

# The *SBJT* Forum: Applications of Counseling in Ministry

*Editor's Note:* Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, Larry Crabb, Ed Welch, Mark McMinn, and Charles Tackett have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

**SBJT: What practical advice would you give to young pastors who want to be careful and faithful in the counseling components of their ministry?**

**D. A. Carson:** These issues are not only complex, but their complexity is compounded by the harsh reality that today people adopt highly polarized positions on these matters. Some are suspicious of almost all counseling. Naturalistic structures of thought govern the dominant psychological theories, it is argued, and those who train in such traditions are almost always tainted by them. What we need is more biblical preaching and teaching. Others concede a place to psychiatrists when there is an organic problem (e.g., a chemical imbalance in the brain), but not elsewhere. On the other hand, many pastors spend less and less time on sermon preparation, swamped as they are by seemingly endless demands for counseling. The moral structures of our culture are falling apart, and people need help. Sermons merely introduce people to broader truths and principles, these pastors argue; beyond that, individuals need individual help. So whether from choice (because some pastors think that counsel-

ing is more effective than preaching) or from sheer necessity (because the demands for counseling never go away), Greek exegesis and homiletic excellence are devoured by Freud and Jung, or at least by Larry Crabb.

What follows are far too many points. Their strengths are: (a) their individual brevity, and (b) the fact that I might easily have trebled the list!

(1) For our purposes, "Christian counseling" is nothing more than what takes place when a Christian who in some area is more informed or more mature helps another person, usually a Christian, or another Christian pair or family, to gain similar maturity or help in that area. Of course, such advice and help can take place on an informal basis at countless levels in the church, but when its structure is more formal, it is appropriately called "counseling."

(2) Pastors must be deeply committed to the priority of what has traditionally been called "the ministry of the Word." But the ministry of the Word must not be restricted to preaching on Sunday and the odd group Bible study. The ministry of the Word is a comprehensive category. Doubt-

**D. A. Carson** is Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. He is the author of numerous commentaries and monographs, and is one of this country's foremost New Testament scholars. Among his books are *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (John Knox Press, 1981; reprint, Baker, 1994) and *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Zondervan, 1996).

less its high point is public preaching and teaching, but it ought to take place in every conversation in which a Christian is helping another, especially another Christian. It follows that counseling, as here understood, should have as one of its aims to teach the Word of God, especially as that Word is applied to the problem or need or challenge at hand.

(3) That in turn means that pastors should build files on appropriate passages to use for a wide array of circumstances: for the bereaved, for the abused, for those consumed by guilt, for the apathetic, for the discouraged or the lonely, for young couples seeking counsel in preparation for marriage, for those facing death, for the abused, for the postmodern seeker, and on and on. Do not merely make lists of such passages, but add to the lists, study the passages, understand them well and know how to teach them. Develop illustrations that flow from them. As often as possible, use your Bible openly in such sessions, and insist that the person seeking counsel is to bring and use their Bible as well. Understand that counseling, properly done, is part of the ministry of the Word.

(4) Be properly suspicious of those who think that conversion means nothing more than sort of tipping people inside, while the real life-changing power is counseling. This anemic view of the gospel turns out to be a self-fulfilling prediction: it will guarantee that your presentation of and experience of the gospel will be anemic. The gospel, holistically considered, is the power of God unto salvation. It restores us to God, and it transforms us—partly in this life, and climactically at the resurrection. In line with Jesus' prayer, one of the means the gospel uses is God's truth: "Sanctify them by the truth," Jesus prays to his Father; "your word is truth" (John 17:17).

Thus the faithful and penetrating application of the Word, whether in one-on-one sessions (hence counseling) or in large public meetings of the entire body, is the crucial means on which we should rely, rather than on the mere *form* of communication, whether counseling or something else.

(5) Many, many, personal problems are intimately tied to poor relationships. But that means that when the church of God, empowered by God's Spirit, is functioning in line with the gospel, it becomes a home. The body of Christ respects and encourages its weakest members. Mutual encouragement and admonition abound. The solitary individual Christian is embedded in the Christian family. In other words, on the long haul the transforming gospel of Christ ought to build a Christ-centered community of believers, with the result that many ordinary problems of poor relationships will dissolve or be handled (super-)naturally within the life of the community.

(6) In line with your particular responsibilities in ministry, budget certain hours for counseling, and, apart from emergencies, do not exceed those hours. That means that if Mr. Jones asks to see you, and all your counseling hours are booked for the next two weeks, gently probe to make sure that what is on his mind is not in any sense an emergency, and book him into your first free slot. But do not increase the number of hours you allot to counseling, unless it is a *principled* decision, and not the decision of pressure for more. The reason, of course, is that in many churches counseling could easily devour more and more of your hours, until you are finding no time for praying, no time for basic administration, and, worst of all, no time for study and preparation. You end up robbing the flock of God of the nourishment they des-

perately need from their under-shepherd, because you are spending all your time with a handful of troubled sheep.

(7) Almost every church has a few troubled souls who will happily eat up every hour you give them. Like death itself, they always want more, and, for whatever reason, they never change. Identify such people, and refuse to give them much time. Some of them need nothing more than companionship and a sympathetic ear, and in due course you can develop a kind of junior tier of helpers who will devote some of their week to bringing encouragement and patience to these tried and trying people. In other words, try to make some provision for them, but under no circumstance may you justly permit them to take up much of your time. You are called to evangelize, make disciples, and engage heartily in the ministry of the Word and prayer. You are not fulfilling your calling if you spend substantial numbers of hours each week holding the hands of those who will never have enough and who will never change.

(8) Many problems people face take time to heal. Nevertheless, it is helpful to distinguish between two different kinds of temporal demands. The first kind almost always improves with time. The extraordinary loneliness of bereavement, and the pain of abandonment engendered by a divorce precipitated by a marriage partner who has run off with someone else, are two good examples. In the early stages, you will be wise to spend extra time with such people. But others can often share the burden, and in due course such people usually return to an even keel, and, in God's mercy, often become people who can help others who go through similar trials. So mark such people well, and find ways to use them. But the other kind of tempo-

ral demand is trickier. It is found in the person who *could* be improving with time, but instead is nurturing the problem, feeding the sin. Sustained and carefully maintained bitterness is a good example. You might like to think that this will improve as the months or years go by, but sometimes it simply gets worse. In such cases you may be wise to demand change, to set concrete goals, to assign homework—and if these things are not done, you will not see them again. The homework may involve memorizing some substantial passages of Scripture, writing a letter asking for forgiveness, re-establishing a broken friendship. But do not permit your hours of counseling to be chewed up by people who want a sympathetic ear regarding their “problems,” but who frankly refuse to address those problems. Where possible, set achievable goals, and hold people accountable.

(9) Work hard to maintain, so far as practicable, biblical terminology and biblical categories. Counselors in the secular world refer to those who come to them as “clients” or, in the case of psychiatrists, sometimes “patients.” Avoid those categories: you are a pastor, and such terms are loaded with overtones you do not want to foster. The panoply of Freudian or Jungian categories can, if given free rein, so domesticate the gospel that you end up selling your gospel heritage for a mess of psychological pottage. This does not mean that there are not important lessons to be learned from others. It means that ideally the best lessons need to be transmuted into biblical categories, so that people instinctively turn to their Bibles as the supreme source of help. That often means learning where the secular categories are *properly* related to biblical themes, and where they are not. Perhaps no topic of this sort is more

important than questions relating to “self-esteem,” which is scarcely a biblical label, but which can certainly be tied appropriately (and terribly inappropriately!) to various biblical themes. But that would take another article!

(10) Don’t bluff. Admit what you do not know. Keep a list of people you can consult to fill in the many gaps where you find your information or training wanting. If while counseling someone you find yourself coming to the end of your resources, tell the person you are helping that you will try to find better responses and more penetrating biblical insight before you meet again. This is especially important for young pastors whose experience is still quite limited, whether the cases they are dealing with are “ordinary” or extraordinarily convoluted.

(11) How much more important is it, then, to develop strong ties with medical people and with experienced counselors when you are uncertain if you are facing things like bipolar disorders, the onset of schizophrenia, and things of that order. The list of things that a pastor should not handle is not nearly as long as many professional psychologists and psychiatrists think, but you should become aware of what is on the short list!

(12) Recognize that there are often problems behind the problems, sins behind the sins, patterns behind the patterns. A marriage that is falling apart, or a woman sliding into deeper depression, may have lurking in the background suppressed bitterness and fear stemming from child abuse during childhood or puberty. Counselors in the Puritan tradition were considered particularly penetrating in their “cure of souls.” That part of evangelical heritage needs to be restored.

(13) Never forget that we are complex

people, and our spiritual state, our emotional well-being, our perceptions of things, and the chemical balances in our brains can all be related to one another in subtle ways. A Christian going through treatment for cancer may suffer some depression. But is this depression generated by a fear of death? Or has the constant nausea from chemotherapy driven the person down? Or have some of the side effects of the anti-nauseants kicked in (for some of them are known to depress some people)? Or is the depression a subtle mix of all of these factors, and more? You may be able to help this Christian think more clearly about death, and trust Christ more knowledgeably and confidently as the resurrected Lord who has triumphed over death. But even if the depression owes much of its power to the drugs being used, the ongoing depression may be interpreted by this believer as irrefutable evidence that he or she is not *really* trusting the Lord, and the depression may deepen. Once again, good medical advice is crucial: the right antidepressant might be a gift from God.

(14) Preserve a healthy place for common sense! I have counseled people who seem to be in danger from complex and subtle pressures and broken relationships, when a little probing and a modicum of sense made it pretty clear that what this person needed above all was a little less stress and a good deal more sleep. Sometimes the godliest thing in the universe is to go to bed and sleep.

(15) Never overlook the profound importance of the gospel insight that you find your life by losing it, you receive by giving, you live by dying. Some cranky and miserable people have matured remarkably in a matter of weeks, when they have been directed to help out in an AIDS clinic, take on some responsibility in a boys club,

join a prison ministry, teach an inner-city kid how to read, learn how to share the gospel effectively, or the like. One pastor I know was on the edge of resigning from the ministry, beaten down by cynics, little fruit, frustration, and loneliness. I asked him when was the last time he had actually explained the gospel to someone in detail. He looked startled. With a little help, he started two evangelistic groups, and recruited and trained others to do the same. A year later he is full of the joy of the Lord, seeing people being converted, and leaving the whiners to gripe in peace while he gets on with the ministry of the Word and prayer. A great many counselors, including pastoral counselors, do not conscientiously aim to draw *every* person to God-centeredness, to Christ-centeredness, removing them from the ugly focus on self and self-fulfillment that degrades so much of our culture and is nothing more than ruinous and odious idolatry.

(16) Take notes. Often this should be done after the person has left, but take notes. The weakest ink (or computer record) is stronger than the strongest memory. Besides, notes will help you to plan ahead, to think through relevant passages in advance of the next session, to discipline your prayer life for these people. Make sure such notes are secure, especially if others in the church commonly have access to your study (and note: I said “study,” not “office”!).

(17) Read widely—occasionally in the more popular counseling literature, but more systematically in serious treatments *from different perspectives*, including those of secularists, those who are attempting theological integration, and historical examples (such as the Puritans).

(18) Become acquainted with relevant legal issues. For example, if you discover

that your youth pastor has been sleeping with one or more of the young people in his care, in addition to securing sound and godly advice from more senior pastors who have faced such a crisis and handled it well, you must be clear as to the age in your state at which the issue extends beyond fornication to statutory rape. If statutory rape is involved, the youth pastor has not only sinned, but committed a crime, and the police *must* be notified. Not only because our society is terribly litigious, but also because we want both to be clean and to be seen to be clean, it is becoming increasingly urgent, in several domains, to become familiar with the relevant law. Nowadays there are seminars, essays, and even books that sometimes help.

(19) Learn how to talk about death; learn how to prepare people to die. Christians used to be known as those who knew how to die well. Nowadays we are not very differentiable from the world in this respect. This abdication of Christian responsibility must be overthrown.

(20) Be very careful about using examples from your counseling as direct illustrations in your sermons. In addition to the offense you may cause to the person you have counseled, you may unwittingly prompt some others to conclude, “Well, I will never seek counsel from *him*. I may end up as a sermon illustration.”

(21) Although I am a bit suspicious of certain kinds of group therapy in the context of pastoral ministry, sometimes it is an effective way for those facing similar challenges to help and support one another, to bear one another’s burdens (which is surely a biblical injunction).

**SBJT: What Should Christians Be Wary of in Contemporary Psychology?**

**Larry Crabb:** When I first enrolled in the

**Larry Crabb** is founder and director of New Way Ministries, Scholar in Residence at Colorado Christian University, Morrison, Colorado, and Spiritual Director of the American Association of Christian Counseling. His many books include *The Pressure's Off: There's a New Way to Live* (WaterBrook Press, 2002) and *Soultalk: The Language God Longs for Us to Speak* (Integrity Publishers, 2003).

University of Illinois' doctoral program in clinical psychology, nearly forty years ago, I hoped to become a good psychologist who happened to be a Christian, like plumbers or surgeons or advertising executives who were competent in their professions and, oh by the way, were also Christians. It caught me badly off guard when, in my first year of training, a disturbing thought occurred to me. To be a psychologist (more precisely, a psychotherapist) who happened to be a Christian was, in at least one respect, like being a thief who happened to be a Christian. Both professions required compromise with convictions essential to Christianity.

A thief makes a living by transgressing a moral standard that the Bible clearly upholds. A psychologist, if he remains true to his training, makes a living by violating an even higher biblical value. His clinical work assumes that relief of pain in the soul for the client's experience of comfort is a greater good than walking through that pain to a deeper trust in God for the sake of His pleasure.

Psychotherapy, a term which literally means to promote the well-being of a human soul, is a grand and ultimately futile effort to arrange for personal fulfillment by rearranging the flesh. By "flesh," I mean the self-obsessed energy in all of us that attempts to match personal desires with present opportunities for satisfaction. The therapeutic culture sees no relationship (or an inverse one) between soul health and self-abandonment to God.

We moderns are forever indebted to Jonathan Edwards for surfacing an often hidden truth, that the unquenchable longing for deep joy in every human soul and an utter yieldedness to God for His glory are beautifully compatible, if the latter is valued above the former. Value the former

above the latter and you lose both.

But contemporary psychology, which in its clinical application remains as much a philosophy as a science, dismisses such thinking with a wave of its non-scientific hand. Medieval nonsense. Dangerous fanaticism. Muddle-headed religion. And we are left with personally satisfying adjustment to this world as our aim in life.

Augustine's ancient psychology, especially in *Confessions*, deserves appreciative study. The psychology of medieval Christian mystics merits close attention. Even better is the pre-modern psychology of students of human nature such as Bunyan, Owen and other Puritans, and Jonathan Edwards. Their thinking is filled with gold for today's Christian to mine.

But psychology since Freud should never be approached as authoritative, only catalytic. I regularly read works by secular psychologists to wake up to questions I might not otherwise ask, questions like—why do some teenage girls and not others starve themselves, or what makes an older Christian woman I know cut her wrists when she has no intention to commit suicide and why does she feel no pain when she does so, or what's going on inside a gifted pastor when he finds the urge to download pornography irresistible?

If I did not explore the thinking of sensitive (and to my knowledge secular) thinkers like psychiatrist Irvin Yalom and psychologist Hans Strupp, I might approach anorexics, cutters, and pornographers with simplistic accountability ("Just stop it!") or sentimental support ("I care. I'll listen. I won't judge.") and think it's biblical.

But I must be careful. Contemporary psychology is largely reductionistic, empirical in its epistemology even about matters that can be known only through

revelation, and unashamedly Ptolemaic. Let me briefly explain.

Despite a developing accommodation to the culture's surging interest in spirituality, most psychological theory has a distinctly unsupernatural view of the soul. I have not read a secular psychology text that declares man to be an image-bearing creation of God designed for enjoyment of divine community who has fallen into immoral narcissism that requires both forgiveness and radical transformation by God. Reduce your view of people to something less, and everything—your understanding of problems, your definition of health, your hope for getting healthy—falls off target.

And the core human fault is misunderstood. The fault of rebellion against God that results in self-obsession is obscured beneath elaborate discussions of psychopathology that invite empirically validated treatment rather than biblically revealed redemption. The effect is to value professional involvement and insight over divine forgiveness and transformation.

And the person is still central, in the spirit of first century physicist Claudius Ptolemy who wrongly declared that the sun revolves around an immobile earth. We are in desperate need of a spiritual Copernican revolution patterned after Nicholas Copernicus. After 1500 years of Ptolemaic error, Copernicus insisted that it is we on earth who move around a stable sun in a relationship of subordinate dependence. Psychology remains Ptolemaic. If there is a God, He is here for us. If your religious views promote your well being, fine. If not, change or dismiss them. The notion that we exist for God in a subordinate relationship of profound dependence is offensive to the world view of psychology. Christians need to remember that the journey of the

soul is not from damage to healing, it is from self-obsession to God-obsession. It is not from emptiness to the experience of fulfillment in this world. It is from proud and terrified independence to humble and trusting dependence until we are home.

Christian counseling is a good thing, if by the term we mean wise, caring followers of Jesus speaking with spiritual authenticity and power into the souls of struggling people with the vision of awakening and nourishing their desire for God until it rules their lives. And it is a good thing when Christian counselors read contemporary psychology to provoke more questions and harder thought.

But when we accommodate psychology by letting human desires become the center of our concern; when we pit their satisfaction against the call to self-sacrifice, brokenness, and repentance; when we favor experts of the psyche who treat disorder over elders of the soul who shepherd pilgrims on their journey to God; when we rely on empirical research and psychological theory to guide our helping efforts more than biblical study and theological reflection, then we are in danger of becoming counselors who happen to be Christians. And that is not a good thing. We might as well become Christian thieves.

### **SBJT: What Is Happening in Counseling Today?**

**Ed Welch:** Counseling and psychotherapy seem to have emerged *ex nihilo* during the 1960s. Suddenly, psychotherapists were on the scene and the church was becoming psychologized. The ascendancy of counseling, however, has its historical reasons. Secular counseling emerged out of a World War II economy in which the government employed thousands of psychologists to develop tests that could place

**Ed Welch** is a counselor, faculty member, and Director of the School of Biblical Counseling and Education Foundation and Professor of Practical Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Glenside, Pennsylvania. He is the author of *When People Are Big and God is Small* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997), *Blame It On The Brain* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998), *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001), and numerous articles.

military personnel in suitable positions. When the war was over, the government kept many of these psychologists in the Veteran's Hospital system and they began to expand their domain beyond testing into what we know as psychotherapy and pastoral care.

Secular counseling's analogue in the church is the one-to-one ministry of the word, and this has been with the church since its inception. The reason secular psychologies gained authority in pastoral care was that from the 1920s to the 1970s the church was occupied by liberalism and the end times, and developments in pastoral care languished. Into the breach stepped a Christianized version of psychotherapy.

Today there are three recognizable groups in the broader counseling field: secular counseling, Christian counseling, and biblical counseling. Secular counseling comes out of models of the person and change that try to explain the person apart from God. Christian counseling consists of Christians who counsel. Its sympathies are with the triad of secular theories, Scripture, and the professional therapeutic community. Biblical counseling attempts to have its theory and practices emerge from Scripture and its goal is to work under and with the church.

Biblical counseling was considered the counseling gadfly until the 1990s. Today it is busting loose from old stereotypes. In the 1970's and 1980's, biblical counseling was associated with the writings of Jay Adams. His 1970 book, *Competent to Counsel*, was a landmark work that was catalytic for pastors and counselors. For the fifteen years after *Competent to Counsel*, Adams dominated the biblical counseling landscape. Since the early 1980's, however, other authors have broadened the movement and produced new biblical work that has

sought to be faithful to Scripture, alert to cultural issues, and open to critique.

The primary task of biblical counseling today is to broaden and deepen the theory and practice of personal ministry. A secondary task is apologetic. Anytime Scripture is fundamental to our thinking and practice, we will make distinctions, be alert to doctrinal error and vulnerability, and, in dialogue, work to persuade others of the truth while we ourselves learn from others and are persuaded by the truth. With this secondary task in mind, here are a few areas within Christian counseling that Scripture tags as being areas of concern.

An assumption within most Christian counseling is that we are a composite of body, soul, and spirit. In the early years of Christian counseling the motto was, "the spirit to the pastor, the body to the physician, and the soul to the psychologist." This simplistic perspective has never been replaced. The result is that within Christian counseling anything labeled psychological is not directly under Scripture's or spiritual jurisdiction. Therefore, theories that have conflicted with Scripture have been allowed into the Christian counseling fold without a careful look at their assumptions. Biblical counseling opts for a human duality in that we are a unity of spiritual and physical substance, and the expanse of human problems can be understood with those two categories.

Christian counseling has not really examined the dynamics of the human heart. It tends to focus on pain and victimization, which Scripture certainly addresses at length with its pervasive concern about justice, but Christian counseling ends with a passive view of the human condition. Rarely does it get to the fundamental concerns of the heart. Biblical counseling highlights victimization when

appropriate, but it does this within its teaching about a heart that is always active. The basic idea is this: the heart establishes spiritual allegiances. In our hearts we know God and his law, and in our hearts we turn either away from God or toward him. Everything is referenced to the true God. Everything is personal. It is in the heart that God's communication collides with the distorted messages from the demonic kingdom and where choices are made and a life is either won or lost.

- Whom do you love (Deut 6:5; 1 John 2:15)—the world or Jesus?
- Whom (or what) do you worship (2 Kings 17:36)—idols or God?
- Whom will you serve (Matt 6:24)—money or God?
- Whom do you obey (1 John 3:10)—the devil or God?
- For whose glory do you live (Rom 1:21-23)—your own or God's?
- Where is your treasure (Matt 6:21)—in the world or in Christ?
- To whom do you belong (John 8:44)—the devil or God?
- Whom do you trust (Jer 17:5-8)—other people or God?

These are the questions confronting the heart and they are the critical questions of human life. There are none deeper.

Christian counseling's professional and secular instincts suggest that specialized knowledge is necessary for change. Biblical counseling recognizes that some people are more gifted than others but it tries to maintain Scripture's populist ethos. Wisdom is in the public domain, and it should always have direct and overt links to the gospel itself: Christ and him crucified. As such, if biblical counseling is communicated clearly, it should be simple and available to the child who is being bullied in school and sophisticated to the scholar.

Given the differences among counselors, the church should be alert. Most every church has members who meet with

professional counselors. What we do not always realize is that these counselors function as adjunct pastoral staff. But, unlike ordained pastoral staff, counselors are unexamined and unaccountable, and their counsel can be out of step with the preaching and teaching ministries of the church. As such, if a counselor is meeting with a church member, consider asking some questions:

- Of what church are you a member?
- Would you give permission to talk with your pastor in order to have a recommendation?
- What is your training in Scripture?
- Are you familiar with the distinctives of our church? Do you agree with those values? How do you incorporate them into the counseling?
- How do you approach confidentiality? Will you make an effort to obtain a release of information so you can communicate freely with relevant pastoral staff?
- Are you pleased to have someone from the pastoral staff or another member of the church come in during the actual counseling sessions, assuming the counselee agrees to it?
- What is the place of the gospel in the counseling process? Are there psychological problems that can't be deeply answered with the gospel?
- What is your basic philosophy of counseling? Do you follow a particular school of thought? Is there a person's name or a particular book that summarizes your approach?

This is not to single out Christian counseling. We all live under the light and gaze of the Spirit working through the Word, and none of us has the perfect theological system. Instead, we all seek to walk humbly before the Lord, repent when we see sin, search Scripture, submit to ecclesiastical authority, sharpen others and be sharpened by them, and, together, bear fruit as we minister in the name of Jesus.

**SBJT: How can Christian counselors better incorporate the doctrine of sin in their counseling?**

**Mark R. McMinn:** Any integrative endeavor that brings together the Christian faith with contemporary methods of counseling should be bi-directional. In one direction, our views of counseling should be transformed by Christian perspectives on sin. In the other direction, our understanding of sin can be enriched through findings of scientific psychology.

**Transforming our Views of Counseling with the Doctrine of Sin**

After many years of providing psychotherapy and studying the scientific literature on its effectiveness, I am convinced that good therapy works because it is a place that emulates grace. It is a place of acceptance and mercy, a place where sins and consequences of sins can be openly explored without the fear of judgment. This frees people to look honestly at themselves, to become more open in their other relationships, and to move forward into richer and deeper connections with those they love. Sadly, some therapists have lost the language of personal sin and focus only on how the client has been hurt by others. Others have overcompensated by focusing exclusively on personal sin and neglecting the ways clients have been harmed by others. In either case such therapy is rendered half-effective. A place of grace needs to be a place of open exploration and acceptance, where both sin and consequences of sin can be named and grieved. In short, psychotherapy works because of its faint resemblance to the greatest story of all time.

Early in my career I met with a man for six months to help him with his depres-

sion. We evaluated his self-talk and made some systematic adjustments to the way he looked at himself and others, and ultimately he started feeling much better. Several months after he finished treatment, I learned that he had sexually abused his niece for several years when she was a child. I pondered my therapeutic intervention, and though it may have been of some use to him, I think that I missed something much more important. I suspect he came to my office longing for a place where he could confess and enter the long spiritual process of repentance and restitution; perhaps he even hoped for forgiveness and some measure of reconciliation. What he got instead was altered self-talk. The therapeutic systems that I learned in graduate school and in my postdoctoral training did not provide the language of sin that might have cleansed this man deeply. How sad that we missed such an opportunity for contrition and healing.

I do not sit with my clients and tell them they are a mess, and I do not begin each session with, “Hey, sinner, how are you today?” In fact, I rarely use the word “sin” in my sessions. But I have learned to value a theological understanding of sin when I think about the mess we are all in—clients, therapists, and everyone else. If I fail to allow my clients the privilege of confession and repentance, I risk providing symptom relief while robbing them of the chance to turn around and take the first step on their journey of deep healing and change.

**Enhancing our Understanding of Sin through Scientific Psychology**

It is quite a paradox for me to argue that psychology, a discipline that rarely discusses sin, can be helpful in fleshing out a Christian understanding of sin. It is surprising to learn that many findings from

**Mark R. McMinn** is the Rech Professor of Psychology at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois. He is the author of *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling* (Tyndale, 1996) and co-editor of *Care for the Soul: Exploring the Intersection of Psychology and Theology* (InterVarsity, 2002). Portions of this forum are excerpted from his forthcoming book, *Why Sin Matters: The Surprising Relationship between Our Sin and God's Grace* (Tyndale, 2004).

scientific psychology, when viewed through a lens of Christian theology, can help us understand how our sin nature affects our everyday life. I have often wished that seminary students were required to take an introductory psychology course—taught from a theistic perspective—to better understand the wonders and brokenness of our human condition.

There is much that could be written on this topic, but in a short forum such as this I will limit my discussion to the topic of pride. For centuries pride has been considered chief among the deadly sins—the sin from which other evils emerge. Not surprisingly then, one of the clearest conclusions from scientific psychology is that we are proud.

Like Yogi Berra—who claimed to be “smarter than the average bear”—most of us see ourselves as smarter than we really are. We also claim to be better leaders, better workers, better parents and spouses, better friends, and better money managers. Not only do we perceive ourselves as more capable than we really are, we also perceive ourselves to be more upright and moral than most others. People think they are better than others—more ethical, considerate, industrious, cooperative, fair, and loyal. One polling expert put it this way: “It’s the great contradiction: the average person believes he is a better person than the average person.”<sup>1</sup> Sixteen centuries earlier Augustine bemoaned: “[My] sin was all the more incurable because I did not judge myself to be a sinner.”<sup>2</sup>

We also express pride in how we perceive our own successes and failures as well as those of others. When something bad happens, we tend to explain it by saying it is someone else’s fault. It was not a fair test, the person next to me was making noise, the professor teaches poorly, and

so on. So how do we explain good outcomes? Scores of research studies demonstrate that we tend to take personal credit when good things happen (I deserve it, I am a hard-worker, I am smart, and so on). When something bad happens, we blame others. When something good happens, we take credit for it.

It gets even more complicated when looking at bad events that happen to others. When something bad happens to us, we blame others; but when something bad happens to others, we tend to explain it as being their own fault.

Many of these attitudes are not deliberate acts of sin—in fact, we are probably not even aware of them—but they reflect what it means to be fallen humans living in a sinful state, and they have obvious implications for the life and work of Christian counselors. Sin exacts a toll where it costs the most—in our close connections with one another. Even if our relationships have not been jolted with the “big sins” of betrayal, they are still tainted by the daily sin of pride. We see ourselves more highly than we ought, and those we care about most have the same problem. We see others more negatively than we ought, and they look at us through the same negative filter. Over time we feel tired, burned out, fatigued by the work of closeness. And it’s because we are sinners who live with other sinners, each of us beset with pride.

Beneath the armor of our pride we live as vulnerable men and women longing to be loved and known. Our hope is found in cautiously shedding our armor in the safety of caring relationships, acknowledging that we are vulnerable and needy, and clinging to the possibility of grace. The work of Christian counselors is to provide a safe place where people can shed their

armor, look honestly at themselves, and find grace.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>R. L. Berke, as cited in Nicholas Epley and David Dunning, "Feeling 'Holier Than Thou': Are Self-Serving Assessments Produced by Errors in Self or Social Prediction?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79 (2000) 861–875.

<sup>2</sup>Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Hal M. Helms (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 1986) 80.

### **SBJT: What Are the Characteristics of the Godliest Couples that You Have Seen in Your Marital Research Lab to Date?**

**Charles Tackett:** At The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, we have been conducting a Christian marital research project among local couples. There are several characteristics that my research team has uncovered at this point in time. Please note that we consider our findings to be preliminary. Before I discuss these characteristics it is important that I establish the percentages of couples who are living in a godly relationship as husband and wife. First, our early finds suggest that only about five percent of our couples are honestly experiencing a godly Christ-centered relationship with each other. This finding has utterly shocked us. The research team expected to find that about thirty percent of our couples would demonstrate a godly marital relationship. We have found that an additional fifteen percent of couples are on a journey toward godliness in their marital relationship. These couples are seeking to grow in godliness as individuals and to promote godly patterns of thinking, emotion, behavior, and Christ-centered spiritual living toward each other.

Secondly, our most disheartening finding at this time is that about forty percent of our couples appear to be on a rapid divorce trajectory. We estimate that these couples will likely be divorced in approximately five to ten years. These couples seem to be overwhelmed by living the Christian life and have little idea about how to take the text of scripture and apply it to their marital relationship.

Thirdly, we estimate that the remaining forty percent of our couples are on a slow divorce trajectory. If these couples stay on this trajectory they will likely divorce between the fifteenth and twentieth years of their marriage. If our marital research is correct, then approximately eighty percent of the couples in our research studies are headed down the road toward divorce. Obviously, this does not mean that eighty percent of our couples will divorce. The real problem is much more severe than eighty percent of our couples being on the road toward divorce. It is that only twenty percent of our couples have even the foggiest idea of how to live a godly life as individuals and then as a marital couple.

Now it is appropriate to begin to describe some of the godly characteristics that our best couples have as a part of their daily lives as husband and wife. First, our best couples have established an excellent biblical foundation for their marriage. Specifically, their standard is that as followers of Jesus Christ they must live a Christ-centered life before God and before one another. Also, their marital life, how they relate to one another, must be characterized by Christ-centeredness. Our best couples understand that even in marriage they are servants of Jesus Christ. One young husband said it best, "When I see my wife in times of agreement and disagreement I must see the Lord on the cross

**Charles W. Tackett** is Associate Professor of Psychology of Religion and Christian Counseling at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Tackett has extensive experience in Christian counseling. He has served congregations as a pastor in Kentucky, Ohio, and Oregon and works as a licensed clinical psychologist with a counseling agency in Louisville, Kentucky. His professional memberships include the Christian Association for Psychological Studies and the Kentucky Psychological Association.

dying for her.” He further said, “When I see her this way, I am reminded of how much she means to the Lord.” This young husband has learned to see his wife as first belonging to Christ because he (Christ) is the one who has given her salvation through his shed blood. His love for his wife is deepened by his understanding of the past and present work of Christ in and through his wife.

A second characteristic of our best couples involves the issue of headship/ownership. Our best couples realize that the husband’s headship does not mean that he owns his wife. These husbands realize that they do not possess their wives because they did not create or save their wives. Many Christian men act as if they are not just the head of their wives, but are truly the owners of their wives. These Christian men believe that because of their position of headship they have the right to control their wives. Our best husbands demonstrate a sacrificial headship before their wives when they make sure to put their wives’ concerns first most of the time in their marriages. So far, all of our best wives have responded to this type of sacrificial headship by putting their husbands’ concerns first. These best couples do argue with each other, but they demonstrate a tendency to argue for the other spouse’s position and needs.

A third characteristic of our best couples involves how the husband leads in the promotion of holiness in his wife’s life. Our best husbands promote holiness with a spiritually natural three-fold method. First, they have learned to lead by being a model of holiness for their wives. They do not push their wives toward holiness. They allow the attractiveness of a life lived for Christ to draw their wives toward a greater commitment and experience of holiness.

Second, these husbands understand that their wives are also their sisters in the Lord. They understand that they must sometimes promote her growth into holiness and that there will not be a direct benefit that they as husbands receive from this work. In fact they may actually pay a personal cost of the loss of convenience in life for this promotion of holiness. Finally, these husbands know that they must promote holiness as it pertains to their wives’ growth and development into their God-assigned roles and functions as wives. They have learned that they must discover with their wives the depth of God’s work in and through the wives.

In most churches we assume that if our Christian couples are still married then they must be acting in a “godly enough way,” otherwise they would be getting divorced. As our findings indicate, this assumption is not necessarily true. It is essential that Christian couples understand that a marital life that honors Christ will yield tangible benefits in this life and in heaven.

