The Search for Truth in Psychology and Counseling

c Richard Winter
Covenant Theological Seminary

Abstract

Three central areas in the debate about the relationship between Christianity and Psychology are discussed. Because of general revelation in creation there is a possibility of common ground with non-Christians but careful discernment is needed to separate truth from error at the levels of philosophical assumptions, goals and methods. A model of Biblical Integration, a spectrum of approaches to Integration and a spectrum of views on the issue of responsibility are presented in diagrammatic form in order to help to define a position in this diverse field more carefully. There is potential for healthy dialogue and “iron sharpening iron” between those who wish to be faithful to the One who has given us the Scriptures, through which like a lens, we discern and test all psychological and sociological “truth”. God’s special revelation in the Bible, and a relationship with him, are crucial for keeping us from error and idolatry.

In the early years of the twenty first century we find our western world inundated with many different systems of counseling and psychotherapy. Most therapists use a pragmatic mixture of theories and techniques. This is characteristic of the postmodern era where no one theory or school dominates the field. To understand where we are today it is helpful to reflect on the roots of twentieth century psychology.

Since around 1900, there have been an increasing number of schools of psychology and psychiatry from which most contemporary therapeutic practices have sprung. From its earliest days as a scientific discipline, psychology wanted to establish itself on an equal footing with the other sciences. Prior to that time, there had been no lack of psychology, counseling and psychotherapy in all cultures but it was not established as a systematic, scientific body of knowledge and practice. Through the centuries there has always been much practical wisdom, often mixed with ignorance and superstition, in the secular therapies of each age. The early Church Fathers, the Reformers and the Puritans left a treasure of pastoral counseling literature (Benner, 1988, Clebsch and Jaekle, 1964, Holifield, 1983, McNeil, 1951, Oden, 1994). One issue of the Journal of Psychology and Christianity, (Winter 1998, 17(4)) looked at the contributions of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Richard Baxter among others. Eric Johnson and Stanton Jones have a helpful overview of “A History of Christians in Psychology,” in their book, Psychology and Christianity: Four Views (2000).

In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the church was strongly influenced by revivalism, pietism and early liberalism and seems to have lost sight of the depths of depravity of the human heart, understood so well by the early Puritans, and thus gave relatively simple and superficial solutions to the problem of human sin and brokenness. Powlison (1992) writes "Evangelical fundamentalism in the last generation offered simplistic formulae and truisms. The church was weak where psychology was strong." This sad vacuum in the evangelical church meant that secular psychology, laden with humanistic assumptions, was taken into the church carelessly and uncritically by those, albeit with good intentions, who were eager to minister more effectively to hurting people. Only now, as a new century begins, excepting a spurt of papers in the 1970s and
1980s, are Christians beginning to reclaim the ground that was lost, by formulating an adequate anthropology and psychology based on a biblical understanding of people. There is a great need for mental health professionals with a good knowledge of both theology and psychology in order to develop the skills of discernment to sort out truth and error in secular psychology. The last decade has seen a revival of interest in the relationship between the disciplines of Psychology and Theology in the *Journals of Psychology and Theology* 23(4), the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 15(2) and 16(4), and the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*. (For an overview of this debate on integration within modern and postmodern contexts, see Hurding (1998, pp. 186-200)). The American Association of Christian Counselors has sponsored the Geneva Conferences described as “A clinical and theological symposium for academicians, counselors and pastors” to foster dialogue on the interface of theology and therapy.

**The Search for Truth about Human Nature**

At least seven dominant schools of counseling, psychotherapy and psychiatry have developed since the turn of the last century and are represented as overlapping circles in Figure 1. The three lower left circles, Psychoanalysis, Behaviorism (traditionally known as the First and Second Forces in psychology) and the Organic/Medical approach, grew out of the scientific materialistic philosophy of the day which believed that all of reality could be defined and described by the scientific method. These schools developed a view of human nature and its problems which was largely deterministic, mechanistic, naturalistic, and reductionist. From a Christian perspective, in their original form, they tended to dehumanize people, defining us as less than we really are, as complex machines or animals with little responsibility or significance.

In the 1950’s and 60’s Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow developed Humanistic psychology (the Third Force) with its much less deterministic view of human nature, as a reaction to the prevailing mechanistic and deterministic models of human nature. They wanted to reclaim human significance, dignity, responsibility and freedom but, certainly initially, without any reference to God or the supernatural. Carl Rogers wrote

> Experience is f or me the highest authority…. It is to experience that I must return again and again to discover a closer approximation to the truth as it is becoming in me. Neither the Bible nor the prophets, neither Freud nor research, neither the revelations of God or man, can take precedence over my own direct experience. (Rogers, 1961, p. 23-24)

Philosophically this view has humanist and existential roots. There is a separate and distinct Existential school of psychotherapy, identified with Victor Frankl, Rollo May, and others, which emphasized the importance of a sense of meaning and purpose. In the 1970’s Transpersonal Psychology (the Fourth Force) with its open interest in spirituality and eastern mysticism, gathered momentum. Key names here are Maslow, Assagioli and Wilber. Abraham Maslow wrote,

> Without the transcendent and transpersonal we get sick…We need something ‘bigger than we are’ to be awed by and to commit ourselves to in a new, naturalistic, empirical, non-churchly sense…. (Maslow, 1968, p. iv)

Transpersonal psychology is now a powerful and increasingly popular influence. Carl Jung, with his interest in religion, acted as a bridge from the older Psychoanalytical psychology to the Humanistic and Transpersonal schools. From a Christian perspective, these movements, in contrast to the earlier schools, tend to deify human nature by saying
that we have all that we need within us to become godlike through our own efforts, or that we are already God if we could only realize it.

The Cognitive and later Cognitive Behavioral schools focus on identifying and correcting irrational and maladaptive thinking patterns and habitual behaviors and are, at the level of philosophical assumptions, an off shoot of the humanist philosophical system. The Sociocultural and Family Systems schools also emerged at about the same time from a similar humanistic root, and shifted the focus from an individual with pathology to the dysfunctional family or society that surrounded and influenced them.

Each of these circles represents a philosophy of life and a worldview. No one is neutral. All are trying to find the answers to the big questions of life: Where have we come from? Why do we have the problems we do? How do we know what is right and wrong? What is the purpose of life? How should we live? What is our destiny?

If Christianity is true, and depends on God's revelation in the Bible, then the other views are, at best, partial truths, and at worst, misleading and false. All men and women, whether they acknowledge it or not, are made in the image of God and, in their scientific work will describe parts of God's creation. In their daily lives, as we will see, they cannot escape the boundaries of reality which God has created, although they may not believe in God.

**Revelation and Speculation in the Search for Truth**

In Figure 1 the central, darker square represents the Christian worldview, given by "special revelation" in the scriptures, and the outer, lighter square represents "general revelation" in creation, including people. The Christian view rests on observation and revelation, while the non-Christian view rests on observation and speculation. Non-Christian views are based on study of natural revelation, though conceptualized simply as nature, interpreted through alternative worldviews. The circles are partial truths within false frameworks. The area of overlap of the circles and rectangles represents common ground between Christian and non-Christian. Calvin expressed this view of general revelation in his Institutes:

Therefore, in reading profane (non Christian) authors, the admirable light of truth displayed in them should remind us, that the human mind, however much fallen and perverted from its original integrity, is still adorned and invested with admirable gifts from its Creator. If we reflect that the Spirit of God is the only fountain of truth, we will be careful, as we would avoid offering insult to him, not to reject or condemn truth wherever it appears... But if the Lord has been pleased to assist us by the work and ministry of the ungodly in physics, dialectics, mathematics and other similar sciences, let us avail ourselves of it lest, by neglecting the gifts of God spontaneously offered to us, we be justly punished for our sloth. (Calvin, 1559/1962, Book II, 15, 16, p.236, 237).

The theologian Van Til expresses a similar idea:

The actual situation is therefore always a mixture of truth with error. Being "without God in the world" the natural man yet knows God, and, in spite of himself, to some extent recognizes God. By virtue of their creation in God's image, by virtue of the ineradicable sense of deity within them and by virtue of God's restraining general grace, those who hate God, yet in a restricted sense know God, and do good (Frame, 1995, p.86).
Mixture of Truth and Error

Some examples will help to clarify this mixture of truth and error. Freud was profoundly atheistic, seeing religion as the ultimate neurosis, but he accurately highlighted the depths of the inner alienation and disintegration that we experience in our hearts. His description of the split between our superego and the id, the “oughts” and the “wants” of life, relates to Paul’s agonized cry in Romans 7:14: "For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." Post Freudian analysts were less reductionist than Freud and have given us insight into the complexities of early parent-child relationships. To take a very practical example, the fact that parents are now allowed to stay in hospital with young children was largely due to research by John Bowlby on attachment and loss (Bowlby, 1969).

B. F. Skinner and other Behaviorists described the ways in which we are like animals and are conditioned by our environment. There is truth in the fact that we are shaped to some degree by our upbringing and culture but, unlike the strict Behaviorists, we do not believe that we are completely determined by our circumstances. And then the psychiatrist who espouses the Organic/Medical model as the primary explanation tends to reduce all emotions to the function of neurotransmitters in the brain. Again, it is true that we are affected by our brain chemistry. Antipsychotics can be dramatically effective and lifesaving in schizophrenia and antidepressants, such as Prozac, are helpful in relieving severe clinical depression. But we are far more than mere biochemistry.

The Humanistic psychologist is right to stress our dignity and responsibility but dismisses the need for God or an external framework of values. He believes that all we need is within us. The Cognitive therapist rightly emphasizes the role of our thinking in shaping our emotions but tends to reduce nearly all problems to faulty thinking. The Family therapist rightly stresses the importance of the system of relationships in which the person lives but sometimes at the expense of the significance of individual choices. The Transpersonal psychologist recognizes the need for something greater than ourselves and rightly reintroduces the importance of the supernatural, but often sees the way of salvation as realizing our essential divinity by means of psycho-spiritual exercises.

The circles, in Figure 1, overlap the central rectangles to represent the areas of common ground with Christian truth. The circles also lie partially outside the rectangle, thus representing the areas of difference from a Christian view of reality. Each of these circles can be seen as a lens through which we see and interpret reality. Each lens, when seen in three dimensions, has three layers (see Figure 2) in order to discern common ground and difference in relation to Philosophical Assumptions and Values, Aims and Goals, and Methods and Techniques. Others have already done work on this detailed task (Hurding, 1985, 2003, Jones and Butman, 1991) and this article is intended only as an overview and summary.

The Search for the Right Lens

In Figure 3 the circles have, for the sake of simplicity and clarity, been moved out to show a highly distilled summary of the main working points of each system under the headings of Cause of dysfunction, Technique of counseling, and Therapy Goal as most are described by Comer in his textbook of Abnormal Psychology (2004).

Each circle represents a theoretical formulation and systematic categorization of psychological and sociological data. Each, we might say, is one lens of contemporary
science and should be evaluated through the Lens of Scripture. Calvin spoke of the Scriptures as “spectacles”

For as persons who are old, or whose eyes are by any means become dim, if you show them the most beautiful book, though they perceive something written, but can scarcely read two words together, yet, by the assistance of spectacles, will begin to read distinctly, so the Scripture… dispels the darkness and gives us a clear view…. (Calvin 1559/1936, p.80)

It is apparent that the lens through which we choose to view reality will certainly affect what we see, how we understand what we see and how we will respond to it. The philosophers Kuhn (1970, 1977) and Polanyi (1958) have highlighted the effects of presuppositions and assumptions on the scientific observer demonstrating that nobody can be objectively neutral. Everybody has their own lens for seeing and making sense of the world. The Christian claim is that there is one True Lens that enables us to see most clearly and accurately. Only when this Lens is used do we realize how blurred and distorted our previous vision was. And even this Lens may sometimes be slightly out of focus as our understanding of Scripture may not be completely accurate. Our theology may also need correction.

The softer sciences of psychology and sociology, compared with the harder sciences of, for example, anatomy and physiology, are much more open to distortion because they are so much more dependant on the worldview (lens) of the observer who is doing the describing, interpreting and prescribing. This does not mean that there is no value in them, but as we use the Lens of Scripture to test their accuracy we will be careful to discern the areas of common ground, difference and distortion.

**Postmodernism and Multiple Therapies**

From each of these circles in Figure 1 has sprung a veritable smorgasbord of therapies. Some are pure derivatives of one circle only; others arise from a combination of circles. The majority of therapists today would probably call themselves eclectics or pragmatists, taking from each of the circles, what seems to fit their personality, worldview, mood and the client’s need on any given day! This post modern pragmatism is popular in many disciplines and reflects a deep and fairly recent philosophical shift. Hurding (1998), for example, has addressed this debate in relation to the interplay between pastoral theology and pastoral psychology.

Since the enlightenment there has been a general faith and belief that some universal truth can be found in either, objective, rational, and logical science and reason, or in subjective, intuitive, non-rational experience. This has been the faith of modernity of the last two hundred years. Today, in the post-positivist, post-modern world, there is no faith that any universal truth exists or can be discovered or known. So each person has his own subjective view of reality. This is, of course, profoundly different from a Christian view which claims that God has revealed Truth which is true for all people for all time, about himself, about our origins, about our present state, about a framework for ethics in day to day life and about our destiny. This Christian view does not exclude the fact that there is some subjectivity in each person’s view of reality, but it holds that there is objective Truth that we can move towards and which can be increasingly known both scientifically and experientially. Of course, our knowledge is limited by our finiteness and, on this side of glory, by our fallenness.
The influence of postmodernism in psychology is particularly seen in Narrative Therapy and in some schools of Family Therapy. The emphasis is on the power of language to construct reality and to create different meanings to family problems. All relationships are interpreted as power struggles where there are victims to be protected and victimizers to be blamed. No one can claim to have a core identity because of the arbitrary nature of the social construction of identity. It is assumed that the therapist has no better view of reality than the client. Ultimately, some therapists are forced into an inconsistency. Fidelibus (1996) writes, “They work for achieving a better state of affairs for their clients, while denying that such value judgements are valid.”

I have spent many summers learning to sail in the fog off the coast of Maine. Even though I may have a compass and sophisticated electronic navigational instruments, without a chart I can only make limited sense of the information and I will have no idea where I am! It seems as if those who have rejected the possibility of revelation from God in the Scriptures have thrown the chart overboard and are sailing in a cultural fog of relativism and subjectivity and are in danger of hitting some nasty rocks. Assuming there are no “given” rules in God's universe and that we can create our own, gives no solid basis for science, morality, meaning or hope. For a Christian, the chart, or map, is the Bible and it is with this that we make sense of all the other information gathered from the world around.

**General and Special Revelation**

A clear understanding of general revelation encourages us to see value in the science of psychology. It is part of the God given task of dominion to explore and develop his world. The bible itself tells us that from the creation alone, without scripture, we can deduce the existence of God and something about his character (Romans 1:19-20, Psalm 19:1-4). There are, says Shakespeare, “tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,/ Sermons in stones, and good in everything” (Shakespeare, 1974). Romans 2:14-15 tells us that God's law is written on our hearts, and although it may be twisted and hardened by sin, conscience gives some reminder of the law of God to all. It is significant that the Mosaic law finds parallels in the ancient pagan legal codes of Babylon and Assyria. The latter were codified about half a century before the Law was given to Moses (Hurley and Berry, 1997). The bible also draws attention to the fact that it was the creativity of the descendants of the rebellious Cain which developed farming, music and metal work (Gen 4:20-22). This scientific knowledge and craft was later taken up and used by the people of God in their worship.

The Bible also tells us that we can learn lessons for life from nature, specifically from the ants and their hard working habits (Prov 1:8, 6:6-8). The farmer does not get his knowledge of when and how to sow particular seeds directly from the Scriptures, or presumably by a voice from God, but learns by patient observation and passes on his wisdom to the next generation. But through his experience, the Scriptures say, “God instructs him and teaches him the right way” (Is 28:23-29). We are also to learn from the wisdom and experience of our parents and elders (Prov 1:8). The wise men of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs obviously learned much from their observations of life and from the existing wisdom literature of the day. “Let the wise listen and add to their learning, let the discerning get guidance - for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise” (Prov 1:5-6). They were able to discern what was true and useful because of their commitment to God and his revelation to them in Scripture.
The wise teacher “pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs” (Eccl 12:9,10). The people turned for advice to the wise men, the prophets and the priests (Jer 18:18).

The Bible is not a textbook of biology, physiology, geology or medicine and we do not expect it to be so. However, the Bible is partially a textbook of psychology and sociology. It deals with relationships, attitudes, thoughts, emotions, and behavior, by direct command and also in many stories of people from whom we can learn, by their example, to do good and to avoid evil and folly. In this sense the Bible gives comprehensive principles which cover the whole of life, and thus it is, as Nouthetic counselors are fond of reminding us, sufficient. But this sufficiency is comprehensive not exhaustive. The behavioral sciences can add to our understanding of life in something of the same way as the other sciences do. They give a systematic description of the effects of sin and righteousness, although, of course, not calling them that. For example, the predisposing causes and the after-effects of alcoholism, divorce, and family problems are being mapped out in ever-increasing and sobering detail. Research is demonstrating the different dimensions and effects of perfectionism. Genetic and biochemical research is gradually helping us to understand the complex intricacies of the relationship between mind and body. The relative contribution of genes, biochemistry, environment and the individual’s thoughts, feelings and choices in depression, anorexia nervosa, phobias, schizophrenia and homosexuality are gradually being unraveled. This is part of exploring the complexities of the fallen world in which we live. Just as in medicine we have explored different diseases and brought untold benefit to millions, so in the psychological realm there is a place for such observation, research and therapy.

But a large caution is in order. We need to remember that scientists are not neutral. As we have seen, each of us brings a worldview and perspective to our descriptions, interpretations and prescriptions. Distortion is present at all levels and therefore we need much discernment and wisdom in the search for truth. All claims to interpret general revelation are to be tested by the principles of Scripture. The Bible is the Lens through which we must view the world. And finally, as we have already noted, we must remember that psychology and sociology are relatively soft sciences and are therefore much more vulnerable to distortion than the harder sciences (eg. physiology and anatomy) which depend far more on accurate observation than on interpretation.

The model of careful, creative, and Christocentric integration that has been presented requires a knowledge of theology and psychology and the desire to allow Scripture to be the ultimate reference point and Lens by which all else is tested.

Scripture is senior because it is propositional and direct... creation is subordinate because it is non-verbal and distorted since the fall. Creation must be interpreted by Scripture... theology and psychology are “sciences” organizing human thoughts about God’s revelation. As human products they both may contain human errors. They may challenge one another and are both subordinate to Scripture and creation (Hurley and Berry, 1997, p. 342).

Some years ago Larry Crabb wrote in Understanding People, Studying the thinking of other people, whether Christian or not, can be legitimately provocative. The data and theories of psychology can serve as catalysts, stimulating us to consider new directions in our thinking. Both our power of reason
and our intuition must be permitted a role in our efforts to build a counseling model. But in all that we do the Bible must provide the framework within which we work and the premises from which we draw our conclusions. (Crabb, 1987, p.44.)

Confrontation with Reality
Evidence of the truth of God’s revelation in scripture is found in a confrontation with empirical reality. If the world was created with certain built-in physical and psychological structures and laws, then it should not be surprising to find that living by the maker’s instructions is profoundly practical and healthy. We see this is in several areas where we find that contemporary behavioral science has, for pragmatic reasons, as a result of research and experience, embraced a Christian view of certain parts of reality without openly acknowledging them as such. In the last ten years there have been some challenging voices and significant shifts of opinion in the secular therapeutic culture. Some brief examples may help to illustrate this point.

Religion, long seen as neurotic and immature by many therapists, has now been demonstrated to be beneficial to both mental and physical health (Ellison, 1998, Larson, 1995, Koenig, 1998). Forgiveness, for many years hardly mentioned amongst secular therapists and remarkably absent from the literature is now increasingly recognized as pragmatically helpful in restoring relationships (Al-Mabuk et al, 1998, Pingleton, 1997, Time Magazine, 1999). Forgiveness is, of course, at the heart of the gospel, and Christian therapists have always emphasized the destructiveness of bitterness and lack of forgiveness. Raising self esteem has been seen for many years as the answer to many problems in life. This view is now being challenged as it is realized that low self esteem may often be a result of other problems rather than a cause, and that unqualified affirmation may create false self confidence and narcissism (California, 1990, Eder, 1997, Eder & Mangelsdorf, 1997, Mecca et al, 1989, Sullivan, 2002). Honesty about an individual’s strengths and weaknesses will help them to develop a more realistic view of themselves. The Bible is clear that we need to develop a realistic sense of both our dignity and our depravity, resting fundamentally on God's view of us rather than our view of ourselves or on other peoples' view of us. In recent years the flood of research on the damaging effects of divorce has restrained many therapists from encouraging easy divorce when marriages run into problems (Hetherington, 1988, Wallerstein, 1992, 2000). Frank Pittman, psychiatrist, author and well-known speaker is a self-proclaimed atheist, but he is very critical of humanistic counseling that has encouraged narcissism, easy divorce, and preoccupation with victimization. He emphasizes the importance of faithfulness in marriage, honesty, responsibility, and forgiveness for health and happiness. (Pittman, 1998). Finally, the harsh reality and devastation of sexually transmitted diseases and broken relationships has allowed once scorned abstinence programs to be taught in the school system (Kay, 1995, Khouzam, 1995, Shin, 1997).

The Christian Spectrum
When we look at the spectrum of views on the relation between theology and psychology amongst Christians, we find an enormous range (See Figure 4). I have used
words that have been used consistently in the integrationist literature and added a few of
my own.

Those at the “Psychology Only” end of the spectrum tend to compartmentalize their
lives into sacred and secular sections. Larry Crabb (1977) calls this the "equal but
different" model with a view that psychological and spiritual languages are different
ways of talking about life that are essentially unrelated. To caricature, they may use
biblical concepts on Sunday but Freudian or Jungian concepts the rest of the week at
work, without any understanding of how the two worlds relate.

A far more sophisticated “equal but different” view is expressed by David Myers
(2000), in the “levels-of-explanation “or “perspectival” model. He says that both
psychology and theology are different ways of examining and talking about reality. The
many legitimate findings of the science of psychology may cause us to correct our
understanding of theology.

At the other end of the spectrum, “Bible Only” counselors are those who believe that
any attempt at "integration" is wrong. James Beck (2003) calls this the Anti-Psychology
approach in which they are “convinced that the use of any psychology by the church is a
travesty on the gospel and poses a substantial threat to the life and health of the church at
large.” (Beck, p. 23) Books such as "Psychoheresy" by Martin and Deidre Bobgan
(1987), "Christian Psychology's War on God's Word" by Jim Owen (1993), and "Why
Christians Can't trust Psychology" by Ed Bulkley (1994), all attack, as unbiblical, any
attempt to see any good in integration of psychology and theology. Jim Craddock writes of

a desperate orgy of syncretism that welded together the so-called truths of
psychology with the precious truths of the word of God, which gave birth to an
illegitimate child that is neither Christian nor psychology. Rather it is a new
religion that I call "Psycho-ianity", and it is rapidly replacing Evangelical faith
today (Craddock, 1993).

Nouthetic counseling is associated with the name of the founder, Jay Adams, who in
the early 1970’s reacted to the pervasiveness of the medical and psychological models,
calling Christians back to the Word of God, and to a moral model which is not afraid of
responsibility and “sin.” Nouthetic counseling has, in recent years, taken the name
“Biblical Counseling,” although there are many Christian counselors who would claim
that their work is worthy of the same label. Traditional Nouthetic counselors claim that
Scripture is comprehensive and sufficient, containing all the principles and information
that we need for living. Mental illness and psychopathology are not useful or true
categories. Problems of living are divided into organic, medical problems and problems
of sin – either personal sin or the results of being sinned against. A spectrum of views
has emerged within the Nouthetic camp. Some, represented by The National Association
of Nouthetic Counselors (NANC) strongly resist any attempt at integration. Others,
represented by the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation (CCEF), while
wanting to reframe everything in biblical categories, recognize some value in secular
psychology and are more open to thoughtful and respectful dialogue. In contrast to many
integrationists, Nouthetic counselors do not believe that the exploration of general
revelation is an important God- given task. They claim that special revelation in
Scripture is adequate to give us the principles we need to help any problem. (Welch and Powlison, 1997, Powlison, 2000)

In the middle of the spectrum is a variety of so-called Christian Integrationists or Eclectics who range from the Chaotic and Careless (Crabb’s “Tossed Salad” category) in their ability and approach to relating theology and psychology, to the Careful and Creative (what Crabb calls “Spoiling The Egyptians”), (Crabb, 1977, Powlison, 1993). Some, writes Soverson (1996) “believe that faith has no relevance for clinical work except for its influence on external issues of personal piety and ethics.” He calls this “uncorrelated” integration. Some add a biblical text to secular psychological wisdom to make it sound more Christian (“accommodating, amalgamating, and assimilating”), while others carefully try to appreciate what is true in secular psychology, and work hard to use discernment in recognizing areas of common ground and difference. The classic integrationist position is described very succinctly in Psychology and Christianity: Four Views (Johnson and Jones, 2000) by Gary Collins, the founder and past president of the huge and rapidly expanding American Association of Christian Counselors. Another view, described in Four Views, as “Christian Psychology,” has been developed by Robert Roberts, Professor of Ethics at Baylor University. While not rejecting secular psychology, he encourages us to focus on the wealth of insights and interventions from the Christian tradition through the ages. He claims that “Christian psychology starts with 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 of influence from the psychologies of the twentieth century” (Roberts, 2001, p. 135).

There are also a number of popular Christian counseling ministries which blend some secular techniques and biblical teaching. Each has psychological and theological strengths and weaknesses. Beck (2003) mentions Neil Anderson’s Christ Centered Therapy and Ed Smith’s Theophostic Counseling as contemporary examples. Many American cities have significant Christian counseling ministries working in or alongside the local churches. Each has had to develop its own philosophy and statement on the relationship of psychology and theology.

Each of us can place ourselves somewhere on the spectrum of Christian counseling. I would be delighted to find a better term than the rather clumsy mouthful of “Careful Christian Integrationist.” The word "Integration" carries the political connotation of racial integration, of bringing together equals. It sounds as if one were shuffling cards of equal value. "Eclectic" is no better as it implies picking and choosing without an overarching framework of belief to inform those choices. “Christian” or “Biblical Eclecticism” sounds too weak. Hurding (1985, 2003, p. 269) puts forward ‘circumspect eclecticism,’ and Powlison and Welch (1997, p. 316) have suggested “recasting, recycling, reformatting, interpreting, and reinterpreting.” Hurley and Berry (1997, p. 328) recognize the “severe liabilities of the term “integration”.” They prefer to “talk about “relating” psychology and theology, rather than “integrating” them.” We are

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1 My differences with Nouthetic counseling are on the relative emphasis that we place on certain issues. From my perspective, Nouthetic counselors under-emphasize: 1. The importance of General Revelation. 2. The importance of Common Grace. 3. Psychological Factors – especially the damaging effects of other’s sins. 4. The time it takes to change deeply rooted patterns of sin. They would probably say that I under-emphasize personal sin, the sufficiency of Scripture and give too much time to studying General Revelation.
attempting to “reclaim” what is rightfully ours, as part of God’s general revelation and to “reframe” it in its original Biblical framework.

In recent years, especially amongst those who are strongly influenced by Reformed Theology, I have seen the emergence of much common ground in foundational biblical teaching on: 1. The great overarching themes of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Future Glory.  2. The healing power of friendship, lay counseling, spiritual direction, and community in the church.  3. The relevance and practicality of scriptural teaching on sanctification for helping people to grow and change. These three areas are at the heart of the current ministries of Larry Crabb, (New Way Ministries, Tennant, 2003), and David Powlison and Paul Tripp (Changing Hearts, Changing Lives Seminars). While agreeing strongly with such foundational issues, Dan Allender (Mars Hill Graduate School), Diane Langberg (AACC), and many others also emphasize the need for well trained professional counselors to minister to those whose lives are particularly broken or confused, and may need extra experience, time and help.

Another spectrum may be useful in relation to a fundamental problem of the human heart and the issue of responsibility (see Figure 5). Those on the left end of this spectrum tend to be people with a large amount of psychology training and often only Sunday School knowledge of theology. Those at the right end usually have much training in theology and relatively little in psychology. This difference is often identified in the literature by the frequency of certain words and concepts. Those who have been seduced too much by psychology tend to use a lot of victim language such as needs, deprivation, rights, wounds, sickness, inner child and need for self actualization. Those who are steeped in biblical language and wary of anything psychological speak much of sin, depravity, willfulness, self-denial, responsibility and idolatry. But a biblical view of human nature sees that both ends of the spectrum are part of reality: deprivation and depravity, sickness and sin, victim and violator, rights and responsibilities. Certainly those who are trying to formulate ideas about human behavior in God’s world need a depth of understanding in both psychology and theology. As we listen to the stories of those who come to us for counseling, we listen for how they have been sinned against and how they, themselves, have sinned in response to injustice. The two ends of the Christian spectrum are attractive because they do not require the rigorous, disciplined and hard work of in-depth understanding and relating of the disciplines of theology and psychology, but they tend to be reductionist, and thus less than the whole counsel of God.

There is a final spectrum (no diagram) on which counselors must find their place, in relation to the role of the demonic and “spiritual warfare.” There are those who understand every psychological problem as a result of direct demonic activity and healing involves exorcism of, for example, spirits of lust, depression and addiction. At the other end of the spectrum there are those who believe that such demonic activity was only seen in Biblical times and deliverance ministries are not relevant or helpful today. Most people hold positions somewhere between these two extremes. Two examples would be Neil Anderson’s, The Bondage Breaker, (1990) and David Powlison’s, Power Encounters. (1995) There is no space to develop this theme here.
Conclusion

In this postmodern world where the very concept of Truth is being undermined, Christians have a vital contribution to make to the field of psychology. Postmodernism has two sides: On the one hand it is open to new ideas and recognizes the limits of science, but, on the other hand, it is closed to the possibility of any overarching Truth about the human condition. As the old “faith” in science crumbles we may meet a new resistance which is less open to rational persuasion, but at the same time we may find that we have new opportunities for the gospel as people feel the consequences of trying to live outside God’s reality and abandoning any concept of Truth.

There is a need for men and women, committed to the Lordship of Christ over the whole of life, who take delight in the God-given tasks of discerning truth and error in the field of psychology. We can struggle together to “reclaim” whatever is true in Psychology as part of God's revelation in the world, and to relate psychological and biblical categories to each other, attempting to apply the Truth appropriately to each detail of day to day life.

Beck points out the dangers of lack of balance in this endeavor. Most professionals in this field are trained in one of the two disciplines, psychology or theology, far more than in the other. Beck points out that the ratio of undergraduate degrees in psychology to degrees in religious studies in 1997-8 was 12:1. At the post-graduate level it is better at 3:1. He writes: “The size of both fields is enormous, and any scholar who tries to master not just one but, both disciplines faces a monumental challenge (Beck, p. 27). For my part, that is the reason why I cherish the opportunity to train counselors in a seminary setting where they can receive excellent teaching in both fields.

The “fear of the Lord” is indeed the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1:1). Exploring general revelation is part of our obedience to the call to dominion (Gen 1:28). There is potential for healthy dialogue and “iron sharpening iron” between those who wish to be faithful to the One who has given us the Scriptures through which, like a lens, we discern and test all psychological and sociological “truth”. God’s special revelation in the Bible, and a relationship with him, are crucial for keeping us from error and idolatry.

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