

Position Paper #2

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In the textbook *Theology for Better Counseling* Virginia Todd Holeman states “Human beings are experts in self-justification, and our ability to rationalize known sin is outstanding.” (Holeman, 2012). When we think about humans' sinful nature, this is a wildly accurate statement. Not only are we naturally sinful but we are constantly justifying and denying that our sin is wrong. All you have to do is turn on the TV or open up social media to see constant examples of humans normalizing our sinful desires rather than acknowledging their faults. As Christian counselors this could lead us into wondering how much of the fall of man, leading to our sinful nature, correlates with psychopathology.

Eric Johnson covers this topic in his lecture *Towards a Christian Pathology*. In this lecture Johnson compares and contrasts the viewpoint of modern psychopathology versus Christian psychopathology. He states that “Modern psychology has a worldview called naturalism... this worldview consists entirely of entities and processes” he goes on to explain that this means there’s no God and “there’s nothing special about human persons, we’re just advanced animals” meaning that “When we have problems with psychopathology it’s due entirely to biological causes and social causes”. But from a Christian worldview there are many things wrong with modern psychopathology. He explains, “It promotes determinism, victimhood, and passivity. Because it doesn’t honor us as human beings made in the image of God and having some measure of freedom”. He goes on to describe what psychopathology looks like from the Christian perspective, starting by stating that this “approach is going to treat humans as personal agents as well as organisms.” (Johnson, 2018).

This combined perspective of scientific and spiritual psychopathology is also described by David N. Entwistle in his article *A Holistic Psychology of Persons: Implications for Theory and Practice*. Entwistle states that “A christian conceptualization of human personhood as a

holistic unity allows us to respect biopsychosocial and spiritual realities, and moreover, to see them unified rather than bifurcated” (Entwistle, 2009). Both Johnson and Entwistle show us their belief that a Christian viewpoint gives a more holistic perspective of psychology that may give us the ability to help the client even better.

Later in Johnson’s video he discusses the connection between sin and psychopathology. Johnson states that “sin is the bible word for disorder of the soul... it’s a way of viewing human nature and what’s wrong with us in terms of ethical and spiritual problems.” He goes on to state that he would call sin “the worst form of psychopathology...sin is anti-glory” (Johnson, 2018).

Any theologian will agree that Jesus came to save us from shame but interestingly, he did it in the most shameful way. As Bird says in his text *What Christians Ought to Believe*; “Crucifixion meant degradation, death, shame, and cruelty. Crucifixion was the Roman way of saying, “If you dare to mess with us, there is no limit and no restraint on the violence that we will do to you.” Ultimately though “despite the foolishness, horror, and the shame associated with crucifixion, the cross quickly became the most cherished symbol of the Christian faith” (Bird, 2016).

Many psychologists have done a great deal of research on shame unrelated to Christianity. Brene Brown is a “shame researcher” and in her book *Gifts of Imperfection* she states:

“When we experience shame, we feel disconnected and desperate for worthiness. Full of shame or fear of shame, we are more likely to engage in destructive behaviors and to attack or shame others. In fact shame is related to violence, aggression, depression addiction, eating disorders, and bullying” (Brown, 2020).

This shows that shame is not only Biblically harmful but also scientifically. Research shows that it is detrimental to humans but God knew, and told us from the beginning that it was our fall from grace.

People may wonder how sin and psychological disorders could possibly be caused by sin and shame. We typically equate sin with evil and disorders seem more unfortunate than evil. It could even seem like we are judging or stigmatizing the disordered person as sinful. The article *From Sin to Science: Fighting the Stigmatization of Mental Illness* by Dr. Julio Arboleda-Florez and Dr. Heather Stuart, discusses this topic further. They state that “In ancient as in modern times, labeling someone as mentally ill has been central to the process of stigmatization as it immediately brands someone as being of lesser social value.” They go on to say that it has been associated with concepts of shame, loss of face, and humiliation.” They even imply that its connection to sin might be the reason for its stigmatization. By stating “the term stigma to mental illness most likely appeared when mental illnesses became linked with sin” (Arboleda-Flórez & Stuart, 2012).

So wouldn't it seem like we are regressing if we argue that sin is the reason for all psychopathology? Johnson has an explanation for that through the understanding of suffering. He tells is in his lecture, though suffering is not a disorder in itself but “in our fallen condition the sin of Adam and Eve have led us to experience suffering in this world and suffering can lead to further problems in our lives that do turn into disorders.” He describes suffering as “strong negative emotion or psychological or physical pain.” Finally he states that “everybody suffers and nobody is protected from suffering down here... We also know that personal sin leads to a special kind of suffering, the more we sin, the more we will suffer.” (Johnson, 2018)

This can be summarized that though sin will cause suffering we do not necessarily suffer, physically or psychological, because we are sinful but because of the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. All people are destined to suffer because human nature is sinful. That is why we needed Jesus to take the most shameful suffering to know that even the one without sin bared our suffering. As Johnson ultimately says God uses suffering “to make us mature and wiser” (Johnson, 2018). If we live with this perspective then we can grow and live with hope through any suffering or disorder.

References

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