

WHAT IS THE DSM-IV? (THE LENS OF MODERN PSYCHOTHERAPY)

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed.) or DSM-IV, is a manual composed by various professionals, and published by the American Psychiatric Association. It contains what is called mental health diagnoses and criteria. According to the task force that compiled it, the highest priority in developing the DSM-IV was to “provide a helpful guide to clinical practice” as well as facilitating utility among practitioners “by striving for brevity of criteria sets, clarity of language, and explicit statements of the constructs embodied in the diagnostic criteria” (DSM-IV, 1994, p. xv).

Whereas the intent of the diagnostic manual, according to its contributors, is to serve as a helpful guide to professionals, the diagnostic labels cited within its pages are often vague, and by the authors’ own admission, “there is no assumption that each category of a mental disorder is a completely discrete entity with absolute boundaries dividing it from other mental disorders or from no mental disorder” (p. xxi). Even so, this manual is revered as highly among professionals as is the Bible among believers. It is within its pages that infamous labels such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and borderline personality disorder may be found. Sadly, such labels have often served to intimidate pastors, Christians, and even some counselors in such a way that person-to-person ministry with those exhibiting extreme behaviors (as cited in the DSM-IV) is often delegated to the “expert” of “mental illness”. Tragically, this mindset has often left “soul-care” only to the professional armed with a man-centered book, while leaving the Christian, armed with the very Word of God, standing on the outskirts of face-to-face ministry.

This manual shapes, as well as was shaped by, a worldview in which God is deemed non-existent. It is not overtly anti-God, nor are all of its proponents. On the contrary, it indeed serves to organize ideas and inform practitioners in the psychotherapeutic community. However, its development and interpretation of human functioning was not brought forth within a God-centered framework, rather it evolved (and continues to evolve) within an impersonal universe where mankind is ultimately the measure of all things. It is from this humanistic vantage point that the DSM-IV provides a structure around which the entire “mental health” field operates. It has become the primary lens through which most professionals (Christian and non-Christian alike) interpret behavior, psychology, and emotional status.

But, what if the Bible is quite sufficient, even superior in its capacity to interpret behavior, psychology, and emotional status? What if one’s counseling approach was shaped by a worldview in which God is deemed the highest source of knowledge in understanding the soul of man? Even more so, does not the Holy Scriptures provide the “why” to mankind’s state of being as well as the “how” to continually move beyond that present state? In a fallen world where humanity peers reality (at best) through a dim glass (I Corinthians 13:12), it appears most logical that a minister of the soul (i.e., counselor, pastor, lay counselor, biblical coach, etc.) would rely completely on the illumination offered by the only source of knowledge in which there is no error. Contrast this to relying on conclusions that have often been formulated within a laboratory in which the veil of depravity has darkened the understanding of the observer. In such cases, man is not viewed as functioning before a righteous God, instead he is simply understood in reference to himself.

Therefore, the question emerges, "On what source of authority does the believer ultimately rely when interpreting the behavior, psychology, and emotions of fellow human beings: the DSM-IV or the Bible? The evidence of faith and reason convincingly point to the latter.

David Powlison (1985) concludes:

Let us be ruthless to root out theoretical structures that view people as psychological or socio-psychological abstractions: the phenomena observed are not 'ego defense mechanisms' but are pride's offensive, defensive, and deceptive strategies. And let us also forswear the therapeutic assumptions that are consequent to the theory: they are poor and deceptive substitutes for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If—and it is a large IF—biblical categories control, we can revel in the descriptive acuity and case-study riches of psychologists. With biblical categories, we ourselves will mature as psychologists in the best sense of the word: acute observers of human life, experienced in cases and case studies, consistently wise in our counseling methods. We will know people deeply enough to know exactly how they need Jesus Christ. We will remember that Christianity is a third way. The alternative to moralism is not psychologism; the alternative is Christianity. 'Warmaking activities' are omnipresent. Jesus Christ came and made true peace. Blessed are the peacemakers who help others into the peace of God that is in Jesus Christ. With biblical categories we will become men and women who know people—including ourselves first of all—and who know how to help with the help that is help indeed, with the *parakiesis* with which we ourselves have been comforted by God (p. 54).

References

- American Psychiatric Association: *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders*, Fourth Edition, Washington, D.C., American Psychiatric Association, 1994.
- Powlison, D. (1985). Human defensiveness: The third way. *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 8(1), 40-55.