

# The Integration of Psychology and Christian Faith

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Some years ago, a new counsellee stepped into my office in order to seek my help with a specific problem. It is my custom, whenever I commence work with a new counsellee, after having taken down some personal details and certainly before ascertaining the presenting problem, to explain five factors concerning myself and the nature of my work so as to establish rapport and put the counsellee at ease. One of the factors which I explain is that I approach my work as a therapist from an integrative perspective, viz. the integration of psychology and Christian faith. I do this so that the counsellee may make an informed decision as to whether or not to work with me. Certainly, on the hereinbefore-mentioned occasion, the counsellee took great offence on my integrative perspective and devoted some considerable time to chastising me on the evil of psychology and the therefore impoverished nature of my Christian faith in making any reference to or use of the discipline of psychology. I was left in no doubt that in coming to me the counsellee had anticipated someone who would have shunned psychology and espoused only Christian faith as contained within the Bible.

The counsellee had, inadvertently, highlighted a real problem; viz. what, if any, is the relationship between Christianity and psychology? Dr Crabb refers to the problem as:

*The thorny, hotly debated, and far from resolved problem of integrating Christianity and psychology. (1)*

## 2. THE REAL PROBLEM

The question of integration is a matter to which every Christian counsellor will need to address him/herself. After all, if one is going to offer Christian counsel, is one permitted to draw from or be guided by secular psychological theory and procedures? The actual problem of integration is not that difficult to describe and Dr Crabb summed it up well in these words:

*There is a body of revealed truth in propositional form to which all evangelicals are committed as the inerrant, inspired Word of God. There is another vast literature which represents the diverse, sometimes contradictory, theories and observations which we can call simply secular psychology. (2)*

The Christian counsellor, then, is confronted on the one hand by the sixty six books of Holy Scripture and on the other hand by a ground-swell of books on psychology.

As both are read, one soon discovers that neither source is benign or neutral; in fact both have definite presuppositions! Just here lays the great juxtaposition, for in placing them side by side we discover that the presuppositions contained within both sources are, at times, radically opposed one to another. The central presupposition of Scripture is that Christianity is Christ - the Creator, Controller and Consummator of all things as revealed in the Bible - and everything revolves around Him and His holiness. The central presupposition of secular psychology is the doctrine of humanism, a belief which insists that man is the highest and central point in history and everything revolves around him and his happiness.

What is of paramount importance to note here is that the central problem of the integration of psychology and Christianity is not the discipline of psychology itself. As a discipline per se, it is of great help and this paper must not be seen as a cavalier dismissal of the discipline of psychology. The problem of integration is the problem of presupposition and to what extent the presuppositions of psychology and Christianity may be seen as compatible.

## 3. APPROACHES TO INTEGRATION

Given that the real problem is the matter of presupposition, one may observe, broadly speaking, three distinct approaches to integration inasmuch as some Christians:

- Exclude psychology cavalierly;
- Embrace psychology unquestioningly; or
- Engage psychology Christianly.

It will be helpful to expand briefly and illustrate succinctly upon these three approaches.

### 3.1 EXCLUDE PSYCHOLOGY CAVALIERLY

In his very helpful book entitled "Christian Counselling," Dr Collins points out that any student undertaking a course in psychology, often encounters a host of seemingly unimportant topics. Moreover, even Seminary level courses, designed to equip in pastoral counselling, whilst more people centred and relevant, frequently cause the student to be lost in a maze of theories and techniques not always useful when confronted with a confused, hurting human being. With these factors as a background, Dr Collins states that:

*This has led some writers to reject psychology, including the field of counselling, and to conclude*

*that a Bible is all that a Christian people-helper needs to assist others. Jay Adams, for example, argues that psychiatrists (and presumably psychologists) have usurped the work of preachers, and are in the dangerous occupation of trying to change the people's behaviour and values in an ungodly manner. Writing to pastors, Adams maintains that "by studying the Word of God carefully and observing how the biblical principles describe the people you counsel ... you can gain all the information and experience that you need to become a competent, confident Christian counsellor without a study of psychology." (3)*

### 3.2 EMBRACE PSYCHOLOGY UNQUESTIONINGLY

In contrast to the above stated exclusion and indicative of having swung the pendulum to the other side, there are those who would embrace psychology unquestioningly. Dr Clinebell, for example, bubbles with enthusiasm when he says:

*Never before have we had such rich resources as are provided by the contemporary renaissance in pastoral care and counselling, the renewal movement in the churches, the sparkling new insights from the sciences of man, and the new techniques from the psychotherapeutic disciplines. As these converge in the pastoral counselling ministry, a broad stream of healing will be released through the churches. (4)*

### 3.3 ENGAGE PSYCHOLOGY CHRISTIANLY

This third view which, incidentally, is my own view, states that psychology as a discipline is very helpful indeed and may be used by a Christian counsellor to assist in understanding human functioning but always beneath the control and authority of Scripture.

For example, Dr Collins, a man whose ministry and books I admire very much, makes the observation that:

*In medicine, teaching and other "people-centred" helping fields, mankind has been permitted to learn much about God's creation through science and academic study. Why, then, should psychology be singled out as the one field that has nothing to contribute to the work of the counsellor? ... In the following chapters, the writings of social scientists are frequently cited on the assumption that all truth comes from God, including truth about the people whom God created. He has revealed this truth through the Bible, God's written Word to*

*mankind, but He also has permitted us to discover truth through experience and through the methods of scientific investigation. Discovered truth must always be consistent with, and tested against, the norms of revealed Biblical truth. But we limit our counselling effectiveness when we pretend that the discoveries of psychology have nothing to contribute to the understanding and solution of problems. (5)*

Dr Crabb, whose books have been the most influential in my own thinking, speaks of integration as "Spoiling the Egyptians" and purports that:

*There is a fourth approach to integration which in my mind strikes a needed balance between the unintended carelessness of Tossed Salad and the overreaction of Nothing Buttery. ... The model I am proposing might be labelled Spoiling the Egyptians. When Moses led the children of Israel out of Egyptian bondage, he took freely of the goods of the Egyptians to sustain God's people on their journey to the promised land. (6)*

In similar vein Drs Meier, Minirth, Wichern and Ratcliff observe that:

*As we examine the relationship between psychology and Christianity, it may help to consider ... two sources of revelation (are) generally identified by theologians: special revelation [the Bible] and general revelation [God's creation - nature/humanity]. ...*

*These two sources of information constitute data bases of potential information to be considered: the data of the Bible and the data of nature/humanity. While to Bible has the advantage of being inspired and inerrant, nature/humanity has the disadvantage of being fallen and imperfect. (7)*

## 4. WHAT MAKES COUNSELLING CHRISTIAN?

It should be obvious by now that I favour the integration of psychology and Christian faith but does that make me a Christian counsellor or, to put it another way, what makes counselling Christian? Counselling is not Christian just because there is an emphasis on the spiritual. Such a view denies the whole person who, in keeping with 1 Thessalonians 5v23, consists of spirit, soul and body. For example, I am often confronted by people who struggle with deep depression but who have been told that they do not need antidepressant medication, only faith in God's power to heal. Such counsel is definitely not Christian and, in my professional opinion, is tantamount





to spiritual abuse. Note that I did not say that a belief in God's power to heal is not Christian, but the underlying assumption that the spiritual is the only consideration. Ours is a fractured world and, in Dr Crabb's words, we witness a fourfold separation:

***First, man is separated from God - he has spiritual problems. Second, he is separated from his fellows - he has social/interpersonal problems. Third, he is separated from nature - he has ecological and physical problems. Fourth, he is separated from himself - he has psychological problems. (8)***

Moreover, counsel is not Christian because it believes that God can not or does not reveal truth outside of special revelation.

*"Our great challenge, then, as Christian counsellors, is the ability to think in a Christian way..."*

That would make Christians out to be the only people who can know truth and, accordingly, create a false antagonism between special revelation and general revelation. It was Dr Guinness who made the astute observation that:

***No one in the fallen world - believer or unbeliever - has the capacity to hold God's truth in its entirety. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, the unbeliever "holds the truth in unrighteousness." If no unbeliever is totally wrong or completely evil - because the truth is inextinguishable - no believer has the full truth by the scruff of the neck. (9)***

Because depression, for example, has its roots in physiological, psychological and spiritual components, as a Christian counsellor I can thank God that He has given medical science the capacity to restore neuro-chemical imbalances by means of medication, psychological research the capacity to understand how the mind really functions and spiritual weapons, as contained in His Word, to deal with the problems uncovered psychologically which are, from a spiritual perspective, the cause of and the means of sustaining the problem.

Christian counselling, then, and this is the most important point to grasp in this paper, is Christian when we can think about the whole person, the data at hand and the

presenting problem brought to us, in a Christian way.

The words of Scripture are really most profound when it states that:

***For as he thinks in his heart, so is he. (10)***

Christian counselling is Christian to the degree that the counsellor is able to think in a Christian way not because he has a set of well defined "Christian principles" at call. It was Dr Crabb who said that a Christian counsellor:

***Needs to be able to "think Biblically." (11)***

I believe that here lies not only our greatest challenge but also our greatest problem. Our greatest challenge, because, in the words of Dr Schaeffer:

***People are unique in the inner life of the mind - what they are in their thought-world determines how they act. ... People have presuppositions, and they will live more consistently on the basis of these presuppositions than even they themselves may realise. By presuppositions we mean the basic way an individual looks at life, his basic world-view, the grid through which he sees the world. Presuppositions rest upon that which a person considers to be the truth of what exists. People's presuppositions lay a grid for all they bring forth into the external world. Their presuppositions also provide the basis for their values and therefore the basis for their decisions. (12)***

Our great challenge, then, as Christian counsellors, is the ability to think in a Christian way about the data which comes our way but therein lies also, I believe, our greatest problem because so often our Christian thinking does not cover all of life but only portions and components thereof. Harry Blamires laments the fact that:

***As a thinking being, the modern Christian has succumbed to secularization. He accepts religion - its morality, its worship, its spiritual culture; but he rejects the religious view of life, the view which sets all earthly issues within the context of the eternal, the view which relates all human problems - social, political, cultural - to the doctrinal foundation of the Christian faith. (13)***

## 5. CONCLUSION

In light of all that which I have stated above, it would seem axiomatic, then, that if, as a Christian counsellor, I am going to offer a truly Christian therapy, it behoves me to deal with the matter of integration by learning

to think Christianly about all the data which I have at hand. This enables me to freely use the truth from God as contained within general revelation (including the discipline of psychology) when I utilise it with a mind-set or a grid which keeps Special revelation, viz. God's Word the Bible, as paramount.

In practical terms, this means three things:

First, I have to ensure that I maintain a Christian mind-set and world-view which, according to Dr Crabb, would require at least the following four qualifications for anyone wanting to practice integration and which I have abridged hereunder:

- All psychology must be under the authority of Scripture which, being truth (John 17v17), becomes the measuring stick to determine all truth.
- All Scripture must be accepted as inspired (2 Timothy 3v16), inerrant (John 10v35) and infallible (John 17v17), in propositional form.
- Scripture must at all times control one's thinking so that, where psychological presuppositions do not agree with Scripture, Scripture has priority in one's conclusions.
- One must be thoroughly and daily saturated in Scripture before attempting to "spoil the Egyptians" in terms of integration. (14)

Second, I would keep in mind, in the words of Dr Ellens, that there are at least eight theological themes which crucially shape a Christian personality theory and counselling or psychotherapy as abridged hereunder:

- God's disposition of unmerited grace toward mankind.
- Man's alienation from God through the fall.
- Human personhood is rooted in the fact that people are created in the image of God.
- The doctrine of man's sinful rebellion against God and its consequences.
- The principles of discipline and discipleship.
- The themes of the suffering servant and the wounded healer as a way to interpret life.
- The theme of celebrating the blessings God has brought into life.
- The present mortality of human life faced in the light of God's future intentions. (15)

Third, in the wise words of Dr Collins, I need to ensure that I receive supervision from a supervisor who is likewise committed to a Christian-world view in relation to integration:

***How, then, do we wade through the quagmire of techniques, theories, and technical terms to***

***find the insights which truly are helpful? The answer involves our finding a guide - some person or persons who are committed followers of Jesus Christ, familiar with the psychological and counselling literature, trained in counselling and in research methods (so that the scientific accuracy of psychologists' conclusions can be evaluated), and effective as counsellors. Of crucial importance is that the guides must be committed to the inspiration and authority of the Bible, both as the standard against which all psychology must be tested and as the written Word of God with which all valid counselling must agree. (16)***

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