The Shotgun Marriage of Psychological Therapy and the Gospel of Repentance
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A. D. Sorensen

Introduction

When Elder Neal Maxwell gave the inaugural address that opened this Gospel and Behavioral Science Conference, I thought he suggested that behavioral science might do well to court the gospel under, of course, the puritanical eyes of proper chaperones. Now I felt that it was about time someone should make this suggestion, since I had seen the two brought together at times quite compromisingly. But then, when Dr. Allen Bergin arose and praised Elder Maxwell’s remarks as he did, I received the distinct impression that the courtship had already occurred, that the gospel and behavioral science, or at least the gospel and psychology, had actually been married by Elder Maxwell, and that without anyone’s being asked whether he cared to protect the marriage! Then, as the day wore on, I began to perceive that some participants in the conference seemed assured that the marriage antedated Brother Maxwell and had been consummated long ago. Well, being well acquainted with the profane nature of the groom, I was not surprised at that end, besides, some observers said that we need not worry about offspring from the union since the groom was sterile and had been since he was born. But by the time we were halfway through the last session of the conference, I began to worry lest the bride might already be pregnant and might soon give birth to quintuplets! Therefore, as the last participant in this conference, I would like to express a few of the concerns I have about this whole affair before any possible children from this questionable union are born and are given gospel names and sent on missions among members of the Church.

I would like to raise three questions about the union of psychology and the gospel and then discuss briefly why they concern me. The questions are (1) Can psychological therapies serve as means to gospel ends? (2) Can psychological and gospel concepts and principles be integrated to engineer a more effective process of personal growth? (3) Can a unique therapeutic psychology be built within a gospel framework?

Can Psychological Therapies Serve as Means to Gospel Ends?

Perhaps therapeutic psychology and the gospel can be joined in a means/end relationship in which the gospel provides the ends to be
achieved and psychology helps provide the means for achieving them. Perhaps, for example, psychoanalytical ideas and techniques could help a person overcome certain personality disorders which prevent him from living as full a life as he might here on earth and which could keep him from making progress toward achieving salvation and exaltation. This sort of union between psychology and the gospel seems especially appropriate when both therapist and patient are members of the Church. As believers, they can form a working alliance within a shared gospel framework. When this sort of alliance is formed, many questions about a union between psychological therapy and the gospel that might otherwise concern us are automatically answered. But this view of the matter is unjustified, and we need to see why.

Consider the following problem. Therapeutic psychologies are typically used for two purposes. One is to interpret and explain human behavior or some other aspect of human culture. The other purpose is to provide a basis for changing the nature of the individual or the society in which he lives. I will refer to the first purpose as the explanatory use of therapeutic psychology and the second purpose as its technological (or therapeutic) use.

Beginning with the first purpose then, what happens to the gospel as a way of life when it becomes the subject of psychological explanation? Certainly, religion has been and continues to be within the explanatory domain of psychological theories that have been and continue to be used to interpret and explain not only religious texts but also religion itself as a feature of society and culture, and the religious beliefs and actions of its adherents. I do not dispute the logical appropriateness of such explanations. But the effects of a psychological explanation on the gospel viewpoint are that the gospel is conceived of, and made intelligible, in the light of the concepts, principles, and generalizations that constitute that particular psychological theory. The danger here is that such concepts, principles, and generalizations are external to the gospel way of life which they are trying to explain. They are external to those concepts and principles which are intrinsic to the gospel and which are used to give an internal account of the life the gospel makes possible. In any such application, different theories refocus and redirect an observer’s attention and lead him to look for different things. The function of a theory is to enable one to pick out, as significant, certain elements in a subject of study and to direct a search for order among those elements. Too, some philosophers of science claim that observations are always “theory laden,” that what a person observes depends to some extent on the theory he holds.1 If this be true, and we apply it to psychological explanations of the gospel way of life, then we should expect psychological explanation to refocus and redirect our attention, to lead us to look for things different from those the gospel itself
leads us to look for. Life in accord with the gospel becomes, therefore, “laden” with that psychological theory, and psychological explanation does indeed throw a different light on the gospel as a way of life and on the meaning and significance of the gospel message. Given the ends of social science, a psychological explanation of the gospel as a way of life may seem appropriate.

But can psychological explanation be the viewpoint from which the gospel can be lived? We may think of a plan of life, or a way of life, as consisting of parts, of concepts, principles, and hypotheses, much as we think of psychological theories as so consisting. Actually, the parts which make up a psychological theory, especially a theory designed with therapeutic goals in mind, often exhibit the same characteristics as the parts which from a way of life. Therapeutic psychologies are cut from the same cloth as plans or ways of life, and understood from this point of view—as containing important dimensions of a way of life—they may differ radically from the gospel view of life. Ways of life give accounts of themselves; but they can, to some extent, account for or explain one another. Typically, the capacity that one life-view has to account for another life-view is developed in order to serve the first life-view’s own special ends (as when prophets in the Book of Mormon interpret worldly ways of life from the gospel point of view in order to save souls). But when one life-view accounts for another one to serve its own ends, the results are not equivalent to that view’s own self-understanding. This is true of the explanatory relation between a psychological theory and the gospel, when both are considered as view’s (or ways) of life, even as it is true with the explanatory relation between the gospel view and the worldly view.

Even so, must gospel ends be sought only from the internal point of view? Cannot an external account provide a viable perspective for living the gospel? Supposedly it is through technological use that therapeutic psychology can serve as means to gospel ends. A serious problem arises when we realize that because a psychological theory helps to constitute a psychological technology, that very theory which transforms the gospel in an explanatory way also helps form the means to gospel ends. Jerome Frank puts the point this way:

Every therapy is based on a set of concepts that explains the patient’s distress and how to overcome it. In the course of therapy, the patient is implicitly or explicitly indoctrinated with these concepts, which, by enabling him to organize and label his inchoate feelings and experience, enhance his sense of control over them.3

In the words of another author:

Psychotherapy is “. . . an intensive training in the use of words to contain and convey a universe.” It is completed when the descriptions of the patient are in substantial agreement with the descriptions of the therapist.4
The concepts and descriptions mentioned in these quotations are the concepts and descriptions of the particular psychological theory on which a given therapeutic process itself is based. That process includes both explanation or interpretation of the patient’s problem and how it may be overcome. Furthermore, this explanation contains and conveys a life-view, or a way of life.

This does not mean, of course, that the patient must learn the technical jargon in which a psychological theory expresses a life-view. Lewis R. Wolberg points out that psychological ideas must be recast into simple words and phrases:

Many patients lack the sophistication necessary for the understanding of complex psychological ideas. It is essential to recast these into simple words and phrases which are readily comprehensible to the patient.5

Victor Frankl makes the same point:

As my oldest cofighter, Paul Polak, once put it, “Logotherapy translates the self-understanding of the man in the street into scientific language.” If this be true, I would say why not help the man in the street to cope better with everyday life by retranslating logotherapy into his own language? Whatever I am teaching—I have learned it from my patients in the first place. Therefore it is only fitting to repay them—by preventing others from ever becoming patients at all.6

Thus, the explanatory use of the therapeutic theory is an integral part of its technological use. To paraphrase one of the above quotations, healing takes place when the patient consistently formulates his experience in agreement with the psychological theory. In his light then, how can a therapeutic technology serve as a means to gospel ends when that means contains a psychological theory (a life-view) that has a transforming effect on the gospel framework (another life-view) which it aims to serve?

A prominent characteristic of every established way of life (and many psychotherapeutic theories) is a hypothesis about the growth process of a person. I do not want to imply by the term hypothesis that we are necessarily dealing with a provisional conjecture. I use the term to suggest that the pattern of human growth which a theory presents may not be definitely fixed in human nature, and that different patterns of personal development are possible. Different ways of life have different human growth hypotheses; these hypotheses help distinguish ways of life, and the very existence of a distinctive growth hypothesis may help bring about its own realization, when that realization is possible.

One such hypothesis is psychotherapeutic theory which takes a religious form is explained by Otto Rank. He divides the human growth process into four major phases: familial, societal, artistic, and spiritual. Each phase involves major rebirth experiences in the form of separations from and major movements towards union with significant others or with the cosmos.
The final stage—the spiritual phase of personality growth—may be described as a deeply religious rebirth in which the person is “now in touch with the eternal, the universal, or, for some, the personified God.” This phase may be summarized as follows:

To claim one’s ethical ideal in a final form, one makes peace with the totality of existence, with one’s life, with one’s fate, and with death. Even the final separation by death has lost its pangs of fear; one has overcome the guilt for having lived because life was lived to its fullest. The fear of death is primarily the fear of failing to live.

Unions and separations are no longer in tension with each other. Man is in union with the ultimate, even as he experiences himself as distinctively separate.

To these authors, the successful therapeutic process consists in the patient’s moving through the phases of growth which culminate in this spiritual union.

Assuming that Rank’s growth hypothesis is humanly possible, if it were introduced into a person’s life and became established as part of a group’s way of life, then he and others would move through Rank’s phases of growth. In Rank’s theory, the growth hypothesis plays an integral part in guiding the major rebirth experiences which aim toward union with “the cosmos” or “the eternal.” If someone in this Rankian way of life became sidetracked, then a form of therapy in harmony with that way of life, one built around the Rankian growth hypothesis, might be employed to help him reach the spiritual phase of human existence.

But, what happens when a life-view that contains one growth hypothesis is applied to a way of life that is built around a different growth hypothesis?

Although Rank’s growth hypothesis is very intriguing and probably within the capacity of some people to realize, it is not the growth hypothesis found in the gospel of repentance. Were Otto Rank’s psychological theory applied therapeutically to persons who are living their lives within a gospel framework, their growth experiences, constituted by a gospel framework, would come to be understood (“laden”) as instances of one or more phases of growth as set down by the Rankian theory. Can growth, in the gospel sense, take place then, in Rankian terms? Typically, therapeutic techniques, when used in intensive psychotherapy, try to achieve “emotional insights” and to “work through” these insights as a basic part of the healing process. These emotional insights arise from certain “understandings” produced by the therapeutic technique and the theory embodied in it. In Rank’s case, his growth hypothesis would be an integral part of the therapeutic theory and the understandings generated by it. These understandings generated by it. These understandings provide the material which can be worked through in bringing about “rebirth.”
From a gospel life-view, both insights and the process of working through them might be likened to Alma’s expansion of the mind and enlargement of the soul (Alma 32). That expansion and enlargement takes place through a relationship between the person and “the word.” Can, then, a therapeutic psychology (e.g., Rank’s theory with its growth hypothesis) produce and work through the soul-enlarging “insights” or “understandings,” given the nature of that theory and the explanatory impact it has on religious phenomena? Or can one life-view create the insights required by another life-view so that the latter can enlarge the soul in accord with its own ends? Even if a life-view could expand the mind end enlarge the soul along its own lines, it might be incapable of expanding the mind end enlarging the soul along lines required by a life-view different from itself. For example, one wouldn’t expect Luther’s religious framework to be used as a means to produce the spiritual insights required by alma’s ends, although it most certainly might produce its own kind of rebirth experiences and personality changes. Therapeutic psychologies produce different rebirth experiences from “working through” the (theoretical) “understandings” which constitute the “emotional insights” produced by their particular therapeutic theories. But in the gospel, persons must be born again—must put off the old man and put on the new man. The question is whether a therapeutic theory can do this. Can therapeutic psychology actually help put on the new man, or can it simply renew or remold only the old man?

Can Gospel and Psychological Ideas Be Integrated to Form a Means to Gospel Ends?

Let us next consider whether psychological ideas and the gospel can be integrated to form a means to gospel ends. This question does not have to do with using an intact therapeutic technique separate from the gospel to achieve gospel ends. Rather the question concerns developing new therapeutic means by integrating gospel ideas and psychological theory. By integration, I do not mean that one’s favorite psychological theory is sanctified by laying on a few scriptures in a superficial way. By integration I mean arriving at a carefully worked out therapeutic theory which contains gospel concepts and psychological concepts—a union of truths from both points of view. This union requires more than a superficial joining (as when one points out parallels in Abraham Maslow’s notion of self-realization and Alma the Younger’s idea of soul enlargement).

This possibility poses a problem in that the terms or ideas employed in the gospel and in psychology are “laden” with the theory (or life-view) of which they are a part. If the meaning of major psychological concepts is dependent upon the principles of the therapeutic theory they help form,
then integrating them into the gospel may result in deep and important changes in the gospel itself, indeed possibly creating a new gospel or a new life-view. The depth and importance of these changes would depend on the impact of such integrations on the basic doctrines of the gospel. There are examples aplenty in the history of theology to make anyone wary of such an undertaking. In philosophy and social science, such integrations result in new philosophies and new theories which often significantly differ from the originals. Since when two views of life become integrated, the result is always a new view of life, can such integrations that involve the gospel be justified in light of the gospel’s claim to truth? Could the resulting therapeutic means actually attain gospel ends? Would not this new means transform the very nature of the ends it aims at?

Such moves to integrate the concepts and principles of different theories and methods are common in the social sciences. Some believe that such integrations are part of the advancement of the human sciences. But it is a different ball game when the subject matters to be integrated include the revealed gospel. Surely, such integrations cannot be undertaken with the same attitude with which they might be undertaken were the subject matters solely social science. Earlier dispensations lost their grasp of gospel truths by so integrating seemingly plausible theories.

Can a Unique Therapeutic Psychology Be Built Within a Gospel Framework?

Perhaps a marriage between psychological therapies and the gospel is not required after all. Perhaps the gospel has its own psychological theory and technique which may be extracted if we only go at it in the right way. Perhaps, hidden within the gospel of repentance itself, there exists a therapeutic theory and technology—a truly gospel means for gospel ends.

There are two direction in which this last approach might proceed. One direction is that our understanding of the gospel of repentance as set forth in the scriptures might be developed more fully than it has been up to now. The commonly understood concept of repentance, as simply consisting of the “four R’s,” would be replaced by a more complete account, a more deeply reaching method for healing the soul. Such a development might eliminate what are considered the inadequacies in the gospel of repentance as we now understanding it, inadequacies which have led some psychologists in the Church to use therapeutic psychology for gospel ends. Were these inadequacies remedied, we might minimize reliance on external forms for healing the soul. There is much to be said for enriching our understanding of repentance and soul enlargement by searching and studying the scriptures and applying their precepts to psychotherapeutic experience.
A second direction is to develop a full-fledged psychological theory and therapeutic technique based on the gospel. Perhaps through scripture study and further revelation, we could discover a true therapeutic psychology which might enter the marketplace of ideas and gradually replace extant therapeutic psychologies which, in many cases, have proven themselves rather unsuccessful. This true theory would not only be a basis for enriching our understanding of the gospel of repentance in its own terms but would also be applicable to tough cases of psychological disorders which appear to be beyond the reach of present understanding of the repentance process.

Such efforts most certainly should not be discouraged any more than the disciplined pursuit of understanding in any field of social or physical science should be. But there is great danger. If we are not unpretentious and circumspect in such endeavors, we may develop different schools of thought which oppose one another in the name of the gospel. In science, we expect strong differences of opinion, and such differences often produce worthwhile results when kept within the bounds of responsible inquiry. But when the gospel becomes involved in differences of this kind, the bounds of responsible inquiry will more than likely be overstepped. The results will be schisms and dogmatisms. Both free inquiry and the gospel will suffer. If efforts to discover the true psychology behind the gospel ever bear fruit, they will probably do so only after much sacrifice and the passing of several generations. Perhaps the psychological theory and therapeutic technique which underlie the gospel are radically different from what we now think. Perhaps we ourselves may have to undergo extensive reeducation and change. This challenge could occupy psychologists for several generations. Meanwhile, should we not protect the gospel from our own efforts as well as preserve the conditions of free inquiry?

Within the context of the Church, it is curious that physics, our most advanced science, has never formally courted the gospel, let alone proposed marriage. It apparently feels no needed to appear in public as her suitor or would-be husband. No doubt, its run-in with religious dogmatists in an earlier age made physics forever wary of making such advances. Perhaps, too, the respect physics holds for the gospel, plus the awareness it has of its own relative infancy within the eternal scheme, keeps it at arm’s length until it comes of age. Meanwhile it freely draws on inspiration from the gospel in carrying on its labor. Psychology might well imitate its older and wiser brother, drawing as much inspiration as it possibly can from the beauties of its would-be bride, but recognizing that it is not yet ready to assume the weighty responsibility of courtship and marriage. Indeed, the maturation of the groom, not to mention the integrity of the bride, may depend on such an arrangement.
Conclusion

Wisdom would dictate that we do not take too seriously any announcement that a science of psychology is being joined with, or developed within, a gospel framework. And, indeed, if a marriage between psychology and the gospel has actually already taken place, we should have it annulled immediately, declaring that it was only a practice run and that the prospective groom is prohibited from wooing the prospective bride until the groom comes of age.

A. D. Sorensen, a professor of political science at Brigham Young University, presented an earlier version of this paper at the first Conference on the Gospel and Behavioral Science, held at BYU.

1. John Fullmer to Uncle John, 27 September 1844, John S. Fullmer Letterbook, Church Archives, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; hereafter cited as Church Archives. In this and other quotations from manuscript materials, abbreviations have been expanded and minimum punctuation and capitalization supplied to improve readability.


8. Ibid.