

Working with the Old Self and New Self in Therapy with Christian Clients

By Eric L. Johnson

The Two Communities in the Bible

“If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” (Jn 15:18-19)

“You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience, among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of humankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ....” (Eph 2:1-5)

“...At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.” (Eph 5:8-10)

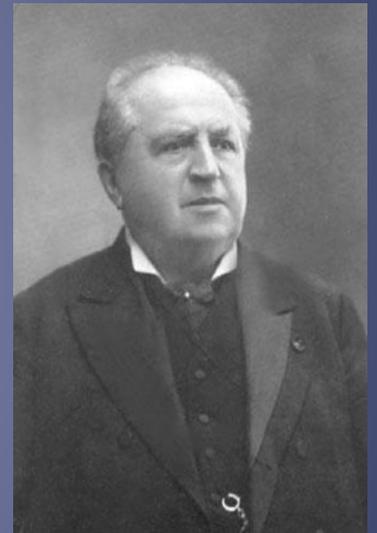
The Two Cities of St. Augustine

- Based on such biblical teaching, St. Augustine wrote that humanity is composed of two communities: the City of God, which by God's grace is becoming increasingly God-centered; and the City of Humanity, which remains human-centered



The Two Sciences of St. Abraham

- According to Abraham Kuyper, these two cities produce two different kinds of human sciences: one issues from regeneration, listens to Scripture, and is becoming increasingly God-centered, while the other remains human-centered



Two Therapeutic Frameworks

- What are the implications of Augustine and Kuyper 's notions for Christian psychotherapy and counseling?
- The City of God and the City of Humanity each have their own therapy framework centered on God or humanity, respectively

Two Therapeutic Frameworks

- The great challenge facing Christian therapists is that we have been trained in a time when the City of Humanity – and its gods and worldview – dominate our culture, including its psychology and therapy
- At the same time, modern/secular psychology has done excellent work studying human beings and their soul-healing – *though from a human-centered standpoint* – the truth of which must be appropriated by the City of God, out of love for God – *but reinterpreted theocentrically.*

Two Therapeutic Frameworks

- Integration programs have made it possible for Christians to participate in public mental health in our day, by teaching them the ethical rules of secular psychotherapy and encouraging as much compliance as possible, without violating Christian values.
- However, it is also desirable to develop distinctly Christian models of psychotherapy and counseling *for use with Christian counselees*. So Christians must also retrieve and reinvest in the therapeutic teachings and practices of Scripture and the Christian tradition.

Convergence of Therapeutic Goals

- Many secular models of therapy have been converging on helping clients objectify their internal-relational world, in order to modify it
 - Classic CBT: exposure therapy and learning to tolerate the distress
 - Mindfulness: non-judgmental observation of one's internal-relational world
 - ACT: accepting one's internal-relational world
 - Contemporary psychodynamic therapy: preventing automatic responses and promoting mentalization
 - Relational and attachment therapy: creating conditions for clients to safely explore their internal-relational world

Convergence of Therapeutic Goals

- All of these models have identified a key feature of psychological healing:

In order to modify a disordered psychic element (a belief, emotion scheme, defense, or part) individuals have to recognize it and disbelieve or disidentify with it, while maintaining it in their consciousness.

- The question I want to try to answer today is *Does Christianity provide distinctive ways to promote this therapeutic process with Christian clients?*

Two-Track Training for Christian Therapists

- The most important part of diagnosis is determining (as best we can) whether the client is a member of the City of God (or open to it) or the City of Humanity
 - Christian therapists are free to use “creation grace” resources developed by secular therapists which are valid for all human beings
 - In addition, *with Christians* they can use distinctly Christian resources – due to “redemptive grace” – unavailable to non-Christian clients
 - However, they should avoid discourse and practices that explicitly *promote* an alternative faith-system *with anyone*
 - And they should be free to share their worldview beliefs *with anyone* – just like secular therapists do every day!

Using Distinctly Christian Therapy Resources with Christian Clients

- Distinctive features of Christian clients
 - Because of Christ's redemption, they are reconciled with God and can have communion with him
 - United to Christ and have the indwelling Holy Spirit
 - Their old self was crucified and their new self was created
- Therefore, distinctly Christian therapy promotes
 - Communion with the Father and Jesus Christ
 - Union-with-Christ identity and reliance on Holy Spirit
 - Differentiation between one's old self and new self
 - Integration of one's whole self in Christ

Communion with the Father and Jesus Christ

- The most notable distinctive of Christian therapy is the central role of communion with God
 - Christian therapy is fundamentally relational and exocentric, rather than individualistic and self-centric
 - Some time should be spent training Christian clients how to engage in *lectio divina*, affective prayer (e.g., lament to God), guided imagery with Christ, and meditation
 - Christian clients need ongoing experiences of God's love in Christ, within which to explore and transform their internal-relational world through collaborative coping strategies

Union-with-Christ Identity and Reliance on the Holy Spirit

- Christians have been given two divine gifts: union with Christ— entailing perfect righteousness, holiness, and sonship – and the indwelling Holy Spirit who empowers new action (Php 2:12-13)
 - Counselors can practice with such themes in session and assign homework that promote their internalization
 - This makes possible self-awareness without condemnation and with hopeful agency
 - Christian therapy communicates a non-judgmental attitude towards internal-relational dynamics – *but only on the basis of one's union with Christ*

Biblical Teaching on the Inner Division

- New creation (2Co 5:17; Eph 2:10)
- Remaining Sin (Ro 6:1-8:2, esp. Ch 7)
- Flesh and the Spirit (Gal 5:17-23; Ro 8:3-11; 1 Co 3:1-8)
- Old self and New Self (Ro 6:6; Eph 4:22-24; Col 3:9-10)

Allegories of the Inner Division

- John Bunyan's allegories
Pilgrim's Progress
The Holy War
- Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde
- The best horror stories
- Lord of the Rings



Controversy About the Old Self/New Self Dichotomy

- Some theologians reject notion that a believer has two selves at war within
 - Old self *was* crucified (Ro 6:6)
 - Two selves in one person?

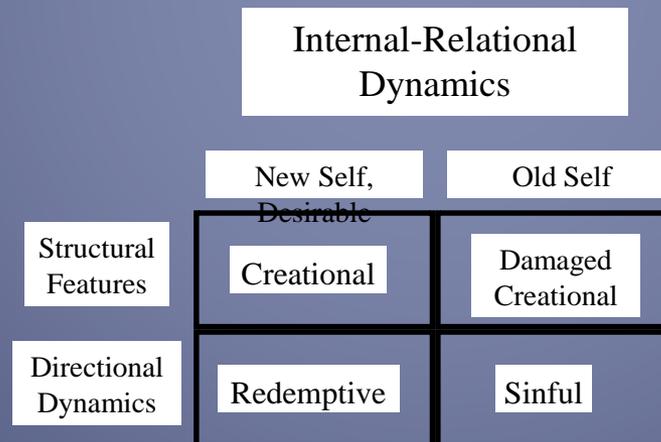


Controversy About the Old Self/New Self Dichotomy

- Already/Not Yet Tension
- Contrast between Eph 4:22-24 and Col 3:9-10
- Paul's overall teaching
 - Indicative preceding imperative
 - Assumption of need to “reckon” the truth or internalize/subjectivize it
- Vast majority of Christian teachers over the centuries

Redemptive Differentiation

- Christians come with a confused and chaotic internal-relational world. They have to be trained how to distinguish their new self and old self
- The old self is all that pertains to themselves that is fallen and the new self is who they are in Christ



- In-session work and homework (journaling, sharing with others) can help Christians distinguish these aspects

Old Self/New Self Dichotomy

- Each is a psychological structure, dependent upon created dynamic structures (CDS): stored in memory (psychological CDS) and constituted in neural networks (supervening on biological CDS)
- Each is a product of the course of one's development and consists of memories, emotions, desires, beliefs, and ways of reasoning – one lives foolishly, independent of God; and the other lives wisely, in dependence on God

Old Self/New Self Dichotomy

- Old self is to be killed:
 - Confession
 - Repentance
 - Receiving Forgiveness

*Union with Christ's Crucifixion
and Mortification*

Old Self/New Self Dichotomy

- Damaged created self (formerly part of the old self) gets redeemed and brought into the new self
 - Experience, express true emotions
 - Surrender them to the Lord
 - Replace with a resurrection emotion

*Union with Christ's Resurrection
and Vivification*

Old Self/New Self Dichotomy

- New self has to be developed and strengthened
 - Much of this requires “soul-work” time
- Worship, love, and enjoyment of the beauty of the triune God
- Special love of Christ as one’s savior and lover
- Gratitude to God for one’s created self and gifts, fulfilled in the new self
- Gratitude to God for one’s salvation

Old Self/New Self Dichotomy

- New self is to be developed and strengthened
 - *Identification* with the real self in heaven
 - Deep reflection on the blessings of declarative salvation
 - Planning of future godliness
 - Practice of godly actions in dependence on Christ

*Union with Christ's Resurrection
and Vivification*

Redemptive Self-Differentiation

Techniques for promoting self-differentiation

- Read, reflect, and meditate on relevant Scripture
- Discriminate one's internal dynamics: Be on the look out for the old and the new
- Talk and journal *about* one's old and new selves

Redemptive Self-Differentiation

Techniques for promoting self-differentiation

- Two-chair technique: Have the two selves talk to each other, switching chairs
- Use one's imagination to picture the two selves, fighting and the new self killing the old self
- Retroactive redemption: dealing with past deeds and events with Christ

Redemptive Integration

- Based on communion with God and their perfection in Christ, Christians gradually come to terms with their internal-relational world and come to *accept* their *actual* self as primordially good, sinful, broken, and redeemed
 - As a result, they become less anxious, depressed, defensive, more open to feedback, more tolerant of their limitations, and more compassionate to themselves, as they come to internalize their relationship with God and union with Christ
- Such outcomes resemble those of the secular therapies we looked at, but through using distinctly Christian resources

Redemptive Integration

- Pursuing unity and purity of heart involves undermining one's internal division through union with Christ, in which
 - 1) one increasingly accepts the reality of one's remaining sinfulness and brokenness, and
 - 2) the created, but damaged dynamic structures of the old self are brought into the new self by the Holy Spirit and faith, and
 - 3) The new self expands in influence through the indwelling Holy Spirit and faith

Redemptive Integration

- Uniting and purifying the soul
 - By faith we bring everything in the soul into its already established union with Christ: thoughts, beliefs, desires, memories, and emotions
 - This means consciously taking “everything” in the soul through Christ’s death and resurrection
 - This undermines and reduces the power of indwelling sin
 - This gradually cleanses, purifies, and heals one’s damaged created structures, so more and more of it is joined to and becomes part of the new self

Redemptive Integration

Promoting the Unity and Purity of the Soul

- Bringing everything in our souls into the light of our conscious awareness in Christ
- Undermining sin by bringing God's truth into the desires of sin
- Combining the negative emotions associated with the cross into the positive feelings associated with the resurrection
- Boasting in one's weaknesses
- Receiving and owning God's creational and redemptive gifts to *me* with gratitude

Redemptive Integration

Techniques for Promoting the Soul's Unity and Purity

- Love, worship, and fear the triune God mindful of all that one is
- Pray to God in Christ mindful of all that one is
- Read, reflect and meditate on relevant Scripture
- Walk and dwell in the new creation/in the Spirit
- Practice the presence of God; avoid long periods of time without acknowledging Christ

Redemptive Integration

Techniques for Promoting the Soul's Unity and Purity

- Believing that one is a complex actual self – *simul iustus et peccator* – fundamentally perfect in Christ, but still a sinner
- Using one's imagination to picture a complex actual self, perfect in Christ and yet a sinner
- Retroactive redemption: dealing with past deeds and events by uniting its memory with Christ

ERIC L. JOHNSON

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God &
Soul Care

THE THERAPEUTIC RESOURCES

— of —

THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Next step

- More research on Christian-derived therapies, like what is being proposed here

