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A Review Article:
How Christian Is Christian Counseling?



Charles H. McGowen, M.D.

HOW CHRISTIAN IS CHRISTIAN COUNSELING?

Gary L. Almy, M.D. Wheaton, Illinois (2000)
353 pages, paper, \$24.00

Gary L. Almy, M.D., is a board-certified psychiatrist and a highly committed Christian whose purpose for writing this book was to dissuade people, especially other Christians from seeking the counsel of psychologists or psychiatrists, both non-Christian as well as Christian who use the techniques of Freudian insight-oriented psychotherapy.

Let me say upfront, that I could not agree more with that opinion, and furthermore it is difficult to be critical of someone that I've never met but with whom I appear to have so very much in common (faith, profession, theological persuasion, passion for God's Word, a creationist position on origins, and an interest in both philosophy and history). I find that Dr. Almy writes very well and explains difficult concepts in such a way as to correctly inform the less well informed. He uses appropriate scriptural references in their proper context and adds an excellent historical perspective to his analytical treatise on the subject of psychoanalysis.

We both agree on the concept of Descartes' dualism and deplore the "art" (it is not science), of psychoanalysis. We

would each concur that it is the futile search by materialistic and naturalistic scientists for a uniformity of natural causes in a closed system that has impaled true science in general on the duel horns of a dilemma: Namely the obvious, yet inexplicable presence of both an immaterial mind (soul/spirit) and a natural body. In other words, how does one explain the invisible, yet obviously active mind, in a visible body apart from a supernatural origin?

Having said all of that, I will proceed with my task of performing a critical review of Dr. Almy's book section-by-section (there are four) and then conclude with some general observations.

INTRODUCTION

In the introduction Dr. Almy sets the tone of his dissertation on, and arguments against, insight-oriented psychotherapy, having been changed in his original opinion by "the Holy Spirit that made me increasingly uncomfortable with psychotherapy." It was here that the doctor gave a short, but appreciated, note of personal testimony. Through his conversion he had apparently discovered that there was a "gross incompatibility of insight-oriented psychotherapy with the care of souls as shown in Scripture." Having seen that modern psychologists and psychiatrists, regardless of their faith or lack of it, had bought into Freudian philosophies and techniques, he thus urges the Church to scrutinize the profession of Christian counseling's "claim to be an effective and scientific method of solving human problems." He states that it is indeed sad that "this false claim that counseling is a science continues to be actively promoted in the church." Dr. Almy uses the remaining pages of his introductory portion to give a general outline of the book. This was a helpful and succinct summary of the publication's contents.

SECTION ONE: THE PILLARS OF THE PSYCHOTHERAPY INDUSTRY

Consisting of three chapters, this section draws a comparison between the Freudian and biblical foundational ideas or

"pillars," upon which each respective philosophy of counseling is based. Freud's six pillars are sighted as being Environmental Determinism, Psychic Determinism, Insight, The Therapist, Self-Sufficiency, and The Pleasure Principle. Dr. Almy wrongly decries the influence of the environment in a person's behavioral development. His argument is based on the presence of original sin as the *sole* basis for all human actions and reactions. Here I must disagree. While I, too, believe in the doctrine of original sin and the presence of utter depravity, I would agree with R. C. Sproul that our innate depravity is radical but not yet total when we are conceived.¹ That is, we are sinful to the core at conception, but not as depraved as we could possibly become. If by analogy, we would view original sin as a pie, when we're born our sin is but a mere slice while we yet have the capacity throughout a lifetime of eating (i.e., sinning) to consume the entire pie.

Almy fails to see that it is the influence of our environment acting synergistically, in concert with our sinful nature, which ultimately results in the advancement of our depravity. We are warned of this by the apostle Paul, who said, "Do not be deceived: Bad company ruins good morals."² It was certainly the "bad company" in Eden that led to Adam and Eve's fall from grace. The "bad company" of the majority report at Kadesh-Barnea delayed Israel's entrance into the land of promise for forty years, and the evil influences of pagan nations deleteriously affected Israel's devotion to Yahweh from Jericho to Samaria. God also offers believers the caveat about being "unequally yoked together with unbelievers."³ Is not God concerned about the ungodly environmental influence here?

Dr. Almy himself admits to environmental influences in several places in his book. "The ideas people choose to believe have definite consequences in their own lives and in the lives of their children" (69). Do those "ideas" not come from their environment? In discussing hedonism and its effect on people's morality he says, "In this system of thinking, abortion of burdensome babies, euthanasia of bothersome old or ill persons, and suicide when facing any loss of 'dignity' all become acceptable, even desirable" (80). From where does

that "system of thinking" arise if not in the midst of one's environment? Discussing rationalism vs. reason during the Enlightenment period on page 91, Dr. Almy admits, "No writer's influence was greater in this regard than that of Friedrich Nietzsche" (emphasis mine). I could site many more examples of his inconsistency when it comes to his attempts to give examples of environmental influence while at the same time denying its effect on behavior, but space does not permit. However, his firm stance on this issue of non-environmental influence and his own statements to the contrary are replete throughout this work. It is somewhat akin to the skeptic who emphatically denies the existence of absolute truth and then repeatedly insists that his opinion is absolutely true.

Now I wholeheartedly agree that far too many people blame their environment for all of their problems (victimism), totally discounting the presence of their sin nature that causes the majority of them. However, to deny both the negative and positive influences of other people or various circumstances in our lives is to deny the obvious.

Genetic and environmental influences are the symbiotic cause of many diseases; diabetes, cancer, obesity, and depression just to name a few. The presence of sin [inherent much like our genes] plus a negative environment will often create a more serious set of sinful acts⁴ while even in the abiding presence of the sinful nature the indwelling "environment" of the Holy Spirit results in positive godly behavior.⁵

In the other four pillars Dr. Almy rightly deplores the Freudian methodology which dangerously attempts to delve into the unconscious as well as utilizing the therapeutic exercises of building a notion of self sufficiency and the right to a pleasurable existence into the mind of the client; an existence which the therapist says should be free of pain, guilt, shame, fear, and anxiety.

Almy then counters Freud's six pillars with six biblical ones: Original Sin, The Heart, Conviction of Sin, Our Counselors (the Holy Spirit, the Church, the Word of God, and other Christians) and Sacrifice. I have little disagreement with what he said in this portion of Section One.

He closes this initial section with an excellent analysis of the unfavorable consequences that psychoanalysis can have for the patient. They include the notion of "victimization," a bondage to the unconscious, the so called "recovered memories" (which may have in fact been implanted through the power of suggestion by the therapist), isolation, and a newly-developed philosophy of hedonism.

SECTION TWO: THE ORIGINS OF THE PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC ETHOS

Section Two provides an admirable summary of the philosophies of Darwin, Haeckel and Fleiss, and how they in turn affected Sigmund Freud. Descartes' dualism is contrasted with materialistic monism and Almy rightly applauds the positive influences of Plato and Augustine. The latter include their roles in encouraging a rational, objective and disciplined approach to the attainment of knowledge about God and man. These are then contrasted with the negative influences (Dare I say coming from the environment?) that Pelagianism and Gnosticism had, and continue to have, on society in general and psychoanalysis in particular. I have no quarrel whatsoever with Dr. Almy's conclusions there, and commend him for his diligent research and subsequent discussion of such a complex set of issues in such a small amount of space.

Once again, however, his knee-jerk bias surfaces whenever he mentions the word "insight," mainly I suppose because of its association with the heresy of insight-oriented psychoanalysis. In chapter 9, for example, the word "insight" is used no less than twenty-one times in the first two pages—and not always in a non-pejorative fashion. I would remind the good doctor that the Scriptures do encourage insight in several places each of which encourages the believer to *gain* "insight."^{6 7 8 9 10}

SECTION THREE: THE EFFECTS OF THE PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC ETHOS

In these three chapters Dr. Almy correctly points out the fact that "psychotherapy rests upon a concept of 'psychic

reality' that in no way . . . has any connection with objective, observable, verifiable, accurate, 'witnessable' reality." Each of those adjectives preceding the word "reality" are the *sine qua non* of true science and Almy shows quite clearly that this practice is as far from science as any smoke and mirrors activity can be.

Almy suitably observes that, in the Church "*sola Scriptura* is no longer the foundation of . . . counseling, and many other sources . . . are relied upon as authoritative . . . because many in the Church no longer see the Bible as sufficient for the care or cure of souls."¹¹

I concur with Dr. Almy that the basis of our society's "psychic" dysfunction is the presence of original sin, but his notion that the environment of "bad parenting," for example, is not detrimental to a child's emotional development is not at all consistent with the Scripture that he rightly calls all counselors to rely upon. "Father's do not *exasperate* your children; instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord,"¹² and "Fathers, do not *embitter* your children or they will become *discouraged*"¹³ (emphasis mine) are adequate proof texts that a negative home environment can produce exasperation, embitterment, and discouragement in the soul of a developing youngster: albeit in the milieu of the child's radical depravity.

I can readily identify with Dr. Almy's discussion of the horrendous "Recovered Memory Therapy" wherein many women in the 1990s were enabled by a therapist to "discover" that they had been sexually abused as a child, either by her father, a brother, or some other close relative. These "repressed" memories were blamed for the numerous psychological disorders present in these women; problems such as agoraphobia, anxiety, depression, anorexia, panic disorder, etc.

As an internist, I had many female patients relate to me their "discovery" of these repressed emotions with the aid of some psychotherapist and, if space permitted, I could recount innumerable horror stories associated with these false revelations. The regularity of these cases frequently made me wonder about their validity, for it seemed that every problem that

anyone of these patients ever had could always be traced back by their therapist to an abusive or alcoholic father. Almy provides ample evidence for the unfortunate results of this unscientific and hucksterial type of "therapy" which is at best malpractice.

SECTION FOUR: ALTERNATIVES TO PSYCHOTHERAPY

It is here in the fourth section that Dr. Almy's true battle colors are raised, begin to unfurl and then flutter in the winds of alternative medicine; notably in chapter 15 and the epilogue.

Almy has a definite propensity toward blaming all of an emotionally disturbed patient's problems on sin. Jesus would disagree with this notion for when questioned by his disciples with a similar mindset, he retorted that neither the sin of the afflicted person (a blind man) nor that of his parents was to blame, but that the infirmity was for the sole purpose of bringing glory to God. In the last two portions of his book Almy sites sin as the etiologic basis for psychological problems on no less than twelve occasions. I would appeal to C. S. Lewis here who said, "You write much about your own sins. Beware lest humility should pass over into anxiety or sadness. It is bidden us to 'rejoice and always rejoice.' Jesus has cancelled the handwriting, which was against us. Lift up our hearts."¹⁴

In the matter of the environment and emotions, Dr. Almy again contradicts himself. First he says these things on pages 309 and 312 respectively: "The Bible does not present what we now call depression as . . . a(n) environmentally-caused . . . disease" and "remind the depressed person . . . that thoughts of . . . blaming others . . . are sinful." Then in a contradictory fashion on pages 314 and 321 respectively, he says: "this kind of situation in the home . . . is a frequent cause of depression" and speaking about the husband of a depressed patient Almy posited, "He was totally resistant to considering that some of the aspects of their life might have been too hard for his wife."

Not surprisingly Dr Almy's treatment methods are totally unorthodox because they are based on an erroneous premise;

that being "it's all a problem of sin." He does not use the standard and acceptable combined therapeutic approach of:

- Assisting the patient in his or her adaptation to their adverse environment [through Christian counseling], plus
- Correcting the chemical imbalance [serotonin depletion] that is producing the patient's symptoms.

His reasons for not using these methods are at least consistent with his beliefs, or rather a lack of belief in environmental influence and the reality of a chemical (neurotransmitter) problem.

Serotonin is the neurotransmitter, which enables nerve impulses to jump the gaps in the lengthy interconnections interspersed along the physical nervous system. This substance is in a dynamic flux during a normal day, being higher in the morning and then by evening being slightly depleted by normal amounts of physical and emotional pressures; and even more so by illness, trauma, surgery, childbirth, loss, and many other stressful events. Normally, if the depletion is minimal, recovery to normal levels is accomplished by a refreshing night of sleep. If however, worry or pain interrupts one's sleep, a full recovery of serotonin levels is not accomplished and then a cascade ensues of further depletion followed by more insomnia until physical manifestations of various kinds and degrees surface. Dr Almy incorrectly avers that "no specific pathogenesis has yet been found for the so-called functional illnesses . . . i.e., depression." That is wrong—serotonin *has* been found to be the culprit, and reestablishment of serotonin levels to a normal range with the aid of antidepressant medications and non-Freudian counseling has resulted in a full recovery from these depressed states. I have personally treated hundreds of depressed patients quite successfully, especially since the advent of the newer selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs). This treatment was, of course, only pursued after I had eliminated other causes for the patient's symptomatology; and always with the combined counsel of a Christian professional.

Almy closes his book with an anecdotal case of severe depression, which he had successfully treated without the aid of antidepressant medications. However, his methods did involve drugs: "A few days of sleep medication normalized her sleep pattern and lessened the likelihood that she would wake up in the middle of the night terrorized by overwhelming fears." By giving his patient the benefit of a refreshing night of sleep, utilizing soporific drugs, Dr. Almy enabled her central nervous system to begin the process of re-establishing a normal serotonin balance. In addition, Dr. Almy and his wife took the patient into their home, thus isolating her from the *environmental* factors, which had been responsible for initiating her negative serotonin balance in the first place. Dr. Almy's wife counseled the lady and provided other forms of emotional support. Unfortunately, most depressed patients are not afforded the benefit of a period of personal nurturing by their physician's spouse; it just isn't practical.

CONCLUSIONS

Dr. Almy is obviously a well-read and passionately-committed Christian physician who has unfortunately been adversely affected by his *environment*—that is, by some people in the Church who have a decided distaste for all forms of the rational treatment of mental disorders and who even deny the chemical basis for such conditions. This reminds one of the late 1980s and the negative advertising campaigns engendered by the cultic "Church of Scientology," against the Eli Lilly Corporation and their new product, Prozac. These disciples of L. Ron Hubbard had a general disdain for all levels of psychotherapy mainly due to Hubbard's influence. He had been a disturbed child and had thus spent most of his early life visiting psychiatrists. As a result, psychology and psychiatry became the brunt of his personal vendetta against various forms of counseling—excluding, of course, the counsel of his own methods of scientology.

Almy downplays environment's role in the lives of God's creatures. We must distinguish between the humanistic notion of "environmental determinism" and the environmental

influences, which impact each of our lives. We who believe in the doctrine of original sin and total depravity still see evidence of the additive effects of one's environment on one's ill or well being. We are in general, from a physical and emotional standpoint, a product of our genes plus the effects of our environment. Adult onset diabetes for example, is genetically predisposed but is also potentiated in its time of onset and severity by various environmental factors: diet, obesity, infections, stress, pregnancy etc. The same can be said for cancer, osteoporosis, thyrotoxicosis, and several arthritic conditions, to name only some. Depression, in particular, is most likely to occur in one who has a family history of depression and in whom environmental factors have precipitated the event—factors such as illness, surgery, infection, loss, stress, etc.

Even non-human creatures are affected by environmental influences. The peppered moth of England has become blacker through a process of natural selection. Pollution has darkened the tree bark upon which these moths roost. The "natural selection" process involves the lighter-colored moths being selected out by predators leaving the genetic pool of darker-colored moths to propagate.

Almy's disdain for the treatment of mental illness by any means other than spiritual counseling reminds me of the avoidance of any social activism by fundamentalist groups in the 1950s, 60s and 70s for fear of being accused of spreading a "social gospel." I agree that psychoanalysis is at best a hoax and at its worse a deception. No one can possibly know the mind of a man except our omniscient God. But we need not throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. I, too, deplore the preaching and counsel directed at "felt needs."

I also agree with the scriptural admonition to avoid the counsel of the "ungodly."¹⁵ But godly counsel by a trained professional, who understands people and the Word, who understands the times¹⁶ and who deplores Freudian psychological theories and techniques as much as Dr. Almy and I do is certainly appropriate, reasonable and necessary.

On page 130 he appears to blame sin for all mental derangement totally discounting the aberrations of brain

chemistry. Of course this blame game is apparent throughout the Church where the faith peddlers accuse all physically ill people of being in their situation specifically due to a lack of faith. Tell that to the apostle Paul. This servant of God suffered throughout his ministry from a "thorn in the flesh" the nature of which has not been revealed in Scripture.¹⁷ It was, however, of such a high degree of severity and chronicity for God to have providentially provided a physician to accompany him from time-to-time during his missionary journeys and ultimately to prison. The Bible describes Paul's illness as producing a profound weakness. This may have been the result of the hemolytic anemia produced by malaria; a condition that he may have acquired on his first missionary journey while visiting the coastal region of Perga in Pamphilia.

I think that Dr. Gary Almy's normally objective and rational mind has been unfavorably effected by the *environmental* influence of the PsychoHeresy Awareness Ministries headed up by Martin and Diedre Bobgan, whether he admits it or not. Four of their books are among those listed as "suggested reading." He discounts any possibility that psychological disorders can have a material (chemical) basis and instead puts the etiologic origin squarely in the sinful heart of the patient. As a result of this preconception Almy deplores the use of so-called psychotropic agents in the management of emotional disorders. However Scripture does not reveal a similar disdain for such therapies.

In the Bible we read "wine . . . gladdens the heart of man."¹⁸ The people of that day were told to "give beer to those who are perishing, wine to those who are in anguish."¹⁹ Paul's advice to his fellow servant Timothy was to "stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses."²⁰ Timothy may have suffered from a psychosomatic disorder known as irritable bowel syndrome characterized by nausea, cramps, plus bouts of alternating constipation and diarrhea. Paul had likely passed on this good advice from his friend and companion, Dr. Luke.²¹

What is lacking in Dr. Almy's methodology is balance. His enthusiasm for a Christian approach to counseling is

dramatically swayed by his knowledge of the heretical claims proposed by the purveyors of psychoanalysis. This would be akin to the avoidance of archeological investigations by a Christian who is dedicated to scientific creationism simply because the majority of archeologists and paleontologists are evolutionists.

We can no more blame depression and other chemically-based brain aberrations totally on our innate and ever present sinful nature than we can diabetes, which results from a measurable insulin depletion or insensitivity. When depletions occur they must be corrected or any attempt at curing the accompanying disease will be fruitless. To deny the reality of a chemical basis for depression is very much in the order of "Christian Science," which is neither Christian, nor scientific.

As Christian physicians we should always strive to discern between physical, emotional, and spiritual illness. All three are very real and deserve their respective and appropriate attention, but it takes an extremely astute clinician to differentiate between the three. Complicating our diagnostic endeavors we often see patients whose overwhelming physical problems have spilled over into the other two realms thus producing both emotional and spiritual affliction. To blame all medical problems on sin is to be possessed of the narrowest of thinking, a sort of tunnel vision and deprives the patient of the proper therapy and a satisfactory outcome.

I am personally pleased that Dr. Almy has given a "heads up" to the Church regarding the heretical nature of *insight-oriented psychotherapy*, but I would also hope that his formidable work does not dissuade all emotionally disturbed people from their seeking competent Christian counsel and sound medical treatment. As Christian physicians we need to be careful not to become so "heavenly minded" that we are no "earthly good."

On the next to the last page of his final chapter Dr. Almy makes this statement: "The Bible clearly shows that the darkness that modern society terms 'depression' is to be expected as a part of this life." Does he mean to say that we should then just "grin and bear it" without providing treatment? The Bible

also pictures leprosy as being quite common in the first century. Would Dr. Almy thus deny a modern-day leper treatment merely because in the first century it was "to be expected as a part of this life"? Would he also deny the use of all modern miracles of medicine (transplants, total joint replacement, coronary artery by-pass grafts, etc.) merely because those treatments are not offered in the Bible? I seriously doubt that he would, nor would he refuse them for himself or his closest family members.

There are many ways for us to encourage our Christian patients toward a more biblical lifestyle without being judgmental, however the withholding of time-tested, reasonable, ethical, and medically-sound treatment is not one of those ways. I hope that Dr Almy's work is taken in the context of which it has been written, that of a therapeutic nihilist where all kinds of psychological illness are concerned.

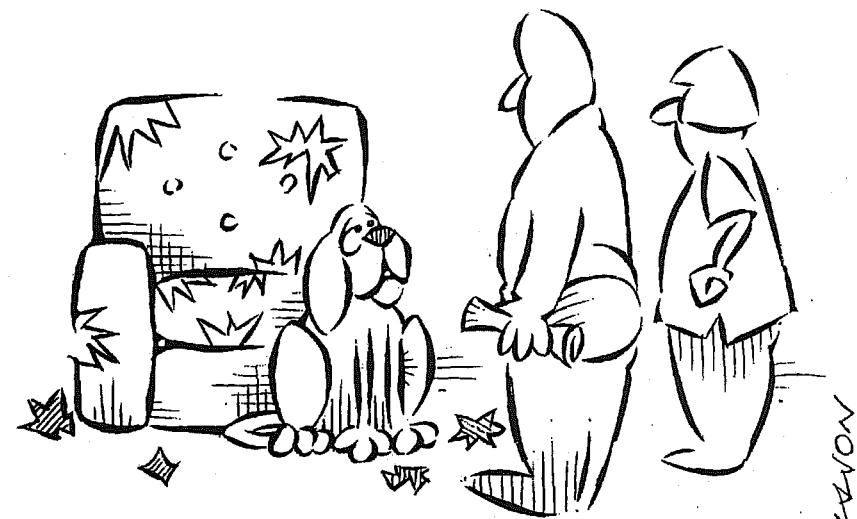
Author

Dr. Charles H. McGowen is a member of the Board of Counsel for Reformation & Revival Ministries, is a board certified internist and assistant professor at Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine. He is also a contributing editor to *Reformation & Revival Journal*. He lives in Warren, Ohio, with his wife, Kay, and can be reached by email at: CHMRETDOC@aol.com.

Notes

1. R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale, 1994), 104.
2. 1 Corinthians 15:33.
3. 2 Corinthians 6:14.
4. Galatians 5:19-21.
5. Galatians 5:22-27.
6. Proverbs 2:1-5.
7. Proverbs 5:1.
8. 1 Kings 4:25.
9. Psalm 119:99.
10. Philippians 1:9.
11. 2 Timothy 2:7.

12. Ephesians 6:4 (NIV).
13. Colossians 3:24 (NIV).
14. *The Quotable Lewis* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale, 1963), 546.
15. Psalm 1:1.
16. 1 Chronicles 12:32.
17. 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.
18. Psalm 104:15.
19. Proverbs 31:6.
20. 1 Timothy 5:23.
21. Colossians 4:14.



I SENSE THAT YOU'RE HARBORING
AN ATTITUDE OF UNFORGIVENESS.

NOVANA