

# The Blessings of Mental Anguish

*The goal of the Christian counselor  
is not to help people become merely "normal."*

C. STEPHEN EVANS

**W**E LIVE IN a "therapeutic society."

Does your child have trouble completing his homework? Take him to see a psychologist who works with learning problems. Does your spouse have a problem with alcohol? Persuade him (or her) to enter an alcohol treatment facility, staffed by skilled psychiatrists. Do you yell at your kids too much? See a psychiatric social worker who specializes in family relationships.

Of course, mental health professionals are often very helpful in dealing with such problems. However, some

problems are very difficult to treat. Psychological "cures" are not always possible, and they are certainly not always immediate.

The church has not been immune to the tendency to view problems in a therapeutic vein. Though a certain amount of uneasiness persists, the idea of going to a mental health professional for all kinds of problems is now widely accepted, and various kinds of Christian counseling centers have proliferated.

Christian counselors, like their secular counterparts, are often faced with

seemingly intractable, chronic problems. It is true that Christian counselors have some unique resources and approaches in such instances. These resources do not guarantee a cure, though; sometimes, in fact, the unique Christian resources do not bear fruit in a cure.

To see this, consider the *goals* of the Christian counselor. When I speak of counselors here, I do *not* mean only professional counselors. All of us have the opportunity to be counselors. Parents counsel their children; Sunday school teachers and youth group leaders often



Odd saint: Charles Spurgeon

provide invaluable counsel; friends counsel friends. So thinking about the goals of Christian counseling is something that ought to concern all Christians, and not simply professional counselors.

### The cure is not all

In our therapeutic society, with psychological problems often construed on a medical model, it is tempting to see the one and only goal of counseling as "curing" people, or at least in terms of eliminating problems. And this is very often correct.

When people are suffering, it is proper to try to alleviate the suffering. There is no difference in principle here between suffering that is caused by physical debilities and suffering that has its origins in psychological impairments. You should attempt to help someone who cannot perform adequately at a job because of an irrational fear of being out of doors, just as you should attempt to help someone who could not do a job adequately because of an infection.

There are times, however, when even the expert counselor is at sea. People cannot always be cured, problems cannot always be eliminated. Psychological problems, unlike many physical ailments, tend to be of a chronic or recurring nature. Such problems sometimes are very tenacious and deep-rooted, responding only slowly and gradually, if at all. Many Christians, even with professional help, struggle for years with depression. Others battle mood swings, or phobias, or a painful inability to function in a group situation. What should the goal of the Christian counselor be in this situation?

### The goodness of weakness

We may gain some valuable hints from the apostle Paul's "thorn in the flesh." He prayed earnestly for God to eliminate his problem, but the answer he received was, "My grace is sufficient for thee; for my strength is made perfect in weakness." This experience led Paul to accept and even rejoice in his problem: "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." Paul had learned that "when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

Though there are many theories, we do not really know the nature of Paul's thorn. It is very probable that his problem was physical in nature. But even if it was physical, it certainly caused



Melancholy Dane: Søren Kierkegaard

great psychological suffering for Paul. Regardless of Paul's specific problem, what is important is the underlying principle: God sometimes works *through* our human weaknesses, rather than eliminating those weaknesses. This principle seems just as applicable to psychological weaknesses as it is to physical problems.

This has profound implications for the goals of Christian counseling. It means that there are times when we ought to look at our psychological problems as part of the providential ordering of our lives by God. God's strength is made perfect in our psychological weaknesses, as well as our physical weaknesses. Therefore, there are times when the proper goal of the Christian counselor is not the elimination of a

problem but is helping an individual discover how a problem can be the occasion for spiritual growth.

The individual must learn how to live with the problem and deal with it, not in his own strength, but with the help of God's grace. Learning to live with a problem in this way can make an individual better suited to accomplish significant tasks for the kingdom of God. Certainly living with a problem in this way can make an individual better suited for participation in that kingdom.

### "Odd" saints

All of us can probably think of Christians who were a little "odd," and were able to do great things for God in part because of their oddness. They learned better than most what it meant to de-

pend on God rather than themselves or even other people.

Charles Spurgeon is a well-known example. He suffered from prolonged bouts of depression, as well as anxiety about all sorts of common problems, including finances. Spurgeon's psychological and physical ailments were so debilitating that he frequently was confined to bed for weeks. However, Spurgeon came to see these problems as part of God's working in his life. His sufferings enabled him to comfort and encourage those who were similarly afflicted. He discovered that his periods of depression invariably preceded a time when God blessed his ministry in a larger way. The depression actually became a sort of "John the Baptist" for him, heralding a new and mighty outpouring of God's Spirit. This psychologically frail man, who died at age 57, published over 3,500 sermons, authored 135 books, and was regarded by many as the outstanding preacher of his generation.

The nineteenth-century Christian philosopher and theologian, Søren Kierkegaard, provides another interesting example of a man whose psychological problems provided a rich harvest for the kingdom of God. Kierkegaard suffered all his life with what he termed his melancholy, a condition that today would doubtless be described as that of chronic depression. It is not too hard to trace the origins of some of his psychological problems. His relationship with his mother was very distant, almost to the point of being nonexistent, and he had great difficulty relating to women. His relation to his father, on the other hand, was very intense.

As a young boy, Kierkegaard spent a great deal of time with his father. Instead of being allowed to play outside with other children, the young boy would frequently be taken for indoor "walks" with his father. The two would stride up and down in the house, with the father's rich imagination enabling him to describe, in great detail, various sections of the city they were "traversing."

The result was an intensely reflective child. When the father slipped pictures of the crucified Christ into pictures of childhood heroes that young Søren played with, it is not surprising that at an early age the boy was gripped with a terrifying conviction that it is the fate of the good to suffer and die. How could it

be otherwise, when the best of all had suffered so?

The point of recounting this is not to diagnose Kierkegaard's psychological ills, but rather to show that his suffering was real and severe. The interesting thing about Kierkegaard was the way he responded to his problems.

As a young man, Kierkegaard fell in love with Regine Olsen, and was engaged. He soon decided, however, that he had made a mistake; that he was not fit for marriage. He did not think that Regine would ever be able truly to understand him or his problems. He consulted with his physician, who advised him that it was unlikely that he would ever be cured of his ailments.

At this point, Kierkegaard could have become angry with God or his father. He did neither. He knew that his father's parenting, however poor the results, had been inspired by love. And he concluded that God must be asking him to sacrifice his love for Regine, just as Abraham had been called by God to sacrifice Isaac. He had been called to the single life, to be celibate for the kingdom of God. His psychological peculiarities were the means God had employed to call him to a special mission. He continued to love Regine, but he could not express that love in the "normal" way. He was to be a writer.

And a writer he did indeed become. A torrent of literature fell from his pen—philosophical, theological, and devotional volumes—all designed, as he put it, to "reintroduce Christianity into Christendom." It would not have been possible for Kierkegaard to write as sensitively and movingly as he did about the role of suffering and sacrifice in the Christian life had he not personally suffered and sacrificed as he did.

### Afraid of flying

Though I do not claim any great accomplishments such as Spurgeon's or Kierkegaard's for the kingdom of God, I have personally experienced the way God can speak to us through our psychological ailments. Like John Madden, Mike Royko, and Gene Shalit, I have an airplane phobia. I am tempted to steal a line from Lewis Grizzard, one of my favorite columnists, and say that it's not flying that scares me, but crashing and burning. That would not be true, however; I am really afraid of flying.

This is not a problem I am proud of or

glad about. It complicates my life in many ways. A simple act of accepting a speaking invitation becomes an exercise in will power and courage. I have attempted to get help and, in time, the problem can perhaps be eliminated. (I have plans to fly this year, but all the air crashes in the summer of 1985 have not helped.)

In the meantime, it is a problem I am trying to live with and deal with. In the course of doing so, God has taught me some things. He has taught me that the possibility of my death at any moment is no abstract theory, but the sober truth about the human condition. He has taught me that I must trust him to watch over my family; I am not really indispensable. He has taught me more of what it really means to believe in his providential care, as I acknowledge that I cannot always control the circumstances surrounding my own life. Trust in the pilot is hardly faith in God, but both involve putting yourself into someone else's hands.

The lesson to be learned from this is not that people should want to be abnormal or have problems, and it is certainly not that Christians should be insensitive to suffering, or fail to try to alleviate suffering. It is rather that we should be more open to the ways in which God can and does use and work through our human weaknesses, both for our own personal growth and to help others.

We can perhaps be grateful that people like Spurgeon and Kierkegaard did not live in a therapeutic age, where they would have been treated (perhaps even hospitalized) until they were "normal." We can be even more grateful that these people were open to seeing the hand of Providence in their afflictions, and that they were willing to suffer in order to become powerful instruments for God. We should all keep it uppermost in our minds that the primary goal of a Christian counselor is not to help people become merely "normal," but to help them love God with all their hearts, minds, and souls. □

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## Called to Be Saints—Not Well-adjusted Sinners



C. Stephen Evans presents the thoughts of a professional philosopher on mental health and the faith. But what would a practicing, professional, and Christian counselor say? Vernon C. Grounds, a *CHRISTIANITY TODAY* contributing editor, is head of the Grounds Counseling Center in Denver. He eloquently set forth his thoughts on the matter at hand in a paper entitled "Christian Perspectives on Mental Illness. Though Grounds wrote the paper years ago, his insights—in today's "therapeutic society"—are more relevant than ever.

**A**S CHRISTIANS who are concerned about the problem of mental illness, we must refuse to abandon the distinctive insights, convictions, and objectives of our own faith. We must beware of prostituting the gospel to a sub-biblical end.

Christianity is concerned about human life in its totality, and therefore Christianity is concerned about healthy-mindedness. But—let me be provocatively blunt—fundamentally and finally, Christianity is not concerned about the individual's emotional welfare any

more than it is concerned about his physical condition. Fundamentally and finally, Christianity is concerned about the individual's relationship to God. Fundamentally and finally, it sees him as a creature whose overriding responsibility is to get this wrong relationship readjusted. Fundamentally and finally, it sees him as the bearer of a destiny that stretches out beyond time into eternity, and this destiny is determined by his God-relationship. Thus, Christianity's perspective on mental health may be summed up in eight brief statements (*see box*).

These eight statements, I suggest, are some of the distinctive insights, convictions, and objectives of our own faith; and as Christians concerned about mental illness we must refuse to abandon them regardless of how they may be criticized by secular psychotherapy.

Years ago in Germany, Christoph Blumhardt carried on a rather phenomenal ministry of pastoral care. Blessed with rare abilities, he helped hundreds of people regain health of body, mind, and spirit. Individuals who could not come to him at Bad Boll would write to him asking his counsel and prayer. Here is his reply to a woman who had requested intercession for an afflicted friend.

"I increasingly feel we should not pray too urgently for health and help in illness, but rather for our right attitude toward God in order to make the streams of living water flow more richly. God is often hindered from doing what he would gladly do if we were more his people serving him. Now that God has caused me to experience so many and such great things, I long for the experience of seeing men care more for his kingdom and take a back seat for themselves. In this way, even illness can become a service for God, and God is again close at hand. I shall faithfully think of your sick friend, but am grateful if she in turn also helps me and wishes even more than her health that God's right be acknowledged on earth and his will alone be done."

That, in my opinion, is a classic statement of the Christian perspective on health, whether it be physical or mental.

VERNON C. GROUNDS

### The Importance of Glorifying God: Eight Thoughts on Mental Health

1. An individual, quite completely free from tension, anxiety, and conflict, may be only a well-adjusted sinner who is dangerously maladjusted to God; and it is infinitely better to be a neurotic saint than a healthy-minded sinner.

2. Healthy-mindedness may be a spiritual hazard that keeps an individual from turning to God precisely because he has no acute sense of need.

3. Emotional illness springing ultimately—ultimately!—from the rift that sin has driven between Creator and creature may prove a disguised blessing, a crisis that compels an individual to face the issues of his divine relationship and eternal destiny.

4. Thus, in a choice between spiritual renewal and psychic recovery, Christianity unhesitatingly assigns priority to the spiritual dimension of personality.

5. Mental illness may be an experience that drives a believer into a deeper faith commitment; hence, mental illness may sometimes be a gain rather than a loss.

6. Tension, conflict, and anxiety, even to the point of mental illness, may be a cross voluntarily carried in God's service.

7. No psychic healing is complete unless it is acknowledged as God's gift and he is praised for it.

8. Health of mind or body is of value only as it is used to serve and glorify God.