

## I. The Problem of Distorted Thinking

“It is impossible to approach subjects from a neutral or uncommitted viewpoint.”<sup>1</sup>

The foundation for any human thought or perspective consists necessarily of certain presuppositions, because no human except Jesus Christ ever knew the truth about everything or everyone.<sup>2</sup> One’s presuppositions are what one is committed to, whether accurate or not. They are the foundation of what is actually believed, whether true or not. What one thinks, says, or does is not always a direct result of what one *claims* to believe, but is usually what one *actually* believes or values. No one but Christ has successfully lived by his proclaimed beliefs, values, or worldview without any deviation.<sup>3</sup>

This study focuses on the inevitable distorted thinking of our species which to one degree or another results in a divergence from reality. Because of distorted thinking and of the unknown, not everything one believes or values is true or worth dying for, though many people throughout history were committed until death with less than concrete and verifiable evidence that they were dying for a true or valid cause. No one but Christ had such evidence before dying, but even he in his humanity hoped for a less painful and tortuous ordeal (Matt. 26:39, 42).

Each person may have some piece or pieces of the truth and may be striving, perhaps even competing with others to acquire more knowledge of what is true. Each may also hope to be perceived as being the first to understand and successfully apply a newly discovered theory or

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<sup>1</sup>Andrew W. Hoffercker, ed., “Building a Christian Worldview,” *God, Man, and Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1986), 1:xii.

<sup>2</sup>John 2:24-25; 1 Cor. 13:9, 12.

<sup>3</sup>John 8:46, cf. context 8:12-59; Rom. 3:23; 5:8; 6:23; 10:9-10.

truth. Depending on one's ability to communicate what may be thought of at one point as truth, and depending on connections with important influencers and publishers, there could be many invitations to speak and write on the topic for millions to hear and read. This could, of course, lead to distorted thinking such as pride, if it had not already occurred somewhere along the route to this point. Perhaps sooner or later someone may successfully prove the idea was either not true, or not completely true.

Because of the nearly exponentially increasing number of books and articles which are published or added to the World Wide Web every year, the task of thoroughly researching almost any topic requires a larger investment of time and energy with each passing year. Many of these documents attempt to provide an additional possible explanation for supporting an existing viewpoint, or propose a new possible resolution of some previously not-quite-satisfactorily-resolved problem. Several writers may attempt to demonstrate that their own perspective may be closer to the truth than the perspective of others. What may appear to be true according to "reliable" research one year may be contradicted the next.

In the headlong rush to acquire some novel truth, theory, doctrine, or strategy, care must be taken, Cymbala warns, to avoid the distorted thinking that "The old truths of the gospel don't seem spectacular enough. We are restless for the latest, greatest, newest teaching or technique. We pastors in particular seem to search for a shortcut or some dynamic new strategy that will fire up our churches."<sup>4</sup>

The temptation to forget about applying a truth which has already been well researched and accepted as the norm of a society becomes almost unbearable when one begins to believe it

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<sup>4</sup>Jim Cymbala, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 105.

may apply to others but not to oneself because of a “unique” situation. Prisons are often filled with such people. Distorted thinking may have led them (and many others who have thus far escaped arrest and conviction) to ignore one or more of the basic truths society in general professes to respect and honor, such as prohibitions against stealing, lying, or killing with malice aforethought. As stated by Shaw, “When the cultural norm is disrupted, society runs the risk of disintegration. ... [So] social control is essential ... from use of shame ... [and] ridicule ... to ... more severe forms of punishment.”<sup>5</sup> Though not all accepted norms of any society are applications of truth, many societies view major infractions as “sins” or “crimes.”

The topic of distorted thinking was selected after a series of several realizations of a need to reduce the original idea down to a more basic fundamental level. The original idea for this study began with the concept of teamwork, stemming from major conflicts personally experienced, observed, or heard firsthand or secondhand. These conflicts were occurring between missionaries, between missionaries and nationals, and between nationals. It is widely known that two of the biggest problems on the mission field are missionaries getting along with each other, and with nationals. Similar conflicts were later observed between several Christian leaders and between church members in Western countries. Each of these heated, long, drawn-out, and sometimes never-resolved conflicts greatly disturbed this writer’s presuppositions about what missionaries and Christians in general should be like. The missing ingredients often included respect for fellow creatures made in the image of God and agape love—failure to uphold the two greatest commandments (Matt. 22:36-40).

This led to an investigation of the fundamental dynamics occurring between any two people such as siblings, relatives, schoolmates, roommates, spouses, and co-workers, as well as

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<sup>5</sup>R. Daniel Shaw, *Transculturation: The Cultural Factor in Translation and Other Communication Tasks* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1988), 95.

between leaders and followers. The presupposition of this investigation was that the Trinity (God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit) was the ideal for any healthy relationship. Over several years this writer learned through working as a counselor in churches, that people who counsel those having relational problems are often only able to address the symptoms to resolve the presenting problem. Counselors are rarely successful in empowering clients to make the needed changes in their attitude and character that would prevent the same or similar problem from occurring again with the same or different people.

Huggins supports this experience: “Today most schools of psychology have abandoned character change as a therapeutic goal, admitting that they don’t have the resources to affect deep changes in people’s hearts. Professional boundaries, economic limitations and the rejection of spiritual resources have reduced the goals of secular psychology to relieving symptoms and stabilizing crises.”<sup>6</sup>

This unfortunate failure to adequately address needed changes in a person’s character, and heart can be remedied by what Huggins claims should be the Christian’s therapeutic goal: “The ultimate goal of Jesus’ words to hurting people was character transformation. His words showed individuals how to acquire the kind of character that enabled them to use their pain and problems to live in ways that give their lives eternal value, meaning, and joy.”<sup>7</sup>

Realizing that conflict does not even require two people—that it can occur within any given person needing to choose between any two beliefs, values, or actions—the search narrowed down to the general topic of character development. After discovering there were over

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<sup>6</sup>Kevin D. Huggins, *Friendship Counseling: Jesus’ Model for Speaking Life-Words to Hurting People* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2003), 71.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

100 different character traits, too broad a scope for a study such as this, the quest began to discover the core traits on which all, or at least most, of the others were based.<sup>8</sup>

Some organizations reduced the number to a core of less than a dozen and others, like the U.S. Navy, reduced them to three. The book this writer had hoped to write on this topic someday had already been written. However, an alternative title and version could have been employed to generalize the information for all ages because millions of children have already grown up without being taught the importance of virtues or character development.

To Borba, the first essential virtue was empathy: “Identifying with and feeling other people’s concerns.”<sup>9</sup> It is, of course, based on the Golden Rule, “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31), which is based on the second greatest commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). Borba’s other six essential virtues include conscience, self-control, respect, kindness, tolerance, and fairness.

At one point, the possibility that truthfulness was the most significant of all the character traits was seriously considered. It seemed that without truthfulness and adequate access to the truth the other traits would not be as valuable, credible, or worthwhile. But soon after, the inseparable “triunity” of holiness, truth, and love was discovered. In these three respectively, Heinze stated, “there is seen perfect willing, perfect knowing, and perfect doing. ... *Holiness* is

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<sup>8</sup>Rod Handley, “100+ Character Qualities,” *Character Counts: Who’s Counting Yours?* (Grand Island, NE: Cross Training Publishing, 2002), 204. Also available from <http://characterthatcounts.gospelcom.net/hundredpluscharqualnew.html>; Internet; accessed 20 November 2006.

<sup>9</sup>Michele Borba, *Building Moral Intelligence: The Seven Essential Virtues that Teach Kids to Do the Right Thing* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 14.

the source of truth. ... functioning through *truth* manifests *love*.”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps this is why holiness is the only trait mentioned three times in a row when referring to deity (Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8). Some boil it down simply to grace and truth (John 1:14), but one man was personally heard to say that without appropriate courage, other virtues would never be demonstrated.

A recently published quotation from Abraham Lincoln verified this pursuit was on the right track: “Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character give him power.”<sup>11</sup> This writer personally observed several people on the American continent and in Cameroon who appeared to have good “Christian” character until they were given a position of power or authority. It wasn’t long before they joined in the culturally accepted customs of bribery, and/or lying and deception.

A person’s true character may also be revealed as stated in the following: “You are very careful about your *actions*, ... [but] Character is revealed by your *reactions*.”<sup>12</sup> Immediate reactions often come from the heart or inner being and reveal what is actually thought, believed, and valued as opposed to what is merely professed (Prov. 23:7; 25:1; Matt. 6:21; Luke 12:21; 1 Tim. 3:7). King once said, “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”<sup>13</sup>

Much research has been done by others on each of the topics above. Although a project could have been done integrating any of them into a ministry among a given group of people, a desire arose within the author to discover what appeared to be the foundation of most of the

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<sup>10</sup>E. Charles Heinze, *Trinity and Triunity: Salvation and the Nature of the Godhead*, with a foreword by John McArthur Jr. (Dale City, VA: Epaphras Press, 1995), 99-101.

<sup>11</sup>*Arizona Republic*, “Thought of the Day,” 18 May 2002, 2.

<sup>12</sup>Class handout of DM732.

<sup>13</sup>Martin Luther King, quoted in Dave Ramsey, *Financial Peace Revisited* (New York, NY: Viking, 2003), 13.

problems all people deal with—the basis for making each decision, the actual motivation or cause of a person’s behavior that rebels against or ignores reality.

In searching for the elusive “bottom line,” this writer audited a class at Phoenix Seminary entitled “Counseling Dysfunctional Families” taught by Dr. Sandra D. Wilson in which the term “distorted thinking” was used to refer to the common thinking process resulting in any unhealthy addiction or abuse. It was a “new” and intriguing term to this author. The most commonly-cited lists mentioned by organizations which deal with unhealthy addictions and misbehavior refer to fifteen different types of distorted thinking. Other lists from other organizations mentioned in the next chapter include many more.

In the videotape series entitled “The Seven Stages of Spiritual Growth,” Wilkinson refers to “Conversion, Consecration, Conduct, Communion, Character, Core, and Convergence.”<sup>14</sup> After reading at length concerning the fifth stage (Character) and learning that Cameroon was the most corrupt nation in the world in 1998 and 1999,<sup>15</sup> this writer turned next to investigating the sixth stage (Core)—understanding the beliefs and values we hold that cause us to do what we do and be what we are. The question pleading for an answer was this: What causes people (even respected Christian servant leaders) to choose the wrong, the unhealthy, or the bad instead of the right, the healthy, and the good? The answer was the root problem: distorted thinking. The root problem was not Satan or his demons, although these and others who ignore or reject reality may influence such thinking. People are free to choose what to think and are often strongly tempted for various reasons to ignore reality, distort what they know to be true, or

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<sup>14</sup>Bruce Wilkinson, *The Seven Stages of Spiritual Growth* (Atlanta, GA: Walk Thru the Bible Ministries, Inc., 2001).

<sup>15</sup>Transparency International [charts on-line]; available from [http://www.transparency.org/policy\\_research/surveys\\_indices/cpi/previous\\_cpi\\_\\_1/1998](http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/previous_cpi__1/1998); and [http://www.transparency.org/policy\\_research/surveys\\_indices/cpi/previous\\_cpi\\_\\_1/1999](http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/previous_cpi__1/1999); Internet; accessed 20 November 2006.

accept what others distort. To ignore reality means to ignore God, what he has clearly built into our universe (including our conscience), and what he has sufficiently revealed in the Bible.

Distorted thinking usually begins with entertaining doubts about God's character. This idea was clearly stated by the Apostle Paul:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen (Rom. 1:18-26, NASB).

Questioning God's goodness (they felt he was withholding something desirable to them), distorting (or accepting the distortions of others) in their minds what God had said, and then believing and acting upon that distortion was the actual cause of the "original sin" of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Everyone since that time except Christ has followed this same pattern one or more times in life (Rom. 3:23). The quotation marks around the two words above were employed because most people think of Adam and Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit as the first sin, but Christ has reminded us that we sin in our minds before we ever sin in our behavior (Matt. 5:28; Luke 6:7-9). Hating someone is just as bad as actually killing someone and entertaining lustful thoughts about someone is just as bad as committing adultery with them.

The Bible records many instances of the distorted thinking of men and women, some of whom sincerely believed they were thinking, saying, and doing what God wanted (for example, Saul in Acts 8-9, and the Jewish religious leaders during the time of Christ). Many others did not

really care what God thought (King Jeroboam of Israel and the kings who followed him, 1 Kings 15:30 and 2 Kings 17:21-23). This study will focus on instances of distorted thinking confronted by Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Luke. Many of these distortions were initiated by the thinking of the Pharisees and religious leaders and were so vivid that John Stott stated even Marxists “are quick to recognize his [Jesus’] confrontation with the [distorted thinking of the] establishment and his compassionate solidarity with the poor.”<sup>16</sup>

We may well wonder if our thinking patterns are that much different from the Pharisees and others whom Jesus rebuked. Do we tend to be legalistic or libertine (antinomian) in our thinking on certain topics (Eccles. 7:16, 18)? Most people, if they were honest, would like feedback from those who are reliable as to whether their thinking is distorted when it comes to matters that are important to them. This is especially true if they are about to make their ideas public (in print or by teaching or preaching them to others, James 3:1).

Many factors may bring one to think in a distorted way. The evidence of this can easily be seen in the huge differences in worldviews and opinions of many well-respected and highly educated people. They cannot all be one hundred percent correct since some of these views are mutually exclusive (further addressed in the next chapter). Those who do not have the time, insight, or funds to search out the truth may choose to agree partially or fully with a particular perspective they read or heard about from a source they personally respect.

Although it is not well known by children today, a quotation like the following was once required for American children to learn in school a generation or so ago:

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<sup>16</sup>John R. W. Stott, *Focus on Christ* (Glasgow, UK: Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1979), 10.

Sow a Thought,  
 Reap an Act;  
 Sow an Act  
 Reap a Habit;  
 Sow a Habit  
 Reap a Character;  
 Sow a Character  
 Reap a Destiny.<sup>17</sup>

One's behavior, character, present circumstances, and destiny may be the result of the choices made about the possibilities or information contemplated. Thousands of ideas pass through the average person's mind each day. These may come from within or from without, including those from friends, authorities, and the media such as radio, television, billboards, newspapers, magazines, books, mail and the Internet. One must sift through the information quickly, discarding what is harmful, unnecessary, or useless, not even giving it a second thought or glance, and retaining only what is edifying, true, honest, etc. (2 Cor. 10:5; Eph. 4:22-32; Phil. 4:8-9).

The Apostle Paul stated in 2 Cor. 10:3-4 that we are not adequately equipped to make decisions on our own because the battle we are engaged in is much bigger than we are. In nearly every case the consequences of our decisions affect other people. It is best to pray for guidance in making decisions and even to consult with others more experienced as well as with close friends and with those who may be affected (Prov. 15:22; Phil. 4:6-7; James 3:13-5:19).

The problem statement for this project was as follows: Servant leadership, whether in the home, work, or ministry environment, may be hindered when the leader slips into the rut of distorted thinking. The assumption here is that every believer is a leader because a leader is an

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<sup>17</sup>Charles R. Swindoll, *The Quest for Character* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1987), 48.

influencer. It's only a matter of whether we are a good servant leader, influencing others by our word and lifestyle to know and follow Christ.

Research on any topic is probably not possible without it being affected by personal presuppositions or biases. Trudell has investigated the history of research and of research questions:

Research questions have their foundation in a particular research paradigm. A research paradigm<sup>18</sup> is an explicit description of the theories underlying the practice of research. Such theories are founded on a set of basic beliefs about how the world is constituted. The value of a research paradigm is that it organizes and makes explicit basic beliefs about the world that affect how research is conducted, thus helping the researcher to formulate a research practice that is consistent with those basic beliefs.<sup>19</sup> Every paradigm has proponents who will argue for the validity of its theories about the nature of reality, but ultimately a paradigm has to be taken on faith, i.e., researchers act on foundational precepts that cannot be proved or disproved.<sup>20</sup>

Traditionally a research paradigm has organized the nature of research by three basic questions:

Ontology: What is the nature of “reality”?  
 Epistemology: What is the nature of the relationship between the knower (inquirer) and the known (or knowable)?  
 Methodology: How should the inquirer go about finding out knowledge?<sup>21</sup>

The answers that particular researchers give to these questions constitute the particular research paradigms through which they approach the task of inquiry.<sup>22</sup>

The positivist paradigm is the oldest paradigm and is still widely accepted. ... [Most] alternative paradigms argue that all answers to questions of ontology, epistemology, and

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<sup>18</sup>Equivalent terms for “research paradigm” include *interpretive framework* and *worldview*.

<sup>19</sup>Egon Guba, *The paradigm dialog* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990), 17.

<sup>20</sup>Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln, “Competing paradigms in qualitative research,” in *Handbook of qualitative research*, ed. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), 107.

<sup>21</sup>Guba 1990, 18.

<sup>22</sup>Joel Trudell, “Bible Translation and Social Literacies among four Nso’ Churches in Cameroon: An Ethnographic Study” (Ph.D. diss., University of Edinburgh, 2004), 13.

methodology are themselves the product of value-based theories of which researchers must be critically aware. ... [So] the category of axiology contributes a fourth question to the research paradigm: what are the values that guide the researcher?<sup>23</sup>

Contrary to the “critical theorists[, who] are *realists* in that they take reality for granted as ‘real,’ not merely as perception [and] are not in fact concerned with ultimate reality *per se*, but with the theories, beliefs, and values that shape reality,”<sup>24</sup> this study *is* concerned with ultimate reality and accepts God’s perspective as our true reality because the best theories, beliefs and values proposed by homo sapiens to date fall far short of “shaping” reality as God sees it.

The research questions for this study were: What types of distorted thinking was Jesus correcting by his responses to people in the Gospel of Luke? Which types are still used by the Esimbi people of West Africa, and how can they be informed to avoid them?

Distorted thinking is often the reason some pastors and Christian leaders have (a) “fallen,” (b) given up the ministry, (c) struggled with various unhealthy addictions, (d) failed to stop abusing others verbally, emotionally or physically, (e) experienced poor relationships with their spouse and family, and (f) experienced difficult relationships with other leaders or members of their church, denomination, or organization.

Chapter 2 reviews pertinent literature and previous research on this topic. Secondly, it provides a fuller basis for this project biblically, theologically and theoretically. And finally, it also explains the choices made for the design of this project.

Chapter 3 describes the research methods used in this study. They include the exegetical/expositional model, a character study of Christ, and personal interviews with some Esimbi people.

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 14.

Because a person's thinking is so closely linked with character, Chapter 4 is devoted to the character of Christ, the standard of measurement for proper thinking (Phil. 2:5). The lifelong process of the transformation of one's character toward conformity to Christ will result in a noticeable reduction in distorted thinking.

Chapter 5 is the exegetical/expositional study of the passages in the Gospel of Luke in which Christ confronts the wrong thinking of individuals or groups. Chapter 6 contains pertinent details of the Esimbi culture as well as the results of personal interviews.

Chapter 7 compares the types of distorted thinking found among the Esimbi people with those found in the Gospel of Luke. It also compares these with others found in the review of the literature, states the conclusions of the study, and offers recommendations for further study.

Chapter 8 offers suggestions for avoiding the types of distorted thinking mentioned in the Gospel of Luke and used by the Esimbi people. The appendix that follows includes several lists of different types of distorted thinking, as well as more complete citations which support the statements made in this study since some citations are no longer available on the Internet. Also included is a list of recommended resources for overcoming distorted thinking, many of which may not appear in the bibliography.

All quotations from the Bible are from the New International Version unless otherwise stated.