Institute of Christian Teaching

Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

ABRAHAM MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS:

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

by

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Introduction

"See to it that no one takes you captive
through hollow and deceptive philosophy,
which depends on human tradition
and the basic principles of this world
rather than Christ."
-Colossians 2:8 NIV

One of the most commonly adopted theories regarding human needs, motivation, and learning is Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The western world in particular has based much of its work in educational, business, and motivational theories on the assumptions that Maslow began developing in the late 1950's and continued until his death in 1970.

Ewart Woolridge goes so far as to call Maslow the "high priest" of needs and motivation and his theories are widely accepted and used. His theory is attractive, according to Woolridge, because it "provides a practical and understandable picture" of needs theory.[1]

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[1]Woolridge, Ewart. "Time to stand Maslow's hierarchy on its head? *People Management.* December 21, 1995.

Maslow has long been recognized as a leading voice for the humanist movement and his hierarchy of needs theory is a classic example of the humanist philosophy at work. Maslow's work has slowly become accepted as fact and is no longer given much critical thought or evaluation, even in Christian schools where a little critique by teachers and students ought to produce some concern or at least raise questions.

Christian schools need to develop critical Christian scholars rather than mere academic consumers who believe whatever the newest theory is. The end result of a Christian classroom where faith and learning are truly integrated needs to be the development of critically thinking Christian students who look intelligently at the world around them through the wisdom and discernment of a Christian worldview.

James Sire calls for critical thinking when he writes, "It is these (unexamined presuppositions) which we need to identify, analyze, and critique if we are to integrate our faith and academic study."[2] Parker Palmer in his extraordinary book, *To Know as We are Known* puts it this way, "The way we teach depends on the way we think people know, we cannot amend our pedagogy until our epistemology is transformed."[3]

In *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship,* George Marsden argues for creating schools that teach and promote the highest levels of Christian critical thought.[4] Arthur Holmes also calls for Christian colleges to become both more Christian and more intellectual, saying in

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[2]Sire, James. *Discipleship of the mind.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990.

[3]Palmer, Parker J. *To know as we are known.* San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993.

[4]Marsden, George M. *The outrageous idea of Christian Scholarship.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

effect that Christian education's work is not yet complete nor finished.[5]

During the 22nd Faith and Learning Seminar sponsored by the Institute for Christian Teaching held at Bogenhofen Seminary, Austria where this paper was first presented, quality Christian critical thinking was called for repeatedly. Gary Land stated that "we must evaluate these ideas critically."[6] Land was addressing the idea of postmodernism but the point is made, critical thinking is needed in Christian education. Land again called for Christian scholarship in his second presentation, stating any subject that requires our utmost effort needs to be taken seriously and examined *Christianly* as we seek for truth.[7]

Leonard Brand also took the opportunity this seminar provided to emphasize the importance of critical Christian scholarship by writing, "Teach students to think critically, and evaluate what they are reading. Help students learn to recognize the difference between data, interpretation, and assumptions... search for a reinterpretation, based on Christian assumptions."[8]

Enrique Becerra put it succinctly, "Bluntly put, spiritual development does not take place without critical thinking."[9]

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[5]Holmes, Arthur F. *The idea of a Christian college.* Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975.

[6]Land, Gary. "Postmodernism: A Christian reflection." Paper presented at the 22nd Integration of Faith and Learning seminar: Bogenhoffen Seminary, Austria, 1998.

[7]Land, Gary. "A biblical-Christian approach to the study of history." Paper presented at the 22nd Integration of Faith and Learning Seminar: Bogenhoffen Seminary, Austria, 1998.

[8]Brand, Leonard. "Christianity and science." Paper presented at the 22nd Integration of Faith and Learning Seminar: Bogenhoffen Seminary, Austria, 1998.

[9]Becerra, Enrique. "The role of an Adventist school in the spiritual development of students." Paper presented at the 22nd Integration of Faith and Learning Seminar: Bogenhoffen Seminary, Austria, 1998.

Christian authors such as C.S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, and more recently, J.P. Moreland, Mark Noll, R.C. Sproul, are joined by secular authors in calling for a further development of our critical thinking skills.[10] Stanley I. Greenspan in *The Growth of the Mind* warns of the decline in our culture's creative and analytic abilities and suggests that Western culture needs to encourage critical thinking skills in school and at home.[11]

Simply put, we need to learn how to think critically and as Christians we need to take this educational challenge very seriously. An examination of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory can provide an example of Christian scholarship at work.

Abraham Maslow: The Man and His Theory

"Children make themselves into something."
-Abraham Maslow[12]

Abraham H. Maslow (1908-1970) was born in Brooklyn, New York, and educated at the City College of New York and the University of Wisconsin. Maslow taught psychology for 14 years at Brooklyn College where he was one of few professors who cared for any of the largely

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[10]See: C.S. Lewis, *The abolition of man, The case for Christianity, An experiment in criticism,* and *Mere Christianity;* Francis Schaeffer, *A Christian manifesto, The mark of a Christian,* and *How should we then live?;* J.P. Moreland, *Love your God with all your mind* and *Scaling the secular city;* Mark Noll, *The scandal of the evangelical mind;* and R.C. Sproul, *Renewing your mind* and *Lifeviews.*

[11]Greenspan, Stanley I. with Beryl Lieff Benderly. *The growth of the mind.* Reading, MA: Perseus Books, 1997.

[12]Maslow, Abraham H. *The farther reaches of human nature.* New York: The Viking Press, 1971.

immigrant student body. The students deeply appreciated his concern for them and Maslow

quickly became the most popular teacher there. So popular in fact that he was called the "Frank

Sinatra of Brooklyn College."[13] Maslow eventually moved to Brandeis University where he

spent the remainder of his teaching career. It was at Brandeis that Maslow developed a theory of

motivation describing the process by which an individual progresses from basic needs such as

food and water to the highest needs, which he called "self-actualization," or the fulfillment of

one's greatest human potential.

Maslow's definition of self-actualization came from his studies of exemplary people such

as Albert Einstein, Jane Addams, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Frederick Douglass. This was a radical

departure from the chief schools of psychology of the era. Sigmund Freud and B. F. Skinner

were the leaders of the day where the study of mentally ill or neurotic people or animals was the

norm.

Maslow felt that Freud saw little difference between the motivations of humans and animals. We

are supposedly rational beings; however we do not act that way. While Freud has made a great

many significant contributions to the study of psychology, Maslow argued that Freud's work

was overly pessimistic and a "crippled philosophy." Skinner, on the other hand, studied how

pigeons and white rats learned. Maslow observed that Skinner's motivational models were

based on simple rewards such as food and water, sex and avoidance of pain. Command your dog

to sit and give the dog a treat when s/he sits or punishment when the dog does not obey and after

several repetitions of the command to sit s/he will sit when you command him/her to do so.

Skinner also has contributed much to furthering our understanding of how the mind works and

the study of motivation but Maslow thought that psychologists should instead study the

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[13]Maslow, Abraham H. *Motivation and personality (3rd edition)*. New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1970.

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playfulness and affections of animals and people.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs provided an alternative to the depressing determinism he found in Freud and Skinner. Maslow felt that people were basically trustworthy, self-protecting, and self-governing. Humans tend toward growth and love, and although there is a continuous cycle of war, murder, and deceit, Maslow believed that human nature was not meant to be violent. Violence and other evils occur when human needs are thwarted. In other words, people who are deprived of basic needs such as food or safety may provide for their needs or defend themselves by violent means. Maslow did not believe that humans are violent because they enjoy violence, or that they cheat, lie, or steal because they like doing so.

It is worth noting that Maslow arrived at these conclusions by observing that animals functioned within fundamental patterns of needs. He proposed that mankind was an evolved animal and applied the instinctive behavior of the animal kingdom to mankind.[14]

Theorists such as Maslow believe that learning is growth. As Christian educators, we need to better understand what motivates students in order to encourage growth thereby encouraging learning. Maslow believed that the best way to learn and grow as human beings is to work our way up through the levels in his hierarchy, eventually arriving at a point of complete holistic awareness.

Maslow's theory promotes individualism and became a cornerstone for the rise of humanism in the sixties and seventies. Henry Lamberton comments that Maslow's contributions to humanism in part caused people to feel that their only public duty was to follow their own interests as far as possible, limited only by the rule that we do not unfairly limit the freedom of

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[14]Maslow, Abraham H. *Toward a psychology of being (2nd edition)*. New York: Harper & Row, 1968.

others.[15]

Maslow's hierarchy of needs originally distinguished five levels of needs that must be satisfied in order to produce a healthy, fully-functioning human being. Near the end of his life, Maslow added two levels, cognitive and aesthetic.[16] If one or more of Maslow's needs is not satisfied, Elizabeth Puttick writes, "the individual will tend to be arrested at that developmental stage, unable to progress to further stages until that need is met."[17]

Maslow's original levels of need	Maslow's revised levels of need
1 Physiological	1. Physiological
2. Safety	2. Safety
3. Belonging	3. Belonging
4. Esteem	4. Esteem
5. Self-actualization	5. Cognitive
	6. Aesthetic
	7. Self-actualization

Table 1. Comparison of Maslow's Original and Revised Levels of Needs

Maslow's heirarchy of needs theorizes that each of these levels must be adequately satisfied starting at physiological needs and working toward self-actualization needs. Finally one arrives at the same level of development as such Maslow examples of self-actualization as Einstein and Roosevelt.

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[15]Lamberton, Henry. "Thoughts on the integration of psychology and religion." Paper presented as the 22nd Integration of Faith and Learning Seminar: Bogenhoffen Seminary, Austria, 1998.

[16]O'Connell, April and Vincent O'Connell. *Choice and growth: The psychology of holistic growth, adjustment, and creativity.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992.

[17]Puttick, Elizabeth. "A new typology and socialogical model of religion based on the needs and values model of Abraham Maslow." *Journal of Beliefs and Values.* November, 1997.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Since Maslow's theory of needs begins by addressing the lower level needs and working your way up his hierarchy, we will define his terms in that order as well. These definitions were developed from Shunk (1996) and O'Connell (1992).[18]
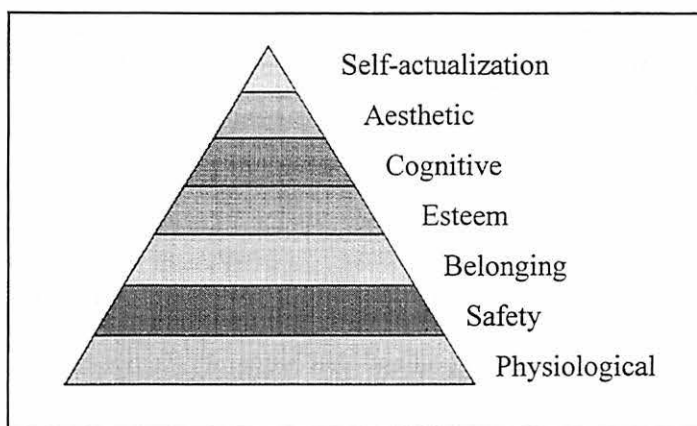

Figure 2. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Physiological needs. These are the basic body needs for continued existence, such as food, water, and air. People deprived of these needs will seek to satisfy them by any means possible, including working for slave wages, begging, and stealing.

Safety needs. To grow and learn we need to feel secure in our lives and jobs. We need a certain stability in our lives. We need some structure and order in our everyday living such as a safe place to rest our heads and nourish our souls, a "territorial" place that is ours, were we are safe and warm. A castle of protection, as it were.

Belonging needs. "Often referred to as love and belonging needs," human beings are social by nature seeking out groups or individuals to form partnerships, friendships, and alliances with. Humankind is driven to find companionship and love.

Esteem needs. Most human beings need to feel not just loved but needed By their community. We need to feel that we can contribute something worthwhile. For some this need for esteem will be satisfied through great achievement, as a teacher, administrator, or scientist. Others may find these needs satisfied by

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[18]Shunk, Dale H. *Learning theories (2nd edition)*. New York: Harper & Row, 1996. O'Connell, 1992.

being a patron of the arts or serving on a school board. Still others may choose
to help in noble causes such as saving the planet's ecology, helping orphaned
children, or going on missionary trips.
Cognitive needs. These needs have to do with how we understand the world
around us. We seek knowledge, we have a curios mind. Human being desire
to uncover the facts, to know the "truth," to discover the laws of the universe
and everything within it, including ourselves and others.
Aesthetic needs. Our needs for order, symmetry, design, harmony, and beauty.
If we cannot express a satisfactory aesthetic statement ourselves, we will try to
satisfy this need by through the work of others, whether it be art, music, poetry,
film, or another medium.
Self-actualization. Achieved when one can embody the highest potential that
s/he is capable of reaching. Once all the other needs are taken care of, there
remains a yearning to explore and to actualize our individual talents and gifts,
to be expressive, creative, dynamic selves with the freedom to master our fate
or perhaps to experience that overwhelming and mystical sense of being in
perfect harmony and at one with the universe.

There is a great deal of truth in Maslow's theory and that is why it has been so widely

adopted into Western education and business practices. However I believe Maslow is misguided.

As a critically thinking Christian, I cannot help but critique his hierarchy for failing to recognize

that animal instinct is not always noble or good and that humanity cannot transcend base animal

instinct without divine assistance and inspiration.

A Christian Response to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

"But seek ye first His kingdom and His righteousness,
and all these things will be given to you as well."
-Matthew 6:33 NIV

Maslow places his hierarchy of needs in a triangle-shape. This implies a few things: the

lower level needs such as physiological, safety, belonging, and esteem take up more space and

effort to satisfy than the upper levels, which seem to be less consuming or at least more focused.

Maslow held that man would nobly move up his pyramid, eventually arriving at a humanistic

god-like state of complete self-actualization. I hold that Maslow is overly optimistic in his estimate of what motivates man. There are many who do enjoy doing wrong purely for the joy or excitement of the act. St. Augustine, for example, stole pears as a child not because he was hungry or to give to the starving but just for the "thrill of the sin."[19]

We all know people who lie, steal, and cheat for no reason other than they like doing so. Mankind is flawed and does not operate under the noble design of God or even as humanists such as Maslow felt it should. Man is often motivated by things far less dignified than Maslow theorized.

Further critique is offered by Viktor Frankl regarding self-actualization:

> "What is called self-actualization is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one would strive for it, the more he would miss it. In other words, self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self transcendence."[20]

While Frankl is still missing the mark for a truly Christian understanding of human transcendence, he has merit in his doubt regarding the possibility of self-actualization. I would add that true self-transcendence is achieved only through divine means.

So what is a possible Christian response to this widely held theory of what motivates mankind and its implications to the classroom?

John the beloved writes, "Thy kingdom is not of this world," (John 18:36) explaining that life under God's control is strikingly different from the secular quest of unfulfilled and unsatisfied needs. Jesus Christ makes it even more clear by advising his disciples to not be concerned with food, clothing, housing, comfort, and money when doing his father's work (Luke

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[19]Lewis, Gordon R. "Augustine: Monistic mystic or holistic Christian?" *Christian Research Journal*. Fall, 1996.

[20]Frankl, Viktor. *Man's search for meaning*. New York: Pocket Books, 1977.

9:3-5). Christ further tells us that God is actively involved in providing for our best interests, and is intimately interested in us, even down to the number of hairs, however rapidly diminishing that may or may not be, on our heads (Luke 12:7).

Christ is simply saying, *"Let everything rest on me. Let our relationship be your balancing point. Let me transcend your hierarchy of needs into something glorious,"* while Maslow in effect is saying that man provides for his own needs or fails to grow.

Donald Kraybill, in his book *The Upside-Down Kingdom* examines how God's kingdom inverts the values that drive our society. "Kingdom values," according to the author, "challenge the patterns of social life taken for granted in modern culture."[21] Kraybill and Tom Sine, in *Wild Hope,* call for a Christian approach to life that would turn our secular hierarchy of needs on its head.[22]

As Christian educators we are responsible for understanding the implications of such theories as Maslow's and their influence on our minds and our students. I believe that in a God-less theory, such as Maslow's, mankind finds itself in a hopeless mess. This hierarchy of needs may show the best way to work within a flawed premise, but to quote Calvin Coolidge, "There is no right way to do the wrong thing."

With Christ at the base of our new hierarchy, we turn the world upside down and we balance all our needs on Him and not on ourselves. Although the balancing point of this Christian hierarchy is smaller than the levels that follow, I am suggesting that Christ is not limited to the tip of the triangle's point, but rather, due to the dotted lines in the diagram below, is integrated into all the other areas of needs.

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[21]Kraybill, Donald B. *The upside-down kingdom.* Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990.

[22]Sine, Tom. *Wild hope.* Turnbridge Wells, England: Monarch, 1991.

In this "transcendent hierarchy" there are two features that need to be addressed. The first feature is the use of dotted lines to divide each need from the other. This is done deliberately to show how all these needs are intertwined and connected to one another and how all are dependent upon Jesus Christ. As a Christian, one believes that Christ is actively and intimately involved in the needs and concerns of daily life. Christ provides true satisfaction of all our needs through a multitude of ways. It is the divine source that provides the soil, sun, water, and air, it is God that gives the spark of life that grows into your spouse, and it is Christ who offers you eternal love and heavenly value.
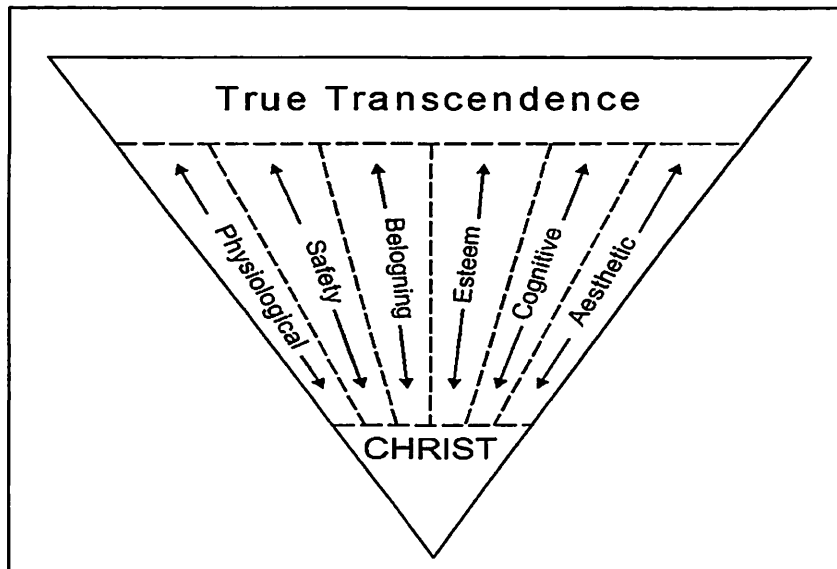

Figure 3. Christian Hierarchy of Needs

The second feature is the arrows pointing upward and downward for each need. This signifies the sliding or changing of importance that each need has during various times in a persons existence. For example, we all have heard stories of parents who were willing to die for their children. The parent placed far less importance on their own physiological and safety needs and far more importance on their love and belonging needs. The starving artist is another

example of someone who places a greater importance on aesthetic needs than other needs.

Abraham Maslow spent a lifetime studying his theory. Further research is needed regarding this Christian or transcendent hierarchy. Christian scholars need to address this theory with the same degree of academic interest.

Conclusion

"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers,

against the authorities, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

-Ephesians 6:12 NIV

This Christian hierarchy of needs has many examples of true-discipleship such as: Moses relinquishing the high life and ruling power in Egypt; Joseph giving up the security and comfort of being Potiphar's chief of staff; S/Paul walked away from a highly respected position in the Jewish faith, all content in God's ability to transcend their needs into something far more worthwhile. The list goes on and on.

Many Christian educators have adopted Maslow's theory because it appears to make sense, but that is not enough. We are called to a higher standard and need to critically examine each and every theory by our Christian beliefs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is incomplete because it denies the most fundamental need of all, an individual relationship with our divine savior, Jesus Christ.

It is important how you choose to believe mankind is motivated for growth and learning. Is the human being pure and motivated solely by noble desires or is humanity flawed and in need of help achieving the best they can possibly be? Do we need God or are we good enough

without heavenly help? A Christian educator who agrees with Maslow, knowingly or not, is denying Christ his rightful place in our schools and our lives. We need to think critically as Christian educators and students and recognize, as Humberto Rassi said, "Due to the secularization of modern culture and the naturalistic assumptions of most graduate programs, some Adventist teachers have unconsciously adopted a dualistic perspective on education."[23]

Dualism is best described as a two-sided approach to something. In this case, Christian education. For example in education as Rasi just observed, some Christian teachers have developed a two-sided approach to education, where on the one hand they believe in God and His creation yet on the other hand they teach in the classroom as if God had no place in any aspect of learning or thought.

Perhaps this paper will help some Christian educators put God back into the learning process. Perhaps it may spark dialogue regarding Christian critical thinking, quality Christian scholarship and further research of the conscious or unconscious assumptions held among Christian educators that lead, as Maslow's hierarchy does, to a dualistic perspective of Christian education. If so, then I am humbly pleased.

"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right,

whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable,

if anything is excellent or praiseworthy,

think about such things."

-Philippians 4:8 NIV

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[23]Rasi, Humberto M. "Worldviews, contemporary culture, and Adventist education." Paper presented at 22nd Integrating of Faith and Learning Seminar, 1998.

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