

Sin, Suffering, and Biopsychosocial Damage:

A Comprehensive
Christian Framework
for Understanding
Psychopathology



What is psychopathology?

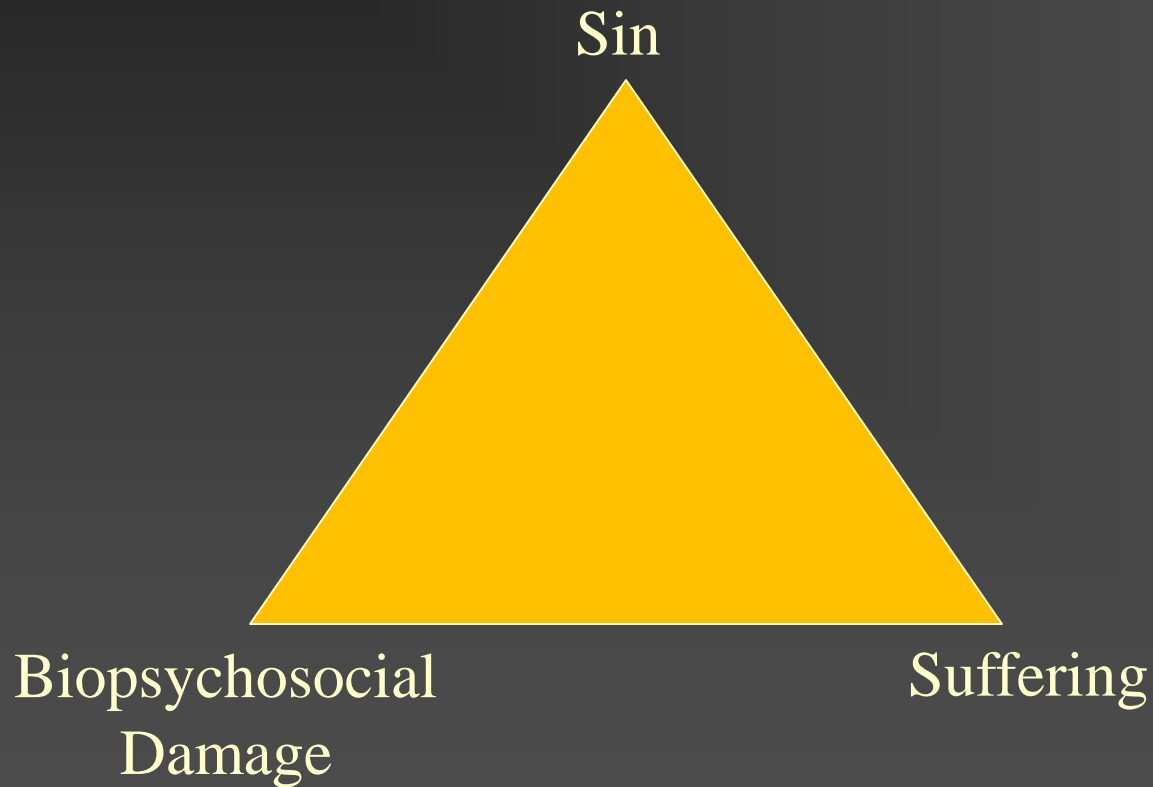
- ⊙ In the field of medicine, pathology is the study of diseases and disorders of the body
- ⊙ *Psyche* is the Greek word for soul

So, Christians might suppose that psychopathology is the study of the disorders of the soul

Modern Psychopathology

- ◎ What is right with this approach?
 - > Biological and social dynamics *do* cause psychological disorders
 - > It has done a vast amount of research on these causes
 - ◎ What is wrong with this approach?
 - > Reduces humans to mere organisms
 - > Promotes determinism and passivity
 - > Undermines human freedom, sin, and responsibility
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A Christian Psychopathology



Sin:

A Christian Framework for Understanding Psychopathology

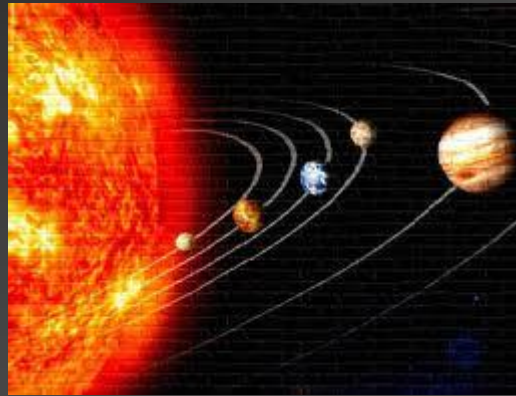


How can sin be a type of psychopathology?

- ◎ Sin is the biblical word for “disorder of the soul”
- ◎ However, sin is an ethical and spiritual disorder
- ◎ It is as if God in the Bible put a circle around this set of disorders and said, “*These* are the most serious, and you bear responsibility for them. Focus especially on them with my help.”

Why is sin so important in Christianity?

God is the most beautiful and valuable being there is,
and sin is fundamentally antagonistic against God



Therefore sin is the worst kind of psychopathology
there is

Sin is a relational disorder

- ⊙ Autonomy/Independence
 - ⊙ Disobedience (1Jn 3:4)
 - ⊙ Hatred of God (Ro 1:30); hostility to God (Ro 8:7)
 - ⊙ Movement away from God
 - ⊙ Hatred of others made in God's image
 - ⊙ But its *usually unconscious*
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Aspects of Sin

- ◎ Originated with Satan, now influenced by the demonic and “the world”
- ◎ Original sin
 - Humans have an inborn propensity to resist God’s centrality and glory
 - W/out God at the center of their lives, humans inevitably move away from him
 - Our created desires are “bent”

“No longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me” (Ro 7:17)

Aspects of Sin

◎ Sins or Sin Acts

- Humans are born in sin and eventually commit personal *sins*, moral deeds contrary to God's norms

◎ Vices

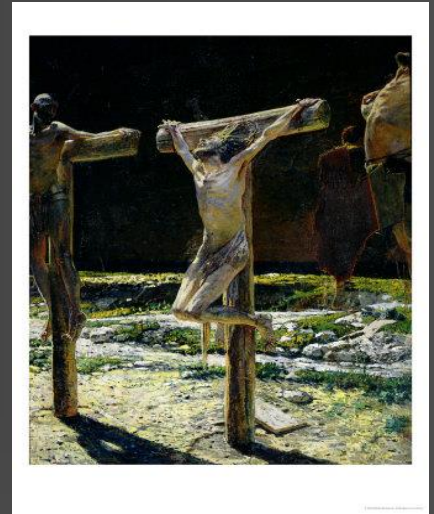
- Practicing sins creates a *vice*, a sinful trait or habit that predisposes us to specific sin acts
 - Personal sins and vices can be shaped by biology and socialization
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Sin and Christ

- ⦿ Sin can only properly be understood in relation to Christ

Only in the Cross is sin fully unmasked

And only in Christ can sin be addressed



The Psychological Benefits of the Christian Doctrine of Sin

- ⦿ Sin explains our shame and guilt
- ⦿ Promotes personal agency; is not deterministic
- ⦿ Directs our attention to our primary counselor:
Jesus

And we can only deal with sin through Christ and his death and resurrection and our union with him

Treatment for Sin



Therapeutic techniques for sin

- Reflect on Christ's death on the cross
- Confession
 - 100% ownership, without excuse
- Repentance
 - "Making a turn" (*metanoia*: change of mind)
- Forgiveness
 - Need to receive forgiveness in Christ

We have to take into account that abuse may make these practices difficult

Suffering:

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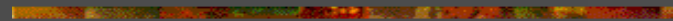
What is suffering?



Strong negative emotion or
psychological or physical pain, which
itself can cause further suffering

Addressing the “problem of suffering” is often involved in Christian counseling

Because many counselees have suffered a great deal



But is suffering psychopathology?

I say yes, because...

1. It is a temporary kind of soul-disorder
 2. It causes many kinds of disorders (trauma)
 3. Most disorders involve suffering
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What does the Bible teach about the reason for personal suffering?

1. All human beings will suffer (Gen 3:15)
2. Personal sin generally leads to suffering (Pr 1:18)
3. But not all suffering is due to personal sin (Job)
4. Suffering brings about wisdom and spiritual maturity (Job, Ro 5:1-3; Ja 1:3-5)

But there is so much we don't understand

For example, what about suffering in childhood?

Neurons are organized into networks in childhood, which can be integrated or dissociated

Children who have suffered a lot will store those negative emotions in their brains/memory systems and will be prone to re-experience them throughout their lives

So, severe suffering in childhood, or trauma, results in brain/souls that do not function according to God's design plan, causing *biopsychosocial damage*.

Suffering in childhood?

So, adults who have suffered a lot in their childhood generally have dispositions towards negative emotions, though they may be strongly avoided and severely repressed

They may also believe that they are bad or that God has singled them out for bad and is against them

What do we learn about suffering from Christ?



Jesus suffered during his life and at his death

He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief (Is 53:3)

He wept with those who wept (Jn 11:35)

He cried out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46), quoting Ps 22

What do we learn about suffering from Christ?



The primary reason Christ suffered on the cross was to pay the penalty for our sins (Mt 20:28; Gal 3:13)

However, what if his suffering also reveals to us that God suffers with us in our suffering

How do we make use of Christ's suffering in therapy?

All this discussion is therapeutic. Gently helping people to work through their suffering in the light of Christ is Christian therapy

So we need to take sufferers to the cross, so they can “hear” Jesus say, “I understand. I’m with you. Trust me. I want us to be joined together in your suffering.”

By pointing them to the cross, we also help them look outside themselves and their subjectivity. This can give them some greater objectivity and promote mentalization of their negative emotion and pain, so they can “work thru it”

Biopsychosocial Damage:

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The Biblical Teaching on Weakness



“astheneia”

- * Means “weakness,” “incapacity.” or “infirmity”
- * Most common word for physical illness in NT (Jn 5:7), also used for poverty (Acts 20:35)
- * But refers generally to any kind of physical, psychological, spiritual limitations

The Biblical Teaching on Weakness

“The spirit is willing, but the flesh is *weak*” (Mt 26:41)

“We do not know how to pray as we ought, because of our *weakness*” (Ro 8:26)

Some believers are *weak*, because of their scrupulosity, others are strong (Ro 14-15:1)

Paul was attacked for his *weakness* by teachers at Corinth, and he conceded to being *weak* with regard to having an unimpressive personal presence (2Co 10:10) and a lack of skill in speech (11:6, 21), and then listed all the difficulties he has had on his apostolic travels (11:23-27).

The Biblical Teaching on Weakness

To summarize:

Weakness is the state of being “less than” in some respect, either less than some ideal – less than the best of which humanity is capable – or less than what is typical for normal human beings – and so inferior in some respect to most other people.

Sin and Weakness Contrasted

◎ God's Viewpoint

- > God judges and punishes sins
- > God is concerned for those with weaknesses and desires their protection

◎ Christ's Relation to Sin and Weakness

- > Christ did not sin, but was punished for our sin
- > Christ became weak for us

“For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15)

He was crucified “in weakness” (2Co 13:4)

Sin and Weakness Contrasted

◎ The Christian's Self-Appraisal

- > We are to confess and repent of our sins (1Jn 1:9)
- > Paul the apostle boasts in his weakness

‘I will boast all the more gladly about my weakness, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.’ (2 Co 12:9-10)

Sin and Weakness Contrasted

◎ Conclusion

- > Sin is created by humans, something God hates, for which we are responsible, and something we are to confess and resist
 - > Weakness is creational damage (not due to personal sin), something God values, for which we are not responsible and in which we can boast
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Implications for psychopathology

- ◎ Examples of weakness or biopsychosocial damage
 - > Autism
 - > Hallucinations and paranoia
 - > Depression due to child abuse
 - > Homosexual orientation
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Fault: Both Sin and Weakness

◎ Poverty in the Bible

“Do not rob the poor because he is poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate” (Pr 22:22)

“Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, but the hand of the diligent makes rich” (Pr 10:4)

◎ Jesus and sinners

“ Why do you eat and drink the tax-gatherers and sinners?” “It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call righteous men but sinners to repentance (Lk 5:30-32)

Fault: Both Sin and Weakness

◎ Sin is a kind of weakness

“For every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins; he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with *weakness*; and because of it he is obligated to offer sacrifices for sins, as for the people, so also for himself.” (Heb. 5:1-3).

Implications for psychopathology

◎ Fault?

- > Depression due to loss of job because of repeated poor work performance
 - > Alcohol addiction
 - > Habitual anger
 - > Homosexual activity
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Implications for therapy

- ◎ Faults will take more time to overcome than sins, because of their weakness/determined quality
Some may never be fully overcome in this life
 - ◎ Nonetheless, because faults are sinful, there is also some responsibility and some possibility of change
 - ◎ Faults entail confession of the sin *and* acceptance and surrender of the biopsychosocial damage (analogous to boasting)
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With a Comprehensive Christian Psychopathology

- ◎ We view psychological problems in terms of sinfulness, suffering, and biopsychosocial damage or brokenness and address each one according to its nature

“Blessed are the poor in the spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt 5:3)

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost.” (ITi 1:15)
