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Faith of a Psychiatrist

by

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A “Christian psychiatrist?” To some people – including many Christians and many psychiatrists – this sounds like a contradiction in terms. How, my psychiatric colleagues wonder, can I as a psychiatrist talk about such unscientific (not to say superstitious) things as faith, salvation, and religious experience? And how, my evangelical and fundamentalist friends wonder, can I as a Christian be involved in such a questionable (not to say heretical) profession as psychiatry? They shake their heads. The two just don’t go together. Science and religion, like oil and water, don’t mix.

In spite of the skeptics, however, I see no contradiction between my faith and my profession. Far from being in conflict with one another, they are in fact complementary. Indeed, I consider my Christian faith absolutely essential to my ability to function as a three-dimensional psychiatrist, able to minister effectively to three-dimensional human beings.

What do I mean by a three-dimensional psychiatrist? Let me explain. The first four years of a psychiatrist’s postgraduate training are spent in a medical school learning about man’s physical dimension. The next four years are spent in a graduate school of psychiatry learning about man’s psychological dimension.

At the end of those eight years, however, regardless of how hard a student has worked, regardless of how thoroughly he may have mastered the material, he has still learned to deal with only two-thirds of the human personality – body and mind. This would be fine if we were dealing with two-dimensional people. But human beings comprise three dimensions – the physical, the psychological and also the spiritual. It is this third dimension, the spiritual, for which a psychiatrist’s training does not give

adequate preparation; yet it is, in many ways, the most important as well as the most neglected dimension. Would you believe me if I told you that the majority of the patients that I see in my professional practice are suffering, not from physical or psychological ailments, but from spiritual ones? If I, as their therapist, did not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, if I did not have a solid grounding in God's inspired and inerrant Word, if I did not have access to the filling and power of the Holy Spirit, then I would be of little use to these individuals who are suffering from spiritual diseases.

The fact is that despite all the mind-boggling advances in science and medical technology, despite all the advances in psychiatric theory, we remain baffled by even the simplest questions: Who am I? Who put me here? Why am I here? Where am I going? Psychology alone is inadequate to answer these apparently simple, yet overwhelmingly difficult questions.

These four questions, which you and I along with everyone else have struggled with, are basic to our human existence. The first refers to my identity: Who am I? The second refers to my origin: Who put me here? The third refers to my purpose: Why am I here? The fourth refers to my destiny: Where am I going?

Secular humanist psychology attempts to formulate answers to these questions, yet its answers are inescapably unsatisfying. To my questions about my origin, its response is evolution. No supernatural power placed me here; I merely ascended or descended from lower life forms. To my questions about my identity, its response is that "I'm Number One," and looking out for myself is what really matters. This leads to a narcissistic preoccupation with myself, a form of idolatry. To my questions about my purpose in life, its response is that I exist to pursue my personal satisfaction and self-actualization (a fancy way of saying that I'm here to grab all the gusto I can). To my questions about my destiny, its response is the least satisfying of all: for the only end that secular psychology can envision is annihilation – an end without hope or meaning.

The reason secular psychology cannot give satisfying answers to these questions is that they are not primarily psychological questions, but are rather spiritual ones. The answers to these questions depend not upon human intellect, but upon divine revelation.

These troubling questions about our identity, our origins, our purpose, and our destiny are symptomatic of what I call our "disjointed human experience", what the Bible calls our fallen condition. It is characterized by a feeling of hopelessness and despair which medicine and psychology alone are powerless to cure. The only remedy for this condition is a spiritual transformation, energized by God's Holy Spirit. Only when a man or woman has undergone this transformation is any kind of harmony with

one's self or the rest of the world possible. Only then can life even begin to make sense. Without God, our human experience remains disjointed.

It's instructive to note that our word "religion" derives from the Latin word "igare", the root word from which we get our word "ligament". Ligaments, as you learned in your high school biology class, are what join our bones together. They literally keep our bodies from falling apart. Similarly, our religion – that is, our relationship with our Creator – is what prevents us from falling apart spiritually.

In his letter to Timothy, St. Paul refers to Jesus Christ as the "one Mediator between God and man." I like to paraphrase this "one great Ligament between God and man." Jesus Christ is the only one who can bind us to God. He is to our spirits what ligaments are to our physical bodies: He joins us together. Psychiatry which is practiced in the light of divine revelation seeks to resolve the disjointedness of human experience by rejoining men and women to God through Jesus Christ.

Apart from Christ, the disjointed state persists. This pitiable condition is sometimes referred to as an "existential vacuum" – an elegant way of saying a big hole inside the human personality. This vacuum must be filled one way or another; if it is not filled by the Holy Spirit, it will surely be filled by unholy things. Everywhere you look you can see people striving to fill the vacuum in their lives with unholy things – by obsession with material things, by the abuse of drugs, by promiscuity, by involvement in religious cults, satanism, witchcraft – the list goes on and on. Since none of these substitutes can satisfy, the inevitable result will be anxiety, depression, frustration, and ultimately despair. If I, as a psychiatrist, am unable to help my patients find the One who alone can fill the void in their lives, then my attempts to cure them of their anxiety and depression and despair are doomed to failure.

How does an individual begin to experience healing in psychotherapy? Interestingly, the process of psychological healing parallels in many respects the experience of spiritual regeneration, of being reborn in Christ. Both must begin with an individual's admission of need. No one experiences spiritual rebirth who has not acknowledged his need of God's saving grace; likewise, no one improves in psychotherapy until he recognizes that he needs help and is willing to seek it.

Secondly, an individual needs to realize that help must come from outside himself. No one can receive salvation by focusing inwardly, rather than looking to God as his sole source of hope, nor will the one in need of psychological healing find it by focusing inwardly by drawing only upon his own resources.

Thirdly, an individual must know what it is to be completely and unconditionally accepted for who he is. Just as spiritual rebirth does not

come about until we experience God's unconditional acceptance and love, so a psychiatric patient must know the complete acceptance of his therapist before there can be any improvement.

Without God's unconditional love and forgiveness, none of us could cope with the burden of our own guilt. But when I confess my sins to God, and acknowledge my need for forgiveness and absolution, then I am able to experience His great love which alone is sufficient to remove the emotional burden of my guilt. The moment I realize that Christ died for me as an individual is when I experience God's forgiveness and am able to *feel* forgiven for the first time. If I had been the only person on earth in need of a Savior, He still would have died for me.

A similar phenomenon takes place in psychotherapy, and we call it "insight." I like to define insight as a sudden, rather startling glimpse of the obvious. It involves a transfer of energy from the intellect to the emotions. Again, this parallels our experience in salvation. It's one thing for me to know cognitively that God has forgiven me, but it's quite another for me to *feel* forgiven. When I feel His love and forgiveness, then at last I am free to stop carrying around my burden of guilt. Similarly, in psychological counseling, if the counselor can communicate complete, no-strings-attached acceptance to his patient, then the patient will experience self-revelation; this moment of insight is the turning point which leads to changes in one's thought patterns and ultimately to positive changes in one's behavior. Just as the removal of our spiritual guilt frees us to begin manifesting the fruits of the Spirit in our lives, so the moment of insight in counseling enables us to let go of the destructive thought and behavior patterns that lead to malaise and to begin the journey toward psychological health.

What are some of the negative thought and behavior patterns which rob us of our mental and spiritual health? Physicians warn us constantly of the destructive habits that rob us of our physical health, but we seem far less aware of the things that destroy our mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being: as a result, we suffer from a wide variety of what I call "diseases of the soul." I'm going to list some of the psychological and spiritual diseases that I encounter most frequently in my patients (and, for that matter, in myself). My guess is that everyone has suffered from some of these diseases at some time or other.

- The first disease, and one of the most prevalent, is boredom. Boredom results, quite simply, from a lack of purpose (the "Why am I here?" question). A person with a strong sense of purpose in life is far too busy to be bored.

- The second disease is frustration, which results from lack of fulfillment. All of us suffer at least occasionally from this disease, but with some people, it becomes a chronic condition, if not a way of life.

- The third disease is insincerity, another malady from which we all suffer to some degree. Dishonesty to one's self is at the root of every emotional disorder, and emotional health and stability can never be restored until a patient is willing to give up the habit of self-deception.

- The fourth disease is loneliness, ironically a near-universal affliction on a planet whose population now numbers six billion. Even as the doomsayers warn us of the threat of overpopulation, vast multitudes of people suffer from terrible loneliness.

- The fifth disease is a lack of authority in one's life. This condition is exacerbated by the pop-psychology gurus who exhort us to "take charge of our lives," to "liberate ourselves" by casting off the repressive mantle of authority. They leave us with no foundation upon which to base our lives.

- The sixth disease is complacency, which robs us of conviction and determination, rendering us unable to accomplish anything worthwhile.

- The seventh disease is despair, in many ways the most deadly of all – as evidenced by the alarming suicide rate in our nation, especially among our young people.

What can I, as a psychiatrist, prescribe as a cure for these diseases of the soul? If I were not a Christian, my only recourse might be to deal out stacks of prescriptions for tranquilizers in order to drug my patients into a state where they might be able to experience some peace of mind. But the Bible shows us a better way! In the Bible, one of the names used for Jesus is "Shiloh": "And the sceptre shall not depart from Judah until Shiloh comes" (Genesis 49:10). Shiloh is an ancient Hebrew word whose root meaning is "The Tranquilizer." With Shiloh in my heart, I have no need for chemical tranquilizers because I have the peace of God which passes understanding.

The yearning for peace and tranquility is one of the most basic of human longings. But the peace we long for can only be found in Jesus, who is the Prince of Peace, and we will never experience the peace of God (Philippians 4:7) until we have first made peace *with* God – that is, until we have experienced His saving power and forgiveness: “Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). Only when the barrier of sin and guilt has been removed by God’s divine forgiveness can I know what it is to have genuine inward peace and tranquility. Obviously, this does not mean that I will never have problems, never feel lonely, and never become depressed. But the peace of God that passes understanding will prevail in my heart in spite of loneliness, in spite of depression, and in spite of all difficulties.

In addition to the need for inward peace, we all have a need for purpose in our lives. No one can be healthy psychologically or spiritually who lacks purpose in his life. Without purpose we only drift along, and without direction we will become progressively more dissatisfied until ultimately we become cynical and despairing.

You can determine whether or not your life has purpose by asking yourself the following questions:

Where is my energy being spent?

Where is my time being spent?

What is the source of my energy? What motivates me?

What are my goals in life? To what do I ultimately aspire?

I have a question that I frequently ask my patients, which some of them understandably find a little unsettling: What epitaph would you like to have engraved on your tombstone? Thinking honestly about how you would like to be remembered after you’re gone can help clarify what your real goals and priorities in life are. Do you want to be remembered as having made a lot of money? As having received recognition and admiration and honors? As having been a good and loyal friend, a help in times of trouble? As having been a light in this dark world?

Another basic psychological and spiritual need we all have is the need for hope. As a Christian, I know that without God, without Christ, there can be no hope. St. Paul makes this clear in his letter to the Ephesians when he reminds them that before their conversion they were “separate from Christ...without hope and without God in the world.” But now, Paul goes on, “you who were once far away have been brought near through the

blood of Christ.” In his letter to Titus, Paul speaks of awaiting the “blessed hope...the glorious appearing of our great God and savior, Jesus Christ.”

Closely related to the need for hope is the need for a sense of the future. It’s easy for us to become preoccupied with the past; in fact, that was the trap that Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, fell into. Freud’s view of human nature was essentially retrospective, and his brand of psychoanalysis focused almost exclusively on the past – what happened to an individual in the early years of his development, what kind of relationship he had as a child with his parents, and so on. While this examination of the past is an integral part of the psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic process, of itself it is not enough. It stops short of a full understanding of human personality.

Toward the middle of the twentieth century, due in large measure to the influence of Victor Frankl, a shift in emphasis occurred from the past to the present. Frankl stressed the importance of the “here and now”: what happens to me today and the choices that I make are what determine my life’s meaning and purpose. While this emphasis on the “here and now” is also an essential element of human psychology, it, too, is insufficient. Human beings need more: they need to have a sense of tomorrow – a sense of continuity from the past and through the present to the future. Merely understanding the past and merely living in the present are not enough. If we have no sense of the future, then ironically we become obsessed with death, wondering what (if anything) will become of us after our bodies die. This, by the way, is just one reason why our young people are so vulnerable to the lure of religious cults since they offer answers to the question of what becomes of us after death. Sadly, when our churches fail to give our young people the answers they seek about the future, they seek answers elsewhere. The need for hope is that strong!

Another universal, psychological, and spiritual need is the need for unconditional love, to which I referred earlier. In my practice I am constantly confronted with the problems that result when an individual has been deprived of this most basic need, which eventuates in insecurity, depression, lack of self-esteem, and even self-hatred. Many persons, having been deprived of love, will try to fill the void with substitutes – power, money, recognition, and so on. But they will never be satisfied, never be at peace until they have experienced the unconditional, affirming love of Jesus Christ.

For many of us, loving ourselves is the most difficult thing to do; we suffer from flagging self-esteem because we are all too painfully aware of our own failures and shortcomings. We find it difficult to believe that God accepts and loves us in spite of our failings (which He knows even better than we do). Although we know that God has forgiven us, we still have

trouble forgiving ourselves. We need to learn to see ourselves as God sees us, to see ourselves as forgiven. Only then can we begin to enjoy a healthy self-esteem that is necessary to our mental and emotional health.

All of us are in need of direction in our lives. We can look for direction until we drop over from exhaustion, but we will never find it until we meet the One who said, "I am the Way." We earnestly seek answers to the questions that plague us; and there is never a shortage of self-appointed prophets about, offering us fast, simple, guaranteed answers to our questions for the price of a cheap paperback book. But we will never find answers until we meet the One who said, "I am the Truth." We can search in vain for meaning in our lives until we begin to fear that life *has* no meaning; but we will never find what we are seeking until we find the One who said, "I am the Life."

People come to my office whose lives are full of chaos and confusion, who long for peace and tranquility. As a Christian psychiatrist, I can show them how to have peace with God through Jesus Christ; only then can they experience the peace of God that passes understanding.

People come to my office who are floundering about aimlessly in search of purpose, in search of something to which they can commit themselves and thereby find direction. I can introduce them to the One who promises that if we commit our ways to Him, He will direct our paths. Only in His service can we find purpose and fulfillment.

People come to my office who are desperately lonely and depressed; I can introduce them to the One in whose presence they will find fullness of joy.

People come to see me who are lacking authority in their lives; having rebelled against all authority in an elusive search for freedom, they find themselves with no foundation upon which to base their lives. I can introduce them to the one sure foundation, Jesus Christ, whom the Bible calls the chief Cornerstone.

People come to see me whose self-esteem is so low they could trip on it. I can introduce them to the One who thought so much of them that He was willing to die a terrible death in order to give them life. Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians that Jesus "did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being made in human likeness; and being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross."

If Jesus considered us worth all the pain and suffering He had to go through to redeem us, can we have doubts about our own self-worth? If Jesus was able to cast evil spirits out of people who had been oppressed by them for years, can we doubt His ability to heal all our diseases of the soul by His divine therapy?

The answer the Bible offers to our problems is neither self-aggrandizement on the one hand, nor self-negation on the other; it is self-realization in the person of Jesus Christ. In Him we discover our true selves, the men and women God created us to be. In Jesus – whom God called His beloved Son in whom He was well pleased – we discover what God had in mind when He made us. In Him we are made new creatures. In Jesus, our humanity is not destroyed, it is transformed; our instincts are not quelled, they are redirected; our desires and passions are not crushed, they are elevated.

Paradoxically, although we lose ourselves in Christ, it is in Him that we find ourselves. We will never discover our true selves until we are ready to let go of what is false in ourselves, for the false is what bars us from experiencing genuine self-discovery and fulfillment.

The divine therapy for us is to concern ourselves with two things: the person of Jesus Christ, who is the Living Word of God, and the Scripture, which is the written Word of God. In the Scripture we find Jesus Christ revealed; in Christ we find the fulfillment of all our psychological and spiritual needs. In Him we find true peace and joy and hope; in His service we find purpose and fulfillment and satisfaction.

That is my kind of psychiatry.
