

NEW EPIPHANIES OR FALSE MESSIAHS

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We are well into the era of "self-help" and promises for growth. Entire sections of book stores, libraries, and even news magazines keep us posted on the latest method or "process" for reaching more of our "potential." Unfortunately, many persons speaking for the church have been as extreme in their praise or vilification of these approaches to living as are the approaches themselves.

My purpose here is to identify some general characteristics that appear frequently in what we call the "pop psychologies" or the Human Potential Movement. Then, some brief theological rumination will be offered as a means of evaluating the "promises" that are involved.

I. FIVE GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

Some of the approaches to human potential have been more appealing to the church and church professionals than others. Those that have seemed to be adopted most rapidly have several common characteristics that are emphasized in varying ways and to varying degrees.

1. A BELIEF THAT PEOPLE ARE NATURALLY INCLINED TOWARD GROWTH. This belief is contained in the phrase "Human Potential Movement." It is a characteristic of optimism that specifically centers on the notion of change. Its basic tenet is that human beings are changeable and, furthermore, are naturally disposed to growing in positive ways. Some of the sources for this come from writers such as Abraham Maslow, who wrote a great deal about self-actualization, peak experiences, etc. Another early theorist of this notion is Gordon Allport in his discussions of inclination toward growth and movement toward maturity.

2. AN EMPHASIS PLACED ON THE VALUE OF EMOTION OR FEELING AS A MAJOR CRITERIA FOR DECISION MAKING AND CHANGE. Many phrases appear in the vocabulary of self-help and human potential to illustrate this. "Get out the anger," "get in touch with your feelings," etc. are common. Many areas of encounter groups, sensitivity training, Gestalt therapy, and some growth groups have a quieter reputation for intense emphasis on emotion and use of those feelings as a vehicle and motivator for positive change.

3. AN EMPHASIS ON THE "HERE AND NOW." To discuss one's history or one's hopes may be viewed as attempts at resistance or denial, thus impeding positive change which may be frightening because of its newness. The present moment is what offers us the "pass key" toward change. That emphasis is found in encounter groups, Gestalt therapy, and many of the forms of meditation. They emphasize a shedding of the past and future, an atomic moment as it were, in quest of one's potential.

4. A HEAVY COMMITMENT TO THE WELFARE OF THE SELF. "Self-fulfillment, potential of the self, taking responsibility for the self, self-esteem, self-worth, autonomy of the self," all are indicators of this heavy emphasis. One certainly is not encouraged to become a hermit or a recluse, but to varying degrees the self is the final source of appeal for what should be done for its own welfare. The introduction of external rules, "oughts and shoulds" are viewed as manipulative or "parental" --the assumption being that the self is of highest importance when a big decision is to be made.

5. A REGULAR AND SOMETIMES CONTRADICTIONARY EMPHASIS ON THE CONCEPT OF INSIGHT. This appears to run full in the face of commitment to emotion and self. Nonetheless, in the careful diagrams of transactional analysis, in the high emphasis on feed-back in groups, in the rational/emotive theory of Albert Ellis, and the reality therapy of William Glasser, high priority is placed on insight. Clearly, to many, insight is more than a cognitive function. It is accompanied by emotion. Otherwise, motivation to change as a result of insight would not be likely to occur.

These five characteristics, I believe, encompass reasonably the primary motifs of the Human Potential Movement which has laid so much claim to the commitments of many who practice care and counseling in our culture and indeed within our churches. It must be said, of course, that these themes can be caricatured to an exaggerated degree. All of them contain elements of caring, and few practitioners would be sterile in their use of these principles. Nonetheless, they present an image of human nature which should be examined carefully from a theological point of view.

The image that is presented is one of the human whose primary source for meaning is in the present moment. Furthermore, it is possible to take control of that present moment and to shape it in such a way as to change the character of the self. The self has the power to assume that responsibility, and thus the highest expression of human nature is to do so. Furthermore, because it is possible and important for the self to care for itself, there is danger in allowing one's self to become overly influenced by others to the point of deprivation in one's own quest for fulfillment. One's quest of potential should be an active one, including a willingness to experience pain as well as elation, since feeling and insight are gained from such movements and experiments, which are the vehicles for growth and change.

An example of this would be transactional analysis, a method of theory and therapy authorized by Eric Berne. It is one of the most popular approaches to growth and development that has made the rounds in our culture. Its approach is straightforward and impressive, describing three ego states (parent, adult and child) which reasonably encompass the dynamics of the self. Change is brought about by a person identifying the ego state in control at a given moment and then deciding whether that is the desirable or realistic one for that situation. Such analysis moves on to examination of the interaction between persons, and responsibility is placed on each person involved to establish the ego state in action at that moment. Then each must act in their interest of engendering a positive or "winning" experience for the self.

Note the presence of the factors I have mentioned. There is strong optimism about the power of the self to change, stimulated by feeling and controlled by a rational process of regular self-analysis. Emphasis on the importance of attending

to the present moment is there, and responsibility is assigned to the self primarily for the welfare of that same self.

II. REFLECTIONS

One of the first questions that must be asked about these characteristics revolves around the changing nature of the personality. This issue really is the old problem of optimism. How changeable are we really? It's optimism versus original sin again!

It seems to me that these psychologies offer an important word of encouragement to us, but they also promise more than they can deliver from a theological point of view. The narrative of the Bible appears to me to be an account of the continuing struggle to face one's limitations as well as one's possibilities. From the saga of the Garden to our ongoing attempts to bring in the kingdom ourselves, God continues to remind us that we are not God. The psychologies of change do not acknowledge those limits very effectively, although they remind us that we have often been too carried away in our preoccupation with sin and its limits. While I have seen many persons return from encounter groups, marathon weekends, and therapy in states of high elation, I have also seen them experience depression later when they discover that the changes did not last. The danger of an optimistic emphasis on the possibilities of change is the accompanying failure to learn to live with limits, to forget that we are not God.

A second difficulty, of course, is that the optimism places a merciless burden on the self. If one believes that changes can be brought about, then one is expected to do so in order to be an adequate human being. The resulting failure, or falling short, carries with it a label of inadequacy. In other words, one becomes a failure rather than experiencing a failure. When one's being becomes so identified with one's experience, we have shifted the definition of self from what we were created to be to what we are able to achieve. This shifts the source of power and definition of self from God to the person.

Of course the danger with an overemphasis on sin and limitation is the stripping of a person of motivation to change at all. At that point, the messiahs of the Human Potential Movement have a positive word to offer us. They have assured us that we can do something to change, and the change can be positive. I merely want to add the dimension of Christian thought that removes the burden of having one's value and sense of meaning on the line in every encounter. Stated positively, we have the freedom to pursue change without the outcome being an ultimate judgment on our worth in our own sight or in the sight of God. Henri Nouwen, in an address at the 1976 ACPE meeting, phrased it clearly when he pointed out that Tom Harris (author of I'm Okay--You're Okay) should have added a fifth dimension to his list which would have provided this note of Christian freedom. It would be "I'm Not Okay--You're Not Okay, and That's Okay!"

Another arena which calls for theological inspection revolves around the emphasis on "here and now." Such emphasis on the present moment is a derivative affirmation from an optimistic view of human nature. If one is only bound by the present moment, then control becomes a possibility again. Certainly there would be no argument about the importance of the present moment from a theological perspective. There would, however, be argument about an exclusive emphasis on the importance of the present moment. An adequate and holistic view of human nature will not lower the importance of one aspect of time to the priority of another and

remain faithful to the Biblical witness. We are people who carry responsibility in the present, have a heritage which provides us support from the past, and are the recipients of promises which enable us to move into the future.

The emphasis on the present moment, accompanied by the need to control our lives, raises interesting issues with regard to providence. The real question with which we must wrestle is whether we are human beings who must control our own destiny. Or, are we willing to be participants in a life over which we have only limited control. Such an issue of providence, for me, raises the issue of trust. Am I willing to trust myself willingly (although theologically I have no real choice) to another with a certain confidence that, although often distasteful and undesirable, my value and meaning is not caught up in what I now see, feel, hear, and experience. The tendency of many current potential movements is to oppose such trust with a subtle affirmation that we can indeed control and shape our destiny.

Of course the importance of the self is a further major concern. Self-fulfillment can stand in bold tension with the importance of loving our neighbor. Theologically, it appears to be in the nature of human beings to both care for the self and care for others. While in our history there has been the tendency to overdo emphasis on self-denial, the Human Potential Movement has introduced a trend toward "other-denial," usually put in a sophisticated, rational, and logical affirmation of the importance of persons "taking responsibility" for themselves and extricating themselves from dependency. Balance, again, seems to be the order of the day here. Taking responsibility for oneself in terms of gratification and growth can be an affirmation of freedom. On the other hand it is only freedom if there is an accompanying commitment to be concerned for and stay with persons who are a part of God's and our community. The freedom comes again in the form of a shift of the source for worth. If the source for worth is external, that is with God, then the taking of responsibility for one's self is something that can be done without the awful burden of having so much hinge on it. Relieved of that awful burden, I am free to care for myself and for others, rather than having to remain preoccupied with my own welfare.

A final issue, and perhaps most significant, revolves around the rational or reflective nature of human beings. The Human Potential Movement has rightfully pointed out the importance of insight. Theologically, we would want to point out that insight does not come simply from within the self. We are a people who have had insight "revealed" to us. It enables us to transcend our sinful tendency to remain preoccupied with ourselves.

Thus, the appeal that I would want to make in evaluating whether aspects of the Human Potential Movement are new epiphanies or false messiahs is a rational one, and a reflective one. What have we learned about ourselves and our own history? Certainly that we are able to distort perceptions in our own self-interest. There is a need for us to stand outside of ourselves and to hear a word from outside of ourselves as we pursue change, not as individuals, but as a community of God's people.

Interestingly enough, findings are showing up in secular research which strengthen such beliefs. Research carried out by Morton, Lieberman, and Miles demonstrated that those persons who tended to grow most positively were those individuals who reflected on their experiences. This was in contrast to those who operated more exclusively on emotion. Furthermore, those groups in which more opportunities for growth seemed to occur were led by leaders characterized by caring in a firm commitment to a theory or set of beliefs, about what was

happening. Masters and Johnson, often accused of being teachers of techniques, point out that our nature as human beings must be considered. The mere teaching of technique is not their cure. Cures come out of the experience of commitments between people which result in asking, "What can I do for you?" as much as saying, "Do this for me!" This would be the focus or dimension that comes from our theology. We are not merely creatures of the night oriented toward the greatest moment. Rather, we are our past, present, and our future, constantly reshaping and adapting. In fact, we are not creatures inclined to change, for we often resist it and must learn that there are many things that we are too limited to change. Neither are we creatures of pure feeling, self-indulgent and self-fulfilling. Rather, we have a reflective capacity and sense of care and awareness of revelation that enables us to transcend ourselves. And only when we come to appreciate all that complexity are we on the road to learning what being humans, created in the image of God, can mean.