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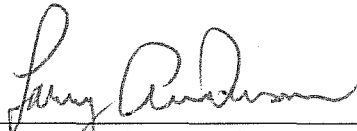
An Integration Of Biblical Principles In Counseling:  
Psychology Filtered Through Scripture

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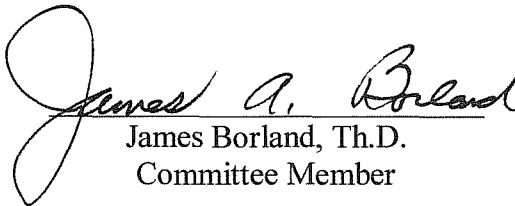
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### Abstract

Psychology is sometimes rejected altogether by evangelical Christians on the basis that it is a flawed discipline. Evangelicals are threatened by what they might call spirituality hiding behind the veil of science. But psychology must be viewed properly, as must theology, in order to interpret and apply its claims correctly.

The Bible may be considered revealed truth, but it is not the only truth God has revealed to humans. The Bible is God's revelation to man in written form, and is reliable as long as it is interpreted and applied properly. God has also given man truth which is outside of, and consistent with, His written revelation. This truth is discoverable through observing creation and through scientific experimentation. It is through this general revelation that the social sciences have discovered truths about man which have enabled man to better understand himself and his relationships with others.

## An Integration Of Biblical Principles In Counseling:

### Psychology Filtered Through Scripture

The nature of integration in science is to work together two fields. Both theology and psychology are sciences, and therefore must be treated as such. Just as hermeneutics is not God's Word itself, neither is theology. They both fall under the scientific heading of the study of God's Word. The sciences of theology and psychology can be integrated just as any other sciences can. The difference is that special consideration must be given to theology due to the subject it is treating. Any discussion of the integration of Biblical principles and the principles of psychology also necessitates a proper understanding of what is at stake. The issue is not just theology and just psychology. It comes down to philosophy and world view. The struggle of integration was already taking place in early church days, mostly through the work of Greek philosophers. The debate about where to draw the line is a long-standing one.

### Classical Greek Dualism

In classical Greek dualism there is a physical realm and a spiritual realm, a separation of the body and the soul (Pojman, 1999). Philosophers created only two categories for people to use in approaching humanity. This poses many problems. If this is the case, then in physical matters such as medicine, one does not have to bother himself with morality: "One of the attractions of the dualist view appeared to be the notion of the soul as a detachable spiritual entity, associated with the body but not identified with it" (Polkinghorne, 1998, p. 60). The spiritual dimension was reserved for things other than the material and the mental. Social sciences such as psychology

would be classified in the spiritual dimension. This separation has crept imperceptibly into modern thought, and since psychology is made out to somehow be a part of the spiritual dimension, it is often critiqued by Christians as if it were. Psychology could never pass a test of doctrine, it could never hold up if it were passed off as inerrant and true. Christians, then, are apt to reject psychology altogether in favor of the higher thing in the spiritual dimension, the Bible itself. But psychology is not in the spiritual dimension. The two overlap, but are not the same.

Psychology is a separate discipline, not a subset of theology. If a man went into a church and claimed to know a great deal about group dynamics, he would not automatically be considered a theologian. His findings might supplement the theologian, whose primary job it is to remind people that what God has said is right and what God has said is wrong. When religion adopts a dichotomous reasoning, polarizing itself from other disciplines in the same way Greek philosophy would polarize spirit and matter, it also breaks down relationships between God and the world. "Such a view of the sacred as completely separate from the finite world parallels the compartmentalized epistemology that sees religion as completely separate from science" (Jones, 1996, p. 152). Certainly the divine has a special nature, but it is not cut off from the rest of life. On the contrary, it should permeate the rest of life. Although psychology is not synonymous with theology, it also cannot be separated from it.

### Written and Spoken Revelation

The Bible is primarily about two issues: one's relationship with God and one's relationship with people. But the Bible never claims to have all the truth of God when it

comes to relationships with people. For example, there is no group theory there. Dr. Lawson in the counseling department at Liberty University called this the two book theory. He said God has a written revelation and a spoken revelation, the world. These two should never conflict, and if they do it is only in human understanding. "All truth is God's truth," (Carter & Narramore, 1979, p. 13) whether found in the Bible or in nature. Whether a Christian discovered  $2+2=4$  or not, it is still true.

Paul wrote on this subject to the church at Rome two thousand years ago. The King James translation of Romans 1:20 says, "For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse." God has revealed Himself to us, therefore making men accountable to Him for truth, whether they had a copy of the Bible or not. Everything that is true is from God, and gives glory to God.

### *Types of Spoken Revelation*

In addition to the Bible, God also allows His truth to be revealed through science, and even psychology. The Bible does not claim to contain everything that we need to know about plumbing or about schizophrenia. Technical things about the brain and the hypothalamus are not in the Bible. In fact, Wallace Clift asserts that for religion to be able to "meet the needs of its day it must be in accord with, and understandable in the language of, the scientific knowledge of the time" (Clift, 1982, p. x). We cannot assist the people living in our culture if we are not keeping up to date with their needs and how best to meet them. We have no excuse when the Lord has put psychology at

our disposal. It is laziness to avoid it altogether simply because it takes work to evaluate what aspects of psychology are useful and what are not.

*Bible never intended to contain all truth.* The Bible does have a lot to say about counseling and how to speak with people. Psychology expounds on those things to develop how we can apply them to people in a counseling setting. Many of the foundational aspects of psychology are in the Bible. However, it does not, and God never intended it to, contain all the truth there is in the world. John 21:25 even says that Jesus did more while He was on earth that was not recorded because books could not contain all of the information!

It is dangerous ground to walk upon when one is speaking of the Bible. It is true that “the Bible stands alone as God’s only perfect guide to life and growth” (Cloud & Townsend, 2001, p. 191). The Bible is absolutely complete and dependable. The fact that psychology can be helpful in counseling does not mean that the Bible is lacking in some way. It only means that psychological theories should not be thrown out altogether. They do hold value in the specific application of principles that are found in the Word of God.

We have established that truth can be found outside the Bible itself, and also that psychology provides years of experience and research that can be filtered through Scripture and applied in practice. What truth is found there at the end can and should be used. Theologians Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart (1982) say, “Wisdom is the discipline of applying truth to one’s life in the light of experience” (p. 187). Applying psychological truth to the foundation of Biblical truth wisely meets the needs of man.

### *Human Error*

God's Word is always accurate, but unfortunately, man's interpretation of it can be inaccurate. For example, in our country's early history pastors were saying that God condoned slavery. On the other hand, psychology can also be incorrect in its scientific interpretation of a matter. So when theology and psychology conflict, we must look at everything, remembering of course that the answer could be that it is so complex we do not even have an answer.

Human error is not limited to interpretation, but also extends to application. In Romans 1:18 Paul says that there are men that "hold the truth in unrighteousness." He is talking to the Romans, who were highly intelligent people. He is saying that there is truth but people are suppressing it from them by explaining it incorrectly. These Romans are people that have only thus far had natural revelation, and Paul tells them they can know the truth and are without excuse. God judges people and He does it on the basis of natural revelation because that genuinely and sufficiently reveals Him. They should have honored God because they looked to nature and gave Him credit for what He created.

### General Revelation Should be Considered

Some Christians argue against psychology by saying that before Freud and Maslow people got along fine with just the Bible. Building on this statement, they further say that there is no reason why we should add unnecessary things to Scripture when counseling, even going so far as to call the discoveries of counseling repetitive of what the Bible has already stated. This argument defeats itself. It asserts that the Bible

alone is sufficient for counseling and no truth from general revelation is even helpful, much less necessary. But the same question could be turned around and asked, “What did Christians do to counsel others before they had access to the Bible?” They had to rely on what little they knew from words the Lord had spoken to them, and mainly had to rely on what creation itself revealed about God, man, and truth. So obviously God has set up our universe and life in it to be a place where God’s truth through general revelation should be considered. The Lord gave us brains to notice things around us and learn from them. Since psychology is the study of man and how he thinks and behaves, it can be a helpful tool to aid in the counsel of man as long as it does not stray from Biblical principles.

*Psychology is a Valid Form of General Revelation*

It has also been said that many of psychology’s points do not mix and are not compatible with each other. But it is not a religious system to be accepted or rejected as a whole. There is, of course, much in psychology that a Christian cannot accept because it is contrary to what the Bible teaches. Anderson is quoted as saying that truth outside the Bible can be found by three main methods: through the use of the scientific method, through naturalistic observation, and through rational thinking (Anderson, 1999). These can produce some knowledge and truth. Even intuition, though, not as reliable, can produce some truth. Any of these kinds of discovered truth must never be elevated to the same level as truth that is revealed in the Bible. But psychology does contain much that can be of practical value to the Christian who truly desires to follow Christ.

### Antagonism between Christianity and Sciences

Many Christians in our society today avoid psychology altogether on the grounds that the Bible alone is sufficient to solve the problems of man. They feel afraid that being exposed to psychological concepts that contradict Biblical principles could taint a person's perspective and cause him to stray from a Christ-centered, doctrinally correct view of life and counseling. Rather than see the good that can be found in a theory of psychotherapy when it is filtered through the Word of God, many Christians have a tendency to run from it if any part strays from the evangelical Christian position.

For some Christians, there is an antagonism between evangelical Christianity and the sciences. Some steps toward reconciliation have been taken by some scientists. For example, fifty years ago scientists declared that "Recent studies in astrophysics suggest a moment of creation" (Ramm, 1955, p. 26). However, for truly successful reconciliation to take place, the evangelical Christian must be the one to set forth the terms. If the reins are controlled by secular men, more and more error will be made in interpretation and application. There is worth to be found in the scholarship of men throughout the ages, and it is ignorant for those who would consider themselves orthodox to sneer at the knowledge gained through the ages without considering what might be gained from it.

If we are wise and discerning about what we accept from the social sciences and its theories, avoiding its pitfalls, we can end up with information that is consistent with the Bible but has not been gleaned from it. Because it is equally irresponsible to uncritically embrace psychology, the preferred option involves filtering each

psychological theory through Scripture and keeping for use whatever proves helpful and true.

### Theology Compared to Psychology

Theology is the study of God. Psychology is the study of how we think and how we apply that thinking, that is, how we behave. Psychological theories and applications are not only good, but also helpful because they tell us how a person is apt to respond to things. Put theology and psychology together and we can correctly change the way people think about God and lead them to Him. Why would we run from such a valuable resource?

The problem lies in a lack of understanding. Counseling itself is sanctioned and even advised in the Bible, as is seen in Proverbs 11:14 where it says, “in the multitude of counselors there is safety.” Granted, many of the theories that exist in psychology do not address the root issues in a man’s heart—sin and our need for forgiveness and repentance. We are only putting on temporary band-aids until we present people with the gospel and the real Healer. We are called to be a light to him that is in the darkness. Once a counselor can bring a person face to face with the Lord in all His glory, that person will be confronted with the sin in his own life as well. “Our Lord is the final standard” (Chambers, 1995, p. 175). Any other psychological techniques in counseling should be used as complimentary.

The essence of Biblical counseling is helping a person through a difficult time in life and getting them back on track. This is based on one thing—that God has a plan for mankind and the farther one gets from that plan the bigger a mess his life will be.

Christians counsel from a Biblical perspective because we believe there is a way God wants life to be lived. Life is ultimately from, about, and for the glory of the Lord, and His Word is the primary source of knowledge about Him. We can use things supplemental to the Bible in counseling as long as they do not contradict or take away from it.

*Psychology is Incomplete Without Theology*

There are many questions in the heart of man. Psychology attempts to resolve those questions, but only the Lord can truly meet the need in a human heart. No amount of therapy can replace His work. Os Guinness (1998) begins his book, The Call, by addressing some of these core issues each individual faces, such as identity and purpose. Every person longs to find his unique calling and fulfill it. However, Guinness (1998) asserts that “this purpose can only be found when we discover the specific purpose for which we were created and to which we were called” (p. 4). Without answering the general calling of God, any pursuit of a particular calling will seem futile and frustrating. So striving for goals, as Adler encourages clients to do (Dreikurs, 1989), is helpful, but only to a point. God’s call alone can provide the foundation needed to fulfill our desire for individual purpose.

Early in Guinness’ book, he defines calling as “the truth that God calls us to Himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion and dynamism lived out as a response to His summons and service” (Guinness, 1998, p. 4). If the created being resists the general calling of his Creator, he will surely remain restless in his pursuit of individual purpose:

“All objects we desire short of God are finite and incomplete as we ourselves are and, therefore, disappointing if we make them the objects of ultimate desire” (Guinness, 1998, p. 13). Reality therapy asks a person what he wants, and whether what he is doing is getting him what he wants. Therapy is then based around changing behavior to meet those goals (Glasser, 1965). But Guinness’ words show the limitations of Reality therapy and following after what we want. True fulfillment is found when one responds to the call of God and what He wants.

### *Theology is Complimented by Psychology*

Theories of psychology have many practical applications that make the process of counseling easier and more effective. They should not be thrown out altogether just because they are flawed and incomplete when they stand each on their own. Psychology should not be rejected as a whole simply because of the humanistic views in it. We do not reject all that biology has to offer even though there is much evolution taught as a part of it. The flawed principles in psychology should obviously not be used, but it is interesting how easily Biblical principles fit into some of the most widely accepted psychological theories. That says something about how God had the answers all along. It also says something about how some parts of psychology can be used alongside the Bible when it compliments the principles found there.

### *Benefits Psychology has to Offer a Christian Counselor*

This is an important issue to research because as Christians we can be better equipped to meet the needs of others and even work through our own problems if we embrace the truth that can be found in psychology. Jay Adams, founder of nouthetic

counseling, said he believes that every Christian is enabled and expected by the Lord to counsel someone at some time (Adams, 1977). We must be educated about this issue and equipped to serve people and our Lord in the best possible way. If we run from psychology, we stand the risk of pushing away those who are open to its helpful and true principles. We are not as able to help people in their time of need. And we ourselves can lose what benefit we could have gained from all the years of research and study psychology has to offer.

Counseling plays a tremendous role in life and in Christian ministry. Proverbs 19:20 says, "Hear counsel, and receive instruction, that thou mayest be wise in thy latter end." Years of psychological research allow counselors to be more effective in helping people with personal and relational difficulties. Psychology can be helpful in so many diverse ways that it is a shame not to make use of what it has to offer. It aids in assessment, documentation, diagnosis, treatment planning, behavior modification, and even arranging of the furniture in the office, all for the best benefit of the client. Psychology as a whole provides a deeper understanding of the thinking patterns of people so that a counselor can be better able to help them with the challenges of life. These are all possible resources that can be used to heal a person's relationship with God, his family, coworkers, and friends, and to help him set healthy personal goals and standards. If we are going to be responsible as Christian counselors we should take advantage of what psychology has to offer.

### Theories Held Up to Scripture

Holding up Scripture to secular psychological theories, and throwing out the concepts that do not match up with what God's Word teaches, is the key to integrating psychology and theology. Practically speaking, this is accomplished by exploring how the most widely accepted psychology theories today, or aspects of those theories, can be used in conjunction with the Bible. Theories that can be filtered successfully through Scripture can and should be used for counseling. This kind of thorough research is additionally beneficial because it helps in gaining a better understanding of the problem and possible solutions. Theories of psychology should be filtered through Scripture for two purposes: to eliminate what is false in those theories and to preserve what is true in them.

#### *Carl Rogers and the Book of Obadiah*

This is easily applied in practice. One method is by comparing a theory directly to a book of the Bible. Carl Rogers' humanistic theory held up against the book of Obadiah makes very evident what is Biblical and what is not in his theories. His therapy will clearly be found lacking when filtered through what the Bible says, but it will also have some valuable insight that can be safely applied to a client in his struggle.

Although they were written by men from far different cultures and are separated by over a thousand years, Carl Rogers' Humanistic theory and the words of the prophet Obadiah have some similarities. But for the most part, God's Word spoken through Obadiah differs from Rogers on many critical points.

Rogers' foundational theory is that man is born good and if the environment is right, he will self-actualize and fulfill all of his great potential. It is a very optimistic approach. His theory states that there is a process in humans called the organismic valuing process which propels us to do what is good (Corey, 2001). He thinks man has a "need to move toward an ideal self, to improve, to become better, to have richer, more connected experiences, and to self-actualize as the person we feel we can be" (Degalan & Lambert, 2001, p. xi). God's Word differs greatly on this point. In verse 3 of the book of Obadiah, God says to the Edomites "the pride of thine heart hath deceived thee." Obadiah finds the heart of man to be naturally evil, not good. God continues to chastise the Edomites, saying that as He searched them, He found "no understanding in them" (verse 7). Man is not found to be instinctively wise or have understanding that will guide them in the right direction. The Lord vows to "destroy the wise...and thy mighty men" (verses 8, 9). Those that are thought by men to be the most wise and mighty cannot stand in those strengths before the Lord. Obadiah strikes down Rogers' theory altogether that man might in any way be born good.

Rogers' second theory builds on his first one. He states that since men are born good but most do not self-actualize, it is the caretakers that are the problem. The teachers, parents, and people that took care of you, that outside influence, interfere with man's ability to self-actualize because those caretakers offer conditional love. This is one theory that Obadiah does strike a chord with in some ways. Although he disagrees with the prerequisite first theory of Rogers' caretakers idea, Obadiah does agree that men can negatively influence others around them and keep them from becoming

healthy, functional individuals. The theme of much of the book of Obadiah revolves around the Lord as saying that Judah's misfortunes come from the aggression the Edomites displayed toward them. In Obadiah 10, the Lord predicts punishment upon the Edomites for their actions, saying "for thy violence against thy brother Jacob shame shall cover thee, and thou shall be cut off forever." Verses 12-14 go on to list the crimes the Lord holds against Edom as they caused problems for Judah. Obadiah does agree that the environment has an influence on people and whether they can live lives that are healthy and functional.

Finally, Rogers presents a person-centered therapy. The therapist will extract the goodness from the client that was there from the beginning. Carl Rogers' person-centered therapy is "based on the belief that the person seeking help is the best judge of the direction that will lead to growth" (Cloninger, 2004, p. 437). Obadiah disagrees with this theory as well. He clearly puts responsibility on each individual for his own actions. Verse 15 says, "as thou hast done, it shall be done unto thee: thy reward shall return upon thy own head." Justice is executed by the Lord in order to establish righteousness. It is not a therapist who extracts that good from within a person.

The three basic principles of Rogers' theory greatly differ from what the Lord tells us about humanity in the book of Obadiah. We can take some things from Rogers' theories, but we must always hold any of man's ideas up against Scripture, because this is an example of just how different God's thoughts are about things than our own. Now that we have protected ourselves from the basic dangers of Rogers' theory, it is only fair to acknowledge what he said that was true and useful in therapy.

*Rogers' compatibility with Christianity.* Rogers himself is quoted as saying that he believes a person can “make realistic and sensible choices as to how he’s going to both live with and transcend the circumstances of the past” (Evans, 1975, p. 76). His ideas about the freedom and even the responsibility a person has to make decisions to think and act in ways that are productive were somewhat revolutionary to psychology at the time he presented them. Rogers also made contributions to counseling in the way a therapist relates to his clients: “The therapeutic triad of empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard have been enormously influential in contemporary psychology and the pastoral care movement” (Jones & Butman, 1991, p. 269). The therapist is essentially displaying Christian love toward a client by embracing him in this Rogerian manner. Rogers is known for his reflective listening, which is a valuable therapeutic tool for a counselor to use in therapy as he attempts to understand the heart of his client. In addition, Rogers was a pioneer in emphasizing clinical research in psychology, which has also had a great positive influence in psychology over the years (Farber, 1996). So although Rogers had many flaws in his therapy when held up against the Word of God, he also had a lot to add to the practice of counseling.

#### *James Beck and the Big Five Personality Theory*

There are, however, theories that look much more like a Christ-centered form of counseling. Jesus and Personality Theory, written by James R. Beck, is a book that addresses this important and, at times, controversial subject. Beck sets before us the Five Factor Model of personality (McCrae & Costa, 1999), a prominent psychological theory for describing the human personality. He then holds up Biblical themes and

Christian teachings next to this personality theory. This comparison provides a breakthrough in the use of psychology in the light of Christianity as opposed to the common practice of running from psychology for fear it will replace or contradict Biblical council. Beck studies the way that the Model can be used by Christian psychologists without sacrificing any Biblical authority or compromising doctrinally.

The Five-Factor Model, sometimes called the “Big Five,” is essentially a study of human traits. Beck defines traits as “components of our personality that enable us to be consistent over time in our behavior and reactions to life” (Beck, 1999, p. 22). The Big Five theory focuses on the description of personality instead of on its causes. “The Big Five principally help us understand how human personality is configured, how it is organized, and what are its main themes” (Beck, 1999, p. 23). It does not help us determine the causes or possible evolution in behavior, it merely aids us in our understanding of it. The Five-Factor Model is internationally researched and is one of the most accepted scientific theories in psychology today.

The Five-Factor Model consists of five major traits that the human personality is composed of. Under each personality trait heading are two sub-categories. James Beck looks at each of these factors and studies how it compares to the teachings of Christ. The end result is a broader understanding of how Christians can view human nature, which offers valuable insight to any Christian counselor in his or her dealings with others.

*Openness to experience.* The first of the five factors Beck examines falls under the heading Openness to Experience, or as he like to call it, Jesus and our experiential

life. It encompasses not only the environment, but our behavior in response to the environment. And the main idea is that we can choose to either be open or closed to it. We can “learn from what happens to us and grow thereby, or we can resist change and remain relatively unaffected by experience” (Beck, 1999, p. 39). As with each of the five factors, people are ranked on a continuum in order to determine their openness to experience. A high score can be characterized by such adjectives as knowledge, perception, imagination, and curiosity (Beck, 1999). People who score low are more likely to prefer routine and be down to earth. Beck is quick to point out that although it seems most commendable to score high on the openness to experience continuum, God can and does use people from both ends of the scale. He cites a study done on Jesus, who generally scores high, and the Apostle Paul, who had a low score. Obviously both lived lives that had a great impact for the gospel.

*Conscientiousness.* The second of the five factors Beck examines is Conscientiousness, or, as Beck calls it, Jesus and our motivational life: “A major part of this conscientiousness factor consists of what is often called character” (Beck, 1999, p. 83). A low scorer could be called negligent, lazy, aimless, or irresponsible, whereas high scorers are better described by adjectives such as disciplined, ambitious, reliable, and hardworking. Although a high scorer could exceed reasonable limits and become a workaholic, for the most part conscientiousness is productive. In the study of conscientiousness, Beck emphasizes the importance of motivation. According to him, this is what drives people to respond differently to similar circumstances. For the most part, humans “are motivated by selfishness and self-seeking desires” (Beck, 1999, p.

85). But Christians are supposed to battle against the sinful, selfish human nature and be motivated by more godly internal motivations.

*Extraversion.* The third of the five factors Beck discusses is Extraversion, or Jesus and our Interpersonal Life. This is the most widely known factor of the five. People who score high on the extraversion continuum are usually outgoing, sociable, and adventuresome, while people who score lower are classified as reserved, passive, and quiet. While extraverts report higher levels of emotions such as joy and love, this does not make their potential service for the Lord greater: “Both interpersonal styles can serve God well; both can be used mightily of God” (Beck, 1999, p. 132). Beck illustrates this by presenting again the comparison of Jesus and Paul. Paul was assertive and went out to seek people, but people often sought after Jesus (Beck, 1999). There are Biblical accounts of Jesus taking time to rest, which may indicate He had less of a drive for excitement than Paul did. But Jesus displayed a high level of assertiveness in His “almost fearless attack on the powerful, entrenched leaders of the nation,” (Beck, 1999, p. 132) while Paul was often more cautious in his confrontations, as is evidenced in his epistles. With all of these factors considered, both Jesus and Paul received average scores on the extraversion scale. God has created each person with individual personality traits that He can use for His glory.

*Agreeableness.* The fourth factor in the Model is called Agreeableness, or Jesus and our attitudinal life. Beck says that high scorers on agreeableness tend to be sympathetic toward others, “willing to reach out and help them” (Beck, 1999, p. 175). Low scorers are much more antagonistic and competitive. However, while high scorers

are usually better liked, low scorers are important to society. Beck uses the example of a policeman, who needs to be somewhat disagreeable or he will “have a very difficult time arresting people or enforcing traffic laws” (Beck, 1999, p. 175). Still, in our daily interactions with people, we are to model Jesus’ example of compassion. In order to live agreeably, we must cultivate an internal compulsion to care for others.

*Neuroticism.* The final factor in Beck’s study is Neuroticism, or Jesus and our Emotional Life. It “measures human weakness and imperfection” (Beck, 1999, p. 220). It has to do with strength of character, and emotional stability. A lack of it could mean a struggle with things like fear, anger, embarrassment, and guilt: “Research indicates that high levels of neuroticism are associated with poorer physical health than low levels” (Beck, 1999, p. 222). So at least some of the personality trait is controllable. And people who begin to develop these negative emotions of depression, anxiety, and hostility only attract more negativity. Jesus preached many times against such attitudes.

*Beck’s compatibility with Christianity.* Beck has done a marvelous work of taking what is good from the well-respected Five-Factor Model, and holding it up to the Word of God. Just as Christ shared His wisdom with people while He was on earth, Christians, and specifically Christian counselors, need to do the same. Christian counselors should “seek to shape their work and ministry after the counseling of the Messiah who was called ‘Wonderful Counselor’” (Beck, 1999, p. 10). Beck has given us a practical, biblical starting point with which to do it. Part of the reason his concepts in the Big Five are so compatible with Scripture is because they involve principles of cognitive oriented theories.

*Cognitive Therapy*

The principles of the cognitive oriented theories are some of the most compatible when integrating Christianity and psychology. To begin with, the focus on cognitive roots to behavior and emotion agrees with the Biblical principle: "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Proverbs 23:7). The Bible emphasizes belief and putting trust in what one knows to be true. We are called to set our minds on things above (Colossians 3:2). The way we think is presented to us as a choice we make. It precedes and drastically effects the way we act. Cognitive therapy, developed by Aaron Beck originally for the treatment of depression, has judged correctly that humans respond to stimuli with automatic thoughts which often lead to "faulty assumptions and misconceptions" (Corey, 2001, p. 310). The Bible and Cognitive therapy both tell us that teaching ourselves to think correctly is key to healthy emotions, behavior, and relationships: "There is some compatibility between Christianity and any system that places a high premium on human rationality" (Jones & Butman, 1991, p. 211).

*Typical therapy protocol.* A Cognitive therapist would approach sessions with a depressed client by displaying warmth, empathy, and acceptance in order to build trust with the client. The therapist would begin a typical course of therapy by gathering personal data about the client and then making an assessment based upon the client's past history, symptoms, and results of the Beck Depression Inventory (Pervin, 2003), used to measure the indication of severity of depression. Once there is indication of depression, therapy would likely focus on the client's symptoms. Homework would be given at each session. The client would be asked to keep a journal about his activities,

which would be used as a tool of the therapist to check “for possible omissions and distortions” (Beck, 1979, p. 107) in the client’s thinking. The therapist would then point out the connections between the patient’s thinking and behavior by using those specific activities as examples.

At this point in therapy the client would also be asked to define what he sees as the problems that are contributing to his depression. As his motivation and activities increase, more attention is paid in therapy to cognitions. The client would be asked to “record cognitions during periods of sadness, anxiety, and anger and during periods of ‘apathy,’ in order to elicit the relationship between thinking, behavior, and affect” (Beck, 1979, p. 108). He should by now be beginning to see the relationship between his thoughts and his mood. He should understand that a stimulus activates his core, underlying belief, which is actually what affects how he thinks and responds. His recordings should become more and more centered on his cognitions rather than on his activities. The therapist would guide the client in discovery of common themes which would begin to surface, perhaps in the form of a general cognition that he is failing in his duties as a husband. The duties he feels he lacks in can cover a range of things, but all his cognitions result in self-criticism, which leads to his depression. Once the client recognizes this, his homework would be to list what his responsibilities are as a husband and what his expectations are of himself. Through discussion of these in therapy, the client would “continue to recognize cognitive errors and review alternative explanations for...negative ‘automatic thoughts’” (Beck, 1979, p. 111). The client would then focus, in therapy and as homework, on proper coping responses. He would evaluate problem

areas of his life realistically instead of critically. He would pursue goals as opposed to his former dysfunctional thoughts about what he “should” do.

The final therapy sessions would focus more on these goals. Attention is still given to self-criticisms, but now the focus is on the underlying assumptions. The client should now be able to assess his own depressive reactions. Listing future goals helps focus the client on what his expectations and needs are. Therapy is generally short, lasting approximately 20 sessions at most over about a 4 month period (Beck, 1979).

*Cognitive therapy's compatibility with Christianity.* Cognitive therapy brings many contributions to counseling. Brief therapy discourages a client becoming dependant upon his therapist. In some forms of long-term therapy, such as psychoanalysis, often a client never really changes, but he feels better because he has someone to talk to. Cognitive therapy aids in a person's independence and control in making effective choices in his life. This is a worthy set of principles for a Christian to adopt in seeking to be a Biblical good steward of the time allotted to us. This theme of independence is further helpful because rather than rely indefinitely upon the expertise of one man, clients learn to evaluate their own thoughts. They are taught to view their beliefs as hypotheses, and to test the validity of their hypotheses by seeing if the data fits what they believe. This kind of approach trains people to follow the Biblical principle of testing everything by the Scriptures (I John 4:1) and not taking at face value the words of any man that claims to be a prophet or preacher, but to look to the Bible for what is true as the final standard.

Cognitive therapy is especially beneficial in counseling a client with depression: “It focuses on developing a detailed case conceptualization as a way to understand how clients view their world” (Corey, 2001, p. 328). It brings the client’s personal experience “back into the realm of legitimate scientific inquiry” (Corey, 2001, p. 328). It is obvious that the client’s background and personal insight into his situation and feelings about it are taken into account. In I Corinthians 9:19-22, Paul talked about the importance of understanding the background of a person, his heritage, and how he thinks. Paul then used this information to reach that person for Christ in the most effective way. In this respect Cognitive therapy agrees with the Biblical approach.

In addition, Cognitive therapy is useful in challenging a client’s beliefs in order to change his behavior (Corey, 2001). This directly agrees with many passages of Scripture that address changing one’s thinking about things in order to change mood and behavior. Philippians 4: 6-7 says that if a person is anxious he should respond instead by praying and changing his thought process to one of thanksgiving about the things that he is petitioning the Lord about. The Bible says that the reward is a mind and heart at peace. Similarly, the Bible tells us to take every thought captive (2 Corinthians 10:5), and to renew our minds (Romans 12:1-2). As in Cognitive therapy, we are to be active in changing the old thought patterns to ones that are true and fitting.

*Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT).* Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) is a type of cognitive therapy with a specific plan for changing behavior by changing beliefs, called the ABC theory. The A stands for an activating experience, or external event. The B stands for the beliefs a person holds about the

activating event and themselves. And the C stands for the behavioral and emotional consequences. Often people blame C on A. They attribute their emotional or behavioral consequence on the events that happen around them. Albert Ellis, founder of REBT, asserts that B is the real cause of abnormality. It is not the events themselves that disturb people, but the beliefs they hold about those events and themselves (Corey, 2001). In spite of Ellis' personal anti-Christian position, his theory is compatible in many ways to Biblical truth.

*Lies we believe.* REBT concepts have been adapted for Christian consumption by Thurman (1989) in *Lies We Believe*. He says that "Most of our unhappiness and emotional struggles are caused by the lies we tell ourselves" (Thurman, 1989, p. 22). He calls lies expectations that do not fit reality. They are like recordings in our head that effect our actions as we unconsciously play them back to ourselves through the day. Discovering the lies in us is half of the battle. The other half is fighting the lies and committing to practicing the truth. He agrees with Ellis's ABC theory that "we can't blame events for our feelings because our feelings are caused by our thoughts" (Thurman, 1989, p. 54). But he also takes the Christian stance in that though we are capable of good, we are naturally bent toward evil. He recommends Scripture memorization and meditation as a vital part of breaking old habits of thought. In light of James 1:2-3, Thurman has a point. Rather than displaying inappropriate behaviors and emotions in the face of difficult circumstances, we are told to *consider* it joy because we *know* that the trying of our faith works patience. If we know that God is in

control and that our faith will result in endurance, that is, we think biblically, then we will be able to be joyful.

*Inconsistencies between Christianity and cognitive therapy.* A major problem with the secular use of cognitive therapy is its use of constructivism, the belief that there are no absolutes, the people construct their own reality. This leaves only a pragmatic view of right and wrong. "Therapists can encourage their clients to reconsider absolutist judgments by moving toward seeing both 'good' and 'bad' elements in situations" (Corey, 2001, 322). The subjective beliefs of the client are elevated as more important than objective faulty beliefs. Right and wrong are not counted as important as what works for the client. Constructivism says that if a belief is helpful for the individual, if it improves his affect, and does not harm others, it is functional.

If used apart from a Christian perspective, cognitive therapy can be a surface approach, dealing only with eliminating symptoms that lead to depression and never with the root cause of difficulty. The Christian approach would involve getting directly to the underlying false beliefs. Some cognitive therapy has been criticized as being too cognitive and downplaying, even undermining, emotions in the process. It does not encourage "emotional ventilation or emotionally reexperiencing painful experiences" (Corey, 2001, p. 331). In comparison, the Bible tells us in Ecclesiastes 3:4 that there is a time for weeping. It tells us to weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15), which implies that we are not only to experience the emotions that are a natural part of going through difficult things, but to encourage others to do so as well.

Jones and Butman make another interesting observation in the assessment of cognitive therapy from a Christian perspective. They note that “there is much more to human beings than cognitive-behavioral therapy would lead us to believe” (Jones & Butman, 1991, p. 222). Things of particular concern which cognitive therapy never addresses are spirituality, self-deception, evil, the depth of the impact humans have upon one another in relationships, the growth process in a person, and the fact that emotion may be “more than the output of cognitive habits” (Jones & Butman, p. 223). Secular cognitive therapy unfortunately is silent on these issues, and thus presents humans as “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” (Jones & Butman, p. 223). By Christian standards, we are much more than that. “Biblical” cognitive therapy would correct these difficulties.

### Conclusion

The Biblical balance needed when making use of psychology requires a great deal of wisdom. There are many pitfalls inherent in the field. It takes discernment to know what things can be taken from it and used in practice. For this reason, it is not advisable for people to seek out counseling with a psychologist who is not a Christian. The Scriptures say “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly” (Psalm 1:1). There are too many erroneous teachings in the world, and a man, without the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, should not be trusted with the great task of dealing with the nature of man, how he should live, and how he can change. There will always be traps to be aware of when using psychology, as there are

with many things in life. Psychological theories must never be used in replacement of the role of the church or pastor. They should not be relied upon before the counsel of our Lord Himself, promoting a “psychological perspective of life rather than a Biblical one” (Bobgan & Bobgan, 1995, p. 1). And psychology should not be used, in its attempts for self-help, as a crutch to cater to self. Self-oriented humans can easily fall into this trap.

Psychology and Christianity do not need to be incompatible. There are many principles of Scripture that nullify certain theories of psychology, and those theories should not be used in intervention. Other theories that filter through a Biblical test have met the strict standard set by our Lord. Christians need not fear the use of them. God can and does work through the careful use of psychology to benefit those He created when they seek His counsel as they filter through it.

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