

# 1 Corinthians 2's Use of Natural versus Spiritual Knowledge: What Can the Natural Person Know?

By Greg E. Gifford<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction and Thesis

Dr. Keathley, thank you for the invitation to be present today and present/contribute to the conversation. The sufficiency of Scripture is an integral doctrine to the practice of counseling, and those who want to develop a counseling methodology based on the comprehensive worldview found in the Bible. That has typically been known as biblical counseling, nouthetic counseling, nouthetic confrontation, or even Christian counseling for a brief period in the 70's.<sup>2</sup> As the author has written on the issue for a few years, it seems there are some basic categories that need to be solidified in the discussion of the sufficiency of Scripture and counseling, one of which the author hopes to address with you today. The first category is that of anthropology. Through God's "common grace" there must be clarity on what this does for the unregenerate counselor. Richard Butman and Stanton Jones argued, "We would argue that it is reasonable at this point in history for Christian counselors to be eclectic or pluralistic in their approach, drawing first on the faith for the foundations of a view of persons and then elaborating on that view with conceptions taken from secular psychology or the writings of the Christian counselors of the past and the present."<sup>3</sup> Jones and Butman are an example of encouraging believing counselors to learn from secular psychology

Instead of a carte blanche authority to employ teachings from secular psychology, the question should be asked: *how does common grace affect the capacities of the unbeliever?* That anthropological question will result in an answer that necessarily becomes hamartiological, which is: if sin has affected every aspect of man—to include man's mind—then common grace would not inherently change the depravity of man, right (Rom. 6:23; Titus 1:15)? One must

---

<sup>1</sup> Greg E. Gifford is an Associate Professor at The Master's University and can be contacted at [ggifford@masters.edu](mailto:ggifford@masters.edu)

<sup>2</sup> Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1970). Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973). Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Casebook: Applying the Principles of Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> Stanton Jones and Richard Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1991), 435.

acknowledge hamartiology and the effects of common grace on the person as integral parts of the common grace conversation in counseling. This is the first category, common grace and anthropology.

The next category that needs to be fleshed out regarding counseling and common grace is that of epistemology. What does the unbeliever know and are there categories of knowledge that are accessible and inaccessible to the unbeliever? That research question is primarily the thrust of this paper. Perhaps there is no clearer passage to speak to the nature of knowledge that is accessible to the unbeliever than that of 1 Corinthians 2. In 1 Corinthians 2, the reader will find foundational categories of knowledge and smaller anthropological claims. In order to make a contribution to the field of counseling and help counselors understand what common grace cannot mean, the author is going to spend time working through the categories provided in 1 Corinthians 2 and let the exegesis of Scripture drive one's conclusions. (Remember, historical theological should not dictate one's doctrine but exegesis should.) If the reader is open to thinking carefully about 1 Corinthians 2, Paul will speak to the issues currently circling in counseling methodology. *The author's thesis is that Paul clearly distinguishes between what an unbeliever can know and cannot know, using the epistemological categories of spiritual and natural knowledge.* The author will demonstrate this through exegesis of the 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 passage and then draw conclusions for the counselor.

### **Key Definitions**

A few key definitions must be articulated before moving further in the paper. The first term is the use of the term *distinguish* when speaking of Paul's use of epistemological categories. Distinguish simply means, "to recognize as distinct or different."<sup>4</sup> Essentially, there is a difference in the categories of knowledge. The author is using the term *distinguish* within its normal, semantic range.

Common grace is simply understood to be something like: "Common Grace is the grace of God by which he gives people innumerable blessings that are not part of salvation. Common grace is different from saving grace in result, recipient, and source."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Oxford Dictionary, s.v. "distinguish," accessed November 17, 2024, oed.com. Also see "to separate into kinds, classes, or categories" in Merriam Webster. "Definition of DISTINGUISH," October 27, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/distinguish>.

<sup>5</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 803.

Next, the term “know” as used in the author’s thesis is to “to perceive directly: have direct cognition of” or to “to be aware of the truth or factuality of.”<sup>6</sup> The limitations of the unbeliever’s ability to “know” is the thrust of the author’s thesis and that means to simply be aware of or have cognition of.

### **The Unbeliever as the Natural Person**

Paul describes the categories of people in 1 Corinthians 2 in direct and indirect ways but he does so clearly. The first instance of direct ways is that of describing one group of people 1 Corinthians 2 as the “natural person” (“ψυχικὸς δὲ ἄνθρωπος”; 1 Cor. 2:14). This is a phrase that is unique to Paul in 1 Corinthians, as no other biblical author uses this exact phrase for any purposes, nonetheless to describe people. The closest is Jude 19 where Jude says, “It is these who cause divisions, *worldly* people, devoid of the Spirit” (Emphasis Added). The adjective, “worldly” (ψυχικοί) simply means *natural* or *unspiritual*. Paul is stating something along the lines of a person who is an unregenerate, BDAG states this as, “*an unspiritual person*, one who merely functions bodily, without being touched by the Spirit of God.”<sup>7</sup> It is for these reasons that certain English translations will simply state the “unspiritual” person in 1 Corinthians 2:14.<sup>8</sup> The clearest and most direct category of the unbeliever is here the one who is void of the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:12).<sup>9</sup>

There are other clues to Paul’s anthropological category, however, as he uses impersonal third person plural to refer to the unbeliever. Consider the following passages:

- “None of the rulers of this age understood this, for *if they* had” (Emphasis Added; 2:8a),
- “*They would not* have crucified the Lord of glory” (Emphasis Added; 2:8b)

---

<sup>6</sup> “Definition of KNOW,” November 17, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/know>. An argument can be made to differentiate between true knowledge versus understanding, however that is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>7</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1100.

<sup>8</sup> See the Legacy Standard Bible, New International Version, and the New Revised Standard Version. Also Rogers and Rogers, 352.

<sup>9</sup> This would stand in contrast to claiming that a person does not have a spirit. Thus, the phrase “natural” might help prevent a reader from coming to those conclusions.

In both of these instances, Paul speaks of the rulers as being “they” and the rulers of the world are not “us” but are “they.” Anthony Thiselton provides a helpful chart to understand the categories of “they”:

“WE”		“THEY”
Our glorification (2:7)	vs.	Rulers of this age (2:6, 8)
Those who love him (2:9)	vs.	Those who crucified the lord of glory (2:8)
The Spirit of God (2:12)	vs.	The spirit of the world (2:12)
The spiritual person (2:15)	vs.	The unspiritual person (2:14) <sup>10</sup>

Figure 1. Categories Between “We” and “They”

Beyond Paul’s use of “we” and “they,” there are a few more indicators of who Paul is speaking of when using “we/they” or of the “natural” person, and it is in Paul’s use of the “rulers of this age” (2:8). This phrase has been used to describe rulers as in the governing rulers. In Romans 13:3, all “rulers” (i.e., ἄρχοντες) are established by God. Also in one instance, Paul calls the High Priest a “ruler” (Acts 23:5). These rulers are not just governing authorities, but are authorities of this age (2:8), further illustrating that the point is to understand that rulers are unbelievers, the very rulers that interrogated Peter and commissioned him to remain silent about the message of Jesus (Acts 4:4, 8, 18).

The text goes on to further support the “natural” person as an unbeliever by stating that the rulers, “don’t understand” (i.e., ἔγνωκεν). Twice in verse 8 do we see that the rulers “don’t understand” (v. 8a, 8b).<sup>11</sup> A.T. Robertson says this is a conditional statement and the obvious answer is that the rulers remain in ignorance (cf. Acts 3:17).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 245.

<sup>11</sup> “If they had” is better translated as “for if they understood” as indicated in the Greek text “εἰ γὰρ ἔγνωσαν” (2:8b). Gnoskō is implied in the ESV, but is actually used in the text.

<sup>12</sup> “[The] condition of the second class, determined as unfulfilled, with aorist active indicative in both condition (ἔγνωσαν [egnōsan]) and conclusion with ἂν [an] (οὐκ ἂν ἐσταυρώσαν [ouk an estaurōsan]).” A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), 1 Co 2:8.

Paul clarifies in verse 14 the nature of who understands and what they understand. “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). Here the natural person, as unbeliever, is indicated by the term not able to “understand” (i.e., οὐ δύναται). Rogers says, “It describes the natural man who does not possess the Holy Spirit.”<sup>13</sup> This is the same term in verse 8, where Paul links rulers as the natural person. Yet, in verse 14 Paul not only says that the natural person rejects the spiritual things, but “*he is not able to understand them*” (v. 14). The phrase, “not able”<sup>14</sup> indicates that the natural person lacks the capacity to know spiritual things (more on this in a moment). The answer is simply—the natural person is an unbeliever who does not have the Spirit of God and is thus unable to understand the things of God.

### **The Believer as the “Spiritual Person”**

“The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one” (1 Cor. 2:15). Paul speaks of a second person in 1 Corinthians 2 and that is of the “spiritual person.” Literally, the spiritual person is “... possesses the divine πνεῦμα, not beside his natural human soul, but in place of it; this enables the person to penetrate the divine mysteries.”<sup>15</sup> The natural person does not have the Spirit of God but the spiritual person does (1 Cor. 2:12). This basic and fundamental difference allows for the person to be of a different anthropological category.

Furthermore, Paul employs first person plural pronouns when speaking about the message that he speaks. “We do impart” (v. 6a), “we impart” (v. 7a), “our glory” (v. 7c), “we have received” (v. 12), “we impart” (v. 13), “we have the mind of Christ” (v. 16) are all indicative of Paul as part of those who are spiritual.<sup>16</sup> The spiritual person is represented by maturity (v. 6), which is why Paul is unable to address the Corinthians as “spiritual” in 1 Corinthians 3:1.

---

<sup>13</sup> “It describes the natural man who does not possess the Holy Spirit” in Cleon L. Rogers, Cleon L. Rogers, and Fritz Rienecker, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Pub. House, 1998), 352.

<sup>14</sup> “οὐ δύναται γινῶναι” (1 Cor. 2:14).

<sup>15</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 837. “The dative plural adjective πνευματικοῖς, which can strictly be rendered either as a masculine plural, to people of the Spirit” in Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 264.

<sup>16</sup> “Resuming ‘we’ (preachers, I, Apollos, &c.). from ‘we preach’ (1 Co 1:28), Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 2 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 266.

Furthermore the response of the spiritual person indicates their being filled with the Spirit because they (1) understand (v. 13) and to (2) judge all things (v. 15). This is, in part, the way to differentiate between the natural and spiritual man in that the natural man rejects the things of the Spirit of God but the spiritual man receives them (vv. 10, 13). “And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual” (1 Cor. 2:13).

At the moment of conversion, a believer is both indwelt by the Holy Spirit and sealed by Him (1 Cor. 6:19; Eph. 1:13). This truth is because of the work of the Holy Spirit to regenerate the unbeliever at the moment of conversion (John 3:5-8; Tit. 3:5). Thus, the spiritual person is the one who has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:12) and is taught by the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:13). Simply put, the spiritual person is a believer and the natural person is an unbeliever.<sup>17</sup>

### **Types of Knowledge**

#### **Spiritual Knowledge**

Paul speaks of differing categories of knowledge that are accessible to natural and spiritual person. First, Paul speaks of a “secret and hidden wisdom” (vv. 6, 7), “spiritual truths” (v. 13), or “things of the Spirit of God” (v. 14). Walvoord and Zuck note in verse 14 that, “The Greek word *pneumatikois* may be neuter gender and so translated *spiritual words* as in the NIV (“expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words”). Or it may be masculine gender and translated ‘spiritual men’ (‘interpreting spiritual truths to spiritual men,’ as in the NIV margin).”<sup>18</sup> This is why certain translations will say, “interpreting spiritual truths for spiritual men” (1 Cor. 2:13). The “spiritual things” of 2:14 are the message that have been spoken of throughout the entirety of 2:6-16, the message the rulers of this age rejected (v. 8).

Paul is delineating between two types of knowledge as evidenced in 1 Corinthians 2: spiritual and natural. In verse 7 Paul says this knowledge is a “secret and hidden” wisdom. This spiritual knowledge is revealed through the Spirit (v. 10), taught by the Spirit (v. 13), and it is not understood by rulers of this age (v. 8).<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, this knowledge is taught by those who are

---

<sup>17</sup> “We Christians like us (ἡμῖν [*hēmin*]) in verse 10 of the revelation, but particularly Paul and the other apostles” in A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), 1 Co 2:12.

<sup>18</sup> David K. Lowery, “1 Corinthians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 510.

<sup>19</sup> “The range of possible meanings, then, according to Robertson and Plummer, amounts to not less than six on the basis of lexicography and grammar. Everything, then, depends on judgments about the contextual flow of the argument, the situation at Corinth which shapes how Paul would consider his language to be perceived and

spiritual (vv. 6, 12-13, 16). Paul's emphasis is that the spiritual knowledge is imparted to those who are spiritual and is not received by the natural man. Thus, a believer is said to be the one who has the "mind" of Christ, which is his "thoughts, counsels, plans."<sup>20</sup> Spiritual knowledge is only accessible for the person who has received the Holy Spirit, which is indicative of being a Christian (1 Cor. 6:19). Furthermore, the mind of Christ (v. 16) is only possible for the person who has received the Holy Spirit. Notably, then, the first category of knowledge is that of spiritual knowledge.

### Natural Knowledge

The second category is that of natural knowledge. Paul characterizes this knowledge by stating this knowledge is "of this age" (v. 6; cf. James 3:15) and antithetical to spiritual knowledge (v. 8). The wisdom of this age is the "course and current" of the world's affairs.<sup>21</sup> Paul consistently shows the message of spiritual knowledge as superior and foolishness to those who are natural (v. 14). Paul uses the term "folly" (i.e., μωρία) to describe the natural person's perspective of spiritual knowledge. In each of Paul's uses of *folly*, Paul is referencing the message of the Gospel, with one exception. 1 Corinthians 3:19 says, "For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, 'He catches the wise in their craftiness.'"<sup>22</sup>

Of note, in 1 Corinthians 2:14, Paul does not limit spiritual knowledge to the Gospel only. In other words, if one takes the interpretation of "πνευματικοῖς πνευματικὰ συγκρίνοντες" (v. 13) as *things* instead *depths*, there is still no immediate contextual limitation to the Gospel. Rather, the limitation is to the "things of the Spirit of God" (v. 14). This means that Paul is clearly showing that a natural knowledge is all the natural person knows. It is a clear epistemological category that spiritual knowledge includes, but is not limited to the Gospel.

Consider Paul's categories of spiritual and natural knowledge with the use of two circles. Natural knowledge is that which is earthly and "knowable" apart from God's Spirit illuminating. The circle to the left indicates natural knowledge as a distinct and separate sphere of knowledge to that of spiritual. The right circle indicates that of spiritual knowledge.

---

received, and not least on Paul's own theology of revelation and communication and of the Holy Spirit." Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 265.

<sup>20</sup> Rogers and Rogers, 352.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 350.

<sup>22</sup> Also see 1 Corinthians 1:18, 1:21, 1:23, 2:14.

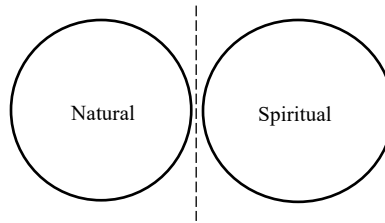


Figure 1. Natural versus Spiritual

Paul notes these epistemological categories as different. They are not aspects of the same body of knowledge but actually different types of knowledge—different categories for it. The dashed line represents a division and difference.<sup>23</sup> Natural knowledge pertains to the spirit of this age and can be understood by the earthly person. Spiritual knowledge is revealed by the Spirit and can only be known by the spiritual person (1 Cor. 2:14).

One further figure may help communicate what these categories of knowledge are not:

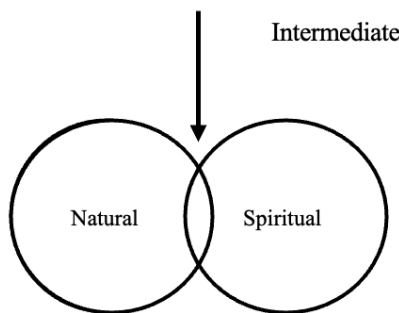


Figure 2. Overlapping Natural and Spiritual Knowledge

Figure 2 represents both natural and spiritual knowledge but it allows for a small overlap between the two areas of knowledge. Overlap between natural and spiritual knowledge, however, is inherently problematic. One could argue for spiritual knowledge enveloping all of natural knowledge, thus natural knowledge would correspond more to that of an island in the ocean. The author finds this acceptable, so long as a person differentiates between the supernatural and natural, as Paul does. Paul makes it clear that the natural person both is unable to receive

---

<sup>23</sup> This difference is not to create a false dichotomy between the natural and spiritual but to represent that there are natural versus spiritual points of knowledge. One could subsume the natural category into the spiritual, but Paul's argument seems to be the natural is distinct from spiritual.



spiritual knowledge and refuses to accept it (1 Cor. 2:14). It is clear that spiritual knowledge is ontologically different from natural knowledge and also is rejected by the natural man.

Ed Wilde helpfully provides a summary of the types of knowledge accessible to the natural person and as it pertains to modern disciplines of counseling: observations from the physical environment, social science observations, and psychological observations.<sup>24</sup>

<b>Natural/Physical Sciences</b>	“Observations The physical environment; including the human body. This includes study of the nervous system, functioning of the senses, et cetera.”
<b>Social Sciences</b>	“With a markedly lesser degree of reliability, social scientists can make observations of patterns in human behavior and reported internal psychological states. Thus, we can see that people under certain circumstances, and/or with certain physiological conditions, will have a tendency to display certain behaviors and/or expressions.”
<b>Psychological</b>	“This category consists of what most people mean when they say ‘psychology’. Here we find theories which concern the matters are both (1) inaccessible to common grace and (2) involve explicitly theological anthropology, teleology and methodology for change (ATM). These are the aspects of human life which are most directly affected by the breach between God and man.” <sup>25</sup>

Table 1. Different Fields of Knowledge as it Relates to Natural and Spiritual Knowledge

Table 1 indicates that the natural person can indeed know natural knowledge but psychology is not natural knowledge. Per the American Psychiatric Association, Psychology is “the study of the mind and behavior. The discipline embraces all aspects of the human experience — from the functions of the brain to the actions of nations, from child development to care for the aged. In every conceivable setting from scientific research centers to mental healthcare services, ‘the understanding of behavior’ is the enterprise of psychologists.”<sup>26</sup> In this way, it is impossible for the natural man to understand the mind—because the mind is spiritual

---

<sup>24</sup> Ed Wilde, “Why Common Grace is Not Enough for Christians Who Counsel: Part 2,” *The Journal of Biblical Soul Care* (Vol. 2:1): 28-29.

<sup>25</sup> Wilde, 28-29.

<sup>26</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions About APA,” <https://www.apa.org>, accessed November 19, 2024, <https://www.apa.org/support/about-apa>.

knowledge (1 Cor. 2:16). It is impossible for the natural man to understand behavior—because the motivation of a person comes from the immaterial heart and is spiritual knowledge (Prov. 4:23). Wilde points out that psychology is not natural knowledge and is attempting to study spiritual realities, like the mind (Rom. 12:2).

This clarification has significant implications for counseling, especially those who would suggest that the natural person *should* be studied on things like the mind and human behavior. If one understands 1 Corinthians 2, there are two categories of knowledge and modern counseling disciplines fit within one those categories. In other words, to argue that one should read an unbelieving psychologist is synonymous with saying “Study the natural person who is speaking about spiritual things.” The author will speak more to this in the conclusion/implications of this paper.

### **Which Category of Knowledge is Accessible to Whom?**

Based on the two types of people mentioned in 1 Corinthians 2, natural and spiritual, a question warrants answering: *who is able to understand the different categories knowledge?* Paul explicitly states that the natural person is incapable of understanding the things of the spirit for two reasons: the natural person does not understand and does not accept the things of the spirit.

He does not understand (v. 8). The phrase is repeated in verse 14 where Paul says the natural man is “*not able*” to understand—literally, he has “no power” to understand.<sup>27</sup> The first reason the natural person does not understand is that there is a capacity issue. It simply means:

“To receive” is in a way “to understand”; yet “to understand” indicates how “to receive” is meant. For this verb γινῶναι indicates more than intellectual apprehension, it means actual realization. This verb corresponds to “the wisdom” which Paul is describing, the substance of which consists of “the things of the Spirit of God,” the entire gospel with all that it offers, its objective gifts and treasures like the saving deeds of God and its subjective blessings like life and salvation.<sup>28</sup>

Paul uses the same phrase to say, “But I, brothers, *could not* address you as spiritual people” [Emphasis Added; 1 Cor. 3:1). The missing capacitation in verse 14 is due to the Spirit *not* revealing himself and *not* imparting knowledge to the natural man (1 Cor. 2:10, 12).<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> “οὐ δύναται γινῶναι” (1 Cor. 2:14).

<sup>28</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963), 115.

<sup>29</sup> Some believe this is because of the spiritual death of the unbeliever (Eph. 2:4). “St. Paul (1 Thess 5:23) recognizes the tripartite nature of man—body, soul, spirit” in H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., *1 Corinthians*, The Pulpit

In contrast, the spiritual person has received the Spirit of God, “[in order] that we might understand the things freely given us by God” (1 Cor. 2:12). The Scripture makes it clear that the natural person lacks the capacity to understand the things of God. The author has compiled a short list to describe the mind of the natural person, which includes both OT and NT references with the definition of the term that is used within the Bible. The natural person’s mind is:

- “Blind” (2 Cor. 4:4): “to deprive of sight, to blind.”<sup>30</sup>
- “Corrupted” (2 Tim. 3:8): “ruin, corrupt.”<sup>31</sup>
- “Darkened” (Eph. 4:18): “be/become darkened in mind.”<sup>32</sup>
- “Deceitful” (Jer. 17:9): “deceitful, sly, difficult, insidious.”<sup>33</sup>
- “Depraved” (Rom. 1:28; 1 Tim. 6:5): “to cause to become morally corrupt, deprave, ruin.”<sup>34</sup>
- “Defiled” (Tit. 1:15): “to cause the purity of something to be violated by immoral behavior, defile.”<sup>35</sup>
- “Futile” (Eph. 4:17): “state of being without use or value, emptiness, futility, purposelessness, transitoriness.”<sup>36</sup>
- “Hardened” (Exod. 7:14): “dull, unresponsive.”<sup>37</sup>
- “Sick” (Jer. 17:9): “disastrous.”<sup>38</sup>

The first reason that the natural person does not have access to the spiritual realities is that they are not able to understand—their mind is broken, futile, hardened, and sick per the Scripture. The natural person’s mind is darkened and incapable of knowing the truths of God. But there is also a second reason the natural person does not understand the things of God.

---

Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 61. However, there is no mention of the spirit in the text being differentiated from the soul.

<sup>30</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1021.

<sup>31</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 529.

<sup>32</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 932.

<sup>33</sup> Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 873.

<sup>34</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 239.

<sup>35</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 650.

<sup>36</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 621.

<sup>37</sup> Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 456.

<sup>38</sup> Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 70.

Paul says another phrase in verse 14 that is different from 8 and 14b. Paul says, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” “Does not accept” (v. 14) is in contrast to “not able.” Paul says, “not accept” (i.e., οὐ δέχεται) “to indicate approval or conviction by accepting.”<sup>39</sup> In Paul’s letters to the Corinthians he reminds the Corinthians to not “receive” the Lord’s grace in vain, the Corinthians “received” Titus, Titus “accepted” Paul’s appeal, and warns of “accepting” a different Gospel.<sup>40</sup> All of these are the same utilization of Paul’s reference to the natural man “rejecting” the things of the Spirit of God. The natural man does not accept them, he rejects them—literally he does “not receive them.”<sup>41</sup>

These two passages indicate rebellion and capacity are what prevent the natural person from receiving the things of God. Rebellion is part of the sin nature of all mankind. “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom. 8:7).<sup>42</sup> Of note, Paul states that both are present—rebellion and capacity. Thus, the categories of knowledge are distinct and the natural person has a lack of capacity to understand the things of God. One could argue that even if the capacity was existent—and it’s not—the natural person still rejects spiritual knowledge.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

As has been demonstrated, Paul clearly distinguishes between what an unbeliever can know and cannot know, using the epistemological categories of spiritual and natural knowledge. These categories of knowledge are integral to the understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture in counseling and the source of knowledge from which a counselor actually counsels.

A few implications must be addressed regarding counseling methodology in light of 1 Corinthians 2: why would a Christian, who understands 1 Corinthians 2, seek to build a counseling methodology that includes natural man’s natural knowledge?

The author would like to share an analogy. Consider that the natural person is much like an individual trained in First Aid. First Aid is the understanding of how to address wounds,

---

<sup>39</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 221.

<sup>40</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:1, 7:15, 8:17, 11:4, 11:16.

<sup>41</sup> “Even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you” (John 14:17).

<sup>42</sup> “You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

knowledge of bandages, how to clean a wound, and applying appropriate pressure to a wound—maybe even a tourniquet. All of these are physical and observable phenomena and will be representative of natural knowledge. The natural and spiritual person alike can observe these phenomena.

However, the ability of the natural person ends immediately at the moment of any type of knowledge about why the wound came about, what is the purpose of wounds, what is the purpose of survival, how should one live their life to prevent such types of wounds. None of these points of data are accessible because they speak to spiritual knowledge. Spiritual knowledge that speaks to teleology, anthropology, soteriology, hamartiology, and even eschatology. The natural person—First Aid Responder—cannot understand these things.

But the analogy continues, not only does the First Aid responder lack the capacity but they also reject the knowledge that would tell them the purpose of wounds, purpose of survival, how to live one's life so as not to incur more injuries. In this way, the First Aid responder does not know but has also rejected knowledge to make them a better First Aid Responder. This illustration is at the center of the common grace, sufficiency of Scripture debate occurring within counseling circles to date.

#### Objection #1—There is “Some Good”

An objection one can raise is well-represented by Eric Johnson, a well-known Christian integrationist, when he claims:

Creation grace, particularly God's goodness to those who oppose him, gives God tremendous glory, and if Christians minimize or neglect it, who will glorify God for that grace? Non-Christians will not. This is perhaps the most important reason why Christians in psychology and counseling should be eager to discover the genuine truth and goodness available in non-Christian psychology: to claim it for God to whom it belongs and rejoice in him for his remarkable goodness and wisdom.<sup>43</sup>

One can greatly appreciate Johnson's desire to glorify God, but once a person considers this argument in light of 1 Corinthians 2 it is not-compelling. Should one study secular psychology (i.e., study of human motivation and behavior) to redeem the truths of the natural person who can only know natural things? To be sure God can use all means to bring about good in a person's

---

<sup>43</sup> Eric L. Johnson, *Foundations for Soul Care: A Christian Psychology Proposal* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2007), 115.

life (Rom. 8:28) but that does not license the pursuit of studying natural man's knowledge about spiritual matters. The author asks, would not time be better spent studying the spiritual person's take on matters of human motivation and behavior with spiritual knowledge?

To further the illustration mentioned above, the natural person / First Aid responder can provide symptom relief but the natural person cannot understand spiritual knowledge. There is seemingly some good done, but one must ask at what level? The natural sphere of knowledge only. The natural First Aid responder provides symptom relief in the realm of natural knowledge. That is all. For those that argue to incorporate the knowledge of natural First Aid responders into counseling practice, they are employing the blind and rebellious mind to see if symptom relief is possible.

#### Objection #2: What Seemingly Comes Close to Spiritual Knowledge?

One more implication must be noted, which is inherently another tension for counseling methodologies. There are bodies of knowledge that seem close to spiritual knowledge, yet are still natural knowledge. One example is that of counseling abuse. What about the unbelieving social worker who observes patterns of behavior that typically result in abuse or are indicative of abuse? Note, the unbelieving social worker cannot understand spiritual knowledge and rejects spiritual knowledge, per 1 Corinthians 2. Thus, the unbelieving social worker is noticing *behavioral patterns* that are demonstrated in words, bruises, actions, and responses. These are all a part of natural knowledge, what can be observed by the physical senses. The social worker is then able to view this data with a corrupt mind that this, in comparison with former experiences, suggest an abusive relationship (or perhaps is already abusive). They use natural knowledge to forecast potential for abuse or diagnose abuse.

However, the unbelieving social worker is unable to understand and rejects spiritual knowledge that will explain why a person abuses or why another may tolerate abuse. Furthermore, the unbelieving social worker cannot explain what makes abuse ultimately wrong. The social worker does not know the spiritual realities that surround abuse and the necessary change for the abuser (i.e., repentance, change, humility, seeking forgiveness of God and man, restoration, etc.). It seems this is close to spiritual knowledge, yet is still natural knowledge. The unbelieving social worker is observing *patterns of behavior*. One could argue that the unbelieving social worker really does not understand the patterns of behavior rightly because a person cannot truly understand natural without spiritual knowledge.

The objection of what seems close to spiritual knowledge, yet is natural knowledge, remains clear. The natural person cannot truly understand counseling issues, like abuse. They reject spiritual knowledge and lack the capacity to understand it. *Should the spiritual person seek to understand the natural person's natural knowledge to better help in counseling?* Call it “trauma informed” or “clinically informed counseling” or whatever a person may call it.<sup>44</sup> There is no biblical reason to study the natural person's knowledge in psychology. The spiritual person, rather, using spiritual truths should seek to understand the dynamics of helping a person in complicated counseling issues—like abuse—and then offer counseling support (1 Cor. 2:13; Gal. 6:1).<sup>45</sup>

It should remain a mystery as to why certain counseling methodologies argue for the integration in counseling of natural knowledge by natural man into superior spiritual knowledge revealed in the inspired Word of God. 1 Corinthians 2 claims that the natural person rejects the Word of God because the very Word of God is written by Spirit-carried men. “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 2:21). God's Word is the sufficient and superior guide to counseling methodology, and the spiritual man should not seek to incorporate natural man's natural knowledge into that counseling methodology.

---

<sup>44</sup> “Foundations of Trauma Care for Biblical Counselors - CCEF,” accessed November 20, 2024, <https://www.ccef.org/jbc-article/foundations-of-trauma-care-for-biblical-counselors/>. One Christian collective is asked about counseling and trauma, to which the organization states its position: “We offer a trauma-informed biblical counseling approach that recognizes the impact of trauma on individuals and incorporates trauma-sensitive principles within a biblical framework.” “Frequently Asked Questions – Gospel Care Collective,” accessed November 20, 2024, <https://www.gospelcarecollective.com/faq/>. In other words, the collective integrates psychology into the Bible.

<sup>45</sup> Note the similar terminology of Paul in Galatians, “ὅμοις οἱ πνευματικοί” (“you who are spiritual”) in Galatians 6:1. F.F. Bruce notes on this passage, “The rehabilitation must be undertaken by those who are truly πνευματικοί, whose life and conduct alike are controlled by the Spirit of Christ” in F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1982), 260. Also see 1 Corinthians 7:40, “