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Christian Psychology – Introduction

Christian psychology may appear at first glance to be a contradiction in terms. Especially after you have examined Marxist, Humanist, and Postmodern psychologies and touched on still other theories of secular psychology, you may be tempted to conclude that psychology is a discipline unworthy of your attention. William Kirk Kilpatrick boldly declares, “If you’re talking about Christianity, it is much truer to say that psychology and religion are competing faiths. If you seriously hold to one set of values, you will logically have to reject the other.”¹

What Kilpatrick says is true. But when he uses the term psychology, he is referring specifically to secular psychology. He can make this generalization because the secular schools of psychology (based on the work of Sigmund Freud,² B.F. Skinner, I.P. Pavlov, Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Erich Fromm, and Jacques Lacan) comprise virtually all of modern psychology.

Just because so many falsehoods flourish in the realm of psychology (for example, that human beings are merely physical animals with no vital essence, soul, or spirit or that mind is merely another name for the physical brain) does not mean Christians should abandon it. Instead, Christians must bring God’s truth to a deceived discipline. Psychology, true to its origin (Greek “psyche”), is the study of the soul—and no worldview other than Christianity has truer insight into the spiritual realm. As Kilpatrick says, “In short, although Christianity is more than a psychology, it happens to be better psychology than psychology is.”³

Christian Psychology – Compatible Terms

Christianity and psychology are compatible for the simple reason that the Biblical Christian worldview contains a psychology. As Charles L. Allen aptly points out, “The very essence of religion is to adjust the mind and soul of man. . . . Healing means bringing the person into a right relationship with the physical, mental and spiritual laws of God.”⁴ Men and women created “in the image of God” ([Genesis 1:27](#)) require a worldview that recognizes the significance of the spiritual. Christianity maintains that God is a person, and that our personhood is somehow related to His person. Plantinga puts it this way: “How should we think about human persons? What sorts of things, fundamentally, are they? What is it to be a human, and what is it to be a human person, and how should we think about personhood? . . . The first point to note is that in the Christian scheme of things, God is the premier person, the first and chief exemplar of personhood . . . and the properties most important for an understanding of our personhood are properties we share with him.”⁵ In other words, as Moreland and Rae say, “There is something about the way God is that is like the way we are.”⁶

It stands to reason that God’s magnificent creation required thinking, planning, artistry, and execution—all qualities that men and women share with their Creator. As God reveals more of Himself apart from the creative order (general revelation) and into the redemptive order (special

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revelation), we find a Person with personality, love, mercy, and grace—again, qualities that are shared in limited quantities with the human race.

Christian Psychology – The Existence of the Soul

Christianity acknowledges the existence of the supernatural, including a consciousness within us that is more than an epiphenomenon of the brain. The Bible's statements regarding body, breath of life, soul, spirit, heart, and mind suggest a dualist ontology (or study of being),⁷ that is, the view that human nature consists of two fundamental kinds of reality: physical (material or natural) and spiritual (supernatural). Christ's statement about fearing the one who could put "both soul and body" in hell ([Matthew 10:28](#)) and Paul's statement regarding body, soul, and spirit ([1 Thessalonians 5:23](#)) enforce the distinction between our material and spiritual qualities. The Bible does not deny body; it simply says that we are more than just a physical body.

Sir John Eccles, one of the world's most respected neuro-physiologists, believes mind and body dualism is the only explanation for many of the phenomena of consciousness. One of the reasons Eccles reaches this conclusion is the individual's "unity of identity." Paul Weiss explains, "[E]ven though I know I am constantly changing—all molecules are changing, everything in me is being turned over substantially—there is nevertheless my identity, my consciousness of being essentially the same that I was 20 years ago. However much I may have changed, the continuity of my identity has remained undisrupted."⁸

The point is that because the physical substance of the brain is constantly changing, no unity of identity could exist if consciousness were a condition wholly dependent on the physical brain. Something more than the physical brain—something spiritual or supernatural—must exist.

Human memory is another facet of the unity-of-identity argument that supports the existence of a supernatural soul, heart, or mind. Arthur Custance writes, "What research has shown thus far is that there is no precise one-to-one relationship between any fragment of memory and the nerve cells in which it is supposed to be encoded."⁹

Without any concept of soul, the Humanist, Marxist, and Postmodernist have difficulty explaining unity of identity and memory. Still another problem you will learn about in the chapters to come is how the materialist position accounts for free will. Only a worldview that postulates something other than the environment manipulating the human physical machine can account for free will. Christian dualism provides a better foundation for psychology because it defends the integrity of our mind and our free will.

Christian Psychology – Fallen Human Nature

When it comes to Christian psychology, a proper understanding of human nature does not end with affirming the existence of a spirit, soul, heart, and mind within us. The Christian position goes on to define human nature as inherently flawed because of Adam and Eve's decision to disobey God in the Garden of Eden. This understanding of our sinful bent is critical for understanding our human nature and our mental processes.

Our revolt against God caused a dramatic, reality-shattering change in our relationship to the rest of existence and even to ourselves. This change has severe ramifications for all aspects of reality, including psychology. In fact, our sinful nature—our desire to rebel against God

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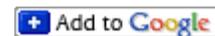
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and our fellow beings—is the source of all psychological problems according to the Christian view. Francis A. Schaeffer says, “The basic psychological problem is trying to be what we are not, and trying to carry what we cannot carry. Most of all, the basic problem is not being willing to be the creatures we are before the Creator.”¹⁰ Instead, we want to be God. Creaturehood is too confining, especially when it comes to making the rules—which to a great extent is the heart of the matter. Remember, it is the heart that says there is no God (Psalm 14:1). It is the heart that is deceitful and wicked ([Jeremiah 17:9](#)).

This view is crucial for Christian theology because it allows us to understand our tremendous need for Christ’s saving power. It is crucial on a lesser level, as well, for Christian psychology. In order to understand human nature properly, the psychologist must understand that we have a natural tendency to revolt against God and His laws. If the Christian view of human nature is correct, then only Christianity can develop a true, meaningful, and workable psychology because only Christianity recognizes the problem of the heart, mind, and will in relation to God. Further, only Christianity provides a framework in which we are truly held responsible for our thoughts and actions. “The great benefit of the doctrine of sin,” says Paul Vitz, “is that it reintroduces responsibility for our own behavior, responsibility for changing as well as giving meaning to our condition.”¹¹

Only Christian psychology perceives human nature in a way that is consistent with reality and capable of speaking to our most difficult problems—sin problems. Christian psychology sees men and women as not only physical, but also spiritual; as morally responsible before God; as created in God’s image; and as having rebelliously turned away from their Creator. Only Christianity is prepared to face the problem that necessarily arises out of our sin nature: the existence of guilt.

Christian Psychology – Conclusion

The Christian view of human nature or what it means to be a human being is complex because it includes such terms as soul, spirit, mind, heart, will, consciousness, and intuition.¹² Further, Christians who properly understand human nature might never need to seek professional counseling—they might maintain spiritual well-being by remaining in submission to Christ. Christians either believe God when He says He has dealt with the sin problem through the sacrifice of His Son, or do not.

Schaeffer outlines a simple approach to what he calls “positive psychological hygiene”—“As a Christian, instead of putting myself in practice at the center of the universe, I must do something else. This is not only right, and the failure to do so is not only sin, but it is important for me personally in this life. I must think after God, and I must will after God.”¹³ To “will after God” is not to think too highly of ourselves, “but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves” ([Philippians 2:3](#)).

Indeed, Paul’s advice in the book of Philippians is worth many a visit to the psychologist’s office: Let nothing be done through strife or vain glory; let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus; do all things without murmurings and disputing; rejoice in the Lord; beware of evil workers; let your moderation be known to all men; whatsoever things are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of a good report—think on these things.

The choice between Christian psychology and all other psychological schools is clear-cut. As Kilpatrick says, “Our choice . . . is really the

your heart, receiving Jesus alone as your Savior, declaring, “[Jesus is Lord](#),” you will be saved from [judgment](#) and spend eternity with God in heaven.

What is your response?

[Yes, today I am deciding to follow Jesus](#)

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same choice offered to Adam and Eve: either we trust God, or we take the serpent's word that we can make ourselves into gods."¹⁴

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Notes:

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¹ William Kirk Kilpatrick, *Psychological Seduction* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 14.

² For a full discussion of Freud's psychology, see Armand M. Nicholi, Jr., *The Question of God: C. S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God, Love, Sex, and the Meaning of Life* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 2002). This work is the substance of a course at Harvard University under Dr. Armand M. Nicholi, Jr. in which he contrasts the worldview of C. S. Lewis with that of Sigmund Freud.

³ Kilpatrick, *Psychological Seduction*, 15–16.

⁴ Charles L. Allen, *God's Psychiatry* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1953), 7 (italics added).

⁵ Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (July 1984): 264–5. Cited in J.P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, *Body & Soul: Human Nature & the Crisis in Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 24.

⁶ Moreland and Rae, *Body & Soul*, 158.

⁷ J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 175: "General ontology is the most basic of metaphysics, and there are three main tasks that make up this branch of metaphysical study. First, general ontology focuses on the nature of existence itself. What is it to be or to exist? Is existence a property that something has? Etc."

⁸ Arthur Koestler and J.R. Smythies, eds., *Beyond Reductionism* (London, UK: Hutchinson Publishers, 1969), 251–2. For an updated discussion of identity, see Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 290f.

⁹ Arthur C. Custance, *Man in Adam and in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 256. Also see Wilder Penfield, *The Mystery of the Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975).

¹⁰ Francis Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*, 5 vols. (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 3:329.

¹¹ Paul Vitz, *Psychology as Religion* (Grand Rapids MI,: Eerdmans, 1985), 43.

¹² For an accounting of soul, spirit, mind, heart et. al., see J.P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, *Body & Soul: Human Nature & the Crisis in Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

¹³ Schaeffer, *Complete Works*, 3:334.

¹⁴ Kilpatrick, *Psychological Seduction*, 233.

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