from bad to good. They could be violent, oppositional, angry, grossly immoral and debauched on one end of the spectrum. They could also possibly be respectful, kind, and seek to live out the realities of an affectionate and mutually beneficial marriage though they would be able to do this only to a relative and imperfect degree.

“Consents to Live With” (suneudokeo)

Paul’s instruction here draws attention to this relative behavior and attitude of the unbelieving spouse using the word *suneudokeo*, translated as “consents” to live with in the ESV. He states in verses 12 and 13 regarding the unbelieving husband and wife respectively, that if they “consent to live with” the believer then the believer should not divorce them. The motivation for remaining is that the unbelieving spouse is “made holy” by the presence of their Christian spouse. They are set apart to experience the blessing and good favor of God because of their relationship to a Christian spouse. Secondly, the children produced by this union are also blessed in a similar way through his or her believing parent.

The term “consent” or “agree” is of key importance for our discussion and is often neglected in an explanation of this passage and in thinking through the implications for situations of abuse and neglect. *Suneudokeo* is used six times in the New Testament, and in every case involves not just unengaged agreement, but *hearty* approval. It involves a passionate agreement and desire to participate and share in the experience. In marriage that experience is a mutually beneficial life together with your spouse. The term is used four other times in the New Testament. Romans 1:32 speaks of those given over to sin, that though they know it is worthy of death “not only do they but give *approval* to those who practice them.” Those mentioned here participated wholeheartedly and willingly. The term is also used to describe Saul’s own “approving” of the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1; 22:20). Jesus uses this term to describe the Scribes approval of the persecution and killing of the prophets by their fathers (Luke 11:48).

In the context of 1 Corinthians 7 the word implies not just consent to stay at the physical address with one’s spouse, but good will and favor toward him or her in the determination to “live with” them. In a true “consent to live with” marriage “there is a

real desire and outward evidence that what is happening is pleasing to them.”⁴⁶ When a spouse engages in consistent outbursts of anger, berating and harsh speech, cruel criticism, and acts or threats of violence and oppression then there is every reason to believe—whether they agree or admit this intention—that the spouse does not “consent to live with” in the sense of *suneudokeo*. We in no way mean to suggest that a spouse “always has an out” for any mistreatment, difficulty, or unreasonable behavior, no matter the nature or degree. Honoring God with a difficult and unbelieving spouse may involve enduring a marriage that is less than God’s ideal (1 Peter 3:1-2). This difficult marriage may not always be what would make a person most happy in the short-term. The desire for God’s glory must supersede one’s desire for comfort or happiness.

Historically the Erasmian position on divorce has viewed this passage as granting an exception for divorce based on “abandonment” or “desertion” of an unbeliever. This nomenclature grows out of Paul’s description of the unbeliever’s lack of commitment to the marriage in verse 15: “if the unbelieving partner *separates*, let it be so” [Greek, *choridzo*; “departs” in the NAS; “leaves” in the NKJV]. The term, also used in verse 10, can be translated leave, separate, divide, sever, or go away, and is used in “divorce” contexts (Matt. 19:6; Mark 10:9). In nine of the 13 New Testament uses, however, it simply means to leave or separate. The separation in view here is not limited to divorce or leaving the physical address. Rather, contextually here it can refer to any persistent behavior that reflects an attitude of being *not pleased* to dwell with one’s spouse. In other words, to reflect in your words, actions, and attitudes that you do not desire to live in an affectionate and mutually beneficial manner is a *functional desertion* of one’s marriage vow.

We believe this view is in perfect accord with the biblical ethics we have observed in the Old Testament law. Indeed, it is possible—even likely—that Paul had in mind not only the spatial desertion of leaving one’s spouse, but the effective desertion of neglect as well. We have seen how Exodus 21:11 allowed for divorce in cases of neglect to provide materially (food and clothing) and conjugally. Paul’s reference to conjugal rights in the immediate context (1 Cor. 7:3-5) suggests neglect was on his mind to some degree. In addition, the ethic of violence and abuse freeing a person from their legal obligation of slavery (Exo. 21:26, 27) suggests that violence and abuse is a misuse of authority that results in freedom. We argued for divorce rights from the Exodus context *a fortiori*, the lesser to the greater, noting that a free Israelite

⁴⁶Steve Viars, “Understanding Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible,” <https://www.faithlafayette.org/resources/articles/understanding-divorce-and-remarriage-in-the-bible>, accessed December 23, 2020.

woman suffering violence in marriage would not have had fewer rights under the law than a slave. Not coincidentally here, we see Paul use “freedom from slavery” language regarding the marriage in question in verse 15. The phraseology “In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved,” suggests this ethical principle and its application is not secondary in his thinking as he writes. He is pointing the reader to consider that matters of neglect and violence are included in these categories (and we suggest abject emotional abuse as well).

“In such cases”

In recent years Wayne Grudem has revisited this text, having not been persuaded by the “abuse is a kind of desertion” argument.⁴⁷ He asks the question of whether the phrase “in such cases” refers only to cases of desertion by an unbeliever, or whether it might refer to “any cases that have similarly destroyed a marriage.” He notes, “I found that several examples from extra-biblical literature show that... (“in such cases”) often includes more kinds of situations than the original example,”⁴⁸ though he admits the phrase itself is used nowhere else in the New Testament or Septuagint. He suggests that “If Paul had meant to refer only to desertion, another option would be to use *ἐν τούτῳ* (singular) ‘in this case.’”⁴⁹ He takes the logic of “such cases” further and concludes that many types of situations fall under the description of “in this and similarly destructive cases,” including extreme prolonged, verbal and relational cruelty, physical harm and the threat of physical harm, and numerous forms of addiction, most notably pornography addiction.⁵⁰ He concludes there are grounds for divorce in cases of desertion, and other “such cases” that have similarly destroyed a marriage.

Gifford ably objects that this reasoning depends on extra-biblical resources and violates the hermeneutical principle of “circles of context.”⁵¹ Though he is careful to note that both he and Grudem share the desire of protecting the abused, he objects to the need for a “third category” of grounds for divorce. Gifford concludes simply, “Grudem has made a leap, suggesting that ‘in such cases’ is not only a reference to

⁴⁷ Wayne Grudem, “Grounds for Divorce: Why I Now Believe There Are More Than Two,” paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society meeting, San Diego, California, November 21, 2019. <http://www.waynegrudem.com/grounds-for-divorce-why-i-now-believe-there-are-more-than-two/>, accessed December 23, 2020.

⁴⁸ Wayne Grudem, 2.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵¹ Greg Gifford, “A Response to Wayne Grudem’s Paper on A Third Reason for Divorce,” <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2020/01/13/a-response-to-wayne-grudems-paper-on-a-third-reason-for-divorce/>, accessed January 14, 2020.

desertion/abandonment but rather another category of cases that ‘similarly destroy a marriage.’ The context of 1 Corinthians 7 does not suggest a third category.”⁵² Indeed, we suggest the more biblically informed view is to see the abuse as a “kind of desertion” (what Roberts calls “constructive desertion,”⁵³ and what we have been referring to as “functional desertion”). In addition, other behaviors like neglect and addictive behavior in extreme cases may also be a functional desertion of the both the marriage and the marriage partner.

New Testament Conclusions

This is the New Testament evidence for abuse, neglect, and pornography use as grounds for divorce. We find a consistent ethic in both the Old and New Testaments, which undergirds the fatherly care of a God who helps and rescues the oppressed and downtrodden. A thorough biblical theology of divorce points us repeatedly to our heavenly Father’s desire to defend, protect, and care for those suffering from oppression, abuse, neglect, and unthinkable mistreatment by another person who has covenanted to love him or her. While some would argue that divorce violates God’s ideal and shatters the intended picture of Christ’s relationship with the Church, this ignores (or at the very least minimizes) the painful and image-shattering circumstances that already exist in the abusive or neglectful marriage, a reality that renders the picture of Christ and the Church imperceptible. We suggest a high view of marriage does not demand the *permanence* of such a travesty of God’s ideal. Rather, a high view of marriage cannot tolerate such severe *distortions* of what marriage is intended to be.⁵⁴

Specific Conclusions Regarding Abuse, Neglect, and Pornography Use

We begin with a reminder that our assumption was the correctness of the Erasmian position on divorce. We have proposed to answer the question whether the Scriptures, rightly understood, would see the social ills of abuse, neglect, or pornography use as an expression of those kinds of sexual immorality or desertion that would justify divorce.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Roberts, 39. She is referencing the language of Stephen Clark, *Putting Asunder: Divorce and Remarriage in Biblical and Pastoral Perspective* (Bridgend, Wales: Bryntirion, 1999).

⁵⁴ We appreciate the observations along this line from Rebecca VanDoodewaard in “A High View of Marriage Includes Divorce,” <https://gentlereformation.com/2017/07/20/a-high-view-of-marriage-includes-divorce/>, accessed July 24, 2017.

It is impossible to deny that God's design and ideal for marriage is a lifelong commitment of mutual love and partnership of service to God and others by one man and one woman. We acknowledge marriage is a sacred institution intended to picture the intimate and divinely established relationship between Jesus Christ and His bride, the church (Eph. 5:32). We also acknowledge the pursuit to picture this divine relationship always involves *striving* for permanence in marriage, and thus may involve enduring a marriage (especially one with an unbeliever) that is less than ideal (1 Cor. 7:12-15; 1 Pet. 3:1-2). There are ways, however, in which unbelieving spouses can distort this picture of Christ and the Church to such a degree that it is unrecognizable. Three of these potential distortions which *may* warrant intervention and provision for divorce approved by those in spiritual authority are abuse, neglect, and habitual pornography use. All three of these social ills are subjective in nature. This is often true in defining its presence, as well as evaluating its severity. Therefore, these matters should be evaluated, and actions taken, only under the guidance and care of pastors and church leaders who understand these principles.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ We recognize that many church leaders may not agree with these principles and their application. In such cases we fear for the safety and protection of the sheep in their care, and in our ministry encourage Christians to seek the care and counsel of a church family guided by shepherds who understand and seek to protect the flock in a biblical manner that reflects the care and protection of God.

Reviews