

Why Theophostic Prayer Ministry is Neither Prayer Nor Christian

By Bob DeWaay

Though my article about the errors of Theophostic Ministry was published several years ago¹, I still get e-mails from practitioners accusing me of falsely attacking a wonderful ministry that is helping many people. Even today many claim that this ministry, invented by Dr. Ed Smith, is the key to emotional healing. My response remains the same, "I never said that Theophostics doesn't work, I said that it is not Biblical."

The simple facts are these: the basic theories of Theophostic Ministry are not found in the Bible and they have not been proven by careful, scientific research. Recently I received a document called "The Essentials of Theophostic Prayer Ministry"² that was distributed by proponents of Theophostic Ministry at a large Evangelical church that has hosted their international convention. This document confirms what my research had previously uncovered about the basic principles of this ministry. In this article I will examine the basic premises of Theophostic Ministry as listed in their own literature and show that they are not Biblical.

Principle One: "The primary source of our present emotional pain is rarely caused by our present situation."

Interestingly, the first principle of Theophostic Prayer Ministry (TPM) concerns emotional pain. I searched the NASB, KJV, NKJV, NIV, ESV, NRSV and the RSV (the most prominent non-paraphrased translations) versions of the Bible and did not find the word "emotional" even once! TPM is predicated on the idea that emotional pain is an evil thing from which every Christian must find deliverance. But is it? -- Emotional is a psychological term.

The closest Biblical word that may describe what we now mean by "emotional pain" is "sorrow." If TPM does mean "sorrow" when using the phrase "emotional pain," then its practitioners are seeking deliverance from something that the Bible says that we will all have in this world. If it does not refer to the sorrow,

grief or something similar that is in the Bible, then their idea of "emotional pain" is not even addressed in the Bible. If it is not, then Theophostic Ministry is unbiblical at its core and should be rejected on that ground.

Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that "emotional pain" as used by TPM is roughly the same as the Biblical word "sorrow." Then let us consider what the Bible teaches about sorrow. Paul said this: *"I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart"* (Romans 9:1, 2). The cause of Paul's sorrow was the unconverted state of many of his Jewish brethren. Would some ministry deliver Paul from his sorrow? Obviously not. In John 16:20-22 Jesus predicts that His followers will have sorrow while the world rejoices, but that this would be resolved when they see Jesus again. We are never promised the complete absence of sorrow until Christ returns and establishes His kingdom. We have comfort in our sorrows because we know our sins are forgiven and we shall one day be with the Lord who wipes away every tear. So the issue addressed by TPM, emotional pain, is not a key issue in the Bible. It exists because we live in a fallen world filled with many sorrows, but there is no ministry prescribed for removing it.

TPM claims that emotional pain is not caused by our present situation. But what difference does the cause of emotional pain make if the Bible never promises to deliver us from it in this life? Furthermore, TPM gives no Biblical or scientific proof that our present situation is not the cause of such pain. So with TPM one chases down the rabbit trail of emotional pain, seeking to find its source, all for no good reason. Whether or not we have emotional pain at the moment is not a gospel issue. All of us will have sorrows and tribulations in this life, but we can know our sins are forgiven and have the promise Jesus has overcome the world (John 16:33).

Principal Two: "Everything we presently know, feel, or are mentally aware of has its roots in a first-time experience."

This claim is an assertion of truth that is offered without proof, either Biblical or scientific. What is amazing is that many people take it seriously. Why? How do we know that everything about our mental processes including our knowledge is caused by a single event early in life? If this is a proven fact, then Ed Smith has made an earth-shattering discovery that touches the realms of psychology, neurology, sociology, and anthropology; and that without having conducted any controlled research in these fields.

The Bible never addresses "first-time experience" as something to be discovered because of its determinative influences on the rest of one's life. The Bible says that sin and spiritual bondage to lust is the root cause of our problems:

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. (Ephesians 2:1-3)

The "first-time experience" that is behind all this was Adam's sin: *"For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive"* (1Corinthians 15:22). We were dead in sin before we had a first time experience of anything.

This "principal" of a determinative first-time experience is neither Biblical nor scientific. It is a claim with no substance or evidence. Smith even claims that pain causes sin: "We tend to act out the way we feel. If we act out our present pain, we will likely manifest sinful behavior."³ The Bible takes a different view. It says that we sin because of lust (James 1:14, 15). There is no reason, based on either Scripture or reason, to believe Smith's claims. It is one thing when the shaky "science" of psychological theory tries to overturn the faith of Christians (as in the theories of Freud and Jung), but it is worse when an evangelical Christian seeks to overturn the clear teachings of the Bible based on truth claims pulled

out of thin air. At least with the secular theorists many Christians consider the source and do not take them seriously. But this is worse.

Principle Three: "If we try to resolve our present conflicts without resolving our historical lie-based woundedness, we will at best find only temporary relief. However, if we find healing for our past we can redeem our present."

The category "lie-based woundedness" is not addressed in the Bible. Smith's theory is that one's interpretations of "first memory events" determine one's present emotional responses. This theory is speculative. In his book, Smith explains what these "lies" are like: "Lies such as, 'I am bad, no good, not lovable, rejected, abandoned, shameful, evil, and so on' cause us to feel bad, not what happened to us."⁴ The Bible says the problem was much worse than thinking we were no good, and evil, we WERE no good and evil: "*as it is written, 'There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who understands, There is none who seeks for God; All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, There is not even one'*" (Romans 3:10-12). If we believe what the Bible says, we will flee to the cross where the blood of Jesus averts God's wrath against our sin. If we believe that our problem is simply thinking bad things about ourselves because we wrongly interpreted first memory events, it is unlikely we will see the need for the cross.

Redemption is not the re-interpretation of first memory events; it is a work of grace that deals with sin. The Bible says: "*In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace*" (Ephesians 1:7). The forgiveness of our trespasses through His blood is by grace through faith and is true no matter what our past was like or what interpretations we made of various events in life. We do not need to interpret or re-interpret our own histories. We need to repent and believe the gospel. Then we find redemption. If we have this redemption from sin now, we have the assurance that one day we will also have "the redemption of the body." But in

the meantime we "groan" (Romans 8:23). Fishing around in our own minds seeking memories of first time experiences and how we interpreted them is not prescribed anywhere in the Bible.

Principle Four: "The negative emotions we currently feel are 'echoes' of the past; they provide opportunities for the wounds of our lives to be exposed."

Smith goes on to say, "If we choose to follow the 'smoke trail' of our stirred-up emotions back to their original memory, we can discover the lie-based belief that is causing the emotional pain. It is here we can find complete freedom as we receive truth from the Spirit of Christ."

Here we see what happens when one starts with a false premise. Without the *a priori* belief that first memory events are the cause of negative emotional responses now, and the belief that negative emotions are evil things that we must be delivered from, there would be no reason to devise a process to discover "original" memories. Having believed an unbiblical and unsubstantiated theory, the rest of the process merely takes one further down the trail of error. But this exposes the worst of TPM— Jesus (or the Spirit of Christ) is conscripted to enter the process.

In TPM, once a first memory event is identified (which is problematic in its own right), Jesus is asked to reinterpret the memory. So now we have more than a false theory that was pulled out of thin air, we have a "prayer" component. The "lie-based pain" comes from a memory that was falsely interpreted. The Spirit of Christ brings healing by going back to the memory with the person, and giving the memory a new interpretation. The counselor's role is to help the person get their own personal revelations from Jesus, not to get them for the counselee. The counselor is supposed to determine if the personal revelation that the person gets is Biblical. The Bible never addresses interpreting first memory events, so how exactly is it going to guide one in such a process?

This process is not "prayer" as defined Biblically. Prayer is not asking God for personal revelations about the meaning of first memory events. Prayer is not about getting revelations at all, it is about bringing our needs to God and knowing that He hears us. Furthermore, the process involves tempting God which the Bible prohibits. I say that because it is asking God to involve Himself in a process He has not ordained.

For example, God did not ordain that Jesus jump from the pinnacle of the temple. Had Jesus done so, expecting God to send the angels to catch Him as Satan suggested the Scripture promised, He would have been tempting God. In like fashion, teaching people that their emotional well being depends on identifying first memory events and gaining personal revelations about the meaning of such event makes them vulnerable. They take the leap into the subjective realm and think that God is going to catch them by providing special revelation. There is no good outcome for this process. Either God gives them what they are looking for and thereby reinforces the false teaching that this whole process is Biblical, or He does not and allows them to be deceived by spirits that are all too ready to hand out secret information. It is pretentious and dangerous to ask God to give revelations, the need for which was determined by a man-made psychological theory. The result is that if the process is deemed positive by the person who submits to it, they think that God has put His imprimatur on what amounts to divination.

Conclusion

My claim is that TPM is neither prayer nor ministry as defined in the Bible. The first four key principles described by its founder show themselves to be speculative theories that have no relationship to anything taught in the Bible. There are 12 all together and the last eight take their meaning from the key ideas of the first four. If the key premises are false, the whole process is false. Must we believe that our personal interpretations of first memory events are the key to happiness and well-being? There is no ground to do so.

In Philippians 3 Paul discussed his memories of life as a zealous Pharisee. He then tells his response to his own past: "More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith" (Philippians 3:8, 9). Paul did not reinterpret the meaning of his memories; he counted everything he had in his previous life, whether it was good or bad in the eyes of man, "rubbish." He further stated, "Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it [the resurrection and conformity to Christ] yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13, 14).

The Bible tells us to forget what lies behind, not to reinterpret it. In verses 15 -17 of the same chapter, Paul tells us to follow his example in this matter. TPM teaches the opposite. So we either follow Paul's example and obey the Bible, or follow a speculative man made theory that causes people to wrongly tempt God. The correct choice is clear.

End Notes

1. Critical Issues Commentary issue 79; November/December 2003: www.cicministry.org/commentary/issue79.htm
2. The Essentials of TPM, Ed. M. Smith, 7/07/2006
3. Ibid.
4. Dr. Edward Smith, *Healing Life's Deepest Hurts*, (Vine Books: Ann Arbor, 2002) 86.