

Critical Issues Commentary

A monthly commentary on Biblical concerns that impact you

Biblical Counseling

Part 1

Why Psychology Cannot Heal the Soul

The Dangers of Integrating the Bible and Psychology

written by Bob DeWaay

“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” (2Timothy 3:16,17)

Is the person who is trained in Scripture, anointed by the Holy Spirit, and called by God to minister to the lost and hurting adequately equipped to counsel? For centuries of church history, the answer was an unequivocal “yes.” Modern psychology has radically changed the answer to this question.

Psychology and the Church

Some seminaries and Bible colleges now offer a broader range of psychological training for prospective ministers than Biblical training. Nearly all of them require the study of psychology. Many assert that any pastor or church worker untrained in modern psychology is not equipped to counsel anyone, no matter how knowledgeable he may be in Scripture or how many years of experience he has. Counseling individuals about marriage, family, emotional distress, personal relationships, raising children, work, etc. no longer fits the category “every good work,” for which Scripture itself claims to equip one.

For example, the following ad appeared in an evangelical newsletter in which an evangelical church sought

someone for their pastoral staff:

Needed: a person to provide marriage and family therapy services for members of the congregation and for the community at large, including appointment counseling, support groups and life enrichment programs. . . Also participate in C.E.L.E. programs and teach one course/workshop. . . Prefer an M.A., M.S., M.S.W., or M.Div. equivalent. Prefer clinical membership in AAMFT and/or ACSW, and Minnesota license or eligible license in Marriage and Family Therapy, Independent Clinical Social Work or Psychologist. A theological education is also desirable.¹

Notice that the least important qualification was a theological education. The message that is often given is that Christian people seeking ministry opportunities in evangelical churches are better off learning the theories of secular social sciences than the truths of Scripture. It was not very many years ago that this was not the case.

Psychology's “Success”

What has changed? Has psychology been so successful in curing personal problems and “mental illnesses” that Christians have felt compelled to lay aside Biblical counsel and embrace secular theories? Clearly it has not. Psychology mostly has not been able to produce controlled, scientific studies to prove its own effectiveness. In many studies, the percentages of persons “showing some improvement” after months of psychological counsel is not significantly different from that of persons who sought to solve their problems without seeking “professional help.” Many studies, beginning with Hans J. Eysenck's published work of 1952, have questioned or failed to demonstrate psychotherapy's effectiveness.

Martin & Deidre Bobgan assess studies that have been done on the usefulness of such therapy and conclude, “. . . the important point is that, whereas at one time in the history of psychotherapy people depended on ‘word of mouth’ to support an assumption that psychotherapy was an enormously successful endeavor, many now recognize that it was only an assumption based on ignorance and enthusiasm, subjective opinion and hearsay.”² They summarize in this chapter some research and studies on the effectiveness of psychotherapy.³ In a chapter entitled “**Selfism as Bad Science,**” professor of psychology Paul Vitz states,

. . . the emphasis no longer falls on attempts to “prove the truth” of different theories of psychotherapy. Clinical psychologists used to argue strenuously that their discipline was a bona fide science in order to support its claim to truth (and to help it get millions of tax dollars in support). Today many are describing psychology in categories indistinguishable from those used for religious cures and conversions.⁴

Another professor of psychology is even more suspicious of the effectiveness of psychology:

Despite the creation of a virtual army of psychiatrists, psychologists, psychometrists, counselors, and social workers, there has been no letup in the rate of mental illness, suicide, alcoholism, drug addiction, child abuse, divorce, murder, and general mayhem. . . . In plain language, it is suspicious. We are forced to entertain the possibility that psychology and related professions are proposing to solve problems that they themselves have helped create. . . We find psychologists making a virtue out of self-preoccupation, and then we find them surprised at the increased supply of narcissists. We find psychologists advising the courts that there is no such thing as a bad boy or even bad adult, and then we find them formulating theories to explain the rise in crime. We find psychologists severing the bonds of family life, and then we find them conducting therapy for broken fami-

lies.⁵

Untold billions of dollars have been spent in the arena of mental health this century. Can you think of one human malady that has been cured as a result? Medical science can list many diseases for which a cure has been found. A trip to the doctor often results in a therapy for which the doctor can confidently assert that the illness will be cured. Though psychology has taken over the arena of mental and emotional counsel and has defined and categorized many problems (though no uniform theory of the cause of these problems has received a consensus acceptance), no cure has been or appears to be forthcoming. Many have argued that no progress has been made at all.

“All Truth is God's Truth”

Under the slogan “all truth is God's truth,” much material from the social sciences has been brought into the teaching and practice of the evangelical church. If we define God's truth as the way things objectively are, **from God's perspective** (which is infallible), the statement is correct. However, the situation is far more complex than is admitted by this approach.

Truth which has been ascertained with reasonable probability through the processes of science as applied to social and psychological issues is not a threat to Biblical Christianity. If we believe that the Bible is inspired by God and is inerrant, then we would not expect it to be incompatible with the facts inherent to the created universe. This includes facts about the nature of man, his psychological make up, and his societal relationships.

The problem has been that much material that is only partially understood by its evangelical users, often destined to refutation by later scientific evidence, has been uncritically promoted as “God's truth.” A recent example has been the popularizing of the differences between left and right brain hemispheres to determine personality, artistic, temperamental, and gender related differences in humans. Some of the material has also been

integrated with occult and New Age concepts. Some scientists who did early research on the brain hemispheres have been openly critical of much of the popularizing and untenable applications that have gone on. Other scientists are skeptical whether any person can do much about which half of their brain is being utilized in any given activity. Whatever eventually comes of the left-brain right-brain hoopla, clearly “God's truth” about this matter has not been determined with sufficient probability. Yet evangelical churches have held brain hemisphere seminars taught by people with little or no scientific understanding of the human brain. Christians supposedly learn how to change things about their talents and personalities by operating out of different hemispheres of their brains.

Questions for the

I submit the following questions as key issues that need answers if pastors and Christian workers are going to rely on “God's truths” as discovered in the social sciences for their teaching, ministry, and counsel:

1) How do we accept or reject the many competing theories that are being presented to us in current literature, especially since the scientists in these fields themselves are unable to come to agreement? Thomas Kuhn who is widely respected in the field of the philosophy of science, defines the term “paradigm” as, “. . . universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners.”⁶ He states that very early work in scientific endeavors often lacks these and gives examples of when the first paradigms were accepted in different fields. About the social sciences he states, “. . . it remains an open question what parts of social science have yet acquired such paradigms at all.”⁷ Where are the universally recognized scientific achievements of the social sciences? It is not up to the relatively untrained (in this arena) Christian worker in the local church to find them

if the scientists cannot!

2) When has sufficient, reasonable probability been shown to integrate “God's truths” as found in psychology and sociology with the body of revealed truth found in Scripture? Some will argue that theologians cannot agree upon a body of revealed truth from Scripture and therefore theology, psychology, and sociology are all on the same level of **improbability**. I do not accept this argument because the Bible is clear and Christians can know the essential truths that it reveals. Evangelical Christians and most others who do not reject the authority of Scripture agree upon the basic needs of human beings that are addressed by Scripture (such as forgiveness of sins, moral direction, meaning and purpose found in knowing God through Jesus Christ, assurance of eternal life, etc.). The basic theology of most Bible believing Christians is not nearly as fragmented and confused as the prevailing situation in the social sciences.

3) Are truths gleaned by science from the creation to be given a one to one degree of significance with Biblically revealed truths discerned hermeneutically (through proper Biblical interpretation)? This question is a difficult one that perhaps needs more explanation by Christians who are strongly in favor of integrating evangelical Christianity with psychology, anthropology, and sociology. Even solving the truth problem leaves the question of significance. I have argued in a previous issue of this commentary that the Great Commission as given in **Matthew 28:18-20** instructs us to teach what Christ taught, not other material. Not everything that is true is pertinent or profound. What Christ taught is pertinent to the mental and spiritual well being of Christians and others who need Christ.

4) How many pastors and other Christian workers have the time or skills to sort through the deluge of conflicting data from these arenas and determine that which is truthful, workable, and pertinent to integrate into his or her practice? Trained Christian psychologists have told me that there is so much material and so many theories that they have had to choose certain ones that seemed to make the most sense to themselves and use them in their practice. They do not claim that these are the best theories available, just the ones that seem to get the best results **for them**. This is clearly pragmatic and less than the type of scientific precision necessary to claim confidently to have arrived at "God's truth." If some trained professionals (perhaps many do not, I do not have enough data to generalize) must resort to this, then what is the less psychologically trained pastor to do?

"There is great pressure to turn our lives and those of our children over to these elite technicians of the soul. . ."

Picking up a current book about the latest pop theory and using it is not very satisfactory.

5) How do we extricate (remove or untangle) the occult and New Age practices that are so much a part of counseling and the social sciences in the 1990-s? Clearly these influences are major and many. They have been a part of psychology from its earliest years, as evidenced by Carl Jung's self professed interest in the occult and use of the "cosmic unconscious" notion that is now a central theme of the New Age. This is not to say that all social sciences are of the occult; but that its influence has been an integral part of their development.

The line between parapsychology and psychology proper is not a clearly defined one. Are such notions as ESP, spiritual energy fields, hypnotically induced encounters with other personalities, visualization and guided imagery, inner children with personalities of their own and secret information to deliver, trances, etc. that are promoted in many popular psychological books and seminars so much a part of the

profession as to make it not useful for Christians? There are serious problems here; who can blame the pastor who decides to forgo the field altogether?

6) Does not the integration of so-called "social science" into the church necessarily lead to the development of a psychological and sociological "priesthood" to mediate their obscure "truths" to the uninitiated laity? In **Acts 17:11**, the Bereans are commended for searching Scriptures to verify Paul's teaching. Paul's custom was to use the Scriptures to show that Jesus is the Messiah (**Acts 17:2,3**). What "scriptures" are the saints to search to see if extra-Biblical psychological theories are true? They find themselves in the situation of having to

trust the educated elite in these matters.

In his excellent book **IDOLS FOR DESTRUCTION**, Herbert Schlossberg tells of the dangers of elite experts running things for us:

Combining social purpose with expertise sets the stage for a gnosticism in which only the special few have the key to the secrets of the universe. This is not something that can be learned from books, although the *cognoscenti* are almost invariably well-educated. They must also have the requisite "social purpose," for the knowledge required to run society cannot simply be communicated rationally. They are like the Pharisees who taught that God gave Moses not only a written law but also and oral one, handed down through the generations to only the privileged few. This was the key to the power of the Pharisees: they had the knowledge to unlock the meaning of the Pentateuch, to be the recipients of wisdom had by no others. Not possessing esoteric knowledge, the masses have no choice but to turn their lives over to the elite to be managed. Never ask the enlightened ones about their track record,

which is a series of disguised disasters; just accept on faith that they have the secret to life.⁸

Though Schlossberg is writing about American society, the principle of the rulership of people who have access to "esoteric" (intended to be understood only by a special few) knowledge has similar implications in the church. The supposed truths and technologies of the social scientists certainly fit this category of knowledge. There is great pressure to turn our lives and those of our children over to these elite technicians of the soul who possess "truths" not accessible to most Christians and Christian pastors who know the Bible.

7) Are those who advocate integrating teachings from psychology and sociology with Biblical teachings raising the theories of these human endeavors to the level of Biblical truth, or are they lowering Biblical truth to the level of the unproven theories? This danger is real. The history of the church tells of many cases in which groups have embraced secular philosophies (such as rationalism) and lost faith in Biblical revelation. The intent may be to integrate the two without damaging either; but the practice often results in the depreciation of Biblical faith. The answers to these questions are important and a lack of reasonable responses to them signifies major problems for the integrators. Maybe some can be answered. What cannot be is the current practice of naively adopting unproven teachings and theories and using them for the counsel and teaching of the church. This cannot be justified by glibly quoting the "all truth is God's truth" tautology. This begs the question. The underlying issue is Pilate's question, "What is truth"? (**John 18:38**). **God's truth** cannot be divorced from the person, work, and teaching of Jesus Christ.

The "integration" process has become different from what is envisioned in the theory of adding "God's truths" revealed through psychology to the truths of Scripture. This is documented in a well written article by

David Powlison entitled INTEGRATION OR INUNDATION? found in the Book POWER RELIGION edited by Michael Scott Horton.⁹ Powlison states, "Instead of portraying the biblical vision of people first to the church and then to psychologists, integrationists imported secular visions into Christianity. . . . Christian psychotherapists generally believe that the Bible is insufficient when it comes to exploring and explaining the significant goings on in the human psyche."¹⁰ He continues, "Psychology's speculative myths reconstruct human nature in ways that are fundamentally false and misleading. Christians who counsel need categories that are concretely Biblical."¹¹ When ideas are fundamentally incompatible as are those of Biblical Christianity and modern psychology, their integration must result in the destruction of one or the other. In this case, it is the Bible that is altered or removed while the ideas of psychology remain unmolested.

This is not to say that it is improper for science to study human behavior and seek to understand it. It is only reasonable for us to want to solve what seems the one area of the human dilemma impervious to a technological solution. Putting a man on the moon has proved to be elementary compared to solving the psychological and sociological problems of the human race. As long as there are people and problems, there will an effort made to understand and solve those problems.

The issue is: lacking a secular and scientific solution to this predicament (which cannot ever completely happen because only God can redeem the soul), why lay aside the Biblical one? Why give up that which is profitable for "teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" for that which has not yet given us a clear set of agreed upon truths and answers?

Jesus Christ is our Creator (**John 1:3; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2**). He has perfect knowledge of man, including that of the motives and intentions of the heart. He has the power to heal, the love and mercy to forgive, and embodies and teaches the truth which will set us free.

Isaiah 28 records a rebuke to Israel for forsaking God's teaching and making an alliance with Egypt, hoping to be saved from Assyria. In the midst of this chapter is an often quoted Messianic prophecy (**Isaiah 28:16**). **Verse 20** uses a metaphor to describe the world's provision: "The bed is too short on which to stretch out, and the blanket is too small to wrap oneself in." A clear implication of **Isaiah 28** is that when Messiah is passed over for a man-made, secular solution, the results are unsatisfactory.

The psychological bed upon which the Christian is seeking to recline is **too short**. "Therefore thus says the Lord God, 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, A costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed. He who believes in it will not be disturbed'" (Isaiah 28:16).

Next month we will discuss counseling based on a Biblical understanding of the basic problems of humanity as revealed in the New Testament.

Written by Bob DeWaay, Twin City Fellowship, P.O. Box 8068, Minneapolis, MN 55408; © 1992.

Scripture taken from the New American Standard Bible, © Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

End Notes

1. This ad was placed in Evangelical Ministers Fellowship, April 1991 Newsletter; GMAE.
2. The Psychological Way / The Spiritual Way, Martin & Deidre Bobgan; Bethany House, 1979; page 21.
3. *ibid.* pages 17-21.
4. Psychology as Religion, Paul C. Vitz, Eerdmans, 1977 (1985 reprint), page 43.
5. Psychological Seduction, William Kirk Kilpatrick, Nelson, 1983, page 31.
6. The Structure of Scientific Revolutions; Thomas S. Kuhn; The University of Chicago Press, 1962 - page x.
7. *ibid.* page 15.
8. Idols For Destruction, Herbert Schlossberg; Nelson, 1983; pages 194, 195.
9. Power Religion - The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church?; Michael Scott Horton, Editor; Moody Press, 1992; chapter 8, pages 191 - 218.
10. *ibid.* page 206.
11. *ibid.* page 208.