A n effective preacher needs the skills of a window dresser. Of course, he should be familiar with the Bible and with theology; and certainly he must be well acquainted with God. But he must have also the art of presenting the gospel in such a form that people are interested in it and that they respond to it. Like the window decorator, the preacher must display his wares so attractively and know human nature so well that window shoppers are transformed into purchasers.

In the first year of my ministry the high point of a personal conference with Dr. Fosdick was his statement: “Do not make a truth your theme; make your theme the man in the pew trying to understand the truth.”

We are coming more fully to recognize the importance of the preacher’s insight into how and why people think and feel as they do. In the days before counseling became a standard factor in theological education, I never missed an opportunity, when I met the president of a seminary, to urge the inclusion of this subject in the curriculum. “A minister who goes out to his first field ignorant of the laws and operation of the mind,” I insisted, “is in the same class as a doctor who finishes medical school ignorant of anatomy. Neither one knows the material with which he is to work.” One seminary dean to whom I made that statement replied, “Let one of these young ministers begin talking with a farmer’s wife about her sex life and her husband will come after him with a shotgun!” That remark was a clever dodge which was unworthy of the speaker, the usual clarity of whose thought I have long admired.

The psychological insight necessary for counseling should deepen and enrich a minister’s preaching. It should be presumed that such a minister has reasonably well worked out his own inner problems so that he is free from disabling tensions and uneasiness. He should have outgrown the egocentricity which qualifies his consecration and the false security which relies on praise or success.

A minister who is fitted for counseling finds that his discernment of how people think and feel and why they be-
have as they do, will direct, illumine, and empower his preaching. Because he understands their anxieties, their mental blind spots, their prejudices, their resistances, he will be able better to interpret Christian experience to them and to do it in a way that will “speak to their condition.” Much indifference to preaching springs from the laymen’s feeling that the minister has no understanding of his problems. The effective sermon is not one in which the minister declares, “Thou art the man,” but one in which the hearer says, “He is talking to me!”

This counseling insight enables a man to perceive the conscious and unconscious needs of people, and to present the gospel as relevant to those lacks.

We are told that one is more apt to evoke action if his appeal is related to some desire within the personality. This process of leading on from the desires one has, to others which bring fuller and higher satisfactions, requires more discernment than the average course in evangelism supplies. If Christian discipleship, faith, brotherly love and prayer are to be made desirable to the average layman, it is important to have a clear understanding of that layman’s gamut of desires, including his unrealized ones.

A clergyman has an enormous advantage in both counseling and in preaching if he knows enough of mental illness and health so that he can deal not with symptoms, but with causes. A physician is not content with reducing a fever; he desires also to discover the source of the infection. That is one reason why a physician is better than a quack.

Many ministers are equipped to deal only with symptoms. They advise troubled people who come to them, on the basis of their self-diagnosis, which is often wide of the mark. The counselor is able to probe below the symptom to the deep-seated causes of the disturbed person. Similarly, in preaching one needs to be able to get below the conventional attitudes and superficial motives to the deep drives which “make Johnny run,” which lead people to sin, and which move toward goodness.

Christian preaching finds in the Bible its content and its power. The scriptures have come out of living experience and they find their true destiny in living experience again. We misuse the Bible if we try to slap a proof text on a trouble as we would a poultice on an aching back. It is worthwhile recalling the account of a woman who in a time of grief came to a minister for help. He drew out his New Testament and fingered through it for a verse. She reached over and closed it. “No, not out of the book, but out of your own experience.”

Still, the Bible remains Christianity’s text book: the source of the Judeo-Christian tradition; the message of singers and prophets of the living God; the records of the life of our Lord and of the early church; the colorful and revealing account of man’s and God’s encounter through a millenium of history.

One of the fascinating discoveries of recent decades has been the frequency with which the scriptures show insights which recent psychology has articulated. If a minister wishes to preach an occasional sermon or a series of sermons on the relevance of some principles of mental health to the Christian life, he need never be at a loss for a text.

The subject of inner conflict can find no more vivid portrayal than Paul gives in the seventh chapter of Romans. The necessity for outgrowing infantil-