

## **BIBLICAL PSYCHOLOGY IN CHRISTIAN MINISTRY**

Does the Church have a ministry in mental health? If so, what role, if any, should psychology have in it? Until now, because of all the other controversies already fomenting among evangelicals, I have been reluctant to discuss these issues publicly.

However, several things have happened to convince me of the need to take up this task. First of all, there is a growing number of Christians entering the field of counseling who have been more thoroughly trained in the behavioral sciences than they have been in the Scriptures. In some cases, their philosophies and methods obviously have not been subjected to a Biblical test. Their faith and their science have never been integrated in their own mind. Believers are likely to leave the offices of such professionals more confused or shocked than helped.

This is of deep personal concern to those of us who have devoted so much of our professional lives to the development of a Biblical role in mental health. After all, there is a big difference between a Christian who practices psychology and the practice of a psychology which is truly Christian or Biblical.

Today the term "Christian psychology" is used much too loosely to be easily understood. Some use this term in referring to a movement within the discipline of psychology that is made up of Christians. Others may use the term to refer to psychology courses taught in the behavioral science department of a Christian college or university.

Because of such confusion and ambiguity surrounding the term "Christian psychology," I prefer to use the term "Biblical psychology." For me, Biblical psychology is a comprehensive study of human behavior pursued under the discipline of Scripture. Its findings can be expressed in terms which are meaningful to both the theological and psychological communities. Preparation for this kind of ministry requires thorough training in the Scriptures and in a theistic approach to the behavioral sciences.

Secondly, I feel some statement is needed to affirm the many committed Christians who are serving the Lord as mental health professionals in both the public and private sectors of our society. Lately, they have been subject to severe and, in many cases, unwarranted attacks. Christian anti-psychologists are flooding the church with their popularized books and periodicals in which they brand all Christian mental health professionals as "Freudians" and "humanists." Nothing could be further from the truth, and I feel this needs to be said. Otherwise, many of the lay reading public are left at the mercy of Christian anti-psychologist authors and their over-generalized conclusions.

These authors deliberately select absurd examples from "fad" psychological theories and therapies and use them as "guilt-by-association" tactics in discrediting all Christian mental health professionals and attacking any use of the behavioral sciences in the ministry of the church. They fail to acknowledge that many evangelical mental health professionals are just as concerned as the evangelical clergy that the church be protected from the determinism, humanism, mechanistic reductionism (the belief that creation evolved and is without purpose), and self-exaltation which characterizes secular psychology.

When the world uses this kind of "guilt-by-association" logic by choosing isolated examples from fringe groups and practices to discredit all evangelicals, all pentecostals, or all charismatics, we recognize it immediately and abhor it. And when those same tactics are used by skilled communicators in the Body of Christ in such a way as to create unwarranted suspicion and mistrust among Christians, such tactics are even more detestable.

Thirdly, an increasing number of people being seen at EMERGE are being affected by the teachings of popular Christian anti- psychologists. Not only are these people suffering from the pain of overwhelming life circumstances, but they also experience intense guilt for seeking the help of a Christian counselor--even though their pastors have referred them. Should hurting people be made to feel guilty for reaching out for the help they obviously need?

### ***Historical antagonism is waning***

Historically, this antagonism between religion and psychiatry has been so intense as to make it impossible for either discipline to gain from the insights of the other. Loud voices from both camps have insisted that religion and psychiatry or psychology are like oil and water--they just don't mix. Many still feel that way. Consequently, much of psychiatry is without a soul and there is certainly no lack of emotionally sick religion.

Today, however, there is evidence that a growing number of reputable people from both camps are looking at their old viewpoints more carefully. They are beginning to see the benefit of helping the minister better understand the emotional issues involved in a person's religious experience, and of helping the psychiatrist or psychologist better understand the spiritual issues involved in a person's emotional life.

### ***Priorities are important!***

Since the issues of faith affect us eternally, they are obviously more important to us than the psychological issues of life. Nevertheless, in our sinful and sick society, there are times when many of us need all the help both fields can give us in order to stay spiritually and mentally healthy. Of course, you don't have to be mentally healthy to go to heaven, but it sure does help to make the trip more enjoyable.

No experience has the potential for making a greater contribution to a person's mental health than a personal relationship with Jesus. And, introducing people to Jesus is the primary mission of the church. Even a casual reading of the New Testament reveals this.

We are called to reach the world with the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. In Mark 16:15, Jesus commands, "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned." The number one task of the church is evangelism.

Knowing that your sins are forgiven brings tremendous relief from guilt and anxiety--what a contribution to a person's mental health. The place for guilt to be dealt with is at the foot of the cross! So the Church's primary mental health mission is carried out in a healthy ministry of evangelism--and there can be no substitute for this!

However, once we are saved, the pastoral question comes into focus--that is, "How much of the saved person will be saved?" So, the enemy, who was bent on our destruction, then seeks to steal from us as much of our kingdom potential as he can. Therefore, each believer needs the help of pastoral ministries to become all God knows he or she can become in Jesus Christ. The extent to which this pastoral mission is successful also has an important bearing on a person's mental health.

Christ, who as Counselor (Isaiah 9:6) was anointed to heal the broken hearted and set the captive free (Luke 4:18), is the role model for the Biblical psychologist or counselor. Their's is a ministry of "helps" in the body of Christ (I Corinthians 12:28). They are members of the church's healing team-- specialists in applied sanctification.

Although Biblical psychologists and counselors will win people to the Lord in the course of their work, most of their efforts will be spent helping the saved become whole in Christ. Of course, the healthier believers are in the practical expression of their faith, the better witnesses they will be.

Much of the Biblical psychologist's and counselor's work involves teaching people practical "how to's" for Biblical "ought to's." It is one thing to tell people how they "ought to feel" about the painful parts of their past, and what they "ought to do" about certain destructive habits in their present; but it is another thing to teach them "how to do" what they "ought to do" about these things.

People know they ought to repent, confess, forgive, lay aside bitterness, be tenderhearted, be transformed by the renewing of their mind, cast all their cares on Christ, put off the old man and put on the new, reverence their husbands, love their wives as Christ also loved the church, obey their parents, not let the sun go down upon their wrath, forget those things that are behind, etc. However, they often don't know "how to do" what they know they "ought to do." An understanding of the behavioral sciences--particularly those areas related to learning, memory, and the developmental process--is of great help in this kind of work.

### *A theistic approach to the behavioral sciences*

Perhaps the greatest problem between religion and secular science is the age-old epistemological conflict over which is the most valuable way of discovering and defining truth. (Epistemology is the study of the origin, nature, methods, and limits of knowledge.) Secular science has rejected subjective- experiential ways of knowing in favor of objective-observational methods.

The epistemological model illustrated in Diagram No. 1 portrays a comprehensive theistic approach to truth. The subjective-experiential ways of knowing are identified by solid lines: faith, experience, authority, and revelation. The objective-observational paths to knowledge are identified by the broken lines: reason, logic, and the scientific method.

For the Christian, truth is defined by what God has revealed of Himself through His Son,

His Word, and His Creation. The revelation of God in His Son and His Word are special revelations that are discovered through faith (Hebrews 11:6). The growth and development of the believer's revelation of God in Christ is carried out under the authority and instruction of Scripture (Matthew 28:19, 20; II Timothy 3:16, 17).

The revelation of God in creation is referred to throughout Scripture (Psalms 8:3,4; 19:1; Romans 1:20,21; Colossians 1:16- 17). Christian members of the scientific community see nature as another book of God's Bible. However, the truth of God in creation can be known only in a relative way. What we know of God's revelation of Himself in nature will never be absolute. However, what we can learn is more likely to be discovered through objective-observational methods than by subjective- experiential ways.

As Christians, we believe there is unity among God's revelations of Himself. That is, truth as it is ultimately discovered in nature through the scientific method will never be in conflict with truth as it is revealed in Christ or the Scriptures.

The believer should seek to use all paths to truth. However, the method of seeking truth one uses should be determined by the nature of truth one seeks. The "who" and "why" questions of life usually require subjective-experiential methods of search. The "what" and "how" questions of life are more likely to be answered through objective-observational paths.

### ***Different kinds of truth require different paths of search***

Yuri Gregarin, the first Russian cosmonaut to orbit the earth, foolishly declared that since he did not see God in his brief trip, God must not exist. His folly was in failing to understand that although science could enable him to orbit the earth, it is not the method of choice in determining the existence of God. The authority of the Scriptures has determined that God can be discovered only by those willing to seek Him through the path of faith (Hebrews 11:6).

On the other hand, if you want to know the meaning of a word, you don't fast and pray for God to reveal it to you. You look the meaning up in your dictionary--a trusted authority. In order to discover the meaning of love, you need to experience it. So, you see, before adopting a particular method of finding truth one needs to determine the nature of the truth being sought. Then, the method of choice for finding that kind of truth should be appropriated.

### ***Integrating theology and psychology***

Before the fall, there was unbroken unity of truth. Certainly, in that moment, theology, psychology, and all other areas of knowledge were integrated in the mind of God. And, Paul tells us in I Corinthians 13:12 that when we are with the Lord we will no longer be the victims of the fragmentary knowledge of our fallen minds; but we will share in the unbroken unity of truth. So, in the meantime, believers who seek truth should focus on that potential unity and pursue it.

By creating human beings in His own image, God brought into existence an intelligence capable of reflecting upon the nature of the Creator's relationship with creation (theology) and

the nature of human behavior (psychology). Here we are not talking about the psychology of Freud, or Rogers, or Skinner, but the psychology God expressed in human nature when He created man in His own image. This psychology has existed from the beginning long before there was a discipline called psychology.

Biblical psychologists employ the discipline to more clearly understand the psychology expressed in human nature as God created it and as sin and redemption have affected it. Their study of such aspects of human behavior as learning, memory, and the developmental process can be very useful in defining a wise application of Biblical truth for helping Christian's overcome hurts from the past and prevent many unnecessary future mental health problems.

Biblical psychologists subject their developing understanding of human behavior to the discipline of Scripture (See Diagram No. 2). Therefore, maintaining a daily walk with Christ within which their exposure to the Word of God can provide continual affirmation or correction for their Biblical and scientific understanding of human behavior is very important.

The field of Biblical psychology and theology can greatly benefit each other. For example, a healthy theology will protect the Biblical psychologist from heresy; and, a Biblical psychology can protect the theologian from an emotionally sick interpretation of Scripture.

### ***Re-Creative Therapy***

Now, I would like to move from this highly philosophical and theological look at the relationship between theology and psychology to a more practical model for explaining how the integration of these two fields can help people deal with problems in living (See Diagram No. 3).

The feelings and thoughts which form the background from which our interpretations of life come have deep roots in our preschool and preverbal years. These feeling, images, and impressions are pooled together in what psychology calls the unconscious and subconscious levels of the mind. Theology refers to this part of us as the darkened, blinded, or deceitful mind and heart (Mark 7:21-23; Romans 1:21; Ephesians 4:18,22; II Corinthians 4:4; I John 2:11; Hebrews 3:13; Proverbs 12:20; Jeremiah 17:9).

Notice, our feelings and thoughts are on a continuum ranging from undefined to defined. Above the level of consciousness, there is defined fantasy, imagination, and thoughts. This whole sensorium is the battlefield of the mind or spirit. Three realms are vying for expression in our attitudes and behavior: human, divine, and demonic. This war is through our feelings and thoughts with the ultimate prize being control of our choices (Romans 6:12-18; II Corinthians 10:3-6; Ephesians 6:10-17).

The human agency is represented by mental energy to be expressed in choices that range across a natural spectrum from destructive to creative. The demonic dimension is represented by the ever-present power of sin to influence our choices.

I view sin as an invisible force emanating from satan, which impacts on the mind to stimulate the brain to think in terms of life options which detract from and destroy a person's

divine potential. The human will is inadequate to always resist temptation in all its forms. Man's fallen nature makes him prone to be influenced by sin in the life choices he makes.

Once a person is born again, there is a divine agency involved in this conflict. Christ brings eternal life ("zoe") into the battle with him when He enters a person's life. Eternal life is an invisible force which is resident in Jesus. It impacts the mind to stimulate the brain to think in terms of life options which enhance and develop our divine potential.

The warfare for our thoughts and choices is often referred to in the New Testament (Romans 6:12-18; I Corinthians 9:26,27; II Corinthians 10:3-6; Ephesians 6:10-18; II Timothy 4:7).

This basic model helps us make the supernatural practical for people who are struggling to: discover new ways of looking at damaged personal histories, overcome destructive habits or character traits, forgive someone who has hurt them, find God's will in some important life decision, or come to terms with other struggles. By making Christians aware of the spiritual dimensions of fantasizing, imagining, and thinking they readily learn how to involve their faith in their counseling and therapy. Knowing where the battle is being waged doesn't guarantee victory, but it certainly helps you fight it more effectively.

### ***Christian counseling fosters healing and growth***

Some of the most crippling problems people bring with them into the family of God are the product of a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of Scripture. These problems involve not just the spiritual dimension of life, but the emotional and social dimensions as well. Let me give you just two examples:

1. Horrifying images of God--many New Testament believers emotionally relate to the God of Sinai rather than the God of Calvary. Their God is more angry than loving. They believe He delights more in punishing them than in rewarding them. They secretly fear their God will reveal every humiliating event of their lives to the whole universe at the judgment seat of Christ. They haven't differentiated the judgment seat of Christ from the great white throne judgment. They are haunted by this nightmare.
2. Horribly crippling views of themselves--they don't understand the difference between being considered unworthy by God and being considered worthless by God. They have never discovered the worth Calvary gives to every person for whom Christ died--His children and His enemies.

Secular psychology is not equipped to help people with these kinds of problems. Helping people like this learn how to identify and reject the crippling ideas about God and themselves that sin has foisted upon them, and discover new ways of thinking about a loving God to whom they are valuable, is a unique task for which God has raised up Biblical psychologists and counselors.