

The Holy Spirit and the Unconscious

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If I dare begin with a disclaimer, I must confess that my professional expertise is more in biblical studies than in psychology. But at the same time I've had a life long interest in psychology, studied it formally, and even done some teaching in this area on the undergraduate level. Frankly I am excited to see how the Holy Spirit can reach to the depths of personhood and transform an individual into the likeness for which Christ came into the world, died for sin and was raised to recreate us into the likeness of Christ.

I wish to start with a definition of what I have in mind when speaking of the "unconscious." I realize that there is a difference of opinion professionally regarding the nature of what is often referred to as the "unconscious" part of us. On one hand the unconscious has been described as "a strange world . . . of passions, hates, and resentments quite foreign to the normal conscious self with which we are all familiar. . . . The hours of darkness and of sleep are the playtime of the unconscious. Insanity is a waking dream."¹ Another has described the unconscious as:
a vast storehouse of all experiences of the individual. . . . All acts ever performed are indelibly recorded there in minute and exact detail.

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However, the unconscious level of the mind is not a mere repository of experiences. It is a veritable beehive of activity which operates twenty-four hours a day.²

On the other hand we have been warned not to make too much of the concept of an unconscious that determines our behavior. Thus another has said: "The notion of the dynamic manipulation of the contents of consciousness by an all powerful Unconscious lurking beneath its surface, has never been accepted by mainstream psychology."³

What looks to me more or less like a standard definition is found in the Encyclopedia for Human Behavior: "The sum of all thoughts, feelings, memories, and impulses of which an individual is not aware, but which influence emotions and behavior."⁴ For this workshop I am working on the basis of this definition. So, even though it was Freud who made the unconscious a prominent issue in psychology, we need not throw out the unconscious in order to distance ourselves from Freud, unless of course, we have an unconscious reason to do so!⁵

¹ Ernest White, *Christian Life and the Unconscious* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), 16

² W. Earl Biddle, *Integration of Religion and Psychiatry* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1955), 25. Dr. Biddle was Clinical Director at the Philadelphia State Hospital.

³ From the *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior* (1994), ed. V. S. Ramachandran, 1:670.

⁴ "Psychotherapy," 3:669.

⁵ Sigmund Freud is credited with holding to three levels: conscious awareness, preconscious, and unconscious, with the "unconscious" comprising all repressed thoughts feeling, memories, experience, etc., "Unconscious," *Encyclopedia of Psychology* (1994), 3:558.

The main role of the Holy Spirit in biblical theology is to bring the presence and power of God into human experience. In the New Testament this includes the application of the healing fruits of redemption in the personal and corporate lives of His people. But to say this is to say there is a problem that requires divine redemptive activity. Thus we are brought to consider the human problem, which theologically and simply is depravity.

The Problem

The experience of moral frustration is quite universal. This is because human beings are made in the likeness of God and thus normally have a sense of "oughtness" about them, however, much this has been ignored or corroded during one's life. It is endemic to be self-centered, often to the neglect and hurt of others. Self-preservation is the first law of human nature, emotionally as well as physically. At the same time we feel the need of the approval of others, especially those closest to us, whether in family, occupational, or other relationships. People long for fellowship, but loneliness easily comes. We hide from others those feelings and concerns that mean most to us, except when we erupt with frustration and anger! In this way we keep others from knowing us as we are and we distance ourselves from them. We naturally want others to see us in the best light, and so we are very cautious in what we reveal of ourselves. However, the transparent disclosing of who we are is possible when we are assured that others love us unconditionally. But this seldom happens in the world of emotional give and take.⁶ If this does not happen, then we seek to deserve to be loved by how we relate to others and thus we learn to be legalistic. We seek to earn the respect and love of others by appearing to them in a manner that elicits what we long to receive. One theologian has said that psychotherapy has confronted modern man with new proof that love is the law of life.⁷ Long ago there was One who preached: You shall love your neighbor as yourself (e.g. Matt. 22:39).

The depth of the dilemma comes home to us when we realize that our self-centeredness goes down into areas over which we have little conscious control. There in the unconscious part of us lie motives and feelings which at times may even surprise *us*. In one way the problem is exacerbated for the Christian, because he/she is committed to a moral code that calls for selfless devotion to Jesus Christ. Thus the cloud of guilt easily hangs more lowly over the one who has a high personal standard. How many times have we sought the Lord's forgiveness and help, but then fallen into the same pit again! No wonder the Lord urges us to forgive our brother seventy times seven!

Psychologically, "defense mechanisms" come into play. I understand that it is the Psychoanalytic School of Psychology, going back to Freud, which particularly links defense mechanisms with the unconscious.⁸ Other viewpoints vary somewhat in the extent to which the

⁶ Erich Fromm, in his book *The Art of Loving*, points to a mother's love for her child as unconditional. She loves her child simply because the child is (New York: Harper, 1956) 35.

⁷ Edward John Carnell, *The Kingdom of Love and the Pride of Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 59.

⁸ Recently in conversation Scott Kerr, a psychologist, has brought to my attention that Carl Jung, also of the Psychoanalytic School sees the unconscious in a problem solving role. We can recognize the value of this insight when we remember that often in waking after sleep we seem to have further insight into a matter that has been on our mind.

unconscious accounts for such defenses. On the other hand, if we accept that there are feelings and impulses of which we are unaware or are only partially aware, but which nevertheless affect behavior, then at least to some extent we can link the unconscious (or subconscious) to ways we emotionally defend ourselves.⁹ Such psychological defenses in efforts to maintain emotional well-being by reducing conflict, frustration, anxiety, etc. have often been acknowledged. They include repression ("forgetting" what is emotionally threatening), denial (reinterpretation of a situation to make it less threatening), rationalization (giving a false reason for what happens, but unaware that we are doing so), displaced aggression (in fear of directing feelings toward the real source of agitation, we direct feelings toward a source we feel we can manage). Such defense mechanisms may include belittling others (lifting up ourselves by thinking lowly of others). There is "compensation" (excelling in one area of life when deficient in another, but hardly aware of our reason for doing so). All of these do not necessarily alienate us from other people, but often they stem from feelings that more or less promote self-love and at the expense of fellowship with others.

Does the foregoing point to areas in which the Holy Spirit touches us in the process of spiritual and behavioral transformation? Two mini case studies are illustrative.

The first is from the record of John Sherrill's spiritual pilgrimage. In his book *They Speak with Other Tongues* he shares a very personal experience.¹⁰ He tells how in a time of prayer with others, he himself was earnestly seeking the Lord for the outpouring of His Spirit. He writes that following a time of spiritual struggle in prayer, the following occurred:

With a sudden burst of will I thrust my hands into the air, turned my face upward, and at the top of my voice I shouted:

"Praise the Lord!"

It was the floodgate opened. From deep inside me, deeper than I knew voice could go, came a torrent of joyful sound. It was not beautiful, like the tongues around me. I had the impression that it was ugly: explosive and grunting. I didn't care. It was healing, it was forgiveness, it was love too deep for words and it burst from me in wordless sound.

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The next three months were one long smile, one long laugh. . . . Never had I known such a protracted period of well-being.

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Many deep rooted psychological quirks, which I had used most of my life to keep people at a safe distance, disappeared entirely during these months. I got to know old friends on an entirely different level and made new ones without the shyness which is my usual lot.

In light of our study, observe key expressions: "healing," "forgiveness," "love too deep for words." And then in the following three months: closer, more meaningful relationships with other people. We evidently see the Holy Spirit reaching into the deeper areas of personality and

⁹ See quote above from Encyclopedia of Human Behavior and note 4.

¹⁰ Hodder and Stoughton, 1964, esp. pp. 140-42. Sherrill was a senior editor for Guideposts magazine.

radically transforming behavior! It involves Sherrill's relationships with other people. Is it going too far to suggest that feelings and motives which normally lie below the level of awareness were touched by the Spirit of God?

In another case study I turn to the autobiography of Charles G. Finney, the renowned 19th century American revivalist.¹¹ Finney, a lawyer, had become earnest in seeking to settle the salvation of his soul. He went into the woods to be alone and pray, but whenever he heard a sound he looked up, fearing someone would see him. Then his pride as hindrance became clearer to him. Finally, after finding peace of soul through trust in the word of God, he returned to his office and began to pray again. He writes as follows of what happened in the course of prayer:

As I went in and shut the door after me, it seemed as if I met the Lord Jesus Christ face to face. . . . It seemed to me that I saw him as I would see any other man. . . . I wept aloud like a child, and made such confessions as I could with my choked utterance.

Without any expectation of it, without ever having the thought in my mind . . . the Holy Spirit descended upon me in a manner that seemed to go through me, body and soul. . . . It seemed to come in waves and waves of liquid love; for I could not express it in any other way.

No words can express the wonderful love that was shed abroad in my heart. I wept aloud with joy and love; and I do not know but I should say, I literally bellowed out the unutterable gushings of my heart.

Finney then tells of the conviction that he must preach the gospel and says the next day after leaving the office he went forth "to converse with those whom [he] should meet about their souls. And he adds: "I spoke with many persons that day, and I believe the Spirit of God made lasting impressions upon every one of them. I cannot remember one whom I spoke with, who was not soon after converted."

Again we see a courage of behavior, combined with sensitivity to the needs of others, that was not apparent prior in Finney's experience. Rather than hiding his true feelings, he courageously shared what meant most to him when he met others. The Holy Spirit had profoundly affected Finney in the depths of his person and changed his behavior.

Of course there are a multitude of testimonies that one could produce to illustrate the way the Holy Spirit affects the depths of human personality. And all experiences may not necessarily be as dramatic as the two I have referenced. But these two do remind us of the potential for the Spirit reaching to what psychologists have often perceived as that part of one's being which unconsciously affects behavior and lifestyle. This does not negate the possibility of psychological help in the doctor's office in the face of emotional distress. But on the other hand, it should remind us of the divine resource for mental health. *A good question to think about is how might the divine and human aspects of a healing ministry be most effectively combined.*

¹¹ The following is taken from *Memoirs of Rev. Charles G. Finney* (New York: Revell, 1876), 11-26.

What I am presenting is simply the work of the Spirit as found in the New Testament. How can the Spirit write God's laws on human hearts so that transformation results, if the inner core of personhood is not touched (cf. 2 Cor. 3:2-3, 18; Heb. 8:10-12)? Paul sets forth the moral work of the Spirit as first of all producing love within one (Rom. 5:5; Gal. 5:22). Likewise the first letter of John indicates that "love" is a mark of spiritual birth (4:7-8). Love is first from God who communicates His love; our love is a response to His love which is experienced deeply within (Rom. 5:5; cf. 1 John 4:16). It is this love which makes for true Christian "community" (cf. Acts 2: 42-47 with 2:1-4, 38-39; also, 4:32-35). This is psychologically understandable. The security that comes from being loved frees one to reciprocate in positive, non-defensive ways. And if we know within that *God* loves us, what more can we ask?! Certainly in the two cases above it is evident that the love of God first became real to the recipients. Theologically, the objective gift of grace in forgiveness and justification is subjectively conveyed to the consciousness of the seeker, so that this one experiences an inner healing and wholeness which frees the individual to relate to others in a more authentic and wholesome way. This freedom comes from a dynamic experience of the Holy Spirit.

But there is struggle in the Christian life, which we all know, even after experiencing the Holy Spirit. That is another subject, but in closing we must say that the resource is surely provided in the availability of the dynamic work of the Spirit to transform life. This does not relieve us of the responsibility of *choosing* to follow the way of loving relations (e.g. 1 Cor. 14:1). Thus there is often struggle, as Paul indicates (Gal. 5:17). But the option of living lovingly, joyfully, and productfully is there for us as we learn to "walk in the Spirit" (Gal. 5:16, 25).