

Bible and Psychology

by David Powlison

(The following is excerpted from “Do You See?”, Journal of Biblical Counseling, 1997.)

Many conservative Protestants do not see the sufficiency of Scripture for the cure of souls. Typically, “spiritual” matters are split off from “psychological, emotional, relational” matters. Spiritual matters include such things as commitment to God, prayer, ethics, doctrine, evangelism, assurance of salvation, the devil, and a mystical leading of the Spirit. Other matters—suffering, socialization dynamics, unpleasant emotions, interpersonal reconciliation, enslavement to sinful habits, patient and probing conversation, self-deception, motivation, and so on—are relegated to extrabiblical authorities. Scripture is not seen to offer the answers that enable us to interpret and redress human experience. Instead, wise and effective counseling can only emerge from grafting or “integrating” secular psychological systems into Christianity. In real life, the engrafted secularism inevitably dominates what is seen as an impoverished and impotent Scripture.

Continued debate must occur over the scope and purposes of Scripture’s intended sufficiency and the consequent use of Scripture. Conservative Protestants on both sides of the question confess Scripture as an authoritative guide to “matters of faith and practice.” But do those matters include understanding life’s practical problems and finding ways to help? On the one hand, the “integrationist” paradigm proclaims that Scripture is an inadequate guide for the counseling task. They believe it has not revealed enough about ourselves and our world. And though most integrationists view their work as a form of “ministry” for Christ, they see such ministry as needing a fundamental contribution from something besides Scripture. The Bible for them simply lacks adequate explanations, instructions, and implications.

On the other hand, those committed to systematic biblical counseling see that a biblical practical theology is not only possible but necessary. We would affirm that “spiritual matters” include the details of practical human problems. Any contribution of extrabiblical sources is distinctly subordinate and secondary to the givens of the biblical model. Other sources may be informative and provocative: we may learn from and be challenged by our own experience, popular fiction, history, the mass media, psychology, the idiosyncrasies of those we counsel, sociology, music theory, rock stars, rhetoric, comparative anthropology, Muslim immigrants who move in next door, medicine, and organizational management. But the “truth” of all these interesting things must be judged by Scripture and reinterpreted according to the Spirit’s wisdom.

Unless God has lied to us, we do have what we need to develop systematic biblical counseling. Any such system must provide four things: (1) a penetrating and comprehensive analysis of the human condition, (2) an effective solution, equally penetrating and comprehensive, (3) a wise pastoral methodology that helps us deal with the variety of persons and problems appropriately, and (4) a standpoint from which to discern unbiblical elements in other systems of counseling. Scripture is crammed with just these things. Do you see?