

# **The Intrusion of Psychology into Christian Theology**

**A three-part discussion of the threat that modern psychology poses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.**  
by Don Matzat

Part 1. Sin and Self-Esteem  
Part 2. Encountering "Encounter"  
Part 3. Psychological Mysticism

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## **Introduction Secular Disciplines**

St. Augustine once said, "All truth is God's truth." This is truth! The principles that drive the internal combustion engine, that cause radio and television to function, that bring into existence computers and cellular phones are not man's inventions, but are simply his discovery of already existing truths and scientific principles. Those truths are not man's truths, but *God's truths*.

But what happens when secular concepts and methods call into question or seek to redefine the truths revealed in Scripture? It is at this point that we must adjust Augustine's dictum to state, "*All error is the devil's error.*"

The Church of Jesus Christ presently finds itself doing battle with some of the diverse principles of modern psychology. Are some elements of psychology a threat to the basic fundamental truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? I believe so. This is the theme of this month's journal.

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## **The Intrusion of Psychology into Christian Theology**

There are many issues that divide Christians today, but there is no issue that is more inflammatory than the issue of the relationship between secular psychology and Christian theology. Some popular Christian teachers are willing to embrace the theories and practices of modern psychology and integrate them with Christian/biblical truths. After all, as they often explain, "all truth is God's truth." Others completely reject modern psychology, refer to it disparagingly as "psychobabble," and condemn the writings of those who dare to quote the findings of its practitioners.

While I do believe that some of the psychological theories and practices being imported into Christianity dangerously distort important biblical doctrines and potentially pervert

the mission and ministry of the Church, I do not demonize or reject modern psychology. As a Lutheran Christian my position on this subject is based upon two important Reformation perspectives: **the doctrine of the two kingdoms, and the centrality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.**

## **Psychology and the Two Kingdoms**

Martin Luther's two kingdom theology was, from his perspective, second only in importance to his discovery of the central doctrine of justification. Luther correctly taught that there is a kingdom of the left-hand, ruled over by the Law, involving the interaction of natural man, and a kingdom of the right-hand, which is the Church ruled over by the Gospel. He described these kingdoms as the kingdom of God's power and the kingdom of God's grace.

Both Luther and Calvin recognized that within the kingdom of power, or the kingdom of the left-hand, natural, sinful man does often exhibit virtuous qualities which are pleasing to God and will be rewarded in this life. Not every person, born out of the root of Adam, is a practicing scoundrel. But when it comes to the righteousness and eternal salvation offered in Christ Jesus, every person, in spite of virtuous qualities and responsible life-style, is a miserable sinner, faces divine judgment, and is in need of the forgiveness of sins and perfect righteousness offered in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, because of the variety of behavior that exists within the world of sinners, it is the legitimate exercise of psychology to seek to understand the why and wherefore of that diversity. Why do some natural-born sinners act morally and virtuously while others are law-breakers, perverts, and scoundrels? Is there a cause and effect produced by environment, genetics, physiology, or neurology? If so, what is that cause and effect? Thus, you have the study of psychology.

So while I accept modern psychology as a legitimate discipline within the social sciences. I reject the notion that psychology can be integrated into biblical theology. Psychology has a place, and it must stay in that place.

## **Focusing Upon the Gospel:**

Since psychology has crossed the line and invaded Christian teaching, and this is not the fault of secular psychologists, our defense against that invasion must focus primarily upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul declares that God has chosen to save this world by the preaching of the Gospel ([1 Corinthians 1: 21](#)). It is the power of God unto salvation ([Romans 1: 16](#)). The Gospel is that proclamation of the forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal salvation gained for us through the sacrificial suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit produces saving faith through the hearing of the Gospel ([Romans 10: 17](#)). If the Gospel of Jesus Christ is distorted by modern psychology, the very essence of Christianity is being undermined.

There are three vital biblical truths that define the purpose of preaching the Gospel, the

power of the Gospel, and the Gospel as the means whereby our Lord Jesus Christ comes to us. These three truths are presently being threatened or distorted by the intrusion of modern psychology into the Christian Church. Let me first briefly share these three truths with you and then discuss how psychological theories and techniques have distorted them.

**1.** The message of the grace of God in Christ Jesus is proclaimed within the context of human sin and depravity. Martin Luther discussed this truth as the relationship between the Law and the Gospel. He said that the key to understanding the Gospel is a proper understanding of human sin. From his perspective, if you get sin wrong, you will get everything else wrong.

**2.** Sanctification or living the Christian life is the result of the Gospel. Justification, my righteous position before God, and sanctification, my daily living before God, must be distinguished but never separated. The one is the cause of the other. The Christian life is not produced by psychological technique.

**3.** Scripture defines the manner in which our Lord Jesus comes to us and is sent among us. The Reformers spoke of the "means of grace," and identified the Gospel and the Sacraments as vehicles whereby the living Christ is brought to us, offering to us the benefits of life and salvation. The Bible does not offer psychological mind-games as a "means of grace."

Let us discuss these deceptions more in detail:

## **I. SIN AND SELF-ESTEEM**

For the past one hundred years, secular psychologists have proposed a number of theories to explain the diverse dynamics of human behavior. The two main schools of thought, Freudianism and behaviorism, reduced man to a creature whose behavior was determined by outside forces, either repressed desires or the conditioning produced by rewards and punishments.

Reacting against these two schools of thought, the "third force," or humanistic psychology arrived on the scene in the late fifties and early sixties. Man is a self-conscious, responsible being, taught humanists such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, and able to control his own destiny.

Out of the dynamic of self-determinism came the notion of self-esteem. Humanists believed that developing a positive self-image would go a long way in improving behavior, emotions, productivity and the like. According to the self-esteem advocates, our behavioral and emotional problems are largely the result of a negative self-image created in us by those who have influenced our lives. Parents who referred to us as "bad little boys and girls," teachers who made us feel bad about ourselves when we failed their tests, and of course the Christian Church with its indubitable "worm theology" became the major culprits.

## Confidence Before Men

The concept of self-esteem is really nothing new. While in the past we did not specifically speak about self-esteem, we were concerned about the dreaded "inferiority complex." Christian parents have always attempted to encourage their children, praise them for jobs well done, and give them reason to feel good about themselves in the light of their hard work and success. I wonder how many Christian parents display the bumper sticker, "my child is an honor roll student..."? Was it wrong for our American Olympic athletes, in view of their years of hard work and dedication, to feel good about themselves when receiving their gold medals and hearing their National Anthem? Didn't you even feel good about yourself as an American citizen? Is this wrong and displeasing to God? Of course not!

But, to teach self-esteem or self-confidence before God or to claim that the death of Jesus Christ enhances our sense of self-worth is a gross distortion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Before God I must declare that I am a poor, miserable, totally depraved sinner in need of his undeserved, mercy, and forgiveness offered in Christ Jesus. Jesus died on the cross not to indicate my value but rather to demonstrate God's grace upon miserable sinners.

## False Teachers

The intrusion of the self-esteem teaching into Christian theology has not been initiated by secular psychologists who have decided to invade Christianity. Rather, Christian pastors, teachers, and authors have been the culprits. For example, Dr. Robert Schuller writes, "the most serious sin is the one that causes me to say 'I am unworthy.'" <sup>1</sup> Has Dr. Schuller forgotten the story of the Pharisee and the publican? ([Luke 18](#)) While the Pharisee was expressing his self-worth and value before God, the publican was guilty of Dr. Schuller's cardinal sin: calling himself "unworthy." Yet, according to our Lord Jesus, it was the Publican, not the Pharisee, who went home justified.

Christian counselors who seek to integrate the secular concept of self-esteem into their "Christian" counseling often use the cross of Jesus Christ and the redemption that is in Christ Jesus as the basis for our self-esteem and self worth. One such counselor defines the cross by saying: "It is as if Christ had said, 'You are of such worth to me that I am going to die; even experience hell so that you might be adopted as my brothers and sisters.'" <sup>2</sup> Another writes: "Of course, the greatest demonstration of a person's worth to God was shown in giving us his Son." <sup>3</sup>

The horrible, sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross is not indicative of our self-worth but rather of the heinous nature of our sin. Consider Martin Luther's attitude toward the cross of Jesus Christ: "The main benefit of Christ's passion is that man sees into his own true self and that he is terrified and crushed by this. Unless we seek that knowledge, we do not derive much benefit from Christ's passion.... He who is so hard-hearted and callous as not to be terrified by Christ's passion and led to a knowledge of

self has reason to fear." 4

This very truth that the death of Jesus Christ is indicative of the depth of human sin, a biblical truth that has been taught for centuries and was at the very heart of the Reformation, is now considered anathema in many evangelical circles today. For example, Dr. Ray Anderson, an instructor at Fuller Theological Seminary, states in his book *The Gospel According to Judas*: "If our sin is viewed as causing the death of Jesus on the cross, then we ourselves become victims of a 'psychological battering' produced by the cross. When I am led to feel that the pain and torment of Jesus' death on the cross is due to my sin, I inflict upon myself spiritual and psychological torment." 5

## **Seeker Sensitivity**

The attempted integration of self-esteem into Christianity has not only influenced the theology of Christian counselors but has also distorted the mission and proclamation of many evangelical and mainline Protestant churches. Influenced by the Church Growth Movement, church leaders ask the questions: If the people in our community are seeking a sense of self-worth and self-esteem, how can we reach them? How can we be sensitive to the desires of these seekers? How can we produce a Sunday morning service that will allow these poor people with their wounded hearts and victimized lives to go home feeling good about themselves?

The answer is obvious. The preaching of the Law, the doctrine of original sin, the confession of sins, the preaching of a bloody cross as the payment for human sin must be given minimal if any attention. As a result, in the thinking of many evangelical "Christians" today, Jesus is no longer primarily the suffering Savior who gave his life for the forgiveness of my sins. Rather, he is the one who gives my life meaning. He causes me to feel good about myself and be happy. He is my good buddy who helps me become a better father or mother, husband or wife. He makes me a good person. He helps me keep my promises.

So, instead of gathering together in contrition and repentance, acknowledging sin and hearing the Good News of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ, Christians today often hear sermons on politics, morals, values, and principles for living the alleged Christian life. Whatever happened to sin and grace?

The integration of the self-esteem concept into Christianity has produced devastating results. Literally, for heaven's sake, we must return to the preaching of human sin and divine grace. After all, what does it profit a man if he feels good about himself in this life, if his psychological "barns" are filled with security, support groups, and a feel-good religion, and he loses his eternal soul.

## **II. ENCOUNTERING ENCOUNTER**

In 1970, a congregation that I was serving in Michigan decided to bring on staff a full-time "deaconess" to serve as director of youth and Christian education. In preparation to

receive our new deaconess, I was invited to attend a gathering of the deaconess graduates from Valparaiso University and the pastors with whom they would be serving in the various congregations. The meeting was over the course of two days at Deaconess Hall in Valparaiso, Indiana. I was totally unprepared for what I was about to encounter.

After a general assembly, the pastors and the deaconesses were divided into three smaller mixed groups for what was called "Sensitivity Training," or "Encounter." The groups would spend about 12 hours together. The purpose was to interact in a totally unstructured setting for the purpose of stripping away each other's veneer, taking off the "masks," uncovering individual insecurities, being "real," and finally arriving at a place of mutual love, respect, and support.

The experience had a profound effect upon my life and ministry. My personality was adjusted. Formerly reserved and aloof, I became a "buggy" person who wanted to "reach out and touch someone."

My preaching and teaching also changed. My emphasis was not on the Law and the Gospel, but rather love, joy, and peace. I attempted to create the same encounter dynamic in our congregation's small group settings, such as Sunday School teachers' meetings and Bible studies. The theme of our Vacation Bible School that summer was the lyrical gospel according to the rock-group The Youngbloods: "C'mon people now, smile on your brother. Everybody get together let us love one another right now."

The experience had "opened me up." In fact, I was open to just about anything. I was a candidate for occultism, false doctrine, and I'm sure, if the opportunity had provided itself, adultery. But the Lord protected me. I owe a large debt of gratitude to a Christian man from Grand Rapids, Michigan whose influence changed my direction.

### **What is Encounter?**

As the years have past, I have attempted to understand the "encounter experience." I have arrived at some conclusions, yet the dynamics of human personality remain a mystery. While it is not difficult to understand *what* happens in the encounter experience, I don't think anyone fully understands *why* it happens.

First of all, the encounter experience has nothing whatsoever to do with Christianity, with the Gospel, or with the Holy Spirit. It is a simple technique of psychology developed by Dr. Kurt Lewin in the 40's and popularized by humanist psychologist Dr. Carl Rogers as a part of his Client-Centered Therapy. Rogers used the technique as a method for developing greater sensitivity, openness, and empathy in therapists. In the 60's and 70's, encounter became the "in thing" in the Human Consciousness Movement and was the early hallmark of the Human Potential Movement.

Secondly, within a small group setting, a personality adjusting dynamic occurs when the human veneer is stripped away and the individual participants begin to openly share

their feelings. In describing the dynamic of the encounter experience, Carl Rogers writes: "Participants feel a closeness and intimacy which they have not felt even with their spouses or members of their own family, because they have revealed themselves here more deeply and fully than to those in their own family circle. 6

I knew a woman who, in the early 80's, worked at a university counseling center. In speaking about the counselors and therapists with whom she interacted, she said, "they are some of the kindest, most loving, and sensitive people I have ever met, *but they're all atheists.*" Undoubtedly these counselors and therapists had been through numerous encounter group experiences.

Encounter groups are normally facilitated-groups in that a leader, in a non-directive fashion, oversees the group direction. Some groups, such as Erhardt Seminar Training or *est*, are intrusive. The participants are verbally bombarded by an authoritarian leader until they break-down and finally accept the responsibility for their own lives. They get *it*, whatever *it* happens to be. 7

Thirdly, the encounter experience is a temporary "high." In order for the feeling of love, intimacy, openness and honesty to continue, an on-going relationship with the group is necessary. In addition, the experience is contrived and does not replicate the reality of human interaction.

The encounter group model has been largely discredited by the psychological community because of the negative after-effects. According to Christian counselor Sarah Leslie, "These groups simply were not equipped to deal with helping participants make the transition back to their normal lives, and as a consequence, many people made rash decisions, became quite depressed, or found their values radically adjusted." 8

But as is often the case, Christians load their wheelbarrows at the garbage dumps of modern psychology.

### **A Quick Trip to Sanctification?**

Since the encounter dynamic seemingly produces "Christian" virtues, it is not surprising that the technique has been readily embraced by Christians. It appears to be a quick trip into sanctification. In his book *Can You Trust Psychology*, Dr. Gary Collins quotes from a respected Christian counselor who claimed that "the fruit of the Spirit could all be produced by psychological techniques alone. There was no reason to wait for the Holy Spirit to develop these." 9

Psychological technique does not and cannot produce the fruit of the Spirit since sanctification is not a psychologically contrived human personality adjustment. The process of sanctification in which the fruit of the Spirit is produced is motivated by the dynamic of justification in which the individual accuses self, turns away from self, and embraces the forgiveness and righteousness found in Christ Jesus. While the Bible

teaches us to deny self, accuse self, and lose self as we live in a daily conscious faith-relationship with Jesus Christ, secular humanist psychology seeks to induce personality adjustments that turn self into a more loving, intimate, open, honest expression of the "goodness that resides within each human heart."

Some have attempted to "Christianize" the encounter experience by blending it with a smattering of Bible study. In so doing they mix the philosophy of secular humanism with Christianity. Since the dynamic of encounter is effective among Christians and non-Christians alike, any life-change that takes place as the Holy Spirit works through the "Bible study" is muddled by the psychological dynamic. Talk about confusion!

In the 70's and 80's, Lyman Coleman developed "Serendipity Workshops" which were "Christianized" versions of encounter with some Bible study thrown in. Participants in these groups were taken through four steps: "Can Openers" - activities designed to break down psychological barriers; "Scripture Happenings" - discussion of a biblical topic; "Scripture Heavies" - examining a topic at a deeper level; and "Growth Events" - an encounter experience in which the participants were encouraged to open up and bear their souls. I suggest that these workshops would have been just as effective in producing an emotional, life-affecting experience if the group had studied the Koran or the Book of Mormon instead of the Bible.

Two popular movements in the church today, "Christian Marriage Encounter" and "Teens Encounter Christ" are generally structured around Coleman's Serendipity model. Two questions: What makes the church's version of marriage encounter "Christian" and do teenagers really encounter Christ or more accurately, encounter "encounter?"

Those who attempt to use the encounter dynamic in a Christian context are often not up-front and honest about their intentions. For example, I attended a "Teens Encounter Christ" weekend as a pastoral participant. At the end, the teens were told to invite their friends to the next gathering but *not to tell them what takes place*. I have known angry church members who attended a small group Bible study only to be thrown unsuspectingly into a Serendipity encounter dynamic. Some years ago I played golf with a pastor who led "Christian Marriage Encounter" groups. I asked him, "What takes place in these groups?" He responded, "We're not supposed to reveal that. Come and see for yourself." If Christian pastors and lay leaders are foolish enough to impose a technique upon their fellow Christians which the psychological community has by-and-large discredited, a technique based upon the assumptions of secular humanism, they should at least be honest enough to tell them. How is this any different than the "Moonies" using psychological techniques upon their unsuspecting weekend visitors in order to capture them into the cult?

### **Promise Keepers**

It appears that the latest movement to load its wheelbarrows at psychology's garbage dump is the Promise Keepers. The PK movement involves more than just the large, publicized, rally-type gatherings. One PK-promoting pastor told me that the real work of

the Promise Keepers takes place in the small group men's meetings within the local congregations. The question is: *what takes place within these small group men's meetings?*

While it is not possible to generalize since diversity undoubtedly exists, there is one thing for sure: if the groups use the Robert Hicks *Masculine Journey Study Guide* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1993) which is imprinted with the official Promise Keepers' logo, the small groups are encounter groups.

In their excellent book *Beyond Promises*, David Hagopian and Doug Wilson write that this study guide "not only foists neo-Freudian and neo-Jungian psychology on the church unawares, it also foists what some have seen as unbiblical encounter group theory." [10](#)

According to Christian counselor Sarah H. Leslie, "*The Masculine Journey Study Guide* promotes an eight week encounter group session with the artificial flavoring of biblical support, The men are put through various recognizable encounter group stages that strongly resemble the 'Serendipity Workshops.'" [11](#)

### **Assessing Encounter**

Not a great deal has been written by Christian apologists and researchers about the encounter dynamic. Therefore, my assessment of encounter is based primarily upon my own personal experience and observation.

In addition to producing confusion over sanctification, I contend that the encounter dynamic, in "cracking the husk," also strips away some of the natural inhibitions of the participants. Values may be radically altered. Some participants experience a "freedom," especially in the area of sexuality. The Promise Keepers' *Masculine Journey Study Guide*, for example, attempts to open up men to speak freely about their sexuality and to reveal intimacies.

I believe that natural, conscience-based, human inhibitions, especially in the area of sexuality, are a divinely constructed "check" against promiscuity. There is little doubt that a connection exists between the popularity of encounter groups in the 60's and 70's and the alleged "sexual revolution." If you remember the movie "Bob and Carol, Ted and Alice" (or was it "Ted and Carol, Bob and Alice?"), you recall that being sensitized via encounter led to wife-swapping. Has the popularity of the encounter dynamic produced sexual promiscuity in the church? I believe so.

The Charismatic "Discipleship Movement" in the 70's attempted to establish divine government via an authority structure. The local discipleship small group gatherings, under the direction of a "shepherd" who was submitted up-the-line, often replicated encounter groups. I heard a presentation from one of the national leaders encouraging people to "allow their shepherds into their gardens." In other words, open up your lives to others. Years later, one high-ranking Discipleship participant told me that a major

problem that developed in these small groups was promiscuity.

We read much today about the sexual promiscuity of the clergy. I wonder how many of these fallen clergy had previously been participants in encounter groups, Serendipity Workshops, or in counseling sessions with a woman in which they mutually opened up their lives to each other. This would make a fascinating research project. We have many sensitized "huggy" preachers out there who should reserve their hugs for their wives and not for the women in their congregations.

I find much similarity between the Discipleship movement in the 70's and the modern Promise Keepers. I seriously wonder what will be the long-range effect of a large number of Christian men becoming uninhibited over their sexuality. While these men do claim to be "men of integrity," they are, in actuality, like all other men. They have a perverse human nature.

I believe that "encounter" is a "psychic experience" in which the devil seeks to counterfeit Christian sanctification. Strangely, after being opened up via encounter, I became very interested in psychic, occult phenomena. I began to read books by Edgar Cayce and Elizabeth Montgomery. In an interview before his death, Carl Rogers said, "If I were a young psychologist today and I knew what I know now, I'd probably start looking into the psychic realm." [12](#)

The Christian church needs to seriously scrutinize the encounter dynamic and stop loading its wheelbarrows at psychology's garbage dumps.

### **III. PSYCHOLOGICAL MYSTICISM**

In the 80's I was one of the speakers at a Charismatic conference at a large Assembly of God church near Chicago. A Roman Catholic priest was also on the program. In his evening presentation, after giving explanation, he invited the huge gathering to participate in an "inner healing" experience.

Using visualization, he regressed the group into various past stages of life from birth to the present, asking them to bring into memory traumatic experiences. As he guided the imagery, causing sobs, weeping, and cries of anguish to emanate from the people, he encouraged them to visualize the image of Jesus being present in each traumatic event, bringing his love and healing into the experience.

As I watched this incredible scenario unfolding before me, I could not help but wonder, "Where in the world did he get *this* from?" I had heard about the inner healing movement but had no idea what it was nor how it worked. Being curious, upon returning home I undertook the task of answering that question. After 18 months of research, my first book (which is now out-of-print) *Inner Healing: Deliverance or Deception*, was the result.

In reading the inner healing sources, I was struck by the importance of the theories and

philosophy of psychiatrist Dr. Carl G. Jung. Agnes Sanford, who is regarded as the mother of the inner healing movement, often quoted the teachings and theories of Jung to support her inner healing teaching, especially in her book *The Healing Gifts of the Spirit*. It seems that Agnes Sanford was highly influenced by her son, an Episcopalian priest, John A. Sanford, and her pastor, also an Episcopalian priest, Morton T. Kelsey, who were both Zurich trained (the home of the Jung Institute) Jungian analysts.

I discovered that the experience of inner healing was only one part of a wider psychological mysticism built upon the theories of Jung and being visited upon unsuspecting Christians, Protestants and Catholics alike. In order to understand this psychological mysticism, we need to first grapple with the theories of Dr. Carl Gustav Jung.

### **Carl G. Jung**

In the early part of this century, Carl Jung was a cohort of Sigmund Freud and his hand-picked successor, but their relationship was short-lived. Jung separated from Freud over the issue of the content of the unconscious mind. While Freud believed that the unconscious contained repressed sexual content, Jung theorized, on the basis of his experience, that it also contained religious, mythical content. Freud admonished his young disciple not to abandon the sexual theory but to raise it up as a "bulwark against the black mud of Occultism." <sup>13</sup> Freud was prophetic!

Jung also added a new dimension to the Freudian unconscious which he called "the collective unconscious." He theorized that all humanity, past and present, were connected on an unconscious plane. Therefore, deep within each individual was the collective wisdom of the ages, including all religious, mythical content.

According to occultists and New Age advocates, Jung placed a "scientific" footing under occult phenomena and mystical experience. Jung was deeply involved in the occult and did his doctoral thesis on parapsychology. He also was interested in Catholic mysticism and conducted seminars on the teachings of Ignatius Loyola.

Jung described the content of the collective unconscious as "archetypes" realities held in common by all humanity. He spoke of the warrior, the mother, the wise old man, the self, God etc. as archetypes that often burst into consciousness via dreams and mental images.

According to his disciples, Jung's greatest discovery was the use of active imagination or visualization as a means of reaching the content of the collective unconscious. After his traumatic break with Freud, Jung spent seven years claiming to have explored the content of the unconscious via visualization. He journalized his results in his infamous "Red Book." Some suggest that Jung, rather than journeying into the unconscious, was actually experiencing a psychotic breakdown.

Jung claimed that the images that emerged into his consciousness had a life of their

own. He had made contact with his own spirit-guide "Philemon" who brought greater wisdom into his life. Using the terminology of theologian Rudolf Otto, Jung described the visualized images as "numinous," meaning they possessed a spiritual reality.

Inner healing teachers, picking up on Jung's description of his images, teach that the image of Jesus brought into past traumatic experiences is not a product of fantasy or imagination, but is actually the real, spiritual presence of Jesus himself. Popular inner healing teacher Rita Bennett tells the story of a woman who was "saved" by encountering the visualized image of Jesus." [14](#) Whatever happened to preaching the Gospel?

## **A Framework for Mysticism**

Carl Jung's teachings on visualization have become the framework for not only the inner healing movement but also the wide proliferation of psychological mysticism in the Christian church. At present, there are many Christian teachers, ministers and priests promoting the technique of visualizing Jesus. Most probably do not have a clue as to its source. Originally, in the 70's and 80's, in addition to the inner healing teachers, mystical visualization was promoted in the church through the writings of Episcopalian priest Morton Kelsey, Quaker Richard Foster, and Charismatic Mark Virkler.

Morton Kelsey has written a veritable truckload of books on the manner in which Christian theology is able to be integrated into Jungian thought. His books have been published by a wide range of publishers including Augsburg, a Lutheran house. Kelsey, a former Notre Dame professor, has also presented seminars at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena. He has had a wide influence upon many Charismatic leaders including the Catholics, Lutheran Larry Christensen, and head of the Vineyard fellowships John Wimber. In fact, at the earliest Lutheran Conference on the Holy Spirit held in Ann Arbor back in 1972, Morton Kelsey was one of the main speakers.

Kelsey, beginning with the Jungian assumption that all religious and mythical content is found within the deep unconscious mind and that visualization or active imagination is a bridge to the unconscious, teaches Christians to enter into a meditative altered state of consciousness in order to make contact with God. [15](#)

In 1978, Quaker Richard J. Foster authored the very popular *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978). The book, together with the film series, was widely popularized. In the book, Foster promotes the inner healing experience, claiming that he learned it from Agnes Sanford (p. 137). He also encouraged the visualization of Bible stories and becoming active participants in the biblical events. In so doing, as he put it, "you can actually encounter the living Christ in this event, be addressed by his voice and be touched by his healing power. It can be more than an exercise of the imagination; it can be a genuine confrontation. Jesus Christ will actually come to you (p. 26).

In 1986, Mark Virkler, who at the time was a teacher at a Pentecostal Bible College,

came out with the book *Dialogue with God* (New Jersey: Bridge Publishing). Virkler openly admits in the book, with almost an apologetic attitude, that he had been highly influenced by the liberal Episcopalian priest Morton Kelsey, especially by Kelsey's book *The Other Side of Silence*. Virkler, claiming that he is "Berean," uses some of the worst interpretive methods imaginable in attempting to build his meditative techniques upon biblical truth. He teaches Christians the New Age method of "centering" in order to visualize Jesus, talk to him, hear his voice, and receive his wisdom. Virkler has traveled far and wide presenting his "Dialogue with God" seminars.

## **How Does Jesus Come To Us?**

Jesus has promised to meet us in his Word and Sacrament. He comes to us through these vehicles, not through some meditative visualization technique initiated by an occult-flavored altered state of consciousness. The Apostle Paul is clear in saying that we do not have to bring Jesus up or call him down. He is near us in the Word that we proclaim ([Romans 10:6-8](#)). Martin Luther stated that any spirit that comes to us without using the vehicle of the Word of God is the devil!

Since the Bible teaches that Jesus comes to us through the Word and Sacraments, what are those Christians who claim to contact Jesus through visualization actually experiencing? If you study the visualization technique induced by an altered state of consciousness you will discover that the alleged "Christian version" is the same as the New Age occult version. The methodology employed by Dr. Carl Jung for encountering his spirit-guide "Philemon" is no different than that taught by Kelsey, Foster, or Virkler for encountering Jesus. Therefore, we must conclude that the Jesus contacted in visualization is "another Jesus," a demonic impersonation, or at very best, a mere figment of human imagination.

Those who defend the mystical visualization of Jesus claim that in New Age occultism the devil is merely counterfeiting a Christian experience. The problem is, the devil would not counterfeit a three dollar bill. There is no biblical command or promise associated with visualizing Jesus.

Others say that visualization is similar to prayer - it can be pointed at God or it can be pointed at the devil. If this is true and methodology and technique are neutral, it would follow that we could point a ouija board or tarot cards at God for the purpose of receiving divine direction.

Some speak of visualization as "prayer." Prayer is certainly biblical, but Jesus taught his disciples to pray by *saying*, "Our Father who art in heaven..." He didn't teach his disciples to visualize him so that he could talk to them.

Still others argue that the Christian Church has always used pictures and images in Christian teaching. This is true. Children have always been taught Bible stories using pictures. But, it is a major leap to move from Christian artwork to employing an altered state of consciousness, or as some say, "a relaxed frame of mind," in order to conjure up

images of Jesus and claim that these images produce spiritual results.

Think of this: In the visualization technique the eyes are closed and the image is formed on the screen of the imagination. Those who become skilled at visualizing images are able to keep their eyes open and stare into a crystal ball. The same images that form in the imagination will also form in the clouded crystal ball. I suggest that those who wish to promote the visualization technique in the Christian Church should go into producing "Crystal Balls for Christians." It could be profitable. In addition, since the Holy Spirit has chosen to work through tangible objects such as words on paper, water, bread, and wine, perhaps the church would be willing to add crystal balls to the list (My sarcasm is intentional!).

### **In Every Denomination**

Given the wide distribution of the books promoting psychological mysticism, I believe it is safe to say that this deceptive practice has found its way into every major Christian denomination, including my own denomination, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Let me give you two incidents that demonstrate this:

A few months ago, after discussing the mystical visualization technique on my daily radio program, a woman called in and stated that she had attended a Lutheran Singles weekend in which she was taught by the guest speaker to relax and visualize Jesus. She was very disturbed to discover that she had been fed a very deceptive technique in a church-sponsored gathering.

As I was working on this very article one evening, I received a phone call from an LCMS pastor who was presenting himself as a potential guest for *Issues, Etc.* He told me that he had developed a seminar and had presented it in numerous places. (He could have been the presenter at the singles' weekend.) He called the seminar "Practicing the Presence of God." He explained that he begins the seminar by leading the people in a Bible study, demonstrating that God has always been present in their lives. He then plays relaxing music and encourages the people to visualize God being with them, hugging them and embracing them, through all their scenes of life. In this way, as he put it, the presence of God becomes real to the people. After first insisting that the Bible was his only source, he finally admitted that he had read Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*.

The presence of God becomes real to us in the Word and Sacraments, not in a mystical visualization technique.

### **CONCLUSION**

Modern psychology is not an innocent helping-discipline that we can carelessly borrow from the kingdom of the left-hand and merge with our pastoral theology. There are theories and techniques in psychology, such as self-esteem, the encounter dynamic, and psychological mysticism, that can grossly distort Christian truth and inflict grave

spiritual damage upon Christian people. While most Christian denominations desire to remain faithful to the truth of God's Word and dot every theological "i" and cross every theological "t", those same denominations, when it comes to the deceptive offerings of modern psychology, practice minimal discernment. The reason is simple. Pastors and church leaders are not equipped to do so.

Most Christian pastors, including myself, have neither sought nor desired academic degrees in psychology. Christian pastors should be primarily concerned with theology, not psychology. If a pastor should happen to embrace strange, deceptive theology and visits the same on his people, he will readily be called to task by the church leaders and his fellow-pastors because they know their theology. But what if that same pastor embraces strange, deceptive psychology, who will challenge him? If a pastor has a doctorate in psychology and is in a position of influence within the denomination, he is virtually untouchable. He can promote any theory, recommend any book, and practice any methodology because he is one of the few professionals in a sea of amateurs. Who has the credentials to challenge him?

Those who promote deceptive psychology in the church more often than not hide the roots of their teaching. The priest who presented the inner healing "ministry" at the conference I attended did not say, "This teaching came from Agnes Sanford. It is based upon the theories of Carl Jung who used the visualization technique to contact his spirit-guide." The pastor who wanted to promote his mystical seminars on my radio program claimed he got his stuff straight from Scripture. Those who visit the encounter dynamic upon Christian people invite them to attend a small group "Bible Study." They hide the roots for an obvious reason. If they were honest, no one would buy into their gimmick. If a pastor questions a specific psychological theory or practice, he must spend weeks or months of digging in order to uncover the roots.

I suggest that Christian denominations who are concerned by the intrusion of modern psychology into their ranks should appoint a standing-committee made up of apologetic researchers, experts in the occult, and orthodox pastors and lay-people who are academically trained in psychology. It would be the task of this committee to do the research that most busy pastors are unable to do and to offer to the church their conclusions and opinions concerning some of the deceptive offerings of modern psychology.

I am in no way suggesting that my thoughts on these subjects are the final word. Undoubtedly there are pastors, theologians, and Christian psychologists who can offer more academically mature opinions than I can, and I would encourage them to do so. It is my hope and prayer that those who read this article will agree with my conclusion. **We must carefully discern the theories and practices of modern psychology before we visit them upon the people of God.**

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## Table of References

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3. Donna Foster, *Building a Child's Self-Esteem*, (Glendale, CA: Regal, 1977), p. 6.
4. Timothy Lull, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), p. 168.
5. Ray S. Anderson, *The Gospel According to Judas*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmer and Howard, 1991), p. 99.
6. Carl R. Rogers, *Encounter Groups*, (New York: Harrow Books, 1973), p. 9.
7. See *Snapping: Americas Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change*, (New York: Lippincott, 1978) by Jim Siegelman and Flo Conway, p. 222
8. Sarah H. Leslie, "Promise Keepers: Encountering Guys at Risk," *The Christian Conscience*, January, 1995.
9. Gary R. Collins, *Can You Trust Psychology*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 83.
10. *Beyond Promises*, pp. 85-86.
11. Sarah H. Leslie, op. cit.
12. *Snapping*, p. 223
13. C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, (Vintage Books, 1965), p. 150.
14. Rita Bennett, *Emotionally Free*, (New Jersey: Revel, 1982), pp. 74-89.
15. While many of Kelsey's books are a rehashing of the same old stuff, the following are important to obtain an overview of his teaching:

*The Other Side of Silence*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1976); Offers Kelsey's perspective on meditation.

*Adventures Inward*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980); Promotes journaling and automatic writing. Published by Lutherans?

*Transcend*, (New York: Crossroad, 1985); Presents Kelsey's position on psychic phenomena.

*Encounter with God*; A general perspective on integrating Jung.

While the book was originally published by Bethany in 1972, they dropped it from their publishing list after I informed them in 1986 of the occult nature of the book. Paulist Press has since picked it up.

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