

Critical Issues Commentary

A monthly commentary on Biblical concerns that impact you

Biblical Counseling Part 2 Getting to the Root of the Problem

written by Bob DeWaay

“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.” (2Timothy 3:16,17)

Last month we explored some shortcomings of modern psychology's approach to healing of the soul. I suggested that Biblical counseling, based on the prescription of 2Timothy 3:16,17 was a better alternative for Christian people. This month I will explain in more detail the Biblical perspective on human nature, and the necessary foundations for healing of the inner person.

The Root Problem

According to the Scripture, human beings are created in the image of God, but fallen (see CIC Vol. 1 Issue 7, Oct. 1992). This explains two observable phenomena: man doing good and man doing evil. Concerning the problems that exist, the most profound influence on every person is **sin**. **Romans 3:23** is often quoted about this, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” This shows God's purpose, “glory,” and the present condition, “fallen.” In whatever way people deny or ignore God's purpose, they still cannot escape the fact that something is terribly wrong.

We can tell ourselves that our guilt feelings are merely neuroses, that we are victims of circumstances created by others, and that we are in no way responsible for our own attitudes or actions; but we cannot totally rid ourselves of the stubborn sense that things are not right with our own souls. God calls the root

problem of all people “**sin**.”

A problem with modern psychological counseling is that it does not recognize “sin” as a valid category. In the New Testament, “sin” means “to miss the mark or standard.” If man is evolved and determined by natural processes and not created in the image of God, then he has no God-given purpose and there is no God-given standard of judgment. In such a case, there is no standard against which to judge “normalcy.” This lack of a God-given standard of what is proper and right for human beings is the context in which nearly every modern psychological theory has been proposed. In this relativistic environment, homosexuality has gone from being considered a disorder to being normal in terms of modern psychotherapy in just the last twenty years. With no God-given standard, the sampling of a cross-section of fallen humanity must suffice for determining normalcy. As society degenerates because of the lack of Biblical restraint, what was previously considered aberrational behavior is often now deemed “normal,” simply because more people are doing it.

Determinism

Starting from this faulty premise (no creation in God's image, no God-given purpose, and no sin) inevitably leads to wrong conclusions. The wrong conclusions of modern psychology are major and many. They are so diverse as to resist categorization. Many are deterministic: unconscious-psychic determinism, bio-chemical determinism, social determinism, economic determinism, parental determinism, in utero determinism and with the New Age we even have karmic determinism (we are determined by things from previous lives). Determinism (that all that we are and do is determined by previous causes outside ourselves) is doubtless the most dehumanizing of all philosophies, but seems never to lack adherents. It is appealing because

it seems to remove guilt and moral responsibility, but it does so at the high price of personal freedom and dignity.

Herbert Schlossberg offers some pertinent warnings about determinism in Idols For Destruction. “Marxism, behaviorism, evolutionism, astrology, and all the other environmentalisms insist that people do things only because external events compel them to do so. The real meaning of Erich Fromm's title *Escape from Freedom* is the flight from moral behavior. This fallacy is now part of the world view of educated people everywhere.”¹ A major logical flaw of determinism is that those who propose it can deliver us from it. If we are determined by various outside forces then the psychotherapist is too. How did the therapist get free from determinism in order to deliver us? Schlossberg discusses this irrationality regarding a controller who proposes to rescue us, “If he is free, then determinism cannot be true. If he is determined, then there is no point in talking about the rationality or wisdom of the plan; since its contents and its outcome are both inevitable, we can only discuss cause and effect.”² If we are morally responsible and not determined by our environment, then repentance and obedience make sense. This is what Biblical counseling is all about.

The Biblical doctrine of sin says that our problem is a relational one, we are alienated from God. An excellent, descriptive word about the sinful nature of humanity is “**autonomy**.” This word describes the relational problem in a way that also gets to the heart of the **motivational** problem. We are by nature dependent, created beings who are seeking to be independent self-ruling ones. We are trying to be little “gods.” This began with Adam and Eve yielding to Satan's lie, “you shall be like God” (see **Genesis 3:4,5**). Rebellion against God is an attempt to be self-ruling, or to use modern, psychological terminology, “self-actualizing.” We are seeking to find self-fulfillment in this life without a submissive relationship to Jesus Christ as Lord and Creator. Selfishness is an integral part of fallen human nature. The best summary of the law of God is “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your

strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27, quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 & Leviticus 19:18). Biblical love is self-less, “We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (1John 3:16 see also John 3:16).

The Biblical doctrine of sin is not deterministic in the sense that many psychological theories are. The Bible teaches that each of us is responsible for our actions and attitudes, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2Corinthians 5:10). We are born alienated from God and unable to save ourselves. This does not negate our personal responsibility. Sin is both a state (independence from God) and an action (rebellion against God).

The condition “sin” is not deterministic of which sins we do, or to what degree. It determines that we need Christ for salvation but does not determine that we must be a mass murderer, rapist, drunkard, or thief. We are completely responsible for each choice we make and cannot legitimately blame God, “On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it?” (Romans 9:20). James says, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death” (James 1:13-15).

Shifting the Blame

Blaming God and others was Adam's first response to his own guilt, “And the man said, ‘The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate’” (Genesis 3:12). The sinful nature of man is such that any theory that shifts the blame for our own obvious failings will find some popularity. A theory that could simultaneously blame others for our bad attitudes and

behaviors and take personal credit for whatever good we do would be ideal, if popularity is a standard for judging theories. Much modern counseling does just that. “You are a basically good person with much human potential, but society, parents, other negative influences in the environment have not allowed you to express you own goodness to its fullest extent,” summarizes much that is said in popular self-help therapies. Christianity says, “you are a wretched sinner who continually and purposely rebels against God's law, but you can be saved through faith in Christ, the crucified and resurrected Messiah.”

Biblical counsel, based as it is on reproof, correction, and training in righteousness will never achieve the popularity of the many, blame-shifting psychological theories. Biblical counsel, however, does have one major advantage: “**it is based on the truth.**” Man is not basically good in spite of what the psychologists tell us. Just a couple of weeks ago a TV documentary (Prime Time Live) showed secretly filmed footage of some Junior High classes in a public school. It showed hopelessly frustrated teachers futilely trying to get students to sit down and listen.

The class rooms and hallways were completely out of control, ruled by rebellious students with no respect for authority nor apparent desire to learn. The principal of the school said he planned to resign, deeming the situation hopeless. This was not a ghetto school, it was in Colorado.

I was shocked to see how far things have come. The fruits of two decades of lies in education and counseling are now becoming ripe. We have trained a generation of children under the lie that man is essentially good, and that if left to himself in a nice environment, he will do the right thing. Punitive justice, parental and adult educational authority, the need for strict discipline, and all other “traditional” approaches gave way to the new plan of building self-esteem and letting children do their own thing. Proverbs says, “Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; The rod of discipline will remove it far from him” (Proverbs

22:15). Much modern psychology says that goodness is bound in the heart of the child and lack of discipline, punishment and parental authority will bring it out. Many homes and schools are out of control. The innate goodness we were promised turned out to be vicious selfishness that destroys everything around it.

Another troubling thing is the idea that only trained professionals can be trusted to resolve the situation that was graphically shown on the documentary. This approach **will not work** because so many trained professionals have believed **the lie**. They believe that man is basically good and ought therefore to love himself and do what seems best in his own mind. They believe that there is no law of God to be obeyed, no need for repentance, no sin, and no judgment of God to avoid. The Devil said, “you shall not surely die, you shall be like God,” and most of modern psychology believes it. Eric Fromm even wrote a book with this lie as the title. We have an educational system based on the lie that man is innately good

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and it is coming apart at the seams.

When we adopt one of the over 250 different psychological theories, we are adopting a theory about the human soul that is far less adequate than the truth revealed in Scripture. Often we adopt these theories because we want to be delivered from the **feelings** of guilt but not from the sin that causes the guilt. Today, before I started working on this article, someone told me that she joined a “Unity” church because it told her that things were the way she wanted them to be - that everyone is going to heaven and there really is no evil, just the illusion of evil in peoples mind's. My response was, “yes that sounds good, but it is not true. God is not the universe, evil is real although limited and to be ultimately overcome by God's intervention.” This is true on the personal level also. We need God's supernatural intervention through Christ to deliver us from evil, especially

the evil in our own hearts.

God Knows Man

One reason that curing the maladies of the human soul has proven so difficult, is that man is so complex spiritually, mentally and emotionally that the depths of his problems are not knowable to himself. **Jeremiah 17:9** says, “The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it?” The term psychology comes from the Greek words *psuchē* & *logos*, and means, “the study of the soul.” The soul of man is not made up of atoms and molecules, but is spiritual in nature. As such, it is impossible to observe in the type of controlled environment that science needs to ascertain cause and effect. The complexities are so great and the variables so many, that the possible causes of any given condition (as seen only superficially through testimony and observable behavior) defy verification or falsification with reasonable probability. The very existence of the soul that is the object of study is difficult to prove using available scientific methods.

Another problem is that human beings who are doing the observing are part of the problem. Fallen men seeking to understand fallen man are subject to prejudice, blindness and moral corruption that influence their objectivity. Theories which are flattering to humans (such as ones that shift the blame for one's bad behavior) are naturally more attractive than ones that are not. Clearly, much of the material of the so-called “social sciences” spills out of the realm of scientific inquiry and into the realms of philosophy and religion. Witness the growing popularity of New Age theories and therapies that ride with the tide of New Age religion. Serious professionals are using crystals and speaking of psychic energy fields.

Jesus knows what is in man, **and it is not good!** “But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man” (**John 2:24,25**). He is our Creator, and knows us from the inside out. He gave the following assessment of the human heart: “But the things that pro-

ceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders” (**Matthew 15:18,19**). Not only does He know us, He is able to change us! Jesus was not and is not subject to the problem He came to resolve.

Jesus lived a sinless life, “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need” (**Hebrews 4:15,16**). He is able to heal the soul and change the darkness within man.

Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, And recovery of sight to the blind, To set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord” (**Luke 4:18,19**). He claimed to fulfill this messianic prophecy. The favorable day of the Lord is a reference to Jubilee, in which all who have come into bondage are set free and given a new start. The healing of soul that Jesus brings is truly liberating. It is not dependent on the past because Jesus died to wash away all of our sins. We are no longer slaves of the past. **Hebrews 9:14**, “how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”

Jesus knows the fallen heart of man and died to deliver us from the bondage to sin that darkened and tormented our souls. He promises to set the captives free. Can we not trust Him to help us with the psychological and emotional traumas and afflictions that are so much a part of life in this fallen world? I do not believe it is flippant, uncaring, or naive to say these things. Christians have found this promised help in horrible and distressing situations for the entirety of church history. Part of finding the Biblical counsel we need is having confidence that God who inspired the Bible knows our problems and has the means to re-

solve them as best as they will be this side of the resurrection.

God Has Spoken

God's knowledge of the maladies of the human soul has been partially given to us in Scripture. The Bible is not exhaustive truth about God or about man, since it is limited by the finiteness of human language and human ability to comprehend. What the Bible does say concerning man and his problems is true and pertinent. God's testimony about the human soul is the most we will confidently know about this matter until the return of Christ. It is safe to say that scientific investigation will neither refute or significantly embellish what God has said about the spiritual condition of man. Science can collaborate that there is a serious problem and it can categorize observable behavior patterns that manifest the problem. Modern psychology is a mixture of science, religion, and philosophy. It cannot and does not have the solution or a reasonable alternative (to the Biblical one) explanation for the pathological condition of the soul. Human beings are seriously flawed and continue to have problems in both behavior and attitude.

Yet, for example, prominent evangelical leaders teach that teen-age, Christian, young people get into pre-marital sex because of “low self-esteem.” This is in turn caused by parents and society that do not give them enough positive, psychic boosts to keep them feeling good about themselves. They say this although the public schools are promoting the self-esteem theory from kindergarten on, and most churches are doing the same. Books are available in the Christian bookstore to teach parents how to give their children self-esteem. Now teens who give into the youthful lust from which Paul warned us to flee, can and do blame their parents and teachers for not making them feel good enough about themselves. At least when the problem was Biblically defined one had the recourse of seeking a Biblical solution, such as the one David describes in **Psalms 51**.

Failing to believe the Biblical assessment of the problem does lead to missing the Biblical solution. In the above exam-

ple, it is said that pre-marital sex **causes** low self-esteem. Having not been given proper love and esteem for “self” by parents, peers, and teachers, the poor, victimized young person “looks for love in all the wrong places” as the song goes. Having done so, the resultant lowered sense of self-worth creates the need for more of this sort of love that supposedly leads to more promiscuous sex. The cycle thus created is hopeless if one accepts the deterministic premise that low-self esteem was the cause. If, however, we believe the Scripture that sinful lust was the cause and flee into the loving arms of our Redeemer for grace and mercy, there is hope. One can admit with David that he sinned against God and cry out for forgiveness and cleansing.

Practical Truth

Biblical counsel is necessary because God has spoken the truth to and about man in His Word. This truth is both practical and applicable. A frustrating lie that seems commonly believed is that theology is not pertinent to real human problems. It is to say that the truth God has revealed about Himself and His relationship to us is nice in its proper place but has no significance or application to the problems that really matter to people. It may be true that not all persons trained in theology are equally skilled in communicating and applying revealed truth to those to whom they minister. It is not true, however, that there **is** no workable application. If there is not, then **2Timothy 3:16,17** is a blatant lie!

The Bible was inspired by the Holy Spirit and written through human agency to human beings. God did not give His Word to humanity to cause us to, like the Athenian philosophers who “used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new” (**Acts 17:21**), engage in fruitless speculation about matters of no significance to the issues of life. He gave His word to tell us the truth and the truth **sets us free!** The Jewish people to whom the Scripture was given were practical, earthy, passionate, and intelligent people who cared about how life ought to be lived. In this context Jesus came, called disciples and imparted to them the “words of eternal life” as Peter called them in **John 6:68**. To hear

Christians say that they would rather have psychological seminars in the church than the exposition of Scripture because psychology is more applicable to their needs is most distressing. It shows how poorly we understand the testimony of God in Scripture.

What Has God Told Us to Do?

One “problem” with Biblical counsel is that it requires faith and obedience. Paul stated about Christ, “through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, for His name’s sake” (**Romans 1:5**). Not everyone is motivated to obey God. The offense of Biblical Christianity is the cross. A crucified Messiah who died a substitutionary death says that we are not just a little mal-adjusted, we are desperately wicked and deserving punishment. Justification by faith and the forgiveness of sins puts us into a renewed relationship with our Creator. It also carries with it the notion of repentance. We do not come to God because we intend to stay the same, we come needing change. We turn to God acknowledging the need to start doing things **His** way rather than **our** way.

Biblical counsel has two key ingredients: **receiving and giving forgiveness**. I am not saying that there are no victims. I am saying that there are no sinlessly, **innocent** victims, except Jesus who died for our sins. We have our own guilt that needs the remedy of the blood of Jesus Christ, shed once for all for the remission of sins. Because we received forgiveness, He commands us to **give** forgiveness to those who have wronged us, no matter how badly. Whatever debt others have to us, it is less than the one we had to God. **Matthew 18:21-35** and other passages show this. The two causes of our problems, what we did and what was done to us, have the Biblical remedy of forgiveness.

Much secular counsel, which starts out by using deterministic, psychological theories to shift the blame for our own behavior, defines us as only victims and not sinners. One does not repent of having been determined by outside forces. One need not obey God if propped up by enough excuses for not doing so. The

problem is our inability to change reality. We can tell ourselves anything we want to believe; but we cannot change the consequences. We live in the world God created, not the world of our own imaginations. Because of this, **obeying God always gets the best results - long term**. Have you ever met anyone who regretted having **not** cheated on his wife, stolen, gotten into drugs, or committed murder?

God knows man and knows what is best for us. God has revealed these things in His word. Biblical counsel is a matter of finding pertinent Scriptural truths and applying them to the real situations of life. By God’s grace and the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, the Christian who obeys the wisdom of God revealed in Scripture is following the best counsel anyone will ever receive! If we really believed this, things would be far different in evangelical Christendom.

Written by Bob DeWaay, Twin City Fellowship, P.O. Box 8068, Minneapolis, MN 55408; © 1992.

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End Notes

1. Herbert Schlossberg, [Idols For Destruction](#), (Nelson, 1983), p. 266.
2. *ibid.* p. 150.

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