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CHRISTIANS AND PSYCHOLOGY

Some Common Questions Answered

by

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During the past 15 to 20 years a dramatic shift has taken place in American Christianity: Psychology has flooded into the church. Christian psychologists are now the ones many Christians primarily look to for guidance in the Christian life. Christian psychologists write many of the best-selling books and dominate much of Christian radio. Many pastors use psychological terms and concepts in their sermons.

When anything new floods into the church, it needs to be evaluated in the light of Scripture, our only infallible guide for faith and practice. Many Christians are confused about “Christian” psychology: Should it be gladly embraced, used cautiously, or rejected outright? What follows are some common questions I’ve encountered and answers based upon God’s Word as I’ve wrestled with this issue.

1. *Why can’t we use the best insights of psychology along with the Bible? Isn’t all truth God’s truth?*

This goes right to the heart of the matter which is, “Is the Bible sufficient for dealing with our deepest psychological and emotional needs or not?”

First, we need to look at the Bible’s claims. Second Peter 1:3 states that through His power, God “has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge” of Christ. He goes on to specify that this gift consists of God’s “precious and magnificent promises,” which, of course, are contained in His Word. Furthermore, 2 Timothy 3:16-17 states, “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.”

These claims are comprehensive—that God’s Word is sufficient for life and godliness, for equipping us for every good work. Surely, “everything pertaining to life and godliness” includes our emotional or psychological well-being. Since people with severe psychological problems are not “equipped for every good work,”

we must conclude that Scripture claims to be sufficient for bringing healing to the whole person.

The list of the fruit of the Spirit (“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control,” Gal. 5:22-23) describes an emotionally balanced, psychologically stable person. If God’s Word and Spirit can produce this, why do we need to turn to worldly psychology?

“But,” some counter, “the Bible isn’t comprehensive. It doesn’t tell us in detail how to deal with many of the complex problems people struggle with. As long as psychology is in line with Scripture, why not use it?” Perhaps this can be answered by answering another question:

2. *We use modern medicine; why not use modern psychology?*

The answer is, the Bible doesn’t claim to be sufficient for dealing with medical problems; it *does* claim to be sufficient for dealing with problems of the soul (psyche, in Greek). How can we determine which psychological “truths” are true? If we answer, “Whatever works,” we’re on thin ice, since many false religious and spiritual techniques produce results. Scripture is the only basis for determining absolute truth (John 17:17).

There are currently over 500 brand-name psychotherapies on the market, with the number expanding yearly. They come at problems from many varied angles, but one thing is common to them all: They start with a biblically defective view of the nature of man, namely, that man is basically good and able to solve his problems apart from God. If you start from the wrong base, you can’t build a system that complements Scripture. If you mix dirt and water, you get mud.

The Bible warns us against turning to the world’s “wisdom,” since it is opposed to God’s wisdom (see Psalm 1:1-2; Isa. 55:8-11; Jer. 2:13; 1 Cor. 1:18-2:16). As Christians, we are to depend solely on God and His Word as our support and wisdom in the trials of life (see Psalms 19:7-11; 32:6-11; 33:6-22; 119) so that He alone gets the glory (Ps. 115; Isa. 42:8).

Serious problems have plagued the human race since we fell into sin. If a relationship with the living God and His Word was not adequate for coping with these problems, but we needed the

insights of modern psychology to resolve them, then God has left people without sufficient answers for the past 2,000 years, until Freud and company came along to save the day. This is preposterous! The God who went to such expense to save us from sin would not abandon us to the world's ways to find answers to our deepest problems (Rom. 8:32). While some problems may be new to our times (anorexia, mid-life crisis, etc.), and thus are not specifically addressed in Scripture, the principles in God's Word are sufficient to deal with the underlying causes of these problems. There is no "new" problem for which Christ is not sufficient (Col. 2:10; 3:1-4).

The danger for modern Christians is that "Christian" psychologists read their psychological biases into Scripture and then cite Scripture as supporting and teaching these "truths." One flagrant example: In *Worry-Free Living* [Thomas Nelson, 1989], Frank Minirth, Paul Meier, and Don Hawkins operate on the psychological premise that a lack of self-worth is the basis of most psychological problems (p. 140). This is not biblically sound. The Bible clearly and repeatedly states that sin is the basis of most problems.

But, the authors seek to illustrate this false psychological premise by claiming that the ten spies who brought back a negative report to Moses suffered from a negative self-concept, whereas the two spies who brought back the good report had proper self-esteem (p. 136)! They tell us that the reason that David could defeat Goliath, but Saul was a coward, was that David had good self-esteem, whereas Saul did not (p. 139)! This psychologizing of the Bible perverts its intended meaning (the Bible clearly attributes these varying responses due to the faith, or lack thereof, of the men) and leads the unsuspecting astray.

3. *Won't I be a better Christian if I resolve some of my inner conflicts through the insights of psychology?*

In His inscrutable sovereignty, God allows trials, some mild, some severe, into every life. Some people have horrible childhoods—physical, sexual, and verbal abuse—that cause deep emotional problems. The question is, where does a person turn for healing? God's Word repeatedly claims that God Himself is our healer, sufficient to bind up our wounds and make us whole through trusting in Him (see Psalm 147:1-11 for one example of many). God's perfect and complete provision for our needs is the

death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. We are warned not to be taken captive by the world's philosophies and principles, but to walk in the fullness of Christ, our all in all (Col. 2:6-15; 3:1-4, 11).

When we learn to rely fully on Jesus Christ as our source of strength and healing, He gets the glory due to Him as the only True God. When we rely on worldly psychology for part or all of our healing (if it can, indeed, provide such), psychology gets the glory. This is not to say that walking with the Lord provides miraculous, easy, instant emotional healing. Many passages show the struggles and difficulty of the Christian walk (2 Cor. 1:9; 4:7-11; 11:23-28; 12:7-10). The Christian life is pictured as warfare, and war is never easy! But God wants each of us to learn that He is the all-sufficient One who knows us and can meet our deepest needs. We don't need the insights of worldly men to grow up in Christ.

4. *I have trouble relating to God as a loving Father because my biological father was abusive. Can't psychology help me work through the repressed pain from my childhood?*

No one has had a perfect earthly father. Evil, abusive fathers have been around since sin entered the world. God has given us all we need in His Word to come to know and love Him as our Heavenly Father. We may have to identify wrong ideas we have adopted due to our upbringing and change these concepts and attitudes to conform to God's truth. But God's Word is adequate to make us whole persons in Christ. It alone reveals God as He is and the human heart as it is.

5. *Don't I need healthy self-esteem to be able to serve the Lord? Don't I need to love myself properly so that I can love God and others properly?*

Again, we must go to Scripture, not to psychology, to find the answer. Can you find a single verse that says that you need to build your self-esteem? Many distort the command, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39), to fit the current psychological "wisdom." They say, "The Bible commands us to love ourselves." Some even go so far as to say that we *cannot* love God and others until we first learn to love ourselves. Thus they turn people toward a futile search for self-love.

If you study the verse in its context, it is clear that Jesus says there are two commands, not three: Love God and love your neighbor. The standard for loving your neighbor is how you do in fact already love yourself! Jesus assumes that we each love ourselves so much that if we just love our neighbor that much, we have obeyed the command. Paul also assumes that each person loves himself (Eph. 5:28-29) and uses this as the standard by which men must love their wives. Even those with poor “self-esteem” love themselves too much, because they are consumed with self. They aren’t sacrificing themselves for God and others. The mark of biblical love is self-sacrifice, not self-esteem (Eph. 5:25; John 13:34; 15:13; 1 John 3:16).

Not only does the Bible not encourage self-love; it strongly warns against it! Self-love heads the list of terrible sins that marks the end times (2 Tim. 3:2-4). The first requirement if we want to be followers of Jesus is to deny ourselves, not affirm ourselves (Mark 8:34). In fact, this is to be the daily experience of all disciples (Luke 9:23, “daily”). Many verses in the Bible tell us to humble ourselves and not to think too highly of ourselves (see James 4:6-10; 1 Pet. 5:5-6; Rom. 12:3); but none tell us to focus on how wonderful or worthy we are (because we’re not worthy—grace is for the unworthy). We are commanded to esteem others more highly than ourselves (Phil. 2:3).

The problem with building your self-esteem is that the focus is wrong. Jesus said that if you seek to save your life, you’ll lose it, but if you lose your life for His sake and the gospel’s, you will save it (Mark 8:35). If you say no to your own self-focus and live for Jesus and others (the two great commandments), God graciously gives you the fulfillment you need. But if you seek fulfillment or self-esteem, you will come up empty in the end.

6. *Shouldn’t I seek to build my children’s self-esteem? Don’t they need to feel good about themselves so they will be well-adjusted?*

We should show biblical, self-sacrificing love toward our children, as we are commanded to do toward all people (even our enemies—Matt. 5:44!). We should seek to build our children in Christ by using speech that encourages and builds them up, not speech that belittles and tears them down (Eph. 4:29; Col. 3:8). We should be tender and compassionate toward our children, modeling

the gracious love of our Savior (Eph. 4:32-5:2). We should esteem our children more highly than we do ourselves (Phil. 2:3-4).

But the goal of such behavior is *not* to “build their self-esteem,” but rather to model Christ and encourage our kids to be like Him. As our children see us denying self to please our Lord, they will want to follow and serve Him by laying down their lives out of love for Him and for others. If our focus is to help our kids “build their self-esteem,” we are encouraging the inborn selfishness that dominates every fallen human heart. If our focus is to show Christlike love to our children and to model a life of service motivated by His grace, they will learn to love and serve Him, too.

7. *Doesn't God want me to be happy? If God loves me, why do I have so much pain and suffering?*

Perhaps we should distinguish between happiness and joy. God wants you to be filled with His joy, peace, and hope in every situation, but often such qualities shine the most in the midst of trials and pain (John 16:20-22, 33; 2 Cor. 4:7-11; 6:4-10; 12:7-10). God's goal for us is *not* primarily that we be *happy*, but that we be *holy* (Rom. 8:28-29; Heb. 12:3-11). Even Jesus learned obedience through the things He suffered (Heb. 5:8); much more so must we! When we learn to submit to God's sovereign hand through the trials we experience, to trust Him and look to Him as our strength and hope in those trials, we grow in holiness and abound in His joy, peace, and hope (1 Pet. 5:6-11; Rom. 15:13).

8. *I tried Bible study, prayer, and obedience, but it didn't work in terms of bringing me relief from the pain from my childhood. If psychology helps resolve this pain, why not use it?*

First, your focus is wrong. The goal of the Christian life is not to be free from pain, but to become like Jesus. Second, I must challenge whether you *truly* followed God's Word or not. To say that you followed God's Word but that it “didn't work” is to accuse God of false promises. To turn from that Word to the supposed wisdom of godless men is to abandon the living God for empty cisterns that hold no water (Jer. 2:13)! On the contrary, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar (Rom. 3:4)!

Let me ask, If following Satan brought you inner relief, would you do it? I hope not! Yet many Christians abandon God's truth

and turn to the self-centered approach of psychology because it offers relief from their inner pain.

The problem is not that God's Word has been tried and failed, but that it hasn't been followed completely. We need to take every thought captive to obedience to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). We must examine ourselves and judge wrong attitudes, thoughts, and motives by God's truth (2 Cor. 13:5; 1 Cor. 11:28-31; 1 John 1:5-10). We are to seek God with all our hearts and not lean on our own or the world's understanding (Psalm 63; Prov. 3:5-7; Isa. 55:6-11). We are to seek first His kingdom and righteousness, not the things the world seeks (Matt. 6:19-33). No one who has done this can say, "It didn't work!"

9. *But don't certain complicated psychological problems require the expertise of a professional therapist?*

Who made you and understands every hidden motive and thought of your heart: a therapist or the living God (Ps. 139)? We can't even understand our own hearts completely, because we are blinded by sin (Jer. 17:9). Only God knows us thoroughly and only in His Word does He tell us how we must live to experience His blessing. Specifically His Word warns us against walking in the counsel of the wicked and promises that if we delight in His law, we will be blessed (Psalm 1). Why are believers turning to therapists trained in the ways of Freud, Jung, Rogers, Maslow, Skinner, and other scoffers rather than to godly men and women who rely solely upon God and His Word? In whom do you trust?

10. *What about the popular 12-Step programs? The 12 Steps sound like biblical principles.*

Remember, Satan is a deceiver. The best counterfeits look like the real thing, but they are false substitutes. The problem with the 12-Step programs is that they subtly replace trust in the living God and His Word with trust in the 12 Steps. These programs repeatedly say things like, "The 12 Steps work. Trust in the 12 Steps." Furthermore, they are generic—they "work" no matter whether you make your "Higher Power" Jesus Christ, Buddha, or a candle on your shelf. This trivializes faith in the living Lord who alone is God, because if the system works no matter who you fit in the slot, then clearly the power is not in God, but in the system.

The Bible repeatedly warns against trusting in anything or anyone other than the one true God. To do so is the essence of idolatry. The 12 Step programs do not teach a person to trust in God in the biblical sense. Instead, people transfer their “addictions” to the 12 Step program.

Also, the 12 Step programs become a substitute for biblical spirituality. They replace biblical terms with psychological ones (drunkenness is called alcoholism, a disease; enslavement to sin is called addiction; sin is called sickness or disease; repentance becomes recovery). This is not a small quibble. Words express truth or error. The biblical terms are important. We don't repent of sickness; we recover. We don't recover from sin; we repent.

11. What about taking medication for psychological problems?

We are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14). God designed our brains to function through chemical reactions which are only minutely understood by modern psychiatry. There probably is an overlap between the physiology of brain function and the realm of the soul or personhood. There are some situations where medication can even out a person's brain chemistry so that they become more “normal” or rational. In such cases, we should gratefully use modern medicine, just as we take antibiotics to get over infections.

But some cautions must be observed. First, medical science is in its infancy on matters of brain chemistry. Doctors do not fully understand how various drugs work in altering brain functioning. Thus we should be careful not to put too much trust in drug therapy. Second, even if the drugs help restore normalcy, each person must still deal with sinful thoughts and habits, bringing every thought captive to obedience to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). If drug therapy is combined with the godless, self-focused counsel of psychology, it will not help. If used with biblical counsel that helps a person confront the sinful self, it can be a part of the healing process.

But even so, in most cases, the medication should be viewed as a cast. When you break a bone, a cast helps hold it in place until it is healed. If a person needs drug therapy, it is best to use it only while he is learning to think and act in line with God's Word. As he learns to trust and hope in the Lord alone, to judge sinful thoughts,

and to submit to and obey the Lord, in most cases he should be able to decrease the medication until he is free from it.

12. I've heard that "feelings aren't right or wrong; feelings just are." Is this biblical?

It needs to be qualified. The statement is often a reaction to people who have denied feelings. For example, some Christians are angry people, but since they think anger is sin, and they don't want to face their own sin, they say (often with clenched teeth), "I'm not angry." Or, since they think Christians are to be happy, they deny depression. But obviously, these are not biblically sound ways of dealing with these emotions. We are to be people of the truth (Eph. 4:25).

But neither is it biblical to say that emotions are totally neutral. The Bible recognizes that some anger is not sinful (Eph. 4:26; Mark 3:5), but it also labels much anger as sin that needs to be put away (Eph. 4:32; Matt. 5:22). It is not sin to be sad, depressed, or grieved when we are in the midst of a trial (Matt. 26:38; John 11:35; Heb. 12:11; Rom. 12:15b). But some depression is due to sin that needs to be confronted (Gen. 4:6-7). Sometimes depression is due to a combination of factors: Emotional, spiritual and physical exhaustion coupled with wrong thinking (see the story of Elijah, 1 Kings 17-19, especially, 19:4, 9-14). To be consistently lacking in joy, peace, and hope is not God's will for the believer (Ps. 5:11; Rom. 15:13; Phil. 4:4; 1 Thess. 5:16).

Thus emotions are a lot like the warning lights on the dashboard of your car. They signal that something is wrong under the hood. When they come on, you need to take time to pull over and figure out what's wrong, so that you don't burn out the engine. When you are troubled by negative emotions, it's time to stop and seek the Lord and His Word as to the root problem, so that it can be corrected.

13. Are you saying, then, that counseling is wrong or not needed?

Not at all! I'm only saying that much of the counseling that has flooded into American Christianity through psychology is contrary to God's Word of Truth. The Bible is clear that we often need the wise counsel of others, especially those who are mature in the faith (Rom. 15:14; Gal. 6:1; Prov. 24:6). We dare not be independ-

ent Christians, living apart from the body of Christ of which we are members. We desperately need one another, just as my hand needs my arm and the rest of my body to function (1 Cor. 12:12-31). Those who are strong need patiently to admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, and help the weak (1 Thess. 5:14). Thus we need counsel; but make sure that it's *biblical* counsel, because, "There is no wisdom and no understanding and no counsel against the Lord" (Prov. 21:30). "He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, but he who walks wisely will be delivered" (Prov. 28:26).

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