

Editorial: Taking Every Thought Captive to Christ

Stephen J. Wellum

Stephen J. Wellum is Associate Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Wellum received his Ph.D. degree in theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and has also taught theology at the Associated Canadian Theological Schools and Northwest Baptist Theological College and Seminary in Canada. He has contributed to several publications and a collection of essays on theology and worldview issues.

The apostle Paul summarizes the heart of the theological task—indeed the heart of the Christian ministry—in the memorable words: “We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor 10:4-5 ESV). Crucial to developing a Christian worldview is to conform all of our thinking, attitudes, and behavior to the authority and teaching of God’s Word. Thus, in order to learn how to think and live biblically, godly, and faithfully in today’s world, it is imperative that we learn how to evaluate all ideas, thoughts, and viewpoints in light of Scripture.

Sadly though, we have to admit that too many times the Christian community has not carried out Paul’s example and exhortation consistently. Instead, more times than not, we have followed what liberal theologian Paul Tillich dubbed “the method of correlation.” This method attempts to correlate “equally” the teaching of Scripture with contemporary thought (whether that is the latest from science, philosophy, or history) with the admirable goal of taking every thought captive to Christ. However, as employed by most of its practitioners, it normally leaves the authority of Scripture far behind and instead places center-stage whatever is current in contemporary secular thought. In the end, rather than teaching Christians to bring all thought under the Lordship of Christ, it encourages us to re-interpret Scripture in the categories, structures, and values of whatever is deemed acceptable

in our present-day world. This observation, unhappily, can be verified in a number of areas in which Christians have sought to correlate their Christian faith with perceived “non-theological” disciplines. Thus, for example, methodological naturalism is viewed as a given in much of contemporary philosophy, science, and historical research, including even biblical and theological studies, thus guaranteeing and biasing the discussion from the outset.

But it is not only in the above areas that Christians have let secular thought drive the agenda; it has also been in the area of psychology. In fact, over the last century we have seen massive shifts in the outlook of our culture that have been largely driven by the revolution that has occurred in the burgeoning study of psychology. The language of “self-esteem,” “self-actualization,” “projection,” “neurosis,” “defense mechanisms,” and so on, has changed how our society thinks about humans and thus how people now view the world. And we must quickly add: the church has not been exempt from the impact of this revolution, both positively and negatively. That is why it is imperative that Christians, whether at the lay level or those who serve the church as professional counselors, carefully and self-consciously learn how to bring every thought captive to Christ, including the ideas that have been shaped by the psychological revolution. If we do not, then we will inevitably face the danger of accommodating the authority of Scripture to alien ideas that in the end will undermine the truthfulness and integrity of the gospel.

With this in mind, we devote this edition of the journal to the theme of Counseling and Christian Ministry. What unites our diverse contributors and contributions is the conviction that Christian theologians, pastors, and professional counselors must do what Paul commands us to do: Take every thought captive to Christ, including the thoughts, ideas, and perspectives of contemporary psychology and counseling. And we must do so in such a way that the full authority and integrity of the gospel is preserved, while at the same time seeking to apply and utilize valid insights from the discipline of psychology, as viewed through the worldview grid of Scripture.

Paul Tripp begins our discussion by showing the important relationship between preaching and counseling. He argues well that true biblical preaching and counseling is committed to the same goal of calling people to view their lives in relation to our great Creator and Redeemer God and to help them live in joyful submission to the counsel of God's Word. Furthermore, the goal of both preaching and counseling is to see the church not merely become a place where ministry takes place, but a ministering community for God's glory and for the good of the church. David Powlison helps us evaluate current psychological thought regarding the important discussion of "defense mechanisms" by first describing how these mechanisms are viewed in secular thought, and then evaluating this contemporary conversation in light of Scripture. He concludes that Scripture, in describing our human problem as that of sin in relation to God, gives us a better and more accurate psychology of both our problem and the solution to it found in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eric Johnson, in his contribution, seeks to turn much of contemporary psychology

on its head by taking the insight of John Calvin that the true knowledge of the self and God are intimately related so that we know ourselves truly and we receive psychological healing in our lives, only when we first view ourselves in light of who God is—in all of his grace, beauty, and glory. Robert Roberts, in his article, adds an important observation that the Christian ministry has always been in the psychology business in the sense of promoting people's wholeness, but he warns us that we must be careful not to wed ourselves to current therapies without first applying a thorough critique from Christian theology, which includes for him both Scripture and the whole theological tradition. Mark Yarhouse picks up this latter point by applying some crucial insights from the Puritan, Richard Sibbes, in relation to helping people think through the issue of assurance in their Christian lives. Finally, Sam Williams reflects on the neglected but important area of a biblical psychology of emotions and feelings as it relates to our lives as Christians and the whole discipline of Christian counseling. In addition to our articles, the sermon from John Piper and our excellent Forum contributions serve as superb models for us, in a variety of ways, of how to apply the Scriptures to all of life, including the important areas of psychology, counseling, and pastoral ministry.

As you read the various contributions, it is my prayer that we, as God's people, might learn better how to fulfill the calling of our ministry of taking every thought captive to Christ so that we will be firmly rooted and grounded in Christ.