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THE EVANGELICAL LOOKS AT PASTORAL COUNSELING

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There is little doubt that the area of the pastor's work which has received the most emphasis during recent years has been the subject of pastoral counseling. This has been largely caused by the impact of Sigmund Freud who about fifty years ago introduced psychoanalysis with the claim that it would cure all the ills of society. The psychoanalyst and his couch became standard procedure for dealing with neurotic disorders. It is logical that many of the counseling techniques which had gained such wide acceptance would have an influence on pastoral counseling.

Most pastors have recognized the need for gaining deeper insight into the complex problems which they face. Even though at that time I had very little background in psychology, very early in my ministry problems arose which emphasized the fact that the outward symptoms of difficulty did not necessarily indicate the deeper cause. A concerned husband brought to me his wife who had been severely disturbed over the fact that she had said something over six years prior to that time that had hurt the feelings of her pastor. I realized that this was not sufficient cause to produce this degree of anxiety for I had known many others who had hurt their pastor and seemed to be able to sleep without any difficulty! Since I felt my inadequacy in probing into the causes, my urgent plea was that she be taken to a psychiatrist immediately. The husband replied that he would rather bury her than see her face the possibility of confinement to a mental hospital. Ironically, her funeral was just one week from that day after she had taken her own life. After this tragedy, I asked the question that the pastor often asks, "How could I have prevented it?" This and many other experiences emphasized the need for a deeper insight into the workings of the mind.

My exposure to psychoanalysis came very unexpectedly. While in the graduate speech department at the University of Southern California I enrolled in a course in the Psychology of Speech. In the treatment of the stutterer it was found that the problem was not that he couldn't make the sounds but that the mind would not allow him to make them. The conclusion was that something had occurred in the past of which the person was unaware which caused his mind to refuse to allow him to make the sound at that particular time. Thus it became the task of the speech therapist to probe beneath the surface in an attempt to discover the problem. This expresses the major premise of psychotherapy. All our actions are caused by previous learning whether it be known or unknown. Psychoanalysis attempts to find the cause of abnormal behavior and seeks to produce normality.

Perhaps at this point, it would be well for us to clarify the terms "psychotherapist," "psychologist" and "psychiatrist." The psychotherapist is one who, having adopted many of the Freudian concepts, believes that the elimination of unconscious motivations is the key to the development of a well-rounded personality. To accomplish this goal, he declares that one must be psychoanalyzed in a series of sessions at which time one is encouraged to reveal everything about himself. The expectation is that by thus unburdening the soul one can be released from the problem of engaging in certain practices and experiencing feelings which cannot be explained. Sometimes this treatment requires a thousand hours or more and can only be administered by one who himself has been psychoanalyzed.

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The psychologist is one who has been trained in some phase of psychology. There are many branches of the field, such as school counseling, industrial counseling and marriage counseling. He may or may not have adopted the principles of psychotherapy.

The psychiatrist is a medical doctor who has majored in the study of the mind.

The question which faces us is, what should be the attitude of the evangelical toward the use of the principles of psychoanalysis in pastoral counseling?

The Shortcomings of Psychoanalysis

First, we should recognize the shortcomings. Perhaps the most disturbing element in psychoanalysis is that the supernatural is ruled out and thus everything must be given a natural explanation. This provides unbelief with an excellent opportunity to undermine faith in the deity of Christ and the new birth, as well as other basic truths.

The noted psychologist Anton Boisen in his book, The Exploration of the Inner World declared that, "It is impossible to deny that Jesus did have an exalted idea of himself. It is impossible also to deny that he had other characteristics which are regarded as evidences of abnormality."¹

He further blasphemed the Lord by stating that, "I am convinced that we will never be able to understand Him except as we recognize and accept it as a fact that He did have the set of ideas which we have found to be characteristic of our acutely disturbed patients."²

In explaining the new birth experience he suggested that, "according to our findings the significant thing about Fox and Bunyan and Paul and Jesus was not the presence or absence of pathological phenomena; these where they occurred would have been merely incidental to the severe struggle through which they passed. The significant thing is that out of that struggle they emerged triumphant. Their personalities became unified around that which they conceived to be their ultimate purpose in life. There was, particularly in Jesus, poise and serenity and beauty of character."³

He added also that "even the hospital patient who thinks of himself as Christ may not be wholly mistaken. The difficulty in most of these cases is not the falsity of the central idea but rather the failure to achieve any degree of harmony and perspective."⁴

Paul Johnson, Professor of Psychology of Religion at Boston University, declared that "psychological rebirth is a major reorganization of interest and purpose."⁵ Many psychologists dismiss as absurd the possibility of God producing the new birth by His Spirit. They believe that the phenomena which are attributed to divine regeneration can be produced through a variety of experiences, all with an explanation on the natural plane. The adoption of these principles by most psychoanalysts makes this a difficult hurdle to overcome in making the teachings of psychoanalysis palatable to the evangelical.

Then also the goal of psychotherapy is to produce socially acceptable behavior. The precepts of the Word of God are ruled out as absolute standards of behavior. If the moral standards of society deteriorate, the acceptable practices will become more and more lenient. Thus psychotherapy can provide no deterrent for the corruption that is endangering our social structure.

Another shortcoming of psychoanalysis is the false impression which many receive in regard to the assurance of success.

H. J. Eysenck, a professor of psychology at the University of London, stated that a study had been made of 500 severe neurotics who were sent to their family doctors and treated with the usual pills and advice. It was found that after two years more than two out of three recovered. He then inquired, "How does psychoanalysis come out in such comparison? There are many published figures concerning the successes and failures of psychoanalytic treatment. When these are sorted out and analyzed in detail, they reveal one startling fact: after years of treatment, about two out of three patients get better! In other words, there is no proof here at all of any efficacy of the Freudian treatment; just as high a proportion of patients recover under psychoanalysis as would have gotten better without it. Indeed, when we go back to hospital records of 100 years ago, we discover an interesting fact: even then the proportion of cures and improvements was about two out of three!

"Patients in the majority of cases get better regardless of what is done to them; but this is then interpreted by the patient and his analyst as evidence that he has gotten better because of the treatment. It does not bother him that other people use other methods with apparently equal effect: hypnosis, the pulling out of teeth to remove foci of infection, the laying on of hands, electric shocks, cold baths, dummy pills, suggestion or confession and prayer."⁶ In spite of these findings, the impression has become widespread that the analyst has all the answers and the only reason for not going to him is the expense involved.

A further problem arises because many patients derive the impression that since their early environment was like it was, there is nothing that can be done about it. A man who went to a psychoanalyst about a marital problem was told that his wife had a brother complex. She had idolized her brother and was trying to make her husband fit into his pattern. Instead of remedying the situation the husband felt the problem was hopeless and secured a divorce. When a person is told that his problem is an over-solicitous mother or an overbearing father the tendency is to feel that nothing can be done to change his behavior because his environment has made him what he is.

The Contributions of Psychoanalysis

But in spite of the shortcomings the evangelical should recognize the contributions of psychoanalysis to the field of pastoral counseling.

The psychoanalyst places great stress on the fact that most conflicts are learned during the first five years of our lives. This ought to reinforce the conviction that the early years are all important in the development of the attitudes of children. It should cause us to increase our efforts not only to provide a proper environment for the education of the child, but also to instruct the parents in child training. You will note that I did not say we should always follow the advice of child psychologists in rearing children, because that would be very difficult. Someone has outlined fifty years of advice from the child psychologists in disciplining the child as follows:

1910	Spank him.
1920	Deprive him.
1930	Ignore him.
1940	Reason with him.
1950	Love him.
1960	Spank him lovingly.

Psychoanalysis helps the evangelical by stressing the importance of the personal contact if our ministry is to be effective. Henry Guntrip, writing in Pastoral Psychology magazine, stated:

"It is possible to 'get by' in preaching. It is quite impossible to 'get by' when you are face to face with an individual human being in real difficulties. Either you can help or you cannot. If you do not know anything effective to say or do, then you will do more harm than good by attempting any sort of encouraging bluff. It is better to be sympathetically frank and say 'I do not know how to help or advise you, but you need help and we must find someone else who can meet your need.' It was said of a once noted preacher that if any individual sought a private interview to lay some problem before him, his invariable reply was: 'I'll preach about that next Sunday. But neither can one 'get by' by using preaching as an illegitimate escape from the responsibility of a personal ministry.

"The most searching test for the minister will be found on the pastoral and personal side of his work. This test can only be escaped by being the kind of man whom it is so obviously useless to approach with personal problems that no one ever thinks of coming to him. Perhaps the most spurious form of ministry is that in which the glitter of public success masks an inability to make helpful and healing contact with individuals. The immortal moments in the story of the Gospel are not the public utterances of Jesus, but His intimate personal conversations with such as Nicodemus, the woman at the well in Samaria, the man whose name was Legion, and Mary Magdalene."⁷

Then also psychoanalysis can teach us the art of listening. This is difficult for most ministers who have been taught that the key to solving any problem is to turn to the right passage of Scripture. We would not in any way minimize the effectiveness of the Word of God, but psychoanalysis has helped us to realize that emotional problems can be extremely complex and sometimes the counselor must listen for a considerable length of time before he realizes the basic problem that must be solved. The counselor must always try to understand what the person means, which may have little relation to what he says. He must not deal with symptoms, but search for the basic cause.

Most psychoanalysts will not accept the alcoholic or homosexual as patients, because they will only discuss symptoms, that is, problems that arise as a result of indulgence, rather than their reason for engaging in the practice. For example, the alcoholic will deal with his family problems, or his difficulty in holding a job, rather than the cause for drinking. If the counselor is to be effective he must learn to look beneath what is said to what is meant. We trust that none of us will take this advice quite as seriously as one psychoanalyst, however. One said to the other, "Good Morning." The other nodded his acknowledgment and then turned to a companion and asked, "I wonder what he meant by that."

Another contribution of psychotherapy to counseling is in determining who should be treated. Generally the psychotic is recognized to be in need of psychiatric help while the neurotic can usually be helped by non-medical counseling. Someone has given an oversimplified explanation of the difference between the two as follows: The psychotic believes that two plus two is five and is certain of it. The neurotic believes that two plus two is four but is worried about it.

Especially should the counselor be careful not to try to deal with those who have serious suicidal and homicidal tendencies. In my early ministry a man came to me saying that he suspected his wife of unfaithfulness and that it was taking place during the daytime. Instead of going to work, he would take his shotgun, go into the woods behind his home and wait for the sultor. Because of my inexperience, I was very slow in recognizing his need for medical care. I hate to think what might have happened to some innocent salesman who might have unsuspectingly visited the home.

The Advantage of the Christian Approach

Not only should we recognize the shortcomings and the contributions of psychotherapy but the evangelist should recognize the advantages of the evangelical approach. Psychoanalysis fails to recognize the true nature of man. Man was created by God with a place in his life that only God can fill. Because of the fall man now possesses a sinful nature which is the basic cause of all of his miseries. Man, being a moral creature, is constantly plagued with guilt feelings caused by his failure to do what he knows he ought to do. The privilege of the evangelical counselor is to show how anyone can be released from guilt through the work of Christ at the cross.

Adolph Koberle, in an article in Pastoral Psychology entitled, "The Problem of Guilt," stated:

"In the center of all Christian preaching and teaching is the message of the forgiveness of sins. This message has its real foundation in the conviction that the eternal God has in Jesus Christ presented Himself to us plainly in the form of an historical Saviour. He has given Himself and sacrificed Himself in this world of sin and death. The sign of the Cross is the great pledge that God is for us, that He is not against us, no matter how much we may separate ourselves from Him through loss of love or flight and rebellion against God. Out of this certainty the Christian church exercises absolution, the assurance of forgiveness, in confession. It defines pastoral care as the administration of pardon and consolation to the individual.

"There are psychotherapists within and outside the sphere of the Christian faith who declare with profound reverence that it is precisely at this point, where the authority of absolution is concerned, that the Christian pastor has a function to perform that goes far beyond what is pertinent or possible to psychotherapy. Whatever importance and value may be assigned and ascribed to psychotherapy, at this point it would defer to a treatment which acknowledges divine authority and power."⁸

However, we have all been forced to recognize that it is often difficult to bring a person to full release from guilt, sometimes for unknown reasons. I remember one man particularly, a member of my church, who never seemed to be able to gain assurance of the forgiveness of sin. I tried to help him many times and he would talk to every Bible teacher and evangelist that came to the church, seeking for some answer to his problem. I am convinced that the answer was psychological.

Mr. Koberle explained this when he stated:

"Anyone who is doing pastoral work knows of plenty of instances in which we have offered the assurance of forgiveness in Christ's name to troubled, guilt-ridden people, either in personal address or in the sacramental action of confession and communion,

and yet nothing has happened. We have not only done it once but repeatedly and yet the 'patient,' man or woman, comes back unchanged with the same trouble and the same despair. We have talked and consoled and assured them that the old things are past, that all their guilt has been forgiven and forgotten by God; but all our help has no effect. When the session is over the old questions and the old doubt come up again; There is no forgiveness for me.

"In such cases we are helpless and at a loss what to do next. Here is where psychotherapy can help. It tells us, and this we must regard very seriously, that there are also morbid forms of the experience of guilt; guilt feelings can be an obsessional neurosis, a mania for self punishment. A person may have been under excessive moral pressure in his childhood. The father-authority has weighed down upon the young life like a giant figure. This excessive load of regimentation has put too great a strain on the mind. Such a person's reaction to any thing that has power and authority can only be that of fear and trembling. In such a case the result will in all probability be the typical 'examination-anxiety,' and then the person's conception of God is also sucked into the neurosis. Obviously where such associations are at work in the background, the direct application of pastoral assurance will remain completely ineffectual. The person is so spellbound by his morbid associations that he is utterly incapable of allowing himself to be relieved of his burden. Such inhibitions and blockages need first the application of dissolving, reductive, mentally restorative, therapeutic aid before the Biblical message of forgiveness can be heard and believed. The abnormal forms of guilt feeling must be eliminated before the genuine experience of guilt can be recognized and removed."⁹

Not only are we able to offer release from guilt, but the Holy Spirit is able to give strength to overcome the difficulty in daily experience. This is a distinct advantage over the approach of psychotherapy which must depend entirely upon the strength of the individual which is often found to be woefully lacking.

We would all agree that the approach of psychoanalysis has many shortcomings. I hope that you agree, however, that there are some benefits that we can learn from it. Whatever attitude we take toward it we should recognize that we have the answers to the needs of the heart that no other approach has to offer. It is too often the sad truth that the evangelical in the past has so detached himself from the needs of the people that few would seek his advice. It is my conviction that we must dedicate ourselves to the task of so understanding the basic needs of our people and demonstrate such a willingness to help, that they will come to us for the help that is often so desperately needed.

John Sutherland Bonnell describes our task well when he maintains:

"The pastor-counselor will remember that above all else he is a Christian minister. His chief reliance, therefore, is not on the principles of psychology and psychiatry but on the spiritual power released through faith in God. His ministry to individuals will, therefore, go beyond that of professional therapists who limit themselves to the sciences of the mind. What the pastor-counselor offers is not merely another form of psychotherapy directed to the regulation of feelings and emotions. It is a therapy to the spirit, and because of the interrelationship which exists among these three, it exerts a powerful influence also upon mind and body.

"The task of one engaged in spiritual counselling is not merely the psychoanalytic goal of restoring someone to his optimum and to his normal function in society. The pastor-counselor not only seeks to break the habit patterns which enslave the consultant and make his life a misery but, what is more important, endeavors to reconcile him, spirit, mind, and body, to God."¹⁰

DOCUMENTATION

1. Anton Bolsen, The Exploration of the Inner World (New York: Willet Clark and Company, 1936), p. 36.
2. Ibid., p. 141.
3. Ibid., pp. 36-37.
4. Ibid., p. 139.
5. Paul E. Johnson, The Psychology of Religion (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1945), p. 92.
6. H. J. Eysenck, "What's the Truth about Psychoanalysis?," Reader's Digest, LXXVI (January, 1960), pp. 39-41.
7. Henry Guntrip, "Psychotherapy and Religion: The Constructive use of Inner Conflict," Pastoral Psychology, VIII (May, 1957), pp. 31-32.
8. Adolph Koberle, "The Problem of Guilt," Pastoral Psychology, VIII, (December, 1957), pp. 34-35.
9. Ibid., p. 39.
10. John Sutherland Bonnell, Psychology for Pastor and People (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), pp. 189-90.