

How God Is Good for the Soul

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Many of the greatest Christian thinkers have believed that knowing God and knowing one's self were intimately interwoven, including Augustine, Bonaventure, John Calvin, and Søren Kierkegaard.¹ Calvin called the knowledge of God and the knowledge of one's self the sum and substance of all "true and sound wisdom" and believed they were thoroughly interdependent.² As Kierkegaard briefly put it, "The more conception of God, the more self; the more self, the more conception of God."³ The more one knows God, he believed, the more one becomes a self (a responsible person as Christianly conceived); and the more one becomes such a self, the more deeply one can appreciate God. The best of historic Christian thought has consistently maintained that it is not possible to know one's soul accurately apart from a corollary knowledge of God. Such a stance offers a radical reconceptualization of the field of counseling, currently conceived of in thoroughly secular terms. But the secular stance of modernism/postmodernism is nothing more than a communally-based assumption that was largely unquestioned in the twentieth century. For the Christian community, grounded as it is in the Christian Scriptures and, secondarily, in the Christian tradition, an accurate understanding of human nature and oneself can only proceed in concert with one's knowledge of God (and vice versa).⁴

To develop a distinct psychology and form of counseling and psychotherapy that is foundationally Christian, then, requires a deeper exploration of the implications of this "bi-polar" stance. The purpose of this

article is a consideration of the mental health benefits of prayerfully meditating upon some of the main features of God's nature.

Some Psychospiritual Benefits of the Experience of Some of God's Attributes

Because of the thorough interdependence of self-understanding and God-understanding according to Christian thought, we would expect that the Christian self would be profoundly benefited by its perception and experience of God. The Bible contains many examples of people being deeply affected by an immediate exposure to God: Abraham, Jacob, Moses (repeatedly), Isaiah, and, of course, most of Jesus' own disciples! The predicament of post-resurrection disciples like ourselves is that our experience of God is mediated through God's word and requires the agency of the Holy Spirit acting upon our capacities. In the present, through our reading, hearing, and reflecting on the word of God, God the Holy Spirit reveals the knowledge of God to the soul (as well as true self-knowledge and a truer knowledge of others).

And this knowledge of God is good for the soul. Jesus equated it with eternal life (John 17:3). Augustine took this insight very seriously. "For Augustine the goal of life is knowing and enjoying God. Knowing God occurs on two fronts. One is the sphere of God's works in history: creation, Incarnation, and so forth. The other is the spiritual sphere—a proper understanding of the qualities of God. In order to enjoy God it is necessary to know who God is

based on what he has done and to understand ourselves in a certain way, a way that takes pleasure in the qualities of God and of ourselves as participants therein.”⁵ As the Puritan, Henry Scougal, wrote (influenced, at least indirectly, by Augustine), “The true way to improve and ennoble our souls is by fixing our love on the divine perfections that we may have them always before us and derive an impression of them on ourselves.”⁶

Before we look at some of God’s traits, we must consider the way in which we are to know God, for the wrong kind of knowing does nothing to benefit the soul. On the contrary, it leads to spiritual death. Edwards sharply distinguished what he called “notional understanding” (an abstract and speculative knowledge that only involves the intellect) and “spiritual understanding” (an apprehension that engages the whole person: the affections as well as the intellect, issuing in love and awe in the heart). For Edwards, spiritual understanding was necessary for true religion. He equated true knowledge of God with the love and worship of God, for true knowledge of an object, according to Edwards, entails the aesthetic perception of its worth, a perception that necessarily produces an emotional, evaluative response. In the case of a spiritually healthy soul, such a perception of God produces immense love and awe. So, for Edwards, knowing facts about God were essential, but not enough. The only *saving* understanding of God involves both an intellectual and affective appreciation or experience of the beauty of God that draws our hearts out to him in love and adoration.⁷

This point cannot be overstated. Some Christians have concluded that the understanding of God produces little, if any, ben-

efit to the soul, because they assume a strictly intellectualistic approach to such efforts, and so they look elsewhere for psychologically transformative experiences. But if, following Edwards, we insist that the true knowledge of God entails a “tasting” of God’s goodness (Ps 34:6), it produces, by definition, emotional change (as a result of a deeper physiological change than factual learning alone can produce), and it is only such changes that can lead to the “re-formative” kinds of encouragement, conviction, humility, and peace that can contribute to a genuine and deep healing of the soul, changes that are especially necessary to aid in the recovery of people who have been emotionally traumatized. However, there is a balance here. God has revealed cognitive content about himself in the Bible that provides the essential grist for Christian experience. Christian orthodoxy does not disparage an intellectual understanding of God, since it provides the necessary foundation for Christian experience of God, without which Christians have no understanding of what they experience and therefore no ability to distinguish the true God from false ones. This feature decisively separates Christian and Eastern approaches to religious experience. The Christian life is based on truth and love.

God’s Greatness

God possesses many traits, and we do not have space to deal with them all here. Erickson distinguishes between two types of traits (or attributes) of God: those having to do with his greatness and his goodness.⁸ Though we humans are inclined to focus on those traits that relate directly to us (mostly those of his goodness), we will begin with God’s greatness, because the greatness of his being is what most distin-

guishes him from us, and it also heightens the significance of his relationship with us and provides its proper context.

God's Self-Existence and Self-Sufficiency

Humans have needs for food, water, and air in order to live, and for social relationships in order to develop (when children) and to live well (as adults). God, by contrast, requires nothing outside himself to exist. God has life in himself (John 5:26). This, of course, makes God utterly unique. He needs nothing outside of himself to be fulfilled or happy, so he certainly does not need humans to fill a void he has. Since God exists as a triune set of persons, God has always existed in perfect, fulfilling social relationship and unthreatened contentment.

Some might feel that this understanding takes significance away from humans (compared to a view that sees God as needing humans). And this is true. Christianity does not place humans at the center of the universe (as humanism does), but God. Upon reflection, the superficial boon a human-centered universe would provide for our self-esteem is quickly negated. If God was made content by the likes of us, the universe would be managed by a needy and unstable deity (in fact, we would be his helper, turning us into his deity), making it difficult, to say the least, to find peace through entrusting our lives into his hands. On the contrary, knowing that God is absolutely self-sufficient is deeply reassuring. It is good for our souls to know, in the midst of our contingent, unpredictable life, that our God is never drained, burned out, or out of control, and is therefore always able to care for us and our needs (though we may have to reconceive our needs).⁹ His sufficiency meets the ultimate needs of my

insufficiency. Secular existential psychology raises the issue of our contingency, frailty, and finitude, but offers no consolation; it just claims that we must face such realities alone. Christianity also encourages us to face them, but armed with the knowledge that we have an all-sufficient God who is with us.

Many people are troubled about their deficiencies, weaknesses, and shame. Such knowledge is made desperate without God. Moreover, out of a need to protect ourselves from our fundamental frailty, humans create and maintain defenses, and become self-sufficient, independent, and even proud and self-absorbed. Over time knowledge of God's self-sufficiency can give us the courage to allow those defenses to be softened and gradually taken down.

If it is true that narcissism is the disorder of our age,¹⁰ what better way is there to treat it than fostering a relationship with the God of the universe? Loving this God gets us outside ourselves and focuses our attention on One who is truly worth magnifying. And the experience of God's affection for us in Christ may go a long ways towards meeting deep, unmet relational needs that foster narcissism. Relating to the absolutely self-sufficient God (as we grow in our ability to acknowledge our own limitations and sins) may be one of the most helpful relational activities in which one struggling with narcissism can engage. One might argue that only a genuinely God-centered religion is able adequately to treat the self-absorption of narcissism; certainly its resources are more beneficial than contemporary Selfism, which simply aids in the sophistication and success of one's autocentric orientation.

None of the foregoing should be read as implying that other humans are not extremely important to such therapeutic

processes. The point here, in this article, is that the awareness of God is, also, extremely important to such processes, and part of Christian counseling is to help Christians avail themselves of the therapeutic resources of their faith.

God's Self-Awareness

Since God knows all things, he knows himself perfectly. He is absolutely self-aware.¹¹ In this capacity, God provides a model for human psychological well-being. Humans are prone to self-deception, defensive activity, self-alienation, dissociation, and, in extreme cases, can experience psychosis. And the more self-aware humans are, the more mature they are, and the more they are able to control themselves and the less they are controlled by unacknowledged dynamics. Knowing God, who knows himself exhaustively, provides a profound encouragement to grow in self-awareness, and God himself, through the enlightening power of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 4:4), makes such self-awareness possible. "Only by being before God can one totally come to oneself in the transparency of soberness."¹²

God's Omni-Competence

To say that God is the greatest being in the universe means that he is superlative in every way. He has no limitations or imperfections, and so he is unimprovable. There is no power greater than his own and so nothing (meaningful) he cannot do (he is omnipotent), nothing he does not know (he is omniscient), and nowhere he is not (he is omnipresent). God then is perfectly competent.

For those who have a personal relationship with him and believe he is perfectly good, such truths can contribute to a deeper sense of comfort and security.

Though most things are outside human control and everyone has experienced some suffering in life, it is encouraging to know that God knows everything that is going to happen to us, he is in absolute control, he is always present with the believer, and he works all things together for the believer's good (Rom 8:28). Such awareness can go far to reduce stress,¹³ and it seems likely that many psychological difficulties could be impacted by a deep acceptance of God's omniscience (combined with the belief that he is "on my side"), including such things as perfectionism, a sense of meaninglessness or insignificance, inferiority, anxiety, phobia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, and feelings of personal incompetence.

Each of the attributes that contributes to God's omniscience provides its own psychospiritual consolation. His omnipotence communicates that no ultimate harm will come to believers. God is their always-victorious protector. "When we say that God is omnipotent, it is not only that we may honor Him, but in order that we may be at rest and invincible in the face of all temptations, for, since the power of God is infinite, he is well able to preserve and guard us."¹⁴ Being omniscient means that God knows the future and will not be surprised by anything that happens to us. It also means that he knows everything that is in the believer's heart. There is no point, therefore, in hiding from him (or from oneself), so believers are encouraged to "come clean" and open up their souls self-consciously to his gaze (and so to their own). Tozer says God's omniscience is sweet because "no talebearer can inform on us, no enemy can make an accusation stick; no forgotten skeleton can come tumbling out of some hidden closet to abash us and

expose our past; no unsuspected weakness in our characters can come to light to turn God away from us, since He knew us utterly before we knew Him and called us to Himself in the full knowledge of everything that was against us.”¹⁵ God’s omnipresence means that no matter where the believer is, God is there present with him and will be there to support the believer through whatever happens. For the believer, there is no place in the universe of absolute loneliness and abandonment.

God is supremely, wondrously great. Since he is the most glorious being in the universe, his beliefs and values are of supreme importance. He is the absolute expert or authority; therefore, he knows what he’s talking about. This is all-important therapeutically because a deep awareness of his greatness makes his affection for us and his understanding of us very important (for example, his view of us as justified in Christ). An awareness of his supreme greatness causes us to value what he thinks about us, more than what other humans think (or have thought) and more than what we fundamentally think about ourselves (in our core beliefs; “we shall assure our heart before him, in whatever our heart condemns us, for God is greater than our heart, and knows all things,” 1 John 3:19-20). Julian of Norwich recognized some of the value to the soul of such knowledge. “Of all things, the beholding of and longing for the Maker most makes the soul become less in its own sight, for it most fills one with reverent dread, true meekness, and fullness of charity toward one’s fellow Christians.”¹⁶

God’s Goodness

We began this section by looking at God’s greatness because it provides the

necessary background for properly understanding God’s goodness. Only after recognizing the vast supremacy of God can one properly appreciate his love for humans and benefit from it. “It is the greatest joy possible, as I see it, that he who is highest and mightiest, noblest and worthiest, becomes lowest and meekest, friendliest and most courteous.”¹⁷ So we consider next God’s overall goodness.

God’s Moral Goodness, Righteousness, and Justice

“God is light and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). Such knowledge can also be deeply helpful to our souls. We were created to correspond to such moral perfection, so we are predisposed to be optimistic about ourselves and our future, to be positive about things in general, and to form a just-world theory of how things work out.¹⁸ Autocentric non-Christians must engage in self-enhancing “positive illusions”¹⁹ to maintain such a positive stance, leading sometimes to tragic self-deception, since humans in this age are inclined to justify themselves and blame others for their difficulties.²⁰ Knowing God through the gospel allows the Christian, ideally, to find cognitive satisfaction for this “positive orientation” in God, in spite of one’s personal shortcomings.

This leads to another reason why the knowledge of God’s moral goodness is good for our souls. Calvin believed that knowing God in his righteousness was one of the best promoters of accurate self-awareness.

As long as we do not look beyond the earth, being quite content with our own righteousness, wisdom, and virtue, we flatter ourselves most sweetly, and fancy ourselves all but demigods. Suppose we but once begin to raise our thoughts to God,

and to ponder his nature, and how completely perfect are his righteousness, wisdom, and power—the straightedge to which we must be shaped. Then, what wonderfully impressed us under the name of wisdom will stink in its very foolishness.²¹

Knowing God’s righteousness can help Christians to be more humble, authentic, and accurate in their self-representations. On the other hand, problems arise when Christians *over-identify* with God’s righteousness and come to assume unconsciously that they are intrinsically as good as God. This, unfortunately, can lead paradoxically to greater self-deception and arrogance than that to which non-Christians are typically given.

Recognizing God’s moral goodness also can benefit the soul by reducing the anxiety, bitterness, and self-pity that can arise from the feelings that one’s maltreatment at the hand of others will never be redressed. God’s righteousness guarantees that everything wrong in this life will somehow be made right in the end. This knowledge can be deeply satisfying, because much of the secret anguish in life that derives from mistreatment in childhood is due to the immense sense of injustice that the victims of such sin feel so deeply.

Can There Be Anything Therapeutic about God’s Wrath?

Surely the most disturbing trait of God is his capacity to be angry (1 Kgs 14:9; John 3:36; Eph 2:3). The Bible makes clear that, in response to the rebellion of his image-bearers, God can be extremely displeased and looks like the opponent of sinners, eventually consigning those who disobey him to hell.²² The prophetic literature in particular shows God to be enraged at sin.

We might think that nothing of therapeutic benefit can be derived from thinking about such a threatening attribute as God’s wrath, but because of the psychological perplexities this attribute poses to the soul (and because of modern discomfort with it), we will examine it a bit more in depth.

Theological liberals, who do not take biblical revelation seriously, find it easy to reject God’s wrath, positing instead a God that is more “accepting” of human faults.²³ Such a stance might seem superficially beneficial to the soul, but trusting God’s word, we should expect that in the long run too much is lost for it to be truly psychologically helpful. For if God were simply to “overlook” wrong-doing, he would of necessity be a moral relativist himself, one without ethical standards, a view that throws the universe into moral chaos, ultimately a devastating move psychologically, since it subtly encourages human moral carelessness, which inevitably brings harm to its practitioners (Prov 1:32, 8:36). In addition, God’s wrath most clearly reveals his absolute opposition to all evil, abuse, and oppression, and this truth, as suggested above, is ultimately consoling to its victims.

When convinced that God is thoroughly holy and righteous, even in his wrath, intellectual problems with his anger dissolve. The real problem in this doctrine comes from its tragic distortions in human sinful anger, since human anger rarely attains the righteousness of God (James 1:20). Most human wrath is narcissistic and self-serving, in the light of God’s holy emotions, and so it hurts others. Excessive parental anger, in particular, is deadly to the child who, being an emotional “sponge,” soaks in aggressive rejection and in different ways takes it into her soul, being profoundly damaged in the process.

Adults who have been exposed to such sinful distortions will be inclined to either reject God, or the idea of wrath in God, or will come to over-identify with God (and his wrath), falsely legitimizing their own sinful wrath (as is the tendency of authoritarian parents, who tend to be religious).

We are driven to take seriously the wrath of God for no other reason than that it is a pervasive theme in the Bible.

Rightly handled, God's holy indignation against sin causes a healthy, theocentric sense of the awfulness of evil. It can lead to soul-maturing experiences of conviction and a deepening humility. God's wrath in Scripture points to his values, that which robs him of glory, but that also happen to be what is ultimately most self-destructive for humans! His anger reveals what is against God *and ourselves*. It is, for the believer, the corollary of his love.²⁴ Theological liberals seem not to grasp this. God has revealed his wrath to spare humans from the harmful consequences of sin, ultimately from that wrath itself (2 Pet 3:3-13). The revelation of God's holiness, righteousness, justice, and wrath, *when combined with the gospel*, can profoundly benefit the soul by causing humans to reject, or repent of, harmful thoughts, behaviors, desires, and motives, to separate themselves by faith from the old self and its evil, and so ultimately to contribute to a fuller and healthier self-awareness and ability to relate to others.

But this attribute must obviously be handled with great care. When perceived through the lenses of past emotional or physical abuse, God's wrath can be interpreted as personal rejection. Consequently, the Christian counselor will have to encourage some clients not to focus on God's anger, until, after receiving healing through the gospel of the grace of God,

they are better able to interpret it, separated from their own abuse and pain. Perhaps this trait is of greatest value to those on the ends of the spiritual-ethical continuum: on one end, those whose very souls are in immediate eternal danger through the ongoing practice of sin (chronic substance abuse or adultery, see 1 Cor 6:18) and, on the other end, those who are the most psychospiritually mature, who are capable of handling it with little distortion and so can use it to promote humility, seriousness, and earnestness in the Christian life.

Ultimately, any consideration of God's anger must take us to the cross of Christ, for there was the greatest display of God's wrath *and his love*, simultaneously, since there God's anger against sin and sinners is swallowed up in his own saving goodness.²⁵ In light of the revelation of the cross of Christ (and his resurrection), humans find whatever angry abuse they have suffered, and their own shame, sorrow, anger, and guilt reckoned to Christ (Isaiah 53), ultimately setting the believer free from all that stands in the way of God's saving purposes. The cross is the tree of life to the believer.²⁶ However, in this age, it takes time to take in more and more of the healing found in that tree.

God's Grace, Mercy, and Forgiveness

At this point, it must be made clear that none of God's attributes can be *properly* perceived (i.e., in a way that benefits the soul) apart from the gospel of God's grace in Christ. "The way to diminish and even overcome those terrors which arise from partial and false apprehensions of God is to attain spiritual, clear, and enlarged views of Him as a God whose glory it is to be merciful and gracious even to the chief of sinners."²⁷ Many humans struggle with a conscious awareness of shame and guilt,

and most humans possess an unconscious sense of the same. Shame, in particular, fosters an avoidance of self-examination and the assumption of responsibility, fear of others and of “being exposed,” defensiveness and aggressive anger; it keeps people from reaching out to others; and it is associated with most forms of psychopathology.²⁸ The revelation of God’s grace and mercy, his love for sinners and the broken and hurting, can therefore be profoundly encouraging and hope-giving. Direct experiences of God’s grace in the gospel can lead to a reconfiguration of one’s self-representations, and one’s view of others and the world, and can facilitate a growing honesty and openness with God, oneself, and others, and so can help Christians become more willing to take risks with others. This is because knowing that the greatest Being in the universe is committed to one’s ultimate well-being in Christ, regardless of one’s sin and dysfunction, provides a deep sense of security, integrity, wholeness, and fulfillment, a sense that corresponds to the extent the individual is able to embrace it and so undermine previous destructive patterns of shame and self-abhorrence.

People who are especially burdened by their guilt and shame can become especially transformed by God’s mercy, grace, and forgiveness. In fact, the greater the sense of shame, the greater can be the eventual sense of gratitude and affection to God (Luke 7:47; though such an awareness tends to grow throughout one’s life with God). The deepening reception of one’s forgiveness gives the soul a serious kind of joy quite unlike any other, one that brings psychospiritual healing in its wings.

God’s Love

Understanding God’s Trinitarian nature

leads to the recognition that God in himself is perfect love and communion (John 17:23, 24; 1 John 4:10, 16).²⁹ So gazing upon the triune God of all love, by faith, is fundamentally beneficial. Naturalism, humanism, and postmodernism have nothing more to give their clients than the admonition that they should care about and love themselves, because it makes persons more happy, adaptive, and successful. But what if someone sincerely believes that he is not lovable (as many depressed people do)? Humanistic psychotherapy has always been hampered by the contradiction of encouraging “unlovable selves” to love themselves. Humans need a transcendent basis for a change in self-evaluation that originates from outside the tainted self.

God, furthermore, is absolutely committed to his children; he is *for* them; he is on their side (Rom 8:26-39). “We may, with his grace and his help, stand in spirit, gazing with endless wonder at this lofty, unmeasurable love beyond human scope that Almighty God has for us of his goodness.”³⁰ For Christians, this absolute support, grounded in his covenantal promises to them in Christ, can become the primary catalyst driving their psychospiritual improvement. As God’s supreme dedication to one’s welfare is increasingly accepted, a deep-seated psychological paradigm shift begins to occur, and believers come to feel that the “cloud” that has hovered over their lives is being gradually lifted, that God *really is* on their side, and that their life *really is* worthwhile.

God’s word encourages believers to see his love as directed personally toward them. “The Lord your God is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will be quiet in his love; he will exult over you with loud

singing.” (Zeph 3:17). Because of Christ, God takes absolute delight in the believer. Experiencing attachment with God can repair attachment damage.³¹ Experiences of his favor help to supplement damaged and weak self-structures and relational dispositions and foster the development of new, healthier internal structures. People who struggle with “co-dependence” or dependent personality disorder can derive special benefit from fostering a deeper relationship with their Father and Friend. The unmet needs that cause people to be overly dependent on other humans in unsatisfying ways can, to some extent, be met in a real sense through a deepening relationship with the Lover of their souls.

The revelation throughout the Bible of God’s love of the poor, the weak, the oppressed, the sinful, the broken, and the suffering, particularly as demonstrated through Christ’s life, ministers to those who have felt disenfranchised, alienated from others, and marginalized. Persons with serious psychospiritual problems are given hope as they accept this revelation. Counselors must take seriously the pain of God’s “absence” in someone’s childhood, the result of the evil or carelessness of human caregivers. While God was not actually absent, distorted image-bearers in childhood seem to provide “evidence” that God does not exist, or perhaps that he is one’s enemy, and, combined with one’s own original sin, these experiences can persuade the soul that it is unlovable and abandoned. Thus, the revelation of God’s love through Scripture can become profoundly curative and therapeutic as the adult comes to know and love this God who felt so distant in earlier periods of life. (This is enhanced when Christian image-bearers [like the counselor] express this love concretely through supportive rela-

tionships with the individual.³²) Together, the love of God, experienced through private and public worship and that which is mediated through God’s people, provides the kinds of relational experiences that permit the relinquishing of pathological self- and other-representations and the incorporation of healthy self and relational structures.

God’s Joy and Contentment

Throughout Church history, Christians have also understood God to exist in unalterable happiness and bliss.³³ God is intrinsically content and joy-filled. He is perfectly satisfied in himself and beyond any threats to his infinite enjoyment. This has powerful implications for human well-being and our relation with God. For this means that,

God is never irritable or edgy. He is never fatigued or depressed or blue or moody or stressed out. His anger never has a short fuse. He is not easily annoyed. He is above any possibility of being touchy or cranky or temperamental. Instead he is infinitely energetic with absolutely unbounded and unending enthusiasm for the fulfillment of his delights.³⁴

God’s perfect peace and joy provide the ultimate foundation for the psychological well-being of the human soul. Human joy has an objective basis in God.³⁵ It is therefore good for the soul to gaze upon and fellowship with this perfectly mentally-healthy and joyful God. Since God is so characterized by such joy, those who worship God and dwell in him (through prayerful meditation) are exposed to and gradually drawn into his contentment. Given his joyful nature, God himself “gives pleasure, creates desires and rewards with enjoyment, because He is pleasant, desirable, and full of enjoyment.”³⁶ Secular

counselors have no such transcendent resources; how advantaged is the Christian counselor who can help others to access such joy in God!

On the other hand, to be cut off from the God of all joy, through distrust and unbelief, makes humans more susceptible to the kinds of psychological dissatisfaction and suffering that are devoid of transcendent joy (e.g., depression) or that result from trying to find transcendent joy in less-than-transcendent places (e.g., in the creation, through drugs). So, Christian counselors assist their counselees as they point them to the God who is perfectly blissful and teach them how to dwell in him and obtain more of the gift of his bliss.

Summary

Since humans are made in God's image, humans can only become whole selves in love with God. Because of the breadth of God's character, just about every distressing or dysfunctional state can be addressed by some trait of God. Knowing and being loved by God strangely transforms one's sense of worthlessness and inferiority. The self-importance of narcissism is relativized in God's presence. His sovereignty soothes anxiety and fear. His righteousness and justice help to put into perspective experiences of injustice and so reduce bitterness. It would seem that whatever one's psycho-spiritual difficulties, they can be fundamentally improved by looking to God. By focusing increased attention and affection on the beauty of God (and so more and more "bringing" the beauty of God into one's internal world), it would seem likely to lead gradually to a fundamental reconfiguration of one's self-other relational context; one's narrative; one's feelings of security, hope, and belongingness; and one's sense of meaning and purpose.

At the same time, it must be restated that God made humans to be in human relationships as well as divine, and the experienced Christian counselor knows that prior harmful relational experiences and later self-understandings and choices can push the experience and comfort of God's goodness outside one's immediate reach. This reality provides no excuses, but it must be taken with utmost seriousness. To minimize such conditions leads to a distorted view of the hindrances that inhibit one's ability to receive the grace of God's nature. Here is where the Christian counselor's resourcefulness comes into play, recognizing that he or she is a sign of God that immediately reveals something of God to the counselee, a function that can eventually become a relational bridge for more direct work with God.

Healing Time with God

Before we finish, we must consider how to help people access God in more of his beauty for therapeutic purposes. For this we need to consider those spiritual disciplines that have been used for centuries for such purposes: prayer; spiritual reading (*lectio divina*), especially the Bible, but also good devotional literature; meditation (or contemplation); and worship.

Christians need more supernatural visits from their Father and Savior to be beneficially impacted by God's nature. It is not enough simply to read the Bible. That is necessary, but such reading must be enlivened experientially by the Holy Spirit, so that our religious affections are engaged and focused on God and we experience his presence.³⁷ For this, Christians have to learn how to cultivate the frame of heart to gaze upon God's beauty. Christians (and too many Christian counselors) are often unconvinced that communing with God

will produce the kind of psychological help people need.³⁸ Many Christians have little understanding of the psychospiritual benefits that result from learning how to abide in Christ and worship God in private and public, so devotions and church attendance often degenerate into mere formal duty. But Christians have to re-wire their brains for accessing glory. It takes time to learn how to meditate and how to develop a simple, daily focus on God that more consistently connects with God's greatness and goodness. So Christians, including emotionally troubled Christians, need to be taught the relevant spiritual disciplines, and they need to make space in their lives for God, getting free of distractions, and getting alone more with God. This is often a huge hurdle because of the busyness of modern life and because of the disarray of many Christians' inner lives. But helping in these areas is also what Christian counseling is about.

Christianity is nothing if it is not relationship with God. So prayer is primary (and therapeutic).³⁹ But it cannot consist merely in restless supplications for it to be deeply helpful. The practice of "listening prayer" leads to a richer, more dialogical form of prayer that rests in the presence of God.⁴⁰ Second, as the Christian learns how effectively to meditate on the nature of God, through Scripture especially, but also good Christian books (something that can take from weeks to months to learn), such meditation tends to produce daily benefits (through ongoing stress-reduction), as well as long-term benefits (by enabling the creation, over time, of new internal structural change in one's deep understanding of reality, one's story, one's relationships, and one's self). Prayerful meditation is essential, especially when it is affectively-charged, because it accesses deeper parts

of the brain (the amygdala and hippocampus)⁴¹ that can bring about fuller, healthier internal reorganization of one's memories and emotional orientation, than can mere intellectual apprehension of spiritual truth, that by itself does little to change the heart.

It should be added that it is also highly therapeutic for Christians to go on nature walks, hikes, or camping trips, to get alone with God and allow his peaceful dignity, contentment, power, and wisdom to be directly communicated to the soul through his creation. Nature does not belong to New Agers; it really belongs to God and to his children. Nature contains countless metaphors of spiritual truth and healing, and some of God's traits seem sometimes almost palpable in nature (Rom 1:20). The assignment of spending time in nature will make good clinical sense for some clients.

So, knowing God is not to be reserved for those who are already psychologically whole. On the contrary, for the Christian, God is always central to human life and to its development, regardless of its degree of psychopathology. May God lead all of us into more of his beautiful, healing presence.

Recommended Resources

There are not enough good, accessible books on God's traits, particularly written in the twentieth century. Most of the following are classics.

Augustine. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. Translated by H. Chadwick. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. Augustine was one of the most God-centered Christian thinkers of all time. This autobiographical prayer (!) is filled with praises of God and reflections on his greatness and beauty.

Bernard of Clairvaux. *The Love of God*. Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1983. A rich

exploration on Christ's love for his people, his bride, and our growing love of God, by an important monk from the 12th century.

Calvin, J. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960. This is rigorous theology but was written before theology became overly intellectual and arid. This is worship-theology. One cannot read far before being drawn to worship, confess, or celebrate.

Charnock, S. *The Existence and Attributes of God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996. Written by a Puritan preacher and published first in 1682, it is a demanding and exhaustive, but rewarding, discussion of some of God's most important attributes.

Edwards, J. *A Passion for His Glory*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998. Accompanied by a lengthy introduction by John Piper on the value of Edwards, the last half of the book is a reprint of Edwards's essay *The End for Which God Created the World*, the best exposition of God's glory ever written (penned around 1750).

Julian of Norwich. *Manifestations of Divine Love*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977. Wondrous insights into the love of God, but it must be read with discernment. Written in the fourteenth century.

Packer, J. I. *Knowing God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973. Great, practical discussion of some of God's attributes and the blessings of knowing him.

Piper, J. *The Pleasures of God*. Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1991. Unusual, worshipful exploration of some of the things that make God happy.

Tozer, A.W. *The Knowledge of the Holy*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1961. Very accessible discussion of nearly 20 attributes in 20 short chapters.

Watson, T. *A Body of Divinity*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1966. A great Puritan treatment of theology. The first section is on the

attributes of God. Watson was one of the most accessible of the Puritans, writing with pithy statements, nice metaphors, and solid theology.

ENDNOTES

¹Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. Henry Chadwick (401; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Bonaventure, *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, the Life of St. Francis* (1259; Mahway, NJ: Paulist, 1978); J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F. L. Battles (1559; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960); and S. Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death* (1848; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941).

²Calvin, 35.

³Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, 129.

⁴It must be added that one's relationship to other humans is just as fundamental to one's self-development and self-understanding as is one's relation to God, a position in keeping with Christian thought. In addition to the duality of self and God that has been the primary focus of Christian reflection on self-development, the individual human person is actually necessarily situated within three poles of relationality: (1) a self in fundamental relationship with (2) God and (3) other humans. God created humans to develop within families, in relationship with other images of God, in order to realize their individuality as image-bearers themselves. Christ's twofold command of love of God and neighbor underscores the interdependence of one's relationships with God and other humans in Christian understanding (O. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985]), an interdependence found

throughout the Bible (e.g., James 3; 1 John), all of which points towards a recognition of a “tripolar” nature of human beings. However, it was not really until the twentieth century that Western thought (and research) more fully explored the dependence of human self-development on human others, as seen in the theories of Cooley, Mead, and Vygotsky, and more recently, Rom Harre, Charles Taylor, and John Shotter, the clinical theories of the object relations and family-systems approaches, and social development research. In light of such conceptual enrichment, the Christian community is better equipped to understand how it is that self- and God-understanding are both also interrelated with other-understanding than Christian thinkers of previous centuries were able to appreciate. It remains for contemporary orthodox Christian psychologists to more fully explore how these three poles are interrelated. The present article, however, focuses exclusively on the relationship between the knowledge of God and the self.

⁵E. Charry, *Renewing the Mind: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 128.

⁶H. Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (1677; Minneapolis: Bethany, 1976) 49.

⁷Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 2: Religious Affections* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959).

⁸M. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998).

⁹L. J. Crabb, Jr., *Shattered Dreams* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2002).

¹⁰D. Capps, *The Depleted Self* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); and C. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979).

¹¹John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002).

¹²S. Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination/ Judge for Yourself!*, trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (1875; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990) 106.

¹³K. I. Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping* (New York: Guilford, 1997) 223.

¹⁴Calvin quoted by A. Lecerf, *An Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics* (London: Lutterworth, 1949) 379.

¹⁵A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1961) 57.

¹⁶Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977) 92.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁸M. E. P. Seligman, *Learned Optimism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991); M. E. P. Seligman and M. Csikszentmihalyi, “Positive Psychology: An Introduction,” *American Psychologist* 55 (2000) 5-14; and C. R. Snyder and S. J. Lopez, eds., *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁹S. E. Taylor and J. D. Brown, “Illusion and Well-Being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health,” *Psychological Bulletin* 116 (1988) 21-27.

²⁰D. G. Myers, *The Inflated Self: Human Illusions and the Biblical Call to Hope*

(New York: Seabury, 1980).

²¹Calvin, 38.

²²L. Morris, *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960).

²³See e.g., S. McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987); for a recent critique, see E. L. Johnson and D. S. Huffman, “Should the God of Historic Christianity Be Replaced?,” in *God under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents God*, ed. D. S. Huffman (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002) 11-41.

²⁴H. Berkhof, *Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979).

²⁵D. Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

²⁶Bonaventure.

²⁷J. Colquhoun, *Spiritual Comfort* (1814; Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1998) 164.

²⁸J. P. Tangney and R. L. Dearing, *Shame and Guilt* (New York: Guilford, 2002).

²⁹C. M. LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991); A. P. Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All: The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002); and J. Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

³⁰Julian of Norwich, 91.

³¹R. C. Roberts, “Attachment: Bowlby and the Bible,” in *Limning the Psyche: Explorations in Christian Psychology*, ed. R. C. Roberts and M. R. Talbot (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997) 206-228.

³²See L. J. Crabb, Jr., *Connecting* (Waco, TX: Word, 1997).

³³See John 14:27, 17:13; T. Aquinas, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Random House, 1945); H. Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1951) 247.

³⁴J. Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1991) 192.

³⁵K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2, part 1: *The Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957).

³⁶Barth, 651.

³⁷Edwards.

³⁸Though for some Christian counseling correctives, see Crabb, *Shattered Dreams*; G. W. Moon, *Homesick for Eden: Confessions about the Journey of a Soul* (Lifespring Resources Moon, 1996); J. Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997); and S. -Y. Tan and D. H. Gregg, *Disciplines of the Holy Spirit: How to Connect to the Spirit's Power and Presence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997).

³⁹Pargament.

⁴⁰W. Wangerin, *Whole Prayer: Speaking and Listening to God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001).

⁴¹See E. D. Aquili and A. B. Newberg, *The Mystical Mind: Probing the Biology of Religious Experience* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999); J. LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain* (New York: Touchstone, 1996); and D. J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: Toward a Neurobiology of Interpersonal Experience* (New York: Guilford, 1999).