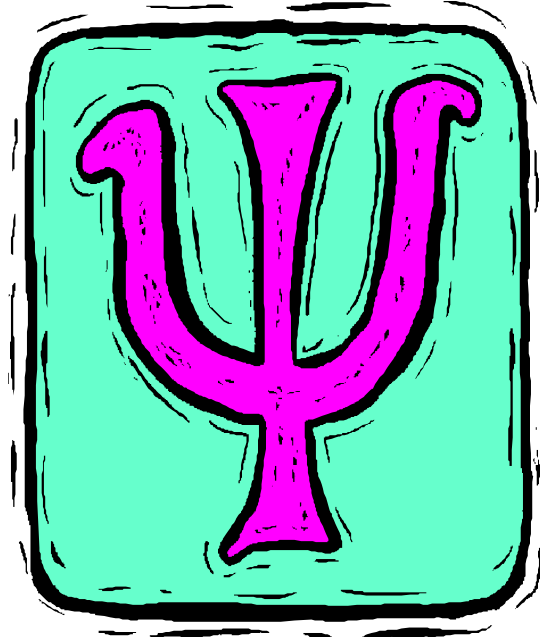


PSYCHOLOGY: A FIELD WORTHY OF FEAR, RESPECT OR WORSHIP?



In this age of enlightenment through information technology it may seem somewhat unnecessary to write about the good and bad of psychology. Yet mostly in the eastern USA, there remains a small Christian influence of opposition to all Christian counseling that integrates psychology or any social science information. It's called *nouthetic* counseling, which means to admonish (warn or reprimand) in the Greek.

Nouthetic's founder, Jay Adams, believes and teaches the following¹:

- Christians should not blend together the holy words and person of God with an unholy and secular psychology.
- All psychological theories are godless and formed from foolish human wisdom.
- Anything extra-biblical (outside the Word) is dangerous ground and, therefore, should be avoided.
- The Bible is the only information source a Christian counselor should depend on.
- Christian counselors need only biblical training to provide helpful treatment.

¹ Adams, Jay E. (1973). *Competent To Counsel*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan

Integrating Psychology With Christianity Or Theology Should Be Shunned. Really?

Caution is necessary in integrating psychology and Christianity, as at times they are at odds. It would be wrong of us to integrate gods, ideas or practices from other man-made religions into our faith and worship of God. But sifting through and integrating information about the



psychology of people that is compatible with—or at least not in opposition to—the Word is useful and wise. After all, we are not just spiritual beings, but also human beings, and those two natures interact with one another.

Theories developed by people are inherently flawed, be it psychology or theology (man-made discipline primarily derived from biblical interpretation). The Bible isn't a book about how to counsel, even though its wisdom and laws are necessary and helpful to every good Christian counselor. Some of the principles underlying secular counseling approaches and theories are contrary to solid scriptural understanding, but some of them are common sense approaches and some are even found in scripture.

Transforming one's mind (Romans 12) is akin to cognitive therapy; putting on and off certain actions (Ephesians 4) is similar to behavioral therapy; having truth in the inward most being (Psalm 51) is connected to psychodynamic or insight-oriented counseling; and the wisdom of Proverbs is in some ways common sense psychology of human behavior. The Bible seems to present an admixture of human (psychological) and spiritual information, stories, wisdom and commands. For example, His spiritual laws are also psychologically sound commands. They all are about what love is and is not. The ability to feel, give and take love is both spiritual and psychological. God gives us the ability to love, while a person's family-of-origin (growing up family) relationships set the tone for the feel, give and take of love that will typically influence him or her for life. For humans, love is most deeply understood from a psychospiritual point of view.

Extra-biblical Information Should Be Avoided. Really?

Going beyond the revelation of the Bible is something we all frequently do. Every time we use a cell phone, read Christian material, search the Internet, go to a medical doctor, buy products from Home Depot, invest for our retirement, drive our car or take courses to educate us, we are involved in extra-biblical information or truth.

**Seeking wisdom, facts and understanding beyond the Bible
is right and necessary.**

Seeking wisdom, facts and understanding beyond the Bible is right and necessary . In fact, Psalm 19:1-6 and Romans 1:20 clearly encourage extra-biblical thinking and evaluation. They clearly state that God is understood apart from His revealed word; that is, in His revealed creation of the universe. Even Proverbs 1:20 says, "Wisdom shouts in the street, she lifts her voice in the square." *People* are in the streets and squares. This proverb tells us it's right to turn to people for wisdom, which is in addition to the Bible. We learn from people's shared

knowledge about people, how the world works and about God who lives in those who are in Christ.

Why should we treat psychology any different by rejecting it out of hand, as some do? Perhaps the most commonly asserted reason is a fear of being captured by a vain philosophy (Colossians 2:8). Psychology or any other science or field of information that is supremely valued or replaces God in our lives would be wrong. But to informed Christian counselors, psychology very rarely reaches that end. Psychology, like all information, is evaluated for its utility and moral acceptability by the truth of scripture. It is seen as an addition to our wellspring of living water and God Himself. Caution, not fear, is exercised regarding all extra-biblical information.

All We Need To Know About Counseling Is In The Bible. Really?



We all understand that the Bible is greatly limited in its scope, purpose and revealed truths. It gives us some understanding of God and people, right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate, reality and fantasy. As I have previously written, the Bible contains about 1600 pages, while “The Oxford College Dictionary” (a single book on one specific subject) has about the same number of pages. God could have written a thousand books and we would still need to seek knowledge beyond them.

Effective Christian counselors must know more than what the Bible says. Knowing about God’s will, confession and repentance may be enough for salvation, but not to heal all of life’s wounds. Most clients I see already know these things, but are trapped by unconscious desires and needs that are made up of their human psychological nature, as well as their sin nature.

How can people effectively provide psychological or spiritual counsel if they can’t diagnose human problems, understand defense mechanisms and resistances, treat specific disorders (not covered in the Bible), or don’t possess the critically important understandings about why people do what they do beyond the issue of sin?

Taken together, His Word and psychology help us comprehend the complexities of human life and allow us to offer a more comprehensive treatment for a variety of emotional and some physical ailments. The Bible and biblical training primarily teach us about God and people’s spiritual nature, with a secondary focus on our psychological nature. The Bible informs us about God’s foundational view of people, which is absolutely necessary to our understanding of humanity. Psychology, on the other hand, primarily teaches us about human functioning. Psychology is first and primarily the empirical study and research of humans—behavior, thought, emotion, attitude, personality, biology, social relationships, development, etc. Though psychology as an organized discipline is in its infancy and its research methods are crude and limited, it is an important attempt to understand human nature—what, why and how we think, feel and behave as we do.

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Those who omit either source are destined for greater life conflict through ignorance, confusion, frustration, disappointment, sin and error. Those who avoid the spiritual side miss out

on a relationship with God in this life and in the one to come. Those who avoid the human side have likely been fooled into thinking human nature is unimportant, irrelevant, weak and corrupt and, therefore, feel justified in discounting or denying the value of their God-given, “very good” humanity (Genesis 1:31). In the world of counseling, it’s the pure scientist, the atheist and most agnostic counselors that avoid the spiritual side of life and it’s the nouthetic and some pastoral counselors who see only the spiritual in this physical world in which we all also live.

We All Need To Understand Our Human And Spiritual Natures And Their Interactions. Really? Yes, Really!

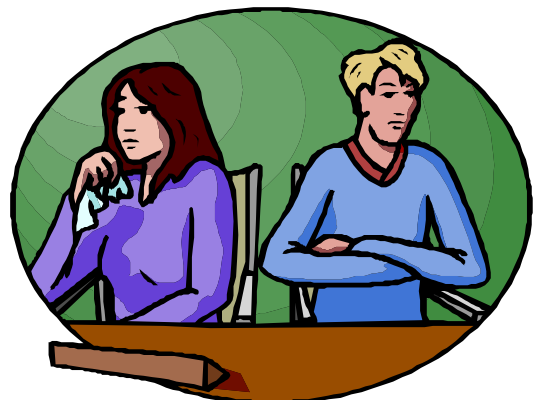
...counseling worth its salt must address both natures and their interactions.

All who omit the spiritual or psychological sides of life miss the manifold, multidirectional influences that our spiritual and human natures have on one another. Any Christian counseling worth its salt must address both natures *and their interactions*. For example, understanding why there exists approximately a 50% divorce rate for Christians (same as non-Christians) is critical to setting up a plan of successful change. Those who think of unwarranted divorce only as a sin, whose remedy is confession and repentance, fail to be of help to the majority who feel emotionally imprisoned without any alternative but submission to a sometimes hellish and life-altering traumatic relationship.

If Christians developed a balanced marital theology of God’s laws and liberties with an understanding of human dynamics and nature, the psychological and spiritual suffering from divorce would be less severe. More people might choose to marry, rather than live together, as well. The absolute, often unchallenged trust parishioners give their leaders (and some leaders expect) is a psychospiritual phenomenon that can result in a dependent, thoughtless faith and even slavery to cultish beliefs and practices and false doctrines.

Unwittingly, many Christians give their allegiance to romantic theologies. One specific area of seriously destructive romantic thinking can be seen and understood in the way people talk and what they teach about marriage. For decades, though less in the last several years, most conservative and fundamental Christian leaders told their followers it was God’s will they stay in their marriages, despite being physically, sexually, financially or emotionally abused. This was justified by an implied biblical promise that one could win his or her partner over to God. The traumatic and mostly avoidable impact on spouses and their children have been great, and the respect for marriage and authority suffered a substantial blow.

There are some in the Christian community today (counselors, pastors and writers) who propagandize marital myths, such as “happily ever after,” or “maximum marriage” and “gold medal marriage.” A false, high expectation, romantic theology is taught that says marriage can be absolutely wonderful, with just a little conflict. It is also taught, at least by implication, that the God-ordained union promises overflowing joy and happiness and that it’s the best this life has to offer beyond God Himself. Yet, couples who believe marital nirvana exists and are



gravely disappointed that their marriages didn't live up to the romantic promise, look for bliss in remarriage. What they are often shocked to discover is that approximately 70% of second and 80% of third marriages fail.

First marriages are extremely difficult, but subsequent marriages are mostly tsunamis moving toward marital shores—a disaster in the making. The church fails to present a balanced biblical perspective on marriage, often ignoring the downside and the natural pitfalls of marriage. For example, Paul encourages people to remain single (trying to save them from marital trouble—1 Corinthians 7:28). After Jesus spoke about marriage and divorce, the disciples said it was better not to marry (Matthew 19:10). What did they know that we need to know?

Couples can better think through and make decisions regarding marriage, if they have an understanding of the psychology of a marriage relationship, relational dynamics, marital statistics and why people engage in unrealistic romantic optimism. Psychology can help inform us about these issues.

Psychology can also help provide answers to questions such as:

- Why do we do what we do?
- How do I better manage my feelings?
- Why do some murder, while others repress their anger?
- Why do more women than men talk things out and pray?
- What is helpful in overcoming disorders like: depression, anxiety, panic, insomnia, physical pain, post-traumatic stress, etc.?
- How does personality impact one's chosen beliefs and conduct of faith?
- How and why is one's sin nature different from all others?
- Is there a psychology to a person's sin nature that can aid (not cure) Christians in overcoming it?

There is no need to fear psychology. Of course it shouldn't be worshipped, but respecting it as a useful discipline that can assist in many arenas of life is reasonable and appropriate.

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