THE CASE AGAINST COVEY
Tim Vickers Uncovers the Toxins in 7 Habits

What is it with lifestyle gurus? They promise significance, success, wealth, fame, efficiency, balance, integration, promotion, peace of mind and endless good cheer. And millions believe that they can deliver it. Christians are not immune. After all, many of us are wondering how on earth we can fit everything into our increasingly busy lives – the pleasures of family, friends and church, the joys and benefits of interesting and challenging work, purpose and meaning, good sleep, refreshing hobbies and firm abdomens. So, we find Christian conferences selling Covey's 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, probably the most successful personal management book ever, turning over 1.5 million copies per year. It is used as essential training by over 16,000 organisations and has spawned a multi-million dollar business. It is such a highly influential book that even the president of the USA has endorsed it. And it's written by a devout Mormon.

IN COVEY'S WORLD INDIVIDUAL SELF-PERFECTION IS THE ROUTE TOWARDS SALVATION

What's 7 Habits About?

Effective people are those who don't lose sight of the bigger things in life, who manage their diaries to ensure that however busy and demanding the day is, the important things are never neglected. They are people who develop habits which enable them to achieve everything they want effectively and smoothly. They are people who routinely monitor their success, with a view to constant improvement. They are focused individuals who get to the end of life and look back with happiness at all they have done.

Covey's sub-title is 'Restoring the Character Ethic' a reference to the concept that Aristotle developed to describe the virtuous, or good, life. Virtue led to happiness, and happiness (or the contented reflection on a life lived without regret) was the ultimate aim of life. Character enables individuals to increase in virtue, and so to better achieve their goal of happiness. Character can be enhanced by virtuous habits, and checked against the norms of society. As such 'virtues' in a given age or location or culture may vary from those elsewhere. Covey's overall aim, then, is to show us how to live the 'good life' in the 20th-21st centuries.

Ironically, although 7 Habits' claims to seek to restore character to the centre of life, it reads in the main like a time management guide, with useful procedures for thinking through how to get the most important things done on a daily, weekly and longer term basis. Nonetheless, we should be aware that these techniques are permeated with a philosophy which is profoundly at odds with the Gospel of Christ.

The Importance of Worldview

Here is Aristotle's argument: everyone wants to be happy above all else; to be happy you have to live a good life; goodness is defined by your values, your worldview. Therefore, to understand how to achieve happiness, you need to have a clear picture of your worldview.

Here Covey hits a major problem: he is a believing Mormon, but he knows that any hard sell of Mormonism will cripple his 'best-selling' status. So, although he doesn't believe in a pluralistic relativism, he (perhaps hypocritically) leaves the reader free to import whatever worldview or belief system they want. He then creates a value system common to all readers by unearthing a set of 'universal principles' or 'natural laws', which he claims help us all to keep the chief priority of our particular worldview at the centre of our lives.

This approach leaves the way open for Christians to drop their own position into the Covey formula, and in theory come out with a Christian solution. His use of religious sounding language about church, family, selfishness, etc. strikes a further chord for many Christian readers and might make us feel comfortable with his general flow. The trouble is that the 'universal principles' are drawn from his own worldview position, which is anything but Christian.

Seven Things You Didn't Know About Covey

In addition to the 7 Habits series, Covey has also written, The Divine Center, which is only available from Mormon bookshops, and is a classic text on contemporary Mormon discipleship. This is orthodox, mainstream Mormonism, drawing on the full range of Mormon writings and showing the foundations of his Mormon worldview:

1. As a Mormon he believes that we're all born with a divine embryo within us.
2. The aim of human life is for us to become fully god and then to procreate, giving birth to more god-embryos. "As man now is, god once was; as god is now, man may become."
3. We become gods by achieving perfection in our lives, encouraging the divine in us to overcome our imperfect humanity.
4. Our own failure to become gods through self-perfection renders us as nothing more than worthless beasts.
5. Self-perfection is an individual occupation, there is no help from God.
6. God has given wisdom, or natural laws and 'principles', to all mankind to help them grow more divine, but only

those with access to Mormon teaching will ever understand how these principles work,

7. Jesus Christ is not the literal Son of God, but like us was born with a divine embryo, and worked out how to achieve self-perfection before anyone else.

There you have it, the Covey worldview, the social paradigm within which Covey wants to define good, and within which he wants to tell his readers how to live. A world in which individual self-perfection is the route towards salvation, or fulfilment of all that means to be truly human (and truly divine).

A PHILOSOPHY WHICH IS PROFOUNDLY AT ODDS WITH THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST.

The Divine Center of Covey's title becomes a pun. Yes, he wants to see the Mormon god at the centre of people's lives, but only because he believes the self to be a latent Mormon god. Hence, his divine centre is in reality a self-centre. Covey's Mormonism leads clearly to a self-orientated bid to secure one's own salvation through self-righteousness. This is the worldview he imports into the ever more successful 7 Habits.

Covey makes it quite clear that what he believes is fundamentally opposed to Christianity, saying that the Christian gospel is heresy and the Bible a distorted version of Mormon truth. His underlying perspective on life, humanity and God therefore could not be farther removed from Christianity if he tried.

A Different Worldview

- Christianity sees us as created by God as human not divine, made in His likeness, not in His exact replication.
- The Christian life is lived for God's glory rather than our own, and our happiness comes from knowing Him[1].
- What will bring ultimate joy to us will be to meet our Lord face to face without fear, secure in the knowledge of salvation through Christ.
- Our sinfulness places us well beyond the scope of God's perfection, and our salvation lies purely in the hands of our God.
- Our destiny is not to become the centre of our own little self-theistic universe but rather to worship the one true God at the centre of His.
- Our lives are lived with a growing sense of what God's goodness is; a growing desire to be like Him; and, most probably, a growing recognition of exactly how far short of righteousness we fall.
- Failure, repentance, faith, acceptance, grace and obedience are the motifs of Christian flourishing, not self-perfection.

Christian Character

If there is something for Christians to learn from the 'character ethic' we need to be careful how we use it. We don't want to find ourselves inadvertently stuck with a theology of salvation by works – salvation is by grace and faith alone. Yet, at the same time, we do want to live lives and do works which are increasingly pleasing to God, and we hope for the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in restoring our character[2]. This sanctification is double barrelled, including both the saving action of Christ on the cross, and our conformity with God's will through obedience to Christ[3].

Christians see the goal of life as salvation in Christ, allowing them to enter into the very presence of God as perfect and sinless human beings, a goal achievable only by the intervening grace of God Himself. The desire of our present existence is, then, to live in a way which pleases God, not for ever in fear of failing to make the grade for divinity, but living in joy that God has himself given us the grade, despite our failure. Of course, we can develop godly and helpful habits, just as Aristotle and Covey have said, but these habits will be reflective of the love of God shown in scripture and in the Church. They are habits which we can take into the not-yet-believing world to act as signposts directing others towards Christ[4].

The Treadmill of Self-Perfecting

In The Divine Center, Covey explains to his readers how they must work hard at conveying Mormon truth to the non-Mormon world in de-Mormonised language, disguising its true significance. This is the very reason for his lifestyle management work. He aims to pull people onto the treadmill of self-perfecting that is at the heart of his religion, but to do so through the common language of effectiveness, happiness and fulfilment. This is perhaps the chief habit of highly effective management gurus: to make me believe that I alone am the answer to all my problems. To show how technique and attitude will allow me to transform my life from inconsequentiality to vibrant purpose-driven fulfilment. To show how bright the future is with me at the centre of my universe.

Covey's emphasis on self-improvement and human flourishing is not drawn from an understanding of us as the image of God, but rather a misrepresentation of us as gods ourselves. Not a divinity which lies at the centre of creation, but rather a divinity at the centre of our being. In our world obsessed with self, this self-idolatry holds great appeal, but the Christian emphasis, both corporately and privately, must be constantly seeking to rediscover God – Father, Son and Spirit – at the centre of all things.

IN OUR WORLD OBSESSED WITH SELF, THIS SELF-IDOLATRY HOLDS GREAT APPEAL.

A large number of Christians have read 7 Habits and claim its usefulness. In truth, there is some helpful stuff about time management and about focus on priorities, but nothing which cannot be learned elsewhere. The pitfalls of getting

drawn into Covey's way of thinking far outweigh its advantages, because at its heart lies heresy. A life lived wholly by this book will never look the same as a life lived wholly by God's book. The onus must be on Christian readers and teachers to find adequate ways of explaining how God's Word helps us address issues of living a meaningful, God-centred life in an increasingly busy world.

A Final Note on Success Books

Two recent books by Christians have stepped into Covey's territory: The Heart of Success by Rob Parsons and The 7 Laws of Spiritual Success by Selwyn Hughes. Parsons' book shares Covey's emphasis on establishing your priorities, and like Covey, he removes explicit reference to a value system. Indeed, though Parsons' own worldview is strongly Christian the book appears as general wisdom rather than something clearly drawn from scripture. As such, Parsons' 'habits' may help us but they don't help us understand the Biblical 'why'. Hughes' book has a number of useful ideas relating to general Christian discipleship, filtered through a transparent plagiarism of Covey's work, but it lacks any cutting edge in its application to the hard balances of working life. The first does not point to Christ, while the other fails to help people get their life balance better sorted. Furthermore, their acquiescence to the cultural infatuation with success runs the risk of producing churches full of individualised Christians who view their salvation and material prosperity in terms of self-satisfying competition. Churches like this have no doubt existed since Corinth or Philippi, but the radical call to Christians at all times is to shun the language of success and replace it with the language of humility, compassion, love and obedience[5].

Resources

- 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Stephen Covey, Simon & Schuster, 1999, £10.99
- The 7 Laws of Spiritual Success, Selwyn Hughes, CWR, 2002, £7.99
- The Heart of Success, Rob Parsons, Hodder & Stoughton, 20O2, £ 6.99
- See book reviews and the article on Success at www.graduateimpact.com

References

1. Westminster Longer Catechism Item 1.
2. Romans 5:3-5
3. 1 Peter 1:1-2
4. 1 Peter 2:11-12
5. Philippians 2:1-10