

THROUGH THE BIBLICAL LOOKING GLASS
A Biblical Critique of *Reality Therapy* and *Choice Therapy*
by Dr. William Glasser, M.D.

This critique spans the work of psychiatrist Glasser (still living) over a period of more than 30 years. In the 1960's, his *Reality Therapy* challenged the failures of traditional Freudian psychoanalysis. In the late 1990's, many of the same ideas have been repackaged under the term "choice therapy." Glasser's approach is termed "a psychiatric version of the three R's, namely, reality, responsibility, and right-and-wrong" (xii RT). This would be initially appealing to Christians who are weary of the blame-shifting that occurs in so much popular psychotherapy, where everyone is a victim and no one is responsible for much of anything. However, a closer look reveals his conflicts with biblical truth. Believers do not need his brand of "therapy" in order to lead responsible, godly lives. Fundamental defects include Glasser's failure to acknowledge God's eternal ethical standards, as well as his promotion of human autonomy under the guise of "responsibility" and "choice." Glasser also has no concept of man's basic sin nature. While at first a welcome relief from Freudian irresponsibility, Glasser's departure from biblical truths and standards offers nothing to the believer seeking growth in godly living.

Freudian Failures

Both of Glasser's books compare his counseling methods and presuppositions to the failed Freudian approach. In a foreword to *Reality Therapy*, O. Hobart Mowrer notes the failure of Freudian psychoanalysis (xi RT). Glasser's system claims to be "in many ways absolutely antithetical" to Freudian approaches (xii RT). Glasser describes the following characteristics and assumptions of traditional Freudian therapy, which are opposed to the methods he advocates:

- * Belief that mental illness exists and that people should be classified according to its categories (42 RT).

- * Belief that a person's past is important and should be explored to discover the roots of his present problems (42 RT).

- * Belief that a person must gain insight into his "unconscious" mind (43 RT).

* Belief that a person in counseling should "transfer" attitudes toward parents to his therapy, and relive the past in order to gain insight (43 RT).

* Avoidance of moral standards by which behavior is evaluated (43 RT).

* Failure to teach people better ways to behave (43 RT).

"Mental illness." Glasser rejects the concept of "mental illness," which he asserts to be a "major road block to proper psychiatric treatment" (45 RT).

One of Glasser's problems with "mental illness" is its tendency to focus on the past and render the individual a victim of circumstances:

"Those who believe in mental illness assume incorrectly that something definite is wrong with the patient which causes him to be the way he is. Most psychiatrists believe that the patient was all right at one time and then fell victim to a series of unhappy life experiences which now cause his deviant behavior." (45 RT)

In addition to being a victim of the past, the "mentally ill" person becomes a passive recipient in the counseling process:

"As long as the mental illness concept prevails and patients continue to see themselves as the recipients of help, we will make little progress in psychiatry." (47 RT)

Indeed, the concept of "mental illness" is biblically invalid. God holds us to moral standards. Sin is not an "illness" as often alleged by modern psychology and various "recovery" groups. However, we are recipients of God's grace, both for eternal salvation and for progressive growth in godliness. We do the good works that God has prepared for us (Ephesians 2:10), because the Holy Spirit is at work in us to will and to do His good pleasure (Philippians 2:12-13). Glasser rightly rejects "mental illness" but has no standard of godliness to supplant it.

Unconscious conflicts and focus on the past. Glasser does not "look for unconscious conflicts or the reasons for them" (44

RT). He believes that such "unconscious mental processes" do exist but that people fulfill their needs using the *conscious* mind (13 RT). "Unconscious conflicts" easily emerge in therapy, according to Glasser, because the patient thereby gains the therapist's approval and at the same time relieves himself of responsibility for his present behavior (55 RT). Meanwhile, counselors vainly pursue the insights of probing the "unconscious" in order to facilitate change:

"The conventional psychiatrist depends far too much on the ability of the patient to change his attitude and ultimately his behavior through gaining insight into his unconscious conflicts and inadequacies." (51 RT)

Glasser fails to see the value in this perpetual "wild goose chase" down memory lane:

"Patients have been treated with conventional psychiatry until they know the unconscious reason for every move they make, but they still do not change because knowing the reason does not lead to fulfilling needs." (53 RT)

Not only does this technique fail to yield positive results; it impedes the change counselors are seeking:

"Emphasis upon the unconscious sidetracks the main issue of the patient's irresponsibility and gives him another excuse to avoid facing reality. We cannot emphasize enough that delving into a man's unconscious mind is detrimental to therapy." (53 RT)

Glasser's counseling centers on assisting people in the fulfillment of certain "needs" (defined later). Focus on the past appears to explain a person's present inability to meet such needs, but such an appearance is deceptive:

"Because no one lives a life where his needs are always fulfilled, it is impossible not to find a wealth of buried conflicts which, being similar to present difficulties, seem to explain a person's inability to fulfill his needs now." (55 RT)

Glasser believes it would be more effective to examine the *present* instead of the past:

"If we examine his present life in detail, we will find behavior *of which he is fully conscious* that does not lead to fulfilling his needs." (53 RT)

He notes that counselors wrongly assume that the person being counseled is *already* aware of his present behavior, and thus it is necessary to delve into the past for answers. However, "in so doing *he misses the extent to which the patient lacks awareness of what he is doing now*" (55 RT). At the same time, Glasser clarifies his view as to responsibility. The person is not responsible for the past, but only for his present responses:

"In the present volume, Dr. Glasser is not saying that patients are *responsible* for what has happened in the past; instead, he is saying that they have not been, and are not now, *living responsibly*." (xxi RT)

For Glasser, the only valid reason to review the past is to consider *successes* rather than *failures*:

"I disagree with the usual psychiatric thinking that you can learn from past misery. When you focus on the past, all you are doing is revisiting the misery.... But if I do go into the past, I look for a time when she was in effective control of her life. We can learn from past successes, not from past misery." (130 CT)

We can agree with Glasser's basis thesis that archaeological digs into the "unconscious," and into a person's past, are generally futile. However, biblical reasons are vastly different. We are made in the image of God, *accountable* before our Creator. Glasser's "responsibility" is solely to self, for meeting the perceived needs of self. Our true responsibility is to God, to serve Him and others, dying to self for the cause of Christ.

What about victims? In *Choice Therapy*, where failed relationships are emphasized, Glasser discusses abused and neglected children "who accept the mistreatment in a desperate attempt to please the people they need so much" (192 CT). He explains that:

"The pain of the abuse is far more bearable than the idea of separating from what children believe are irreplaceable

persons, which, of course, means taking those persons out of their quality worlds." (192 CT)

Glasser digresses somewhat from his usual "call to responsibility" when he explains that:

"As they grow older and separate from the weak relationship they had with a parent, many of them are too distrustful of people to consider trying to find happiness in human relationships. They now have no one, not even their parents, in their quality worlds. But they want to feel good--*we all want to feel good*--so many of them pursue what is available to them, the pleasures associates with violence and drugs." (194 CT)

Nevertheless, Glasser refutes the idea that we can repress memories of abuse and neglect after age three or four, and he does not advocate attempts to dig up such memories in counseling (231). He rejects the teaching that formerly abused children *must* recall and rehash the pain of the past:

"The conventional wisdom is that an abused child, especially a sexually abused child, will never be able to deal with what has happened unless he or she is made aware of it and, perhaps goes so far as to confront the person who did it. It is believed that the abused person cannot deal alone with what happened and needs a psychotherapist to guide him or her through what is called a healing process." (219 CT)

Glasser also warns about the potential for creating *false* memories of abuse in therapy that seeks out such events to explain problems in the present:

"Too many adult clients have been so convinced that they can't deal with their present misery until they can recover a forgotten memory of childhood abuse. Unfortunately, what they do 'recover' is a false memory of abuse that never happened. This *memory* has been created by the client's creative system to try to please the therapist and/or to avoid dealing with the present. Neither the client nor anyone else has any way to know that it is not a true memory." (232 CT)

Continuing on, Glasser does not believe that past abuse is the cause of present behavior:

"Regardless of what has happened to us, choice theory does not focus on the past as the cause of our present difficulties. Many clients want to stay in the past... to find someone to blame for their present unhappiness."
(231 CT)

"Choice theory explains that all problems are present problems because the needs must be satisfied now." (220 CT)

Glasser contends that people do not continue to be "victims" unless they actively *choose* to see themselves as such:

"They are no longer victims of what happened unless they choose to see themselves that way.... Most important, they must learn that they are not suffering from the abuse itself as much as from the fact that they have lost trust in or may never have learned to trust people." (219 CT)

We can agree that there are numerous, serious problems with viewing people as victims of their past. "False memories" can indeed be created by suggestive counseling techniques, and families destroyed in the process. However, as indicated elsewhere, we part ways with Glasser in terms of his goals for counseling and the standards which guide the process.

Counseling relationship. The relationship between the counselor and the person counseled (discussed in a later section) is another one of the key areas in which "reality therapy" conflicts with the methods of Freud:

"Psychoanalytic transference is said to be best achieved when the therapist remains inexplicit and shadowy as a person, onto whom the patient can 'project' his neurotic, harsh, unrealistic, anxiety-arousing expectations of all authoritative 'father figures.'" (xx RT)

"In Reality Therapy, the helping person becomes both involved with and very real to the patient in a way which would be regarded as utterly destructive of the transference as conceived and cultivated in classical analysis." (xii RT)

Glasser explains his rejection of Freudian transference:

"Psychiatric patients are not seeking to repeat unsuccessful involvements past or present; they are looking for a satisfying human involvement through which they can fulfill their needs now." (52 RT)

From a biblical standpoint, we can agree that it is futile to repeat relationships of the past. However, our present involvements are not for the purpose of fulfilling perceived needs, but rather to serve God and others as commanded by Christ.

Morality. Glasser takes issue with Freud's failure to consider standards of morality. *Reality's* foreword alleges that Freudian therapy has resulted in "deeper delinquency, defiance, and rejection of parents and authority" (xiv RT). Critical of the Freudian rejection of society's ethical standards, Glasser claims that "the very conventions and moral standards which analysts so freely criticize are precisely what keep groups and persons from 'falling apart'" (xv RT). Freud's argument was "that 'conventional morality' is unrealistic in the sense of making more demands for restraint and 'repression' than are actually necessary" (xviii-xix RT). Thus traditional psychoanalysis assumes that "neurosis" occurs when a person's ethical *standards* are too *high*, while Glasser contends that such difficulties result when *performance* is too *low* (xiii RT). Freudians do acknowledge that in some persons, i.e., criminals, there is "too little rather than too much conscience" (xiii). Thus *two* types of therapy develop: one educational, another corrective (xiii RT). Glasser has only *one* approach focused on responsibility (xiv RT). Nevertheless, while he asserts that "we emphasize the morality of behavior" (44 RT), it is unfortunate that Glasser has no clue as to the universal moral standards established by God in His Word. If he did, his criticisms of Freud might lead people in paths of righteousness. Instead, he leads the reader down a deceptive path of "responsibility" that ultimate begins and ends with self.

Glasser's alleged improvements. Unlike Freud, Glasser teaches people "better ways to fulfill their needs" (45 RT). Psychoanalysis ultimately negates responsible behavior:

"...while praising the reality principle, Freud propounded a therapeutic technique which, paradoxically, glorifies pleasure and permissiveness." (xviii RT)

Glasser's approach to therapy claims to eliminate the following:

1. Lengthy probing into the nature of the problem, because "it is always an unsatisfying **present** relationship" (116 CT, emphasis added).
2. Extensive investigation of the individual's past (116 CT). Glasser believes that focus on the past may delay dealing effectively with what is happening in the present (117 CT).
3. Time spent listening to complaints about symptoms and the actions of others (117 CT). "Choice theory does not deny that clients have legitimate complaints, but it teaches that the only persons we can control are ourselves." (117 CT)

Glasser has made his point. His counseling differs significantly from Freudian psychoanalysis. However, it also differs just as significantly from biblical truths about the nature of man, man's fundamental problems, and how such problems should be addressed.

The Nature of Man

Basic to understanding Glasser's erroneous view of man is his failure to understand sin:

"Thus the concept of responsibility, far from implying or stressing the evil in man is rather one which sees and builds upon his potentialities *for good*; and it is therefore decidedly optimistic and hopeful rather than cynical or pessimistic." (xxi RT)

When the failure to recognize sin is coupled with a call to freedom and responsibility, the stage is set for destruction. Such a call is doomed to failure, because the *grace* of God, to forgive and cleanse from sin, is excluded. The *power* of God's Spirit, to produce godly change, is also eliminated. The psychologist who wrote the foreword to *Reality Therapy*, O.

Hobart Mowrer, committed suicide. Faced with the *reality* of sin, but no hope to handle the inevitable guilt, his life ended in utter despair. As believers, we want to call people to responsible, godly living. But we do so with the glorious hope of the gospel!

The "quality world." Glasser's need-centered therapy (discussed more fully in the next section) begins with his theory that each individual creates a "quality world" for himself in order to fulfill his perceived needs:

"Choice theory explains that the reason we perceive much of reality so differently from others has to do with another important world, unique to each of us, called the quality world. This small, personal world, which each person starts to create in his or her memory shortly after birth and continues to create and re-create throughout life, is made up of a small group of specific pictures that portray, more than anything else we know, the best ways to satisfy one or more of our basic needs." (44-45 CT)

This "quality world" includes people (to be with), things (to own or experience), and ideas or beliefs that govern our behavior (45 CT). Glasser claims that people do not know about their basic needs, but build their "quality worlds" on the basis of those people, things, and beliefs, that make them feel good (45 CT). He explains that the individual can choose to rearrange his quality world, excluding or including people at will, except that *self* may never be removed:

"But just as we can choose to put people into our quality worlds and picture them anyway we want them to be, we can also choose to take them out.... Even though it is unusual, we can actually remove every single person from our quality worlds except ourselves. No matter how we picture ourselves, we can't take ourselves out." (53 CT)

Parents are also difficult to remove from a person's "quality world":

"Unlike all others who are in our quality worlds, we do not consciously choose to put our parents in. By the time we become aware of them, we have made that choice; they are there.... Even if they treat us terribly from the moment we are aware of them, most of us struggle to keep these

people [family members] in our quality worlds far longer than anyone we meet later in life." (192 CT)

Among Glasser's descriptions of the "quality world" for different people: "...for religious people, the picture of heaven or paradise in which they hope to spend eternity" (45 CT). Heaven appears to be merely one choice along a smorgasbord of "quality worlds." Religion, meanwhile, is defined in a very broad sense with no reference to God:

"What we most *believe in* is our religion, our political convictions, and our way of life." (54 CT)

There is a fleeting allusion to evangelism when Glasser notes that:

"But systems of belief that are strong enough for us to put into our quality worlds mean little to us if we cannot convince another person that what we believe is also good for him or her." (54 CT)

The reader must wonder where God fits into this "quality world," created according to man's imaginations.

Glasser explains how "unreality" creeps into the utopian "quality world":

"...most of us keep pictures in our quality worlds long after we are no longer able to satisfy them to the extent we want." (48 CT)

He also notes that "quality" worlds are purely for the individual creator, not to be imposed on others:

"Choice therapy teaches that my quality world is the core of *my* life; it is not the core of anyone else's life. This is a difficult lesson for external control people to learn." (53 CT)

However, marital love is defined by Glasser in terms of *sharing* "quality worlds with no fear of rejection, ridicule, criticism, blame, or complaint" (164 CT):

"It is this willingness, even eagerness, to share your hopes and fears that defines love." (164 CT)

Glasser claims that "if you and the person you fall in love with know choice theory and know about your quality worlds, you can use this knowledge to stay in love with each other" (164 CT). Good marriages, for Glasser, are centered on human imaginations rather than the commandments of God.

Needs, needs, and more needs. Glasser's view of man, in both *Reality Therapy* and *Choice Therapy*, is focused largely around the necessity to satisfy basic needs:

"Learning to fulfill our needs must begin early in infancy and continue all our lives." (11 RT)

Although critical of much traditional need-centered therapy, Glasser presupposes that "the basic human needs are for *relatedness* and *respect*," satisfied through "doing what is realistic, responsible, right" (xii RT). Much of his counseling is built upon an absolute requirement to fulfill the needs that Glasser defines. According to Glasser, those who are unsuccessful in fulfilling their needs all have one common characteristic, namely, "they all deny the reality of the world around them" (xvii RT). He explains that:

"If the evil, pain, suffering which ultimately occur as a result of a given action exceed the immediate satisfaction which it produced, that action may be termed unrealistic; whereas, if the satisfaction which ultimately occurs as a result of an action is greater than the immediate effort or sacrifice associated with it, such an action can be called realistic." (xviii RT)

Living that is "unrealistic" consists of behavior that fails to result in the satisfaction of needs. Counseling, accordingly, is centered largely around the development of successful need meeting strategies:

"We believe that throughout their lives people constantly strive to fulfill their needs. Any time in their lives when they are unsuccessful in doing so, they behave unrealistically.... We believe that there is no noxious psychological causative agent to remove. *Our job is to help the patient help himself to fulfill his needs right now.*" (46 RT)

Thus we have the term "reality therapy."

The need for love and **relationships** is one of Glasser's basic themes:

"At all times in our lives we must have at least one person who cares about us and whom we care for ourselves. If we do not have this essential person, we will not be able to fulfill our basic needs." (7 RT)

"...essential to fulfillment of our needs is a person, preferably a group of people, with whom we are emotionally involved *from the time we are born to the time we die.*" (8 RT)

Biblically, relationships are important. Many texts of Scripture exhort believers about their care and love for one another. The Bible is phrased in terms of *giving* love rather than centering attention on *getting* love or other needs met. Glasser recognizes the importance of giving to some extent but places genetic limitations on the ability to give love:

"It is important to understand that the strength of this need [love and belonging] is measured by how much we are willing to give, not by how much we are willing to receive.... We can't give any more love than the amount that is **written in our genes**, but in the vast majority of marriages that's enough." (96, emphasis added)

Scripture states that we love because *God* first loved us. Furthermore, Glasser misses the most important relationship of all: God and man. Man's greatest *need* is to be reconciled with God, his Creator.

In *Choice Therapy*, Glasser develops a larger catalogue of needs that he believes are genetically programmed:

"As I explain our motivation, which I believe is built into our genes, I will also explain that there are **genetic reasons** why we choose so many controlling behaviors." (25 CT, emphasis added)

"I believe we are **genetically programmed** to try to satisfy four psychological needs: love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun. All our behavior is always our best

choice, at the time we make the choice, to satisfy one or more of these needs." (28 CT, emphasis added)

The need for "**survival**" is yet another fundamental human need proposed by Glasser:

"All living creatures are genetically programmed to struggle to survive." (31 CT)

This need, first seen during infancy, is viewed by Glasser as a prelude to later attempts to control others:

"This early crying [of an infant], which is our attempt to satisfy a genetic need to survive, introduces us to what will be a lifelong practice of trying to control others." (25-26 CT)

Biblically, attempts to control are understood in terms of man's sinful desire for autonomy, first emerging at the Fall.

The need for **power**, Glasser, claims "is unique to our species" (37 CR):

"It is this need for power that very early displaces survival and governs the lives most of us choose to live.... We want to win; to run things; to have it our way; and to tell others what to do, see them do it, and have them do it the way we know is best." (37 CT)

However, Glasser warns about potential conflicts between power and love:

"Power destroys love. No one wants to be dominated, no matter how much those who dominate protest their love." (42 CT)

Glasser discusses the "need for power" in marriages, claiming that this is "the most difficult need to satisfy in or out of marriage" (98 CT):

"Battered wives are often the victims of powerless husbands who are trying to get from their wives at home what they can't get elsewhere.... Partners who both have a low need for power are almost always compatible." (98-99 CT)

However, Glasser holds out little hope for a marriage in which both partners have a high need for freedom:

"Unlike a mutual need for power, a couple can't unite for increased freedom. Shared freedom for two high-freedom people is an oxymoron." (100-101 CT)

Thus sinful marital behavior is explained away in terms of psychological need deficits. Such conflicts must be viewed in terms of a biblical view of sin.

Still another "basic psychological need" is **freedom**:

"Whenever we lose freedom, we reduce or lose what may be a defining human characteristic: our ability to be constructively creative.... When we don't feel free to express ourselves, or if we do and no one will listen to us, our creativity may cause us pain or even make us sick." (40 CT)

While the Bible informs us that man is not free from God and His law, Glasser claims that man is not free from his genetic programming:

"But if you want total freedom, you can't have it. None of us is free from what is written in his or her genes. As much as we may try to find love and belonging, we can't disregard the other needs, especially power and freedom." (42 CT)

Fun is another "genetic need" proposed by Glasser, "the genetic reward for learning" (41 CT).

The Bible promises something far better than these psychological needs Glasser advocates: *joy* in knowing and serving Christ, plus *freedom* from the power of sin and death. As noted in the discussion that follows, Glasser's view of needs and their origin is thoroughly rooted in his acceptance of evolutionary theory, which is diametrically opposed to the biblical account of creation.

Evolution. Glasser's evolutionary view of man is cause for alarm. In *Reality Therapy*, evolution is implied by Glasser's statement that:

"The teaching of responsibility is the most important task of all **higher animals**, man most certainly included. Except for man this task is performed primarily under the pressure of instinct--**instinct** related directly to the **continuation of the species.**" (16 RT, emphasis added)

Glasser appears here to *assume* that evolution is truth. In *Choice Therapy*, references are more direct, but again, evolution is an assumption rather than a theory that Glasser seeks to prove:

"More than those of any other **higher-order animals**, our genes motivate us far beyond survival.... Some large-brained animals, such as whales, porpoises, and primates, seem to have similar needs, but not enough is known to compare their needs with ours." (28 CT, emphasis added)

"**Evolution** has provided humans and **higher-order animals** with genes that grant us the ability *to feel*. On the basis of this ability, the first thing we know and more than anything we will ever know is *how we feel.*" (28 CT, emphasis added)

Elsewhere, Glasser personifies evolution:

"I believe that the need for freedom is evolution's attempt to provide the correct balance between your need to try to force me to live my life the way you want and my need to be free of that force." (39-40 CT)

Such personification of an impersonal force is one unregenerate man's attempt to suppress the truth about the Creator (Romans 1). Having rejected the personal God who created man, Glasser wants to endow "evolution" with the ability to develop and carry out a purposeful plan.

Glasser's evolutionary view of man contrasts sharply with the truth that man has been created in the image of God and is therefore fundamentally different in nature from the animals. Man is not a "higher-order animal." Man is not an "animal" at all.

Genes. Glasser's evolutionary views underlie his many comments in *Choice Therapy* about human "genes." He has a "genetic explanation" for the human personality:

"I believe that the way we usually relate to other people, best called our personalities, is, in part, **written in our genes**.... What gives us our different personalities is that our five basic, or genetic, needs differ in strength. Some of us have a high need for love and belonging. Others have a high need for power or freedom. The strength of each need is **fixed at birth** and does not change." (91 CT, emphasis added)

This deterministic language about unchanging, "fixed at birth" needs seems to contradict Glasser's belief in man's seemingly unlimited ability to choose. Even if Glasser were correct, he isn't specific as to *who* has "written in our genes."

Relationships appear to be the result of genetic programming in Glasser's scheme. He notes that "caring for those who are not related to us is a uniquely human behavior" (26 CT):

"Since the long-term care of our children and lifelong concern for members of our species takes a lot of time, energy, and resources that could be devoted to our own and our children's survival, I believe that humans have additional genetic instructions, as strong as survival, that drive us to be closely involved with each other all our lives." (26-27 CT)

Genes have been the subject of scientific inquiry and study. What hard evidence does Glasser offer us about the genetic programming that he proposes as an explanation for human *behavior*? All he can muster is a mysterious, "unknown" gene. In describing the ongoing work of geneticists, Glasser says:

"I believe that some of these **unknown genes** provide a basis for our psychology--how we behave and what we choose to do with our lives." (27 CT, emphasis added)

As an example of Glasser's speculations, here is how he explains human anger:

"Angering is built into our genes to help us survive, and since infancy we have used it or thought about using it whenever we are not able to satisfy an important picture in our quality worlds." (79-80 CT)

What is really odd about Glasser's system is that while holding up genetic programming as an explanation for so much human behavior, he simultaneously asserts a high view of the ability to choose. This seems internally inconsistent. The Bible recognizes man as a responsible moral agent who is in bondage to sin as the consequence of his rebellion against God.

Choice and control. Some of the opening remarks in *Choice Therapy* reveal Glasser's extreme views concerning the human ability to choose, to be in control:

"Choice theory explains that, for all practical purposes, we choose *everything* we do, including the misery we feel. Other people can neither make us miserable nor make us happy." (3 CT)

"As I explain in great detail in this book, we choose all our actions and thoughts and, indirectly, almost all our feeling and much of our physiology.... Choice therapy teaches that we are much more in control of our lives than we realize. Unfortunately, much of that control is not effective.... The best way to learn choice theory is to focus on why we choose the common miseries that we believe just happen to us." (4 CT)

But, Glasser cautions, people are unaware of their "choice" to be miserable:

"Whenever we feel bad, it does not seem like a choice; it seems as if it is happening to us." (64 CT)

However, he insists that all conscious behavior is the result of choices, primarily as an attempt to be "in control" and to fulfill basic needs:

"All your significant conscious behaviors, that is, all behaviors that have anything directly to do with satisfying basic needs, are chosen.... Not only are we always behaving, but we are also always trying to choose to behave in a way that gives us *the most effective control over our lives*. In terms of choice therapy, having effective control means being able to behave in a way that reasonably satisfies the pictures in our quality worlds." (71 CT)

Even depression is viewed as a way to "be in control," although certainly not the best:

"Although depressing gives us some control, it does so at a very high price: misery. Even as we depress, our misery and our continued frustration force us to keep looking for better behavior.... It is not in our genes to accept a major frustration, such as an unsatisfying relationship, without getting our creative systems involved." (145 CT)

Glasser explains that feelings do not appear as "choices" because the control over them is indirect:

"My explanation of why you believe that you have no control over what you feel is that you have no direct control over what you feel in the way that you have direct control over your acting or thinking." (73 CT)

Even *physical* problems are viewed as the result of choice, placing a rather intolerable burden on people who are ill:

"...what we feel and our physiology are *inseparable* from these chosen actions and thoughts." (75 CT)

Man's perceived lack of control is what apparently makes his circumstances so seeming intolerable:

"The idea that a situation is hopeless, that you can do nothing about it, is what makes it so uncomfortable."
(77 CT)

Glasser sees a relatively simple, quick solution in his advice to reorient choices:

"...*these are our choices when we want to stop choosing a painful behavior like depressing: (1) change what we want, (2) change what we are doing, or (3) change both.*" (71 CT)

For example, in counseling a depressed man with marital problems, Glasser says:

"My counseling will offer him two options.... First, he can choose to change what he wants his wife to do. Second, he can choose to change the way he is dealing with her."
(63 CT)

Glasser's exaltation of choice is perceived as an panacea for all sorts of conflicts:

"Choice theory is the way to compromise [in marital disputes]; fighting, arguing, and trying to control are the paths to increased conflict." (94 CT)

Glasser warns, however, that "trying to implement choice theory can be a trap if the willing partner tries to *make* the other move to his or her choice theory way of thinking" (177 CT).

There is apparently no situation in which "choice" cannot save the day. In situations where "there is nothing effective we can do does not mean we do nothing. This is exactly the situation for which our creative system evolved. It never shuts down or gives up" but "offers *new actions and thoughts*" (136 CT). (Note that a purposeful "creativity" is alleged to have "evolved" without the involvement of a personal God.)

In case Glasser might appear to be insensitive by blaming people for their own misery, he explains his approach as one of breaking the news gently:

"It is important to me that I not be seen as lacking compassion. I never tell people that they are choosing any painful or self-destructive symptoms. I help them to make better choices and better relationships and teach them some choice theory." (158 CT)

How does Scripture view man's ability to make choices and to control the circumstances of his life? Clearly, man, created in the image of God, is a moral agent responsible for his sin. Such responsibility can be seen in early Genesis, where mankind begins to reap the consequences of that first sinful choice. However, choices are not made in a vacuum. Man has a relationship to God, and his moral choices are either in accordance with God's commands or they are not. Furthermore, Scripture portrays the unregenerate man as being in bondage to sin. Christ's work on the cross sets believers free from both the penalty and the power of sin (Romans 6). Apart from His redemptive work, man does not have the ability to perform what is righteous in the sight of God. Man does not possess the extreme freedom-to-choose advocated by Glasser, but his

responsibility is far more serious than "choice therapy" proclaims.

As for control, that province belongs to the sovereign Lord, who works all things according to the counsel of His own will (Ephesians 1:11). Although man should not be viewed as a passive victim of circumstances, there is *much* that lies beyond his control. Man's duty is to respond to circumstances in a godly manner, acknowledging the sovereignty of God and trusting Him.

In summary, Glasser views man as the product of evolution with numerous genetically programmed needs, yet able to exercise a high degree of choice and control over his life. He misses completely the fact of man's creation in the image of God, man's fall into sin, and God's sovereignty.

What is Man's Problem?

Glasser's view of man's basic problem can be summed up quickly: external control psychology, failure to fulfill certain genetically programmed needs, and lack of close relationships. He insists that:

"...the cause of the psychiatric patient's condition is different from that of a patient with a physical illness, who is more truly the victim of forces outside himself."

(46 CT)

It *is* truly different. Christians should be weary of attempts to apply a medical model to human behavior. Glasser, however, begins and ends with man--not God. As believers, we must begin with God and His standards. We must end with God and His solution for man's sin: the cross of Christ.

External control psychology. In the Bible, man's fundamental problem is sin, rooted in rebellion against God. Glasser, on the contrary, sees the problem as excessive external control. This is the essence of rebellion. Glasser turns the problem upside down!

Glasser describes the "external control" system in terms of three main beliefs (16 CT):

FIRST BELIEF: I answer a ringing phone, open the door to a doorbell, stop at a red light, or do countless other things because I am responding to a simple external signal.

SECOND BELIEF: I can make other people do what I want them to do even if they do not want to do it. And other people can control how I think, act, and feel.

THIRD BELIEF: It is right, it is even my moral obligation, to ridicule, threaten, or punish those who don't do what I tell them to do or even reward them if it will get them to do what I want.

Choice Therapy is "about the fact that the belief in and use of external control harms everyone, both the controllers and the controlled" (7 CT). It all begins in early childhood:

"The seeds of almost all our unhappiness are planted early in our lives when we begin to encounter people who have discovered not only what is right for them--but also, unfortunately, what is right for us.... Our choice of how we resist that force is, by far, the greatest source of human misery. Choice theory challenges this ancient I-know-what's-best-for-you tradition." (4 CT)

Underlying such a view, but not openly expressed, is the idea that very small children could somehow know with is right for them. This certainly flies in the face of biblical teachings about original sin, as well as God-ordained authority in the home, church, and state. But Glasser persists in highlighting "external control" as the root of much evil:

"Our present psychology has failed...the psychology we have embraced tends to drive us apart." (5 CT)

"What makes external control doubly harmful is that not only does our belief in it create the problems we are trying to solve, but it is also used to deal with the problems."
(12-13 CT)

Why do people nevertheless cling to a system where some persons exercise control over others? Glasser raises this question and offers an explanation:

"If external control is the source of so much misery, why is it the choice of almost all people, even powerless people who suffer so much from it? The answer is simple: It works. It works for the powerful because it often gets them what they want. It works for the powerless because they experience it working on them and live in hope that they will eventually be able to use it on someone else." (6 CT)

Furthermore, sometimes people believe that they have the right to control others:

"What may also be involved here is ownership. Most of us believe that we should or do own our husbands, wives, children, students, and employees." (15 CT)

There is a much better explanation for control that violates biblical commands: sin. Meanwhile, some "external control" is biblically ordained and proper. Parents do not "own" their children, but children are to obey their parents in the Lord (Ephesians 6:1). Husbands do not "own" their wives, but there is a hierarchy in the home wherein wives submit "as to the Lord" while husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:22-33). God does not give people "ownership" of others but He does delegate authority for the ordering of our lives. Glasser cites Alcoholics Anonymous as an organization that utilizes "more choice therapy than external control" and offers relationships that people "desperately need" (23 CT). That organization, however, usurps the role of the church and practices idolatry by encouraging the worship of whatever "god" suits each person.

The "external control" problem is one that Glasser applies in the home, the school, the workplace, the church, and even the entire community. Marital problems are explained as rooted in control:

"...if you are an external control person, the heart of that ideal relationship is what the other can do for you. Having this other-centered relationship as the ideal leaves you unprepared to find what you really need--a relationship that is based on what each partner can do for the other." (102 CT)

"In an abusive marriage, the husband is following the most destructive external control practice: He believes he owns his wife." (177 CT)

Any discipline of children beyond the *natural* consequences of their actions is similarly condemned:

"Punishment is external control psychology to the core--an imposed consequence that always increases the distance between parents and children.... Children should not be made to suffer any more than the natural consequences of what they choose to do." (212 CT)

According to Glasser, parents have no business exercising control over the behavior of their children:

"What bothers people, especially parents, is that choice theory, which states that we can control only our own behavior, imposes such strict limitations on what we can do when we want children, or anyone else, to behave differently.... Few of us are prepared to accept that it is our attempts to control that destroys the only thing we have with our children that gives us some control over them, our relationship." (196 CT)

Glasser's summary of parental responsibility ignores the reality of sin and many biblical commands:

"I can only explain the basics of choice theory child rearing: a lot of love and no punishment." (208 CT)

A full chapter is devoted to the condemnation of current educational practices. Again, the primary culprit is external control. Glasser begins by noting that many students are not doing their best in school, even the good students:

"Not only are many poor students doing badly in our coercive schools, many good students are not doing their best either." (237 CT).

This, he alleges, is due to the belief in external control psychology; school leaders "adhere rigidly to the idea that what is taught in school is right and that students who won't learn it should be punished" (237 CT). There are two destructive practices in schools that Glasser cites. One is "trying to make

students acquire knowledge or memorize facts in school that have no value for anyone, including students, in the real world" (237 CT). The second is "forcing students to acquire knowledge that may have value in the real world but nowhere near enough value to try to force every student to learn it" (237 CT). Glasser concludes that:

"Forcing people to learn has never been successful, yet we continue to do it because we think it is right." (237 CT)

"Education is not acquiring knowledge; it is best defined as using knowledge." (238 CT)

Application of knowledge to "real life" is certainly an important skill to be emphasized in any educational program. There may well be problems (beyond the scope of this paper) in the way education is conducted. However, there are also serious *moral* problems in our schools which this theory, exalting "choice," does not touch. In some respects, we need *less* choice and *more* respect for legitimate authority.

In the work environment, Glasser is critical of "boss management," another expression of external control psychology. He says that "if high-quality work is what the manager is trying to achieve, fear is the worst strategy" (284 CP):

"The more workers are bossed...the more they enjoy using what little power they may have to obstruct." (292 CT)

Glasser claims that "no human being should ever evaluate another human being...no person with some power should ever make a formal evaluation of a subordinate" (302 CT).

Even the church is targeted for "choice therapy." Glasser recommends his book for church congregations to use (326 CT) as well as religious leaders (327 CT) and numerous others. In fact, he appears to be advocating his book and theory as something of a "cure all" for our entire society. In planning a "pilot project" for a community in Corning, New York:

"Our goal is to show other communities that working together, we can successfully challenge the flat line on the graph of human progress. It's time to move that line up." (331 CT)

Glasser would like to see:

"...a community in which you wouldn't have to be concerned that the people you encountered would be trying to make you do what you didn't want to do and in which the people all around you would think, before they did anything, Will this bring me closer to the others in the community or will it tend to move us further apart?" (310)

The type of "quality community" advocated in the final chapter of *Choice Therapy* is one that seeks to replace the mutual care and concern of the church community. Also, while the alleged results sound good, underlying it is a high view of human nature. Some of Glasser's suggestions are simple ways in which people could treat one another with more kindness and respect, such as employers giving thoughtful consideration to improvements recommended by employees in the workplace. However, Glasser fails to acknowledge the depth of sin in the human heart. He also fails to recognize the fact that God has ordained an orderly authority structure for this world.

Need deficits. Problems of a "psychiatric" nature are viewed by Glasser as fundamentally rooted in the failure to satisfy needs:

"We believe that, regardless of how he expresses his problem, everyone who needs psychiatric treatment suffers from one basic inadequacy: he is unable to fulfill his essential needs." (5 RT)

"We might say...that all people who have any kind of serious psychiatric problem are at that time lacking the proper involvement with someone--and, lacking that involvement, are unable to satisfy their needs.... We know...that at the time any person comes for psychiatric help he is lacking the most critical factor for fulfilling his needs, a person whom he genuinely cares about and who he feels genuinely cares about him." (12 RT)

There is a sense in which this is true. People pay "professional" counselors for the personal ministry that should be given free in the body of Christ.

What other psychiatrists would label "psychosis," Glasser explains in terms of need deficits. In a hospital program using Reality Therapy:

"Every staff member is taught that, at one time in his life, each long-term patient had been **unable to fulfill his needs** and was, therefore, unable to function in a responsible manner. Because he **could not fulfill his needs** in the real world, sometimes suddenly but more often gradually, the patient began to deny the existence of the real world and live in a world of his own, trying thereby to **fulfill his needs**.... No matter what his behavior, it was his way of **trying to fulfill his needs** or denying that he had needs to fulfill." (109 RT, emphasis added)

Every sort of human problem, even the most serious, is explained by Glasser as a failure to fulfill the needs he defines as basic.

Destructive creativity. "A life without creativity would be hardly worth living" (135 CT). Glasser claims that "in our brains we have a *creative system* that adds creativity to all our total behaviors" (135 CT). There is also, however, a "destructive creativity" that Glasser states is "most often seen when we want good relationships and are not able to get them" (136 CT). In situations where "there is nothing effective we can do does not mean we do nothing. This is exactly the situation for which our creative system evolved. It never shuts down or gives up" but "offers *new actions and thoughts*" (136 CT).

Glasser blames our "destructive creativity" for many "psychomatic" illnesses, but notes that "sometimes a whole group of psychological acting, thinking, and feeling behaviors" may be devised "by our creative systems" (146 CT). This is his explanation of "mental illness." Usually, he claims, an unsatisfactory relationship is the root of the problem. This distorted creativity is used to explain the highs and lows of "manic depressive" persons:

"Bipolar or manic depressive psychosis, discussed earlier in connection with the workless, is another variation of crazy creativity. It is not restricted to the workless, however; some successful people choose this up-and-down

behavior when their relationships are extremely unsatisfying." (154 CT)

The ability to be "creative" should be understood as part of the image of God in man, not a product of evolution. Because of *sin* (not need deficits), man's imaginations go astray and become destructive.

Relationship failures. Having defined one of man's fundamental problems as the lack of relationships, it is not surprising that Glasser emphasizes this area in his therapy:

"Psychiatry must be concerned with two basic psychological needs: *the need to love and be loved and the need to feel that we are worthwhile to ourselves and to others.*" (9 RT)

"To either love or to allow ourselves to be loved is not enough; we must do both." (10 RT)

The "need" to "feel worthwhile" is thrown into the mix:

"Equal in importance to the need for love is the need to feel that we are worthwhile both to ourselves and to others." (10 RT)

Glasser's view is in line with the modern psychological focus on "self-worth":

"A responsible person also does that which gives him a feeling of self-worth and a feeling that he is worthwhile to others.... When a responsible man says that he will perform a job for us, he will try to accomplish what was asked, both for us and so that he may gain a measure of self-worth for himself." (13 RT)

In Scripture, we are told to live our lives in a manner that is *worthy* of our calling in Christ (Ephesians 4:1), but the emphasis biblically is the glory and honor of God, not a subjective feeling of "self-worth." Godly relationships are not grounded in "self-worth" but in glorifying God.

Without even a reference to God, Glasser advocates the importance of relationships and describes the purpose of *Choice Therapy* in terms of helping people in this area:

"This book is about how important good relationships are to a successful life.... This whole book is both an explanation of why this happens and what to do to get along better with one another." (ix CT)

Glasser explains that we remember our feelings and then struggle to avoid feeling bad (28 CT). However, relationships complicate the picture as people grow from infancy to adulthood (29 CT). It becomes increasingly difficult to feel good, yet people willingly suffer a lot of pain because of the importance of their relationships (29 CT). Many unhappy people, however, have given up on trying to find happiness in relationships, turning instead to nonhuman pleasures such as alcohol, drugs, violence, or nonloving sex (22 CT). Some attempt to "feel good" through various solitary pursuits (29 CT). Unhappy people are often irrational in their search for "instant gratification" (30 CT). Successful therapy, according to Glasser, requires understanding that what people lack is relationships, "but to relate successfully to them, we must be scrupulous about not trying to control them" (23 CT). Meanwhile, *sin* is explained away as love deprivation.

Significant space is devoted to one of our most important human relationships: marriage. Glasser's understanding is centered on fulfilling the needs of each partner (as he defines them). He recommends marriage to someone with a similar "personality" (92 CT). The interplay between various "needs" appears to be the basis for a lasting relationship:

"...the best marriages share an average need for survival, a high need for love and belonging, low needs for power and freedom, and a high need for fun." (101 CT)

In the event that the reader is already married:

"If you are willing to give up trying to control each other and to begin using choice therapy in the relationship, you can usually negotiate these differences. But to negotiate accurately, you need to become aware of what these differences are, that is, which need or needs are in conflict." (93 CT)

Glasser does note briefly the need to consider the other person, rather than concentrating solely on one's own needs:

"A small compromise sends the message, *I care more about our relationship than I do about what I want personally.* That is a powerful message." (104 CT)

Biblical commands about divorce (see 1 Corinthians 7, for example) are cast aside when Glasser notes two "types of personalities" who should never marry, the "sociopath" and the "workless" (106-107 CT):

"If you are married when you discover that your partner has one of these personalities, realize that no matter how bad the relationship is now, it is guaranteed to get worse. Begin now to think of what you can do to extricate yourself." (106 CT)

The sociopath is "genetically incapable of feeling love or belonging for anyone" (107 CT). This person exploits others. He seems to care only about power and personal freedom and has no real consideration for the needs of anyone else" (106 CT). The "workless" person is characterized by a "low need for survival" but a "high need for power" (108 CT). This person "likes to be loved and, even more, to be befriended... He does, however, have a very high need for fun in a childish sense" (109 CT). He is erratic in holding down a job and depends on others to care for him (108 CT).

There are biblical exhortations for these situations. Paul, for example, states that whoever does not work shall not eat (2 Thessalonians). No person is "genetically incapable" of love. We love because God first loved us. Glasser has no concept of regeneration, and how God's Spirit enables the believer to love God and others.

Most disturbing is Glasser's belief that his type of therapy ought to be ordered by courts in cases of violent home situations:

"What is needed is a court-ordered diversion program that offers husbands and wives the chance to choose to learn choice theory and reality therapy together in a group setting with others who have the same domestic violence problem." (178 CT)

Glasser's recommendation that his methods be ordered by our judicial system is hardly consistent with his alleged rejection of "external control"!

Sin and guilt. Although Glasser excludes God's moral laws from his counseling, he is aware of the existence of guilt. Unlike Freud, he isn't quick to chase it away:

"In Reality Therapy it is important not to minimize guilt when it is deserved, and Jeri [an adolescent girl treated by Dr. Glasser] deserved to feel as bad as she did." (79 RT)

The specific sin of greed receives some brief attention from Glasser. He sees a "potential for greed that is written into our genes," claiming that "greedy people picture themselves in their quality worlds as deserving a lot more than other people" (287 CT). The "main cause of greed," according to Glasser, is "the product of the intense need for power in the genes of greedy, successful people" (288 CT).

There is a dim reflection of biblical truth about man's depravity when Glasser compares the technical progress over the past hundred years, which has rapidly escalated, with progress in human relationships--none! (9 CT) What he fails to acknowledge is the universal problem of man's *sin*. What he does acknowledge is the utter bankruptcy of modern psychology as practiced in this century.

Sin, which separates man from God, is the most fundamental problem to be reckoned with in giving godly, biblically based counsel to another believer. Sin, and the accompanying guilt, is man's basic problem. Glasser's therapy departs from the methods of Freud in his *faint* recognition of the problem. However, he has no biblical standards and no concept of man's accountability to God. Psychological explanations of sin abound. There is no atonement, no forgiveness, no power for righteous living. Progress in human relationships must be linked to God's Word and to the solution He has provided for man's sin. Glasser's system is thoroughly humanistic, just as doomed to failure as the Freudian methods that precede him.

By What Standard?

Glasser maintains that "reality therapy" is grounded in definite standards of morality:

"Morals, standards, values, or right and wrong behavior are all intimately related to the fulfillment of our need for self-worth and, as will be explained later, a necessary part of Reality Therapy." (11 RT)

Even if a person is not loved, *"to be worthwhile we must maintain a satisfactory standard of behavior"* (10 RT).

Therapy necessarily involves some discussion of morality, standards, and values to guide responsible living:

"All society is based on morality, and if the important people in the patient's life, **especially his therapist**, do not discuss whether his behavior is right or wrong, reality cannot be brought home to him." (56 RT, emphasis added)

"Where standards and values are not stressed, the most that therapy can accomplish is to help patients become more comfortable in their irresponsibility. Because our effort is always directed toward helping patients fulfill their needs, we insist on their striving to reach the highest possible standards." (59 RT)

It appears that the therapist has replaced both family and church (including pastors and elders) in the scheme, and that need fulfillment is the highest "value" in Glasser's ethical system.

Despite his emphasis on morals, Glasser refuses to acknowledge the existence of any universal standard for right and wrong such as God has revealed in His Word:

"We do not claim that we have discovered the key to universal right or that we are experts in ethics. We do believe, however, that to the best of our ability as responsible human beings, we must help our patients arrive at some decision concerning the moral quality of their behavior." (56 RT)

Here is Glasser's best attempt to arrive at some unchanging moral standard:

"When a man acts in such a way that he gives and receives love, and feels worthwhile to himself and others, his behavior is right or moral." (57 RT)

Apart from God, how can Glasser define love? How does he know exactly who or what should be deemed "worthwhile"? Is it merely whenever someone "feels worthwhile"?

Ultimately, in Glasser's counseling system, it is the person being counseled, not the counselor and certainly not God, who is the judge of right and wrong:

"People come to therapy suffering because they behave in ways that do not fulfill their needs, and they ask if their behavior is wrong. Our job is to face this question, confront them with their total behavior, and *get them to judge* the quality of what they are doing." (56 RT, emphasis in original)

"When a person is able to fulfill his need to feel worthwhile to himself and others, there is **little conflict over whether his behavior is right**, but in many instances the needs are in conflict and it is much more difficult to arrive at the correct course of behavior." (57 RT, emphasis added)

"...responsible people who are caught in a serious conflict of needs rarely consult a psychiatrist. They recognize that it is **up to them to decide what to do**. However, the psychiatrist does see hundreds of patients who have some conflict between their needs and would like to use this as an excuse for irresponsible behavior." (58 RT, emphasis added)

The lack of any universal moral standard emerges with clarity when Glasser alleges that responsible people may adhere to *different* standards in the fulfillment of needs.

"Because the needs can be fulfilled by many different courses of action, **reasonable men can have serious conflicts concerning values**. An excellent example is the recent controversy over non-denominational prayers in public schools. Some responsible men feel worthwhile without any religion, others without publicly acknowledging religion, and still others do not feel worthwhile unless

religion is a part of all life, public and private." (59 RT, emphasis added)

Evidently, Glasser sees *need fulfillment* as a universal value for all people, but otherwise, morality is up for grabs.

Glasser's failure to adhere to biblical standards, or anything remotely close, is particularly evident when he speaks of counseling on sexual matters. As an example of his lack of biblical standards in therapy, Glasser makes these comments about a young man struggling with homosexuality:

"Recently he told me of a sexual urge for a married woman with whom he had once had a brief affair, which encouraged me in my belief that he can eventually lead a heterosexual life. **I did not discourage his pursuit of this woman even though it is morally unsound.**" (152 RT, emphasis added)

In his recent book, *Choice Therapy*, Glasser describes his counseling with a married woman who had a four-day affair, then was torn between loyalty and love, unable to leave her family and go with the other man:

"She can't change what she or Robert did, but she can control what she chooses to do now. I have to try to find something she wants now, something that she has control over, something that depends only on her and that no one can take away. This is the way to live through a conflict." (122 CT)

Nothing here about repentance, sin, reconciliation, cleansing, confession, or any other biblical concept. Nothing at all. A few pages later, discussing the conflicts of a mother-daughter relationship, Glasser states that:

"Early sex is part of today's culture. Whatever Samantha [the daughter] does, it is better for her that she and her mother are now talking and that Linda [the mother] has stopped preaching, criticizing, and controlling." (206 CT)

Whatever happened to *responsibility*? For Glasser, it appears to be shifting sand, depending on the whims of the culture. God's eternal moral standards have no role in this counseling.

What does Glasser have to say concerning religion or the Bible? In contrast to Freud, whose blasphemous attacks on Christianity consume entire books, Glasser's remarks are few, but revealing. As in the closing words of the book of Judges, apparently everyone does what is religiously right in his own eyes:

"...whichever side a person takes [regarding religion], he must examine the reality of what he is doing in all its implications and then decide, as a judge must, what he believes is the correct course." (59 RT)

The Bible is mentioned exactly *once*, and then only as an example of a broader literary theme:

"The universal appeal of the test of responsibility in the path of temptation has made it a favorite literary theme starting with the story of Adam and Eve." (19 RT)

Glasser ignores the biblical truth about sin that is revealed in this text.

Unfortunately, Glasser has no concept of *biblical* standards to guide his counseling. "Responsibility" is an excellent idea in counseling, but without a biblical definition, it is useless.

Counseling: Who, Why, and How?

Glasser exerts much effort to convince his readers that his methods are dramatically different from those of Freud. Differences emerges in terms of the counselor's relationship with the person he counsels, the goals of counseling, and the methods. He claims that, unlike psychoanalysis, "reality therapy" offers real *hope*. In speaking about a hospital program for patients typically considered "hopeless," he says:

"They [hospital staff] have been thoroughly instructed that they must never accept the situation as hopeless, that each patient can be taught better ways to act, and that there is some place for him in the world." (110 RT)

This "hope" is rooted in the ability to make responsible choices:

"Because these are the result of a choice, it becomes obvious that there is hope. If you can make one choice, you can make another--better--choice. Your choice may be painful, but it is not irreversible." (77 CT)

Biblically, *hope* is an important concept, but it is rooted in the atonement that Christ has made for our sins. We can be forgiven, cleansed, and enabled to live a new life, while enjoying the assurance of our heavenly inheritance.

Glasser alleges that his counseling is *compassionate* toward those who suffer:

"It is no kindness to treat unhappy people as helpless, hopeless, or inadequate, no matter what has happened to them. Kindness is having faith in the truth and that people can handle it and use it for their benefit. True compassion is helping people help themselves." (158 CT)

Far more compassionate is the truth about sin and the glorious hope of the gospel for God's forgiveness and power. Glasser's system offers no real redemption for past sin, only the stark reality of guilt. It is in reality a *hopeless* scheme.

In line with his claims of hope and compassion, Glasser outlines "ten axioms" of "choice therapy" as follows:

1. "The only person whose behavior we can control is our own." (332 CT)

"If we don't do what we are told, we can decide how much personal freedom we are willing to give up." (333 CT)

2. "All we can give or get from other people is information. How we deal with that information is our or their choice." (333 CT)

3. "All long-lasting psychological problems are relationship problems." (333 CT)

"The cause of the misery is **always** our way of dealing with an important relationship that is not working out the way we want it to." (334 CT, emphasis added)

4. "The problem relationship is always part of our present lives," rather than a *past* or *future* relationship. (334 CT)

"...we are never free to live happily without at least one satisfying personal relationship." (334 CT)

5. "What happened in the past that was painful has a great deal to do with what we are today, but revisiting this painful past can contribute little or nothing to what we need to do now: improve an important, present relationship." (334 CT)

"Most of the time we actually know what happened, but sometimes, if it was very traumatic, our creative systems have stepped in and erased those miserable memories. The argument that if we don't know our past, we are doomed to repeat it is incorrect." (334 CT)

6. "We are driven by five genetic needs: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun. These needs have to be satisfied. They can be delayed but not denied. Only we can decide when they are satisfied. No one else can tell us. We can help others, but we can never satisfy anyone else's needs, only our own. If we attempt to satisfy other people's needs, we lock ourselves into an impossible task. In locking ourselves into anything, we lose freedom." (335 CT)

7. "We can satisfy these needs only by satisfying a picture or pictures in our quality worlds." (335 CT)

8. "All we can do from birth to death is behave. All behavior is total behavior and is made up of four inseparable components: acting, thinking, feeling, and physiology." (335 CT)

9. "All total behavior is designated by verbs...for example, I am choosing to depress...instead of I am suffering from depression...." (335 CT)

10. "All total behavior is chosen, but we have direct control over only the acting and thinking components. We can, however, control our feelings and physiology indirectly through how we choose to act and think." (336

CT) [This is very similar to the approach of Albert Ellis.]

In line with these axioms, Glasser advocates "choice," and the elimination of "external control," as the sole remedy for interpersonal or any other problems of living:

"There is nothing I can suggest to solve family or any other difficulties that have to do with giving and getting love except giving up external control and starting to practice choice therapy." (37 CT)

WHO? The counselor. Glasser rejects the detached relationship developed in Freudian analysis. He advises the therapist to develop an "honest, human relationship" where the person counseled "realizes that someone cares enough about him not only to accept him but to help him fulfill his needs in the real world" (xx RT). The counselor must be a real person:

"The therapist must be a very responsible person--tough, interested, human, and sensitive...able to fulfill his own needs...willing to discuss some of his own struggles."
(22 RT)

Similar principles are expressed when Glasser applies his theories to education. As in the therapeutic setting, Glasser recommends a high level of personal involvement between teachers and students:

"Unfortunately teachers have been trained (partly as a carry-over from conventional psychiatry) not to get involved with students, but to remain objective and detached.... We must reject the idea that it is good to be objective with people; objectivity is good only when working with their irresponsible behavior." (158 RT)

The counselor must be strong enough "to have his values tested by the patient, and to withstand intense criticism by the person he is trying to help" (22 RT). After therapeutic involvement has been established, "the therapist begins to insist that the patient face the reality of his behavior" and recognize that "he is responsible for his behavior" (27 RT), with no excuses:

"No reason is acceptable to the therapist for any irresponsible behavior. He confronts the patient with his behavior and asks him to decide whether or not he is taking the responsible course. The patient thus finds a man who cares enough about him to reject behavior which will not help him to fulfill his needs." (27 RT)

The standards, however, are apparently to be set by the individual being counseled. Although "the therapist freely gives praise when the patient acts responsibly and shows disapproval when he does not"... "the patient rather than the therapist must decide whether or not his behavior is irresponsible and whether he should change it" (28 RT). Thus Glasser's therapy is not guided by any eternal moral standard, but rather by self. Everyone does what is right in his own eyes!

"The skill of therapy is to put the responsibility upon the patient and, after involvement is established, to ask him why he remains in therapy if he is not dissatisfied with his behavior." (29 RT)

However:

"It must not be asked before the involvement is deep enough to force the patient to stop defending his irresponsible actions rather than leave therapy." (29 RT)

What we have here is another "self-help" program where responsibility is primarily to *self*, determined by standards that are the product of man's sinful imagination, not God's Word.

Nevertheless, later in *Reality Therapy*, Glasser cautions the counselor to always retain control of the counseling:

"Results come slowly and the gain in responsibility is never as dramatic as in cases in which the therapist has more control." (140 RT)

Biblically, we should also reject the detached, uninvolved approach developed in Freudian analysis. God's people must be *involved* in the lives of one another. However, the Holy Spirit is the one "in control," and the standards for wise living are found in the Scripture, not man's imagination.

WHY? The goals of counseling. In *Reality Therapy*, Glasser gives a succinct summary of his goals in counseling:

"Thus the therapeutic problem, basically, is that of getting another person to abandon what may be called the *primitive* pleasure principle and to adopt that long-term, enlightened, *wise* pursuit of pleasure, satisfaction, joy, happiness which the reality principle implies." (xix RI)

This could be contrasted with a great deal of Scripture. Glasser appears to be seeking *wisdom* in living for those he counsels. The book of Proverbs tells us that the *fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*. Ecclesiastes speaks to the vanity of focusing on earthly pleasures rather than serving the Lord. Many New Testament verses draw our attention to the eternal inheritance that awaits us in heaven, so that we are not distracted by the pleasures of this life. Christ called us to deny self and lose our lives for the sake of His kingdom. Yes, we want to live wisely, but Glasser has no biblical perspective to offer as to what really constitutes wise living.

One of the primary goals of Glasser's therapy is the development of **responsibility**, at first glance a seemingly worthy goal. This responsibility is rooted in the ability to make choices:

"If it is a choice, it follows that you are responsible for making it...a choice theory world is a tough, responsible world." (77 CT)

Glasser defines responsibility primarily in terms of the ability to fulfill needs rather than in conformity to God's standards:

"Responsibility, a concept basic to Reality therapy, is here defined as the ability to fulfill one's needs, and to do so *in a way that does not deprive others of the ability to fulfill their needs*." (13 RT)

"Regardless of past circumstances, the psychiatric patient must develop the strength to take the responsibility to fulfill his needs satisfactorily." (46 RT)

Glasser recommends dispensing with psychiatric labels such as "neurotic" and "psychotic" (15 RT). Instead, he would simply describe the person's behavior, in terms of the individual's lack of success in meeting his needs, and call him "irresponsible" (15 RT). For this there is no excuse:

"We never agree that his irresponsibility is justified no matter how much he may have suffered at the hands of others." (32 RT)

There is also no purpose for encouraging a person to "act out" his irresponsibility in counseling:

"We never encourage hostility or acting our irresponsible impulses, for that only compounds the problem." (32 RT)

Glasser insists that focus must be maintained in the present rather than the individual's past:

"Because the patient must gain responsibility right now, we always focus on the present.... Why become involved with the irresponsible person he was? We want to become involved with the responsible person we know he can be." (32 RT)

Biblically, a better description than "irresponsible" is "sinful."

Counseling is deemed "successful" where the individual learns to fulfill his needs in the real world:

"Therapy will be successful when they are able to give up denying the world and recognize that reality not only exists but that they must fulfill their needs within its framework...it is not enough to help a patient face reality; he must also learn to fulfill his needs." (6 RT)

This is to be accomplished in the real world, rather than in denial of some aspect of that world (6 RT).

"Reality may be painful, it may be harsh, it may be dangerous, but it changes slowly. All any man can hope to do is to struggle with it in a responsible way by doing right and enjoying the pleasure or suffering the pain that may follow." (41 RT)

In addition, Glasser alleges that the ability to meet one's own needs is a skill to be learned:

"Although we are given unchanging needs from birth to death, needs which, if left unsatisfied, cause us or others to suffer, we are not naturally endowed with the ability to fulfill them." (14 RT)

"As the many instances of abandoned children show, man is not driven by instinct to care for and teach responsibility to his children. In place of instinct, however, man has developed the intellectual capacity to be able to teach responsibility well." (16 RT)

Glasser believes that parents can begin to teach children responsibility at an early age, but he does not support the use of any punishment:

"Choice theory parents begin to teach their children by three years of age that they have to be willing to take responsibility for what they choose. But taking responsibility does not mean being punished. Sending them to their rooms is the maximum you should need for control." (212 CT)

Biblically, parents do have a solemn responsibility before God to teach their children *His commandments* (not "choice therapy"). However, because of sin, some "punishment" is required.

According to Glasser, psychotherapists are not concerned with two groups of people (1) those, like Hitler, "who may fulfill their needs at the price of preventing others from doing so" (14 RT), and (2) "those [such as homosexuals] who only partially fulfill their needs but are not the concern of psychotherapists because they do not harm others and do not ask for help themselves" (15 RT). The behaviors described here involve sin. Psychotherapists, however, generally excise that term from their vocabulary.

Behavior, initially, is the focus of change in Glasser's counseling. Glasser defines "behavior" as "the way of conducting ourselves" (72 CT). This "way" has four components: activity, thinking, feeling, physiology (72 CT). Thus Glasser uses the

term "total behavior" to describe this "way" rather than merely "behavior" (72 CT). Attitudes will supposedly change over time, after appropriate changes in behavior have been made:

"In Reality Therapy we are much more concerned with behavior than with attitudes." (27 RT)

"...waiting for attitudes to change stalls therapy whereas changing behavior leads quickly to a change in attitude." (28 RT)

"Once we become involved with a patient and teach him new ways of behavior, his attitude will change regardless of whether or not he understands his old ways, and then his new attitude will help promote further behavioral change. What starts the process, however, is *an initial change in behavior*, and it is toward this that the therapist must work." (51 RT)

Emotions, too, will allegedly line up with changed behavior:

"We believe that the consequences of behavior determine emotional tone; so if we can control the behavior, we believe we also control the feeling. We are arguing the so-called symptoms are the illness and if they are given up, therapy is complete." (132 RT)

Glasser contrasts his approach with methods that center on the unconscious and excuse irresponsible behavior:

"In Reality Therapy emotions and happiness are never divorced from behavior. Gaining insight into the unconscious thinking which accompanies aberrant behavior is not an objective; excuses for deviant behavior are not accepted and one's history is not made more important than one's present life." (32 RT)

Happiness is claimed to depend upon responsible behavior:

"Happiness occurs most often when we are willing to take responsibility for our behavior. Irresponsible people, always seeking to gain happiness without assuming responsibility, find only brief periods of joy, but not the deep-seated satisfaction which accompanies responsible behavior." (29 RT)

Biblically, behavior is rooted in the *heart*. Jesus taught that out of the heart comes adultery, murder, and other sins. Mere external changes are insufficient. God is vitally concerned with the heart as well as the outward manifestations seen in a person's behavior. The Bible doesn't ask us to dig into the "unconscious" or to engage in lengthy journeys into the past. However, God cares deeply about the human heart.

HOW? The methods of counseling. According to Glasser, counseling is essentially a specialized type of teaching responsibility:

"Therapy is a special kind of teaching or training which attempts to accomplish in a relatively short, intense period what should have been established during normal growing up...the major difference between therapy and common guidance that is effective is in intensity, not in kind." (20 RT)

In *Reality Therapy*, three counseling phases are proposed (21 RT):

- (1) Involvement (between therapist and patient):
- (2) Therapist rejects irresponsible behavior but accepts the patient and maintains involvement with him;
- (3) Therapist teaches the patient to fulfill his needs "within the confines of reality."

Glasser recommends that therapists and patients talk about "anything two people might discuss," including "politics, plays, books, movies, sports, hobbies, finances, health, marriage, sex, and religion" (31 RT). In therapy, he claims, "the patient develops an increased sense of self-worth in the process of parrying his convictions and values with a trusted, respected person" (31 RT). Therapy sessions need not be continually focused on the person's problems:

"Sessions which do not bear directly on the patient's problems are not wasted as long as they relate to his growing awareness that he is a part of the world and that perhaps he can cope with it. *When values, standards, and responsibility are in the background, all discussion is relevant to therapy.* Continually stressing responsibility is artificial." (31 RT)

Glasser sees great value in group therapy, where people can confront one another:

"Patients in similar situations quickly confront each other with reality and are not hesitant to suggest better ways to cope with it. The therapist guides the group toward increasing involvement, intervenes when the group strays from reality, and suggests better ways to cope with reality when the group becomes bogged down." (64 RT)

He also recommends his methods in an educational context:

"Through the use of Reality Therapy in the public schools, mental hygiene can be extended to children when they are receptive to learning responsibility, and in a place where they feel comfortable and natural in their efforts to gain a better life for themselves." (165 RT)

Glasser has established a nonprofit organization to promote his choice therapy, train counselors, and educate people about his theories and thinking (337-340 CT). Personal freedom of choice appears to be the highest value. This is an extremely self-oriented system, with nothing about serving God and little, if anything, about caring for others. Although responsible behavior appears at first a worthy goal, there are no biblical standards at any point in the process. Responsibility before God is an excellent biblical goal, but responsibility to fulfill "genetically programmed needs" is not. Although Glasser does depart significantly from the failed theories and methods of Freud, he is no closer to biblical truth.

© **1999, Christian Discernment Publications Ministry, Inc.**
www.christiandiscernment.com

