

## Chapter 9

### Caution: Counseling Systems Are Belief Systems

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At one of the many wonderful speaking opportunities the Lord gives in local churches I had the privilege of meeting a psychologist who was responsible for all of the counseling of her State's death row inmates. Imagine her responsibility! After the Sunday School hour she told me how much she enjoyed the presentation on biblical counseling and about her responsibilities. I was impressed with her care for people but also her interest in biblical counseling. She then raised an issue that was causing her much concern. She said, "I've been attending this church for months and keep offering to help with counseling but no one will take me up on my offer. I feel like I'm being held at arm's length. Can you help me understand this?" I obviously didn't know all the background but knowing this church's view of Scripture I could guess some of the issues.

We met after the morning service and I heard about her decades of service and experience. She struck me as a woman with a wealth of practical wisdom for dealing with people. So, why would the church have concerns? What's the issue? She just wanted to help people. But I was guessing that the church was concerned that what they believe about people, problems and the Scriptures would not be compatible with her views.

Because of understanding that there are different theories about why humans have the problems they do and that varying counseling systems have arisen from these theories to help people deal with their problems I asked her what her approach was to counseling. She explained that she had two Masters degrees, and she had been trained in an Adlerian approach to counseling and Family Systems Counseling.<sup>1</sup>

I then began to explain to her that there are many philosophical issues related to these counseling systems using an outline showing that these really are belief systems. For example, every counseling system has a view of what the problem is and then what solution naturally follows. As I unfolded the six points of this outline she caught on quickly and began to fill in the blanks with her training and telling me what she was taught. It became very evident to her that her counseling systems were philosophical and she began to see why the church might be concerned that her belief system might be contrary to a biblical belief system. Both she and the church were interested in answering questions like, “Why do humans have problems?” And, “how do we help them with those problems?” But, the church was concerned that the answers to those questions come primarily from Scripture.

I was also able to explain to her that this church and Biblical counseling are both concerned about mixing biblical truth with secular views of humans and that this mixture of belief systems is called *syncretism*.

Syncretism is not new and is defined as, “the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought.”<sup>2</sup> It often flourished in the history of Israel. For example, we read in 2 Kings 1:1-2:

Now Ahaziah fell through the lattice in his upper chamber in Samaria, and lay sick; so he sent messengers, telling them, “Go, inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, whether I shall recover from this sickness.” But the angel of the LORD said to Elijah the Tishbite, “Arise, go up to meet the messengers of the king of Samaria, and say to them, ‘Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron?’”

In Luke 11:18 Jesus indicates that Beelzebul (different spelling, same character) is in fact Satan. Hence, this king of Israel (God's representative in a theocracy) is consorting with Satan to discern his end rather than the God of Israel. That is raw syncretism.

It is also evident in the prophetic books. A clear example is when the true God warned Judah about this through Zephaniah. In the following verses notice how they were worshipping the stars, Baal, Milcom but also swearing allegiance to the LORD.

I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests, those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens, those who bow down and swear to the LORD and yet swear by Milcom, those who have turned back from following the LORD, who do not seek the LORD or inquire of him (Zephaniah 1:4-6).

It ought to be obvious from these examples that the LORD does not think highly of this mixture of beliefs but why bring up this issue in a book on the authority of Scripture in counseling? We would like to demonstrate that the subject matter of counseling theories significantly overlaps with the subject matter of theology.<sup>3</sup> Thus, counseling systems are really belief systems. They are philosophical by their very nature. If this is true, then we must be on high alert to the danger of syncretism.

For a Christian, psychology is one of the most difficult fields of study in which to keep one's bearings. Hence, it is vitally important for the Christian to have a very tightly woven theology as the framework for the study of psychology. Christians seem to fall into two categories in their view of psychological theory and theology. Some view these disciplines as parallel; they perceive them to be two unrelated disciplines. Others view them as disciplines that mutually inform each other; they are perceived as integrateable. A tightly woven biblical theology takes a third view. This view perceives theology as the governing framework by which psychology-as-theory-building must be understood or interpreted. This view does not invalidate

psychology as a legitimate field of study. However, it recognizes that the presuppositional underpinnings are out of sync with biblical theology and hence provide interpretations of reality (and therefore, often prescriptions) that are consequently also out of sync.

David Powlison has cogently stated the value of studying psychology. He noted that he studied psychology and the history of psychiatry because biblical counseling takes place in contemporary culture and is utterly framed and surrounded by psychiatry. He provides a number of illustrations as to how the knowledge gained in his study provided the opportunity to more precisely understand counselees and address issues biblically.<sup>4</sup>

The Apostle Paul at Mars Hill portrays this for us. He drew upon the philosophical thinking (until the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, psychology was a subset of philosophy and until the Enlightenment philosophy was a subset of religion) of the Athenians. They had drawn the conclusion that there was something more to life than they had come to understand and, therefore, created the category of “the unknown god” as a potential way to explain *this-more-to-life* category. Paul took their provocative conclusion as the starting point for the proclamation of Truth. But later in Colossians 1-2, the same Apostle warns us to not become contaminated by “vain philosophy” in our attempts to understand life (Colossians 2: 8). At first glance it may appear that Paul is contradicting himself. But such is not the case. He is not using their theory (vain philosophy) as a basis for explaining their behavior, but rather to demolish it. He is saying, “You recognize there is more to life than you can explain so let me introduce you to reality that is known only through revelation.”

### **Contextual Observations and Interpretations**

We propose to make some contextual observations from Colossians intertwined with interpretations from the point of view of the Colossians and ourselves. This will lead us to the

question, “How does this instruction apply to us today?” Then we will ask the question, “How do we implement this application in our study and our counseling?”

### **Contextual Observation # 1: Gnosticism and Syncretism**

Evangelical scholarship is in general agreement that the Colossian church was being infected by Proto-Gnosticism.<sup>5</sup> Gnostics embraced three errors regarding Christ: He was not creator; He was not God incarnate; and He was not enough to enable the Christian to live a full life. A basic knowledge of Christian theology is all that is required to recognize that these three errors strike at the very heart of the person and work of Christ. The first two chapters of this epistle challenge this Proto-Gnosticism.

Gnosticism highlighted grasping superior knowledge obtained through a complex system of asceticism, legalism, and mysticism all of which they wanted to combine with belief in Christ—syncretism. The participation of the Colossians in this system is precisely what Paul questions when he writes:

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (Colossians 2:20-23).

*Elemental spirits (stoicheion)* may have two different meanings. Some scholars understand this term to refer to spiritual powers or cosmic spirits, while others prefer the ceremonial worship precepts common to Jew and Gentiles.<sup>6</sup> Given the context, the latter seems to be the more plausible explanation. Hence, Paul is questioning why the Colossian Christians are engaging in a syncretistic approach by reincorporating less-than biblical concepts into their understanding of life.

Paul describes the real danger of this syncretistic approach in Colossians 2:23. These explanations have the aura of wisdom, but in reality are of little value in changing the course of life. They appear to provide correctives which, in the Colossian context, came through *self-made religion*, ascetic practices, and severe bodily discipline practiced by the Gnostics. The Christians who were practicing Gnosticism were following the lead of Adam and Eve in that they set themselves up as the arbitrators between the counsel of God (you shall not eat) and the counsel of the serpent (you shall not surely die) in that they coupled with Christ ascetic practices to effect wholeness. So modern day Christians overshadow/overpower biblical anthropology with *psychological findings*.

## **Contextual Observation # 2: Paul's Word-Saturated and Christ-Focused Ministry**

### **Methodology and Goals**

In Colossians 1:28, Paul outlines his ministry method and goal. "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ." We can summarize Paul's ministry methodology as the proclamation of Christ in all His fullness.

This ministry methodology has three dimensions. The first component is admonishment from the Greek word *nouthesis*. This is that word that Jay Adams used in his development of nouthetic counseling. Adams explained that the word has three aspects: 1) it infers a problem, 2) this problem is to be addressed verbally, and 3) this verbal address is to be engaged in love.<sup>7</sup>

The second dimension of Paul's ministry methodology is formal teaching of all the implications of the Person of Christ. This second dimension is tempered by the third dimension, *all wisdom*, that is, skillful application.

Three times Paul says, “everyone.” Whatever the problem any person may have should be addressed in this manner. As the Apostle notes elsewhere (for example I Thessalonians 5:14) admonition and teaching is coupled with comforting, support and patience with each to be implemented appropriately with diverse individuals. This does not mean that the biblical counselor disregards the ever-growing knowledge-base regarding the intricacies of how God designed humanity. Precisely the opposite is true. It means that he does access the knowledge of both hard and soft science, but it is always subject to the authority of Scripture and the application of it must always be theological and ethical.

The goal of Paul’s ministry is all-encompassing: “present everyone mature in Christ.” Paul was concerned about how the Colossian Christians were addressing life issues. His goal was to enable them to be mature in every dimension of life.

### **Contextual Observation # 3: Warnings to Remain Rooted in Christ**

In Colossians 2:4, Paul reiterates that his purpose in writing to them is that “no one may delude you with plausible arguments.” He continues in Colossians 2:7 by reminding them that they were rooted (taught the basic knowledge) and being further instructed in the multifaceted Christ (Hebrews 4:15) resulting in the establishing of their faith. And then, in the remainder of Colossians 2, he issues three stern warnings.

In Colossians 2:8, *see to it* has the implied tone of a coach telling his players to in no way allow the opposing player to make his often-executed play. Paul is saying, “Do not allow that insidious thinking to deceive you into adopting these elementary principles that are inconsistent with your faith in Christ who is the very fullness of Deity.” He adds further warnings in Colossians 2:16-22 where he tells the Colossians and us, “Don’t let anyone stand as the judge of your thinking. Stand your ground as to the validity of your Christian methodology. Don’t let

anyone defraud you of your prize of being humble and depending upon God’s methods and goals for life and counseling.” There is no profession in which it is more difficult to discern and avoid “elementary principles” from overshadowing and/or overpowering biblical truth than counseling. Without a finely tuned theology and biblical anthropology, for example, the humanistic thinking regarding self-esteem or poor self-image will seep into Christian thinking. Self ends up sitting on the throne of a life rather than Christ.

#### **Contextual Observation # 4: Sharpen Our Focus for Living**

Paul next describes four foundational principles for sharpening our focus that make syncretism obsolete (Colossians 3:1-4). Colossians 3:1 provides his first focus: *keep seeking answers from a sovereign and loving Lord*. The Colossian Christians were being confronted with questions of their identity (who they were) and how to change. The Gnostics were propounding both the questions and the answers. Paul reminds the believers to seek the answers from above.

Our society in its quest for meaning generates questions for which we do not always immediately have answers. Sometimes it takes struggling with the questions and the manifestations in behaviors for us to ferret out an appropriate biblical approach. For example, what to do with an anorexic was a troubling question for biblical counseling forty years ago. We were surrounded by worldly wisdom that was not working all that well. But as a corporate body we kept seeking answers from above and today we have gained greater understanding and wisdom.

Paul shares his second focus in Colossians 3:2: *connect your affections to higher values*. The word affection in the original is inclusive of thinking and feeling hence this translation. *Higher values* is from a word simply meaning above, high, heavenward. So, Paul instructs the Colossians to look to God and his revelation for answers, not human conclusions. The broader



counseling community has been instructed in the importance of self-esteem and methods of obtaining it. However, biblical counseling, following Paul's lead, concluded from the study of Scripture that this goal and the methods for obtaining it are inconsistent with a Christian approach to life. Instead of adapting the self-esteem movement into biblical counseling, we have discerned other issues at work in the lives of those diagnosed with low self-esteem. Helping counselees to cultivate the many-splendored dimensions of their identity in Christ addresses the low self-esteem presentation problem at the heart level.

Colossians 3:3 offers Paul's third focus: *remember your union with Christ*. I (Howard) have recently finished the work by Scott and Lambert on counseling the hard cases.<sup>8</sup> A frequent theme in this book is the methodology of leading the counselee to the cross and an understanding of our co-crucifixion with Christ. We died with Him. He died for sin and we died to sin. He was resurrected and we were resurrected with Him (Romans 6:1ff). So, Paul tells us that our lives are hidden with Christ in God. As a result we are free to choose to live for God's glory rather than our own desires. This freedom is exercised through the enabling power of the indwelling Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 4:1-8).

Paul shares his fourth focus in Colossians 3:4: *anticipate the eternal and maintain an eternal perspective*. Nothing can dull the attraction of sin more than the glories of heaven. Even as believers we seldom contemplate the reality of heaven. But that is what Paul is inciting in the Colossian believers. The syncretistic explanations for the realities of living in this world lose their appeal when considered in the light of eternity.

### **Counseling Systems Are Philosophical Belief Systems**

So, what does Paul's warning have to do with the Evangelical world and psychological theory-building in particular? As has been hinted at through some of the applications, we believe

that incorporating the conclusions of the secular psychologies concerning the problems of people with a biblical perspective can result in syncretism. Though well-meaning and sincere, this practice can be naïve from a theological perspective about why people have the problems they do.

Many have recognized the philosophical and religious nature of the psychologies, including psychologists themselves. For example, psychologist Paul Vitz quotes Carl Jung as writing, “Patients force the psychotherapist into the role of priest, and expect and demand that he shall free them from distress. That is why we psychotherapists must occupy ourselves with problems which strictly speaking belong to the Theologian.”<sup>9</sup>

During a recent sabbatical I (Ernie) did a significant amount of reading on the current state of the psychologies and what the most-used therapies are. My suspicions were confirmed that CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) has huge popularity. Knowing that I was going to write this chapter, I was especially interested to find out that self-admittedly CBT and Buddhism are very similar in their approaches. In fact, Aaron Beck (the founder of CBT) has done conferences with the Dalai Lama.

I came across this in a delightfully informative book on the current state of psychiatry, the drug industry, and alternative approaches to counseling. The author, Charles Barber (a professor of Psychiatry at Yale) wrote out of a concern about the amount of drugs Americans are putting into their systems to deal with personal problems. He wrote:

Even Aaron Beck has gotten into the Buddhist act. Or perhaps the Dalai Lama has gotten into the cognitive-behavioral act.... Aaron Beck held a public dialogue at the International Congress of Cognitive Psychotherapy in Sweden in 2005. Afterward, Beck posted on the university of Pennsylvania Web site.... “From my readings and discussions with His Holiness and other Buddhists, I am struck with the notion that Buddhism is the philosophy and psychology closest to cognitive therapy and vice versa.”<sup>10</sup>

Is CBT just neutral? Doesn't this at least raise some suspicions about taking CBT and baptizing it into Christianity?

Why does this matter? We have already seen that Scripture warns us about being carried away by false philosophies so it matters because Scripture, meaning the Lord, says it matters. But it also matters because by mixing belief systems you come up with a hybrid belief system that waters down both. This means practically that the full authority and beautiful wisdom of Scripture is not unleashed on the problems of people.

### **Evaluating Belief Systems**

We're going to use religious terminology to describe belief systems and in particular counseling systems. In brief, we will see that counseling systems quote someone or something. There is some *source of authority*. Counseling systems also seek to identify human nature and why humans have problems—there is some view of *sin*. These theories also then propose a solution to the perceived dilemma of humanity. In other words, there is a view of *salvation*. It makes sense then that there has to be a *methodology* to carry out the view of what the solution is. We will use the theological term *sanctification* here. Counseling systems also have *support systems*. There are those that promote this perspective on counseling and schools that its methodology. Lastly, these theories do *apologetics* to defend their belief systems and show the weaknesses of others. Much like Barber does in his book. Here we'll use the term *sparring*.<sup>11</sup> Let's get started.

### **Source of Authority**

It has been interesting through the years to see that the psychological and psychiatric world uses the term “bible” to describe the DSM (the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). The latest and most controversial edition has just been released which

describes the problems humans face. One of my students recently told me about an ad he had seen for the new DSM V. It was in a psychology magazine and at first glance he thought they were really advertising a Bible. The picture showed a beautiful book opened up with big letters stating that the latest edition of the “bible” of psychiatry was now available.

I realize that the term “bible” here is just being used in a generic sense describing a book that gives instruction and is recognized as an authority and not pejoratively against **The Bible**. That’s my point though. Every counseling system has someone or something that gets quoted and is the basis of diagnosis. Sometimes it is the theorist’s observations based upon experience, sometimes it is a scientific study<sup>12</sup> or a combination of both.

It ought to be obvious that the basis of authority in Christianity is God’s Word the Bible. But too often other things become the authority. It is easy for the opinions of people to override what God has written. The Church has always been considered “people of the Book.” It is to be the primary source for defining our reality since it tells us what the Creator says is reality. Shouldn’t He know best what is happening in human souls since He is the Creator?

John MacArthur has stated this perspective well:

If there is one word that best describes the Christian worldview, it is *truth*. . . . Scripture alone teaches us how to perceive the world in a way that accurately corresponds with reality. . . . The theories and philosophies of men are constantly in flux. . . . In a very real sense, when it comes to human wisdom the only constant is change.<sup>13</sup>

This doesn’t mean we ignore the theories and philosophies of men. It means that we keep them in their proper place. This doesn’t mean we don’t learn from science, but we have a realistic perspective on science and interpret the findings through the lens of Scripture giving Scripture the primary place.

**Sin**

Humans have problems. It is not cynical to see another human and ask yourself, “I wonder what his issues are?” That’s just reality and we all know it. There is something *really* wrong with humanity. Even secular psychologies recognize this. Carl Rogers wrote:

...I am very well aware of the incredible amount of destructive, cruel, malevolent behavior in today’s world—from the threats of war to the senseless violence in the streets—I do not find that this evil is inherent in human nature.<sup>14</sup>

He then goes on to state why he believes we have problems. “It is cultural influences which are the major factor in our evil behaviors....I see members of the human species as *essentially* [emphasis in the original] constructive in their fundamental nature but damaged by their experiences.”<sup>15</sup>

His view of humanity (his anthropology) was the starting point for then developing a system to help (a therapeutic approach). But he didn’t see the source of the problem as being the same as what Scripture says is the ultimate problem.

Other systems propose alternative answers to the question of what is wrong with us. Some might say your needs aren’t being met. Others would say you have a wounded inner child or that it’s just your personality.

From a Christian worldview sin is the ultimate source of problems. We believe that the events described in Genesis 3 impacted everything and we are all still living with a “Genesis 3 hangover.” While we believe there are secondary “causes” like biology or past experiences, we must always remember that what happened in Genesis 3 has permeated everything about life on the planet.

It is the primary or first cause of everything and has reshaped the human heart (the biblical term for the inner person) to have a distorted view of the world. This is obvious even in

the dramatic narrative we call “the fall.” This chapter displays messed up emotions and relationships. It introduces words and concepts like fear, shame, guilt and hiding. It permeates my biology and influences the way my biology responds to life. Scripture says, I live out of my heart (Proverbs 4:23) and my heart, now influenced by sin, creatively reinterprets environmental influences. Both nature and nurture are impacted.

If a counseling system is not clear at this point the interpretation of humanity will be skewed. Believing in sin and how it has influenced the heart as the primary first cause makes sense of the world with all of its pain and personal problems. It is a key ingredient in a model that makes the best sense of the data.

### **Salvation**

It may be shocking to some that some psychologies have even admitted their proposed solution should be viewed as a form of salvation. For example, Jacobi, one of Carl Jung’s students, wrote the following about his system.

Jungian psychotherapy is...a way of healing and a way of salvation. It has the power to cure....in addition it knows the way and has the means to lead the individual to his ‘salvation,’ to the knowledge and fulfillment of his personality which have always been the aim of spiritual striving.... Apart from its medical aspect, Jungian psychotherapy is thus a system of education and spiritual guidance.<sup>16</sup>

We have a deeper solution. It is one that changes hearts, not just thinking. In fact, Scripture says that the Savior came to open blinded eyes and to set captives free. Christ came to save us for all eternity, but Scripture also says that this Good Shepherd is also in the soul restoration business (Psalm 23:3).

### **Sanctification (Methodologies)**

It naturally follows then that every counseling system has its own methodologies for effecting change. For skinner’s behaviorism it was reprogramming through a positive and

negative reinforcement. For the Biblical counseling model change builds upon the doctrine of progressive sanctification. We are endeavoring to think deeply about how worship filled obedience changes the orientation of the heart toward Christ likeness.

This beautiful, humbling, awe inspiring doctrine teaches us that the Lord saved us to change us into His image (2 Corinthians 3:18). The fallen image of God in us is being restored through the power of the gospel (Colossians 3:10). We are being made normal out of an abnormal condition and Jesus Christ Himself is template of normality.

### **Support Systems**

You would expect then that various individuals and organizations take up the cause of the various counseling perspectives and this is exactly what happens. Even though it is typical to mix counseling theories and methodologies in actual practice universities and mental health clinics have preferences for the theories and methodologies they teach. There are also massive organizations that promote the mental health field like the National Institute of Mental Health, the American Psychiatric Association, The American Psychological Association, and local clinics and support groups that use the preferred theories in their practices.

We are blessed though to be part of an amazing organism that God gave for the purpose of learning His Word and ministering to each other and the world. In particular, the New Testament revolves around local bodies that are to use Scripture to care for one another as they reach the world with the liberating and life-changing gospel.

### **Sparring (Apologetics)**

It has intrigued us through the years to read how counseling systems defend themselves and seek to promote their supposed superior validity to others. Just as Charles Barber's book

seeks to show the immense weaknesses of a drug-only therapy, he also argues for the superiority of other approaches like CBT. He is doing apologetics.

It ought to be obvious, but the book you are reading right now is an apologetic for the superiority of the living Word of God as the lens through which we look at counseling. So, for the sake of apologetics, let us propose that Scripture can be used to do what psychology states it is about.

Psychology is the science that seeks to understand behavior and mental processes and to apply that understanding in the service of human welfare... As a group, the world's half-million psychologists are interested in all the behaviors and mental processes that make you who you are and make other people who they are in every culture around the world.<sup>17</sup>

We believe that scripture-based counseling does this and even more. The Scriptures speak abundantly about human behavior both in direct teaching and story form. The implications of the precepts taught about human nature and the stories that illustrate it cannot be exhausted.

The Bible is also a sure guide to understanding thinking. Words for describing the thought life abound, like “mind,” “heart,” or others. Scripture even addresses how to change our thinking (Philippians 4:8; Romans 12:1-2).

Scripture goes deeper than this definition though because God's Word talks about the desires and devotion of the heart. It helps me understand where my devotion is to be but where my desires often lead me (Romans 13:14).

The rest of this book is about what biblical counseling believes about Scripture's authority in the counseling world and clarifies what we mean by the term *sufficiency*. But allow us to add our voice briefly to the arguments for the sufficiency of Scripture in counseling. If these S's (Source of Authority, Scripture, Sin, Salvation, Sanctification/Methodologies, Support Systems, Sparring/Doing Apologetics) are what make up a belief system, then it ought to be clear that Christians have a *complete* belief system for counseling. By complete, we mean that



we have a total framework for a counseling approach and it is the interpretive grid to understand other belief systems. Therefore, we don't need to combine our framework for understanding people, problems and solutions with the framework of other systems.

Like any counseling system it, "...provide(s) an organizing structure that confirms how the world works."<sup>18</sup> These words came from Charles Barber talking about the "Stages of Change" and "Motivational Interviewing" models. As I (Ernie) read I was thinking, "If that's how a counseling system can be described, than I certainly have one in Scripture."

### **When It Is Not Syncretism**

Now that we have clarified that counseling systems have to do with beliefs let's consider briefly what can still be used from other systems. For example, we would conclude it is not syncretism to learn about psychology and psychological research. To say that is syncretism would be like saying it is syncretism to learn geology. There are worldview issues with psychology and geology, but they are still academic disciplines. We can learn a lot of useful information from the secular psychologies as they research humans and it is wise to acknowledge these findings but also to assess them biblically.

It is not syncretism to acknowledge "truths" that do not violate biblical **Truth**. For example, it would not be syncretism to acknowledge that hypothyroidism may be the cause of the experience of depression. Wisdom would tell me that I should know this.

It is not syncretism to learn from helpful methodologies. For example, if a secular counselor has learned through experience what good questions sound like and how bad questions are worded I can learn from his experience. Why repeat the effort to learn strategic question asking if someone else has already done the work? On the one hand, it is important to keep your radar active though so that you don't buy into the philosophy behind why those questions are

being asked (the framework of that system). On the other hand, learning how to ask questions from another system is not as much of a core issue as say incorporating their answer to the question, why do people do what they do. The answer to that question would be in competition with a biblical framework.

### **A Grid for Knowing Where Danger Lurks**

How would we know then when we are in danger of being “taken captive” by false philosophies as Paul warned? The following questions are just a sampling of theological questions that could provide a grid.

- Would this system make the counselee the central person of life and hinder the centrality of Christ? Who is on the throne?
- Does this theory or practice reinforce selfism or hinder our dying to self and loving God and others? Who or what is being loved?
- How could this theory detract from the power of the gospel to change lives? Where is the power to change?
- Would this theory rob Scripture of being the primary lens through which to understand the issues of life? What are the eyeglasses to bring life into focus?
- Would this counseling system rob the Church of its authority? Who has the authority?
- Does this theory acknowledge humans as image bearers or as evolved animals? What are humans?
- Does this system believe humans are infected with a sin nature or that they are born as a blank slate? What’s wrong with us?

Though they may not be worded to capture all the nuances of various situations, notice that these are theological questions. Hence, knowledge of theology is essential since, as noted previously counseling theories are theological by their very nature.

### **Conclusion**

If this chapter (and this book) has prompted some concerns about the syncretistic influence of secular psychology, what practical steps could you take in response? Here are some ideas. Studying a systematic theology book could provide a grid to interpret what you are hearing from the secular psychologies. As you read, ask yourself how this matches with what you were taught about humans and their problems in psychology classes.

Here's another idea—using each element of the definition of psychology cited above study Scripture and ask how the themes and details of Scripture fulfill that element of the definition.

Lastly, you could use the six “S’s” as a way to evaluate your favorite psychological theories to truly understand, using biblical thinking, what that belief system is promoting.

Even though this has been a warning chapter, we hope that you are not just challenged to be careful, but also that you are encouraged with the completeness of Scripture to provide a model for the personal problems of people. We invite you to join us in our quest to see the Church regain its confidence in the resources of Scripture for dealing with the complexities of life in a broken world.

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Adler (1870-1937). An Austrian physician best known for the concept of “inferiority complex.” Family Systems helps change to take place by understanding the systems of interaction between family members.

<sup>2</sup>*Oxford On-Line Dictionary*, accessed August 31, 2013 <http://oxfordictionaries.com>.

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<sup>3</sup>This chapter is not specifically addressing scientific research or descriptive research. Chapters 3 and 4 address those matters. This chapter focuses on psychology as theory-building—a way of thinking about people, problems, and solutions.

<sup>4</sup>David Powlison, “Is There Value In Biblical Counselors Pursuing a PhD at Secular Institutions?” Biblical Counseling Coalition, accessed September 3, 2013, <http://biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/resources/is-there-value-in-biblical-counselors-pursuing-a-phd-at-secular-institution>.

<sup>5</sup>Most scholars believe that full-blown Gnosticism was a later development, thus the term proto-Gnosticism or incipient-Gnosticism.

<sup>6</sup>Edward Goodrick, and John Kohlberger III, *The Strongest NIV Exhaustive Concordance*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), # 4747.

<sup>7</sup>Heath Lambert, “Explaining the Difference Between Nouthetic and Biblical Counseling: Two Sides of the Counseling Coin” Biblical Counseling Coalition, accessed August 9, 2013: <http://biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/blogs/2012/10/30/explaining-the-difference-between-nouthetic-and-biblical-counseling-two-sides-of-the-counseling-coin/>.

<sup>8</sup>Stuart Scott and Heath Lambert, *Counseling the Hard Cases* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012).

<sup>9</sup>Paul Vitz, *Psychology as Religion*, 2nd ed. (Eerdmans and The Paternoster Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>10</sup>Charles Barber, *Comfortably Numb, How Psychiatry is Medicating a Nation* (New York, Random House, 2009), 164.

<sup>11</sup>I am thankful for Dr. David Powlison of The Christian Counseling and Education Foundation for teaching this framework for evaluating counseling systems.

<sup>12</sup> It is beyond the scope of this chapter to talk about scientific studies but the authors would urge readers to think through issues related to how easy it is for scientific studies to become “scientism.” That is, science becoming the authority instead of God’s Word.

<sup>13</sup>John MacArthur, *Reasons We Believe*, Fwd., Nathan Buzenitz, (Crossway, 2008), 9.

<sup>14</sup>Carl Rogers, *The Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, vol. 22 Summer, 1982, 4.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>*The Psychology of C. G. Jung* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), quoted in Vitz, *Psychology as Religion*, 3.

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<sup>17</sup>Douglas Bernstein Peggy Nash, *Essentials of Psychology* (Instructor's Copy), 4th ed. (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 4.

<sup>18</sup>Barber, 179.