

Psychology & the Bible

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In the evangelical churches of America, many people who do not know the meaning of "substitutionary atonement," "sanctification," "holiness" and "depravity" are becoming intimately acquainted with the meaning of "codependency," "enabler," "dysfunction" and "abuse."

The biblical model of personal responsibility, man's sin and God's redemption is being replaced by the psychological model of victimization, dysfunction and recovery.

Though past experience in dealing with controversial subjects suggests this will not be remembered, I want to make clear at the beginning **I am in favor of biblical counseling** and all support groups that conform to biblical truth, focus on Christ and help people deal with their pasts so they can move on in the present and future to a walk with Christ. My title for seven years was "Pastor of Counseling and Family Ministries." Ten years ago I recruited and trained sixty lay counselors at my church meeting with them every week for nine months. I have and still do recommend Christian counselors to many people.

I am not anti-psychology per se, and I recognize the helpfulness of many psychological insights and techniques. I am not a crusader against psychology and counseling in the church, and am not writing a book called *Psycho-Nuts in the Pulpit*. That is my disclaimer. If it isn't long enough (it probably isn't) feel free to reread it several times.

If as you read this issue you wonder why I don't have some articles to balance the others, it is simply because I am attempting to balance something which is already in a state of unbalance in the evangelical community—an uncritical acceptance of the beliefs and practices of modern psychology.

Two Different Frameworks

Is man's fundamental problem ignorance of ourselves and our psychic injuries, or is it disobedience to and rebellion against our Creator and Judge? The book of Romans gives a clear answer to this question. Modern psychology, buying into the assumptions of secular humanism that include the basic goodness of human nature, gives us a very different answer.

Does the solution for the human dilemma lie in coming to terms with how others have mistreated us, or in coming to terms with how we have sinned against God and others? Are we victims, or are we victimizers, and if we are both, which problem is the fundamental one and warrants our first and major attention? Again, the Bible and much (not all) of modern psychology give us radically different answers.

A Christian woman told me she was having a few problems, nothing really serious, but felt she wanted some input and guidance. Her pastor recommended a Christian psychologist. The woman told me the psychologist informed her she was showing all the classic symptoms of having been sexually abused as a child. She was stunned, and assured him she had never been sexually abused. He nodded knowingly and said it wasn't surprising she didn't remember, since such memories are often blocked out. This woman was now an emotional wreck, trying to figure out if it was her father, brother, or who it was that sexually abused her. She

had no clue, but was filled with dread and suspicion. After all, the psychologist must know better than she. He'd been recommended by her pastor.

Here was a growing and productive Christian who went to counseling for some insight and direction in one area, and was transformed into an emotional basket case. While this is obviously a dramatic example, some of what she experienced is increasingly typical. Consider the fact that she didn't remember being abused was taken as substantiation of the probability she had been! It goes like this--if you remember being abused you were really abused. But if you don't remember being abused, it was probably because you were abused so badly. The bottom line is an assumption of abuse which amounts to a theology of victimization. We are all victims--some of us just haven't discovered who victimized us yet but we will, in time, with help. Then we must go back and explore our history of victimization, discovering other ways we were mistreated.

Even in cases where there has indeed been devastating abuse (and I do not deny such cases for a moment), the victim identity easily becomes our primary identity. Instead of children of God, our first identity becomes children of alcoholics, children of neglect and children of abuse. I do not deny some families are dysfunctional. In a world tainted by sin, of course they are. I do not deny abuse exists--of course it does. But the fact we are so preoccupied with it shows we have an unrealistic view of a fallen world. Peter says, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Pet. 4:12). Life is difficult. This is to be expected. We must deal with it and move on. That may sound calloused, but it isn't when you realize it's not just "buck up"--the point is Jesus feels our pain, heals us, and gives us the resources to move on.

I recently bumped into a woman who used to attend our church. I hadn't seen her for years. It turns out she got a divorce and felt wounded and condemned by her pastors. In fact, our pastors had simply pointed out to her exactly what they should have--that she had no biblical basis for divorcing her husband, and was obligated to obey God, keep her vows, remain married, and work out the problems, all of which they were glad to help her do. She had elected to get the divorce anyway. After all, her personal happiness was at stake. She couldn't deny who she was, could she? Everything was everybody's fault but her own, and she "owed herself" the happy life.

This woman informed me she has spent years in recovery, and is now a recovery group leader, helping people deal with life's challenges in a self-affirming way, as opposed to how she had been treated at church. She had no repentance or regret for her sinful actions in the past--in fact she is more convinced than ever she was right. (Which means God was wrong.) She does not attend church any more, but she assured me she is much "closer to the Lord" than ever. Her recovery group is now her "church," she said--it makes her feel good about herself. She put short-term happiness over holiness, and her new religion is popular psychology.

The Tyranny of Self

What is the common focus in self-esteem, self-image, self-determination and self-actualization? Self. And while we must pay a certain amount of attention to ourselves--I do not discount this--we are not to make our self-interest the center of gravity in our lives. A husband's focus is to be on his spouse and her needs, not himself and his needs. Our focus is not to be on our spouse's responsibility to meet our needs, but our own responsibility to meet her needs. The modern "self-" movement legitimizes and glorifies selfishness. It leaves many people feeling better about sin (self-gratification in violation of God's Word) because sin has at its best become virtuous self-actualization or at its worst a dysfunction where no one sees himself as the perpetrator of sin, but only its victim.

Many Christian leaders have bought into this. A seminary professor, now president of a leading evangelical seminary, said in a *Christianity Today* interview,

"There is a more complicated way in which tendencies to certain addictions--including certain sexual misbehaviors--seems to run in families. I'm convinced there is a genetic propensity to alcoholism. That makes us nervous, because we want to say that if a person is drinking too much, it is her fault; or if a person habitually commits adultery, that's because of a decision he made."

The real issue is not what "we want to say" but what the Bible says. Alcoholism is not a new problem--the Bible just considers it a sin in which one is willfully involved, not merely a disease that one passively catches. The Bible condemns drunkenness and clearly holds people morally accountable for it (Luke 21:34; Rom. 13:13; 1 Cor. 5:11; 1 Cor. 6:10; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:18). In answer to the seminary president, regardless of environment, genetics, proneness or anything else *it is, in fact, "her fault."* (Some have presented evidence that there may be a genetic propensity to rape. Shall we then say rape is not the fault of the rapist?)

And what about the habitual adultery the seminary president refers to? It *is* "because of a decision he made." Decisions to view pornography, decisions to put himself in the place of temptation may have led up to it. But in any case he made a decision, or repeated decisions, to have adulterous sex, to violate his marriage vows, to betray his wife. These are decisions he has made, and God's Word holds him fully accountable for them, just as you and I are fully accountable for our moral decisions no matter what influences or abuses we have endured.

When a leading evangelical seminary president, charged with molding the minds and ministries of evangelical pastors, can hold such a view, isn't this a red flag that suggests secular psychology is dethroning the Scriptures as the reigning authority of the church? Instead of helping deliver people from the bondage of sin, is our strategy degenerating into helping them sin with less guilt? Is our calling from God simply to help people *feel* better or is it first and foremost to help them *be* better?

Does Conversion Matter?

I recently heard of a pastor who told his congregation, "Every Christian should be in a recovery group." Not a discipleship group, not a growth group, not a Christian life and ministry group, but a recovery group. Of course, many people are helped in recovery groups. But are they the backbone or core of church life, a universal need for every Christian?

I was assured by a pastor and counselor at a well known evangelical church that it "wasn't realistic" to think Jesus really changes peoples lives in dramatic ways. To think otherwise, he said, was "simplistic" and "naive." But where do you find that in the Bible? 2 Corinthians 5:17 says "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come." God sounds pretty simplistic and naive, doesn't he?

We have come to grossly underestimate the life-changing power of conversion, and the role of the Holy Spirit in illumination and sanctification. We are content with too little change. Sometimes therapy is helpful, to direct people to biblical long-term changes in thinking and behavior, to help overcome especially entrenched patterns. But is it possible some problems intended to be dealt with in a moment at the cross are now the center of years of therapy?

We do people no favor by telling them their life will be inevitably centered on their dysfunction or disorder (e.g. they are "sex addicts" or "food addicts" or "alcoholics" or "adult children of alcoholics"). We not only put the focus in the wrong place, we rob them of hope. Why? Because Christ didn't die for dysfunctions and

misfortunes. He died for sins. Therefore he doesn't deliver us from dysfunctions and misfortunes, he delivers us from sins. He covers us with the righteousness of Christ, changes us, transforms us (2 Cor. 5:21). The beginning of life change is confession and repentance, to which God responds with grace and empowerment. But confession and repentance require that people take responsibility for their sins, for their choices. If we take away people's sense of responsibility, we take away the hope that God can change them.

So what about the school of thought that insists an alcoholic will always be an alcoholic, a homosexual will always be a homosexual? God has an opinion:

"Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Cor. 6:9-11)

Notice the past tense--"such *were* some of you." But what we *were* we no longer *are*! While the Christian life is certainly fraught with temptations and struggles, Christ's work on our behalf is sufficient to let us live victoriously, so sin does not master us (Rom. 6:11-14). We have underestimated and undermined the sufficiency of Christ in dealing with our sins, addictions and inadequacies. By all means, if you can get help from a counselor, get it. But that help--both the beliefs and the behaviors it involves--must be judged in light of the eternal Word of God, not simply by how it leaves us feeling.

Forgetting What Is Behind

Part of what concerns me is the endless backward movement of much therapy. While there can be real merit in going back to one's past, the point is not to stay back there, but to deal with things that help free you to move on. Paul says, "One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14). Yet I know Christians, dear people, who have spent year after year exploring their pasts, going to counselors and seminars and groups and reading books and listening to tapes, constantly searching for (and inevitably discovering) past abuses that explain present pains. There is no forward movement. They are prisoners to the past. They never experience the therapy there is in moving on with Christ, focusing on the glory of God and the good of others. Their focus is never forward, but always backward, never upward, always inward.

How did the church of Christ advance throughout the centuries, through the first 95% of its history before Freud pioneered psychology just over a hundred years ago? How is the church advancing throughout the world today in places where there is only God's Word, and no psychology and therapy groups to speak of? If these modern principles and techniques are not simply helpful, but actually essential as many proponents seem to claim, how did the church of Christ survive without them till now, and how does the church in China and Mozambique survive today? When we consider that western Europe and America are the places most under the influence of modern psychology, and that these cultures have simultaneously experienced tremendous moral and spiritual deterioration, what does it suggest?

Room for Evangelism?

I asked a Christian psychologist to recommend some biblical counselors who could advise a nonchristian young man struggling in a certain area. He gave me some names. Then I said that, of course, I wanted someone who would be conscious of this young man's spiritual needs and would not hesitate to share the gospel and lead him to Christ if he was receptive. Suddenly this man had to pare down the list because he

knew several of the counselors just weren't inclined that way. I was struck by the irony of sincere Christian counselors who would deal with any problem in this young man's life except the one the Bible calls our greatest and most basic problem--alienation from God.

Our role is not just to help sinners become better adjusted in their sin, it is to bring them to the Savior. I was told that some Christian counselors actually withhold the gospel because they feel it would be a breach of ethics to take advantage of someone's vulnerability in such a situation. Isn't that sort of like a breach of ethics in offering a starving man food? Isn't the ultimate breach of ethics withholding from them the single most important reality in the universe--their desperate need to know God, to be forgiven of sin, to spend eternity in heaven rather than hell?

The old emphasis was on the fact that people are sinners in desperate need of salvation in Christ. The new emphasis is on the idea that "people are hurting" and we can share with them "principles that will help them live more fulfilled lives." What else could explain how a Christian counselor can be content helping people feel better about themselves and live more productive self-actualized lives at the end of which they will go to hell for eternity?

Does Integration Work?

There has been a lot of talk about integrating psychology and the Bible, but [as David Powlison points out](#), more often than not psychology has ended up with the primary role, while the Bible becomes secondary.

Because of this tendency, I think it's better not to think in terms of integrating, but in terms of *subordinating* psychology to the Bible. Most attempts at integration I see conform more to psychology than the Bible. Let me give an example. A Christian counselor teaching a junior high Sunday school class had the girls deeply identify with the feelings of betrayal Mary supposedly experienced when she learned that Joseph was intending to cancel their marriage.

So what's the problem with that? Well, if you read the biblical accounts (always a good idea), there is no indication of a self-absorbed Joseph betraying Mary, nor Mary feeling she had been betrayed. Indeed, he loved her and was doing the right thing in light of what he knew (there had never been a virgin birth before and the law was clear that Mary could have been put to death, which Joseph obviously tried to avoid). Joseph moved forward "quietly." It was certainly a difficult challenge for both Joseph and Mary--one that God gave Mary the opportunity to agree to, which she willingly did (Luke 1:38). When God told Joseph what was going on, he immediately went forward with no record of resistance.

To portray this to Sunday School children in the victim and betrayal model of modern psychology is to do an injustice to Joseph, Mary *and* to the Word of God. This passage is about something else. By all means let's try to understand what the characters were experiencing, but let Scripture and common sense lead us to that conclusion, not therapy-based speculation. This is what happens when the Bible is seen through the lens of psychology. We would do much better to turn it around and see psychology through the lens of the Bible.

A self-study book by a Christian psychologist, *Do I Really Have Value? A Study in Self-Love*, includes an essay by a secular humanist, "My Declaration of Self-Esteem." The author says she owns herself and "everything about me." She concludes "I own me, and therefore I can engineer me. I am me, and I am okay." The Christian psychologist does not critique this as unbiblical--on the contrary, he uses it as positive guidance for his readers. But what about "You are not your own; you were brought at a price" (1 Cor. 6:19-20)?

I am pro-science. Astronomy has been one of my hobbies since I was a child. Yet I also recognize that with all the wonderful things it offers, science has become tainted with error and wrong perspective that has left God out of the picture and substituted alternative explanations for life. Likewise I am not anti-psychology, but am simply pointing out that while many aspects of psychology are seductively appealing they are also flawed or tainted. We ignore these deficiencies at our peril.

All Truth is God's Truth

Christian psychologists are right in assuring us that "all truth is God's truth." But that begs the question. The point is, not all that comprises psychology *is* truth, and we must find something more reliable than our personal feelings and popular opinion to determine which parts are true and which are not. What is true in psychology can only be discovered when it is evaluated by the one totally reliable authority we have--God's Word. Psychology leading the way for Christianity is a classic case of the tail wagging the dog.

There is much in psychology that is good and insightful and usable to the Christian. (A dog's tail serves a good purpose.) But as a framework, as a source of perspective on life, as an authoritative standard by which to interpret reality, psychology is just one more man-made attempt to figure it all out and get by without God. On its own, it is a myopic, short-term perspective that leaves us celebrating "truths" that do not square with the Truth.

Where are we left looking for answers? Inward to ourselves? Outward to others? Upward to God? Purely internal and horizontal solutions to life's problems just don't cut it. Without the vertical, or with merely a token nod to it, we are left to fend for ourselves in consultation with equally lost people. Without the guiding light of God's Word, professional therapists trying to help counselees becomes the blind leading the blind. Some blind leaders are certain the answer to our problems lies over that way, having no clue "that way" leads to the edge of a cliff with a thousand foot drop. "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death" (Prov. 14:12).

If you're in counseling, good for you that you've recognized your need for help. Here are some questions to ask. Does the counseling you are getting leave you with your focus more on Christ than yourself and others? Does it leave you headed forward rather than dwelling endlessly on past offenses? If it probes back into hurts of the past (that is sometimes legitimate), does it do so with a view toward leaving them at the foot of the cross, and moving forward into a productive Christian life? Does it leave you throwing yourself into ministry to others, rather than withdrawing into pity parties and preoccupation with yourself? Does it leave you more willing to obey God and follow him wholeheartedly? Does it leave you coming to terms with your full responsibility for sin so you can confess and repent of it, leave it behind and experience the grace and healing of God? Does it leave you trusting God more rather than trusting Him less? If it does all this, it's doing good. If it doesn't, it's time to reevaluate.