

Light Brings Salt

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Psychology And The Evangelical Church T. A. McMahon

Note: the article is from the Berean Call Newsletter for March. It is extremely pertinent to the issues in the Church as well as our lives as believers. P/T

Nothing in the history of the modern church has induced believers to abandon their faith in the sufficiency of God's Word like the pseudo-science of psychological counseling. Consider the following: the evangelical church is a primary referral service for counseling psychologists and psychiatrists. Many large churches have licensed psychotherapists on staff. Mission agencies are requiring their missionary candidates to be evaluated and approved by licensed psychological professionals prior to being considered for service. Christian psychologists and counselors are often better known and more respected by evangelicals than preachers and teachers. Who has not heard of psychologist Dr. James Dobson?

Most evangelicals are convinced that psychotherapy is scientific and is necessary to supply what is lacking in the Bible regarding man's mental, emotional, and behavioral needs. When I use the term, "psychotherapy," what I am referring to is psychological counseling, clinical psychology, and (non-biological) psychiatry. I may also use the general term "psychology." I recognize that there are some areas of psychology that are clearly distinct from psychotherapy and may have scientific merit and value, e.g., those fields that study perception, man-machine interface, ergonomics, some educational psychology, and so forth. They are, however, a very small percentage of the entire industry of psychology, which claims to have scientific insights into the mind of many.

So what's the problem with psychotherapy? According to numerous scientific studies, it rarely works (and then only superficially) and is known to be harmful. From a biblical perspective, it is an antichristian, religious counterfeit. Both conclusions will become quite apparent as we proceed. Given the significant influence it has had

on the church, the psychological way compared to the biblical way should be an issue of critical concern for all those who believe that the Word of God is their authority and that it is completely sufficient for "all things that pertain to life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3). How do these two ways compare?

They couldn't be more at odds. The basic theories of psychological counseling are contradictory to what the Bible teaches about the nature of man and God's solution for his mental, emotional, and behavioral problems. Psychotherapeutic concepts regard humanity as intrinsically good. The Bible says that other than Jesus Christ, man is not good but was born with a sinful nature, "for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

Psychological counseling often promotes the belief that problems adversely affecting a person's mental and emotional welfare are determined by circumstances external to the person, such as parental abuse or environment. The Bible tells us that a man's evil heart and his sinful choices cause his mental, emotional, and behavioral problems. "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man" (Mark 7:21-23).

Psychotherapy attempts to improve the self through concepts such as self-love, self-esteem, self-worth, self-image, self-actualization, etc. The Bible teaches that self is humanity's main problem, not the solution to the ills that plague mankind. And it prophetically identifies the chief solution of psychological counseling, self-love, as the catalyst to a life of depravity. "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves... "(2 Timothy 3:1).

The Bible teaches that reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ is the only way for man to truly remedy his sin-related mental, emotional, and behavioral troubles. "And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, *engaged* in evil deeds, ²² yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in

order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach--" (Colossians 1:21, 22).

Psychotherapy has shipwrecked the faith of many regarding the sufficiency of the Bible. Because psychologists claim to have insights into the nature of man and also methods for change not found in the Bible, it follows that the Bible cannot be sufficient for counseling or addressing believers mental, emotional, and behavioral needs.

Psychotherapy has sold the church the lie that psychology can be integrated with the Bible. That ought to be scandalous to any thoughtful believer. Since psychology and the Bible are fundamentally in opposition to one another, it should be obvious that there can be no real integration of their teachings. Moreover, if the Bible, the Manufacturer's handbook, isn't sufficient to cover all things that pertain to life and godliness, then His created beings must look elsewhere for their mental, emotional, and behavioral welfare. And if they must look elsewhere, then the Bible's claim to be authoritative, inerrant, and sufficient is also false.

How influential is psychotherapy in the church? It would be rare indeed to find a topical sermon with no supposed insights from psychology. Typical would be Willow Creek church near Chicago, whose influence is national and international through its 10,000-member association of churches. One researcher of church-growth methods who spent a year at Willow Creek observed, "[Pastor Bill] Hybels not only teaches psychological principles but often uses the psychological principles as interpretive guides for his exegesis of Scripture....King David had an identity crisis, the apostle Paul encouraged Timothy to do self-analysis, and Peter had a problem with boundary issues. The point is, psychological principles are regularly built into Hybels' teaching." Rick Warren's record-breaking *The Purpose-Driven Life* furthers the acceptance of psychology in the church by including such psychobabble as "Samson was co-dependent" and "Gideon's weakness was low self-esteem and deep insecurities."

Why this psychologizing of Christianity? Well, primarily because the church has been sold three erroneous ideas:

- 1) Psychotherapy is a scientific endeavor;
- 2) Counseling is for professionals only;
- 3) Christian psychology reconciles science and faith.

Let's look at each of these. First, psychotherapy is not a scientific endeavor. Martin and Deidre Bobgan report in their book, *The End of "Christian Psychology"*: "Attempting to evaluate the status of psychology, the American Psychological Association appointed Dr. Sigmund Koch to plan and direct a study which was subsidized by the National Science Foundation. This study involved eighty eminent scholars assessing the

facts, theories, and methods of psychology. The results of this extensive endeavor were published in a seven-volume series entitled *Psychology: A Study of a Science*." Dr. Koch sums up the panel's findings in these words: "I think it is by this time utterly and finally clear that psychology cannot be a coherent science."

Dr. Karl Popper, regarded as one of the greatest philosophers of science, after a thorough study of psychotherapy, declared: "though posing as sciences [psychotherapy] had in fact more in common with primitive myths than with science [and] resembled astrology rather than astronomy."

Secondly, counseling is not for professionals only. Psychotherapy, thanks to Freud and some others with medical backgrounds, has terms and concepts that falsely give the impression that they have to do with medical science. An understanding of the term "illness" is key to seeing through this mirage. Can one's mental process—that is, his thinking or behavior—literally be ill? Our brains, which are physical, can certainly be, but our minds, which are nonphysical, can't be ill. So the term "mental illness" is a misnomer—a myth. Furthermore, with exceptions in the area of psychiatry, psychotherapists do not address the organic or physical problems of their clients.

So, what do psychotherapists do? Well, mostly they talk and listen. Research psychiatrist Dr. Thomas Szasz spells it out for us: "In plain language, what do patient and psychotherapist actually do? They speak and listen to each other. What do they speak about? Narrowly put, the patient speaks about himself, and the therapist speaks about the patient....Each tries to move the other to see or do things in a certain way." I assume that most evangelicals, whether in the pulpit or pew, can certainly handle the medium of counseling—which is simply talking and listening! But, few of us are trained professionals. We don't have an advanced degree in talking and listening, nor have we studied theories about human behavior, which are nothing more than the opinions and speculations of godless men. Furthermore, there are more than 500 different (often contradictory and sometimes utterly bizarre) psychotherapeutic systems and thousands of methods and techniques.

So, as nonprofessionals, we missed out on all of that knowledge—so-called. But still, aren't professionals more effective than nonprofessionals in helping people with their problems? No!

After reviewing the research comparing trained and untrained psychological counselors, researchers Truax and Mitchell report: "There is no evidence that the usual traditional graduate training program has any positive value in producing therapists who are more helpful than nonprofessionals." Consider the conclusion of a lengthy research project conducted by Dr. Joseph Durlak:

Overall, outcome results in comparative studies have favored nonprofessionals.... There were no significant differences among helpers in 28 investigations, but nonprofessionals were significantly more effective than professionals in 12 studies.

The provocative conclusion from these comparative investigations is that professionals do not possess demonstrably superior therapeutic skills, compared with nonprofessionals. Moreover, professional mental health education, training, and experience are not necessary prerequisites for an effective helping person. Best-selling author, psychologist Dr. Bernie Zilbergeld, writes in his book, *The Shrinking of America: Myths of Psychological Change*: "...most problems faced by people would be better solved by talking to friends, spouses, relatives or anyone else who appears to be doing well with what you believe you're doing poorly....If I personally had a relationship problem and I couldn't work it out with my partner, I wouldn't go and see a shrink. I would look around me for the kind of relationship I admire....That's who I would go to. I want somebody who's showing by his life that he can do it."

Now that's just good commonsense advice from a man who understands the field of psychotherapy. Yet, in this "perilous time" for the church, many (and the numbers continue to grow) have abandoned not only "common sense," but worse yet, they have discarded their biblical mandate, which is to minister to one another through the Word of God and in the power of the Holy Spirit. They've been intimidated by myths and have turned from the truth.

Finally, Christian psychology cannot reconcile science and faith. Why not? Because psychology is not a science, nor can it be Christianized. Of course, there are Christians who are licensed professional psychotherapists, but there is no recognized branch or stream of psychology identified as Christian. Consider this statement representing the view of the Christian Association for Psychological Studies:

We are often asked if we are "Christian psychologists"...We are Christians who are psychologists but at the present time there is no acceptable Christian psychology that is markedly different from non-Christian psychology. It is difficult to imply that we function in a manner that is fundamentally distinct from our non-Christian colleagues...as yet there is not an acceptable theory, mode of research or treatment methodology that is distinctly Christian.

How then do licensed psychotherapists who are Christians function? They selectively draw from the concepts learned during their secular education and training and attempt to integrate them into their Christian belief system. Yet, the concepts are all

antithetical to the biblical way of ministering to a believer's problems related to overcoming sin and living a life that is fruitful, productive, and pleasing to the Lord.

You have to wonder why a Christian would turn to any of these wisdom-of-men approaches that were conceived by people who were so obviously anti-Christian. Freud considered religion an illusion and was known to have a hatred for Christianity because of what he believed to be its anti-Semitic teachings. Others, such as Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, were blatant New Agers and occultists. Yet, consider this quote from a leading Christian psychologist: "Under the influence of humanistic psychologists like Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, many of us Christians have begun to see our need for self-love and self-esteem. This is a good and necessary focus." Not according to the Scriptures! The Book of Nehemiah gives us a picture of what's happening in the church. Nehemiah (his name means "Jehovah is our comforter") is a type of the Holy Spirit. God sends him to rebuild and strengthen Jerusalem. Under the guise of helping Nehemiah, enemies of Israel attempt to subvert the restoration. Incredibly, the priest gives one such adversary, Tobiah, a room within the Temple. So it is with so-called Christian psychology today.

How serious is this psychologizing of the church? Although devastating even now, Scripture tells us it will far exceed what we can imagine. The Apostle Paul is emphatic in his warning (2 Timothy 3:1-5) that "in the last days" man's condition will be "perilous." That warning begins with a characteristic that is the cornerstone of humanistic psychology and which Paul indicates (verses 2-5) is the source of a host of evils: self-love.