

"Psychology and the Church: Unequally Yoked Partners?"

By Frank Mancuso, Ph.D.

Some brothers and sisters in Christ answer the question, "Can psychology and the church coexist?" with a firm, "No!" They ask, "How can the church of Jesus Christ or Christians committed to God and the Bible, ever permit a 'hollow and deceptive philosophy' (Col 2:8, NIV) like psychology to be integrated into its teachings about life?" Their concerns include one or more of the following:

- Psychology was founded and continues to be developed by fallible humans, many of whom deny the existence of God and/or the authority of Scripture.
- The theories, principles and techniques of all social science are ungodly, born of fleshly minds and frequently contradict Scripture.
- The only truths that one can fully rely upon come from the Bible. Scripture, and not psychology, is authoritative, inerrant, and inspired. As II Timothy 3:16 and 17 state, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work (NASB)."

The conclusion often reached by advocates of this position is that anyone delving into extra-Biblical teachings is in error or treading on dangerous ground and should be avoided at all costs.

Apples and Oranges – A Context for the Discussion

There are three primary approaches in the field of Christian counseling:

- the "Bible only,"
- social science only,
- a blend of Scripture and social science.

Bible Only Approach

Jay Adams developed the most well-known "Bible only" approach, called Nouthetic counseling, from a Greek word meaning to *admonish or warn*. He and his colleagues believe any attempt to integrate ungodly information, theory or techniques (psychology) with God's truth as

revealed in the Bible, is morally wrong. A fully qualified and competent counselor requires only Biblical training.¹

Social Science Approach

A second approach uses psychology, sociology and/or medical science only. There are those who have a saving relationship of Jesus Christ and follow Him in their personal lives, but believe their faith should be separate from their professional lives. Their counseling is almost exclusively secular in nature.

A Blended Approach

The last approach integrates psychology with the Christian faith. Some attempt to integrate psychology and theology, others see these as two separate disciplines.¹ Although theology and psychology are different disciplines, they overlap. While theology can inform us about human behavior (people's actions are in part a result of their sinful nature), psychology can't directly inform us about theology—only the Holy Spirit, Scripture and careful study can do that.

Our Approach

The Center for Christian Counseling & Relationship Development, L.L.C. (CCCRD) staff believe social and medical science information can be very helpful to Christians who use Scripture and Godly wisdom as their foundation of truth. There is great benefit in some extra-Biblical information. Psychology and the church can peacefully coexist, and need to do so for the good health of God's people. Many influential Christian counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists and writers share this view including Drs. Clyde Narramore, Larry Crabb, James Dobson, Gary Collins, Frank Minirth and Paul Meier.

Why Not "Bible Only"?

We believe sincere Christians who apply psychology, do not thwart God's special revelation (the Bible) by making use of selected social science theories, principles and techniques. Information gleaned from general revelation (medical, environmental and social science) can be very useful if it is consistent with and not opposed to Biblical teachings and reasonable inferences derived from Scripture. Seeking wisdom and knowledge beyond Scriptural truths is not only possible, but an intelligent and responsible position.

Romans 1:19,20 says, "because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world, His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse." This passage supports the idea that we can know truths about God gleaned from general revelation through the experiences of seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling and tasting of life. Of course, we should do that cautiously.

A second Scripture supporting the discovery of extra-Biblical wisdom and knowledge is found in II Timothy 3:16, 17 which 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." The Greek word for "profitable" primarily denotes "assistance... then beneficial."² Further, the Greek word for "adequate" comes from Greek words

meaning “fresh” and “fitted” as with a limb or joint.³ The word “adequate” is a better definition than “perfect”. Our experience and logic tell us that no worker for God is perfect. The central question is, Why did God deliberately choose these two words to tell us that Scripture is an assistant and adequate? Why did He not choose firmer and more absolute words such as, *teleios* (perfect in having reached an end) or all we need? One of the conclusions we can reach is that Scripture is not all that God uses to prepare us for His work (though it is essential) or to communicate to us in this world.

Christians rely on the extra-Biblical leading and communication of the Holy Spirit. How often do we hear, “He told me to...” or “He led me to...” Even when we say, “God blessed me with...” supports our individual beliefs, conscience, and interpretations about God and His relationship with us beyond the words of the Bible.

Scripture also supports Christians obtaining extra-Biblical information from our individual consciences, which is necessary in living out our faith. Romans 14:22-23 says, “The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.”

The Bible, though entirely true, is limited in the amount of truth it reveals. The Bible, which contains less than 2000 pages of information, isn’t exhaustive in reporting on every subject in the universe. It does not tell us everything about God, humankind, the past, or the future. As Gary Collins (*Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide*, 1988) wrote, “The Bible was not written to be a self-help, question-and-answer book covering every possible human problem. It does not claim to be a textbook of counseling techniques or personal problem-solving.”³ Even Scripture itself tells us to search out wisdom, understanding, and knowledge from parents and others (Pro. 1:8,20-21).

In our discovery of the truth, we all would do well to heed the words of Colossians 2:8. It says, “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.” Nothing the world has to offer us should ever supercede Biblical truth. The key here is that we are not to be taken captive (in the Greek, to be seduced and carried off as booty) and lose our allegiance to Christ by esteeming other life views as the only right way or better way to live. Using psychology is not the same as being taken captive by psychology. Thoughtful Christian counselors can successfully use psychology without losing or living contrary to their faith.

Right Facts, Wrong Conclusion

Some people say psychology cannot be trusted because it was founded and developed by fallible humans who often denied the Christian faith and the truth of Scripture. They argue that many of the assumptions that underlie psychological theories are filled with falsehood. While their reasoning is right, their conclusions are wrong. Just because a car has a bad engine and rust on a quarter-panel, it does not mean it won’t take you to your destination. We all have a sinful nature, but it doesn’t mean we should distrust every spoken word or deed of every person, including ourselves. On the contrary, we use reasonable discernment to evaluate the words and examples of others for truth and worth. Developing our skills of discernment, enable us to properly use and benefit from information from extra-Biblical sources. (Whether we realize it or not, we do this every day. To exclude psychological help on this basis is not logical.)

Here are a few examples of how psychology can help us better understand ourselves, grow and problem-solve, without undermining our faith.

- Psychology provides us with assessments and insights about the critical importance of secure attachment between infants and caregivers and the dysfunctions that occur with poor attachments.
- Psychology helps us evaluate and make appropriate recommendations for people with different mental illnesses, (personality disorders, obsessions, compulsions, panic, depression, gender identity and dissociative identity,) which can result from extreme physical and sexual abuse.
- Psychology has developed rigorous research methods so individuals can evaluate the effectiveness of ministries and programs and provide themselves with information that will support their values and beliefs. For example, research tells us good parenting is of unquestionable value and we see the truth of that concept play out in actual lives: by midlife, 91% of men develop a serious physical ailment if they do not have a warm relationship with their mother; 82% who did not have a warm relationship with their father.⁴
- Psychological research can help increase our Christian faith. Studies have shown prayer to be beneficial to physical and mental health, and drawing comfort and strength from religion increases one's chances of living after surgery by seven times. Faith itself is a critical variable in treatments for various health problems.⁵
- Psychology has taught us a great deal about how people learn. For instance, scent can trigger memories and remind us of things we learned when we first smelled the same odor. It can also cause a predictable response in a person who is triggered by it. This is helpful in working with some kinds of clients in retraining their thinking and behavior.
- Psychological theory can help us to better understand and manage groups within the church. Yalom posited three stages of group development: orientation (looking for structure), conflict and cohesion (a sense of community).⁶
- Psychology formulates personality development, including common defense mechanisms used to cope with the hardships of life. It typically eschews the influence of spiritual forces upon development, but contributes to our understanding of environmental influences.
- Psychology gives insight into how and why people conform to social pressure so we may use it more intelligently and rightly develop cohesiveness in groups and churches. For example, knowing the difference between getting the response we want versus actually helping someone believe and act on that belief is critical in group settings, but especially in the church. Knowing how these processes

work can create better cohesion of the members and lead to a healthier, happier church.

This is just a sampling of how social science theories and research can add to our knowledge and help improve our lives, when we carefully evaluate that information from a Biblical perspective.

We hope this article has helped answer some of your questions, perhaps challenged you to reevaluate some of your beliefs and opened you to consider talking with a Christian counselor about the use of psychology within the church and in Christian counseling. In the end, what is important is that we honor Christ in all our relationships and work towards being unified in Him. Tools offered through psychology can help to remove some of the barriers that prevent us from achieving greater health and living a fulfilling life.

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