

"THINK ON THESE THINGS" (Philippians 4:8)

A Critique of *Telling Yourself the Truth*, by William Backus & Marie Chapien and *The Lies We Believe*, by Chris Thurman

Much current "Christian" counseling is heavily rooted in Freud, promoting archaeological digs into the hidden recesses of one's past and strong encouragement to see oneself as a *victim* of the sins of others. In contrast to this increasingly popular approach, other Christian authors have opted for the cognitive techniques developed primarily by Albert Ellis, founder of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT).¹ Two key examples are *Telling Yourself the Truth* and *The Lies We Believe* (abbreviated as TYT and LWB).

Both Backus and Thurman give credit to Ellis for his ideas. However, it should be noted at the outset that Ellis is an aggressive atheist who believes that religious faith is grounded in "irrational" ideas and is evidence of mental instability. (See Discernment Publications' critique of Ellis in "Exposing the Roots" series.) At first glance, the cognitive approach may appear consistent with biblical teachings about renewal of the mind. Personal responsibility is a critical emphasis, in opposition to the prevalent "victim" theory that permeates too much modern counseling. However, as we shall explore more fully, there is nevertheless a wide chasm between the REBT of Albert Ellis and scriptural truth.

In addition to Albert Ellis, Thurman quotes and credits M. Scott Peck, a popular author who espouses New Age theology rather than Christian faith. He also considers Carl Jung "one of the leaders of modern psychology" (p. 165, LWB) and cites him favorably. Backus quotes stoic ruler Marcus Aurelius as a key source for his teachings (p. 16, TYT). Ellis' own writings reveal roots in modern existentialism (Sartre, Heidegger) and aberrant theology (Tillich). Backus naively believes that this eclectic mixtures leads to *biblical* truth:

"...the findings of psychological researchers as well as the probings of the greatest minds of history bring us to the truths set forth in the Holy Scriptures and the principles we share with you." (p. 9, TYT)

¹ According to the most recent information from the Institute for Rational-Emotive Therapy, directed by Albert Ellis and located in New York, Ellis' therapy is Rational-Emotive-**Behavior** Therapy. Formerly it was simply Rational-Emotive Therapy (RET).

Can we truly call Albert Ellis one of "the greatest minds of history"? This man demonstrates nothing but hatred for our faith, arrogant atheism, and blatant disregard for God's righteous standards. *Sin* impacts the *mind* in addition to all other aspects of man. An unbeliever, despite whatever intellectual brilliance he may possess, cannot lead us into *biblical* truth.

Still, Backus claims that his way "will work for you now" (p. 23, TYT). The stated purpose of *Telling Yourself the Truth* is "to help you possess the happiness you desire and to be the person you'd like to be" (p. 10, TYT). Note that the focus is on what you desire rather than on what God desires. This self-focus runs throughout the writings of "misbelief" psychology and is consistent with Ellis, but *not with the Bible*.

A major premise of this approach is that our thoughts *determine* our emotional responses. In the introduction to *The Lies We Believe*, Frank Minirth states:

"On an intellectual level and, most certainly, on an emotional level, we all wrestle with lies; and our response to them may very well determine our happiness or sadness, peace or worry, and mental health or mental disorders."
(foreword, LWB)

Scripture does emphasize the thoughts and the renewal of the mind. *Every* thought is to be taken captive in obedience to Christ. Emotions do not constitute the entire inner man, and certainly they are *related* to man's thoughts. However, the inner man also encompasses desires, will, imaginations, and such. Even more importantly, man *worships* either the creation or the Creator. The *Holy Spirit*, not self, is the primary agent for godly change--sanctification. Some of these basic biblical facts are glossed over in this reductionistic approach that promotes significant long-lasting changes *solely* through self-induced changes in thinking, termed "self-talk" by these authors.

The simplistic "A-B-C-D-E" approach of Albert Ellis is one that Thurman borrows and promotes (p. 55, 81 LWB):

A = the event
B = what you mentally tell yourself about that event, your "self-talk"
C = your emotional response to this "self-talk"
D = *truthful* "self-talk"
E = your new, more appropriate emotional response to "A"

Backus advocates a similar exercise, "three steps to becoming the happy person you were meant to be...

Locate your misbeliefs...

Remove them...

Replace misbeliefs with the truth." (p. 15, TYT)

It is surely important to know and believe the *truths* that God has revealed in Scripture. There are truths about God and truths about man. One of these important truths, again, is that sanctification is a work of God's grace through His Spirit and Word. "Misbelief" therapy bypasses the work of the Spirit, places only scarce attention on God's Word, and promises profound changes through the work of *self*, through the flesh.

Presuppositions

Certain basic assumptions form the foundation for the counseling approach promoted in these two books.

One of these is an emphasis on the power of *truth* in our thought life:

"Once we yank the irrationalities and lies from our thoughts and replace them with the *truth*, we can lead satisfying, rich and fulfilling emotional lives." (p. 16, TYT)

It is further assumed that *emotions* are produced by *thoughts*. Backus cites stoic ruler Marcus Aurelius, who:

"...saw that human emotion is not just a product of chance circumstances, but is determined by the way people *think*." (p. 16, TYT)

The converse of these assumptions is that emotional disturbances are created by wrong thinking:

"Misbeliefs are the *direct cause* of emotional turmoil, maladaptive behavior and most so-called 'mental illness.' Misbeliefs are the *cause* of the destructive behavior people persist in engaging in even when they are fully aware that it is harmful to them." (p. 17, TYT, emphasis added)

"Most of our unhappiness and emotional struggles are caused by the lies we tell ourselves.... Your emotional life hangs

in the balance. It directly reflects whether your mind is dominated by lies or truth." (p. 23-24, LWB)

Faith and "psychological laws." Backus believes that his cognitive approach works because it is grounded in psychological "laws":

"...its effectiveness depends upon very explicit psychological laws which are as universal as the law of gravity."
(p. 25, TYT)

The power ascribed to thinking is similar to the popular "faith movement" of some Christian ministries.² Backus notes that "Jesus kept telling people to believe, believe" (p. 27, TYT). Explaining further:

"'Faith' is a noun that refers to the act of *believing*. Jesus' statement clearly teaches that we can expect certain things in our lives to take place as a direct result of how we believe." (p. 27, TYT)

Jesus did, of course, tell people to *believe...in Him!* The faith of which He spoke was specifically a *faith in Him as Messiah, Lord, and Savior*. It wasn't merely a type of "faith in faith," or a "faith" in "psychological laws," but rather was directed toward one specific object: Jesus Christ Himself.

Thurman takes the implications of this assumption one step further. The responsibility for change, based on assumed "psychological laws," is placed wholly on man:

"This 'law' that governs the psychological world--that thoughts bear after their own kind--is actually one of the greatest messages of hope for us. Why? Because it makes emotional well-being available to anyone who is willing to dedicate him- or herself to knowing, believing, and practicing truth." (p. 24, LWB)

Man does, of course, have responsibility before God for his actions. However, the assumption that *man alone* can achieve necessary life changes solely through cognitive alterations, *is not a message of hope!* Man absolutely needs the power of God's Holy Spirit in order to be conformed to the image of Christ...to

² For a critique of this movement, I recommend *Christianity in Crisis*, authored by Hank Hanegraaff and published by Harvest House.

make *godly* changes, not merely changes that enhance his own self-interests.

Suffering. Another assumption concerns human suffering. Backus assumes that:

"The treachery and suffering of man is not from the hand of God, but from his own hand." (p. 40, TYT)

This is *false*, as any decent study of the book of Job will prove. God is *sovereign* over His creation, and although He is not the *author* of sin, He ordains whatsoever comes to pass for purposes of His own glory (Ephesians 1:11). Man does bring suffering on himself through his own sin, at times. He also suffers due to the sins of others. But God remains in control, working all things according to the counsel of His own will. This theological *truth* is critical to responding in a godly way to unjust suffering.

Idolatry. Much "misbelief therapy" concerns our human relationships. Here Backus makes an assumption that is biblically true:

"To ascribe the all-sufficiency of God to any person is idolatry." (p. 43, TYT)

He is right to say that one's life does not depend wholly on one other person or relationship. Note, however, that it would be far more biblical to examine the idolatry of the human heart, rather than to trace all emotional turmoil merely to *thinking*.

Man's Sinful Nature. Thurman, fortunately, refutes the assumption of some psychologists (Maslow is cited) that people are basically good (p. 76 & 78, LWB). He considers the history of mankind, as well as evidence "within ourselves--humanity seems bent individually toward self-destruction as much as growth" (p. 78, LWB). He also notes the teachings of Scripture and the fact that people all too often do not seek God:

"Spiritually, most people do not seek God or any form of meaning in life with much consistency or depth...the Bible teaches that we are corrupted by a sin nature." (p. 78, LWB)

So far, so good. The Bible clearly teaches that we have *all*, like sheep, gone astray (see Romans 3:10-18). There is none righteous, not even one. But Thurman is unwilling to accept the full extent of man's depravity as taught in Scripture:

"I don't agree with those who say we are *totally* evil and incapable of good. History also supports how loving and kind and noble people can be. We are created in God's image, and so we mirror His qualities too. We are capable, then, of tremendous good and tremendous evil, but as I see it, we are bent toward evil." (p. 79, LWB)

This author goes on to make the astounding claim that we ought to accept "the bad as well as the good within us" (p. 79, LWB). Yet God doesn't *accept* the evil within us, but rather sent His own Son to satisfy the requirements of His justice and holiness on the cross. Christ made propitiation for our sin; he never "accepted" it!

The Bible, however, teaches us the *truth* about man's total depravity. Consider, for example, this direct quote of God in the early chapters of Genesis:

"Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." (Genesis 6:5)

In Genesis 8:21, after the flood, God reaffirmed the fact that "the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth." Note that man's wickedness is extensive and total, covering every intent of his heart. Consider, also, the phrase "*only* evil." That evil is *continual*, and it exists *from youth*. In Psalm 51:5, David confirms the inherent sin nature of man *from birth*. The prophet Jeremiah tells us that the heart of man is "deceitful above all things" (Jeremiah 17:9). The apostle Paul writes, in Ephesians 2:1-3, that we are "by nature children of wrath." Jesus Himself explained that evil thoughts and deeds originate in the *heart* of man (Matthew 15:16-20). The awesome glory of the gospel is found in the fact that even *while we were yet sinners*, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8)! The *Christian* experiences a radical change at conversion, being set free from both the penalty and power of sin (although sin is not fully eradicated in this life). In addition to watering down the inherent total depravity of man, psychologists gloss over the radical distinction between Christian and unbeliever.

Free will, faith, and risk. Backus goes astray from Scripture when he considers man's "free will." Incredibly, he believes that *God took a risk* when He created man:

"Look at the risk God took when He created man with a free will. He took the risk that man might use his will to rebel

against God, his creator and protector. And that's just what happened.... We can't conclude that God didn't know what He was doing or that because He took a risk He acted impulsively or without judgment (as we accuse ourselves of doing when we take risks). To God the stakes were so high that the risk was worth it." (p. 132, TYT)

God didn't take a "risk" at any time! The first chapter of Ephesians gives believers the eternally comforting words that God chose them in Christ *before the foundations of the world*. God knew exactly what would happen! God knew that man would sin, and even prior to creation, His plan of redemption was fully formulated!

Backus also claims that our own faith involves taking a risk:

"Faith itself is a risk. You must trust God and act in faith in order to take that step you cannot see." (p. 133, TYT)

It is true that we must *trust* God, even at times when we cannot see the road ahead clearly (which is often!). However, our basic *faith in Christ as Savior* is not a "risk." Backus needs to make this clear, and he doesn't. Scripture assures us in 1 John that the Christian is able to *know* he has eternal life. There's no guesswork or risk here! Christ infallibly secured the salvation of all believers on the cross.

Thurman also spends time discussing man's "free will." He says that God won't interfere with it, and that "He will allow us to make unhealthy choices that bring painful consequences" (p. 144, LWB). In addition to our own "free will," others have it, too (p. 144, LWB).

"Free will" is no easy topic. Man is clearly responsible before God, and there is surely a sense in which he has *free agency* and makes certain choices--sinful choices with frequently painful consequences. However, Scripture clearly states that the unbeliever, who does not have the indwelling Spirit, is both *unwilling and unable* to do the will of God (Romans 8:7-8). These biblical limitations on "free will" ought to be made clear, without in any sense compromising *responsibility for sin*.

Thurman makes a few limited concessions, and inches closer to biblical truth, a few pages later:

"Sometimes God allows bad things to happen to good people because He wants to display His power...to help us mature."
(p. 147, LWB)

Yes! But read on. Thurman affirms God's sovereignty momentarily, then hesitates:

"He (God) can do anything He wants through anybody He wants, anytime, and no one can stop Him--except perhaps, if that 'anybody' says no." (p. 155, LWB)

This sentence should have been ended prior to the hyphen! No man can thwart the sovereign will of God.

The foundations of "misbelief" therapy are shaky. Certainly the Bible emphasizes truth, thinking, and the renewal of the mind. But Scripture does not place *sole* responsibility on our thoughts for *all*, or even *almost* all, emotional turmoil. Nor is *man alone* able to alter his thoughts so that they are godly. Furthermore, there is much, much more to sanctification than merely changing one's thoughts and emotions, or even thoughts, emotions, *plus* actions. God's purpose is to conform the Christian to the image of Christ (Romans 8:28-30), using His Spirit and Word. Exhortations are given to the believer *based on* his new position in Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

What is Truth?

Here is the "million-dollar question" posed by Pontius Pilate to our Lord. Most Christians are familiar with His famous line in John 8:32: "The truth will set you free." Psychologists love to quote this one...out of its full context. We need to examine the teachings of Backus and Thurman, along with taking a closer look at this passage of Scripture. What *truth* are we talking about here? And what specifically are we set free *from*?

Early in his book, Backus notes that "*truth* sets us free." He says that he therefore wants to "inject the truth into our every truth" (p. 10, TYT). It sounds good, but are we really talking about *biblical* truth?

Actually, if it isn't true, it isn't biblical. Nevertheless, many offer definitions of "truth" that fail to include any reference to God's eternal Word. Thurman defines truth as "reality as it is, not as it seems to be" (p. 25, LWB). He defines lies as "beliefs, attitudes, or expectations that don't fit reality" (p. 24, LWB). The Christian is vitally interested in

reality, of course. Our faith is grounded in real, historical facts, such as the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. In addition to historical accounts of these events, Scripture provides the truth that we need to know about God and about ourselves.

Ultimate truths. Thurman devotes some attention to what he calls "ultimate truths" which he believes "can only be learned through spiritual means" (p. 25, LWB), or more specifically, such truth must be revealed by God:

"Knowing the deeper, spiritual truths of life that lie below life's surface requires that we depend on a greater power than ourselves. It seems planned that way." (p. 25, LWB)

"We must rely on God as the ultimate source of truth in our lives. We can't rely on what feels true, what someone we trust tells us is true, or what our favorite speaker or author says is true.... The most critical pieces of truth...must be revealed by God and accepted by faith." (p. 166, LWB)

Certainly, we can agree about the necessity of God's revelation. Scripture speaks of that revelation in two ways. There is *general* revelation in nature, wherein God reveals His existence such that man is without excuse for not believing in Him (Romans 1:18ff; Psalm 19). God's plan of redemption, however, is provided only through the *special* revelation He has given in Scripture. We do not rely merely on some vaguely defined "higher power," however, but specifically on the God of the Bible. Also, our faith in God's Word is backed by *facts*. Indeed, without assuming that the God of Scripture exists, *nothing* makes sense.

Revelation and the limits of human knowledge. Unfortunately, Thurman brings in Carl Jung for support of his beliefs. He is correct to state that we don't know the whole truth, and that we learn "piece by piece" rather than all at once. Our knowledge as humans is limited. God alone has comprehensive knowledge. But here is what Thurman says about Jung:

"As Carl Jung, one of the leaders of modern psychology, put it, 'Are we related to something infinite or not? That is the telling question of life....' I agree with Jung.... whether or not there is an infinite being and whether or not we are related to it is life's most telling question.... If 'it' does exist, then we must ask, 'What is "it" like?' and 'What does "it" want?' My own answer to Jung's question is

'Yes!' and that the 'something infinite' is the Creator--God--and He alone knows the whole truth." (p. 165, LWB)

Carl Jung is an enemy of the Christian faith. Examining his beliefs leads inescapably to the conclusion that he is an *atheist*, because he denies the God of Scripture and locates his "god" solely *within man*. (See Discernment's publication about Jung.) The question is more than whether there is "something infinite." Thurman's statement implies that perhaps some other "something infinite" might be suitable for someone else. We can't merely reason from an indefinite "it" to the almighty Creator.

Black and white. One of the "distortion lies" examined by Thurman is "polarization" or thinking in "all or nothing extremes" (p. 116, LWB). He recognizes, however, that certain issues, such as the existence of God and the deity of Christ, truly are "black and white" and require such thinking. However, it is necessary to point out that there are *many more* such issues, such as God's moral standards. It would have been better to address *relativity*, rather than "polarization," as a "distortion lie."

"Emotional reasoning." Thurman rightly recognizes the error of determining truth on the basis of emotion: "Because I feel it to be true, it is true" (p. 126, LWB). Clearly, emotions are not the basis for truth. However, modern psychology all too often *does* attempt to base truth on emotions, "recovered memories," and the like!

Doubt. Thurman places a premium on doubt, which he considers "a God-given ability that helps us to take what we hear and test its truth" (p. 171, LWB). Furthermore, he insists that "we need to doubt many of our beliefs in order to know if they are true" (p. 171, LWB). According to this author:

"God wants us to doubt what we hear, even from a minister's mouth, so that we know *why* we believe what we believe."
(p. 172, LWB)

However, noting the example of Thomas, a doubting attitude shouldn't be taken to extremes:

"Doubt is good, to a point. Anyone, though, who needs repeated proof of the same truth may never make a commitment to it at all." (p. 173, LWB)

It is certainly biblical to be *discerning* about what we hear. What Thurman fails to highlight is that our "doubt," or rather

discernment, must be firmly rooted in God's Word. Specifically, we are to test what we hear by these divinely revealed standards. Pure "doubt," *apart from* the Scripture, is not a biblical concept.

"Unexciting truth." Thurman is right to note that "an unexciting truth can be eclipsed by a thrilling lie," such as the popular "health and wealth" gospel (p. 174, LWB). The problem here is one that is rooted in the sinful desires of the human heart. The whole approach of "misbelief therapy" fails to adequately address the sinful condition of the heart.

Truth is eternal. Thurman advises, on a rather pragmatic basis, that truth should be seen as eternal:

"If we do not see the truth as eternal, our commitment to it will be weak and we will be unable to use it to grow and mature." (p. 175, LWB)

God's truth is indeed eternal, as Scripture repeatedly affirms. It *really is* eternal, however. It's not merely a matter of *thinking* that it's eternal, in order "to use it to grow." This may seem like a minor distinction, but it's critical.

Truth and pain. Thurman ties together truth and pain in two ways. First, he notes that hearing the truth about ourselves is often painful. We may react with hurt and anger when we hear it from others (p. 170, LWB). Going beyond Thurman, *Scripture* tells us the truth about our own nature--our sin. Indeed, only the Holy Spirit can bring needed conviction about that sin.

Second, when Thurman interprets the phrase, "the truth shall set you free," he takes it to mean freedom from *unnecessary* pain, although not from *all* pain (p. 186, LWB). He differentiates between pain caused by truth, and pain caused by lies:

"Truth, when it does cause pain, generates constructive emotional and spiritual pain, while lies generate pain that sabotages personal growth." (p. 186, LWB)

But what did *Jesus Christ* mean when He stated that "the truth shall make you free" in John 8:32? Look at the whole sentence:

"Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, 'If you abide in My Word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.'" (John 8:31-32)

Look at His explanation, given to those Jews who didn't understand what He was talking about:

"Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. And the slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed.'" (John 8:34-36)

The *truth* to which Jesus referred was clearly *God's Word*, not a vague "reality" with no specific scriptural foundation. The *freedom* He promised was freedom from *sin*. No comments at all here about freedom from *pain*! "Misbelief therapy" is focused on the wrong kind of freedom: freedom from *pain* rather than freedom from *sin*.

Should We Avoid "Shoulds"?

The atheist (Ellis) who founded Rational-Emotive Behavior therapy is a man who violently rejects absolutes of any kind--absolute truth, absolute moral values, absolute commands. His entire system would crumble if he admitted that *shoulds* cannot be avoided. Of all people, Christians *should* be aware that absolutes do exist!

Backus, however, picks up the anti-"shoulds" attitude of Ellis when he approaches relationships:

"If we lay down our lives out of guilt and self-hate, we are not fulfilling the very meaning of the verse, 'Greater love has no man'...." (p. 107, TYT)

Looking at 1 Corinthians 13, it is true that without love, we are nothing. As believers, we lay down our lives for the cause of Christ because we love Him. And we love Him because He first loved us. But Backus wants to avoid the concept of *obligation* in our relationships with others. There is a mixture of truth and error in what he has to say.

First, he says that we have "only two basic obligations," love for God and love for others (p. 141, TYT). Yet he considers it a "misbelief" to think "that human relationships are alliances of obligation" (p. 141, TYT). He defines "false obligations" as rooted in such statements as "I ought to" or "I owe." But obligations of love he words as "I choose to," "I'd like to," or "I want to because I care," explaining that:

"It's a matter of bondage versus liberty; law versus freedom; letter and code versus Spirit and life." (p. 142, TYT)

"You're a person given a choice to love other people and love yourself without fear, manipulation, guilt, or obligation. The Bible tells us that it is *love* that fulfills the law, not duty or responsibility or obligation." (p. 144, TYT)

"The old law of demands, obligations, and expectations shall no more rule over us. We are now under the law of grace. We're free." (p. 148-149, TYT)

There is an inherent assumption *that guilt is always bad* when Backus says that:

"The words *I ought to* are preludes to feelings of guilt.... True freedom is the opportunity to *choose* to act and live as you ought. We have the glorious opportunity to discover the personality of Jesus, to choose love over manipulation, guilt, and false obligation." (p. 142, TYT)

One fairly valid observation occurs when Backus says that:

"The answer is not to learn to love everything we do for one another; it's learning to stop hurling unloving and ungodly demands at each other." (p. 143, TYT)

Examining our *own* actions, we can agree with Backus that we ought not to make unloving demands of *others*. However, he does advocate *asking* others for what we want from them:

"You stop manipulating when you come right and state what it is you want. Manipulation plays on guilt." (p. 147, TYT)

Scripture exhorts us to esteem others ahead of self and not to seek solely our own interests (Philippians 2:3-4). However, the bulk of his discussion centers on our responses to the demands placed on us *by* others. Here his teachings are clearly erroneous.

First of all, Backus creates a false dichotomy between *love* and *obligation*. Love does not exclude obligation in our relationships. A husband *ought to* love his wife as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:28), and parents *ought to* raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. This list could be multiplied from biblical exhortations. The presence of obligation does not exclude love.

Furthermore, being "under grace" does not mean that we are free from our obligation to obey the law of God. Our eternal salvation is granted by God's grace, and our sanctification is a work of God's grace through His Spirit. By the power of the indwelling Spirit, we are enabled to *fulfill our obligations*. We are set free *from sin, unto obedience*. We are not free to disregard our biblical obligations to others.

Backus takes some space within this discussion to discuss *desires*. He says that "some Christians have a deep suspicion of their own desires" (p. 144, TYT). However, those desires are not sinful when they line up with God's Word; selfish, ungodly desires "need to be laid at the foot of the cross" (p. 145, TYT). As a Christian, Backus notes, "you are a completely different person from the self-seeking sinner you once were," but "the question is, do you *really believe* you're a completely new person?" (p. 145, TYT, emphasis added).

It is good that Backus has brought *desires* into the picture, rather than concentrating *only* on thoughts. Desires, thoughts, imaginations, and intentions are all part of the inner man, the heart. Scripture states that the "old man," apart from Christ, is being corrupted by deceitful *desires*. As Backus notes, the believer is a completely new person. Certainly, the believer needs to be instructed about the life-changing truths of Scripture. He needs to understand his position in Christ, and the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. *Desires* of the heart are part of the radical change, so that the believer is inclined to love the Lord who has bought him with His own blood. Note, however, that the process of changing the heart involves more than *merely* changes in thinking. Also, it is possible to both love and at the same time fulfill God-given *obligations* to others.

The Process of Change

Every counseling method involves some basic assumptions about *who* is primarily responsible for change, and *how* that change is to occur. Certain *goals* are involved in the process. The cognitive method is no exception.

Who is responsible for change? Is it the counselor? Or the person being counseled? Or *Someone else*? Backus tells us early in his book that "we use methods of achieving happiness that make us *unhappy*" (p. 9, TYT). This statement implies that *happiness* is the primary goal of change. In addition, it implies that the *person being counseled* is primarily responsible for changes in his own life. Just a page later, Backus makes this promise:

"You don't have to be a victim of circumstances, events, relationships. You don't have to be trapped by persistent painful emotions." (p. 10, TYT)

People typically want to shift blame to others for their unhappiness, according to Backus, who asks this probing question:

"But what are we *telling* ourselves about these circumstances?" (p. 13, TYT)

Not far into the book, it becomes crystal clear that the *counselor* is not the primary agent for change in this approach:

"A misbelief that is frequently encountered in psychotherapy is that it is the *therapist's* job to make the client a well-adjusted and happy person." (p. 23, TYT)

Notice again the implicit assumption that *happiness* is the main goal. Backus later is even more explicit about responsibility for change:

"You are in control of your happiness or unhappiness. You make the choice to be happy." (p. 119, TYT)

"Your attitudes, choices, and beliefs make you what you are." (p. 125, TYT)

Thurman makes similar comments:

"The truth about change...is that you must *want* to." (p. 30, LWB)

The general plan of attack put forth by Backus is this:

"Listen to the words you tell yourself, *argue* against those words, and *replace* the misbelief with the truth." (p. 75, TYT)

The factor of personal *choice* is a key ingredient:

"When you tell yourself you can't do without something or that it's terrible you have to suffer discomfort or you just can't help yourself, you're engaging in an activity called *choosing*." (p. 92, TYT)

Interestingly, however, in a later chapter subtitled "when the truth does *not* set us free," Backus focuses on the *counselor*. He lists a number of reasons why hearing the truth *may not help*: the counselor lacks love, fails to hear the troubled person, fails to learn about him, beats him over the head with Scripture, seems to have all the answers instantly, or gives the impression that he is a better person than the individual he is counseling (p. 177, TYT). "There are no pat answers to emotional suffering," Backus admits here. Evidently, *success* can be credited to the person who is counseled, but *failure* lands at the door of the counselor. Meanwhile, where is the *Holy Spirit*, who by His power and Word sanctifies the believer and conforms him to the image of Christ?

Backus isn't silent on this. At one point, he makes a biblical statement on the matter:

"Christ, living within us by His Holy Spirit, will have the chief position in our lives! This thundering truth is the very purpose for writing this book." (p. 100, TYT)

Perhaps this truth is the *intended* purpose for *Telling Yourself the Truth*, but--sadly--the heavy emphasis on *self* obscures that purpose. In fact, giving full credit to the Lord is considered a "misbelief":

"One misbelief that prevents some Christians from rewarding themselves for real accomplishments is the notion that they didn't do it--it was the Lord who did it.... It is true that out of our old sinful selves no good thing can flow. It is true that without the Holy Spirit at work within, we can do nothing good. But it is also true that with the Holy Spirit at work within, we do the good." (p. 99, TYT)

Applying this to the arena of saving faith, the author says:

"You do the believing. It is not the Holy Spirit's faith, but *your* faith which saved you." (p. 99, TYT)

Yes, it is *your* faith. But that faith is God's *gift* to you, not of yourself that you might boast--or reward yourself for it!

"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, that no one should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:8-10)

The teachings of Backus here require much caution. It is biblical to emphasize personal responsibility before God, and to avoid shifting blame for sin. But this author--and in fact the entire approach advocated in these two books--gives credit to man rather than glory to God.

Backus provides us with a restatement of the popular "God-helps-those-who-help-themselves" philosophy, which, incidentally, is not in Scripture:

"And to the new person, the person who takes a stand against misbeliefs that deny the power and glory of God, He gives His blessing." (p. 124, TYT)

This statement, along with the general teaching of the book, fails to acknowledge the divine *initiative* that undergirds both salvation and sanctification. We do have responsibilities and we do perform actions, but only by God's *grace* can any of our thoughts, actions, or feelings be pleasing to Him.

The Process of Change. Much of the "misbelief" approach is rooted in human techniques. We saw earlier the A-B-C-D-E process borrowed from Albert Ellis. In addition, Thurman mentions a "thought stopping" technique (also thanks to Ellis), wherein you are to focus on your anxiety-producing thought for 15 to 30 seconds, then shout "stop!" or make some other loud noise (p. 156, LWB). In his closing chapter, Thurman outlines a particular four-phase pattern that he believes will apply to replacing certain thought patterns with truth. The first phase involves living in pain, the "neurotic paradox" where "you hang on to certain ways of acting or thinking even though they are self-destructive or painful" (p. 178, LWB). Second, the pain becomes even worse..."at the very point where you try to change your lies, emotional pain in your life increases" (p. 179, LWB). Later, although some pain remains, there is a move toward pleasure (p. 179, LWB). Finally, the fourth phase is one of plateau, yet a time to continue working so that your accomplishments are not washed away (p. 180, LWB). Like Backus, Thurman states that it's *all up to you* whether or not you remain in "phase four," based on "whether or not you stay dedicated to the truth or revert back to the lie" (p. 183, LWB).

Summarizing all of this, we must conclude that "misbelief" therapy is fundamentally man-centered rather than God-centered. The goal of change is primarily happiness or pleasure; Albert Ellis calls this "long-range hedonism"! Man, rather than the Holy Spirit, is the primary agent for change. What we have here is

primarily a *works* arrangement, replacing God's *grace* effecting godly changes in the lives of His people.

The Failure of Freud

The cognitive approach may well be attractive to those who are weary of Freudianism and its destruction of personal responsibility. Backus notes that Freudian philosophy presently dominates our culture and "has nearly made it mandatory to believe that no one can be healed psychologically without exploring the past in detail and in depth" (p. 17, TYT). He strongly disagrees:

"It is not, however, events either past or present which make us feel the way we feel, but our *interpretation of those events.*" (p. 17, TYT)

However, while calling the Freudian theory of personality "frequently erroneous," Backus nevertheless insists that sometimes a problem is better understood by examining its history: "often our thoughts and beliefs originate in childhood" (p. 25, TYT). He advises an examination of childhood in order to uncover misbeliefs learned during early years and current misbeliefs about the events of your childhood (p. 25-26, TYT). There is an element of truth in such an approach, but caution is needed. Any examination of "misbeliefs," about childhood events or anything else, should be conducted according to *biblical* truth. For example, it is important for the Christian to understand that *God*, for His own purposes and glory, has foreordained the events of his life. (See the paper, "Christians in Crisis," published by Discernment.)

One of the "self lies" considered in Thurman's book is that "it's somebody else's fault" (p. 51, LWB). This "misbelief" allows shifting of blame to others for all of your emotional turmoil. Certainly, it is a relief to see a psychologist nail the popular "victimization" theory that permeates all too much modern counseling. At this point, the author is to be commended for his departure from Freudianism.

However, Freudian influence is not entirely absent from cognitive counseling! Thurman buys into the "unconscious" theory, a concept incompatible with biblical truth. For example, he says concerning the "marital lies" examined in one chapter that they:

"...are not lies most married couples would consciously admit to believing. Rather, the lies affect them on an unconscious level, which makes confronting the lies much more difficult." (p. 86, LWB)

Similar reasoning undergirds Thurman's thinking about unexpressed emotions:

"The belief that we shouldn't feel what we feel often results in 'stuffing....' The feelings don't really go away, though. They stay buried in the unconscious or subconscious."
(p. 151, LWB)

The Freudian "unconscious" is a reservoir of "repressed" feelings and memories from childhood. It *destroys* the responsibility that these authors so desperately want to maintain. It is inconsistent with their own man-centered concept of responsibility, and even more diametrically opposed to *biblical* responsibility.

Freud pops up again when Thurman discusses the "God's-love-must-be-earned" lie (p. 135, LWB). The origin of this lie, he teaches, is in the conditional love of our parents:

"Then as we grew up and started to understand the concept called 'God,' we transferred our feelings toward our parents onto God." (p. 137, LWB)

This is an interesting example of the *eclectic* approach of "Christian psychology." This statement is pure Freudianism. Freud was an aggressive *atheist* who taught that belief in God originated in parent-child relationships. Ellis, an equally devout atheist, insists that belief in God is *irrational*. Thurman mixes the theories of these two atheists to combat a "religious lie" that God's love must be earned. He pits one atheist against another, rather than turning to the pure truth of God's Word. People do erroneously believe that God's love can be earned, or rather that their *salvation* is by works rather than grace. But nowhere does Scripture attribute that error to the conditional love of parents. Nor does the Bible ever teach that relationship with God is in any way grounded in the parent-child relationship.

Freud is refuted in these cognitive therapies, but not entirely! He falls only to rise and haunt us once again.

Emotions

Contrary to what might be conveyed by first impressions, *emotions* are of major concern to cognitive therapists. However, one key teaching is that emotions are *determined* by thoughts:

"Inconvenient, annoying, unfortunate, unpleasant stimuli will always exist. You, however, control your own feelings. *Thinking creates feelings.*" (p. 76, TYT)

"Feelings...are just feelings. They change quite a bit, they are hard to predict, and they often spring from irrational and unrealistic ways of thinking." (p. 126, LWB)

"Epictetus' truth: we can't blame *events* for our feelings because our *feelings* are caused by our *thoughts*.... The bottom line is that we mold our emotional lives by the way we choose to think about what happens to us." (p. 54, LWB)

Thurman notes the extensiveness of this teaching, which reaches even to events like the death of a loved one--events where most people experience similar feelings:

"The people involved share the same belief system, the belief that death is a bad thing, and that is why they are all reacting in a similar way." (p. 52, LWB)

Both authors make a point of not promoting the *denial* of emotions. Backus states that his "truth-telling" is definitely not denial:

"We're speaking the truth, not making stupid remarks about not having the emotions we were born with." (p. 42, TYT)

It isn't particularly clear how we are "born with" our emotions and yet *determine* those same emotions by our thoughts!

Thurman advocates the expression or ventilation of emotion (Freud peeks in on us yet again):

"Allow yourself to hurt and feel depressed! Get it out of your system so you don't have to carry it around the rest of your life! Grieve through it and then move on."
(p. 152, LWB)

Backus promotes the power of thinking when he teaches that thoughts can change even your biochemistry, which in turn impacts your emotions (p. 26, TYT).

Later in *Telling Yourself the Truth*, Backus recognizes the complexity in emotional suffering. Various answers promulgated include unconscious conflict, genes, chemical imbalance, and:

"Then there are the religious folk who insist emotional trouble is always due to unrepented sin and lack of faith.... In actuality, there may be some truth in all these theories, but none of them in themselves is sufficient explanation and cure for all disordered behavior." (p. 178, TYT)

Some improvement *occasionally* follows each method, according to Backus, but none is "the answer" (p. 178, TYT). This sounds remarkably like the *rejection of all absolutes* that is an essential pillar to the system of Albert Ellis. There are, to be sure, physiological factors that influence emotion. Unrepented sin may well be a factor, one grossly neglected by psychological counseling. Still, it would be a mistake to insist that *all* negative emotions directly result from one's own sin.

But the believer has better answers in God's Word. There is a full range of emotions in Scripture; note particularly the Psalms. The believer is not always "happy" and is not to seek pleasure as his primary goal. However, firmly anchored in *God's* truth, and in the assurance of his eternal inheritance, he can face his trials with joy and confidence:

"Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces perseverance, and perseverance must have its complete work in you, that you might be mature and complete, lacking nothing." (James 1:2-4)

Backus divides his book into chapters about specific misbeliefs. Some of these address particular emotions. Let's look at some of them more closely.

Anger. Backus believes that anger is generated and perpetrated by misbeliefs. When those misbeliefs are changed, he says, the relationships *may* change drastically, but "*always* the person who works to change misbeliefs will benefit even if the other person does not change" (p. 51, TYT).

Backus reveals certain beliefs that he holds concerning anger:

1. It is not a "single moral problem," contrary to what many Christians believe, and it doesn't disappear just because you wish it would (p. 46-47, TYT).

2. Anger is an inherent part of human nature (p. 47, TYT).

3. Anger is sustained by misbeliefs, while "constant repeating of the truth generates peace and health" (p. 51, TYT). Anger is made worse by misbeliefs such as "I must never get angry" or "I'm not angry" (p. 55, TYT).
4. Anger in itself is not necessarily sinful, but our responses may be (p. 52, TYT, citing Ephesians 4:26).
5. Sometimes anger should be expressed (p. 52, TYT, citing Matthew 18:15-17, which is *not* a passage about expressing anger, but rather about confronting the sin of another person for purposes of reconciliation!). Anger should not be hypocritically hidden (p. 59, TYT).
6. Ventilation is likely to increase aggression (p. 52, TYT, contrary to Freud!).
7. "Anger is behavior...responses of your body and mind to a stimulus." (p. 53, TYT)
8. Remaining angry is a choice (p. 53, TYT).
9. Anger has no *necessary* connection with another person's behavior, but arises from your own "self-talk" (p. 53, TYT).
10. Angry feelings should be identified immediately and talked about, although sometimes it is possible to take care of your anger with the Lord alone (p. 59, TYT).
11. If another person is angry with you, the problem is *theirs*, and should not be made *yours* (p. 61, TYT). However, your own faults should be acknowledged where applicable, and the anger of others toward you is not a disaster (p. 60, TYT).
12. Pray about answers rather than rehearsing grievances (p. 61, TYT).

Backus also lists what he considers common *misbeliefs* about anger (p. 51, TYT):

1. Anger is always bad, and Christians should never be angry.
2. Ventilation (throwing things and such) is good.
3. Anger is best suppressed rather than expressed.

4. It's right to be angry when another person doesn't live up to your expectations.

5. It's outrageous when others don't treat you as they should.

The focus of this critique is not on anger (see Discernment's publication, "Ephesians 4:26--Concession or Command?"), but a couple of comments are in order. First, the author has certain specific beliefs *about* anger that will influence how he counsels. Cognitive counseling is not a *neutral*, value-free approach as claimed by its founder, Albert Ellis. One major point here is that cognitive counseling approaches anger as being the direct result of *thinking*. The Bible provides the believer with *everything* necessary for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3), including *everything* he needs to know about handling anger God's way. It isn't necessary to look to Ellis or any other psychologist for such knowledge. Furthermore, the scriptural approach penetrates the depths of the human heart, *including but not limited to* the thoughts of the heart.

Anxiety. Albert Ellis frequently uses the term "awfulizing," a type of thinking common to anxious people (p. 65, TYT). Anxiety is defined by Backus as fear where no real danger exists, exaggeration of actual danger, or imagined negative results (p. 68, TYT). Backus sees anxious people as being overly concerned about pleasing other people:

"The central theme running through the misbeliefs in anxiety is that what other people think about me is of such crucial importance that I must anticipate it in advance of all my actions. I must do all I can in order to prevent others from thinking badly of me. If they think badly of me, it will be a mortal blow to me. It would be terrible." (p. 66, TYT)

"This philosophy that says you should be liked and appreciated by one and all is not only silly, it's non-biblical...Jesus never told us to go out and take a course in how to get people to like us. He told us to love *Him*, trust *Him*, have faith in *Him*, glorify *Him*, and to genuinely care about others."
(p. 67, TYT)

Biblically, the *anxiety* problem described here is the fear of man. "The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord will be exalted" (Proverb 29:25). Such fear of man is to be

replaced with the reverential fear of God. The author is right on this specific point. He goes on to recommend that you not avoid anxiety-producing situations, *telling yourself* that you don't need to fear unpleasant emotions (p. 73, TYT). However, more than a mere change of thoughts is needed. There's a serious issue of *worship* here. Do we *worship* and *serve* the Creator, or the *creation*? Merely attempting to change one's thoughts--"it isn't a disaster if others don't like me"--is inadequate, failing to address the most critical heart issues.

Self-Talk, Self-Worth, Self-Acceptance, Self-Esteem, Self-Hate, Self-Love, Self-Evaluation, Self-Rewards

One of the cornerstones of Albert Ellis' therapy is unconditional *self-acceptance*. He advises strongly against *self-evaluation*, *self-esteem*, or *self-worth*, promoting only an *acceptance* of self without conditions. Backus and Thurman do not totally concur with Ellis, but *self* remains a focus of their attention.

Self-Talk. Backus defines "self-talk" as "the words we tell ourselves in our thoughts...about people, self, experiences, life in general, God, the future, the past, the present" (p. 28, TYT). As noted earlier, Backus believes that lies and misbeliefs *originate in this self-talk* (p. 28, TYT). *Self*, in this counseling system, is the focal point. Biblically, *God* should be the focus. *He* is the primary agent effecting change in the believer, and it is *His* glory that should be foremost. Backus does contrast a number of negative "self-talk" statements with sentences that begin with "thank you, Lord" (p. 30, TYT), but the general approach remains much too *self-oriented*.

Peace with Self. Backus emphasizes being at peace with self:

"Pursuing peace means to choose it. You will never have peace if you are putting yourself down. The peaceful person is the one who is at peace with himself." (p. 35, TYT)

There is a building up of self implicit in this statement. Contrary to Scripture, peace with *self* is the emphasis rather than peace with *God*. God's Word never instructs us to pursue peace with *self*. Rather, the atoning work of Christ brings about peace with *God*, and we are instructed to live at peace with *others* to the extent that it depends on us (Romans 12:18).

Self-Evaluation. Albert Ellis, rejecting the truth of God, repudiates any attempts to evaluate self, advocating a mere *acceptance* of self without standards. It's no wonder; Ellis has no standards! Happily, Backus turns us back to Scripture in setting standards for evaluation of self:

"Are you comparing yourself and your life with someone else who seems better in some way, or are you looking at yourself in the light of God's Word?" (p. 31, TYT)

Backus also says to "choose to say truthful things about yourself to yourself" (p. 33, TYT). On the surface, this is a true statement. However, a really truthful evaluation of self, in the light of God's righteous, holy standards, *does not* lead to a positive evaluation! Isaiah was a righteous man by human standards, but when he entered the presence of God, he was *undone* by God's holiness! Any "self-esteem" or "self-worth" he might have had was totally bulldozed. Yet such a negative self-evaluation is precisely what is needed for *repentance*, saving faith, and continued growth in godliness.

Self-Rewards. Backus believes that "you don't control your behavior by putting yourself down or finding fault with yourself" (p. 98, TYT). He strongly advises the use of self-rewards (p. 96-97, TYT):

- ...for small successes
- ...for accomplishing something you have wanted to accomplish
- ...when you've exhibited self-control (but Backus also says: "Do not wait to reward yourself"!)
- ...even when nobody else rewards you
- ...when you've worked hard
- ...with words

"Self-rewards" recommended by Backus include:

- Words of appreciation
- Activities you enjoy
- Token awards
- Helping others learn
- Enjoying joy and confidence

This heavy concentration on rewarding of *self* is found nowhere in Scripture, nor is it compatible with biblical exhortations to focus on loving and serving God, confident of our eternal inheritance in Christ.

Self-Worth. Unlike Ellis, who is concerned with self-acceptance rather than self-worth, Backus places much emphasis on self-worth:

"If we do not find worth in what we are and what we have now, we will tell ourselves we are less important than others or we have less than others. When we tell ourselves these things, we create unrest within ourselves." (p. 32, TYT)

Backus notes a three-stage downward progression in the development of depression, and it all begins with a devaluing of *self* (p. 39, TYT). This is no minor matter in his writing.

Citing one of his own clients as an example, Backus traces anxiety and lack of self-worth to early childhood influences:

"Suzie feels anxious because she has been *conditioned* to feel that way.... In time, if Suzie has enough of these painful experiences--that is, breaks enough glasses and receives enough insults and spankings--she will develop anxiety that spreads into her very feelings of self-worth." (p. 63, TYT)

In later life experiences, Backus looks at the expectations of other people as a major factor contributing to lack of self-worth:

"Living up to others' expectations will wear down the best of us and cause us to lose our own sense of self-worth to the all-prevailing menace of others-worth." (p. 182, TYT)

However, in spite of these powerful influences, the burden for change remains with *self*, according to Backus:

"Happy is something you teach yourself to be.... You teach yourself to be contented because YOU have decided you are a worthwhile person. You know you are a worthwhile person because *God* says so!" (p. 169, TYT)

The "self-worth" promoted by Thurman is similar to the "self-acceptance" advocated by Ellis in that it is in no way based on performance:

"Many...driven people reach the point of suicide when their tendency to equate worth with performance makes them experience feelings of failure and self-hate." (p. 65, LWB)

Scripture does not tell us to place inherent value on ourselves. However, we are created in God's image for the purpose

of glorifying *Him*. Our fall into sin is all the more grievous because we are His image. It is God alone who is worthy of praise, glory, and honor:

"Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." (Revelation 5:12)

Self-Esteem. The contemporary focus on building self-esteem is an idea whose time should never have come. Both Backus and Thurman have bought it, however.

Backus cautions against speaking evil of yourself:

"It is not pleasing to the Lord when we speak evil of anyone, or for that matter, when we speak evil *period*. To speak of yourself in a belittling or destructive way is, in His sight, evil." (p. 34, TYT)

The prophet Isaiah said:

"Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." (Isaiah 6:5)

The apostle Paul, who was called by God to write a significant portion of the New Testament, said this of himself:

"It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. And yet for this reason I found mercy, in order that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience, as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life." (1 Timothy 1:15-16)

Do these sound like exhortations to speak highly of self? Or prohibitions against "putting down" yourself? Hardly. Yet Thurman insists that self-esteem and self-worth result from dedication to the truth:

"There is a direct, inescapable connection between our self-esteem and whether or not we are dedicated to truth.... The moment we wrap our lives around lies, genuine feelings of self-worth are virtually impossible." (p. 168, LWB)

Yet Isaiah, in the presence of God's pure holiness, saw the grim reality of his own sin and was *undone*. Dedication to *truth* is not likely to increase self-esteem, but rather to uncover the depths of sin lurking in the human heart. But the believer knows that God has taken the initiative to *save* him, and to *recreate* him in the image of Christ--not because of his great merits or worth, but *in spite of* his total depravity. The glorious message of the gospel cannot be fully appreciated apart from the gravity of sin, a fact obscured by modern self-esteem teachings.

Thurman goes on to speak against what he calls "scum/saint" thinking:

"Many of my patients view themselves as either completely scummy or completely saintly, or they flip back and forth between the two.... When aimed inward, the label of 'scum' breeds nothing but low self-esteem and depression, while the label of 'saint' breeds arrogance and 'holier than thou' feelings." (p. 116-117, LWB)

A proper understanding of the New Testament term "saint" corrects the problems noted here. A *saint* is hardly what the common term "holier than thou" brings to mind. A *saint* is a person called by the sovereign Lord, according to His own good pleasure and grace, not because of the person's own righteousness and/or works. Scripture calls *all* believers "saints," because they are *sanctified*, set apart to belong to God. By His Spirit, God progressively transforms His saints so that they are conformed to the image of His Son.

Christians, even though *saints* according to God's Word, are exhorted not to think too highly of themselves:

"For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith." (Romans 12:3)

Thurman does warn against pride, which "can set the stage for committing sins because you aren't watching your blind spot" (p. 119, LWB). Nevertheless, he promotes self-esteem:

"What...should be the basis of self-esteem? I believe that comes from who made us, not what we do...who we are in God's eyes.... God sees us having great worth because He created us in His image. Now that is a true basis for self-esteem." (p. 66-67, LWB)

Actually, that is a basis for glorifying *God*, and for following His exhortations to treat *others* well:

"But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father; and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be this way."
(James 3:8-10)

Thurman devotes a fair amount of attention to **perfectionism** and attempts to gain the approval of others. He says of perfectionists that:

"They have unrealistically high standards they have never met and can't possibly meet, yet they hang on to these standards as if they are objects of worship." (p. 37, LWB)

"Each of us feels inferior to one degree or another."
(p. 37, citing Alfred Adler)

The term "objects of worship" should be given more emphasis. Here is the heart of sin; man worships and serves the creation rather than the Creator. But Thurman counsels the "perfectionist" to *accept* himself, rather than to smash his idols:

"Perfectionism is a hard lie to break. Breaking it demands that the perfectionist treat him or herself with respect, allowing for the same mistakes as other mortals make and acknowledging that the efforts are worthy in and of themselves." (p. 41, LWB)

But our efforts, "in and of themselves," are anything *but* worthy:

"For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away." (Isaiah 64:6)

The so-called "perfectionist" needs to know God's *grace*. He needs *salvation*, which is totally a work of divine grace, being fully grounded in the righteousness of *Christ*.

Similar to "perfectionism" is the attempt to gain love and approval from other people:

The "lie": "I must have everyone's love and approval.... Unless everybody loves and accepts me, I can't feel good about myself." (p. 42, LWB)

"In the attempt to gain everyone's love and approval through chronic acquiescence...we may lose ourselves.... This lie puts your emotional well-being into the hands of people who may not be trustworthy." (p. 44-45, LWB)

But again, "feeling good about ourselves" is not a biblically valid goal. And Jesus cautioned *against* attempts to save ourselves, exhorting us rather to be willing to *lose* ourselves *for His sake*:

"He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life shall lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake shall find it." (Matthew 10:37-39)

Self-Love. Backus repeats the error of many modern psychologists when he claims that love of *self* is a prerequisite for loving *others*:

"You can't honor your neighbor as he ought to be if you don't give any honor to yourself. At best your feelings are neurotic and self-debasing. God does not want us debased. He wants us healthy and sound of mind. The self-debaser flatters others to get their approval. If others don't approve of him, he feels worthless. His own good opinions of himself don't mean a thing. Other people's opinions are what count." (p. 105, TYT)

"You love yourself; therefore you can love others."
(p. 112, TYT)

Jesus specifically stated *two* commandments: first, to love God with your entire being, and second, to love others *as yourself*. He clearly assumes that you *already do* love yourself. Paul makes that assumption even more explicit in his instructions to husbands:

"So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church." (Ephesians 5:28-29)

If *no one ever hated his own flesh*, we certainly have no need for modern psychologists to encourage an increase in self-love!!

But they continue to do exactly that. Backus says that loving others as *yourself* means:

"...to consider the needs of others as *equally* important with your own.... It means that other people are not less important than you and they are also not more important than you." (p. 106, TYT)

Before we critique this, listen to his list of "misbeliefs" in this area (p. 106, TYT):

- (1) "It is more Christian to please other people than to please myself."
- (2) "It is wrong and un-Christian to think of my own needs, or to consider my own needs important, compared to the wants of others."
- (3) "Pleasing others is an insurance policy which guarantees that people will be nice to me in return."
- (4) "It is wrong not to be willing to forget my own wants to please friends and family when they want me to."

The second and fourth "misbeliefs" are concerned with the *desires* of others rather than the true *needs* of others. The difference is crucial. We are not taught in Scripture to cater to every demand of others. Some of those demands and desires may be ungodly, or may not work for the real good of that other individual. The third "misbelief" is one that focuses on *self*, so we can agree with Backus that it is an erroneous belief. However, Scripture *does* instruct us to consider others more important than self:

"Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interest of others."
(Philippians 2:3-4)

There is, to be sure, an assumption that you will in some sense look out for your own interests. There is a certain amount of reasonable self-care that does not constitute "selfishness or empty conceit," but such self-interest is very basic, not the

excessive self-concern promoted by psychologists today. Psychologists regularly gloss over the biblical fact that man by nature seeks to satisfy his own desires and interests.

Thurman does bring in, at least briefly, the Christian's obligation to *please God* rather than other people (p. 113, LWB). He further notes that:

"The question to answer is not: Is someone else expecting it of me? but rather, *Is God directing me to do it?*"
(p. 113, LWB)

This is a good point, *but* the author also says that:

"Frequently, God's will for you will require that you consider your own needs first and set aside the wishes of others." (p. 113, LWB)

Sometimes, perhaps, but "frequently"? Also, at times the *wishes* of others must be set aside, but as noted earlier, *wishes* do not equal genuine *needs*.

Self-Acceptance. Backus' basic teachings about self-love, self-worth, and self-acceptance are supposedly grounded in God's attitude toward us:

"Self-worth...does not depend on others' opinions, but upon God's declaration.... A most godly thing for you to do is to have respect and love for yourself.... Loving yourself is to be content with yourself whether or not other people approve of you. With God's approval, you no longer are compelled to *earn* love and acceptance. You're free to be you--for better or worse." (p. 111, TYT)

Since when does Scripture say to "be you--for better or worse"? The Bible provides us with *God's* standards. Nowhere is such unconditional "self-acceptance" condoned. The believer is to live to please God, certainly, but being "content with yourself" is never stated as a biblical goal.

"Even if everyone disliked you and disapproved of you, you could still survive.... You can be released from the grip of self-hate when you freely and fully know the approval of God is far more precious than the approval of people."
(p. 114, TYT)

It is true that we don't require the approval of man, but rather we seek to please God. As Paul said:

"For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ." (Galatians 1:10)

However, the believer isn't striving to be "released from the grip of self-hate."

Although he discourages seeking the approval of man, Backus believes it can be obtained if it isn't sought:

"When you stop striving to get the approval of others, you'll gain it without trying. When you like yourself, others will like you, too. When you accept yourself, others will accept you, too." (p. 112, TYT)

Nowhere does Scripture make this type of promise. The approval of man may or may not be forthcoming. The believer is exhorted to willingly endure persecution, even martyrdom, for the cause of the gospel of Christ. But such exhortations are galaxies removed from the self-oriented teachings of modern psychology, including this cognitive approach.

Backus recognizes that many people fight their depression with "self-centered retaliation," exalting and looking out for self. He acknowledges the error of such a response:

"This philosophy is costly because there is no way to love others as long as the star of the great show is you...Jesus Christ is the foundation of our lives, not ourselves alone and not another person or persons." (p. 41, TYT)

Indeed, since Christ died for us and rose from the dead, we *live* for Him (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). It is both confusing and tragic that these authors do not consistently apply this truth, that Jesus Christ, not self, is the center of the believers' life.

Self-Control: The Fruit of the Spirit

Although Scripture does not promote self-worth, self-esteem, self-love, and the like, believers are to exercise proper self-control. This is the subject of a whole chapter in *Telling Yourself the Truth*, where Backus addresses "misbelief" in the lack of self-control. He associates this problem with "discontent,

guilt, deep dissatisfaction with life, lack of self-confidence, and anger at God" (p. 81, TYT). Several "misbeliefs" are listed (p. 81-82, TYT):

1. You should always have what you want.
2. Having to wait for what you want is unjust.
3. It's intolerable to be uncomfortable. Discomfort should therefore always be avoided.
4. It isn't possible to control strong desires. These desires are *needs*.
5. You're entitled to inflict your demands on others.

In addition, some mistaken "self-talk" statements are noted (p. 86-87, TYT):

1. Nobody cares.
2. I'm worthless, so why should I try?
3. I'm entitled to indulge myself because I've had a hard life...or because I've worked so hard.
4. I can't live without (fill in the blank!).
5. I *need* (fill in the blank!).

Backus insists that behavior is *learned*, and therefore self-control can be learned (p. 84, TYT). He believes that many people "*train* themselves to believe they are weak, worthless, and inadequate" (p. 85, TYT). He concludes that "if you *think* and *tell yourself* you can't control yourself, you probably won't be able to" (p. 84, TYT).

His answer is to "actively counter your misbeliefs with the sword of the Spirit, the *truth*" (p. 87, TYT). Good! He also states that gaining something valuable often involves the willingness to wait and to experience temporary discomfort (p. 89, TYT). The Christian life *does* involve patient endurance of trials, and it is right to counter our erroneous beliefs with the truth of Scripture. But Backus places the power for change in the *wrong* place, self:

"You are *not* helpless. You *do* have control over your life. You *can* do what you think may be impossible." (p. 89, TYT)

There's an element of truth here, in that the Christian is indeed *not powerless*, because he can depend on the power of the indwelling Spirit. At the same time, the statement above obscures the crucial role of the Spirit. Self-control is one of the nine qualities characterizing the *fruit of the Spirit*:

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." (Galatians 5:22-24; see 16-24 for further study)

Certainly, we must not press this to the point of becoming totally passive and uninvolved in our own sanctification. God expects us to take actions, and we are responsible before Him for those acts. At the same time, the primary agent for change is the Holy Spirit, not efforts of the flesh. The approach of "misbelief therapy" is one that masks this crucial role of the Spirit.

The Work of Jesus Christ

Backus makes several statements about the *purpose* of our Lord's work on the cross. Unfortunately, his teachings reflect his man-centered, self-oriented psychology rather than the truth of Scripture.

Self-love is one of the purposes this author attributes to the atonement:

"He prepared the way for us to be able to love ourselves in the purest sense. Condemnation, guilt, despair, self-gradation, shame and self-hate have all been nailed to the cross in His body.... Jesus died on the cross for you, and to despise yourself is to insult Him." (p. 107, TYT)

Similarly, Backus teaches that freedom from the evaluations of others is a purpose of Christ's work on our behalf:

"Jesus died on the cross for me so that I can be free from the misbelief that other people decide my value." (p. 113, TYT)

Later in the book, Backus provides an even more detailed explanation of his views about what Christ has done for us. He says that "Jesus died on the cross to save you from deceit and false notions" (p. 171, TYT). Such "false notions" refer to certain negative evaluations of yourself, such as...I'm miserable, dumb, unattractive, poor, lonely, lacking in talents, less happy than others, not liked by others; or "I can't..." (p. 171, TYT).

But do any of these statements actually reveal the purpose of our Lord's agonizing death on the cross? No, they do not. No Scriptures back up these statements, which are borrowed from

ungodly psychological theories. Jesus died *for our sins*. He was "delivered up because of our transgressions" (Romans 4:25). He was an "offering for sin" (Romans 8:3). "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3). He "gave Himself up for our sins" (Galatians 1:4). His death is one described as being on behalf of the *ungodly*:

"For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the Spirit."
(1 Peter 3:18)

"For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." (Romans 5:6)

We are *sinners*. Christ died for our *sins*, as an expiatory sacrifice and a propitiation removing the wrath of God. He fully satisfied the requirements of God's perfect justice. He took on Himself the penalty we deserve for our transgressions against God. He redeemed us from our former, futile way of life, by His own blood (1 Peter 1:18-19), so that we might serve God (Hebrews 9:14), not so that we might love ourselves! Scriptures could be multiplied to demonstrate these truths. The true, biblical purposes for the work of Christ are *not even mentioned* in this book about "telling yourself the *truth*."

Backus also casts doubt on the *certainty* of Christ's work. He calls it a "risk" which only brings about the *possibility* of salvation:

"God Himself took the risk of great loss when He set out to build His kingdom. He took the greatest risk since the history of man when He sent His Son, Jesus to the earth for our sakes." (p. 132, TYT)

"When Jesus went to the cross on our behalf He gave us that great possibility of being saved from ourselves by allowing His life to enter and transform ours." (p. 100, TYT)

This author needs to *tell himself the truth* about Christ's saving work. The *real truth* in Scripture is far more comforting than these tentative statements! Did God really take a *risk* when He sent Christ? Did He only make salvation *possible*, or did He infallibly secure the salvation of God's chosen people? Consider the comforting words of Christ Himself:

"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one." (John 10:27-30)

Hebrews 9:12 states that Christ:

"...through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption."

He *actually obtained* redemption. To redeem is to purchase by the payment of a ransom. The ransom was His own life, and He actually did redeem us. This is no "risk," no mere "possibility"! Other Scriptures, too, confirm this glorious *accomplished* reality (Matthew 20:28; Acts 20:28; Titus 2:14; Revelation 5:9).

The reader is invited to study thoughtfully the first chapter of Ephesians. That passage repeatedly emphasizes *God's purpose*. He *chose* believers in Christ *before the foundation of the world* (1:4). No "risk" can be found here. God's purpose in Christ is accomplished with certainty. He is the one "who works all things according to the counsel of His own will" (1:11).

Again, Backus needs to return to Scripture and *tell himself the truth*, or rather, *learn from God the truth*, about the marvelous atoning work of Christ on the cross.

The Use of Scripture

It can hardly be overemphasized that the "cognitive therapy" originated in the mind of a devout atheist, Albert Ellis, who despises the Christian faith. Backus and Thurman are both professing Christians, and they attempt to combine the theories of Ellis with the truth of God's Word. But how do they use the Bible?

Inconsistency emerges at the outset. After quoting Psalm 1:1, which prohibits the believer from walking in the *counsel of the ungodly*, Backus notes his appreciation for the theories of Albert Ellis, clearly an *ungodly* man! (p. 10, TYT). It's hard to miss the irony here. Backus claims to rest his case on the foundation of Scripture:

"The Bible solidly teaches that man's feelings, passions and behavior are subject to the conditioned by the way he thinks." (p. 16, TYT)

This conclusion is based on the first half of Proverbs 23:7, "for as he reckons within his soul, so he is." Looking at the context of verses 6-7, the writer is considering a selfish man who says, "eat and drink!" but is inwardly counting the cost. The outward appearance is contrasted with the *inner* man. Thoughts are *one aspect* of the inner man, and, to be sure, an important aspect. But this verse does not exalt thoughts *above* other aspects of the heart, such as the will or the desires. Many psychologists focus too heavily on feelings, but the cognitive approach goes to similar extremes concerning thoughts. These verses in Proverbs bring out the selfish desires and intentions of the heart, rather than teaching that thoughts are all-powerful, controlling the emotions and behavior.

Later, Backus uses the Bible to support his basically man-centered approach to change:

"You *can* change. The Bible is brimming with stories of changed lives through the power of God. Faith puts you in touch with the power of God. Nobody else can give you faith. You're the only one who can take the life of faith. You either take faith and believe in Jesus Christ and who you are in Him, or you wander along through life, a victim of circumstances, people, events, and situations you can't control." (p. 123, TYT)

We can agree that the believer in Christ need not wander through life as a *victim*, but rather has the power of God to change. But faith is a *gift* of God, not something generated by the efforts or will of self. (Ironically, Backus quotes John 1:13 on the same page. This verse attributes our new birth to the will of *God*, not the will of *man*!) Sanctification--our growth as Christians--is a work of God's grace through His Spirit, not a man-made achievement. Cognitive therapy exalts the efforts of self and fails to mention the necessary role of the Spirit.

Basic approaches to Scripture. Writing critiques of Christian authors is a most difficult task because of the *mix* of truth and error. This one is no exception! Some of Thurman's comments about Bible study are worth noting. He believes that we need to "study the Bible more carefully and see what it *really* says. Hand-me-down interpretations are easily misconstrued" (p. 156, LWB). Agreed! In fact, reading "Christian psychology" books

with proper discernment requires a close examination of quoted Scriptures *in their full context*, to see what God is really saying.

Thurman is also on target when he recommends Scripture memorization and meditation, even though "we usually feel quite a bit of guilt about rarely doing either of the two at home" (p. 157, LWB). The benefits of Scripture meditation and memorization are highlighted in Psalms 1, 19, and 119.

Also noted is the fact that "the Bible places tremendous emphasis on 'mind renewal'" (p. 157, LWB). Romans 12:2 supports this truth (but without resorting to the theories or methods of atheists like Albert Ellis!).

This author also believes that Christians at times read their Bibles selectively, missing the full truth:

"I have seen some Christians use selective abstraction when they read the Bible. Selective abstractors may only pay attention to verses that have to do with judgment or sin or works while ignoring verses on grace or forgiveness. (Of course, there's also the opposite distortion: remembering only the promise verses and disregarding God's caution that life can be difficult)." (p. 122, LWB)

No doubt this can happen. But it should also be a caution to those who read their psychological presuppositions onto the pages of Scriptures, reading selectively and *distorting* the passages they choose. As believers who are not yet glorified, we need the whole counsel of God, untainted by the "counsel of the ungodly."

Proper Uses of Scripture. Backus uses Scripture rightly at various points. (We really have to separate truth from error in these books!) His words concerning Philippians 3:8 are excellent:

"These words are not the words of an unfulfilled man driven with anxiety that he might lose something precious. Saint Paul here was willing to risk everything there was to risk because he knew with absolute certainty whom he belonged to, and a relationship with Jesus Christ was more important to him than his own comfort and life." (p. 134, TYT)

It's unfortunate, however, that much of the rest of Backus' book is focused on our own comfort and life!

Backus also notes, rightly, that being willing to take some risks teaches you to seek, trust, and obey God, experiencing His blessings (p. 138, TYT). He notes the fear of the one-talent servant in Matthew 25:14-30 (p. 136, TYT).

Thurman makes some biblical observations when he examines "worldly lies." One of these lies is "you can have it all." Solomon is noted as one who erroneously bought into this lie and suffered for it, as his words in Ecclesiastes show us (p. 61-62, LWB). (We can go back even further on this one...to Adam and Eve!) Another lie, one that may trap Christians, is that life ought to be easy (p. 69, LWB). We can agree that Scripture doesn't make any such promise. (Thurman cites Romans 8:28; we could mention numerous others!) A third lie is that life should be fair. Thurman again refers to Solomon, who speaks about the wicked and the righteous in Ecclesiastes (p. 70-71, LWB). Indeed, life on this earth isn't necessarily "fair" by human standards (see Psalms 37 and 73), although the Christian can be assured of the final victorious triumph of God's justice. Thurman also notes the "don't wait" lie believed by many, and he rightly states that Christians surely ought to understand the value of waiting (p. 74-75, LWB). We certainly have some truthful comments here, although we don't need the therapeutic methods of Albert Ellis to tell us so! The Scripture is *sufficient* to instruct us about such matters as patience and justice. Ellis may agree that "you can't have it all," but as an atheist he has absolutely nothing comparable to our glorious hope of eternal life with the Lord. Nor can he offer a coherent explanation for the injustices of earthly life--or any future *hope* such as Christians enjoy.

Religious "Lies." Thurman says that "if we accept the Bible as God's Word, we have a guide" (p. 166, LWB). He warns, however, that:

"...those around us can use the Bible itself to teach us lies...we should proceed carefully, eyes and mind open. Then the truths of the Bible will become the measure of other 'truths.' The Bible is the most direct way to seek God's truth." (p. 167, LWB)

An even stronger view of Scripture is needed here. As the Westminster Confession words it so beautifully, God's Word is *the only infallible rule for faith and practice*. It is more than merely "the most direct way to seek God's truth." It is the *only way*, at least in terms of *saving faith*. God's revelation in nature clearly reveals Him (Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1:18-20) but does not outline His plan of redemption in Christ. God's Word is

breathed out by Him, and is fully sufficient to equip the believer for every good work God has prepared for him to do (2 Timothy 3:16-17). It pierces and lays bare the heart of man (Hebrews 4:12-13), and provides everything necessary for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3-4). It endures *forever* (1 Peter 1:25). With all this in mind, let us examine the "religious lies" that Thurman proposes.

Here are some basics that Thurman teaches *about* such lies:

"Religious lies are usually taught as theological truths by people we trust in our homes and our churches." (p. 134, LWB)

"Lies like these that are practiced over and over again since childhood are usually deeply held and very difficult to let go of. Second, these lies are taught to us as God's beliefs, so the typical Christian has an extremely difficult time giving them up." (p. 135, LWB)

"Like other lies, they are emotionally damaging...they are rarely questioned." (p. 135, LWB)

These statements grossly underestimate the power of God's Spirit to help the believer discern the truth (1 Corinthians 2:14). There is also an implication that such "lies" are taught *often* in our churches and require the intervention of *psychologists*. These are questionable assumptions--actually, *wrong* assumptions.

Here are the "religious lies" Thurman discusses:

- (1) "God's love must be earned." (p. 135, LWB)
- (2) "God hates the sin and sinner." (p. 138, LWB)
- (3) "Because I'm a Christian, God will protect me from pain and suffering." (p. 142, LWB)
- (4) "All my problems are caused by my sins." (p. 146, LWB)
- (5) "It is my Christian duty to meet all the needs of others." (p. 148, LWB)
- (6) "A good Christian doesn't feel angry, anxious, or depressed." (p. 150, LWB) Backus has a similar "misbelief" listed: "I should always be and act happy in spite of all hardship or trouble that comes my way." (p. 166, TYT)

(7) "God can't use me unless I'm spiritually strong."
(p. 154, LWB)

There are, to be sure, serious theological problems with these statements. But we need *Scripture*, not *psychology*, to discern and correct the errors. Let's look at them.

God's love toward the believer is not conditioned on our own works. He does not choose the believer either on the basis of his works *or* his inherent "worth." God demonstrated His love by sending Christ to die for our sins *while we were yet sinners* (Romans 5:8). The conditions for our salvation have been fully met by the work of Christ. Interestingly, Thurman describes his battle with "perfectionism" and "burning out," saying that he had to:

"...back away from formal Christianity--church, Bible study, prayer--to regain some emotional balance. When you're on a perfection treadmill and you keep falling off, the only escape seems to be giving up altogether." (p. 137, LWB)

This is the *wrong* answer! Scriptural truth--and nothing else--corrects erroneous beliefs about the conditionality of God's love.

Hatred of the sin versus the sinner is more complex. Sin cannot be abstracted from the sinner. It is the unrepentant sinner, not the sin isolated from him, who ultimately resides in hell. However, the Christian has assurance of God's love even prior to his conversion experience (Romans 5:8 again!). Thurman goes astray here when he focuses on self-hate. He claims that this "lie" is one that leads to self-hatred, and "the energy it takes to turn from sin is used up by the self-hate we waste on ourselves" (p. 138-139, LWB). He says that this lie includes the belief that "somebody has to pay." Citing the example of a woman who had an abortion and suffered a lengthy, severe depression, he says that "you've already paid for what happened" (p. 140, LWB). We've already discussed self-love at length; Scripture assures us that we *do not* hate ourselves (Ephesians 5:29). We *love* ourselves more than enough! It is *true* that "somebody has to pay," but *Christ has already paid* for the sins of the believer on the cross. The believer himself *has not already paid*, as claimed by Thurman. A biblical understanding of the atonement is needed for this second "religious lie."

The third statement, that God will protect the believer from all suffering, is refuted by a *multitude* of biblical passages.

See the whole book of 1 Peter, for example! In addition, the Bible outlines God's *purposes* for suffering, such as teaching (Hebrews 12:4-13), testimony to the world, transformation into the image of Christ (Romans 8:28-30), testing of faith (James 1:2-4). Thurman notes the propensity of some people to blame God, to make Him a "scapegoat" when He doesn't come to the rescue (p. 143, LWB), but this tendency is a *sinful* attitude. Happily, Thurman does make a biblical comment about the Christian lifestyle, one that:

"...requires 'dying to self.' It's a lifestyle of sacrifice, service, humility--actions and attitudes extremely difficult for any human being in our 'do your own thing' and 'you're #1' modern culture." (p. 144, LWB)

Thurman grants an element of truth in the belief that all problems are caused by your own sin (p. 147, LWB). He also says that "we humans like to explain things...everything must happen for a reason, we feel" (p. 147, LWB). Actually, everything *does* happen for a reason--God's reason, *His* glory--although the specifics are frequently far beyond our finite human comprehension. But here, the *entire book of Job* can be studied in order to recognize that other factors, in addition to our sin, are relevant to suffering.

The statement about meeting the needs of others is also paraphrased as "Christians never say no" (p. 149, LWB). In one sense, of course, no human is *God*, and therefore it is not possible to always meet every need of another person. Also, we are not expected to cater to every *desire* expressed by others. However, we do have legitimate biblical obligation to meet the needs of others. Our sinful tendency is to place self first. This "lie" must be examined more closely, and with great caution.

Christians--not yet being in a state of glory--do sometimes experience anger, anxiety, and depression. However, there are many *biblical* exhortations about each of these. *Sometimes* a lack of faith, or unconfessed sin, may be a primary factor. The "misbelief" cited by Backus should be compared with passages such as James 1:2-4, instructing us to *count it all joy* when we encounter various trials, because we know that God is at work to accomplish His purposes in and through those trials.

Thurman cites our own arrogance as "an underlying cause" of the belief that we must be spiritually strong to be used by God. Here, a study of numerous important biblical characters--Moses and Jeremiah come to mind--instructs us. God does use fallible,

imperfect, weak humans to accomplish His will. *However*, He also molds and spiritually strengthens His chosen vessels in the process.

Scripture and Counseling. A hot issue in "Christian psychology" is the proper role of God's Word. Backus has a chapter subtitled "When the Truth Does Not Set Us Free." He describes a severely depressed woman who has not been helped by well-meaning Christian counselors:

"They have advised her to pray more, praise more, give more and do more, and these well-intentioned words have only served to depress her further." (p. 173, TYT)

These counselors have said that it's "all in her head" and advised her to be happy because Jesus has given her His joy (p. 173, TYT). Backus says that:

"The struggle for her happiness will be all-out war with the devil of lies.... The therapeutic tool will be *truth*.... Esther had been devastated by the counseling she received, even though the words were true enough." (p. 174, TYT)

Explaining further, Backus describes three basic "misbeliefs" about counseling:

"1. Counseling is very simple once you've become a Christian. All you have to do is know some Scripture verses and some popular current teachings.

2. There is no need to listen to people since feeling bad and having unresolved problems is always a result of sin and failure to apply the Word of God.

3. Knowing Scripture verses is all a counselor needs to help a person who is having problems. If a troubled person doesn't want to hear the truth, it's just too bad." (p. 176, TYT)

The author partially agrees with these statements, but says of the depressed woman's previous counseling experience that:

"...she was not offered any means of understanding her own dynamics or any *procedures* for change. She heard only the stern demands to do what she couldn't do." (p. 176, TYT)

Backus does not delve into the issue of whether we ought to integrate the truth of God's Word with the theories of psychology. (That issue has been addressed elsewhere in my writings. See "Statement of Position" and "Psychology: Friend or Fraud?") However, the picture painted above is a frequently encountered caricature of the position held by those who reject psychological counseling. Let's look more closely at the three "misbeliefs."

Counseling is "simple" in the sense that Scripture, *without psychology*, is sufficient for counsel. Man tends to add complexity where none is required. It started in the Garden, when Satan asked, "Did God *really* say...!" However, the riches of Scripture are such that every believer can spend a lifetime exploring its depths.

Also, the first "misbelief" mentions adding "some popular current teachings" to the Bible. This is precisely where "Christian psychology" goes off track! These additions are *not* helpful, but muddy the pure waters of Scripture.

Listening to other people is a biblical concept:

"This you know, my beloved brothers. But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger." (James 1:19)

We certainly don't need psychological theories to know that we need to *listen* to other believers!

Concerning the third statement, knowing Scripture *is* all a counselor really needs to know to help troubled people. And that is not so simple as it sounds! Psychologists often consider a biblical approach "simplistic," but it is not. Really *knowing* the Scripture--where to look and how to apply the truth--is neither superficial nor simplistic. But consider the second part of this "misbelief." A truly *biblical* approach demands humility and compassion, *not* the take-it-or-leave-it attitude expressed here.

Biblical truth is indeed the proper foundation for counseling, without the complications of ungodly psychological theories. In spite of all their talk about "truth," both of these authors need to return to the pure truth of God's inerrant, sufficient Word as the foundation for counseling others.

"Think About These Things"

The fourth chapter of Philippians is a good place to conclude our examination of cognitive counseling. Scripture does address

our thoughts, and God considers them important. In this passage, Paul addresses thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Here is a key portion of what he says:

"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything is worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things. The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things; and the God of peace shall be with you." (Philippians 4:8-9)

Thoughts are important, but not king. Thoughts, emotions, and actions are interrelated, and all are subject to the authority of Christ. Every thought is to be taken captive unto obedience to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5). The Spirit of God is at work in the believer to sanctify him:

"Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is he who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass." (1 Thessalonians 5:23)

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