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# Divided by Sin (Chapter 1 from Sin and Grace in Christian Counseling)

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## Divided by Sin

SOMETIMES THE CLEAREST DIVISIONS IN LIFE do not hold up well under scrutiny. In my case, I once divided Christian counseling into two distinct categories: the biblical counselors and the integrationists. On one hand, biblical counselors were—more or less—the bad guys. Trained in conservative seminaries and influenced by writers like Jay Adams, they had one goal in therapy: to root out sin in their clients' lives. They did not know much about psychology, and they seemed insensitive to relational aspects of counseling. I, on the other hand, was a good guy—an integrationist. Trained as a clinical psychologist at a reputable university, I understood a good deal about psychology and still affirmed the importance of theological orthodoxy. My approach to psychotherapy, I thought, was more sophisticated and nuanced than the biblical counselors'. The division was clear in my mind: they emphasized sin, I emphasized grace.

Philip Monroe messed up my tidy categorization of Christian counseling. Phil and I first met in my office at Wheaton College when I was interviewing him for the doctoral program in clinical psychology that I was directing at the time. Phil was an unusual candidate because he was coming from the "other side." Trained at Westminster Seminary in biblical counseling, he wanted a graduate degree in psychology also. Before the interview, I was expecting not to recommend him for admission; after all, he was one of *them*. But to my surprise, I found him a delightful, engaging, compassionate man. I was drawn to his love of theology and people. We accepted Phil into our program, and he came and studied at Wheaton College for five years. I suspect I learned at least as much from Phil during that half-decade as he learned from me. He helped me get beyond my caricatures and misunderstandings of biblical counseling and helped me to see the importance of a theological perspective on counseling. While in our graduate program, Phil wrote an article in *Journal of Psychology and Theology* about building

bridges between biblical counselors and Christian psychologists (Monroe, 1997). Now he is a licensed psychologist teaching at Biblical Seminary where he is still building bridges. Though my audience for this book is mostly intended for those in the integrationist tradition, I hope it helps build some bridges also.

Seemingly, the doctrine of sin has become a watershed among Christian counselors. On one side of the divide are the many seminarians, pastors and biblical counselors who identify themselves with biblical counseling (Powlison, 2000, 2001) or nouthetic counseling (Adams, 1970). On the other side, many pastoral counselors, Christian psychologists, social workers and psychotherapists prefer to emphasize the integration of faith and the behavioral sciences. The dividing line has been drawn, and loyalties run deep. Counselors in one group attend conferences of the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation ([www.ccef.org](http://www.ccef.org)) and subscribe to *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*. Counselors in the other group attend the Christian Association for Psychological Studies ([www.caps.net](http://www.caps.net)) and subscribe to *The Journal of Psychology and Christianity*. Educational institutions have joined one side or the other—some offering degrees in biblical counseling and others degrees in Christian counseling or clinical psychology. Churches have entered the fray. Some embrace contemporary psychological methods; others insist that all psychology must be rejected. And many practitioners first identify what they do *not* believe (I am *not* a biblical counselor, or I am *not* an integrationist) even before they identify what they *do* believe. But could it be that these divisions over the doctrine of sin reflect some deeper divide about the nature of what it means to be human and how we relate to a God who longs to draw us close in loving relationship?

If the watershed is about the doctrines of sin and grace—with some Christian counselors emphasizing sin while others emphasize grace—then it is not surprising that most choose grace. Shall I emphasize sin with my clients, causing them to slink further into shame and remorse for their struggles and perhaps take on unnecessary guilt for events over which they have no control? Or shall I emphasize grace, accepting my clients as Christ has accepted me, allowing them to grow into awareness of their strengths and weaknesses? Stated this way, the choice is clear. Who wouldn't choose grace?

But maybe the matter is not so simple. Dividing the Christian counseling world into a sin camp and a grace camp is misleading and incorrect. I suggest this for two reasons. First, the biblical counseling movement is not pri-

### COUNSELING TIP 1.1: *The Confirmation Bias Affects Counselors Too*

Cognitive psychologists write about the confirmation bias, which means that people seek out information consistent with what they already believe and avoid contrary information. Consider how this might work for Mandy, a newly graduated Christian psychologist or counselor who has heard negative things about the biblical counseling movement. Rather than reading what biblical counselors are actually saying, Mandy might be content to read those who criticize biblical counseling. She will be confirming what she already believes, which helps her simplify the world and make sense of her counseling methods. But notice that she may also be quite wrong because she has never read the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* or a book by a convinced biblical counselor. She might become a much better Christian counselor after reading some of the biblical counseling materials. Even if she disagrees sharply with what the biblical counselors have to say, at least she will be in a position to consider perspectives that she had not considered before.

marily about sin. The critics of the movement reduce biblical counselors to counselors who hold naive and simplistic views of sin, often without even reading their work. More accurately, the biblical counseling movement is primarily about Christian anthropology and ecclesiology. They are trying to reclaim a Christian view of health and functioning that keeps the care of souls within the ministries and teachings of the church. The doctrine of sin is a key Christian teaching, of course, so it is one of several tenets emphasized by biblical counselors. Psychology is viewed skeptically by biblical counselors because it has removed the care of souls from the ministry of the church, and because it has supplanted a Christian view of persons with a subtle and pernicious tug toward a secular view of human functioning. Dividing the Christian counseling world into a sin camp and a grace camp, and then associating biblical counselors with the sin camp, does terrible injustice to what they are saying.

Second, it is not helpful to divide Christian counselors according to sin and grace because it distorts Christian doctrine. Sin and grace may warrant separate chapters in a systematic theology text, because both are huge con-

cepts and we must divide books into chapters somehow, but the concepts are so deeply and thoroughly interconnected that one cannot possibly be understood without the other; grace cannot be understood without understanding the extent of our sin, and we must have the hope of grace in order to look honestly at the depth of our sin. When Christian counselors attempt to emphasize sin without grace, or grace without sin, they distort both.

### The Lost Language of Sin and Grace

There was once a time when the language of sin and grace was understood, both in private and public discourse, but that era has largely been supplanted by a therapeutic culture that emphasizes symptoms more than sin and unconditional acceptance more than grace. The language of sin has been replaced with a language of crime and sickness (Menninger, 1973; Taylor, 2000). One leading psychologist even suggested that the belief in sin is what makes people disturbed (Ellis, 1960, 1971), though he has recently recanted this belief (Ellis, 2000).

I sometimes read Puritan prayers to my students, and then we pause to ponder what sort of response such a prayer might engender in churches today. For example, consider these two phrases from separate prayers:

It is fitting thou shouldest not regard me,  
for I am vile and selfish;  
yet I seek thee,  
and when I find thee there is no wrath  
to devour me,  
but only sweet love. (Bennett, 1975, p. 46)

No poor creature stands in need of divine grace more than I do,  
And yet none abuses it more than I have done, and still do.  
How heartless and dull I am!  
Humble me in the dust for not loving thee more.  
Every time I exercise any grace renewedly  
I am renewedly indebted to thee,  
the God of all grace, for special assistance. (Bennett, 1975, p. 111)

Imagine how public prayers such as these might be perceived today. The person offering such a prayer might be prescribed a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (e.g., Prozac), sent to a pastoral counselor or referred to a self-esteem group. The language of sin seems quaint, a relic of some old-time religion, and though the word *grace* has persisted, it cannot possibly

mean the same thing as it did before we lost track of sin.

Today we use *grace* as a synonym for being lenient or tolerant: "I will show some grace and accept late papers," or "You have a ten-day grace period by which to make your mortgage payment." This is a shallow, vapid, consumerist sort of grace compared to what was known in previous generations when people went trembling into the confessional booth and emerged with the lightness of step that comes with forgiveness of sin.

The Puritan prayers may seem harsh or old-fashioned, but they remind us of how far sin separates us from God and how desperately we need a solution so that we can be ushered back into relationship with God—a God who has demonstrated a passionate and holy love for humanity from the Garden of Eden until today. The doctrines of sin and grace are ultimately our great hope because they reverberate with some primordial rhythm in the human soul, giving us the courage to believe in a God who is restoring and redeeming all creation.

In his book *Whatever Became of Sin?* Karl Menninger, a distinguished twentieth-century psychiatrist, describes his eyewitness account of how sin disappeared. "When I was a boy, sin was still a serious matter and the word was not a jocular term. But I saw this change; I saw it go. I am afraid I even joined in hailing its going" (Menninger, 1973, p. 24). Menninger goes on to describe a new social morality, which was introduced with contemporary mental health research and practice; psychiatrists and psychologists became the high priests of this new moral order. While Menninger affirms the importance of mental health professions, he regrets that the concept of sin did not survive the transition. I would add that a true understanding of grace has also been lost, because it cannot exist without a language of sin.

And now we can see what the biblical counselors are saying. They are not saying we should call our clients sinners and demand repentance in the counseling office as much as they are calling us back to a way of thinking that is easily lost in today's flurry of mental health activity. A theological worldview has been supplanted by a therapeutic paradigm as one vocabulary has been traded in for another. In the process we may have lost our understanding of what it means to be fallen humans in God's world.

Jennifer was a bright young woman, newly married, trying desperately to recover from that awful Wednesday evening. Finances were tight, as they often are for newlyweds, so Jennifer took a job at the local convenience store. She stepped away from the counter one evening to get something

from the back room when she realized that a customer had followed her. The next moments were a horrifying haze of knife-point threats, partial disrobing, the foul stench of unwanted closeness and, ultimately, forced sexual penetration. When the rapist was satisfied, he holstered his knife and walked out the front door as if he had bought a pack of chewing gum or cigarettes. Meanwhile Jennifer lay sobbing beside cases of beer in the back room, forever changed.

In our counseling, Jennifer and I needed the language of sin. She needed a word like sin to understand what had happened. How else could such horror be understood? Her perpetrator had not merely made a mistake. This was not just a bad choice. His behavior was not merely a symptom of some psychological disorder. This was horrendous sin, and it needed to be named and grieved, over and over. We needed the language of sin to exonerate her. This was not her doing. It was not her sin. She was targeted, stalked and devastated by the sin of another. And she needed a caring, gentle listener to help her walk back into memories of the trauma, to help her weep and lament and try to make sense of her future.

This may seem like an easy clinical example because it identifies a sin done to the client rather than by the client. Who wouldn't view rape as a horrendous offense worthy of the label of sin? But what does a Christian counselor do when a client is struggling with a personal pattern of sin? Here again, the temptation is to bifurcate the world into two artificial categories—those who are sinned against and those who are sinning themselves. As I will explore further in chapter two, this is a misleading and simplistic view of sin. Even in Jennifer's case, where the source of the problem was so clearly a sin against her, she found it had devastating implications in her own personal choices thereafter.

Events like rape change people. In the months following, Jennifer found herself irritable, aloof and annoyed easily by her husband. She screamed out in rage and anxiety, but the rapist who caused her pain was not there to hear, so her feelings spilled over onto undeserving loved ones. Her relationships became strained, her emotions frazzled, her hope compromised.

Here we see the complexity of sin. It is not merely packaged inside the skin of a single human being. We are social beings, constantly interacting with one another, always being influenced by the sin of the world around us. Jennifer had been violated, and though she had no culpability for this tragic rape, the rape cost her so dearly that it submerged her into a pattern

## IN THE OFFICE 1.1: Whispering the Language of Sin

Considering sin in therapy does not mean that a counselor calls a client a sinner. The following counseling dialogue reveals a gentle acknowledgment of sin, struggle and a cry for grace without ever using the word *sin*.

Jennifer: Things were rough this week with Justin. I know he just wants to help, but sometimes he drives me crazy.

Mark: I know that has been a challenge for you lately. Tell me more about him driving you crazy.

Jennifer: He's just always asking stuff, like if I'm okay or if I had any dreams last night or if I would favor the death penalty for rape. It's just nonstop. And I ask him to stop, and he does for a few days, and then he starts all over again.

Mark: Yeah, and it really gets to you.

Jennifer: Completely. I'm so annoyed.

Mark: How does your feeling annoyed come out in your relationship with Justin?

Jennifer: I don't think I treat him very well. Sometimes I just get really frustrated and scream at him. He looks really hurt and walks away, and I feel terrible.

Mark: That's not how you want to respond.

Jennifer: No, not at all. I feel terrible about it.

Mark: Yes, I see that, both in your words and in your eyes.

Jennifer: [crying] I need to handle this better. I just feel all tied up inside, like any little thing sets me off. I'm so tense and upset and afraid.

Mark: You're trying to move on, but it feels tougher than you could have imagined.

Jennifer: Yes, and I'm so tired and confused too.

The client and counselor are whispering a language of sin and grace, even without using the words.

of sinful and damaging interactions with family members. With time and ample doses of grace from God, caring friends, family members and her therapist, Jennifer was able to grieve her loss, recover the majority of her hope, renew strained relationships and move ahead with life.

It seems to me that Christian psychotherapists and biblical counselors might handle someone like Jennifer in similar ways. Both would sit with her in her pain, listen to her story, and allow her to grieve, weep and ask the sort of questions that injured people ask. Both would identify the rapist's behavior as an evil, horrendous act—a rupture of human civility. Both would notice that Jennifer herself began treating people unkindly in the aftermath of the rape, and whether or not they used the word *sin* they would be concerned about helping Jennifer reclaim an ability to treat her friends and family better. Biblical counselors might use a theological vocabulary in understanding Jennifer while Christian psychotherapists use a psychological vocabulary—and these different vocabularies are no small matter—but ultimately both are likely to provide competent care for a hurting person.

### Transcending the Divide

As an integrationist, I believe there is value in both psychology and Christian theology. We ought to study and learn about human nature—however fallen it has become—and psychology helps us do so with its various theories, scientific findings and methods. But let us not slip into the trap of thinking that we are offering grace while the biblical counselors are preaching about sin. Too often we integrationists are minimizing both grace and sin because our psychological vocabulary does not allow for these notions. Here we have a good deal to learn from the biblical counselors and the theological tradition they represent.

In losing track of sin, we have also lost a careful theological definition of our most basic human problem. For some, the word *sin* evokes images of angry fundamentalist preachers who seem more intent on condemning and judging than searching for forgiveness and grace. Others think of *sin* as a word used to manipulate and coerce people into particular ways of behavior. Still others think of sin lightly, as a topic of lighthearted joking or a name for a city where people go to gamble and party (that one can buy a motorcycle at a place called Sin City Scooters in Las Vegas is evidence of how imprecisely and lightly we have come to view sin). Only as we move beyond these distorted views of sin can we reclaim it as part of an essential vocabulary—one that opens the possibility of forgiveness, redemption, and renewed relationships with God and others.

From a Christian perspective, sin is failing to conform to God's moral law (Erickson, 1985). Sin is evident both in our fallen state (i.e., our distorted

dispositions) and in our actions. It is both personal and corporate. It is both forensic—meaning that we have violated God's will—and relational, causing a tragic distance between humanity and our loving Creator. In an earlier book, which I mentioned in the introduction to this one, Clark Campbell and I presented a model for Christian counseling that is based on three views of what it means to be made in the image of God (McMinn & Campbell, 2007). These same three views of the *imago Dei*—functional, structural and relational—are helpful in understanding the nature of sin and our desperate need for grace.

From a functional perspective, God created humans and instructed them to manage themselves and creation with goodness and self-control. We have fallen short. Wars divide our world, pollution produced for the sake of convenience and profit threatens the health of creation, and our failures of self-control are evident everywhere—in crime, addiction, poverty, pornography, violence, gluttony, consumerism and so much more.

From a structural vantage point, God created humans with certain ontological capacities, to speak and reason and understand morality. These capacities have been compromised by original sin. (Original sin refers to the state into which we are born as opposed to the sinful choices we voluntarily make later in life.) As King David cried out in Psalm 51:5, “For I was born a sinner— / yes, from the moment my mother conceived me,” so also, centuries later, Augustine reflected: “For in your sight, no one is free from sin, not even the infant whose life is but a day upon the earth” (Augustine 398/1986, p. 7). Because of this sinful nature, our God-given structural capacities are weakened and distorted. Our capacity to think well, to determine the moral alternative, to understand the complexities of the created order have all been tainted by our sinful nature. Our human will has become corrupted and twisted, even before we consciously chose sin, so that we do not naturally love God first and neighbor as self.

Only God, in grace, can break through our blindness and offer us salvation. Relational views of the *imago Dei* emphasize that God's character is seen in the relationships humans form with one another and with God. God's purposes, which arise from God's character, are revealed in relationship with humanity. It is not so much that any individual contains an ontological stamp bearing God's nature, but that our relating to God and one another is a reflection of a God who cares so much about relationship that he sent Jesus to reestablish a covenantal relationship with lost hu-

manity. Here again, we see the devastating consequences of sin. Our relationships have been damaged—both our relationships with other humans and our relationship with God. Conflict is all around us, ranging from interpersonal to international, and we have turned away from God—the source of greatest joy—in our relentless quest for personal fulfillment and pleasure.

In all these ways we see the wreckage of sin extending through all creation, but this is not the end of the gospel. Indeed, it is a starting point for understanding the incredible grace God extends. The apostle Paul describes how human sin makes the good news so vivid. “God’s law was given so that all people could see how sinful they were. But as people sinned more and more, God’s wonderful grace became more abundant. So just as sin ruled over all people and brought them to death, now God’s wonderful grace rules instead, giving us right standing with God and resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 5:20-21). God’s grace is both justifying and sanctifying. Grace justifies those who accept Christ’s gift of salvation, regenerating us and making us pure in God’s sight. “As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault” (Col 1:22). And grace is also sanctifying, sticking with us over time, causing us to be transformed into the women and men God desires us to be.

Sin is offensive and unpopular. Grace is winsome and inviting. If given a choice, we should all choose grace. But we cannot approach sin and grace as separate items on a menu; Christian theology will simply not allow it. As will be explored in subsequent chapters, we cannot possibly understand the Christian doctrine of grace unless we understand sin.

It is a curious thing that those of us involved in the integration movement have not studied and written about sin very much. We are interested in human behavior and theology, so would it not seem reasonable for us to study the meaning and implications of sin alongside our interest in grace? After all, sin is a central doctrine of the Christian faith, and the problems and consequences of human evil are continually confronted in the therapy office. When Philip Monroe (2001) looked for articles about sin in the integration literature he found almost nothing, and most of what has been written has been an effort to view sin through the lens of various psychological theories. Monroe concludes:

No matter what the therapist’s theoretical orientation is, therapy will deal with

### SURVEY SAYS 1.1: Sin Matters

With the help of four graduate students, I surveyed a sample of Christian leaders in 2005, asking them, “What do you wish every psychologist knew about the nature of sin?” The survey went out to pastors, theologians, biblical scholars, missionaries and ministry leaders. In all, 171 Christian leaders replied to the question. My students and I organized the answers we received and wrote a brief research article for a journal published by the American Psychological Association (McMinn, Ruiz, Marx, Wright & Gilbert, 2006). We sifted through a number of wise and helpful comments in the process. For example:

I wish all of us—pastors and psychologists alike—were more realistic about sin . . . its pervasiveness, its blinding effect upon us, its persistence in us. We need to communicate without apology that human beings are capable of enormous evil and of enormous good. Both sides of the truth need to come through.

To me, this is the crux of clinical counseling. Is the problem a consequence of sinful choices or of a psychological or neurological disorder? Sin should not be the cause of every disorder. Neither should it be dismissed or minimized as a root cause either.

One can deal with the topic of sin in a compassionate manner in therapy that is not shameful. Most psychologists I know associate discussions of sin automatically with shame.

I will draw on the wisdom of these Christian leaders throughout this book. They have much insight to offer, and many have concerns about the ways Christian psychologists have avoided talking about sin.

the sins of clients. But the dominant culture that sets boundaries for appropriate care of persons does not generally consider sinfulness and all of its ramifications as a significant influence on human functioning and behavior. Because we function within the dominant paradigm, we also may be tempted to downplay the effect of sin in our clients’ lives, or at least to remove the traditional vocabulary of sin. It is my belief that we must consider the result of the vocabulary we use when we talk about sin. In our effort to contextualize our message to clients, we often use words that are more palatable. . . . However, does our new vocabulary cause the concept of sin to lose its . . . meaning because sin’s devastation and Godward orientation are softened? Does the vocabulary of shortcomings and dysfunction direct our eyes away from the de-

structiveness of sin and God's holiness? Does our vocabulary encourage a lifestyle of self-examination and repentance? (p. 217)

Monroe provides an important corrective for those of us involved in integration. The language of sin is important in the contemporary and historic witness of the church, in the lives of individuals and communities, and in the Christian counseling office.

I became convinced of this when I was asked to deliver a plenary address to the Christian Association of Psychological Studies in 2002. The theme of the conference was "Grace, Freedom, and Responsibility." As I began preparing for my talk, looking into the psychological and theological literature on grace, I realized how little can be said about grace without also attending to sin. Eventually I decided to title my talk, which was scheduled for the first night of the conference, "Prelude to Grace: A Psychology of Sin and a Sin of Psychology." The premise of that talk, and of this book, is that we Christian psychologists have been remiss in considering sin. We are right to be so attracted to grace, but how much deeper and richer our understanding of grace can be if we reclaim a Christian view of sin.

### Amazing Grace

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound . . .* There was a time when I would sing out the first phrase of John Newton's beloved hymn but then—convinced I was no wretch—sit in rebellious silence for the next six words. I was a young man back then, just finished with a doctoral program in clinical psychology and filled with some shallow version of self-esteem I had learned in the process, crossing the threshold of adulthood with great confidence in human potential. I was wrong.

Back in those days of youthful arrogance, I wrote a book about grace. The book was never published. I sent my two-hundred-fifty-page manuscript to several different publishers, and each of them responded with a permutation of the standard "thanks, but no thanks" letter. Twenty years later, I am grateful that book was never published. It was a book produced by an overachieving, young, assistant professor who wasn't ready to write about grace. It was written before I began to grasp the depth of brokenness and sin and lostness in our world and in my own heart. Understanding grace cannot be done without understanding sin. Sometimes I ponder what that unpublished book, with its anemic view of grace, would have been titled if it had been published. Perhaps *Grace Lite* or *Grace: Because I'm Worth It* or

*Grace: I'm Good Enough, I'm Smart Enough and, Doggonit, People Like Me.*

Like many Christian counselors in our therapeutic culture, I sometimes try to muster amazement about grace without taking sin seriously, searching for the beauty of Easter without the ashes of Lent, insisting I am found before admitting how lost I sometimes get. Sin and grace are part of the same story, and if we leave out either part, we end up with a shallow, life-draining theology and psychology.

Newton himself lived and told a story of sin and grace. I have often heard Christians speak of his powerful story: how Newton was once a slave trader who was gripped by God's love in the midst of a tumultuous storm on the high seas. But his story is not as simple as the one we tend to tell in our churches. Here is the way we tend to tell the story: Newton grew up in a culture in which slavery was commonplace and ended up lured by avarice into the slave-trading business. But then, during an awful storm in March of 1748, he saw the wretchedness of his greed and was sickened by his crimes against humanity. *I once was lost but now am found.* From that moment forward Newton turned against slavery, devoted himself to God and became a tireless crusader against the horrendous social evil of slavery. This is the sanitized version of Newton's life that we often hear from pulpits and read on Christian web sites. But it is not true.

I wish each of our life stories, and the stories of our clients, could be neat and tidy: we are lost in our sin, but then we find God—or, more correctly, God finds us—and we bask in the light of being found as we live happily ever after. All our troubles melt away, our priorities seem clear, our strained relationships are suddenly healed, we cast off our sins and self-deceptions, and we settle into a life of faithful obedience to God. Despite my best wishes, this was not Newton's story. It's not my story either, and it is not the story of my counseling clients.

It is true that Newton had some sort of awakening from a shockingly profane and blasphemous existence as he guided the *Greyhound*—a ship that carried gold, ivory and beeswax (rather than slaves)—through mountainous ocean swells. Before Newton's devout mother died, when he was six, she had instilled in him some knowledge of God, and in these hours of almost certain death, Newton returned to the faith of his youth. His blind eyes may have been opened on that dismal March night, but not wide enough to see the full extent of his lostness and his culture's evil. The ship drifted for several weeks before finding the coast of Northern Ireland. Newton stayed in



Londonderry for six weeks as the ship was being repaired, attending prayer services, studying the Christian faith and renouncing his former way of life. He later reflected:

I was no longer an infidel; I heartily renounced my former profaneness; I had taken up some right notions, was seriously disposed, and sincerely touched with a sense of the undeserving mercy I had received in being brought safely through so many dangers. I was sorry for my past misspent life, and purposed an immediate reformation . . . yet still I was greatly deficient in many respects. . . . I was little aware of the innate evils of my heart. (Martin, 1950, p. 79)

Upon Newton's return to Liverpool he promptly signed on as mate of the *Brownlow*, a ship that sailed to Africa, where Newton relapsed into a life of sexual sin despite his commitment to Mary Catlett, his wife to be. He later described himself as a dog returning to his vomit. These were obvious sins to Newton, arousing guilt and a desire to live better. But far more alarming was the abhorrent sin and disordered passions he could not see because his culture blinded him from the truth. The *Brownlow* docked in the Sierra Leone River as Newton traveled from village to village buying slaves and returning them as cargo to the ship. He then sailed across the Atlantic, studying a Latin Bible in his quarters as two hundred slaves lay in the hull, shackled two by two, squeezed into shelves like secondhand books. As many as a third died during the long voyage across the ocean, and many more suffered serious illnesses. When the ship arrived in Charleston, South Carolina, Newton's crew sold the slaves into a life of toil and oppression as he sat in church services and took leisurely strolls through fields and woods outside Charleston.

Like Newton, we view our lives through the lens of self-interest. We so naturally elevate our selves, families and communities above others and uncritically accept the social evils we perpetuate. Newton had little concept of slavery being wrong—few Christians of his day did. Sometimes I wonder how blind I am, how blind each of us are, to the cultural deceptions of our times. What lingering oppression of slavery remains, and how have I blinded myself to the evils of institutional racism? How has a global economy helped me, living in a country that consumes most of the world's resources, while hurting others in less fortunate circumstances? What other sins skulk in my soul, yet I am without the awareness or language to name them, let alone change them?

While Newton was in Charleston—a city influenced by George White-

### COUNSELING TIP 1.2: *Seeing Is Believing, or Is It the Other Way Around?*

The human capacity for self-deception is mind-boggling. Though we may assume that seeing something makes us believe it, a good deal of social science evidence suggests it is the other way around; what we believe shapes what we are able to see. John Newton's story illustrates how the cultural norms of his day so completely shaped his perceptions that he studied his Latin Bible happily even as he was stealing and selling human lives. He truly was blind to his sin. Though the cultural issues are different today, we are still vulnerable to the same processes of self-deception.

Perhaps a client is justifying a bitter attitude or a decision to behave contrary to Christian morality or excusing a past failure. When a client seems to be self-deceiving, here are some questions and prompts that can be useful:

- "I have the sense that you're trying to convince yourself that you made the right decision."
- "Is there any other way you could look at this situation?"
- "What do others who know you well have to say about this?"
- "How does this decision fit with your faith commitments?"
- "Who is a person you trust, maybe someone in your faith community, who could give you another perspective on this?"

field's preaching on civility to slaves—the slave trader began writing letters and journal entries that showed pity for his human cargo. God was working in Newton's heart, but still he resisted. Newton returned to England, married Mary Catlett and then squandered his money on the lottery before embarking on another slave-trading journey—this time as captain of the *Duke of Argyll*. More than a year later he returned home, having purchased and sold another two hundred human lives, and read extensively on the Christian faith during his time ashore. Still he did not stop.

He captained another ship, the *African*, on yet more slave voyages. Newton became a pastor to his crews, helping them see the grace of God, as his eyes remained mostly closed to the plight of the slaves the ship carried. The conditions of capture and transport were horrendous. Though more hu-

mane than most slave-ship captains, at times Newton resorted to torturing slaves to quell insurrections. Yet he wrote how being the captain of a slave ship was optimal for “promoting the Life of God in the Soul.” He could exert some control over the behavior of his crew, had ample leisure time for studying, was removed from temptations to waste time in social engagements and could observe the majesty of God’s creation. He regularly saw God deliver him from hazards of death.

Newton’s slave trading might have continued for many more years except for a seizure that made a career change medically necessary. In all, Newton spent ten years trading slaves, most of them *after* reclaiming his Christian faith. Newton’s real life story is not the sanitized version we often hear, yet it is hauntingly familiar to the Christian journey we see in ourselves. Our disordered passions do not suddenly become ordered with a flash of insight or a spiritual awakening. Change is a lifelong calling, an epic journey. It was not until many years later that Newton could write, “I once was lost but now am found.” He could write about amazing grace only as he began to see the depth of his sin.

How lost we all can be. So many prideful sins lurk beneath our awareness, stealing away the abundant life God desires for us and those around us. But God does not give up. “And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus comes back again” (Phil 1:6).

Newton became a customs officer, studied theology and, eventually—despite feelings of unworthiness because of his past sins—became a minister at Olney, England, where he preached as many as a dozen sermons a week and often wrote a hymn a week. He loved Mary faithfully, served his congregation and community well, and became an advocate for the abolition of slavery. Sometimes he annoyed parishioners because he seemed too gentle on sinners—perhaps because he saw the depths of sin in his past and was moved to extend mercy, as God had extended him such amazing grace. Newton believed that hearts are softened by the grace of the gospel, not by harsh accusation.

As Newton’s eyes opened more fully with each passing year, he was horrified at his sin. One of his friends later recalled that he never spent thirty minutes with Newton without hearing the former captain’s remorse for trading slaves. It was always on his mind, nagging his conscience while reminding him of his utter dependence on God’s forgiving grace. John Newton’s

pamphlet, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*, played an important role in the political battles to end slave trade. Two months before Newton’s seventy-ninth birthday, after a major political victory for abolition, he wrote to a friend in Parliament: “Though I can scarcely see the paper before me I must attempt to express my thankfulness to the Lord, and to offer my congratulations to you for . . . your unwearied endeavours for the abolition of the slave trade, which I have considered as a millstone, sufficient, of itself sufficient, to sink such an enlightened and highly favour’d nation as ours to the bottom of the sea” (Martin, 1950, p. 355).

When I began reading about Newton, I expected sudden enlightenment to come with his faith conversion on the stormy North Atlantic. I hoped the lostness of his heart would suddenly be reversed, allowing him to love God and others above himself. How foolish my expectation! Sometimes I demand the same from myself and those I counsel: that our sin should suddenly be solved by a moment of insight, a spiritual renewal or a commitment to change. How wrong this is. We are broken souls, struggling to see more clearly as God continues to work in our lives. Sight is a long process, calling us to a “long obedience” (Peterson, 1980).

Seeing ourselves clearly occurs over a lifetime of pursuing God. Our vision is seldom restored in a single burst of light but with countless rays streaming into our darkened eyes over many years—and always in the midst of amazing grace. At the end of his life Newton said to his friends, “My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior” (Christian History Institute, 2004).

I am the guy who used to sit in church refusing to sing the second phrase of “Amazing Grace”: that saved a wretch like me. But with the passing years I have begun to see what John Newton eventually saw in his life—that being amazed by grace also requires being honest about the sin that resides deep in one’s character. Our greatest faults are often the ones we cannot see, and our supreme hope is found in a God who loves us despite our sin, calls us back into loving relationship, and helps us grow toward greater awareness and holiness. God’s love is deeper and richer and more abundant than I ever imagined as a young man. *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.* I sing it out.

Karl Menninger, though theologically unorthodox from my evangelical vantage point, seems to have come to a similar conclusion in *Whatever Became of Sin?* Menninger (1973) concludes: “Preach! Tell it like it is. Say it

from the pulpit. Cry it from the housetops. What shall we cry? Cry comfort, cry repentance, cry hope. Because recognition of our part in the world transgression is the only remaining hope" (p. 228). Likewise, in her fine book *Speaking of Sin*, Barbara Brown Taylor—college professor and Episcopal priest—suggests that "sin is our only hope" because it calls us back to a theological vocabulary that causes us to place ourselves in the merciful hands of God (Taylor, 2000, p. 41).

It is unlikely that Christian psychologists and biblical counselors will ever agree on all counseling methods and theoretical matters—there are simply too many epistemological differences to expect complete rapprochement. But we can learn to listen to one another and to engage in dialogue characterized by some portion of the grace and truth revealed in Christ (Jn 1:14). As we learn from one another we can transcend the naïve bifurcation that suggests one group is interested in sin and the other in grace. These doctrines must be held together, for the doctrine of sin holds the hope of amazing grace for Christian counselors and their clients.