#### **The Integration of Psychology and Theology**

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This paper integrates my theological beliefs, with contemporary psychoanalytic and existential psychological theory. As a Christian psychologist my goal is to seek truth about human nature and human behavior from both theology and psychology. If an apparent conflict exists between these two sources of truth, I will always choose to align my interventions with my current understanding of theological truth.

Since I am writing a statement of what I believe is true, I will elaborate on how I believe truth can be found. I believe God is the source of all ultimate truth. I believe God has revealed His truth to us in the Bible and in nature (i.e. God’s word and God’s world). Unfortunately, truths from the Bible (special revelation) and truths from nature (general revelation) must be interpreted by fallible persons. Therefore, I remain humble as I attempt to discover truth from both the Bible and Psychological theory and research, knowing that I am fallible this side of heaven. Nevertheless, I believe the Holy Spirit can guide me into truth by His power. My approach to interpreting the raw data gleaned from the scientific study of humans and the Biblical text is to get as much information as possible, to analyze that information in an informed and thoughtful manner, and to pray that the Holy Spirit will open my eyes to see the truth.

My approach to psychotherapy is integrative. I believe Theology and Psychology complement each other in their perspective on some of the big questions clients will be asking at some point in their therapy. For example, the question, “Who am I?” has received much attention from both disciplines. I believe we are created by God and made in His image. I also believe that we are born with a sinful nature and, as Christians we are freely given a spiritual nature not because we deserve it but rather because of the tremendous love of God and the worth he attaches to his children. As Luther has said, “We are simultaneously saints and sinners.” This dual aspect of our ontology creates a tension within us all. We have a desire to obey God and a desire to reject God. We are image bearers and yet we remain imperfect even after our conversion. I believe that both Psychology and Theology error when one aspect of our humanity is emphasized over and above the other. In the language of psychoanalytic theory, humans live with internal conflicts. However, I believe that with the empowering of the Holy Spirit we can freely choose to live according to our spiritual nature in any specific instance. 1 Corinthians 10:13 reminds us that for every temptation we face God will provide a way out.

Furthermore, I believe that humans are self-protective in nature. We employ defenses to protect ourselves from pain and anxiety. Sometimes these defenses help us and sometimes they hurt ourselves and others. What I have found as a psychotherapist is that defenses that are adaptive growing up often become maladaptive in current relationships. In the here and now we need to become aware of our defenses so we can be more intentional about when to protect against the threat of anxiety and pain and when to risk vulnerability in order to grow and to heal. Unfortunately, sometimes we are forced into a vulnerable place by the sinful acts of others and are exploited and traumatized. This can lead to the construction of even stronger and more limiting defenses. These defenses protect us from further pain, but also can keep us from being who we are created to be. Thus, we are prevented from experiencing validation from others for who we really are. This lack of acceptance can lead to depression, anxiety, fearfulness and compulsivity.

Fortunately, we cannot hide from God. He always sees through our defenses and loves us for who we are. As we trust God and experience His love and unconditional and unmerited acceptance we move forward in our journey toward wholeness and health. In psychotherapy, the therapist attempts to create a similar experience for clients. In other words, we try our best to present Jesus with skin on to our clients. The psychotherapist provides a safe environment that allows the weakening of defenses which then leads to a gradual emergence of the true self. When the true self is revealed the therapist responds to it with warmth, empathy and understanding. This is healing and promotes further growth and development of the true self.

The second big question is, “What should I do?” The Bible again speaks clearly to this question. Scripture instructs us on how we ought to live our life. We are called to be in intimate relationships, to take care of the earth, to love our neighbors, to glorify God, to be ourselves, and to enjoy our relationship with God forever. In psychotherapy, the therapist guides the client along this journey by encouraging behaviors and creating experience that encourages movement toward the attainment these goals. The psychotherapist also challenges and interprets the client’s movements in the opposite direction explaining how these maneuvers were adaptive in the past but are no longer helpful.

The third big question is “Why can’t I do the things God wants me to do?” The Bible gives us a general answer to this question by telling us that we are sinful and have fallen short of God’s design. Despite this, the Bible does not tell us to give up, but rather to keep on trying; to press on and to pursue holiness. It is at this point that psychotherapists can help. The therapist helps clients understand the psychological dynamics behind their inability to do the things they want to do. Through psychotherapy they can gain insight into their defensive structures that protect them from anticipated pain and anxiety. They learn how unconscious identifications and compliances with their parents and repetitions of intergenerational family patterns bind them up in maladaptive styles of relating to others.

The fourth big question is “How can I move toward doing the things I want to do?” Here, both the Bible and Psychology are helpful. The Bible gives us several helpful spiritual resources and disciplines such as confession and absolution, prayer, scripture reading, fellowship, meditation, and several admonitions. In psychotherapy, clients have a wonderful opportunity to experience in a healthy relationship, the disconfirmation of various fears and negative expectancies. Clients begin to trust their therapist and to trust God. They begin to take risks, behave less defensively, and become who God has intended for them to be. Clients free themselves from the bondage of sinful behavioral patterns as they discover previously hidden aspects of themselves and accept these parts of themselves knowing that God accepts them in totality. Clients grow toward health and wholeness as they shed defenses and embrace and deal with pain and anxiety knowing that God is with them in the midst of this process and will protect them and give them His peace. Finally clients realize that while they are not perfect and can never be perfect in this life, they can be forgiven, redeemed and restored.

Psychotherapy from a Christian perspective thus becomes a transformational experience. As Jesus said, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free (John 8:32).” As clients discover who they are, why they do what they do, how they can heal and from whom they have true worth and value they can become free indeed.

**My Role as a Christian Psychologist**

The following is a summary of how I distinguish myself as a Christian psychologist. First, I see my clients as bio-psycho-social-spiritual beings. Healing is needed in each of these facets of the self since they interact systemically and reciprocally with one another. Regardless of which area the client’s presenting complaint is in, I am going to examine the symptoms from each of these four perspectives. For example a person complaining of a spiritual problem of demonization may actually have the biological problem of a brain injury. Conversely, a person who complains of headaches may be experiencing unconscious death anxiety that has not been resolved at a spiritual level.

My intention as a Christian psychologist is to provide a growth promoting relationship. I believe the metaphor of the plant growing under the right conditions of sunlight, water, and soil works well with both Biblical principles and psychological theory. As a therapist I attempt to provide a favorable climate for growth. The Rogerian concepts of warmth, empathy, and genuineness fit very well with Biblical concept of Agape love. I believe that these therapeutic ingredients are the water and sunlight necessary for growth. In addition, the psychoanalytic propositions that behavior is motivated by both conscious and unconscious forces and that insight can be attained through interpretation by the therapist is very consistent with the Biblical truth that “the purposes of a man are deep waters but a man of understanding draws them out (Proverbs 20:5).”

Finally, I look at the soil that my client has been placed into. Seeds need to be planted in good soil if they are to grow into what God has intended them to be. The soil is the foundational context in which the seed exists. Jesus said, “But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown (Matthew 13: 23).” Therefore, as a psychotherapist I need to look at the client’s early relationships with primary caregivers to see what developmental disruptions and injuries have occurred. In other words, I’m trying to find out what nutrients are missing from the soil. As I discover the nature and contours of these injuries and disruptions I learn how to best fertilize and rejuvenate the soil. The fertilization process consists primarily of what contemporary psychoanalytic theorists have termed the “corrective emotional experience.” The corrective emotional experience is achieved when the therapist provides a new healing experience for the client in the therapy that runs counter to the traumatizing experiences of the past and is deeply felt by the client.

The end result of warmth, understanding and new relational experiences is a client who is free to live authentically and spontaneously. They are free to become the person God has intended them to be, free to live without the burden of psychological symptoms and free to glorify God with their lives.