

# Reformed Biblical Counseling: A Definition

The Institute for Reformed Biblical Counseling (1<sup>st</sup> Edition, October 2025)

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## Preamble

Reformed biblical counselors recognize and hold great appreciation for the foundations of the biblical counseling movement established by Jay Adams, David Powlison, and other biblical counselors. It is the mission and vision of the Institute for Reformed Biblical Counseling to provide resources and training in counseling, discipleship, and pastoral care for Reformed denominations and congregations, including but not limited to the Continental Reformed, Presbyterians, and Reformed Baptists. The Institute for Reformed Biblical Counseling frames central biblical counseling concepts in conversation with the Reformed tradition and its theological resources to address contemporary counseling issues confronting the church.

## Biblical and Confessional

Reformed biblical counseling is biblical and confessional. Reformed biblical counseling stands with historic biblical counseling upon the conviction that the Scriptures are the personal words of a triune God (2<sup>nd</sup> London Baptist Confession 1.4). As the Word of God, Scripture possesses all the authority of God himself. No other words or sources are necessary for communicating and applying salvation to fallen men and women and instructing them in godliness and all duties of piety (The Second Helvetic Confession of Faith I.3, The Belgic Confession Article 7). Therefore, Reformed biblical counselors seek to understand and apply God's divine counsel in the Scriptures to the lives of those they serve.

As church history demonstrates, the label "biblical" is not sufficient in itself to discern biblical truth from error.<sup>1</sup> Reformed biblical counselors recognize the significance of confessions and their role in summarizing the system of truth contained in the Scriptures. The church is God's confessing community, led by the Holy Spirit to summarize the truths taught within Scriptures and to guard truth from error (1 John 2:26–27; 4:6). In one sense, the adjectives "Reformed" and "biblical" are redundant, since Reformed biblical counselors interpret and apply the Scriptures in accordance with the truths summarized in the Reformed confessions and creeds, resulting in a distinctly Reformed theory and practice of biblical counseling.

## Experiential and Covenantal

Reformed biblical counselors understand the truths contained within the Scriptures to be experiential and covenantal. The Reformed tradition understands theology as a discipline oriented towards the glory of God and the salvation of man.<sup>2</sup> This theological approach is reflected in the numerous definitions of theology within the Reformation era, which describe theology as "the doctrine of living for God."<sup>3</sup> Scripture consistently qualifies truth as inseparable from godliness (1 Tim 6:3–4; Tit 1:1), and

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<sup>1</sup> As Richard Muller observes concerning conflicts over what qualifies as "biblical" that "a broadly defined appeal to *sola Scriptura* or to methodological principles of Scripture [do not] offer a suitable antidote to the problem. Scripture, to cite an old maxim, can have 'a nose of wax.' It can be bent in all directions unless there is a confessional context within which the work of interpretation takes place." Richard A. Muller, "Historiography in the Service of Theology and Worship: Toward Dialogue with John Frame," *Westminster Theological Journal* 59 (1997): 302.

<sup>2</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena to Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 338.

<sup>3</sup> Muller continues, "The Reformed, following the more traditional Augustinian line, balanced intellect and will with an emphasis on the activity of the regenerate will in 'living to God' or 'living blessedly forever.' Calvin, for example, had argued the faithful apprehension of Christ by the 'heart' or will to be the chief part of faith. Thus,

knowing God with living for God (Jer 22:15–16; Jas 1:27; 2 Pet 1:3–4; 1 John 2:36). The truths within the Scriptures provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the scope of human experience and directing man to live for God’s glory in every area of life (1 Cor 10:31; 2 Tim 3:17). The practical nature of truth underscores the importance of helping counselees diagnose their spiritual condition and needs according to Scripture.

Reformed biblical counselors also recognize the covenantal nature of reality.<sup>4</sup> They unapologetically apply the covenantal framework of Scripture—such as the covenant of redemption, the covenant of works, and the covenant of grace—to the context of counseling. According to David Powlison, biblical counseling has sought to replace the “*psychologizing* of human life” with a distinctly “covenantal” framework, locating every aspect of life in relation to God and challenging counselees to live *coram Deo*.<sup>5</sup> The doctrine of covenant provides a theological foundation for counseling since the concept of covenant “expresses the idea that in all things man is face to face with God.”<sup>6</sup> By virtue of the covenant of works, every image bearer is a covenant creature. Reformed biblical counselors apply God’s redemptive Word so that covenant breakers may become covenant keepers in Christ.<sup>7</sup>

## Pastoral and Ecclesiastical

Reformed biblical counselors are pastoral and ecclesiastical. The covenantal framework of Scripture reveals that God’s plan of redemption and sanctification of covenant creatures is revealed, accomplished, and advanced within the context of God’s covenant community as the visible institution of the covenant of grace (Matt 28:19–20).<sup>8</sup> As covenant documents, the Scriptures are written for teaching and application in God’s covenant community, the church (Rom 3:2, 9:4; Eph 3:1–10, 4:11–16), even as

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theology for the Reformed was both theoretical and practical, both intellectual and voluntary, with the emphasis on the practical or voluntary element.” Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:354. Marcus Friedrich Wendelin (1584–1652): “True theology is more practical than theoretical, since its goal is the glorification of God and our salvation.” Cited in Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:354. William Ames (1576–1633): “Theology is the Doctrine, or Teaching, of Living to God.” William Ames, *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity or Medulla ss. theologiae* (Amsterdam, 1623; London, 1630), I.i.1. Cited in Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:345. On the relationship between Ames’s definition and the Dutch *Nadere Reformatie*, see Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:345. Petrus Ramus (1515–1572): “The teaching (*doctrina*) of living well.” Petrus Ramus, *De religione christiana, libri IV* (Frankfurt: Andreas Wechel, 1576), 6. Cited in Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:150. Petrus van Mastricht (1630–1706): “The doctrine of living for God through Christ.” Petrus Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, vol. 3, *The Works of God and the Fall of Man*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Todd M. Rester (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021), 64. Richard Baxter (1615–1691): “Let it be your chiefest study to attain of a true, orderly and practical knowledge of God, in his several attributes and relations; and to find a due impression from each of them upon your hearts, and a distinct, effectual improvement of them in your lives. . . . That the true knowledge of God is the sum of godliness, and the end of all our other knowledge, and of all that we have or do as Christians.” Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory*, in *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter*, vol 1 (1654; repr., Grand Rapids: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2023), 72.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon Spykman comments, “All God’s dealings with creation are covenantal in character. Our life in God’s world is set within a pervasively covenantal context. To be a creature is to have a covenantally defined place to be and role to play within the cosmos. At the heart of covenant is the divine promise (*Wort*) and the appropriate human response (*Antwort*): I am your God, you be my people. The entire created order is anchored securely in God’s mediating covenantal Word, by which he called the world into existence, by which he also continually calls it (back) to order.” Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 259.

<sup>5</sup> David Powlison, “Editorial: Biological Psychiatry,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 17, no. 3 (1999): 4.

<sup>6</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 62.

<sup>7</sup> Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 62–63, Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling*, The Jay Adams Library (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 269.

<sup>8</sup> Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert write, “But believe it or not, the church is the primary arena God has chosen to make his redemptive reign visible over his people.” Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 127.

the Word itself gives life to the church.<sup>9</sup> When rightly interpreted and applied, God's almighty power is always present in the reading and teaching of Scripture in "public address" or "personal admonition" (Eph 2:13–14, 17–18; 1 Thess 1:4–5; see also The Second Helvetic Confession of Faith I.4).

Christ the head rules and teaches the Church through His Word and Spirit as mediated through the ministry of lawfully ordained men (Matt 18:17–18; 1 Cor 5:4–5, 12:28). Therefore, the primary individuals appointed to teach, equip, and counsel God's Word and care for God's flock are pastors and elders (Acts 20:28; Eph 4:11–12; 1 Thess 2:7–8; 1 Tim 3:1–7, 4:13; 2 Tim 4:2; Tit 1:5–9; 1 Pet 5:1–3). Pastors are "physicians of the soul" and are called to "recognize (diagnose) spiritual life, nurture it, and when it is sick, to restore it."<sup>10</sup> Simultaneously, the responsibility for the maturing of the saints also falls upon the collective body of believers within a church (Rom 15:14; Eph 4:15–16; Col 3:16–17). Therefore, all believers, especially pastors, must be trained and equipped to apply the divine counsel of Scripture to all of life so that people may know how to respond to sin and suffering and live unto the glory of God.

## Further Distinctives

### Scripture as the Rule of Faith and Life

Reformed biblical counselors stand upon the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. The sufficiency of Scripture is the biblical truth that Scripture contains all the counsel that any Christian, living in any place or time, needs to know God and to live the Christian life. Scripture is sufficient to equip the saints to accomplish the spiritual mission of the church (Eph 4:11–16; 2 Tim 3:16–17). Biblical counselors also recognize that Scripture provides Christians with a comprehensive resource for understanding and providing counsel for man and his problems.<sup>11</sup> Although comprehensive, Scripture is not exhaustive, meaning that Christians will necessarily draw on information and observations from extrabiblical resources. Therefore, as Christians seek to interpret human experience and evaluate extrabiblical resources, Reformed biblical counselors uphold the principle of *sola Scriptura*, confessing Scripture alone to be the first and only infallible rule of faith and practice (Belgic Confession Article 5, 2<sup>nd</sup> London Baptist Confession 1.1, 1.10).<sup>12</sup>

As Reformed biblical counselors uphold Scripture as the sole authority for all biblical counseling, they also deny that *sola Scriptura* teaches that Scripture is the only source of knowledge for Christians and counselors. This erroneous belief leads to biblicism. As David Powlison observes, "the Bible itself mandates looking and learning from outside. The Bible itself resists biblicism."<sup>13</sup> Contrary to this *nuda* or *solo Scriptura* position, the historical position of *sola Scriptura* recognizes the authoritative veracity of Scripture over other legitimate sources of knowledge, including tradition, reason, science, and art.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 312, 447.

<sup>10</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, *Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 240.

<sup>11</sup> David Powlison, "Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies)," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 25, no. 2 (2007): 5–36.

<sup>12</sup> Francis Turretin writes, "We think that revelation to be contained in the Bible itself which is the first and infallible truth and rule of faith. . . . That the Scriptures makes itself known to us is proved: (1) by the nature of the Scripture itself. For as a law does not derive its authority from the subordinate judges who interpret it or from the heralds who promulgate it, but from its author alone—as a will obtains its weight not from the notary to whom it is entrusted, but from the purpose of the testator; as a rule has the power of ruling from its own innate perfection, not from the artificer who uses it—so the Scripture which is the law of the supreme lawgiver, the will of our heavenly Father and the inflexible (aklinēs) rule of faith, cannot have authority even as to us from the church, but only from itself." Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 88–89.

<sup>13</sup> Powlison, "Cure of Souls," 8.

<sup>14</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:439. Richard Muller comments, "The strongly worded arguments of Protestant theologians of both the Reformation and orthodox eras against the idea of a coequal authority of Scripture, tradition, and church, typically summarized by the phrase *sola Scriptura*, must never be taken as a condemnation of tradition

Extra-biblical information that is pertinent to counseling falls under the theological categories of general revelation, the law (or book) of nature (2<sup>nd</sup> London Baptist Confession 1.1; see also Westminster Confession of Faith 21.1), and divine providence, as summarized in Scripture's testimony to the divine laws that established and continue to govern creation (Gen 1, 9:21–22; Pss 19:1–2, 24:1–2, 33:6, 102:25, 104:24, 147:18, 148:5–6; Prov 3:19, 8:22–31; Is 28:23–29; Jer 31:35–36; John 1:1–4; Col 1:15–17; Heb 1:2–3; 2 Pet 3:5–7). As the Psalmist says, “The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein” (Ps 24:1). Thus, faithful biblical counseling practices are also not limited to theories, observations, and interventions that are explicitly demonstrated from biblical proof-texting. Rather, they also include truths which “by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture” (Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6, 2<sup>nd</sup> London Baptist Confession 1.6), as well as areas of life that are relevant for counseling, such as “circumstances . . . common to human actions and societies,” that may be “ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed” (Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6, 2<sup>nd</sup> London Baptist Confession 1.6).

Therefore, Reformed biblical counselors recognize the divine wisdom embedded in creation and seek to understand this knowledge for counseling as general revelation is read and perceived through the “spectacles” of special revelation.<sup>15</sup> Reformed biblical counselors define “biblical” as offering counsel that is not exhaustively contained in Scripture but is consistent with the “system of truth set forth in the Bible.”<sup>16</sup> A faithful application of the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* acknowledges that every counseling observation, theory, and methodology, including biblical truths and extra-biblical information, must be self-consciously submitted to the examination and testing of Scripture. In this way, Reformed biblical counselors uphold Scripture as the only authoritative rule and supreme judge of every element of Christian counseling.

## Human Beings as Embodied Worshippers

Reformed biblical counselors acknowledge that all counselees are created in God's image and for a covenant relationship with God (Gen 1:26–27; Gen 2:15–17). Genesis 2:7 details the special and personal creation of human beings out of dust and spirit, “with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness after His own image, having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfill it” (Westminster Confession of Faith 4.2). In his original creation, man's “understanding was adorned with a true and saving knowledge of his Creator and of spiritual things; his heart and will were upright; all his affections pure; and the whole man was holy” (Canons of Dort 3, 4 Article 1). In accordance with God's wisdom as revealed in the creation order, human beings are a

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or a denigration of the authority of the church as a confessing community of believers. The Reformation took as its point of departure the late medieval debate over the relation of Scripture to tradition and assumed that tradition stood as a subordinate norm under the authority of Scripture and deriving its authority from Scripture.” Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 345. For a critique of *Sola Scriptura* as a sufficient evangelical theological method, see John Bolt, “*Sola Scriptura* as an Evangelical Theological Method?” in *Reforming or Conforming: Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church*, eds. Gary L. W. Johnson and Ronald N. Gleason (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 62–92. In this chapter, Bolt demonstrates how the principle of *sola Scriptura* is a “necessary but not sufficient condition for Christian theology” as well as how the great theologians of theology (from Augustine to Aquinas, Turretin, and Bavinck) “were not strict biblicists in their theologizing but also serious metaphysicians.”

<sup>15</sup> Calvin uses the language of Scripture as “spectacles” or a “lens” in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), I.VI.1. See also B. B. Warfield, “The Knowledge of God,” in *Calvin and Calvinism*, vol. 5 of *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 69–70. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 75.

<sup>16</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint (1969; repr., Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 2023), 27–29.

harmony of body and soul, with the soul animating and governing the body's actions and the body qualifying and facilitating the soul's functions and faculties, even as "the faculties and parts of soul and body" have been "wholly defiled" by sin (Westminster Confession of Faith 6.2; Canons of Dort 3, 4 Article 16).<sup>17</sup> Reformed biblical counselors acknowledge that they are not counseling disembodied spirits or dispirited animals, but psychosomatic persons.<sup>18</sup>

Reformed biblical counselors view counselees as embodied worshippers, attending to the various domains of every human person. These domains include the mental domain (the brain and neuro-functioning) and the bodily domain (hygiene, diet, exercise, sleep, and organic systems such as the endocrine system), when seeking to understand human behavior and human conditions. At the same time, Reformed biblical counselors also understand that human experience cannot be reduced to the totalizing paradigms that define secular psychology; rather, it subsumes every domain and sphere of human life under biblical and covenantal categories. As Powlison writes, "Biblical wisdom considers every part of our circumstances significant, but it gives final decisive authority to the physically-embodied, socially-embedded, spiritually-embattled person."<sup>19</sup>

Reformed biblical counselors confess that "man is a *religious creature* who worships, serves, loves, hopes in, seeks, trusts, fears... something – either God or God-substitutes."<sup>20</sup> Secular psychologies offer incomplete descriptions of human behavior, as they overlook the biblical reality that the inner man is a covenantal and religious environment, housing a heart that is active and oriented toward worshipping either God or God replacements (i.e., idols; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 34, Q&A 95).<sup>21</sup> Reformed biblical counselors honor the embodied domains of counselees while directing them toward the proper worship of the Creator and proper relationships with the various aspects of God's creation, including their interactions with other people, the world, and themselves.

## Psychology as a Handmaiden to Theology

A Christian view of the sciences acknowledges them as a legitimate calling of human beings to study and organize the divine wisdom and knowledge embedded within creation.<sup>22</sup> This calling also

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<sup>17</sup> See Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:46.

<sup>18</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 217–18.

<sup>19</sup> David Powlison, "Vive la Différence!" *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 28, no. 1 (2014): 5.

<sup>20</sup> David Powlison, "Does Biblical Counseling Really Work?" in *Totally Sufficient: The Bible and Christian Counseling*, ed. Ed Hindson and Howard Eyrich (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2004), 69–70.

<sup>21</sup> David Powlison, "Cure of Souls," 24–25; David Powlison, "Integration or Inundation?," in *Power Religion: The Selling out of the Evangelical Church?*, ed. Michael Scott Horton (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 47; David Powlison, "Questions at the Crossroads," in *Care for the Soul: Exploring the Intersection of Psychology and Theology*, ed. Mark R. McMinn and Timothy R. Phillips (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 46; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1.268. See also Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World*, ed. Jordan J. Ballor and Melvin Flikkema, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman and Ed M. van der Maas, vol. 3, *Collected Works in Public Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 64.2–4.

<sup>22</sup> Bavinck writes, "In this religion, God is the *creator* of all things. The whole world is the work of his hands; matter itself is made by him and before its making was the object of his thought. All being and becoming thus rests on the foundation of a revelation of God. This revelation is the starting point of the unity of nature, the unity of the human race, the unity of history, and is also the source of all laws—the laws of nature, of history, and of all development. The ideas and norms which govern religious, ethical, and social life, and appear in the self-consciousness and the thought of humanity, are the product of this revelation of God. In a word, that the world is not chaos but a cosmos, a universe, is the silent postulate of all science and art for which they are indebted to the revelation which Christianity makes known to us. Nature and grace, culture and *cultus*, are built upon the same foundations." Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, ed. Cory Brock and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2018), 240. Van Til adds that "the facts and principles employed by the philosopher and the scientist must first of all be regarded under the aspect of revelation." Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 63. Also, Van Til observes, "Christians think of the whole of the created universe as a revelation of God." Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 119. Concerning the calling of man to study the world, Van Til writes, "We ought to note in addition to this that man was created the only self-conscious reinterpreter in this

encompasses the study of human beings, including both their physical and non-physical aspects of personality. As Herman Bavinck writes, “Knowledge of the human heart, psychology—both natural and supernatural—is a requirement for the shepherd.”<sup>23</sup> While acknowledging that the soul is beyond the reach of direct human observation,<sup>24</sup> the Reformed tradition reflects a prolonged engagement with the psychological disciplines and a willingness to utilize insights from empirical observations and philosophical reflection in their writings and confessional statements (see Canons of Dort 3, 4, Articles 11, 12, 16; Westminster Confession of Faith 2.1, 4.2, 6.2; Westminster Larger Catechism Q&A 99, 135–136; 2<sup>nd</sup> London Baptist Confession 2.1, 9.1–5).<sup>25</sup>

Reformed biblical counselors envision psychology as a handmaiden to theology. As Francis Turretin (1623–87) explains, the Reformed position on the relationship between theology and philosophy sits between the Anabaptists (who reject and “proclaimed war against philosophy and the liberal arts”) and the rationalists and Socinians (“placing philosophy in the citadel as the foundation of faith and interpreter of Scripture”).<sup>26</sup> The Reformed tradition has seen theology as the master of philosophy and philosophy “as the handmaid to” and servant of theology.<sup>27</sup> Reformed biblical counselors acknowledge the legitimate application of extra-biblical philosophical concepts and tools in their counseling framework, including references to presuppositions and worldviews. Since the conceptual and

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universe. Man was to gather up in his consciousness all the meaning that God had deposited in the universe and be the reflector of it all. The revelation of God was deposited in the whole of creation, but it was in the mind of man alone that this revelation was to come to self-conscious reinterpretation. Man was to be God’s reinterpreter, that is, God’s prophet on earth.” Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 129.

<sup>23</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:410.

<sup>24</sup> Herman Bavinck, “Foundations of Psychology,” ed. John Bolt, trans. Jack Vanden Born, Nelson D. Kloosterman, and John Bolt, *Bavinck Review* 9 (2018): 43. Furthermore, the knowledge of God provides the foundation of the study of psychology since God knows and ordains the existence and nature of soul(s). Human beings do not need to have a comprehensive knowledge of the soul to study it, since all psychological knowledge finds its foundation and unity in the wisdom and knowledge of God.

<sup>25</sup> As recent scholarship is demonstrating, the Reformation was not a clear break from the history and developments of the Christian church nor the Catholic church, rather a critique of errant Roman Catholic doctrine. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:34. For the Reformer’s engagement with psychology, see Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:355–382; Richard A. Muller, *Providence, Freedom, and the Will in Early Modern Reformed Theology*, Reformed Historical-Theological Studies (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Press, 2022), Paul Helm, *Human Nature from Calvin to Edwards* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Press, 2018); Willem J. Van Asselt, *Introduction to Reformed Scholastic*, trans. Albert Gootjes, Reformed Historical-Theological Studies (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2011), 51; Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 80, 305–319.

<sup>26</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, I.XIII.1.

<sup>27</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, I.XIII.2.

institutional divorce of psychology from philosophy did not occur until the nineteenth century,<sup>28</sup> Turretin's paradigm would have subsumed psychology as a rightful discipline under theology.

Reformed biblical counselors apply Turretin's paradigm to the relationship between theology and psychology. Situated between Christians who reject psychology (Anabaptists) and Christians who place the psychological disciplines on the same level with or above Scripture and theology (Rationalists), Reformed biblical counselors see Scripture and theology ruling over psychology, "and this latter acts as a handmaid to and subserves" theology.<sup>29</sup> Reformed biblical counselors prioritize the presentation of God's counsel contained in the Scriptures to counselees and do not allow psychological insights to usurp the primacy of Scripture in counseling. Nevertheless, they remain open to receiving insights into human nature from psychology and are thankful for "any improvement in the technique of handling men that anyone offers us."<sup>30</sup> Reformed biblical counselors are comfortable "plundering the Egyptians" (Exod 12:36) of secular psychology<sup>31</sup> or "enlisting the Phoenicians as servants" (1 Kings 5)<sup>32</sup> in the building of

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<sup>28</sup> Prior to 1870 in America, many of the practitioners of science in American colleges were also clergy or recipients of some clerical training. Jon H. Roberts and James Turner, *The Sacred and the Secular University* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 24. As the college curriculum expanded and disciplines could no longer be taught by cleric-generalists, American colleges began to specialize into different schools and disciplines, explaining the emergence of psychology as an empirical science distinguished from philosophy. In the late nineteenth century, a number of "new psychologists," Roberts and Turner observe, "in the nation's burgeoning colleges and universities sought to detach themselves from speculative philosophy by emphasizing the importance of using methods associated with the natural sciences to study the human psyche. One source of inspiration for this declaration of independence was the theory of organic evolution, which implied that human beings were not unlike other animals and that the human mind, like the human body, was a product of transmutation. Another was the work of European physiologists and psychologists, which suggested the interdependence of mental and neurophysiological processes and provided American psychologists with some of the experimental techniques that they employed in subjecting consciousness to scientific explanation and measurement." Roberts and Turner, *The Sacred and the Secular University*, 46. Daniel N. Robinson also comments, "Contemporary psychology, in its broadest features, remains a nineteenth-century enterprise. This is by no means to say that modern psychology is 'old-fashioned' or behind the times. Still, it must be noted that the problems that consume the energy of contemporary psychologists were either set forth explicitly in the nineteenth century or were introduced by those whose educational and cultural backgrounds were provided by the unique perspective of the nineteenth century." Daniel N. Robinson, *An Intellectual History of Psychology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Madison, MI: University of Wisconsin, 1997), 259. "In the late nineteenth century, in the work of psychologists like Wilhelm Wundt and William James, philosophy and psychology, despite growing disparity in their interests and approaches, still enjoyed a marriage of convenience. The divorce came in 1913." Raymond Martin and John Barresi, *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self: An Intellectual History of Personal Identity* (New York: Columbia, 2006), 229. It should also be noted that the nineteenth century also brought about reforms in the care of the mentally insane, with "moral therapy" transferring insane persons from shackles to rooms in asylums surrounded by a moral and environmental regiment designed to cure insanity. Andrew Scull, *Desperate Remedies: Psychiatry's Turbulent Question to Cure Mental Illness* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2022), 3. Among those applying new scientific principles to the study of the causes of insanity in the nineteenth century were the alienists and the neurologists, the predecessors of modern-day psychiatrists. Scull, *Desperate Remedies*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, I.XIII.2.

<sup>30</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Psychology of Religion*, In Defense of Biblical Christianity 4 (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976), 2.

<sup>31</sup> This phrase originates in Augustine's reflections on the Exodus out of Egypt. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 40.60. See also Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, I.XIII.5; Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:162; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:496; Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.II.14–15.

<sup>32</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2016), 114. See also Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, In Defense of Biblical Christianity 2 (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 57.

the spiritual temple of God, the church (1 Cor 3:17). Reformed biblical counselors are also ready to “cast out the handmaid” if psychology “will not be obedient” to theology and Scripture.<sup>33</sup>

## Secular Psychology as a Competitive Worldview

Recent developments within Western society, and America in particular, have strained the relationship between Christians and the psychological sciences. The twentieth century witnessed the incessant march of various models of psychology and psychiatry—from Freudian to Meyerian to Neo-Kraepelinian models—into prominence in every corner of society, including media, higher education, government, and medicine. While Reformed biblical counselors are open to gleaning insights and techniques from the psychological disciplines, they recognize that secular psychologies include not only observations and theories but also competing world-and-life views that contradict Scripture.<sup>34</sup> These secular psychologies allow non-Christian men and women to understand and address their problems apart from God, sin, judgment, and the salvific work of Christ. In the words of David Powlison, “Today Christianity has a self-conscious, self-proclaimed competitor.”<sup>35</sup>

Non-Christians, by virtue of civic righteousness, may demonstrate elements of moral dignity and lives ordered according to the light of nature, but they also practice and give approval to practices that ought not to be done and are worthy of death and judgment as a consequence of suppressing the truth in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18–32; Canons of Dort 3, 4, Article 4). Fallen man, in his rebellion, having “entailed on himself blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity and perverseness of judgment, became wicked, rebellious, and obdurate in heart and will, and impure in his affections” (Canons of Dort 3, 4, Article 1). Therefore, Reformed biblical counselors recognize secular psychology as one of the dominant areas within contemporary society in which man’s sinful rebellion and hostility manifests itself against God (Rom 1:18, 8:7–8; 1 Cor 2:14; Eph 4:18). Because of the ethical and covenantal context that inevitably accompanies the interpretation of human experience and the offering of counsel, secular psychological methods and therapies are not morally neutral and cannot be separated from the ethical implications of their systems.<sup>36</sup> The language, observations, and methodologies of secular psychology require a radical reorientation at a foundational level, according to biblical principles—a process that biblical counselors have historically referred to as presuppositional analysis. Reformed biblical counselors reject non-Christian premises, “but need to reinterpret what [non-Christians] get right in light of Christian presuppositions.”<sup>37</sup> Reformed biblical counselors use the Scriptures to assess the philosophical and moralistic assumptions embedded within secular findings and insights from a Reformed and confessional perspective, reframing “every tiny bit of secular thinking so it functions as a comprehensible part of the God-centered world.”<sup>38</sup>

## Christ as the Ultimate Remedy for Sin and Suffering

Reformed biblical counselors acknowledge that, by virtue of God’s common grace and the goodness of the created order, human civilization has been able to advance and mature into the various institutions and civilizations observed throughout human history.<sup>39</sup> Non-Christians can discern truths

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<sup>33</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, I.XIII.5.

<sup>34</sup> David Powlison, “A Biblical Counseling View,” in *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views*, ed. Eric Johnson, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 256–57.

<sup>35</sup> David Powlison, “Modern Therapies and the Church’s Faith,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 15, no. 1 (1996): 33.

<sup>36</sup> Powlison, “Cure of Souls,” 35.

<sup>37</sup> David Powlison, “Slow Growth,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 32, no. 3 (2018): 8.

<sup>38</sup> David Powlison, “Crucial Issues in Contemporary Biblical Counseling,” *The Journal of Pastoral Practice* 9, no. 3 (1988): 76.

<sup>39</sup> B. B. Warfield reflects upon this perspective in writing, “[His] Spirit still everywhere wrought upon the hearts of men, stirring up all their powers (though created in the image of God, marred and impaired by sin) to their best activities, and to such splendid effect in every department of human achievement as to command the admiration of all ages...” Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, 8.



about the creation order and govern themselves according to God's creational wisdom, leading to non-Christians excelling in social (work, science, art, business, productivity) and private settings (child-rearing, marriage, etc.).<sup>40</sup> Therefore, non-Christians may stumble upon insights and techniques for the proper ordering of life that are true and helpful in counseling, are things which God commands, and are of "good use both to themselves and others" (Westminster Confession of Faith 16.7; 1 Kings 21:27, 29; 2 Kings 10:30–31; Luke 6:32–34, 18:2–7; Rom 13:4). Powlison writes that "by common grace, secular people are often knowledgeable and skillful in ways that challenge us."<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, since the works of non-Christians do not proceed from a heart "purified by faith," nor are done in a manner "according to the Word, not to a right end, the glory of God," these good works, and any counsel derived from them, are therefore sinful, cannot please God, and are not meritorious for salvation, even though the neglect of this counsel and these works are more displeasing and sinful unto God (Westminster Confession of Faith 16.7; Canons of Dort 3, 4, Articles 3–4). Non-Christians are also unable to provide a logical justification for their counsel apart from Scripture and reference to God, since the effective elements of their counsel are borrowed capital from the Christian system of truth and a Christian approach to life.

Therefore, Reformed biblical counselors also confess that counsel from Scripture supersedes and exceeds counsel derived by man from reflections upon the creation order since Scripture alone declares to mankind the message of salvation (Acts 17:30–31; Heb 1:1–2; Canons of Dort 3, 4, Article 6). Scripture alone rightly diagnoses the root cause of all sin and disorder within the world, since all human problems—personal and impersonal, organic and inorganic, individual and corporate—go back to the garden of Eden (Gen 3; Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 17–19).<sup>42</sup> Unlike the counsel of this world that is passing away (1 John 2:17) and unable to discern spiritual realities (1 Cor 2:6–16; 1 John 2:6–16), Scripture alone offers the only true and lasting remedy for sin and suffering within the world—believing and trusting in Christ alone for salvation. Christ alone offers covenant breakers forgiveness, restoration, and repose from sin and suffering in salvation and life in the new heavens and new earth.<sup>43</sup> Reformed biblical counselors confess that, while the world offers palliative counsel for sin and suffering, Christ is the ultimate remedy and cure for sin and suffering, and Christ alone "cures sin-sickness."<sup>44</sup> While common grace restrains sin, saving grace—the basis of true change in Reformed biblical counseling—alone restores and perfects man through the application of the benefits of Christ's salvation

<sup>40</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.III.4; Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 2.42.3, 4; Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 3.42.3, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Powlison, "Slow Growth," 8.

<sup>42</sup> "All problems, without exception, organic and non-organic, go back to the Garden of Eden." Jay E. Adams, *The Big Umbrella and Other Essays on Christian Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), 109. "Sin, in all its dimensions (for example, both motive and behavior, both the sins we do and the sins done against us; both the consequences of personal sin and the consequences of Adam's sin), is the primary problem counselors must deal with. Sin includes wrong behavior, distorted thinking, an orientation to follow personal desires, and bad attitudes. Sin is habitual and deceptive, and much of the difficulty of counseling consists in bringing specific sin to awareness and breaking its hold. The problems in living that necessitate counseling are not matters of unmet psychological needs, indwelling demons of sin, poor socialization, inborn temperament, genetic disposition, or anything else that removes attention from the responsible human being. The problem in believers is remnant sin; the problem in unbelievers is reigning sin. Sin is the problem." David Powlison, "Biblical Counseling in Recent Times," *Counseling: How to Counsel Biblically*, by John MacArthur and the Master's College Faculty (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 28. Bavinck adds, "And all the suffering that strikes people here on earth—a short life; a sudden, violent death; famine; plagues; wars; defeats; childlessness; painful losses; deprivation of goods; impoverishment; crop failure; cattle mortality; and so one—all has its root in sin, indeed not always in personal sins...yet still in sin in general." Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 176.

<sup>43</sup> "No matter what the problem is, no matter how greatly sin has abounded, the Christian counselor's stance is struck by the far-more-abounding nature of the grace of Jesus Christ in redemption." Jay E. Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling: More Than Redemption*, The Jay Adams Library (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 183.

<sup>44</sup> Powlison, "Questions at the Crossroads," 47.

by the Holy Spirit to those effectually called, including justification, adoption, and sanctification, and the benefits that the effectually called partake of in this life and in the life to come (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 30–38).

Reformed biblical counselors address every area of life through the application of biblical truths for the transformation and renewal of the inner man by the Holy Spirit as God's people await the consummation of the kingdom of God.<sup>45</sup> Because God uses means to prolong and support our natural life (Canons of Dort 3, 4, Article 17), Reformed biblical counselors do not neglect the proximate goods and immediate ends that medical interventions and therapies may bring to alleviate suffering and restore human functioning, so long as these interventions do not eclipse or become competitive with the chief end of man (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 1) and man's only true comfort in life and death (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 1; Canons of Dort 3, 4, Article 17). Reformed biblical counselors challenge secular psychology whenever non-Christians diagnose personal problems and offer counsel based upon false promises of lasting hope and deliverance from sin and suffering apart from the Gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Christ—even now—is prophet, priest, and king; and by his Word and Spirit he persuasively impacts the entire world. Because of him there radiates from everyone who believes in him a renewing and sanctifying influence upon the family, society, state, occupation, business, art, science, and so forth. The spiritual life is meant to refashion the natural and moral life in its full depth and scope according to the laws of God.” Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:437. Furthermore, Bavinck continues, “God’s aim in special revelation . . . is none other than to redeem human beings in their totality of body and soul with all their capacities and powers; to redeem not only individual, isolated human beings but humanity as an organic whole.” Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:346. Also, “Jesus is Savior, only that but that totally. He came not only to restore the religious-ethical life of human beings and to leave all other things untouched as if they were not corrupted by sin and did not need to be restored. Indeed not, for as far as sin extends, so far also the grace of Christ extends.” Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:445.

<sup>46</sup> Powlison contends that secular counseling systems are “all committed to be wrong because every single one is committed to say, in the last analysis, that people are not sinners. People can be explained in some way or other either by what happens to them or by choices occurring in a moral vacuum. When a humanistic theory says your needs were not met by primary caretakers or when a psychodynamic theory says that the trauma you endured as a child has determined your life, or when a behavioral theory says you were conditioned by socio-cultural forces to be the kind of person you are, or when a physiological theory explains the problems of living in terms of genetics, neurophysiology, and chemical imbalance, every one of them is committed to defining people in a way in which Christ, the Savior, will not be the answer.” David Powlison, “Modern Therapies and the Church’s Faith,” 38.