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Reformational Counseling: A Middle Way



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*T*he ancient term “cure of souls” reminds contemporary pastors of their apostolic forebears who, in the spirit of Jesus, met human pain with compassion and human guilt with grace and forgiveness.

ALBERT L. MEIBURG, *DICTIONARY OF PASTORAL CARE AND COUNSELING*, 122.

I stand amazed at how many evangelicals have approached the “care” or “cure” of souls in the modern age. We live in a time when the contributions of serious neurological research, proper social psychology, and good biblical theology need to converse with each other and listen. Sadly, we seem deaf toward the traditions of those we do not know or understand. I consulted several evangelical dictionaries and found not one entry under the terms “soul care” or the “care of souls” while mainline sources retained both the concept and the tradition. Perhaps evangelicals could begin by recovering the ancient and classical traditions of the Church’s pastoral practice.

JOHN H. ARMSTRONG

*W*hatever happened to Christian soul-care? If one reads classical Christian literature, sermons, treatises, and letters, from the Patristic period, the Medieval period, and the Reformation and Puritan periods, one finds a wealth of material that deals with the care and improvement of the soul. One might even say that such an agenda forms the major thrust of Christian literature over the twenty centuries since the New Testament canon was closed. But something terrible happened in the twentieth century: evangelical soul-care literature largely dried up. With a few exceptions (e.g. A. W. Tozer, Martyn-Lloyd Jones, and Arthur Pink), most evangelical writing did not focus on improving the well-being of the Christian soul, concentrating instead on propositional theology, evangelism and missions, and eschatology. Going back just to the nineteenth century, one can find a number of works written on pastoral theology by Evangelicals (e.g. Shedd, Fairbairn, Bridges, and Murphy), but nothing of any consequence was written by an Evangelical during the first seventy years of the twentieth (though during this time, liberal pastoral theology was very active; see Hiltner, Oates, Wise, and Clinebell, to name a few), and virtually nothing evangelical addressed counseling prior to 1960.

During the 1960s and 70s, however, a major renewal of

sorts was underway to fill the void. Since that time, two evangelical counseling movements have arisen, each vying for the role of guiding evangelical soul-care, but from very different standpoints. The first one, integrationism, arose from Christians who were professional counselors, trained in secular counseling programs, who knew that Christianity had something distinctive to contribute to soul-care and sought to integrate their faith and their evangelical worldview with the psychology and soul-care techniques they had learned.¹ Integration continues to be the dominant evangelical approach to counseling among evangelical counseling professionals who seek to have their Christianity inform their practice. Justifying the integration agenda for relating one's faith to secular psychology by reference to God's general revelation and the assertion that "All truth is God's truth," integrationists have sought to develop models of counseling that were largely informed by modern (or secular) theory and research and that took seriously its findings regarding the impact of the brain, childhood experiences, and psychological structures on human well-being, but all of which was rendered compatible with evangelical commitments by being screened through and checked against a Christian worldview and Christian theological beliefs.

The integrationist movement created a number of evangelical graduate counseling programs (including professional and research doctoral programs at Rosemead School of Psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary, Wheaton College, George Fox University, Seattle Pacific University, as well as a host of Masters programs, including many at a number of evangelical seminaries, e.g. Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Denver Seminary, and Nyack Seminary), two journals (the *Journal of Psychology and Theology* and the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*), and two organizations (the Christian Association for Psychological Studies and the American Association of Christian Counselors).

The second movement, nouthetic counseling (now increasingly labeled biblical counseling), was advanced largely by seminary faculty and pastors who reacted negatively to

integrationism. Initially through the leadership of Jay Adams,² they developed a distinctive model of evangelical soul-care that has had wide influence among conservative evangelical and fundamentalist pastors in America. Arguing that the integrationists have not been critical enough of secular psychology and were too eager to embrace it, nouthetic/biblical counseling authors sought to develop counseling practices that were informed solely by Scripture.³ Basing their approach on the Reformation cry of *Sola Scriptura* and the notion of the sufficiency of Scripture for soul-care, they centered on sin as the fundamental presenting problem of Christian soul-care and the acceptance of the truth of the Bible and the implementation of its precepts as the main agenda of counseling. The corollary of their stance, however, was a nearly absolute neglect of what modern psychology had written, believing that its research and theory were essentially bankrupt and devoid of value for the Christian. (Though some have explicitly disavowed this position, in practice the only time secular psychology is cited by adherents of this position is for the purpose of criticism).

Westminster Theological Seminary has long been identified as the leading nouthetic/biblical counseling school; however, Master's College and Seminary has also developed notable undergraduate and graduate programs in biblical counseling. In addition, Bob Jones University and many other fundamentalist schools and seminaries teach some version of nouthetic/biblical counseling. Organizations representing this stance include the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors, the International Association of Biblical Counselors, and the Psychoheresy Awareness Network. The movement's major periodical is the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*.

There have been integrationists who appreciated the contributions of the nouthetic/biblical counselors and who responded by attempting to be more biblical in their orientation.⁴ However, integrationists could not accept that all of modern psychology was so corrupt that it was essentially of no use. Nouthetic/biblical counselors, on the other hand, believe that integrationism is syncretistic and is bringing secular,

non-Christian religious ideology into the Christian Church.

Though each approach has noticeable strengths, questions about both can legitimately be raised (though not thoroughly in the space of this article). Their relative merits and weaknesses suggest that a “middle way” may lie between them. Over the past fifteen years, the beginnings of such a path have been articulated and labeled “Christian psychology”.⁵ This article presents an outline of a model of soul-care that is a specific example of Christian psychology called *reformational counseling*.

FEATURES OF THE REFORMATION RELEVANT TO COUNSELING

All evangelical Christians express a strong degree of allegiance to the Bible and the integrationist and nouthetic/biblical counseling (NBC) movements are no exception (though the NBC approach is much more consistent and thorough in its engagement with Scripture with reference to counseling). The model presented here shares this commitment to Scripture, but the reformational counseling model is distinguished by its explicit identification with the main dynamics and contributions of the Reformation.

The Reformation was actually composed of two factions, named the radical and the magisterial Reformations, the former somewhat of a reaction to the latter.⁶ As is well known, the Reformation began with the protests of an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther, who was calling the Catholic Church of his day back to the teachings and practices of the Bible and the early Church. Soon, others joined him in his protests, including Zwingli, Bucer, Bullinger, and later Calvin. Because they attempted to work with, persuade, and ultimately submit to the ruling authorities (the magistrates), they were termed the magisterial Reformation. The leaders of the radical Reformation—people like Grebel, Sattler, Hubmaier, and later Menno Simons—saw Christianity as more of a counter-cultural movement and so were more inclined to separate themselves from the civil authorities and practice a more radical form of Christianity that disregarded the wishes of the

magistrates (and others) to preserve civil and cultural order through religious rites like child baptism (most of the radical Reformers were Anabaptists).

Though a committed Baptist myself, my thinking and this model are closer in spirit with the magisterial Reformation rather than the radical (the modern descendents of which include the Mennonites and the Amish), so when referring to the reformational tradition, I will be thinking of the founders of the magisterial Reformation as well as its intellectual heirs (which happen to include many Baptists, including John Bunyan, William Carey, Charles Spurgeon, J. P. Boyce, and Carl F. H. Henry). Though there have been notable differences among those descending from the magisterial Reformers, in the main, the movement is united by an interwoven and interdependent set of biblical themes.

God Is Supreme in All the Universe and His Glory Is the Highest Human Motive

Perhaps the most significant theme of reformational Christianity is an abiding concern for the supremacy of God. Because of original sin, the human self is disposed to idolatry and to regard some aspect(s) of the creation as the center of the universe (in secular cultures, this is usually the Self). However, the triune God is the only fitting object of religious ultimacy since he is, in fact, the greatest, most glorious and beautiful being in the universe, and so the most worthy of human attention, devotion, and worship. Moreover, God made humans in his image, for these very purposes. Consequently, humans are the most psychospiritually healthy and whole as they center their lives on him, and have as the fundamental motivating principle of their lives, not the actualizing of their selves, but the furthering of his glory (which, in the Christian scheme of things, is really the only appropriate way to obtain fulfillment and genuine happiness⁷). As a result, reformational counseling seeks to direct counselees toward a theocentric way of life and toward admiring, cherishing, participating in, and manifesting the glory of God.⁸

The Triune God Is Sovereign Over All Things

The magisterial Reformation also taught that the triune God is the Lord of the whole universe. Such a realization undermines the human tendency to relegate God's relation to the world to the explicitly religious sphere (and therefore to be focused on only at holy sites like monasteries and in holy activities like prayer). By contrast, reformational Christianity recognizes God has authority over every square inch of reality and is sovereign over every molecule. Consequently, it teaches that God's will and glory should be sought in every cultural endeavor, including family life, work and play, the arts, the crafts, and science and technology. This theme helped contribute to the development of modern science and the economic and artistic energy that fueled the West's cultural expansion over the next 350 years.⁹

In keeping with this orientation, reformational counseling would not separate the religious (or spiritual) and the psychological, neither directing counselees to focus on narrowly religious solutions like "prayer" or "reading the Word" to resolve all their psychological problems (and thus denigrating the significance of other factors) nor dividing spiritual problems from psychological and thus sending those with the former to pastors and those with the latter to secular counselors. Rather, it interprets all such problems as *psychospiritual*—since the spiritual and psychological thoroughly interpenetrate each other—and so would direct their counselees to see that their current life struggles all relate fundamentally to God. It will also demonstrate how such problems are addressed in the gospel and, *at the same time*, they are to be taken seriously as *holistic* problems having a range of additional contributing factors, including biological, psychological, familial, sociocultural, and ethical—a holism that flows directly from the fact that God is involved in all the dimensions of human life. Consequently, they *would* be prone to direct their counselees to pray and read Scripture as central, orienting, soul-healing activities, but would also, secondarily, help them engage in self-examination; reflection on things like one's family-of-origin, self-representations, and unconscious relational expectations, and

exploration of their emotion regulation, reasoning patterns, and life narrative (to name a few relevant topics); and they would, thirdly, also encourage counselees to see a physician if it seemed advantageous. From a Reformation standpoint, God is relevant to every aspect of life and so legitimizes the pursuit of the reparation of all relevant aspects. One can also deduce from this principle that a discipline like the science of psychology and the practice of counseling, whether in the Church or not, are intrinsically worthwhile and so should be surrendered to the lordship of Christ.¹⁰

In addition, the Reformed tradition has always affirmed the doctrine of election. God revealed this truth to be of encouragement to his people. Salvation is not dependent on ancestral blood-lines, human effort, or priestly acts, but is solely in the hands of a sovereign, but loving and trustworthy God (John 1:13). This is meant to give great solace to the believer, since were it not for election, human fallibility and sin give good cause for a deep sense of insecurity regarding one's fundamental status in life.

Another soul-care benefit of the tradition regarding God's sovereignty has been its high view of divine providence. Since God is sovereign over all things, the believer can be encouraged that God is working all things together for good (Romans 8:28¹¹). This truth, like all truth, can be handled superficially and cause great harm when it is thrust on others in the midst of their suffering. (As John Piper has counseled, pastors should address God's sovereignty regularly in the pulpit, so that when tragic events occur they can come alongside and not preach, but weep with those that weep). But the believer should be deeply encouraged by knowing that suffering, sorrow, and even sin are permitted by a loving Father and can be overruled by God for good to the believer and realize the fulfillment of God's purposes. In contrast to the folly of open theism, which tries to encourage believers by teaching that God has nothing to do with evil (whether natural or moral), thereby rendering it truly meaningless, reformational counseling points to the mysterious purposes of God in allowing pain into believers' lives to foster greater conformity

to Christ, bestowing purpose on tragic events (even, it must be said, terrible events in one's childhood).

The Problem of Sin

The Reformation is also known as having taken sin very seriously and viewing humans as completely spiritually helpless given their condition as sinners. Following Augustine, the Reformers taught that since humanity's first parents sinned, humans are born with original sin, that is, they are born with a disposition that inevitably leads them away from God. This fall results in specific deeds that manifest a disposition (called sin) and in the negative effects of shame and guilt. These corrupt all human activity unless these effects are overcome by grace. This dynamic is the great scandal of the universe, calling into question Christ's lordship and robbing God of the glory that is his due. Sin, then, is the worst psychological aberration, the worst psychospiritual abnormality, and one for which relatively mature humans are held responsible before God (on the other hand, it is not clear that God holds severely mentally impaired humans responsible for what would be considered sin in normal humans—like an angry outburst). The biblical counseling movement must be credited with underscoring this important theme and identifying the idolatry of the heart as the greatest psychospiritual danger humans face.¹²

"The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9) An awareness of the pervasive corrupting power of sin should also lead reformational counselors to explore the unconscious dynamics of those with whom they work, dynamics that influence conscious thought and behavior, leading humans to act for reasons for which they are unaware. At the same time, knowing the remaining corruption of their own hearts, reformational counselors will be quicker to identify false thinking and valuing in their own hearts than that of others. Unfortunately, we conservative Reformed Christians have often been proud and arrogant toward others, paradoxically (and unconsciously!) denying the implications of our own understanding of biblical teaching on sin and God's supremacy.

At the same time, according to the metonymies listed in Genesis 3, sin has led to the suffering of human life, both psychological as well as physical. Psychological suffering can include damage to created structures, processes, and development, including neural abnormalities, distorted thinking and emotional activity, maladaptive behavior, personality disorders, and relational dysfunction. In this age, sin and human damage are mysteriously interwoven, such that it is often impossible to tease apart their respective contributions to human psychopathology. Nevertheless, reformational counselors will strive to distinguish the two, since human persons are held accountable for sin in a way that they are not for those areas that the Bible calls *weakness* (see 2 Corinthians), which God can use for his glory.

When considering sin, reformational counselors will also reflect on the noetic (mental) and carditive (heart) effects of sin on the formation of the science of psychology. As Kuyper discussed, sin causes distortions in the thinking and evaluating of non-Christian scientists, leading to an *antithesis* between non-Christian and Christian thought and cultural activity.¹³ This is certainly evident in the work of modern and postmodern psychologists whose autocentric/anthropocentric and naturalistic/evolutionary agenda undergirds the entire project.

The Relation Between Knowledge of God and Self and Covenantal Care of the Soul

Obviously influenced by Augustine—that great theocentric psychologist—and following his Reformed predecessor Zwingli,¹⁴ John Calvin began his magnum opus in a way that might strike some later Calvinists as controversial: "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern."¹⁵ The psychological significance of this opening to the *Institutes* has been overlooked by some of Calvin's followers who became so extremely theocentric that they lost sight of humanity. But who's a better Calvinist than Calvin? To know God better, he said, we

must know ourselves better—our sin and weakness as well as our gifts—and to know ourselves better we must know God better—his word, nature, and works (this latter insight has often been neglected by integrationists). A theocentric orientation, according to Calvin, can be fostered through a high degree of self-awareness, properly understood.

On this score, the Puritans proved themselves to be Calvin's heirs par excellence. Ames, for example, defined theology as "the doctrine or teaching of living to God."¹⁶ The Puritans understood that knowing God powerfully affected human life and their enormous corpus constituted the greatest outpouring of Christian soul-care literature in English ever seen. The Puritans' experiential emphasis (they called it experimental) combined with the call to greater, God-centered self-awareness provided a rich and safe context for soul-care and for helping people become more aware of their remaining sin and idolatry. Edwards, for example, decried a merely intellectual approach to the truths and God of the Christian faith, that did not engage the affections, as sub-Christian.¹⁷

This relational grounding of the Christian faith was further bolstered in the Reformed tradition's development of the doctrine of the covenant. It brings together many other biblical themes that have developmental and counseling implications—the glory of Trinitarian communion, the value of human communion with the Trinity, the relation of faith and obedience, and the significance of God's dramatic working in history—and it fosters Christian life and maturity by underscoring the interpersonal, dependent, and historical-temporal nature of Christian salvation in this age.¹⁸ With insights like these, the Reformed tradition has provided a rich set of foundational resources for the development of a psychologically sophisticated, yet fundamentally theocentric, approach to counseling.

The Created Order and Common Grace are Good and Must Be Taken Seriously

Christ is sovereign over all things because he is their creative source and the cause of their consistence (John 1:1-3, 10;

Colossians 1:16-17; Hebrews 1:3). They depend entirely upon him for their existence and they, therefore, belong to him. Consequently, the created order, including nature, human beings, and culture, are originally and fundamentally good (Genesis 1) and to be esteemed as such by Christ's followers. Though the magisterial Reformers had a "high" view of sin (as we noted above), Calvin and his heirs also recognized that sin cannot destroy the created order, and they understood that whatever good is found in nature, human beings, and culture is due ultimately to God's graciousness (Matthew 5:45-48; Acts 14:17; James 1:17). In fact, it was their doctrine of sin (and before them, Augustine's), combined with the doctrine of God's sovereignty (also influenced by Augustine), that led to the richest development of the doctrine of common grace in the Church's history.¹⁹ As a result, the Reformed tradition recognized that the existence and development of culture, including the arts and sciences, was part of the manifestation of God's sovereign *common* grace given to sinful humanity. In contrast, it was the radical Reformation and its heirs that identified culture (including the civil authorities) with the "world," and as fundamentally opposed to God's program of salvation.

In reference to the science and philosophy of which he was aware, Calvin argued strongly that Christians are to make constructive use of it. "If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God."²⁰ "We cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects without great admiration. We marvel at them because we are compelled to recognize how preeminent they are. But shall we count anything praiseworthy or noble without recognizing at the same time that it comes from God?"²¹ Consequently, reformational soul-care takes seriously the biological and psychological structures and processes of human nature, and their development, as well as the scientific study of them. This also implies that even though such matters are not often addressed directly in the Bible, they must be given appropriate consideration. So reformational counselors

will read the work of non-Christian psychologists and clinicians, mindful that it is distorted by sin, but also that it manifests something of God's goodness, wisdom, and greatness. Because Christians are "glory-hunters," it is their joy to study the creation and sift through the writings of non-Christians to recognize God's common grace gifts and extol him for them, and incorporate them into their own thought, practice, and life. After all, if Christians do not acknowledge God as the source of his gifts, who will?

In addition, guided by Calvin's encouragement to grow in self-knowledge and the Reformed doctrine of God's sovereignty, reformational counselors will pay attention to past events in the stories of those they see and the ongoing psychological effects of such events (on thoughts, emotions, dispositions, and action patterns). Given that proper human development is a function of common grace, and its inhibition therefore is contrary to God's will, such dynamics are worthy of our attention.

As a result of careful study of human development, contemporary reformational counselors will have to move beyond Calvin's bipolar model of the constitution of human personhood (grounded in the God-self knowledge relation) to a tripolar model (which assumes an interrelation between knowledge of God, self, and others), since such study leads to the conclusion that God has ordained that human development is intrinsically relational, at first with respect to the formative influence of parents, siblings, and other humans, and eventually with respect to believers and (especially) the triune God (which is significantly affected by prior experience with those made in God's image). Such considerations are not intrinsically anthropocentric (though they certainly may be), but rather can be the outworking of a genuinely theocentric orientation that takes seriously God's created order out of loving respect for God himself.

This is a complex theocentrism (as exemplified in the writings of Augustine, Calvin, and Edwards) that should be distinguished from a simple theocentrism that values God supremely, but in such a way as to unwittingly end up pitting

his centrality against a subordinate appreciation of his created order. But according to Edwards, loving God entails a legitimate appreciation for all that proceeds from God. A simple theocentrism (as found in pietistic or fundamentalist versions of counseling) assumes a foundational ontological and epistemological dualism regarding the created order,²² and so are limited in their ability to affirm most completely God's goodness in the created order, whether human nature and its development or the common grace-dependent work of non-Christians. Typical of these approaches is the acceptance of a mindset that reads the Creator-creature distinction (an essential duality in Christian thought) into the differences between Christian and non-Christian cultural activity and between the Bible and non-Christian texts, seeing them as *thoroughly* in opposition to each other, rendering a more holistic understanding of the created order incomprehensible, if not impossible, a stance actually representative of the radical Reformation (and disconcertingly closer to Roman Catholic asceticism than the genius of the magisterial Reformation).

On the other hand, to their credit, pietists and fundamentalists recognize the basic ethicospiritual divide that separates the people of God from those who are not Christians. Augustine and Reformed heirs have recognized that there is an absolute ethicospiritual antithesis between what he called the City of God and the City of Humanity that is basic to human culture. A recognition of this second, legitimate duality should permeate our interpretation of non-Christian activity and texts. As suggested in the discussion on sin, all non-Christian psychology and counseling is corrupted by autocentric and anthropocentric motives, so that its understanding of human nature is distorted in the most significant ways possible. As a result, reformational counselors cannot "integrate" the findings of secular psychologists with the teachings of the Bible in a simplistic fashion that ignores their underlying (and usually unconscious) biasing motives. Kuyper argued that this ethicospiritual duality results in two kinds of science. Though they have the same scientific aims, they proceed from different starting points, have different motives, and run in

opposite directions.²³ This, according to Kuyper, is due to the *palingenesis* (regeneration) of God which, through the subcultural development of his people, is responsible for the re-creation of a new community and cultural enterprise devoted to God and his glory, including scientific and artistic achievements that flow from both special grace and common grace (and not common grace alone).

At the same time, antithesis dynamics, as important as they are, must not be allowed to obscure God's common grace given to all humans and abundantly evident in the work of modern psychology. Pietistic and fundamentalist counselors demonstrate a profound lack of familiarity with such work with strident denunciations of psychology as being unscientific (compared with the natural sciences). However, those who have read carefully in the philosophy of the human sciences and in the texts of secular psychology can only be amazed at the complexity and richness of psychological phenomena that they have uncovered. Since God's glory is more important than anything else, reformational counselors wish not to dishonor the Spirit of God who gave such insights to these non-Christians. Rather, they seek to take every thought (and theory and research finding) captive to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5) and interpret it accordingly.

The doctrines of the antithesis and common grace—when understood in relation to each other, as the Reformed tradition historically has understood them—function like what Van Til called "limiting concepts."²⁴ They are related dialectically and cannot be understood in abstraction from their corollary, if Christians are to properly interpret the created order and non-Christian cultural activity and texts.

Christ's Redemption Is the Primary Soul-Curing Dynamic

In contrast to secular counseling, reformational counseling assumes a redemptive-therapeutics that places Christ's person and work in his life, death, and resurrection at the center of the therapeutic enterprise. Whether directly or indirectly, all the counselor's efforts are oriented to helping the client benefit from Christ's person and work. As Calvin taught,

union with Christ is foundational to Christian soul-healing.²⁵ "Union with Christ is the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation."²⁶ The outworking of union with Christ leads to the mortification of the old self and the vivification of the new self.²⁷ Reformational counselors will strategize with their counselees, teaching them how to receive the cross and the resurrection more deeply into their beings, so that the Holy Spirit's application of Christ's work in the new creation may be eschatologically realized in their hearts, lives, relationships, and stories in this age (see Romans 6:1-11; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 5:17-26; 6:14-15; Ephesians 2:1-10; 4:22-24; Colossians 3:1-11²⁸).

Declarative Salvation Is the Foundation of Soul-Care Change

The Reformation is perhaps most identified with a renewal of interest in Paul's teachings on justification by faith. Flowing from their union with Christ, the basis of the confidence of Christians before God is solely found in Christ and the resulting forgiveness of the believer combined with the application of Christ's righteousness to the believer through a speech-act of God. Christians are not to find their soul's rest in their faith or their doctrine or their virtue or good works, but in Christ and his work on their behalf. The declaration that the believer is perfectly holy, righteous, adopted, and beloved provides the all-sufficient ground for the believer's confidence, rest, consolation, and security. On the basis of this divine speech-act and through its deeper internalization by faith (through the means of grace, especially meditation), believers are enabled to see and evaluate themselves differently. Because believers are perfect in Christ, they are freed to be increasingly honest about their remaining imperfection. The knowledge that one is perfect in Christ allows believers to let go of their defenses (religious or otherwise) that keep them in a relatively self-deceived, superficial, and impoverished spiritual state, to become more self-aware, honest, and genuinely humble, and to more fully relinquish remaining aut centrism (or self-idolatry) that usually hides in a religious guise in well-taught Christians.

Sanctification Is a Gradual Process

So far, I have ignored differences between the various groups that composed the magisterial Reformation and derive from it, because in most respects, there was profound agreement surrounding the most important issues of the faith. However, on a host of secondary issues, there was and continues to be disagreement. One of those issues concerns the nature of sanctification or the believer's growth in grace. Three approaches to this topic deriving from the Reformation can be distinguished: Lutheran, Reformed, and Wesleyan.²⁹ In the main, the Lutheran approach emphasizes the believer's declarative status before God in justification, so that sanctification is seen merely as a by-product of justification and not something to be addressed directly, without distorting what is felt to be the biblical priority of God's declarative word. As a result, development in the Christian life is not taken as seriously as it might be. The Wesleyan approach, developed two centuries after the Reformation by John Wesley (originally an Anglican), advocates a second work of grace after conversion by which the believer attains a heightened state of spiritual resolve that is supposedly markedly free of a struggle with sin. This approach is sometimes termed "perfectionism." The Reformed tradition, however, attempts to steer between what is believed to be an overemphasis on justification (in Lutheranism) and a lack of self-awareness in Wesleyanism. Both would seem to lack a degree of experiential realism. Like Lutheranism, the Reformed approach to sanctification is based on justification, but it actively seeks to promote greater conformity to Christ in the believer's life; however, in contrast to Wesleyanism, it maintains that this process is gradual, involves an inner conflict with remaining sin (termed the flesh by Paul, Galatians 5:16-21), and is far from complete in this life.³⁰

Based on the Reformed understanding of sanctification, a reformational approach to soul-care would likewise see soul-improvement as being incremental. While God is always free to work miraculously and instantaneously, soul-change is typically a slow process that involves the replacement of old

beliefs, affective responses, attitudes, motives, and patterns of relating to others with new ones, one at a time. Given what we know now of the neurological conditions of such change, it is not surprising why this process is gradual. Old neural networks must be shut down, and new ones must be constructed. None of this happens in genuine sanctification apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, but in this age most of the time God tends to work through the created order, and not take shortcuts. Though an incremental approach is sometimes hard for counselees to accept, such a stance, when grounded in justification, helps them to accept their present limitations and to be more realistic about the speed of their recovery, without undermining the ongoing call to grow in conformity to the image of Christ.

The Bible Provides Our Spectacles and Sets the Soul-Care Agenda

Another key teaching of the Reformation was the renewed emphasis on the Bible as the ultimate criterion for establishing Christian doctrine. *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) was a motto at that time to distinguish the Reformers' orientation from that of the Roman Catholic Church, which based its doctrine on Church tradition as well as Scripture. The Reformation maintained that Scripture alone is sufficient for determining the key doctrines of the Christian faith. In a striking metaphor, Calvin likened the Bible to a set of spectacles that alone shows humans the way to God and helps them interpret the available evidence about him (including Church tradition).³¹

However, as McGrath has demonstrated, the magisterial Reformation (Luther, Calvin, and the English Reformation) did not reject Church tradition *in toto* (as did the Anabaptists of the radical Reformation), but sought to test it by Scripture. Calvin's use of Augustine demonstrates clearly both that he saw Augustine as a tremendous guide to Scripture interpretation and that he was willing to criticize him to the extent he deviated from Scripture's own teaching.³²

Such a realization invalidates the simplistic use of the

Reformation cry of *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) and “the sufficiency of Scripture” by some extreme conservatives today who argue that the Bible is the only book that should be consulted with reference to Christian soul-care. Correct in sensing the relevance, authority, and value of Scripture for psychology and soul-care, they have tended to press this theme to unreformational extremes. The magisterial Reformers never believed that their emphasis on the priority of Scripture implied a rejection of Church tradition, to say nothing of a rejection of the findings of scientific research (as suggested above, the Reformation helped to foster the scientific revolution; it was by no means anti-science³³). Historically, the heirs of the Reformation believed that the Bible was a trustworthy source of whatever it asserted and was the sufficient and infallible source of all the information *necessary for salvation*.³⁴ For example, the Belgic Confession states:

The Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures to Be the Only Rule of Faith: We believe that these Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe, unto salvation, is sufficiently taught therein. . . . The doctrine thereof is most perfect and complete in all respects. For since the whole manner of worship which God requires of us, is written in them at large, it is unlawful for any one, though an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are taught in the Holy Scriptures. . . . Therefore we reject with all our hearts, whatsoever doth not agree with this infallible rule. . . . (Article 7; see also Westminster Confession, Chapter 1).

The Confession argues here that the Bible contains all the doctrines necessary for salvation and that nothing that contradicts the Bible’s teaching can be accepted by believers. An important aspect of salvation concerns the restoration of human well-being in God,³⁵ so the Belgic Confession teaches that Scripture addresses issues at the heart of Christian soul-care. In fact, Christian soul-care could be said to be concerned centrally with the human application and appropriation of divine salvation. Consequently, a genuinely reformational

model of counseling would have to be grounded in the truths of Scripture, would incorporate and take Scripture seriously in its practice, and would reject any teaching inconsistent with Scripture, particularly its instruction on divine salvation. However, there is no valid reason to deduce from this position that God revealed *everything* there is to know about soul-care in the Bible or that Christian counselors (or psychologists) are obliged to disregard psychological research and theory—even when it is the product of non-Christians. A faithful reading of Scripture makes clear there are many details regarding human nature that are of relevance to soul-care that were not revealed there: for example, the role of neural activity in thinking and acting, a description of various personality traits, how emotion and cognition interact, and even the best way to internalize Scripture. Apparently, the Bible was not given to be an exhaustive, comprehensive soul-treatment book. It is rather like an essential guidebook that contains the “first principles” of Christian soul-care. A truly radical allegiance to the Bible must respect the form of Scripture as it was given to us and does not impose on it an alien set of assumptions regarding its comprehensiveness. Then, as in reading anything, when reading non-Christian psychology texts, reformational counselors will use Scripture as “interpreting spectacles,” in order to avoid being biased in their understanding of human nature and the treatment of psychopathology by the “first principles” of secular ideology.

Which leads to the opposite concern. As the nouthetic/biblical counseling movement has recognized, secular soul-care is at core the application of a false religion of the Self, all the more dangerous because of its seemingly religiously neutral stance.³⁶ Consequently, in contrast with the weakest versions of integrationism, the reformational counselor will not allow secular psychology to set its agenda. Rather, the Bible must set the agenda, for it provides the divinely revealed map for helping people get from the City of Humanity to the City of God, offering a description of the main features of the territory and showing the path to greater Christlikeness.

So, with the nouthetic/biblical counseling movement,

reformational counseling affirms the sufficiency of Scripture, however, only with reference to the most important soul-care information. Like a map, the Bible does not include every feature of importance (every tree, squirrel, or hole), just the most important features necessary to find where we are, where we are going, and how to get there. Consequently, as in the magisterial Reformation, a reformational counseling approach also advocates the *primacy* of Scripture in relation to other texts. That is, the Bible is the final textual authority on all soul-care matters, so that all extra-biblical texts that provide valid, relevant information for soul-care are to be gratefully read and appropriated by God's people, but must be read and appropriated carefully, interpreted in the light of God's word.

Reformata Reformanda

Finally, a truly reformational approach recognizes that no human understanding of anything will ever be completely adequate. Because of finitude and remaining sin, every Christian understanding can always be improved upon and be drawn closer into conformity with the perfect understanding of God. *Reformata reformanda* is the ultimate cry of the Reformation: *Reformed, yet always reforming*. As a result, it would be contrary to reformational ideals to assume that our current understanding of counseling (or anything) is inerrant. And there are at least a few areas that deserve greater exploration by those in the Reformed tradition and by reformational counselors. To cite just one example, in contrast to the writings of Augustine who in other ways has exercised such a profound influence on the Reformation, love has not gotten the attention in the Reformed tradition that it deserves, given its prominence in the New Testament.

Because the Reformed tradition is supposed to be, by definition, always reforming, it has a tradition-correcting, self-questioning dynamic built into it. As a result, reformational counseling should always be seeking to incorporate more of God's understanding, through better biblical exegesis, philosophical analysis, self-examination, psychological research and theory-building, and the reading of relevant Christian

and non-Christian authors, interpreting everything in the light of Scripture, wherever clues to that divine understanding can be found. Let us not be cowardly, but courageous, battling, in dependence on God's word and Spirit, with weapons "not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses" (2 Corinthians 10:4), seeking to think God's thoughts about human nature, its problems, and its healing after him.

REFORMING THE SOUL

There is another large set of reasons that contributed to the use of the term "reformation" for this counseling model. Having examined some of the main Reformation themes that bear on psychology and soul-care, we turn in this last section to consider another way in which the term "reformation" is relevant for the soul-care task that flows out of the magisterial Reformation.

The Form of Christ

The Bible teaches that the Son of God exists in the form (*morphe*) of God (Philippians 2:6). However, as the God-human Jesus Christ, he was also said to be the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15), the exact representation of his nature (Hebrews 1:3), we might say, the perfect human exemplification of the form of God. So, Christ is both the form and image of God. As such, his form is the model toward which all humans, created in the image of God, are to aspire.

Formation

The rest of the human race, of course, does not exist in the form of God; the rest is not divine. But from the beginning, all humans, like Christ, have been made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27; 9:6; James 3:9), that is, they bore some resemblance to the form of God. Humans in general are copies or images of the divine form. While there are many aspects to image-bearing (functional, relational, structural, ethicospiritual), the fact that non-Christians also exist in the

image of God suggests that there have to be features of image-bearing that are common to all people regardless of their personal relationship with God. As a result, most Christians through the ages (including Calvin³⁷) have believed that the image of God, at least in part, consisted of the characteristics that humans share with God but that distinguish them from animals, including their spirituality, immortality, moral sense, various psychological capacities (e.g. reason, emotion, will), personality, personal agency, relationality, a capacity for religion and holiness, and dominion over the earth.³⁸ The last characteristic is sometimes called the functional aspect and the others could be called the structural aspect. However, as Reformed theologians attest, the distinctive of the Reformed view on this issue is the recognition, initiated by Calvin, that the nature of the image of God is clarified by consulting the New Testament teaching regarding the increased conformity to the image of God that occurs after conversion, suggesting that the image of God also consists in holiness, righteousness, and a living, dependent relationship with God. This, we might call its ethicospiritual aspect (as well as its directional or material aspect). In the interests of encompassing all this teaching, the Reformed tradition has distinguished the structural and functional features from the ethicospiritual, labeling them the broad and the narrow aspects, respectively.

Many of those features listed under the broad view of the image of God, upon reflection and research, do not arise in human nature spontaneously, but develop over time, through the course of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Reason (including subcomponents like memory, problem-solving skills, language, and metacognition), emotions, and the will (including the capacities to engage in self-control and self-regulation) unfold and grow in complexity. As a result, contemporary Christians must do justice to the fact that at least some aspects of the image of God would seem to develop. This would suggest that all normal human beings come to resemble God increasingly as they get older, at least until middle age. We must acknowledge that the most important works in Reformed theology were written before a more sophisticated

developmental understanding would have made sense. But there is no purpose served in neglecting this possible advance in our understanding of the image of God in our day. Let us, then, reform our understanding of image-bearing.

So, if Christ is the form of God and also the perfect image of God, if all humans share some image-bearing features, and if all adult humans have developed into some of these image-bearing features (like personality, reason, emotion, and will), then human development can be considered a process of development into the broad aspect of the image of the form of God. This process would be a product of common grace—common to all normally developing human beings—and we shall label it *formation*.

Admittedly, the Bible nowhere teaches explicitly that the image of God develops. But by good and necessary consequence it may be deduced from the evidence of Scripture and the nature of human development. Assuming the foregoing, humans grow up in a fallen world, with genetic flaws and families that themselves do not model well God's likeness, creating problems in the formation process in this age, and this leads to distortions in the image of God, resulting in a wide variance in how well normal humans resemble their Maker structurally and functionally. Consequently, all humans enter adulthood in a state of falling short of perfect image-bearing. This falling short can be labeled psychopathology, and includes such diagnoses as mental impairment, autism, personality disorders, chronic depression, anxiety, anorexia nervosa, addiction, adultery, and idolatry. All of these are disorders of the soul and distortions in the image of God, some for which an adult bears no responsibility (most cases of mental impairment)—the abnormal developmental process which we will call *deformation*—and some for which the adult bears personal responsibility (for sin, like idolatry and adultery)—the abnormal developmental process which we will call *malformation*. In either case, becoming an image of God is more or less compromised, and some such distortions are common to all human beings. Much of soul-care is concerned with remediating the damage and distortion of the

image of God. We call this reparative process *reformation*.

Reformation

There are many ways to label the process by which God's healing in this age is realized in human lives, for example, sanctification (Hebrews 12:14), salvation (1 Corinthians 1:18), cleansing (2 Corinthians 7:1), or yielding (Romans 6:19). Of special note for our purposes, however, are those biblical expressions that refer to "form." God, we are told, has predestined Christians "to become conformed (*summorphous*) to the image of his Son" (Romans 8:29); "beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, (they) are being transformed (*metamorphoumetha*) into the same image from glory to glory" (2 Corinthians 3:18). Paul prayed "that I may know (Christ), and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed (*symmorphizomenos*) to his death" (Philippians 3:10). He wished that Christ be formed (*morphothe*) in believers (Galatians 4:19), and he encouraged them to "be transformed (*metamorphousthe*) by the renewal of [their] mind" (Romans 12:2). These passages all point to the need for Christians to be changed and most suggest that Christ is the archetype, model, *telos*, ideal, or form according to which they are changed. As a result, the process of humans being changed into the image or form of Christ is sometimes called *Christiformity*, a term that has a long history in the Church³⁹ and aptly describes what should be the primary focus of Christian soul-care. In conformity to the image of Christ, the image of God is most fully realized. Here the broad elements of the image of God that all humans have in common are taken up and refined by the Holy Spirit, so that the image comes to include that which was lost at the Fall—righteousness, holiness of the truth, and knowledge (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10)—to cite just that which is explicitly stated in the New Testament.

The term *reformation* is a synonym for Christiformity, but it connotes more the reparative nature of this process, being a *secondary* activity, that is corrective of the earlier deformation and malformation processes. Whereas formation and defor-

mation are largely passive processes that are a result of biological and social forces acting upon the developing individual, malformation and reformation are more active processes that entail a degree of personal agency, that is, the capacity to act with some self-awareness, rationality, and intentionality, for which individuals are responsible. However, Christian reformation (in distinction from secular therapy) also requires the agency of the Holy Spirit (Philippians 2:10-11), working through the Word of God, which together enable the reconstruction of the individual soul (and brain) along lines that more resemble the image of Christ. In fact, according to Christianity, true reformation cannot occur apart from the supernatural work of God in regeneration, reconciliation, redemption, salvation, and sanctification. At the same time, while Christian reformation includes sanctification, it includes more than simply becoming more holy. Holiness and the reconstruction of psychological structures and processes like memories, emotions, thinking, attitudes, relational skills, and action patterns are interdependent in reformation.

In addition, as Christians are to seek to become like Christ, they are also encouraged to imitate other mature believers (1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7; 2:14) who themselves, more closely approximate the image of Christ. Presumably, spending time with such believers, through the course of social interaction and significant conversation, enhances the less mature believers' reformation. This provides a rationale for reformational counseling. In a variety of ways, believers are helped when other, more skilled believers work closely with them in formal and informal settings to aid them in the overcoming of their previous soul-damage (a result of deformation and malformation processes), and to help them to learn how to increasingly "put off" the distortions of the image of Christ and "put on" more of the form of Christ.⁴⁰

In light of all of the above considerations, the outline of a distinctive model of Christian soul-care is presented here. Not only does this model derive in large part from the major themes of the historical movement called the Reformation,

but it aims at a re-formation of the soul, according to the image of Christ, in reliance upon the Word of God and the Holy Spirit, through the mediating assistance of relatively mature people of God. Consequently, this model is labeled reformational counseling. While building on the strengths of the nouthetic/biblical counseling and integrationist models, it is hoped that reformational counseling points toward a middle way that avoids the weaknesses of both approaches.

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Notes

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 40. So, Christiformity, conformation, transformation, and reformation can all be used interchangeably to indicate the same supernatural developmental activity, with somewhat different connotations.