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## Understanding Human Beings in the Light of Grace: The Possibility and Promise of Theology-informed Psychologies

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Theologians, pastors, and psychologists all claim to understand – at least to some extent – the lives of human beings. Suppose a pastor receives a visit from a parishioner. “I’m really screwing up my life,” Mike begins. “I heard that passage from Matthew on Sunday, and have just been feeling guiltier by the minute ever since. If the greatest commandments are to ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind’ and ‘your neighbor as yourself,’ then I’m really in deep trouble. I’m not even sure I know what it means to love God, so I’m quite sure I’m not doing that. And I ... well, most of the time I don’t even *like* people very much. And I know I’m not very good at *loving* them.” The pastor knows that Mike, a semi-regular attendee who reluctantly agrees to help when asked to do some specific task, is rather aloof. “Loving” is, indeed, far from the first word that comes to mind in describing him.

Dionne, by way of contrast, experiences little guilt. She likes herself, her job, her friends, and her life, but has little passion about any of it. “The existentialists are right,” she asserts. “Life, at root, is meaningless.” She does, however, vote, and – when she feels she has a sufficient financial cushion – contributes to worthy causes, feeling especially virtuous the year she gave away a full 2% of her income. She is honest and faithful to her small circle of friends. When asked about her religious affiliation, she curtly replies, “I’m with the scientists about God: For that hypothesis I simply have no need.”

How are we to understand Mike and Dionne, and people in general? In this paper, I will address a more specific question: As we seek to understand people, including Mike and Dionne, that is, as we seek to develop a psychology that can account for their lives and those of others, what difference does it make if we take grace seriously? How (if at all) does grace transform human lives,

including our actions, emotions, thoughts, relationships (with others and with God), motivations, and characters?

Well-trained psychologists have a well-learned response to any query about human behavior: First, define the variables in a way that permits us to reliably observe and measure them. "If you can't measure it," confidently asserts psychologist Seymour Korchin, "it doesn't exist."<sup>1</sup> Variables are then systematically manipulated in accord with scientific methods to produce explanations of human behavior. Practicing clinical psychologists may, of course, use a different set of theories and assumptions to explain human behavior.<sup>2</sup> Their authority stems primarily, however, from the purportedly scientific basis of their methods, so I will focus here on psychology's scientific dimension.

To insist upon reliably measuring all variables before developing an understanding of human beings would, however, require the exclusion from psychology of some "variables" Christians think essential in understanding human beings. We think God exists and actively works in human lives, through the Sacraments, when the Word is preached, and in other ways. Grace is a reality at the heart of the lives of Christians. Neither God nor grace can be fully (and perhaps not even partially) quantified and manipulated, however. And so the scientists' marvelously productive and important methods fall short of addressing some psychological dimensions of human lives; those methods alone cannot produce a *comprehensive* understanding of human beings.

Christians make two kinds of errors with regard to scientific psychology. The first (and far more common) is accepting it uncritically, with psychologists' conclusions considered the sole source of understanding about human beings. The second is not taking scientific psychology sufficiently seriously. This neglect can take the form of condemning it as godless, to be avoided at all costs, and claiming (on some uses, or misuses, of the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*) that the Bible alone provides us with important knowledge about human beings. Christians' neglect of science can also, however, take the form of ignoring scientific findings because "I use spiritual language," "I don't do science," or "I have some problems with using science to understand people, so I don't pay any attention to it."

We need, I think, to avoid both general types of errors and draw upon both psychology and theology. We need scientific studies and

theories; we also need to understand human beings in relationship to God, sin, the cross, forgiveness, new life in Christ, and grace. We also need to understand the implications for psychology and our understanding of human beings of the Biblical report that Jesus said loving God and neighbor-as-self are the greatest commandments. We need to understand what it means that they are *commandments*. We need to ask, *What does it say about human beings that we flourish most fully when we love God with all that we are and love our neighbours-as-ourselves?* Psychologists generally hold very different views about what constitutes human flourishing and most would reject the view that love of God and neighbor-as-self is central. Their views and those of pastors and theologians need to be brought into dialogue, with the insights of each considered without reducing each to a bland lowest common denominator that likely resembles no one's idea of human flourishing. Indeed, psychology and theology also appropriately critique each other. Psychology's problematic, at times anti-theological,<sup>3</sup> assumptions need to be exposed, challenged, and replaced. Theology's (usually implicit) descriptions of human beings also need to be challenged in light of relevant scientific findings. Finally, where data can legitimately be understood in terms of a variety of theoretical frameworks, we can, I think, at times legitimately interpret<sup>4</sup> those findings in accord with Christian understandings.

In this paper, I will briefly discuss contemporary psychology, highlighting dimensions of it that stand in the way of developing understandings of human beings that take grace seriously. I will then address some theological understandings (about God, human freedom, sin, morality, the cross, and community) that provide the essential backdrop for a psychology that takes grace seriously. In the final section, I will discuss some of the ways in which grace might transform our psychologies, the ways in which grace can make a difference in how we understand Mike, Dionne, and other human beings.

Of necessity much (too much) will be left unsaid here. The topics I am raising have to do with the nature, definition, and findings of psychology, theology, and science, with their proper limits, and with the challenges those disciplines pose to one another. Human beings and the grace of God are very complex, and the disciplines that purport to address them are extensive and fall far short of coherence

or consensus. Furthermore, as the prophet Jeremiah observed, “The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse – who can understand it?”<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, what follows is best regarded as a tentative, partial, flawed approach at an answer; I think the questions, however, are of the utmost importance.

## Contemporary Psychology

Forget Freud. Forget Jung. About the only devotees of Freud and Jung in the academy today are in English and Religious Studies Departments.<sup>6</sup> Forget Carl Rogers and Pastoral Counseling as well. Psychology in its modern guise strives mightily – and often with considerable success – to be scientific.

The diversity among psychologists is so deep and wide that Koch suggested the “discipline” is perhaps termed “Psychological Studies.”<sup>7</sup> I accordingly use the plural “psychologies” rather than the field’s customary “psychology.” Despite their differences, however, psychologists traditionally rally around a common definition of the field that is some variation of, “Psychology is the science of human behavior and cognition.” Method, that is, unites psychologists, not a particular theory or some consensual, data-derived understanding of human beings. This focus on method permits psychologists to distinguish themselves from (and claim superiority to) other approaches to understanding human beings. Bellah and colleagues argued contentiously, however, that “current disciplinary boundaries are historical products that are more the cause of our intellectual and ethical problems than useful limits of specialization with which to search for their solution.”<sup>8</sup> Although I think Bellah et al. failed to recognize the extraordinary benefits that result from employing specialized natural scientific methods to understand human beings, and collapse the tension among disciplinary approaches that I think we need to maintain to understand human beings optimally, they raise an important question about the legitimacy and usefulness of disciplinary boundaries. As psychologist Sigmund Koch argued, “extensive and important sectors of psychological study require modes of inquiry rather more like those of the humanities than the sciences.”<sup>9</sup>

The approach I adopt in this paper, along the lines suggested by Koch, is to aim for psychologies that strive to understand human beings by any means necessary, including scientific methods, to be

sure, but also including (albeit in critical tension with) theological methods and ways of knowing that come only by grace through faith, through the cross, in the community of faith, through the Word and Sacraments, the means of grace.

Dominant forms of psychology, however, use a method that is purportedly purely objective and descriptive. Scientific psychology rests, in fact, however, upon a substantial set of assumptions about human beings and morality that limit the conclusions that its methods can produce. Of greatest importance for this paper, the scientific method leaves no room for free will, morality, God, and grace in explanations of human beings. Accordingly, the understandings of human beings that most contemporary psychologists produce are devoid of any consideration of human beings' relationship of human beings to God and utterly blind to how grace can transform human beings.

Psychology purportedly produces facts unencumbered by values, or encumbered by them as little as possible. Psychologists can address research participants' *beliefs* about morality (or God or grace), but, on a widely held view, science cannot tell us which moral belief to endorse.<sup>10</sup> Another widely held view contends that "moral" expressions like, "Thou shalt not commit adultery" are mere expressions of a societal consensus, or of the speaker's emotion, not pertaining at all to what one actually should or should not do, because "shoulds" are meaningless, because indeterminable by data or logic.<sup>11</sup>

Those claims to the pure objectivity and value-freedom of science have not, however, kept psychologists from slipping their own moral views into their scientific work. As Hilary Putnam has recently documented, the fact-value dichotomy has collapsed.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, the conclusions of supposedly value-free scientists in fact often reflect particular ethical (and often metaphysical) viewpoints. The implicit morality of much of contemporary psychology is individualistic and egoistic, stressing self-interest as both fact about human behavior and as ideal. Adjustment to one's environment and one's own survival (and that of one's family and close friends) are stressed. These assumptions are deeply buried in psychological discourse, however; the dominant language is that of pure description; the moral commitments (if any) of the investigator are supposed to be properly shelved throughout the investigation and not in any way affect the outcome of the study. They do, of course, and value-laden psychologies result.

Another psychological aspect of human beings assumed to be present by most Christians is some measure of free will.<sup>13</sup> Scientific psychologists (at least in their role as scientists) espouse, by way of contrast, their own version of the bondage of the human will. This bondage is of a very different sort than that espoused by Luther in his battles with Erasmus, however. It's a bondage to neurotransmitters and genes, to one's environment (including history of positive and negative reinforcement and the parenting style one experienced as a child), and to the pressures of social influence. As with the assumption of self-interest lying behind every purportedly free human action, vehement counterarguments face anyone who claims that even a single human action is genuinely free. More commonly, psychologists simply assume in their scientific work that all human behavior is determined, with many assuming that sufficient research will uncover a complete account of the scientific laws that fully govern all human behavior.

Psychologists also generally rely upon the assumptions of a philosophy of naturalism that is materialistic and reductionistic.<sup>14</sup> All of reality is ultimately physical matter; explanations of human behaviors such as agape love can, at root be explained by, or reduced to, biological mechanisms and the unfolding of the laws of learning. Some psychologists are metaphysical naturalists: they believe that only nature exists; accordingly only methods that get at nature (so understood) are legitimately employed in the production of knowledge. Other psychologists are functionally naturalistic, working as "as if" naturalistic explanations fully explain human behavior.

Naturalism employs a contested definition of nature, however. One can affirm the importance of nature and the usefulness of the scientific method in understanding human beings, as I think Christians should, but not think that matter is the only reality or that all human behavior is fully reducible to biological and psychological laws. To put this point another way, naturalism's understanding of nature is quite different than that produced by the doctrine of creation, which affirms a non-reductive understanding of nature that is always in relationship with the non-material God who created (and creates) it.<sup>15</sup> In contemporary psychology, however, affirming morality and God's existence is seen as subjective or biased; producing psychological accounts that deny morality and the active God of history are, however, regarded as unbiased.

This naturalistic bias means that most psychologists assume that there are no goals or ends intrinsic to human beings and no human nature in any rich sense of the word (save perhaps biologically determined goals, e.g., a propensity to engage in behaviors that have been adaptive for the species). Explicitly rejected are claims about human nature like that found in Augustine's psychologically profound prayer, "Our heart is restless until it rests in you."<sup>16</sup>

Of particular importance for this article, psychology's naturalistic bias means that most psychologists assume God does not exist. Psychology's *de jure* agnosticism ("Science can't say one way or another whether God exists; our explanations of human beings will therefore simply omit any mention of God") produces, however, psychologists that are *de facto* atheistic, psychologists that purport to explain human beings but omit our relationship to God. Accordingly, grace finds no place in these psychologists.

Although the naturalistic bias has produced extensive additions to our understanding of human beings, and should by all means be employed as part of (repeat, part of) how we develop our psychologists, it does not and cannot, I contend, lead to a *complete* understanding of human beings, and especially not to a psychology that takes grace seriously. For that we need to turn to the riches of theology.

## **A Theological Context for Psychologies That Take Grace Seriously**

That God created men and women is of great importance in understanding human beings. Furthermore, that God declared his creation good means our psychologists must, in some way, affirm that created goodness. That the world and (to some extent) our lives are relatively orderly and that God created us with minds capable of grasping that order (at least to some extent) means we have theological reasons to affirm scientific investigations of human beings. Christians should, accordingly, affirm scientific psychology, at least in part. As Hong points out, the various disciplines do have "their characteristic structures and methodological principles which give them relative autonomy, but only," he continues, "as parts and levels of the whole world of discovery, thought, creativity, exploit, and valuing. For the Christian this world of man's knowing and aspiring is subject to the critique of faith, faith seeking to understand



itself (theology) and faith in critical–appreciative conversation with man’s attempts to order and understand his experiences, judgments, presuppositions, and actions.”<sup>17</sup>

We must thus both affirm and critique scientific psychology. The central error among Lutheran scholars, I suggested above, is to affirm it without critiquing it. The Lutheran quietism before temporal authority that has been so troublesome in the political realm has its parallel in the academy, suggests Robert Benne, a quietism manifested as “undue submissiveness before educational authority.”<sup>18</sup> Although theology should remain open to scientific psychology’s insights and criticisms, theology (including the doctrine of creation and much more) remains a vitally important source for constructive, comprehensive psychologies that take grace seriously and a source as well for critiquing interpretations produced by scientific psychologists.

To say that we are created means more, much more, however, than simply saying that human beings are part of the (at-some-level good) physical world. It also points us to the importance of our relationship with God, a theme central to theological reflection about human beings, but perhaps easy to forget. Theology-based psychologies and science-based psychologies differ profoundly on this point, however. Scientific psychologists claim we can (and should) understand human beings without any reference to God. Theologians, by way of contrast, contend our relationship with God is central to who we are, and is therefore utterly essential to comprehensive explanations of human beings. This link between the doctrine of creation and our nature as beings whose fullness comes only when in a right relationship with God can be seen in the full context of the Bishop of Hippo’s famous prayer: “[M]an, this part of your creation, wishes to praise you. You arouse him to take joy in praising you, for you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”<sup>19</sup> More broadly, the theology of Jonathan Edwards, as portrayed by H. Richard Niebuhr, involved “measuring man by the standard of his position before God.”<sup>20</sup>

The relevance of our relationship with God to our understanding of human beings can be approached in another way, by returning to the question I posed above: What does it say about human beings, about the kind of beings we are, that the two greatest commandments are loving the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul,

and with all our mind and our neighbors as ourselves?<sup>21</sup> Although they can be interpreted in a variety of ways, those great commandments are relevant to our understanding of human beings and our psychologies in several ways. We are beings who are most deeply human, Jesus' words suggest, when we love God and neighbor-as-self. This speaks to our nature, the kind of beings we are. Dionne is therefore gravely mistaken when she claims there is no meaning to life, and although she may have many good qualities, she will never—as an isolated individual out of relationship with God—come close to her full potential as a human being.

Furthermore, we are not called to love God with some compartmentalized spiritual or religious part of ourselves alone, but with all our hearts, souls, and minds. Contrary to the Greek and Cartesian dualism that dominates western thinking – but consistent with Luther's notion of *totus homo* and with the warning of Bellah et al. about the dangers of disciplinary compartmentalization – the image that emerges is that of unified human beings.

Thirdly, we learn about the importance of *love* to human beings from the great commandments. Not mere intellectual assent to some doctrine, not behavior disconnected from our motivations, emotions, and thoughts. Rather, love. That love – involving human hearts, minds, souls, neighbors, and selves – is clearly psychological.

Finally, the importance Jesus places on love, not just of neighbor, but on love of *God* points again to the utter centrality to who we are of our relationship with God, especially a relationship of the right kind. Our relationship with God surely ought to be part, then, of our psychological vision of what human beings are, and how we become fulfilled and whole.<sup>22</sup>

That God *commands* us to love God and neighbor points us theologically to the Law. What implications does the Law have for our understanding of human beings? In addition to pointing to yet another way in which we are related to God, the Law points to the reality<sup>23</sup> of morality. Some things are right and some wrong, some good and some bad.

In addition, the commandments don't pertain only to the (often small) compartment of life contemporary moral philosophers call moral (with all other matters governed entirely by our preferences and choices). Theology affirms that the span of morality is broad and deep; indeed, the commands of God are far more challenging and

inclusive than we often want to imagine. The Law pertains to every dimension of our lives, to every corner of our psyches and relationships. There are, for example, hard and challenging words in Matthew and elsewhere in the Bible. The Law may (and will, if we listen to it) make us feel guilty, uncomfortable, or ashamed. Given the Law alone, then, the fact Mike was feeling guilty about not loving God and neighbor was quite justified. Absent the Gospel, if he's not loving, he *should* feel guilty.<sup>24</sup> And he has much more guilt to face as he reads Scriptural injunctions about peace, turning the other cheek, justice, lust, marital fidelity, and so forth.

"Law came in," the Apostle Paul asserted, "with the result that the trespass multiplied."<sup>25</sup> Sin is another theological topic pertaining very much to human beings. Over thirty years ago, in his *Whatever became of sin?*<sup>26</sup>, psychiatrist Karl Menninger complained about reducing all human problems to psychological problems. That trend has, if anything accelerated.<sup>27</sup> Doing so deprives us of profound psychological and theological insights found in the discussions of sin by Luther, Niebuhr, and others<sup>28</sup>, for example, in Luther's discussion of turning in on ourselves, *incurvatus in se*.

God's loving response to sin – Jesus Christ and the cross – are at the heart of Christian theology. Sin, death, and the Law do not have the last word. Christ on the cross takes us into him, we die with him, and we are raised to new life. We cannot, however, directly observe, measure, and manipulate that reality. Our proclamation of Christ crucified is, accordingly, "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."<sup>29</sup> The cross of Christ produces, however, our freedom from sin, death, and the Law; it produces new life, reconciliation, redemption, everlasting life, and freedom in Christ. The cross transforms us, in this age and the age to come. The cross could thus not be more relevant to the development of a comprehensive psychology fully informed by scientific findings and Christian faith. Through the cross, human beings are freed to love God with all our hearts and souls and minds, and our neighbors as ourselves.<sup>30</sup>

The daily lives we lead at present, however, are characterized by a continual presence of both justification and sinfulness. Luther's doctrine of *simul justus et peccator*, to be discussed later because the reality to which it points is so closely tied to grace and a psychology that takes it seriously, contends that the Christian is simultaneously a righteous man and a sinner.

In part because we remain sinners in need of the cross, ecclesiology is also a critical dimension for a psychology that takes grace seriously. In contrast to the dominant individualism of American psychology, Christians point to our need for others, our relational nature, to our ongoing need to hear the Gospel, to hear the Word of God, to receive the Sacraments, to receive, that is, the means of grace.

Grace, of course, is the theological concept most closely tied to the purpose of my paper. Although the other theological themes I've discussed might seem to some to be far removed from an understanding of human beings that takes grace seriously, they are, I think, the crucial context for that understanding, because the Christian concept of grace is inextricably tied to God, creation, sin, Law, the cross, freedom in Christ, and the Church.

"Grace," Luther asserted, "is the continuous and perpetual operation or action through which we are grasped and moved by the Spirit of God so that we do not disbelieve His promises and that we think and do whatever is favorable and pleasing to God."<sup>31</sup> It has, Gilbert Meilaender maintains, a twofold character:

God's grace in Christ is both transforming power and declaration of pardon. As transforming power it enters into the history of our lives, driving out the sin that still clings, drawing us ever more fully into the holiness of Christ, making possible continued growth in righteousness, giving a direction and trajectory to the moral life, and fitting us for heaven. Yet, as Schlink saw clearly, this very description of grace as transforming power can be heard not as gospel but as law whenever we do not see the signs of continued growth, whenever we seem to turn away from the holiness to which Christ calls us. When we turn away, we need the warning of the law, but we also need – when our wills are sorely divided – a gospel that is not transforming power but sheer declaration of pardon, a declaration that we are pardoned precisely in our ungodliness (Rom 5:6). Grace must be spoken of in both ways because our theology must do justice to both the fifth and the sixth chapters of Romans.<sup>32</sup>

Grace as transforming power and as unilateral declaration of pardon are both, I think found in Luther's definition of grace, although he clearly regard the latter as primary. The problem of overemphasizing grace as transforming power, Meilaender maintains, is that doing so leaves us with "the *power* of grace apart from its *pardon*, a grace that does not invite us in our weakness simply to take shade and shelter in the fact that Jesus is *for* us."<sup>33</sup>

What difference, then, might grace make in how we understand human beings, in how we construct our psychologies?

### **How Grace Might Transform Our Psychologies**

If we take grace seriously, our psychologies must include God, the Law, sin, the cross, the resurrection, the Sacraments, and the church, because we can only understand grace and the deep changes it produces in human beings if we take them seriously. To put that more formally, understanding the ways in which grace affects human beings – that is, understanding the shape of psychologies that take grace seriously – requires including in our understandings of human beings some of the realities that theology describes. Theology thus provides some (although only some) of the essential conceptual context for understanding the ways in which grace shapes (and can shape) human lives.

A psychology that takes grace seriously should also employ scientific methods to understand the impact of grace on human lives. Although we can't measure the reality of grace, we can measure people's experience of, and beliefs about, grace, and then empirically establish what other measurable dimensions of human life correspond to those experiences and beliefs. One might easily suppose, for instance, that – among people with an equal desire to know and love God and an equal awareness of the Law – those who believe in grace and experience it will experience more freedom, less anxiety, and more service to others than those who don't. We need not limit ourselves to studies that examine the static relationships among variables, however. Among groups of people matched for belief in God and awareness of the Law, one group could hear a sermon that is pure Law, a second could hear a sermon that rightly divides Law and Gospel and whose primary message is grace, and a third could hear a talk on a neutral subject, like the weather. We could measure – both before and after those interventions – self-reported anxiety level,

peace with God, desire to serve others, freedom, and so forth. We could thus investigate empirically the effects of people's experience of, and belief in, grace. I think it strange that Lutheran psychologists (to the best of my knowledge) haven't done so, given their enthusiastic embrace of scientific psychology and the centrality of grace in Christian theology.

Scientific psychology gets at the regularities of observable human existence (the orderliness of creation), and does so very, very well. As such scientific psychologists might well agree with a former boss of my wife: "The three most important words in the English language," he regularly intoned, "are *Behavior has consequences.*" Nothing, however, could be further from a Christian understanding of grace, which means that – despite our sinful behavior, despite our willful disobedience – God loves us and redeems us. In Paul's classic formulation, "by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast."<sup>14</sup> Grace means we are loved, embraced, freed to serve, despite our actions. Our salvation is a consequence unrelated to our efforts, a surprising, transforming, redemptive consequence. Grace is a violation of the expected order, of regularity. Grace, in a word, is amazing. And so scientific methods will only get us so far in understanding human beings, the recipients of grace.

Given those limits to our understanding of grace, how can we understand how it transforms human beings? First, I think, efforts to develop psychologies that take grace seriously shouldn't involve attempts to understand grace itself. Rather, we need to understand the role of grace in daily life, grace as it affects (can affect, should affect) human beings in our personal lives, vocations, and interactions with others, that is, to understand the psychological effects of grace, effects such as freedom from sin and death, radical freedom in Christ, new life, service to others, and our ongoing need to receive and experience grace.

Grace means that we are free, in Christ, from sin, the Law, and death. We are freed from the obligation to establish our own righteousness, to prove ourselves worthy of God's love. People like Mike, afflicted with guilt over sin, are, by grace, freed. This is not simply an abstract forensic matter, where St. Peter wipes clean the slate that was filled with our sins so we can enter heaven when we die. Grace produces a freedom that affects us in the here and now, that transforms us in a variety of ways. In Luther's words:

the Christian conscience must be dead to the Law, that is, free from the Law, and must have no business with it. This important and basic doctrine does much to comfort afflicted consciences. Therefore when you see a man terrified and saddened by a consciousness of sin, say: "Brother, you are not distinguishing properly. Into your conscience you are putting the Law, which belongs in the flesh. Wake up, get up, and remember that you believe in Christ, the Victor over the Law and sin. With this faith you will transcend the Law and enter into grace, where there is neither Law nor sin."<sup>35</sup>

This freedom is surely psychological in character. It affects our motivations (no longer to avoid punishment or try to please God), our behavior (no more ceaseless striving to do good works as means of justifying ourselves to God), our beliefs about ourselves and God, our identities (not as unloving sinners damned to hell forever but as God's beloved children fully reconciled to him and welcomed into his eternal loving care), our consciences (no longer guilty or shameful, but clear), and our feelings<sup>36</sup> (we need no longer experience fear and despair about our sinfulness). As Luther expressed it:

The forgiveness of guilt, the heavenly indulgence, does away with the heart's fear and timidity before God; it makes the conscience glad and joyful within and reconciles man with God. And this is what true forgiveness of sins really means, that a person's sins no longer bite him or make him uneasy, but rather that the joyful confidence overcomes him that God has forgiven him his sins forever."<sup>37</sup>

Finally, freed from a sinful all-consuming focus on ourselves (*incurvatus in se*), we are free for service to our neighbors. As Forell puts it, "Christian liberty frees Christians from their obsession with themselves and their own salvation to act in the true interest of the neighbor. Insofar as I act as a justified sinner, I am free to act without any concern for my own self-interest. God has taken care of me so that I might be empowered to care for my neighbor."<sup>38</sup>

We are, by grace, freed not just *from* sin and death, but free *for* service to our neighbors. Our freedom in Christ is radical. And the transformation it produces is radical. Grace is God's declaration of pardon which frees us for renewal, new life, and service to others. Our liberty is "a gift of God, dependent every moment on God's grace," proclaims Forell, not, as many think, "a right that makes us into autonomous beings for whom faith in God is an option."<sup>39</sup> It is, rather, "the alien righteousness granted to Christians by grace alone" that creates Christian liberty.<sup>40</sup> We move from death to life, from the old Adam to the new, from Law to Gospel. The practical implications of this for human lives were spelled out by Luther:

By faith in the Word of grace, therefore, the Christian should conquer fear, turn his eyes away from the time of Law, and gaze at Christ Himself and at the faith to come. Then fear becomes sweet and is mixed with nectar, so that he begins not only to fear God but also to love Him.<sup>41</sup>

We ought to love God, then, at least in part because of the grace we receive. Loving God, loving neighbor-as-self, doing justice, and so forth, are all fit responses, grateful responses that represent our best possible – even if ultimately partial and incomplete – answer to the grace of God.

That the lives of people freed in Christ exhibit human love for God and neighbor-as-self (among other fruits) is additional evidence of the psychological nature of grace's transformation of human lives. We engage in loving (moral) behavior with others (interpersonal relations or social psychology, in the argot of contemporary psychology), are motivated (out of freedom in Christ and gratitude toward God), have particular intentions (the well-being of others), and experience particular emotions. The psychologist properly investigates those psychological phenomenon.

Some psychologists, drawing upon mechanistic metaphors from naturalism, may well demand to know the (observable, measurable, replicable) mechanisms or processes by which this supposed grace effects such changes in human lives. Although I think we should investigate empirically the processes of human transformation, I fear we will always be disappointed if we want a complete scientific



explanation of how grace works. Grace is mysterious. That, however, makes it no less efficacious. However much we document empirically cases of spiritual transformation, I don't think we will ever definitively link those transformations to the (mysterious, surprising) grace of (the hidden) God. That doesn't mean grace is unreal; it simply means science is limited, a fact with which genuinely humble scientists are untroubled.

Freedom in Christ produces changes broader than love, however. "Christian liberty," notes Forell, "has ethical consequences; it affects the daily life of the Christian."<sup>42</sup> The full range of Christian ethical reflection thus comes into play,<sup>43</sup> as an expression of our liberty. Questions of normativity in human life are thoroughly intertwined in psychology,<sup>44</sup> its aspirations to ethical neutrality and objectivity notwithstanding. For the Christian, however, ethical questions are only asked properly on the far side of the cross, as grateful responses to the free gift of life in Christ. They cannot rightly be asked except by persons fully aware of their radical freedom in Christ, by persons under no obligation to perform any good works, by Christians who are "perfectly free lord[s] of all, subject to none."<sup>45</sup>

Those who exercise their freedom in Christ find, however, that they slip back into bondage to sin. The glorious transformation that grace produces in us doesn't take the form of a once-for-all perfection, or even a slow steady progression to greater and greater holiness. The Christian life is far more complex and psychologically rich, which Paul, Augustine, and Luther understood well. Because we are simultaneously justified and sinful, we need – again and again and again – both Law and Gospel, cross and resurrection, experienced daily, as long as we all shall live. Christ "abrogated the Law," Luther announces, "and brought liberty and eternal life to light – this happens personally and spiritually every day in any Christian, in whom there are found the time of Law and the time of grace in constant alternation."<sup>46</sup>

And so we need grace, grace as transforming power and, above all, grace as declaration of pardon, as we lead lives in which return, again and again and again, to the cross. Both dimensions of grace can be found in Luther. "This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly," reports Luther, "not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet

finished but is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road.”<sup>47</sup> Recent revivals of traditions of spiritual formation, drawing upon certain Biblical themes and often psychologically very sophisticated and nuanced, often portray the Christian life as a journey and emphasize grace as transforming power.

However much progress we make, however, we remain sinful. We are always susceptible to disobedience, and regularly succumb. Using our free will to reject grace remains a live possibility – always. We thus live our entire lives on the cusp, needing grace – always. Although Meilaender acknowledges the importance of growth in discipleship, he contends that “even for the obedient, even for the disciples, the Christian faith is not best described in terms of growth and progress, of a journey toward perfection.”<sup>48</sup> Faith (*fiducia*) is the better description, faith “the starting point to which one constantly returns.”<sup>49</sup> We receive faith as a gift by grace, by God’s unilateral unconditional declaration of pardon and reconciliation. “Not growth, but a continual return to the starting point,” asserts Meilaender, “characterizes the way of discipleship.”<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Zackrisson contends that “any theology that defines the Gospel in terms of being *like* Christ rather than being *in* Christ ... injects moralism as the root element and thus misunderstands the function and radical nature of grace and forgiveness.”<sup>51</sup>

That the way of discipleship is a “continual return” to faith, that Luther refers to the Christian life as a “process,” means that we need to experience grace again and again and again. This dynamic vision of the Christian life is perhaps most commonly known among Lutherans in terms of the (psychologically complex) notion of the daily renewal of baptism. Baptism with water “signifies that the old Adam in us, together with all sins and evil lusts, should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance and be put to death, and that the new man should come forth daily and rise up, cleansed and righteous, to live forever in God’s presence.”<sup>52</sup> We allow the old man to die, to be put to death on the cross. All our sins, all our infirmities, weaknesses, and insecurities die with him. By grace, we allow them to be put to death with Christ on the cross. And we allow the new man to rise – from the waters of baptism, from death, from the cross – to newness of life, a new life characterized by radical freedom in Christ, by lives characterized by service to others and justice for all. This dynamic cycle – accepting our sinfulness, and allowing Christ’s grace to

transform us, secure in the knowledge of his sufficiency and not our own – allows us increasingly to know our sin, for we can have complete assurance in God's forgiveness. We need not deny our sinfulness, our weaknesses, our shame, our guilt; all that dies with Christ on the cross. And the forgiveness and new life we receive enables us to confess all the more. When the church works well, we hear Law and Gospel, we receive the Sacraments. And so we break through our distortions about ourselves and others and come to know ourselves more deeply, and so we also come to know others more deeply and to serve them more profoundly. We daily re-experience the wholeness that is ours in Christ. This, then, is a sort of spiritual therapy, a transformation of all that we are by the liberating declaration of God's grace, that we can (and ideally do) experience every day of our lives.

## **Conclusion**

If we are to develop psychologies that take grace seriously, we need to affirm the ability of scientific psychologies to provide important knowledge about human beings (one part, the crown, of God's creation). Scientific psychologies can produce knowledge about measurable dimensions of the effects of grace on human lives, effects that exhibit some level of regularity. That affirmation of one disciplinary approach needs to be held in tension, however, with an affirmation of theological perspectives that challenge the ultimate adequacy of psychologies that exclude from their accounts of human beings concepts (and the realities to which they refer) that are often at once theological and psychological – God, sin, the Law, the cross, the church, and the efficacy of the Sacraments. Our psychologies, if aspiring to remain true to the dialectical tension found in the best Lutheran thinking, require dialogue across various disciplinary understandings of human beings, critiques (including fundamental critiques that challenge the adequacy of underlying assumptions) of other disciplines, a willingness to rethink the conclusions of one discipline along the lines suggested by other disciplines, and the willingness to think across disciplinary lines with pluralistic methodologies and comprehensive understandings of human beings. Finally, Christians need to be humble about the limits of our knowledge about human beings, humble as scientists, humble as pastors and theologians. We stand, always, in need of grace. Through

the cross, grace is available to us, always. In our efforts to understand human beings, that may be the most profound fact of all.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Seymour J. Korchin, *Modern Clinical Psychology* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), p. 355. For a view of science more in harmony with my view that we need science but more than science to understand human beings optimally, consider a sign that Einstein reportedly kept on his wall: “Not everything that counts can be counted; not everything that can be counted counts.” Martin McKee, “Commentary: Not Everything That Counts can be Counted; Not Everything That can be Counted Counts,” *BMJ (British Medical Journal)* 328 (2004):153.
- <sup>2</sup> The fact that the ethical and metaphysical assumptions of clinical psychologists inevitably and deeply (albeit usually implicitly) shape their explanations of human behavior is well documented. See Don S. Browning, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies: A Critical Conversation in the Theology of Culture* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress, 1987); Stanton L. Jones and Richard E. Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1991); Frank C. Richardson, Blaine J. Fowers, and Charles B. Guignon, *Re-envisioning Psychology: Moral Dimensions of Theory and Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999); John Z. Sadler, ed., *Descriptions and Prescriptions: Values, Mental Disorders, and the DSMs* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Alan C. Tjeltveit, “Psychotherapeutic Triumphalism and Freedom From Mental Illness: Diverse Concepts of Mental Health,” *Word and World: Theology for Christian Ministry* 9 (1989):132–139; Alan C. Tjeltveit, *Ethics and Values in Psychotherapy* (London: Routledge, 1999). Their ethical and metaphysical theories, notes Browning, are “on equal logical footing” (p. 122) with those from the Christian tradition.
- <sup>3</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1993).
- <sup>4</sup> A precise explication of how we can legitimately interpret in accord with Christian understandings is beyond the scope of this paper, but I think that such endeavor would require, at the very least, that the interpretations: (a) take into account all relevant data rather than selectively drawing upon only data that fits the proposed interpretation, (b) don’t contradict a study’s empirical findings, (c) are explicitly labeled as interpretations rather than as established fact, (d) explicitly note that the author’s intention is to interpret the data consistent with

Christian understandings, and (e) are developed through a process in which the interpreter is open to, and considers, the possibility that Christian understandings need to be altered or rejected.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah 17:9.

<sup>6</sup> Psychoanalytically-oriented psychologists generally advocate post-Freudian ego psychology or object relations, which differ in significant regards from the views of Freud and Jung.

<sup>7</sup> Seymour Koch, "'Psychology' or 'the Psychological Studies,'" *American Psychologist* 48 (1993):902–904.

<sup>8</sup> Robert N. Bellah, Norma Haan, Paul Rabinow, and William M. Sullivan, "Introduction," in *Social Science as Moral Inquiry*, eds. Norma Haan, Robert N. Bellah, Paul Rabinow, and William M. Sullivan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Seymour Koch, "The Nature and Limits of Psychological Knowledge: Lessons of a Century qua 'Science,'" *American Psychologist* 36 (1981):269.

<sup>10</sup> See Kendler and Waterman, who maintain that, although science can sometimes inform us about human nature (understood descriptively) and which alternative course of action most effectively helps us reach some end, science cannot tell us what is good, right, and/or virtuous. Howard H. Kendler, *Amoral Thoughts about Morality: The Intersection of Science, Psychology, and Ethics* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 2000). Alan S. Waterman, "On the Uses of Psychological Theory and Research in the Process of Ethical Inquiry," *Psychological Bulletin* 103 (1988):283–298.

<sup>11</sup> Emotivism, the view that moral expressions are merely emotional expressions, was, Koch (1969) noted, the de facto ethical theory of logical positivism, which was long psychology's philosophy of science. Seymour Koch, "Value Properties: Their Significance for Psychology, Axiology, and Science," in *The Anatomy of Knowledge*, ed. Marjorie Greene (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 119–48. Few psychologists, it should be noted, would explicitly now affirm that view, although many still do so implicitly.

<sup>12</sup> Hillary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Most psychologists address the realm of ordinary life, to which reason applies. The Augsburg Confession states that the human being "possesses some measure of freedom of the will which enables him [or her]... to make choices among the things that reason comprehends." *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran*

*Church*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress, 1959), Section XVIII, "Freedom of the Will," p. 39. Whether we have the ability to choose a relationship with God is, of course, another matter entirely.

<sup>14</sup> Brent D. Slife, "Theoretical Challenges to Therapy Practice and Research: The Constraint of Naturalism," in *Bergin and Garfield's Handbook of Psychotherapy and Behavior Change*, ed. Michael J. Lambert (New York: Wiley, 2004), pp. 44–83.

<sup>15</sup> See Robinson, who argues against "prevailing tendencies to conflate the 'natural' with the 'physical.'" Daniel N. Robinson, *Praise and Blame: Moral Realism and its Applications* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. xi.

<sup>16</sup> Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. and intro J. K. Ryan (Garden City, New York: Image/Doubleday, 1960), Book 1, Chapter 1, p. 43.

<sup>17</sup> Howard Hong ed., *Integration in the Christian Liberal Arts College* (Northfield, Minnesota: St. Olaf College Press, 1956), p. 68.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Benne, "Lutheran Quietism in Higher Education," *The Cresset Trinity* (2003), available from <http://www.roanoke.edu/crs/QuietismArticle.htm>, ¶3.

<sup>19</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 43.

<sup>20</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards," *Christian Century*, 1 May 1996:482.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 22:37, 39

<sup>22</sup> Curiously, Martin Marty draws upon the language of clinical psychology in making Martin Luther's "obsession" with God the organizing motif in his new biography of Luther. Martin E. Marty, "Which Luther? A God-obsessed seeker," *Christian Century*, 10 February 2004:30–31. If Augustine, Edwards, and the words of Jesus as recorded in Matthew are correct, it is indeed quite proper to place one's relationship with God at the center of one's life. The greatest problem facing most of us, then, is not a psychopathological obsession with God, like that supposedly suffered by Luther, but the blindness of most of us to God and his grace, and the fulfillment we experience when we, by grace, love him with all that we are.

<sup>23</sup> For a contemporary defense of moral realism by a psychologist-philosopher, see Robinson, *Praise and Blame*.

<sup>24</sup> The first resort of many psychologists, when confronted with guilt, is to persuade someone they have nothing to feel guilty about. Their psychology that is, is Law-less. Usually, however, such amorality has

its limits, with most psychologists rejecting incest, violations of autonomy, and clients/students/funding agencies/employers who don't pay psychologists what they had agreed to pay them.

<sup>25</sup> Romans 5:20a.

<sup>26</sup> Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn/Dutton, 1973).

<sup>27</sup> "It is Luther's emphasis on sin and the justification of the sinner," Forell observes, "which is the great obstacle to the acceptance of his theology in modern times." George W. Forell, "Luther and Christian Liberty," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 2 (1, 2002), [http://www.elca.org/jle/articles/history/article.forell\\_george05.html](http://www.elca.org/jle/articles/history/article.forell_george05.html), ¶9. "The profound objection to Luther," Forell continues, "comes from those who understand (correctly, to be sure) that he insists that apart from faith even good works are sin" (Ibid., ¶10).

<sup>28</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (New York: Scribner's, 1948). See Solomon Schimmel, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Jewish, Christian, and Classical Reflections on Human Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>29</sup> I Corinthians 1:23

<sup>30</sup> Forell notes that "Luther's entire perspective is almost incomprehensible to modern men and women. ... We do believe in our liberty but not as a gift of God, dependent every moment on God's grace, but as a right that makes us into autonomous beings for whom faith in God is an option." Ibid., ¶16.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Luther, "Psalm 51," in *Luther's Works* (12), ed. and trans. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia, 1955), pp. 377-378.

<sup>32</sup> Gilbert Meilaender, "Grace, Justification Through Faith, and Sin," in *Ecumenical Ventures in Ethics*, eds. Reinhard Hütter & Theodor Dieter (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 81. He reports that he sets forth his views about the necessity of grace in both senses for Christian ethics in *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 100-126, and *Faith and Faithfulness* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), pp. 74-80. Pope John Paul II, he suggests, fails to emphasize sufficiently grace as declaration of pardon.

The Roman Catholic William Meissner constructed a psychology of grace (*Foundations for a Psychology of Grace*. New York: Paulist Press, 1966), but appears to have tilted Meilaender's balance entirely in the direction of grace as transforming power: "Grace does not change man, but it gives man the power to change himself" (p. 238) and "the action

of grace, whether sufficient or efficacious in theological perspective, demands ego-activity as part of the condition for its actuality" (p. 150). Believing that grace as declaration of pardon is the primary meaning of grace (God, that is, does need our help to redeem us; indeed our help is entirely inefficacious), I don't discuss Meissner here.

My approach differs from Meissner in a second way: His primary focus is on the contributions of psychologists, not theologians, to a psychology of grace; while I think both can and should contribute to a psychology of grace, I focus here on theology's contributions.

<sup>33</sup> Meilaender, "Grace, Justification Through Faith, and Sin," p. 69.

<sup>34</sup> Ephesians 2:8–9.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians 1535," in *Luther's Works* (26), ed. & trans. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), p. 158.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Luther, "The Sacrament of Penance," in *Luther's Works* (35), ed. & trans. E. Theodore Bachman (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1960), p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> Forell, ¶30.

<sup>39</sup> Forell, ¶16.

<sup>40</sup> Forell, ¶26.

<sup>41</sup> Luther, "Lectures on Galatians 1535," p. 343.

<sup>42</sup> Forell, ¶30.

<sup>43</sup> This involves questions of justice, and so forth. See e.g., Karen L. Bloomquist, and John L. Stumme, eds., *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress, 1998) and Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Richardson et al., *Re-envisioning Psychology*.

<sup>45</sup> Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Luther's Works*, Vol. 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm, trans. W. A. Lambert and Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), p. 344.

<sup>46</sup> Luther, "Lectures on Galatians 1535," p. 340.

<sup>47</sup> Martin Luther, "Defense and Explanation of All the Articles," in *Luther's Works*, Vol. 32, ed. George W. Forell, trans. Charles M. Jacobs & George W. Forell (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1958), p. 24.

<sup>48</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 67.



<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>51</sup> Edwin Zackrisson, "A Theology of Sin, Grace and Forgiveness," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 11(1992):152.

<sup>52</sup> Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism," in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 349.