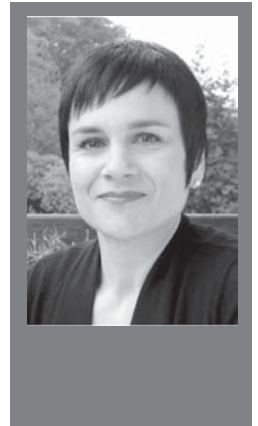


The Couch or the Cross?

Some thoughts on the Psychology of being a Christian at Work

by Sally Orwin



Using modern psychological techniques in her work as coach and consultant, questions arise about how secularised these techniques are, and to what extent they conflict with a Christian world view. Sally here explores some of the ways the divide between the sacred and the secular might be bridged, not only in her own work, but in a wider context. She concludes that the solution lies not in self-help but in acceptance of grace.

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves ... [A] veritable world of miseries is to be found in humankind ... Accordingly, the knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him. (John Calvin, 1559)¹

Worldviews at work

Having worked as a coach and consultant for many years with small businesses and charities, I often struggle to convey an understanding to others of what I do. I use the words 'coach' or 'consultant' as a shorthand way of saying someone who helps people work better together (although I would argue that the terms are not entirely interchangeable). I use the words 'business' or 'charity' to enable people to understand where I go to help people.

My work crosses the boundaries of psychology and theology. Psychology, the science of mental states and processes, is a discipline which provides many useful tools

for human flourishing at work. Christian theology is the lens or worldview through which I approach everything I do at work and across the whole of life. This may or may not coincide with the worldview of my clients. Putting it simplistically, the psychology may provide the *how* to help people at work and the theology provides the *why*.

We use particular terminology to describe the world of work beyond the gathered church. We talk about life in the 'secular world', or in the context of business we speak of the 'marketplace' where we work during the week and we go 'to church' on a Sunday. The challenge is to accept the reality of this unwelcome divide of the sacred and the secular worlds and yet move consciously between them with a biblical worldview intact. What I learn in a 'sacred' context on a Sunday in church ought to equip me to proclaim the Gospel and to witness to it in the 'secular' world during the week.²

I am conscious that my own thinking and professional behaviour is influenced by this ►►

▶▶ sacred/secular divide in the context of working as a coach who is a Christian in a secular world. The challenge lies in the fact that whilst my faith means I view the whole of life and creation as being under the sovereignty of God, I am often required to work in a context where this is not acknowledged. I am aware of being a disciple of Christ through the whole of life in the



Differing world views
Christ before the High Priest (c.1617)
 Gerrit van Honthorst, National Gallery

contemporary world where my Christian worldview is expected take its place alongside many other worldviews as we rub along together in the pluralistic society of the 21st century. So Christians can find it challenging to behave *and* speak at work in line with their primary Christian calling to love God and love their neighbour. Our behaviour and our words are appropriate at different times as we seek to participate in God’s redemptive processes in our *specific* place of work.

My purpose in this article is not to pitch psychology against theology. Arising out of my particular experience of working with

people, I will explore some developing thoughts on how secular psychology has influenced our ideas about what it means to be a Christian at work. I will also offer some thoughts on how this can differ from a biblical view. This is a personal skim over a vast area. I hope it will prompt thought and debate with no claim to being the final word.

In the light of Paul’s great encouragement to Timothy, our efforts at living consistently as disciples can often appear meagre and ineffective, ‘For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline’ (2 Timothy 1:7). How concerned are we that we are not radical enough at work, don’t speak the name of Christ enough and are influenced by secular approaches which undermine the radical grace he has shown in first loving us? How do we shape our discipleship in the ‘secular’ world of work such that it is theology, our view of the world through the lens of the Bible, which might provide much of the *how* as well as the *why*?

Theological Imagination

Let’s start with the Good News. The American theologian Kevin Vanhoozer has written of what he calls ‘the evangelical imagination’ which springs from the biblical narratives that display the world as it really is: created, fallen and redeemed.³

Christians locate their identity in the gospel story concerning what God has done in Jesus Christ. This means that the Christian believer exercises imagination to ‘apprehend a dimension of reality that eludes sensory perception.’ What we know and what we feel is grounded in the reality of our place in God’s creative and redemptive purposes revealed in Scripture and worked out in history.



Kevin Vanhoozer



▶▶ In a recent article in FiBQ, John Lovatt drew our attention to the redemption of ‘all things’ including the inanimate creation:

I certainly find it helpful to think of the created world around me as brothers and sisters, all in the same condition - subject to frustration, longing to be as God desires us to be, but still struggling. We're all together in this. To be continually angry with things around me is to feel that 'Life's a bitch and then you die'. In contrast, Christ's gift is peace - the Hebrew shalom - where you are at peace with things, though they may still annoy you.⁴



Paul Tripp

So as we live amid the disappointing realities of life the Holy Spirit sparks our ability to imagine the place Christ has guaranteed for us in the great story of redemption. We exercise our imagination in being aware that God is already at work in the world and we need the eyes of faith to look around us and see it. Paul Tripp puts it like this:

People struggling with life in a fallen world often want explanations when what they really need is imagination. They want strategies, techniques, and principles because they simply want things to be better. But God offers much more. People need to look at their families, neighbours, friends, cities, jobs, history, and churches, and see the kingdom. They need imagination - the ability to see what is real but unseen.’ (my emphases)⁵

As we experience the reality of the world with our senses, imagination allows us to grasp what it means that we have a place in God’s salvation story, even though we cannot always see and hear and understand this unseen reality in the concrete circumstances and situations of life. Vanhoozer has described this imagination in terms of enabling us to integrate what we know in our head with what we feel in our hearts. T. S. Eliot described this process in relation to poetry:

I take as metaphysical poetry that in which what is ordinarily apprehensible only by thought is brought within the grasp of feeling,

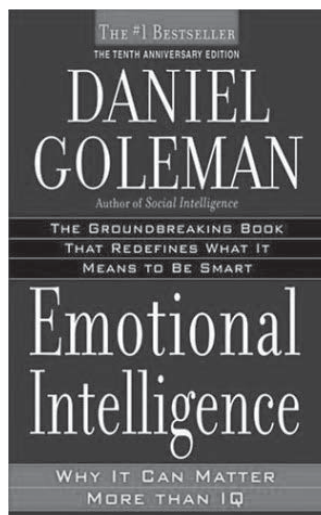
or that in which what is ordinarily only felt is transformed into thought without ceasing to be feeling.⁶

Psychology and Self-help at Work

So we live now as embodied persons within the historical and epic narrative of God’s creative and redemptive purposes for his creation. This narrative within which I am located as a Christian will have a profound effect on how I approach working with people and the created order. I am challenged to bring my imagination to bear upon how I operate within the seen and unseen realities of this narrative.

But to what extent have we allowed the impact of secular psychological approaches to influence our behaviour and attitudes at work at the expense of biblical obedience in the name of Christ? Psychological theory has filtered into the world of work through the professional category of occupational or organisational psychology. There is also a huge market for more popular ‘self-help’ manuals in both the disciplines of theology and psychology and these are my focus for the purposes of this article.

One well-known example from the past 25 years is the work of Daniel Goleman, now one of the giants in the world of ‘emotional intelligence’ training who published his bestseller, aptly entitled *Emotional Intelligence*, in 1995. ▶▶



▶▶ Goleman defines emotional intelligence as the non-cognitive skills an individual develops in relationships. These include personal qualities, such as initiative and empathy, adaptability and persuasiveness. He argued that these qualities matter as much as IQ, intellectual ability and technical know-how for workplace success in the modern world.⁷

Goleman articulates these skills in a framework which gives the reader direction as they seek to improve their emotional intelligence. These skills are categorised into personal competence (how we manage our own emotions) and social competence (how



Social Incompetence

Bad leadership illustration used in Emotional Intelligence training

we handle our emotions in relationships with others.) Personal competence includes the skills of self-awareness, self-regulation and motivation. Social competence includes the skills of empathy (awareness of the needs of others) and social skills which induce desirable responses in others including influence, communication and collaboration.

The presupposition is that understanding the framework of how we manage self and others informs the development of new ways of behaving which will lead to *positive* outcomes rather than *negative* outcomes. Goleman’s motivation is to provide his readers with insight which will allow them to better

understand the emotional drive which lies behind particular behaviours. This awareness can then lead to behavioural change. Anyone can learn to improve their emotional intelligence skills and the reader is inspired to give it a go. If there is a why underlying Goleman’s conclusions I suggest it links back to the classic *raison d’être* of cognitive psychotherapeutic intervention in the workplace which is so *that we might feel better and therefore perform better* or indeed *that we might perform better and therefore feel better*.

This is all good stuff and one cannot argue with a sincere motivation to make life better for people. But where is the radical theological imagination in all this? In the context of that great redemptive Story, is it enough to perform better and feel better?

Theological Self-help and psychological Theology? ...

In the last few years, a number of Christians have written on discipleship at work in the context of bridging the kind of behavioural self-help we see in Goleman to the reality of being a Christian. Some of these have come from organisations which exist to help Christians be more effective in their witness and discipleship such as the *London Institute for Contemporary Christianity* and the *Alpha Group* which now includes the *God at Work* course written by Ken Costa published in 2009. We have reviewed many of these works in previous issues of FiBQ.

In volume 12:2, for example, I reviewed *Get a Life* by Paul Valler, formerly finance and HR Director at Hewlett Packard. He now leads a ▶▶



▶▶ portfolio lifestyle as a speaker and writer, his motivation being to ‘help people make the right choices’. In this book, Valler presents his reflections on how our individual choices have the potential to lead us into the *shalom* that God intends for us. He uses the contemporary vocabulary and concepts of social psychology to frame the problem. He explains how he came to challenge his own choices as a busy professional and the malaise this busyness resulted in across the whole of his life. He was ‘forced to get to grips with the tension between three key dimensions of my life: who I was (identity), why I was here (purpose), and what I should do (choices)’. In an ‘always-on’ world we become ‘tired, trapped and troubled’ by our lack of awareness of who we are and why we are here, resulting in a life of fragmentation as opposed to integration.⁸

The aim of books like this is to help Christians live out their faith in the contemporary world of work. As I suggested in my review, however, the fact that Valler frames the problem using concepts familiar to the social psychologist means the solution falls short of being theologically radical. The concept of ‘choice’ appeals to a view of humanity with roots in contemporary secularity. The presupposition is that I am in control of my life and the choices I make. Valler does indeed recognise that these choices rest on core beliefs and as a Christian he quotes Rick Warren ‘You were made by God and for God - and until you understand that, life will never make sense.’ Valler also draws up a long list of ‘functional’ gods which compete for the worship of our hearts.

This is all helpful but I wonder if the flow of the argument appears to reduce God to *one* of the choices *I* might make (my italics):

*The more we have renewed our minds through Scripture, the more we have sought God in prayer, the more we experience God in the community of his people, then the clearer our convictions can become.*⁹

So Valler recognises that our lives can only make sense in the context of being made by and for God. The problems arise when I am

‘tired, trapped and troubled’ on a Monday morning. The underlying message appears to be that the authentic choice is the Christian choice: *I can choose God*.

Looking at humanity through the lens of the Bible, we get a different picture. The battle played out in Genesis 3 was between the truth spoken to Adam and Eve by God and the lie spoken by the serpent. Adam and Eve were created by and for God in the sense that their world was to be interpreted within the framework of *his* revelation to them. By



Modern depiction of Eve listening to the Serpent

contrast, the serpent whispered to Eve the lie that God was dispensable and that *she* could choose to interpret her life on the basis of her own desires and reasoning rather than in radical and exclusive obedience to God.

There is a danger, therefore, that in a world in which we become ‘tired, trapped and troubled’ so quickly and easily, Christ becomes one of many choices, the supreme therapist whom we choose as a means of dispensing love, justice and comfort to needy people trying their best to cope in a damaged world. This emphasises God’s love but it is not sufficient. This approach suggests we begin with the presuppositions of social and psychotherapeutic psychology and look for ▶▶

- points of integration with theology rather than the other way round. We look for somewhere to go, someone to help us feel better. We may choose to look to Christ.

But in the light of the great redemptive Story ought our question to be: ‘How is God at work redemptively in me and others for his glory in these particular circumstances?’ It is in the times when we are most ‘tired, trapped and troubled’ that we question our enlightenment-fuelled right to make choice. Paul Tripp puts it like this:

*The good news of the kingdom is not freedom from hardship, suffering and loss; it is the news of a Redeemer who has come to rescue me from myself.*¹⁰ (my emphasis)

It is the reality of God’s choice to love us first which softens the heart intent on making a choice based on *self* rather than understanding its place in *his* redemptive Story.

Back to Theology

I suggest, therefore, that ‘making authentic choices’ sits uncomfortably with the direct call from Jesus to ‘follow me.’ A disciple is obedient to Jesus’s call and command. Bonhoeffer summed this up in his commentary on the call of the tax collector



“Follow me”

*The Calling of St. Matthew by Hendrick Terbrugghen, 1616
Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest*

Levi in Mark 2:14 which is lengthy but worth quoting here in full, I believe:

‘The call goes out, and without any further ado the obedient deed of the one called follows. The disciple’s answer is not a spoken confession of faith in Jesus. Instead, it is the obedient deed. How is this direct relation between call and obedience possible? It is quite offensive to natural reason. Reason is impelled to reject the abruptness of the response. It seeks something to mediate it; it seeks an explanation. No matter what, some sort of mediation has to be found, psychological or historical. Some have asked the foolish question whether the tax collector had known Jesus previously and therefore was prepared to follow his call. But the text is stubbornly silent on this point; in it, everything depends on call and deed directly facing each other. The text is not interested in psychological explanations for the faithful decisions of a person. Why not? Because there is only one good reason for the proximity of call and deed: Jesus Christ himself. It is he who calls. That is why the tax collector follows. This encounter gives witness to Jesus’ unconditional, immediate, and inexplicable authority. Nothing precedes it, and nothing follows except the obedience of the called. Because Jesus is the Christ, he has authority to call and to demand obedience to his word. Jesus calls to discipleship, not as a teacher and a role model, but as the Christ, the Son of God. Thus, in this short text Jesus Christ and his claim on people are proclaimed, and nothing else. No praise falls on the disciple or on his espoused Christianity. Attention should not fall to him, but only the one who calls, to his authority. Not even a path to faith, to discipleship, is aimed at; there is no other path to faith than obedience to Jesus’ call.’¹¹

This is the reality of our place in the redemptive Story. Bonhoeffer uses powerful theological language to show that the love of God *compels* us to obedience: ‘the most experienced psychologist or observer of human nature knows infinitely less of the human heart than the simplest Christian who lives beneath the Cross of Jesus.’ This is quite different from turning to psychological ►►

►► technique, to choosing God as a way of alleviating anxieties and performing better in that difficult situation on a Monday morning.

It is not just a question of making a choice to surrender my will and my desire to his. It is remembering, imagining, the place I have in *his* great redemptive Story. The alternative is psychology and we might put it like this, ‘Lord, help *me* stay in control in the midst of my circumstances and emotions.’

In 1965, Martyn Lloyd-Jones gave a series of sermons in Westminster Chapel on the subject of ‘Spiritual Depression’. These were subsequently published in a book of the same name. George Verwer commented on the back cover that the book is really a mini encyclopaedia on how to know God and to walk with him.

It is now dated in its language, but it remains a classic of how to rivet biblical wisdom into the reality of life to give power to our faith in the world through obedience. Lloyd-Jones effectively took the wind out of psychological self-help through explaining that it is the overwhelming grace of the Redeemer at work through the Spirit which empowers us to obey. In chapter 19, for example, he gives an exposition of Philippians 4:6-7 in which the Apostle says that we are to pray and make our requests known unto God ‘and God will do something. It is not your prayer that is going to do it, it is not you who are going to do it, but God.’¹²

So the great promise of God in these verses is one of the ‘most thrilling things about the



Overwhelming Grace
Supper at Emmaus (1648) by Rembrandt
 Musée du Louvre, Paris

Christian life’ and it is this: that Paul says nothing at all about the things that worry us! We are kept in peace in spite of them. There is no psychological technique advocated to alleviate our anxiety, indeed nothing I can do at all other than ‘present’ my requests to God. But the promise is that He will ‘guard my heart and mind in knowledge and love of *him*.’

There is much to be learnt about our human ways from psychology. I have seen people grow and work better together by gaining an understanding of their own unique human ways through the tools it offers. But Calvin’s ‘veritable world of miseries’ is only *redeemed* through the cross of Christ and this is something which lies beyond our limited capacity to make good choices in difficult circumstances at work. It is the Redeemer himself at work in us, through us and with us on the next chapter of his Story. ■

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- 1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Ford Lewis Battles (transl.), Westminster, John Knox Press, 2006, section 1.1.1
- 2 See Mark Greene, *The Great Divide*, LICC, 2010, available from www.licc.org.uk
- 3 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Evangelicalism and the Church: The Company of the Gospel*, in Craig Bartholomew, Robin Parry and Andrew West (eds.) *The Futures of Evangelicalism: Issues and Prospects*, IVP Leicester, 2003, pp. 40-9
- 4 John Lovatt, ‘All Things’, *FiBQ* 13:2, p.7
- 5 Paul Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands*, P&R, 2002, p.7
- 6 T.S. Eliot, *The Varieties of metaphysical poetry, The Clarke Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1926*. Faber and Faber, 1993, p.220.
- 7 Daniel Goleman, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Bloomsbury, 1999, p.3
- 8 Paul Valler, *Get a Life*, IVP, 2008, pp.16-17
- 9 *ibid*, p.26
- 10 Tripp, *op cit*, p.16
- 11 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Touchstone, 1995, pp. 57-58
- 12 Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures*, Marshall Pickering, 1998, p. 27