

an essay:

CASE STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL FORMATION

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I. INTRODUCTION – MAN’S QUEST FOR PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

Where, amidst our conflicts with others, are we to find peace and reconciliation? It is only at The Cross of CHRIST, by GOD’s Grace, that The HOLY SPIRIT of GOD comes to work in us and in our lives, that we may find renewal and repair of our relationships. The Almighty revealed this to the prophet Isaiah as in ISAIAH 32:15-17, that The Spirit of GOD brings the only true and lasting peace to men in their relationships: “Until The Spirit be poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness be a fruitful field, and the fruitful field be counted for a forest. Then judgment shall dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness remain in the fruitful field. And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever!”¹ So we shall see.

II. CHRIST-CENTERED COUNSELING TOOLS FOR PEACE & RECONCILIATION

There are certain tools found in the schools of modern counseling that, when divorced from their atheistic paganized underpinnings and administered to hurting people at The Cross of The Saviour JESUS CHRIST, can help bring peace to men and restore damaged relationships. Dr. Aaron Beck, in “Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders,” defines “distancing” as “the process of regarding thoughts objectively.” A patient who is able to separate his interpretations of a subject from the reality of that subject is said to be able to “take distance.” Therefore, “a person who can examine his automatic thoughts as psychological phenomena rather than as identical to reality is exercising the capacity for distancing.”² These two ideas deserve our further consideration within a Christian context.

To routinely equate one’s automatic thoughts with one’s perception of reality shows poor distancing skills. “Distancing involves being able to make the distinction between ‘I believe’ (an opinion that is subject to validation) and ‘I know’ (an irrefutable fact).” A healthy person is able to test his automatic thoughts via distancing. Being able to distance oneself from one’s automatic thoughts through this process is needed to

¹ 1, KJV, ISAIAH 32:15-17.

² 2, Beck, “Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders,” p 243-244.

correct a patient's reactions that are subject to distortions.³ It is the healthy learned ability of men to take themselves out of a situation in which they are immersed and look at the bigger picture with a measure of objectivity.

Beck defines "decentering" as "the technique of prying the patient loose from his pattern of regarding himself as the focal point of all events." Likewise, a patient who is able to separate his attention from surrounding life events impacting solely on himself from the reality of those events being is considered to be able to decenter well. To automatically associate life events happening around oneself as specifically designed to impact the self above all others shows poor "decentering." In many psychological disorders, major distortion in thinking results from the patient's tendency to personalize events that have no objective causal connection to him. Decentering is the realization by a patient that events occurring around him are not necessarily specially directed at him and him alone. Likewise, being able to decenter oneself from one's environment through this process is also needed to correct a patient's reactions that are subject to distortions.⁴

III. DAMAGED RELATIONSHIPS & SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Dr. John Pugh, in "Improving Relationships Through Spiritual Formation,"⁵ defines the vital phenomenon of "spiritual formation" as "a term that has been used to describe the evidence of The [HOLY] SPIRIT's work within human beings beyond that of institutionalized religion... [which leads to] a more personal form of a living Faith."⁶ We are reminded that, not only does spiritual growth occur in relief from and after human suffering, but also during and because of human suffering. And also, that we must seek to avoid having a "faith without works," which as Saint James says, "is dead."⁷

Such growth of men associated with suffering presents opportunities to both minister to those in need and also to be ministered to by others. No right-minded person

³ 2, Beck, "Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders," p 243-244, definition of "distancing."

⁴ 2, Ibid., p 243-244, definition of "decentering."

⁵ 3, Pugh, "Improving Relationships Through Spiritual Formation."

⁶ 3, Ibid., p 2, abstract, definition of "spiritual formation."

⁷ 1, KJV, JAMES 2:20.

seeks suffering, but human suffering can be an opportunity to grow closer to GOD our Creator. Indeed it is when we suffer - when all external worldly and human supports fail us - that we often seem most open to the Divine Presence in our lives. It is one of the great tragedies of fallen man since The Garden that much of our suffering is self inflicted, and that so many of us refuse to resort to The loving Grace of GOD for His healing. But when we walk through life's challenges and troubles with The LORD, He uses them, by His HOLY SPIRIT working in us, to strengthen our faith. As Saint James says in JAMES 1:3, "...the trying of your faith worketh patience."⁸

We are presented with three case studies.⁹ In each case, we will seek to identify the therapeutic tasks facing the patients and how the ideas of "decentering" and "distancing" apply in each situation from a solidly Biblical and soundly Christian perspective. The goal of such Christian counseling is to lead these patients to deeper Christian "spiritual formation," that they may be blessed with closer, healthier and restored relationships with first The LORD and then with their loved ones. We will attempt to identify the stressors in each case and inquire as to what The Word of GOD offers for each case. And as these patients are redirected back to The Cross of The Saviour JESUS CHRIST, it is hoped that they will find The HOLY SPIRIT working more and more in them and in their lives to bring about lasting and enduring peace and reconciliation.

IV. CASE 1 - THE ANGRY HUSBAND

The first case is that of an angry husband:¹⁰ He presents an adult male patient experiencing severe marital difficulties, alcohol abuse and sexual promiscuity. The patient reports a difficult and unloving childhood including a poor father role model; being tied to a toilet as a child by his mother; violent and unstable grandparents. His only escape was to The Church and his only positive adult role model was a Christian youth pastor. He reports a history of deep despair up to and including his college days.

⁸ 1, KJV, JAMES 1:3.

⁹ 3, Pugh, "Improving Relationships Through Spiritual Formation."

After courting his wife - often with a certain lack of respect shown her - he married her - a pastor's daughter. He found his first job as a youth pastor difficult, hiding his difficulties from his senior pastor. His wife at home was the only recipient of his blame shifting based anger for an unfulfilling career, which included foul moods; angry tirades against his spouse; being strongly critical of his spouse; outbursts of violence; Napoleonic control of his spouse; sexual sadism with his spouse.

Subsequent jobs as a youth pastor ended in failure when his wife would approach Church authorities requesting marital counseling. The patient then abandoned his wife, began to abuse alcohol and cohabitated with a number of women. In spite of all this, the patient's wife sought counseling to save the marriage. The patient was observed to be manipulative, requiring reconciliation on his terms only, continued to display angry outbursts, made long lists of baseless accusations against his wife, and to be defensive of his new lifestyle. In spite of some moments of clarity - when confronted by the therapist as to his baseless anger against his wife for all his failings - he admitted his errors. However, he often reverted back to his former angry blame shifting behaviors.

Distancing may enable this patient to consider what he would think of a husband who is likewise so angry with his wife for no concrete reasons. PROVERBS 15:1 - "A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger."¹¹ What would this patient think of a husband who is likewise using alcohol to escape his guilt for unjustified anger against his wife? PROVERBS 20:1 - "Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise."¹² What would this patient think of a husband who is likewise controlling his wife so abusively? Would he not see that the husband doesn't love himself? EPHESIANS 5:25&28 - "Husbands, love your wives, even as CHRIST also loved The Church, and gave Himself for It; So ought men t love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself."¹³

¹⁰ 3, Ibid., case 1 presentation, p 8-10.

¹¹ 1, KJV, PROVERBS 15:1.

¹² 1, KJV, PROVERBS 20:1.

¹³ 1, KJV, EPHESIANS 5:25&28.

Decentering may enable this patient to consider - not just his own feelings - but also those of his wife. How does the patient's wife feel as a result of the intense unjustified guilt she feels as a result of the patient's blame shifting onto her? PSALMS 38:4&6 - "For mine iniquities are gone over mine head: as an heavy burden they are too heavy for me. I am troubled; I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long."¹⁴ How, for example, does the patient's wife feel as a result of his sexual promiscuity? How does GOD feel about the patient's infidelity? II PETER 2:9 - "The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the Day of Judgment to be punished."¹⁵

The early Church's "Apostolic Constitutions" offer these words to this couple, and especially to the husband: "Let the husband not be insolent or arrogant towards his wife. But let him be compassionate, generous, willing to please his own wife. Let him treat her honorably and obligingly, trying to be agreeable to her."¹⁶ The patient will hopefully recognize that, in spite of the great suffering his wife has endured as a result of his unjustified anger towards her, even so she seeks to restore their marriage. Appreciating the sorrow, strength and love of his wife may open the patient's heart to work towards repentance and reconciliation. I CORINTHIANS 4:12b-13a - "Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it: Being defamed, we intreat."¹⁷ As Saint James declares in JAMES 1:19-20, "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of GOD."¹⁸

V. CASE 2 - THE FEARFUL MOTHER-IN-LAW

The second case is that of a fearful mother-in-law in conflict with her son-in-law:¹⁹ She presents as an older woman - a mother-in-law and grandmother - who is at odds

¹⁴ 1, KJV, PSALMS 38:4&6.

¹⁵ 1, KJV, II PETER 2:9.

¹⁶ 4, Early Christian Beliefs, "husbands," 8th entry, "Apostolic Constitutions (compiled c. 390, E), 7.392."

¹⁷ 1, KJV, I CORINTHIANS 4:12b-13a.

¹⁸ 1, KJV, JAMES 1:19-20.

¹⁹ 3, Pugh, "Improving Relationships Through Spiritual Formation," case 2 presentation, p 15-16.

with and never accepted her son-in-law as good enough for her daughter to marry. The patient complained about being persecuted with mistreatment and cruelty by her son-in-law to the therapist. Yet she claimed - when confronted in a family counseling session about her very long list of wrongs done to her by her son-in-law - to have never derided him in any way. The patient and her son-in-law apparently had years of tension between them. The group family therapy meeting resulted from an incident in which, when the patient was caring for her grandchildren, apparently made unkind remarks about their father. The remarks were repeated to the parents, who retaliated by forbidding the patient from seeing the children further unless they were present to monitor and supervise the visits.

Therapy revealed the patient first denying the event, then offering vague and half hearted apologies for her comments made in front of the children about the son-in-law, then justifying her behaviour by speculating the son-in-law was saying derogatory things about her to the children. The patient appears to be fearful of loosing both her daughter and grandchildren to the son-in-law, and thus acts proactively to disparage the source of those potential losses - her son-in-law. The son-in-law appears to be fearful of loosing his wife and children to the mother-in-law and so acts proactively to disparage the source of those potential losses - his mother-in-law. As is observed by the counselor, "Their fears were true to prediction because that is exactly what happened. Control is often the resort for the fear of being controlled by another."²⁰

Distancing might help this patient to recognize the damage a mother-in-law/grandmother in a similar situation would be inflicting upon her family. PSALMS 36:1-3a - "The transgression of the wicked saith within my heart, that there is no fear of GOD before his eyes. The words of his mouth are iniquity and deceit: he hath left off to be wise, and to do good. He deviseth mischief upon his bed; he setteth himself in a way that is not good."²¹ How would the patient view the rationalizing of creating family strife by a mother-in-law/grandmother in such a similar situation? How would GOD

²⁰ 3, Ibid, p 17.

²¹ 1, KJV, PSALMS 36:1-3a.

view it? PROVERBS 21:4&3 - "A high look, and a proud heart, and the plowing of the wicked, is sin. To do justice and judgment is more acceptable to The LORD than sacrifice."²² How would the patient view the apparent worry over loss of control by a mother-in-law/grandmother in such a situation? What recourse is there for such cares? MATTHEW 11:28-29 - CHRIST says "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls."²³

Decentering might aid this patient to consider what pain and fear other people in this given family strife are experiencing. Is the patient's son-in-law not fearful of losing his wife and children to whom he is bound before GOD and man? Would not a common ground of trust be established if the patient embraced her son-in-law and thus allay his fears? I CORINTHIANS 7:11b-12 - "Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife."²⁴ Saint Novatian paraphrases The Words recorded by Saint Paul in EPHESIANS 5:25&28,²⁵ which we cited in our first case: "Wives are to be loved by their husbands even as CHRIST loved The Church. And wives should love their husbands also as The Church loves CHRIST!"²⁶ It is to be hoped that the patient, as her Christian spiritual formation progresses, will better appreciate GOD's perspective on the unity and sanctity of the marriage covenant between a husband and a wife, and respect it accordingly.

The patient should be encouraged to think how this family strife will hurt her grandchildren's present happiness and future Faith. LUKE 18:16 - "But JESUS called them unto Him, and said, Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not:

²² 1, KJV, PROVERBS 21:4&3.

²³ 1, KJV, MATTHEW 11:28-29.

²⁴ 1, KJV, I CORINTHIANS 7:11b-12.

²⁵ 1, KJV, EPHESIANS 5:25&28, "Husbands, love your wives, even as CHRIST also loved The Church, and gave Himself for It; So ought men t love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself."

²⁶ 4, Early Christian Beliefs, "marriage," 17th entry, p 425, "Novatian (C. 235, W), 5.589, formerly attributed to Cyprian."

for of such is the Kingdom of GOD.”²⁷ The patient needs to be encouraged to consider also how this strife between herself and her son-in-law will affect her husband. What kind of wife does she herself want to be for her husband? PROVERBS 31:10,11a,23,28 - “Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust her. Her husband is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land. Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her.”²⁸

VI. CASE 3 - THE RETREATING HUSBAND & THE SULKING WIFE

The third case is that of a retreating husband and his sulking wife:²⁹ They present as a married couple receiving counseling. The husband is a dominant, successful businessman who becomes emotional when reflecting on his unmet expectations for his family and marriage. The wife is a submissive, emotional, overly sensitive woman who makes negative comparisons of her life with that of others. The husband complains that his wife nags him about their home, never interested in what he wants, and always insists on her way.

The wife complains that her husband is cruel and heartless to her and their children, was too money fixated, and critical of her role as a wife, mother and homemaker. They were otherwise pleasant people, but experienced deep resentment and disappointment with each other when they projected negative reactions and feedback each upon the other. Once projected upon each other, both would sink into bitter despair. Each convinced that the other did not love them, the husband would retreat into himself and the wife would sulk.

Distancing might help this couple to see their negative behaviors and those of the other more objectively and thus unfounded. What would this male patient think of a couple where the husband acted in such an unloving manner towards his wife to the point of causing her to sulk? COLOSSIANS 3:17,19 - “And whatsoever ye do in word or

²⁷ 1, KJV, LUKE 18:16.

²⁸ 1, KJV, PROVERBS 31:10,11a,23,28.

deed, do all in the Name of The Lord JESUS, giving thanks to GOD and The father by Him. Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them.”³⁰

What would this female patient think of a couple where the wife refused to submit herself in love to her husband to the point of causing him to withdraw? EPHESIANS 5:22-23a - “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto The Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as CHRIST is the head of The Church.”³¹ How does GOD view the sanctity of marriage? MARK 10:6-9 - “But from the beginning of the creation GOD made them male and female. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife: And they twain shall be one flesh: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore GOD hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”³²

Decentering may offer this couple to appreciate how the other feels as a result of the bitterness and rejection they each project upon the other. The male patient should be encouraged to consider the pain that his wife feels as a result of his behaviour. How should he behave towards his wife? EPHESIANS 4:31-21 - “Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as GOD for CHRIST’S sake hath forgiven you.”³³

The female patient should be encouraged to consider the pain that her husband feels as a result of her behaviour. How should she behave towards her husband? I JOHN 4:7 - “Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of GOD; and every one that loveth is born of GOD, and knoweth GOD.”³⁴ Both patients need to ask how GOD feels as a result of their strife? What does GOD tell them both to overcome their mutually afflicted sorrow? I JOHN 5:4-5 - “For whatsoever is born of GOD overcometh the world: and

²⁹ 3, Pugh, “Improving Relationships Through Spiritual Formation,” case 3 presentation, p 22.

³⁰ 1, KJV, COLOSSIANS 3:17,19.

³¹ 1, KJV, EPHESIANS 5:22-23a.

³² 1, KJV, MARK 10:6-9.

³³ 1, KJV, EPHESIANS 4:31-21.

³⁴ 1, KJV, I JOHN 4:7.

this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our Faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that JESUS is the Son of GOD.”³⁵

Saint Origen expounds on the peace, unity and love which The Creator calls a husband and wife to be together in oneness before Him: “Describing what should be in the case of those who are joined together by GOD, so that they may be joined together in a manner worthy of GOD, The Savior adds, ‘So that they are no longer two [but one flesh].’ Wherever there is true concord, unison, and harmony between husband and wife – when he is as ruler and she is obedient to the saying, ‘he will rule over you,’ then of such persons we may truly say, ‘they are no more two [but one]!’”³⁶

VII. IN CONCLUSION – PEACE & RECONCILIATION ONLY IN THE LORD

We began with a Scripture passage from ISAIAH 32:15-17, which declares that true peace and reconciliation for men is found only by The Spirit of GOD working in us and in our lives.³⁷ Pope John Paul II quotes These Words recorded by Isaiah in his own “Message of Peace,” reminding us of The Biblical Truth that “The heart of The Gospel message is CHRIST, Who is everyone’s peace and reconciliation. May His countenance shine upon the path of humanity. May His justice and His peace become a gift for all, without distinction! ‘Then shall the wilderness be fertile land and fertile land become forest! In the wilderness justice will come to live, and integrity in the fertile land; integrity will bring peace, justice give everlasting security...!’”³⁸

As we have seen, certain tools of modern secular counseling, when divorced from their ineffective roots of atheism and administered through sound and faithful Christian counseling, can help men to restore peace and bring reconciliation to damaged relationships in their lives. The concepts of “distancing” and “decentering” may serve as

³⁵ 1, KJV, I JOHN 5:4-5.

³⁶ 4, Early Christian Beliefs, “marriage,” 19th entry, p 426, “Origen (c. 245, E), 9.506.”

³⁷ 1, KJV, ISAIAH 32:5-17, “Until The Spirit be poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness be a fruitful field, and the fruitful field be counted for a forest. Then judgment shall dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness remain in the fruitful field. And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever!”

³⁸ 5, Catholic Family Prayer Book, “Message of Peace,” Pope John Paul II, p 157.

healthy tools in the repair and growth of positive relationships for the hurting in the midst of suffering the pain of damaged relationships: the ability to step back and see the entire picture of our lives objectively within the bigger picture of things and the ability to consider how events impact others around us and not just how they impact us.

Spiritual growth may occur in the midst of and as a result of suffering when we walk through those dark valleys of trouble with The Lord JESUS CHRIST, The HOLY SPIRIT thus working in us and in our lives, teaching us how we may grow closer to Him and to others. Using the tools of distancing and decentering within Christian therapy can strengthen this process of “spiritual formation” and help heal damaged relationships. Three case studies were considered in which the questions were asked: “How would the patient perceive his maladaptive behaviors seen in another person in a situation similar to his own?” How do other people affected by the patient’s maladaptive behaviors feel?” “How does GOD see the situation?” In each case, The Holy Bible provides direction on what should not be and what should be in our relationships. PSALMS 119:105 - “Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path!”³⁹

³⁹ 1, KJV, PSALMS 119:105.

VIII. REFERENCES

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