

# Psychology as a Christian Profession

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Psychology is a discipline, which more than most, is greatly misunderstood by the average person. Most people come in contact with psychology through the flood of self-help books in bookstores or the ramblings of some therapist when she appears on Oprah. This unfortunately creates a lot of misunderstanding about the nature of psychology. Broadly speaking psychology has always had two broad branches. The clinical branch started by Freud which has aimed to treat people with “mental problems” and the academic branch which grew out of philosophy and which attempts to develop a scientific understanding of people’s thoughts and actions. For a young person who might consider psychology as a potential field of study it is important to understand this division; while psychology considers the treatment of “mental problems” and therapy for these individuals, this is not the sole focus of psychology.

I teach psychology at Hope College, and our students are about evenly divided between those who pursue the clinical branch and those who pursue the academic branch. We actually have slightly more graduates who pursue careers in business and teaching and the like (utilizing the academic branch) than who pursue clinical careers. In a recent survey of our graduates 24% are in business, 18% are in teaching, 18% are in clinical psychology, 7% are in the ministry and the remainder are in a variety of other occupations. Each of these potential careers present challenges and rewards to the Christian. In the current article, I don’t have time to present the challenges and rewards of each of these professions, but I will write briefly about the challenges and opportunities of the clinical branch and the academic branch.

One of the main challenges for Christians studying clinical psychology is that this branch of psychology has had a tendency to follow certain influential men. The field began with a strong following a Sigmund Freud, later Carl Rogers, Albert Ellis, and numerous other men gained status and reputation that influenced many. The difficulty with this approach for the child of God is that these men have all displayed remarkable ungodliness and often open hostility to Christianity. Following these men and their teaching is nearly or completely impossible for the Christian. Fortunately, clinical psychology has gradually moved away from this emphasis of following particular men or particular schools of thinking. It is now quite possible for clinical psychologists to not endorse the views of any particular theorist and to develop views that are consistent with their own beliefs. Yet the arguments and views contrary to God's Word are something the student of clinical psychology will have to face. The child of God who enters clinical psychology must be strong in the face of these challenges.

Despite the challenges of clinical psychology, the opportunities can be quite appealing to some. Clinical psychologists work hard to help people recover from difficult problems in their lives, depression, abuse, anxiety and the like, and the treatment that clinical psychologists offer quite often provide at least modest relief from these problems. The skills and practice of clinical psychology still has a long way to go, but even at the present clinical psychologists do offer some treatments that can go a long way to helping people recover from certain problems. For the child of God, this means that if they study clinical psychology they can offer these services to those that are in our churches. The child of God will realize that just addressing symptoms of these problems is often not enough, sin will need to be dealt with. However, they can work together with the shepherd of the flock, and provide an important service. Anyone who has had to seek psychological treatment can testify how difficult it is to find a therapist who supports and does not undermine one's religious beliefs. The child of God who enters clinical psychology can provide this valuable service to the Christian community.

The academic branch provides it’s own unique challenges and opportunities. For the Christian studying academic psychology they will be less likely to face people who are following the teachings of one particular man, yet ideas that challenge and threaten one's beliefs will be prevalent here as well.

For example, in recent years the theory of evolution has crept from biology into psychology at an ever-increasing rate. The child of God studying academic psychology (or any other field) must be able to discern the truth from the lie. He or she must reject the lie, such as the teaching of evolution, but embrace the truth when it is taught. This means that Christians must be firmly grounded in faith if they are to study academic psychology. They will be presented with many ideas only some of which are truthful and valuable. This challenge is true for a Christian studying any discipline, but it is especially true for the Christian studying academic psychology.

Despite the dangers of academic psychology, it presents some interesting opportunities. Studying academic psychology will often take extra schooling beyond four years of college. To teach at the college level five more years are often required and work in business and other setting often requires two more years of schooling. This schooling takes much time and effort, but usually results in interesting work where people have more freedom in their work that can allow them to spend more time with their families. Christians in these settings are usually able to direct their own work and to engage in activities that do not contradict their religious beliefs. Careers in academic psychology are much like the careers of businessmen and high school teachers that most young people are familiar with. I hope that as young people consider the calling to which God is directing them they realize that a career in psychology is a possibility.

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