

MEDIA SPOTLIGHT



A BIBLICAL ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS & SECULAR MEDIA

SPECIAL REPORT

JAMES DOBSON

A CRITIQUE

by Martin & Deidre Bobgan with Albert James Dager

This article is based largely on a condensation of three chapters from the book, Prophets of PsychoHeresy II, by Martin and Deidre Bobgan, with some thoughts of my own sprinkled throughout. It is a critique of some of Dr. James Dobson's psychological theories and practices which are not in conformity with scriptural truth.

By no means do we question Dr. Dobson's sincerity or faith in Christ. Nor do we question his integrity. There are few among public figures whose integrity is as well-known as Dr. Dobson's. Our interest is not in denigrating Dr. Dobson, but in helping Christians see the fallacy of incorporating psychology—a system of thought based on man's wisdom rather than on God's Word—as a valid means of helping true Christians.

It will be argued that, in spite of some problems, Dr. Dobson has done a world of good. We do not dispute that. But so, too, has the Roman Catholic Church done much good through its hospitals and many charitable outreaches. The quality of education at Roman Catholic schools is seldom surpassed by other educational institutions. The Freemasons do much good, as do the Mormons, and many secular and even New Age organizations. Our concern is not with the outward good, but with the subtle errors that can lead astray. Would we ignore these groups's errors because of the good they do?

For a better understanding of the information presented herein, I suggest you read Prophets of PsychoHeresy II, and the Bobgan's other authoritative books on psychology which will be listed at the end of the article, as well as our special report, "Psychology: Science or Religion," a condensation of the Bobgans's book, PsychoHeresy.

Albert James Dager, Editor & Publisher

Dr. James Dobson is one of the most influential spokesmen in evangelical Christianity. Millions, both Christian and non-Christian, listen to his daily *Focus on the Family* broadcast, and over 50 million people have viewed his *Focus on the family* film series. Dobson's books remain on the best-seller lists for years. In addition, *Focus on the Family* magazine and church bulletin inserts supply weekly and monthly insights into his philosophy. Dobson may well be the best-known and most respected man in present-day Christendom.

MAN OF THE HOUR

There is good reason for Dobson's popularity among Christians. Secular society has become increasingly saturated with overt evil—the result of decades mired in psychological theories that have turned many hearts away from God's truth. The encroachment of many of these psychological theories into Christianity has been a subtle, gradual movement which began in seminaries and pastoral counseling classes. Pastors, concerned about their congregants seeking help outside their fold, began to

avail themselves of man's wisdom as a means to minister.¹

The liberal denominations became psychologized much earlier than the more conservative ones. Society was becoming saturated with the kind of psychology that seeks to understand human behavior. Psychological language had become a part of everyday language and psychological solutions became the answer to everyday problems. Sometimes, through the efforts of local mental health organizations, psychologists and pastors dialogued together; in the process, pastors became intimidated and felt inadequate to counsel on certain problems. Thus they began to refer their congregants to psychologists.

Most evangelical Christians were suspicious of those psychological ideas which obviously contradicted what they understood to be biblical. Misunderstanding the pastor's role to be one of solving problems rather than presenting scriptural answers to people with the problems, they desired a form of psychology which seemed to agree with what they knew about the Bible. They were ready for a person who was both a psychologist and a Chris-

tian—a person who could meld psychological theory with biblical truth. To carry the titles of both "Christian" and "psychologist" is the new ideal in the contemporary church.

Dobson's first book, *Dare to Discipline* (Tyndale House, 1970), was a breath of fresh air to Christian parents lost in the fog of permissiveness promoted by secular psychologists and educators. Dobson rightly criticized the proponents of permissiveness and their humanistic philosophy which allowed a child to do almost whatever he wanted with the idea that eventually he would respond positively.

Christians familiar with Scripture's admonitions on child rearing were uncomfortable with the permissiveness theory. They were relieved to find a readable book by a Christian educator and psychologist who seemed to teach biblical methods of child rearing. Here was a licensed psychologist confirming their beliefs.

Pastors and other Bible teachers had been teaching for centuries what Christian parents should know and practice. But many wanted another source of confirmation. Dobson was not just some "lowly" pastor teaching from a biblical perspective; he was a psychologist who could give authoritative, pragmatic, psychological reasons for disciplining children.

Although he holds the coveted title of "psychologist," Dobson was trained in education rather than in psychology. He earned his Ph.D. in Education with a major in Child Development from the University of Southern California. According to the State of California Psychology Examining Committee, Dobson has a generic license:

The license provided for in California law is a *generic* license. Given, however, the wide variety of activities in which psychologists engage, the Examining Committee allows candidates to specify an area of emphasis for oral examination. Dr. Dobson indicated "educational psychology" as his area of competency when he completed his oral examination in 1968...Under the generic license requirements one is titled "licensed Psychologist" in California.²

CRITICISMS OF EXPERTS

Dobson is to be commended for his strong teachings on combining firm discipline with love and affection in contrast to those child psychologists who promote permissiveness. In fact, although Dobson's authoritative position in Christendom rests upon his status as a licensed psychologist and an expert in child development, even he expresses concern about people's dependence upon "experts." He points out the difference between them and himself:

How do my writings differ from the unsupported recommendations of those whom I have criticized? The distinction lies in the *source* of the views being presented. The underlying principles expressed herein are not my own innovative insights which would be forgotten in a brief season or two. Instead, they originated with the inspired biblical writers who gave us the foundation for all relationships in the home.³ (Emphasis Dobson's)

Dobson does believe that his source is the Bible, and yet a number of concepts that Dobson teaches—particularly his self-esteem concepts—are not found in Scripture. And while some of his teachings may agree with the Bible, and he may use Scripture to give his points added strength, many of his teachings glorify the psychological wisdom of the world more than the God of the Bible. Psychology is the point of reference and authority from which he teaches. In most cases, rather than quote Scripture as the basis for a truth that psychology finds compatible, he quotes the psychological model as the basis with Scripture as the underlying support. It isn't that Dobson is necessarily wrong in everything he says; it's that his point of reference leads his adherents toward psychological theory rather than toward God's Word as the authoritative source for his teachings.

Dobson's criticism of those psychological theories and techniques with which he disagrees is not surprising. With over 250 different systems of psychotherapy (psychological counseling) and the often contradictory theories of child psychology, there is bound to be conflict. Rather than each so-called discovery and theory adding up to a cohesive body of knowledge based on empirical evidence, psychology is made up of a cacophony of conflicting voices. To add to the confusion, psychologists are often eclectic, picking and choosing bits and pieces they happen to like. Therefore, each psychologist offers his own concoction of theories and techniques.

Although the study of child development and educational psychology (Dobson's fields of study) have some basis in objective observation, they are filled with subjectivity and are contaminated with presuppositions which conflict with the Bible, including evolutionism, behaviorism, pragmatism, and humanism.

While Dobson rejects and even opposes the more aberrant teachings of psychological theorists, he also embraces the theories and practices of others which, while appearing to conform to truth, are based on erroneous presuppositions. Like most practitioners, Dobson is eclectic in his approach, choosing from a variety of theorists. In the long run, however, his brand of

psychology is not original. Nor do his psychological pronouncements and recommendations originate from a careful exegesis of Scripture.

METHODS OF TEACHING

Dobson's faith in psychology can be seen throughout his teachings. He quotes numerous psychologists as authorities and recommends their books. Among those he cites authoritatively are Sigmund Freud,⁴ B.F. Skinner,⁵ E.L. Thorndike,⁶ William Glasser,⁷

Stanley Coopersmith,⁸ and Clyde Naramore.⁹ For the most part, Dobson uses story-telling and case histories to impart his philosophy. This method not only keeps his adherents interested but gives a seeming reality to everything he says, including his ideology and the conclusions he makes.

These considerations do not seem to bother the many Christians who base daily decisions on what Dobson says. In fact, his influence extends beyond denominational and even religious boundaries. By avoiding certain theological doctrines and questions, Dobson's teachings have become well-received in a great variety of religious settings including among Mormons.

Consider his popularity among Mormons. It seems incredible that, in over two decades, one so highly esteemed as a Christian teacher would never have said anything that even indirectly challenges their basic beliefs in the nature of God or establishes sound doctrine as the basis of his own teachings. Tim Stafford, writing in *Christianity Today* says of Dobson:

Dobson is a generalist and a popularist. That is an American tradition: speaking with authority and without footnotes.... If Dobson were more qualified in his assertions, if he developed careful biblical and theological arguments, if he marshaled psychological data for his positions, it is doubtful that he would sell millions of books.¹⁰

We must be careful to note that much of what Dobson says about families and child rearing is true. And, in fact, some of the beliefs he propounds are not incompatible with biblical truth. The fact is some of the theories that psychologists propose have a seeming parallel with biblical truth. However, that does not validate the psychological way. If what is true about human nature and behavior is found in Scripture, the question arises as to why Christians desire to look beyond Scripture for the answers. And would Dobson's teachings be necessary if Christians believed what the Word of God says without the need for what appears to be pragmatic confirmation?

It's as if, lacking sufficient faith in God's Word, they must find a source apart from God—preferably from those educated

in the ways of the world—to validate what God has said before they will believe it. In essence, many Christians use Dobson to justify looking beyond Scripture to find solutions to human problems.

This condition exists in large part because many have accepted the lie that there is a difference between spiritual problems and psychological problems. On that basis they have also acquiesced to the belief that pastors and biblical counselors can only deal with spiritual matters (with a very limited definition) and only those trained in psychological theories are equipped to deal with psychological matters (which include virtually everything about understanding the nature of man and how to help him change undesirable behavior).

Today, because of the erroneous separation of the psychological from the spiritual, the word sin has been replaced by the word "dysfunction." This implies that one has no choice but to react wrongly to disagreeable circumstances. This latter view—the psychological view—is predicated upon belief in man's inherent goodness; he only acts bad because of his circumstances. Pastors who refer people to psychologists—even Christian psychologists—are placing them in the hands of those trained in an unscriptural view of man's nature. Even those Christian psychologists who say they believe in man's sinful nature cannot fully escape the influences of the secular psychological view of human nature.

Referrals

An important aspect of James Dobson's practice is to refer people only to those trained in psychological theory. Focus on the Family has become a vast referral system for Christians to be therapized by professional, psychologically-trained counselors. This excludes pastoral counselors who do not hold those degrees and licenses which require extensive course work in psychology. In light of this policy, biblical counselors who rely solely on the Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit need not apply.

This practice is indicative of a failure to understand that curing outward behavior has the same effect of whitewashing a tomb. By all appearances a person has found new life, but inside resides death. Once "cured" by the psychological method, he is less disposed toward seeking God's answer for inward change.

The truth is that outward change for the better makes everyone more comfortable. Most pastors are no different than anyone else in this regard. It is easier to refer a difficult case to a trained psychologist than to make the sacrifices necessary to confront individuals with their sin nature and the need for repentance. If there is failure the pastor is not held responsible.

In his book *Hide or Seek*, Dobson vividly describes what he believes to be the ideal therapeutic relationship. The therapist is portrayed as savior, and the thrust of humanistic psychology can be seen in the sentimental unconditional acceptance that Carl Rogers equated with love. Dobson dramatizes the supposed internal response of the client and then equates professional psychological counseling with the essence of biblical compassion and with the biblical commandment to "bear one another's burdens."¹¹

Of course, no mention is made about the exchange of money for "professional services." Nor does Dobson mention that Paul would not equate bearing one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2) with psychological counseling, especially for a fee. Indeed, in Galatians 6 the counseling is spiritual and can only be done by those who are spiritual. The same epistle explicitly warns against Christians following or dispensing the vain philosophies of men rather than the only true Gospel established by the cross of Christ and the Word of God.

Dobson's love for psychology is reflected in his encouraging young people to consider psychology as their vocation. With that encouragement he does offer the caution that one's own faith must be strong enough to withstand the humanistic concepts to which they will be exposed in graduate school.¹²

His note of caution could be much stronger than it is. In order to become a disciple of Christ in a career of counseling psychology, one must also be a disciple of such psychologists as Freud, Skinner, Adler, Fromm, Maslow, and Rogers. The compromise is so subtle that those who call themselves Christian psychologists do not recognize the extent to which they allow psychological presuppositions to compromise their faith. And if so many pastors and Bible teachers have failed to recognize the subtle dangers to the Faith, how will young college students be able to establish an adequate defense against the plausible arguments of their teachers? Each concession to psychology erodes one's total reliance upon God's Word until psychology is no longer a supplement to the Word, but a supplanter of the Word.

Yet it must be admitted that, by God's grace, some who have undergone psychotherapy have been drawn toward God. This does not validate psychotherapy, however, but God's grace.

THE FEAR FACTOR

Dobson has a strong appeal to women. Here is a man who appears to understand the trials and tribulations of motherhood. Yet along with all his support, Dobson also engenders just enough fear to make parents insecure about rearing children without his psychological understanding and teaching.

One of his methods is through the telling of horror stories. For example, he stresses the importance of disciplining a so-called "strong-willed child" by telling the story about a girl who lost her eyesight by looking at the sun, even though she had been told not to. He suggests that parents read the story to their children in hopes of preventing a similar tragedy.¹³ He dramatizes a story of Lee Harvey Oswald's life to illustrate his point that inferiority and low self-esteem lead to disaster.¹⁴

While he often gives great emotional encouragement to mothers, Dobson also appears to hold them responsible for their children's failures. He tells a story about himself when he caused pain to a new boy in his Sunday school class by making fun of his physical appearance. He claims he was not responsible for his insensitivity because his teachers and parents never told him what it felt like to be laughed at:

Looking back on the episode, I hold my teachers and my parents responsible for that event. They should have told me what it feels like to be laughed at...especially for something different about your body.¹⁵

It is difficult to imagine that they had all neglected to teach him the rudimentary principles of thoughtfulness.

THE GOD OF SELF ESTEEM

Like virtually all psychology practitioners, Dobson believes in the importance of building self esteem or self love. Parents who are conscientious about raising their children and who read Dobson's expansive repertoire of case histories may very well become fearful that no matter what they do they may harm junior's self-esteem. After listing ways a child's self-esteem can be damaged, Dobson says:

...whereas a child can lose self esteem in a thousand ways, the careful reconstruction of his personal worth is usually a slow, difficult process.¹⁶

Even his choice of words, such as "irreparable damage," "there is no escape,"¹⁷ and the "damaged" child¹⁸ can engender fear in the heart of every caring parent. With such engendered fear, a parent may feel an ominous sense of guilt for possibly failing to build the child's self-esteem. But self-esteem is something everyone has by nature. While it is true that a child may become insecure in his abilities and/or perceive that he is unloved, it is not because of low self-esteem. Rather, it is high self-esteem—love of oneself—that leads people of all ages take offense and react adversely to the actions of others. What appears as low self esteem is just another manifestation of self-love.

In part, Christians must love others because we do not want to be responsible for causing anyone to sin by taking offense. But we are not to take offense if someone does something unloving to us. This is not always good psychology, but it is what God's Word tells us (Matthew 6:43-48).

Granted, it takes a certain degree of spiritual maturity to come to the place of not taking offense, but the lessons should begin early in life. Children must learn that Jesus didn't die for us because we are worthy; He died for us while we were yet worthless sinners (Romans 5:8).

Though Dobson rejects the theory of man's inherent goodness, his promotion of self-esteem comes from the same source as that presupposition of secular humanism. Humanistic psychologists presuppose that people are born good and that when their needs for self-worth, self-esteem, and self-actualization are met they will become good people who are socially responsible. The fruit that Dobson offers to Christians is from the same tree as that of permissiveness. And it is just as unbiblical.

THE RELIGION OF PRAGMATISM

The influence of pragmatism among Christians cannot be underestimated. The crux of the matter is this: Will we obey God because He is God or will we obey God if we think that it will work for our own good? Most appeals to Christians today are based on the premise that something works for someone's good. The reason has shifted from God's authority to whether or not something works for one's best interests.

In attempting to avoid a dogmatic, manner of presenting the Word of God, many Christian teachers supply man-centered reasons for obeying God. It is a subtle shift, which places man's opinion of what is right above what God has said is right.

Dobson's reliance upon pragmatism taints his message. His advice in *What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew about Women* is based more on pragmatism than on God's will. For instance, Dobson describes what he calls "a universal characteristic of human nature" and how women can use this to their advantage.¹⁹

Even in his appeal for parents to discipline their children, pragmatism is evident; discipline works. He quotes Jack London's words, "The best measurement of anything should be: does it work?"²⁰The reason is pragmatism. And, although he brings God into the picture by saying that properly applied discipline will help teach our children about God, he does not give God's will as the primary reason for disciplining children. Rather, he offers psychologists E.L. Thorndike's theory of the "Law of Reinforcement":

The most magnificent theory ever devised for the control of behavior is called the "Law of Rein-

forcement," formulated many years ago by the first educational psychologist, E.L. Thorndike. **This is magnificent because it works!**²¹ (Emphasis added.)

Dobson has great confidence in the Thorndike Law of Reinforcement, which he quotes: "Behavior which achieves desirable consequences will recur."²²

To illustrate, Dobson tells how well this Law of Reinforcement worked on his dog. And that makes sense, because E.L. Thorndike was an animal psychologist, best known for his work in animal training. He developed the theory of the "law of effect" and is in the same tradition as behaviorists Ivan Pavlov and John B. Watson. Such behaviorism views humans as highly evolved animals. Calvin S. Hall and Gardner Lindzey call Thorndike's law of effect a "hedonistic formulation."²³

Dobson evidently believes that what works with dogs will work with humans:

Rewards are not only useful in shaping animal behavior; they succeed even better with humans.²⁴

Drawing this conclusion from animal psychology rather than from the Bible, he presents it as fact:

It is an absolute fact that unreinforced behavior will eventually disappear. This process, called *extinction* by psychologists, can be very useful to parents and teachers who want to alter the characteristics of children.²⁵

While this may be true of some animals it is not true of people. Because of the complexity of sinful humanity coupled with other factors, one cannot state categorically that "It is an absolute fact." The truth is that many people continue in adverse behavior in spite of adverse consequences. And many siblings, raised in the same home environment and culture, turn out completely different. Everyone has his weaknesses in specific areas; some are more pronounced than others.

All fall under the category of sin. And only the rebirth that comes through surrender to God through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ provides the ultimate solution to the human condition.

Jay Adams offers some succinct observations about Dobson's behavioristic method of child training:

James Dobson's book *Dare to Discipline* ... while placing a needed emphasis upon discipline by structure, is based upon this non-Christian ideology. It is basically a godless humanistic book. The discipline advocated is behavioristic (Skinnerian). According to Dobson, a child is to be "trained" as one

would train his dog. The methodology does not differ. The presupposition (not stated, but underlying the book) is that man is but another animal. There is no place for the work of the Holy Spirit in conversion or sanctification. Change takes place strictly on the horizontal level.²⁶

When Dobson, for instance, recommends strictly behavioristic methods for child raising *in the name of Christianity*, he badly confuses important distinctions and erases lines that forever must be drawn clearly. His near total capitulation to behaviorism is couched in Christian terms but really introduces an equally godless system into the Christian home while purporting to be a Christian reaction to permissiveness....Conspicuously absent in such child discipline is the use of the Scriptures, conversion, repentance, the work of the Holy Spirit, and sanctification. Ephesians 6:4 emphasizes, in contrast, *both* discipline (by reward and punishment) and nouthetic confrontation (the "nurture and admonition of the Lord").²⁷ (Emphasis Adams')

CONCLUSION

Because of Dobson's vast popularity, those who dare question the overall soundness of his teachings become pariahs even among the most conservative, fundamentalist churches. The basic pragmatism that permeates the messages from today's pulpits is a large factor in this. Everyone wants to see results. If a biblical counselor cannot produce results by exhortation from Scripture, it is not the counselee who is blamed for failing to heed correction; it is the counselor and even God's Word that are seen as lacking.


Dobson is clearly well-meaning, if misguided, in his approach to the role of psychology for Christians. But we must warn our brethren not to accept as truth the theories of men because they are espoused by a professional Christian psychologist.

The ultimate test for all things is God's Word, rightly divided and applied with a heart for serving God for Who He is, not for what we can get from Him. The pragmatism and self-love doctrines of psychology have tainted the offerings of the majority of today's popular teachers from those of the word-faith ilk to fundamentalists who believe that numbers in the pews are of greater importance than the truth of God spoken in a void.

Although the blending of human wisdom with scriptural truth often appeals to human reason, we must stand with Paul when he stated in Romans 3:4, "yea, let God be true, but every man a liar." ♦

NOTES

1. E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), pp. 231ff.
2. Letter from Board of Medical Quality Assurance Psychology Examining Committee, State of California, on file.
3. Dobson, *The Strong-Willed Child*, *op. cit.*, p. 234.
4. James Dobson, *Dare to Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1970), p. 157.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
8. James Dobson, *Hide or Seek*, Revised Edition (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1979), pp. 60, 92-93.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
10. Tim Stafford, "His Father's Son," *Christianity Today*, April 22, 1988, p. 22.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
12. James Dobson, *Dr. Dobson Answers Your Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1982, 1989), p. 498.
13. James Dobson, *The Strong-Willed Child* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1984), p. 63.
14. Dobson, *Hide or Seek*, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-20.
15. Dobson, *The Strong-Willed Child*, *op. cit.*, p. 88.
16. Dobson, *Hide or Seek*, *op. cit.*, p. 54.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
19. James Dobson, *What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew about Women* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1975), p. 78.
20. Dobson, *Dare to Discipline*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
23. Calvin S. Hall and Gardner Lindzey, *Theories of Personality* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1957), p. 234. Also see, pp. 420-421.
24. Dobson, *Dare to Discipline*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
26. Jay E. Adams, *The Big Umbrella* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1972), p. 131.
27. Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973), p. 82.



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