

SPIRITUAL DEVIATIONS

The Self-correction of the Soul

Many Christian bookstores have reserved generous and prominent display space for books that present psychology from a Christian perspective. These books primarily offer advice on overcoming a broad range of emotional or mental failings such as anger, guilt, depression, lack of forgiveness, irritability, annoyance, and anxiety. They often focus on managing certain troublesome behaviors through multi-step programs. In spite of mounting criticism, books of this nature continue to enjoy a sizable following.

Let me say from the outset that I do acknowledge a need for professional counseling to address serious, overwhelming emotional or mental difficulties. Also, some mental disorders are physiologically based and require medical attention. Finally, for unbelievers who are completely governed by the thoughts of the mind and the desires of the flesh, there can be substantial benefit from psychological counseling when the excesses of such behavior result in damaging and destructive consequences. However, the current explosion of workbooks on behavior management for believers constitutes a substantial spiritual deviation, one which usurps Christ's role as the soul's true Physician in God's New Testament economy. While some Christian authors have undertaken to critique attempts to "Christianize" secular psychology, including its array of self-improvement techniques, I intend to underscore its more fundamental flaws. From the smorgasbord of available books on Christian psychology, I have chosen to examine *The Anger Workbook* (hereafter referred to as *Anger*) by Drs. Les Carter and Frank Minirth as representative of this type of deviation.

Anger presents a plan designed to help the reader both to understand the various causes of anger and to find healthy ways of expressing and managing it. However well-intentioned this book may be, it ultimately deviates from God's New Testament economy by incorrectly identifying three pivotal issues: the source of anger, the solution to controlling anger, and the goal of the believer's daily living.

The Real Source of Our Soul's Problems

First, *Anger* deviates from the truth by diagnosing only symptoms associated with the soul's problems. Specifically, *Anger* only links psychological problems to unmet needs,

experiences of childhood deprivation (44, 134), or subjection to uncontrollable, manipulative environments (70-76). Its basic premise is that "each of us has basic psychological needs that have to be adequately met if we are to enjoy emotional balance" (43). *Anger* maintains that the Bible also recognizes "our intricate system of needs that must be satisfactorily addressed if we are to have emotional well-being" (12-13).

Nevertheless, the Bible makes it unmistakably clear that our soul's problems are of a different nature and source. Our real problems are in fact rooted in the fall of man and the consequent effect of sin on our soul. When man fell, his physical body was transmuted into the flesh (Gen. 6:3) and indwelt by the sinful nature (Rom. 7:20). This fallen nature affected the soul, darkening the mind, hardening the will (Eph. 4:18; Acts 19:9), and warping the emotion (Eph. 4:19). The faculties of the soul were wonderfully created to aid man in expressing God (1 Cor. 2:11-12). But the fall with its corrupting effects has demoted man from spiritual to soulish, with the result that this "soulish man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him" (v. 14). A soulish person is out of balance and proportion, one whose corrupted soul (mind, emotion, and will) dominates his entire being, eclipsing his spirit, with the result that he ignores his spirit and is unable to receive from the Spirit of God. Is it any wonder that such a soul chronically bemoans its "unmet needs," laments its victimized history, and blames its pitiable past or its current environment for its problems? Such a focus serves to conceal from the believer the real dilemma, namely that the soul is not fulfilling its created purpose: to magnify the Lord (Luke 1:46). It is the Christ-deprived soul that is unhealthy. It is the Christ-filled soul that is balanced and thus enjoys functional well-being.

The Biblical Solution to Our Soul's Problems

Second, *Anger* deviates from the New Testament truth in the solution it proposes for the soul's problems. Central to its program is the notion that a Christian can learn to manage and redirect the less desirable manifestations of his soul. *Anger* encourages its readers, "Don't give up! *Anger* can be managed if you apply an awakened mind to it" (6). It holds forth the unrealistic expectation that one can

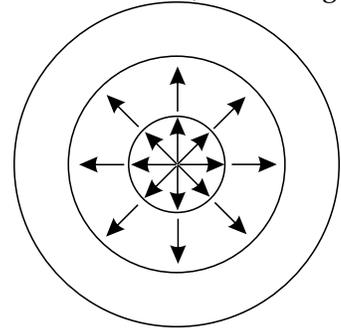
“learn to distinguish right and wrong ways of managing [anger]” (22) by being always on guard (28) and “internally sifting through your emotional options” (24). *Anger* says of one resolute client, “While her thinking patterns would not change overnight, she knew her task was not impossible. Determined to manage anger properly, she chose not to live with negative generalizations” (93). *Anger* can actually be summed up as a Herculean attempt to fortify the fallen soul to overcome its own deficiencies through self-management techniques. To this end, prominence and preeminence are accorded not to Christ filling the soul, but rather to shoring up the soul’s strength. Instead of providing a cure, *Anger* prescribes a series of techniques to manage the symptoms. One key technique repeatedly emphasized is the willful effort of choice: “We need to choose to accept our worth....This choice can have a major effect on the intensity of our angry emotions” (12). “All angry expressions...are the result of choices” (21); “we still have the choice to drop the anger altogether;...but I choose to thrive in spite of them” (84-85); “she learned that as a free person she could choose to respond to her husband’s control in any way she saw fit” (75); “we can choose to behave appropriately in the face of another’s inappropriateness” (72). Believers are also required to master a labyrinth of additional complicated techniques: we are instructed to link anger “to a reasonable issue” and communicate it “in a proper manner” (19), “learn to focus” (16), learn how to plan your emotions (52), channel your anger (34), “anticipate situations that make us vulnerable to anger” (56), and “explore the meaning of [your] emotions” (51). In the final analysis, even though *Anger* cites—and often misapplies—a token smattering of verses as theological support, it utterly fails in its efforts to formulate and present a “Christian” psychology.

Happily for the weary and heavy-laden soul, the Bible presents God’s wonderful and completely effective alternative to self-help tactics and willful efforts. The human soul is supremely precious to God and as such is the primary object both of Satan’s destructive, corrupting works and of God’s organic salvation throughout the believer’s life. In fact, given the soul’s strategic role in His eternal economy, why would God relegate its recovery and care to the fallen faculty which is itself in need of rescue? Instead, in His wisdom and prudence, He has provided a rich, comprehensive, and foolproof “program” of His own to shepherd our souls from their ruined fallen state into His full glory. Several biblical terms help describe this process of salvation which not only succors the soul, but transforms it fully into the image of Christ.

Regeneration (John 3:3; Titus 3:5): Regeneration is the commencement of God’s salvation and the basis for the soul’s lifelong organic salvation. It is the re-creating of the believers in their spirit, the center of their being, for the believers

to have the life of God in addition to their own natural life. This divine life, acquired by the Christian’s rebirth, is not only the basis but also the unique means for God to organically save the fallen, damaged soul. The regeneration of the spirit is instantaneous and complete, occurring once for all when the believer receives Christ as his Savior. It is by the spreading of the divine life from this spirit that God is able to accomplish a saving work in the soul.

Renewing (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23; Col. 3:10): Renewing is the addition of the eternally new life of God into the faculties of the soul, particularly the mind. Both the teaching of the holy Scriptures and the enlightening of the Holy Spirit bring in God’s element, which is ever new. Gradually, the oldness of the old nature with its fallen adamic concepts and manifestations is displaced and replaced not by the believers turning over endless new leaves, but by God’s evergreen life.



Sanctification (1 Thes. 5:23; Heb. 2:11): Based on the positional sanctification accomplished through God’s judicial redemption, dispositional sanctification is carried out through God’s organic salvation, that is, through the spreading of the element of the life of God from the believers’ spirit into their entire soul. This takes place in order for the believers to be sanctified in their disposition (their soul) that they may partake of the holy nature of God (2 Pet. 1:4). Hence, the ultimate consummation of God’s salvation, the culmination and product of such partaking, is called the *holy city* (Rev. 21:2).

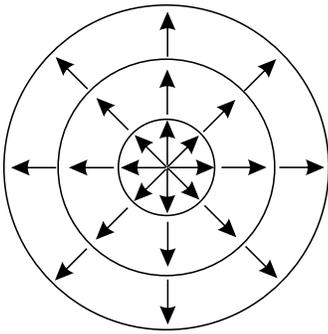
Transformation (Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Cor. 3:16-18): While Christian psychology specializes in the outward correction of behavior, God is concerned with a wonderful metabolic change—a metamorphosis, referred to in the verses cited above as transformation. Whenever the believers turn their hearts to the Lord in their daily lives, they behold Him and reflect His glory while their receptive souls are simultaneously transformed (metamorphosed) into the same image from one level of glory to another. This is no mere change in one’s behavior or manipulation of choices. This is the normal Christian experience of an organic metamorphosis, a fundamental change in nature and constitution.

Building Up (Eph. 3:17; 4:15-16): As Christ makes His home in the believers’ hearts, the divine life spreads into the chambers of the soul. Then, by the believers’ individual growth in the divine life, they are collectively joined and knit with

others who are undergoing the same organic salvation. This process results in the organic building up of the Body of Christ, in which the believers shepherd one another's souls with a view of God's New Testament economy.

Conformation (Rom. 8:29; Phil. 3:10): Conformation consummates the believers' transformation in life, conforming their souls completely to the image of God's firstborn Son as they become full-grown in the life and in the expression of God.

Glorification (Rom. 8:30): Glorification in full is the final stage of God's complete salvation, the spreading forth of Christ's glory from within the believers. The believers are progressively glorified, degree by degree, as they allow the divine life to grow to maturity in their souls. Glorification is the believers' entering into the glory of God (Heb. 2:10) and, ultimately, their enjoyment of the redemption of their body (Rom. 8:23; Eph. 4:30).



God's ways of caring for our soul are unquestionably higher than our ways (Isa. 55:8-9). God's way is not to adjust the soul in order to suppress the vile and express the virtuous, but to *save* it in His life (Rom. 5:10b). Christian psychology seriously deviates from this divine wisdom by leading believers down the dubious pathway of behavior modification (albeit with a Christian slant) rather than setting them firmly on the solid and sure pathway of growth in life and genuine transformation.

The Real Goal of Our Daily Living

The third major flaw of *Anger*, perhaps its most serious, is its stated goal for the believers' soul and human living. According to *Anger*, "relating in love...is the ultimate goal in life" (64). While there is certainly nothing inherently wrong with this statement, it in fact reveals the governing thought behind much of current Christian psychology—that proper Christ-like behavior is the believers' chief aim in life. *Anger* speaks of "incorporating the puritan ethic" (99) and "implementing more conservative values" (99). The goal of *Anger* is conservative, ethical, puritan behavior. *Anger* counseled one client in this way: "You've said you agree that the puritan lifestyle is probably best, yet you've hesitated to commit to it. Why is that?" (104). *Anger* goes so far as to say that behavioral adjustment was Paul's purpose: "Paul was determined that his angry history would actually motivate him to change. This became his goal..." (91). According to *Anger*, "Your goal will be to communicate your emotions in a constructive fashion" (34). While to some this

may seem admirable, it actually falls far short of God's goal for man's soul as revealed in the New Testament, which is the transformation of the soul into the image of Christ, that Christ Himself may be expressed through the believer.

On the whole, the premise of such a construct as Christian psychology is found to be fatally flawed, in three essential aspects. Christian psychology neglects the primary cause of psychological imbalance—the fall of man. Due to sin we are all imbalanced; every soul is damaged, the difference existing only in degree.

Christian psychology ignores the God-ordained way of organic salvation in and with the divine life, misdirecting the soul toward ethical improvement and self-managed behavior. The flaw in Christian psychology's goal—a puritan lifestyle—is that it falls far short of God's goal, a holy city constituted with transformed and glorified believers.

Obviously, it is important that believers maintain a healthy soul and endeavor to preserve it until the Lord comes (1 Thes. 5:23), and this often is aided by fellowship with more mature and experienced believers. However, Christian psychology mistakenly places its confidence in the soul-life's ability to improve itself, which in the end is both unprofitable and destructive because it distracts the believer from God's economy and hampers the genuine transformation of the soul.

Christian psychology, perhaps unwittingly, thereby fosters a dependence on the fallen soul-life instead of denying it (Matt. 16:23-25). Further, by fortifying the believers' soulish ethical living, it actually counterfeits the authentic experience of living Christ (not living like Christ) in all things (Gal. 2:20; Phil. 1:21). The problem with the soul is thus not one of behavior, but of nature. The heavenly biopsy of the soul has been diagnosed and God has pronounced it "desperately sick" (Jer. 17:9), terminally ill!

Our ongoing need for the perfecting of the soul and its shortage of the glory of God are often painfully apparent, but this same soul has neither the appropriate source nor the adequate means to effect the needed transformation. Only the addition of the divine element is able to meet both the desperate need of our soul's damaged condition and, more crucially, God's eternal need for a corporate, divine-human counterpart whose soul, like a mirror, beholds and reflects His own glory.

Praise Him for His blessed intention! Through His daily transforming work He will metamorphose the fallen human soul into His own likeness, and through this soul will express His divine attributes in human virtues.

by Gary Evans