

Carl Rogers and His Client-Centered Therapy

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Dr. Carl Rogers is one of the best-known and most admired humanistic psychologists, and his popularity has prevailed through the years. In surveys conducted in 1982 and 2006, Rogers had far more influence on psychotherapists than any other major theorist. [2] In the 1982 survey, which included Canadian and U.S. psychologists, Sigmund Freud ranked third, while Rogers was “considered the **most influential psychotherapist in history**.”[3]

Rogers spent a lifetime studying human behavior and developed a treatment model called “nondirective” or “client-centered” therapy. It is nondirective in that the therapist does not lead the client’s attention to any topic or material. The client does the choosing. It is client-centered in that it proposes to allow clients to have their own insights and make their own interpretations rather than looking to the therapist to provide the insights and interpretations.

Dr. Jay Haley says, “Actually nondirective therapy is a misnomer. To state that any communication between two people can be nondirective is to state an impossibility.”[4] A psychotherapist, even without intending to do so, will influence what his client thinks, says, and does.[5]

Rogers also developed a personality theory called the “self theory,” which assumes that everyone can change and that everyone has a measure of freedom for self-direction and growth. He places great importance on the uniqueness of the individual. His view of the basic nature of man is positive and a welcome contrast to the negative and deterministic view of man presented by both the psychoanalytic and behavioristic models.

The self theory with its positive possibilities came at a time in history when many people were facing material affluence but experiencing spiritual emptiness. Rogers’ theory seemed to fill the emptiness and provide new hope to match the new affluence after World War II. It emphasized the kind of personal values and self-determination that permitted one to enjoy material prosperity more fully.

Besides emphasizing the innate goodness of man, Rogers sees self as central, in that individuals live in their own special world of experience, in which they are the center and form their own judgments and values. Although Rogers places strong emphasis on having values for guiding behavior and for living a meaningful life, he contends that these values should be based upon internal, individual decisions, rather than blind acceptance of the values in their environment. All experiences in self theory are evaluated in relation to the individual’s self concept.

Rogers believes that a person's inner tendencies are toward what he calls "self-actualization," which he identifies as the basic force motivating the person. Through self-actualization, the person tries to maintain his personhood and strives to grow towards a greater sense of fulfillment in relation to his self concept and in relation to how other people relate to him. Rogers contends that the natural man's basic inner direction is towards health and wholeness.

Rogers and Christianity

Important to Rogers' self theory is his view of Christianity. Christianity was not foreign to Rogers. He describes himself as "the middle child in a large, close-knit family, where hard work and a highly conservative Protestant Christianity were about equally revered." [6] At one time he attended Union Theological Seminary and confesses that during a seminar he, as well as others, "thought themselves right out of religious work." [7] He felt that on the one hand, he would probably always be interested in the "questions as to the meaning of life," [8] but on the other hand he says, "I could not work in a field where I would be required to believe in some specified religious doctrine." [9] Obviously he sees Christianity as having requirements rather than privileges.

Rogers goes on to say, "I wanted to find a field in which I could be sure my freedom of thought would not be limited." [10] Rogers does not want to be what he calls "limited" by biblical dogma, but by his very act he has set up another kind of dogma. Instead of an external dogma (Bible), he has set up an internal dogma (self). He has restricted himself by the very act of refusing Christianity. **His refusal of Christian doctrine placed restrictions upon his own thought and influenced his entire work.**

We will first examine how his rejection of Christianity colors his theories; then we will consider three important ideas which he discovered during his career and compare them with biblical principles. Basically, some of Rogers' theory and therapy sound biblical, without giving credit to the Bible, but other parts are absolutely contrary to Scripture.

Rogers received enough Christianity to deny determinism but not enough to escape self-indulgence. He rejected the external authority of Scripture and established an internal authority of self. This rejection changed the course of his career from theology to psychology and from the worship of God to the worship of self. He exalts self rather than God. The apostle Paul describes this move from serving God to serving self in the first chapter of Romans. Paul says that men "changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator" (Rom. 1:25).

Rogers is to be commended for his break with psychoanalytic and behavioristic determinism, but not for his self theory. Steeped in the philosophy of humanism, Rogers believed in the basic goodness of man, and his system establishes the self as the final authority rather than God. His avoidance of "religious dogma" is a rejection of external authority and places self at the center of all experience. Although Rogers stresses freedom of choice, the basis for such a choice is the internal value system of the

individual, rather than the external authority of Scripture. The value system focuses upon the earthly and immediate rather than on the heavenly and eternal. It is based upon the natural without regard to the supernatural and divine.

For the Christian, the Word of God is supreme; for the self theorist, the word of self is supreme. And when the self is thus exalted, the biblical concept of sin goes out the window and is replaced by another concept of sin, which is based upon the standards established by self. Although Rogers can be commended for recognizing the uniqueness of man, he rejected the universality of sin.

The concept of self-actualization sounds quite lofty and wonderful, but it is merely a disguise for self-indulgence. Self theory has self at the center of all things, and this position of the self has been and always will be contrary to Scripture. We live in a God-centered (theocentric) universe with theocratic rule, not in a self-centered (egocentric) universe with egocratic rule.

Rogers' Three "Discoveries"

Rogers claims to have discovered three important principles during his lifetime of studying human behavior and practicing his therapy.[11]**The first discovery is that of listening.** He points out that people have a real need to be heard and that seemingly unbearable problems become bearable when someone listens. He further believes that a sense of utter loneliness occurs when no one listens.

There is no question that listening is a vital response. However, this "fact of psychotherapy," newly "discovered" by Rogers, was long known and used by the church. James wrote to the early church, ". . . let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath" (James 1:19). This is a necessary function of every man, not a special gift given to only a few chosen persons.

Rogers did discover something of infinite value, but it was a fact of Scripture long before it became a fact of psychotherapy. We need not follow Rogers into the web of self theory just because of one truth that already existed in Scripture. "Swift to hear" and "slow to speak" do not require psychological graduate training. Furthermore, Rogers completely omits the crucial concept of listening to God and of His response of listening to our words, our thoughts, and our unspoken yearnings.

Rogers' second important discovery is "to be real." By this he means being oneself and not playing a role or being phony. Being honest with oneself and others is also a principle found throughout Scripture. For instance, the writer of Hebrews says, "Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly" (Heb. 13:18). Paul exhorted the Thessalonians to "walk honestly" (1 Thess. 4:12) and he encouraged servants to serve "not with eyeservice, as men pleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart" (Eph. 6:6). The Bible teaches that God

looks upon the heart of man, the real inner person, and that men are to be honest and true. Being unreal is a form of deception and false witness; being unreal is labeled *sin* in the Bible.

Although both Rogers and the Bible encourage a person to be real, do the concepts of Rogers and the teachings of the Bible harmonize on this basic principle? If by “being real” Rogers means following whatever internal value system that one has developed, good or bad, his form of “being real” is not biblical truth; it is just another form of self-deception, which could lead to disaster.

Attached to Rogers’ principle “to be real” is his concept of “unconditional self-regard,” which is merely a euphemism for self love. Rogers says that unconditional self-regard occurs when the person “perceives himself in such a way that no self experience can be discriminated as more or less worthy of positive regard than any other.”[12] According to Rogers, the individual becomes the “locus of evaluation,” the final authority and evaluator of all experience.

After much research in the area of human judgment, Einhorn and Hogarth point out the paradox of a person’s high confidence in his own judgment in spite of its unreliability. They bemoan the fact that, because of a person’s tendency to rely on his own fallible judgment, theories such as Rogers’, which totally depend upon a person’s subjective perception and evaluation, will continue to be popular.[13]

Rogers’ system puts self in the position to say, “I am the one that evaluates all experiences and I am the one who sets up my own value system. Nothing is in and of itself more valuable than anything else unless I say so.” This is surely contrary to Scripture, because it eliminates the Bible and sets up self as the center of authority and the creator of values. Rogers has rejected the biblical doctrine of being real and substituted a false doctrine, which eliminates the Bible as the source of truth and denies the biblical concept of sin. Graduate school in psychology will never enable a person to be “real,” true, honest, and just because of humankind’s innate sinful nature, which inevitably deceives itself as well as others. Jesus is the only man who was true to himself, God, and others, and He is the essence of the new life, which believers receive at salvation.

Rogers’ third important discovery, which he considers to be his crowning discovery, is that of “love between persons.” When Jesus was asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” He answered “love.” He further said to His disciples, “Love one another, as I have loved you” (John 15:12). In addition, 1 Corinthians 13 ends: “And now abideth faith, hope, and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” Love is one of the most obvious and repeated principles in all Scripture.

Before we criticize or compliment Rogers, we need to understand what he means by “love between persons.” First of all, Rogers is only speaking about human love. While human love is an admirable virtue, it does not compare with divine love. Human love without the divine is merely another form of self love. Divine love, on the other hand,

encompasses all the qualities listed in 1 Corinthians 13. Second, Rogers is only speaking of love between humans. He ignores the great commandment to “love the Lord thy God.” Third, he never mentions God’s love for man, which is demonstrated throughout the Bible.

Rogers’ crowning discovery is a limited human love between persons, which excludes the love of God and the love for God. In excluding God, Rogers sets up the me, myself, and I as the evaluator and prioritizer of all experiences. The self, rather than God, becomes the center of the universe, and love apart from God becomes only a self-rewarding activity. In leaving out God, Rogers ends up with a “love between persons,” which is hardly more than a feeble extension of self love. Psychotherapy ignores God’s love for humankind and, thereby, misses the essence of love between persons, which is found in the Great Commandment: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself” (Luke 10:27).

Conclusion

Remember that these important ideas did not originate with Rogers. They have always existed. Rogers merely found three principles that are superficial substitutes for the deep divine principles of Scripture.

In both theory and therapy, Carl Rogers has managed to elevate self to the position of being a god. Dr. Paul C. Vitz has done an excellent job of comparing the self theory of Rogers with Christianity and of exposing it as a form of self worship in his book *Psychology As Religion: The Cult of Self Worship*.^[14] With self at the center of the universe and God completely ignored, self theory exists as a counterfeit religion. Self theory wears an effective disguise. It sometimes looks like Christianity, but in reality it is fundamentally contrary to Scripture.

Christians do not need Rogers’ theories or therapy techniques. They have the Bible and the Holy Spirit to apply what they know from Scripture, both in their own lives and in ministering God’s grace to one another. When difficulties come, they have the privilege of communicating with the Creator of the universe within a relationship of love that is constant and that will enable them to grow spiritually through every trial. God speaks through His Word and will bring Scriptures or biblical truths to mind if they have been put into the mind and obeyed. That is why knowing God’s Word is vital. Rather than turning to the fallen, fallible psychological wisdom of mere humans, Christians can turn to their heavenly Father in trust and obedience and grow in faith, wisdom, spiritual life, strength for the moment, and eternal life forever.

[1] “Carl Rogers and His Client-Centered Therapy” is excerpted and adapted from Martin and Deidre Bobgan, *The Psychological Way / The Spiritual Way*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1979; republished by EastGate Publishers, 2023, pp. 110-116.

[2] *Psychotherapy Networker*, March/April 2007, p. 24.

[3] D. Smith, "Trends in Counseling and Psychotherapy, *American Psychologist*, 1982, Vol. 37, p. 7.

[4] Jay Haley. *Strategies of Psychotherapy*. New York: Grune & Stratton, Inc., 1963, p. 71.

[5]*Ibid.*, p. 82.

[6] Calvin S. Hall and Gardner Lindzey. *Theories of Personality*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1957, p. 476.

[7] Carl Rogers. *On Becoming a Person*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961, p. 8.

[8]*Ibid.*, p. 8.

[9]*Ibid.*, p. 8.

[10]*Ibid.*, p. 8.

[11] Carl Rogers, "Some Personal Learnings about Interpersonal Relationships," 33 min. 16mm film developed by Dr. Charles K. Ferguson. University of California Extension Media Center, Berkeley, Calif., film #6785.

[12] Carl Rogers in *Psychology: A Study of a Science*, Vol. 3, Sigmund Koch, ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959, p. 209.

[13] Hillel J. Einhorn and Robin M. Hogarth, "Confidence in Judgment: Persistence of the Illusion of Validity." *Psychological Review*, Vol. 85, No. 5, 1978, p. 414.

[14] Paul C. Vitz. *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self Worship*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977.