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FAITH'S PSYCHOLOGY AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FAITHS

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SYNOPSIS

What does the word *psychology* mean? How does psychology interact with the Christian faith? How does Scripture's view of human nature relate to modern social and behavioral sciences?

God's view of what makes us tick (*psychology*) and His call for us to help each other through honest, loving conversation (*psychotherapy*) differ radically from the theories and therapies that dominated psychological discourse and practice in the twentieth century. Only a psychology that is loyal to the Christian faith will understand and cure the madness in our hearts and lives because these realities have to do with God. With a well-trained ability to think from faith's point of view, Christians and Christian counselors can learn from, and interact appropriately with, other psychologies, other points of view, and other conversations.

Christians are called to become radical reformers within the institutional structures and cultural mindset of a psychologized society in which everything is explained by secular psychological principles. We are called to become well-tuned instruments of Christ's grace to the out-of-control, the needy, and the confused. As we develop and hone faith's distinctive message, methods, and institutional structures, faith's psychology will again be seen as radical, satisfying, and true, and it will carry the day against its worldly competitors.

How do destructive people become constructive? How do out-of-control people become fruitfully self-controlled? How do rigid people become flexible? How do distracted people learn to focus? How do hopeless people grow in hope? How do angry people learn to make peace? Before we ask *How*, we must ask, *Why* are troubled people troubled? What is wrong with us?

I came to Christ while being a true believer in secular psychology. When I came to know the living God, my plan to pursue a doctorate in clinical psychology while working in a psychiatric hospital was radically rerouted. As my faith grew, I realized that Christians have a profoundly different way of looking at the nature of people and their problems than does secular psychology—and that is through the lens of Scripture.¹

Here is the problem, however: modern society as a whole has largely ignored Scripture's way of explaining and engaging people. What must we do to recover the centrality of Scripture for helping people to grow up into the image of Christ? How can we reconfigure face-to-face "helping" relationships to serve as instruments of the only enduring wisdom and the only true humanity? To recover the centrality of Scripture for the cure of souls demands two things: *conviction* backed up with *content*.

The conviction? Scripture is about understanding and helping people. The scope of Scripture's sufficiency includes those face-to-face relationships that our Western culture labels *counseling* or *psychotherapy*.

The content? The problems, needs, and struggles of real people—right down to the details—must be rationally explained by the categories the Bible uses to help us understand human life: “lusts of the flesh” (e.g., fornication, greed, gluttony, jealousy, envy); “fear of man” (e.g., need for approval of others, self-esteem, self-pity, feelings of inadequacy); “desires of the mind” (e.g., power, control, domination, success, wealth, self-righteousness); “pride,” and others.

Conviction alone simply waves a flag and eventually degenerates into sloganeering, but comprehensive and penetrating conviction demonstrated in action edifies the teachable and persuades the skeptical. A key ingredient in such persuasion will be to parade the riches of Scripture for curing souls.²

Portraying the Christian faith’s psychology in detail lies far beyond the scope of this article, but in its briefest form, our psychology says the following: human beings live actively accountable to the true God who knows and weighs our desires, motives, and actions. We are innately, actively, and thoroughly worshipers, lovers, fearers, trusters, believers, obeyers, hoppers, seekers, and desirers of one thing or another. The human heart and our responses are *ruled*: We heed either the true God or a host of identifiable lies, lusts, idols, voices, and pretenders.

Human beings are fundamentally *depraved*: morally bent, dark, insane, and unholy in relation to the God who made us. We are moral responders, but we do not live in a vacuum: significant forces affect us and to some degree constrain and shape us. These forces, however, only set the stage on which we live. They operate within God’s sovereign government and provide the context that reveals our hearts’ desires and our loyalties. Everything in our lives matters—the varied trials and temptations; the sufferings of being sinned against and the joys of being loved; the abilities and disabilities of genetic inheritance and physiological functioning; the blessings and curses of economic, political, and technological conditions; the opportunities and constraints of each historical moment; and so forth—but these forces do not control our fundamental direction. In the Bible’s view, such things can never be the ultimate cause of our soul’s pervasive moral insanity.

Human beings are not fundamentally *deprived*, as if the nature and/or nurture we received could explain the most significant things about us. We are active agents. We are not products of conditioned drives (behavioral psychology), physiological dysfunctions (biopsychiatry), unmet needs (humanistic psychology), or traumatized or conflicted instincts (psychodynamic psychology). We are not self-determined, whether responsible to ourselves (per philosophical psychologies, such as existential, logotherapeutic, rational-emotive, and cognitive) or responsible to society (per moralistic psychologies). The Bible teaches a God-centered view of both the outward influences on life and the inward springs of life.

Consistent Christianity rethinks the modern psychologies, looking at them through the lens of Scripture. When problems of person and situation are conceived in relation to God, then the only sufficient and logical solution is Christ, as the Bible presents Him. In faith’s view, *biblical counseling* is the fundamentally personalized, face-to-face ministry of this Christ within the context of His redeemed and redeeming community.³ Biblical counseling is not simply throwing Bible verses at counselees, though. Neither is it tacking verses of Scripture onto secular psychological principles. Biblical counseling involves understanding what Scripture teaches about the human heart’s motivations and then guiding others to this understanding. Out of this understanding come changed hearts, changed motivations, and changed lives—lives that are God-centered, not self-centered.

WHICH PSYCHOLOGY DO YOU MEAN?

The word *psychology* serves us in the same way that the words *religion*, *philosophy*, *literature*, and *politics* serve us. Big words label realms of ultimate concern: Who am I? What matters? What should be? What must change and how?

We hear generalizations such as “psychology’s research findings show...” or “psychology is able to teach us that...” What do such phrases mean? There is no unitary psychology. Whenever someone cites the teachings of “psychology,” we must always ask, “Which psychology do you mean?” There are many different psychologies (like there are many religions).

Many different meanings are attached to the word *psychology* and the potential to confuse them is high. In this article I will consider six slices of this semantic pie.

1. PSYCHOLOGY PER SE

The bedrock meaning, psychology *per se*, simply refers to the functioning of the human soul itself. People operate heart, soul, mind, and might in relation to everything under the sun and over the sun. Psychology is not the cancer ravaging your body, but your response to the cancer. It is not the social conditions that you experience, but how you interpret and respond to them. It is not the wrenching experiences you faced as a child, but how you live your life now. It is neither the Devil nor God. It is how you respond to the Devil's sayings and doings and how you respond to God. It is how you embrace or evade truth. The core meaning of psychology is simply *you*.

Your psychology is what you are about—the functional aspects of your life: belief, memory, emotion, conscience, identity, will, attitude, action, speech, imagination, perception, desire, knowledge, self-deception, and anticipation as well as the various dynamics and interrelationships that exist within these. In addition, every context influences your heart, soul, mind, and might. What you interact with moment-by-moment is fair game for psychological interest. The soul's functions are wedded to the body and include our heredity, social networks, culture, economics, politics, and language. Psychology is all about you in your world.

Like all the modern Western psychologies (and all world religions that substitute for psychology in non-Westernized places), the Christian faith is busy with psychology *per se*. Every believer ought to be a psychologist in the best sense of the word. We ought to study the soul. We ought to know people and understand what makes them tick. We ought to see God's gaze after Him—God's view of the human person and condition—if we are to proceed wisely to intervene to change those things that need changing in every nation, tribe, tongue, and people. We also ought to know ourselves as we actually are if we ever to live wisely. Finally, while busy ministering to people, Christianity also ought to subject its psychological competitors to a radical critique.

2. PSYCHOLOGY AS KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HUMAN FUNCTIONING

Psychology as *knowledge* refers to many sorts of close observations and descriptions of human functioning. Case experience and research findings “ring bells” with readers. We understand the pain and confusion of a woman abused as a child and now abused by her husband. We sense the pain and anger of the constantly arguing couple locked in a seemingly hopeless power struggle.

This descriptive aspect of psychology intuitively seems to be the most objective, neutral, scientific, and informative. The potential always exists, however, to misinterpret and misuse these observations. The more important something is for understanding and influencing what makes people tick—the closer it gets to *personality theory* and *applied psychology*—the more potential there is for distorted interpretation. Christians and non-Christians both ring bells of experience with case-study details, but a world of difference exists between a “codependent's wounded inner child”⁴ and a person whose “fear of man”⁵ has replaced fear of God. Wisdom—a biblical understanding of the human condition and an ability to address that condition constructively—will not be significantly altered by a new theory of brain processing or memory.

Psychological theory never presents “just the facts.” A theory selects facts based on what it has determined to be significant. Secular psychological research does not see or report the most significant pieces of information about people, and it invariably misses the overall pattern of what is there. Only faith turns up the magnifying power without losing breadth: God's point of view.

In a God-made, God-sustained, God-interpreted world, observational data expresses the distorting effect of secularity in any theory. Observations are always presented in a context of meanings, beliefs, values, priorities, and goals. Psychoanalyst Karen Horney, for example, sees people who pursue human approval, power, pleasure, and safety as having “neurotic needs,”⁶ not “lusts of the flesh.” Only the faith

principle (God's point of view) corrects this distortion. We as Christians must interact with secular knowledge with an intentional, self-conscious ambivalence, always thinking through what we hear in the light of what we already know in the faith. We must always expand our understanding of the scope of faith's applicability to all of life.

Alfred Adler's theory of "individual psychology," for example, continues to exert a profound effect on modern psychologies, such as cognitive psychology, family systems, self-esteem theory, and intervention techniques in counseling. But how useful is Adler's detailed portrayal of the "inferiority complex" in onetime people,⁷ compared with the biblical portrayal of the "desires of body and mind" complex that enslaves sinful people of any size (Eph. 2:3)? Did Adler teach things comparable to biblical truth? Yes. A theory would babble if it did not speak at least half-truths. Christians, nevertheless, must reinterpret everything through God's gaze. Adler's catalog of human depravity—vanity, jealousy, avarice, hate, and faint-heartedness—rings true, but his description of this condition is warped by his theory. He sees sin, but calls it something else.

Would Christians ever *integrate* Adler and Christian faith? No. A biblical gaze *converts* Adler's gaze and changes his "facts." God sees everything and controls it all for His own purposes. The Bible guides us into seeing things, more and more, from God's point of view. Of course, we who profess the faith are not immune to distortions and fabrications, but God patiently teaches us—individually and corporately, over decades and centuries—how to see what we most need to see.

How should biblical counselors view psychological information? Bring it on! It is the stuff of life that only the Christian faith weighs properly. Bring on all sorts of documents, portrayals of life that also need interpretation through faith's eyes: imaginative literature, history, cross-cultural studies, film, popular music, cultural anthropology, the daily newspaper, and lots of other things whose epistemological status is the same as modern psychologies. With a well-trained ability to think from faith's point of view (Heb. 5:14), we can learn from, and interact with, anything.

3. PSYCHOLOGY AS COMPETING PHILOSOPHIES OF LIFE AND THEORIES OF HUMAN PERSONALITY

Modern psychology is a marketplace of differing popular philosophies of life. Each psychology's interpretive system sets up categories and labels that map onto life. Norms and ideals set standards against which diagnoses are made. Therapies aspire to alter life.

Psychological professionals lament the seemingly irresolvable chaos in their field. Robert Coles wrote, "This is all in a 'field' all too prone toward ideological splits and antagonisms, if not outright internecine war."⁸ No bridging theory reconciles conflicting views; instead, eclecticism is the order of the day. Eclecticism offers a pragmatic way to keep going, but it is an intellectual counsel of despair.

Other observers of modern psychological theorizing express skepticism. Thomas Kuhn considered psychology to be "pre-scientific" because it had never attained to any agreed-on paradigm.⁹ Karl Popper thought that Marx's theory of history, Freud's psychoanalysis, and Alfred Adler's so-called "individual psychology" had more in common with primitive myths than with science.¹⁰ Gerald Grob called the search for the cause of troubled and troublesome people the "holy grail" of theory, but "the very concept of mental disease, for example, could not be separated from the deeper and more profound problem of explaining the nature of human beings in general and their behavior in particular."¹¹ George Marsden spoke of the "obviously Herculean task of integrating the largely opposed assumptions of modern psychology and evangelical theology."¹²

In the social sciences (and particularly in psychology, because it aims closest to the human heart), consensus is elusive and disagreement abounds. The secular psychologies chase a rainbow: an explanation that what is wrong with us is *anything but* sin against God, and a cure for the human condition that is *anything but* Christ. Biblical wisdom, however, says, "The hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live" (Ecc. 9:3 NKJV). Sinners theorize sinfully about sinners.

Noting overtly incompatible points of view does not speak the final word. The Christian perspective does not rest on skepticism. Our point of view rests on the true explanation that subjects all other explanations

of human life to the deepest possible criticism. An underlying falsehood unifies the seeming incompatible psychologies: *All* agree that human beings are autonomous, rather than responsible to an objective God who acts and speaks. *All* agree that the problem with people is *anything but* sin; problems can be explained in purely psychological terms. *All* agree in identifying some sort of determining factor that replaces choice either for or against God as the central, specific, and pervasive issue of human existence. *All* agree that both answers and power to change reside in either the individual, in human relationships, or in medical chemistry. *All* agree that *anything but* Jesus Christ and the ministry of the Word will be the answer to sin and misery (our dysfunctions, dysphorias, and syndromes). *All* busy themselves trying to prove that *anything but* the Christian view of things is true. In the most fundamental sense, all the varied psychologies are committed to being wrong in the same way. However striking their observations or their effects, they impart a false consciousness to their devotees. These devotees must be subjected to radical demythologizing by Christian presuppositions and invited to intelligent repentance.

We forget the following important things, however: First, faith is a “theory” whose view of human nature competes head-on with personality theories, and a “therapy” whose cure of souls competes head-on with modern psychotherapies.

Second, we who hold to the Christian faith face a problem of our own making: we truncate the scope and depth of the faith. We relegate it to “spiritual” matters, as a separate component of our lives. We view Scripture as a helpful “resource” to aid with problems that others define. We lose the detail, relevance, purposes, and breadth of God’s communication in the Bible. Scripture does not discuss our soul’s dynamics in the form of a psychology textbook, research study, or self-help book; it discusses us and addresses us in a better form.

Third, those who do not hold to the Christian faith view it not as a rational system, but as a form of superstition, moralism, and irrationalism. Our God-centered rational system is directly opposed by naturalistic rational systems. Secular theoreticians of the soul are among many moderns (including Christians!) who believe that the faith’s perspective on the psyche has little value for use in probing the psyche and alleviating its problems. Christians, instead, simply must say, “On the contrary....” The psyche, rationally understood, operates the way God says it does. It operates with respect to God. Any theory that explains the psyche’s essential operations as a self-contained entity, as a social role within a social system, as a phenomenon of biology, or as some combination of all three, is wrong—for rational reasons.

Granted, there has been a serious lack of fresh pastoral theological labor among Bible believers since the mid-nineteenth century. The church often has been an uneasy borrower from the achievements of those committed to erasing sin as the rational diagnosis and Christ as the rational cure. Christians have had relatively little of significance to say or do about those phenomena, problems, and conflicts that now bear the labels psychological, mental, social, emotional, behavioral, developmental, interpersonal, cross-cultural, temperament, or adjustment. Even a cursory reading of the Bible, however, shows a dominating concern for precisely those things. The modern psychologies have appropriated (or been granted) the heartland of the faith. We have deferred and referred to secular wisdoms and neglected to cultivate our own wisdom. Christians need to reclaim the faith’s heartland.

Adequate wisdom for counseling is not a present possession of the church, and such wisdom is not acquired easily. Our “theory,” however, does not need to be created out of nothing. A biblical psychology for the third millennium will break huge tracts of fresh ground, be consistent with belief, and extend the application of that belief.

4. PSYCHOLOGY AS PSYCHOTHERAPY

Counseling practices and strategies are designed to facilitate change in beliefs, behaviors, feelings, attitudes, values, and relationships. Theory guides this intervention. One cannot help another person change without an *ideal* for human functioning. An ideal declares criteria of good and evil (although most practitioners do not acknowledge the moral nature of their ideals). A practitioner identifies discrepancies between the ideal and problems, dysfunctions, illnesses, syndromes, and sins, and then makes a diagnosis. The ideal then serves as a beacon toward which their counseling conversations aim.

In America, counseling conversation became associated with psychiatrists (1910s), clinical social workers (1920s), and clinical psychologists (1940s). Twentieth-century America saw an explosion of professionals claiming to help people by talking with them. Prior to that time, only pastors had any rationale for intentional interventive conversation. Between the Civil War and the 1920s, however, pastors lost their leadership role in counseling troubled people because “clergy analysis remained primitive” during the very time that powerful competing models and professions arose outside of the church.¹³

Psychotherapy is conversation. A “therapist” seeks to “heal” the “patient” through talking. The whole process is an “educative” experience under the leadership of an expert who strategically intervenes in another’s life.¹⁴ Representatives of any counseling school (e.g., cognitive, behavioral, existential, Adlerian, family systems, nouthetic), however, could say something similar. Even Carl Rogers ought to have said it, because his purportedly “nondirective” counseling actually did very directive things covertly.

To phrase this in words from the faith: all counseling attempts to be *pastoral*. Basic tools of all counseling are the same: “speak the truth in love,” using all the ingredients of any effective and ethical attempt to persuade another person. A message—some “truth” about what is wrong, what should be different, and how to get there—aims to restructure and reeducate the soul. Modern psychotherapy is simply the attempt to do face-to-face pastoral work in service to different gods (e.g., self, feelings, desires of the body or mind, pleasure), different ideals (e.g., the “good life,” wealth, entitlement), different diagnosis (e.g., addiction, dependency, poor self-esteem), and a different gospel (e.g., man is the center of all things, “I deserve it”).

Faith teaches us to make a searching criticism of psychological theories and psychotherapeutic activities. What should we think, however, about the instances of good sense and insight one finds scattered in psychology books, the caring and helpful things done in psychotherapies, the precisely accurate observations, and the winsome personal characteristics of individual psychologists? The most accurate way to put it is that these are not intrinsic to the logic of any secular psychological model. They arise not from what is distinctly secular psychology, but from God’s providential common grace that scatters blessings and restrains evils.

Again, consider Alfred Adler as a case in point, not because he is so unusual, but because he is so typical. He knew that love—“social feeling”—is better than hate, isolation, manipulation, and fear. Adler’s relative goodness unwittingly points to something better. His best insights and most pressing concerns come into their own only within the fuller model of the faith. God shouts clearly what others mumble. Adler’s relative goodness rebukes us who profess the faith. Where we are ignorant about people, remote from human need, and slow when it comes to helping others, God uses Adler’s example to reprove us—not so we would become Adlerians, but so we would grow more faithful to the faith.

5. PSYCHOLOGY AS A SYSTEM OF INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

Ideas and practices do not exist in a vacuum; they happen somewhere. Psychotherapeutic educational departments, accrediting boards, licensing laws and courts, patients, referral systems, publishers, drug companies, medical doctors, and health insurance companies all contribute to psychology as a “mental health system.” The various psychologies wield power in our society because theories and therapies have become institutionalized. Institutional structures quietly shape many assumptions that work against the faith. Biblical categories such as sin, God’s sovereignty, repentance, faith, obedience, and the Holy Spirit are inconspicuous in comparison to, for example, the labels of mental illness found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), the bible of secular psychology.

Institutional structures are not givens of the natural order; they are *functional*. Faith critiques the working of the various forces—personal, social, professional, political, cultural, and economic—that create and sustain such structures. Faith has as much to say about normative institutional structures and professional roles as it does about theory of personality and counseling methodology. In Ephesians 3:14–5:2, the people of God are called to mobilize as a transformative countercultural community. When the church falls short of God’s will, the solution is not to change the goal and take recourse in autonomous mental health professionalism. Faith intends to exercise authority and oversight in the counseling field,

both over the faith and practice of personal ministry (theory and therapy), and over the institutional arrangements that deliver care (education, accreditation, licensing, counseling, and supervision). An autonomous counseling profession ordained by the state is unconscionable. The church itself is called to counsel as an instrument of Christ's grace and wisdom.

6. PSYCHOLOGY AS MASS ETHOS

Psychology in this final sense is the mindset of a therapeutic society. Whole categories of life experience have become "psychologized," and because the modern psychologies borrow heavily from medical prestige and metaphors, they also have become "medicalized." Existential and relational realities of life—pointedly addressed by the faith—are often interpreted as medical and therapeutic drama. Signposts to this phenomenon abound: terms such as *alcoholism*, *dysfunctionality*, *victimization*; a proliferation of syndromes; the explosion of Ritalin and Prozac use; and psychologized legal defenses. Life turns on whether we feel good, not on what God thinks of us. The spirit of the age is the pervasive foe of faith—a mass religion that has "no fear of God before its eyes" (Rom. 3:18).

Therapeutic language has infiltrated Christianity. It is not surprising to hear people in the church foyer talking about "dysfunctional family upbringing," "victimization," "self-esteem," "needs not being met," and how "antidepressants help." People read their lives in terms of the therapeutic, rather than through God's gaze on the same phenomena. Os Guinness called the modern psychologies "carriers of idolatry and heresy," adding that the therapeutic is "a substitute theology designed to replace faith in God."¹⁵ Sincere counselors may bridle at this point, but there is no question that psychology itself has become an ideology—a set of ideas that serves the interests of an entire industry.

Faith will eventually draw converts from among the multitude who imbibe psychology as ethos as well as from the more self-consciously psychologized. These converts need continual discipleship into the radically different thought forms and practices taught and modeled in Scripture. Much of the ongoing work of counseling and discipleship involves the progressive reshaping of psychologized people in biblical wisdom. Faith teaches us to focus on God in Christ instead of around the self with its feelings and desires.

NOTES

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4. John Bradshaw, *Homecoming* (New York: Bantam, 1990).
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7. Alfred Adler, *Understanding Human Nature*, trans. Colin Brett (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1927).
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12. George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 238.
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14. Sigmund Freud, "Some Character-types Met With in Psycho-analytic Work," in *On the History of the Psycho-analytic Movement*, vol. 14. *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (New York: Norton, 1976), 312.
15. Os Guinness, "America's Last Men and Their Magnificent Talking Cure," in *No God but God*, ed. Os Guinness and J. Seel (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 114.