

Integrating Psychology and the Bible

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The church was weak where psychology was strong. The current breakout of psychology into the evangelical mainstream began in the minds and practices of Christian psychotherapists impressed with that relative weakness and strength. Evangelicals sought to redress the church's weakness by engaging in psychotherapies. But the conversion process has gone the wrong way. Instead of portraying the biblical vision of people first to the church and then to psychologists, integrationists imported secular visions into Christianity. Personality theory, psychopathology, health, and therapeutic change have replaced biblical anthropology, sin, grace, holiness, and sanctification. Psychology's cultural, social, and pragmatic authority proved too strong. Biblical truth seemed insufficiently applicable.

Christian psychotherapists generally believe that the Bible is insufficient when it comes to exploring and explaining the significant goings on in the human psyche. For example, integrationists repeatedly cite the Bible's failure to offer a "personality theory." Because Scripture does not detail how individual differences arise--in motivation, behavior, cognition, affective expression--it is presumed deficient when it comes to counseling.

That view rests on the massive assumption that explaining the differences between people provides the key to counseling. The Bible proclaims the opposite. The deep-seated commonalities between people are far more crucial to counseling than the extensive variations between people. For example, Christians across all times and places have found that "there is no temptation that has overtaken you that is not common to all" (1 Corinthians 10:13). The social, cultural, historical, and individual differences between Hebrew herdsmen and Corinthian cosmopolitans--and between both of them and contemporary American readers--can hardly be exaggerated. What do people in Irian Jaya and in New York City suburbs have in common? Yet Paul freely recited Exodus stories to urban Greeks and then said, "These things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction" (10:11). Though the visible content of life's struggles is widely variable, the core themes in people are identical.

Observations and descriptions of individual differences are, of course, extremely valuable in making counselors mature and case-wise. An appreciation of differences nourishes a godly disenculturation from the assumptions of ego- and ethno-centricity. But we should be agnostic about personality theories. On the surface such theories are speculative, prone to intellectual fashion, and prejudiced by their hostility to what is true and significant about people. Even more important, personality theory turns out to be absolutely unnecessary for effective counseling. Personality theory is even a distraction because it directs attention to the wrong questions. It mistakes the fascinating but superficial for the significant. It buries significant clarities that the Bible provides beneath superficial ambiguities that psychology attempts to explain. The questions that personality theory tackles are interesting subjects for general scholarship. They are perennially vexed because they are inherently ambiguous. But the Bible addresses in practical detail the significant things good counseling must address. The diverse

fruit on the human tree arises from generic patterns of idolatry or faith and exhibits generic patterns of sin or righteousness.

The integration movement has thought that the gold mine of significant truth for counseling was in the secular psychologies and psychotherapies. So integrationists diligently exegete psychology for relevant and needed truth. In effect, the Bible contains only "control beliefs" at a high level of generality: creation in the image of God, fall into sin, redemption in Christ. Psychology contains exegetical riches of great specificity and practicality for understanding and transforming human functioning.

Of course, even at a level of generality, biblical control beliefs are helpful. The best integrationist thinkers are troubled by the current mass psychologization of the Christian faith. For example, Stan Jones and Richard Butman write, "Too much of what passes for integration today is anemic theologically or biblically, and tends to be little more than a spiritualized rehashing of mainstream mental health thought." But integrationists do not provide vigorous and perceptive biblical categories both for explaining people and for stemming the psychologizing tide. The center of gravity and interest for even the most careful and theologically astute integrationists is psychology. The center of gravity for effective counseling and de-psychologizing the evangelical church must be Scripture. Integrationists underestimate the Bible. Their conviction of the deficiency of Scripture logically mirrors an inadequate perception of how the sufficiency of Scripture works in practice.