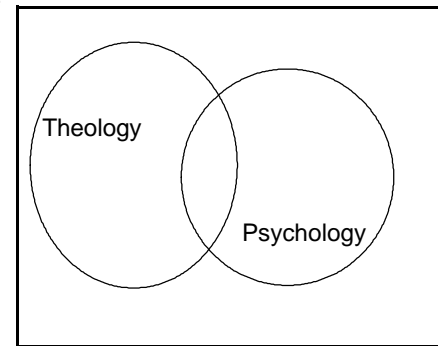


## ***THE SUBORDINATION OF PSYCHOLOGY***

For most of the history of Christianity, this paper assignment would have been incomprehensible. The notion that there are two distinct fields of inquiry, psychology and theology, which require “integration” would have been inconceivable to thinkers like Augustine, Gregory, and even Luther. For them, theology as the “queen of the sciences” encompassed all knowledge, especially wisdom about the nature of human beings. In this paper, I seek to defend this classical understanding of pastoral counseling on theological and historical grounds. In the process, I hope to suggest ways psychology is to be subordinated to, as opposed to “integrated” with, theology.

### **THEOLGOY OF INCARNATION**

Discussions about the relationship between psychology and theology are frequently framed in terms of the relationship between “science” and “faith,” or alternatively “general revelation” and “special revelation” (especially for those in the Reformed tradition), or “secular knowledge” and “sacred knowledge.”<sup>1</sup> In this framework, psychology, as the “science” of individual human mental and emotional processes, can be integrated with theology in the same manner that other sciences like physics, chemistry, astronomy, etc. can be integrated. The realms of “science” and “theology” stand as two distinct but somewhat overlapping fields of inquiry. So long as neither oversteps its boundaries and so long as theology reigns in the overlapping region, there can be a peaceful and even beneficial relationship, especially within their mutually shared region. Visually, the picture might look like the diagram on the right.



Scholars have more recently asked probing questions about the legitimacy of the framework described above. There is growing acknowledgment that the very epistemology of modern science rests on theological foundations.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, epistemological questions aside, the framework still “works” as a description of actual practice. A chemist and theologian can coexist side by side in different disciplines: the (honest) chemist doesn’t venture to explain the ultimate purpose and origin of the molecules under study while the theologian doesn’t attempt an account of exothermic reactions based on Scripture. There can even exist an overlapping region where, for instance, the chemist’s discovery of nature’s complexity submits to and even benefits the theologian’s explanation of a Grand Designer.

Yet this framework becomes untenable when applied to psychology. Psychology is intrinsically an endeavor to know the nature of human beings. In claiming this subject of knowledge, psychology so trespasses on the theological realm that one must deal with questions about subordination at almost every turn. This is because to “talk” about human beings — especially to talk about the inner nature of human existence (*psycho-logos*) — is to talk about God. The Christian doctrine of Incarnation means that God has fully indwelt every aspect of human life, including humanity’s mental and emotional life, and has taken that life into His own divine Trinitarian existence.<sup>3</sup> Thus all attempts to know human beings must be rooted in and directed towards knowledge of God in Christ Jesus. This is why the New Testament writers so repeatedly emphasize phrases such as “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...,” “... continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him...,”

<sup>1</sup> For example, see William Kirwan, *Biblical Concepts for Christian Counseling*; Grand Rapids, Baker, 1984, pp. 24-27.

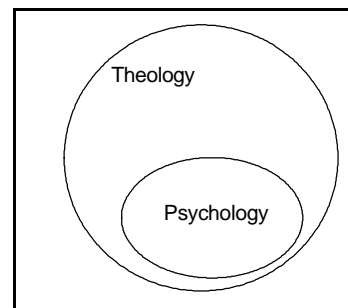
<sup>2</sup> For a review of such arguments, see Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1986, pp. 65-94.

<sup>3</sup> Scripture of course is adamant on this point (i.e. John 1:1-18, Phil. 2: 5-11) as were all the early church councils.

“be conformed to the image of his Son.”<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth was attempting to capture this truth about the Incarnation when he stated, “Theology has become anthropology since God became man.”<sup>5</sup>

While Barth’s statement may be too extreme (one may argue that there still exists areas of theology that does not directly touch upon mankind), perhaps a more accurate statement would be that all “anthro-logos has become theo-logos since God became man.” Humanity so occupies God’s attention, purposes, and even His own divine inner life that talk about God must fully encompass all talk about humanity’s inner life.

A psychologist, therefore, treads on holy ground in a way that a physicist, geologist, or chemist never can. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any psychological endeavor that does not occupy theological territory. Psychological questions inevitably take the basic form of questions like: “Who are human beings? Where do their natures come from? What has gone wrong? Why are they here? Towards where should they be directed?” In Christ Jesus, theology must claim to encompass all those ultimate questions.<sup>6</sup> Thus the diagram for the relationship between the two fields of inquiry looks more like the one on the right:



This framework of course does not mean that there can be no such endeavor termed “psychology.” However, theology sets the agenda for the questions psychology seeks to answer and interprets whatever data psychologists discover. In terms of what we would call “secular” psychology, a warily critical stance is needed. While secular psychology may provide helpful empirical data, even its empiricism most likely reflects presuppositions about what can be known about human beings and how can it be known. Such presuppositions inevitably touch upon theological truth. Moreover, secular psychology will almost always seek to provide interpretations of its data that will be essentially theological claims — usually disguised in the name of “theory.”<sup>7</sup> Christians must always seek to expose and critique such claims, “taking every thought captive to obey Christ.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, ostensibly “neutral” psychological categories which may provide a degree of helpful insight nevertheless can subtly displace theological truths.<sup>9</sup> Thus as a general rule, I would argue we should practice an *a priori* suspicion towards any secular psychological contribution that arrives at the Church’s doorsteps without a thorough theological vetting.

An incarnational theology will especially critique, modify, and often reject secular psychology when it comes to questions of prescriptive response. As Leanne Payne has articulated eloquently in her works, inner healing only comes in the encounter with the Real Presence of the Incarnated Christ.<sup>10</sup> This encounter will inevitably involve realities such as repentance, forgiveness, obedience, healing, hope, divine acceptance and love, and listening to the Holy Spirit. Secular psychology can offer little or no insight into those realities that incarnational theology has not already possessed for millennia. Indeed, outcome studies have shown that very little true healing takes place under modern psychotherapy.<sup>11</sup> What help psychology can offer will probably take

<sup>4</sup> Phil. 2:5, Col. 2:6-7, Rom. 8:29.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Ray Anderson, *On Being Human*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1982, p. viii. In part I of his book, Anderson develops this argument in much more detail than I can attempt here.

<sup>6</sup> See John 13:1-15 for an example of where in a very brief passage, Jesus gives answers to precisely those questions.

<sup>7</sup> Larry Crabb, *Effective Biblical Counseling*; Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1977, pp. 36-38

<sup>8</sup> 2 Corin. 10:5

<sup>9</sup> In my community, for example, the Myers Briggs Personality Test reigns supreme as a tool to understand each other. While its categories have undoubtedly lent some insight, it easily (in my opinion) depersonalizes how Christ’s presence uniquely takes place in individuals. Moreover, the test is based on Jungian theory of personality which, as Leanne Payne and others have noted, contains theological presuppositions hostile to Christianity. See David Keirse and Marilyn Bates, *Please Understand Me*, Del Mar, CA, Gnosology Books, 1984, pp. 2-3. Leanne Payne, *The Real Presence*; Eastbourne, Monarch, 1988,

<sup>10</sup> Leanne Payne, *The Real Presence*, and *The Broken Image*; Grand Rapids, Baker, 1986

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Oden, *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition*; Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1984, p.23

the form of providing descriptions of the cultural context for various psychological ills that need this healing encounter with the Real Presence.<sup>12</sup>

## THE HISTORY OF SECULAR PSYCHOLOGY'S INSUBORDINATION

Drawing the relationship between psychology and theology cannot be done in an abstract fashion. Regardless of how one may conceive of an ideal "balance" between the two disciplines, the Christian does not live in an ideal vacuum but rather in an actual historical context. The actual history of how secular psychology has usurped theology within the Church further dictates that Christians today need to rigorously reestablish the subordination of psychology.

Charles Taylor has persuasively demonstrated how the basic features of modern psychology, such as a reflective awareness of an "inner life," stems from classical theologians like Augustine.<sup>13</sup> In his magisterial Theology and Social Theory, John Milbank has recounted how it was only theological "moves" by Christians that prepared the way for secular social sciences to assert itself as an independent and increasingly superior realm of inquiry.<sup>14</sup> In terms of pastoral counseling, the modern church has increasingly acceded to secular psychology's claims to superiority. Thomas Oden has compared the major works of pastoral counseling from the 19th to the 20th century and found that in the span of less than a century, references to Freud, Jung, Rogers, and Fromm have totally eclipsed the traditional references to Augustine, Chrysostom, Gregory, Luther, and Baxter.<sup>15</sup> In short, our historical situation is one where the church has traded away more and more of its theological inheritance for a hodge-podge stew of secular psychology.

This new diet is not only lacking in theological nutrition; it is poisonous. Crabb and others have shown how the most influential schools of secular psychology assert claims about the very nature of human beings that directly conflict with orthodox Christian theology.<sup>16</sup> Bedrock notions of sin and repentance have given way to "dysfunction" and "self-actualization." The deleterious effect of such an influence on both Christian counseling and preaching have been widely noted.<sup>17</sup>

Scholars of Christian counseling therefore need to recover our own historical legacy. As mentioned in my introduction, all of the classical theologians were intimately aware of and concerned for what we would today call "psychology."<sup>18</sup> We need to recover and translate that heritage for our historical context today, while at the same time further undertaking an assessment of how secular psychology has corrupted our proclamation. Moreover, we need to be aware of the historical effects of secular psychology on the recipients of our counsel and proclamation. It is a historical reality that Freud, Jung, Rogers, etc. have thoroughly influenced our culture's self-understanding and we must counsel and preach to that context. Thus, I am not advocating insulating ourselves from secular psychology; but we study it not so much to learn about what and how we should minister, but rather to learn about what we must combat and who our potential listeners have tragically become.

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<sup>12</sup> A good example of this is Donald Capps, The Depleted Self; Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993 which argues persuasively and helpfully that post-modern man suffers more from experience of "depletion" than the "guilt" that his ancestors faced. However, it is precisely when Capps seeks to offer an interpretation of this observation and a prescriptive response that he departs radically, in my view, from theological truth. See also Gerald May, Addiction and Grace; New York, HarperSan Francisco, 1988, for an example of a psychologist's helpful attempt to describe the widespread experience of addiction in our culture.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self; Cambridge, Harvard Univ. Press, 1989, pp. 127-42

<sup>14</sup> John Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, Oxford, Blackwell Publ, 1990.

<sup>15</sup> Oden, pp. 28-32

<sup>16</sup> Crabb, Basic Principles..., pp. 26-42

<sup>17</sup> See Karl Menniger, Whatever Became of Sin, NY, Hawthorn, 1973 and E. Brooks Holifield, A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization, Nashville, Abingdon, 1983

<sup>18</sup> For further examples, see William Clebsch and Charles Jackle, Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective; New York, Jason Aaronson, 1983,

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