

The Bible and ADHD

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Recently, in behalf of the defense of a confessed murderer, a neurologist testified that “there are “holes” in school shooter Kip Kinkel’s brain that could be related to mental illness...[there are] areas of reduced blood flow - or “holes” - especially in the frontal lobe, the seat of emotional control and decision making.”¹ This incident demonstrates what we already know: The theory of neurological disorders and chemical imbalances has swept the country. It has become a standard answer for why people have severe emotional and behavioral problems. Everything from drunkenness and rage to murder is said to be caused by a neurochemical problem in the brain. It would not be an overstatement to say that the church, to a large degree, has accepted these theories as gospel truth. In fact, it is new dogma presented in scientific terms as if it were a settled fact. The primary focus is on ADHD or *Attention Deficit Hyper Disorder* and *Bipolar Disorder*, formerly known as Manic Depressive Disorder. There are many other related disorders, as well, often new ones, which seem to be identified and catalogued weekly. For pastors, parents, and others who have people under their care, this is an important issue. It concerns how we help those who we love. It is important for another even more vital reason. The very things that Christ says come from the heart, we are now told originate from a chemical imbalance or a neurological disorder. Both, of course, can’t be true. We must consider these things, for you can’t be involved in the ministry of helping people without coming to some conclusion about these matters. With these things in mind, and recognizing the great significance of the issue, I will attempt to show that this is unfounded teaching - nothing more than an unproven theory.

The Admission of its Proponents That ADHD Is an Unproven Theory

To begin with, many in the scientific community consider ADHD to be an unproven theory. The ‘experts’, themselves, acknowledge this. For example, the author of the book, *“The Attention Deficit Child”*, who has written books published by Focus on the Family admits concerning ADHD; *“The exact causes are still not known. Neurochemical abnormalities which might underlie this disorder are difficult to document. The research appears to be moving toward a consensus that ADHD has a biological base.”*² Notice the tentative language *“the exact causes are still not known”*, *“might underlie”*, and *“the research appears”*. He is more direct elsewhere when he admits, *“I will give you the best answers scientific research has been able to provide about the origins of these problems. The most accurate statement I can make is that we don’t really know for sure what causes ADHD.”*³

This is a startling admission. What is even more startling, however, is the readiness with which ADHD advocates treat it as fact, and regularly prescribe medication! Here is the point of concern: Is it good pastoral or parental care to permit the prescription of medication for something when its cause is unknown? Is it wise or loving to prescribe medication when the long-term effects are, at best unknown, and at worst may have serious consequences?⁴ Of greater concern is the readiness with which many Christians accept this theory and, in so doing, dismiss what the Scripture says is the source of man’s emotional and behavioral problems. Should not Christians be suspicious of any theory that attributes evil or foolish behavior to any source other than the heart? The readiness of the church to receive new psychological theory seems to know no bounds.

The above admission comes from a Christian psychologist. Those in the secular medical community are even more to the point. Many bluntly assert that ADHD and related disorders, clearly are not proven to be caused by neurological or biochemical problems. For example, Dr. Peter Breggan, an M.D. and a psychiatrist who has appeared four times on the Oprah Winfrey show, authored the book *“Talking Back to Ritalin”*. He wrote it in order to debunk the theories about biochemical imbalance and neurological disorders. After extensive research, he says:

*“When talking to parents who have no medical or scientific background, ADHD/Ritalin advocates frequently claim that ADHD is known to be caused by a biochemical imbalance. Statements to this effect have so little foundation that they could, at times, be considered outright lies. In their professional writings, not even staunch ADHD advocates try to claim there is a proven biochemical in the brains of children labeled ADHD.”*⁵

He goes on to quote the 1997 edition of the American Psychiatric Press Textbook of Neuropsychiatry, it says:

“Efforts to identify a selective neurochemical imbalance have been disappointing.” In regard to the two most frequently discussed neurotransmitters in ADHD, they find there are “no reliable differences on blood, urine, or cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) measures of dopamine or norepinephrine metabolites.”⁶

Breggan then comments: *“Like true believers, the authors then march on briskly into yet another hoped for biochemical cause of the most speculative nature.”⁷* Regarding the Drug Enforcement Administration’s findings on the biological basis of ADHD he says:

“In December 1996 the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) held a two-day conference on ADHD and Ritalin. One of the sections dealt with studies of the biological basis of the disorder and included several ADHD/Ritalin advocates, including Alan Zametkin and Jeffrey Lewine. They concluded that no “specific neurological lesion or deficit” has been found in people diagnosed ADHD. Studies that claim to make such a finding have not been replicated. As we found in regard to drug efficacy, the behind-the-scenes consensus is much different from the public image promoted by advocates.”⁸

Breggan then refers to the findings of Richard E. Vatz and Lee S. Weinberg, professionals who are Associate Psychology Editors for U.S.A. Today. They comment:

“Periodically, there are “discoveries” that are trumpeted as the Rosetta stone for those seeking to define ADHD as a disease. Such was the case of the “landmark” 1990 study on hyperactivity and cerebral glucose metabolism in adults, published in the New England Journal of Medicine, that was—and is—heralded widely as demonstrating the biological basis for hyperactivity. However, it does not demonstrate that ADHD is caused by “abnormal brain chemistry,” a misrepresentation regularly made by journalists and even researchers.”⁹

Here is one last reference regarding the unproven nature of this theory:

“The brain of a child diagnosed ADHD is indistinguishable from the brain of a normal child. The differences between brains generated in Zametkin’s studies—and all other such research—appear only as the end result of mathematical formulae used to analyze data that have been grouped together from comparisons among many brains. To repeat, the individual brain scans in Zametkin’s studies—or in any other similar studies—cannot distinguish between the supposedly normal and the supposedly abnormal individual. None of the brains of the children or adults in Zametkin’s PET scan studies look abnormal and none of them are known to be abnormal!”¹⁰

The above are just some of the many sources which could be quoted to demonstrate that ADHD and other similarly labeled “biochemical disorders” have no basis in medical or scientific fact. Now we must consider how this bears on what the Scripture teaches and how the Christian should view these matters.

The Biblical Perspective on ADHD

According to its proponents, the Attention Deficit Hyper Disorder is marked by a number of specific characteristics. I will present these characteristics and then show how they are identical to the characteristics of ‘foolishness’ described in the Book of Proverbs. Proverbs 22:15 says: *“Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of discipline will remove it far from him.”* Notice that foolishness is “bound up” in the heart. That is, it is ingrained in the child’s nature; it is an essential part of his disposition. In the context of the Book of Proverbs, foolishness is a comprehensive term which describes the effects of the sinfulness and fallenness of human nature.

The following is a relatively complete list of the characteristics of ADHD commonly presented by its advocates. It will help us compare it to what is described in Scripture as foolishness. The hyperactive child has difficulty sustaining attention and is easily distracted. He doesn’t listen when spoken to directly. He doesn’t complete tasks or follow through on instructions. He can’t sit still and is constantly moving, even when he is told not to, especially in school. The child is impulsive, acting without thinking of the consequences. The child is antisocial, often demanding to be in charge of all social actions. The child has mood swings marked by anger or sullenness. Finally, he often interrupts others and is disruptive. These are the main indicators which are mentioned in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fourth Edition, developed by the American Psychiatric Association.

Now, as I mentioned above, every one of these characteristics can be found in the Book of Proverbs as marks of foolishness. According to Proverbs, foolishness is characterized by the following:

An unteachableness and an unwillingness to listen: *A rebuke goes deeper into one who has • understanding than*

a hundred blows into a fool, 17:10; The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction, 1:7; The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, But a wise man is he who listens to counsel, 12:15.

- A quarrelsome, contentious, anti-social spirit: *Keeping away from strife is an honor for a man, But any fool will quarrel, 20:3; When a wise man has a controversy with a foolish man, The foolish man either rages or laughs, and there is no rest, 29:9.*
- An impulsive, careless attitude, without regard to consequences: *A wise man is cautious and turns away from evil; But a fool is arrogant and careless, 14:16.*
- An uncontrolled, irrational anger and temper: *A fool's vexation is known at once, But a prudent man conceals dishonor, 12:16; A fool always loses his temper, But a wise man holds it back, 29:11.*
- An inability to finish something and an impulsiveness that moves from one thing to another: *Wisdom is in the presence of the one who has understanding, But the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth, 17:24.*
- A belittling of wrong-doing and an enjoyment of evil, even when it causes trouble in the lives of others: *Fools mock at sin, But among the upright there is good will, 14:9; Doing wickedness is like sport to a fool; And so is wisdom to a man of understanding, 10:23.*
- A slanderous, evil speaking, disrespectful tongue: *He who conceals hatred has lying lips, And he who spreads slander is a fool, 10:18; A fool's lips bring strife, And his mouth calls for blows, 18:6.*
- A disruptive, self-destructive tendency.

It should be easy to see that these are the very behaviors and characteristics catalogued as the indicators of ADHD. Therefore, the Scriptures give no basis for attributing the source of these things to chemical disorders or other merely physical causes. It must be said in passing that physical factors (such as infections, nutritional problems, chronic anemia, hormonal disorders, hypo-thyroidism) may occasion or increase behavioral and emotional problems. However, these are secondary factors and not the ultimate cause; this is an important distinction and is often not taken into consideration.

In regard to the predisposition of a person with ADHD, Scripture is in conflict with the current explanation of this as well. A typical explanation of the source of ADHD states:

*"The research appears to be moving toward a consensus that ADHD has a biological base. The data points to a genetically endowed predisposition along with a common neurological mechanism. Part of the basis for this predisposition may be inherited ... all of this suggests a genetic base for the problem. Due to developmental neurological problems ... a person with attention disorder has an impairment in his basic mental process which allows him to inhibit his behavior."*¹¹

According to this thinking, ADHD has a "biological base" which is the result of a "genetically endowed predisposition". It is a predisposition caused by "biological and neurological problems". Moreover, it is a predisposition that causes an "impairment" in the child so that he can't "inhibit" his behavior. The Biblical position on this is clear. The Scriptures do teach that people are born with a predisposition and that it causes an inability to inhibit behavior. The Scriptures, however, attribute both to fallen human nature and its enslaving power, not ADHD! David, for example, said, *"Behold I was bought forth in iniquity and in sin my mother conceived me"*, Psalm 51:5. Here it is asserted that people are indeed born with a predisposition, but it is a predisposition to sin! David also said in regard to sin's enslaving power: *"the wicked are estranged from the womb; those who speak lies go astray from birth."* Psalm 58:3. This Scripture tells us that, because of the enslaving power of sin, children from infancy develop evil patterns of behavior. It is important that we not fail to see that what we are dealing with here is a fundamental issue that touches the very heart of Biblical theology. The acceptance of ADHD and other biochemical theories is no minor matter. It cuts at the heart of the Biblical teaching of the sinful depravity of human nature. There is a direct conflict in this regard. The ADHD theory says that a child's unruly behavior comes from a biochemical or neurological problem for which he is not responsible. The Scriptures and the church, throughout its long history, assert that unruly behavior comes from a foolish, sinful heart, for which the child is responsible. Both, of course, cannot be true. We must choose one or the other.

In conclusion, we can say the following. The claims of ADHD advocates that ADHD is a disorder which is the result of chemical imbalance or a neurological disorder is not only not proven by science but it is contradicted by clear Biblical teaching. The predisposition to these behaviors and their enslaving tendency is not the result of chemical imbalances; it is the result of the child's fallen nature acquired at conception. As the Lord Jesus Christ so clearly teaches in the Gospels, the problem is the heart - a heart that defiles. The solution isn't

drugs, where there is no long-term hope. Many times the solution is consistent, loving discipline coupled with patience, faith, and wisdom. This often involves hard work. It may require a re-prioritized life, and a change of lifestyle. In other cases, the problem isn't the need for consistent, loving, balanced discipline. Sometimes the matter is simply a child's immature, foolish reaction to stress and change in his own life. Things such as a new or unfriendly social environment, a marital disruption, a loss of a familiar friend, a family move, or even an absent parent may cause excessive emotional and sinful responses. This, of course, will entail much prayer and patient waiting upon God. In other words, it isn't easy. These things can test and stretch a parent's faith unlike anything else.

Here is the ultimate issue: Do we listen to Christ or men? To Scripture or pseudo-science? Many, trusting the supposed findings of psychiatry, have chosen the teachings of men. Peter's words must be our standard and guiding principle concerning the authority we heed in making our final judgment in these matters. Speaking of the Word of God he said, "*And you have the more sure Word of prophesy which you are well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your heart,*" 2 Peter 1:19.

The Scriptures convey the very mind and will of God; therefore, they can and must be trusted. Christ will not fail us when we cast ourselves on His wisdom and follow His way. May God help us to do so.

Endnotes

1. *The Sacramento Bee News Service*, November 5, 1999
2. Grant Martin, *The Attention Deficit Child*, p. 45
3. *Ibid.*, p. 45
4. *Time Magazine*, November 30, 1998, p. 90
5. Peter Breggan, *Talking Back to Ritalin*, p. 173
6. *Ibid.*, p. 173
7. *Ibid.*, p. 173
8. *Ibid.*, p. 168
9. *Ibid.*, p. 169
10. *Ibid.*, p. 168
11. Martin, p. 45