

FOUR MODELS OF COUNSELING IN PASTORAL MINISTRY

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Anyone engaged in pastoral ministry today is faced with various frameworks for counseling. This article identifies four main spheres of counseling, the similarities and differences between them, and how one can carefully engage biblical principles in modern-day counseling.

INTRODUCTION

A major issue facing those doing pastoral ministry today is the question of the place of counseling. Let me frame the problem in general terms: Some ministers realize that many churches have uncritically adopted secular models of counseling based on the expressive individualism of the Enlightenment and modern romanticism. In reaction to this, many others have virtually ignored the importance of counseling in the shepherding of God's flock. They seem to assume that strong preaching and exhortations to repentance and obedience will suffice to help people with their problems. Is there a way to avoid either of these inadequate positions?

During the early twentieth century modern psychology was largely ignored by American Protestants. In the 1950's and 1960's, some Christian scholars (mostly at Fuller Seminary, Rosemead School of Psychology, and the Christian Association for Psychological Studies) began the *Integration Model* for counseling and psychology. Then, in the 1970's, Jay Adams at Westminster Theological Seminary reacted to this trend and formulated the *Biblical Counseling* approach (originally called "nouthetic counseling.") He saw counseling as simply applying the Scripture to people's hearts through exhortation and coaching, and he placed no emphasis on plumbing the depths of the person's past.

Soon, however, rumblings began to be heard to the left of Integrationism. Some Christians, mostly among those working in the world of academic psychology, developed the *Levels of Explanation Model*, an approach that was even more friendly to modern psychology than the original Integration Model was. On the other hand, further rumblings also were heard to the right of Integrationism. During the last ten to fifteen years, some have felt that the Integrationists were conceding too much to modern psychology. They wanted a much sharper critique of psychological theories, yet they did not want to identify with the Biblical Counseling movement. Some have called this *Christian Psychology*. The Christian Association for Psychological Studies (CAPS) organization split. The continuing CAPS group is more open to modern psychology and the Levels of Explanation Model, while the new organization, the American Association of Christian Counselors (AACC), is by far the larger and includes Integrationists and others more critical of modern psychology. Meanwhile, there were many within the Biblical Counseling movement who had come to see Adams's approach as too simplistic, based on a naive understanding of "the flesh," and ultimately too moralistic. All of these changes have caused the options for Christian counseling to become varied and complex.

In the 1970's I took courses in counseling at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary under professors who were Integrationists leaning strongly toward the validity of psychology. My wife Kathy took her degree in counseling at Gordon-Conwell under the same teachers. In the middle of our seminary career, however, we went to

Philadelphia and took an intensive course in advanced pastoral counseling from Jay Adams to get the other side. (Back then these two positions were the only options.) Adams made more sense to us than what we had received at Gordon-Conwell, and for my first nine years of ministry in which I had an extremely heavy counseling load I leaned on Adams's approach and material.

I began to notice, however, some limitations to his approach: it focuses almost exclusively on a person's behavior to the point of ignoring issues of the heart and motivation. During the 1980's when I taught at Westminster Theological Seminary I became personal friends with the younger counselors at the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF). These teachers and counselors were making revisions to Adams's counseling model. Meanwhile I was also close friends with Tremper Longman, whose associates Dan Allender and Larry Crabb were trying to mark out a position somewhat more open to psychology than Biblical Counseling but less open to it than Integrationism. They received rather strong critiques from CCEF.

I am not a teacher of counseling, nor have I written anything about it (except this paper!) So I hardly think of myself as having marked out some new, perfectly balanced position. Rather, I am a working pastor, and over the years I've had to ask myself, "In light of all these options and positions, what kind of counsel and counseling should I be giving to my people?" What follows is my answer to that question.

UNDERSTANDING FOUR MODELS OF COUNSELING¹

1. LEVELS OF EXPLANATION MODEL

Affiliated groups: Christian Association for Psychological Studies (CAPS); *The Journal of Psychology and Christianity*; Fuller Seminary School of Psychology

Basic premise: Psychology and biblical theology deal with different dimensions of human life, use different methods of study, ask different questions, and look at two different things. The Bible looks at the human spirit and relationship to God. Psychology looks at how the human brain functions, how people adapt and react to natural and social environments. Psychology and biblical theology, therefore, provide insights that are complementary and not contradictory to one another. They should be kept distinct. Psychology is a science that, when conducted properly, goes a long way to eliminate the biases of the researcher.

Bottom line: No real biblical critique of modern psychology.

Criticism: In actuality, modern psychology and biblical theology *do* look at many of the same things: motivations, suffering, abuse, anger, worry, fear, a desire for meaning in life, and so on. Thus, this view does not really take seriously the strength and comprehensiveness of the claims of either psychology or theology. The only possible way to hold that psychology and theology operate independently of one another at different "levels" is to support the view (ironically, a very specific theological view) that the soul and the spirit are two different things. The final result is that the Bible is not permitted access to parts of human life over which it claims authority.

The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has demonstrated that empirical science can only describe what *is*, never what people *ought to do*.² As soon as you move from description (*is*) to prescription (*ought*), you have moved out of the realm of science into the realm of morals, religion, and values. Science might prove, for example, that there is a biological basis for a certain kind of behavior, but it cannot prove that a person should resist the behavior or acquiesce to it. As soon as you move to *ought*, that is, to counseling, you are no longer a scientist.

Keep in mind that this approach, which tends to rankle Christians with a high view of the Bible, is mainly adhered to by Christian academics as a way to handle their research. It enables them to simply publish their research findings without having to submit them to a biblical critique. Most Christian counselors, even those very friendly to psychology, are more Integrationist.

1. The following is a summary of *Psychology and Christianity: Four Views*, eds. E. L. Johnson and S. L. Jones (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), supplemented by my own observations.

2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

2. INTEGRATION MODEL

Affiliated Groups: Rosemead School of Psychology at Biola University, La Mirada, CA; American Association of Christian Counselors; Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, MS

Basic premise: Psychology and biblical theology are both looking at the same thing—human nature, what’s gone wrong with it, and how it can be made right. But they are using two different tools to study human beings, “general revelation” (scientific observation) and “special revelation” (the will of God revealed in the Bible). Integrationists combine the insights of science with the insights of the Bible, and where the two conflict, they want to allow the Bible to hold sway. Thus in the Integration Model, unlike in the Levels of Explanation Model, the Bible is used to critique modern scientific psychology.

Bottom line: Provides some real biblical critique of modern psychology, but it can be rather inconsequential.

Criticism: This approach as stated—integrating psychology with the Bible—is simply too elastic. At one end of the spectrum it could mean simply supplementing a rather strong biblical approach with insights from psychology; at the other end it could mean adopting modern psychological counseling methods wholesale with just a sprinkling of supportive Bible references and prayer. It is no wonder that counseling associations based on this model have split. Counselors at opposite ends of the spectrum, both claiming to be Integrationist, could be extremely different in their approaches. In practical terms, the Integrationist counselor could use any psychological technique not directly ruled out by the Bible. So in the end it is important to realize that a counselor who says he or she is an Integrationist is not telling us much. That could mean almost anything.

3. CHRISTIAN PSYCHOLOGY MODEL

Affiliated Group: Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, MO

Basic premise: Counseling cannot be done with an eclectic grab bag of techniques and procedures. While everyone can gain insights for counseling from psychology, the real question is, “What is foundationally wrong with human beings and what will put them right?” The answer constitutes one’s theory-narrative of human nature, which is what fundamentally controls one’s counseling advice. The answer should come from biblical theology, since one’s theory-narrative cannot be deduced from science. The Christian Psychology model understands that psychology is not an objective, empirical science but is theory laden; it proceeds from underlying philosophical and religious assumptions about human nature, and it tries to locate the ultimate problem with people in something other than sin. Christian Psychology, therefore, insists that counselors must have a strong biblical theory-narrative as their foundation. The Bible must critique psychology systemically at its theory-narrative level, not in a piecemeal way emphasizing specific psychological practices. Unlike the Biblical Counseling model, however, this approach leaves counselors free to incorporate psychological insights, especially from modern theory-narratives that come closer to a Christian understanding of creation, fall, and redemption. This view also—more than any of the others—looks to the past, to the church fathers and traditional “soul physicians,” for insights.

Bottom line: A very strong critique of modern psychology, combined with a certain willingness to use psychological terms and techniques.

Criticism: The Biblical Counseling Model critiques this approach on the premise that it grants too much power to experts in counseling. The Biblical Counseling movement has always been an exercise in populism, a rebellion against the professionalization and elitism of psychology. Biblical Counseling contends that psychological insights and methods are tainted and warped by underlying false theory-narratives and worldviews; it dislikes using the terminology of modern psychology. But some of these differences may be mostly matters of temperament or judgment rather than major divergences based on principle.

4. BIBLICAL COUNSELING MODEL

Affiliated Groups: National Association of Nouthetic Counselors (NANC); Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF)

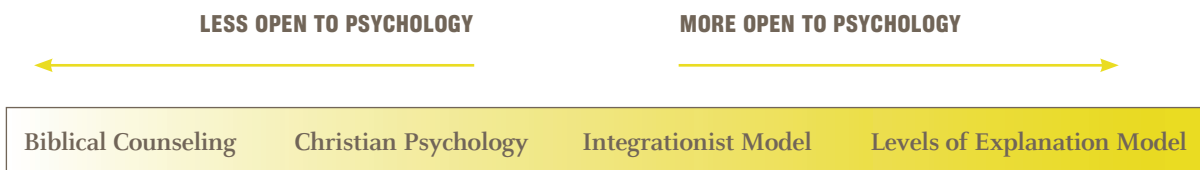
Basic premise: The Biblical Counseling movement is united by the conviction that modern psychology brings with it underlying, nonempirical, quasi-religious theory-narratives of human nature that don't fit with biblical revelation. Therefore, psychological insights should be used with extreme caution. The older approach, formulated by Jay Adams, put great emphasis on behavioral change and the adoption of patterns of biblical living. The newer generation has pointed out, gently but firmly, that this was basically a behavioral theory-narrative of human nature that ignored the heart and its motivations. The newer theory-narrative avoids making behavior the fundamental issue (as in behaviorism) or thinking (as in cognitive therapy) or emotions (as in psychodynamic object relations) or the will (as in existential humanistic psychology); rather, it emphasizes worship and faith. According to the Biblical Counseling model, our basic problem is that we worship and put our faith in lesser-god things. If this is the problem, neither simple acts of the will and right thinking (favored by more conservative counselors) nor loving relationships and emotional exploration (favored by more liberal counselors) will provide more than superficial help. The CCEF wing of the Biblical Counseling movement does incorporate insights from psychology but only very carefully. (For example, its understanding of idolatry and motivation is given some confirmation in Alfred Adler's psychology.)

Bottom line: This model represents the strongest critique of psychology and shows the least inclination to incorporate insights from that discipline.

Critique: The Biblical Counseling movement is somewhat divided, as noted above. Though the theory looks extremely attractive, it may be that it appeals to a certain kind of temperament, one that prefers exhortation to loving and listening. It is impossible to check the validity of the criticisms, but what is often said about counselors using this model is that they tend to do more confronting than comforting; they identify behavioral patterns rather than exploring deeper motivational issues and family background patterns; and they often use behavioral and cognitive therapy techniques anyway.

These criticisms are likely more applicable to hard-core factions of this movement than to more moderate practitioners. Still, the charge that Biblical Counseling therapists tend to simply call people to repent should be taken seriously. It may be that the practice of the movement in general is not nearly as nuanced as the articulate expressions of it. Many counselors in this tradition seem unwilling to explore the complex relationship between physiology and behavior—that is, a person with a real spiritual fear or anger problem may, at the same time, have a physiological makeup that greatly aggravates the problem. Many counselors in this tradition, though rightly speaking of “idols of the heart,” underestimate how long and complex a process it is to disentangle the heart from those idols.

Summary: Because the Biblical Counseling Model and the Integrationist Model comprise such a wide spectrum of practice, it is helpful to map out the positions, noted below, from the most open to psychology to the least.



REFLECTIONS ON THE DIFFERENCES IN MODELS

THE CONTROVERSY

Proponents of all four views agree, at least in theory, with the following statement: *God gives us knowledge of human psychological problems not only through special revelation of the Bible but also through the general revelation of empirical observation.* But while all four views incorporate this principle in theory, they apply it very differently in practice. At one end of the spectrum (Biblical Counseling), the insights of psychological research are seldom if ever used. At the other end of the spectrum (Levels of Explanation Model), the Bible is seen as irrelevant to most psychological problems. In theory everyone agrees that humans are both soul and body; but at one end of the spectrum, counseling problems are seldom seen as having medical or physical roots, while at the other end, medical and physical explanations are dominant.

What are we to make of all this? To what degree, if any, can one borrow or learn from modern psychological and counseling theories? Almost no one believes that secular therapies lack any wisdom and truth. But the exact relationship of Christian counseling to secular therapies is much debated.

The basic problem is that non-Christian counseling theories tend to take hold of one facet or one real problem area of human nature and turn it into the ultimate issue. Because they lack the comprehensive Christian worldview, which understands the problem of sin as infecting everything and understands the gift of grace as restoring everything, they fall into dualism. They see some parts of human nature as intrinsically bad or weak and other parts as intrinsically good. (Similarly, the Greeks saw the body as bad and the spirit as good; the Enlightenment saw the emotions as the lower animal nature, and reason and self-control as good.) So all psychological theories that are not Christian choose one part of human nature and make it the key to everything. Following are a few of the most common theory-narratives:

- + *Cognitive-Behavioral.* Problems are the result of wrong thinking and unwise behavior. The key is to reprogram one's thinking so as to get control of one's emotions.
- + *Object-Relations.* Problems are the result of inadequate love attachments in childhood. The key is to come to grips with one's past and the people who failed to love one well. Ignoring cognition, this approach stresses love, positive emotions, and relationships as the key to all healing.
- + *Humanistic Psychology.* Problems are the result of not taking personal responsibility. While the cognitive makes an idol out of the mind, and object-relations makes an idol out of emotions, the humanistic or existential approach makes an idol out of the will. The emphasis is on identifying one's needs and desires and taking responsibility to meet those needs.

Now what does this mean for a Christian? Each of these theories is inadequate as a system, and yet each one is partly right; because in the biblical theory-narrative the mind, will, and emotions are all rooted in the heart and all need to be addressed. Indeed, it sometimes happens that a field of psychology has focused so much on one aspect of human nature that it can provide interesting insights into that area. For example, cognitive therapy proposes some ways of analyzing one's self-talk that look uncannily like Puritan pastoral counseling!³ Cognitive therapy as a system, though, is really a form of Stoicism. It holds that if you control the thoughts, you get control of every other part of human nature. It basically ignores the deeper motivations of the heart. As a system it is a failure, but out of cognitive therapy come some tools that can help a counselee identify his or her self-talk during times of stress. It may be that a Christian counselor will want to use these self-talk tools to help the counselee see the way his or her heart has taken hold of a very unbiblical lie.

If Christians are able to engage in worldview analysis at the theory-narrative level, can they fruitfully make use of some insights and techniques of psychology? Yes. But my experience is that it is not as easy as Integrationists make it out to be, nor is it as impossible as some in Biblical Counseling have suggested.

3. See Thomas Brooks, *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices* (London, 1652).

A KEY AREA OF CONTROVERSY: EMOTIONS VERSUS BEHAVIOR

Within the church, books on pastoral care and counseling fall along a spectrum. At one end are those that put more emphasis on emotions and on the techniques of modern psychology (Integrationist and Levels of Explanation models). The root problem here is some form of low self-esteem, an insecurity and emptiness that comes from an inability to feel good or loved. The basic pastoral response is to show love, support, and acceptance, as well as to point to God's love. The emphasis is on the feelings, and the counseling process focuses on emotional issues.

At the other end are those that put more emphasis on repentance and obedience and therefore give very little credence to the techniques of psychology (Biblical Counseling and Christian Psychology). The root problem here is some form of failure to live life God's way, which produces insecurity, emptiness, fear, or anger. The basic pastoral response is to call the person to repentance, faith, and obedience, especially at the points where they are failing. The emphasis is one's actions, and all counseling is focused on behavioral issues.

The Dangers of the More Psychological Approach

Following are two reasons why the more psychological approach is fraught with danger.

Epistemological Issue: Theory versus Common Sense. People at the psychological end of the spectrum believe that many of the conclusions of psychological research should be accepted and adopted by Christians. Compared to those at the Biblical Counseling / Christian Psychology end of the spectrum, they do not put as much stress on how theory-laden and commitment-driven the nature of all knowledge is. This is a very big subject, and I can't begin to tackle it here. But in many ways this is the old "presuppositionalist versus evidentialist" controversy in apologetics played out in the arena of psychology. Basically, those more friendly to psychology still practice something like "common sense realism," a form of epistemology from the Scottish Enlightenment that was quite influential during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴ The Levels of Explanation Model and Integration Model propose that common sense makes human beings capable of perceiving data without bias. In general, however, common sense realism as an epistemology has by now been largely rejected across the spectrum by both Christian and non-Christian thinkers and philosophers. The myth of the purely neutral, objective scientist has been shattered. Skepticism of the scientific purity of psychology has been on the rise for a long time, and not just because of Christian critiques; it originally arose out of critiques from feminists, Marxists, and many others.

Alasdair MacIntyre has demonstrated the impossibility of neutral scientific psychology. His famous example is the question "Is this a good hammer or not?" Now there is no way to answer the question unless you answer a prior question, "What is a hammer made for?" A person from Mars, who has no idea what a hammer is made for, cannot assess its goodness or badness without learning what it was designed to do—that is, its purpose. Hammers are very bad for doing surgery. But they are very good for pounding nails into wood. So you can find out many things about a hammer, such as its chemical constituents, weight, and length; but you can't evaluate whether it is good or bad without knowing its purpose.

Now turn to counseling. There is no way to determine what a person ought to do, whether behavior is good or bad, unless we know for what purpose a person was made. Is the purpose of the human being to glorify God, pursue individual freedom, or promote honor within his or her family? Each of these examples presumes a distinctive worldview. Science cannot answer the question of human purpose; therefore it cannot by itself provide advice about what people ought to do.

Consider this example. Secular psychologies generally assume that people should be individually free to choose for themselves the life they want to live. That assumes the secular view of the world: that we were not created, we just evolved; therefore there is no purpose for which we were created. We are free to determine our purpose for ourselves. But can this psychology be proven by empirical science? Of course not; it is a faith assumption.

4. See David G. Myers's response to David Powlison on page 228 of *Psychology and Christianity: Four Views*, where he actually insists, "But some research findings do jolt our common sense."

Traditional cultures assume that our purpose in life is to honor our families and fulfill our roles within the family structure; Christianity says our purpose in life is to honor God. MacIntyre is right: there is no objective, scientific counseling approach. The minute you say, “This way of thinking, feeling, behaving, choosing is *better* than that one,” you are bringing a faith-held worldview to bear on the counselee’s problem. Even the most nondirective counseling approaches, then, are actually quite directive. They assume the old humanistic belief that people have the inner resources to solve their own problems.

Here is another example. In one of his books, David Myers says scientific research shows a biological basis for homosexuality.⁵ This would lead to the conclusion that it may be acceptable for a Christian, if his same-sex attraction is biological, to be homosexual. But the case can be made that substance-addictive behavior also has a biological basis, yet modern psychology insists that counselees resist addiction. Why the difference? The secular counselor would probably say that addictive behavior harms people but homosexual behavior does not. But wait a moment: Here is a definition of *harm* that precludes the spiritual, that assumes we are not created to serve God. Humanistic secular psychology, then, is filled with assumptions about the purpose of human beings that are not empirically provable; it is thus a faith-based worldview that is different than most other worldviews (Christian, Confucian, Buddhist, Greek dualistic, and many others). Why should this worldview and its assumptions about the human *telos* be privileged over all others? Many people would still prefer to view psychology as an objectively neutral science, but we see that such is not the case.

Theological Issue: Soul versus Spirit. There is a view of human nature, sometimes called the *tripartite view of man*, that makes a distinction between the soul and the spirit. The soul is defined as our emotions and temperament, while the spirit is defined as our faith and commitments. This view was very popular in the Keswick stream of twentieth-century Christianity, which emphasized the higher life that was possible if one “lived out of one’s spirit” instead of “out of one’s soul.” Watchman Nee books such as *The Release of the Spirit* were built on this distinction. In such a view it is possible to be spiritually healthy but have many emotional problems requiring psychological treatment. Spiritual nurture (Bible study, prayer, worship, and confession) would be a separate discipline from psychological treatment (providing insight into difficult emotions and gaining freedom from one’s past, and so on).

Sociological Issue: Individual versus Corporate. Normally we think of pastoral care as a private, one-on-one encounter between a pastor and an individual. But while one-on-one ministry is important, it will not be effective unless the corporate aspects of church ministry have been created to be pastoral in their impact and allow individual care to take place. Many ministers rightly perceive the main cause of personal problems—apart from physiologically caused problems—to be sin. They tend to be wary of forms of counseling, such as psychodynamic psychology or family therapy, in which a person’s problems are traced back to childhood experiences and which remove responsibility from the counselee. But we overreact when we tacitly or consciously imply that people will improve only through their individual interactions with the pastor or through their personal actions of repentance. The Bible recognizes corporate responsibility in some degree. For example, in Joshua 7 Achan’s entire family was punished for his individual disobedience.

We are not merely the products of our own choices. What is done to us (in our relationships) and what is done in our presence (our most formative models) bear much of the responsibility for who we are. Our most seminal early choices were responses to actions done to us and before us by our family members, early peers, and even neighbors. Therefore evil character flaws (such as Achan’s) do not develop strictly through discrete individual choices. The family and community of a grossly wicked person must bear some responsibility. Interestingly, this was intuitively understood by the American public after the school massacre at Columbine High School in 1999. In our much more individualistic society, no one can legally prosecute the parents of the murderers for the deaths if they did not know about their children’s plans. But many people believe them to bear some

5 .David G. Myers, *Exploring Psychology* (New York: Macmillan, 2004), 368.

responsibility. This demonstrates a deeply rooted belief in corporate responsibility even in our extremely individualistic society.

The Bible, however, shows a much greater consciousness of this than we have in the modern West. God's covenant with families (Deut. 6), God's condemnation of the nation that neglects its poor (Isa. 58), and even the very doctrine of righteousness by faith assume a level of corporate responsibility not recognized in the contemporary Western worldview.

What is the implication for pastoral care? Many Biblical Counseling advocates insist that the counselee primarily needs repentance and faith. In many cases these may be all that is needed. But such insistence may be a form of Western individualism. We became who we are not simply through sin done *by* us but also through sin done *against* us and *around* us. (That is, our parents' behavior served as powerful modeling to us, even when they weren't interacting with us.) So why would we get better simply through individual actions and choices? Or why would we get better through a single good relationship with a counselor? To put it crassly, if we got screwed up in a community, we will be healed only by being immersed in a community that models and provides relationships of truth and love.

Psychodynamic psychology can be very irritating. In its more popular form it says, "Your problems are a result of low self-esteem, because your parents didn't love you. You must realize your value and worth." But in some ways isn't this an acknowledgement that we are the product of bad community and that only in good community can we be healed? We must beware of giving people the impression that through individual repentance for sin they should be able to undo their personal problems. Obviously, we should not go to the other unbiblical extreme of refusing to acknowledge personal responsibility for sinful behavior as well. But in ordinary pastoral practice, it will be as important to build great community as to become skilled in personal counseling.

THE PROBLEMS WITH THE "ANTIPSYCHOLOGICAL" APPROACH

Despite all the problems associated with an emphasis on psychology, those who are the most opposed to the use of modern psychology often make other mistakes in pastoral care, and the mistakes have serious repercussions.

The moralistic mistake. As we have seen, the psychological approach tends to say the foundational problem is in the *emotions* (a lack of love) and the main solution is to build up self-esteem. In reaction to this, many Biblical counselors stress obedience. Often they talk a lot about repentance, but they usually mean setting the will against wrong behavior and on right behavior. Practically speaking, this pastoral approach tends to say the foundational problem is in the *will* (a lack of obedience). Then the main solution is to stop disobeying God and start obeying.

This approach is not gospel-oriented and is therefore too shallow. Eventually counselees will find that their problems do not go away simply by the exercise of willpower. This approach defines "spiritual nurture" too narrowly, which can lead one to conclude, "I'm OK spiritually; it must be my emotions." But as Augustine, Jonathan Edwards, and others have shown us, spiritual health includes emotional health. You can be doing the right things all for the wrong reasons and motives.

As I have noted, many Christian counselors have identified "the flesh" as the physical body habituated to sinful behavior; they advise self-discipline, rehabilitating the body to patterns of right, biblical behavior. This can lead counselors to ignore the counselee's past, his or her emotions and motivations of the heart. Such an understanding of the flesh is not supported by biblical exegesis.

It is one thing to believe the gospel; it is another thing to be affected in the deepest parts of our heart by the gospel. It takes years for the gospel to sink in and govern our thinking. When it finally happens, it produces the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, self-control (cf. Gal. 5:16-26). If we understand the fruit of the Spirit to be the definition of "spiritual health," we wouldn't need to invent the category of emotional health.

Of course, the ultimate key to a changed heart is repentance, but not repentance understood simply as the setting of the will against superficial behavior patterns. Repentance that changes the heart is repentance for unbelief, for self-salvation strategies underlying everything we do, for a lack of joy in Jesus. Repentance for a lack of joy in Jesus is not something we can adopt with a snap of the fingers.

The individualistic mistake. As mentioned under “Sociological Issue,” above, it is common to define all problems as individual-centric issues requiring solutions involving individual repentance, decisions, and actions. But we are not the product of only our own isolated choices and thus cannot be fixed simply through our own choices. Antipsychological theorists may dismiss the importance of understanding family history and dynamics, but that may be a Western individualistic mistake. The Bible shows God dealing with people as families, not just as individuals. So understanding one’s family background is often very critical to understanding the idols of the heart. Further, friendship and community are important vehicles for God’s Spirit to work in us. We can’t fix the effects of a belittling, abusive parent without entering into healthy relationships. Many underestimate the pastoral importance of fellowship and community in which people get spiritually formed, supported, and shepherded.

The spiritually simplistic mistake. Another common error is to neglect the importance of physical factors in one’s relationship to God and others. While we can’t fall into the reductionism of believing all problems are chemically based and require medication, we also cannot fall into the reductionism of believing all problems are simply a matter of lacking spiritual disciplines. Schizophrenia, bipolar depression, and a host of other psychological problems are rooted in physiological problems that call for medical treatment, not simple talk therapy.

THE EVER-ELUSIVE “BALANCED” APPROACH

The basic problem with all the above-mentioned counseling methods is the tendency to locate the basic problem in some part of the human body. The four models show the wide range of counseling theories; some consider the emotions to be the “real you,” while others see the will and mind as the “real you” and the emotions as peripheral. But there is serious peril in elevating any one part of human nature as more important than the rest. Consider the following:

Sin . . . attaches itself to [every good] created thing like a parasite. The great danger is to always single out some aspect of God’s good creation and identify it, rather than the alien intrusion of sin, as the villain. Such an error conceives the good-evil dichotomy as intrinsic to the creation itself . . . [as] something in the good creation is identified as [the source] of evil. In the course of history, this “something” has been variously identified as . . . the body and its passions (Plato and much of Greek philosophy), as culture in distinction from nature (Rousseau and Romanticism), as authority figures in society and family (psychodynamic psychology), as economic forces (Marx), as technology and management (Heidegger and existentialists). . . . As far as I can tell, the Bible is unique in its rejection of all attempts to either demonize some part of creation as the root of our problems or idolize some part of creation as the solution. All other religions, philosophies, and worldviews in one way or another fall into the trap of [idolatry]—of failing to keep creation and fall distinct. And this trap is an ever-present danger for Christians [as well].⁶

Every ideology tends to make an idol out of something as the solution. What I have been calling the “psychologistic” approach makes an idol out of emotions, but there is definitely a “moralistic” approach that makes an idol out of human will and obedience. What, then, is the right way to go? It is too easy in an article like this to construct a wonderful approach that seems perfectly balanced as compared to the alternatives listed; it is another thing to actually practice it. The right approach is to say, The foundational problem is in the *worship of wrong things*. The main solution is to *worship the true God* with all your being.

6. Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basis for Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005).

First, if worship is the key, we avoid identifying one part of the human nature as the important part, since we are to worship and honor God with every aspect of our being. Recognizing all beings as worshipers fits with Jonathan Edwards's remarkable "biblical psychology," in which he identifies two very interrelated faculties: the mind and the affections. According to Edwards, the will and the emotions are two different manifestations of the central commitments (worship) of the heart. Moreover, we always do what we most want to do. We only ever will to do that which our heart's deepest affections are most set upon. So seeing worship as the key to psychology gives us a more holistic and unified understanding of human faculties.

In its briefest form our psychology says the following. . . . Life has to do with God. We are innately and thoroughly worshipers, lovers, fearers, trusters, believers, obeyers, refugees, hoppers, seekers, desirers of something or other. The human heart and the intricate multitude of responses—behavior, emotion, cognition, memory, anticipation, attitude, and so on—are ruled. We heed either the true God, Savior, and Lord, or a host of identifiable lies, lusts, idols, voices, and pretenders.⁷

Second, if worship is the key, we avoid identifying the emotions as either peripheral or central, since real repentance is not just for sinful behavior but for idols of the heart that replace God in our lives. Identifying idols, things we really worship, gets to the root of our identity and our real psychology. Discovering idols entails understanding our past and family history, looking at our beliefs, and becoming cognizant of our emotions. It draws us beneath the surface, pulling us deeper than a moralistic approach (with its emphasis on behavior) can do.

Third, if worship is the key, we avoid the individualistic mistake and realize the limitations of one-on-one counseling. Ultimately we are called to be part of a worshipping community, a group of people who are formed and united to one another in regular worship together.

In summary, the psychological approach puts emphasis on love to heal low self-esteem. The moralistic approach puts emphasis on obedience to heal the guilt and troubles of law-breaking. The gospel approach puts emphasis on repentance for false trusts to heal a lack of joyful worship of Christ. While this looks great on paper, my experience is that even when we are committed to the gospel theology and approach, our pastoral care and counseling tends to stray either into the moralistic approach (urging people to "do the right thing") or the psychological approach (trying to strengthen people through loving them). Christian counselors, like pastors, have a tendency toward one approach or the other. We are habitually either too easy or too hard on people. It takes a great deal of theological reflection, spiritual maturity, and experience to sustain a balanced approach to pastoral care.

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7. David Powlison, "A Biblical Counseling View," *Psychology and Christianity: Four Views*, 219–220.