

Why Can't Preachers and Psychologists Get Along?

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Abstract: The validity of Christian Psychology became a hotly contested issue in the 1980s. While these tensions have abated somewhat, an underlying disconnect between the pulpit and the therapy room remains in the church. This article explores *why* Preachers and Psychologists don't always get along, and how a new cooperative relationship between the pulpit and the behavioral sciences could be developed.

Some of my best friends are psychologists. Really. Several of them are also ministers in my fellowship. Just a few years ago the idea of a minister being a mental health professional was virtually unknown in our circles. However, the epidemic of emotional illness in our nation has given the behavioral sciences a place in the church. "Christian Psychology" has arrived.

There are several ways in which ministers are involved in the practice of psychology. The first way is through pastoral counseling. Every pastor finds himself or herself helping people through their emotional crises. Like a doctor with a stethoscope, we spend many hours listening to the beat of broken hearts. By one estimate, pastors do about half of the counseling in our country.

A second type of involvement is found in multiple staff churches. In this setting it is not unusual to find associate pastors with a full or part-time counseling portfolio. They represent a rapidly growing trend.

The third way in which ministers are involved with Christian Psychology is through clinical practice. An increasing number of us hold graduate degrees in behavioral science and are practicing either in counseling centers or individually. This third group produces the materials that train the first two groups.

Christian Psychology has indeed arrived. But not everyone is happy about this development. Vehement criticism has been leveled at the practice of behavioral science

within the body of Christ on the grounds that it substitutes dangerously "humanistic" ideas for the true gospel. In many ways, then, the "preachers" and the "psychologists" just don't seem to get along.

One early critic of Christian Psychology wrote:

Such ministries have their place, but that place is not center stage. Such ministries might reflect the "fringe benefits" of the faith--- but this is not the gospel!....There is a blandness in the church, an undue emphasis on stable living and emotional well-being that is centered solely on self, which has become one big ego trip.... This is a most recent perversion that has lately overrun the evangelical establishments and which is making greater and greater inroads. (Ralph Fillicchi, "This Present Perversion," *Herald of His Coming* 45 [May 1986], p. 3.)

That's strong stuff. But the defenses offered by our mental health professionals often are no less strident. Some have come to view pastors as their poor "country cousins" in the ministry, sources of referral to therapists who do the "real" work of healing.

How could so many people who love the Lord and read the same Bible wind up on diametrically opposite sides of this issue? And how can it be that so many brothers and sisters in the Lord, all called to the same virtues of meekness and humility, hold their positions with such ferocity---and sometimes downright nastiness? Why can't "preachers" and "psychologists" seem to get along?

For the sake of clarity I will follow Paul's example (2 Cor. 11: 17-21) by using hyperbole to overstate the contrast between these two schools of thought. The position of each side will be summarized as it appears to the other. Beware--you may find yourself somewhere on this list of reasons why preachers and psychologists do not get along:

1. Preachers spiritualize. Psychologists de-spiritualize.

When ministering to a troubled person the pastor may point to a flagging devotional life as the cause of the problem. The therapist often regards it only as a symptom of a deeper emotional struggle that cannot be resolved with a prescription of prayer and Bible reading. Is Deacon Smith's marriage failing because he doesn't tithe? Or, is his giving dropping off because he is so troubled by his family problems? The first disparity between preachers and psychologists, therefore, stems from the problem of the chicken and the egg. What is cause and what is effect?

2. Preachers raise expectations. Psychologists lower expectations.

From the pulpit we are likely to hear words that encourage us to increase our faith, ask things of God boldly and live a holy life. In the counseling room it may be the exact

opposite. The psychologist frequently tries to relieve a client's pain by helping the person see that he or she is demanding far too much of themselves, God and others. The congregation is wrestling with the power of temptation and sin from the pastor's point of view. But the counselor is likely to see the opponents as legalism and perfectionism. The second point of contention between preachers and psychologists, then, is over their definitions of *grace*. Does God expect us to rest in Him or to, "just snap out of it?"

3. Preachers want to adjust our situation. Psychologists want to adjust us.

To the pulpiteer something about the counseling process can seem rather fatalistic. The very fact that a person is seeing a mental health professional says that God isn't going to change the situation so the therapist must help the client adjust to it. While the preacher is praying for the healing of a marriage, the therapist is boning up on divorce recovery. Thus, the third issue where sparks fly between these ministries is the ancient paradox of God's absolute sovereignty versus His absolute promises to help anyone who seeks Him. In other words, does getting special help represent wisdom, or just giving up on God?

4. Preachers use Biblical wisdom. Psychologists use human wisdom.

The pastor's sermons are developed from a careful searching of the Word of God. The therapist, on the other hand, has obtained his or her degree by attending a school that may not even have been Christian! On one weekend we hear the preacher waxing eloquent on Noah and the ark. Next weekend, at the family life conference, the speaker tells us how to help our teenage daughter through her first menstrual period. To some it is hard to believe that these teach from the same Bible! One critic of psychology put it bluntly:

Since growth in the Christian walk includes growth in godliness of both mind and behavior, should not God's Word be the source of truth for all non-medical problems of mind and behavior?

.... Is not psychology contradicting God by claiming that, instead of the Bible, it has the answers for problems of mind and behavior? (Wendell E. Miller, "The Bible, Psychology and You, Pt. 1," *Pulpit Helps*, [February 1990], p. 19.)

The root of this argument is whether the Bible is meant to be a fence that confines Truth, or, in addition, a yardstick allowing us evaluate all kinds of truths from God's point of view.

Some preachers would maintain that unless a thing is actually mentioned in Scripture it is out of bounds. The counselor might reply that *all* truth belongs to God. The Bible's function is, in part, to help us discern which thoughts and discoveries from outside its

pages represent this God-given truth. It is in exactly this sense, for example, that a preacher would use Scripture to evaluate a prophetic utterance during a worship service. (I Corinthians 14: 37)

Psychologists also claim that the behavioral sciences should be no more threatening to us than the physical sciences. In this view, the only tests that should be applied to any therapy are: is it safe and effective, and, does it avoid violating Scripture. The preacher might contest this with the argument that research in psychology has nothing approaching the scientific validity of research in the "hard" sciences; it is neither as extensive nor as rigorous.

In any event, both sides agree that anything inconsistent with Scripture is impermissible. Where they cross swords is over the definition of "inconsistent." The fourth controversy, therefore, centers on the nature and purpose of the Bible.

5. Preachers preach. Psychologists just ask questions

The pastor may blister the hide off sinners on Sunday morning, but on Monday the therapist asks them quietly, "So--how does that make *you* feel?" To a real preacher, something about counseling seems rather mushy. There is no iron in it!

From the pulpit, the pastor describes our "sins", yet the psychologist talks only in terms of "issues." To some, the "softness" of counseling hints at compromise. Those accustomed to talking *at* others may be a little suspicious of those who only talk *with* them.

To the counselor, the pulpit minister may appear to be an overbearing spiritual taskmaster who leads the sheep with a whip and a chair--so to speak. The counselor frets that the pulpit is being used as a whipping post to make his clients feel guilty. The preacher worries that the counselor is subtly subverting the stark, straightforward claims of the gospel just to make people feel good.

Preachers intone on heaven and hell, while counselors only whisper about the here and now. The differing communication styles used in each ministry account for the fifth reason that preachers and therapists do not get along. We generally mistrust those whose way of communicating seems odd to us.

6. Preachers want holiness at any price. Psychologists want healing at any price.

The advent of Christian therapy has been a virtual Copernican revolution. It suggests that long-cherished values may no longer be at the center of our theological universe. Psychologists, for example, seem to imply that God is the Big-Therapist-in-the-Sky. (remember, I'm exaggerating) His primary motive is to welcome the hurting *as they are* into a healing experience.

Counseling becomes the vehicle through which a troubled person learns to look within to resolve inner wounds, and to look without to change behaviors and relationships. The result should be a better-adjusted person with an improved ability to cope with the outside world.

This kind of talk has a lot of preachers ready to burn someone at the stake. Their God is a healer, but, more importantly, He is the Big-Judge-in-the-Sky. His primary motive is the salvation of souls and the sanctification of believers through the painful process of "getting-the-sin-out-of-your-life." Through preaching, the lost find Christ and the saved are challenged to a life of holiness, "without which no one will see the Lord." (Heb. 12:14b)

For every therapist who sees emotional problems as sickness, there is a preacher who sees them as sin. The current debate over the nature of alcoholism is instructive in this regard. Is the individual enslaved by alcohol a "sinner" in need of repentance or a "patient" in need of recovery? Is he or she the perpetrator of sin or merely its victim?

The preacher may say that if the alcoholic will "get right with God" cleansing and restoration will follow a pardon from the Big-Judge-in-the-Sky. The psychologist might counter that pardon is only the beginning as far as the Big-Therapist-in-the-Sky is concerned. Thus, vastly different God images constitute the sixth reason why preachers and psychologists can have such a terrible time with one another.

7. Preachers eschew emotions. Psychologists embrace them.

When viewed from the perspective of the pulpit, the pastor may see his or her people as wayward sheep being driven hither and yon by emotions raging out of control. These feelings are seen as enemies of spirituality in need of a strong dose of self-control administered from the Scriptures. A corollary may be that negative feelings (e.g., discouragement, anger, fear) are not to be expressed because they are inconsistent with the attitude believers are supposed to display. In other words, certain feelings are not "Christian."

A therapist may take the opposite view, explaining the "waywardness" of the sheep as the result of normal, even healthy emotions being acted out in unhealthy or destructive ways. While the pastor assumes that Brother Jones just needs to get his temper under control during board meetings, the psychologist is thinking that Jones may have been an abused child who has never forgiven his angry father, and, thus, finds himself "blowing up" at authority figures. The corollary here is that emotions are spiritually neutral and need to be expressed in appropriate ways if believers are to be healthy.

This area of clash is, to an extent, the function of a "generation gap" that exists in the Christian ministry. Viewing the emotions as suspect and in need of strict control is a trait of the Builder generation that grew up during the Depression and World War II. Embracing the emotional dimension of life tends to be a characteristic of the Baby

Boomers, whether Christians or not! With the average minister in my fellowship being around 50 years old, conflict over this issue seems almost inevitable. The seventh area of friction between these two fields, therefore, is their disagreement over the validity and function of human emotions.

There is a great irony woven into these seven points of disagreement. Dr. Richard Dobbins summarizes:

Some have believed the minister sees only the discouraged and occasionally depressed. However, evidence exists to suggest that "people seeking pastoral counseling might not differ greatly from those seen in clinical practice by psychologists or psychiatrists."
("The Pastor and Personal Counseling," *And He Gave Pastors*. ed. Thomas F. Zimmerman. Gospel Publishing House, 1979, p. 198.)

The difference between preachers and psychologists is *not* in their clientele! While there are some genuine theological disagreements between the two groups, the real problem is that they do not have the same perspective. The pulpit and the counselor's chair are unlikely to be filled by persons with identical gifts and personalities. Even if they were, life just does not look the same from the platform as it does from across the therapist's desk. Each of us tends to feel that the ministry that is most natural for us must be the "right" one.

There is nothing wrong with varying points of view. Any married person can tell you that two people who see things in *extremely* different ways can still have an excellent relationship. I think here of my married friends Dana and Lynn: he is a preacher, she is a therapist!

The tragedy occurs when we let our differences in the realm of individual preference separate us in the realm of ministerial cooperation. The issues separating preachers and psychologists are virtually the same as those dividing all of the theological camps. And yet, Christians with wildly dissimilar opinions on the Holy Spirit, predestination, water baptism, etc. manage to work together. There is no reason why preachers and therapists could not do this as well.

This points to a second irony: the preacher and the therapist may have the two *most compatible* ministries in the body of Christ! They fit well into the New Testament pattern of cooperation based on diversity. One plants, another waters, but God gives the increase (1 Cor. 3: 5-10). One lays a foundation, another builds upon it, but God is the real architect! (Eph. 2: 19- 22)

Preachers and psychologists can complement each other in many ways. Here are a few:

1. *Preachers talk to groups. Psychologists talk to individuals.*

Preachers traffic in ideals presented to large groups. The therapist's task is to remove anything that might hinder the spiritual growth that the preacher is trying to encourage. Mental health professionals assist individual believers in overcoming their personal barriers to spiritual maturity, barriers that may need more concentrated attention than is available in a large setting such as a church service. If the seeds are planted from the pulpit, then the weeds are pulled in the counselor's office.

A cooperative ministry recognizes that we are all *both* perpetrators and *victims* of sin. The Fall of Man and the enemy of our soul produce millions of casualties every year in the form of divorce, mental illness, dysfunctional families, and life-controlling problems of all kinds. On Sunday morning the perpetrators of sin can be called to account while sin's victims are touched by the balm of Gilead. During the week, the Christian therapist can confront perpetrators one-on-one with the truth of the Word while using the same truth to set the captives free.

2. Preachers have a preventive ministry. Psychologists have a therapeutic ministry.

The pastor can minister to the hurting by proclaiming the power and love of God. To many broken people it comes as a shock that there is a God who cares for them! Knowing this is the beginning of all healing.

Also, the preacher has a unique opportunity to shape a church's attitude toward the hurting: there is no better therapy anywhere than to be surrounded by a group of loving, accepting, praying believers who are ministering in the power the Holy Spirit. In many cases the support of a local church led by a caring pastor is the difference between disaster and restoration. It is the pastor's privilege to set the "agenda" for the congregation in this regard through pulpit ministry.

Moreover, the pulpit is an excellent vehicle for supplying a congregation with accurate information on family, relational and emotional issues from a Biblical perspective. Solid teaching can do enormous good in preventing serious problems, regardless of what labels we put on them. We ought to be more concerned with our people finding healing in Christ than with defending out particular system of interpretation.

3. Preachers can generalize. Psychologists can specialize.

The therapist performs an invaluable service for the pastor. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that one in five Americans are emotionally ill on any given day. Thousands will flock to our churches in the next decade who are in need of specialized or long-term ministry that pastors simply may not be trained to provide. In these cases, the Christian counselor helps the hurting *and* the preacher by lifting the burden of long-term therapy from the pastor's shoulders by way of referral.

Working actively together, a pastor and a counselor can consult on the most effective ways to minister to the wounded. A suicidal person, for example, needs a "safety net" of friends to be called whenever the individual feels at risk. This ministry is ideally suited for a local church environment, but will not materialize unless all involved are working as a team. More than once I have seen a life saved by just such an arrangement. A pastor planted, a psychologist watered and God gave the increase!

What I am suggesting is that ministers of the Word and behavioral scientists enter into a new relationship of humble *interdependence* on one another (1 Peter 5:5). Neither side need compromise its theology. However, no one's theology can be bigger than God's commandment that we live and work in harmony.

This team relationship can be a little scary to both sides. The pastor may see each of the psychologist's clients as a symbol of failure and a challenge to the validity of his or her ministry. Meanwhile the counselor may secretly scoff at dramatic altar services, anointing with oil, and other facets of church life that seem to offer simplistic answers to complex human problems. Perhaps both sides would benefit from realizing that a sudden outpouring of miracles would cut everyone's caseload in a hurry.

The truth of the matter is that the preacher and the Christian psychologist need each other very much. If each would accept the other (Ro. 15:7) many of their "theological" disputes might cease to seem so important. When I abandon my self-righteousness, heated diatribe can become honest discussion.

If we begin to operate as the body of Christ was designed to--in cooperation based on diversity-- (I Corinthians 11:12-31) the results could be outstanding! Frequently I have seen the emotionally troubled receive invaluable ministry from both a church service and a therapy session, touched by the Master's hand both at the altar and in the counseling room! The taste of tears is identical in either setting. Perhaps we have cared so much about *being* right that we have forgotten about *doing* right for those who hurt.

As believers come into wholeness and growth through the cooperative ministry of the body of Christ, they can surrender themselves more fully to the indwelling person of Christ, the Lord of both the preacher and the psychologist.