

## **The Dangers of Integrating Secular Psychology and Christianity**

By Daniel Tomczyk

Rachard Ganz had attended school to become a psychologist and had finally begun his profession when he first heard the good news of Christ and became Christian. After being forced to give up his job as a secular psychologist because he could not help but apply the truth of the Gospel rather than tell his patients a lie, he was offered a job at a Christian counseling service and as a professor at the Rosemead Graduate School of Psychology, a Christian school. Neither of these offers he accepted because, he writes, "I knew that my psychoanalytic psychology had no Christian foundation. I wondered how I could teach at a Christian school under those circumstances. Strangely, no one seemed concerned about this except me" (Ganz 24).

Gary Almy was a renowned psychologist. But when he began to realize that he too needed a therapist, but found that no psychologist could help, his Christian wife led him to her pastor who counseled Almy from God's Word. Faced with his sin, he admitted, "I had to face the reality that neither the knowledge of psychoanalysis nor my successful career in psychiatry was going to bring the contentment and glory of which I had dreamed" (Almy 9). From here he began a campaign to remove the false premises of psychology from Christian counseling and joined men like Bernie Zilbergle, an acclaimed psychological researcher and author, who has written that psychology is "overpromoted, overused, and over valued" (Bulkey 30).

Lawrence Crabb, in his book Basic Principles of Biblical Counseling, was forced to confess:

When I received my Ph.D. in clinical psychology, I assumed that I knew how to counsel people with problems...as I restudied what I had learned in graduate school, it became clearly and frighteningly apparent that most of what I was believing and doing as a professional psychologist was built upon the swaying

foundation of humanism... The truths of Christianity seemed to have little bearing on the activities in my counseling office and were at many points flatly contradicted by my professionally orthodox behavior. (11-12)

Had these arguments come from journalists or theologians, they might have been more easily ignored. Coming from men who have based their entire profession on psychology and who have given up their careers solely for the sake of retaining the Gospel, we cannot help but take notice.

Indeed, the integration of psychology and Christianity cannot only be difficult, but dangerous. For pastors to refer parishioners, teachers to refer students, and Christians in general to refer brothers and sisters in Christ to a “mental doctor” whose primary training has been based on anti-Christian philosophy, whether they be Christian or not, for assistance in the growth of their sanctification is a delicate issue, especially when eight percent of all Americans are faced with trusting their spiritual life to a counselor (Almy 26). It is tempting to think that there is a difference between the roles of a Christian and a counselor in assisting a person’s mental state, but as the WELS web page on depression states best, “I think the teachings of Scripture have more to suggest about the treatment of depression than simply the permissibility of medication or therapy.... From God's perspective there is no arbitrary division between "spiritual" and "psychological" responses to conditions like depression.” The danger to not only the gospel, but also people’s earthly *and* eternal life, stems from this seemingly minor misconception. Rich Ganz explains it quite clearly, “Many Christian psychologists believe that the therapies based on a secular mind-set are not only valuable, but indispensable. In truth, what has taken place is not integration but substitution, the substitution of secular psychology for the Word of God” (64). Our entire goal in counseling is to help the person grow in his or her sanctified living. Pastor John Schuetze, a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, explained what is taught by describing it as horizontal issues, those that deal with faith and our life on earth, and vertical

issues, those that deal with the relationship between God and us. “What we emphasize is that we never lose sight of the goal. The goal is to strengthen the person in faith. That we just don't deal with the horizontal issues, but with the vertical as well.... The more we strengthen [the vertical issues] the more the horizontal issues will be strengthened as well.”

Before I begin to explain the problems that arise from such misconceptions, it is necessary to clarify some issues. Pastor Schuetze pointed out a major issue in my discussions with him, “What does Christian counseling mean? It could be a Christian who does counseling. It could be a Christian who uses Christian principles. It could be a person who takes people to God's word, who does counseling. The term Christian counseling is pretty broad.” Rather than address specifics, which would be needlessly long and practically impossible due to the variety of circumstances, my goal is to bring to your attention some fundamental problems in integration so that no matter the circumstances, as Christians you will be familiar with the most important issues and be ready, no matter the circumstances, to “examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD” (Lam. 3:40).

In addition, my intent is not to scare those who are in counseling or to degrade Christian counselors. If you are in counseling, my hope is that you will weigh the advice you receive against God's Word and continue to discuss the issues with a strong Christian. If you are a psychologist or are planning on going into psychology, I am extremely glad with your desire to help fellow Christians and hope that your counseling is based entirely on unerring scripture. As Ed Bulkley pictured it, "A chemist takes a beaker of clear liquid marked 'water' and shakes it vigorously and it suddenly explodes in his hand. What happened? Someone switched labels on him and he didn't realize he was handling nitroglycerin. He was not naive and he was not evil; he was simply mistaken. Unfortunately, anyone standing nearby at that moment was also injured” (189). I am not accusing Christian psychologists *ad hominem*. Rather I am extremely glad at

their motivation. I just want to examine what is in the beakers so that those around them are not hurt, because the theories they are working with have been labeled scientific and Christian.

My first concern springs from the fact that psychological counseling is barely a science or medical field at all, although many would contend otherwise. In 1973 a professor of psychology and law at Stanford University and a dozen friends admitted themselves to numerous mental hospitals merely by saying that they felt “empty” and acted completely normally after their admission. The length of stay was between seven and fifty-two days, and only under the term “schizophrenic in remission” were they released. How would they have felt had they not been researchers and had to live the rest of their lives believing they were schizophrenic (Ganz 45-46)? Before Ganz’s conversion to Christianity, he was continually plagued by the memories of his associate dismissing his fears of excessive emphasis on psychology by saying, “What did it matter anyway? Half of the patients improved and half didn’t, regardless of psychiatric intervention” (51). How would you feel going to a doctor who believed you only had a fifty percent chance of getting better? In his 1921 Introduction to the History of Medicine, F.H. Garrison stated, “Whenever many different remedies are used for a disease, it usually means that we know little about treating the disease” (Bulkey 131-132) and yet, according to Almy, a standard textbook of psychiatry describes more than 250 kinds of psychotherapy (18). In fact, Bulkey makes an interesting point, “Psychological studies have not shown that mankind is mentally healthier since the introduction of psychological theories and therapies. To the contrary; there is evidence that society has become more psychotic rather than better adjusted” (28).

Why would a Christian, who knows the truth, want to *base* his counseling on such a poor, ever-changing science rather than the unchanging word of God? “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matt 24:35; cf. also Psalm 119:89 and 1 Peter 1:24-25). Rather, the Lord implores of us, “Guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away

from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith” (1 Tim. 6:20-21). Paul here is referring to Gnosticism, but in a very similar way some Christian counseling seems to imply that by special knowledge of psychology which is not found in God’s word they can improve their sanctified living. Only through God’s Word, however, can we grow in our sanctified life.

Others may contest that we live in a more complex society with different issues than the people of the Bible did, as Joseph Stowell did in his book A Multitude of Counselors, “We live in a season when life is increasingly complex and the fragility of precious souls is demonstrated by growing brokenness and complicated conflicts. We dare not waste their sorrows on the battlefield of careless counsel that violates biblical parameters or with simplistic, unqualified solutions that plunge them ultimately into deeper despair” (24). While it is arguable that the world is more complex and certainly our world has changed from that of Bible times, we do not claim that the Bible provides explicit directions for counseling. Rather, we contend that the Bible provides the general principles on which we must build. “All scripture...is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17; cf. also Phi. 4:7, Col. 2:8, 1 Pet. 2:1-3, and 2 Pet. 1:4). In fact, without God’s word, insight psychology, which expects us to look into our thoughts, is impossible. Scripture tells us that our view of ourselves and our past will always be blinded by our sinful nature, unless we assess ourselves according to the rule of God’s Word. Even had Scripture remained silent about such issues, which it doesn’t, current psychological counseling can easily contradict unerring Scripture.

In 1980, a review of forty-two studies comparing professional counselors with untrained helpers showed “consistent and provocative” findings that “paraprofessionals achieved clinical outcomes equal to or significantly better than those obtained by professionals.” The study

concluded, “The study, on the whole, lent no support to the major hypothesis that...the technical skills of professional psychotherapists produced measurably better therapeutic change” (Durlak 80). While this study is obviously debated, it raises questions concerning my next point: What makes professionals better than normal Christians? Jeffrey Masson once wrote, “I spent eight years in my psychoanalytic training. In retrospect, I feel I could have learned the basic ideas in about eight hours of concentrated reading” (248). Most psychology students do not realize the number of different theories in their field nor do they recognize the lack of a standardized, proven curriculum for their study. What other area of medicine tells their patients that it may take numerous counselors before they find one that works for them? Would you go to a doctor that told you that he may not know the right medication, but he will try a few and if they don’t work you may want to find another doctor who works for you?

Even if counselors are Christian, after having spent up to nine years studying secular methods and being required to stay current in their field, it is nearly impossible not to develop a certain mind set. As Lawrence Crabb described it, “The all too common, but disastrous result in that we tend to look at Scripture through the eyeglasses of psychology when the critical need is to look at psychology through the glasses of Scripture” (48). Ganz was eventually drawn into the pastoral ministry because he “realized that the pastorate is the heart of truly Christian counseling, which is the ministry of God’s Holy Word” (26). Remember, this is coming from a man who not only studied, but also practiced psychology as a profession. He says, “They don’t know the Word of God or its power. They have devoted years to obtaining psychology degrees from secular institutions, training under people much like my director at the medical center. Inevitably the fruit of those years subverts even their best efforts as Christian believers. Sadly, this is true even of many who are most esteemed in Christian circles” (27).

Now I am by no means stating that we should eliminate psychologists or that they do not

have some tools which may assist the Christian in helping others. We must ask, however, if counselors should be the basis of psychological welfare or if they are any more competent in this area than a Christian who is firmly founded in his faith.

Another, larger concern is that we look to such experts for answers rather than the Holy Spirit, whom we are told alone can bring change in a person's life. As Almy puts it, "The psychotherapy industry rests upon the pillar of the therapist, who he is, what he believes, and what he does is not nearly so important as the fact that he is there, and that clients see him as able to provide answers" (27). In my interview with Professor Schuetze, he conveyed the necessity of basing counseling on Scripture alone, "This miserable, depressing picture of the human heart is based not on psychological research and conclusions but on the revelation of the God who created man and ALONE can search and know the human heart...There may be some changes in thoughts, feelings, and conduct through such applications of human reason (psychology), but nothing is done about the root problem in the human heart." Ed Bulkey reports of a psychologist who argued that the fruits of the Spirit could all be produced by psychological techniques. If this would be true, we would have no need for the Holy Spirit and the church is useless, as Bulkey believes, "If psychology counsel is necessary for solving problems of life, the Bible must give way to the New Harvard Guide to Psychiatry. Pastors should sneak away quietly and find an honest job" (204).

The Bible speaks of no such experts or psychological findings to produce the fruits of the Spirit. Paul tells the Philippians, "It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (2:13; cf. also Gal. 5:24-25). Instead of pointing his readers to the modern philosophy of the time, the author of Hebrews prays, "May *the God of peace*...equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him" (13:20-21). Rather than referring the Romans to counselors, Paul tells them, "I myself am convinced, my

brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another” (15:14). Time and time again the Bible calls on fellow Christians, grounded firmly in the word, to help one another (cf. Prov. 17:17-18, Rom. 1:11, I Cor. 13:20-31, Gal 6:1-2, Phil. 4:11-14, Col 3:16, I Thess. 5:10-14, Tit. 2:3-4, and James 5:13-16). Helping fellow believers is not a private undertaking, as if only by the pastor, but a autonomous process. The whole church is responsible for the sanctified life their fellow believers. *You* are responsible to *everyone* in your congregation.

One of the most dangerous lies of psychology is that the suffering we are experiencing is not our fault. Any suffering is caused by their upbringing, their family, the neighborhood, the culture, or even by their genetics, over which they had no say. Started by Darwin’s belief in natural selection that made out all men to have started with a clean slate, Freud popularized this theory when he wrote, “Man is basically a socialized animal; he is not responsible for his actions” (21:5-6). Of course, this sin has been rampant ever since Adam blamed Eve for his sin, but Darwinism and Freudianism made these sins scientifically acceptable. The news is covered with examples of such sin: The “Unabomber” murdered because he was not held by his mother, the Menendez brothers murdered because they were abused by their parents, and school shootings are the result of ridicule from others. The surgeon general’s report on school violence states, “There are many reasons for the overlap between offending and victimization. Perhaps the most common is that the offender is injured by the intended target—either during the offensive or later in retaliation. Another reason is that offenders tend to live in more violent environments or their lifestyles take them into high-risk environments.” What is truly sad is that this anti-scriptural teaching that we are not responsible for our sin is promoted by television evangelist like Robert Schuller who are watched by millions of people and say, “I don't think anything has been done in the name of Christ and under the banner of Christianity that has proven more

destructive to human personality and, hence, counterproductive to the evangelism enterprise, then the often crude, uncouth, and unchristian strategy of attempting to make people aware of their lost and sinful condition” (Ganz 67-68). Albert Schweitzer probably countered this lie most bluntly when he said, “Man must cease attributing his problems to his environment, and learn again to exercise his will—his personal responsibility in the realm of faith and morals.”

We cannot deny that pain and suffering are powerful influences on our perceptions and responses to situations and our genes affect us. Nevertheless, we are still responsible for our actions as Ezekiel points out, “The soul who sins is the one who will die” (18:20). It is without a doubt obvious that we are sinful and we are responsible for our actions (cf. Gen. 8:21, Psalm 58:3, Mark 7:18,23, Luke 23:34, Romans 3:9-12, and I Cor. 10:3,7-8) Never in the Bible does it refer to sexual addiction, kleptomania, alcoholism, or parental defiance as a disease or disorder, but only as sin. Once it is a disease, it rules you, not Christ ruling in you. When we stand before God on Judgment Day, no environment, gene, or influence will stand as an excuse, nor will any medical excuse from any doctor or psychiatrist.

Even those things which happen to us are a result of our original sin. Had not Adam sinned, the Lord would have had no purpose in cursing the earth. “For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom. 8:20-21). But in this punishment for sin, we see the blessing: a need to accept God’s gift of faith. If we do not see these problems as sin, there is no need to look for a Savior. But when we do sin, God is faithful and forgives us through his Son. We are not called depressed, an alcoholic, an addict, abused, sexually compulsive, or a victim. Rather we are called children of God, redeemed, forgiven, a new creation, and a victor.

Psychology advertises that it can provide relief from suffering. “Freedom from guilt,

shame, fear, anxiety, and suffering is the unabashed, openly-stated goal of psychotherapy.... The desire to avoid suffering is a major reason for the existence of the therapeutic community. Suffering is to be avoided at all costs, and pleasure is to be pursued at all costs” (Almy 28-29). Because of this belief, abortion removes burdensome babies, euthanasia removes burdensome or ill elderly persons, and in suicide a person removes himself from being a burden to others. Yet, as pointed out in the Romans passage quoted earlier, suffering is a necessary trial of faith which draws us closer to God, as the Lord did for the Israelites crossing the desert or Paul being faced with persecution. John Zubly, a Swiss Presbyterian Minister who was a member of the Continental Congress, said, “A more unhappy situation could not easily be devised into mankind, than that every man should have it in his power to do what is right in his own eyes” (Almy 83).

Psychology wants us to believe that *we* are of primary importance. This is clearly evident from such terms as self-actualization, self-empowerment, self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-identity. In psychology, counselees are brought to believe that they must do this for themselves and must consider how they can make themselves happier. This is exactly what is being referred to in 2 Timothy, “There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves...conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have *nothing* to do with them” (3:1-5). Rather than focus on ourselves, the Bible wants us to focus on Christ and to serve others. “And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Cor. 5:15) Christ says a man must “deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24). Numerous times the Bible not only calls, but shows how the Lord humbles his people. In fact, the whole basis of the doctrine of law and gospel relies on the fact that we must realize that we are nothing and look to Christ for our life. President Thomas Clap of Yale realized the dreadfulness of life if we decide to look to ourselves rather than God:

For a man to make the sole, supreme, or ultimate end of all being and action to be for himself alone or his happiness, as the summum bonum and to regard God and all other beings, only so far as they may serve himself or be subservient to his own happiness, or to gratify his principle of self-love, is the most absolute inversion of the order, dignity, and perfection of beings: and one of the worst principles that can be in human nature. (78)

Finally, the biggest anti-scriptural presupposition about psychology that is rampant, even in Christian counseling, is that we can expect a cure for our sins and suffering in psychology. Since psychology is considered medical and problems are often diseases, the whole concept implies that there is a cure. This misconception was popularized by Freud who saw the human condition “only as a developmental stage, which all healthy individuals are biologically destined to leave behind them as they grow to maturity” (Almy 23). Nevertheless, psychology has not eliminated and cannot eliminate suffering. Thomas Sowell reports that although one third of the money in New York schools goes to psychologists and counselors, “We have yet to see test scores as high as they were thirty years ago. Maybe students are happier, healthier, or something, but statistics on cheating, theft, vandalism, violent crime, venereal disease, and teen-age suicide say no” (Bulkey 49). As we look around it seems that there are more problems and more people needing psychological counseling than ever before.

At what point is a person considered by a psychologist “mentally healthy?” In fact, we cannot remove suffering or be removed from suffering while we continue to live in a sinful world. We are never completely mentally healthy while on this earth. Since we cannot be rescued from the results of a sinful world, we logically would be left with endless therapy. People flee to psychology trying to escape their bondage to their sinful nature and the sinful world they live in only to find that they are different people who still are bound to their sinful

natures and who still live in a sinful world. Unsure of who they are and which is better, they are left only in deeper despair when they realize that there is no escape from their sinful nature and the sinful world. We will remain sinful as long as we live because we have an Old Adam. Paul describes this Old Adam battling with the New Man in this way, “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing” (Rom. 7:18-19).

Even in suffering we rejoice. In the book Pressed Down But Not Forgotten, which is published through Northwestern Publishing House, we are told, “In some cases, unfortunately, depression is a way of life, perhaps the result of a physical ailment without a cure. God provides strength and hope for that reality too. God's love does not change. He loves you just as much now as he did when Jesus went to the cross for you. We all need to remember that love constantly, but especially when we must accept depression or any other lingering illness as a way of life (Lyon and Juern 18-19). The Christian should expect suffering in this life and see its purpose in his life to strengthen his faith and increase his longing to attain the prize that Christ won for him. “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:12-14). We are also told, “But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (1 Cor. 9:12) and “We know that the whole creation has been

groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved” (Rom. 8:22-24; cf. also Phil. 3 and James 1). In fact, what is mental health? Is it not to “attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:12)? We are called to imitate Christ, the man who was once told “He is out of his mind” (Mark 3:21). Almy sums it up brilliantly:

The fundamental goal of psychotherapy is to achieve a life of pleasure and to avoid suffering at all costs. The contrasting fundamental goal of the Christian life is to glorify God through all aspects of our lives, trusting that our suffering will be used in just the way Scripture promises. These two goals are diametrically opposed. A goal of personal peace and prosperity can never produce a life that glorifies God. One goal eliminates the other: these purposes cannot be integrated.

So what is Christian counseling? Bulkey puts it this way, “Of course therapy can make people feel better--temporarily. But does it truly change them? Does it help them solve their problems? Do they become more like Christ? Are they led into Christian maturity? Are their thought and behavior patterns brought into conformity to God's Word? Those should be the tests of effectiveness of Christian counseling” (79). Where does Pastor Schuetze stand? “We always let psychology and reason be the servant and let God's Word be the master. And when you take that approach you are always filtering information through the filter of God's Word. If it passes it's something you can use; if it doesn't pass, it's not something you can use.” We must base all counseling on the three *solas* of our faith: by faith alone, by grace alone, by scripture alone.

Can psychology be integrated with Christianity? The WELS website on mental health states, “Mental illness may have spiritual, emotional, and physical causes. The spiritual causes should be dealt with by spiritual pastoral care, repentance and forgiveness. *This is of primary*

*importance.* Emotional causes may be helped by counseling that is done in agreement with scriptural principles. Medication may help where there is a physical or chemical cause. Any method of treatment should be evaluated on the basis of Scripture.” In certain situations a pastor may need the help of psychiatry or may even benefit from the techniques psychology can provide. In severe cases the pastor or lay member may need to work with a counselor. No matter what the situation, however, the Christian should remain the main support for those who need counseling and all techniques used by either the Christian or the counselor must agree with God’s Word. Schuetze told me, “If by integration we mean two disciplines that are coming at it from equal planes, well then no. God’s word is above reason, which is basically what psychology is.” Psychologists have a hard enough time deciding what role biology has in psychology. How are we to decide how much of a role theology play in psychology, or rather, how much of a role psychology plays in theology? We must make every effort to make certain that, although using psychological techniques, we base our counseling entirely on Christian principles. “The first objective is growth in faith that leads to eternal salvation.... No counseling can be called pastoral or ‘Christian’ if it loses sight of this objective” (Schuetze 23).

I would like to emphasize once more that I am not attacking any Christian psychologists. I realize that they have indeed helped numerous Christians. I am not ignorant of their zeal to help their fellow Christians in their sanctified living. I believe there is a role for psychology in the church. However, I cannot stand back silently without bringing attention to how the devil is ever so slyly trying to sneak under the door and into our churches.

After all of my research, what do I believe needs to be done, if anything? To be honest, I am still uncertain. Should we require counselors to get certified? Should we start a Biblical counseling course of study? Should we prepare congregation members to assist in counseling? Should we just make our fellow Christians aware of the possibility of the devil using such

tactics? I don't know. I would truly appreciate any questions, experiences, comments, suggestions, or even criticisms. This I do know: psychology can easily detract from both law and gospel, and it is this use of the law and gospel that people are dealing with right now. This is not something fellow Christians struggle with only when they step into church once a week. It is not something they struggle with only when they do their daily devotions. This is something that affects them right now. We must be aware and make others aware of this temptation of the devil, and that, although we may use tactics of psychology, our church *cannot* make psychology the basis of its counseling. We must examine our tactics and make sure they conform to God's Word. If they do not, "Let us examine and test them, and let us return to the Lord" (Lam. 3:40).

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