

NAME *PAPER ON THOMAS C. ODEN,
KERYGMA AND COUNSELLING (168?)* NO. *D-7*
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Thomas C. Oden's Kerygma and Counseling is an utterly fascinating work. It attempts to solve the practical problem of the Christian minister of reconciling a theology of revelation, in which God is considered as one who calls for a radical reformulation of the human question because of his self-disclosure in Jesus Christ, and a client-centered therapy, in which the individual is seen as containing within himself the capacity for appropriate self-direction, if only he is given a safe context to explore his feelings.

Oden states over and over that he in no way intends for the work of the psychotherapist to be regarded as equivalent to divine salvation. The psychotherapeutic process is distinct from revelation. Nevertheless -- and this is Oden's main thesis -- this process "implicitly presupposes an ontological assumption -- Deus pro nobis -- which is made explicit in the Christian kerygma and clarified in faith's response to revelation, and it is . . . possible by means of the analogy of faith to perceive Christologically the so-called secular counseling situation as the arena of God's self-disclosure" (p. 17). The analogy referred to is that of Karl Barth, according to which the natural entity or relationship is perceived from the vantage point of the divine activity as received and understood in faith.

In the first chapter, Oden states with precision what he means by this thesis. First of all, he states that the effective psychotherapist -- one who, through the conversational process, helps the client to achieve congruence, openness to experience, personal self-disclosure and self-understanding -- is laboring under the presupposition or ontological assumption that the client is acceptable not only to the counselor but as a human being, by the ground of being itself, that "the final reality that we confront

in life is for us -- Deus pro nobis" (p. 21). The counselor always points to an acceptance, which has its source beyond himself.

Secondly, he states, it is precisely this assumption which the Christian proclamation of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ makes explicit. However this explicitation is not the only thing unique about proclamation. In addition, Christian kerygma states that the word of acceptance is made known in an event. Only through this event does the accepting reality cease to be merely an idea in our minds and become a reality whose personal character is known to us. Oden feels that liberating divine acceptance can be and is mediated to men not only explicitly and verbally, as in preaching, but also relationally, through interpersonal relationships and without overt witness to the divine ground and source of this acceptance. The Christian community, in its liturgical activities, "celebrates the occurring love of God precisely in the midst of secular processes that are unaware of His unique self-disclosure" (p. 29).

Oden next moves, in his second chapter, to an analogical understanding of psychotherapy, proceeding according to Karl Barth's analogia fidei, i.e., an analogy which reads not from therapeutic experience to theological categories, but the other way around. There is much that we can learn about therapy from divine self-disclosure. He discusses five dimensions of the analogy between God's activity in revelation and the therapist's actions, always mainly concerned with the similarity between revelation and therapy. The following statements will serve to state these five dimensions and clarify what he is doing in this chapter: "Just as the incarnation witnesses to the God who does not just diagnose or analyze man's

needs but actively participates in them, likewise effective counseling is not just objective diagnosis of the individual's conflict but active empathetic involvement in the patient's suffering" (pp. 54-55); "even as God participates in our estrangement without being estranged from himself, likewise the therapist participates in the estrangement of the client without losing his self-identity" (p. 57); "As divine love recognizes and forgives the inconsistencies, the egotism and willful rebelliousness of man, and presents him with a new possibility of self-understanding, counseling likewise involves the bringing to awareness of inconsistencies within the self with the hope that they can be understood, accepted, and resolved" (p. 63); ". . . the similarity, despite all other dissimilarities, between the grace of God which permits us to be who we are, calling us to self-direction under this permission, and the permission of the therapist who places the distraught person in a setting that enables and calls him to discover himself, feel his feelings, and move toward self-direction" (p. 69); "even as God unconditionally loves the sinner in order to free him from the self-righteousness, anxiety, guilt, and defensiveness that prevent him from loving his neighbor, so in effective therapy does the client experience in some sense what appears to be a relationship of unconditional positive regard, which frees him to value others anew in the light of his new self-valuation" (p. 74).

Despite his emphasis in this chapter on similarity (and dissimilarity), Oden goes farther than this on occasion, repeating his major thesis and filling it in with more detail: ". . . the therapist (perhaps even unwittingly) shares

in the reality of God's healing in the midst of his work, and thus embodies that healing power" (p. 73). He concludes the chapter with a discussion of a "covenant ontology," "a study of being which sees being as existing in covenant and the covenant of God as the center and circumference of being" (p. 78).

In the third chapter, Oden discusses "the theology of Carl Rogers." Here theology means "a deliberate and systematic attempt to speak self-consistently of man's predicament, redemption, and authenticity" (p. 83). Oden feels that Rogers' therapy can be understood in terms of this threefold structure.

First of all, Oden maintains that Rogers' dialectic of the original possibility of man and man's self-estrangement is imbued with the essential Christian dialectic of the fall. For Rogers, the event which saves man from this alienation is "the mediation of unconditional positive regard through a congruent and empathetic person" (p. 95). For Oden, "these supposedly humanistic, horizontal, interpersonal relationships are the ingognito of the reconciling God" (p. 101). In responding to the empathetic positive regard of a human brother, the individual is progressively liberated to admit his incongruities, feel his feelings, and re-organize his self-concepts, i.e., he "becomes increasingly able to value himself positively, . . . to accept himself" (p. 102).

In the fourth chapter, Oden discusses Karl Barth's doctrine of analogy as a way of understanding psychotherapeutic process. Enough has been said above on this point for the purposes of this paper.

In the final chapter, Oden attempts a Biblical exegesis of terms. He considers first the etymology of the word "therapeia," meaning "attentive,

caring service;" a therapeia rendered to man's psychē^s is a "service to human self-understanding at the center of vitality of the human organism." This he finds to be a persistent theme of the New Testament.

Kerygma complements therapeia by witnessing to the hidden source of all healing. "Whereas therapeia wordlessly witnesses to the reign of God through the events of the exorcism of demonic powers, kerygma involves the explicit clarification of the meaning of these events" (p. 152). Oden finishes with a more detailed Scriptural witness to the truth of what he is here maintaining and with a theological statement that "all psychotherapy embodies an expectation for deliverance analogous [in the Barthian sense] to the Christ hopes of the Judeo-Christian tradition" (p. 162). The meaning of the Christian community's affirmation of Jesus as the Christ is that "the reality which we meet in the now is the reconciling, forgiving, renewing reality which is proclaimed and celebrated in the therapeutic ministry of Jesus of Nazareth" (p. 170).

In summary, Oden's work is a very valuable contribution to theology, more so than it is a contribution to psychology. Theology is in dire need of works of this sort which seek to detail the workings of the redeeming God in our midst. This book is precisely the kind of thing I have been looking for during the past nine months. It is a shame that Catholic theology cannot also be producing works of this type. This work is a meaningful exposition, by way of example, of the contemporary bearing of God's work in Jesus Christ.