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# Christianity and Cognitive Therapy (Chapter 3 of Cognitive Therapy Techniques in Christian Counseling)

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CHAPTER THREE

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**CHRISTIANITY AND COGNITIVE THERAPY**

LEN NERVOUSLY EYED THE DIPLOMAS on the wall, the titles on the bookshelf, and the wilted leaves on the plant I routinely neglect before telling me why he came for help. "I guess I'm here because you're a Christian and I need help dealing with my feelings." Within this first thirty seconds of therapy, Len had revealed some important information about himself. He was nervous. He wanted to talk with a Christian, probably because he was also a Christian. He was troubled with uncomfortable feelings, but wanted to be selective about the help he received. Len, like so many clients, assumed there was a standard set of techniques that make up Christian counseling. Clients often come for "Christian counseling," not knowing there are many different guiding assumptions and techniques used by Christian counselors.

It is easier to define what Christian counseling is not than to define what it is. First, most Christian counselors agree that Christian counseling is not a matter of using Scripture or prayer as a complete answer to emotional problems. Although Scripture and prayer often have a powerful effect within the context of counseling, when they are applied as "Band-Aids," troubled clients often leave feeling misunderstood and patronized.

Second, most Christian counselors assume emotional problems are not necessarily spiritual problems. Their position is supported by many who study the integration of psychology and Christianity.<sup>1</sup> To assume spiritual health must come before emotional health denies that physiological, social, and psychological factors contribute to emotional problems. Furthermore, most Christian counselors do not assume emotional health is always necessary for spiritual health. Some people appear to have vital relationships with God despite their ongoing battles with depression, anxiety, or relationship difficulties.

Although most Christian counselors do not assume spiritual health always leads to emotional health or vice versa, they recognize the overlap between spiritual and emotional health. Indeed, it is our human need for categories that causes us to separate the two concepts in the first place. Christian counselors help their clients experience both emotional and spiritual well-being by using a variety of spiritual disciplines and psychological techniques. Dr. Howard Clinebell, the first president of the American Association of Pastoral Counseling, wrote, "Pastoral care and counseling must be holistic, seeking to enable healing and growth in all dimensions of human wholeness."<sup>2</sup>

Some Christian counselors focus on childhood experiences; others look for present behaviors. Some pray with their clients; others do not. Some assign Scripture verses to be memorized; others believe homework is too invasive or threatening as a therapeutic intervention. But despite the diversity of approaches, there are common emphases on emotional and spiritual wholeness in most forms of Christian counseling. The distinctions of Christian counseling merge well with cognitive therapy techniques, producing the benefits discussed in this chapter.

All counselors view their offices as places for healing and growth, places to pursue truth, and places to be authentic. But Christian counselors can enrich these opportunities by blending excellent counseling with sensitivity to religious values and spiritual awareness.

## A PLACE FOR HEALING AND GROWTH

Any form of successful counseling requires a healing atmosphere that generates hope and growth in clients.<sup>3</sup> As L. Rebecca Propst points out in her book, *Psychotherapy in a Religious Framework*, cognitive therapy techniques and Christian ideas can be blended to provide an effective healing environment. Propst notes that cognitive therapy helps in the healing partnership by giving the client a rationale for the treatment procedures, encouraging self-awareness, and teaching new ways of thinking more flexibly and productively.<sup>4</sup> In addition to these benefits, cognitive therapy helps promote a safe, healing environment for Christian clients in several ways.

### Healing Factors 1: Individualized Approach

Law-enforcement agencies benefit from human diversity because each person has unique fingerprints. Long-distance telephone companies are now perfecting technology to recognize "voice prints" so that callers can bill their credit card calls just by speaking their name. These are reminders of our individuality.

Just as we have unique fingerprints and voices, our personalities are unique. Each person has his or her own genes, memories, and life situations. Similarly, we are each engaged in our own spiritual pilgrimage and have diverse perspectives of God, the Bible, and theology. The healing counseling environment allows for diversity and individuality.

When my clients ask me if I see a lot of people with similar problems, I respond by reminding them of their individuality. "No two people are alike. That's one of the challenges and the pleasures of my work. Although emotional symptoms and underlying thoughts have similarities, each person is a unique individual made in God's image."

Unlike some forms of counseling based on the medical model of treatment (where standard techniques are applied to all clients with similar problems), cognitive therapy is individualized according to the specific needs of the client. Client and counselor collaborate to understand the client's dysfunctional thinking patterns and to develop treatment strategies. As a result, cognitive therapy is applied differently with different clients. For example, Christian counselors are familiar with the question, "Do you use Scripture and prayer in your counseling?" This question assumes the medical model; if a cognitive therapist uses Scripture and prayer, he or she will vary the use according to the

client's needs. Two brief examples demonstrate why an individualized approach provides a healing environment.

Greg brought in, maybe dragged, Cindy for counseling. They had seen three counselors during the two years since Cindy had been involved with another man. Greg was convinced that Cindy had never expressed adequate remorse for her wrongdoing and so he could not forgive her. He selectively pulled Scripture verses out of context to support his rigid views of paternalism and interpersonal behavior. He believed the Bible taught that his wife should not smile at other men. As we tried to explore Scripture together, I quickly realized his views of God and the Bible were not amenable to change. He had his mind made up. Our time was better spent uncovering his fears of abandonment and the feelings of rejection resulting from his wife's extramarital affair. In working with Greg, I did not use Scripture in counseling.

Sandy sought counseling for help with depression. She felt unloved and unlovable. Raised in the church, she had given up her faith because she felt she could never be good enough to meet the church's expectations. She recognized the authority of Scripture, but had built emotional walls to protect herself from the guilt she experienced when she read Scripture. In order to take down her emotional walls, we needed to explore her fear of God and the Bible. She was open to new interpretations of passages she had previously thought pointed to her guilt. Before she had pulled condemning verses out of context, but soon she was able to see themes of grace and forgiveness blanketing isolated verses about sin and inadequacy. Scripture was an important part of working with Sandy.

These cases illustrate the importance of individualizing treatment and counseling techniques. Sometimes Scripture and prayer are important components of Christian counseling, but other times they are not; it depends on the beliefs and environment of the client. A healing atmosphere is enhanced by viewing each client as a unique individual. As clients learn to feel confident and safe in the counseling office, they are better able to learn skills and accept God's love to heal their pain.

### **Healing Factor 2: Metacognition**

Metacognition is the ability to think about thinking—to understand and control one's thought processes. As clients progress in cognitive therapy, they become adept at metacognition, recognizing inflexible and destructive thoughts and replacing them with adaptive ones.

Like cognitive therapy, Christian healing has traditionally required skills of metacognition. Those looking for spiritual help are often directed to passages of Scripture that require metacognition. This common methodology provides a sense of safety for many Christians as they begin cognitive therapy—safety that promotes a healing, therapeutic atmosphere. Consider the following examples of familiar Scripture passages emphasizing metacognition.

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve, what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Rom. 12:2)

The idea of renewing our minds requires us to understand our thoughts and feelings and examine them critically in the light of Scripture and Christian theology. The context of this passage (see Romans 12:1) suggests it is our Christian obligation, an act of worship, to renew our minds. As a result, many Christians are experienced introspectors. Some are skilled at analyzing their thoughts and looking for alternative ways of thinking, while others introspect but come to inflexible or unreasonable conclusions.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. (Phil. 4:8)

In the context of describing peace and joy, the apostle Paul clearly emphasizes thinking about thinking. He admonishes his readers to seek pure, correct thoughts. This same connection between thoughts and feelings is suggested by cognitive therapists. Dysfunctional, inflexible thinking leads to negative feelings; accurate, true thinking leads to peace.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices

and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment." But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, "Raca," is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, "You fool!" will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

You have heard that it was said, "Do not commit adultery." But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. (Matt. 5:17-30)

Jesus came to fulfill the law and in the process, he helped his listeners better understand sin. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that murder and adultery result from malignant thoughts. While it may be hyperbole to say that thoughts are as evil as actions, it demonstrates that thoughts are powerful forces that need to be controlled.

These examples demonstrate ways Christians learn about metacognition. When they come for counseling, many of them are already familiar with thinking about thoughts. As a cognitive therapist explains the road map for counseling, Christian clients are put at ease by the emphasis on thoughts—an emphasis with which they are familiar. As their comfort grows into feelings of safety and trust, it enhances the healing environment.

### **Healing Factor 3: Support for Religious Beliefs**

Christian counselors routinely hear horror stories about other therapists who tell their clients they must give up their religious beliefs in order to be well. Psychotherapist Albert Ellis, for example, has suggested the concept of sin causes virtually all psychopathology.<sup>5</sup> And psychologist Gary Walls has implied that religious beliefs are not carefully reasoned and that counselors should help their clients develop better reasoning.<sup>6</sup> However, empirical studies suggest that these claims are inaccurate.<sup>7</sup>

When counselors discredit clients' beliefs, clients often feel unnecessarily threatened and defensive. In study with middle-aged adults, potential clients found religiously sensitive counselors more trustworthy, likable, and approachable than agnostic or atheistic counselors.<sup>8</sup> In one survey, 79 percent of respondents selected from a phone book believed religious values were important to discuss in therapy and over half of the respondents preferred to seek therapy at a pastoral counseling center.<sup>9</sup>

Constructing a healing environment requires the counselor to work sensitively with clients' religious values. Feelings of security are unlikely to develop if the counselor requires clients to give up beliefs they cherish. Cognitive therapy is well suited for working within the client's religious framework, because it involves collaborative experiments rather than direct confrontation.

If a client believes good Christians are not attracted to members of the opposite sex (except the spouse), one approach would be to directly confront the belief. A therapist might say, "Even Christians find others attractive." This might be received well by the client or it might be threatening, depending on the strength of the original belief. Another approach, one cognitive therapists would be likely to try, is to collaborate with the client to evaluate the belief. "You feel it is wrong to find others attractive. Could we set up an experiment to test your belief?" The experiment might include interviewing a pastor or another respected Christian leader. The client becomes responsible for altering religious beliefs and doesn't feel threatened by the counselor's differing beliefs.

As counselor and client work together to establish a safe, trusting environment, a place for healing is created. When Christians are involved, the place of healing can include an open consideration of religious values, Scripture, and prayer. Although I have focused on the benefits of cognitive therapy, many forms of Christian counseling create such a place where healing can occur.



**A PLACE TO PURSUE TRUTH ABOVE HAPPINESS**

The following conversation is familiar to counselors.

COUNSELOR: What would you like to see happen as a result of counseling?

CLIENT: I just want to feel happy.

COUNSELOR: Happy?

CLIENT: Yeah. I just want to be happy like other people are.

Happiness is pleasant but elusive. Often those who vigorously pursue happiness are the ones feeling the most unhappy. Some pursue happiness through extramarital affairs, but they produce an unhappy existence for themselves with broken promises, broken children, and broken dreams. Some pursue happiness through consumerism and materialism. During the past three decades, an increasing number of college freshman report that making a lot of money is an important life goal while a decreasing number see gaining a meaningful philosophy of life as important. However, while personal income has consistently increased, the percentage of Americans who report being very happy hovers around 30 percent.<sup>10</sup> Prosperity doesn't make people happy. After interviewing two hundred Americans, sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues concluded, "few have found a life devoted to 'personal ambition and consumerism' satisfactory, and most are seeking in one way or another to transcend the limitations of a self-centered life."<sup>11</sup>

Happiness is slippery. Those who seek it watch it ooze through their fingers as their hands become empty. In contrast, those who seek purpose and meaning and truth often find happiness, too. The apostle Paul does not instruct the Philippians to set their minds on whatever makes them happy, but on whatever is true and right. Then he instructs them to live obediently, concluding, "And the God of peace will be with you" (Phil. 4:9).

In his book, *Effective Biblical Counseling*, Dr. Larry Crabb comes to a similar conclusion. He writes:

Many of us place top priority not on becoming Christ-like in the middle of our problems but on finding happiness. I want to be happy but the paradoxical truth is that I will never be happy if I am concerned primarily with becoming happy. My overriding goal must

be in every circumstance to respond biblically, to put the Lord first, to seek to behave as He would want me to. The wonderful truth is that as we devote all our energies to the task of becoming what Christ wants us to be, He fills us with joy unspeakable and a peace far surpassing what the world offers.<sup>12</sup>

Christian counselors help their clients look beyond happiness or symptom relief to seek truth. Cognitive therapy and Christianity blend nicely as counselors seek to move their clients beyond a futile search for happiness.

### **Truth-Seeking Factor 1: Critical Thinking**

Cognitive therapy assumes emotions stem from personal beliefs about events in the world. Thus, accurate, critical, flexible thinking is the key to changing unwanted feelings.<sup>13</sup> The cognitive therapy model works well for counselors who want to emphasize truth-seeking above happiness-seeking, because teaching critical thinking skills is an essential part of treatment. Clients repeatedly confront the truthfulness of their thoughts and beliefs in cognitive therapy. The following conversation reflects this truth-seeking emphasis.

CLIENT: I'm so tired of him [husband] never appreciating me. I do so much for him and he just does whatever he wants. I just don't think I can stand it any more.

COUNSELOR: You're saying to yourself, "I just can't take this anymore." I'm wondering if that's true.

CLIENT: Well, I can take it. I mean I have been for twelve years. But I don't like it and it's driving me crazy!

COUNSELOR: Crazy?

CLIENT: Not literally, but I sure am tired of doing things for him and not getting any appreciation.

COUNSELOR: Does it feel different when you say, as you did a minute ago, "I can't stand this any more," than it does when you say, "I'm getting tired of this."

CLIENT: A little. I suppose I can stand it, but I am tired.

COUNSELOR: That's good. Now let's go back a minute. You also said your husband never appreciates you. Tell me about that.

CLIENT: I see what you're getting at. He has been nice to me lately, but there are so many things he forgets. I have asked him hundreds of times to put his dishes in the dishwasher after breakfast, but he still puts them on the counter.

COUNSELOR: I see. So another way to say it would be that he has some troubling habits and he forgets some things easily, but he shows appreciation sometimes.

CLIENT: Yes. That's what I mean.

This conversation demonstrates the centrality of truth-seeking in cognitive therapy. This client's initial assumptions were based on happiness-seeking: "If I can't be happy in my marriage, then I can't stand it." When she believed her husband was never appreciative and that she could no longer stand her marriage, her only options were to leave her husband or to feel miserable. But as she looked at the situation more accurately, she realized she could survive with her husband, although some of his behavior was disappointing. Once she accepted the option of working on the relationship, she critically examined her confusion between submissiveness and passivity, learned to assertively express her feelings, and convinced her husband to come with her for marital therapy. Seeking short-sighted happiness by leaving the marriage would have resulted in a painful child-custody battle and feelings of loneliness, despair, and guilt.

### **Truth-Seeking Factor 2: Models in Scripture**

Christian counselors attempting to create a truth-seeking atmosphere in therapy can point to examples in Scripture when godly men and women altered their beliefs and obeyed, sometimes sacrificing happiness to do so. Throughout the Bible, God's people stood firm in the midst of tribulation because they were committed to godliness through truthful and productive thinking.

- Abraham chose to believe God's promise of a child though it seemed impossible.
- Job survived crises and resisted his friends' conclusions that his troubles were caused by sin.
- Daniel obediently prayed, though he knew he could be punished with death in the lions' den.

- David thought of God's power rather than Goliath's size.
- Hosea chose to forgive Gomer's unfaithfulness, overcoming his anger.
- The apostle Paul sought obedience above personal safety.

These examples demonstrate independent, critical thinking in the midst of danger or emotional pain. It is useful in cognitive therapy with Christian clients to speculate on the thought processes that were involved. Consider the following example.

COUNSELOR: You're facing a tough situation, feeling committed to your marriage, but finding yourself attracted to your co-worker. And he seems to be interested in you, too. What kind of thoughts are going through your mind as you describe this situation?

CLIENT: I feel helpless. I'm happily married but I don't know how long I can resist this temptation. It's like there's a war going on inside. It seems impossible to resist.

COUNSELOR: You use the word "impossible." And your situation feels impossible to you at times, I'm sure. I was thinking of Job in the Old Testament. What do you suppose went through his mind after he lost his children and his property?

CLIENT: That was even worse. I imagine he thought he could never survive. He did, though. I get it. You think I can survive this, too.

COUNSELOR: Yeah. And when it was all over, Job said to God, "I know that you can do all things." I'm not suggesting this will be easy. I'm just questioning the word "impossible."

CLIENT: I see what you mean.

In this example, Job's story is used to help dispel the belief that the client's temptation is too strong to bear. Although temptations sometimes feel overwhelming, Scripture gives examples of those who have stood firm in the midst of monumental hardships. Because counseling is not a place for preaching, Scripture is best used cautiously in a collaborative way rather than in a prescriptive or condescending way. The story of Job is a better choice in this case than quoting 1 Corinthians 10:13, "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man . . . ," because the Job story allows the client to collaborate in understanding the thought processes involved.

Many other examples in Scripture produce useful discussions of truth-seeking in counseling. Cognitive therapists who weave the examples into discussions of clients' thoughts help produce an environment where truth is valued more than happiness.

### A PLACE TO BE AUTHENTIC

A Christian counselor's office is also a place for authenticity. Because we show our best selves to one another, church attenders sometimes assume the church is filled with flawless saints, or at least those who see themselves as flawless. As a result, church congregations are not a likely place to admit weaknesses. Those wanting to authentically discuss temptations, fears, or doubts often end up talking with Christian counselors.

In an earlier book, *Your Hidden Half*,<sup>14</sup> I described how authenticity is hindered by two categories of impulse, which I call *dark side* and *glossy side*. The dark side is comprised of our pleasure-seeking impulses and the glossy side is made up of our impulses to appear perfect to others. Glossy side and dark side are synergistic—that is, they are much worse together than either would be alone.

This synergistic effect is shown in Figure 3-1. All Christians experience temptations. Most Christians believe temptation is not sin. Even Jesus experienced temptation. But those same Christians who rationally believe temptation is not sin often feel the emotions of guilt. Their glossy side says, *The best Christians are the ones who aren't tempted, or, You are a weak Christian if you have those desires!* It may be that most Christians face the same temptations from time to time, but since we don't talk about our temptations openly, we each feel alone and weak when we are tempted. This is *irrational guilt*, guilt based on faulty thinking rather than violating God's moral law. But once a person already feels guilty for temptation, it is not a big step to go ahead and sin. The dark side reasons, *As long as I'm already feeling guilty, I might as well enjoy myself.* By analogy, once dieters go off their diet, they show less restraint in eating than those who are not dieting.<sup>15</sup> Once sin has occurred, the person feels confirmed guilt as the glossy side reasons, *I knew I was weak; others would never sin like I do.* In looking for ways to prevent future sin, people often resort to self-deprivation. But temptation comes anyway, and the cycle begins again.

## The Vicious Cycle of Dark-Side and Glossy-Side Impulses

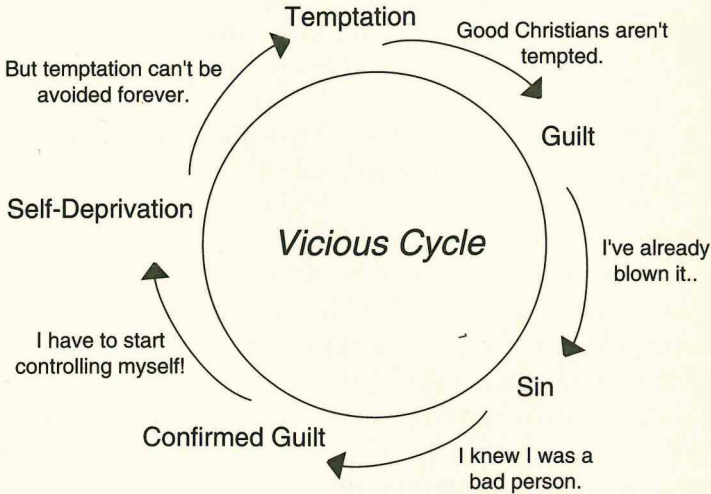


Fig. 3-1

In order to interrupt this vicious cycle, we need to compare our irrational guilt feelings with Scripture. If we have violated a moral law, then guilt can be our friend—guiding us to repentance and correction. But if the guilt is irrational it is our enemy—guiding us to self-condemnation and greater temptation. In cognitive therapy, clients can examine their beliefs with Scripture and come to a rational evaluation of their guilt.

Another way to interrupt the cycle is to authentically discuss temptation with other Christians so the irrational guilt can be managed. Knowing that others face similar temptations and being reminded that temptation is not sin helps break the vicious cycle created by the dark-side and glossy-side impulses, and allows people to live authentic lives before God and others. Cognitive therapy provides benefits for counselors wanting to create this atmosphere of authenticity for their clients.

### Authenticity Factor 1: Fighting “Shoulds,” “Musts,” and “Oughts”

Christians often come for counseling with a rigid set of personal rules. Cognitive therapists help their clients develop a different vocabulary to eliminate the unnecessary pressure of “shoulds,” “oughts,” and “musts.” The client whose self-talk is, *I must be friendly to everyone I know*, finds it freeing to say instead, *It would be nice to be friendly to many different people*. Since glossy-side impulses—shoulds, musts, and oughts—inhibit authenticity, cognitive therapists can free clients from unrealistic

expectations by helping them understand and revise unnecessary demands they place on themselves.

I had one Christian client write down the reasons she believed herself to be a bad person. She returned with a detailed list of glossy-side impulses. She was a bad person because she didn't read her Bible or pray as much as she should. She was grumpy with her husband sometimes and didn't always want to have sex when he did. Her house wasn't always clean. She overused her credit card. She sometimes found men other than her husband attractive. Years earlier, when she babysat as a high schooler, she sometimes took food from the families' cupboards without telling anyone about it. These shoulds convinced her of her worthlessness before God and others. Not surprisingly, she did not feel authentic because she felt a continual need to hide her real self from others, even those close to her. She feared their rejection if they knew what she was really like. As she learned to revise her self-talk, her glossy-side impulses lessened and she gained more control over her emotions and behavior.

As Christian counselors, we need to be prudent about taking away shoulds, musts and oughts. Many of these are irrational impulses, but some clients depend on these ineffective impulses for self-control. Taking away ineffective self-control mechanisms does not mean the client will automatically develop effective means of self-control. Psychotherapist S. R. Graham noted the same problem:

Quite early in the treatment process, the patient begins to use words like good and bad, and it is our tendency as therapists to diminish the intensity of these words since they relate to a value system within the individual which has led to the current state of stress. My own personal view of the last thirty years of psychotherapy is that we have collectively done an excellent job of diminishing the demonstration of good and bad and a very poor job of replacing these concepts with acceptable definitions which allow the individual self-acceptance and peace.<sup>16</sup>

It is not enough to remove "shoulds," "oughts," and "musts." We need to help our clients replace these glossy-side constraints with more effective rational constraints. Otherwise we encourage authenticity at the cost of Christian obedience. Strategies for removing unnecessary self-demands while giving new strategies of self-control will be discussed in later chapters.

## Authenticity Factor 2: Psychology and Grace

Christian counselors can also promote authenticity by emphasizing God's grace as they teach clients to think in increasingly flexible ways. When the apostle Paul was struggling with dark-side and glossy-side impulses in Romans 7, he concluded that God's grace addresses the problem: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:1, 2). And when Paul struggled with his "thorn in the flesh," which many scholars take to mean temptation, he was reminded that God's grace was sufficient for him (see 2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

Grace paves the way for authenticity. The one who reasons, *If people really knew me they would never love me*, develops inauthentic ways of dealing with others for purposes of self-protection. God's message of grace is the opposite: "I love you regardless of your performance."

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:4-7)

Once people feel loved, they are more willing to be authentic because their acceptability is no longer at stake.

Christian counselors are faced with the task of helping their clients feel God's love. Pastor David Seamands, in *Healing for Damaged Emotions*, writes: "We read, we hear, we believe a good theology of grace. But that's not the way we live. We believe grace in our heads but not in our gut-level feelings or in our relationships."<sup>17</sup> Counselors who help others understand God's grace in their "gut-level feelings" and in their relationships unlock their clients from prisons of self-doubt, inadequacy, and shame, freeing them to live authentically.

### POTENTIAL OBSTACLES

In addition to these seven benefits of using cognitive therapy techniques in Christian counseling, there are some potential obstacles to



combining the two.<sup>18</sup> Christian counselors do well to anticipate these problems and avoid them by using collaboration rather than confrontation.

Albert Ellis, founder of rational-emotive therapy, openly disputes faulty beliefs with his clients.<sup>19</sup> Imagine the following conversation:

CLIENT: I can't believe I yelled at my kids again. I keep thinking a good person—a good Christian—wouldn't lose control like that.

COUNSELOR: You're telling yourself you're no good because you yelled at your kids. What does yelling have to do with your worth?

CLIENT: Because most people don't do that kind of thing—so I feel worthless.

COUNSELOR: You're using *musts* and *shoulds*, like you've done something awful by yelling at your kids and that you're worthless because of it. That doesn't make sense. You're making yourself feel bad by the things you're choosing to believe.

For many clients, this confrontive style is too threatening. Psychiatrist Aaron Beck and psychologist Donald Meichenbaum prefer collaborating with the client to test their faulty beliefs.<sup>20</sup> This is a better alternative in most cases.

CLIENT: I can't believe I yelled at my kids again. I keep thinking a good person—a good Christian—wouldn't lose control like that.

COUNSELOR: You're telling yourself you're no good because you yelled at your kids. What kind of evidence do you have for connecting your worth with your parenting?

CLIENT: Because most people don't do that kind of thing—I feel worthless.

COUNSELOR: I see. You believe most people don't yell at their children from time to time. That belief leads to feelings of worthlessness. I wonder if it's accurate—that most people don't yell at their children. Can you think of any way we could test that idea?

This collaborative approach allows clients to challenge their own beliefs at their own pace and often results in less defensiveness. Collaboration is an effective way to deal with the obstacles described here.

## **Obstacle 1: Self-Interest and Self-Direction**

In an essay entitled, "The Case Against Religion," Albert Ellis asserted that self-interest and self-direction are qualities of emotionally healthy individuals. Because religious clients have neither, according to Ellis, they are not emotionally healthy.<sup>21</sup>

Ellis is correct that Christian clients are concerned about excessive self-interest. The Bible teaches, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 10:39); and, "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ" (Phil. 3:7). Many Christians see self-sacrifice as a higher calling than self-interest.

Although self-sacrifice is valued among Christians, Ellis's conclusion that religious people are emotionally unhealthy is not justified. Self-interest and self-sacrifice are not mutually exclusive—Ellis is guilty of categorical thinking in assuming they are. Despite the emphasis on self-sacrifice, religious individuals report having at least as much control over their thoughts and behaviors as nonreligious people.<sup>22</sup> Cognitive therapists need not make religious clients more self-interested.

Some Christian clients, however, have misunderstood self-sacrifice. They feel they must meet all the needs of others and ignore their own needs, and they end up resenting the things they do for others. These irrational ideas need to be evaluated in cognitive counseling. Self-interest and self-sacrifice need to be balanced.

Using confrontation to get a Christian client to become more self-interested and self-directed often produces resistance, especially since Christian clients often come to counseling fearing their values will be attacked.<sup>23</sup> Collaboration with clients more effectively helps them balance self-interest with self-sacrifice. In the process of interviewing friends, pastors, and other Christian leaders, reading the Bible, and praying, many Christians are able to distinguish between voluntary self-sacrifice and the acquiescing that leads to resentment.

## **Obstacle 2: Rigid Thinking**

Cognitive therapists try to change clients' inflexible, rigid thinking. To some extent, this is appropriate for Christian clients since those who are depressed often have unrealistic perfection demands and illogical beliefs,<sup>24</sup> and since effective treatment for Christians often requires examination of their perfectionistic tendencies.<sup>25</sup> But cognitive therapists are guilty of

categorical thinking if they assume all rigid thinking is inappropriate. Perhaps it is rigid to believe in the authority of Scripture, the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, or the second coming, but these are central aspects of the Christian faith. When cognitive therapists challenge beliefs central to Christianity, they are likely to face resistance from Christian clients.

Which beliefs are central to Christianity and which are not? Some believe that women are to be submissive to men and hold this belief as a central doctrine of their faith. Others disagree, emphasizing the equality of all people before God. Some believe the rapture will occur before the tribulation, while others insist it will be during or after the tribulation. One client told me the Bible taught that men and women should not be friends unless they are married. Another believed depression is a sin. Are these beliefs central to the faith?

Rather than the therapist determining which beliefs are central and which are not, client and therapist can collaborate to evaluate the necessity of various beliefs. For example, one client's depression seemed directly connected to her beliefs that she was an inadequate Christian. Rather than overtly disputing the belief, I encouraged her to keep track of the internal script she used while sitting in church. Her pastor, who was apparently quite negative and critical in most sermons, evoked many self-statements in her. She told herself, *Other Christians are more committed than I*, and *If I were really a Christian I would do more things for the church*, and so on. We then used Scripture to evaluate the beliefs she had during the sermons and found they were unnecessary. In her new internal script, she challenged the words of her pastor rather than automatically feeling guilty for her inadequacy. She learned the healthier script quickly, generalized it to other self-statements, and showed significant gains in therapy. The key was collaborating in evaluating her self-talk rather than immediately confronting it as irrational.

Some rigid thinking needs to be changed and some needs to be respected. Allowing clients to help determine which beliefs need changing is an important strategy for counselors.

### **Obstacle 3: Need for Philosophical Change**

Albert Ellis suggests that cognitive therapies need to help clients with meaningful philosophical changes in their thinking.<sup>26</sup> He advocates atheistic-humanistic values to his clients.<sup>27</sup>

Because the goal is to change underlying beliefs about the world, clients often leave cognitive therapy with a new set of assumptions about

themselves, others, and God. If these values are transferred without respect for Christian convictions, clients' values can be undermined. "There has always been a danger that the rational or cognitive therapies have underplayed the role played by values in the urge to stress the importance of rationality and logic."<sup>28</sup>

The goal of cognitive therapy is to implement philosophical changes in the way clients view their world. However, Ellis's assumptions that religious beliefs need to be changed is not consistent with the goals of pastoral or Christian counseling,<sup>29</sup> nor does it seem reasonable when one considers the many emotionally well-adjusted Christians in our world. Again, collaboration is important in establishing with the client which beliefs need to be changed to reach emotional and spiritual health.

These obstacles require Christian counselors to sensitively collaborate with their clients in designing effective treatments. Cognitive therapy has been effective in treating religious clients,<sup>30</sup> and there are many benefits of using cognitive techniques in Christian counseling.