

IS BIBLICAL COUNSELING BIBLICAL?
Insight from Scripture and Classical Readings to the Current
Anathematizing of Psychology

by
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Introduction

I was as surprised as anyone to hear that books by authors who seem to have served our church well for years had been pulled from the church bookstore. I wasn't troubled by the decision itself--it's certainly legitimate for any church to restrict its offering as much as it wants; and it's hard to argue with the noble desire to focus on training materials that are more directly biblical.

I was stunned, instead, by the reasons these authors had been excluded: they promoted principles gleaned from psychology and not specifically from the Bible, integrating godless human philosophy with godly wisdom, a biblically unacceptable marriage.

Worse than that, these men that we had looked up to for years, whose ideas we had promoted from the pulpit and from the classroom--all with good reason, it seems--whose council had elevated our Christian experience and deepened our understanding of ourselves and of our God were now accused of teaching "heresy" and in even some cases were branded as "heretics" who had done great damage to the church.

Now, it certainly is possible that such a thing can happen. Wolves come in sheep's clothing, Jesus warned, and Paul's admonition to Titus was that elders be appointed in the churches who would "[hold] fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict." (Titus 1:9)

But sometimes the distinction between fleece and fur is not so easily determined, and even verses--quoted as proof texts--that seem crystal clear at first glance may take on a whole different sense when examined more closely, or held in the balance against other Scriptural teaching, or illuminated by the counsel of those who came before us and upon whose shoulders, theologically, we stand.

I carefully listened to the reasons offered, looked closely at the Scriptures quoted, and drew extensively from the thinking of theologians--both living and long dead. I'm convinced that this assessment--this wholesale rejection of psychology and the indictment that has fallen on the heads of those Christians who practice it--is wrong-headed. The goal of this paper is to draw on the counsel of Scripture and of church history to help solve a contemporary problem in theology and Christian thinking.

This paper is not meant to be comprehensive. My analysis is neither a thorough critique of the nouthetic counseling promoted by the Biblical Counseling Foundation nor, on the other hand, a sweeping defense of psychology. Rather, it is limited to two specific issues that form a significant part of the foundation of this radical rejection of psychology.

First, the Bible itself does not teach "Bible only." The Reformers understood this and held to a rather robust notion of general revelation. Second, man is not so distorted by the fall as to lose his ability to discover true things about his broken world or about his fallen condition and to develop ways to improve both of those circumstances. Even the Reformers, those who held the strictest definition of human depravity, did not hold the view that man has no ultimate worth apart from Jesus Christ, as this view contends.

Does the Bible Teach "Bible Only"?

In its broadside attack on any use of psychology in the life of the Christian, the Biblical Counseling Foundation in its *Self-Confrontation* material comments about the role of Scripture. Since "The Word of God has been given to man as the sole source for finding God's solutions to the real problems that plague him (Ps 19:7-11; 2 Tim 3:16-17, Hebrews 4:12; 2 Pet 1:2-4)," the Foundation decries "...the futile attempts to mix God's Word with unregenerate suppositions and theories¹ (Deut 4:2, Prov 30:6, Rev 22:19)."

Their "scriptural" assessment is followed by this conclusion: "These man-contrived solutions to problems of the mind, heart, and spirit are as unacceptable to God as are man's futile speculations and substitutes for salvation and the unalterable truths of God's Word."

Does the Bible really teach the specific things that the BCF claims? Do these texts support their views?²

"The Word of God has been given to man as the sole source for finding God's solutions to the real problems that plague him." (Ps 19:7-11; 2 Tim 3:16-17, Hebrews 4:12; 2 Pet 1:2-4)

None of these verses make the point that God's Word is the sole source of getting information helpful to man in dealing with his problems. Both Ps 19:7-11 and Heb 4:12 extol the value of God's law and His Word, but say nothing of the illegitimacy of other material. Peter talks about the things we gain through a true knowledge of God, but doesn't say that the Scriptures are the only source of such knowledge. I have much to say about the 2nd Timothy passage; it's more complicated and is dealt with it below.

"Attempts to mix God's Word with unregenerate suppositions and theories" are futile. (Deut 4:2, Prov 30:6, Rev 22:19)

¹It's not clear what "unregenerate suppositions and theories" are, except possibly those suppositions or theories coming from unregenerate people. Ideas and theories aren't the subjects of regeneration; people are. But why is a theory false simply because it comes from an unregenerate person? Would the same theory coming from a believer be true?

²All quotations are from the NASB version of the Bible.

In the Deuteronomy passage Moses is simply prohibiting anyone from changing the specific revelation he has just given; he was not prohibiting the use of man's observations about life and human behavior. To prove that Moses did not intend the application currently being given to this verse, note that 61 additional books of the Bible were written after the Pentateuch. The Proverbs passage simply says not to add to God's Word, yet no Christian who uses information from psychology would argue that such information is equal to Scripture in authority. Rev 22:19 is speaking only about adding to the "words of the book of this prophecy." This verse is not even limiting the extent of the Canon, much less human wisdom regarding man's problems. In fact, there is strong evidence that the Gospel of John was written after John wrote the Revelation.

Rom 8:5-10 "For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. And if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness."

This section makes it clear that those in the "flesh" (i.e., the unregenerate according to Paul's use of the term) are utterly lost; they cannot please God because they are hostile towards God. All non-believers are spiritually dead. This verse says they can't contribute to their salvation, not that they can't contribute anything useful or truthful about their problems.

Rom 1:21, 25, 28 "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened....For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen....And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper...."

This classic passage uses the term "depraved mind" to describe fallen man. What does this term mean? Paul identifies this depravity as the animus for man's improper behavior. Simply put, their depravity has led them to moral deviance. However, this couldn't mean that men are incapable of discerning truth with their darkened mind. Paul's whole argument hinges on the fact that they can discern truth and this is what makes them blameworthy for rejecting it. He even acknowledges later that not only do they know good to do, sometimes they actually do it, a further indictment on them (Rom 2:14-15 "For

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when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them....").

1 Cor 3:18-20 "Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become foolish that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. For it is written, 'He is the one who catches the wise in their craftiness'; and again, 'The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless.'"

Paul is arguing here that the world's wisdom is foolishness compared to God's wisdom because God can't be outwitted. Paul quotes Ps 94 in which God is warning the arrogant wicked who think they're getting away with their murderous deeds that any attempt to put something over on God is pure stupidity, a useless endeavor. The "reasonings of the wise" that are "useless" spoken of in the Corinthian passage are the kind of wicked plots referred the Psalm that will not escape God's notice. He calls these thoughts of men "a mere breath" (Ps 94:11), that is, they are of no consequence when pitted against God. The text doesn't assert that man is incapable of useful reasoning, as a cursory reading of the passage might suggest. This usage also fits the broader context of 1 Cor 3 where Paul is warning of the consequences of sin. Paul and the Psalmist are talking about the same thing, which is why Paul quotes him.

The second group of verses is so large that I thought it best to list them in Appendix B where I do a full assessment. Suffice it to say that of the 15 verses cited, 11 of them--nearly 70%--have nothing to do with the issue at all. One wonders why they were even cited they're so far removed from the topic. Of the remaining four, only one addresses the issue directly and even that verse is misapplied.

Do these texts teach what the syllabus asserts, that any of man's contribution to the problems of mind, heart and spirit are unacceptable to God? No, they don't. Not only do these texts fail to make the Biblical Counseling Foundation's point, but a pattern emerges of misuse and misrepresentation of Scripture, a pattern we'll note in other areas as well. This is unsettling, considering the BCF's own admonition to be "diligent in learning to handle accurately the Word of God."³

2 Tim 3:16-17 and the "Adequacy" of Scripture

³*Self-Confrontation* syllabus, Lesson 2, p. 6.

The question "Is Scripture adequate?" is much like the question "Is Christ adequate?" The answer depends entirely upon what one means by the concept of adequacy.⁴

The passage in 2 Tim 3:16-17 is one that's used to argue that no other material, e.g. the writings of psychologists, is legitimate to use in assessing man's spiritual condition or the solutions to man's problems. The verse reads in the NASB: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."

The reasoning goes something like this. Paul said that all Scripture was "adequate." If something is adequate, nothing more is allowed because allowing material other than Scripture--which Paul calls adequate--implies its inadequacy, contradicting Paul's statement. Therefore, nothing other than the Scripture Paul cites here is legitimate to use to help equip us; nothing else is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness." This is the sole province of the Scripture. That's the argument.

Here's the problem with it. The Scripture Paul has in view as "adequate" is what we know as the Old Testament, specifically--in Paul's own words--the sacred writings of Timothy's childhood (note verse 15). These are the particular Scriptures Paul identifies as being able to "give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus."

Now if "adequacy" means that nothing more can be used, and the Old Testament is adequate by Paul's admission, then how do we justify "adding" the words of the New Testament to the fully adequate Old Testament? Even Paul's writings in 2 Timothy would have to be rejected, even the words of 2 Timothy 3:16 which make this claim.

In other words, if this argument is sound, if Paul meant by the use of the word "adequate" that we are restricted from making use of any other material than what he describes here to further our understanding of man and of man's problems and solutions, we would not be able to use any writings that came after the fully "adequate" Old Testament, because anything additional would imply its inadequacy, according to this thinking. ~~None~~ of the New Testament writings--because they add to those Scriptures Paul already identifies as "adequate"--could be admitted, including Paul's second epistle to Timothy and the very passage this whole argument is based upon. It would have to be disqualified because it would be adding to the Old Testament which Paul says is already adequate. If the Old Testament Scriptures are adequate, and if Paul means by "adequacy" that the addition of any useful information about man is wrong, then even Paul's words (as

⁴In one sense God wasn't even "adequate" for Adam in the garden. Though Adam was walking in unfallen fellowship with the Father, God still said "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him." (Gen 2:18)

well as Peter's, John's etc.) are inadmissible. Paul's assertion casts doubt on his own assertion, thus refuting itself. Paul would be saying, in effect, "My counsel is this: You can't trust my council, even this statement."

Of course this is ludicrous and self-refuting. But if this conclusion is false, the entire case--the view that asserts Paul meant to disqualify all other sources of information here--crumbles. This verse does not prove that any additional information is somehow an assault on the Scripture's completeness or adequacy, at least in the way that Paul meant those terms in this passage. Paul's teaching in Second Timothy was meant to qualify the nature of Scripture, not to disqualify the usefulness of other material.⁵

Second, and more debilitating to BCF's view, 2 Timothy 3:15 doesn't even teach that the Scripture is adequate. A close look at the text reveals that the words "inspired" and "profitable" describe the Scripture. However, the word "adequate" does not describe the Scripture, but rather "the man of God" who uses the inspired Scripture in a profitable way. Note carefully: "...that *the man of God* may be *adequate*, equipped for every good work." Once again, the proof text itself has unwittingly been maligned to say something it just doesn't say, given the context.

What does "adequate" mean here? It probably simply means what adequate usually means, capable of giving everything that is essential. Food and air and water are adequate to keep a man alive, but their adequacy doesn't imply that other things are not useful or beneficial.

John writes 1 Jn 2:27, "And as for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need for anyone to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide in Him." John's comment identifies a kind of adequacy of the Holy Spirit's teaching, but I doubt anyone would argue to dismantle the pulpit and abandon the classrooms because we "have no need for anyone to teach."

Proverbs and Wisdom from Nature

There are other problems with the "Bible only" view. Scripture itself seems to encourage us to take counsel from other sources of information. The mandate to be fruitful and multiply in Genesis seems to require that man observe his environment, learn useful things, and then employ them to improve his condition--all apart from direct revelation.

⁵Some have pointed out that this same reasoning could be used to cast doubt on the inspiration of the New Testament. Not so. Paul's statement here was a statement about Scripture, which at that time included the Old Testament. He did not assert that no more "God-breathed" Scripture would be forthcoming. The corpus of Scripture was expanded by the New Testament writings and therefore they're included under the claims of this verse. Keep in mind that the issue here hinges on what Paul means by the term "adequate" and how restrictive he means that term to be. If we assert that Paul and the Apostles wrote legitimate Scripture then that proves that Paul's term "adequate" couldn't mean that nothing else could be added. That's my whole point; the term simply is not restrictive in the way this position argues.

This is precisely what we find in the book of Proverbs. According to Solomon, wise counselors are those who are skilled at life, including the ability to observe the natural realm and deduce spiritual truth, moral knowledge, and skills at living.

Note this statement in Proverbs 24:30-34:

I passed by the field of the sluggard, and by the vineyard of the man lacking sense; and behold, it was completely overgrown with thistles. Its surface was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. When I saw, I reflected upon it; *I looked, and received instruction*. "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest," then your poverty will come as a robber, and your want like an armed man.

Dr. John Coe, professor of psychology at Rosemead University, has this to say about Proverbs 24:

Though the sage elsewhere acknowledges the Scriptures as a source of wisdom (Prov. 29:18), here he informs us that his own reflections and observations were sufficient to gain this piece of practical and moral wisdom. In fact, this pattern seems to fit well with many of his proverbs which do not explicitly depend upon the *Torah* or some further divine revelation. Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that the sage's peculiar task, in contrast to the priest and prophet, *involves keenness in observation and reflection for interpreting natural, particularly human phenomena*. His reflections result not only in the theoretical and technological knowledge for the natural sciences, but especially in moral knowledge for the human sciences (*viz.* the *Proverbs*). In the above case the sage, on the basis of observation and reflection, discovers that laziness leads to financial ruin and self-injury.

The sage, then, is convinced that by observing and reflecting upon the ordering structures particularly of the human situation he will discover quasi-causal laws which govern the human situation. From these observations he claims to receive instruction and wisdom for living, hence, moral knowledge.⁶ [emphasis in the original]

Dr. Coe's point is an important one. Proverbs 24:30-34 shows that we can draw true conclusions about right conduct through astute observations of the world. Even before the sage says, "My son, observe the commandment of your father" (6:20), he says, "Go to the ant, O sluggard. Observe her ways and be wise" (5:6).

Coe continues:

The Scriptures in general, then, find their authority in the fact that they are given by God. However, the Scriptures recognize another source of wisdom as well, to which the OT sage appeals for his wise principles. Of course, *as a member of the believing community* the Hebrew sage recognizes that God is the ultimate source of all wisdom (2:6), that a relationship with Him is requisite for a fully wise life (1:7), and that the Scriptures are necessary for the mental health of a community (29:17, 30:5-6). However, *as a member of a community of sages* he ventures out into the natural order of things--with Scriptures in hand and God in mind--in

⁶"Why Biblical Counseling is Unbiblical, or Speaking Psychology Gently into the Church," Dr. John Coe, 20-21; from a paper read at the 1991 Evangelical Theological Society, Far West Regional Annual Meeting (paper on file).

order to discern the wisdom available as well in natural and human phenomena.⁷ [emphasis in the original]

Dr. Coe argues that God's will is expressed in propositional form (Scripture) and non-propositional form (nature). Through observation and reflection on either--if they are properly interpreted--one can infer principles for living because *both* inform man how to live well.

Taking his own advice, the sage of Proverbs makes this observation:

Four things are small on the earth, but they are exceedingly wise: the ants are not a strong folk, but they prepare their food in the summer; the badgers are not mighty folk, yet they make their houses in the rocks; the locusts have no king, yet all of them go out in ranks; the lizard you may grasp with the hands, yet it is in kings' palaces (30:24-28).

Consider this scenario. When a city is plagued by violence, the people decide to execute murderers. Immediately the murder rate drops and peace is restored to the city. These people used their fallen, human wisdom to employ a biblical solution--government bearing the sword to mitigate the impact of evil. They accurately assess and solve a human problem, even with no knowledge of Scripture. This kind of thing happens all the time.

The Wisdom Literature of the Amenomope

The *Wisdom Literature of the Amenomope* makes the same point in another way. This is a body of work from the Middle East that pre-dates Proverbs and contains a section of material that is almost identical to Proverbs 22:17-24:22 (nearly two full chapters). Some scholars saw this as a serious compromise of the doctrine of inspiration. It's pretty clear that the authors of the latter part of Proverbs "borrowed" this material from the Amenomope and inserted it in the "inspired" text. However, a more robust (and I would say a more biblical) view of natural theology removes the objection. Clearly, natural man apart from God is capable of discerning truth that, according to the writer of Proverbs, is directly from God.

It seems to me that if a thing is true, it's true. It's no less true if it comes from the lips of an unregenerate person. Paul quoted the Greek poets because he understood this fact.

His classic remarks in Romans 1 identify the universal *natural* ability to draw certain specific conclusions about God without the aid of special revelation, a capability so powerful that the willful suppression of it brings God's judgment.

Keep in mind that the specific things Paul identifies here--"His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature"--are only examples of natural revelation, not the total sum of natural revelation. He doesn't limit our knowledge to only those things listed there.

⁷Ibid., p. 26-27.

Other passages, in fact, teach that we can know much more than just basic information about God's existence.

In Gen 18:25, for example, Abraham challenges God's plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. He says, "Far be it from Thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from Thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" The question here is, where did Abraham get his notion of justice? It wasn't revealed; it was innate, a moral law built into his humanity.

Moral Knowledge from Natural Revelation

One of the things that's at stake here is the whole issue of natural theology--that which can be known about God and about man's spiritual condition through general revelation. Can unregenerate man know anything significant without the aid of special revelation? The Bible seems to teach that he can know much.

As the late Dr. Francis Schaeffer pointed out, the Bible is "true truth" but not exhaustive truth. In other words, it's completely true about everything to which it speaks, but it doesn't speak about everything there is to know. Much more can be discovered.

Dr. Bruce A. Demarest, Professor of Systematic Theology at Denver Seminary, makes this observation in his extensive survey of the issue, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues*:

"It is true that the Bible sets forth no explicit and clearly defined theory of knowledge...Nevertheless, the implicit evidence seems to point us in the following direction. Although man is a sinner, he uniquely bears the image of God. The crippling effects of sin in the human mind are overcome in part by a general illumination of the Logos (John 1:4, 9). God wills that man, the pinnacle of His creation, should use his reason to secure truth, including elementary truths about himself. Equipped with an intuitional knowledge of God, including the light of conscience, and enabled by common grace, man by rational reflection on the data of the natural and historical order draws inferences about God's character and operations. By inspection of the created order that surrounds him and by the discursive workings of the mind by which one thing is inferred from another, man reaches conclusions that confirm the fact of God's existence and enlarge his understanding of the character of the Creator, Preserver and Judge that stands over him."⁸

Demarest comments here on how natural man, made in the image of God, gains knowledge based on general revelation. Man has an innate ability to know first principles and basic rules of logic, Demarest argues, and knows how to apply these abilities to learn truth not just about his world but also about spiritual things.

⁸Demarest, Bruce A., *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues*, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1982), p. 233.

Demarest concludes: "Scripture supports our thesis that further truth content about God is acquired by rational reflection on God's general revelation on nature in history."⁹

A case in point is Dr. Bernard Nathanson. An atheist, he was one of the founders of the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) and ran one of the largest commercial abortion operations in the country. He later repudiated the practice and has become an ardent advocate of the rights of the unborn child.

Why the change of heart? Because he became convinced that abortion was a serious violation of the unborn's human rights.

The irony of Dr. Nathanson's situation is that he remained an atheist. One could argue that it's very hard to justify the concept of human rights--a type of transcendent law--if there is no transcendent law-giver. Dr. Nathanson's reversal, however, makes the point that even those with faulty philosophical foundations (like Freud, Maslow, Jung, etc.) can reason *inconsistently* to a conclusion that turns out to be true. Nathanson's thinking was inconsistent with his world view, but his intuitive knowledge of human value was, in fact, correct--a function of general revelation.

The View of the Reformers

Even the Reformers, aggressive in asserting total depravity in the face of the Pelagianism of the Roman Church and advocates of *sola Scriptura*, did not hold to this radical position. Note Calvin:

"Therefore, in reading profane authors, the admirable light of truth displayed in them should remind us, that the human mind, however much fallen and perverted from its original integrity, is still adorned and invested with admirable gifts from its Creator....How then can we deny that truth must have beamed on those ancient lawgivers who arranged civil order and discipline with so much equity? Shall we say that the philosophers, in their exquisite researches and skillful description of nature, were blind?....Nay, we cannot read the ancients on these subjects without the highest admiration; an admiration which their excellence will not allow us to withhold....Therefore, since it is manifest that men whom the Scriptures term natural, are so acute and clear-sighted in the investigation of inferior things, their example should teach us how many gifts the Lord has left in possession of human nature, notwithstanding of its having been despoiled of the true good."¹⁰

Certainly Calvin does not take lightly this "despoiling." With regards to what he called spiritual discernment--"the knowledge of God, the knowledge of...our salvation and the method of regulating of our conduct in accordance with the Divine Law"--he said that "the

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 234.

¹⁰*Institutes*, Book II, ch. 2, para. 15.

mind of man must ever remain a mere chaos of confusion. To the great truths, what God is in Himself, and what He is in relation to us, human reason makes not the least approach."¹¹

So Calvin distinguished between two kinds of knowledge; he calls them natural gifts and supernatural gifts. He holds, with Augustine, that man's natural gifts were corrupted by sin, but not withdrawn.¹² He then continues for almost five pages in his *Institutes* detailing the capabilities of fallen reason (some of which I've noted above). Only man's supernatural gifts were lost, specifically "the light of faith and righteousness, which would have been sufficient for the attainment of heavenly life and everlasting felicity."¹³

Would Calvin be offended by the contributions of modern psychology as mere human or worldly wisdom that deserved wholesale rejection? No; that's all part of the natural gifting God has given to man. In fact, Calvin even quotes what he calls the shrewd observations of Aristotle regarding the inner workings of man's mind:

"Aristotle seems to me to have made a very shrewd distinction between incontinence and intemperance. Where incontinence reigns, he says, that through the passion particular knowledge is suppressed: so that the individual sees not in his own misdeed the evil which he sees generally in similar cases; but when the passion is over, repentance immediately succeeds. Intemperance, again, is not extinguished or diminished by a sense of sin, but, on the contrary, persists in the evil choice which it has once made."¹⁴

The broader context of this passage makes Aristotle's point more clear. His argument goes like this: People have this tendency. The tendency is for them to be able to acknowledge general moral principles, but to go into denial when they personally contemplate committing sin, until afterwards when guilt and remorse set in.

Whether one agrees with the particular point or not is incidental. What is important is that Calvin--a principal Reformer and utterly dedicated to the biblical doctrine of "total depravity"¹⁵--is quoting the reflections of Aristotle--an unregenerate Greek philosopher--on

¹¹*Ibid.*, para. 18.

¹²*Ibid.*, para. 12.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*, para. 23.

¹⁵The Term "total depravity" is the accepted term, but I've put it in quotes here because it's actually a misnomer, giving the mistaken impression that man is utterly depraved and incapable of producing anything good or of value.

There is a difference between extent of depravity and degree of depravity. Our term total depravity actually means that no part of man is untouched and untainted--the extent of the impact of the fall is total, not the degree of the impact of the fall. The term "radical depravity" captures the sense of the biblical doctrine better and is favored by some. Every capacity that man possesses has been tainted rendering him incapable of producing anything of merit that would justify him before God. He continues to be capable,

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the vicissitudes of the human psyche. *Calvin is using Aristotle's psychology to help articulate an aspect of man's fallenness.* In fact, the term he uses is suppression--specifically the suppression of moral knowledge here--two millennium before Freud.

No, the Bible doesn't teach "Bible only." The texts quoted to support the notion are misapplied. Moreover, according to the Reformers man seems to have a rather extensive ability to draw from general revelation and make accurate and useful assessments about his life and his problems.

Does the Bible Teach that Man Has No Ultimate Worth
Apart from Jesus Christ?

Note this assessment taken almost word for word from the *Self-Confrontation* syllabus that appeared in our weekend service material and read as a welcome to our visitors (July 23, 1993):

We are a church made up of people who desperately need Jesus Christ. Corporately, we are a people who in and of ourselves have been enslaved by everything under the sun, but are no longer powerless against these things. Before Jesus entered our lives we were biblically described as "like dust" (Ps 90:3), "a mere breath and a passing shadow" (Ps 62:9), "like grass" (Is 40:6-8), "like a vanishing vapor" (James 4:14), "stupid and devoid of knowledge" (Jer 51:17), "accounted as nothing and meaningless" (Is 40:17, Dan 4:35), and "like a worm and not a man" (Job 25:6, Ps 22:6). But now, because of Jesus Christ, and what He has done for us, we know longer qualify as any of those things. We are His precious children, co-heirs to the kingdom of God, and saved from eternal fire and damnation. Jesus came for people like you and me, and we, at Hope Chapel, welcome you in Jesus name.

What is one to make of a Christian welcome that extends the right hand of fellowship to believers, but identifies the non-believing visitors as dust and vapor, and as stupid, ignorant, meaningless worms? We might easily shorten this salutation to, "A warm welcome to our home, you worthless worm." To add "By the way, we used to be worms, too" doesn't seem to significantly soften the impact.

Second, these citations represent an extraordinary misuse of Scripture. A close look at the context reveals: teaching about the transience of all human life--non-believers and

however, of arriving at rational truth about his world or doing acts of goodness, all expressions of an essential nature made in image of God. More detail on the notion of total depravity follows.

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believers--not their innate worthlessness; the relative greatness of God as compared to man; a messianic Psalm identifying the worthless "worm" as Jesus Christ Himself; and the folly of trusting in oppression because oppressive men have no "weight"; they are "together lighter than breath." These verses don't teach that man is essentially worthless, as the paragraph implies. The only exception here seems to be Bildad the Shuhite's council to Job, council that's almost universally regarded as flawed.¹⁶

Is Every Single Thing Man Does Sin?

This view is exemplified in the statement, "Everything I do is sinful because everything I do misses the mark."

Yes, the Greek word *harmartia*, translated "sin," embodies the notion of falling short or missing the mark. But the above rather extreme conclusion about man isn't warranted by either the word *harmartia* or the rest of the teaching of the text. First of all, not everything everyone does misses the mark; secondly, not all missing of the mark--falling short--is sin.

Balancing a checkbook, traveling from point A to point B, shooting a basket, kissing a child, all can be done perfectly because all of them can accomplish the precise goal they had in mind. These acts can rightfully be called, respectively, a good sum, a good trip, and good shot, and a good kiss. Perfect sums are perfect sums; even a child can do them. In basketball if the shot goes in it "perfectly" scores; that's why each is awarded the same two points.

And what of those things that are short of perfection? Is it true that every sort of missing the mark is sin? Think about it. Since nothing that is sinful is good, and if everything man does is sinful, then nothing man does can be called good. If all human undertakings that fall short of perfection--all that miss the mark--are therefore sinful, and something sinful can never be called good because it's sin, then nothing anyone does can ever be called good.

If that's really true then it's a remarkable statement. Even love coming from a spouse misses the mark, would be sinful and therefore couldn't be called good. Love between people, then, could not be called good; it's sin. Acts of kindness between people miss the mark, are sinful and therefore cannot be called good. According to this assessment not only is man incapable of saving himself, he is also incapable of doing anything good what-

¹⁶Note that in the same verse Bildad says that man can't be just with God, nor can one born of woman be clean. He is contradicting Job's claim to righteousness, a claim even the Scripture makes for Job in Job 1:1 ("There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job, and that man was blameless, upright, fearing God, and turning away from evil.") I'm not arguing that Job was perfectly righteous; he had a temporal uprightness attested to by Scripture, which Bildad is contradicting. Therefore Bildad is not a good source of information and anything he or the other of Job's "comforters" asserts here must be severely qualified.

so-ever, because everything he does misses the mark and is therefore sin. And sin can never be good.

Something is wrong with any assessment of human behavior that forces us to label all human virtue--love, kindness, mercy, patience, gentleness--as sin simply because none are expressed perfectly. This conclusion is not a biblical one. Since we were "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph 2:9) and since Paul tells Titus to "remind them to...be ready for every good deed" (Titus 3:1), it seems we must be capable of fulfilling that command by doing good. And if we can do good, then those good things can't, at the same time, be called sin. Therefore the statement, "Everything I do is sinful because everything I do misses the mark," is false. It does not comport with Scripture or with reason.

This, to me, is another excessive application this unsound attack on self-esteem results in. Do we tell our workers, "Nice try, but it was no good because it was all sin"? Do we tell our children, "I know you're trying hard, honey, but nothing you'll ever do will be good"? or "I know you're trying hard to please Daddy, Son, but it's all sin. I forgive you." Is this really God's idea of building one another up in love?

Total Depravity

If my objections are sound, what then is one to make of Paul's assessment in Romans 3:10-12? Quoting from the Psalms he says: "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands. There is none who seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good. There is not even one."

Paul's point is hyperbolic. He is not arguing that every single thing any man does is sinful. He refers here to the total product of man's offering before God. Man, though made in the image of God, is so thoroughly marred by sin that he is utterly incapable of independently producing a life that can in any way commend itself to God. Job manifested a type of righteousness, doing good through a genuine desire to honor and please God (Job 1:1), yet he still needed a redeemer (Job 19:25).

Once again we must clarify the notion of "total depravity." Dr. Millard Erickson, the distinguished research professor of theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, makes this clarification:

We do not mean by total depravity that the unregenerate person is totally insensitive in matters of conscience, of right and wrong. For Paul's statement in Romans 2:15 says that the Gentiles have the law written on their hearts, so that "their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them.

Further, total depravity does not mean that the sinful man is as sinful as he can possibly be. He does not continuously do only evil and in the most wicked fashion possible. There are unregenerate persons who are genuinely altruistic, who show kindness, generosity, and love to others, who are good, devoted spouses and parents.... These actions, insofar as they are in conformity with God's will and law, are pleasing to God. *But they are not in any way meritorious. They do not qualify the person for salvation, or contribute to it in any way.*¹⁷ [emphasis mine]

It is precisely on this point of depravity that the attack on psychology hits very wide of the mark of the biblical teaching. The *Self-Confrontation* syllabus states it bluntly in a section entitled "The error of man's way regarding 'self-esteem'": "Apart from Jesus Christ, you have no inherent value in yourself..."¹⁸

No, original sin is not a trivial thing. All the reformers held a to very strong view of depravity, but none went so far as to say that man apart from the cross is worthless. When some in their ranks took an extreme position, their views were officially excluded when the church provided a corrective through a formal confession.

The Formula of Concord, 1577 AD

Soon after Luther died in 1546 the Lutheran church went through tremendous upheaval, battling with a number of controversies. One of these conflicts revolved around the teaching of Matthias Flacius, a champion of *sola fidei* in the face of synergistic Lutheranism and the Pelagian teaching of medieval Catholicism.

In attacking the view that men can make a contribution to their salvation, Flacius held--with the Reformers--that man has no ability to fulfill God's requirements or to do anything that can in any way merit his salvation. But Flacius took the doctrine of depravity an unwarranted step further holding that fallen man had, in effect, taken on the nature of Satan ("The image of God has been replaced by the true and living image of the devil").

It wasn't until 1577 and the adoption of the *Formula of Concord* that this controversy was settled. Philip Schaff, in his *Creeds of Christendom*, records the council's response.

First, *Concord* makes a distinction that is lost on much of modern evangelicalism: man does not have a sinful nature, strictly speaking, but a nature that is corrupted by sin. This comports with Augustine's view that evil is a privation of good and not a thing in itself. As such, the fall doesn't create in man an ontologically new nature--in Flacius's case, the nature of Satan--but merely robs his human nature of its original righteousness. In their words:

¹⁷Erickson, Millard J., *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), p. 628.

¹⁸*Self-Confrontation* syllabus, Lesson 4, p. 8.

"We believe, teach and confess that there is a distinction between the nature of man itself, not only as man was created of God in the beginning pure and holy and free from sin, but *also as we now possess it after our nature has fallen*; a distinction, namely, between the nature itself, which even after the fall is and remains God's creature, and Original Sin; and that this difference between nature and Original Sin is as great as between the work of God and the work of the devil."¹⁹ [emphasis added]

Second, this assessment did not mean, however, that *Concord* took lightly the impact of Original Sin. The document continues: "We believe, teach, and confess that Original Sin is no trivial corruption, but is so profound a corruption of human nature as to leave nothing sound, nothing uncorrupt in the body or soul of man, or in his mental or bodily powers." Theologian Reinhold Seeberg sums up their conclusions this way:

The *Formula* opposes Flacius' theory of original sin and every view which does not acknowledge that man is "utterly corrupted and dead toward good." *There yet remains, indeed, in the natural man a certain knowledge of God and the capacity of "civil righteousness."* This makes man capable of experiencing conversion.....[However], the only cause of conversion...is the Holy Spirit, who through the word lays hold upon the heart and works faith, "new spiritual emotions, regeneration, and renovation, and new obedience."²¹ [emphasis mine]

The Augsburg Confession (Article XVIII) makes a similar reference:

Concerning free will, they teach that man's will hath some liberty to work a civil righteousness, and to choose such things as reason can reach unto; but it hath no power to work the righteousness of God, or a spiritual righteousness, without the Spirit of God; because the natural man receiveth not the things of God...

Finally, the *Formula* emphasized that regeneration does not destroy our fallen nature and create something entirely (that is, ontologically) new: "[We reject] also that God in the regeneration of man utterly abolishes the substance and essence of the old Adam, and especially the rational soul, and creates from nothing in that conversion and regeneration a new essence of the soul."²²

I fully realize that in their critique of psychology no one is claiming, as Matthias Flacius did, that fallen man possesses the nature of Satan. However, when the *Formula of Concord* spoke to this problem it gave us information that helps us with the question we

¹⁹Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. III, p. 98.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 100.

²¹Seeberg, Reinhold, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966), p. 383.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 111.

face, specifically, "How are we to understand the value of man in light of the devastating reality of the fall?"

Concord asserts that man isn't sin by very nature, possessed of the nature of the devil, such that regeneration must create something entirely new. Rather, sin inheres man's nature, much like a disease inheres in a body. Man is crippled by sin, but his inherent value remains intact in spite of the fall.

This is the distinction between innate goodness and innate value. Having worth or value on the one hand, and earning forgiveness (as Millard Erickson pointed out) on the other, are two different things. The *Formula of Concord* labored to keep these two distinct; the *Self-Confrontation* material does not, and actually seems to deny the distinction.

The *Formula* was no casual document, but instead was a formal correction of errant views by the reformation church at large. Harold O.J. Brown notes

[The *Formula*] was signed by eighty-six imperial estates and over eight thousand Lutheran theologians and represented, despite the resistance of a few, a real solidification of Lutheranism.²³

Conclusion: The Wholesale Attack on Psychology is
Biblically and Historically Unwarranted.

I have spent some time and effort to make two simple points in support of my contention that the broad attack on psychology is seriously flawed.

First, the Bible itself does not teach "Bible only." The notion of scriptural adequacy in 2 Tim 3:16-17 and other places was not meant to disqualify the usefulness of other material. Proverbs instructs us to draw moral conclusions from nature, and the unregenerate sages of the Amenomope did just that. Natural revelation allows fallen man to know a measure of spiritual truth, a point that even John Calvin makes forcefully.

Second, the Bible does not teach that man is so distorted by the fall that he has no ultimate worth apart from Jesus Christ. The doctrine of total depravity does not teach that every single thing that man does is sin; worth and value are different than merit. The Reformers did not hold this view, but corrected it in the *Formula of Concord*.

If it is true that fallen man, using a variety of means, can draw true conclusions about his world and his condition, and if it's true that man has intrinsic value apart from the cross of Jesus, then the broad attack on psychology is without warrant.

²³Brown, Harold O.J., *Heresies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 346.

And if the general attack on psychology is wrong-headed, on what grounds are Christian leaders attacked who seek to employ these tools in subjection to the greater and more complete knowledge of man and his problems detailed in God's revelation, the Bible? If the blanket attack on psychology is unbiblical, unreasonable, and unfair, then the censure of Christians who advocate the use of psychology is unbiblical, unreasonable, and unfair too.

Instead of the wholesale rejection of psychology, we're forced to sift through the heap and separate wheat from chaff, isolating the legitimate objections to psychology from the legitimate contributions of human observation and learning. We must also alter our criticisms of those Christians who employ valuable techniques, insights, lessons, or applications learned from that field.

The criticisms of psychology are many, and frequently they're valid. But as with most things, the sledgehammer approach to dealing with the problem doesn't work. Instead, the church must do the more difficult and time consuming job of exercising discernment. That coupled with an attentive ear to the contributions of our spiritual fathers will protect us from this current retreat into fundamentalism and intellectual monasticism.

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