

The Bible and Psychology – Oil and Water That Don't Mix!

by

G. Harry Leafe, Th.M., D.Min

We are living in the midst of a crisis. Satan continues to captivate the thinking of many well-meaning men and women by convincing them that what God has provided in the Bible is insufficient. "Man's problems cannot be understood or resolved on the basis of what God has provided," it is argued. In fact, not only does he challenge the sufficiency of Scripture, he also casts doubt on its accuracy and whether or not it can really be trusted.

The strategy of Satan is to get God's people to live their lives according to the philosophies of this world and not the Word of God. Satan's system of thought is referred to by Paul in Colossians 2:8 as "*philosophy and empty deception.*" Further, he says that this system has been formulated on the basis of "*the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.*" We are warned not to be "*taken captive*" by this system of thought. The Greek term actually means to carry off as spoil or booty, as in a war.

What many Christian leaders and counselors seem to overlook is that we have been warned about this satanic strategy. Paul sets it forth clearly in 2 Corinthians 10 when he writes, "*For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ*" (vv. 3-5).

The essence of the crisis centers around the authority and sufficiency of the Word of God. In 2 Peter 1:3-4, we are told that God has "*granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, in order that by them you might become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.*"

The apostle Paul adds that, "*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*" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The question that every Christian must answer is this: Is what the Bible claims for itself true?

What are we really facing? For the Christian, isn't the issue really one of sanctification? And if the issue is sanctification, isn't God's Word sufficient? Having been warned about the satanic strategy and the philosophies of this world, are we going to blindly suggest that they should be viewed as a desirable means of sanctification? Are we to suggest that such systems of thought should be "integrated" with the Word of God? The very thought of such an idea is blasphemous!

First, we want to take a look at what the world calls *Psychology*. We must determine whether or not it should be considered a *philosophy* of this world.

What Is Psychology?

Psychology is described in *Dictionary of Psychology* (David Statt, Barnes & Noble Books, 1982), as "the study of human and animal behavior." The editor then adds "[It] would be a good definition but for the fact that it focuses attention on the behavior itself rather than the attempt to understand what it's about. But then that's a point that frequently eludes psychologists anyway, so maybe it's not such a bad definition after all." (p. 103).

There are three main theoretical approaches to psychology (and many variations of the three): behavioristic, humanistic, and psychoanalytic. Behavioristic psychology has to do with the study of "observable human behavior." (Ibid., p.13). This school was founded in the United States by J. B. Watson in 1913. Another well-known behaviorist is B. F. Skinner. Humanistic psychology "Emphasizes the qualities that differentiate human beings from other animals, particularly creativity, humor, play, and psychological growth in general." (Ibid., p. 62). Its leading proponents are Gordon Allport, Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers. Psychoanalytic psychology, invented and developed by Sigmund Freud, "Places a great emphasis on the uncovering and

understanding of unconscious motivation. Any form of psychoanalysis, no matter how far removed it may be from its Freudian origins, would subscribe to this principle. Psychoanalysis is the most arduous and demanding form of psychotherapy, requiring years of (expensive) sessions during which powerful conflicts and emotions may be raised." (Ibid., p. 102).

Is Psychology a Science or an Art Form?

It seems that most people automatically assume that psychology is a science, or at least a *behavioral* science. But is the assumption a valid one? Let's take a closer look. A dictionary is a good place to begin. For our purposes we will use *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* published by Houghton Mifflin Company in 1981.

Science is defined as "The observation, identification, description, experimental investigation, and theoretical explanation of natural phenomena" (p. 1162). The adjective natural deserves a more precise definition. It is "that which pertains to or results from inherent nature; not acquired: 'The love of power...and the admiration of it...are both natural to man' (Christopher Morris). It is distinguished by innate qualities or attributes" (p. 875). When applied to a study of man it clearly involves a study of human nature: What is man's nature all about, innately? Why does he behave as he does?

Now let's evaluate psychology by these definitions. First, regarding observation and experimental investigation, Martin Bobgan says it well: "The observation [and experimental investigation] is not visual or objective, but rather verbal and subjective forms of personal revelation. In other words, rather than gaining their data through observation, they gain it through verbal means, such as interviews, conversations, and questionnaires. Thus a subject reveals his own perceptions to a listener or reader rather than performing an act that can be observed. Self-reporting or descriptions of others cannot be fully objective. Therefore, the practice of observation [and experimental investigation] -- especially as related to the psychologies that underlie psychotherapies or psychological counseling -- is generally the practice of gathering subjective information. This does not mean that such information lacks accuracy. However, there is a great possibility for inaccuracy in the very basics of data gathering in this field." (*Prophets of Psychoheresy* I, p. 18).

After the data is gathered it must be classified in some manner. This is identification and description. The question is, *How* will it be classified? It can not be done as objectively as blood types. In the end it becomes as subjective as trying to classify personality types! The difficulty in classifying this subjective data is admitted by the American Psychiatric Association. In the introduction to its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, better known as DSM-III, published in 1980, it was stated, "DSM-III is only one still frame in the ongoing process of attempting to better understand mental disorders." To explain the need for its 1987 revision, known as DSM-III-R, the following was offered in the introduction: "Data were emerging from new studies that were inconsistent with some of the diagnostic criteria. In addition, despite extensive field testing of the DSM-III diagnostic criteria before their official adoption, experience with them since their publication had revealed, as expected, many instances in which the criteria were not entirely clear, were inconsistent across categories, or were even contradictory."

First there is the subjective data, then it is subjectively classified. But what about its theoretical explanation? Will it be explained according to Skinner, Maslow, Rogers, or Freud? In

other words, what theoretical or philosophical influences will determine how the data is explained?

One other important consideration is the notion of *predictability*. There are certain laws of the physical universe that are known as the Laws of Nature. The laws of gravity and motion are examples. These laws have been formulated from the scientific process as it has been applied to that which is innate to the physical universe. The problem with the various psychologies is that they cannot set forth that which is predictable. That is, *specific behaviors* and *result of counsel* are unpredictable.

Clearly, psychology is not a science in the strict sense of the term. Then how should we view it? Perhaps it should be considered an art form rather than a science. An art form is "A system of principles and methods employed in the performance of a set of activities: *the art of building*. A trade or craft that applies such a system of principles and methods: *pursuing the baker's art*." (TAMDEL, p. 74).

Since the goal of psychology is to understand the non-material aspect of man, his innate nature, and to facilitate his adherence to culturally conditioned and accepted norms and standards of behavior, it is more appropriate to see it as an *art form* rather than a science. Hence, *the art of psychotherapy*: "The use of psychological techniques to treat psychological disturbances." (DP, p. 104).

What Is the Content of Psychology?

It may sound like an over-simplification, but it hits at the heart of the matter: *it is man's opinions about man*. It has no relationship at all to the Bible. The basis for biblical counseling, however, is the truth revealed by God in His Word.

The Scriptures are emphatic that the wisdom of man and the wisdom of God are different. They are as different as night and day, light and darkness. The questions of 2 Corinthians 6:14 and 15 are penetrating: "*What fellowship has light with darkness?*" (v. 14); "*What has a believer in common with an unbeliever?*" (v. 15). The answer of course to both questions is obvious: They don't! Yet we are being told by many that as long as the statements of psychology do not conflict with the Bible, it is acceptable. Indeed, we are said to be remiss if we do not take advantage of what psychological observation and experimental investigation has revealed about man. "After all," they say, "Isn't all truth God's truth?" The assumption being that the subjective observations and classifications formulated and represented by the varied psychologies represent truth!

What we have said thus far is only a beginning. The various psychologies represent man's best efforts to explain man. That is, how and why he thinks as he does, acts as he does, and feels as he does -- and how these things relate to each other. It represents the traditions of men and the elementary principles of the world. As such it is philosophy of this world. The Bible, on the other hand, gives us a clear, authoritative word from God about these same subjects. Which brings us back to the question that was raised when we started: "Is what the Bible claims for itself true?" Is it sufficient "...that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work?"

Is it wise to set the Bible aside for the philosophies of this world, or to attempt to integrate light with darkness? Because humanistic philosophies of life and the various views of psychology make statements from time to time that are compatible with what the Bible teaches, it does not compel Christians to be supportive of them. It doesn't make any more sense to do that than it

would to utilize the literature of a cult because on occasion it might make a correct doctrinal statement.

Satan, the god of this age, has wrapped these false teaching in very appealing clothes. They are presented as scholarly, scientific, medical (clinical), and the answer to man's problems. The tragedy is that a great many in the Church of Jesus Christ have bought the package!