

OUR ATTITUDE TOWARD SEEKING PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL HELP

The ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee focuses on God's New Testament economy. This matches the focus of the apostles' teaching in the New Testament (Acts 2:42; 1 Tim. 1:3-4). God's purpose in His economy is to produce the Body of Christ through His full salvation, which includes the judicial redemption accomplished by the incarnate Son of God and the organic salvation carried out by Christ as the Spirit in resurrection (Rom. 5:10; 2 Cor. 3:17-18). God's organic salvation is the ultimate solution to all the intrinsic problems introduced into man's being—spirit, soul, and body (1 Thes. 5:23)—through the fall. This organic salvation begins with the regeneration of our spirit by the Spirit (John 3:6); proceeds through the spreading of the Spirit into our soul, thereby accomplishing dispositional sanctification (Rom. 6:19-22), renewing (Titus 3:5; Eph. 4:23), transformation (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18), and conformation (Rom. 8:29); and ultimately consummates in the glorification of our body (v. 30).

An unflinching focus on God's economy accounts for why there is little speaking by our brothers about mental illness. Nevertheless, they realized, as do we, that in the course of our Christian life we might encounter difficulties in our body and our soul that require attention lest they interfere with our progress toward the goal of God's salvation. We need to care for our physical body through proper diet, exercise, and medical care to prolong our days so that the Lord will have an opportunity to work Himself into us and so that we can serve Him in the building up of His Body. Similarly, we need to take care of our soul so that it does not hinder our pursuit of Christ and our participation in the building up of His Body.

We are complex creatures with three parts that interact with and affect each other. It is well known that such things as genetic predisposition, poor nutrition, lack of sleep, prolonged stress, unhealthy societal influences, and traumas can affect a person's psychological wellbeing and contribute to the onset of psychiatric disorders. Moreover, the spiritual condition of a person who suffers from physical or psychological conditions may be impaired due to that person's psychological instability. (Of course, our spiritual condition can affect our physical or psychological health positively or negatively.) Just as physical ailments are not necessarily indicators of spiritual problems, so psychological maladies may stem from chemical imbalances or traumatic life experiences. In this day and age, when mental conditions seem, for a variety of reasons, to be increasing, what should be our attitude? Should we stigmatize those who are afflicted with such conditions? Should we simply charge them to take the cross and exercise their spirit to overcome, potentially pushing them deeper into condemnation? Or should we exercise "to take all-inclusive tender care of the flock" (*Life-study of Acts*, 465), which includes shepherding the souls of the saints in cooperation with Christ as the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls (1 Pet. 2:25)?

Some saints and leading ones may feel that seeking psychological help is a failure, something that a person who desires to be an overcomer would never do. Actually, the proper measure is not victory or failure but what facilitates the Lord's work in a person. To have another consideration is actually to lose sight of the mark of God's economy. Brother Lee said, "The Lord does not care for whether or not we have a victory. The Lord cares for only one thing—that we gain Christ" (*The Flesh and the Spirit*, 33). Hebrews 12:1 charges believers to "put away every encumbrance" to be able to "run with endurance the race which is set before us." An encumbrance is any weight, burden, or impediment that hinders our running. Such encumbrances may include psychological conditions or negative concepts concerning receiving professional help. We should never feel condemned or condemn others for seeking help for problems with their physical body. Similarly, if we suffer from a psychological disorder that hinders our pursuit and gaining of the Lord, we should seek to put it away by whatever means necessary, including seeking professional help when needed. Verse 2 speaks of "looking away unto Jesus." Helping the saints to look away unto Jesus while shepherding them through difficulties can yield a dramatic breakthrough in both their human life and spiritual life.

Did Witness Lee Discourage Seeking Professional Help for Diagnosable Psychological Conditions?

Those who point to isolated statements in Witness Lee's ministry to claim that he disparaged professional help for psychological conditions miss the mark. When, for example, he spoke of people being sick in their mind or emotion and of psychiatrists being unable to help them, he was not talking about a clinical diagnosis but the fallen condition of every human being. For example, in the *Life-study of Exodus* he said, "You may think that you have no need to be healed in your mind, emotion, or will, much less in your spirit. Allow me to say that we all have problems with these parts of our being. Whether we are old or young, male or female, we are sick in our mind, emotion, and will" (352). If we see that sin is the fundamental sickness of all mankind and that this sickness is manifested in things as simple as murmuring and reasoning (Phil. 2:14), we will realize that the root sickness is something no psychologist or psychiatrist can cure. Only the life of Christ and the cross subjectively experienced and applied can cure this sickness (Rom. 8:2, 13).

On the other hand, there is no passage in the ministry that anyone can point to where Brother Lee discouraged believers from seeking professional help for diagnosable mental or emotional disorders. In fact, the opposite is true. In *The Christian Life*, spoken in 1992, he told the following story:

In 1948 I was in Nanking, China. There was a boy there who suddenly became crazy. Some of the saints considered that he was demon-possessed. They came together to pray to cast out the "demon," but the more they prayed, the more he was active. Then they wondered about this situation. It seemed to them that the Lord's name was not that powerful or mighty. They prayed in the name of the Lord Jesus for the "demon" to depart, but it did not work. Then they referred the case to me and told me what had happened. I told them that this was not a case of demon possession but a case of mental illness. I told these saints that this boy should be sent to the hospital for a period of time to be under some medical care. Eventually, the boy was admitted to the hospital, and he became well. (56)

In the 1970s, Brother Lee encouraged a brother who was a clinical psychologist to counsel a few saints who were in need of professional advice. *The Mystery of Human Life*, a widely used gospel booklet prepared under Brother Lee's oversight, says clearly, "For problems of the mind one may visit a psychiatrist."

Seeking Professional Help

Today a number of diagnosable conditions are treatable with counseling and medication. Professionals trained in these fields have specialized knowledge and training that very few leading ones possess, including helping victims of various types of traumas. The leading ones should recognize the limitations of their own ability to directly help those in need. A person who desires to but is unable to maintain a normal human life, family life, spiritual life, and church life because of an underlying psychological malady may require help in addition to the scriptural and spiritual help that the responsible brothers can render.

Saints seeking help with mental health problems should still take responsibility for their own treatment. If possible, those who seek counseling should find professionals who will render care without pushing an agenda that is in opposition to the Christian faith or the moral standards of the Bible.

Attention to these matters does not nullify or supplant the power of the Lord's life to transform us. Rather, it seeks to create conditions that optimize the "soil" of our heart for the seed of life to take root and for the life in the seed to operate and grow so that God's ultimate purpose can be accomplished (Matt. 13:8; Eph. 3:17; Col. 2:7).