
Critiquing Modern Integrationists

by David Powlison

Nouthetic counseling was founded in the confidence that God has spoken comprehensively about and to human beings. His Word teaches the truth. The Holy Spirit enables effective, loving ministry. Our positive call has been to pursue and then to promote biblical truth and methods in counseling. As a secondary application of this positive call, nouthetic counselors have consistently opposed the “integration” movement.

Integrationists attempt to wed secular psychology to conservative Christianity because they believe that Scripture is not comprehensively sufficient. Scripture, the Word of the Holy Spirit, is in some essential way deficient for understanding and changing people. The church, therefore, needs systematic and constitutive input from the social sciences in order to know what is true and to enable effective, loving counseling ministry. Integrationists aim to import the intellectual contents and psychotherapeutic practices of psychology into the church in a way that is consistent with biblical faith.

Nouthetic counselors have claimed, on the contrary, that the imports consistently hijack biblical faith and ministry. This is not to say that biblical counselors should ignore or dismiss the various secular psychologies.¹ But when we look at psychology we take seriously the pervasiveness of secular presuppositions and the malignancy of secular intentions. Thus, any utility secular psychology may have must be carefully qualified. Integrationists are not careful enough, and they import fundamental and systematic falsehoods. Also, any potential utility of psychology must be subordinate to other far more important issues, such as how to convert psychologized people in a psychologized culture. Integrationists have exacerbated the ‘psychologization’ of

¹For example, see Jay Adams’s *What About Nouthetic Counseling?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), page 31: Question: “Don’t you think that we can learn something from psychologists?” Answer: “Yes, we can learn a lot; I certainly have. That answer surprised you, didn’t it? If it did, you have been led to believe, no doubt, that nouthetic counselors are obscurantists who see no good in psychology.” Adams goes on to clarify what he opposes, what he embraces, and why. See also the last several pages of Adams’s “Counseling and the Sovereignty of God” in *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* XI:2 (Winter, 1993), pages 4–9.

human life, not remedied it. I want to critique the current state of integrationist thinking and practice. First, however, let me give a bit of historical background. The integration movement has developed through three phases.²

1. Preliminary Phase

The “integration” movement among professedly Bible-believing Christians dates to the 1950’s with the prominence of Clyde Narramore and the founding of the Christian Association for Psychological Studies (CAPS). The founding of Fuller Graduate School of Psychology in the mid-60’s was the culmination of this early phase.

2. Professionalization Phase

Over the past 25 years—partly as it has reacted to Jay Adams’s criticisms—the integration movement has consolidated intellectually and institutionally. The current leaders have emerged into positions of influence through their writings and their institutional affiliations.

The following are noteworthy institutions that have developed and disseminated integrationist thinking and practices: Fuller Graduate School of Psychology; Rosemead School of Professional Psychology and *The Journal of Psychology and Theology*; CAPS and *The Journal of Christianity and Psychology*; American Association of Christian Counselors and *The Christian Journal of Psychology and Counseling*; integrationist departments at seminaries and Christian colleges such as Wheaton College, Dallas Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Liberty University; Minirth-Meier Clinics; Rapha; and “Focus on the Family.”

The following are leaders in the integrationist movement: Clyde Narramore, H. Newton Maloney, Paul

²This section summarizes my article, “Integration or Inundation?”, in Michael Horton, ed., *Power Religion* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), pages 191–218. For further reading on the relationship of nouthetic counseling to the integrationist Christian psychologists, see Jay Adams, “Reflections on the History of Biblical Counseling,” in Harvie Conn, ed., *Practical Theology and the Ministry of the Church, 1952–1984: Essays in Honor of Edmund P. Clowney* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1990). For background reading see E. Brook Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983). Holifield’s subtitle tells it all. He ends his narrative with the main-line churches, circa 1960. The integration movement in conservative churches since then is a further illustration of Holifield’s thesis. Nouthetic counseling is a movement counter the tide.

Tournier, Bruce Narramore, John Carter, Harold Ellens, Gary Collins, Larry Crabb, Frank Minirth & Paul Meier, James Dobson, Vernon Grounds, David Seamands, Robert Schuller, and Robert McGee.

3. Popularization Phase

In the mid-1980's integrationist thinking broke out of the confines of educational institutions and professional psychotherapy. Pop psychology swept into evangelical churches through the recovery movement ("codependents, adult children, dysfunctional families, 12-steps, support groups"), healing of memories and various popular psychological writers. With increasing frequency the pulpit, the pew and the publishing house speak the same psychological language when they attempt to explain human experience and solve life's problems.

The stated intent of frank integrationists is to borrow theories and practices from secular psychology and to weave these in with Christian faith. Covert or unwitting integrationists do not state this intention but simply borrow. The net effect in every integrationist's system is that secular error eats up biblical truth, so that false views of human nature, of Christ and of the change/counseling process control the system.

* * *

Modern Integrationists

What is the current state of integrationism? The integrationist movement is neither static nor monolithic. Though there are recurrent themes, there are often divergent and conflicting emphases and styles. I see three major styles. Within each I will flag two crucial issues where the recurrent themes appear. First, what is at the bottom of the heart of man?; what is the view of human nature (anthropology)? Second, how do we know what is true?; what is the view of knowledge (epistemology), particularly in regard to secular psychology?

1. "The Flea Market": Chaotic Integrationism

This is the integrationism that sells on the street, that jumps off the bookstore shelves into the hands and hearts of Christians looking to solve their life problems. Here are several examples (among scores that could be cited):

- Frank Minirth, Paul Meier & Robert Hemfelt, *Love is a Choice: Recovery for Codependent Relationships*;
- David Seamands, *Healing for Damaged Emotions*;
- Robert Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*;
- William Backus and Marie Chapien, *Telling Your-*

self the Truth.³

What is at the bottom of the heart of man?

Here is a sampling of the answers offered in the Flea Market:

- Minirth, Meier, Hemfelt: legitimate need to be loved, love hunger, an empty love tank because of the failures of others to love us (e.g., pages 33–40);
- Seamands: the need to feel good about yourself, the heart as a storehouse of repressed hurts and deprivations (e.g., pages 48–54, 60, 138);
- Schuller: an unfulfilled need for self-esteem underlies every human act; the need for self-love, dignity, self-worth, self-respect, self-esteem is the deepest of all human needs; the core of sin is a lack of self-esteem; at the deepest level sin is self-rejection and psychological self-abuse, which leads to the more outward sins (e.g., pages 15, 33f, 98f);
- Backus & Chapien: the need to feel good about yourself, to be happy, to feel loved and important. (e.g., pages 9f, 40, 51, 109, 111).

In each case some variety of "the heart as needy and/or wounded" undergirds the theory. Needs for love and for self-esteem predominate in the "flea market" literature. Sin and misery are secondary consequences of deep unmet needs.

How do we know what is true?

Each of the books above is an eclectic hodge-podge of personal experiences, gleanings from various psychologies, and random Bible verses (almost invariably misused). The criterion for truth is a slipshod version of "every man did what was right in his own eyes." There is no attempt to think systematically about human beings in a way that is exegetically careful, emerging out of Scripture (*exegesis*) rather than read into Scripture (*eisegesis*).

2. "The Big Umbrella": Sophisticated Integrationism

The latest, high culture integrationism articulates the intellectual cutting edge of integrationist philosophy, hence I will describe it in greater detail. This is the integrationism of the Christian graduate schools of psychology. It seeks to appropriate and evaluate secular psychological theory in an eclectic manner under the guidance of Christian "control beliefs." The Big Um-

³ Frank Minirth, Paul Meier & Robert Hemfelt, *Love is a Choice: Recovery for Codependent Relationships* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989). David Seamands, *Healing for Damaged Emotions* (U.S.A.: Victor Books, 1981). Robert Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982). William Backus and Marie Chapien, *Telling Yourself the Truth* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1980).

brella integrates everything—from Freud to Skinner, from exorcism to healing of memories, from Carl Rogers to Jay Adams, from the inner child to repentance from sin.

It tends to be critical of the Flea Market pop psychologies. For example, Stan Jones and Richard Butman write, “Too much of what passes for integration today is anemic theologically or biblically and tends to be little more than a spiritualized rehashing of mainstream mental health thought” and “Christians doing integration have deserved much of the criticism they have received from the psychology-bashers.”⁴

One striking development in modern, sophisticated integrationism is that it attempts to enfold Jay Adams under the Big Umbrella. Scholarly integrationism does not have the knee-jerk hostility to Adams that characterized the integrationism of the 1970’s. They believe they have domesticated the “radically biblical” message, assimilating Adams as one further contributor to their eclectic melange. For example, Siang-Yang Tan’s lay counseling system is a syncretism of Jay Adams, Larry Crabb and Gary Collins. Here are two examples of recent Big Umbrella writing.

- Stanton Jones & Richard Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal*;
- Siang-Yang Tan, *Lay Counseling: Equipping Christians for a Helping Ministry*.⁵

What is at the bottom of the heart of man?

Here is the way these authors speak of the essential issues of human nature.

- Jones & Butman: “the Bible does not say much about human motivation,” but we can glean from Genesis 2 that people have fundamental needs for purposeful activity and loving relatedness to others (pages 47–49). “Biblically *heart* is what psychologists and philosophers often call our *self*” page 46).
- Tan: psychological and spiritual longings or needs for significance, love and hope (pages 34–37, 50f).

Some variety of need theory undergirds their view of human motivation, though it is not stated with the blatant self-centeredness of the Flea Market.

There are differences between Tan and Jones & Butman. Tan has overt affinities with what will be said below about Larry Crabb’s view of the heart. Here I will note two revealing aspects of Jones & Butman’s view of motivation. First, the comment, “The Bible does not say

much about human motivation,” stopped me in my tracks. How could they say that? The Bible that I read is fundamentally and pervasively *about* human motivation!

So why do Jones & Butman perceive Scripture as relatively empty? What they look for—and do not find in the Bible—is the sort of definition of motivation that secular psychologists pursue. Secularists want to define some list of drives, needs or core desires that motivate people *irrespective of our relationship to God*. They seek to define human nature in-and-of-itself, not with-respect-to-God; to analyze the heart *per se*, not *coram Deo*. Examples of discussions of motivation that might fit Jones & Butman’s criteria for “saying much” would be the following: Maslow’s hierarchy of needs; the behaviorists’ distinction between primary and secondary drives; Freud’s Eros and Thanatos and the conflict between id and super-ego compulsions. The Bible does not say much about human motivation in the sense Jones & Butman pursue because God defines the issues of the heart as pervasively with-respect-to-God or, in other words, “covenantal.”

Jones & Butman go on to define “the action” of human motivation as a need for purposeful activity and loving relatedness to others. I believe these things are better understood as self-evident spheres of human activity. Certainly human beings operate in the channels of interpersonal relationships and productive accomplishment. That is a truism, not a significant system-aligning truth. Jones & Butman miss *the* issue of motivation, relationship to God, that gets played out in these spheres and every other sphere of human functioning. If spheres of activity are so important, why limit the list to man as a social being (attuned to being loved) and a productive being (attuned to accomplishing something)? We could easily add many other spheres of significant and instinctive human activity. Man is obviously a somatic being, continually oriented towards sensual comfort or discomfort, pain or pleasure. Man is a meaning maker, always ordering and interpreting life. Man is an economic being, oriented towards money and possessions. Man is a political being, instinctively attuned to issues of power, authority and submission. Man is a moral being, always evaluating according to criteria of fair or unfair, good or evil. Man is a glory being, alert to issues of relative status and success. Man is an aesthetic being, creative and sensitive to beauty, metaphor, rhythm and order. Man is.... The pie can be sliced many ways.

Each of these spheres of human activity is abundantly illustrated within the Bible. However, listing them or prioritizing them turns out to be relatively inconsequential for understanding human motivation. Scripture subordinates all under its master category of

⁴Stanton Jones & Richard Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1991), page 411 and pages 29f.

⁵Stanton Jones & Richard Butman, see Note 3 above. Siang-Yang Tan, *Lay Counseling: Equipping Christians for a Helping Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991).

motivation: man is a *religious creature* who worships, serves, loves, hopes in, seeks, trusts, fears...something, either God or God-substitutes. So there is a great divide in man's social nature, between whether people are attuned to being loved or attuned to loving. There is a great divide in man's economic nature, between whether people are attuned to financial advantage and disadvantage or attuned to gratitude, contentment and generosity. There is a great divide, a *religious divide*, in every sphere. Jones & Butman, like the secular psychologists on whom they model their idea of what a motivation theory should accomplish, strain at gnats and ignore the camel. They view Scripture as deficient with regard to human motivation because God is unconcerned to provide a systematic catalogue of gnats!

Second, how should we understand Jones & Butman's comment about the equivalence of the biblical *heart* with the secular idea of *self*? This comment nicely illustrates the fundamental weakness in integrationist anthropology and epistemology. Integrationists see synonyms where a closer look reveals antonyms. In biblical anthropology, *heart* has to do with man's relationship either to God or to false gods of world, flesh and devil. The issue of the heart is the question, "Who or what rules me? For which voice(s) do I have ears?" Contrary to Jones & Butman's assertion, not a single one of the psychologists or philosophers to whom they refer mean "man-with-respect-to-God" when they speak of self as the core of human identity. They mean "man-in-and-of-himself," an idea absolutely foreign to the Bible, except as a description of the way sinners would *like* to think of themselves. Secular thinkers would prefer to interpret man as self rather than as heart-before-God because they are secular.

The idea of self in secular philosophers and psychologists is not an equivalent term for the biblical idea of heart. It is a *functional* equivalent; that is, a counterfeit and substitute. To say "Biblically *heart* is what psychologists and philosophers often call our *self*" is rather like saying "Chemically *sugar* is what dieters call *saccharine*." Nonsense. The two are different things, and the latter substitutes for and counterfeits the former. Hence it is completely logical that no secular thinker sees repentance unto Jesus Christ, the new heart and the power of the Holy Spirit as the center of significant change. Their faulty anthropology forbids such answers and prescribes other answers. Jones & Butman seriously underestimate the noetic effects of sin on systems of thought that seek to describe, explain and change human beings.

How do we know what is true?

Jones & Butman (chapter 15) teach—and Tan (chap-

ters 3 & 4) exemplifies—a frank but avowedly "responsible" eclecticism. It "makes infinite sense" to select and combine in orderly fashion "compatible features from diverse sources, sometimes from otherwise incompatible theories and systems; the effort to find valid elements in all doctrines and theories and to combine them into a harmonious whole."⁶ The integrity of the individual integrator is the ultimate guarantor of truth; the mind and practice of the individual integrator is the ultimate location where truth is forged. In so doing, the Big Umbrella denies that Scripture gives the "harmonious whole" up front as God's point of view—Truth—about human beings.

Specific exegesis plays no role in the trenches of counseling theory and practice for Jones & Butman. Their Christian control beliefs are high-flying theological generalities open to speculative and idiosyncratic application. After stating the obvious fact that the Bible is not exhaustively encyclopedic (it does not contain every fact), they go on to conclude that, therefore, the Bible is useful only in a very general way:

While the Bible provides us with life's most important and ultimate answers as well as the starting points for knowledge of the human condition, it is not an all-sufficient guide for the discipline of counseling. The Bible is inspired and precious, but it is also a revelation of limited scope, the main concern of which is religious in its presentation of God's redemptive plan for his people and the great doctrines of the faith.⁷

Sweet sentiments aside, the Bible is deficient. They misunderstand the nature of the Word of God. While the theology of Jones & Butman is full of sweeping generalizations, the theology of the Bible rivets us to the details of the real life struggles of human beings. Jones & Butman ignore the very things the Bible is useful *for* when they discuss the supposed teaching of II Timothy 3:16f that the Bible is only a "useful" resource among many resources.⁸

Of course, nouthetic counselors agree that the Bible is not exhaustively encyclopedic. We use and pursue extrabiblical information continuously. We gather data from a bickering couple, for example, eagerly pursuing those extrabiblical details that are grist for the mill of biblical truth! We may freely comment, "Bill, when you said those things to Sue in an angry tone..." without apology stringing together four extrabiblical things in a row (Bill, the things said, Sue, the angry tone). But we draw the opposite conclusion from Jones & Butman

⁶Jones & Butman, *op. cit.*, page 382.

⁷*Ibid.*, page 27.

⁸*Ibid.*, page 26.

when we say that Scripture is not an exhaustive catalogue of every fact about every person in every time and every place.

We know—and they do not believe—that the Bible is comprehensively sufficient as a guide for the discipline of counseling. Scripture guides the questions asked in data gathering; it explains and exposes the motives for Bill's anger; it maps out in detail the way of peacemaking. For example, James 3 and 4, Ephesians 4, Matthew 7 and 18, and Galatians 5 and 6 are *about* what is going on between Bill and Sue and between each of them and God. In fact, it is exactly the breadth of Scripture's scope and the relevance of Scripture's details that impress us. Human life is essentially religious down to the details of behavior, thought, emotion and motivation; Scripture applies. Those great doctrines of the faith—and the hosts of tiny instructions as well—include all the categories for understanding human beings and all the pastoral practices that God the Holy Spirit uses to change people. Jones & Butman's "responsible eclecticism" in the last analysis is simply a sophisticated version of "every man did what was right in his own eyes."

Sophisticated integrationists seek to distance themselves from the grotesque wares hawked in the Flea Market. But often a "naive" outsider sees more clearly what clothing the emperor wears. Sociologist James Hunter's *American Evangelicalism* analyzed the accommodation of contemporary evangelicalism to modern culture.⁹ In one section he compares the differences between the crude and the sophisticated psychologizers of evangelical faith:

[Their] analyses differ in degree of sophistication. At one level there is the crude psychologizing of biblical language and imagery...At the highest level, there is the synthesis of biblicism and humanistic or Freudian psychology...Yet the substantive difference is superficial, for what they all share is a *psychological Christocentrism*—a view of authentic mental and emotional health as rooted in the "establishment of a harmonious relationship with God through Jesus Christ..."¹⁰

He describes this psychologized faith as subjective, preoccupied with the self and "mental health," hedonistic, narcissistic, and oriented to address the "sensitivities and 'needs' of modern man."¹¹ It teaches a type of self-examination that departs from ways Protestants

⁹James Davison Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1983). Note the chapter, "Accommodation: The Domestication of Belief," in particular pages 91–99.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, page 95.

¹¹*Ibid.*, page 99.

traditionally searched their lives because of their paramount concern for "the rule of sin in the life and the process of mortification and sanctification."¹² For all the stated differences between sophisticated and chaotic integrationists, they have major items in common: (1) a man-centered view of what is "deep" in the "core" of man, and (2) a systematic embrace of secular psychology's "riches" because of Scripture's inadequacy for the task of significant self-understanding and change. Logically, they also share a third major item: a revised gospel that makes Christ the servant of the emotional and psychological "needs" of human beings.

3. "Good Intentions Notwithstanding": Covert Integrationism

This is a seemingly unwitting integrationism—it claims to oppose psychology and to work in biblical categories. But psychological categories slip into the very foundation stones. The chief example is:

•Larry Crabb, *Understanding People: Deep Longings for Relationship*.¹³

What is at the bottom of the heart of man?

To his credit, Crabb is very critical of both the careless integration of the Flea Market and the careful integration of the Big Umbrella. But the systematic parallels between Crabb and other integrationists are hard to miss.

Crabb's explanation of human motives posits needs or yearnings for relational love and significant accomplishment. Idolatrous demands and sinful life strategies are secondary reactions and compensations, wrong ways of going about getting these needs met.

Crabb's need theory is not stated with the blatant, sinless self-centeredness of the Flea Market. But his system still pivots around the human experience of inner yearning or pain, taking those experiences at face value; the needy, wounded, longing heart of Crabb's "personal circle" underlies sin. The Bible's view of the heart is the opposite; life pivots around our relationship with God or false gods, not around the idolatrous felt needs of sinners.

How do we know what is true?

For Crabb exegesis of Scripture is the avowed starting point.¹⁴ "Biblical categories are sufficient for answering the questions a counselor will ask...[Our task] is to think about life within the categories that the Scrip-

¹²*Ibid.*, page 94.

¹³Lawrence J. Crabb, Jr., *Understanding People: Deep Longings for Relationship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

¹⁴*Ibid.*, page 65f.

tures provide...The authority for our thinking depends on the degree to which it *necessarily emerges from clearly taught biblical categories.*"¹⁵ These are statements to which every nouthetic counselor subscribes.

But where does Crabb in fact get his system-shaping categories? Scripture nowhere yields Crabb's view of "deep yearnings/needs for relationship and impact"; his Jesus Who encounters us primarily as the meeter of our needs; his reductionistic analysis of the psyche into four nested circles of emotion, volition, rationality and need; his distinction between casual, critical and crucial longings; his definition of ontological maleness and femaleness. These ideas are the drive train and steering mechanism of Crabb's distinctives. These ideas are explicit betrayals of Crabb's stated goal. These ideas are exegetically and theologically insupportable. "Every man did what was right in his own eyes." Good intentions are no hedge against the noetic effects of sin on systems of thought.

The Fundamental Critique: What unifies these outwardly diverse forms of integrationism?

Both the Big Umbrella and Good Intentions Notwithstanding abhor the excesses of the Flea Market and seek to distance themselves from such conspicuously bad theology and careless uses of psychology. But in the last analysis all integrationism evidences a defective view of human nature and a defective functional epistemology. For them sin is never *the* specific issue that underlies problems in living. And the categories that emerge from specific exegesis of Scripture are never *the* significant categories for understanding and helping people.

1. "What is at the bottom of the heart of man?": The question of anthropology

Biblically the heart of man is the crucible where the First Great Commandment plays out: Do you love, fear, trust, serve and listen to God? Or do you love, fear, trust, serve and listen to idols, self, other people, your own performance, mammon, Satan and cravings (for love, importance, self-esteem, control, among a horde of other things)? In other words, the law of God cuts to the very deepest issues of human life, not just in high-flown theory but in the trenches of daily life: behavior, thinking, emotions, priorities, relationships, attitudes, conscience, desires and the rest.

J. C. Ryle commented astutely.

There are very few errors and false doctrines of which the beginning may not be traced up to unsound views about the corruption of human nature.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, page 70, emphasis his.

Wrong views of a disease will always bring with them wrong views of a remedy. Wrong views of the corruption of human nature will always carry with them wrong views of the grand antidote and cure of that corruption.

It is striking how all three forms of integrationism—chaotic, sophisticated and covert—converge in their view of the core of man. For all their differences they are all fundamentally man-centered. Integrationists systematically make human needs and desires fundamental. They baptize certain lusts of the flesh as "needs." As need theories, rather than sin theories, they typically focus attention on supposed basic needs for love or to feel good about ourselves or to accomplish something worthwhile. In the logic of each theory the human heart is fundamentally good, but because of the rough sledding of life in a fallen world hearts become empty, needy, yearning, and wounded.

All integrationists subscribe by profession of Christian faith to the fact of sin. All profess to believe in human responsibility. Many make incidental comments along the way that are wise and perceptive. (Naturally, such "happy contradictions" are more frequent in some than in others.) All profess to believe Mark 7:21–23: "From within, out of the heart of men, come..." But the logic of a psychologized system defines that heart in such a way that "out of the wounded, needy, legitimately yearning heart come..." The ultimate WHY for our problems is *logically* in those other people who wounded us, who did not meet our needs, who left our longings unfulfilled.

My emphasis has been on the basic logic of integrationist teaching. The "happy contradictions" in these writers are matters for which God can be praised. But it is hard to cheer authors who so relentlessly attempt to build on faulty foundations. We nouthetic counselors have many failings. But I believe that by the grace of God we are fundamentally right and occasionally wrong, foolish and blind. May God give us a heart both to hold fast to what we have been given and to press forward, repenting of our sins and growing in wisdom. But integrationists are fundamentally wrong and, by the grace of God, occasionally right, wise and perceptive. That difference is a world of difference, and may God give many integrationists a heart to turn from a fundamental and destructive error.

2. "How do we know what is true?": The question of epistemology

Scripture is comprehensively sufficient for understanding those aspects of human nature and those processes of change that are essential for wise and effective counseling.

It is striking how all three forms of integrationism—chaotic, sophisticated and covert—converge in the way they construct their basic ideas. For all their differences each is fundamentally eclectic and self-willed rather than exegetical and systematically submissive to the Word of God. Each is receptive to secular misinterpretations of human life. Each fails to build a consistently biblical system that stands up exegetically and theologically. The great doctrines of the faith are variously ignored, compromised, amalgamated with other things, or unbalanced by picking and choosing. The eclectic tendency of the integrationist mind-set does not yield nourishing food for the body of Christ. Integrationists do not exegete Scripture; they eisegete and proof-text, sometimes recklessly.

* * *

How should biblical Christians view and use psychology?

Having critiqued the use of psychology by integrationists, what can be said about how biblical Christians should view psychology? This is a crucial question because my critique of integrationism emerges from a positive understanding of how the Bible calls us to interact with error. This is also a large question, and what I say here will only sketch the broad contours of an answer.

The so-called “truths” of psychology are analogous to the “truth” an angry pagan wife might say as she curses out her sinning, Christian husband: “You’re married to your job, not to me, you #%*X@! Every word out of your mouth is sniping and mean. I wish you were even a little bit kind and considerate of me and the kids.” Has she spoken “truth”? As biblical counselors we answer both “Yes” and “No,” and unpack what we mean carefully.

This woman may be devastatingly accurate about her husband in certain respects. She sees the speck in his eye (analogous to the descriptive accuracy of many psychological observations and case studies). But she ignores many other relevant facts about him (just as psychologists do). And her conclusions are shot through with deadly error and demand drastic reinterpretation from a wise counselor. She has no idea that what she so perceptively describes is his sin against God first. Neither does she know that her explanation (“You are chiefly offending ME”) and the implications she draws (“I have a right to bring wrath against you”) reflect her sin against God. She has no idea of the Gospel’s way of changing both her and him. She has no idea of how to win him or confront him in a godly way. Her interpretive schema is godless—or, rather, places the human

interpreter in the place of God. The “counseling” implications she draws serve the interests of her own autonomy from God. Biblical counselors turn her observations and concerns inside out and upside down. From what she has said, we’ve learned a number of useful and provocative things about both her and (possibly, we need to check it out) her husband. But we don’t buy her schema for a minute because Scripture gives us a different set of eyeglasses.

Secular psychologists are like this angry counselee as they observe, theorize and practice. They notice many things but bend everything to evade the God-relatedness of what they see. The cornerstone of the biblical interaction with psychology is to recognize the pervasive antithesis between biblical truth and secular psychology. Contrary to how biblical counselors are caricatured, we did not initiate this hostility! Psychologists initiate the antithesis to God’s truth as they systematically express the noetic effect of their sin. The *à priori* assumption that they can explain people truly without reference to God commits psychologists to systematic error. Integrationists wash away or pay lip service to this antithesis; biblical counselors restore the antithesis.

What role, if any, should psychology then have in our model of counseling? It should play *no* role in our *model* of counseling. But, radically reinterpreted, secular observations could play an illustrational role, providing examples and details that illustrate the biblical model and fill out our knowledge. They could also play a provocative role, challenging us to develop our model in areas we may never have thought about or may have neglected. Jay Adams stated this succinctly in *Competent to Counsel*. Psychology could be a “useful adjunct” in two ways: (1) “for the purposes of illustrating, filling in generalizations with specifics”; and (2) “challenging wrong human interpretations of Scripture, thereby forcing the student to restudy the Scriptures.”¹⁶ In reviewing the past fifteen years of *The Journal of Pastoral Practice*, I was struck by how consistently writers built on the fundamental antithesis between biblical and secular presuppositions and utilized secular psychology (and other secular sources) in these illustrational and provocative roles.¹⁷

¹⁶ Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 1970), page xxi. Compare *The Christian Counselor’s Manual* (USA: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973), pages 76–93; “Counseling and the Sovereignty of God,” cited in Footnote 1; and “Integration,” *The Journal of Pastoral Practice*, VI:1 (1983), pages 3–7, reprinted in *How to Help People Change* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), pages 33–40.

¹⁷ Adams and other biblical counselors have also used psychology in a third way as a co-belligerent. The intramural critiques one psychologist makes of another—e.g. Szasz’s and Mowrer’s

These illustrational and provocative roles of psychology are no different from the way wise biblical counselors utilize every other source of extrabiblical knowledge. Here are a few examples of distorted, extrabiblical knowledge that the eyeglasses of Scripture equip us to utilize by reinterpreting constructively:

- the observations of that angry counselee—or *any* counselee who is not thinking biblically! Biblical counselors continually reinterpret the data they hear, filling out our categories with fresh details. This reinterpretive labor is at the heart both of counseling and of the counselor's growth in becoming case-wise and mature;

- mystery novels, in which greed, pride, fear, lust and many other motives are portrayed in action. Fiction of any kind is not to be read as epistemologically authoritative. But if biblical categories control, such literature extends the range of our application of Scripture and forces us to think about things or notice things we might not have attended to previously;

- the daily newspaper, which is a pig wallow of mammon worship, power politics and gossip about sin. Biblical preachers may quote newspapers not because the papers are authoritative but because they illustrate biblical truth and may make us stop to think about things we've never considered;

- medical research into "psychosomatic" relationships and their prevalence. We don't buy their categories but can appreciate—and reinterpret—their observations as illustrations of "spiritual-physiological" relationships;

- sociology, history, archeology, comparative anthropology, etc. As with psychology, the consistent Christian refuses to accept these as norm-setting disciplines. Such studies of human life—when explicitly based on biblical presuppositions or when consistently reinterpreted through the lens of biblical presuppositions—may be of

indictments of the psychiatric establishment—serve as an adjunct to the normative presuppositional critique we make from Scripture. This is a subset of the provocative use of psychology: e.g., Mowrer's belligerency to the psychodynamic establishment played a catalytic role in the founding of nouthetic counseling as a distinctively biblical "anti-psychiatry." It is also a subset of the illustrational use: e.g., that some secular people see that certain secular theories are not true and that certain secular practices are not helpful illustrates and buttresses our critique. Among the critics of psychology, Martin and Deidre Bobgan are the ones who most frequently use psychology illustrationally as their co-belligerent. They frequently muster counter-evidential research from secular psychologists to debunk the psychologies Christians drink in.

¹⁸cf. Jay Adams, *More Than Redemption: A Theology of Christian Counseling* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1979), page 101, and *Communicating with 20th Century Man* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1979), page 33, for discussions of the descriptive utility of sociology if under the reign of biblical presuppositions.

use in describing a given people at some point in time¹⁸;

- self-knowledge of my own sins and temptations. My personal application of I Corinthians 10:12,13 does not create truth but illustrates, amplifies and personalizes truth.

None of these sources *adds* anything to a biblical model of human nature and counseling. Each of these sources illustrates, unwittingly or wittingly, a biblical model of people in lush detail: "Now there's an aspect of anger I've never seen before." Each may provoke me to think biblically about something I haven't really considered: "How would I tackle *that* problem or help *that* person?" Debunk psychologists of their pretensions to expert knowledge, to "science," and they have the same twisted and blinkered perceptiveness of any other group of sinners. They may perhaps do empirical legwork that we do not have to repeat. But we must radically reinterpret what they see according to biblical truth. This reinterpretive labor—whether in the counseling office, in our closet, or in our reading—is a logical extension of grasping the pervasive antithesis between biblical truth and human error. What are psychologists—and counselees, novelists, M.D.'s and others—*really* looking at?¹⁹

Let me give one final example. This twisted usefulness of psychological observation is no different than the possible "usefulness" of reading a novel such as Thomas Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Wolfe portrays in action many generic human idolatries and sins (things I know from the Bible), giving them their particular "New York City, 1980s" color and detail (things I did not know previously, not having lived in New York). Could *Bonfire of the Vanities* "help" me counsel a jet-set New Yorker? It has already, not because I buy Thomas Wolfe's interpretive grid or relish the sleaze he depicts, but because the biblical model readily explains his observations of people.

Biblical counselors face a twofold challenge: to hold faithfully to the categories of biblical truth *and* to grow case-wise about diverse human beings. Jay Adams put it this way:

Sin, then, in all of its dimensions, clearly is the problem with which the Christian counselor must grapple.

It is the secondary dimensions—the variations on the

¹⁹ See Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual* (USA: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973), pages 76–93, for a fuller portrayal of how biblical presuppositions demand seeing the antithesis and enable a reinterpretive labor. For specific examples of reinterpretations of secular observation, see David Powlison, "Human Defensiveness: The Third Way," *The Journal of Pastoral Practice*, VIII:1 (1985), pages 40–55; "Idols of the Heart and 'Vanity Fair,'" *Areopagus*, II:1 (Summer 1991), pages 2–21; "Integration or Inundation?," cited in Footnote 2; and "What Do You Feel?," *The Journal of Pastoral Practice*, X:4 (1992), pages 50–61.

common themes—that make counseling so difficult. While all men are born sinners and engage in the same sinful practices and dodges, each develops his own styles of sinning. The styles (combinations of sins and dodges) are peculiar to each individual; but beneath them are the common themes. It is the counselor's work to discover these commonalities beneath the individualities.²⁰

Scripture alone makes us systematically wise into the commonalities of human life. That wisdom then matures and becomes case-wise through practice in applying Scripture to our own lives, to counselees, to the things we read. Every wise biblical counselor engages in lifelong empirical researches, informally if not formally. In this process psychologists, sociologists, historians, counselees, the non-Christians who live next door, *USA Today* and Agatha Christie may contribute to our grasp of the styles and how they develop. Often in counseling or reading—and even in our own repentance!—we will have to take the *re-interpretive* step that turns everything upside down and inside out.²¹

Biblical counselors who fail to think through carefully the nature of biblical epistemology run the danger of acting as if Scripture were exhaustive, rather than comprehensive; as if Scripture were an encyclopedic catalogue of all significant facts, rather than God's revelation of the crucial facts, richly illustrated, that yield a world view sufficient to interpret whatever other facts we encounter; as if Scripture were the whole bag of marbles rather than the eyeglasses through which we interpret all marbles; as if our current grasp of Scripture and people were triumphant and final. Integrationists view Scripture as a small bag of marbles and psychology as a large bag of marbles. The logic of integrationist epistemology is this: Put the two bags together, weeding out the obviously bad marbles in psychology, and you have more marbles. But it is easy for would-be biblical counselors to view the Scripture as simply a huge bag of marbles. This epistemological position differs from the epistemology of integrationists only in quantity, not quality. It leads either to absurd forms of proof-texting ("There must be a verse in here on anorexia somewhere.") or to substituting pat answers for careful pastoral wisdom ("First Timothy 4:3–5 says to eat with thankfulness; repent of not eating and follow this eating

plan.") or to capitulating to integrationism in the wake of counseling failures ("Maybe the Bible doesn't contain all the marbles after all; it is only one useful resource for acquiring marbles, among many other sources.").²²

The Scriptures provide both the eyeglasses (interpretive categories that are true) and a vast number of concrete examples. But the Bible never pretends to provide all the examples. God demands that we put on our eyeglasses and think hard, well and biblically about people. For example, ponder the implications of Galatians 5:19–21. Paul lists 15 representative examples of those works which the flesh's desires produce. He brackets that list with two comments that remind us to put on our biblical glasses, look around us, and notice 115 (or 1015!) other examples: "The works of the flesh are *obvious...and the like*." Consider I Timothy 6:10: what are the *countless specific forms* of sin that a craving for money produces? Consider James 3:16: What *countless variations and permutations* of chaos and sin arise when people are self-absorbed in pride and demandingness? The sufficiency of Scripture challenges us to hard thinking and close observation of both individuals and cultures.

Sufficiency does not allow us to relax into the encyclopedia or concordance mentality. I have met biblical counselors who operated as if a problem not listed in the Bible is not a problem. They fail to appreciate the scope of biblical sufficiency. They fail to grasp that such problems *are* listed implicitly—within the "and the like" and "every evil practice." They fail to do the hard thinking to demonstrate *how* the common themes of biblical truth underlie the idiosyncrasies and complexities of human sin, misery, chaos and confusion.

I have also met a number of people who once were "biblical counselors" but became disillusioned, turning towards integrationism and the "riches" of secular psychology. These are people, however, whose epistemology had grave defects. Their bag-of-marbles epistemology made the Bible promise both more (an exhaustive encyclopedia) and less (an exhaustive encyclopedia!) than the real Bible promises. When their grasp of the Bible proved disappointing in the face of human sin and suffering, psychology stepped persuasively into the gap. Psychology's abundance of hitherto unrecognized marbles made psychology's theories and techniques—its distorting glasses and fun-house mirrors—seem wonderfully persuasive. We must remember that most integrationists were once conservative "Bible Christians." Their bag-of-marbles epistemology came in for

²⁰ Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual* (USA: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973), pages 124f.

²¹ Of course, we do not always need to utilize that intervening *re-interpretive* step, if we begin with biblical categories. Ideally, we—and any psychologists worthy of the name—will gather data about people with biblical categories operative from the start.

²² See Elyse Fitzpatrick's "Helping Anorexics" on pages 19-23 of this issue of *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* for an approach that probes the problem of anorexia using biblical eyeglasses.

rude shocks during their higher education or when they struggled with personal problems or the problems of counselees. Their suddenly insufficient Bible yielded to seemingly greater secular "wisdom." This same dynamic will continue to occur among biblical counselors unless we accurately define the meaning of Scripture's sufficiency. Is the Bible a bag of marbles or the all-sufficient eyeglasses of truth—with lots of illustrative marbles—by which God corrects our sin-tainted vision? The ability of biblical counselors to deal wisely with our own sins, to counsel wisely and to defend our position effectively hinges on the answer.

Doing Ministry to the Psychologized

How do you convince integrationists that there is a better way of viewing people and helping people? Typically you will run into two sorts of integrationists in your church or school: Christians with problems and Christians who want to help those with problems. Usually these people will be naive integrationists—chaotic or unwitting—rather than philosophically committed integrationists. Typically they are Christians who have not thought systematically about what they believe and so have accumulated an eclectic mix of contradictory ideas about life, problems and solutions. Many prove very responsive to biblical truth.

How do you do ministry of the Word to such people? Let me sketch a worst-case scenario. A person in your church comes to you and says, "I'm a codependent with low self-esteem and I really need to learn to love myself because of the deep wounds to my inner child from my dysfunctional family." (Or, as a variant, a would-be counselor in your church says of someone else, "He/she is a codependent....") What a mouthful! Several historical facts and biblical convictions lay important foundations on which to construct a pastoral strategy adapted to your hearer:²³

1. The Bible never teaches that "low self-esteem" is the crucial issue. Gaining biblically accurate self-knowledge and knowledge of God is crucial.

2. The Bible never teaches that we have a need to love ourselves. It assumes we love ourselves inordinately and are self-absorbed (even when we "hate" ourselves). We need to learn to love God and neighbor.²⁴

²³See Jay E. Adams's "Adaptation through Audience Analysis" on pages 35–37 of this issue of *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*. This article, with Adams's book *Studies in Preaching, Volume II: Audience Adaptation in the Sermons and Speeches of Paul* (USA: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976), presents a challenge to ministers of the Word to labor at adapting truth without accommodating it.

²⁴On these first two points, see Jay E. Adams, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image* (USA: Harvest House, 1986)

3. The categories that this psychologized person uses are an eclectic potpourri imbibed from godless sources: Alcoholics Anonymous, the recovery movement, psychodynamic psychology and humanistic psychology.²⁵

How do we use these bedrock truths? Few psychologized people are convinced by hearing these three bedrock truths served up as raw meat. How will you cook, garnish and serve, and so *apply truth* in effective ministry?

First, gather the facts which truth calls you to know. You are not debating in a book or a lecture hall where ideas are kicked about as intellectual abstractions. You are talking to a person, committed, at least temporarily, to falsehoods. You must climb into his life. For example, "Tell me everything you mean by those words with which you just described yourself. What specific actions, emotions, thoughts and experiences do you have in mind? When are you depressed? When do you 'hate yourself'? What do you say to yourself? What do you do or not do because you 'feel so insecure'? In what ways are you a relationship junkie? When, where and with whom do such reactions show up? What was your family like: sins, beliefs and values, models?" As you, the counselor, dig behind the distorted labels you will find concrete realities that can be reinterpreted biblically.

You will frequently find, for example, (an implication of conviction 1, above) a person who *does not know* that he lives sinfully, pursuing human approval, pursuing his own standards of accomplishment as a form of self-righteousness, attempting to control life's circumstances to maximize personal advantage and comfort. The dawn of accurate self-knowledge arrives. Reigning ignorance—in the biblical sense—can yield to true self-knowledge. You will find (an implication of conviction 2) a person who *loves* those many things just described, who loves them "heart, soul, mind and might" more than God, and who "loves [him]self" more than neighbor. Such attitudes and desires give birth to many specific sins (James 1:14f; 3:16): anger, grumbling, fears, anxiety, self-pity, blame-shifting, escapism, manipulating, fawning, playing the chameleon, immorality....

"The fear of the LORD" enters and wisdom dawns. Intelligent repentance and humbling before God becomes possible. Light pierces the darkness. You will find

and John Bettler, "Gaining an Accurate Self-Image" (Parts I–VI, *The Journal of Pastoral Practice*, VI:4, VII:1–4, VIII:2).

²⁵See Edward Welch, "Codependency and the Cult of Self" in Michael Horton, ed., *Power Religion* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), pages 219–243; William Playfair, *The Useful Lie* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 1991); Martin Bobgan and Deidre Bobgan, *12 Steps to Destruction* (Santa Barbara, California: East Gate, 1991).

(implication of conviction 3) a person who has imbibed false explanations from the culture that have left him deceived and stuck. Truth comes as light, honey and a way out: "Now I *see* a much better way to understand myself. *This* really makes sense, where those other labels just left me feeling stuck and even more hopeless."

The counselor who works wisely stands able to help a confused and wandering person renew his mind, repent, and find the light of truth, love and life. Because you have gotten to know the person well, you gain the ability to polish the arrows of truth, to aim them into *this* individual's life, standing his current understandings on their head, and opening the door for the gospel of Jesus Christ to enter. The general bedrock truths have been worked and applied, to bring about specific conviction of lies believed, lusts pursued, and sins committed.

The goal of biblically reinterpreting human experience—whether described by a counselee or a psychologist—is not "look how much we can learn from them." The goal is the ministry of the Word that converts the soul. We can say more than "Psychology and psychotherapy are systematically wrong-headed." We can show exactly *how* they are wrong-headed, and lay out in detail the biblical alternative that challenges and converts.

On the one hand, integrationists do not see that the payoff of a valid biblical interaction with psychology must be the conversion of the psychologized. On the other hand biblical counselors who do not do the hard work of reinterpreting error, standing it on its head, miss an opportunity for effective ministry. Psychology is to our society as Islam is to Morocco. Let's wield the evangelistic sword effectively.

A Final Word

Modern integrationism stands in basic continuity to the older integrationism. Some new forms are more grotesque: the Flea Market of Christianized pop psychologies. Some new forms are more polished, scholarly and even say some nice things about their critics: the Big Umbrella of theoretical integrationism. Some new forms even sound the notes of biblical authority and sufficiency: those who, Good Intentions Notwithstanding, still construct systems in a secular mold. But in each of its forms, the integrationist paradigm is an unbiblical paradigm, both for conducting counseling and for interacting with the world of secular psychology. Biblical counselors must live and teach the church the alternative.