

# How Does Scripture Teach Us to Redeem Psychology?



by David Powlison

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It's hard to *redeem*.

Things that need redeeming are complex—people, relationships, social conditions, and the like. By definition, *redemption* tackles mixed up cases: the odd jumble of rights and wrongs, good intentions with unintended consequences, truths and falsehoods living together as one flesh, good potential partly fulfilled but compromised by destructive tendencies. That's how the Bible depicts fallen creation. That's what the world is like. That's what people are like. And God purposefully goes about redeeming this fatal entanglement of good and bad. Jesus and Scripture redeem. And we also redeem, in submission to the Word given to us in writing and coming to us in person. In our current historical moment, secular psychology is one of these mixed cases in need of redeeming.

"Psychology" is an umbrella term for numerous fields of study and practice. The rules of the game are secular—though there is some mild tolerance for "spirituality" as a topic of interest and a therapeutic aid. Psychological research, theory, and therapy is essentially an endeavor to find out true things about people, to come to a true interpretation, and to help people find true redemptions—while living in denial of the omnipresent reality of sin and the actual gift of mercies in Christ. To all appearances,

psychological realities evidence no life-or-death need for Jesus Christ. So the fact-collecting, theorizing, and counseling do not intrinsically lead to true wisdom. The DNA of wisdom contains a reckoning with God, but secularity erases God and sin as forces to be reckoned with.

On the surface, the secularity of the psychologies seems a threat to Christian faith. But on closer inspection, secularity is rather like the Wizard of Oz—it seems big and menacing, but in reality it's vulnerable. Actual human beings *always* work the way the Bible says that we work. Every psyche organizes around some life-defining love, purpose, meaning, trust, hope, fear, identity. This defining center is either a fabricated lesser god or the self-revealing God. Secular psychological models fail to capture this most significant reality. The effort to erase the God-oriented or God-disoriented core of the human psyche immediately creates blind spots and fatal flaws, internal contradictions, irresolvable disconnects between theory and reality. The disjunct creates wonderful opportunities for redemption. Christian faith contains the good sense and good news of a comprehensive alternative. The points of contact are everywhere.

Therefore, it is on us, the church, to "convert" their knowledge, theories, and therapies—as part of loving them well. Such redeeming does everyone a world of good and produces a major upgrade in the quality of conversation and

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evangelization. We engage secular people most effectively when we can show how Christian faith makes *better* sense of all that they see most clearly, care about most deeply, ask most perceptively, and do most skillfully. Indeed, Psychology needs redeeming. No doubt, the overwhelming majority of psychologists do not want to convert, but God is willing and able to overturn their willfulness—and he will use us in the process.

### **To Redeem Calls for Careful Critical Thinking**

But how do we do it? For starters, to *redeem* calls for careful critical thinking. We must learn

skills in knowing, in loving, and in speaking so as to catch the ear of strugglers.

(We may be relatively clumsy. O skillful God, make me more probing. Make me more patient and kind. Make me more able to speak constructive words, according to the need of the moment, that I might give grace to those who hear.)

We gain much and lose nothing by being appropriately attentive to and appreciative of their strengths.

**Identify what is wrong.** Critical thinking also identifies what is wrong. This too must be underlined. Compromising syncretism only sees

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to recognize and differentiate a variety of mixed cases: ourselves, kith and kin, those we counsel, the church of Christ, the secular psychological endeavor. We must carefully disentangle the right from the wrong—and rework the entirety. We must assess everything by the right criteria. We must rethink the whole within a comprehensive moral vision that makes true sense of it all.

**Look for the good.** To make true sense of the psychologies, our critical thinking must intentionally look for the good. This has to be underlined. Sectarian contentiousness only sees the bad, and does not produce redemption. But as in all the other mixed cases needing redemption, there is good in Psychology:

- Secular researchers and clinicians know reams of significant facts about people and problems, about strengths and weaknesses. (We may not have noticed or known some or many of those facts. In encountering psychological information, I'm listening, so tell me anything and everything you know about everybody and anybody.)
- Secular theories seek to answer crucial questions and address hard problems. (We may not have thought to ask those questions or address those problems. I want to take to heart hard questions that need answering.)
- Secular therapies often embody helpful

the good, and does not produce redemption. There is wrong in Psychology as in all the other mixed cases. When mastered by redemptive purposes, constructive criticism will always engage wrong by offering something better. The facts that psychologists know by heart only really make sense within a Christian understanding. When theoreticians set out to interpret precious facts and to answer important questions, their theories stumble precisely because they do not reckon with the reality of God, or the active presence of sin, or the meaning of suffering, or the omnipresence of judgment, or the invasion of mercies in the present ministry of Christ. Secularity bites its believers. Stable, judicious understanding proves elusive, because so much of significant reality is excluded from view. But a Christian understanding answers deep questions deeply, making sense of what is.

When psychotherapists address the manifold sufferings and sins that impel people to seek therapy or to read a self-help book, the same failure to reckon with God generates an inescapable shallowness. Secular therapists describe troubled people so vividly! Their desire to help is so palpable! But their answers and solutions are always so disappointing. Given that the core human pathology is inertial self-centeredness, it is striking how those who testify to healing still sound sick. Me-Myself-and-I may

become more self-aware, more self-accepting, more self-confident, more self-satisfied, and more noble in ways of self-serving. But the pathology remains.

Only a pointedly Christian psychotherapy can aim for the revolutionary extraversion of faith and love. Only a Christian cure of souls can even think to say, "The goals of our counseling are the same for both of us in this conversation, that each of us learns the love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith." Counseling needs Christian DNA if it is to call people out of the death spiral of self-

Scripture presents a broader, deeper, and richer picture: a true understanding. To illustrate this, we will look at Psalm 31 as a first-person case study. Obviously a psalm is neither research, nor theory, nor therapy. What it does, however, is capture the experience of an intensely alive and fully alert human being as he gives voice to what he perceives, feels, thinks, needs, trusts, loves, and does. Listening in, we catch the bird on the wing, the living person who needs explaining and needs help.

Albert Einstein famously commented that all of science is nothing more than the

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## Counseling needs Christian DNA if it is to call people out of the death spiral of self-preoccupation.

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preoccupation. Redemption works so both parties might move (however haltingly) in the direction of God and neighbor.

To erase God from the study, explanation, and repair of human beings has consequences. It entails a commitment to systematically misunderstand humankind, even while knowing many valuable things. It entails a commitment to mislead both oneself and others about what most matters, even while accomplishing lesser goods. The repression of God-awareness is the universal obsessional neurosis of mankind (to borrow and invert Freud's pungent analysis). Secularizing psychologists are included in that diagnosis, whether they are researchers, theorists, or therapists. And, mercy of mercies, God willingly cures those who suffer the universal obsessional neurosis. He uses us—who are still being redeemed—to help others find redemption.

Fair-minded judgment sees both the good and the bad, and offers something comprehensively better. We gain a point of contact with non-Christian psychologists when we wed something true and clear to the very things they know, care about, pursue, and do. Redemption is our big picture calling. More particularly, *how* does Christian faith engage the various facts, ideas, and activities that cluster under the heading Psychology?

### To Redeem Calls for a True Understanding of Persons

Secularity construes persons too narrowly.

refinement of everyday thinking. Psalm 31 expresses everyday thinking (however intense, condensed, and poetic). It is pretheoretical, if you will. It portrays in straightforward manner the depth and complexity of human personality and experience. It awaits the refinement of science by presenting human facts that research ought to acknowledge, explore, and account for; that theory must explain; that therapy ought to address and produce.

Psalm 31 creates an overwhelming impression of four things.

The first overwhelming impression is that a *person* is front and center. This person expresses a living stream of feelings, perceptions, and consciousness: the human quality of *sentience*. This person demonstrates well-grounded intelligence, coherence, conscience, and judgment: the human quality of *sapience*. Acute feelings and acute moral awareness co-operate. We are privileged to listen to a symphony of emotional, phenomenological, relational, moral, and intellectual honesty. Consider how much humanity pours forth from merely 300 words (in the Hebrew original).

- lucid awareness of dire need
- sharp cry for help
- deep reliance on the goodness and aid of another
- apprehension at the prospect of being shamed
- fierce hatred of apostasy
- joyous gratitude for mercies
- tremendous grief and pain

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# Psalm 31

*For the choir director. A Psalm of David.*

In You, O LORD, I have taken refuge;  
Let me never be ashamed;  
In Your righteousness deliver me.  
Incline Your ear to me, rescue me quickly;  
Be to me a rock of strength,  
A stronghold to save me.  
For You are my rock and my fortress;  
For Your name's sake You will  
lead me and guide me.  
You will pull me out of the net which  
they have secretly laid for me,  
For You are my strength.  
Into Your hand I commit my spirit;  
You have ransomed me, O  
LORD, God of truth.

I hate those who regard vain idols,  
But I trust in the LORD.  
I will rejoice and be glad in  
Your lovingkindness,  
Because You have seen my affliction;  
You have known the troubles of my soul,  
And You have not given me over  
into the hand of the enemy;  
You have set my feet in a large place.

Be gracious to me, O LORD,  
for I am in distress;  
My eye is wasted away from grief,  
my soul and my body also.  
For my life is spent with sorrow  
And my years with sighing;  
My strength has failed because of my iniquity,  
And my body has wasted away.  
Because of all my adversaries, I  
have become a reproach,  
Especially to my neighbors,  
And an object of dread to my acquaintances;  
Those who see me in the street flee from me.  
I am forgotten as a dead man, out of mind;  
I am like a broken vessel.  
For I have heard the slander of many,  
Terror is on every side;  
While they took counsel together against me,  
They schemed to take away my life

But as for me, I trust in You, O LORD,  
I say, "You are my God."  
My times are in Your hand;  
Deliver me from the hand of my enemies  
and from those who persecute me.  
Make Your face to shine upon Your servant;  
Save me in Your lovingkindness.  
Let me not be put to shame, O  
LORD, for I call upon You;  
Let the wicked be put to shame,  
let them be silent in Sheol.  
Let the lying lips be mute,  
Which speak arrogantly against the righteous  
With pride and contempt.

How great is Your goodness,  
Which You have stored up for  
those who fear You,  
Which You have wrought for those  
who take refuge in You,  
Before the sons of men!  
You hide them in the secret place of Your  
presence from the conspiracies of man;  
You keep them secretly in a shelter  
from the strife of tongues.  
Blessed be the LORD,  
For He has made marvelous His  
lovingkindness to me in a besieged city.  
As for me, I said in my alarm,  
"I am cut off from before Your eyes";  
Nevertheless You heard the  
voice of my supplications  
When I cried to You.

O love the LORD, all you His godly ones!  
The LORD preserves the faithful  
And fully recompenses the proud doer.  
Be strong and let your heart take courage,  
All you who hope in the LORD.

New American Standard Bible (NASB)

- complete helplessness
- bone-weary sorrow
- awareness of personal sinfulness and culpability
- sense of abandonment and insignificance
- candid and justified aggression
- quivering terror
- intimate sense of enfolding safety
- claustrophobic awareness of threat
- distress at being encircled by deadly foes
- settled trust
- hearty courage
- love that considers and encourages others

This is no collection of theoretical human responses. The kaleidoscope of one man's experience lives before us, captivates us, bids to remake us into this likeness. The variety is electrifying. Yet we hear one psychologically coherent voice. A *person* is on display psychologically.

A *true* psychology will be attuned to the sentience and sapience of actual persons.

A second overwhelming impression is that this person is fully aware of the presence of a Most Significant Other. Someone else matters supremely. To be human is to depend on him. To be human is to live at a moral divide: either in friendship or in enmity, either humbled or proud, either as servant or as adversary. Life and death play out in terms of who this LORD God is, what he does, and the moral quality of how we relate to him. He is the only place of safety and refuge in a world of troubles. He willingly rescues from trouble because he is good. He leads and guides because of who he is. He hears cries for help and acts to intervene for the needy. He is the strength of those powerless to rescue themselves. He is characterized by loving-kindness and generosity. He is trustworthy. He will destroy those who do what is wrong by ignoring him and by harming neighbors, those who live as "enemies" of love for God and for God's people. He is fiercely protective of those who need him, trust him, love him. This God is the dominating psychological reality in the sanity of Psalm 31.

A *true* psychology will be attuned to the presence of this Most Significant Other, by whom we live and against whom we perish.

Here is the third overwhelming impression of the psychology revealed in Psalm 31. It is entirely relational. This is a conversation,

not a soliloquy. This is a conversation about things that matter, not self-talk to bolster self-confidence. This is a conversation of consequence, not a stream of cognitions. Sane psychological experience does not take place within the confines of an encapsulated psyche. David's utterly candid experience finds voice in relationship to this Most Significant Other. His personal psychology is wholly *interpersonal*. His psyche operates in God's direction and out loud. He talks *with* God, relates *to* God, thinks *in terms of* God, feels *vis-à-vis* God, acts *because of* God.

A *true* psychology will be attuned to how human beings are meant to live in conversational relationship with God about the things that most matter. To live in the God-suppressing solipsisms of inner life or social life is madness.

A fourth overwhelming impression is that David is fully engaged situationally. He is alive to time, place, and circumstances. The exigency, contingency, threat, and opportunity of the present moment matter. Looking to the anticipated future and considering the past are both crucial to how he is fully alive to present difficulties.<sup>1</sup> The immediate enmity of people out to harm him arouses a storm of reactions. He hates. He is afraid. He is in distress. He is also deeply cognizant of and concerned for his friends. David is a chorister, not a soloist. He is one person among a multitude of people who know God, fear God, take refuge in him, love him, set their hopes on him. David reaches out on behalf of his fellows, and Psalm 31 expresses the profound logic of how personal faith moves to interpersonal love.

A *true* psychology will be attuned to the significance of the present moment and situation—reflecting on the past and anticipating the future.

A *true* psychology will be attuned to the profound division in the human race between those who serve empty gods and those who serve the LORD God. No universalist psychology can be true, because at the deepest core of a person one does not encounter a universal human nature but a profound difference in ultimate loyalties.

A *true* psychology will be attuned to how personal life and corporate life seamlessly integrate. No "individual psychology" can be true, because persons are meant to live out a corporate identity. Psalm 31's drama of the human psyche



portrays the goal of full humanness: a responsive, responsible person lives acutely aware of the living God, in a vividly honest relationship, fully engaged in the immediate situation, and in solidarity with others.

The secular psychological endeavor has been plagued since its inception by the tendency to depersonalize the very persons that are the object of study. A thoughtful mid-twentieth century psychiatrist called out his colleagues about this tendency:

The reader can see why psychiatry is so often charged with being reductive. For while the creatures described . . . may bear some resemblance to animals or to steam engines or robots or electronic brains, they do not sound like people. They are in fact constructs of theory, more humanoid than human. . . . It is just those qualities most distinctively human which seem to have been omitted. It is a matter of some irony, if one turns from psychology to one of Dostoevsky's novels, to find that no matter how wretched, how puerile, or how dilapidated his characters may be, they all possess more humanity than the ideal man who lives in the pages of psychiatry.<sup>2</sup>

A true psychology possesses and expresses full humanity.

Fyodor Dostoevsky is rightly regarded as the first great psychological novelist because of the vivid *humanity* of his characters. Psychological models ought to be at least as good as Dostoevsky. But Psalm 31 is even better. We hear a lucid awareness of personal need and faith, and a perfect correspondence between situational realities, psychological responses, and the personal presence of God. In comparison, psychological research, theories, and therapies do indeed seem more humanoid than human. As secularity juggles to locate explanations in external variables (genetics, personal history, and the like) and gropes in the dark about the deeper dynamics, it loses its grip on the actual humanness in the persons under consideration. It is just those qualities most distinctively human which seem to have been omitted.

Research psychology ought to *acknowledge* and *explore* the psychological realities evident in Psalm 31. Personality theory ought to be able to *explain* the experience of Psalm 31 (as well as reckon with the moral divide, and explain

the varieties of God-suppressing experience that more typically characterize humankind). Psychotherapy ought to *recreate* men and women in the image of Psalm 31.

### **To Redeem We Must Address Causality in Human Behavior**

It is worth noting that the Bible's portrayal of psychological riches is neither scientific (e.g., research psychology), nor theoretical (e.g., attachment theory), nor psychotherapeutic (e.g., an Irvin Yalom), nor literary (e.g., a Dostoevsky). The psychological riches revealed are "by the way," a secondary spin-off from primary purposes. By revealing the true God in relation to his creatures, the Bible primarily intends to give us a new orientation and direction. Therefore, in a sense, Psalm 31 performs a psychotherapeutic intervention. It changes you, if you have ears to hear. This has huge implications for how Christian faith redeems the modern psychologies.

**Why do people do, think, and feel as they do?** The rest of this article will discuss this critical foundational issue that bridges research, theory, and therapy. Causality is the Holy Grail, the Great Question. And the question of causality offers a continual point of contact in the redemption of Psychology.

The explanation of human behavior orients research psychology, defines the task of personality theory, and undergirds therapeutic interventions. In his popular textbook *Psychology*, David Myers defines what he considers to be "Psychology's Big Issues":

The biggest and most persistent issue concerns the impact of biological nature and experienced nurture, the relative contributions of biology and experience. This nature-nurture debate is long-standing. Over and over again we will see the nature-nurture tension dissolve: Nurture works on what nature endows.<sup>3</sup>

You might want to read that again. What is missing?

It is revealing that in identifying the *biggest and most persistent* question for understanding people, David Myers leaves out any contribution of the person. The great goal of psychological research and knowledge becomes the search for situational and bodily influences that explain who a person is, and how a person thinks, feels,

acts, and treats others. The psyche itself is not an essential, decisive factor in the operations of the psyche. This is a massive, systemic shortcoming. It is as if a portrait artist did not believe in eyes, or a musician did not believe in middle-C. They might produce portraits or music after a fashion, but in the end what's missing and unaccounted for will be more noticeable than what's present and active.

No doubt, the strengths and weaknesses of our bodies matter: God has made each of us to live as a physically-embodied creature. No doubt, the vast host of environmental influences for good or bad matter: God has placed each one of us to live as a situationally-embedded creature. Bravo that research should seek to trace the innumerable significant variables that influence us as thinking, feeling, moral beings. These influences variously affect us: tempting us to turn to the dark side or encouraging us to live in the light of faith working through love. These influences define our opportunities and limitations, our abilities and disabilities, our sorrows and felicities, within which we either flourish or perish before the one true and living God. These influences describe the God-arranged stage on which you and I make the choices that define our lives and character. All of us should want to know about factors that exert influence. But research into these factors cannot finally account for the decisive person. Though each of us lives within a world of influences, our obedience or disobedience to God's two great commandments is not determined by those influences. It is out of the heart that both wisdom and folly spring.

Because the most persistent issue driving the enterprise of psychological research has been to assess the relative contributions of biology and experience, the explanations that emerge from research always have an amoral logic. They shift personal responsibility away from the person and onto other causal factors. They discount the human factor so evident in Dostoevsky and Psalm 31. They dehumanize us. These assumptions trickle down into everyday life. For example, in discussing personal and interpersonal problems, it has become a cultural reflex to assign final cause significance to experiences in personal history and/or to genetic predisposition. A catch phrase from the treatment of addictions and eating disorders

nicely captures it: "The genes load the gun, and the environment pulls the trigger."

That last paragraph could have the ring of cultural triumph for a worldview that shifts responsibility from persons and onto influences—except that nobody actually lives as if this were so. Let me demonstrate with four simple examples.

First, for a number of years I enjoyed watching the last episode of *Survivor* each season. Humanness was on full display, and the proceedings could be quite volatile! Contestants vented outrage at those who lied, manipulated, and betrayed trust. They voiced tender affection for those who exhibited human decency. Without fail, contestants treated each other as morally responsible, continually sizing up character. "You're a jerk" or "You're such a nice person" were instinctive. "Oh, your genes made you do it" or "You must have had an unhappy childhood" would have been wholly implausible, dismissive, and condescending.

Second, I worked for three years on the inpatient ward of a psychiatric hospital. In theory, a patient's mental illness and destructive family experiences were the root cause. But in the reality of community life on the ward, patients, like staff, were treated as responsible human beings both by staff and by other patients. You were held accountable for how you treated others, for the choices you made, for whether you kept your word. If you lost your temper and acted out, there were consequences. If you talked nonsense, others disagreed with you and did some reality testing. If you showed kindness, others were grateful and liked you for it. The quality of your humanness—wisdom or folly, in the biblical sense—was the decisive factor.

Third, if nature and nurture are really the decisive variables, then the human fascination with literature, film, art, music, and history is inexplicable. The "arts and humanities" are about human beings. And what makes human beings interesting is what they *do* with the body and with the circumstances in which they live. We care about courage, or hypocrisy, or evil, or love, or betrayal, or arrogance, or humility, or achievement, or futility, or joy. We care about things that are not finally caused by physiology or circumstance.

Fourth, your life is proof that people are more than nurture working on what nature

endows. You are most likely a combination of the good guys and the bad guys on display both in Dostoevsky and in the psalms!

Christian theology coheres with daily life. It overthrows views of causation that neuter life of significant choice and moral significance. From every page the Bible breathes forth the significance of daily life. Even the smallest actions and gestures, even the invisible inner current of thoughts, feelings, and attitudes expresses how life is a profoundly moral enterprise with life or death consequences. So Christian faith has much to say about how scientific research both seeks out and interprets its wondrous profusion of facts.

For centuries, theologians and philosophers have recognized the significance of nature and nurture factors. (And they would appreciate the incalculable quantities of new information generated by the modern scientific enterprise.) They discussed the relative influence of these factors under headings such as “material cause” (physiology) and “efficient cause” (social experience and other situational factors). But they wisely located “final cause” elsewhere—in the interplay between the person and God. Throughout its history, research psychology has functionally treated nature and nurture as if they were in fact “final causes.” The information might occasionally be spectacular and rich (though most of it is commonplace). But the interpretation fails the tests of reality and Scripture.

***What is the actual contribution of the PERSON to what he or she does?*** That is the biggest and most persistent question that needs answering. This is the great lacuna in research psychology. The intricate dance between our bodies and our situational context may be insolubly complex, but it is relatively simple and accessible in comparison to the abyss and ambivalence of human desires and intentions.

Christian faith is uniquely strong regarding this most persistent psychological issue. When other psychologies take up the task of understanding the person *per se*—the *psyche* in our psycho-socio-somatic whole—they misread people in one of three typical ways:

1. Scientific researchers offer bare acknowledgment of a fact: all human beings operate with intentions. So they mention the existence of internal motives, goals, hopes,

expectations, desires, fears, schemata, a reality map. But they sidestep the question of how to interpret this fact, because intentions can’t be measured. They cannot understand the significance of the very thing that raises the most important psychological question of all. These are the core issues of personhood. But responsible choice and commitment are wild-cards, not susceptible to scientific method, analysis, and explanation. Bell curves can portray the range and frequency of typical choices in a population, but the actual choices of any one individual remain opaque when nature and/or nurture are the only causal factors that count as explanations.

2. Personality theorists go a step further and try to figure out the inner workings. They seek to explain what can’t be seen about the person. But, because they repress the deep divide in ultimate allegiances, they inevitably posit some unitary configuration of hard-wired motives: perhaps a hierarchy of needs, or conflicting instincts, or conditionable drives, or some one particularized need for \_\_\_\_ (e.g., love, achievement, self-esteem, meaning, healthy attachments, sense of personal efficacy, etc.). These motivational patterns and energies are seen as givens to work with, to adjust, to rebalance, because the instinctive configuration of longings of the human heart cannot be changed.

3. Psychotherapists take a further step. They are pragmatic (as the staff was on the inpatient psychiatric ward). They hope to change what is troubling and destructive, so they must grapple hand-to-hand with what makes a person tick, whether or not they understand what that is. Typically, they assert the possibility of life-determining, volitional control.

- the ability to make “better” choices, more personally satisfying, or more socially acceptable, or more authentic, creating a cycle of empowerment
- the power of self-talk to manage moods and behavioral choices
- the impact of constructive interpersonal interactions to reshape experience and actions
- the power of insight to open up unimagined possibilities for choice

They believe that the human will, though beset by influences, is significantly free, responsible, and capable of decisive action. Though your



genes might partly load the gun, and though your environment might tell you where to aim and might tug on the trigger, *you* are the one who aims and who pulls the trigger. You can choose to be different. Decades ago, Freud articulated the philosophy that continues to this day: “We seek to strengthen the patient out of his own resources.”<sup>4</sup>

When we think theologically and redemptively, we come to a fundamentally different reading of the psyche—and we discover a fountain of gratitude for God’s personal intervention. It is not a matter of

Maker, final Judge, and only Savior (Heb 4:12–16). *Why* you do what you do always comes down to *you* as a moral agent. In the decisive matters of life and death, good and evil, love and hate, courage and fear, wise and foolish, hope and despair, the final cause of *you* is not something happening to you.

2. Unlike the personality theorists, Christian truth reasons that the deep motivating impulses of the human heart are not givens, but can and must be radically changed. In fact, two competing motivational complexes exist, not one universal template. The first is only found fully in Jesus.

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## We are pressed as Christians to fashion a distinctive psychology—just as every other psychology posits its distinctive interpretation of human experience.

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uncovering a Bible verse that critiques the prevalent motivation theories. Such a verse doesn’t exist, because these theories didn’t yet exist. But it is a matter of thinking Christianly—comprehensively and coherently—about why people do what they do. Thinking biblically is practical theological work, bringing to bear “the whole of Scripture” in a fresh way. Such work builds on the wisdom of practical theologians through the ages. For example, Augustine’s seminal analysis of false and true loves has abiding relevance.<sup>5</sup> So do Calvin’s discussions of how secular wisdom misfires when it comes to making sense of our desires.<sup>6</sup> And these works demand that we reason afresh. The questions at stake are today’s questions, never before asked in quite this way, never before answered in the ways they need answering. It takes hard and careful thought about information, questions, points of view, and controversies that have arisen only in the past 150 years. It calls for pointing out cases of misinformation and disinformation that claim the mantle of science and truth. It calls for alertness to the inner contradictions, the blind spots, the fatal flaws. Here are three contributions that theological reasoning makes toward answering the Big Question of causality.

1. Unlike the scientific researchers, Christian truth reasons that the human factor is a decisive element in the complex of final causation. The thoughts and intentions of every heart interact with him with whom we have to do, our true

He operates differently from everyone who ever lived, and his way of operating expresses how a fully sane human being ought to work. The motives, emotions, cognitions, and behavior in Psalm 31 are a different dance step, inexplicable by any of the personality theories. The second motivational complex is found either fully or partially in everyone else. Human motives instinctively obey a perverse self-referential logic: reinforced by nature, nurture, choice, habit, and obsession. But the desires of the wise (witnessed everywhere in Scripture in hundreds of prayers, songs, and stories) differ *qualitatively* from the desires of the foolish (also witnessed everywhere in Scripture). And yet the wise have a peculiarly divided soul. Part of wisdom is knowing and wrestling with the folly that coexists with and contradicts the resident wisdom.

3. Unlike the pragmatic people-helpers, Christian truth reasons that human will is not free when it comes to the decisive life and death choices. With good reason, Luther’s personal favorite among all his books was *The Bondage of the Will*. Luther thought Christianly, and knew himself Christianly, and he wept over who he knew himself to be. He knew what all the psalms know: unless God hears me and intervenes mercifully, I will die. Christian faith knows that by nature we are psychologically enslaved to instinctive desires of body and mind (there is “madness in our hearts” per Ecclesiastes 9:3). And Luther knew something far more important

than accurate self-knowing. By the intervening grace of our merciful Redeemer we are truly forgiven. We are beloved. We are brought from death to life. We are included. We are decisively and progressively set free to want other things than what used to obsess us. We are given meaningful work to do. A secular psychotherapy, by definition, excludes such self-knowledge, such struggle, such transformation, and such joy.

So, to think Christianly about psychology brings a reorienting perspective to psychological information, theories, and skills. We are pressed as Christians to fashion a distinctive psychology—just as every other psychology posits its distinctive interpretation of human experience. We are pressed by God, by the needs of our time and place, by our own need, to articulate a coherent and comprehensive Christian gaze in order to rightly interpret all psychological facts and experiences. We are pressed to counsel in fidelity to what we know to be true. Knowing is for living, and for giving away to others in counseling and in all other forms of ministry.

### **Take up the Call to Redeem Psychology**

What does it look like for psychology to be redeemed? Not a shred of valid information is lost, no skills in loving are forfeited, no hard questions are ducked. Rather, whatever was known is enriched and changed by being seen in a new and true light—and reams of previously neglected information become available for the first time. Whatever was done skillfully is taken to an entirely different level when it is embedded in the purposes of Christ's redemptive love—

and previously unimagined skills are brought into your repertoire. Psychologists themselves come to faith, not simply as a matter of private piety and personal morals, but by discovering the full-orbed Christian faith that touches and rearranges all things psychological. I know this because that is the world from which I came into Christ.

We redeem psychology as we learn to think theologically and redemptively about issues of life and death importance. We redeem psychology as we bring Scripture and Christian faith to bear in the psychological work of self-knowing, of knowing others, of making sense of our lives, and of participating in transformation—as individuals and all together—into the image of Jesus.

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

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1 A thousand years later, this psalm appropriately gave voice to Jesus' last words before death—"Into your hands I commit my spirit" (Ps 31:5; Luke 23:46). Jesus' psychology, too, was located: fully engaged in the present moment with an eye to both past and future.

2 Leslie Farber, "Martin Buber and Psychiatry," *Psychiatry: A Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes*, 19 (1956): 109-120.

3 David Myers, *Psychology*, 5th edition (New York: Worth Publishers, 1998), 6.

4 Sigmund Freud, *The Question of Lay Analysis*

5 This is the major theme of St. Augustine's *Confessions*.

6 For example, John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960; org. 1559), II:2:xxiv, 284.

*The Journal of Biblical Counseling*  
(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:  
Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation  
1803 East Willow Grove Avenue  
Glenside, PA 19038  
[www.ccef.org](http://www.ccef.org)

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