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## BREAKTHROUGH/MOMENTUS: PSYCHOLOGICAL TECHNIQUES OR CHRISTIAN MINISTRY?

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In its new incarnation as Breakthrough seminars, Momentus trainings, developed and promoted by founder Daniel Tocchini, are marketed toward Christians as an effective means to attain transformation of character.<sup>1</sup> The umbrella organization offering the trainings is the *Association for Christian Character Development* (ACCD). Tocchini believes the trainings provide “something lost” for most of Christian church history: “So in the spirit of providing a piece of what was missing I founded Mashiyach Ministries, Inc. and wrote Momentus Training.” He also states that Momentus was “a rebirth of the apostolic disciplines that lead to repentance.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite its Christian profile and the fact that Christians serve as trainers and sponsors and that Bible verses and concepts are used in the trainings, Breakthrough has engendered concerns, criticisms, and complaints from observers and participants throughout its history. The Christian nature of Momentus is hardly apparent in the majority of its publications. Instead, the training describes itself in the same kinds of secular terms that secular Large Group Awareness Trainings (LGATs) such as Lifespring or est would use. It appears primarily to be a behavior/human potential training with Christian values intermixed.

The *Operating Standards Manual* always calls the leader a “trainer,” never an “elder” or any other Christian position. It is always called a “training,” never a worship service or Bible study. The *Personal Assessment Form* filled out by recruits has 16 questions, only one of which broaches any spiritual content. Many items are synonymous with those commonly found in popular psychology. The psychological nature of the training is assumed and alluded to repeatedly. Recruits are questioned extensively about their mental health and any medications they may be taking for psychological problems.

Even though the trainer’s introduction script directs him to say that the training is from a Christian perspective (Christian songs and Bible verses are used along with religiously neutral lyrics and aphorisms), at the same time, the script makes it clear that it is not about one’s religion: “This training is not about your religion or lack of it; this training is about how you govern your vision or what matters to you into existence [*sic*].”

Secular rather than spiritual terms pepper the team manuals. Terms include such *momentusspeak* as “self government,” “mechanics of each exercise,” and “killing the victim.” The psychological terminology is considered distinctive enough that the Breakthrough trainers who wrote the book *Killing the Victim* include a glossary that combines dictionary definitions with “our own understanding” (223). Biblical terms, meanwhile, are often given new uses. The biblical term *sanctification*, for example, is described as a process that, in part, “involves killing the victim” (236), which means to stop believing one is a powerless “victim” of circumstances and instead live the “self-governed” life that will transform one’s visions into reality.

The *Declaration of Commitment* graduates complete after trainings includes psychological jargon as well:

The results you produce and the extent of your transformation of character are determined by how you govern yourself....The extent of the rigor and discipline you

bring to this endeavor will, as always, determine the level of your success....The Plan of Accomplishment is intended to assist you in bringing your vision to reality by translating your Declaration of Commitment into an explicit written course of action, using the performative language of promises, requests, declaration and assertion.

This declaration fails to mention God's role in transforming His people. In contrast, biblical passages such as Romans 12:2 clearly reveal God's transforming work in His people. The biblical imperative uses the passive "be transformed" rather than the active "transform yourselves." Breakthrough overwhelmingly promotes self-effort (a works-based emphasis) rather than God's power to transform (a grace-based emphasis).

Christian observers are concerned more with Breakthrough's psychological component than its Christian goals. Terms used by Breakthrough to describe its training, quoted from the *Operating Standards Manual* and other forms produced by Breakthrough, seem alarming rather than reassuring:

- Challenging, stressful, and/or generally uncomfortable....intense or emotional experience....anxiety and risk of dealing with the unfamiliar....disputes that may arise....may experience adverse consequences....feeling uncomfortable to a degree that you think is excessive. (The Momentus Trainings Course Outline and Questionnaire)
- The rigor of the training could aggravate some mental conditions. (Support Call Form)
- 5....I may experience deep emotions and possibly emotional stress, anxiety, tears, physical discomfort, or exhaustion....7. If I feel mental or physical discomfort or adverse effects during the TRAINING....10....any personal, physical, psychological or emotional injuries you may suffer as a result of the TRAINING....11. May contain risks of physical or psychological injury....(I) assume any and all such risks and dangers. 12....personal, physical, psychological or emotional injuries, distress, or death arising from....13....loss, damage or injury resulting from the negligence of MM...(Hold Harmless Agreement).

The *Team Captain's Manual* also instructs the team to watch for participants hurting their hands when they beat the floor during the Weeping and Wailing exercise. The team is told to have "barf bags" ready for participants who need them during this exercise,<sup>3</sup> and team members use hand signals like a hand over the heart to signal an emotional situation with a participant.

The trainings themselves warn participants of emotional and physical troubles that may be caused during the process. Although Breakthrough claims the stresses are simply due to naturally stressful self-examination, the kinds of emotional and physical problems cited are far more characteristic of the trauma known to accompany human potential seminars than anything associated with Christian discipleship programs.

Breakthrough is evidently so aware of problems that may arise from its training that it asks prospective participants detailed questions about their mental histories and psychiatric medications. Some of these disclaimers, such as those from the *Hold Harmless Agreement*, may be because of legal precautions to protect Breakthrough from liability. They appear to be far more numerous and cautionary than one would find in any ordinary church program or activity, however.

Many of the warnings are found in team instruction manuals, which are not intended to protect Breakthrough from liability. Even though all participants are informed before the training that they will be asked to sign this agreement, they are seldom given sufficient opportunity to read the statement with its long list of potential risks until *after* they have paid the nonrefundable fee, taken time off work, and begun the training. This indirectly pressures participants to sign up even if they have reservations, and it further surrounds them with peer, financial, and other pressures.

Breakthrough barely acknowledges the stressful nature of the training in its dealings with potential participants. The ACCD Web site article, *What Do You Do in the Training?* diplomatically admits, "It is an intense experience, because of both the rigor of the schedule and the integrity with which you are called to deal with issues that arise." The article *Is the Training Confrontational?* answers some accusations from past participants that the script of the training is psychologically manipulative. ACCD changes the meaning of the term "confrontational" to assert that participants' consciences are challenged rather than admitting that the psychological techniques used by the trainers are confrontational: "The confrontations will be between belief systems: your current beliefs coming up against the teachings of Jesus Christ and how you are actually behaving....Confront the reality of your life based on your actions not your intentions....Confront yourself through a rigorous process of inquiry." In effect, ACCD shifts the blame for the tension from Breakthrough's methods to the participants' emotional weakness.

Some of the psychological techniques used by Breakthrough are nearly identical to those in other LGAT trainings such as est and Lifespring. The *Awareness Page*<sup>4</sup> outlines a family tree of LGATs. Werner Erhard, who founded est and The Forum, and John P. Hanley, who founded Lifespring, both were Mind Dynamics teachers. The page lists 16 spinoffs of Lifespring founded by former Lifespring trainers, including Momentus, whose founder, Daniel Tocchini, was a Lifespring trainer for about eight years. While there are differences, they have significant similarities in techniques, philosophy, and terminology.

Similar techniques include long hours, aggressively confronting or humiliating participants, guilt-inducing exercises, changes in stress levels, guided imagery designed to "return to childhood memories and recapture sadness," precise control of the circumstances of the setting, and so on. LGATs also produce an experience of "transformation" and a spiritual effect very similar to that of Breakthrough, which admits that some of its exercises (such as Lifeboat, Living Mirrors, Voyage, and Weeping and Wailing) are now sold by Pfeiffer and Associates to be used in non-Christian settings.

There are similarities in terminology and philosophy between Breakthrough and other LGATs. Virtually all focus on delivering "transformation" of some sort, although their definition of it varies. Virtually all have some variation of the theme of eliminating the "victim" mentality by taking control of one's life.

Breakthrough leaders say "adverse effects" occur in people who do not want to examine themselves or look at their own sin; however, the pretraining questionnaire participants answer seeks to exclude people who are already under emotional distress, not those who resist self-examination. Breakthrough admits to psychological manipulation, such as psychological exercises, control of lighting, music, volume, peer pressure, and the trainer's delivery.

Techniques and methods included in the script of the training, not the people or central goals involved, is the primary issue of concern. Breakthrough training follows a close script, in part because the trainer depends on a support team to carry out well-defined duties. The script prescribes a detailed list of music for the team to play at set times. It requires the team to make copies of homework, the *Hold Harmless* statement, and ground rules, which are used at specific times.

It is possible to have good intentions but harmful results. Breakthrough cannot be the only way, or even the best way, that Christians can examine themselves since LGAT exercises didn't exist when the apostle exhorted people to examine themselves (1 Cor. 11:28; 2 Cor. 13:5). The New Testament never implies that self-examination is likely to prompt "adverse consequences....feeling uncomfortable to a degree that you think is excessive....aggravate some mental conditions....emotional stress....exhaustion....adverse effects....physical or psychological injury" as Breakthrough does.

Breakthrough/Momentus has received criticism because of the stressful nature of the psychological techniques used. Breakthrough founder Dan Tocchini seeks to eliminate public criticism (which he classifies slander) by insisting that critics deal with him as a Christian elder and leader and show him where he has sinned. Tocchini's view does not fit the biblical pattern of Matthew 18, to which he appeals. Critics for the most part do not accuse the founder or trainers of unrepentant sin against them, which is the concern of the passage, but of unbiblical practices, regardless of the motives of the founder or trainers.

Another passage often appealed to, 1 Timothy 5, deals with elders within the local church, not to a paid program imported into a church. The trainings are neither a church nor an extension of a church.

About 18 Breakthrough trainings are scheduled for 2002, charging a fee of \$150 per participant. Controversy, nevertheless, will continue to follow Breakthrough as long as it resembles Large Group Awareness Trainings more than Christianity.

-- *John Juedes*

## **NOTES**

1. Other names associated with the trainings are Masihiyach Ministries, Inc., M.O.R.E., and Association for Christian Character Development (ACCD).
2. "Christian Transformation and the Momentum Trainings," Momentum Web site, [www.momentum.org](http://www.momentum.org).
3. Training Notes for Team Grounding Meeting Section (not paginated).
4. <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/eldon.braun/awareness/>