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# Counsel for the Counsellors

PAUL A O’GORMAN

*The author is an incumbent with extensive experience as a counsellor. He is concerned that much which underlies accepted counselling theory is contrary to biblical teaching.*

Considerable anxiety has been expressed in recent months regarding the abuse of power exercised by certain Christian leaders. Such power is not just exercised corporately with large gatherings of worshippers, but also individually in the form of spiritual counselling. We live in an age that has spawned a multiplicity of counselling approaches and anyone wishing to set themselves up as a counsellor may do so quite legally with little or virtually no training.

Often when Christians do undertake training they go for the professionally acceptable options available, rather than barely recognised but extremely effective Christian courses. However, therein lies a danger. Professionally recognised courses are sometimes anti-biblical and it would be wise for any Christian wanting to train in counselling to beware and examine the syllabus and content of the course before commitment to it. Christian courses too can be far from biblical and sometimes appeal to the secular, hedonistic humanism of our culture. Some are little more than a do-it-yourself route to gaining power over others – and in this field a little knowledge is dangerous.

In his book, *Psychology as Religion*<sup>1</sup> Paul C Vitz uses the sub-title *The Cult of Self-Worship* to encapsulate the essence of his thesis.

Even some Christian counselling is only dressed up humanism. It is an appropriate description of much that passes as counselling today. My contention is that one particular school of thought relies on assumptions concerning the nature of man that are utterly false. Yet we find, alarmingly, many Christians use its insights in their counselling practice. I am referring to psychoanalysis – particularly Freudian. It should always be remembered that Sigmund Freud was a professed atheist and his atheism had a profound effect upon his work. His tentacles have reached far and wide.

As a young and newly qualified Viennese doctor of Jewish extraction, he

1 Paul C Vitz *Psychology and Religion – The Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1994)

journeyed to Paris in 1895, to study and work at Professor Charcot's clinic for nervous diseases. Charcot was famous for the application of hypnosis in therapy. Freud became especially interested in hysterical patients. One particular patient he examined was partially paralysed and had speech difficulties. According to Freud, under light hypnosis she was enabled to speak. As she did so, it appeared that the cause of her present problems could be traced back to childhood, to an emotional difficulty with her father whom she loved. After she recalled this, her paralysis supposedly left her and her speech difficulty disappeared.

On his return to Vienna, and without any further research which would have justified his causal link assertions, Freud set up his own clinic. He found that he did not need hypnosis, but just let his patients relax and tell him everything about their background and difficulties. When these were brought to light and ejected from the subconscious a so-called cure was effected.

Forever associated with Freud are the terms he used to describe the structure of the mind. For example, what he called the *id* is that part of the mind uncontrolled by reality, prudence or restraint. It is the source of instinctual drives, is unlearned, dynamic and obeys an individual's craving for pleasure.

Freud called the seat of morality, prudence and responsibility the *ego* and this exercises a controlling influence over the *id*. But it was the *super-ego* that also controlled the ego. *Super-ego* is another word for *conscience*. Freud reckoned that the *super-ego* was the cause of repression, which resulted in neurosis, frustration, conflicts and complexes of all kinds.

Finally, the *libido* was the term he used to describe sexual energy. In its narrow sense it denotes a drive for sexual gratification. But in its broad sense it referred to all the instincts of the *id*, including the instinct for survival and, very strangely, what he called the *death instinct*.

Like Darwinian evolutionary biology, where a theory has been widely accepted as incontrovertible fact, so too Freudian psychoanalysis is assumed by many to be unquestionably true. The consequences and damage caused by well meaning individuals seeking cures for their disturbed clients have been incalculable.

If the *super-ego* is seen as the villain, causing repression, then the logical cure is to render it harmless and ineffective. It is a short step from such a view to one which denies the gravity of sin. With no conscience to bother about, sin does not matter. The trouble is that, in the long term, guilt will always come back to haunt the individual, because, whatever the therapists say, sin is sin and guilt is guilt, and God's way, the best way, is to repent,

accept forgiveness and enjoy the peace that true forgiveness brings. Much modern counselling tries to do away with guilt by neutralising the conscience, with disastrous consequences. In my opinion Freud has passed on a legacy that has had an impact far greater than it should have done, given the weakness of its claims and the long-term ineffectiveness of its therapy.

It is true that many Freudian practitioners of psychoanalysis have come to realise that something is wrong with psychoanalytic theory and practice. Christian psychotherapists have, in large numbers, been turning away from a predominantly Freudian ethic and approach to healing, to approaches more in harmony with biblical principles.

Many years ago, an eminent psychologist called Percival Bailey said, in an address to the American Psychological Association, 'One wonders how long the hoary errors of Freud will continue to plague psychiatry'. Sadly, the truth is, they still do! There are just as many Freudian theorists and therapists as there have ever been and many of them are Christians. In his own inimitable style, Professor H J Eysenck once said 'The success of the Freudian revolution seemed complete, only one thing went wrong – patients did not get better'.

The truth is that Freudian techniques have not worked because they are contrary to biblical truth; God knows best as he always has done! What then does psychoanalysis hold to? It believes in the classification of people according to specified types of mental illness. It insists that the therapist needs to dig deep into a person's past life, in order to reveal the psychological *genesis* of a person's problems. It assumes that, once people realise these psychological roots of their problems, this understanding will enable them to revise their attitude to life. The object is to create new effective habits of life which will solve their mental hang-ups and problems of the present. Transference is a key word! Because problems have arisen as a result of unhealthy attitudes towards important authority figures in a patient's past life, the patient is encouraged to transfer these to the therapist. In other words the therapist becomes like God to the patient, and is in a position of great power and influence. When that happens, the psychoanalyst re-lives these past difficulties with the patient, and during these counselling sessions explains the ways in which the sufferer is repeating all over again the same unhealthy behaviour that went on in childhood.

Through the therapist's explanation patients gain understanding that enables them to dispose of old damaging attitudes and replace them with positive healing ones, thus enabling them to relate to others in a healthier way. Successful outcomes are therefore dependent upon the effectiveness of the insight gained from the unconscious mind. Freudian psychology claims that conflicts in the unconscious mind are far more important than those in

the conscious mind.

This whole enterprise, in my view, is fraught with danger for the therapist is necessarily employing guesswork; when probing the unconscious with its roots in the past, when analysing dreams or interpreting slips of the tongue observed in free association. The most damning aspect of it all, however, is psychotherapy's persistent and consistent avoidance of the whole question of morality. It consciously avoids questions of right and wrong in relation to attitudes and behaviour. The consequence of such amorality in therapy is that if behaviour is deviant or unsociable it must be because the patient is mentally ill, according to its own classification system. If you are mentally ill, you cannot help it; therefore you are not morally responsible. Moral instruction is considered a waste of time, since only insight gained in therapy will change a person's attitude and behaviour.

I have just described a therapy and its theoretical presuppositions which, in my view, are contrary to biblical truth. There are many others of which to be cautious. Let us remember the allegory of the tree; if its roots are bad, so will be its fruit. The 'heavy shepherding' approaches used by some church leaders and directors of Christian healing centres place those leaders in a position of power over those they lead. This is a position which only Christ should have, and is similar to the power of the therapist in psychoanalysis over his client. Yet Chris Brain of the *9 o'clock service* in Sheffield is receiving psychotherapy, and one wonders what the consequences will be! All counselling theories and therapies have their dangers and weaknesses. That is why so many counsellors are becoming increasingly eclectic in their work. Unless, however, the guiding principle in all their counselling is the Word of God, the consequences will always be, at best second best, at worst highly dangerous.

To mention but a few:

**Behaviour Therapy**, the therapeutic application of Behavioural Psychology, was pioneered by the Russian scientist Professor Pavlov. His work was developed and refined by B F Skinner and J B Watson. Their contention was that man could be manipulated by using a system of reward and punishment – called 'aversive control'. By such a system a person can learn how to replace anti-social behaviour by 'normal' behaviour. The object of the therapist is to recondition the patient by altering his expectations.

The problem is that he too plays 'God' with his client, for who sets the controls, who decides the standards and norms? They certainly do not consult the Bible. So who controls the behaviour therapist?

**Gestalt Therapy** has become increasingly popular today. *Gestalt* is the

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German word for whole. A great danger of this kind of approach is that it involves actually touching patients and encourages them to touch each other. It is based upon ways of hearing, seeing, touching and movement.

**Drug Therapy** has obvious dangers of dependency, and it offers no real cure, only temporary alteration of symptoms.

**Existential Therapy** came from European philosophical thinking. It is jargon-loaded; God is left out and man is unknowable. There are no laws, no directions, no absolutes and it is very much akin to Joseph Fletcher's situation ethics. There is no restraint upon behaviour, and standards set by God are completely ignored.

**Hypnosis Therapy** depends upon an induced altered state of consciousness, in which part of the nervous system is brought under partial control. This enables the therapist to have complete power and control over his patient. Again he assumes a role only God has a right to have. Hypnosis should be completely taboo for the Christian.

I could refer to many more.

In our desire to help others we should be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves. If I were to recommend any therapeutic approach, it would be that which honours the Word of God and helps a patient face reality.

An American therapist called William Glasser<sup>2</sup> came as near to a biblical approach as any psychologist has done, without actually referring to the Scriptures. This was endorsed by Selwyn Hughes of CWR in the sixties.<sup>3</sup> Glasser challenged the very idea of classifying mental illness according to certain attitudes and behaviour. He believed that what we are actually referring to is an individual's personal inadequacy in that they have failed to act responsibly in a given situation. It is easy to convince yourself that you are not really responsible for your actions, if you believe that you are mentally ill.

**Reality Therapy** completely reverses the Freudian assumption that mental illness has caused irresponsible behaviour. On the contrary, it is irresponsible attitudes and behaviour that have caused the unbalanced frame of mind and deviant behaviour. It is no good delving into the past in order to make excuses for it. What needs to be done is to face the reality of the past, accept that which is wrong and for which we are responsible, truly repent, open ourselves to receive God's wonderful forgiveness, then look from the present to the

2 William Glasser *Reality Therapy* (London: Harper Row 1990)

3 Selwyn Hughes 'Reality Therapy' *Ministers' Manual Series* Vol 1 No 1 (undated)

future. What is past is past and cannot be changed. It can, however, be forgiven and that for which we are not responsible can be released.

Past experiences should never be allowed to give patients an excuse to avoid present responsibility. As Glasser so rightly said 'It is how you are behaving now, what attitudes you have now and how you need to change these, that will help you to secure a better future'. Any therapy that ignores moral standards or considers deviant behaviour as the product of mental illness cannot be Christian and therefore I contend that it should not be used by any Christian counsellors.

Of course the concept of mental illness cannot be dismissed. Some people do suffer from much deeper problems which have a physiological, biological, biochemical or hormonal cause. Sometimes it is necessary to administer drugs in cases such as schizophrenia or manic depressive illness. It is in the labelling of mental illness that the problem often lies and psychotherapists and psychiatrists may be guilty of broadening the parameters to include conditions that do not come within this category.

If we interfere with the operations of the conscience, instead of healing, harm is done. Glasser said:

Conscience is a welcome and creative aspect of our personality; if the therapist works with it men and women can achieve their highest possibilities. The conscience is awesome in its power, but it is also persuasive in its influence, rewarding in its returns when it is cooperated with, but exacting in its penalties for indifference. But – interfere with the conscience and a deep sense of guilt descends upon the personality.

G K Chesterton said 'Psychoanalysis is confession without absolution, and that re-inforces guilt'. Karl Kraus called psychoanalysis 'the disease it purports to cure'.

Many of our problems do not stem from the past but arise when God's grace is unknown or ignored. The Christian counsellor's aim must always be to bring men and women into a right relationship with God through our Lord Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit; otherwise our basic needs of faith, hope and love will never be met (1 Cor 13:13).

I have not so far referred in this article to men like Carl Jung and Alfred Adler, who had a great influence upon psychology and counselling. Both men broke away from Freud to form their own schools. Adler, like Freud, tended to reduce God to an unhealthy product of the unconscious mind. But Jung was, in my view, not nearly so dismissive of the Christian faith. He

was somewhat of a mystic, and for that reason it is not always easy to understand his thinking. He was himself a religious man, and said, at one point, that 'patients fell ill because they lacked what the living religions of all ages had given to their adherents'. He added that 'they never got well unless and until they acquired or recovered a religious attitude to life'.<sup>4</sup> Jung believed they needed to gain or regain an attitude of reverence or humility towards a reality greater than themselves.

Though Jung was a pupil of Freud he eventually came to opposite conclusions regarding the nature of man, more in line with biblical truth, though in some respects he too was mistaken. Whereas Freud regarded belief in God as wish fulfilment; for example, the frightened child feels safe when father is around. As he grows older and realises that his father cannot be relied upon to help in facing the fears that beset him after childhood, he finds the idea of God a reassuring substitute for father. Jung, on the other hand, came to interpret the phenomena in an opposite sense. As a result of trying to understand his patients and help them solve their problems, he came to think that the tendency to believe in God, what he called the *God Archetype* is innate in all men. This tendency leads men to create absolutes, to give unconditional value, if not to God, then to an ideal person or cause, in other words to make gods of them.

Thus Freud and Jung came to opposite conclusions from the same psychological data. For Freud, God is a father substitute, for Jung, a child's father is a God substitute. The real difference was that Jung believed in God, and came to respect all he had made which profoundly influenced his theories.

In conclusion, it is extremely important that we place psychology and all the various approaches to counselling in a proper perspective. It is imperative that we submit all we have at our disposal to God and his Word. We should always seek his wisdom to discern what is good and bad and have the courage to adhere faithfully to biblical truth. We should not be dismissive of scientific investigation of mental processes, human nature and human behaviour. Such investigation can shed light upon our vulnerability and utter dependence upon God our Creator. A vital ingredient of good counselling is the exercise of spiritual discernment with regard to the 'tools' we use to assist us to perceive what is good and biblically wholesome and to reject what is contrary to God's Word and a hindrance to achieving a right relationship with God.

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4 Christopher Bryant SSJE *Depth Psychology and Religious Belief* (Mirfield Yorks: Mirfield Publications 1977)