

EXPOSING THE ROOTS

What are Your Most Basic Assumptions?

Psychological counseling represents one of the most serious threats to the Christian church today, undermining sound doctrine and damaging countless lives. Its deception is so widespread that many otherwise orthodox believers are ignorant of the doctrinal issues and dangers involved.

How did it happen? How is it that sincere believers have embraced the teachings of militant atheists in their counseling methods, while claiming to uphold and defend the absolute truth of the Scriptures?

Much work has been done in the critical analysis of both secular and Christian psychological writings, in order to expose the subtle (and blatant) errors inherent in these works. Now, it is necessary to cut at the roots. Christians need to know the anti-religious, *and specifically anti-Christian*, bias of the founders of major psychological systems. The *roots* need to be exposed. It is for this specific purpose that Discernment Publications offers a series of reviews, covering such men as Freud, Fromm, Ellis, Adler, Rogers, Jung, Maslow, and the like, to show how each has rejected and distorted the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are challenging the very starting point--the foundation, the basic presuppositions--of their systems.

Christians need to know specifically *why* they cannot--indeed, dare not--trust the conclusions of these anti-Christian theorists about the nature of man, his fundamental problems, and how he can change. They need to examine the fundamental assumptions that underlie the belief that one may safely combine the teachings of atheists with the truth of God's Word. That is the purpose of this introductory statement.

A Look at Presuppositions: The Apologetic Method of Cornelius Van Til

Whenever someone throws around the name of a famous sports star--a name known to every American except me!--I respond with, "But have you ever heard of Cornelius Van Til?" Usually the person returns the blank stare I've just given in response to the sports quiz. Perhaps you, too, are unfamiliar with Van Til, apologetics professor at Westminster Theological Seminary for some 40 years. But although his name isn't a household word, he brought

to Christian apologetics some perceptive and highly relevant observations. Many of these observations, concerned as they are with the nature of the unbeliever in contrast to the Christian, are equally applicable to the counseling issue. I wish to express my indebtedness to Dr. Van Til for the following books he has written, which provided invaluable guidance to me in writing this paper: *Psychology of Religion, A Christian Theory of Knowledge, Introduction to Systematic Theology, Christian Apologetics, The Defense of the Faith, and Common Grace and the Gospel*. I would also like to express thanks to Professor John Frame at Westminster Theological for his classroom instruction which helped me to understand and appreciate Van Til, and to Dr. Greg Bahnsen, guest lecturer at Westminster who helped unpack and summarize some of Van Til's teachings. Let me note, however, that it is my intention to back up my conclusions with careful exegesis of Scripture, rather than to merely quote the statements of another person.

Van Til expressed grave concerns about many of the assumptions of traditional apologetic methods. These *same assumptions* easily lead to the entrance of psychology into the church. Let's look at some of them.

Assumption #1: *The unbeliever can and ought to be religiously neutral.*

Perhaps you have witnessed to a friend or relative, assuming that person is neutral concerning Christianity, simply because he appears "open," searching honestly for the truth. The truth is, he is not neutral at all, nor can he be. According to Romans 1, God's invisible qualities are clearly known to him from the things He has made, but *he holds down the truth in unrighteousness*. Your friend has exchanged the truth for a lie, and he worships created things instead of the Creator. Regardless of appearances, the Bible says he is not neutral.

Assumption #2: *The unbeliever is able to reason autonomously, that is, without the Scripture. Based on his professed philosophical perspective, he has intelligible standards, such as the laws of logic and causation, by which he can test the truth of the Christian "hypothesis." The believer and unbeliever have commonly understood standards, not yet controversial, that will lead the unbeliever into Christianity if he will simply reason cogently.*

Perhaps, you think, if you could only prove the fact of the resurrection (or some other fact) beyond any reasonable doubt, surely that unbeliever would be brought to his knees and trust in Christ as Savior. It could indeed happen that way, *if* the sovereign Lord determines to intervene in that person's heart so that he *interprets* the fact of the resurrection the way God has revealed it in His Word. Otherwise, he might just as easily cast it off as a freak coincidence. The unbeliever is darkened in his understanding and the futility of his thinking. He lives as an enemy of God, holding down the truth in unrighteousness. Again, he is not neutral.

Assumption #3: *Believers and unbelievers have in common certain observable, "brute" facts by which a hypothesis may be tested.*

This assumption makes facts more ultimate than worldviews. As noted above, facts require interpretation--*God's interpretation.*

Assumption #4: *A presupposition is merely another hypothesis to be tested, rather than one's most basic assumptions by which intelligibility is determined.*

Like the first other assumptions, this one assumes the possibility of *neutrality*, the possibility that a person may begin his research or study on a totally "objective" basis, with no assumptions whatsoever.

Assumption #5: *The defense of the faith need not be specifically Christian. Certain aspects of the Christian worldview are theoretically compatible with other worldviews. The unbeliever's worldview is merely incomplete.*

According to this assumption, the unbeliever merely "adds" Christianity to the knowledge he has already obtained on the basis of his worldview.

Assumption #6: *Only the probability, not the certainty, of God's existence can be established.*

On this assumption, Christianity is simply a *better* explanation of the world, rather than the *only* intelligible option. It is viewed as highly probable and superior, but not necessarily the only possibility. Underlying this assumption is the philosophical conviction that no one really knows anything

with absolutely certainty, that the universe is ultimately mysterious.

What does all this mean for counseling? How do these assumptions wrongly allow the psychological theories and speculations of ungodly men into the church? Why is it so terribly dangerous to attempt the integration of such theories with the pure truth of the Scripture? Let us look again at each assumption, showing how it is specifically relevant to our issue.

Religious Neutrality

Many believe that science in general is neutral, open to whatever truth is proved by its methods. More specifically, psychology, as the study of man, is regarded as neutral. Nothing could be further from the truth. Unless the scientist assumes a Christian worldview at the outset, that the eternal, self-existent God revealed in Scripture created the world and assigned meaning to every fact of the universe, he has no ground for proving anything at all. He has no basis for assuming that the sun will rise tomorrow morning as it has for centuries past. He has no basis for assuming any sort of regularity in any area of life, and thus no valid reason for even conducting the business of scientific inquiry. He has no grounds for laws of logic or laws of causation. He certainly has no basis for assuming anything at all about the behavior of man or the inner man.

Examination of the major founders of psychological systems--Freud, Jung, Ellis, Fromm, Maslow, Rogers, and the whole line-up of them--reveals without exception a hostile bias against the truth of Christianity. In one form or another, an atheist worldview is assumed--not proven, simply assumed--as the foundation for their speculations about man. Such an assumption means that, in each system, man is not viewed as a creature created by God in His image and responsible before Him. Such a fundamentally anti-biblical view of man's nature has far-reaching implications that *must not* be ignored. Freud, as a key example, speculates about the origins of religion in *Totem and Taboo*. Since he *assumes* that God does not exist, he is forced to the conclusion that religious beliefs and practices are pathological. This is so diametrically opposed to the basics of the Christian doctrine of man's nature that a believer cannot dare to take seriously his view of man, other than to thoroughly refute it.

The myth of neutrality is clearly and fully refuted by Romans 1:18-25. Ungodly men *suppress the truth in unrighteousness* (verse 18). This truth is incompatible with the idea that they may make neutral observations about the behavior of man. God has made His invisible qualities *clearly known* so that these men are without excuse (verses 19-20). They are not simply seekers of truth stumbling in innocent ignorance, perhaps uncovering a few insights about human nature. Rather, they *refuse to thank and glorify God* (verse 21). They profess wisdom but their hearts are darkened and their thoughts are futile (verse 21-22). They have rebelliously *exchanged God's glory, the worship of the Creator, for the worship of created things, including man* (verse 23). They engage in unrighteous behavior (verse 24), and behavior is certainly one of the major areas of psychological study. They have exchanged God's truth for a lie, serving the *creature* rather than the *Creator* (verse 25). How dare we even entertain the *possibility* that such unrighteous men can add their futile "insights" and "wisdom" to the pure revelation of God? Religious neutrality is a myth that must be exposed in order to properly study the nature of man. Men like Freud are not religiously neutral, but radically hostile to the Christian faith. Such men utilize their ungodly theories about the nature of man to launch vicious attacks on God's truth.

Autonomous Reason

Here we encounter the very roots of the fall of man into sin. It was the attempt at *autonomous reason* that led to the original sin of Adam in the Garden of Eden. God had said, "In the day you eat of it, you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17) Satan countered, "You shall *not* surely die" (Genesis 3:4). Adam exchanged the truth for a lie. He attempted to reason *autonomously*, contrary to the word and revelation he had received directly from God. As a result, sin and death entered into the world. Autonomous reason underlies man's sin. Thus we cannot accept the claim that ungodly men can reason autonomously, *apart from God's revelation*, concerning the nature of man and his fundamental problems.

Further substantiation occurs in Romans 1:21, which we have examined, and again in Ephesians 4:18. Here God explains that the unbeliever is darkened in his understanding, *separated from the life of God*, and ignorant due to the hardening of his heart. Furthermore, the truth of the gospel is *foolishness* to his darkened mind (1 Corinthians 1:18, 2:14). Not having the Spirit of God, he is incapable of understanding God's truth. God states that He will *destroy* the "wisdom" and "intelligence" of the

unbeliever (1 Corinthians 1:19-20; Isaiah 29:14), who rejects God's revelation and attempts to *reason autonomously*.

Allowing psychology to be integrated with Scripture assumes at the outset that ungodly men can *reason autonomously* and add insights to our knowledge of man. In view of all that God says about the condition of the unbeliever's mind, and his rebellious heart, this is a faulty assumption that must be rejected.

Standards of Truth: "Brute" Facts vs. God's Facts

It is often presumed that the believer and unbeliever have commonly understood standards by which each may determine truth. This assumption is one of the underpinnings of the church's embracing of psychology. *If* the unbeliever had such standards in common with the Christian, such standards would have to be *religiously neutral* in order to be held in common, and it might be reasonable to assume that the unbeliever is capable to making valid observations concerning the nature of man.

But religious neutrality is a myth. So is the assumption of common standards. The Christian judges reality on the basis of God's revealed standards. The unbeliever judges reality on the basis of his autonomously conceived standards of what can or cannot be true. The two systems are mutually exclusive. Either God sets the standards of truth, as the Christian claims, or man independently does so, as the unbeliever asserts. The unbeliever is *hostile* to God, refusing to submit to Him. The standards he devises reflect this hostility, presuming that God did not create man in His image, that God's revelation is unnecessary, and other crucial errors. The unbeliever is incompetent to study the nature of man, his fundamental problem (sin), how he ought to change, and how those changes can be effected. In all of his "research," he continually holds down the truth about God, the image of God in man, man's separation from God due to sin, and man's accountability before God.

Can facts be truly known without God? Do "brute" facts, facts without meaning, exist? No to both questions. This is *particularly* true when we address questions concerning the nature of either God or man, created in His image for His glory. Facts in other fields of study (auto mechanics, computers, tax law, anatomy) might be known by the unbeliever when he unwittingly borrows the Christian worldview, which is the *foundation* for laws of nature and logic. However, the study of *man* is fundamentally

different. Even the facts concerning the creation (other than man), auto mechanics, history, and such must *presuppose* the personal, self-existent Creator God. He alone assigns *meaning* to every fact. But when we come to the facts about the nature of man and problems of the human heart, we are in an area where *nothing* can be rightly known apart from God and His revelation. Man was created by God, in His image, to glorify Him and live in covenantal fellowship with Him. Man broke the covenant, seeking his own glory, exchanging God's truth for a lie, attempting to establish his own reasoning powers independent of God. There is no way to understand man's nature and problems without a true knowledge of his Creator, knowledge that comes solely by revelation. The unregenerate man, darkened in his understanding and living in rebellion against his Creator, *cannot* rightly know his nature and condition independently of God. To separate the study of God and man, as the psychologists inevitably do, is to be assured of theologically fatal error in every aspect of the study of man. The erroneous theory of evolution, for example, blurs the distinction between man and animal when it looks back to the origins of man, and blurs the distinction between man and God when it peers into the future. This is but one example of the disastrous course of ungodly psychological speculation. Man must submit himself to the sovereign Lord if he is to obtain any true knowledge of himself.

This point can be clarified even further by examining the use of words by believers and unbelievers. The word "man," to the Christian, is a creature, created by a special act of God in His image, but now fallen into sin. To the unregenerate, however, the same word "man" means a being *not* created by God, but existing by pure chance, without meaning save that which he "creates" autonomously. For some, "man" may be synonymous with God. This semantic difficulty is particularly striking when we encounter Freud's statement that *all men are sinners*. It sounds like biblical truth, but in Freud's ungodly mind it is something else. Besides the problems just enumerated in the word "man," the word "sin" is redefined as well. The Christian knows sin to be violation of God's commandments. However, the word "sin" *cannot* have this meaning to the atheist, who *assumes* the nonexistence of God! Thus, even statements by psychologists that are superficially compatible with Scripture, when examined more closely, are antithetical to God's truth.

Presupposition or Hypothesis?

Again we are faced with the question of whether neutrality is possible, and it is not. The unbeliever may attempt to "test" the "hypothesis" of Christianity. We cannot join him in this endeavor, except to do so for the sake of argument and thus to demonstrate that *on the basis of his basic presuppositions, his worldview reduces to absurdity*. Denying the sovereign, self-existent, personal Creator, he has no rational basis for explaining the origins of man, the purpose of man, or any basic principles about the nature of man. He has no basis for saying *anything* about man. The truth of Christianity is not another "hypothesis," but a fundamental presupposition by which the believer must judge everything that he hears. The Scripture, being *the ultimate authority*, is necessarily self-attesting. God attests to His own authority. If there were some higher standard by which the Scripture could be judged, then Scripture could not be the ultimate authority, and God would not be God.

These observations carry over to counseling as they do to all areas of study, and are particularly crucial to the study of man. The believer must look to the Scripture to have any true knowledge of himself. He cannot look to the autonomous standards of unregenerate men, who presumptuously attempt to critique Christianity and invent alternatives to it. The Scripture declares its own sufficiency (2 Peter 1:3-4), and forbids the believer to *walk in the counsel of the ungodly* (Psalm 1:1). Clearly, the Christian must presuppose the truth of Scripture, and walk according to its statutes. He must reject the conclusions of those whose basic assumptions defy the living God.

Incomplete or Incompatible?

If certain aspects of the Christian worldview were compatible with opposing worldviews, then the unbeliever's worldview would be merely incomplete rather than incompatible. However, such an assumption bypasses the radical nature of man's fall into sin and the results of that fall. Apart from regeneration, man is spiritually *dead* in sins and trespasses, an object of God's wrath (thus His enemy), pursuing the sinful cravings of the flesh (Ephesians 2:1-3). Consider carefully the nature of fallen man:

"As it is written: there is none righteous, no, not one;
There is no one who understands;
There is no one who seeks after God.
They have all turned aside;
They have together become worthless;

There is no one who does good, not even one.
Their throat is an open tomb;
With their tongues they have practiced deceit;
The poison of vipers is on their lips;
Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.
Their feet are swift to shed blood;
Destruction and misery are in their ways;
And the way of peace they have not known.
There is no fear of God before their eyes."
(Romans 3:10-18)

What, on this list, might be compatible with the Christian worldview? Sin radically impacts every area of the human heart. We dare not assume that there are areas of agreement with the unregenerate man. We do not merely "add" Christian truth to modern psychology. We must rather *replace* the speculations of godless men with the pure, eternal truth given by God's revelation.

The Absolute Certainty of the True God

Unregenerate philosophers, despite their professed autonomy, are quick to assume that no knowledge is certain. Only probability can be established. On the basis of such radical doubt, Christian apologists are sometimes content to establish the mere *probability* that God exists and that Christianity is true. But as we have noted in Romans 1, and will observe again in discussing general revelation, the existence of the God of Christian theism is an absolute certainty. He cannot *not* exist. If His existence is not assumed at every turn, there is no basis for knowledge in any area. This is particularly true when we study man, who bears His image. Atheists like Freud speak from the evil imaginations of their own hearts, and they have no basis for presuming that *their* particular insights are more likely true than the theories of others. If it were even *possible* that God did not exist, we would have little reason to state with conviction that the Scriptures *alone* declare the truth about man and his condition. However, we *can* speak with absolute certainty of the existence of our God, and thus also concerning the truth of His Word. Our knowledge of God is not comprehensive, because we are finite creatures, but the knowledge given by God in His revelation is nevertheless *true* knowledge of which we can be absolutely certain. Bearing in mind all that Scripture says concerning its own inerrancy and sufficiency, we must reject the godless (and

often contradictory) speculations that psychologists wish to impose on us.

General and Special Revelation

There are two basic ways in which God reveals Himself and His truth to man. An understanding of each form of revelation is crucial to our discussion, in order to know *how truth is revealed to man*. Each type of revelation has a specific purpose and specific recipients. Confusion about those purposes and recipients results in some basic confusion and errors about how man is able to understand himself, and how he can change.

General or Natural Revelation

According to Psalm 19, "the heavens declare the glory of God." They don't just *probably* declare the glory of God, but rather they *emphatically* do declare the glory of God. There is no doubt here about whether God exists. His creation *clearly* reveals His existence *to all men*. In the New Testament, Paul reiterates this truth when he proclaims in Romans 1 that God's invisible qualities, His power and deity, are *clearly perceived* in the things that are made:

"The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--His eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse." (Romans 1:18-20)

No man will be able to stand before the living God and claim that the evidence for His existence was inadequate. *General or natural revelation, given to all men, clearly reveals the existence of the true, eternal God*. Not merely the probability of God's existence, and not the existence of some finite, false "god," but the eternal God of the Scriptures is revealed with absolute certainty. The purpose of that revelation is to leave man without excuse for his sin. Protests of atheism and agnosticism, including the many philosophies and psychologies that distort the reality and nature of God, are attempts by unregenerate men to hold down the truth in

unrighteousness. Men do not, by nature, want to believe in and submit to the living God.

Special Revelation

Despite the acknowledged clarity of general revelation, and the accomplishment of its specific purpose, man is in need of additional, special revelation for two reasons. First, sin blinds man and he is unable to clearly read the revelation given in nature. He distorts it in numerous ways. Pantheism equates God with His creation, for example. Complex theories attempt to assert the origins of the world through a "big bang" or some other irrational manner. Man cannot escape the voice of the living God, but he makes every conceivable attempt to do so, and in the process, he misreads what is so clearly written through all of creation.

Second, the natural revelation does not provide saving faith. God's existence and nature are established, but man does not see his sin and does not know the way of salvation. Not only does God's general revelation need to be interpreted to sinful man by the Scriptures, but God's plan of redemption must be revealed.

Notice here that only those regenerated by the Holy Spirit, *not all men*, are capable of understanding special revelation:

"The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned." (1 Corinthians 2:14)

Not only does the purpose of special revelation differ from that of general revelation; the recipients also differ.

How does the distinction between general and special revelation impact the issue at hand? How does God reveal to man His nature, as well as man's own nature? How does God reveal truth about human motivations, attitudes, behaviors--their roots, how to change, and what particular changes ought to be made? Is general revelation adequate or even accurate here, or is special revelation a necessity? Is special revelation *sufficient*; does it or can it be usefully supplemented by general revelation? These are critical questions to address.

General revelation is addressed to all men, special revelation only to the regenerate. However, only the regenerate are able to read general revelation accurately. Thus, even if some knowledge of man might be gained from general revelation, it would be grossly distorted by the unregenerate. Looking to Scripture as our authority, we discover, however, the *sufficiency* of special revelation:

"His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness. Through these He has given us His very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires." (2 Peter 1:3-4)

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Since the unbeliever is unable to read either general or special revelation, and since he holds down the truth about God in unrighteousness, we must certainly reject his speculations concerning the nature of man and how he can change. Furthermore, the Scripture attests to its own sufficiency, so we need not wander off into general revelation for the knowledge that is necessary for counseling.

Common Grace

An understanding of the meaning and purpose of common grace is essential to our knowledge of truth. Many people believe that because of the operation of common grace, unregenerate men are able to discover new facts about the nature of man. A biblical review of this subject shows that assumption to be sadly mistaken.

The time period in which we live is one characterized by both *common curse* as well as *common grace*. Because of the impact of sin on the entire human race, both believers and unbelievers are subject to disease, physical death, and all manner of suffering during earthly life. Sometimes, misunderstanding of this common curse leads Christians to unwarranted expectations, and confusing disappointments, about the character of the present life.

On the other hand, an incorrect understanding of common *grace* leads both to confusion about the prosperity of the wicked, and to a naive assumption that it is proper to embrace the "wisdom" of the unregenerate. Due to common grace, several results can be observed. First, the ungodly may receive various undeserved material blessings during the life. (Psalms 37 and 73 help the believer to respond righteously to such prosperity.) Second, God restrains the natural outworking of man's sinful nature. Unbelievers may perform acts of kindness, and their sin does not escalate to its full potential. Finally, God postpones His full judgment of the sin of the unregenerate.

If the nature and function of common grace are not properly understood, the radical distinction between the believer and the unbeliever is obscured. That distinction which must not be overlooked in the area of counseling foundations. It impacts both the theory and methodology of counseling, and the basis for change in the lives of counselees.

Concluding Comments

Van Til comments in *Psychology of Religion*, that psychologists "are constantly explaining people psychologically, and should not object to having their own medicine turned on themselves" (p. 108). (Ha.) Indeed they should not. Listen closely to Van Til's "psychological" explanation of psychology:

"There is an unconscious conflict at the bottom of it all we would say, if we may use the psychologists' methods, and turn them upon themselves. Man is kicking against the pricks. He will not serve the only living God. Satan helps him to devise all manner of ways and means by which he will seek to escape the obligation to serve God. The most effective way of doing this would be to try to erase from the minds of men the memory of God. That would be more effective than to fight against God. Hence he has cultivated the spirit of neutrality and said that gods are no more than symbolical expressions for the laws of nature. Satan has employed the psychologists of religion in particular to devise such plausible arguments as the one devised with respect to the origin of God idea. He will see to it that men, for no good reason at all, think that psychologists ought to know more about God than other people do. If Freud can get a hearing

for his father-complex, we certainly ought to get a hearing when we offer as a psychological explanation of false religion the idea of an anti-God complex. We would go so far as to explain the whole of the argument advanced by the psychology of religion school by this anti-God complex. When men in their hearts hate the living God, they begin to make psychology the conditioning science for systematic theology and claim that the study of the origin of religion will solve many theological puzzles." (p. 137-8, *Psychology of Religion*)

In this series, we will examine the enormous volume of *religious* writing from the pens of psychologists. So far from being a *neutral science*, psychology is itself a religion that sets up its own standards against those of the living God. As both Van Til and the Apostle Paul (Romans 1) have stated so well, ungodly men hold down the truth in unrighteousness. It is the unregenerate man's hatred of the living God that drives his speculations concerning the nature of man, wherein he makes every conceivable effort to avoid the truth of man's separation from God caused by his sinful attempt at autonomy.

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