

## THE COUCH OR CHRIST

Multitudes of Christians are now viewing psychology with awe and respect. Paradoxically, this torrid love affair that a great segment of the church seems to be pursuing comes at a time when more and more secular researchers in the field are expressing their disillusionment with psychotherapy and exposing both its impotence to help and its power to harm. Christian counseling centers are sprouting up all over the country offering what many believe to be the perfect combination: Christianity and psychology. Anxiously, psychologists are being sought out to answer the age-old questions of how to live, how to relate to others, and how to meet the challenges of life. And slowly but surely there seems to be a growing notion among God's people that the church no longer has the ability to meet the needs of people suffering from anxiety, depression, fear, and other problems of living: that the "science" of psychology has now superseded the antiquated biblical cures used by the early church for the problems of life: and, that biblical counseling in and of itself is not enough-and must be integrated with psychology.

What is a biblical Christian to believe? Is it possible to wed psychology and theology? Can we filter out and combine the best of both worlds so that a person may be helped all the more? Or, must a Christian choose between the biblical and the psychological method of counseling?

From the beginning of man's history, the world has offered a myriad of ideas that have clearly stood in opposition to God's Word. Some have been clear cut and blatant while others have been subtle and disguised. Whether of one kind or the other, left unexamined both have possessed the power to wreak havoc in the church. In light of the current questions about psychological counseling, we would do well to scrutinize and compare its teachings against the Word of God. If its teachings are valid and biblical, then its proponents have nothing to fear from a Scriptural analysis of its tenets: and if its precepts are in fact false and dangerous, then those who love God and truth will be grateful when the error is exposed.

Perhaps the best way to clearly see the disparity between psychological counseling and biblical counseling is to compare and contrast the two. In spite of the seeming similarities, we will observe that they are drastically different and cannot and should not be wedged together. We will see that the Living Word of God is enough to answer the questions of why man is the way he is, how he should live, and how he is to change. Rather than refer Christians with problems of living out into the world system of psychological counseling the church should come to the realization that it is responsible to carry out its work of restoration in the life of the hurting one.

Undoubtedly, the crucial difference between psychological counseling and biblical counseling is that the former is based upon man-made philosophies. In psychological counseling, the theories and practices are limited to human understanding, opinion, and bias. It originates with man and ends with man. And not without surprise, the field of psychology contains over two hundred and ten different therapies and ten thousand different techniques which are often contradictory and incompatible with one another. It has become a Babel of conflicting and confusing voices that should cause even the most ardent supporter of the psychological counseling to throw up his hands in despair.

Biblical counseling, on the other hand, depends full on God and is based upon the principles of Scripture. It holds that the Bible alone is the authoritative and final word about all matters of the human heart, soul, mind, and behavior. It alone is the

standard and guide for values, attitudes, emotions, thoughts, actions, and relationships. It is the source that tells us how to know and understand man, why he behaves the way he does, and how to help him change.

Those who insist on incorporating the theories of men with Scripture evidently believe that the Word of God and the Holy Spirit are not sufficient in themselves to transform a person's life. In fact, many of them restrict the Bible exclusively to an explanation of God and as a guide only in what they refer to as "spiritual" matters. If the Bible does not speak to the crucial issues of life and if Christ has not come to indwell and transform believers, then we are to be pitied above all people. We must remember that the early church and Christians throughout the centuries survived without psychological counseling. Pastors ministered to the problems of life through preaching, teaching, and counseling from the Word of God. Lives were transformed, not by techniques from worldly wisdom or from the philosophy of the Greeks, but the Word of God ministered through the power of the Holy Spirit. The early Church faced and ministered to mental-emotional-behavioral problems, which were as complex as the ones that exist today. If anything, the conditions of the early church were more difficult than those we face today. They suffered persecution, poverty, and other afflictions that are foreign to most twentieth century, Western Christians. If the biblical cures used by the early church were effective then, they are just as potent if used today. The Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit are still applicable to all problems of living and therefore do not need to be superseded by psychological theories. As the apostle Peter said, "God's divine power has granted us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence" (2 Pet. 1:3).

While epistemology (origin of knowledge) is perhaps the crucial difference between psychological and biblical counseling, there are others that should be pointed out.

Psychological counseling is man-centered. Self-actualization is its major focus and self-fulfillment its clarion call. Self-love, self-esteem, self-acceptance, and self-worth and other self-fixated variations are the new antidotes psychology is prescribing to life's problems. Self-denial is out and self-stroking is in.

Psychological counseling is limited to self-effort but biblical counseling is accomplished through God's provision of new life through His indwelling Holy Spirit. He is the one who enables the believer in making biblical changes. The goal of psychological counseling is self-enhancement. The motivation for change is personal benefit. The goal of biblical counseling is to glorify God and the motivation for change is love for God and the desire to please Him.

Psychological counseling includes many theories that attempt to explain man's nature and how he can change. Biblical counseling holds that the problems of life are due to separation from God because of sin. The answer for the dilemma is Jesus Christ. He has provided the only means to reestablish the broken relationship between God and man.

A great number of psychological theories say that the past determines the present. That is, what a person does today is not by present choice but is rather predetermined by his past. Hours are spent in searching the past to find the key to explain why he behaves the way he does in the present. In biblical counseling, however, the past belongs on the cross and under the blood of Christ. The new life begins at salvation and the old is done away with and buried. Although a believer may

have developed wrong attitudes and habits in the past, he can deal with them in the present through the presence of Christ within him. He can repudiate the past through present choices, but he cannot blame the past. Like Paul he can say, "But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil.3: 13-14).

Many psychological theories include the idea that man is compelled by unconscious drives to do what he does not consciously choose to do. The unconscious, as a result, is blamed for all kinds of behavior and problems. The biblical response says that God speaks to the conscious mind. His Word addresses human behavior from a conscious point of view. There is no indication whatsoever in Scripture that unconscious drives determine what one says or does. When Paul cried out in despair over doing what he did not want to do (Rom.7), he did not blame the unconscious for his behavior. He identified sin as the problem- not just in deed but also in condition.

Psychological counseling is wed to evolution which see humanity not in a class by itself but simply further along than the apes. It holds that man himself is continuing to evolve and is moving toward greater potential of becoming divine. Biblical counseling teaches that man is a spiritual being created in the image of God and cannot find his identity apart from Him.

Psychological counseling emphasizes human potential and encourages faith in the therapist's professional training and status. Biblical counseling encourages faith in God-in His faithfulness, love, power, and Word. Psychological counseling attempts to treat guilt feelings. But generally avoids or dismisses the problem of sin. Biblical counseling reveals the problem of sin and encourages confession. This enables the Christian to go beyond remorse to transformation through repentance. Biblical counseling teaches humility and submission to the perfect will of God. Psychological counseling, especially through the many self-theories, fosters pride, rebellion and self-will.

While other comparisons could be made between the two systems of thought, those mentioned above should adequately demonstrate that biblical counseling differs drastically with its psychological counterpart. As believers, we should take more seriously the warning Paul gave the Colossians about following the ways of men: "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ" (Col.2: 8). Although some disciplines in the broad field of psychological study have contributed some knowledge about people, much of the information that has filtered down into popular literature and into the psychologist's office is spurious and insufficient for genuinely transforming people. As Christians we must come to our senses and accept the fact that God has provided the Manual of operation for His people. We must believe that any counseling which incorporates the philosophies and methods of men cannot and will not nourish and build a believer's relationship with God or others. Think about it. Can people who are of the flesh, who are hostile to God, who do not subject themselves to the law of God, and who cannot please God, propose to explain the nature of man, tell him how he should live, and help him make change for the better?

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, don't quench the Holy Spirit by devaluing the Bible and its supreme place in transforming your lives. For the problems of life, turn only to the whole counsel of God. God's truth has always been sufficient- His grace always enough. May God richly bless you as you honor His Word.