The Gospel and Psychotherapy: A Mormon Counselor's Dilemma

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In introducing this topic, it was especially important for us to be honest with ourselves and express the concerns that we have had, and ask others simply to do the same. We do not profess to have all the answers, but we are grateful that we have taken the time to at least explore some questions. Such vexations of the soul can be a bit threatening unless undertaken in sincerity. The following represent a selection of personal and professional concerns that have arisen over the past ten to fifteen years with regard to our role in this business of helping—counseling and psychotherapy.

**QUESTION #1.**
**IS THERE IN REALITY A DICHOTOMY IN OUR LIVES BETWEEN OUR PRACTICE OF RELIGION AND OUR PRACTICE OF THERAPY?**

We have experienced conversations with colleagues, Mormon therapists who reply, in essence: “You know, everything I do from Monday through Friday is based upon my training as a therapist—secular learning and dealing with the theories of man. However, I find no problem in changing hats on Sunday and becoming a good Latter-day Saint.” We have thought to ourselves: What are you saying? What is it that you’re really telling us? Here are men who serve on the high councils, in bishoprics, in stake presidencies—good, active, committed members of the Church. They attend the temple as often as possible. Yet they attempt to create a dichotomy in their lives that may be unnecessary. Is there a dichotomy at all? Should there be a dichotomy? One member of a psychology faculty was asked, “Don’t you have difficulty with this ‘dichotomy’ problem?” He replied that he did not, that (and these words are worth pondering) “I have had to make that kind of compromise in my life.” Again, is that necessary? Is it even safe? One wonders where academic necessity ends and moral responsibility begins.

A young psychologist was attending an Abnormal Psychology class at BYU. The class was being taught by a High Priests’ group leader, a fine man. While turning the pages and following along in the textbook, looking carefully at what was being discussed (it was Coleman’s book on Abnormal Psychology) he remembers hearing these words: “Now we know, of course, that there are no such things as evil spirits. We recognize that these are simply mental disorders.” That remark had the effect of a cold slap in the face. The student’s reaction: “Now wait a minute. Wait a minute. How can you say that? What’s the message of the New Testament?” The professor insisted that demonic possession was a symbolic or unsophisticated way of saying that people were troubled mentally and emotionally. This caused great concern. It seemed as if an awful price was being paid needlessly.

Anyone who has had experience with demonic possession will testify of the reality of evil powers. We are foolish to ignore or deny their existence. The issue of demonic possession is one example of many in which Mormon professionals have been forced, as they suppose, into an unnecessary compromise, which compromise may follow such a dichotomy.

**QUESTION #2.**
**DOES A COMPARTMENTALIZATION OF OUR LIVES AS MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH AND AS MEMBERS OF A PROFESSION DILUTE OUR EFFECTIVENESS AS TRUE DISCIPLES OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST?**

Let us suppose that we can compartmentalize our lives. Though we have no data from which to base our feelings at this point, the real issue seems to be: if one can produce that compartmentalization Monday through Saturday, and on Sunday put on a different hat, is it affecting us in some way of which we may be unaware? We have come to sense in our own personal lives that such a compartmentalization may be detrimental to our discipleship.

Consider Alma’s beautiful definition of faith. He taught that faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things, but it is to have a hope for things which are true. (Alma 32:21.) President N. Eldon Tanner has given an example of the Indians planting gunpowder with all the sincerity in the world, with all the diligence possible, trying to nourish and harvest more
gunpowder--only to find that such is not possible because the seed was not proper, was not true, simply wasn’t what they thought it was. Is it improper to ask, “Are we planting gunpowder?” with regard to our work? Does much of what we teach or use have any basis in truth? Are we certain there is no personal effect?

We find that many people say, “Well, I can borrow from this theory and I can take from that one. I can take techniques; I don’t have to believe in the theory. I can use these kinds of applications in my therapeutic practice with my clients.” But what if the theory is based on a godless system created by godless men who have no affinity for the spiritual dimensions of Man? Could there be a toll, however subtle, that might occur--one that works inexorably but slowly to dilute faith and perhaps even to weaken our effectiveness as members of the Church? None of us would suggest that we embrace and use false doctrines within our theology. We know this is the path to apostasy. However, are we willing and open enough to examine and understand every aspect of the therapeutic theories we employ and profess--to examine every theory carefully--to “prove all things; [to] hold fast that which is good”?

President Jeffrey Holland suggests the importance of placing the Gospel as the “hub of the wheel” and arranging any other secular disciplines as spokes. This is the thrust we suggest. So often we hear in classes: “Here is the principle that’s taught by this particular theorist; isn’t that interesting? That’s very similar to what Jesus taught.” Here is what another therapist says: “Why, isn’t that something? Paul had something to say in just that same fashion.” This may be in error. We need to approach the problem from the opposite viewpoint. We need to proceed from hub to spokes in order to enhance our professional lives and the practice of our religion.

QUESTION #3.

HAVE WE AS LATTER-DAY SAINTS SUCCumbed TO THE UBIQUITOUS PRACTICE OF IMBUING THERAPY WITH MAGICAL QUALITIES?

We have all heard individuals speak of the uniqueness of the therapeutic relationship. Should not that make one wonder about the type of relationship being considered? The only unique relationship that is critical within the Gospel is one’s personal relationship with the Savior. When we speak, therefore, about a special relationship with a therapist, we may be establishing a dependency that is totally unnecessary. We often hear therapists acclaim: “Oh, you ought to see the kind of feelings that my clients (or my patients) have about me. I have to work with these feelings in such depth, with such gravity because it’s so important to everyone that I see.” Ought it to be? One wonders sometimes whether counsellee or counselor is in greatest need of emotional acceptance and support!

We sincerely sense the need to recognize the therapist or counselor as a teacher. If we could see things from that perspective, it might alter what we do in our own sessions. Who is so bold as to suggest that what really matters is not the theory, but the therapist? It is even more threatening to imply that we have made something of this counseling matter that should not exist. Maybe we have “created” something. Perhaps Brother Packer’s talk on self-reliance, given first at Brigham Young University (See Self-Reliance. Ensign, Aug., 1975, Pp. 85-89.) needs to be studied carefully in trying to determine if it is possible to cause the very thing we’re trying to prevent. Could we be contributing to the epidemic spread of “counselitis?” (“If there are problems we’ll abate them. If there aren’t, we’ll create them!” ...B.K. Packer) If we do not place the therapist in the role of the master teacher, as educator, we may be contributing to the erroneous notion of the therapist as “magic worker.”

If we conceptualize therapy as a subcase of teaching, then perhaps we will not succumb to this thinking (therapy is magical). We have had the experience of suggesting that clients may be treated anywhere (e.g., a restaurant to work on social skills). Colleagues often respond with a perplexed look and state, “You are polluting the relationship of a therapist with his client.” They continue, “You mean you are going to take him out of,” (one almost hears “these sacred walls”)—“these walls and put him in a restaurant? Nobody can do therapy in a restaurant.” “We need to recognize properly and assess accurately this relationship variable, accepting it for what it really is (student--teacher).

Kids love their teachers too. Everyday after school, one of our third grade children runs up to her teacher, puts her arms around her and gives her “a love goodbye” until the next day. Of course we should have positive relationships with our people. But such are not magical. We are teachers of men and women, trying to help them find the right way and make responsible decisions about and adjustments to life. We are not practicing magic.

QUESTION #4.

WHEN TRUE PRINCIPLES OF DEALING WITH MAN ARE READILY AVAILABLE THROUGH THE RESTORED GOSPEL, ARE THEORIES REALLY NECESSARY?

Suppose one of us was approached by a non-Mormon with: “I’d like you to consider carefully our religion. I’d like you to adopt the doctrine of grace as it’s taught by most of Protestantism.” Could you imagine turning to him and saying, “Well, I think we could probably adopt much of what the Protestants
teach, because it’s close. We could handle predestination without much difficulty, because foreordination is very similar. Another practice we could adopt is baptism. You use water, we use water. Dipping is terribly close to immersion. Let’s accept the baptism. Yes, it seems like a ‘good fit.’ Would we even consider doing that with theology? Ecumenism in theology results in what Elder Neal Maxwell has called “shared impotence.” We fear that too often we find ourselves doing similar things with our therapy. We indicate that this theory or that principle is a “good fit” to the Gospel. Perhaps the undergirding question is: “Is a good fit good enough?”

The Gospel is not a theory. The Gospel has the answers. We work from the known. As President Ezra Taft Benson has said, “The Lord has already done his research.” In a very real way we should consider therapy or research differently from a gospel point of view. We do research to verify truth, not to discover it. In this sense, there is no apparent need to construct theories of human relationships. The Gospel is the grand application of eternal verities to the human being: relationships with God and man. It seems that what is needed most is to uncover or discover the truths and principles and practices that are contained within the writings and sermons of ancient and modern prophets. More than ever before we need to undertake a systematic study to formulate and organize the Lord’s methods and techniques in His way. We have the Gospel of Jesus Christ and we have the principles that are taught in the scriptures and the writings of the living prophets. However, we have not yet formalized them into a body of knowledge which would allow us all to be working toward the same goal. Certainly we are all different, and essential research indicates personality variables are important ingredients. But we ought to be working and building upon the same foundation. We teach with different techniques, but our message is the same.

Would we say, “I’ll follow Joseph Smith even though he was immoral, because he had a great program.”? Or, “It’s okay if Joseph Smith did the following blasphemous things. That’s alright; he had a great system.” We would never even consider those propositions because we expect the man that represents the system to be the embodiment of what his system claims to produce. Joseph Smith stood boldly and preached to the Saints in 1844 that the goal of man is to become even as God is. And so, if we are really honest and true to ourselves, we ask the question, “Is it not important what the person who espouses the theory believe that man may become as God is?” There is not a single major theory of therapy or counseling that is not propounded by a godless man, or at least a man who is not a believer in anything close to the kind of God that we believe in. Most theorists are either pure humanists or exclusively deterministic. Some of them give passing reference to the fact that a God may exist, but the major theories were developed and propounded by men who are godless. Can we in good conscience ignore what it is that Freud or Skinner or Maslow would have man to become?

QUESTION #5.

IS THERE A TENDENCY TO REIFY OR EVEN DEIFY CERTAIN THEORETICAL CONCEPTS CONCERNING HUMAN BEHAVIOR?

In our culture it is difficult to avoid the imputation of excessive meaning. You often hear people say, “Oh, that’s a Freudian slip,” or “He’s what I would call a self-actualized person!” What is unfortunate is that some of these theoretical concepts are antithetical to Gospel principles. We are dealing with such matters in a book now in preparation. In the meantime we are concerned with the fact that “ego strength” and “unconditional positive regard” and “I’m O.K.” and “contingencies of reinforcement” have not only inundated our speech and general world view, but have slipped subtly into the literature of the Church. The conflict models of personality at the base of all Freudian and Neo-Freudian systems, when taken to their ends, deny the notion that man is “an agent unto himself.” The humanistic models place man at the center of existence and deny the need for divine assistance or Grace. Behavioristic models, when taken to logical extremes, view man as an organism shaped by the consequences of his actions, by reinforcing stimuli which are independent of any divine source. There is a tendency among us all to classify or label in order to alleviate a bit of the anxiety we feel over a lack of understanding. That is, our tendency to propose that a person’s problem is really a “fixation” or a “deficient behavioral repertoire” or an “aberrant action” in response to “conditions of worth” seems to us to be a sincere, albeit misguided, attempt at understanding. If a label truly defines a problem and leads to correct remediation, then there is no problem with labeling. Far too often, however, labels are mere tautologies. Some labels even alleviate responsibility—that is, give away the problem. And even more distressing, labels occasionally may distract our attention from true principles.

Too often intellectuals seem to be fascinated by something that appears to be complicated or at least esoteric. Many are unduly attracted to systems based predominately upon hypothetical constructs (“Parent-Child”; “id”; “reinforcement”; etc.) Some explanations simply complicate the matter further through the use of language which is difficult to follow. Such expressions seem to have an aura of authority about them, but if we are not careful we can get so caught up with the language system itself that we confuse the issue. We must take special care that we do not become like the Jews in the Meridian.
Dispensation who were guilty of “looking beyond the mark” (Jacob 4:14), and thus miss the message of the Master. President Ezra Taft Benson has taught:

Sometimes Gospel principles are written with such erudition that the Gospel is hardly recognizable in them. Worldly phraseology and authority replace the scriptures and the prophets. You institute teachers [this was given to C.E.S. personnel in 1976] need to be aware of this in teaching courses such as “Courtship and Marriage” and in giving counsel on child-rearing. Be careful of lending your worldly training to the Gospel courses you teach lest you be guilty of distorting the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ and end up teaching the philosophy of men mingled with a few scriptures.

QUESTION #6. 

DOES IT PLEASE THE LORD WHEN THE PRINCIPLES OF HIS GOSPEL ARE PLACED IN JUXTAPOSITION WITH THE THEORIES OF MAN?

Too often we use and rely upon concepts, ideas, and techniques that are not fully the Lord’s. For a number of years we have heard of the need for integrating the theories of human behavior with the Gospel. We are not so certain that an integration is what is needed, since far too often we are attempting to integrate disparate entities which do not successfully mix. President Benson has reminded us that “nominal Christianity outside the restored Church stands as an evidence that the blend between worldly philosophy and revealed truth leads to impotence.” (Benson, op. cit.)

This particular problem is not unique to counselors. How many of us have perused manuals published by the Church wherein are found secular suggestions and interpretations that are readily recognizable because of our academic background in therapeutic systems? One good example will suffice. We recall a particular mother education lesson wherein mothers were encouraged in spiritual terminology to engage in practices which run counter to the revealed Word (i.e., allowing children to “fight it out,”) rather than teaching the self-control advocated by King Benjamin in the Book of Mormon - Mosiah 4:14).

Merely because the Lord uses rewards and punishments is no reason to conclude that behavior theory is sanctioned by the Lord. Because the scriptures speak of a natural vs. a spiritual man does not give us the license to equate “natural” with a conflict-oriented unconscious. Because the Lord expects us to strive toward an ultimate exaltation, we should not conclude that “self-actualization” represents that spiritual process. Many well-educated Latter-day Saint therapists take the liberty of attempting to integrate gospel principles and secular theories. Apparent similarities (on a surface level) appear to lend credence to attempts at such an integration. Could it be, however, that aligning ourselves too closely with either artificial or at best superficial concepts is like moving (on a stormy night) toward a lighthouse placed tragically amid the reefs?

QUESTION #7.

SHOULD OUR APPROACH AS L.D.S. COUNSELORS BE DIFFERENT FROM THAT OF OUR NON-MEMBER COLLEAGUES?

Do we deal with Mr. and Mrs. Jones in the same way we do with Brother and Sister Brown? An initial response might be: “Well, no. The Joneses aren’t Latter-day Saints, and don’t have the same value system.” But we wonder. Perhaps we need to be more aware of our own doctrine on this matter in recognizing that “the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil,” (Moroni 7:16) and also that “the Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world.” (D&C 84:46.) The Light of Christ is a moral monitoring device given to every Child of God. We are taught that every son or daughter of the Father who adheres and responds to the Light of Christ will eventually be led to the Covenant Gospel. (D&C 84:47-48.) We are committed to the principle that as therapists/teachers it is our responsibility to help clients, members or non-members, to be in harmony with their divine monitors or consciences. Much success should therefore be associated with our ability to assist people to be true to what they really are. It may very well be that some persons have come close to quenching the Light of Christ within themselves, and others perhaps have extinguished it. This does not change our basic task: to reinforce absolute truths, eternal verities which hold irrevocably for Mormons, Methodists, or Muslims.

Can we in good conscience pretend that adultery, homosexuality, theft or emotional abuse (sin) are not paths which lead toward misery and unhappiness? We should not feel any more at ease about helping a homosexual feel emotionally comfortable about his male “sexual preference” than we should about assisting a colleague to feel at ease about his embezzlement. We should no more ignore a couple’s marital infidelity in marriage counseling than a bishop should ignore an abortion in the life of an unmarried Latter-day Saint young woman. We should not bury our heads in the academic sands and try to overlook the fact that we know better! Because we recognize that laws have been established, that blessings and punishments are the consequences of one’s actions, we are in a peculiar position in the professional world--we need not teach Mormonism in our sessions, but we must suggest that individuals “get in touch” with their hearts, with their souls. If these people can honestly affirm that they do not know what is right or wrong in given cases, then we need to become serious about our assignment as teachers. We feel that the Latter-day Saint therapist is one who ought to stand firm in defense of the moral

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and ethical life, not only in his personal life, but in his professional practice. In summary, we are suggesting that one way our therapy might be different from the mental health center's or the local clinic's is in our firm stand in behalf of obedience to one's conscience. We teach the client to listen to his heart (or, if necessary, we teach his heart first), and then "bear witness" of the responsible and productive life which will follow.

Secondly, the Latter-day Saint counselor has at his disposal a precious therapeutic tool—one which is gained only through proper preparation. This is the Gift of the Holy Ghost. Our clients simply ought to feel better—more at ease, more loved, more understood—in our presence than anyplace else. Why? Simply because the Holy Ghost creates a calming influence, an atmosphere where one may feel free to unburden himself. There really ought to be something different about us, depending upon our individual spirituality.

Of even more importance is the matter of revelation. Though an L.D.S. therapist who is not serving as an individual's priesthood leader does not have the right to receive confessions nor direction as to where one might serve in the Church, etc., we sense strongly that the Lord is eager to reveal information or insights to those therapists who expect it, ask for it, and live worthy of it. A young woman came into L.D.S. Social Services with a serious problem. Her mother reported that she had been vomiting constantly for four weeks, that she was rapidly losing weight. After praying over the matter (before the girl came into the office), the worker felt inspired to ask a particular question to begin the interview. The young woman gave a perfectly normal response to the query, but the Social Services worker noticed something in her eyes that led him to ask another question. Suddenly he had the impression that the girl was guilty of immorality, though he had no reason to suspect this or no tangible means of tying this transgression with the vomiting. The next series of questions were also "given" to him. Within a very short time the girl said: "My boyfriend and I have been doing some things we shouldn't have. I kind of think this might have something to do with my throwing-up."

Frankly stated, why shouldn't we have the Father's direction in working with these people? These are His children, and He desires their happiness and well-being. If we live for it we can serve as instruments in His hand in this business of recovering and building and saving souls.

QUO VADIS?

President Joseph F. Smith taught: "Our young people are diligent students. They reach out after truth and knowledge with commendable zeal. and in so doing they must necessarily adopt for temporary use, many theories of men. As long, however, as they recognize them as scaffolding useful for research purposes, there can be no special harm in them. It is when these theories are settled upon as basic truth that trouble appears, and the searcher then stands in grave danger of being led hopelessly from the right way." (Gospel Doctrine, pp. 38-39.) We sincerely feel that the day has arrived for us to climb down from the scaffolding long enough to examine the current status of the building under construction. Perhaps it is not yet time to tear down the scaffolding in wholesale fashion, but it is at least time to assess our
progress. We have begun work toward a book which aims at the removal of such scaffolding. We are dealing with each major theory of human behavior and indicating how each is either at best deficient or at worst perverse, when the measuring device is the Restored Gospel. In addition, we plan to discuss how the revelations of the Lord should guide therapeutic practice. That idea is both thrilling and threatening. Be that as it may, we affirm that the time has come to begin the slow but steady turn toward that glorious society of Zion, in our professional practice as well as in our religious lives. "For it shall come to pass that the inhabitants of Zion shall judge all things pertaining to Zion." (D&C 64:38.)