
Taking Up the Challenge

by Alfred J. Poirier

In 1997, the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* published a friendly and lengthy debate (almost sixty pages) between two schools of Christian counselors. David Powlison and Ed Welch represented the Biblical Counseling school (BC), while James Hurley and James Berry were spokesmen for the Christian-Integrationist (CI) position.¹

A major criticism which Hurley and Berry leveled against BC is its failure to utilize general revelation, specifically in the form of psychological empirical research, for developing their counseling theories. Hurley and Berry urged BC to “work towards producing organizing theories of counseling which engage general revelation, either by proving through research what can and should be rejected or showing how knowledge is to be used before God.” If this is done, then BC “will become a credible alternative to organized, researched-based psychologies rather than a patchwork of interesting pieces.”²

As a pastor who counsels, I am greatly interested in this debate. I, too, desire more

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¹See *The Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 1997, pp. 303-362.

²*ibid.*, p. 344.

than a patchwork of counseling ideas to help me counsel those afflicted by suffering and entrapped by sin. I, too, know that in the realm of common grace God has given believer and unbeliever alike insight into other people's problems of living. My wife, without seminary or psychological training, is frequently able to size up a situation or person accurately. Jane Austen, Shakespeare, Robert Thomas, and Arthur Miller are just some of those people who have in their own individual ways an uncanny perception into the complexities of the human psyche.

However, my purpose in this paper is to assess Hurley and Berry's challenge to BC to ground its theories in research-based psychology. It is this area of common grace that CI advocates for all Christian counselors and in which it accuses BC of being deficient.

Since Hurley and Berry did not provide specific examples of the kind of research-based psychological theories they espouse, I have selected what I think is a good representative example of what they would propose as scientific research-based theory. The field I have chosen is that of forgiveness. My interest in this matter is very high since I am active in the field of conflict resolution as a counseling pastor and as an instructor and mediator for *Peacemaker Ministries*. As any pastor or mediator will tell you, forgiveness is the meat and potatoes of conflict resolution. Matters of forgiveness are absolutely

crucial for reconciliation between conflicted parties.³ Most counselors would agree that forgiveness is an issue they must frequently address in their own counseling. Surprisingly, psychology has only of late turned its attention to it. But whatever was once lacking is surely now made up by the proliferation of articles and even institutions(!) dedicated to forgiveness.⁴

Among the recent publications on forgiveness is one titled: *To Forgive is Human: How to Put Your Past in the Past*. Here is a work that I believe fits well within the intent of Hurley and Berry's call for research-based psychological theory. The authors of *To Forgive is Human* are three pro-integrationist research psychologists well-known in the Christian community.⁵ Moreover, it has received an enthusiastic endorsement from no less than Gary R. Collins, president of the American Association of Christian Counselors. Of it he says:

This is a fresh, in-depth, carefully written discussion of forgiveness. It moves beyond the superficial and gives insightful, practical and relevant perspective on how we can understand, experience and show genuine forgiveness. The authors have produced a landmark book that is well worth reading.⁶

My desire is to assess the kinds of advances and insights these authors allege have been made by empirical psychological research in the area of forgiveness.

A Psychological and Empirically Researched Approach

McCullough, Sandage and Worthington (M-S-W) come with impressive credentials.⁷ In their introduction, they identify themselves as Christians and confess that their commitment to a Christian worldview shapes their presuppositions "about what forgiveness is, how forgiveness occurs, and why forgiveness is impor-

tant."⁸ However, as professional psychologists, they state that their purpose in writing this book is to distill for their readers, "what psychological theory and research have to teach us about forgiveness and how we might become better at forgiving."⁹ For this reason, they state at the outset that they will avoid explicit Christian language and theological constructs, and instead use the language of psychology to describe their insights and findings.¹⁰ In fact, they believe that their "unique" contribution to this area of study (for-

Matters of forgiveness are absolutely crucial for reconciliation between conflicted parties.

giveness) is exactly in their appeal to this psychological research.¹¹

Anticipating the question of integration, M-S-W assure their readers that they are confident that their psychological work will comport with biblical truth: "We find that psychological research on forgiveness is easily harmonized with traditional Christian theology" (my emphasis).¹²

Each of the fifteen chapters of their book is devoted to summarizing psychological findings pertinent to the issue of forgiveness and giving practical exercises to apply to life. They divide the book into four themes:

- Forgiveness involves the entire person
- Empathy is at the heart of forgiveness
- Forgiveness is for relationships
- Forgiveness requires commitment

In analyzing M-S-W's book on forgiveness, I will look at three areas: their understanding of psychology, their appeal to scientific/empirical research, and their insights on forgiveness.

1. What do they mean by psychology?

M-S-W use the word "psychology" as if it denoted a singular, monolithic enterprise. Hence, we find them appealing to "psychological theory" (not "theories") and "its scientific research" (not "their scientific researches"), and they argue for their own use of the "language of psychology" in order to explicate forgive-

⁸*To Forgive Is Human*, p. 13.

⁹*ibid.*

¹⁰*ibid.*

¹¹*ibid.*

¹²*ibid.*

³For a biblical view and practice of conflict resolution, see Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997 second edition). See, particularly, chapter 10 on forgiveness.

⁴See Robert D. Enright's International Forgiveness Institute associated with the University of Wisconsin.

⁵Michael E. McCullough, Steven J. Sandage, Everett L. Worthington, *To Forgive is Human: How to Put Your Past in the Past* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

⁶Collins' quote taken from liner notes on back cover of the book.

⁷Michael E. McCullough holds a Ph.D. and is director of research for the National Institute for Healthcare Research (NIHR) in Rockville, Maryland. Steven J. Sandage is a Ph.D. candidate in Counseling Psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University, as well as a psychology intern at the Federal Correctional Institution in Petersburg, Virginia. Everett L. Worthington, Jr., holds a Ph.D. and is professor of psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University.

ness. All of this conveys the impression that “psychology and its scientific research” is unitive in theory and practice.

Surely, M-S-W are well aware of the differing theoretical and therapeutic schools, of the many psychologies that abound in our 20th century therapeutic culture. Yet, their language suggests otherwise. A variety of inferences can be drawn from this. Maybe M-S-W find the differences between the various psychologies to be minor and nonessential. Or they may intend by their appeal to “psychology” to denote a specific school

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of psychology. Yet again, they may have in mind a unitive principle which to them not only binds together these various psychologies, but also acts as a filter of M-S-W's own selection as to what does and does not constitute legitimate psychology. In the case of M-S-W, it appears to be the latter, and the unitive principle that seems so obvious to M-S-W is what they call “scientific” or “empirical” research-based psychology. This is the very kind of “psychology” advocated by Hurley and Berry, and of which they charge biblical counseling to be deficient.

I would simply ask, what is the epistemological principle by which one adjudicates competing truth-claims within the research? How do we know that what any one research study claims is in fact *true*? How do we know whether or not whole areas of significant knowledge and truth regarding forgiveness have been ignored or neglected? M-S-W have a strong presumption that empirical research yields only *insights*. But they never seem to consider that such research *by its very nature* may actually have a blinding effect, leading to substantial distortions of the truth about forgiveness. Could what this research *doesn't* see be the very thing that matters? Could what it *can't* put under the microscope be the very key to forgiveness and reconciliation?

2. What do they mean by scientific research?

For M-S-W, psychology (as over and against biblical counseling) is necessary and beneficial in giving us insight into forgiveness, and they believe this is due primarily to psychological knowledge being based on scientific research. They enunciate this throughout their book.

The use of psychological theory and *research*...are

the qualities that make this book unique.

Our approach is based on *science*...and is immensely practical...

Scientists have been studying the practical side of forgiving...

We have tried to rely on *scientific research*...

We have focused on *scientific research* because its methods and conclusions are open to public scrutiny.

Throughout our exploration we will rely heavily on *empirical research* as one trustworthy source of guidance for how we can build forgiveness.¹³

The last citation is significant. M-S-W tell us they are aware that other sources of knowledge besides that gained by empirical research are trustworthy. What then is the advantage of “psychological empirical research”? M-S-W see the advantage of research-based knowledge as yielding a more certain knowledge, and as open to public scrutiny with respect to its methods and conclusions.

For M-S-W, non-research-based knowledge (general wisdom), even if trustworthy, is not as trustworthy as research-based knowledge since it is knowledge based on intuition and opinion, and is random or drawn from a narrow selection. As such, non-research-based knowledge may be true, but it is not certain. Thus, they see that the appeal of their book will be for those people “who want to go beyond what the school of hard knocks has taught them.”¹⁴ They clarify what they mean by this in a subsequent paragraph:

We have tried to rely on scientific research...

Many people have written books about forgiveness based on opinion, personal experience, clinical experience and theology. Although we draw on each of these important sources of knowledge occasionally throughout the book, we have focused on scientific research because its methods and conclusions are open to public scrutiny.¹⁵

Again, it is important to see that though M-S-W recognize there are other ways we gain knowledge, and that these other ways are “important” and “trustworthy,” such knowledge is not as certain or true as that based on scientific research. Why? According to M-S-W, the reason is that research-based knowledge is a result of a *method* of gaining knowledge, and its *conclusions* are open to *public scrutiny*. By “method” I take them to mean the empirical method. One can only conclude that for M-S-W, scientific psychological research, unlike

¹³*ibid.*, pp. 13, 17-18, 23. (My emphases)

¹⁴*ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁵*ibid.*, p. 18.

general wisdom or even biblical wisdom regarding forgiveness, yields greater certainty and therefore greater truth because of its verifiable methodology, as well as its falsifiable truth-claims.

However, while all of us desire greater certainty in knowledge, M-S-W's appeal to "scientific research" is problematical in their quest for a more certain knowledge of forgiveness. My reasons are as follows:

First, M-S-W fail to adequately define psychology and the parameters of the specific field of psychological research to which they will appeal. This failure belies the problematical state of psychological research. The problematical character of what M-S-W call psychological research is brought out well by Malcolm Jeeves, neuropsychologist and researcher, when he says:

[T]he very diversity of subject matter subsumed under contemporary psychology leads to a corresponding diversity in the methods and techniques employed by different groups of research psychologists. It soon becomes evident, for example, that the *relative objectivity and reproducibility of empirical findings vary enormously*, depending on the subdiscipline of contemporary psychology under consideration; on whether you are studying the responses of single cells in the cortex of an alert and awake monkey on seeing a familiar face; on whether you are measuring interhemispheric transmission times in normal human beings; on whether you are studying working memory in Alzheimer's patients; on whether you are studying racial attitudes in inner-city populations; or on whether you are interested in cross-cultural differences in attitudes or beliefs. These areas are today all labeled psychology, *even though they differ widely in the investigative technique they use, the reproducibility of their findings, and their links with cognate disciplines.*¹⁶

Jeeves does well to remind us that it is the subject under review that determines the nature of the kind of research that can be done and the degree of certainty that can be hoped for. We might say that our certainty will be greater when measuring altitude than attitude. M-S-W's unqualified optimism that research-based knowledge of how to forgive will yield greater certainty than, say, careful exegetical and theological thinking, is naive, at best, and deceptive, at worst. I do not mean by this that M-S-W intend to deceive their readers. Yet, debatable, if not erroneous conclusions, are indeed

¹⁶Malcolm A. Jeeves, *Human Nature at the Millennium: Reflections on the Integration of Psychology and Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997), p. 16. (My emphasis)

deceptive. They lead us away from the truth rather than towards it.

An example of this is evident in their claims about the relation between the brain and forgiveness. They begin with a case study of a man named John and his difficult relationship with his father. They ask: Why hasn't John been able to forgive his father? They attribute part of the answer to "John's reliance on his rational mind." They follow this with a brief description of the brain and the "web," or interconnections,

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between the various parts of the brain. Then they conclude:

It is the complexity of those interconnections that makes forgiveness so difficult to experience and maintain. John's brain has kept him embroiled in unforgiveness. His left cortex rationally understands himself as one who was irreparably hurt by his father. His right cortex supplies images of his troubled relationship with his father...His whole brain works together to keep him stuck in unforgiveness.¹⁷

M-S-W's analysis of the relationship between the brain and forgiveness is highly dubious. Their leap from describing the brain's inner workings to interpreting those workings as affecting forgiveness is a clear example of question-begging. This is not empirical scientific knowledge, but mere speculation. Not only is such a conclusion speculative, but it is a distortion of God's truth. We are compelled to ask: Is John, then, not responsible for his failure to forgive? If the way the brain functions is so determinative of forgiveness, how can Jesus impute guilt to those who find it difficult to forgive? (See Matthew 6:12, 14-15; 18:22-35). Clearly, such underlying precommitments with respect to empirical research can have a blinding effect.

Second, M-S-W give us the distinct impression that the view of science which they hold to and to which they make their appeal is of the positivist kind. Though popular, this view of science has often been shown to be philosophically naive. Are they not familiar with the works of philosophers both secular and Christian:

¹⁷*To Forgive is Human*, pp. 98-100. The errors and leaps of logic are evident and many. The most obvious is their confusing the brain with the mind or with what is rational.

Kuhn, Polanyi, Popper, Moreland, Wolterstorff, Gruenler, and Poythress?¹⁸ Simply put, these philosophers have shown that science is not neutral. All empirical research is theory-laden. All science (all gathering knowledge) begins with theories and presuppositions that guide us to what we will study, cause us to ask one set of questions and not another, and prepare us to see one set of evidence over another. Many philosophers of

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science have commented on the magnifying effect of presuppositions when it comes to the social and behavioral sciences and attempts to alter human beings. While M-S-W are aware that they hold Christian presuppositions, they don't discuss the presuppositions of psychologists in their psychological research.

A third kind of criticism is what I call a "category error." How, in fact, does one "test" for forgiveness? How does one "measure" empathy? How do we "quantify" forgiveness? How does one create a "repeatable experiment" of forgiving if, by the nature of the research subject, it is *mutable people* we are examining? Even these questions arise out of a theory already presupposed!

For example, on page 18 under the title *What Does Forgiveness Mean?*, M-S-W write (my emphasis added):

¹⁸Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962, 1970); Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, 1962); Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); J. P. Moreland, *Christianity and the Nature of Science: A Philosophical Investigation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1976, 1984); Royce Gordon Gruenler, *Meaning and Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991); Vern S. Poythress, *Science and Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988). While I ask whether or not M-S-W have heard of these philosophers, I know that they have at least read Kuhn (pp. 89-90). Yet, their use of Kuhn's work on scientific revolutions seems not to affect their positivistic understanding of science.

The facts. Empirical research reveals some surprising and important findings about forgiveness.

- You can forgive without compromising your *moral integrity*.
- Your *painful memories* of being hurt by others can be *changed* more easily than you might think.
- You can improve your *ability to forgive* by improving your ability to *empathize* with others.
- You can improve your ability to forgive others in as little as one hour.

These findings from "scientific research" raise a host of questions. How can "moral integrity" be measured? Who defines moral integrity? Who sets the criteria for changed memories? Changed into *what*? How does one measure "ability to forgive"? I may be able to measure a man's weight, the pounds he can lift, or the glucose level in his blood, but how do we quantify (much less, define) moral integrity, changes in painful memories, or one's ability to forgive? When it does offer "quantifiable" studies (psychosomatic effects of forgiving), the research yields what can only be thought of as knowledge obvious to any observer. For example, "Patients who continued with their Type A behavior were more likely to have recurrent heart attacks. Reducing the hostility, time urgency and impatience that characterize the Type A behavior pattern reduced the rise of recurrent heart attacks."¹⁹ But how is such information an "important insight," or even "immensely practical"? Isn't such knowledge already evident in common wisdom and attested to in Scripture itself (see Psalms 32, 38)?

In the end, then, what have M-S-W actually given us? We cannot say that they have brought to the discussion of forgiveness any insights more certain or trustworthy than those from other fields of knowledge. When the knowledge is "empirical," it is largely trivial. When truly insightful, it is no different than what philosophers, social ethicists, pastoral theologians, and the like have already told us.

At the same time, we must not discount M-S-W's quest for a knowledge about persons. It is a good goal. Who knows best about persons? CI would have us look to research-based knowledge; BC calls us to Scripture. I do not think that we are left here in a dilemma. I would answer that our "trustworthy" knowledge will and must come through Scripture *within the community of faith*. Scripture alone gives us the eyeglasses through which we can profit from a novel, a wife, a bitter counsellor, or a research study on our growth from bitterness to forgiveness. Only Scripture provides the final court of appeal to correct the misperceptions and distortions

¹⁹*To Forgive is Human*, p. 196.

that inevitably arise as a result of our being finite and sinful people. Can we say more? Must we? Yes. We must say that Scripture is God speaking (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Here we have the voice of God, as judge and arbiter of all counsel, insight, wisdom and research (John 12:47; Heb. 4:12-13:20).²⁰

A fourth criticism is M-S-W's failure to give credit where credit is due. M-S-W are emphatic in appealing to scientific research as the basis of their more trustworthy "insights." However, most of the endnote citations are from fields of knowledge such as theology, philosophy, moral philosophy, social ethics, and the like.²¹ There is nothing wrong with appealing to these other sources of knowledge, but M-S-W's appeal actually undermines their own original claims and confidence in "scientific research" as the basis of a *more certain knowledge* about forgiveness. Why not come out and say that such and such a philosopher or ethicist gives us a true picture of forgiveness, or is more biblical?

3. What do they mean by insights on forgiveness?

If M-S-W's attempt to provide us with a more certain or "scientific" understanding of forgiveness is naive and misguided, can we nevertheless learn from their own insights on forgiveness? For this, let's see what they have discovered about forgiveness and motivation.

M-S-W define forgiveness as "an increase in our internal motivation to repair and maintain a relationship after the relationship has been damaged by the hurtful actions of the other person."²² I would contend that forgiveness is not "an increase in our internal motivation." It is to release another from the "debt" of his or her offense; to no longer hold something against someone else, out of a response of gratitude for the forgiveness we have received from Christ.²³ There may be an increased motivation to build relationship (not, howev-

er, when the offender is dead or remote), but neither forgiveness itself nor an increase thereof is our motivation. Maybe M-S-W meant to say that forgiveness is our desire to repair our damaged relationship with another instead of protecting our own integrity or safety.

Their definition also doesn't do justice to their own subsequent insights. The words "hurtful, damaged, repair" frame forgiveness as more of a *medical* than a *moral* issue. To their credit, M-S-W do treat forgiveness in terms of our moral sense and our requirement to balance justice and mercy. Yet, each time they speak of the

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"moral" aspect of forgiveness, they again betray the declared "uniqueness" of their book—that its findings rest on empirical research. Yet, a universal, absolute, non-material moral law is the very kind of thing that cannot be empirically studied.

Such "empirical" support, however, is what is missing from their chief insights. The first "expert" they appeal to is a psychologist, James Wilson, whose insights do not appear particularly "psychological." For example, M-S-W tell us that everyone makes statements about vices and virtues, and they say that Wilson "suggests that the reason we do this is that human beings have a moral sense."²⁴ I'm glad that Wilson sees this, but his "insight" is by no means empirical, nor does it arise uniquely from psychological research. Philosophers, ethicists, theologians, poets, and our own consciences have been telling us this and assuming it throughout the ages. Gathering together the insights of the "psychologists and philosophers," we discover:

- there is evidence that there are some moral universals
- relationships rest on a foundation of mutual respect and trust
- forgiveness is a moral virtue embodied in the context of relationships
- virtue ethics is needed in contemporary discussions of morality and relationships

defective because it leaves out the key relationship—our relationship to God!

²⁴*ibid.*, p. 25

²⁰See the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, I.10.

²¹Out of 174 endnotes, I identified fewer than 20 articles that could be deemed "scientific." My assessment is quite subjective. I looked for articles containing words or concepts like biological, issues, tests, control. For example, "Self-focusing effects of heartbeat feedback"; "When a lie becomes memory's truth: Memory distortion after exposure to misinformation"; "White bears and other unwanted thoughts: Suppression, obsession and the psychology of mental control"; "The psychophysiology of confession: Linking inhibitory and psychosomatic processes"; "Alterations of Type A behavior and its effects on cardiac recurrence in post-myocardial infarction patients," etc.

²²*To Forgive is Human*, p. 22.

²³M-S-W's definition again reveals the "blinding" effect of their discipline. Their definition is highly distorted and

-
- we are often in a dilemma how to balance justice and mercy

Since the aim of the book is to distill psychological insights into forgiveness, I have to ask, what makes these insights peculiar to the domain of psychology? In fact, in the chapter on forgiveness as a moral sense, M-

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and mercy-given.*

S-W do much to debunk what psychology has told us about relationships and forgiveness! M-S-W take on the “victimology” or “blame-game” fostered largely by the therapeutic industry. They cite Karl Menninger’s complaint over the disappearance of sin—again, another effect of modern, secular psychotherapy and psychological theory. Yet, no sooner do they point this out than they commit the very kind of academic obfuscation responsible for the disappearance of sin. They tell us, “Social psychologists have called this tendency the fundamental attribution error.”²⁵ They continue their description of this by flattening out the sharp-edged language of morals and virtues. Instead of speaking of “right and wrong, sinful and righteous,” their use of the language of psychology calls sin “negative behavior” and thereby effaces the very moral categories within which forgiveness operates.

How, we ask, do such a label and description improve on the “blame-game”? Moreover, doesn’t this kind of description blind us to the realities of our actions? “Blame-game” sounds chance-like, and “fundamental attribution error” sounds deterministic, or merely a mental error like wrongly computing a math problem. But false accusation or false condemnation is morally charged language, and better fits what actually takes place. We may see this more clearly if we simply reversed the categories. What if we charged our third-grader with false accusation when he wrongly computed an addition problem? The idea is laughable, of course, yet the consequences are not. The difference between “false accusation” and “fundamental attribution error” would blind us to miss the very nature of his problem—that it is *mathematical* and not *moral*! Moreover, we would treat him by moral reproof rather than

²⁵*ibid.*, p. 29.

have him memorize math!

Lest it seem I am picking on one error, let me give another example. In their discussion on forgiveness and transformation, M-S-W distill for us the insights of modern chaos theory and seek to show its ramifications for marital relationships. They cite the work of John Gottman, a psychologist who has studied more than 2,000 couples over a period of twenty years. They conclude:

A couple of recent applications of the science of chaos have been suggested in psychology...The dissolution of marriages...has been seen as a noncontinuous event. [Gottman] found that when marital relations go bad, they gradually worsen...At some point, though, things dramatically change. Gottman thinks he knows the straw that breaks the marriage’s back. When the ratio of positive to negative interactions falls lower than five to one, people start to think negatively about their marriage...If the positive interactions don’t quickly increase, the marriage is in grave danger.²⁶

As you can see, the appeal is not to empirical studies, but to a theory—chaos theory. And what is concluded is nothing unique to psychology or research. The average man-on-the-street is able to tell you that if you keep fighting with your spouse, things won’t get better, but worse. The only “scientific” aspect of this “finding” is the language (from physics) of positive and negative, and the attempt to quantify “ratio...lower than five to one.” Yet, in the end, we must ask: how is such knowledge useful, or “immensely practical”?

This is where the Bible offers a unique understanding: bitterness and wrath are not just socially destructive attitudes and behaviors. They are sins against God explicitly, and they arise from such idolatrous cravings as pride, self-righteousness, to be treated a certain way, and so forth. The *Bible’s* explanation of the core motivation to be able to forgive is not empathy for the offender, but gratitude for mercy received from God through Jesus Christ (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:12). No psychological researcher can ever “discover” the God-ward dimension of bitterness, mercy-received and mercy-given. And M-S-W actually misconstrue and ignore the core dynamics. “Empathy” for the offender is more like *excusing* than *forgiving* the other. The most significant and deep dynamics of forgiveness are never touched by psychological research.

Conclusion:

Christian integrationists have challenged biblical

²⁶*ibid.*, p. 93.

counselors to ground their psychological theories in empirical research. They encouraged BC that such research would correct initial insights and establish BC theories on a more sure footing. Implied in their challenge is a view that our epistemological certitude of psychological theories can best be gained by scientific research.

In considering their challenge, I have examined *To Forgive is Human*, which claims for itself the very kind of research-based psychological study which CI desires to see exercised by BC.

What I have found and shown is that the CI challenge fails in its promise of greater knowledge or certitude in the theory and practice of forgiveness. As psychologists, M-S-W have shown a naive conception of their own field, of psychology, and of so-called scientific research. This critique is by no means unique, for similar criticisms have been raised even within secular psychology.²⁷ M-S-W do not make good on their claim to provide more trustworthy insights from psychological research. The “research” upon which they would rest their insights is either trivial as concerns its knowledge content, or simply rehearses the common stock of wisdom in psychological language.²⁸ What insight they do offer from psychologists comes when these psychologists speak not as researchers, but as philosophers and ethicists. Yet, even this general wisdom is skewed by use of *psychological* language rather than God-centered language to describe a God-related problem and solution. Psychological language is not neutral in its effect where it attempts to describe and prescribe forgiveness. It typically flattens the ethical dynamic and complexity

²⁷See the fascinating article by Howard H. Kendler, “Psychology and Social Ethics,” in the October 1993 journal *American Psychologist* (Vol. 48, No. 10, pp. 1046-1053) and responses in the same journal, November 1994, pp. 966-971. Especially, the article by Karen L. Pellegrin and B. Christopher Frueh, “Why psychologists don’t think like philosophers,” *American Psychologist*, Nov. 1994, p. 970.

²⁸I am well aware that the adjective “trivial” can appear harsh and subjective with respect to my criticism of their research. My criticism, though, is not of their persons but of their truth-claims. I leave it to the reader to decide for himself whether or not the “insights” of such research is of value or not. To those who are counselors, I ask: Does this research have any “cash value”? Does it result in greater confidence and certitude in the counsel you are presently giving?

of persons, situations, and norms by which we, as moral creatures, are called to forgive. It guts the moral dimension, not to say the religious dimension, of forgiveness.

Moreover, when M-S-W do address the moral dimension of forgiveness, a dimension they themselves cannot escape, they neglect central biblical teachings.²⁹ Their appeal to morals ends in simple moralism. Thus, their concept of empathy, moral empathy, results in a *Christless* empathy—a Christless empathy that replaces

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true Christ-driven mercy. Instead of Christ being the center and heart of forgiveness, they substitute something else—empathy. But is it true that “empathy is at the heart of forgiveness”?³⁰ Not according to the only reliable, trustworthy, and practical authority—God’s Word.

The CI challenge fails. What is needed is to define more specifically the domains of psychology appropriate to study by scientific research. Only then can we assess the value and worth of such research to problems of living. What is also needed is a robustly biblical, practical theology by which alone we can understand and help people in great need of learning to forgive.

²⁹M-S-W prove by example that one cannot address the subject of forgiveness in terms of mere empiricism. Again and again, they themselves feel compelled to bring to their discussion the non-psychological language of morals. We would ask them, why not simply forgo the straitjacket of “psychological language” and discuss forgiveness in the richer, deeper language of Scripture?

³⁰*To Forgive is Human*, p. 14, 228. Even in this claim, M-S-W waffle. First, they say that empathy is at the heart of forgiveness. Then they say that forgiveness requires empathy. Next they say that empathy is a central component of living an “other-oriented lifestyle.” I kept asking, “Which is it?”

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