ACBC ESSAYS

Biblical counseling is some of the most significant work in the world. In our counseling conversations we engage the troubles of men and women who will exist forever. Our conversations matter for eternity. That means we need to take this work incredibly seriously. The Association of Certified Biblical Counselors desires to engage the discipline of counseling in the most serious way possible. We want to address the issues that concern biblical counselors in a robust and substantive way. That is why we have created ACBC Essays.

Our goal is to address issues related to biblical counseling in long-form articles utilizing the sophistication and seriousness of a journal with the accessibility of a blog. We will release bi-monthly articles on our website that engage the issues most relevant to biblical counseling. These essays will be written by some of the best minds in the biblical counseling world. Because of the generous support of a gracious donor we are thrilled to offer these articles to the church free of charge.

For our first year of ACBC Essays we will be engaging in a biblical analysis of several popular therapeutic approaches.

We are excited about serving all Christians in general and biblical counselors in particular with crucial research on these important topics. We hope you find them helpful.

- ACBC
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oil and Water: The Impossible Relationship Between Evangelicalism and Reparative Therapy</td>
<td>Heath Lambert</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are Biblical Counselors Unbiblical? Evaluating Transformational Therapy</td>
<td>Kyle Johnston</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The CBT Therapist in Us All: A Biblical Evaluation of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy</td>
<td>Scott Mehl</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Psychology: An Introduction and Biblical Analysis</td>
<td>Keith Palmer</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
OIL AND WATER: THE IMPOSSIBLE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EVANGELICALISM AND REPARATIVE THERAPY

BY HEATH LAMBERT

Introduction

Reparative therapy is a counseling approach developed by secular psychologists to help people turn away from their struggles with homosexuality. It is a therapy that evangelicals must consider for at least two reasons. First, few issues today have occupied a place in our cultural consciousness as large as homosexuality. The decision of the United States Supreme Court in Obergefell v. Hodges in the summer of 2015 represented a massive revolution in our public morality. For nearly 15 years before the decision a number of developments and trends were signaling that the moral judgment of Americans was changing regarding that issue: individual states were passing laws legalizing homosexual marriage, federal laws defining marriage as the union of one man and one woman were struck down, and an incumbent president of the United States won reelection after publicly declaring his support for gay marriage. The verdict of Obergefell in legalizing same-sex marriage in all 50 states was not out of the blue, but did represent the capstone of a monumental series of changes. Now the moral framework of our society is exactly the opposite of what it was less than a generation ago. In my childhood homosexuality was nearly universally understood to be wrong, its practice meeting with cultural opprobrium. Now in my children’s elementary years, homosexuality is met with nearly universal acceptance, and opprobrium comes to anyone who would dare question the morality of the lifestyle.

The problem with this is that the attitudes of our culture about homosexuality cannot change the sinfulness of it. God’s verdict is the only one that matters throughout eternity, and his remains
the same. Because God has remained consistent in his moral judgment about homosexuality all of the consequences for that sin still remain even though unbelievers will try to suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18). This means the cultural embrace of this sin cannot change the pain that homosexuals will experience as a consequence of their sin. No popular acceptance of homosexuality will alter the fact that many will experience the painful consequences of their sin, will desire help, and will want to change.

That leads to the second reason that this issue is important for evangelicals to consider. Christians will reach out for help to change, and for many that will mean trying to connect with a therapist specializing in reparative therapy. The problem here is that the fortunes of reparative therapy have declined as our cultural values about homosexuality have shifted. Whereas reparative therapy once claimed a modicum of interest and respect, it is now decried by secularists as immoral. Laws have been passed against its practice in states like California and New Jersey. These states will not be the last to take that action.

I think many people equate the biblical approach to helping homosexuals with reparative therapy. Many assume that all efforts to help homosexuals change are equivalent. Such an assumption is in error. In our day there are two secular approaches to understanding homosexuality. The first and most popular is the view that advances complete cultural acceptance of homosexuality. The second is the view of reparative therapy, which believes homosexuality to be problematic and seeks change through secular therapeutic techniques. The Bible offers a third approach to homosexuality, which is different than each of these secular approaches.

My goal in this article is to argue that reparative therapy is not a legitimate option for evangelical Christians to use in their engagement with homosexuals. Evangelicals will agree with reparative therapists in their negative moral judgment about homosexuality, and will also agree that change is possible for people struggling with this sin. Agreement on these issues however, will not lead evangelicals to using the secular counseling tactics used by reparative therapists. Before we can understand why evangelicals cannot defend reparative therapy we need to be sure we understand what we are talking about. To begin, therefore, I want to define our terms.

An Understanding of Terms

If my goal is to show that reparative therapy is not an option for evangelicals, then we need to understand what an evangelical is as well as what reparative therapy is. I shall take each one in turn.

It is notoriously difficult work to define what an evangelical is. Scholars have found it to be very challenging to nail down one definition that makes everyone happy. I do not believe I can provide the definitive description in one article about reparative therapy, so I will just point to one helpful description. Many believe that the understanding of an evangelical provided by David Bebbington is a helpful description.
This is how he described an evangelical,

*There are the four qualities that have been the special marks of Evangelical religion: conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; biblicism a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Together they form a quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of evangelicalism.*

Bebbington’s emphasis that evangelicals are committed to conversion (Matt 28:16-20), to the Bible (2 Tim 3:16-17), to an active faith (James 2:14-25), and to the centrality of Christ (Col 1:15-20) certainly ring true as biblical emphases that should inform the lives of every person committed to Christ. For the purposes of this article his so-called quadrilateral will be our point of reference for what constitutes an evangelical Christian. When I say that reparative therapy should not be a considered an option for evangelicals, Bebbington’s quadrilateral constitutes my particular idea of what it means to be one.

Next we shall spend some time discerning what reparative therapy is. Reparative therapy is a secular approach to counseling care. The key intellectual leader for this therapy is Joseph Nicolosi. He is the co-founder and former president of the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), the national organization that seeks to advance reparative therapy. Three key realities explain his theory known as reparative therapy.

First, reparative therapy seeks to explain the origins of homosexuality as being grounded in a relational break between parents and their children. Reparative therapists believe that male homosexuality is, in the main, a problem that comes about from a break in the parent-child relationship. These breaks create shame on the part of “pre-homosexual boys.” These shamed boys with broken parental relationships experience psychological damage to their male gender development. As these boys mature they increasingly affiliate with the female gender. Over time, they begin to develop sexual desires for the physical bodies of men who are different than the female bodies with which they have developed familiarity. Thus, “the exotic becomes erotic.” As Nicolosi explains, boys begin to “Envy the masculine bodies of other boys, in a compensatory (reparative) attempt to acquire other male bodies by erotically joining with them.”

Second, reparative therapists have an understanding of how to help homosexuals change, which involves a reparative relationship with a therapist. Nicolosi writes,

*The goal for the client is the “corrective emotional experience,” which is to say, to learn to feel and express intolerable emotions while experiencing the therapist’s attunement. Through this process the client experiences reparation of parental malattunement and gains greater self-compassion.*

Nicolosi is saying that the process of reparative therapy involves a kind of therapeutic re-parenting. The same-sex therapist provides the type of acceptance and encouragement that was denied in the parent-child relationship. Through this means the client experiences the relationship he was denied from his parents. Change is the supposed result. Nicolosi has referred to counseling as the opportunity to give what parents did not.

Finally, the goal of reparative therapy is the presence of heterosexual desires on the part of the once-homosexual man. Nicolosi says,
As shame is slowly diminished in therapy and the same-sex attracted man grows in self-awareness and self-assertion, he should gradually begin to find within himself a natural heterosexual response. Reparative therapists do not believe a person has truly changed unless and until he experiences heterosexual attractions. Such attractions are the “natural” response to therapy.

Now that we have something of an understanding about what reparative therapy is I want to enter into an analysis of whether this therapy is an acceptable approach for evangelical Christians to use in helping homosexuals change.

Reparative Therapy: An Evangelical Assessment

As I stated at the beginning of this essay reparative therapy is not a legitimate evangelical approach to counseling homosexuals. In what follows I want to evaluate reparative therapy and show why I believe this argument to be correct. Before I get to that point, however, I need to make an honest admission. Some Christians have tried to argue that there is a way to use reparative therapy as the basis for a counseling approach while removing the unbiblical elements of the therapy and adding biblical truth as a supplement. Some very good scholars like Robert Gagnon have suggested that my criticisms of the Christian use of reparative therapy do not take into account the way many Christians have tweaked the theory to make it more biblical. There is more to say about the mixing of secular therapies with biblical truth than I can now address.

For now, I will simply make two brief comments. First, I have argued at length in other places that it is unbiblical and unnecessary to mix secular counseling therapies with biblical truth. Second, when Christians undertake this effort they create a third reality that is distinct from either biblical interventions or the secular therapy with which they began. When Christians do this with reparative therapy, for example, they have created a new therapy. My task here is to evaluate reparative therapy as it has been advocated by the authors of the theory, not to evaluate they way various Christians have tried to rehabilitate it into something biblical. For now, I we will turn our attention to reparative therapy as it actually exists, not as some Christians wish it to exist.

Reparative Therapy and the Freedom of Client Choice

Reparative therapy has fallen on hard times. Sometimes it seems that the only thing more upsetting to homosexual activists than calling their behavior sinful is saying that the behavior is changeable. Advocates who vocalize support for the homosexual lifestyle oppose any kind of contention that homosexuals can change. This opposition has led those advocates to try and make reparative therapy unavailable through legal and social pressure. As observed above, several states have taken action to make reparative therapy illegal for therapists licensed by the state who would counsel minors. The list of states where such regulations are enforced by the state are bound to grow.

I am arguing in this essay that reparative therapy is an unbiblical approach to care that evangelicals should not use when helping people who struggle with homosexuality. As much as I believe that reparative therapy cuts against the biblical grain I can see no reason why people in a free society should not be able to choose this option. Reparative therapists have expressed alarm
that the government would seek to restrict the practice of a therapy that has some empirical
evidence of effectiveness as I will show below. They have argued that there is no good reason
why a free society should restrict this practice when many people seek this kind of help for their
struggle with homosexuality. Reparative therapists have gone out of their way to argue that they
do not force their therapy on anyone, but only make it available to those who desire to change.

They make this argument on the basis of the freedom of client choice. Evangelicals share the
concerns of reparative therapists about the actions of the state to restrict the practice. If Caesar
can restrict the conversations of reparative therapists then he can restrict the conversations of
evangelicals as well. And yet evangelicals have a greater concern than the freedom of client
choice.

The four-fold elements of evangelicalism, which we saw above to be biblical indicators that should
inform Christian conviction will require Christians to be committed to more than the freedom of
clients to choose their own therapy. Our commitment to the Word of God, to the centrality of
Christ, to an activist faith, and to evangelization will require us to insist on matters that reparative
therapists must let slide. Reparative therapists can afford to say to homosexuals that they can
choose therapy if they like, but do not need to change unless they desire. Evangelicals cannot do
this. We must point out that the Bible calls this behavior a grievous sin, and that everyone who
struggles against it must call upon the name of Jesus Christ for salvation from their sin. The
evangelical commitment to the Word and to Christ, therefore, provides more urgency than the
commitments of reparative therapists to mere freedom.

Of course Christians are not despots. We do not call people to repent at gunpoint. Nobody is
forced to listen a message they do not want to hear. Christian people enforce no requirements
that homosexuals engage in behaviors they dislike. Evangelicals know that we cannot force
unbelievers to embrace our teachings. Even Jesus let the rich young ruler walk away (Matt
19:16-30). Unbelievers have a right to refuse our message, but evangelicals have no right to
refuse to offer it. So evangelicals cannot agree with reparative therapists that the option to
change is one among many. We must say with Paul, “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and
teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Col 1:28).

Reparative Therapists and Moral Honesty about Homosexuality

Reparative therapists are morally honest about the consequences of homosexuality. In a culture
where it is difficult to be honest about the dangers of homosexuality, reparative therapists often
tell the truth. They are some of the only people reporting that the rates of depression, self-injury,
suicide, addiction, and disease are all much higher in the homosexual community than the
heterosexual community. Homosexual activists try to place responsibility for these problems at
the feet of those who express concern about homosexual practices like religious conservatives and
reparative therapists. But these deadly statistics are in place even for homosexuals living in
accepting environments. It is homosexuality that is dangerous, not an honest discussion of its
dangers.8

I’m thankful for this honesty on the part of my friends committed to reparative therapy. Our
culture is lost in a fog of moral relativism and has lost the ability to be honest. And yet this
commendable honesty is not enough for evangelicals. As Christians committed to Scripture we know that homosexuality creates consequences that are not only temporal, but also eternal. Homosexuals have a much worse fate than a mental illness diagnosis or even the risk of bringing harm to themselves. They face death and hell (Rom 2:5). This reality will mean that evangelicals cannot afford merely to be concerned about the earthly lives of homosexuals. We are concerned about their eternal destiny. Our commitment to the Bible will stir in us a passionate call to repentant faith in Christ to avoid this fate that awaits every single person who does not trust Jesus.

**Reparative Therapists and the Ability of Homosexuals to Change**

One of the most persistent claims of advocates for the gay lifestyle is that homosexual desires and behaviors are a fixed and immutable reality. They claim that efforts at change always fail. The problem with this assertion is that it is not supported by the facts. Reparative therapists have effectively shown that change is possible for those who desire it. In one study by Nicolosi, Byrd, and Potts of 882 persons in “sexual reorientation therapy” only 13% reported no change away from homosexual desire. In another study conducted by Stan Jones and Mark Yarhouse they found stunning evidence for change. They report,

The general picture that emerges from our analyses of these data is that, on average, this population has experienced significant change away from homosexual orientation and toward heterosexual orientation. The most surprising single finding, and one that is replicated over several different measures, is that the population most likely on average to manifest significant change is the “Truly Gay” population. Common sense and dominant clinical professional opinion would clearly predict that these would be the research subjects least likely to report fundamental change, and yet consistently it was this group that reported the greatest degree of change.

As believers in Jesus Christ we should be thankful for strong, empirical support for the claim that homosexuals can change. It provides helpful evidence to contradict the nearly-universal belief, which exists in the popular culture.

And yet, as evangelicals we must go further. As thankful as we are for research indicating the possibility for change, for Christians this information is insufficient to justify our efforts at change. Evangelicals believe that homosexuals can change, not primarily because of empirical evidence, but because our commitment to the Bible demands that we believe it.

One passage of Scripture that is routinely cited in this regard is 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. This text lists homosexuality, among other sins, as the kinds of things that once characterized the lives of people, but no longer characterize the lives of Christians because they have been washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and by the Spirit of God. Empirical evidence, while interesting and often useful, is not the authority for Christians.

Empirical evidence shows imperfectly what is the case, and cannot possibly show what should be the case. We need the teaching of Scripture to provide the ballast of truth in the midst of conflicting claims about the ability of homosexuals to change. Because evangelicals stand on Scripture we have more confidence than anyone who merely reads research. As Christians we
believe the Bible teaches, not only, that homosexuals can change, but by the grace of Jesus they will change.

**Reparative Therapists and the Importance of the Parent-Child Relationship**

We saw earlier that reparative therapists place a great deal of importance on the developments of early childhood in understanding the problem of homosexuality. In their view homosexuality grows out of critical breaks in the important relationship between children and their parents. Christians are thankful for an emphasis on the importance of parental roles for biblical reasons. The Bible indicates the importance of parenting in childhood development. Scripture points out that parents play a crucial role during this phase of life (Deut 6:4-9). The Apostle Paul singles out fathers by addressing them as particularly important in the moral and spiritual formation of their children (Eph 6:1-4). Tedd Tripp refers to this category of biblical teaching on parenting as shaping influences and shows how important it is.\(^{12}\)

Unfortunately, reparative therapists exaggerate the importance of parents in childhood development. The Bible is clear that the influence of parents is critical, but is equally clear that this influence is not determinative. Human beings are not set on an irreversible trajectory dictated by the role their parents played in their life before they were adolescents. Such a fatalistic understanding fails to account for other biblical realities of even greater significance than parental involvement.

One of those biblical realities is sin. Sin warps everything it touches and dramatically impacts every human being. This reality means that even children with incredible parents will go their own way in rebellion in spite of incredibly positive examples. This reality also means that people will engage in homosexuality primarily because they are sinners, and not because of any outside influence, no matter how important. The Bible understands that the sinful behavior of people can be powerfully impacted by outside sources of temptation, but always lays the blame for sin in the heart of the sinner (Jas 1:14-15).

Another biblical reality of greater significance than parental involvement is grace. The Bible teaches that where sin increases, grace abounds all the more (Rom 5:20). Grace means that there is power from Christ to be holy in spite of tempting influences and sinful proclivities. Grace means that even the most broken homes are not inextricably determined to lead to more brokenness and sin.

These biblical realities of sin and grace provide a better rational for homosexuality than any secular reparative therapist ever can. It alone explains why some men with distant and difficult relationships with their fathers pursue godly marriage with a woman, and why other men with wonderful fathers still embrace godless sex. Reparative therapists have a glancing appreciation of the biblical importance on parenting, but miss the more profound biblical teaching about the sin of man, and the grace of God.
Reparative Therapists and The Benefit of Heterosexual Relationships

Reparative therapists clearly see the value of heterosexual normativity. They argue that “Normality is that which functions according to its design.” Statements like this one make a powerful argument for heterosexual behavior grounded in the physical design of male and female bodies. Homosexual activity goes against the obvious design of our physical bodies. It is against nature and dishonors the human body (Rom 1:24, 26-27).

Reparative therapists are correct to see that homosexuality is against nature, but then they take this biblical teaching and move farther than the Bible allows. As demonstrated above, reparative therapists argue that people who struggle with homosexuality must demonstrate the fullness of the change process by pursuing the goal of heterosexual relationships. This argument goes beyond what Scripture argues.

The biblical position on sexuality is that sexual relationships are to take place between one man and one woman in the context of marriage which lasts for a lifetime. Spouses are called to have sexual desire for their opposite sex spouse, and are to reject any sexual desire or activity for anyone else (Prov 5:18-19; 1 Cor 7:1-5). The Bible never commands individuals to cultivate sexual desire for the opposite sex in general. In fact, the Bible condemns as sinful lust any sexual desire that is not directed toward one’s partner in marriage (Matt 5:27-30).

What this all means is that, contrary to the teaching of reparative therapists, heterosexual desire is not a virtue in and of itself. The biblical teaching is much more sophisticated, calling for purity and chastity, rather than the cultivation of general heterosexual desire. People who struggle with homosexuality change by pursuing the goal of chastity, which means fighting to eradicate any sexual desire outside of marriage, and fighting to cultivate exclusive sexual desire for one’s spouse within marriage.

Reparative Therapists and the Importance of Process in Counseling Homosexuals

Reparative therapy is not an approach to counseling that avoids practical strategies leading to change being content only to talk about problems. It is not mere commiseration, but has a strong therapeutic process in place. Reparative therapy is a form of directive therapy. That means there is a teaching element to it. Evangelicals should be grateful for this element because of our commitment to the teaching ministry of the Word (1 Tim 1:3).

Reparative therapy is also relational. Relationships are crucial to their therapeutic process. Nicolosi discusses each of these elements of teaching and relationship in his book Healing Homosexuality,

Reparative therapy requires a more involved therapist—a “benevolent provocateur” who departs from the tradition of uninvolved, opaque analyst to become a salient male presence. The therapist must balance active challenge with warm encouragement to follow the father-son, mentor-pupil model. This is an essential principle of reparative therapy.”
This reality is also encouraging to evangelicals who submit to a Bible that tells us that change happens best as we live life together (Heb 3:7-19).

Reparative therapists have another element of their therapeutic process that evangelicals can embrace. Reparative therapy pursues a process of change where people are encouraged, not only to avoid harmful behaviors like the practice of homosexuality, but to engage in constructive behaviors. Nicolosi says, “Reparative therapy is initiatory in nature. It requires not just a passive musing over insights into the self, but an active initiation of new behaviors.” This is a very practical approach to care that is reminiscent of the biblical commands to put off sinful behavior and put on righteous activities (Rom 6:12-14, Eph 4:17-32; Col 3:5-17).

Evangelicals are grateful for each of these elements of the therapeutic process in reparative therapy, but we need to be clear why we are grateful for them. We are grateful for them because they are biblical processes. Whether the issue is the value of teaching, the importance of relationship, or the necessity of replacing sinful behaviors with righteous ones, each of these strategies existed in the mind of God before any secular therapist in the 1900s “developed” them. Reparative therapists happened upon strategies that are biblical strategies. We know the strategies are helpful because God’s Word confirms they are. As evangelicals we should be thankful for the common grace of God that would lead unbelievers to the kinds of effective strategies that God reveals authoritatively in his Word. We should also acknowledge that reparative therapy needs to be more biblical.

Once you realize that the effective elements of reparative therapy are the instances when the therapists were unwittingly biblical it drives you away from that therapy to the Scriptures which authoritatively declares what will help people struggling with homosexuality. The Bible reveals many other teachings about helping homosexuals, which are not included in reparative therapy. The Bible also rules out many therapeutic approaches advocated by reparative therapy. Evangelicals refuse to be choosey about the parts of the Bible they embrace, and the parts they reject. This commitment to biblical authority requires them reject many approaches that reparative therapists use.

One significant intervention that evangelicals must reject is the use of pornography by reparative therapists. A lecture by Nicolosi entitled Gay Pornography as a Therapeutic Tool, is described in the following terms,

Reparative Therapists have recently developed a therapeutic technique utilizing gay pornographic images to expose deeper emotional needs beneath mere sexual arousal. While many clients have been told that their homosexuality is a defense against emotional needs, this technique offers “experiential knowing” resulting from personal experience. The result is a diminishment of pornographic appeal and movement toward resolving deeper conflicts.15

In a talk that Nicolosi gave at Exodus International he said, “Now this is interesting. If you have a pornographic image when you go home. Get your best porn picture—this is an experiment . . . and look at the picture and it loses the power.”16 This is a practice that evangelicals simply cannot condone.
Another practice that evangelicals must reject is the use of nudity in counseling. CNN reported in 2012 about a lawsuit against reparative therapy ministry called Jews Offering New Alternatives for Healing (JONAH). CNN describes the horrifying practices, 

*The conversion therapy techniques included having them strip naked in group sessions, cuddling and intimate holding of others of the same-sex, violently beating an effigy of their mothers with a tennis racket, visiting bath houses ‘in order to be nude with father figures,’ and being subjected to ridicule as ‘faggots’ and ‘homos’ in mock locker room scenarios.*\(^{17}\)

The defendants, Rich Wyler, Alan Downing, Jeff Bennion, and Jeremy Schwab admitted to this behavior during court depositions. The defendants refer to this as body work. Nicolosi comments on this process, “Through this process the client experiences reparation of parental malattunement and gains greater self-compassion.”\(^{18}\)

Practices like this are clear violations of the biblical call to purity and must be rejected by evangelical Christians who believe that all acts of sexual immorality are sinful, not just homosexuality.

Each of these examples are interventions that reparative therapists use that the Bible explicitly rules out. Even more more important than the nudity and pornography that many reparative therapists include is the crucial reality they exclude. Reparative therapists exclude Jesus. The Bible teaches that it is Jesus, and the power he makes available through his gospel that is the crucial reality in allowing homosexuals to change (2 Pet 1:3-4). It is Jesus’ power to change that works in the Word and through the biblical processes so that sin is defeated in the life of the believer. At the end of the day all evangelicals must believe that no change is possible that ultimately honors God without him.

**Conclusion**

As the cultural attitude about homosexuality has changed, I have talked with Christians who believe my criticisms of reparative therapy have been improper. One influential man accused me of giving aid and comfort to the enemy in my opposition to reparative therapy. This good man was concerned that I was unhelpfully breaking ranks with reparative therapists who are on the same side as I am.

I have written this essay to try and argue that reparative therapy is something very different than a biblical approach to change. While there may be some superficial similarities, a probing examination shows that reparative therapy is nearly as secular as the current cultural embrace of homosexuality, but with different commitments. As Christians we cannot afford this. If we are to be the salt and light that we are called to be then we must be devoted to the Bible, to an activist faith, to conversion, and to Jesus Christ. Each of these commitments will place us at ultimate odds with reparative therapy. Evangelicals can do much better than reparative therapy. God’s Word gives us a more profound understanding of the homosexuality and how to help than any secular approach to the topic, even when that secular approach is called reparative therapy.


3 Ibid., 150.


5 Nicolosi, *Shame and Attachment Loss*, 324.

6 Robert Gagnon made this charge against a blog post I wrote critiquing reparative therapy during a debate he and I had about reparative therapy at the meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in November of 2015 in Atlanta Georgia. See, https://biblicalcounseling.com/blog/what-wrong-with-reparative-therapy


9 One example of someone saying this is David Myers, “A Levels of Explanation Approach” in *Christianity and Psychology: Five Views* ed. Eric L. Johnson (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 73-74.


15 This was a conference talk with Nicolosi proposed to give at a conference of Exodus International, but the talk was not approved. See note below for source information.


18 Nicolosi, *Shame and Attachment Loss*, 150.
ARE BIBLICAL COUNSELORS UNBIBLICAL?

EVALUATING TRANSFORMATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY’S EXEGETICAL FOUNDATIONS

BY KYLE JOHNSTON

Introduction

There are many models of Christian counseling that vie for the consideration of the church. One variety that has more recently garnered attention is Transformational Psychology (TP). I first found out about TP when I read Dr. John Coe’s ETS paper: “Why Biblical Counseling Is Unbiblical.” As I consider myself a biblical counselor, I was struck by his assessment and decided to learn more. Coe co-authored a book with Todd Hall titled, Psychology in the Spirit: Contours of a Transformational Psychology. I read this book with much interest, trying to understand what was distinctive about their approach.

Though there are many helpful insights shared in that book, there is a significant point of disagreement concerning biblical counseling. Coe’s basic thesis is that Proverbs teaches that the moral wisdom embedded in creation can (even should) inform our counseling. And because biblical counselors do not seek this extra-biblical wisdom, but rather exhibit what Coe calls an
over-reliance on Scripture, they are unbiblical, and, presumably, their counseling is unwise. As this critique comes from a respected and careful theologian, it is worth exploring in more detail. So, are biblical counselors unbiblical? Is Coe right? Is the Bible teaching us that there are sources of wisdom outside Scripture, which wise counselors ought to diligently pursue? Are biblical counselors unbiblical?

I will evaluate Coe’s argument from different angles. First, I’ll summarize the TP model. Second, I’ll engage in an exegetical evaluation of passages in Proverbs cited by Coe, followed by a consideration of Proverbs in general. Third, having done this, we’ll be in a position to identify weaknesses of TP. Fourth, we’ll consider Coe and Hall’s pastoral motivation and find out how similar our aims are. I’ll conclude by responding to their invitation to join them in developing a truly biblical psychology.

What Is Transformational Psychology?

TP is a (relatively) new approach to doing psychology, aiming to develop an inherently Christian approach to understanding the person. Coe and Hall’s *Psychology in the Spirit* is their proposal for this new approach, and it sketches some of the major contours for doing “transformational psychology.” The following is their description of TP:

> Our transformational model is not primarily about how to take the fruits of science and integrate them with Christianity, but to develop a holistic approach to doing psychology and science that is inherently Christian, grounded in the transformed psychologist studying God’s world in God.¹

Notice that last phrase, “in God.” Coe and Hall emphasize in this book how the character of the psychologist is vital to the process of doing psychology. They argue that only spiritually healthy people can develop and practice TP. The heart of the methodology of their transformational psychology is described in chapter 7, which is titled: “An Old Testament Model for a Transformational Science and Psychology.” This chapter contains their foundational thesis. Therefore, I will seek to engage with the assertions made in that chapter specifically.

In the seventh chapter, Coe argues that there are two sources of wisdom: propositional (Scripture) and non-propositional (Creation). In other words, he argues that God reveals wisdom in his Word and in his world. Wisdom is inherent in the dynamic structures of creation. Coe contends that this is something the Bible teaches, and models in the book of Proverbs. He claims that this non-propositional wisdom is “embedded and evident within the patterns and dynamic structures of both the inorganic and organic world…the OT sage identifies this ordering structure with Cosmic Wisdom or the Wisdom of God embedded within the structures of the cosmos.”² Coe contends that, through studying natural phenomena, the sage “discovers the moral knowledge and skill necessary for living well in all areas of life.”³

The biblical texts he believes warrant this approach are based on the parable/story of the sluggard in Proverbs 24:30-34, and reference the relationship between wisdom and creation in Proverbs 3:19-20 and 8:22-36. We’ll explore each of these texts below, but—for now—it’s important to recognize the critique he makes of biblical counselors, which is an “over-reliance upon the Scriptures for all wisdom.”⁴ God has provided two sources of wisdom, Coe argues, and
therefore the task of the psychologist-sage is to acquire wisdom from both sources. “The sage and our transformational model of psychology appeal to Scripture and creation as sources of wisdom, inasmuch as both inform us on how to live well.”

Coe argues that the Old Testament sage shows us how human observations can lead to a discovery of the dynamic law-like structures of nature (including human psychological dynamics). Discovering these dynamic structures embedded in creation enables people to then develop an understanding of what leads to healthy versus unhealthy living: “The Old Testament sage is convinced that one can discover facts about values from facts about nature, particularly from facts about human behavioral, interpersonal and intrapsychic phenomena.”

How does Coe understand the book of Proverbs specifically? He appears to see Proverbs as an early example (or precursor) of psychological literature. He argues that the Old Testament sage is a model for a transformational approach to doing science in general, and psychology in particular. He thus sees Proverbs “as representing the Old Testament sage’s science of values.”

Proverbs provides a scientific model for modern psychospiritual sages to replicate in their own time and place. In short, “the Old Testament sage is our biblical model.” In his review of the book, Bob Kellemen summarizes Coe’s view of the book of Proverbs: “Proverbs illustrates what the Christian psychologist should be and do.”

As a result Coe argues that Proverbs is a model project of psychology, in which the psychologist discovers (through observation and reflection) values from creation. Since moral truths are embedded in nature, scientific psychological study of the created order will bring the discovery of moral knowledge that one would not have known apart from such observation. Coe does not provide an example of how this might work out practically in chapter 7, but Hall does so in chapter 12. Co-author Todd Hall introduces readers to the concepts of Human Attachment and Relationality in chapter 12. (These concepts, I assume Hall would argue, have come to us through the psychological study of the created order—in this case, through a synthesis of recent developments in multiple fields.) Hall then proceeds to give a counseling example of Fred and Bonnie (a couple experiencing marital problems), illustrating how the concepts of Human Attachment and Relationality enable him to deeply understand and effectively care for them. By inference, the message is that the Transformational Psychologist, through studying creation, has a greater wisdom than does the biblical counselor because his scientific studies have yielded additional valuable information regarding human behavioral, interpersonal, and intrapsychic phenomena.

The bottom line of the argument Coe makes in chapter 7 is that it is the Bible’s own testimony that Scripture is not the only source of wisdom. “As a social scientist with a moral stripe, [the sage’s] goal is to translate his observations and reflections of the human ordering structure into principles for living well in all areas of life under God. The Proverbs in particular represent his attempt at mapping out the quasi-causal laws of sow and reap that regulate human phenomena.”

The sage, Coe argues, is our biblical model, showing us how to pursue a distinctively Christian approach to psychology (and thus counseling). The sage does this by gleaning wisdom from his study of creation and applying that wisdom to human life.
Coe’s critique of the biblical counseling position is that “it fails to adequately account for the wisdom that God has for us to discover by observation and reflection on human beings…[biblical counselors have an] over-reliance upon the Scriptures for all wisdom.” Biblical counselors are ignoring the mandate to discover the extra-biblical wisdom God has embedded in creation and are therefore less likely to offer wise soul care. To rightly evaluate Coe’s assertion, we must explore whether he properly understands the teaching of Proverbs. It is to that examination that we shall now turn.

Examining Coe’s Exegesis

Does Proverbs teach that wisdom is found in creation? To answer this question, let’s first consider the key passages Coe cites in support of his view that Proverbs teaches a non-propositional source of wisdom. The first is Proverbs 3:19–20.

“The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens; by his knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds drop down the dew.”

Coe says about these verses:

“God’s wisdom is responsible for the ordered structure, mechanics and causal laws that ontologically ground the natural sciences. This cosmic ordering structure provides the objective data that makes nature comprehensible.”

That is a true and helpful insight and worth unpacking a bit. By looking at the context of Proverbs, we recognize these verses are part of a larger treatise, praising the value of wisdom, and they particularly highlight the value of wisdom to the Lord in his creating and sustaining of the earth. In other words, God used wisdom in creation (3:19-20a: “by wisdom founded the earth,” and “by understanding he established the heavens”), and continues to employ wisdom in sustaining the earth (3:20b: “by his knowledge…the clouds drop down the dew”). Through wisdom, God created the world. This connects with the focus of Proverbs 1-9, in which Solomon seeks to highlight the value of wisdom for his readers. Wisdom is beautiful, majestic, and attractive—something God utilized in creation and so something that we ought to seek.

But here’s the important point about Proverbs 3:19-20—the world does not contain God’s wisdom; it was created by God’s wisdom. Commenting on verse 3:19, John Kitchen helpfully notices this nuance: “God employed His wisdom, understanding, and knowledge (v. 20) in bringing forth all of creation (Pss. 104:24; 136:5; Jer. 10:12; 51:15). Wisdom predates all creation.” For this reason, these verses do not teach us that the ordered structure contains God’s wisdom. Rather, these verses teach us that the ordered structure was created and is sustained by God’s wisdom. God’s wisdom was used in creation, but that does not mean that creation contains God’s wisdom. To give a word picture: wisdom is not like a mineral that needs to be mined out of a mountainside. Instead, the whole mountain testifies to the wisdom of its Creator. The mountain does not contain wisdom; it was created by wisdom. The mountain reveals (but does not contain) the wisdom of its maker.
Let’s consider another key text that Coe cites in this passage. In this passage, Lady Wisdom is speaking in Proverbs 8:22-31.

The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth… Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth… When he established the heavens, I was there… when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master workman, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man.

Commenting on these verses, Coe writes,

“God’s wisdom not only creates but is itself imprinted upon and embedded within nature as its pattern, way and dynamic law-like structure of things (Cosmic Wisdom)”.

Crucially, Coe here identifies Cosmic (Lady) Wisdom as the cause-and-effect order of things in creation. Commenting on Proverbs 8:30-36, Coe writes, “In the same way that Cosmic Wisdom represents the causal laws that govern nonhuman natural phenomena, she also represents the quasi-causal laws of sow-and-reap that govern human agents. Thus, according to the Old Testament sage, Cosmic Wisdom implores persons to listen to her inasmuch as she governs all human behavioural, interpersonal and intrapsychic phenomena.” Coe therefore argues that Lady Wisdom, or Cosmic Wisdom, refers to the ordering structure embedded within creation. This means, Coe argues, that the sage studies creation to better know Lady Wisdom.

The problem with this contention is the lack of clear exegetical support. No verses explicitly identify Lady Wisdom as being embedded within creation. None. A decisive issue in this discussion is identifying Lady Wisdom, because she implores us to listen to her. If Lady Wisdom refers to the ordering structure of creation, then surely Coe and Hall are correct – she beckons us to listen to her by studying creation. But which verses identify Lady Wisdom as the ordered structure of creation? We’ll revisit this question in more detail below.

Here is the final significant passage Coe cites, from Proverbs 24:30-34.

I passed by the field of a sluggard, by the vineyard of a man lacking sense, and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. Then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction. A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.

Coe argues that this observation of the sluggard reveals the epistemological method of the sage. As the sage “saw and considered,” he “received instruction.” This is the way Coe exegetes this passage on laziness:

This is the only passage I am aware of in the Proverbs in which the sage draws back the curtain and exposes his modus operandi in apprehending wisdom and moral knowledge...though the sage elsewhere acknowledges the Scriptures as a source of wisdom (Proverbs 29:18), here he informs us that his own reflections and observations were sufficient to discover this piece of practical and moral wisdom...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.\(^{17}\)

This is the crux of his argument. He asserts that the sage’s “reflections and observations were sufficient to discover … moral wisdom.” But this claim that engaging with creation leads to new moral knowledge lacks warrant. The text of Proverbs never actually makes the claim that facts about values can be gleaned from facts regarding creation. At best, this is an argument from silence.

A clear and specific verse explaining or illustrating a non-propositional source of wisdom cannot be located. Proverbs 24:30-34 itself appears unclear on this: Is the sage discovering new moral knowledge, or merely being reminded by way of illustration of an earlier truth that he previously articulated (cf. Prov. 6:9-11, which includes the same refrain, “A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man”)? Or, is this merely a parable or riddle (which Proverbs 1:6 suggests it might be), illustrating a truth already known to the sage? To be sure, the sage most certainly reflects upon what he sees. Most scholars would not deny that the sage keenly observes the world he inhabits—he does! The sage is a keen observer of his surroundings, as we should be today. Kitchen exegetes this passage well when he writes:

> “Whether or not this reflects an actual event or is a moral story manufactured for purposes of instruction is beside the point. What should not be lost, however, is how much can be learned if one simply keeps his eyes open.”\(^{18}\)

We should keep our eyes open! Biblical counselors, pastors, and all Christians would do well to keenly observe the world we inhabit. Biblical counseling is not, and has never been, opposed to scientific investigation and thoughtful reflection upon the world we inhabit. But the crucial exegetical question for Coe to consider is if this parable is giving us a methodology in science of values. Although it is wise for us to value scientific endeavors, this passage is simply not teaching us that the OT sage discovered moral wisdom through scientific observation. The parable/story does not reveal the sage’s epistemological modus operandi.

Perhaps, in response, Coe would contend that Proverbs 24:32 (“Then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction”) specifically teaches that moral wisdom can be gleaned from scientific study. But Proverbs 24:32 is surely too unclear to be one’s primary text in supporting this epistemological framework, particularly when the clear and consistent message of Proverbs is that wisdom comes from God’s Word (cf. Prov. 2:1-11; 4:1-19; 19:27). While Coe quotes various passages from Proverbs generally, he makes no strong exegetical argument from specific verses persuasively demonstrating that Cosmic Wisdom is embedded in creation.\(^{19}\) In fact, arguing that wisdom comes from studying creation is almost contrary to the message that the book of Proverbs is seeking to communicate, which is that wisdom comes through the Word of God (Prov. 1:1-7). While the sage certainly observed and reflected on what he saw, his divinely inspired and subsequently recorded observations were performed through the lens of orthodoxy.
Hebrew scholar Bruce K. Waltke points out,

“The authors of Proverbs drew inspiration through keen observations and cogent reflections on creation, but they brought to their task Israel’s world-and-life view and used the creation to confirm it.”

Yes, the sages certainly reflected on nature and human phenomena (and so should we!), but they reflected through the lens of biblical faith. They saw illustrations and confirmations, rather than discovering authoritative new moral truths in what they observed. This is what all Christians do; this is what preachers do; and this is also what counselors do—reflect upon creation through the lens of biblical faith. Indeed, it is important and valuable that we do this. Science is an ally to the Christian person, and biblical counselors are positive pertaining to scientific investigation. As the scholars we’ve quoted from articulated, the sage of Proverbs certainly observed and reflected upon creation. Thoughtful biblical counselors have done the same—yet without claiming that they were studying Lady Wisdom when they were observing and reflecting.

The exegetical arguments made by Coe are based on texts that do not teach what he asserts. Lady Wisdom (Cosmic Wisdom is a term Coe employs) does not represent the causal laws that govern nonhuman natural phenomena; the OT sage does not affirm a moral science. It does raise the question of what Lady Wisdom does represent, though, and what the nature of the wisdom in Proverbs is. It is to these important questions that we now turn.

**Identifying Lady Wisdom and Defining the Nature of Wisdom in Proverbs**

Waltke writes that the book of Proverbs is the intermediary of God’s wisdom. In other words, God gave us the Proverbs, so that we might become wise. Despite the important direction given to us by the introductory verses (cf. Prov. 1:1-7), Waltke laments how many biblical scholars have defined wisdom as being located in an impersonal created order. This fundamentally misunderstands what Proverbs is teaching: wisdom is revealed in the Word of the Lord, and not upon a person’s recognition of the world’s ordered structure.

Waltke explicitly opposes the exegetical error that underpins Coe’s argument:

>This fundamental hermeneutical blunder of substituting the search for a self-revelatory cosmic order has been highly influential, misleading many…[and] thereby setting up the book to teach trust in human research rather than in God, who guarantees the truth of his revelation.

When this interpretive error is made, the entire purpose of Proverbs is misunderstood; indeed, it is inverted! Proverbs is not promoting the value of human reasoning, nor the value of human scientific-moralistic endeavor, nor the importance of natural law, but the value of receiving and depending upon God’s revealed, inscripturated, wisdom: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths” (Prov. 3:5).

The emphasis in Proverbs is that wisdom is gained not through discovering wisdom in the world, but receiving wisdom through the Word (Prov. 2:6-10). Amongst many other texts, we could cite those in which we see the parents imploring their child to receive their words (Prov. 1:8; 2:1; 3:1, 11-12,
21-22; 4:1, 10, etc.). Realizing that wisdom in Proverbs is connected to knowing and obeying God’s Word also helps us understand why “teaching and education are the major means of acquiring wisdom (Prov 1:1–6).” Because it is as someone teaches me Proverbs that I hear God’s voice, and as I hear and heed what God says, I grow in wisdom (Prov. 4:1: “Hear, O sons, a father’s instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight”).

Again, with particular relevance to the verses cited by Coe (Prov. 3:19-20 and 8:22-31), Waltke provides clarity regarding the nature of wisdom in Proverbs:

>To be sure, biblical texts outside Proverbs speak of God’s revelation of himself as Creator and/or Judge through his creation … but Proverbs does not identify this revelation as the source of its wisdom. Prov. 3:19-20 says that God used wisdom as an instrument to create the world, not as an instrument to reveal wisdom. The primary feature of the poem in 8:22-31 on the role of wisdom in creation is its strong emphasis on the cosmic range and authority of wisdom… the poem does certainly not identify wisdom as existing within the creation.

Proverbs nowhere teaches us that wisdom can be found outside God’s revelation, nor does it encourage us to seek wisdom that way. In other words, Proverbs does not teach us about a non-propositional source of wisdom. It reveals a primal source of wisdom—revealed in propositions. To claim otherwise not only lacks clear exegetical support, it contradicts clear exegetical support that asserts the very opposite! This does not mean that we shouldn’t study nature or embark on scientific investigations, but it does mean that Proverbs is simply not teaching us how to discover moral wisdom from scientific inquiry. The message of Proverbs is that Lady Wisdom is received through embracing the inspired words of the book, and embracing the Lord whose Spirit wrote the book. Identifying Lady Wisdom correctly is the critical issue, or the crucial error Coe makes, and so let’s seek to rightly identify her.

By carefully studying Proverbs 4:1-9, we see that Lady Wisdom is linked explicitly to the sage’s words/commands (rather than creation). In Proverbs 4:4-6, Solomon quotes his father, David, who said to him, “Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live. Get wisdom; get insight; do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you” (italics mine). Notice, in the Hebrew parallelism, how Lady Wisdom is there, linked explicitly to King David’s wise teaching. “David had urged young Solomon to obey his words wholeheartedly (with all your heart; cf. Prov. 3:5) so that he would live (cf. 3:1–2)… Wisdom was to be pursued (three times Solomon said “get”; Prov. 4:5 [twice], 7) and valued (love her; cf. 8:17, 21) because she (wisdom is again personified as a woman) protects (cf. 2:7–8, 11; 3:21–23) and guards.”

Lady Wisdom is embraced as Solomon’s words are obeyed. Another scholar comments on these verses: “The words of my mouth represent as it were the means by which wisdom may be purchased.”

Wisdom comes from studying God’s Word, rather than from studying God’s world, because Lady Wisdom is embedded in God’s Word, instead of God’s world.

Proverbs 4:13 makes this same point: “Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life.” Notice again how instruction is subsequently referred to by the feminine pronoun her. Lady Wisdom is embedded in God’s Word, rather than in God’s world, as articulated by scholars Reyburn and Fry:
The sense of this command is for the learner to attach himself to understanding, to keep it always near him, that is, as the guide to his life. “She is your life” equates instruction or “education” with life.27

Life, and living life well, is found by obtaining (and then remaining devoted to) the truths and instructions found in God’s Word. Proverbs, therefore, does not teach us that Cosmic/Lady Wisdom is embedded in creation. Lady Wisdom is, instead, a poetic figure who represents the wisdom of God and is obtained by internalizing the many truths of Proverbs.

This is particularly important because Coe’s major exegetical mistake is to wrongly identify Lady Wisdom (or Cosmic Wisdom). And this misunderstanding of Cosmic/Lady Wisdom that leads him to make this thoroughly unbiblical conclusion about the sage’s prime directive as Israel’s counselor: “to discern and follow [the] ordering structure within nature itself…in order to live life well under God.”28 His conclusion is that the sage-psychologist-counselor’s primary directive is discerning moral knowledge from observing nature to help God’s people live well. But this is not the message of Proverbs, nor consequently the prime directive of the sage. Indeed, as I have briefly argued, Proverbs’s message is exactly the opposite: these inspired wise words have been given to us that our trust may be in the Lord (cf. Prov. 22:17-19). Waltke summarizes: “The basis for the book of Proverbs’ epistemology and theological reflections is not natural theology, but special revelation through inspired spokespeople (see 30:5-6).”29

Two Weaknesses of Transformational Psychology

By this point, it is clear that Coe’s argument for his view of Proverbs is exegetically unsound. Proverbs is not showing us how to engage in a psychology of values. Proverbs is rooted in special revelation. God’s very wisdom is contained in Proverbs; these inspired sayings have come from his mouth (cf. Prov. 2:6). The sage of Proverbs, rather than being primarily our example, wants to be primarily our teacher.30

Professor James Hamilton helpfully notes that, rather than modeling a scientific methodology, Proverbs “results from Solomon’s obedience to Deuteronomy 6, filtered through his obedience to Deuteronomy 17, as he creatively teaches the Torah to his son.”31 Proverbs concerns the transmission of wisdom through inspired words – from Solomon, to his sons, and on to us. Transformational Psychology misunderstands Proverbs, and so rests on an exegetically faulty foundation.

There is a second weakness in TP. Seeking wisdom from two sources compromises doctrinal accuracy, and thereby makes counseling less effective because general revelation, or insights from psychology, cannot foster virtue in one’s soul. This difference in spiritual impact between general revelation and special revelation is highlighted in Psalm 19:1-11. The first six verses discuss general revelation (the created order), and make no mention of man discovering moral knowledge that enables him to live well spiritually.32 Verses 7-11 however, teach us that special revelation is “needed to change the heart of man and make him wise.”33 If we want individuals to grow through counseling, and if we want counselees to become wise, we must necessarily employ the Scriptures in dependence upon the Spirit. Wisdom comes by the Spirit of God,
through the Word of God. In other words, the Lord transforms us (and our counselees) by his Spirit, through his Word.

These two weaknesses are significant. The exegetical mistake means that TP rests on an erroneous foundation. The second mistake may well mean that, in actual counseling scenarios, Transformational Psychologists may not implement the Scriptures as much as they should (and the case studies that Todd Hall shares in chapter 14 seem to bear this out). This means that TP will be less effective in achieving spiritual growth in counselees. These two significant weaknesses are enough for us to seriously question the validity of TP.

Are Biblical Counselors Unbiblical?

We have made a careful assessment of TP’s exegetical underpinnings and found them to be flawed. This brings me back to the original question asked in the opening section: “Are biblical counselors unbiblical?” Has Coe made his case? The answer is clearly “no.”

However, it is worth emphasizing that, even though biblical counselors rely on the Scriptures in counseling, the biblical counseling approach is not at all opposed to scientific investigation. As we saw when considering Proverbs 24:30-34, the sage keenly observes and reflects upon what he sees—he keeps his eyes open, and we should, too! Biblical counselors can learn from sources other than Scripture, because numerous sources (from scientific research to literature, and more) contribute toward our knowledge of people. And academic developments in a variety of disciplines will always be of interest to those who practice biblical counseling—although the biblical approach to how that knowledge is viewed and used would be different from the TP model. The TP model may overly exalt such knowledge, considering it to be a non-propositional source of wisdom. The Transformational Psychologist is potentially in danger of calling human knowledge God’s wisdom. In contrast, the biblical counseling model recognizes academic developments positively—yet views them as potentially helpful sources of knowledge, rather than as new authoritative moral truths. Advances in knowledge can be helpful and enthusiastically welcomed, but a thoughtful biblical counselor would not equate those academic advances with God’s wisdom.

Proverbs is teaching us that wisdom comes to us through God’s Word (Prov 1:1-7). Rather than perceiving the sage as an example of a social scientist, Proverbs emphasizes the sage’s role as an inspired teacher of divine wisdom. Our role is becoming perennial students, always growing wiser as we more deeply understand, embrace, and apply the truths contained in Proverbs. The words of the book of Proverbs should be written on our hearts and applied to our lives. Of course, other sources of knowledge can help us grow as counselors—we affirm that gladly. But the primary directive for us who seek to help alleviate the soul troubles of others must be to relationally share the wisdom of God, as it is revealed in the Word of God. In fact, by the wisdom attained in places like Proverbs, the biblical counselor can appropriately assess and utilize information from other sources like history, poetry or psychological literature. Of course, biblical counselors—like all Christian counselors—will always have an ongoing need to grow in wisdom. Wonderfully, despite our weaknesses and perennial need for wisdom, Proverbs teaches us that wisdom is available to us through God’s Word.
A Shared Motivation

While I disagree with Coe’s exegesis, the TP model, and his opinions about biblical counseling, I admire and share his motivation. Both John Coe and Todd Hall want to develop a truly biblical psychology for the sake of transforming the church and the world. Their desire to serve and aid others is right, laudable, and encouraging. Coe and Hall end their thought-provoking book with a humble invitation: to join them in seeking to develop a spiritually transformative psychology. As biblical counselors, we should respond to that invitation by doing our best in developing a biblical psychology, based on a thorough exegesis of biblical texts. May God help all those whom He has called to counsel; may we learn how to wisely minister his Word to those in need of help and hope.
1 John H. Coe and Todd W. Hall, Psychology in the Spirit: Contours of a Transformational Psychology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 134.
3 Ibid.
4 Coe and Hall, Psychology in the Spirit, 62.
5 Ibid., 154. See figure 7.4 on this page for a helpful visual summary of the argument.
6 Ibid., 134.
7 Ibid., 148. Coe is not exactly arguing that Proverbs is an ancient equivalent to a modern psychological textbook. But he does see it as a record of the sage’s scientific and educational literature (footnote 17, page 149).
8 Ibid, 134. Of course, Coe also recognizes that Proverbs is divinely inspired by God and thus unique in that sense. Nevertheless, the sage does act as our biblical model.
10 Coe and Hall, Psychology in the Spirit, 145.
11 Ibid., 62.
12 Ibid., 138.
14 Thanks to my friend Joshua Clutterham for this word picture.
15 Coe and Hall, Psychology in the Spirit, 140.
16 Ibid., 142.
17 Ibid., 146.
18 Kitchen, Proverbs, 557.
19 In fact, such passages as Job 28 (which highlights the hiddenness of wisdom) seem to indicate the opposite.
21 Ibid., 80.
22 Ibid., 81.
24 Waltke, Proverbs, 81.
28 Coe, Unbiblical.
29 Waltke, Proverbs, 82.
30 Of course, it’s true to say that the sage of Proverbs is a good example for us of someone who fears the Lord, who observes created phenomena keenly, and who counsels wisely. For more about this, see The Proverbs and the Art of Persuasion, by George M. Schwab, Sr., The Journal of Biblical Counseling 14:1 (1995).
32 This does not mean that general revelation reveals nothing important – it does reveal God’s glory and character to us, as taught in Psalm 19:1-6 teaches.
THE CBT THERAPIST IN US ALL:
A BIBLICAL EVALUATION OF COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY
BY SCOTT MEHL

Introduction

“Cognitive Behavioral Therapy changes people, and we can prove it.” This implicit claim has propelled Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to become one of the most widely practiced therapies in the world. No other form of therapy has the scientific validation and popular support currently enjoyed by CBT. In the first week of May 2016 alone, news outlets across the United States published stories touting the power of CBT in treating chronic pain, insomnia, depression, OCD, opioid abuse, suicidal thoughts, and even memory loss from chemotherapy. In addition, the empirical evidence supporting CBT is unparalleled in the world of psychotherapy. As one researcher puts it, “CBT is arguably the most widely studied form of psychotherapy…. Despite weaknesses in some areas, it is clear that the evidence-base of CBT is enormous. Given the high cost-effectiveness of the intervention, it is surprising that many countries, including many developed nations, have not yet adopted CBT as the first-line intervention for mental disorders.” For these reasons CBT has become the go-to intervention for most mental disorders in the United States. Being trained and competent in CBT is now one of
the accreditation criteria for all psychiatry residency programs in the US. What’s more, the psychiatry practice guidelines for almost every mental disorder include CBT as a first-line therapy.

CBT is also popular among many Christians who believe that it is able to be effectively integrated into a Christian worldview. As Stanton Jones and Richard Butman summarize, “Perhaps no other therapy approach so closely mirrors a biblical balance of cognitive and action orientation as cognitive-behavioral therapy. Even a superficial reading of the pastoral exhortations of the New Testament epistles yields a clear theme of obedience in actions and in thoughts as the way to maturity.” CBT can appear to be the ideal psychotherapy for the Christian. It hits the trifecta of being (a) scientifically demonstrated, (b) anecdotally effective, and (c) consistent with biblical principles. But is CBT actually consistent with Scripture’s understanding of motivation and change? Before we can answer that question we need to understand what CBT actually is.

The History and Philosophy of CBT

To understand CBT we must first recognize where it came from. CBT was birthed out of two previously separate forms of therapy: behavioral therapy and cognitive therapy. Behavioral therapy was developed, most famously, by B.F. Skinner and was propelled into wide use by the needs of soldiers returning from World War II. Cognitive therapy was developed by Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck. They identified irrational thoughts and beliefs as the greatest cause of psychological problems. Beginning in the late 1970s, those who practiced behavioral therapy (behaviorists), recognizing the overly simplistic nature of their theories, began incorporating cognitive approaches into their therapeutic repertoire. This gave rise to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy in the early 1980s. In observing CBT today, the legacies of Skinner, Ellis, and Beck are still readily apparent. CBT recognizes that, just as thoughts must be addressed in order to change behavior, changing behavior inevitably helps in the process of changing thoughts. “Part of the inheritance from [behavioral therapy] is that CBT considers behaviour (what we do) as crucial in maintaining – or in changing – psychological states.” For the CBT therapist this dual legacy is reflected in equal emphasis given to behavioral and cognitive techniques.

But recognizing the roles these “grandfathers” of the movement played does not take us back quite far enough. While the theoretical underpinnings of Skinners’ behaviorism are well-known among psychologists and can be traced back to the famous experiments of Pavlov and his dogs, the philosophical underpinnings of Ellis and Beck are less commonly recognized. Donald Robertson explores this philosophical backdrop in his book, The Philosophy of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. He writes:

“It is important to emphasize that both Aaron Beck and Albert Ellis, often regarded as the main pioneers of CBT, have stressed the role of Stoicism as a philosophical precursor of their respective approaches. There is only a relatively vague appreciation of this fact among many therapists, however, so it is worth drawing attention to the key passages in their writings.”

Robertson points out that both Stoicism and CBT assume that thoughts determine emotions and both see changing our thoughts as the greatest way to change our emotions. In both Stoicism and CBT “cognitions are central to both the cause and the cure of emotional disturbance.”
Or put more simply, “[Ellis’] own approach was based on the ancient Stoic philosophy…[which] stated that facts do not upset people, but rather people upset themselves with the view that they take of those facts.” This is the assumption that is at the core of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. 2,300 years after the first Stoics and 20 years after Ellis and Beck, David Burns, who popularized CBT (selling over 4 million copies of his landmark bestseller), summarized CBT in a way that is undeniably Stoic in nature: “You can learn to change the way you think about things, and you can also change your basic values and beliefs. And when you do, you will often experience profound and lasting changes in your mood, outlook, and productivity. That, in a nutshell, is what cognitive therapy is all about.”

What is CBT?

So what exactly is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, then? David Burns says that CBT is essentially about changing the way you think in order to change your mood, outlook, and productivity. Michelle Craske (director of the UCLA Anxiety Disorder Research Center) agrees: “The primary assumption of cognitive therapy, whether in accordance with Ellis or Beck, is that dysfunctional thinking can be changed and, in turn, lead to symptomatic relief and improvement in functioning.” In short, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is the application of behavioral and cognitive interventions to address an undesirable psychological problem. But what are these behavioral and cognitive interventions?

Behavioral interventions are developed reactively from classical conditioning or proactively from instrumental conditioning. Classical conditioning observes that there are certain innate, involuntary responses that follow certain stimuli. But it also recognizes that these involuntary responses can be changed. If anxiety is the involuntary response to a nurse walking into the room — because you associate nurses with getting shots — all you have to do is repeatedly introduce a nurse into the room without giving you a shot to change the involuntary response from anxiety to calm. This is at the root of exposure therapy, a classic behavioral intervention.

Instrumental conditioning, on the other hand, is not aimed at reacting to involuntary responses but at eliciting certain desirable responses by means of reinforcement or punishment. Simply put, behavior can be altered through a systematic and consistent application of positive and negative reinforcements that encourage adaptive behavior and discourage maladaptive behavior. Craske observes that, “the challenge for treatment is to make the reinforcement for the adaptive behavior more influential than the reinforcement for maladaptive behavior” (an observation that any parent of a 3 year-old can readily attest to).

Cognitive interventions differ from behavioral interventions in that they are aimed at the more complex cognitive process of how life is interpreted and discerned. Whereas a behaviorist would simply observe that a certain event produces a certain behavior or emotion, the cognitive therapist observes that, in fact, a certain event produces a certain cognition, which in turn produces a certain behavior or emotion. When these “cognitions” are maladaptive or problematic they are sometimes called “negative automatic thoughts.” But these automatic thoughts don’t spring from thin air. If they did, they might be easier to change. However, cognitive therapists observe that these negative automatic thoughts are the natural byproduct of dysfunctional assumptions
and that these dysfunctional assumptions stem from problematic “core beliefs.” Cognitive interventions are developed to help someone with problematic “core beliefs” identify those beliefs and replace them with more “healthy” beliefs that will naturally produce more helpful assumptions and, eventually, more constructive automatic thoughts.

**CBT Skills and Interventions**

If the last two sections left you scrambling for your dictionary, I can assure you that you are not alone. While filled with astute observations, the theory of CBT can get a little convoluted, especially for those not steeped in its history and terminology. For this reason I find the most helpful way to understand CBT is by identifying some of the specific skills and interventions it employs in seeking to help people change. While there is great diversity between behavioral and cognitive interventions, the CBT therapist employs them all, not necessarily because they all stem from one coherent theory of humanity, but simply because they all work in certain situations. CBT is eclectic at its core, providing a smorgasbord of different behavioral and cognitive interventions for the therapist to choose from depending on the person, the situation, and the issue. In order to get a sense for exactly what this entails, let me give you a sampling of some of the most common interventions.

There are two main types of behavioral interventions: exposure-based interventions (as applications of classical conditioning) and skills-based interventions (as applications of instrumental conditioning). Exposure-based interventions involve repeatedly and progressively introducing certain stimuli for the sake of addressing either fear or craving. For example, if someone has an irrational fear of water, repeated and gradual exposure to a swimming pool without harm coming to the person will gradually reduce the unwanted fear. Similarly, if someone has a destructive craving for dessert every night when their kids go to bed, repeated exposure to their kids going to bed without eating desert (because it has been removed from the house) will, over time, reduce the undesirable craving.

Skills-based interventions involve teaching the counselee certain skills that help to produce the desired behaviors or emotions. Examples include:

**Relaxation.** Counselees are taught techniques of muscle relaxation or breathing training as tools to combat anxiety or fear and to use moments of anxiety as reminders to engage in intentional relaxation. Eastern meditation and yoga (in their popular forms) have also become prevalent manifestations of this intervention.

**Problem Solving.** Many behavioral and emotional issues can be helped significantly by providing counselees with simple problem solving skills. This often takes the form of teaching a counselee how to identify a problem, brainstorm possible solutions, evaluate those solutions, enact a solution, and evaluate the result afterwards.

**Behavioral Rehearsal.** Role playing and modeling by the counselor are ways to help produce desirable social skills or social confidence that may be lacking. By practicing the desired behaviors
in a safe setting, the counselee will be better prepared to manifest those behaviors in the desired contexts.

**Systems of Reinforcement.** Developing various systems of reinforcement are a key strategy in CBT interventions. These may include systems of positive reinforcement: using activity logs, praise from the counselor, or identification of the ongoing benefits of particular behaviors. These may also include systems of negative reinforcement: removing certain privileges or positive reinforcements, if goals are not met.

**Increased Activity.** Many CBT therapists have also observed (as demonstrated in numerous scientific studies) that simply increasing one’s activity level (through exercise or some other form of physical exertion) can oftentimes contribute to the production of desirable emotions or even behaviors. Setting up plans to increase a counselee’s activity level is a common behavioral intervention.

Cognitive interventions, as discussed above, seek to address deeper beliefs and assumptions. In order to do this, most cognitive therapy first involves instructing the counselee on the theory of cognitive therapy in order to gain their buy-in moving forward. From there the counselor and the counselee embark on a journey of identifying and confronting dysfunctional thought patterns through a process of “collaborative empiricism.” The two collaboratively seek to study the thought patterns of the counselee and, together, make observations regarding what should be regarded as “dysfunctional.” Those problematic thought patterns are then addressed with “truth” that is more helpful or healthy for the individual. The most straight-forward example of this can be found in David Burns’ 10 cognitive distortions. He summarizes the most common cognitive problems into 10 categories, only a few of which can be mentioned here for the sake of space.

*Jumping to Conclusions.* “You make a negative interpretation even though there are not definite facts that convincingly support your conclusion.”

*Emotional Reasoning.* “You assume your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are.”

*Disqualifying the Positive.* “You reject positive experiences by insisting they ‘don’t count’ for some reason or other.”

Burns’ entire book is a perfect example of how the cognitive therapist would confront these dysfunctional types of thinking. He takes them head-on and uses evidence from the person’s life to demonstrate how and why their thinking is untrue and replaces the untrue thoughts with healthier, more helpful thoughts such as: “The evidence of my life suggests that I’m not a total failure, but have experienced success in certain areas.” Or, “My emotions don’t determine reality, and even though I feel unloved, there are actually plenty of people who love me very much.” Or, “The promotion I got at work really does show that I am a good worker and valued by my boss; it’s not just the natural result of the person ahead of me leaving the company.” These are all examples of the truth statements involved in confronting someone’s core beliefs, and replacing their negative automatic thoughts with positive ones.
The Popularity of CBT

Before we evaluate all of this from a biblical perspective, there's one last question that is important to address. It's the question that helps us to understand why any of this matters for the Christian today. In addition to asking, “What is CBT?” and “Where did it come from?” we also need to ask, “Why is CBT so popular?” Although there are many complicated factors that contribute to its popularity, there are four reasons that rise above the rest.

First, CBT is popular because it just makes sense. Many of the “interventions” utilized in CBT are similar (if not identical) to the common sense parenting that many mothers have provided to their kids for centuries. “If you talk to me that way again you will have to be disciplined.” “Let’s think about other ways you could have handled this situation.” “Don’t let anyone tell you that you’re stupid, it’s just not true!” “Go outside and play.” These are all simple, common sense applications of cognitive-behavioral therapy.

Second, CBT is popular because it has been empirically demonstrated to be effective. No form of therapy has been studied more than CBT. And the result of all of those studies has been a great deal of confidence that CBT really can help people change how they act and feel. In fact, a 2012 comprehensive review which analyzed 106 meta-analyses (studies of studies) concluded that, “In general, the evidence-base of CBT is very strong.” This is the reason for the high level of respect it currently enjoys in the medical community.

Third, CBT is popular because the interventions are reproducible and easy to learn. When CBT is compared to other forms of psychotherapy, the simplicity of many of its interventions stands out. Psychoanalysis, hypnosis, existential therapy, and many others can be difficult to learn with concepts that take years to grasp. In contrast, while CBT can always be improved, its interventions are far more accessible and can be quite easily handed to counselees to apply on their own.

A final reason CBT is popular is because it is so cost effective. CBT is known for being time-limited (especially in comparison to psychoanalysis), applicable in groups, and able to be self-directed. This makes CBT the most cost-effective form of treatment available for mental disorders. In a world of managed healthcare, the impact of this on CBT’s current popularity cannot be overstated.

Similarities to the Biblical Process of Change

Having identified where CBT came from, what it is, and why it’s so popular, let’s revisit the key question for us as Christians: “Is CBT actually consistent with Scripture’s understanding of motivation and change?” It may appear that there are a lot of similarities between CBT and the biblical process of change. As you read through the list of behavioral interventions, many of them look very similar to strategies Christians engage in to “put off” sinful actions. Behavioral rehearsal is oftentimes used to prepare someone for a future moment of temptation, problem-solving skills are used when helping someone identify alternative responses to temptation, and systems of reinforcement are utilized in almost every accountability group. Think of the Bible
study group that does pushups for every word they get incorrect when memorizing Scripture. Or the “cheat day” granted as a reward to Christians who are trying to get control of their eating habits. All of these are strategies of habituation, which even the biblical counseling movement has utilized extensively. After all, Paul instructs the Thessalonians that, “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat” (2 Thes 3:10). CBT can sound a lot like the common-sense approaches to change many Christians utilize every day.

Similarly, the emphasis CBT places on identifying faulty core beliefs and irrational thinking, confronting them with truth statements, and altering behavior by changing one’s thoughts, all sounds downright biblical. After all, in one of the clearest passages on human motivation and change, Paul instructs believers to, “not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom 12:2). CBT seems like a simple, empirically demonstrated tool for renewing one’s mind. All we need to do is use Scripture as the content of those truths, and Christianized CBT is essentially biblical counseling, right?

While it may look similar on the surface, CBT and the biblical process of change are, in fact, very different. This is not to say that there are not components of the biblical process of change that are echoed in the efforts of CBT therapists. There undeniably are. Ancient Stoics, Skinnerian behaviorists, Ellis-inspired cognitivists, and modern-day cognitive-behavioral therapists have all stumbled upon practical strategies that have been in God’s Word all along and utilized by Christians for centuries. But that does not mean that we need to integrate their systems with biblical truth in order to more-effectively help people. As Lambert writes in his essay on Reparative Therapy, “Once you realize that the effective elements of [CBT] are the instances when the therapists are unwittingly biblical it drives you away from that therapy to the Scriptures which authoritatively declares what will help people.” When an employee for a tire company approaches GM with a design for a new tire, but it’s essentially the same design GM already uses, they don’t hire the guy and ask him to oversee their entire R&D department. His expertise is limited to one rubber part of an incredibly complex machine, and all he did was recognize something they had already known. Talk about reinventing the wheel.

Different Truth

So what are the fundamental differences between CBT and the biblical process of change? While both CBT and the biblical process of change involve identifying untrue thinking and renewing one’s mind with truth, the content of that truth is completely different. In CBT, the counselor can only affirm that which is helpful, while the biblical counselor can affirm that which is true. All of the truth statements of CBT are utilized because they have been shown to be helpful in combatting automatic thoughts and core beliefs that produce undesirable behavioral and emotional patterns. The problem is, the emperor has no clothes. Just because something is helpful to produce desirable behavioral and emotional patterns does not mean that it is actually true. In contrast, the biblical process of change reminds us of what the God of the universe has declared to be true about himself, what he has done, and who we are in him. He reminds us that he is our Creator (Gen 1), our Savior (1 Pet 1:17-19), our Father (John 1:12), and our Lord (Eph 4:1-6). He reminds us that our real “cognitive distortions” stem from the fact that we have forgotten who he has made us to be in Christ (for those that are in Christ). He reminds us that:
In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. (Eph 1:7-14)

In doing this, the biblical process doesn’t settle for surface-level change, but seeks to draw everyone into Christ himself. Scripture teaches us that even if you have identified and addressed every one of Burns’ cognitive distortions, you are still not any closer to becoming who you were created to be in Christ.

Some might say that this is a perfect example of how we can integrate CBT and the biblical process of change. If you switch out the truth statements of secular CBT with truth statements from the Bible, can’t you integrate the two seamlessly? Unfortunately, there are more differences between CBT and biblical change than simply the truth statements. The biblical process of change utilizes different means as well.

**Different Means**

While practical strategies for changing our behavior and addressing untrue thought patterns are absolutely a part of the biblical change process, Scripture offers us so much more. Stanton Jones and Richard Butman provide a candid summary: “It seems likely that we are what cognitive-behavioral therapy depicts us as being: thinking and acting creatures of habit who act upon and are acted upon by our environments for the purpose of obtaining that which we value. But it also seems clear to the Christian that we are more than this.”

At its core, CBT denies the fundamental spiritual component of humanity. It sees us as beings whose actions and emotions can be manipulated through training or intervention. There is no place in CBT for the reality of the heart as Scripture conceptualizes it. CBT tells us that what comes out of us proceeds from our habits. Scripture tells us that what comes out of us proceeds from our heart (Matt 15:18).

More than all of this, in CBT the answer to our problems is found in the right “truth statements.” But, for the Christian, the answer to our problems is not only found in “truth statements,” but in the person who is Truth. God himself is the means of our transformation through the work of Christ on the cross and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. God offers us more than certain truths, he offers us himself. He offers us more than truth statements, he offers us a relationship. This is why, leading into behavioral instructions, Paul exhorts the Colossians:
If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Col 3:1-4)

This is different from “addressing maladaptive core beliefs.” This is coming home to the One we were created for. In Christ we don’t have to settle for change through behavior management, we can be transformed through the gospel. Again, some might point out that if we align both our means and truth with Scripture we still should be able to integrate CBT and the biblical process of change, utilizing the best that both have to offer. But, even if we were to align the truth of CBT and the means of CBT with the biblical process of change we would still have to reconcile the fact that the two have distinctly different goals.

**Different Goal**

In CBT the goal of change is determined by the counselee and the counselor collaboratively. Together they determine what is “healthy.” This means that the goal of CBT ends up simply being a compilation of the desires of the fallen hearts of these two people. Their own systems of ethics and morality inform what they are working toward and, usually, the goals center on happiness, individuality, freedom, self-interest, or some variation thereof. As such, CBT is fundamentally a philosophy based on culturally defined morality and ethics. It may be the best system for achieving those goals, but that does not mean that it’s the best system for achieving what God wants to achieve.

God’s goal for our lives is different than these narrow and subjectively defined goals. God is, most basically, interested in making us more like Christ. He desires for us to be reconciled to him through Christ, and having been reconciled he is in the process of transforming us more and more into his image. As Scripture communicates so clearly:

“For this is the will of God, your sanctification” (1 Thes 4:3)

“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Eph 2:10)

Even if you were to “Christianize” CBT by making the goal biblically-defined morality, while CBT may be helpful at achieving self-defined goals, it is unable to produce the God-defined goals of sanctification and Christlikeness. CBT may have a large body of scientific evidence to support it, but it has never, in any study, been empirically demonstrated to be effective at producing godliness. Scripture is unequivocal on this point. “Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Gal 3:2-3) CBT may be a compassionate stop-gap for people who don’t know Jesus, but we must recognize that it is impotent to address their greatest needs or to fulfill their greatest desires.
It’s not that the CBT therapist isn’t on the right track, it’s just that they stop far too early on that track, thinking they have arrived. This was true of the Stoics, it was true of the original cognitive therapists, and it’s true of CBT therapists today. Robertson connects the Stoic’s goal of happiness to Ellis’ same goal:

“As the Stoics put it, the basic, common sense, preconception that we should seek happiness and well-being (eudaemonia) is correct, but we frequently fall into error when applying this to specific cases in our daily lives….Albert Ellis made a similar distinction in his philosophy between short-range and long-range hedonism, which he derives explicitly from Stoicism. He observed that people often suffer because they irrationally sacrifice their long-term happiness for the lure of short-term pleasure.”

Read that last sentence again. Doesn’t a Christian worldview declare that exact same thing? We can heartily affirm that our greatest problem is our choice to “irrationally sacrifice long-term happiness for the lure of short-term pleasure.” This was Eve’s problem, and it’s yours and mine as well.

As John Piper has asserted throughout his entire ministry, the problem isn’t our hedonism but our refusal to acknowledge that God himself is the source of our greatest long-term happiness. Piper defines what he calls “Christian hedonism” by acknowledging five specific truths. Here are the first three:

1. The longing to be happy is a universal human experience, and it is good, not sinful.

2. We should never try to deny or resist our longing to be happy…we should seek to intensify this longing and nourish it with whatever will provide the deepest and most enduring satisfaction.

3. The deepest and most enduring happiness is found only in God. Not from God, but in God.

Both the Stoic and the CBT therapist would heartily affirm #1 and #2. But by settling for simple cognitive or behavioral modifications to achieve satisfaction and happiness they stop far too early on the track. For it is only in recognizing and embracing #3 that God’s goal for humanity can truly be pursued. To truly be happy we must find our satisfaction in him.

Even in light of all of these differences, the counselor committed to integration may still assert that CBT and the biblical process of change can (or even should) be integrated as long as the Christian CBT therapist adopts the biblical truth, means, and goal discussed above. But if the CBT therapist were to integrate their approach that fully with biblical truth it would raise the question, “In what ways are they still a CBT therapist?” In fact, they would no longer be practicing CBT, but biblical counseling. This isn’t integration but assimilation. The therapist has become a biblical counselor.

This distinction is important because it will determine where the counselor turns most often for additional wisdom, insight, and tools in their ministry to others. If they believe they are fundamentally practicing CBT, they will turn to expert CBT practitioners to learn and grow. However, if the Christian recognizes that what they are practicing is, in fact, biblical counseling, they will turn to Scripture and to the wealth of wisdom provided both in the local church and the
biblical counseling movement. If you were to take your car, remove the wheels and build a hull underneath it, remove the engine and replace it with an outboard motor on the back, and remove the dash instruments in order to install sea navigation instruments, I guess you could still call it a car if you wanted to, but it would probably be more accurate to call it a boat. And if you wanted to improve your new vehicle the best place to take it to would probably be a boat shop, as the only help your auto mechanic would have to offer would be cosmetic at best.

The CBT Therapist in Us All

Having established the significant differences between CBT and the biblical process of change, the biblical counselor may be tempted to walk away from this article secure in their commitment to biblical counseling and content to never think about CBT again. However, I believe that would be a mistake. First of all, there are many astute observations about human functioning that CBT practitioners have made throughout the years that can remind us to consider factors we might otherwise miss or downplay. Listening to other observers of humanity (regardless of their theoretical commitments) always has benefits for the Christian whether it be in identifying helpful observations or simply better understanding how others think and make sense of the world without Christ. But probably the most helpful fruit of evaluating CBT for the Christian is the opportunity it provides to evaluate how much of our own counseling utilizes CBT-style behavior management and how much is truly dependent on God and his Word to transform hearts.

If we’re honest with ourselves, we will find that we all minister as CBT therapists far more often than we would care to admit. In fact, the history of biblical counseling has shown a subtle propensity for Bible-loving God-glorifying Christians to be drawn to the interventions promoted by CBT over gospel-motivated heart change. Let me provide three examples.

First, we can all be tempted to equate behavior modification with sanctification. When we do this, we declare “Success!” when we see certain emotions or behaviors change without taking the time to evaluate the reason they changed and whether or not God is actually transforming the person’s heart. What is it that has produced this change? A certain plan put in place by a counselor, or the truth of the gospel, delivered through the counselor, and empowered by the Spirit?

Second, giving homework to a counselee is one of the trademark features of CBT. Giving specific and realistic instructions (homework) is an undeniably helpful tool in a Christian’s process of sanctification. But we may be tempted to neglect the many other tools in the biblical counselor’s toolbox (generosity, a loving community, patient listening, prayer, etc.) when we, like the CBT therapist, see homework as the single most helpful thing we can offer a counselee.

Finally, the simplicity of many CBT interventions can tempt us to take their “common-sense approach” to change instead of prioritizing the counselee’s relationship with God. I know that far too much of my own counseling has been spent finding practical solutions to people’s immediate problems as opposed to helping the counselee remember God’s call to “seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things will be added to you” (Matt 6:33). Far more important than the counselee’s relationship with the counselor is his or her relationship with their Creator.
When we gently and consistently lead counselees back to the grace and glory of the gospel they will have all the truth they will ever need. When we gently and consistently lead counselees back to the person of Christ they will find their deepest satisfaction and richest joy. When we gently and consistently remind counselees of God’s call upon their lives to live humbly and sacrificially, confusion will dissipate. This is what it means to be a biblical counselor.

CBT changes people. That’s what it claims. And while there is plenty of evidence to demonstrate the fact that it can change certain behaviors and emotions, that doesn’t mean it can actually change people. Hurting and struggling people need more than just surface level change; they need transformation. And what can bring that about? As the old hymn says: nothing but the blood of Jesus.
Christian Psychology (CP) is a unique form of psychology which seeks to develop a distinctly Christian model for understanding the human condition. CP represents one of several ways that Christians have attempted to think about the connection between Christianity and psychology.\textsuperscript{1} Today, CP does not describe an established Christian system of psychological understanding so much as it represents a loose movement of psychologists, counselors, theologians, and Christian philosophers who seek to develop such a psychology. When Christian psychologists refer to the development of a uniquely Christian psychology, they mean a comprehensive understanding of the nature of human beings from a Christian viewpoint. Robert C. Roberts explains:

\begin{quote}
\textit{The discipline I am calling Christian psychology is the conceptual and clinical exploration of our [Christian] tradition for its psychological resources. It is properly called psychology because it is a set of concepts by which the nature and well-being of the psyche are understood, by which healthy and unhealthy traits, behaviors, desires and emotions are identified and to some extent explained. It is a set of practices for making the transition from unhealthy to healthy traits, behaviors, desires and emotions. That is essentially what a psychology (and its allied psychotherapy) is}.\textsuperscript{2}
\end{quote}

As a movement, CP seeks to understand both the nature of human beings (psychology) and appropriate practices to address life problems (psychotherapy).
**Background**

Christian psychology is a relatively new movement, but its followers rightly point out that a uniquely “Christian” understanding of persons began with the writing of the Bible itself and was later developed by various authors throughout church history. This observation is important for understanding CP since its authors often refer to Christian writers in church history as “psychologists.” Utilizing the term “psychologist” to describe ancient Christian authors may seem odd to modern readers who think of a psychologist as a modern day professional in the mental health care field. But Christian psychologists use the term “psychology” in a broad, general sense, referencing any study, insight, or reflections regarding the human condition. Eric Johnson writes, “So if we define psychology broadly as a rigorous inquiry into human nature and how to treat its problems and advance well-being, Christians have been thinking and practicing psychology for centuries.” Hence, the followers of CP identify many authors throughout Christian history who wrote about the human condition and contribute to a Christian understanding of psychology.

Johnson traces the emergence of the modern Christian psychology movement initially to the writings of Christian philosophers Soren Kierkegaard, and later to C. Stephen Evans. Kierkegaard referred to some of his writings as “psychology.” Evans, inspired in part by philosophers like Kierkegaard, challenged Christians in the area of psychology to “develop their own theories, research and practice that flow from Christian beliefs about human beings—while continuing to participate actively in the broader field.”

Several contemporary authors identify themselves as Christian psychologists or participate in the broader movement. Writers who promote CP or write from this viewpoint include Dan Allender, Neil Anderson, Larry Crabb, Eric L. Johnson, Diane Langberg, Tremper Longman III, Gary Moon, Leanne Payne, Robert C. Roberts, Siang-Yang Tan, and P.J. Watson. In 2004, the Society for Christian Psychology was founded to promote “the development of a distinctly Christian psychology (including theory, research, and practice) that is based on a Christian understanding of human nature.” The society publishes a journal, *Christian Psychology*, to promote articles written from a CP perspective.

**Approach**

Advocates of Christian psychology endeavor to accomplish two main goals through the CP movement. First, the central goal is to produce or “retrieve” a Christian psychology. Utilizing Scripture and works from Christian writers of the past, psychologically-informed Christians seek to glean principles for understanding human nature and then systematize these findings into a comprehensive system of psychology. Roberts and Watson write:

> Much of the foundational work in Christian psychology will therefore require a careful rereading of Scripture, in the light of some of the great Christian psychologists of the subsequent past (Augustine, Aquinas, Pascal, Kierkegaard), by people who are familiar with contemporary psychology and can therefore sniff out a biblical psychology that effectively speaks to current circumstances.

This task of retrieval is two-tiered. It requires the comprehensive study of the Bible as a primary source for “true” psychology, but also requires the careful reading of major theological and
philosophical works of church history. While no comprehensive, systematic Christian psychology work has yet been produced, the authors previously mentioned have all offered contributions toward this goal.\textsuperscript{11}

Second, Christian psychologists strive to develop empirical research pursuits that derive from a distinctly Christian worldview. Christian psychologists acknowledge the impossibility of truly objective, value-free research.\textsuperscript{12} In order to compete with secular studies that are laden with secular worldview assumptions, Christian psychologists endeavor to develop their own body of psychological research from a Christian point of view. P.J. Watson and R.J. Morris are representative of Christian psychologists who have led and published research efforts of this nature.\textsuperscript{13}

### Uniqueness from Integration

Integration refers to a related but different system for understanding the relationship between Christianity and psychology. In the integrationist model, biblical theology and some principles from secular psychology are integrated together.\textsuperscript{14} At first glance, Christian psychology does not seem to be distinct from integration, but there are three key differences. First, Christian psychologists seek to form their system of Christian psychology primarily from the Bible and works from church history, with only minimal reference to systems of modern, secular psychology.\textsuperscript{15} Roberts explains:

\begin{quote}
Christian psychology starts with the ideas and practices already established by centuries of Christian tradition, and it develops psychological concepts and practices from these with a minimum of reference to or influence from the psychologies of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

In contrast, Christian integrationists seek to examine and extract psychological and psychotherapeutic principles and insights from many sources, including the modern psychologies.\textsuperscript{17} This does not mean that Christian psychologists are against or do not practice integration. However, Christian psychologists note that integration is very difficult and seem to be more sensitive to the need to establish a uniquely Christian psychology first before pursuing additional insight from non-Christian systems.\textsuperscript{18}

Second, Christian psychologists are more sensitive to the anti-Christian worldviews and methodologies of modern psychological research and thus are less likely to utilize this research compared to integrationists. Christian psychologists prefer to do their own research based on a distinctly Christian psychology and methodology, while integrationists believe that much of secular psychology can be “redeemed” for Christian counseling purposes.\textsuperscript{19}

Third, Christian psychology differs from integration in respect to the goal of the system. While Christian psychology strives to develop a singular, unified system of psychology, integrationists question the possibility of this goal. Stanton Jones notes:
…integrationists understand that our commitment to a biblical view of persons provide a presumptive framework, not a fully constructed system of psychology. The key difference between integration and Christian psychology is how much we claim we can construct of a complete psychology from the Scriptures and Christian tradition and resources.²⁰

Furthermore, some integrationists conclude that extracting one unified system of psychology from the entirety of the works of church history seems impossible, a conclusion that, ironically, even some Christian psychologists seem to acknowledge.²¹

With these differences in mind, a basic conclusion can be drawn that all Christian psychologists are, to some degree, those who practice a form of integration, but as systems of counseling, integration and Christian psychology are distinct.²² Christian psychology differs from classic integration by drawing distinctions in regard to goal of the system, the manner of integration, and the use of secular psychological research.

Integration and Christian Psychology Comparison Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Integration</th>
<th>Christian Psychology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal</td>
<td>Combine biblical truth with psychological findings to create systems for understanding and helping people</td>
<td>Form a uniquely Christian psychology (view of human nature) based upon the Bible and works from Christian authors in church history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration of secular psychology</td>
<td>Needed because Scriptures only form general framework. One, unique Christian psychology not possible</td>
<td>Needed but a solid, uniquely Christian psychology must be established first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular psychology research</td>
<td>Findings must be compatible with Scripture and may need to be “redeemed” or reinterpreted for Christian purposes</td>
<td>Prefer a Christian science of psychology by doing own research utilizing uniquely Christian approaches and methodologies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Biblical Analysis

Strengths of Christian Psychology

Christian psychology rightly observes that true “psychology” is not so much the professional, modern, scientific discipline that is thought of today but simply refers to the study of human nature. This perspective may help people to recognize how the Scriptures speak insightfully and powerfully regarding human nature, though it does not sound like a modern-day psychology textbook. Since Christians believe the Bible is the authoritative Word of God and is the sole, God-breathed source of truth (2 Tim. 3:16-17), it would be backward to expect the Scriptures to conform to modern psychological terminology and categories anyway. Furthermore, with this more general definition of “psychology” in mind, rich resources of insight regarding human nature may be re-discovered in works like those of the English Puritans, who wrote deeply and biblically about the human condition.

Christian psychology has also shed light on the all-too ignored problem of presuppositions in psychological systems. As a discipline, psychology has been around for 2500 years and yet no agreement regarding the nature of human psyche well-being has been achieved. Why is this? Roberts and Watson insightfully note that the concept of well-being cannot “be settled to everyone’s satisfaction independently of metaphysical, moral and religious commitments… [nor] by purely empirical methods of research.” Christian psychologists have been more careful than other Christian thinkers regarding worldview commitments and their impact on psychological conclusions. They endeavor to form a psychological system that is presuppositionally Christian, and recognize that this system will reflect a true picture of humanity because it is distinctly Christian. In addition, the worldview awareness of Christian psychologists often allows them to detect unbiblical commitments in psychological systems that integrationists sometimes fail to see.

Finally, Christian psychology is to be commended for its desire to be a distinctly Christian witness in a secular psychological environment. C. Stephen Evans’ challenge for Christians to develop a uniquely Christian approach to psychology “while continuing to participate actively in the broader field” means that unbelievers may be influenced by Christian psychologists with the gospel of Christ and biblical truth (Matt. 28:19-20).

Weaknesses of Christian Psychology

While Christian psychology has much to commend, it also suffers from several weaknesses. First, CP is built upon a faulty view of the Scriptures. Though Christian psychology rightly notes the need for proper presuppositions, it stumbles out of the gate in the area of bibliology. Christian psychologists affirm a form of the authority, necessity, sufficiency, and primacy of the Scriptures, yet they define these qualities of Scripture in such a way as to actually undermine them. For example, Johnson affirms that, “the Bible has ultimate authority over all of psychology and soul care,” but later admits that “the Bible’s authority also varies depending on the subject matter. Scripture’s authority increases in proportion to the extent that Scripture explicitly addresses a particular topic.” This is a significant assertion. While it is true that the Bible addresses some topics in more detail than others, the Bible always carries with it final, ultimate authority in all of the matters it addresses. The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy affirms:
Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God’s instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God’s command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God’s pledge, in all that it promises.29

Scripture does not teach a sliding-scale of authority which varies depending upon the amount of information revealed on any given topic. Rather, the Bible is equally authoritative in all the matters it addresses. Grudem writes, “all the words in Scripture are God’s words in such a way that to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God.”30

Christian psychologists affirm a form of the sufficiency of Scripture, but explain this doctrine in such a way as to actually view the Scriptures as insufficient for soul care.31 They hold to the primacy of Scripture, but deny it in many of their works by reading into Scripture certain psychological terms, concepts and theories. For example, Siang-Yang Tan and Larry Crabb both affirm that man has certain psychological “needs” for security (love) and significance (meaning/impact), but these conclusions arise from the influence of Maslow and needs psychology, rather than the Bible.32 Though the stated goal of CP is to construct a true “psychology” from the text of Scripture, Christian psychologists often read their own psychology into the biblical text. In his otherwise helpful article describing Pauline psychotherapy, Roberts cannot help but use terms and concepts from twentieth century psychology: “dysfunctional personality,” “self-transformative action,” “therapeutic action,” “actualizing the new personality,” “dissociation.”33 Even the term “Pauline therapy” seems oddly modern when seeking to do biblical exposition regarding the sanctification model revealed in the Pauline epistles. While Roberts may simply be employing these terms in order to better communicate to a psychologically-informed audience, these terms are not neutral, and are being imposed upon, rather than derived from the biblical text.

Solid exegesis and interpretation of the biblical text is absolutely necessary for Christian psychologists to achieve their goal of developing a truly Christian psychology. But a proper handling of the text of Scripture is actually a weakness of the movement. For example, Diane Langberg’s interpretation of Genesis 1:26-28 regarding the image of God as voice, relationship, and power is novel, and not based on solid exegesis of the passage.34 Roberts and Watson’s explanation of the Sermon on the Mount amounts to a surface-level inspection of “healthy traits” for “well-being,” rather than a serious exposition of the text.35 Likewise, Crabb struggles with proper exposition of three key passages which form the basis of his book, The Pressure’s Off.36

Not only do Christian psychologists struggle in areas regarding the Bible, the movement provokes concern in regard to the ecumenical emphasis it articulates. The stated goal of CP is to form or “recover” a unique, truly Christian psychology by studying the Scriptures and works from Christians in church history. Yet at the same time, CP strives to be ecumenical, diverse and pluralistic in all of its endeavors. The amplification of the mission statement of the Society for Christian Psychology states:

A Christian vision of human nature is shaped primarily by the Christian Scriptures, as well as Christianity’s intellectual and ecclesial traditions. However, a Christian psychology will also be critically informed by other
relevant sources of psychological truth, particularly its own reflection, research, and practice, but also the psychological work of other traditions (e.g., secular psychology), philosophy, human experience, and the other human sciences. While God’s understanding of human nature is the goal of a Christian psychology, given human finitude and the existence of distinct Christian traditions, the Society welcomes those working from any perspective within the historic Christian Church.37

The ecumenism of the movement is further seen through the diverse background of the Society’s executive and references boards as well as the diversity of both the authors and theological systems represented in the society’s journal, Christian Psychology. For example, two editions of the journal featured a focus on Catholic Psychology and Eastern Orthodox Psychology.38 While diversity can provide wonderful opportunities of mutual learning, understanding and communication, it seems that CP’s commitment to this level of ecumenism will render its initial goal of developing a singular Christian psychology unlikely. There are vast differences between a Protestant and Catholic understanding of salvation alone, with dozens of other significant theological differences which render any sort of compatibility impossible.39 Integrationists have challenged Christian psychologists regarding the possibility of achieving such a unique, singular Christian psychology,40 and even Eric Johnson himself seems to concede that the whole CP project is destined to fail as the “inevitable and happy result of human finitude.”41

Finally, Christian psychology suffers from weaknesses in actual counseling practice. The most telling aspect of any system of soul-care is ultimately how one goes about helping people with counseling problems. CP desires to develop a unique Christian psychology (understanding of people) and psychotherapy (how to help people) while “continuing to participate actively in the broader field.”42 Since the “broader field” of psychology and professional mental health is largely secular, Christian psychologists often maintain licensure, accreditation, and memberships in professional societies that require certain secular commitments. In counseling practice, these secular commitments often mean there is a reluctance to be overtly Christian in counseling through prayer, through utilizing the Scriptures or through presenting the gospel to clients who may not be saved. Worse still, secular commitments of this nature may render these biblically mandated pursuits “unethical” in one’s professional context.

Diane Langberg provides a clear example of Christian psychology at work in an actual counseling situation.43 She rightly notes that the mental health professional ought to “bear in their person a representation of the character of Christ and that character must shape the therapist, the client and the relationship between them.”44 However, her overall approach to counseling is surprisingly secular. Like the levels-of-explanation, transformational, and integrationist approaches, CP avoids anchoring its counseling in the Bible.45 At best, the Bible has an accessory role, rather than a foundational, functional control over the counseling process.46 While the Scriptures are clear that a relationship with God through the Person of Christ is a person’s source of hope, strength, encouragement and stability in the day of trouble, Langberg notes that the client’s relationship with God needs to be explored to “see whether or not that can contribute to his stability at this time.”47 The gospel message of Jesus Christ is noticeably absent throughout the entire case. Without Christ as the hope for the counselee, encouragement will primarily be found through the relationship with the therapist. In another work, Langberg describes the role of the therapist as bringing about “redemptive” healing as she “incarnates” Christ.48 This latter term goes beyond simply being “Christlike” to actually assuming something
of a parallel role with Christ in the “redemptive” healing process.\textsuperscript{49} She writes, “The work of Jesus in this world resulted in redemption. His work in and through you [the therapist] in this world will also result in redemption.”\textsuperscript{50}

**Conclusion**

While Christian Psychology commendably sets out to rediscover a truly Christian view of persons and rightly sounds the alert regarding the unbiblical worldview assumptions of secular counseling systems, it seems that their efforts to develop such a system are not being realized. In counseling theory, CP is plagued by a commitment to ecumenism and struggles to accurately interpret and apply the biblical text. In counseling practice, CP looks surprisingly secular, where Scripture and the gospel of Jesus Christ do not functionally inform and drive the counseling process. If a solid biblical and theological foundation could be established based upon an affirmation of Scripture’s sufficiency and authority for counseling, coupled with a more careful exegesis of the text applied to both counseling theory and practice, perhaps the vision of Christian Psychology could be achieved.


For example, Johnson considers Augustine the “first great Christian ‘psychologist,’” Ibid., 12.

Ibid., 14.


Johnson, *Five Views*, 36;


As one example, see C.S. Evans, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Christian Psychology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). As the title implies, Evans develops Kierkegaard’s psychology of human beings through a careful study of his works.


Roberts, “Outline,” *Care for the Soul*, 135. Though some Christian Psychologists are more open to learning from the modern psychologies. For example, Tan includes a whole section on modern psychologies in his work *Counseling & Psychotherapy* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011); and the Society of Christian Psychology purposes to “read, learn from, and interact with the psychological knowledge of other communities (obviously the modern),” Society for Christian Psychology, “About the Society” [online]; accessed 12 October 2016; available at http://www.christianpsych.org/. These examples illustrate that there is a spectrum of diversity amongst Christian psychologists.

Roberts notes, “Christian psychology insists on the priority of a deep knowledge of the psychology that is distinctive of Christianity as a prerequisite to the integration of modern professional and scientific psychologies into Christian thought and practice.” Roberts, *Five Views*, 136.

Ibid., 134.


Responding in part to integrationist Stanton Jones’ critique of CP along these lines, Christian psychologist Eric Johnson writes, “Finally, it must be conceded that this book has so far been somewhat misleading. It would be terribly naïve to assume that there will ever be only one Christian psychology in this age. Many difference interpretive approaches to the Bible have arisen within the Christian community—consider the diverse subgroups within the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox communion (regional, ideological and institutional), as well as the slightly more obvious subtraditions that make up the Protestant communion—and it would be unworthy of a Christian psychology to downplay these differences. Rather than this being an argument against a Christian psychology (Jones, 1986), these differences will contribute to its richness and fruitfulness.” Johnson, *Foundations*, 218.

As will be demonstrated later in this essay, Christian psychology looks similar to integration in actual counseling practice.


C. Stephen Evans, as quoted by Johnson, *Five Views*. 36.


Ibid., 171-2. Johnson rightly notes that the Bible contains less content that directly applies to subjects like mathematics or the natural sciences versus subjects like the nature of God and the polity of the church (173). However, he errors in concluding that this makes the Bible less authoritative regarding subjects where it reveals less content. The Bible is always and finally authoritative, even when it reveals less content or seems less relevant on any given subject. This is the testimony of Scripture itself and the historic position of Protestant Christianity. Grudem writes, “…the Bible does not support any restriction on the kinds of subjects to which it speaks with absolute authority and truth” (94). See Grudem, 93-5; John Armstrong, “The Authority of Scripture” in *Sola Scriptura: The Protestant Position on the Bible*, Don Kistler, ed. (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 96-150, esp. 139-40; Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2010), 143-82, 216. Frame notes, “…Scripture’s authoritative content is not religious as opposed to secular, not about ‘matters of salvation’ in contrast with other matters unrelated to salvation. Rather, Scripture addresses all of human life, as only God himself has a right to do. It applies to all situations of our experience” (216).

John Frame writes, “Theologians who try to play down the importance of God’s authority—whether to avoid ‘patriarchalism,’ to promote freedom of human thought and choice, to allow great latitude to science and philosophy, or whatever—have lost something that is central to biblical revelation. *Everything* in Scripture comes to us as authoritative communication” (emphasis original), *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002), 92.

Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, as cited in Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1204. The Statement later denies that infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science” (Article XII).

Grudem, 73.

A full explanation and critique of the “insufficiency” view as held by Christian psychologists and integrationists is beyond the scope of this essay, but may be found in two works by Heath Lambert: *A Theology of Biblical Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 35-59; and “Introduction: The Sufficiency of Scripture, the Biblical Counseling Movement, and the Purpose of this Book” in *Counseling the Hard Cases*, Heath Lambert and Stuart Scott, eds (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), 1-24.

Tan, *Counseling and Psychotherapy*, 329; Crabb, *Effective Biblical Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 61-71. In Crabb’s understanding, the gospel message is “psychologized” such these psychological “needs” are met through the gospel. For a critique of this therapeutic version of the gospel, see David Powlison, “The Therapeutic Gospel,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 25/3 (2007): 2-7.
Ironically, Roberts states at the beginning of his article that Christian psychologists strive to develop their psychology “with a minimum of reference to or influence from the psychologies of the twentieth century” (135). It is also confusing that Christian psychologists state that it is “people who are familiar with contemporary psychology” who are required to do the work of “extracting” psychology from the Bible and other Christian works. Roberts & Watson, *Five Views*, 155. If the goal is to form a biblical psychology, why is familiarity in contemporary psychology needed? Wouldn’t this task be better pursued by theologically informed and biblically trained pastors with experience in wise pastoral care? Langberg’s 3 fold view of the image is a key premise to her approach for understanding and ministering to those who have experienced the trauma of sexual abuse. *Counseling Survivors*, 45-51. However, only one aspect (relationship) of her three is supported by commentaries and theological works. Compare her conclusions with standard theologies and works: Grudem, 442-450; Lambert, *Theology*, 184-91; Anthony Hoekema, *Created In God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 517-536; Jay Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 118-120; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, New Com. Ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 202-210.


In his book, *The Pressure’s Off*, Grabb confuses justification with sanctification in his interpretation of two key passages: Romans 7:6 and Hebrews 7:18-19 (27). In a third text, Galatians 4:3-9, he confuses the “Galatian heresy of the Judaizers” with what he calls the “law of linearity” (35-36). He again confuses justification with sanctification in application of this text to what he calls “modern Judaizers” (55-7). Most troubling is the fact that Grabb claims the Holy Spirit spoke audibly to him and led him to these passages and conclusions (67-68).


The journal was previously titled, Edification. See Edification 3.1 (2009) and Edification 6.2 (2012). In another edition (*Christian Psychology 7.1* (2013)), Brent D. Shle, board of reference member for the Society of Christian Psychology, co-authored an article on Theistic psychology with Mormon psychologist Jeffrey Reber. While Mormon doctrine is inconsistent with the doctrinal statement of the Society, this level of cooperation between two scholars representing vastly different theological systems raises additional concerns regarding the ecumenism of Christian Psychology as a movement. If the goal of CP is a uniquely “biblical” psychology based upon historic Christianity, efforts of this nature are confusing and illustrate that the actual developmental work of the movement is often pointed in the wrong direction.


Johnson, *Foundations*, 218-9. Johnson’s admission is exceedingly confusing and ultimately, telling. In the end, he seems to be more committed to diversity and dialogue for its own sake rather than to serious biblical and theological scholarship of soul-care material from Scripture in order construct a truly Christian psychology.


Langberg, *Five Approaches*, 110-31. The case presented in this work is hypothetical, but still help for demonstrating how various Christian approaches to counseling flesh out in actual counseling practice.

Ibid., 111.

Lambert, *Theology*, 57. Langberg notes that later on in the counseling process, the use of the Scriptures will be introduced (125, 127), but not initially. Furthermore, her limited “use” of the Scriptures in counseling as revealed in her book, *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*, reveals a commitment to the therapeutic gospel. Biblical redemption is re-defined as emotional acceptance and unconditional love (58, 128). Her re-telling of Isaiah 53 re-casts sin against God as psychological “hurt,” comes dangerously close to making God the Father the abusing father of Christ, turns Jesus into a victim of abuse, and makes the “gospel” primarily about Jesus being abused so that He can identify with the abuse of others (150-153). While Jesus does identify with people in their suffering (Heb. 4:15, Phil. 3:10), it is clear that the “abuse” of Christ mentioned...
in Isaiah 53 is because of “our transgressions” and “our iniquities” as He accomplishes redemption, not because He was a victim of senseless abuse. For a more biblical approach for counseling abuse survivors which exemplifies a proper handling of the Scriptures, see Laura Hendrickson, “Mariana’ and Surviving Sexual Abuse” in Counseling the Hard Cases, Heath Lambert and Stuart Scott, eds. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), 25-56.

In the same work, this case is handled from a biblical counseling viewpoint where the Bible does have such a functional control. See Stuart Scott, “A Biblical Counseling Approach” in Counseling and Christianity: Five Approaches, Stephen P. Greggo and Timothy A. Sisemore, eds. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 157-83.

Langberg, Five Approaches, 122. Contrast Langberg’s perspective with Psalm 18:2, “The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge; My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.” Or with Jesus, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30).

Ibid., 79, 108, 123, 128, 134, 137, 158.

Ibid., 134.
95 THESES
FOR AN
AUTHENTICALLY
CHRISTIAN COMMITMENT
TO COUNSELING

HEATH LAMBERT

"We must have the same kind of debate about grace with respect to counseling that Luther did in his day with respect to indulgences."

Get your copy at

biblicalcounseling.com