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## Faithful Integration: The Importance of Worldview, Hermeneutics, and Theology for Christian Counseling

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# FAITHFUL INTEGRATION

## THE IMPORTANCE OF WORLDVIEW, HERMENEUTICS, AND THEOLOGY FOR CHRISTIAN COUNSELING

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### Abstract

Efforts to integrate faith with psychological science and counseling have been present within Christian graduate programs for decades; however, questions remain about how to do this effectively. A brief review of integration efforts and a survey of the experience of graduate students within these programs reveal a desire to further model this practical integration within the classroom. Possible solutions emphasize a biblically informed worldview, intentionally crafted hermeneutics, and well developed theology, which can lead to faith-informed counseling practices.

### Introduction

Does the integration of psychology and theology matter to the Christian counselor? If so, how—and what does that look like practically in the counseling room? As a second-year student in ORU's Master of Arts in Professional Counseling program, these questions have been at the forefront of my mind. Christian integration in counseling includes the union of faith and professional practice in the lives of practitioners. It recognizes a partnership with the work of the Holy Spirit within the counseling

room and allows one's theological worldview to inform the psychological theories and counseling methodologies utilized. While Christian programs emphasize the importance of integration, student testimonials point to the inherent challenge of properly joining the science of psychology and the art of counseling with Christian theology. A brief overview and review of student perspectives explain the goals and application of integrating counseling and theology in practice.

### **Brief Overview of Integration**

The efforts to integrate Christian theology with psychological science or related counseling approaches have occurred for many years. One of the primary facets of proper integration is the recognition that every person interprets the world through his worldview, which is made up of held beliefs about the world that color the way current affairs and information are interpreted. Slife and Reber (2009) have done good work exploring the concept of worldview and recognizing the inherent incompatibility of some facets of psychology with a Christian worldview (pp. 68-70). Whether psychology and theology are complementary or competing disciplines depends on how integration occurs. McMinn (2011) explains that “beneath every technique is a counseling theory, and beneath every theory is a worldview” (p. 16). He also stresses how counseling programs frequently fail to properly explain to students how to integrate faith and practice, with training being “experiential and often private” (McMinn, 2014, p. 11).

In their text, *Counseling and Christianity: Five Approaches*, Greggo and Sisemore (2012), present the five dominant approaches for integrating Christianity and counseling—the levels-of-explanation, integration, Christian psychology, transformational, and Biblical counseling approaches (p. 17). These approaches, as outlined by Greggo and Sisemore, are intended to be practical considerations and applications of the content presented in Johnson's (2010) earlier text, *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views*. Regardless of which approach one takes, the Christian practitioner must recognize that modern psychology, emerging in the late 1800s with Sigmund Freud, largely abandoned the idea of the soul in favor of a godless

worldview, which has informed psychological theories and counseling methods that have since been developed. These theories and methods have prioritized materialist resources and overwhelmingly eliminated the supernatural's relevance to therapeutic change processes (Slife & Whoolery, 2006; see also Greggo & Sisemore, 2012). Objective versus subjective levels of explanation greatly impact the treatment methods accessible to the clinician and implicitly place all the impetus of change onto the practitioner and client, disavowing any options not based on empirical evidence. It is unwise to assume that the methodologies created by a psychologist operating from a materialist worldview can always be converted for practical use by the Christian counselor. Thus, great discernment is needed to determine when to incorporate psychological theories into the Christian counseling framework. Science is not neutral; therefore, practitioners must distinguish the differences between materialist and faith-based worldviews (Slife & Whoolery, 2006; see also Slife & Reber, 2009).

### **Graduate School Experience**

There is tension for the Christian counselor between making room for alternative perspectives while remaining steadfast to the Christian faith—where unity and acceptance meet the truth presented in love. This effort can be envisioned as inviting ideas to sit at one's table. In doing so, the counselor is not obligated to adopt or personally accept the ideas considered; rather, it creates a space to listen, evaluate, and potentially integrate new information (see Swinton & Mowat, 2016). The emphasis is on sitting with another person rather than trying to fix him. However, questions remain regarding the Christian counselor's role in presenting the truth to clients: how does the counseling experience with a Christian counselor differ from that of a spiritual or nonreligious practitioner?

The bottom line is that questions of theology underlie questions of ultimate meaning, which counselors engage with in their counseling rooms daily. Because of this, each Christian practitioner is charged with critically reflecting upon his or her worldview (i.e., interpretive grid) that inevitably shapes praxis: is naturalistic science the dominant influence

upon the counselor's worldview by which he or she views the rest of the world, including the theories and methods that inform and guide the counseling process? Or, is a biblical foundation dominantly shaping the counselor's worldview through which the counseling process and related methods are critically assessed and engaged? If one supports the integrative effort to join Christianity and counseling, the goal is to connect scripture and science. However, the question becomes a matter of how these two can be thoughtfully drawn together to shape the person and actions of the counselor.

To this end, psychological science is an example of a lens through which one can view the world, and the assumption of its 'neutrality' should be questioned (Slife & Reber, 2009). Science is not all-knowing—it must be interpreted by interpretive beings (i.e., humans), and it is constantly changing. Looking at the history of the DSM is enough to witness how the "objective" science continues to be changed and influenced by the opinions of the time. Homosexuality, long viewed as a mental disorder, has now, after a series of rewrites, been removed entirely from the handbook as the societal view of homosexuality has changed from taboo to acceptance (Dresher, 2015, pp. 565-575).

Faced with the common dissonance between personal belief and professional practice, graduate counseling students in Christian programs often ask genuine questions as they wrestle with the implications of ethical dilemmas faced by the integrative Christian counselor. Even at Christian institutions, students in classrooms require further theological training and individual guidance to parse what integration looks like personally and practically. Research has indicated that counseling students can distinguish between effectual integrative efforts in their graduate counseling programs and those that are less so (Hall et al., 2009). With this, studies have shown that students learn how to integrate best through mentoring relationships and personal examples, which model how to bring together faith and practice effectively on an experiential level (French, 2023; Neff et al., 2020). Leaving the integration of psychology and theology to each student is a recipe for confusion. In no other area of the Christian life are believers called to walk alone. Rather, Christians are called to walk out their faith

in community, iron sharpening iron (Proverbs 27:17), and share the truth each has gleaned on their life journey. Autonomy at the expense of proper training and formation is a bad trade.

The desire to cultivate an integrative program is a good and worthy enterprise. However, the desire to be integrative alone is insufficient to ensure proper integration. Integrating faith and psychology necessitates lived-out theological training that transforms the counselor into a living agent of hope to clients (French, 2021, p. 270). This is best transmitted to students through effective modeling by professors, mentors, and professional connections who can practically model what faith in action looks like within the professional counseling context. Neff et al. (2020) suggest that a shift from teaching integration (with an emphasis on models) towards training integrators (developing ears to discern spiritual themes and embody principles) could be a relevant change in perspective within the integrative effort (p. 77).

### **Integration Problems**

Critical reflection is hard work. It is easier to accept concepts at face value rather than analyze their underlying claims regarding the world and the human person. Before engaging with psychological theories or counseling practices, proper consideration of their congruence with the Christian faith is necessary. Christian practitioners must grow in their ability to submit to scrutiny the psychological and counseling perspectives and methods in which they are trained rather than uncritically or passively receiving them without evaluation. Holeman (2012) frames this reflection as engaging in “strong-sense” rather than “weak-sense” theological thinking (p. 27). It necessitates moving beyond simple answers to simple questions into a place of wrestling with theology and reflecting on how it interfaces with contemporary issues (Holeman, 2012, p. 27).

The field of psychology, which shapes and informs the art of counseling, has defined its worldview perspective as being “neutral,” “objective,” and “scientific”; however, all therapeutic techniques are built upon philosophical and moral assumptions (Slife & Whoolery, 2006, p.

217). One cannot be unbiased in viewing the world; psychologists and counselors are no different. Often, practitioners focus on the surface of psychological theories, neglecting the philosophical assumptions these methods are built upon (p. 218). Naturalism assumes that God is not required to understand the world, and ‘not required’ is often viewed as meaning ‘theologically neutral’ (p. 219). If God is not required, as naturalism stipulates, then no bias toward or against views of God should be involved. C.S. Lewis (1970) recognizes that the Christian and Materialist view the world through fundamentally different lenses—they cannot both be right (p. 110). “The one who is wrong will act in a way which simply doesn’t fit the real universe” (Lewis, 1970, p. 110). Nothing one does is neutral. The integrated practitioner is aware of his worldview through which he interacts with the world and recognizes the worldviews of his intervention methods. Pearcey (2019) explains that a worldview is attached to every practice; it is important to be aware of this because not all worldviews are true or attractive upon close inspection (p. 30).

Furthermore, the scientific community has embraced the worldview of ontological naturalism, which is held up by the three pillars of objectivism, materialism, and reductionism (Slife & Whoolery, 2006, p. 222). Objectivism is the study of objects external to the observer’s mind, making the relevant subject matter of study the objective world—values and beliefs need not enter the field. This objective/subjective split helps the researcher dismiss the supernatural within events, as the researcher is told to excommunicate the subjective self within which religion resides. Religious values are viewed as bad, distorting the true knowledge found within scientific methods. Materialism holds that only those things that are tangible and visible are relevant to scientific discourse (Slife & Whoolery, 2006). This viewpoint is linked with empiricism, as only behavior that is seen and observed is considered valuable (Greggo & Sisemore, 2012). Reductionism is the final pillar, claiming that all change can be reduced to natural laws and principles. Everything is thus determined, and any true knowledge can be replicated and repeated (Slife & Whoolery, 2006).

## Solutions

So, where do we go from here? Are there ways to challenge the naturalistic framework that has permeated the counseling profession? The most effective way for an integrative program to equip its students is a three-stranded chord: training students in a biblical worldview, developing intentionally-crafted hermeneutics, and promoting sound theology (French, 2021; 2023).

### Biblically Informed Worldview

The scientific notion of worldview neutrality or bias-free research must be challenged. Whenever one works within an academic endeavor (and throughout the rhythms of daily living), philosophical assumptions and propositions are in place, regardless of whether the scholar is aware of them. Theories regarding the acquisition of knowledge, the nature of reality, and the view of the human person are constantly being promoted as underlying assumptions of the theories and methods utilized within one's professional practice (Slife & Whoolery, 2006, p. 217). We cannot simply assume that materialistic philosophy is compatible with Christian belief; thorough testing and analysis need to ensue to ensure faithfulness to God through our practice.

Hathaway (2021) frames integration as occurring when a “fusion of horizons” occurs between Christianity and psychology—fusion has not occurred “if either perspective has been distorted or is not faithfully present” (p. 262). Some questions worth posing to Christian counseling students are: What are the presuppositions through which we view the world? Are we theologians incorporating the truths found in psychology into our practices? Or, are we crafting our theology into a preestablished framework and “search[ing] for a place for religion within the limits of reason?” (Bartholomew, 2000, p. 13). Christian integrationists need to be careful about the “naturalistic, humanistic, transpersonal, [and] or other non-Christian assumptions present in much of psychology” (Hathaway, 2021, p. 265). Look to the foundation. If divine intervention in the world is consistently subordinated to autonomous rationality within one's worldview, it could point to a disconnect, an artificial separation, between faith and professional practice.



As Christian integrative counselors, we believe in the worthy effort of mining truth from the beds of psychology; however, we must be aware of the underlying theological foundations by which we live and move and have our being. Otherwise, the lines between truth and falsehood will remain vague and opaque, leaving us in danger of swallowing poison alongside medicine—not all psychology is beneficial, and discernment must be used when integrating.

### Intentionally Crafted Hermeneutics

Christians in the 21st century are exposed to a wide range of various biblical interpretations. When opinions on scripture vary widely, how can counseling students determine the faithfulness of their beliefs and practices? One way this may occur is through intentionality in congruent biblical hermeneutics. Learning to interpret scripture faithfully revolutionizes how Christians relate to the word of God. In Bartholomew's (2000) translation of Hans Robert Jauss, Jauss explains that a hermeneutic "is no esoteric teaching but the theory of a practice" (p. 3). Those studying scripture are properly oriented to the text when they aim to excavate the truth; however, as discussed previously, everyone approaches the world with prior foundational commitments through which experience is interpreted. Before exploring integration at the disciplinary level, the "contours of a Christian worldview" need to be developed (Entwistle, 2021, p. 79). What, then, are the proper commitments for Christians to hold to? For the Christian, the starting points for understanding the world begin with God, who has revealed Himself in scripture and tradition passed down through the ages by the Christian church (Bartholomew, 2015, p. 5). Other men may hold fragments of truth, but Jesus is divine Truth itself. As such, all other beliefs need to stem from this Christocentric awareness.

If one claims to be a follower of Christ, he must carefully consider his core tenets of belief and how they affect his life. Does he believe scripture is the authoritative Word of God? What makes up scripture—the Old Testament, the New Testament, or both? Is the God revealed in these testaments the same? Does tradition play a role in biblical interpretation? These are the

types of questions that shape how one approaches the text. Hathaway (2021) warns that Christian integrationists must reject hermeneutical approaches that are “hijacked with Enlightenment worldviews” and lead one to read the Word of God incorrectly through “their a priori commitments” (p. 266). Without proper consideration, one can come to scripture through an unexamined amalgamation of beliefs, detached from the historical and ecclesial guidelines that can help discern the text’s true meaning. According to Hathaway (2021), some “broadly recognizable theological framework” needs to guide the exegesis of scripture so that each passage is understood considering the whole Canon (p. 266).

Recognizing the literary and historical contexts of scripture helps the reader to understand and draw inferences from the text intended by the author and in line with its original design as opposed to the personal creations of the reader (Keener, 2019, p. 22). Bartholomew (2000) asserts that a biblical hermeneutic “has theological and philosophical dimensions, and both need to be informed by faith seeking understanding” (p. 33). As this is recognized and implemented, the philosophical and theological presuppositions that shape current scholarship will surface more readily and be easier to notice, critique, and correct (Bartholomew, 2000, p. 34). Vanhoozer (2005) explains the importance of receptivity to the Holy Spirit throughout the process of interpretation, noting “the Spirit’s sanctifying work in their lives in order better to cultivate the interpretive virtues such as openness and humility” (p. 36). When psychological data and related counseling methods appear to conflict with scriptural teaching, the Christian integrative counselor is right to consider the accuracy of his understanding; however, with “well-established interpretations anchored in Christian community,” exploration of alternative explanations for the data “would be the more natural course” (Hathaway, 2021, p. 262).

Recognizing the wisdom of those who have come before is also critical. A tradition of study and truth-seeking has been promulgated through the Christian church, and this tradition is available to Christians to glean from today. Piper (1946) posits that proper interpretation requires awareness of the ecumenical structure in which one has established himself: “The faith

by which the exegete is guided will be the historic faith of his Church. There is no way of approaching the Bible as a Christian in general” (p. 204). Having the humility to submit oneself to Christ’s authority, as revealed through scripture and the scholarly thought of the Christian saints of the ages, goes a long way to helping orient oneself in the world. The Christian in today’s world is given a remarkable heritage in tradition. From the early church of classical creeds, through the medieval church of Aquinas, and into Protestant scholasticism, the Christian can glean from the wisdom before him. While faithful Christians may not be bound to every doctrine posited throughout church history, extreme caution should be taken when explicitly detethering oneself from doctrinal positions of the church that have existed for hundreds, if not thousands, of years (e.g., see Wright, 2020).

### Thick, Complex, and Secure Theology

Holeman (2012) claims there is “nothing more practical than good theology” (p. 9). A primary question to ask when considering theology is, “How does one approach scripture?” Good theology is yielded from good interpretation, which means the one who wishes to be faithful to scripture benefits greatly from learning how to interpret properly. Theology is the primary source of knowledge for the Christian; it guides him and provides a hermeneutical framework (Swinton & Mowat, 2016, p. 19). Because of this, Christian counselors need to continue exploring and developing their explicit theology—for the sake of their formation and the good of their clients, who will receive counseling from a better-sharpened view of God and the world.

Good theology involves thinking rightly about God and developing a perspective from which to view the world and make congruent decisions reflective of one’s beliefs. For the Christian, professional competency requires theological reflection. Because his identity is rooted in being a Christian who counsels, he recognizes the omnipresence and omnipotence of God in the counseling room. Anywhere the counselor is, he can invite the presence of the living God to dwell and work. The Christian counselor can be an agent of hope, mirroring the Kingdom of God by recognizing

the pain of the counselee while also holding onto hope for the future (French, 2021, p. 271).

For the Christian counselor to be equipped for properly integrated work, he needs to move from an embedded, implicit theology into the study of theological resources and personal growth in faith. Obtaining theological knowledge does not make one integrative; however, as theology informs practice, theology necessarily permeates the lifestyle of the counselor, including professional practices (Holeman, 2012, p. 31). One's theology guides the methods utilized in client sessions and undergirds every interaction; it is critical that the integrative counselor carefully consider his beliefs, committing to a lifetime of the study of God for his own sake and the sake of his clients.

### **Integrating Biblical Worldview, Hermeneutics, and Theology into Practice**

As the student develops a biblically sound worldview, intentional hermeneutics, and theology that points to Christ, she can properly assess her counseling methods and practices. Her training in developing a worldview corresponding to biblical truth is immediately relevant in helping her recognize truth from falsehood within the psychological community. Discernment is required of the Christian counselor—she is called to distinguish between theories that can be properly integrated into the biblical framework versus those situated too firmly upon humanistic assumptions to help point people to true freedom. Counseling encompasses all aspects of the person, and the domain of spirituality is not exempt for the client or the counselor. As A.W. Tozer (1987) famously said, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us” (p. 1). Beliefs about God permeate all of one's life, and the counselor must intentionally build her practice in congruence with theological truth.

Choosing methods congruent with one's faith necessitates careful examination of the underlying propositions upon which each method is built. What does this method assume about the world and/or the human

person? Our practices are “theory-laden,” whether we recognize the theories behind our practices or not (Swinton & Mowat, 2016, p. 19). In our post-Enlightenment culture, one of the most permeating belief structures is that of reason above all else. Philosophies that elevate reason above the supernatural contradict a Christian worldview, as the believer claims God is both beyond reason and currently active in the world today, directly refuting naturalistic conceptions of the world in which God is not required (Slife & Whoolery, 2006, p. 219). Elevating oneself and reason above God is exactly the sin of pride by which Lucifer fell (Isaiah 14:12-17). To avoid using practices with incongruent belief structures, intentionality in leaving room for the supernatural and scrutiny of the methodologies and practices utilized are necessary for the Christian integrative counselor. Helping students see how a biblical worldview, a strong hermeneutic, and informed Christian theology practically impact the counseling profession and their role in the ongoing work of the Christian counselor thus needs to be a primary goal of Christian counseling programs.

## Conclusion

Christian counselors and training programs must reflect on their theological beliefs and professional practices. One of the lessons taught early on in counseling classes is that the counselor is one’s greatest tool—the counselor can best offer help to others through careful reflection and intentional growth of herself. This necessitates reflexivity on the part of the counselor: she must take the time to reflect on her professional practices, practical theology, and psychological information to ensure the three domains are congruent. McMinn (2011) explains the profession of counseling as both professional and personal, as therapeutic relationships “grow out of the person’s inner life” (p. 12). Though integration is not an easy enterprise, it is worth the effort required. The key distinctive that separates Christian programs from their secular counterparts is explaining to students how to connect their faith with daily professional practice. Through careful

attention to worldview, hermeneutics, and theology, Christian counselors will be properly equipped to minister to clients through faithful, Christ-reflecting methodologies and practices.

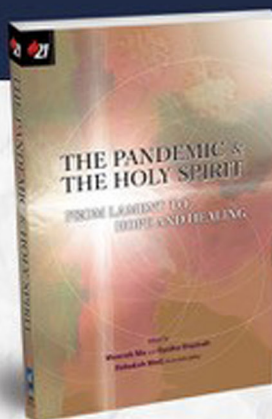
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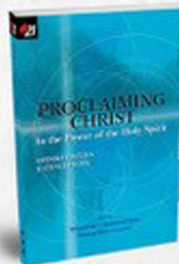
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