

## **What does Christian Psychology mean? Showed by the example of a Process Model of Forgiveness**

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### **1. Introduction:**

There are different proposals regarding whether or not and how you can connect the Christian faith with psychology. You often hear the statement that there can't be a "Christian psychology" and that no one speaks of a "Christian chemistry". But in the sciences, the anthropological paradigms mostly have more effects on the declared results of research than the researching process itself. Therefore we don't speak of the one psychology, but rather, empirical psychology, humanistic psychology, analytical psychology and so on. Why should we as Christians stand back behind modern humanists, who declare their own humanistic psychology?

The forgiveness process in five phases is an example to show that you will have different results in psychological research dependent on different world views and anthropology. These different results lead to different practical strategies in counselling!

### **2. Four different positions of how faith and psychology connect**

#### **2.1. No Mixture of $\Psi$ (psychology) and faith**

Questions of faith and psychological questions belong to two different levels of a person.



The Bible doesn't answer every question in every area of life (it is no handbook for mechanics, no handbook for doctors, biologists or psychologists). Since the Bible isn't a psychological book, we need to turn to the experts at this point. Biblical statements and psychological statements are viewed as belonging to different levels that don't interfere each other. They don't contradict, but only complement each other.

But:

- Regarding various subjects and aspects of human life, they both function as relevant sources of knowledge for example: fear, aggression, frustration, low self-esteem.
- Due to the created oneness of the person, there is a lot of interaction between the two levels. Separating the levels leads to "pigeonhole- research"
- On a biblical primate, the equality of the two levels don't seem justifiable.

## 2.2. "Only the Bible"



Counselling should rely on the Bible as it's only source, otherwise there would be a great danger of defilement. Psychology and psychotherapy are based on basic assumptions contrary to God. For example: Man is good and carries in himself all resources to enable change. Sin as the source for psychological problems is denied. Instead of striving for biblical sanctification, symptom reduction and wellbeing are set as ultimate goals in therapy.

But:

- This view rejects modern psychotherapy. At the same time, it accepts modern medicine (including psychiatry) and at least parts of empirical psychology as relevant for counselling, even though these scientific fields overlap.
- By His grace, God blesses secular psychotherapists, despite their wrong fundamentals. Their research results may picture God-given ways of dealing with people in need of help. These results shouldn't be cast aside too quickly.

## 2.3. Integrative approaches



Developing an integrative model,

**sources of insight are the bible and  $\psi$**



Secular theories can be used by us Christians. Psychology and psychotherapy aren't built assumptions contradicting God, and if they are, they are easily removed, and their methods can be used as neutral instruments. The possibility to work with models and intervention strategies is based on the existence of a God-given order of creation. We can use whatever works and doesn't directly contradict the Bible to treat symptoms (method pluralism and pragmatic eclecticism).

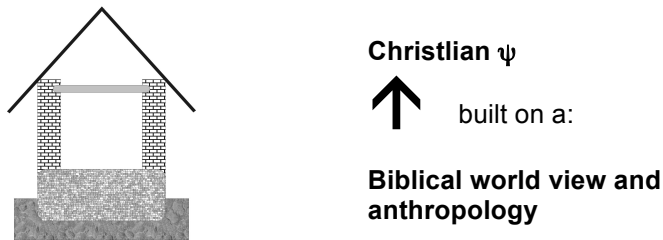
But:

- Presumptions have an lot larger effect on perspective and research (results) as commonly assumed and these presumptions aren't always conscious.
- Although I affirm the presumption of a God-given order of creation, many integrative views seem to me naïve in regards to implied presumptions and they often draw little out of biblical and church-historical traditions.

Comment: In the Anglo-American speaking area, the term “integration” often describes the following point more than has already mentioned.

## 2.4. Reconstruction - rebuilding on a biblical foundation

the building of a **Christian  $\psi$**  on a **Biblical worldview and anthropology**

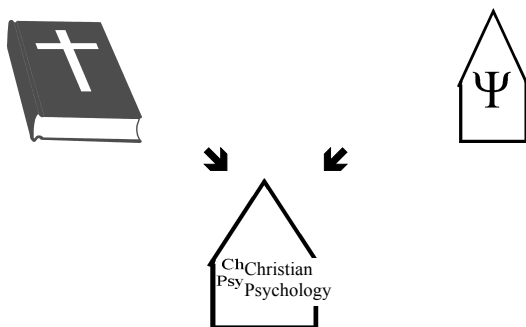


Not secular models and methods, but the development of a Christian psychology, whose models and methods are influenced by a Christian worldview serves as main interest.

*Christian psychologists have more to do than parasitically sift the writings of their secular colleagues. The Christian faith has its own agenda that may or may not resemble the agenda of any secular psychology. Within the kingdom of God, the Christian psychological community is set free to chart new territory in psychology by becoming immersed in scripture and the Christian tradition. Christian psychologists may be enabled to discover new facts and theories, devising new lines of research to more accurately understand human nature the way it really is, the way God sees it.”*

*Eric Johnson (Ph.D., chairman of the Society for Christian Psychology in the US)  
Journal of Psychology and Theology p. 21f*

But Christian  $\psi$  doesn't separate itself from secular models but includes **Biblical as well as secular knowledge**:



Christian  $\psi$  is **careful**, but **fearless**, in dealing with secular theories. Church father **Basilus the great**:

**Like the bees** we should fly of different flowers, take impulses of the secular world of thoughts and with our “enzymes” (on the basis of our own worldview) make them into something new, into honey.

Our task is to pick out the impulses that are compatible with a Biblical foundation and to evaluate what meaning the treasures and important impulses become in a frame of a Biblical worldview and anthropology. We try to find out what its actual meaning could be in our different frame, that is to say a Biblical concept of reality.

**Christian psychology is a unique approach to psychology, which is based on a Biblical foundation, but uses secular experiences and insight and reconstructs them.**

### **3. Reconstruction showed in the example of forgiveness**

#### **3.1. Many different models but from which source?**

Literature and research on forgiveness is vast in theology, as well as in psychology (psychotherapy). I can't say I have an actual overview of it all. But with everything that has fallen into my hands I noticed one thing: if models are built, they usually come out of secular psychology. These models usually function without defining guilt or sin (e.g.: Enright & Fitzgibbon) and due to a process steered by understanding and will, the person is able to forgive without having to receive redemption from outside of himself. Christian authors then add the aspect of sin and redemption (e.g.: Linn&Linn). Also, there is a lot of theologically influenced literature, which mostly don't formulate models but describe forgiveness in a more narrative way. Here redemption through Christ is of great importance and very essential. (e.g.: Johann C Arnold).

#### **3.2. Specialties of a model developed closely along the bible**

Among the theological studies I find a completely satisfying portrayal of forgiveness, although mainly without psychologically comprehensive models. I find models important in practical counselling as a "road map" for critical questions to complex processes of change. Whereby these "rode maps" need to be tested of their usefulness on the concrete "paths." Psychologically founded studies show strength in their practically applicable models. I personally was fortunate to develop my own model due to my experiences working as a physician in a Christian Clinic and later at the Ignis- Academy for Christian Psychology, in continuous Bible studies and by application in counselling and self-awareness groups, before I got acquainted with secular models.

Since my model came out of a close analysis of the bible (especially Mathew 18), it includes a clear definition of sin and redemption through Jesus Christ. On the other hand, it is (like other psychological models) complex enough to picture the variety of possible processes of forgiveness in real life. Secular psychological and psychotherapeutic insight (after being tested and evaluated) can be implanted (e.g. the concept of projection and transference). These secular insights often change and receive a deeper meaning in this new context (e.g. pilot function of transference and projection phenomena in the forgiveness process). Surely my model needs the help of other forgiveness models to complement it.

#### **3.3 Another concrete example for its practical significance**

The forgiveness process often includes times of crisis. There is tension between necessary investment of the will and the experience of (God given) breakthroughs. In experiencing deep forgiveness there are often phases of powerlessness. In keeping focused on the goal (own activity!) a breakthrough to experiencing redemption (God's grace) is possible. The interaction of discipline on one hand, and letting go, let happen, and receive on the other hand isn't easy to picture in a model. My double five-phase model tries to picture this dynamic. The same dynamic is contained in Mathew 18. This dynamic is very relevant, especially in dealing with difficult processes. I haven't seen it pictured as clearly in any other forgiveness model. A gestalt-therapeutic model of change (by Staemmler) also describes a similar dynamic well, but it is not a forgiveness model.

This is how I experience the step-wise discovery of reconstruction of the forgiveness model, which is introduced in this workshop. I experience it as a procedure like Eric Johnson explains the work of Christian Psychologists in the above quotation.