

The Relationship between the Bible and Psychology

Although the Lord Jesus Christ and His apostles never addressed the relationship between the Bible and psychology, the Scriptures speak to this issue quite clearly. From the middle of the twentieth century to the present day, America has been becoming increasingly secularized. This secularization was accelerated by the wide-spread acceptance and teaching of Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud. As the culture began to increasingly accept pluralism and reject the notion of divine absolute truth, theology lost its recognition as “Queen of the Sciences” and men began to look at science as distinct from the Bible and of equal or greater authority. This shift in thought led even those who maintained belief in the Bible to the conclusion that one should trust theologians and pastors to provide answers to spiritual questions and scientists (including psychiatrists and psychologists) to provide answers to physical questions. This attempt to compartmentalize truth has led many professing Christians to believe that they can hold evolution and secular psychology in one hand and the Bible in the other with no contradiction or tension. Usually this amounts to accepting whatever the scientists declare as truth and looking to the Bible for help in the areas not related to science. Although this would perhaps be reasonable if the Bible and science were addressing mutually exclusive topics with no overlap whatsoever, we know this is not the case. To believe that there is no intersection would be thoroughly naïve.

Furthermore, not only do the Bible and science address some of the same issues, they present contradictory conclusions, assertions, and directives. So, what are we to think when the Bible and science seemingly contradict? Shall we side with the Bible, with science, or try to synthesize the two? Should we accuse the Bible, science, or neither of crossing its bounds?

The Three Basic Positions

In essence, there are only three basic positions that one can take with regard to the relationship between the Bible and psychology: (1) No real or apparent contradictions exist between the two and therefore no resolution is necessary; (2) No real contradiction exists, but apparent contradictions do exist; (3) Real contradictions exist.

As mentioned above, (1) is untenable and naïve. The only way to come to the conclusion that nothing appears to contradict is to be ignorant in one, the other, or both. It is obvious that many areas of disagreement exist between the two, such as the nature and behavior of homosexuality.

Those who hold to (2) usually espouse “all truth is God’s truth.” This presupposition, combined with the belief that both systems present truth, leads people of this persuasion to see the apparent contradiction as a limitation in human understanding of either the Bible or psychology. Thus, they attempt to find a solution to the apparent contradiction. Seeing both secular psychology and the Bible as reconcilable truths inevitably leads to an attempt to integrate the Bible and psychology. This can be done in two ways: (a) Resolving the apparent contradiction by reexamining one’s interpretation of psychology in areas of apparent contradiction, or (b) Resolving the apparent contradiction by reexamining one’s interpretation of the Bible in areas of apparent contradiction. Unfortunately, the solution often comes in the form of reinterpretation of the Bible in light of the “scientific knowledge.” Homosexuality also serves as a great example of this. Throughout history, homosexuality has been universally understood as a sin by Christians. However, only recently, in light of contemporary scientific advancement and a shift in culture toward “tolerance,” have believers begun to argue that Scripture supports homosexuality. Since the Bible was written thousands of years ago in another culture and other

languages, while much of modern secular psychology has been developed in the last fifty to one hundred years, it seems logical to many that one's interpretation of the Bible is unreliable.

The only other basic option is (3): real contradictions exist. It is the position of this writer that any honest person must come to the obvious conclusion that real, significant, and irreconcilable contradictions do exist. Much of the Scripture pertaining to these contradictions is plain and clear and does not require specialized knowledge in hermeneutics to understand. When someone approaches the topic with this level of straightforward honesty, he is faced with the clear decision of whether he will submit to and delight in the authority and sufficiency of Scripture or whether he will set the Word of God aside in favor of man's opinions.

It is critically important to correctly answer these questions and others like them, because one's conclusions will have drastic implications on everyday living in twenty-first-century America. What level of authority does the Bible have in comparison to psychology? Where do I go for help? Does the Bible speak to my everyday life or do I need to look elsewhere for solutions to my problems? How shall I live? How shall I relate to others? How do I solve problems? In this paper, I will propose a biblical perspective that will provide a framework for how to answer these questions and others like them.

Contrasting Presuppositions

Before proceeding to methodology, it is imperative to examine the presuppositions made by both secular psychology and the Bible. Upon doing so, it will become immediately evident that modern, secular psychology simply cannot be reconciled with the Bible in areas of contradiction. Two main presuppositions will be considered: (1) presuppositions regarding God and man; (2) presuppositions regarding authority and sufficiency.

God and Man: Naturalism vs. Supernaturalism

Although some may not realize that discrepancies exist between the Bible and psychology, and others may see them as minor reconcilable differences, these discrepancies are in fact momentous and sweeping. It is no exaggeration to state that these are not isolated differences at all; instead, all of them emerge as a result of being rooted in two significantly divergent worldviews.¹ At the most fundamental level, one presents a biblical/supernatural worldview and the other presents a humanistic/naturalistic worldview.

The existence and nature of God is the most foundational consideration. If a person has an incorrect view of God, his view of everything else will also be skewed. Interestingly enough, much of modern psychology was developed by anti-Christian atheists, such as Sigmund Freud, B.F. Skinner, and John Dewey as well as others who rejected Christianity, such as Carl Rogers. One may argue that atheists can discover "scientific truth" just as well as Christians. In the section below on authority and sufficiency, we will examine this assertion in more detail. For now, it is sufficient to note that an unbeliever cannot properly interpret human behavior, because he has an inherently incorrect view of man, which stems from an incorrect view of God.

The Bible does not set out to prove the existence of God. It simply presupposes His existence: "*In the beginning God...*" (Genesis 1:1). Furthermore, the God of the Bible reveals Himself clearly, among other things, as Triune (Matthew 28:19), Creator (Revelation 4:11), Sustainer (Colossians 1:17), eternal King and only God (1 Timothy 1:17), Most High Ruler (2

¹ A worldview, or *weltanschauung*, is defined as "a comprehensive conception or apprehension of the world especially from a specific standpoint." (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/weltanschauung?show=0&t=1288113598>). In other words, it is a view of God, man, the world, and how these relate to one another.

Chronicles 20:6), Lord (1 Timothy 6:15), and Judge (James 4:12). Therefore, He is the Creator and Sovereign Ruler of this world. Simply stated, He created us and owns us. He therefore has the right to rule us, direct us, and judge us. We, as humans, live in His kingly domain and must answer to Him.

The Bible also contains clear teaching about man. Among other things, the Bible teaches that man was made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26), has sinned (Romans 3:23), is a totally depraved enemy of God who cannot obey God until converted (Romans 8:7-10; Ephesians 2:1-10), is responsible for his sin, accountable to God, and without excuse (Romans 1:18-20), and is commanded to believe the gospel and obey God (Matthew 5:22; John 3:18, 36; Romans 6:23; Revelation 21:8). The bottom line is: every person is accountable and responsible to God.

Psychology, on the other hand, begins with the assumption that evolution is the creator and man in the ruler. These naturalistic and humanistic presuppositions are in total opposition to God and Scripture. Thus, any system that attempts to address human behavior (i.e. psychology) without a fundamental acknowledgement of the true God has no basis for its conclusions. Whether overtly or functionally atheistic, psychology, at every point of divergence from Biblical testimony, either explicitly or implicitly denies God as well as man's responsibility to obey Him. Much of psychology attempts to understand and address human behavior apart from recognition of the true God and apart from a correct understanding of man. God is either seen as non-existent or is largely ignored, and man is viewed as an essentially good (or at least neutral) and purely physical product of nature instead of a physical and spiritual being who is inherently sinful. It is interesting to note that psychology, which literally means "the study of the soul," largely rejects the notion of a soul. Furthermore, the presupposition of any non-biblical model is that man has the power in himself to change, whereas the Bible teaches that depraved man cannot do anything pleasing to God apart from regenerating grace. Again, one's presuppositions and beliefs about God and man are fundamental, since they make up his worldview.

Authority and Sufficiency: General Revelation vs. Special Revelation

The second primary presupposition under consideration regards man's source of authority and sufficiency. Due to the fundamental conflict in worldviews stated above, the Bible and psychology are in strong opposition on this point.

The Bible teaches that it alone is authoritative and sufficient. The Bible is God's revelation of Himself to mankind (Job 12:22; Psalm 98:2; Amos 4:13; Habakkuk 2:2; Romans 16:25-27; 1 Corinthians 2:6-16) and communicates redemption in Christ (John 5:37, 20:31; Luke 24:25-27, 44-49). It presents itself as the inspired (Acts 1:16; 2 Timothy 3:16) Word of God (1 Thessalonians 2:13). It is sacred (2 Timothy 3:15), holy (Romans 1:2), righteous (Romans 7:12), pure (Psalm 12:6), eternal (Matthew 24:35; Isaiah 40:8; 1 Peter 1:25), unchanging (Psalm 119:89), perfect (Psalm 19:7), infallible (Psalm 119:160), and inerrant (2 Peter 1:20-21). Therefore, man is obliged to receive it as true (John 17:17; Acts 17:11, Mark 7:9,13; Psalm 119:160; John 10:34-36), reliable (Isaiah 7:14; Micah 5:2; Psalm 16:10), sufficient (2 Timothy 3:17, 2 Peter 1:3), authoritative (Matthew 4:4; Psalm 119:89; Isaiah 1:2), and powerful to change lives (Matthew 5:18; Isaiah 55:11; Luke 16:17; Hebrews 4:12-13).

Secular psychology rejects the Bible as "*inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work*" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Instead of embracing the fact that the Bible is the all-sufficient and authoritative source of "*everything pertaining to life and godliness*" (2 Peter 1:3), they rely on man-made theories about human thought and behavior rooted in the humanistic and naturalistic theories of ungodly, unregenerate men.

Although their theories are based on general revelation and common grace, we must take caution for three reasons. First, their view of general revelation and common grace is biased by their unbiblical worldview. Second, although general revelation and common grace can provide *some* direction based on empirical observation and experience (e.g. common sense, budgeting, how to eliminate debt, etc.), they are limited in that they only serve to vaguely reveal God enough to eliminate all excuses for rejecting Him (Romans 1:20). Special revelation and saving grace are *necessary* for conversion (Romans 10:13-17), and the new birth is necessary for victorious living (Romans 8:5-8). In other words, efficacy for life change and transformation only comes through the Spirit of God to regenerated people. Due to total depravity, unregenerate people have no power within themselves to change (Jeremiah 13:23). Third, general revelation and common grace are not even sufficient for counseling *saved* people. Special revelation is necessary for life, godliness, and every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:3).

These fundamental differences in presuppositions present significant implications with regard to methodology. This will be examined in the following section.

Contrasting Methodologies

Methodology is always derived from and flows out of presuppositions and convictions. Given the vast disparity between the presuppositions of the Bible and secular psychology detailed above, one would correctly expect to find equally incongruent counseling methods resulting from each. Here, we will discuss a few of the most important ones.

Who Should Counsel?

To begin, we must ask the following foundational questions: “Who is competent to counsel?” and “How should counseling be conducted?” The secular psychology community would lead us to believe that one must be a state-licensed counselor with a graduate degree in psychology to be qualified to counsel others. However, the Bible presents a very different picture. All believers, regardless of education or certification, are commanded and charged “*to admonish [or counsel] one another*” (Romans 15:14; cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:18, 5:11; Colossians 1:29, 3:16; Galatians 6:1-2). This is the basic concept of Christian discipleship. Believers are told that they are able to do so, because they are “*full of goodness, filled with all knowledge*” (Romans 15:14). This knowledge is rooted and grounded in the Word of God, which is sufficient and authoritative. Just as all believers are called to use biblical counseling for the purposes of “*teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work*” (2 Timothy 3:16b-17), pastors and church leaders are also called to “*preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction*” (2 Timothy 4:2). Since only believers can properly understand and apply the Bible (1 Corinthians 2:10-14), only Christians are given the charge to counsel others and they are to do so through teaching, admonishing, correcting, and training in righteousness.

Diagnosis and Misdiagnosis

Additionally, the way in which one arrives at conclusions regarding the nature of a problem will determine how he believes the problem should be solved. Given the fact that secular psychology begins with a naturalistic and humanistic set of presuppositions, personal problems are invariably viewed as physiological (i.e. genetic, chemical, etc.) and/or environmental (i.e. family upbringing, work situation, etc.) when oftentimes the root problem is, in actuality, a spiritual problem. It goes without saying that this type of misdiagnosis inevitably

leads to incorrect counsel and treatment. For example, psychologists and psychiatrists who subscribe to naturalism view depression as a result of a chemical imbalance in the brain and treat it with medication, but depression is often the result of ungodly attitudes and/or behaviors. When this is the case, depression is not the problem but the symptom, and the secular counselor is guilty of prescribing an incorrect physical solution for the spiritual problem at hand.

The Issue of Personal Responsibility

Related to the concern of misdiagnosis is the issue of personal responsibility. Due to naturalistic presuppositions, belief that personal problems are physiological or environmental leads to the obliteration of personal responsibility. As a result, the need for forgiveness and reconciliation is not addressed. Instead, clients are told that the problem is outside of their control, because no one could possibly be responsible for a genetic, chemical, or environmental problem! For example, a man who is experiencing anger and resentment toward his wife may be told that his job or coworkers are causing him stress and that he needs medication to help him calm down. This is contrary to a biblical approach, which recognizes and emphasizes personal responsibility and the need for salvation, self-control, and reconciliation.

Is Integration Appropriate?

As previously stated, there are only three basic options with regards to the relationship between the Bible and psychology, and there are real contradictions (not just apparent contradictions) at the most fundamental levels. Now that the framework has been laid and we have seen some of the primary areas where presuppositions and methodologies differ between psychology and the Bible, we will return to the question of whether integration of the two is ever an appropriate model. In other words, is it possible to “baptize” ideas from secular psychology? Some argue (incorrectly) that it is not only possible but helpful.

Why Integrate?

The first question that must be asked is “For what reason(s) should integration be considered?” Usually, professing Christians in favor of integration see some value in secular psychology due to common grace, general revelation, and the idea that “all truth is God’s truth.” As argued in the section on presuppositions above, many of the issues addressed in the context of counseling are spiritual problems (i.e. sin) with spiritual solutions (i.e. repentance). For these issues, common grace and general revelation are not sufficient. Rather, the counselor needs to possess the Spirit of God, combined with special revelation, in order to make proper assessments of root causes and to discern appropriate solutions. Furthermore, counselees need the Spirit of God and special revelation to forsake the sins that enslave them and to walk in righteousness and obedience to Christ (Romans 6:6, 16-20). Since the Bible is sufficient for all things pertaining to life and godliness, there is no reason to look beyond the Bible for answers to spiritual problems. With this in mind, one need not integrate with the hope of supplementing the Bible with some form of extra-biblical truth necessary for life and godliness, because it does not exist.

The Dangers of Integration

Second, one must consider the outright dangers posed by integration. It cannot be overemphasized that even the prospect of integration is testimony to distrust in the sufficiency of the Bible and the Spirit. Additionally, as we have seen, incorrect presuppositions lead to incorrect methodology. In this sense, “biblical” counseling can not be done properly given the presuppositions of secular psychology. Remember, there is tremendous practical impact (e.g.

how a counselor addresses problems like fear). With regard to spiritual issues, the Bible and the Spirit are in no need of assistance from the secular word, general revelation, or anything else.

Given all of this, we must ask: “Does secular psychology have any value at all or should it be fully rejected in every respect?” It is the opinion of this writer that any area of psychology that conflicts with the Bible is extremely dangerous. So, what about the areas of psychology that do not conflict with Scripture? Should they be rejected also? No, not necessarily. Some forms of psychology (as well as other “sciences”) do have value, so it is imperative to address some well-defined, yet simple, parameters for understanding where to draw the lines. We will offer two: observation versus causation and physical versus spiritual.

Principle #1: Observation vs. Causation

The most basic principle involves the difference between observation and causation. It is possible for sciences, including psychology, to have value on a purely observational level. In other words, it is possible for psychologists (or anyone else) to observe human behavior and record statistics. For example, psychologists may conduct an experiment and find that ninety nine percent of children under five years old would opt to eat a cookie for dinner if offered. This type of observational psychology is acceptable in that it does not offer any moral judgments regarding causation. However, once it moves from observation to assumptions of causation, it has crossed the line. At this point, the offenders claim to understand the human heart and place themselves in danger of conflicting with the Bible. So, it is within their bounds to make observations of human behavior and perhaps to even calculate statistical correlations, but any value gained from observation is thrown out of the window when they attempt to move beyond observation to assumptions regarding causation. One must always remember that correlation does not imply causation, and causation is never within the jurisdiction of the scientist or psychologist. Only God knows the heart and provides an accurate diagnosis of root causes.

Principle #2: Physical (i.e. Organic) vs. Spiritual (i.e. Non-Organic)

The second principle is to distinguish between physical and spiritual. Anything biblically ascertained to be non-organic, has a spiritual cause, and should be addressed with biblical counseling. On the other hand, organic issues that have a physical cause require medical attention (e.g. brain tumors, Alzheimer’s disease, etc.). However, it should be noted that, along with medical attention, it is beneficial for those with organic issues to receive biblical counseling to help them learn to live in a God-honoring manner with their physical condition.

Integration as a Means to an End

One last consideration concerning the prospect of integration must be considered. Some argue that it is necessary for Christians to do Christ’s work (i.e. biblical counseling) in the context of the world’s system (i.e. secular psychology). The reason one typically gives in support of this “marriage” is that he desires to make himself more available to the general public in order to reach those who would not otherwise be reached. Is this a valid reason for Christians to enter into the realm of secular psychology? Does this justify a Christian seeking out state licensing for counseling? No, it does not for three reasons. First, as argued above, the Bible explicitly states that counseling ought to be done in the church by believers, not apart from the church by believers and unbelievers. Second, the Bible makes it clear that there should be no partnership between the church and the world with regard to spiritual concerns (2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1; James 4:4). The church has always been called to separate from the world, and syncretism has always been condemned. So, the means are never justified by the ends. Third,

even if it was permissible to use the world as a means to a good spiritual end, it must be recognized that it is utterly impossible to counsel within the parameters of the state without compromise. Either the counselor will follow the code of ethics and violate Scriptural injunctions or purposely violate the code of ethics that he signed and promised to keep thereby placing himself in the position to be sued, fired, and/or slandered, which is hardly a picture of a believer who strives to be “*above approach*” (Philippians 2:15). Again, counseling ought to be thoroughly biblical, but cannot be such according to secular principles, such as are prescribed by the ACA Code of Ethics. For example, this code requires counselors to respect “the freedom of choice of the clients”² with regard to counselees constructing their own goals for counseling, whether biblical or not. Counselors are also directed to “avoid imposing values that are inconsistent with counseling goals...respect the diversity of clients, trainees, and research participants.”³ This makes it impossible to practice biblical counseling!

Conclusion

It is obvious that there are significant contradictions between the Bible and psychology, and that these contradictions cannot be resolved or integrated. At the most fundamental level, there are conflicting presuppositions which lead to conflicting methodologies. The Bible presents a supernatural worldview that consists of God as Creator, Ruler, and Judge and man as depraved, sinful, and responsible/accountable to God. Psychology presents a naturalistic and humanistic worldview that is either overtly or functionally atheistic, sees man as essentially good, and removes responsibility and accountability. The Bible presents all believers as counselors, addresses spiritual issues as such, and assumes personal responsibility for sin. Psychology holds that only state-licensed counselors that agree to their secular code of ethics are competent to counsel, misdiagnoses spiritual issues as physiological and/or environmental ones, and dulls the conscience by shifting blame and removing guilt for sin. Finally, integrating the Bible with psychology is not appropriate, because the Bible is sufficient, special revelation and the Spirit of God are necessary, and spiritual problems require spiritual solutions. Psychology is only valuable on an observational level, never on a causal level, and medical science is only valuable for physical matters, not spiritual ones. Finally, the notion that a Christian should use secular psychology as a means to the end of reaching people for Christ is unbiblical and should be rejected.

² American Counseling Association, “ACA Code of Ethics as Approved by the ACA Governing Council, 2005,” <http://www.ncyu.edu.tw/files/list/family/CodeEthics05enhancedprint%5B1%5D.pdf> (accessed 10/29/2010), 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 4-5.