

WHAT EVANGELICALS SAY ABOUT PSYCHOLOGY

By Janeen Carrell-Brown*

When I first became a Christian in 1981, I was immediately drawn to meet other counselors and psychologists who were intentionally Christian in their professional lives. I signed up to attend a training workshop in the outskirts of Philadelphia given by a Reformed Presbyterian minister and professor of counseling named Jay Adams.¹ I was excited by the Biblical teaching, seeing what the Bible had to say about anxiety and anger and relationships. However, very subtly, and eventually not so subtly, Adams spoke against and then railed against the evils of psychology and psychiatry. In essence, there was no counseling approach or technique of which he approved, except his own. He insisted that nothing could be accomplished until the client was "saved." His Nouthetic Counseling (based **only** on the Bible) was the **only** appropriate way to help people.

I am a person who feels first and thinks second. I was internally confused. I was naive. I was unable to cognitively ponder and consider advisedly what I was hearing. I began to wonder whether I could continue to be a psychologist. (It never crossed my mind to give up my Christianity.)

It was a blessing that my husband Bill had accompanied me to the program. He thinks first and feels second. He very calmly helped me to sort out the doubts, confusions and issues. He helped me realize that Adams condemned behavioral psychology but the system he described was certainly behavioral psychology. My heart and mind were finally put at ease when Bill stated, "Janeen, God has prepared you in this direction for years. He certainly wouldn't want you to give up all that learning and training. He wants you to use it for Him."

Through the years I have heard of people who thought psychology was of the devil, yet it wasn't until a client brought me the book *The Seduction of Christianity*² that I could tangibly feel the fear of evangelical fundamentalists for something about which I considered them to be woefully ignorant.

The diatribe did not "hit home," however, until several of my counseling supervisees, who are Christian, reported clients who were fearful that their pastor would learn they were seeking professional help for emotional problems. I had no real understanding of the lack of pastoral support for mental health. I had some things to learn!

This assignment is a wonderful opportunity to begin research on what the evangelical world thinks about psychology. I approach the topic with a real desire to understand different positions.

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What Some Evangelicals Say About Psychology

Evangelist Jimmy Swaggart vehemently opposes psychology. Sometime before his own spiritual and psychological problems became public, he told a television audience that psychology was the "rot of hell" and that psychologists were prostitutes of modern society. I did not hear him say these things directly, but they were reported to me by clients. Dr. Richard Dobbins, the director of the Emerge Pastoral Counseling and Training Center for Ashland Theological Seminary, confirmed the veracity of the reports.³

A pastor in north eastern Ohio recently had an article in his church bulletin about "psychoheresy." In it he wrote, "With alarming frequency problems of living which were once tackled and transformed by submission to the truth of God's word are now being toyed with on the couches of man's wisdom." He said psychotherapists are the gurus of our age, "the witch doctors of the late 20th century," who "externalize our guilt, [and] explain our sin as a Christian neurosis."

" . . . [A]las," he continues, "as with so much before, the church has married the spirit of the age. Tragically the 'boat' is not simply in the water where it should be, but the water is in the boat where it shouldn't be."⁴

Dave Hunt and T.A. McMahon in their book, *The Seduction of Christianity*, include psychotherapy as one of the deceptions which would immediately precede the Second Coming as predicted by Jesus and the apostles.⁵ "This seduction now touches every aspect of Christian life, and infects the church from charismatics to anticharismatics, from liberals to evangelicals, from Catholics to Protestants, from clergy to laymen."⁶ Hunt and McMahon strongly advocate sticking strictly to the Bible and avoiding psychological influences.

Jay Adams, in a 1973 lecture at an unnamed seminary, "a bastion of biblical truth,"⁷ told the students and faculty, "In my opinion, advocating, allowing and practicing psychiatric and psychoanalytical dogmas within the church is every bit as pagan and heretical (and therefore perilous) as propogating the teachings of some of the most bizarre cults. The only vital difference is that the cults are less dangerous because their errors are more identifiable."⁸ He has warned pastoral students:

Members of your congregation, elders, deacons and fellow ministers (not to speak of Christians who are psychiatrists and psychologists) may turn on the pressure and try to dissuade you from any resolute determination to make your counseling wholly scriptural.

They may insist that you cannot use the Bible as a textbook for counseling, try to shame you into thinking that seminary has inadequately trained you for the work, tempt you to buy all sorts of shiny psychological wares⁹ to use as adjuncts to the Bible, and generally demand that you abandon what they may imply or openly state to be an arrogant, insular, and hopelessly inadequate basis for counseling.

They may even warn and threaten, as they caricature the biblical method: "Think of the harm that you may do by simply handing out Bible verses like prescriptions and pills."¹⁰

There are positions other than these evangelical anti-psychology and anti-psychiatry stances. Everett Worthington surveyed religious counseling and techniques. He found there were three major styles.¹¹ One was using techniques drawn only from theology or religion. These people believe “it is possible to minister to mental-emotional-behavioral problems without resorting to psychological models or to psychological gimmicks and devices.”^{12 13}

Spiritual guidance, prayer, confession of sin, meditation on Scripture, involvement in a caring church and similar biblical concepts are seen as the only ways to help hurting people. Critics argue that these methods promote religious education, discipleship or spiritual growth, but they aren’t counseling techniques.¹⁴

A second is to use only secular methods even when helping persons with their religious concerns and problems. “Critics of this view . . . argue that if only secular techniques and theories are used, then the counseling is secular. It is not religious, and it certainly isn’t Christian, despite the counselor’s personal beliefs.”¹⁵ The third view attempts to combine the use of modern psychological knowledge about human behavior and the teachings of Scripture. “Secular theories and approaches are combined with religious methods in an effort to help people with their problems, values and personal struggles. Critics of this view proclaim loudly that such integration of the secular with the biblical is impossible.”¹⁶

There are many evangelicals who support the integrated view, however. For years, Clyde M. Narramore¹⁷ affected many lives with his daily radio broadcast, “Psychology For Living.” As a Christian and a psychologist, he, along with Henry Brandt, showed that a biblical approach to counseling was possible “and some evangelicals began to see the relevance of psychology to theological education.”¹⁸ The Narramore Christian Foundation continues to spread the message that individual human problems are based in physiological, emotional and spiritual factors. Some solutions are found within the field of medicine, some within psychology, some within spiritual counsel. These perspectives are combined in Narramore’s counseling manual, the *Encyclopedia of Psychological Problems*.¹⁹ His nephew, S. Bruce Narramore²⁰, has carried on the tradition with professional and scholarly dedication. Constantly exploring the relationship between sin and psychopathology, he has called for a rethinking about the harm guilt motivation can produce in counseling, preaching and parenting.²¹

Ronald L. Koteskey²² has strong Christian convictions to which he adheres without compromise. These he brings to the teaching of psychology. He believes we can and must find the truth in secular psychology that is consistent with Christianity and develop a more complete understanding of human behavior. “Too often we reject truth discovered by the non-Christian because we believe that it is not the whole truth . . . There are indications that the artificial dichotomy between psychology and Christianity is being broken down. Christian psychologists are becoming increasingly open about their faith.”²³

Perhaps the most influential voice today in helping lay people come to terms

with the integration of theological, psychological and psychiatric issues comes from the team of Drs. Paul D. Meier and Frank B. Minerth. They met in seminary after each had been in independent psychiatric practice and were searching for ways to more completely help hurting people. Through the Minerth and Meier Clinic in Richardson, Texas, a suburb of Dallas, and an extensive radio ministry, they spread the concept that "problems are often divided into the categories of spiritual, psychological and physical. Such categories correspond to the biblical concepts of spirit, soul and body, respectively. Although those divisions are useful in helping us to think about human experiences, we need to remember that in reality a person is a whole and must be dealt with as such . . . Christian psychology can be biblical and functional."²⁴

I found a very helpful model for understanding the categories of Christian counseling, which includes psychological care, in the writings of Gary Collins. He states that there are five overlapping categories. These he titles Mainstream, Evangelical Pastoral Counselors, Christian Professionals, Theoreticians and Researchers, and Popularizers.²⁵ These categories have helped me further understand various positions.

The Mainstreams are the practitioners who use all secular strategies yet are working in church settings. The CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education) movement is considered part of this area. According to Collins, CPE was a theologically liberal movement because of the suspect theology and because of their general distrust of psychology.²⁶

The Evangelical Pastoral Counselors are those that use only Biblical understanding and direction. Jay Adams, whom Collins describes as "controversial but influential,"²⁷ is included here.

In the opinion of many, . . . Adams' lack of formal training in psychology has led him to oversimplify and thus to reject too quickly the arguments of his opposition. His confrontational approach to counseling is clearly based on Scripture, but he appears to overlook other Bible passages which show the equal importance of supportive, referral and insight counseling. Adams also has had a tendency to attack psychological writers, Christian and non-Christian alike, in a combative, name-calling manner. This has undermined some of his arguments and detracted from what might be taken as a more serious approach if it were presented in a more gracious manner.²⁸

Also included in this grouping would be Lawrence Crabb. Though trained in psychology, ²⁹ he describes his "biblical" counseling as evangelism, encouragement, exhortation and enlightenment.³⁰ He calls for an approach based on Scripture, "a reliable, fixed framework for counseling."³¹ However, he writes, "I do not want anyone to interpret [my position] as a cavalier dismissal of secular psychology. I believe psychology as a thoroughly secular discipline (like dentistry or engineering) has real value."³²

The Christian Professionals are those with formal training in psychology, psychiatry and related disciplines. Paul Tournier, James Dobson, Frank Minerth and Paul Meier, and Bruce Narramore are names known by their writings for

the lay public. Clyde Narramore and Gary Collins have written primarily from pastoral and professional perspectives.³³

Those who discuss psychology and religion from a religious perspective and take a theological stand “risk ostracism from their professional colleagues for even daring to take religion seriously.”³⁴ There are, however, a growing number of dedicated people as evidenced by more than a thousand members of the Christian Association for Psychological Study. Theoreticians and researchers who are readily recognized would include Vernon Grounds, Bruce Narramore, Wayne Oates and Gary Collins.

The last of Collins’ categories includes the Popularizers. “All deal with practical, down-to-earth subjects, give simple explanations for problems, communicate effectively without psychological jargon, are attractive personalities, are at least somewhat biblically oriented, and say something that is in some way unique.”³⁵ Names which might be recognized are Charlie Shedd, Bruce Larson, Tim LaHaye, Keith Miller, Ruth Carter Stapleton, Bill Gothard, Howard Hendricks, Norman Wright, J. Allan Petersen, and Florence Littauer. We can each add our own favorites.

In Conclusion

Can theology be trusted? One professor has answered, “It all depends on the theology and the theologian When the theologian seeks to be guided by the Holy Spirit and when theology is based on a careful study of Scripture, then theology most likely can be trusted.”³⁶ Gary Collins believes similar conclusions can be made about psychology:

When a psychologist seeks to be guided by the Holy Spirit, is committed to serving Christ faithfully, is growing in his or her knowledge of the Scriptures, is well aware of the facts and conclusions of psychology and is willing to evaluate psychological ideas in the light of biblical teaching — then you can trust the psychologist, even though he or she will at times make mistakes, as we all do Don’t throw out everything simply because some psychology is weak and in error, any more than a jeweler would throw out his whole stock of rings because he found some glass stones among the gems.³⁷

As a result of reading for this paper, I have been intrigued by some ideas that I want to explore. I have become fully aware that there is no one school of thought that can claim the label “Christian” or “biblical.” “The idea of counseling — listening and responding in such a way as to bring about change in another person — is a relatively modern procedure and process. Strictly speaking, the 20th century concept of counseling does not seem to have a biblical parallel.”³⁸ According to David Carlson, we must remember that the Bible plays a crucial role in our knowledge, but is not the only source to be considered. In fact, “anyone writing about counseling from a Christian viewpoint since the turn of the century is doing so as a result of counseling becoming increasingly popular and acceptable, and not because the Bible clearly teaches counseling.”³⁹

I remain a Christian who is a psychologist, who feels called to my ministry within that profession and outlook. Just because people are saved spiritually does not mean they are whole emotionally. Conversely, many people, living adequately from an emotional standpoint, need spiritual direction. I feel compelled to help people with the integration.

NOTES

¹Jay Adams is dean of the Institute of Pastoral Studies and visiting professor of practical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, near Philadelphia, Penn. Among his many publications are *Competent to Counsel* (1972), *The Christian Counsellor's Manual* (1973), and *Shepherding God's Flock* (1975).

²Dave Hunt and T.A. McMahon, *The Seduction of Christianity* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishing, 1985).

³Dobbins also had some insight into the attack as he had been directly and specifically named by Swaggart derogatorily.

⁴*The Chapel News*, published by The Chapel, 6175 SOM Center Road, #250, Solon, Ohio 44139. Pastor Alistair Beggs recommends the book *Psychoheresy* by Martin & Deidre Bobgan published by Eastgate.

⁵Hunt and McMahon, pp. 8-9.

⁶Ibid., p. 189.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Jay E. Adams, *More Than Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), pp. xi-xii.

⁹What are shiny psychological wares?

¹⁰Jay E. Adams, *The Use of Scriptures in Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), p.1.

¹¹Everett L. Worthington, Jr., "Religious Counseling: A Review of Published Empirical Research," *Journal of Counseling and Development* 64 (March, 1986), pp. 421-31.

¹²Martin and Dierdre Bobgan, *How to Counsel from Scripture* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), p.42.

¹³Are psychological gimmicks and devices any kin to shiny psychological wares? See Note 8.

¹⁴Gary R. Collins, *Can You Trust Psychology?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 70. The author was professor of psychology and chairman of the division of pastoral counseling and psychology at Trinity Evangelical

Divinity School in Deerfield, Ill. He earned a Ph.D. in psychology at Purdue and attended seminary for a year.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid. The Bobgans would support this view.

¹⁷Clyde M. Narramore has an Ed.D. from Columbia University.

¹⁸Gary Collins, *Helping People Grow* (Santa Ana: Vision House, 1980), p. 13.

¹⁹Clyde M. Narramore, *Encyclopedia of Psychological Problems* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1966).

²⁰Bruce Narramore, Ph.D., is professor of psychology at the Rosemead Graduate School of Professional Psychology at Biola University, and is a contributing editor to the *The Journal of Psychology and Theology*.

²¹S. Bruce Narramore, *No Condemnation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

²²Ronald L. Koteskey earned a Ph.D. at Wayne State University and is a professor of psychology at Asbury College in Wilmore, Ky. He has written numerous articles for professional journals including *The Journal of Psychology and Theology*, an evangelical forum for the integration of psychology and theology. He has also been published in *Christianity Today*.

²³Ronald L. Koteskey, *Psychology From a Christian Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), p. 14.

²⁴Paul D. Meier, M.D., Frank B. Minirth, M.D., Frank B. Wichern, Ph.D., *Introduction to Psychology and Counseling: Christian Perspectives and Applications* (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1982), p. 20.

²⁵Collins, *Helping People Grow*, p. 13.

²⁶Ibid., p. 12.

²⁷Ibid., p. 16.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Lawrence Crabb, Jr. received his B.A. in psychology from Ursinus College, and M.A. and Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the University of Illinois.

³⁰Lawrence Crabb, "Moving the Couch into the Church" in *Christianity Today*, Sept. 22, 1978, pp. 17-19.

³¹Lawrence J. Carabb Jr., *Basic Principles of Biblical Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), p. 27.

³²Ibid., p. 26.

³³Collins, *Helping People Grow*, p. 17.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., p. 19.

³⁶Ibid., pp. 18-19.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸David Carlson, "Jesus' Style of Relating: The Search for a Biblical View of Counseling," *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, Summer, 1976. This has been copyrighted by the Rosemead Graduate School of Theology.

³⁹Collins, *Helping People Grow*, p. 39.

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