

SECULAR PSYCHOLOGY'S GREAT HEIST: THE THEFT OF SOUL CARE FROM THE CHARGE OF THE CHURCH

by
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Introduction

Secular psychology is a popular approach to helping people with their problems that can offer utilitarian benefits even for churches. While secular psychology can offer useful observations, however, it falls short of providing complete solutions to life's problems.

Part of the challenge in evaluating secular psychology is that it purports to be neutral, when it is not. More thoughtful psychologists know that they are doing pastoral work and that their moral values and worldview assumptions lurk in every human interaction. The primary methodology of secular psychology, psychotherapy, rests on presuppositional beliefs about who man is, what drives him, what his goals are, and where he is going.² It is not a neutral discipline.

The goal of this article is to show that while secular psychology has sought to care for and cure souls, the work of caring for and curing souls belongs properly to the church of Jesus Christ. Psychology, as its name suggests, seeks to study the human soul in order to understand it and improve human welfare. Like every scientific discipline, however, the claims of psychology are valid only as they submit to the rule of Christ. Without this, secular psychology's intention to transform human behavior, while generally praiseworthy, falls short of comprehensively explaining and improving human behavior. Only Christianity supplies a comprehensive framework for human transformation.

Psychology: The Study of the Soul

The word psychology derives from the Greek term *ψυχολογία*, the “study of the soul.” It may be defined as “the science of mind and behavior; the mental or behavioral characteristic of an individual or group,”³

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²David Powlison, “A Biblical Counseling View” in *Psychology & Christianity: Five Views*, 2nd ed., ed. Eric Johnson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 257.

³*Merriam-Webster 11th Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. “Psychology,” accessed 19 January 2021. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/psychology>.

or as “the scientific study of behavior and mental processes.”⁴ Because it uses the scientific method to acquire knowledge, psychology qualifies as a true science. For purposes of this essay, I will use *psychology* to refer to the science or study of the immaterial part of man apart from biblical presuppositions.⁵

The modern academic discipline of psychology finds its roots in three disciplines: philosophy, physiology, and psychophysics. Because psychology is the study of human behavior, philosophy stands at its root, offering an answer to a key question about life: why are humans the way that they are? After Hermann Helmholtz suggested in the late nineteenth century that neural impulses could be measured and understood scientifically, early psychologists deduced that a person’s soul could be evaluated physiologically as well. Psychophysics, a theory about the relationship between physical stimuli and mental phenomena, gave psychology its final component.⁶

The convergence of these three disciplines led to the 1879 establishment of the modern discipline of psychology at the hand of William Wundt, regarded as the father of modern psychology. Wundt argued that psychology dealt with experience and, therefore, that the study of psychology had to include the observation of experience. Since experience is only observable by the person who has it, Wundt focused on introspection and helping his patients to make self-observations. He established the first psychological laboratory, marking the beginning of experimental psychology. Due to Wundt’s influence, hundreds of psychological laboratories emerged in several countries, including the United States.

From this beginning, the discipline of psychology developed into various schools of thought, including associationism,⁷ structuralism,⁸ functionalism,⁹ behaviorism,¹⁰ Gestalt Psychology,¹¹ and perhaps the

⁴Samuel E. Wood, Ellen Green Wood, and Denise Boyd, *The World of Psychology*, 7th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2011), 3.

⁵Ed Bulkley, *Why Christians Can’t Trust Psychology* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1993), 335.

⁶Gustav Fencher was a key figure in this field. He sought to establish the relationship between the mind and the body in a scientific way (C. E. Henry, “Psychology,” in David G. Benner, *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985], 952).

⁷Associationism suggests that a person cannot know something apart from the senses. Ivan Pavlov was a leader in this school of thought. He pushed for objective methodology, and his influence strongly influenced the school of behaviorism (*ibid.*, 953).

⁸Although structuralism had a short shelf life, Wundt made it one of the most popular schools of thought in the early years of psychology. Structural psychologists analyzed the structure of the human mind by means of introspection (*ibid.*, 954).

⁹Begun in America by William James, functional psychology saw psychology as the study of the mind as it functions in adapting the organism to its environment. It expanded the methodology of counseling from introspection only to include things like data collection, questionnaires, mental tests, physiological research, and objective

most dominant today, psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis has become so influential that many see it as synonymous with psychology. Psychoanalysis finds its roots in the writings of Sigmund Freud, who argued that human behavior reifies suppressed realities, especially sexual ones. Freud used dreams and free association to understand human behavior and to explore the unconscious mind.¹² He began his practice as a neurologist using electrotherapy, but later evolved to use hypnosis and then psychoanalysis. He argued that hypnosis and electrotherapy were pretenses for treatment, and one wonders if Freud viewed psychoanalysis as a pretense for treatment as well.¹³ Having established psychoanalysis as a valid science, Freud developed a new platform from which he could peddle his approach to solving spiritual problems, and the public bought it.¹⁴ Psychology has since expanded its influence into the disciplines of law, art, forensic medicine, and even religion.¹⁵

Missing the Mark

Psychology has as its primary goals to understand human behavior and to improve human welfare.¹⁶ Since its founding by Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis/psychotherapy has been psychology's primary method for improving human behavior. This method for transforming human behavior was revolutionary. Freud used the basic activities of

descriptions of human behavior. Functionalism would lay some important groundwork for behaviorism (ibid.).

¹⁰John Watson led a revolt against these old forms of psychology and established a self-proclaimed new and better way—behaviorism. Watson described psychology as the scientific study of observable behavior. He rejected introspection. Perhaps the most influential among behavior psychologists was B. F. Skinner. Among his most notable accomplishments in the psychological world was his development of behavior modification (ibid.). Behaviorism not only sought to describe humans in terms of how they acted but actually defined individuals as such. In other words, a man is who he is because of how he behaves. In behaviorism, humans are no different than animals.

¹¹While behaviorism was making ground in the United States, Gestalt Psychology was making waves in Germany. This school of thought saw psychology as the study of the immediate experience of the whole organism. This discipline was an attempt to make a case for the whole person, not just a portion of the parts. In other words, instead of focusing just on learning, memory, or personality, Gestalt Psychology focused on perception and how an individual sees the bigger picture (ibid., 955).

¹²Ibid.

¹³Thomas Szasz, *The Myth of Psychotherapy: Mental Healing as Religion, Rhetoric, and Repression* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 97.

¹⁴Ibid., 101.

¹⁵Henry, "Psychology," 956.

¹⁶One psychology textbook adds two more goals to the goals stated above: (1) describe human behavior or mental processes as accurately as possible; (2) explain causes for behavior or mental processes; (3) predict conditions under which behavior or mental processes are likely to occur; and (4) influence a desired real-world outcome or prevent an undesired real-world outcome (Wood, et al., *The World of Psychology*, 5).

listening and talking to devise what he called a therapy—a treatment for healing—using simple conversation.¹⁷ Psychotherapy, defined by one author as “a treatment of emotional or personality disorders by psychological means,”¹⁸ is in its most basic form a kind of “soul-healing.”¹⁹ The term implies that this method or treatment can result in the healing of one’s soul.

But secular psychology cannot heal souls. Its attempt at understanding and improving human behavior falls short every time, because it does not use the best source for analyzing and providing solutions for human behavior: the Christian Scriptures.²⁰

Limits of Secular Psychology

Secular psychology works hard at observation and description, but its analysis always falls short because it is missing key information: the revelation necessary to explain (1) man’s purpose in relation to God and (2) the source of his affections. Psychologists are able to explain a person’s needs and do so with some degree of accuracy, but when God is excluded from the analysis the results are, at best, incomplete. At worst, the psychologist is practicing pseudoscience. If a psychologist wishes to offer an effective and comprehensive treatment, he must include God in the picture. When fundamental truth is excluded, then secondary factors take its place, and both the explanation and the treatment are skewed.²¹ Life and all of its complexities cannot be adequately explained apart from God and his Word.²²

¹⁷Szasz, *Psychotherapy*, 7.

¹⁸Arthur Percy Noyes and Lawrence Coleman Kolb, *Modern Clinical Psychiatry*, 7th ed. (Philadelphia: Saunders Publishing, 1968), 334.

¹⁹With physical therapy, a therapist uses exercises to help a person recover or heal from an injury, but psychotherapy is less like physical therapy, where a therapist works with a post-operational patient, using exercises to help the patient recover or heal. Psychotherapy is more like chemotherapy, in that it refers to a process, not a part of the body (Szasz, *Psychotherapy*, 7).

²⁰Thomas Szasz, a former psychiatrist, suggests that psychotherapies are metaphorical treatments. Psychotherapies do not carry any weight because they are pretenses for treatments. He believes psychotherapies are metaphorical for at least three reasons. First, if the conditions that psychologists seek to cure are not diseases, then the procedures they use are not genuine treatments. Secondly, if treatments are imposed against a patient’s will, then they are tortures not treatments. Thirdly, if treatments consist of nothing but listening and talking, then they constitute a type of conversation which can be therapeutic only in a metaphorical sense (Szasz, *Psychotherapy*, xii).

²¹David Powlison, “A Biblical Counseling Response to Integration,” in *Psychology & Christianity: Five Views*, 2nd ed., ed. Eric Johnson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 144.

²²David Powlison, “A Biblical Counseling Response to Levels of Explanation,” in *Psychology & Christianity: Five Views*, 2nd ed., ed. Eric Johnson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 98.

While secular psychology is limited and potentially dangerous, it would be unfair to say that Christians can learn nothing from secular psychology. Christians *can* learn from it. But there are significant assumptions that psychology makes, and Christians must recognize the distortions that can follow. Where secular psychologists speak truthfully and helpfully, Christians ought to applaud them for their insights and thank God for his common grace. Where secular psychologists fall short and oppose the Scriptures, Christians ought to denounce their findings as blind and wrong-headed. David Powlison, a key leader in biblical counseling, describes the insights of secular psychologists as simultaneously neurotic and “brilliant and distorted.”²³ Psychologists can offer helpful observations, but be clueless as to why those observations are correct. For example, an atheistic scientist might be able to determine the number of cells in the human body or the distance from the earth to the North Star. Indeed, using the proper tools and with the gift of God’s common grace, scientists made in God’s image, have the capacity to make countless accurate observations. However, like all of the sciences, the findings of secular psychology cannot be accepted without discernment. No scientific conclusions may trump the truth of the Scripture.

Adequate at Observation, but Inadequate at Evaluation

The human transformation that secular psychology seeks can come only by supernatural means, but psychologists demur. One modern psychotherapist, Erwin Singer, attributes the capacity for change to man’s optimism to change: “Man is capable of change and capable of bringing this change about himself, provided he is aided [by other humans] in his search for such change. Were it not for this inherent optimism, this fundamental confidence in man’s ultimate capacity to find his way, psychotherapy as a discipline could not exist, salvation could come about only through divine grace.”²⁴ With that last line, Singer speaks better than he knows. Salvation is not inherent in human introspection or by means of psychotherapy. Human transformation as the Scriptures describe it can happen only through a work of divine grace.

This is not to say that secular psychology cannot bring about transformation. Psychology can lead a person, say, to stop drinking. However, psychology falls short of leading the person to a productive lifestyle that seeks to honor God. The patient may simply replace his drunkenness with some other vice. Genuine spiritual transformation cannot happen with secular psychology because secular psychology is not interested in working toward that kind of change.

Research psychology tends to focus on the tangled workings of human intentionality—hopes, goals, expectations, motivated choices,

²³Powlison, “A Biblical Counseling View,” 255.

²⁴Erwin Singer, *Key Concepts in Psychotherapy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 16.

reality maps, schemata, desires, etc. Introductory psychology texts tend to focus on the relationship between nature and nurture (neuropsychology and social psychology). In other words, they focus on the impact of situations. But the ultimate purpose which humans do what they do is always missing in their analysis. While psychologists can delve deeply into a person's desires, they can never go deeply enough because they are unwilling to see people as moral agents in God's image. The human affections are related to God, either consciously directed toward him, or away from him to some other object.²⁵

The Great Heist

Freud described psychotherapy as intentional conversation where one person skillfully draws out of another person his thoughts and beliefs and then seeks to influence that person to move in a certain direction.²⁶ This is what pastoral work is. An undershepherd is charged with leading sheep when they are wandering or hurting, caring for them, and providing solutions to obstacles. Freud knew this and described psychotherapy as "pastoral work" done by "secular workers."²⁷ Using the house of science as a metaphor, Freud said,

I have always lived on the ground floor and in the basement of the building—you maintain that on changing one's viewpoint one can also see an upper floor housing such distinguished guests as religion, art, and others.... In this respect you are the conservative, I the revolutionary. If I had another life of work ahead of me, I would dare to offer even those high-born people a home in my lowly hut. I already found one for religion when I stumbled on the category of neurosis of mankind.²⁸

In other words, his life's work was to take religion from the "upper floor" of societal respectability into the "basement"—from inspiration to insanity.

Powlison suggests part of the reason that early psychologists offered a method for change was that they turned away from religion: "The new psychology promised to offer a better basis for understanding human life and the improvement of human mind—without religion—so it is no surprise that many of its early leaders were raised in the Christian or Jewish faiths and came later to reject, at least orthodox versions of these faiths [i.e., deconversion]."²⁹ The problem was that secular

²⁵Powlison, "A Biblical Counseling Response to Levels of Explanation," 99.

²⁶Sigmund Freud, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1915), 161.

²⁷Powlison, "A Biblical Counseling View," 258.

²⁸*Letters of Sigmund Freud*, ed. E. L. Freud, trans. Tania and James Stern (New York: Basic Books, 1960), 431.

²⁹Eric Johnson, "A Brief History of Christians in Psychology," in *Psychology & Christianity: Five Views*, 2nd ed., ed. Eric Johnson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity

psychologists, like countless philosophers, sought to find in themselves what could be found only in Christ.³⁰

Prior to the rise of psychology in the late 1800s, Christians with spiritual problems went to their pastors. Biblical counseling occurred long before psychology emerged. As Greggo and Sisemore note, “Historically, most believers turned to clergy for solace and help.”³¹ Richard Baxter, a seventeenth-century pastor from England who outlined his private ministry of the Word to his congregation, recounted that he would spend much time studying the Word and preaching throughout the week (i.e., the public ministry of the Word). But he also was purposeful in his interpersonal ministry of the Word as well, using Mondays and Tuesdays of each week to visit the families of his church. By horseback, he visited the homes of all of his 800 church members throughout the course of each year. In these home meetings, he would ask members about their spiritual condition, then give them biblical solutions to help with their problems.³²

So while it is true that the biblical counseling *movement* was a response to psychology, the pastoral use of Scripture to help individuals with their problems had been happening long before the biblical counseling movement began. But when secular psychology emerged in the late nineteenth century to professionalize the work of counseling, the church was left out. Some look at secular psychology’s hijacking of counseling away from the local church as mere coincidence. But consider what Sigmund Freud wrote in one of his published letters: “The cure of souls [the term used for pastoral care] will one day be a recognized *non-ecclesiastical* and even *non-religious* calling [emphasis mine].”³³ With his development of a secularized version of soul care, Freud knew exactly what he was doing. He was secularizing the study of the human mind in order to steal the care of souls from the church.

Thomas Szasz, arguing that the rise of secular psychology and psychotherapy coincided with the decline of religion and the growth of science in the eighteenth century, writes, “The cure of (sinful) souls, which had been an integral part of the Christian religions, was recast as the cure of (sick) minds, and became an integral part of medical science.”³⁴ The tide of soul care had shifted.

Press, 2010), 21.

³⁰A. W. Pink, *The Doctrine of Sanctification* (London: CreateSpace, 2016), 218.

³¹Stephen Greggo and Timothy Sisemore, eds., *Counseling and Christianity: Five Approaches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 17.

³²Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (London: CreateSpace, 2011).

³³Sigmund Freud, *Psycho-Analysis and Faith: The Letters of Sigmund Freud*, trans. Eric Mosbacher (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1963), 104.

³⁴Szasz, *Psychotherapy*, xviii. The chief guidebook for psychology, the *Diagnostics and Statistics Manual (DSM)*, claims causality between symptoms and disorders without giving rationale for their claims. Allen Frances, the chief editor for the fourth

A Better Way

Biblical counseling is an intensely focused and personal aspect of the discipleship process whereby a believer comes alongside another believer in order to apply the Bible in a way that leads the individual to grow in spiritual maturity.³⁵ In short, biblical counseling is the use of Scripture to help people with the problems they face. This work has been ongoing since the first century, and must continue.

Secular Psychology Must Be Evaluated In Light of Scripture

Secular psychology's goal in counseling is to understand and improve human behavior—but to no clearly defined end. The goal of biblical counseling, on the other hand, is sanctification: conformity to the image of Christ.³⁶ Christians recognize that all humans were made in

edition reversed his view on the validity of psychology several years after the fourth edition was published. Gary Greenberg interviewed Frances following his deconversion from the psychological community. Frances suggested that the DSM essentially granted psychiatrists dominion over the entire landscape of mental suffering, as if they could describe every mental condition with systematic precision. Frances explained that he later recanted his position: "Here's the problem. There is no definition of a mental disorder." Greenberg pushed back by saying that Frances had put a definition in DSM IV, to which Frances responded, "and it is [total garbage], I mean you cannot define it [i.e., a mental disorder]" (Gary Greenberg, *The Book of Woe: The DSM and the Unmaking of Psychiatry* [London: Penguin Books, 2013], 66. See also Allen Frances, *Saving Normal: An Insider's Revolt against Out-of-Control Psychiatric Diagnosis, DSM-5, Big Pharma, and the Medicalization of Ordinary Life* [New York: Harper Collins, 2013]). While psychologists like to claim that the DSM is as scientific as an anatomy book, their claim is simply not well-grounded.

³⁵Paul Tautges, *Counseling One Another: A Theology of Interpersonal Discipleship* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2016), 20.

³⁶Not all counseling models see it this way. Other counseling approaches either have a different goal than sanctification in view, or a different way to get to that goal. In the "Levels of Explanation" approach, Thomas Plante does not deny the Bible and Christianity, but neither does he see the Bible as authoritative. He believes that "occasionally science will challenge traditional Christian understandings" (Greggo and Sisemore, eds., *Counseling and Christianity: Five Approaches*, 23). Essentially, this approach chooses reason over faith. Consequently, a counselee's presenting problem, which the Bible would call sin, "science" might call biologically or environmentally determined. In other words, if the counselor misdiagnoses the problem, he almost certainly will misidentify the solution. Mark McMinn uses a more eclectic approach to counseling, incorporating psychology, theology, and spirituality. However, he does not believe that all three will necessarily be used at the same time. Psychology, he says, is less authoritative than theology and spirituality, but still necessary ("An Integration Approach," in *Counseling and Christianity: Five Approaches*, ed. Stephen Greggo and Timothy Sisemore [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012], 88). One of the main problems with McMinn's approach to counseling is that he denies that sanctification is the goal of Christian counseling. He writes that "every Christian relationship *has the potential of* promoting sanctification," but that "growing in sanctification is not the goal of counseling." Rather, it is "the inevitable outcome of an effective counseling relationship between Christians" (ibid., 88, emphasis mine). The "Transformational Approach" championed by Gary Moon is also somewhat eclectic. The problem with this approach is not so much in the goal—transformation—which Moon seems

the image of the eternal God and were designed to serve and worship him. However, Adam's sin separated him from God and brought condemnation on all mankind. But God did not leave his creation to die in their sin. He pursued his people and provided atonement for their sins. But even after atonement is applied to an individual's account, God continues to perfect believers. This is the work of sanctification, where God transforms a forgiven sinner into the image of Jesus Christ. This transformation process takes a lifetime and should be the goal of every Christian—to glorify God by growing in Christ. Even if psychologists do not want to admit that the goal of counseling is spiritual transformation or even that God exists, that does not change the fact of those realities. Secular psychology must submit to the rule of Christ.

The Biblical Data

Two key biblical texts show that the goal of a believer's life should be sanctification. The first, Romans 8:28–30, will be examined briefly. The second, Colossians 1:28–29, will be examined in slightly greater detail.

Romans 8:28–30

God's ultimate goal for believers is to transform them into the image of Christ. In Romans 8, Paul guarantees that believers will suffer (vv. 18–25), but believers do not need to fear because the Spirit intercedes on their behalf (vv. 28–30). Furthermore, God is working out all things for the good of believers (vv. 28–30).³⁷ As Douglas Moo writes, "There is nothing in this world that is not intended by God to assist us on our earthly pilgrimage and to bring us safely and certainly to the righteous destination of that pilgrimage."³⁸ God designs all things for believers' "good," according to verse 28, but does not stop here. He defines what that "good" looks like in verses 29–30: conformity to the image of Christ. God does not simply call people to salvation and say, "I hope they make it." God provides the means necessary to do so, supplying all that is necessary for their preservation, growth in the fruit of the Spirit, and final glorification.

to get right. The problem is in how the transformation comes. Proponents of this approach gain value from all of the counseling disciplines and incorporate them into a method that promotes transformation. Moon writes: "I have become convinced that Jesus offers a source of exquisite knowledge that answers life's most important questions and that his answers deserve—at minimum—equal attention to that received by psychology's pioneers" ("A Transformational Approach," in *Counseling and Christianity: Five Approaches*, ed. Stephen Greggo and Timothy Sisemore [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012], 140). It seems that Moon is trying to exalt Christ's teaching over psychology, but in his attempt to do so, he actually undermines Christ's authority and superiority by putting it on the same level as psychology.

³⁷Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 530.

³⁸*Ibid.*

Colossians 1:28–29³⁹

In the second text, Colossians 1, Paul makes clear to his readers that he wants them to become mature in Christ. In the opening section of his letter to Colossae, Paul argued that the source of spiritual change comes from God through Christ. God had transformed sinners from corrupt strangers and enemies into beloved children at peace with him. He did this through the ministry of reconciliation, so that they would be trophies of his grace. While a believer's final salvation is dependent upon God, Paul further argues, it is at the same time conditioned on a Christian's perseverance (1:23).

Discipling Calls for Spiritual Transformation

In view of the preceding, Paul's task of proclaiming Christ was not finished when people exercised saving faith. Initial salvation was merely the beginning of the work that God intended to do in the believers' lives. The ultimate goal of Paul's ministry of proclamation was to "present every man complete in Christ" (1:28). The word "complete" (τέλειον) means to "make complete" or "render mature."⁴⁰ Paul would not be satisfied until every believer reached full maturity.⁴¹ He desired what God desired—to present them "before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach" (v. 22).

Discipling Aims for Full Maturity

With this goal in view, Paul shepherded his readers toward spiritual maturity. Paul understood that the success of his ministry would be tested by the quality and maturity of those whom God entrusted to him. Either he would be joyful if they were found to be genuine and worthy believers, or he would be ashamed if they were not.⁴²

This maturity for which Paul strove in the lives of believers was not an abstract idea. Through his proclamation, Paul intended to present everyone mature in Christ. God is not working to accomplish some vague notion of spiritual growth in believers; he is working to transform them for an eschatological era.⁴³

³⁹This section is adapted from Jacob Elwart, "Equipping Seminary Students for Biblical Counseling Certification at Inter-City Baptist Church in Allen Park, Michigan" (DEdMin Project, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2020).

⁴⁰Murray Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 73.

⁴¹Peter O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 90.

⁴²F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 88.

⁴³David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 133.

Discipling Is for Every Believer

Paul's intention to develop maturity in his readers compelled him to exhort them to persevere in the faith—and not just some of them: Paul was committed to the perseverance of every believer. Not only must each soul be individually brought to justifying faith; each one must also grow, individually, in sanctification. While sanctification flourishes in the soil of community, it must take root in each individual believer. Paul recognized this truth and emphasized it in his letter to Colossae.

Paul used the term *every* (πάντα) three times in Colossians 1:28–29 to highlight the reality that no part of Christian teaching is to be reserved for the spiritual elite.⁴⁴ What does Paul mean by using this word? The term *every* obviously cannot refer to everyone who lived in the world at that time—Paul could never reach every living person with the Gospel. Nor is there contextual evidence that he is referring to every kind of person. More likely, he is referring to every person he would encounter.⁴⁵

The scope of Paul's ministry sought to leave no one behind spiritually. The Scriptures teach that Christ will judge everyone in the final day (Heb 9:27). Anyone who does not have genuine spiritual life will be cast into an eternal hell. As an appointed apostle to the Gentiles, Paul recognized his responsibility to proclaim the whole counsel of God (Col 1:25–27; Acts 20:27). Consequently, he was motivated to see every professing believer embrace this message and respond with faith and obedience.

Discipling Demands Proclamation

The means to achieving this full spiritual maturity came through Paul's proclamation of Christ, the hope of glory (v. 27):⁴⁶ Christ was the object of Paul's proclamation.⁴⁷ Recognizing that he was not alone in proclaiming Christ, however, he transitions to the first person-plural pronoun, "*we* proclaim him," likely including Epaphras and others. This proclamation of Christ included two things: "admonishing" and "teaching."

The Greek word νουθετοῦντες, "admonishing,"⁴⁸ requires that

⁴⁴Bruce, *Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 87.

⁴⁵Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 160.

⁴⁶The word "ὅν" is an accusative masculine singular of the relative pronoun "ὅς." "It is accusative because within the relative clause it is the object, although its antecedent is nominative," pointing to Χριστός in verse 27 (Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 72).

⁴⁷Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 131.

⁴⁸Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 72.

pastors warn believers who might be tempted to stray. Admonition includes correction of either action or thinking.⁴⁹ In cases where a believer's wrong action or thinking arises from ignorance, the pastor must kindly and carefully guide them to following Christ; in cases where a believer's wrong action or thinking arises from obstinacy, the pastor must rebuke and call the person to repentance.

The Greek word διδάσκοντες, "teaching," involves intensive teaching.⁵⁰ This does not include simply a summary of all the main themes in the Bible (although it is certainly not less than that); instead, Paul made it his goal to teach the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). Just as Jesus had commanded Matthew 28.

While the main responsibility for this warning and teaching belongs to pastors, each believer has some level of responsibility to teach others.⁵¹ In the following chapter, Paul exhorts all believers to teach and admonish one another with singing (Col 3:16). In Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica, he commands all believers to "admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone" (1 Thess 5:14). Discipling demands the proclamation of Christ and his Word by both the pastors and the congregation.

Discipling Demands Hard Work

Even though Paul believed strongly in the sovereign purpose of God to finish the work that he started in believers (Phil 1:6), Paul still recognized that he needed to work. In Colossians 1:29, Paul "toils" to present everyone mature in Christ. This verb (κοπιῶ) means "to work to the point of exhaustion."⁵² The work of the discipler is tenacious labor. In 1 Corinthians 15:10, Paul compares himself to the other apostles, saying that he "worked harder than them all." This was not a point of boasting for Paul; he simply was making the point that discipling requires hard work.

Discipling Relies on God's Work

Despite Paul's hard work, he recognized that God worked through his work. In 1:29, he writes that he strenuously labored to bring people to full spiritual maturity, but immediately follows this statement by

⁴⁹O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 87.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Jesus commissioned all disciples to make disciples in Matt 28:18–20. However, church leaders bear the largest weight of responsibility. For example, even though Jesus commands the disciples to baptize believers, we would not say that all members are responsible to baptize believers. The NT pattern seems to point to pastors baptizing. In a similar way, much discipling is accomplished through preaching and teaching, tasks given to pastors. Paul writes to believers in Rome that they are both able and responsible to admonish each other (Rom 15:14).

⁵²O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 90.

acknowledging that he was “striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.” Paul describes his striving as God’s energy working within him. One could ask the question, “Where is God powerfully at work?” and Paul answer might be something like this: “God’s work is wherever Paul is energetically at work.”⁵³ Paul’s work was God’s work.

Paul makes a similar acknowledgement of God’s work in 1 Corinthians 15:10, where he precedes his statement about working harder than the other apostles with a recognition that all of it was “by the grace of God.” He follows this statement about hard work with a clarification: “Yet not I, but the grace of God with me.” Paul clearly owned the work that he engaged in, but he also recognized that it was reliant work: God was working through him.

The sphere of God’s power in Paul’s proclamation in Colossians 1 is not so much believing as it is working. When believers toil and strive at a God-given task, they receive God-given energy.⁵⁴ God’s work in believers does not exclude their strenuous labor, it requires it. Paul’s work “merely meant that his labors and struggles would not be futile because God was empowering him. The message of Christ the Reconciler would succeed because God Himself supplied the power to sustain His messengers.”⁵⁵

Summary: Colossians 1:28–29 Applied to Biblical Counseling

Because the Christian life culminates in full spiritual maturity at glorification, and because God has given tools to pastors to proclaim Christ leading believers to spiritual growth, pastors must be skilled in influencing people toward spiritual growth. Specifically, pastors must be able to shape people’s beliefs, affections, and choices. Biblical counseling is a kind of intensive discipleship that brings the proclamation of Christ down to a personal level. It allows for a person to speak truth to a believer who is working through a particular challenge.

Proclaiming Christ includes the difficult task of warning and teaching—the sometimes-uncomfortable task of challenging a brother to turn back to Christ or correcting incorrect beliefs. Pastors must also guide believers on the path of righteousness and perseverance by teaching the whole counsel of God and warning them about dangers along the way. A pastor’s job continues as long as he remains in the office given by God. As long as the Master is away, pastors must be reaching people with the gospel, making the glories of the gospel known, and then working to mature them in the gospel, until every man is complete in him.

⁵³Ibid., 91.

⁵⁴Ibid., 91.

⁵⁵Homer Kent, *Treasures of Wisdom: Studies in Colossians & Philemon* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 2006), 63.

Spiritual Transformation Occurs by Means of Scripture

Spiritual transformation cannot happen apart from the Holy Spirit's working through the Word. The Scriptures provide the means by which a person views, interprets, and responds to life's problems. The best way to learn about what goes into the manufacturing of a car is not to take a sampling of hundreds of cars and see what is common in all of them. Certainly, a person could learn a lot from that exercise, but the best way to learn about the manufacturing of a car is to learn from the designers. In a similar way, the best way to learn about human personality and behavior is by learning from the Designer. Understanding human behavior and seeking to improve human welfare will be best served when that behavior is brought into submission to the Scriptures, the special revelation of the Creator of heaven and earth.

Pastors who refer members to a secular psychologist must do so with great caution. The work of soul care belongs to the local church. Hebrews 13:17 says that pastors keep watch over the souls of their congregation as those who will give an account. The point is not that every church needs to have an "official" counseling ministry, but churches should be evaluating how they are training their membership to care for the souls of each other. Secular psychology can be helpful, but it is certainly not essential. As author Ed Bulkley points out,

Christians should understand that psychology does not provide any essential techniques not already revealed in Scripture. Just as modern technology has not produced anything essential to evangelism, neither has psychology produced any essential counseling technique. Does this mean that because a technique or technological development is not essential it is wrong to use it? Of course not. The printing press greatly helped in making the Scriptures available to the general public. Computers help churches track membership. Word processors greatly speed the production of correspondence and literature. But none of these are essential.⁵⁶

God has provided Christians with everything they need for life and godliness (2 Pet 1:3). Every spiritual, mental, or emotional problem that mankind can face or experience has an answer in the Word. Sexual, verbal, and physical abuse have been with us since the days of Cain. Marriage problems, poor self-esteem, addictions of every kind, jealousy, violent rage, depression, and virtually every other psychological dysfunction have answers in the Scriptures.⁵⁷ There are no truly new or unique problems that man faces.

By contrast secular psychology has incomplete goals and lacks proper accountability. One of the drawbacks of psychology, even Christian psychology, is that it lacks the biblical accountability of the church. If a client declines to receive truth from the counselor or knows

⁵⁶Bulkley, *Psychology*, 202.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 277.

what is right but refuses to do it, little if anything can be done by the secular psychologist. But the church is entrusted in such cases with a stewardship of mutual accountability and restorative discipline in the context of committed and compassionate relationships.

A Comprehensive Framework for Human Transformation

The Scriptures alone provide a comprehensive framework for human transformation. God, the Creator of all, made humans in his image and with a purpose to know him (John 17:3). As Judge of the living and the dead from whose eyes nothing is hidden, God will receive an account from every person. But this Creator and Judge is also mankind's only hope of salvation. All that is wrong in the world will be made right by him. This restoration starts with a restoration of human souls, causing them to come into fellowship with the Creator. It ends when he makes all things new, removing all sin and sickness.⁵⁸ Only the Scriptures that he supplies can provide a comprehensive framework that brings into focus the true realities experienced by each individual. Man is responsible to his Creator-Judge and must turn to him as Savior to be restored. Secular psychology cannot give the comprehensive insight into humanity's lost condition and inevitable responsibility to stand before the Judge and Ruler over all.

Conclusion

While secular psychology can offer helpful observations, secular psychology as a discipline is not essential for the care of souls.⁵⁹ God is the source of truth: "For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light" (Psalm 36:9). Christ offers rest for the souls of men (Matt 11:29). Christians can learn a great deal from secular psychology, but they must remember that secular psychology's faulty assumptions can lead to exclusion of key truths, distortion of fundamental beliefs, falsification of information, and misplaced emphases.⁶⁰ Psychotherapies, with all of their care and skill, "do not reorient strugglers to reality, and the deeper they probe into a person, the more misleading they become. The more psychotherapy does orient to reality, the more it moves in the direction of biblical counseling."⁶¹ Psychologists have sought to contribute to the cure of souls and even take over the responsibility, but the work of caring for and curing souls belongs to Christ's church.

⁵⁸Powlison, "A Biblical Counseling View," 247–48.

⁵⁹Would Christianity be worse off if psychology vanished from the scene?

⁶⁰Ibid., 255.

⁶¹Powlison, "A Biblical Counseling Response to Integration," 144.