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The Myth of Integration

“They that come to Christ, get life.... They get a life that is worth the having. We think much of the natural life, but this life will avail us when the other is gone.”¹

Richard Cameron, a Scottish Covenanter pastor, preached these words the week before he was martyred for his faith. He is part of the “cloud of witnesses” who proceeded beautifully in their sanctification without the benefits of modern psychology. What has brought us to the pace where we Christians feel we cannot deal with our problems without the help of popular psychology? Do we realize how far from a truly Biblical perspective of man we have wandered?

Harry Blamires in the 1960s noted a shift from Biblical to secular thinking. He wrote that Christians were able to think like Christians in matters of personal morality and worship, but he lamented the inability of most Christians to think Christianly about political, social, and cultural issues. “We have prayed and worshipped Christianly,” Blamires said. “Then we have gone back to talk politics with the politician, social welfare with the trade unionist, and we have emptied our brains of Christian vocabulary, Christian concepts, in advance, just to make sure that we should get fully in touch... We have trained, even disciplined ourselves, to think secularly about secular things.”²

The progressive loss of the Christian consciousness has brought us deeper into relativism and irrationalism (just note the upsurge and proliferation of occult and New Age philosophies and practices). Nowhere is the loss of a Christian consciousness more apparent than in the field of psychology. One reason is that most Christian psychologists receive an entirely secular training and are ignorant of the Scriptures. They seldom question the underlying worldview of the field in which they were trained. Instead, they take an essentially secular approach and sprinkle a few Christian insights on top. The result: Secular insights that sound pious, but are dangerous and misleading.

When Christian counselors try to integrate Biblical principles with modern psychology, they run into trouble. Many end up redefining Biblical terms to bring them into harmony with psychology. For instance, Gary Sweeten redefines the theological term *sanctification* to mean

¹ Richard Cameron, quoted in John Stone, *Sermons Delivered in Times of Persecution in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Hunter and Co., 1880), p. 384.

² Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (London: SPCK, 1963), pp. 4, 16, 38-39, 41, 45, 190-191.

“Mortifying the flesh and developing our *new* (emphasis his) self or our personal self.”³ Sanctification (theological) becomes the “development of our personal selves” (psychological).

Meier and Minirth equate the *unconscious* and the *heart*. They believe that Jeremiah 17:9 is the key to Christian psychiatry. However, they misunderstand what Jeremiah means when he says, “The heart is more deceitful than all else, and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” Minirth and Meier write, “The prophet Jeremiah is saying that we humans cannot fathom or comprehend how desperately sinful and deceitful our heart is – our unconscious motives, conflicts, drives, emotions, and thoughts.”⁴ By redefining heart, Minirth and Meier open up the door to the use of Freud’s system of defense mechanisms.

Gary Sweeten also uses the unbiblical concept of the unconscious. He focuses on the unconscious of a believer as the seat of the “residue” (whatever that is) of our Adamic nature and the location of our own rebellion, guilt, and shame. Sweeten’s unconscious has more in common with Freud’s unconscious (with its drives and neuroses) than it does with the Biblical concept of the heart. The Bible teaches that “out of the heart flows...” and then numerous behaviors such as murder and fornication are enumerated (Matthew 15:19). At conversion, God gives a person a new heart, a heart of flesh, and not of stone (Ezekiel 11:19, 36:26; 2 Timothy 2:22). He is born again, regenerated (John 3:3). At the deepest level of his being, he is a new person (2 Corinthians 5:17).

David Seamands relabels sin “difficulties” when he writes about “various kinds of sexual difficulties, from incest to prostitution.”⁵ Gary Collins expresses the attitude of many Christian psychologists when he writes, “Even love, hope, compassion, forgiving, caring, kindness, confrontation and a host of other concepts are shared by theologians and psychologists.”⁶ Collins forgets that the psychologists’ definitions of these concepts are vastly different from the Biblical definitions. As so often happens with such “integration” of the Scriptures with human wisdom, the wisdom of “Nature” predominates; in time Nature will, in Francis Schaeffer’s pregnant expression, “eat up grace.”

By borrowing theological terms, the Christian psychologists have blurred the irreconcilable distinctions between the theories of Freud et al., and the teachings of the Bible. 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

³ Gary Sweeten, *The Theology of a Caring, Equipping Community* (Cincinnati, OH: Christian Information Center, 1989), p. 36.

⁴ Paul Meier and Frank Minirth, *Happiness Is a Choice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 97.

⁵ David Seamands, *Healing for Damaged Emotions* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1988), p. 19.

⁶ Gary Collins, *Can You Trust Psychology?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 129.

substitution of secular psychology for the Word of God. Let's now take a look at a few of the areas where the substitution has occurred.

Change

What does it mean to genuinely change? Does it involve journeying back into the womb to relive your birth experience? Resolving an Oedipus complex? Discovering a functional mother archetype? Obviously, Christians and Freudians would sharply disagree on the nature of behavioral change, wouldn't they? Maybe not. Sadly, the distinction in today's practice is not as clear as one would hope, and once again we see the danger of "Christianizing" and incorporating secular concepts into what is essentially evangelical and well-meaning counsel.

Biblical counsel is based on the supposition that a Biblical standard exists for genuine change, but what is that Biblical standard? Even within the context of contemporary Christianity, there is confusion regarding the place, purpose, and direction of Biblical change.

In his immensely popular book *Inside Out*, Larry Crabb presents a comprehensive picture of change. He says, "Change as our Lord describes it involves more than cleaning up our visible acts. He intends us to do more than sweep the streets; He wants us to climb down into the sewers and do something about the filth beneath the concrete. He directs us to enter the dark regions of our soul to find light."⁷

Is this what it means to change? Are we really supposed to "climb down into the sewers" of our lives in order to clean "the filth" beneath the surface? This is a terribly important question, because people everywhere, even those in the church, are desperately searching for ways out of the boredom, anxiety, loneliness, meaninglessness, and despair of their lives. Often the answers in the evangelical community have been cheap clichés with no Biblical substance: "Just keep praising the Lord"; "Rebuke your anxiety"; "Visualize yourself as happy"; "Just keep praying."

Crabb, to his credit, does none of the above in his attempts to take the misery seriously. But he does not provide a Biblical answer. Instead, he takes the concept of total depravity (he says, for example, "Our souls are so thoroughly stained with self-reliance...") and gently brushes on top of it a Christ-colored coating of psychoanalysis.

Crabb supports his proposal for sewer-cleaning with this quote from Matthew's Gospel: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and

⁷ Larry Crabb, *Inside Out* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1988), p. 33.

dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean” (Matthew 23:25,26 NIV).

Was Jesus’ condemnation of the Pharisees intended to serve as a model for deep digging within? No. When Jesus calls the Pharisees to “clean the inside of the cup,” He is not concerned with the Pharisees taking a prolonged inner journey. His concern is simply that they clean up their less visible acts – greed and self-indulgence. These are inner attitudes that outwardly manifest themselves in actions. These men were not commanded to look deeply within. Rather, they were told to live righteously in the realm of their actions *and* their thoughts.

Jesus did not make too fine a distinction between thoughts and actions. He said simply that “from vile thoughts flow vile actions.” They are intimately linked. Real change will not be accomplished from an inner search, except as it is necessary to identify unrecognized or unrepented thoughts or attitudes that may be impelling us to evil actions.

What will we find in a prolonged inner search? A desperately sick and deceitful heart, which God alone can search (Jeremiah 17:9,10). Rather than calling us inward, the Bible is calling us away from self. The idea that a deeper analysis will bring healing is fallacious. Deeper analysis will bring deeper (ungodly) introspection and deeper self-absorption, both of which are to be deplored.

Scripture never suggest that the path to sanctification lies in therapeutically probing the “deep heart,” whatever that is. The Biblical path to sanctification lies in obedience, encouraged by hope, guided by faith, motivated by love. Jesus says simply, “If you love Me, keep My commandments.”

Self-Esteem – The Right of Every Christian?

Sin has always been the starting point in dealing with human problems from a Christian perspective. Yet for many contemporary Christian counselors, the concept of sin is considered dangerous and harmful. Robert Schuller writes, “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, than the often crude, uncouth, and unchristian strategy of attempting to make people aware of their lost and sinful condition.”⁸ This is an amazing statement to come from one who parades across the television screen with God’s Holy Scriptures tucked neatly under his arm. Indeed, *sin* has become an ugly

⁸ Robert Schuller, *Self-Esteem, the New Reformation* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), pp. 14-15.

word. The reality which necessitated the death of Christ is now “destructive” to human personality.

Robert Schuller’s “Hour of Power” is watched and supported weekly by millions, and why shouldn’t it be? His message scratches right where our sinful natures itch. “Self-esteem” is a difficult catch-phrase to challenge. It sounds so good. Who wants to be against it? Schuller goes so far as to call it the “New Reformation.” So much for the battles of the “old” Reformation.

But Schuller is not the only one promoting self-esteem. Another respected leader, who has done excellent work in waking up Christians to our cultural decline, writes, “In a real sense, the health of an entire society depends on the ease with which the individual members gain personal acceptance. Thus, whenever the keys to self-esteem are seemingly out of reach for a large percentage of the people, as in twentieth-century America, then widespread mental illness, neuroticism, hatred, alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, and social disorder will certainly occur.”⁹ He makes that statement because in this situation he is thinking secularly, not Biblically.

Millions of Christians read authors such as David Seamands. In his enormously successful *Healing for Damaged Emotions*, Seamands argues that low self-esteem is “Satan’s deadliest weapon.”¹⁰ The ruin in Christian lives, according to this view, comes when “Satan uses this deadliest of all his emotional and psychological weapons to bring defeat and failure into your life.”¹¹ As individuals read these words, their hope shifts, perhaps just slightly at first, from the blood of Christ and the forgiveness of sin, to the things they can learn from the psychologist.

Men like Seamands have a good rationale. They say that they preach self-esteem only because their ministries were once mired in defeat. They say they knew all about forgiveness and sanctification and yet remained defeated. Anyone who does a great deal of counseling is going to run up against much that does not respond to the Word. Yet, I have found that the problem is not with the sufficiency of Scripture (so that we need modern psychology), but with the failure of absorb the lessons of Church history and systematic theology. Applying psychology is much easier because the sinful nature of man is far more ready to be coddled than confronted.

Schuller says that restoration of self-esteem is the New Reformation. Seamands calls low self-esteem “Satan’s deadliest weapon.” People everywhere are tuned in to self-esteem. There is

⁹ James Dobson, *Hide or Seek* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1974), pp. 12-13.

¹⁰ Seamands, *Healing for Damaged Emotions*, note 5, p. 48.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 49.

even a bumper sticker that proclaims boldly: "Self-esteem: the right of every child." What does the Bible say?

Proponents of this gospel of "self" argue that it is foundational for a Christian view of man. But that's not the view of the Apostle Paul, who wrote, "In the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3:1-4). Christians today write books on self-esteem and self-love, but Paul warned the Church that the first sign of the "difficult times" of the last days will be that people are lovers of self.

To see what God thinks about self-love, look at what happened to Nebuchadnezzar, the great king of Babylon. He boasted of his feats, "Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?" (Daniel 4:30). The words were hardly off his lips before God decreed that this proud and arrogant man, consumed with himself, would become as a beast until he acknowledged the sovereignty of Almighty God. Nebuchadnezzar had to turn from self to the service and worship for the true and living God. His self-love dissolved, by God's grace.

We need to teach people to fear God, reject sin, and live godly lives. Rather than seeking approval from others and ourselves, we need to seek God's approval, but not to gain salvation, which is provided entirely through God's approval of Christ's sacrifice on our behalf. Emphasis on self-esteem encourages truly hurting individuals to become like Pharisees. They are encouraged to delve into and build up self, rather than turn from self to God, building up the Church. They focus on themselves rather than turning from themselves and "reaching forward to what lies ahead" (Philippians 3:13).

I am not calling for an easy, superficial, or shallow approach. I believe that inward pain can be dealt with and that people can really change, but this will only happen as God's people become absorbed with Him. God wants the Church to be caught up with His glory, His righteousness, and His Kingdom. Then, and only then (when our primary focus is away from ourselves), will the aching and the longings within be dissipated. Looking to self, even with the good intentions of breaking through layers of problems, will not accomplish the liberation and joy people crave. It will only reveal the deeper levels that have yet to be traversed, a process which, like its secular twin, psychoanalysis, can easily consume an entire lifetime.

In some ways, Woody Allen, who has spent most of his adult life in psychoanalysis, said it best in his 1972 movie *Sleeper*. In this film, Allen has his body frozen for two hundred years until a

cure for his disease is discovered. Upon awakening, Allen is told that he has been frozen for two hundred years. He replies (as he thinks of the intervening years), "I was in psychoanalysis. If only I had been going all this time, I'd almost be cured by now."