

Taking a Step Back—Maslow’s Theory of Motivation: A Christian Critical Perspective

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ABSTRACT: This article presents a review of the extant literature concerning Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory of motivation as the key component of Maslow’s broader view of motivation. It also includes a synopsis of prior criticisms of the theory. Further, this manuscript presents a Christian critique of Maslow’s motivation theory (specifically his methodology, view of human nature, and hierarchy of needs) so that the reader will gain new insights about motivation from a Christian worldview in contrast to Maslow’s secular model. After analyzing Maslow’s concepts, including self-actualization, peak experience, and the hierarchy of needs using a biblical perspective, we find that Maslow’s theory of human motivation is not supported by Scripture and Maslow is attempting to create a new worldview designed to supplant the traditional Christian worldview.

KEYWORDS: Maslow, need, hierarchy of needs, motivation, peak experience, self-actualization, Maslow Bible, Maslow worldview

INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges of the Church throughout history is how to live in the world without adopting the world’s secular (explaining how the world “works” without God) beliefs. We see this failure to distinguish differences in various ways, and one is with Maslow’s theory of human motivation. This position paper attempts to point out the influence of Maslow, distinctives of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory of motivation, issues with Maslow from the literature, and ways Maslow’s hierarchy is part of his broader theory of motivation that contrast with Scripture. The hope is that the reader will take a “step back” and look deeper at what Maslow says and how Scripture contrasts with his ideas.

MASLOW’S THEORY

The Popularity of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory

Since its first appearance in print in 1943, Abraham Maslow’s theory of human motivation and specifically his hierarchy of needs, has grown into one of the most ubiquitous and widely accepted psychological theories in

the world. Maslow’s theory of human motivation appears in textbooks on leadership (e.g., Bass, 2008; Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2015), psychology (e.g., Ong & Van Dulmen, 2007; Wininger & Norman, 2010), management (e.g., Robbins & Judge, 2011), organizational behavior (e.g., Schermerhorn, Hunt, Osborn, & Uhl-Bien, 2010), marketing (e.g., Kotler & Armstrong, 2016), sociology (e.g., Andersen & Taylor, 2017), medicine (e.g., Carter, 2019), and education (e.g., Martin & Loomis, 2013). Added evidence of the popularity of Maslow’s theory of human motivation is presented by Miner (2001) in a study of 47 management scholars. Miner asked the scholars to name the most useful and important management theories, and Maslow’s theory of human motivation was in the top five of over 100 theories nominated. Further, a recent electronic search of Google for the term “Maslow’s theory of motivation” returned 989,000 results. The same search for “Maslow” returned 16,800,000 results. An electronic search for “Maslow’s theory of human motivation” performed at Google Scholar returned 43,700 results, and Maslow’s (1943) original published work, “A Theory of Human Motivation” shows over 29,000 citations in the search results. These results suggest that Maslow’s work

is widely distributed, incredibly popular, and largely accepted. However, despite these results, Maslow's theory of human motivation is not without its critics. Before we consider Maslow's critics, a brief presentation of the history of Maslow's theory of human motivation is warranted.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow introduced his theory of motivation in 1943 and continued writing and researching on the topic for more than ten years, finally publishing the theory in its full form in 1954 in a book titled *Motivation and Personality*. Maslow begins from the basic assumption that certain needs are universal in all humans, related to feelings of well-being in those humans, and that these universal needs apply to all cultures (Tay & Diener, 2011). Maslow's theory of human motivation is arranged in a five-tier model of needs, typically depicted as hierarchical levels (Taormina & Gao, 2013). The levels begin with physiological needs, followed by safety needs, love needs, esteem needs, and the need for self-actualization. Maslow (1943) argues that "the clear emergence of these needs rest upon prior satisfaction" of the needs at the previous level (p. 376). Maslow proposes the following tenets:

1. Human beings are motivated by a hierarchy of needs; the more basic needs must be more or less met prior to addressing higher needs.
2. The order of the needs is not rigid and may be flexible based on external circumstances or differences between individuals.
3. Most human behavior is multi-motivated and simultaneously determined by more than one basic human need (Taormina & Gao, 2013).

This theory of human needs evolved over a period of many years, and Maslow required more than two decades of reflection to arrive at these conclusions (Maslow, 1943; 1954; 1963; 1970). Despite its popularity, Maslow's theory of human motivation drew a variety of criticisms.

Criticisms of The Theory

Criticisms of Maslow's theory of human motivation date back almost as far as the theory itself. Wahba and Bridwell (1973) present a meta-analysis of what they conceded was little empirical data available at the time, despite 30 years having passed since the original publication of the theory. The authors conclude that Maslow's theory of human motivation received "little clear or consistent support from the available research findings" and note that some propositions were rejected while others received mixed or questionable support in the findings

(Wahba & Bridwell, 1973, p. 518). The authors are pessimistic about the usefulness of Maslow's theory of human motivation, despite its popularity.

Following criticisms of Maslow based on political ideology by previous authors (Aron, 1977; Buss, 1979; Smith, 1973), Shaw and Colimore (1988) conclude that the inherent contradictions in Maslow's work are the result of his capitalist ideology. The authors viewed Maslow's hierarchy as a reflection of his juxtaposition in a modern capitalist system where inequality is produced by a capitalistic economy. They indicate that Maslow's theory of human motivation represents a "new and seductive form of Social Darwinism" used to justify the system along with the privilege and power of the elite members of that system (Shaw & Colimore, 1988, p. 56). While these authors criticize Maslow for his political ideology, other authors criticize Maslow's theory of human motivation on quite different grounds.

Whitson and Olczak (1991) provide an impressive summary of much of the prior criticisms of Maslow's theory of human motivation and attempt to debunk most of it, including the claims made by Aron (1977), Buss (1979), and Smith (1973). Whitson and Olczak (1991) also took on the claims made by Geller (1982; 1984) and Daniels (1988). Geller (1982) initially argues against the idea that self-actualization is independent of experience and transcends both history and culture and further argued that the concept of self is not reducible to a basic genetic or biological nature. In other words, we are more than just our biology. Later, Geller (1984) doubles down on his criticism arguing that self-actualization is fundamentally ideological and is therefore responsible for dehumanizing us and reinforcing divisiveness among people, rather than promoting equality and advancement for everyone. Whitson and Olczak (1991) seem to simplify much of the criticism by indicating that many of Maslow's critics argue that his theory is not humanistic enough, an ironic criticism given his status as one of the fathers of the humanistic movement. They concede, however, that Maslow's theory of human motivation represents a "provocative, and influential psychological construct" with important implications for society (Whitson & Olczak, 1991, p. 93).

Heylighen (1992) takes the criticism of Maslow's theory of human motivation to a new level, rewriting the hierarchy from scratch based on cognitive development theory. Heylighen (1992) establishes new levels of needs corresponding to the need for homeostasis, the need for safety, the need for protection, the need for feedback, and

the need for exploration. Heylighen (1992) criticizes the definition of self-actualization, the concept of total needs gratification, and the conceptualization of a self-actualizing personality. However, Heylighen's updated version of the hierarchy does not enjoy much popularity.

Cullen (1997) aims criticism of Maslow's theory of human motivation at the original research upon which much of it rests. Cullen notes that Maslow's doctoral work is in primatology and that his later postdoctoral studies extend his study of dominance and sexuality to humans (1997). Many researchers have used primate studies to draw inferences about human nature, and this research is fraught with political and cultural implications. As Cullen (1997) notes, "Each era of primatological research reflects the wider concerns" of its day (p. 360). Subsequent studies of primates (Goodall, 1990) reveal a much more interactional and social culture based on cooperation and relationship more than on dominance and sexual interactions. Therefore, Cullen (1997) argues that Maslow's theory of human motivation is based on a foundation of flawed research.

Around the same time that Cullen (1997) published his critique, one of the first Christian scholars to take aim at Maslow was presenting his views. Pfeifer (1998) argues for a Christian hierarchy of needs that focuses on the relationship with Christ and faith in God as the path to true transcendence. Further, Pfeifer (1998) calls on Christian educators to hold themselves to a higher standard than secular education and to critically examine any theory through a Christian worldview before teaching it to students. Pfeifer (1988) sets the stage for critically examining Maslow's theory of human motivation from a Christian worldview perspective. We return to this concept in greater detail later in this article.

Heylighen (1992) was not the only scholar to rewrite Maslow's theory of human motivation. Following developments in comparative biology, neuroscience, and studies of reproductive success, and assuming a functional perspective as their theoretical lens, Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, and Schaller (2010) propose a new hierarchy of needs. Kenrick et al. (2010) argue that Maslow was right about physiological needs, safety needs, belonging needs, and esteem needs, but they discarded self-actualization (which they considered too conceptually confusing) in favor of a set of biologically based needs including mate acquisition, mate retention, and parenting. Kenrick et al. (2010) failed to achieve the same level of popularity and intuitive appeal achieved by Maslow, possibly because Maslow's theory of human motivation is optimistic about

the best man could be, while Kenrick et al. (2010) show no real differentiation between man and the lower animals.

Pfeifer (1998) is not the only author considering the Christian worldview perspective on Maslow's theory of human motivation. Porter and VanderVeen (2002) examine a variety of classic motivational theories using a Christian worldview perspective. The authors maintain that the classic theories of motivation as typically taught in textbooks, including Maslow's theory of human motivation, may provide readers with ideas about the underlying structure of human motivation. However, the true foundation of human motivation and the current body of research conducted on motivation has been misdirected away from biblical truth (Porter & VanderVeen, 2002). Balraj (2017) also utilizes a Christian worldview framework to criticize Maslow's theory of human motivation. Balraj (2017) employs a narrow approach to the problem by limiting the discussion to the initial published work (Maslow, 1954) and by limiting the discussion of biblical teachings to Matthew 6:25-34. Balraj (2017) creates a new model for motivation based on biblical principles that showed some similarity to Pfeifer's (1998) model. However, the narrow scope of Balraj's (2017) criticism prevents it from being a robust discussion of human motivation from a Christian worldview perspective.

Criticism of Maslow's theory of human motivation accumulated based on its empirical evidence, its philosophy, its ideology, its foundational research background, its lack of spirituality, and its worldview perspective. However, prior authors who criticize Maslow's theory of human motivation fail to take a deep dive into its Christian worldview and biblical applications. Next, this article will present a critique of Maslow's theory of human motivation from a Christian worldview perspective.

A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS OF MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

One of the challenges of the Church throughout history is how to live in the world without adopting the world's secular beliefs (John 17:14-17). Schaffer (1968) calls this dynamic the *fog*. "The tragedy of our situation today is that men and women are being fundamentally affected by the new way of looking at truth and yet they have never analyzed the drift [*fog*] which has taken place" (Schaeffer, 1968, p. 13) Schaeffer wrote about this shift many years ago and it continues to exist today. The problem may lie in that Christians desire to love others

(1 Corinthians 13) and build bridges of commonality with others (1 Corinthians 9:19-23) which is all good, but we also need to do both without giving up Christian standards (i.e., see warning in 1 Corinthians 10:14 to “flee from idolatry,”). Christians must seek to understand the world to engage it (Kappelman, 1999; Schaeffer, 2006) without giving up our own standards (Ruddell, 2014, pp. 13-14). The approach in this section is therefore a bit different. In this section, we will look at differences between Maslow and Scripture and potential application problems with Maslow in the areas of methodology, view of human nature, and Maslow’s theory of human motivation.

Methodology

Ideologically speaking, one can describe Maslow’s methodology as “like a kid in a candy store” who goes after one tasty item after another without settling on one. Because of his breadth, Maslow is brilliant as far as his intellectual capacity goes, but his writing can be tedious. For example, he has 15 ways of describing “self-actualization.” He seems to use a scattered approach, intellectually speaking; if he keeps firing enough, something will “hit.” Henry Geiger (1971) who wrote the introduction to *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* based on Maslow’s ideas, notes, “But something might be added about his way of writing. What he wanted to write was not easy to express. He would stand back and send ‘waves’ of words at the reader” (Geiger, 1971, p. xviii). Contrast this difficulty in expression with, for example, the simple profundity of John 1:1.

Maslow’s methodological blind spot is the problem with any eclectic thought process. The writer picks and chooses ideas thinking he is being “neutral” but never identifies the standard by which he includes ideas into his eclectic system. This produces a potential Romans 1:18 ff. situation where the individual creates his own belief system to make life work: “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking...” (Romans 1:21a). Because, to Maslow, ideas were like a smorgasbord, there is no coherent system to his thinking beyond himself. He does admit this to some degree responding to the criticism of others: “I have found to my dismay that some intelligent and capable psychologists persist in treating my empirical description of the characteristic of self-actualizing people as if I had arbitrarily invented these characteristics instead of discovering them” (Maslow, 1968, pp. vi-vii).

Maslow’s methodology reveals the relative nature of his thought system. He attacks “science” as originally

defined (something that can be measured and is valid and reliable = the scientific method) and wants to “change” science to fit whatever he is doing (a “science” based on his values). There is little objective truth going on. He holds that truth is relative to the individual, “*Is* becomes the same as *ought*. Fact becomes the same as value.... In other words, facts have been fused with values” (Maslow, 1971, p. 120).

It also means that he uses other ideas without giving credit, particularly as they apply to Christianity. This is called *borrowed capital*. Cornelius Van Til coined the term and Frame (2012) describes it this way: “The truth known and acknowledged by the unbeliever. He has no right to believe or assert truth in terms of his presuppositions, but only on Christian ones. His assertions of truth are based on borrowed capital.” For example, Maslow heaps up terms like “effective” and “virtuous” without giving the standard for what these terms mean. He borrows from natural law (see Romans 1:19-20) while acting like he’s creating something new. Note the assertion of Christian terms in his vote for a new ideology:

The Third Psychology [Force] is now one facet of a general *Weltanschauung*, a new philosophy of life, a new conception of man, the beginning of a new century of work... For any **man of good will, any pro-life man**, there is work to be done here, **effective, virtuous, satisfying work** which can give rich meaning to one’s own life and to others. (Maslow, 1968, p. iii) (bold added)

We could also argue that Maslow is trying to accomplish (borrow) the “fruit of the Spirit” without God (Galatians 5:22-23). He admits that he wants to reflect religion but one could argue that he is actually using borrowed capital.

If the various extant religions may be taken as expressions of human aspiration, i.e., what people would *like* to become if only they could, then we can see here too a validation of the affirmation that all people yearn toward self-actualization or tend toward it... **This is so because our description of the actual characteristics of self-actualizing people parallels at many points the ideals urged by the religions.** (Maslow, 1968, p. 158) (bold added)

Another issue with Maslow is that he admits that his research findings are based on what he deems 2% of the population (Maslow, 1964). He has faith that what is good for this 2% is good for everyone else. However, he fails to consider that the reason this 2% (the “self-actualized”) seem so well adjusted may be that there was

a history of faith in their families. Even though children may forget the faith of their parents, the promise is that there is still a blessing. “Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations...” (Deuteronomy 7:9).

Finally, Maslow seems to be self-contradictory at times. In other words, he seems to argue for both sides of an issue at the same time and does not appear to see the logical inconsistency. This has been called an *If-By-Whiskey* fallacy. “This fallacy appears to support both sides of an issue—a tactic common in politics” (“If-By-Whiskey,” n.d.). For example, he comments on science, “It is quite clear to me that scientific methods (broadly conceived) are our only ultimate ways of being sure that we do have truth” (Maslow, 1968, p. viii). Again, note equivocation of, on the one hand, appearing to endorse the scientific *method* while substituting *methods* and using the term “broadly conceived.” He goes on to admit that he wants to redefine science: “Possibly most important of all the changes wrought by the phenomenologists and existentialists is an overdue revolution in the theory of science” (Maslow, 1968, p. 15).

At bottom line, Maslow’s methodology rests on his eclectic value system. Now let us turn to his view of human nature, which forms the foundation of his motivational system.

View of Human Nature

Anthropology basically means the study of man. Historically, Christian anthropology, the Doctrine of Man (men and women), has included such subjects as how we came to be (creation), the Fall, the impact of the Fall on human nature, and what our purpose is today (Washer, 2012). It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into this topic in detail. However, suffice it to say that secular anthropology involves describing people without reference to the Living God. Maslow’s anthropology is in this vein. His view of human nature impacts his view of how people are motivated, so it needs to be examined.

Maslow sees his view of human nature as a “Third Force” regarding psychological teaching on the subject. He acknowledges the anthropologies of Freud and Skinner as the two basic approaches and then presents his (although cites others as well) as the new view (Maslow, 1968, p. ix). He goes on to articulate his assumptions about human nature (summarized):

1. We have, each of us, an essential biologically based inner nature that is, in a certain limited sense, unchangeable, or, at least, unchanging.
2. Each person’s inner nature is in part unique to himself and in part species-wide.
3. It is possible to study this inner nature scientifically and to discover what it is like.
4. This inner nature, as much as we know of it so far, seems not to be intrinsically, primarily, or necessarily evil.
5. Since this inner nature is good or neutral, rather than bad, it is best to bring it out and encourage it rather than to suppress it.
6. If this essential core of the person is denied or suppressed, a person gets sick.
7. Observe that if these assumptions are proven true, they promise a scientific ethic, a natural value system, a court of ultimate appeal for the determination of good and bad, of right and wrong (Maslow, 1968, pp. 3-4).

Let us examine the list above and see how it contrasts with the Scriptures. We will start with number one: *We have, each of us, an essential biologically based inner nature that is, in a certain limited sense, unchangeable, or, at least, unchanging.* Regarding number 1, it is true that we are biologically based. See Genesis 2:7 that reads, “Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.” However, it is not true that we have “an essential biologically based inner nature.” Maslow triangulates support of evolution while arguing strongly for something else in human nature that is inside individuals: “The thing to do seems to be to find out what one is *really* like inside, deep down, as a member of the human species and as a particular individual” (Maslow, 1968, p. 5).

Let us now examine number two: *Each person’s inner nature is in part unique to himself and in part species-wide.* Note the contradiction. We are part of a “species” so determined (by evolution—refer to number one above: “in a certain limited sense, unchangeable, or, at least, unchanging”), yet we are a “particular individual” (so ostensibly free). Maslow stumbles onto a biblical principle regarding human nature here: the federal headship of Adam. The Bible teaches that because Adam sinned, all [“species” wide] of us are influenced by his sin (“born sinners”). See Romans 5:12: “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned....”

However, we are also unique individuals. See Romans 12:3-4 that reads,

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, **each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.** For as in one body we have many members, and **the members do not all have the same function.** (bold added)

Maslow's notion that we are physical (body) and personal (spirit) is somewhat accurate, but there is a big difference between emerging from an impersonal "force" by chance via evolution and then arguing that we are somehow "connected." In contrast, the biblical view is that God created people and that we have a connection because we are created in God's image (Genesis 1:27; John 15).

There is not a conflict between Christian principles and number three, as far as it goes. *It is possible to study this inner nature scientifically and to discover what it is like.* However, as we have seen in the above section on Maslow's methodology, we can have a longer discussion on what "scientifically" means.

The big issue with Maslow's view of human nature comes with number four: *This inner nature, as much as we know of it so far, seems not to be intrinsically or primarily or necessarily evil.* This point contradicts the Scriptures. Maslow equivocates a bit by using the word "evil" versus "sinful." But the Bible clearly states that everyone has sinned (Romans 3:23).

Maslow works around this problem by changing the ethical standard from God to one's self. It does come down to a matter of trust, and the Scripture encourages us to trust God's perspective on the world versus our own: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths" (Proverbs 3:5-6).

However, there is more to human nature than the fact that we are sinners. See Ruddell's (2014) discussion on human nature as it relates to business;

From the Christian view, three important facts emerge about the people with whom we do business. First, people are basically sinful and they do not by nature desire to follow God's principles. Secondly, people are not as bad as they could be because of God's common concern for the world, so they may obey God's principles in spite of themselves. Thirdly, people are valuable and worthy of respect and fair treatment because all people are created in

God's image and are objects of His concern. (p. 132)

Number five can flange with biblical principles if the premise is ignored. *Since this inner nature is good or neutral rather than bad, it is best to bring it out and to encourage it rather than to suppress it.* As mentioned above, sin impacts the inner nature. Having said this, the Bible certainly calls on us to "be ourselves." But, our true "self" is found in a relationship with Jesus Christ. The Christian view of self is that we will understand who we are when we lose ourselves; "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25). The biblical view is that we need to be freed from our old nature to live ethically and to enjoy the blessings of doing the right thing (Deuteronomy 4:1).

The second part of the discussion on number five is that we **should** use our gifts, but this, again, is done "in [relationship with] Christ." "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace" (1 Peter 4:10).

So, we should suppress our natures in that we need to toss aside this old deceitful nature (Jeremiah 17:9) and trust in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17; John 3:3). We need to come under God's authority, not our own.

Number six has the most ramifications for Maslow's theory of motivation: *If this essential core of the person is denied or suppressed, he gets sick.*

[E]very falling away from species-virtue, every crime against one's own nature, every evil act, every *one without exception records itself* in our unconscious and makes us despise ourselves.... This point of view in no way denies the usual Freudian picture.... It is as if Freud supplied to us the sick half of psychology and we must now fill it out with the healthy half. (Maslow, 1968, p. 5)

Note Maslow's appeal to the Freudian account here. "Sin" for Maslow is a violation against our old natures, not a violation against a Holy God. All guilt is false guilt and not real guilt, so evil has no meaning since an objective standard is not defined. There is also the logical problem of assuming evolution ("species-virtue"), yet somehow wanting people to be accountable.

At bottom line, Maslow (1968) puts the person in the transcendent position instead of the Living God (p. 11). Maslow goes on to say, "From this flows naturally a concern with the ideal, authentic, or perfect or godlike human being" (p. 11). Maslow flat out denies the biblical view of human nature and thus ethical truth:

To spell out only one implication here [connection between inner and outer values], **these proposi-**

tions affirm the existence of the highest values with human nature itself, to be discovered there. This is in sharp contradiction to the older and more customary beliefs that the highest values can come only from a supernatural God, or from some other source outside human nature itself. (Maslow, 1968, p. 170) (bold added)

Note the utopian verbiage in number seven: *Observe that if these assumptions are proven true, they promise a scientific ethics, a natural value system, a court of ultimate appeal for the determination of good and bad, of right and wrong.* This underscores his desire to create a whole new worldview, except that his ideas are not new.

Maslow's view of human nature emerges from his worldview:

I must confess that **I have come to think of this humanist trend in psychology as a revolution in the truest sense of the word**, oldest sense of the word, the sense in which Galileo, Darwin, Einstein, Freud, and Marx made revolutions, i.e., new ways of perceiving and thinking, new images of man and of society, new conceptions of ethics and of values, new directions in which to move. (Maslow, 1968, p. iii) (bold added)

The following statement brings together his utopian view, how that view impacts his view of human nature, and his suspect methodology.

There is now emerging over the horizon a new conception of human sickness and of human health [note assertion of Freudian point of view on anthropology], a psychology that I find so thrilling and so full of wonderful possibilities that I yield to the temptation to present it publicly even before it is checked and confirmed, and before it can be called reliable scientific knowledge. (Maslow, 1968, p. 3)

We can see the influence of evolutionary thinking in Maslow's comment, "Every age but ours has had its model, its ideal" (Maslow, 1968, p. 5). So, his standard is relative. But it can also be a tacit acknowledgment of the possibility that other ages had "its ideal" because of the influence of the Christian worldview.

Theory of Motivation

As discussed above, Maslow founded his theory of motivation on his view of human nature that assumes that people have basic needs (as detailed by him) that if not met will result in sickness. Maslow's theory of motivation introduces new terms (and/or new meanings of other terms), which is in step with his desire to create a

new worldview to replace the old, Christian worldview. These terms are *self-actualization*, *peak experience*, and the *hierarchy of needs* (Maslow, 1971, p. xv). Let us examine each term based on Maslow's definition and then analyze. But first, let us revisit how he sees a *need and motivation*, as they are fundamental to his hierarchy.

Need and motivation. Maslow explains *need* in terms of physical needs. "It would not occur to anyone to question the statement that we 'need' iodine or vitamin C. I remind you that the evidence that we 'need' love is of exactly the same type" (Maslow, 1968, p. 23). He goes on to say, "We know already that the main prerequisite of healthy growth is gratification of basic needs" (Maslow, 1968, p. 163). He then details what he thinks happens when needs are not met.

"What makes people neurotic?" My answer ... was, in brief, **that neurosis seemed ... to be a deficiency disease; that it was born out of being deprived of certain satisfactions which I call needs, namely that their absence produces illness.** (Maslow, 1968, p. 21) (bold added)

Maslow sees motivation as coming from trying to fulfill these desires.

The Bible has a different view of *need*. See 1 Timothy 6:6-8 that reads, "But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. **But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content**" (bold added). Note that food and clothing (protection from the elements, which could also include shelter) are all the things we need. Note also the emphasis on contentment, which comes from godliness. See also Philippians 4:9 where, in the context of instructing about worry and how to find peace, Paul enjoins, "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you." In other words, what we need is to be in right relationship with God through the work of Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1). As we trust in Christ for salvation and sanctification and live for him, "[T]he God of peace will be with you." In other words, we will have our needs met in him. See also Philippians 4:11-19 where Paul says that he does not have any real needs but has learned to be content and then contrasts the Christian view further. "And my God will supply every need of yours" (Philippians 4:19a). So there is a stark contrast between hoping others meet your "needs" (as defined by Maslow) versus the living God.

Regarding motivation, we contrast the biblical view with Maslow. "For many, of whom I have often told

you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, **their god is their belly**, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things” (Philippians 3:18-19) (bold added). Maslow seems to advocate this approach of being driven by our “belly” (internal, sinful desires). The Bible contrasts a motivation from the belly with a motivation driven by a heart that is in right relationship with God and God’s ethical system. God promises that if we trust him, then he will take care of our needs.

Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (Matthew 6:31-33)

There is nothing wrong with having desires for things like money, relationships, or success, but at bottom line, we trust God with those desires and focus on daily seeking the “kingdom of God and his righteousness.” Maslow confuses “needs” with “desires” and in doing so misses the mark. “One conclusion ... is a very revolutionary one, namely, that our deepest needs are not, in themselves, dangerous or evil or bad (Maslow, 1968, p. 158).

Peak Experience and Self-Actualization. Peak experience is a result of self-actualization so we will examine them together.

The concept “psychological health,” though still necessary, has various intrinsic shortcomings for scientific purposes.... **A much better term is “self-actualization” as I have used it. It stresses “full-humanness,” the development of the biologically based nature of man, and therefore is (empirically) normative for the whole species rather than for particular times and places.** (Maslow, 1968, p. vi) (bold added)

Again, here we see the methodological problem of “full-humanness” as borrowed capital. And note Maslow’s borrowing of evolutionary ideology: “It [self-actualization] conforms to biological destiny.” More importantly, he seems to want to create sanctification without Christ. In other words, he wants people to become better on their own. Christianity sees growth as a work of the Holy Spirit, and we are not controlled by the Holy Spirit until we trust in Christ for eternal life and become a new person (2 Corinthians 5:17). As we daily put off our old patterns and put on God’s new patterns (see Ephesians 4:17-24), we will more and more become ourselves. Note how

Maslow strives (borrowed capital) but fails to capture the biblical view of sanctification:

That is, the human being is so constructed that he presses toward fuller and fuller being and **this means pressing toward what most people would call good values, toward serenity, kindness, courage, honesty, love, unselfishness, and goodness.** (Maslow, 1968, p. 155) (bold added)

Maslow goes on to describe the *peak experience*:

The climax of self-actualization is the peak experience. “Peak experience” is a splendidly *naturalistic* idiom, hospitable to all the similar meanings in the vocabularies of religion and mysticism, yet confined by none of them. **A peak experience is what you feel and perhaps “know” when you gain authentic elevation as a human being.** (Maslow, 1971) (bold added)

Maslow seems to borrow from the eastern monistic notion of nirvana here but puts his own secular spin on it. Christians, however, look forward to glorification—a home in heaven secured by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:19-20).

Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow tips his hat to the developmental psychologists by asserting that having needs met should follow a hierarchy with the result of self-actualization:

But these needs or values are related to each other in a hierarchical and developmental way, in order of strength and of priority.... Furthermore, *all* these basic needs may be considered to be simply steps along the path to general self-actualization, under which all basic needs can be subsumed. (Maslow, 1968, p. 153)

The Scripture does not seem to appeal to a hierarchy in justification but allows for immediate change. See, for example, 2 Corinthians 6:2b that reads, “[B]ehold, now is the day of salvation.” (Albeit, this most likely appeals to the work of Christ in fulfilling what the Old Testament prophets only pointed to.) The point is that Christ’s work is available right now for all who would trust in Him. For Christians, immediate change is expected. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). See also 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 where Paul lists problems that overcome people but then acknowledges that change can happen without a hierarchy. **And such were some of you.** But you were washed, you were sanc-

tified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:11) (bold added).

The other problem is that the hierarchy relies on other people for personal growth, whereas the Scriptures encourage starting with oneself and through the power of the Holy Spirit focusing on others (Philippians 2:1-4; 1 John 4:19). See Acts 20:35 for the proper perspective: “In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way [following Scripture and setting an example through word and deed] we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” Our trust should be in God and not in other people or ourselves. Maslow cannot answer the question, “Who initiates the love that everyone needs?” However, Christians can. “We love because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

ANALYSIS SUMMARY

For Christians, there are several issues with Maslow’s theory of motivation. First, we could argue that Maslow is trying to accomplish the “fruit of the Spirit” without God. (See Galatians 5:22-23.) Some percentage of the population may reflect some of these qualities due to their heritage, but it is foolish to think that everyone can develop these qualities without God because He is the only one who can really meet our need, which is the need for salvation from the punishment of sin and from the power of sin. That is where real freedom lies (John 8:36). Maslow himself admits,

I have the strong intuition that such authentic, fully human persons are the actualization of what many human beings could be. **And yet we are confronted with the sad fact that so few people achieve this goal, perhaps only one in a hundred, or two hundred.** We can be hopeful for mankind because in principle anybody *could* become a good and healthy man. (Maslow, 1968, p. 163) (bold added)

So, there is no real hope in Maslow’s approach beyond a vague belief in a secular, utopian, theoretical possibility.

Maslow’s view of need creates problems (1 Kings 14:23-24). For example, if sex is a “need,” then to suppress the sex drive makes one “sick.” This contrasts sharply with the biblical view that sex is good in the context of marriage but not otherwise (Colossians 3:5). Maslow’s view can give unsuspecting Christians a green light to rationalize behavior out of step with Scripture with the

resulting challenges, both personally and relationally. But even in tough times, Scriptures acknowledges the sex drive and encourages a proper outlet for it. “Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control” (1 Corinthians 7:5).

Another contrast between Scripture and Maslow is his “peak experience” notion. This idea seemed to be co-opted in the 1960s to justify drug use as a good thing, leading to “fuller” experience and insight. Maslow (1964) speculated that drug abusers were likely starving for the feelings associated with peak experiences but could not recreate the full experience. Paul addresses this problem when he counsels, “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18).

Finally, Maslow wants to replace the church and its pastors with psychologists as the ones offering salvation to others:

I find it sometimes amusing ... that so many ... philosophers and theologians, who talk about human values, of good and evil, proceed in complete disregard of the plain fact that professional psychotherapists every day, as a matter of course, change and improve human nature, help people to become more strong, virtuous.... (Maslow, 1968, p. 165)

This is the secular solution to life’s challenges, but only the Gospel meets our need for salvation and real help. We could reverse the question and ask why so many psychologists ignore theologians who help people eternally and thus become “more strong, virtuous.”

In conclusion, keep in mind that this paper is dealing with Maslow’s broad theory of human motivation. It is another entire work to dig into the details of people’s problems and how to help them. However, Maslow admits that his overarching objective is to create a new worldview, so it is valid to evaluate his ideas from this perspective. It is hoped that all of us will consider God’s words in Ephesians 5:15-17, “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.”

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