

ADLERIAN ABERRATIONS
A Brief Review of Alfred Adler's Teachings
Based on *Understanding Human Nature and What Life Should Mean To You*

The individual psychology of Alfred Adler (1870-1937) has significant impact in areas of modern thinking such as the New Age movement, self-esteem teaching, and the epidemic false memory syndrome.

Understanding Human Nature

Adler proposes to show how "mistaken" human behavior impacts social life. He wants his psychology to be understood by *everyone* and not merely create a class of psychological "experts." He assumes the absolute equality of all human beings.

Adler's "individual psychology" includes an emphasis on childhood and its memories, the "unconscious," the striving for power and superiority in order to overcome an innate "inferiority complex," and understanding the individual's "style of life." The individual is seen in relation to his community and valued on the basis of his "social feeling."

Childhood

Adler's association with Freud is evident in his view of early childhood. He believes that a "crystallized pattern of behavior" is set after the first four to five years of life. Major life goals have been determined at this point, along with a particular interpretation of life, and these continue into adulthood. Changes later in life are extremely difficult.

The term "**inferiority complex**" was coined by Adler, who bases much of his psychology on the "inferior" position experienced in childhood.

Childhood Memories

Like many of today's psychologists, Adler assigns a crucial role to early childhood memories. He believes that events are selectively remembered for purposes that may be largely unconscious. Special significance is assigned to the very *earliest* childhood memory. Such memories serve to keep a person focused on his particular life's goal. Significantly, it does not matter to Adler whether a memory is actually *true*.

When change is attempted later in life, memories are used to uncover the person's original "error" in his attitude toward life.

Adler's view of childhood memories is one which contributes toward the current epidemic of false memories and accusations. It is contrary to Scripture in its failure to acknowledge the radical change that takes place at conversion, in its disregard for *truth*, and in its omission of the Holy Spirit's role in sanctification.

The Unconscious

Drawing on his association with Freud, Adler emphasizes the "unconscious," believing that it is possible to uncover a person's behavior pattern in this mysterious realm. Adler believes that his approach to the "unconscious" (in dream analysis particularly) is *scientific* because, unlike Freud, he considers the whole personality rather than setting the conscious life in opposition to the "unconscious." He teaches that dreams arouse feelings which support the individual's "style of life."

The existence of the "unconscious" is pure speculation. No such concept occurs anywhere in Scripture, which views us as whole, conscious persons before God.

Power and Inferiority

Adler assumes that human beings are motivated primarily by their strong desires to overcome **inferiority** and to gain power. Much of his theory is grounded in his observation that children occupy an inferior position in society. Adler explains both creative progress *and* criminal acts in terms of man's attempt to overcome the "inferiority complex." In fact, Adler quickly looks behind appearances and defines all sorts of behaviors and attitudes in terms of his theory, from which there is seemingly no escape.

The Bible identifies man's most basic problem in terms of his sinful rebellion against *God*. Adler defines man's most fundamental problem in terms of a striving to overcome inferiority and achieve superiority in relation to other people.

"Social Feeling"

Adlerian psychology emphasizes the individual's life within a community of others. Adler believes that person's value is determined by his attitude toward others. According to his theory, universal values are based on the judgment of the social

community, rather than God's revelation. An element of determinism occurs when Adler proposes that there are "universal laws" operating in community life.

Adler ties "mistaken meanings of life" to failure in "social feeling." Without considering the biblical view of sin, he asserts that children can be trained to develop the proper social interest.

Rejecting the Christian's hope of heaven, Adler believes that nothing survives of past generations except the contributions they have made to continued earthly life.

Although Adler's emphasis on responsibility to others may seem a welcome relief from the self-centered psychology of modern times, his teachings have no *biblical* foundation. Adler cuts the command to "love your neighbor as yourself" from the primary command to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength."

The Meaning of Life

Adler defines the "meaning of life" according to each individual's interpretation of his experiences. He believes that psychologists can and should uncover a person's "meaning of life" and that in doing so they have the key necessary to unlock his entire personality. Biblically, however, only the Holy Spirit, using God's Word, may discern the thoughts, motives, and imaginations of a person's heart. Adler reassigns this crucial work to human psychologists working on the basis of pure speculation and theory.

Truth is strictly a relative, humanly determined concept in his system, where many legitimate "life meanings" are possible. God's absolute, revealed truth has no place in Adler's psychology.

The "Style of Life"

This critical term is an individual's "fundamental behavior pattern," formed primarily during the first five years of life. It isn't *merely* behavior, however, but encompasses a person's striving toward an underlying goal (superiority). Adler does not see people as strictly *victims*, but rather insists that they are active participants in shaping and interpreting their experiences. Nevertheless, there is a strong element of determinism in his system. The shaping of experience is largely *unconscious*, and the basic "style of life" remains fundamentally unchanged regardless

of outward changes. Childhood memories are an essential building block in constructing one's "style of life." There is no escape from the system, where two completely *different* patterns may represent pursuit of the *same* goal.

The "style of life" requires skillful discernment. Scripture contrasts the believer's former *manner* of life with his new life in Christ. That "manner of life" (Greek *anastrophe*, used in Ephesians 4:22 and elsewhere) is a person's conduct. In Scripture, the *former* "manner of life" is viewed in contrast to the holy conduct required of the believer. It is to be "put off." Adler's "style of life" is not the equivalent of the Bible's "manner of life." It includes, in addition to conduct, the inmost thoughts and purposes of a man's heart. Only the Holy Spirit can discern and change the inner man. Adlerian counselors wrongly intrude on the Spirit's territory when they attempt to uncover and alter the "style of life." Furthermore, a *Christian* is under no compulsion to search his life *before Christ* in order to understand and change his new life as a believer.

The "Creative Self"

Despite the determinism he carried over from Freud, Adler helped to pave the way for humanistic psychologies that assert man's full autonomy and ability to determine his own fate. He describes human beings as "self-determined," capable of courageously mastering their own destiny. Christians must certainly reject the psychic determinism evident in Freud and Adler, but they must equally reject such radical autonomy, which cuts man *even from God's sovereignty and authority*.

The Role of Education

Adler proposes a key role for the school in the "salvation" of mankind. He sees it as the only institution capable of effecting the changes necessary for social cooperation. He proposes that teachers be *psychologists* and that the school should replace and "correct" the family, which is relegated to an inferior and clearly unbiblical position in the training of children.

Image of God

Adler totally misunderstands this crucial biblical concept, attributing many problems to the teaching that a person should strive to be like God. He rejects the biblical account that man was created in the image of God, believing it to have "perilous

consequences" when taught to children. He also adamantly rejects any genuine hope of immortality.

Religious Aberrations

Although not as openly blasphemous as Freud, Jung, Fromm, or Ellis, Adler's comments about spiritual matters leave no doubt that he is unregenerate and therefore untrustworthy.

Scripture. Adler views God's Word as *myth, saga, or legend*, rather than as true revelation or accurate historical narrative. This destroys the credibility of the Christian faith.

Truth. Adler sees concepts such as good and evil as *varieties* rather than *contradictions*. He rejects making any type of *moral* judgments.

Sin, Guilt, Salvation. Adler explains sinful behavior by his psychological theories, refusing to acknowledge that any true guilt is involved. Religion is seen as an attempt to increase social interest, which Adler believes is the "salvation of mankind."

Prayer. Adler makes a mockery of prayer, which he views as a ritualistic attempt to manipulate God. He lumps Christianity with all sorts of pagan religion, much like the modern New Age movement. While it is true that some prayers are offered wrongly, Adler shows no biblical understanding of how prayer ought to be offered by believers.

Family. Adler denies key biblical teachings about the family. He rejects any use of authority in his attempt to uproot "inferiority complexes." He goes so far as to call the father's authority an *evil* thing, downgrading any family education that is based on it. Although at some points he superficially affirms some biblical values, such as monogamy, Adler never roots his thoughts in Scripture.

Religion and psychology. Adler sees the major purpose of religion as one of facilitating his goals for social cooperation, *regardless of doctrinal content*. He goes on to insist that psychology can achieve this purpose more efficiently because it is "scientific," while religions have often been misinterpreted. *Psychology thus replaces religion!*

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