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A Study of the Word "Know" in Scripture as it Relates to Core Beliefs in Cognitive Therapy

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Although there has been a level of mutual discomfort between the field of psychology and Christianity for the latter half of the 20th century, portions of cognitive therapy managed to become incorporated into Christian lay ministries. As churches began to organize lay counseling ministries, crisis hotlines, support groups, crisis pregnancy centers, and other forms of mental/emotional health social services into their communities, the evangelical movement embraced various psychological resources. Books such as Effective Biblical Counseling (Crabb, 1977), Telling Yourself the Truth (Backus & Chapian, 1980), and a host of other pseudo-cognitive therapy works were written for people in the lay ministry to equip them with a model of conceptualizing counseling as well as easy-to-learn techniques for conducting counseling. While there is a wide range of pros and cons to the lay ministry version of cognitive therapy, the focus of this paper will concentrate on one aspect of how the Scriptures can enhance cognitive therapy. This paper will start with a brief overview of the concepts behind cognitive therapy, followed by a study of the term 'know' in Scripture as it relates to the concept of core beliefs in cognitive therapy, and end with a critique of the ideas presented in this paper.

What is Cognitive Therapy?

In its simplest form, cognitive therapy operates on a model that believes people's behaviors are affected by their thoughts. The thoughts and interpretations people assign to events influence the way they respond to their circumstances (Beck, 1995). This cognitive filter system is a manifestation of the core beliefs that lay below the surface of

peoples' awareness. Core beliefs are "one's most central ideas about the self" (Beck, 1995, p. 166). It is hypothesized that core beliefs are developed and shaped throughout one's childhood and remain relatively stable once a person becomes an adult. Unless a person has undergone quality therapy or an in-depth searching of the soul, core beliefs are difficult to identify and extremely resistant to change. These deeply ingrained beliefs serve as the foundation to a person's perspective on life. When a person encounters an event (e.g., forgets a friend's birthday), the core belief (e.g., I am incompetent) triggers off thoughts (e.g., Oh how stupid of me; I should have remembered) which influence emotions (e.g., embarrassment; anger towards self) and impact a person's response (e.g., belittle oneself; call friend and make up a lame excuse to shift blame). While this over-simplistic, linear generalization does not do justice to the complexities of many of the advanced Constructivist models of cognitive therapy (Neimeyer, 1993), it does reflect the important role cognitions play in the way people conceptualize their circumstances. To help further understand the cognitive therapy model, the following example should help illustrate the connection between a person's core beliefs and his or her response to the events of life.

Imagine passengers A, B, and C are on a flight from Dallas to Seattle. Along the way they have a scheduled stop in Denver where they need to switch planes. However, while in Denver, the airline announces that the plane to Seattle has mechanical problems and will be delayed at least an additional three hours until the matter is resolved. Upon hearing the news, Passenger A's thoughts immediately burst into a rage as he tells himself that he knew this airline would do this to him. Due to his core belief that he always gets a raw deal out of life, he interprets this incidence as one more confirmation that you cannot

trust anyone. He feels others are responsible for his happiness, causing him to lash out when life does not live up to his expectations. Therefore, he responds by berating the flight attendant at the gate and demanding compensation for his inconvenience. Meanwhile, passenger B responds to the news of the delay by mentally beating herself up for being so cheap and getting the flight with a layover rather than spending the extra $40 to get the direct flight. Her core belief that she is a failure taints her perspective on reality to the point where she personalizes all the mishaps of life as her own fault. Therefore, she responds by sitting at the gate for the next three hours, silently belittling herself for not knowing better. At the same time, passenger C is off exploring all the adventures the Denver airport has to offer. Operating with an optimistic core belief that all things happen for a purpose, he is a little set back by the delay, yet grateful that the mechanics noticed the problem before everyone boarded and was airborne. Therefore, he decides to make the best of it by enjoying the opportunity to peruse through the souvenir shop and get a decent lunch at a quaint little airport café.

In the preceding example, each of the three passengers encountered the same series of events, yet they had very different responses in their thought patterns, emotions, and behaviors. Though an argument can be made that the differences might be due to their personalities, cultural background, gender, and other extenuating variables, cognitive therapists would attribute part of the difference between the responses to their core beliefs. Because their core beliefs varied, their interpretations about the delayed flight influenced their thoughts patterns, which in turn affected their responses.

Given the importance of a person's core beliefs, they become the focal point in cognitive therapy. One of the essential goals of cognitive therapy is to reprogram the

thoughts and interpretive criteria via the core belief system of people so they no longer adhere to faulty, irrational, distorted views of themselves and their world (McMullin, 1986). Given the fact that this paper is not meant to be a manual about cognitive therapy, topics such as the numerous techniques, methods of intervention, structure of therapy sessions, and other components of conducting cognitive therapy will not be addressed. Instead, the focus will concentrate on core beliefs as they relate to Christianity. More specifically, a brief walk through the Bible will demonstrate some of the core beliefs that Christians are admonished to possess. If lay counselors choose to follow the cognitive therapy model, this paper will give them a sample of the kinds of core beliefs they can listen for in the lives of Christian clients.

"Knowing" the Scriptures

Even though the term core beliefs may be foreign to most churches, the concept is nothing new to Christianity. The Scriptures speak often of a person's actions being directed by what is found in his heart, mind, thoughts, and inner being. A quick skim through the following verses demonstrates the emphasis Scripture places on the cognitive component of the Christian life (all of the verses used in this paper will be from the New American Standard version of the Bible -- NASB): "be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2); "be renewed in the spirit of your mind" (Ephesians 4:23); "we have the mind of Christ" (I Corinthians 2:16); "for as he thinks within himself, so he is" (Proverbs 23:7); "whatever is true…honorable… right…lovely…good repute… excellence…worthy of praise…let your mind dwell on these things" (Philippians 4:8); "set your mind on things above" (Colossians 3:2).

Although the Bible does not advocate for the use of cognitive therapy, it does have a wealth of things to say about the kinds of cognitions Christians can utilize in coping with various struggles. In fact, the word 'know' and its variations (knew, knowledge, knowing, etc.) can be found over 1500 times in the NASB. Indeed, the Scriptures provide explicitly clear directives when it comes to the types of ingrained knowledge and core beliefs God's people are to have imbedded in their minds. In return, this knowledge should impact people's conceptualization of their circumstances, as well as their response to the events of life.

The remainder of this paper will focus on a handful of the 1500 references regarding the term know to demonstrate four of the core beliefs God says His people can possess. Each of the four hypothesized core beliefs reflects an attribute or characteristic of God.

The first core belief gleaned from a study on the word know is reflected in God's omnipotence. As He calls His people to know Him, He instructs them to have an experiential understanding of the fact that He has the power to execute His perfect will even in the midst of life's bleakest circumstances. One place to find this point is in the book of Exodus. As the children of Israel faced impossible challenges and miraculous interventions, the book of Exodus proclaims at least 15 times that God demonstrated His power so that they would "***know*** that I am the Lord." (bold and italics added for emphasis). For generations to come, the Lord wanted it imbedded in the minds of His people that despite the calamities they faced, they would know for certain that an omnipotent God went before them. Rather than resort to thoughts of doubt or self-sufficiency, God wanted His sovereignty firmly established in their core beliefs. In a similar scenario centuries later, the kingdom of Judah found itself at its lowest point

while exiled in captivity under the nation of Babylon. Although it would seem that the enslaved Jews had every right to fill their minds with thoughts of depression, hopelessness, and fear for their lives, the Lord utilized this catastrophe to focus their thoughts on Him. In the midst of Judah's calamity, the Lord exclaimed over 70 times in the book of Ezekiel that He wanted them to "***know*** that I am the Lord." He knew that if they were to be successful in returning to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple, walls, and city, they would have to have an unshakable conviction within their minds that the great and omnipotent "I AM" was their God and would deliver them.

Within the New Testament, the concept of adhering to the things God tells His people to know is operationalized ever further. Amidst the hardships that Christians face, God gave them specific instructions of what thoughts to hold onto so they could weather the storm and achieve God's desired outcome for their lives. This point is demonstrated in the following verses:

> Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, ***knowing*** that the testing of your faith produces endurance. (James 1:2-3)
>
> And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, ***knowing*** that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint… (Romans 5:3-5)
>
> I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may ***know*** what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. (Ephesians 1:19-20)
>
> Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, ***knowing*** that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. (I Peter 5:8-9)

The preceding verses are just a handful of the many truths which illustrate the importance of having a mental coping strategy when it comes to handling overwhelming

circumstances. It is almost as if the Lord is saying that before the tidal waves of life come crashing down upon you, let this truth of the Lord's omnipotence formulate your primary core belief so it can function as an "anchor to your soul" (Hebrews 6:19). As Christians face the inevitable trials, tribulations, and adversities of living in a fallen world, God does not want people to operate in despair, anxiety, or fear. He wants their interpretation of the events to be properly informed by the faith God imparts in them so that endurance, perseverance and hope can produce their "perfect result…lacking in nothing" (James 1:4). These verses do not exempt Christians from hardships, nor are they designed to promote a feel-good theology with magical get-out-of-depression free cards that shelter Christians from suffering emotional pain. However, if understood in their proper context, they do inform believers how to conceptualize, address, and cope authentically in a healthy manner with the pain that permeates this broken world.

A second core belief advocated within Scripture centers around the concept of knowing one's position in relation to the Creator. When a person is able to operate on the reality found in Deuteronomy 4:39, "***Know*** therefore today, and take it to your heart, that the Lord, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other," the Lord's sovereignty enables the individual to keep the difficulties of life in their proper perspective. If a person truly operates from a core belief that reflects the mindset of "***Know*** the Lord Himself is God; it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves" (Psalm 100:3), then the person can rest comfortably in the fact that the God of the whole universe watches over him.

The third core belief is the fact that people are deeply loved and valued by God. The Scriptures tell people to know, no matter what, that they are loved unconditionally by

God. A person operating from a core belief that knows God is love can cherish the words found in I John 4:16, "And we have come to ***know*** and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him." No matter how bleak the circumstances a person finds himself in, he can stand firm in "***knowing*** that you were not redeemed with perishable things…but with precious blood…the blood of Christ." (I Peter 1:17-19). Therefore, a person with this conviction does not degrade himself with thoughts of self-blame and condemnation, but reminds himself of the tremendous value of God's grace spelled out in II Corinthians 8:9, "For you ***know*** the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." Likewise, one who walks in the knowledge of God's love is not prone to respond to circumstances with self-destructive behaviors, because he reminds himself of the truth found in I Corinthians 3:16, "Do you not ***know*** that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?"

A further examination of the word know in Scripture reveals a passion within the heart of God for His people to have a firm confidence in the fact that He will take up the cause of the righteous and see to it that justice is implemented. This final core belief reflects God's justice and mercy. By adhering to this core belief, God's people can look past the temporal state of their present circumstances and cling to a knowledge that God rewards those who diligently seek Him. The following verses are just a tiny sampling of the wealth of things the Scriptures have to say about this core belief:

> Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, ***knowing*** that your toil is not in vain in the Lord. (I Corinthians 15:58)

> And we ***know*** that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28)
>
> For you showed sympathy to the prisoners, and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, ***knowing*** that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. (Hebrews 10:34-35)
> With good will render service, as to the Lord, not to men, ***knowing*** that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord… (Ephesians 6:7-8)
>
> Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; ***knowing*** that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. (Colossians 3:23-24)
>
> For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I ***know*** whom I have believed and am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day. (II Timothy 1:12)
>
> And you will ***know*** that I am the Lord; those who hopefully wait for Me will not be put to shame. (Isaiah 49:23b)
>
> I ***know*** that the Lord will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and justice for the poor. (Psalm 140:12)

Although the abundance of the word know in Scripture is by no stretch of the imagination an endorsement of the theories behind cognitive therapy, it does serve as a reminder that the Scriptures admonish people to take a proactive position in monitoring the thoughts that guide their decisions. As counselors listen with discernment to the messages being communicated by their clients, they can determine if the thoughts, emotions, and responses flow out of core beliefs that reflect God's omnipotence, sovereignty, love, and justice.

Critique

Although it may be true that the Scriptures have a lot to offer counselors in terms of understanding the types of core beliefs Christians should possess, a few notes of caution need to be emphasized. The first of three warnings has to do with the nature of this paper

in that it is designed to be a brief overview of core beliefs as they relate to Scripture. It would be unfortunate for someone to assume that a brief examination of one term found in the Bible represents a comprehensive picture of the topic. Obviously, pulling a series of verses out of the Bible and categorizing them together to emphasize a point has its proper place and merit, but it also contains a significant number of potential pitfalls. The Bible certainly has more to say on the topics of mental health, counseling, core beliefs, and a host of related issues than what a study on the word know can possibly convey. Likewise, anyone with a basic knowledge of the Greek language is aware that the English word know does not always convey the complexity of what was intended in the original language. For the sake of brevity, the paper has remained narrow in its coverage of the Scriptures as they relate to counseling. Therefore, this paper is useful to lay counselors who may have never encountered the term core belief or considered the wealth of things the Scriptures have to say about cognitions. However, a counselor who attempts to utilize the concept of Christian core beliefs without doing further reading and research on the topic runs the risk of making grave mistakes with clients based on limited information.

Second, it would be erroneous to glean an oversimplification of counseling from this paper. Evaluating a person's core beliefs can be an important step in the therapeutic process, but it is just one of numerous steps. Likewise, the achievement of biblically-based core beliefs is not necessarily the final goal of counseling. Having the right core beliefs helps in the process of coping with the reality of living in a broken world, but life is still broken. Just as all mental, emotional, relational, social, and biological problems do not stem from an etiology of faulty cognitions, so the acquiring of healthy, rational core beliefs from a knowledge of biblical principles will not resolve those problems.

Possessing healthy, realistic, biblically-based core beliefs is certainly a key component to mental health, but it does not automatically guarantee a life free from pain. People with the types of core beliefs God desires still get depressed, have brain tumors, experience panic attacks, get divorced, develop unhealthy addictions, and struggle with controlling their temper.

Finally, little, if anything at all, has been said in this paper about how core beliefs change. Though this paper has briefly addressed what core beliefs are and what the Bible has to say about Christian core beliefs, the role a counselor plays in changing a client's core beliefs is an altogether different issue. Being able to identify a client's core beliefs and compare them against Scripture are worthy skills, but knowing the art of transforming a destructive core belief into something that reflects biblical standards is a complicated issue beyond the scope of this paper. Just as God did not drop the Bible out of the sky and expect people to transform their lives simply by acquiring knowledge, so counseling is more than relaying a series of verses to clients. While counseling might incorporate a teaching component to it, true change occurs in the context of a quality relationship. Similar to the manner in which God invites His children into a relationship with Him, the therapeutic relationship affords the client the opportunity to encounter an experiential knowledge of God's unconditional love.

Conclusion

As lay counselors journey with clients through the emotional and relational valleys of life, they are given the privilege of playing an active role in helping people cope with pain. One important concept cognitive therapists utilize in this process is the evaluation of core beliefs. Through skillful listening, the lay counselor can discern a client's core

beliefs in order to begin the process of replacing destructive, negative notions of the self and others with core beliefs that reflect a more biblical understanding of the new creation in Christ.

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