

## **Dr. Kevin Leman and Randy Carlson: Childhood Memories and Birth Order**

**(The following is excerpted from the book *Prophets of PsychoHeresy II*  
by Martin and Deidre Bobgan, which is now out-of-print.)**

Dr. Kevin Leman and Randy Carlson have appeared with Dobson on his radio broadcast and have written an article on “Childhood Memories” for Focus on the Family magazine. In addition, Dobson has offered Leman and Carlson’s book *Unlocking the Secrets of Your Childhood Memories* through his ministry.

### **Childhood Memories.**

Leman is a psychologist and Carlson is a marriage and family counselor. With their psychological background and experience it is no wonder that they see life from a psychological, rather than a biblical, perspective. As an expression of their psychological point of view, they say:

Tell us about your earliest childhood memories, and we’ll tell you about yourself. We can confidently make this declaration because who you are today . . . your basic personality. . . your personal life philosophy. . . the secret to your entire outlook on life. . . is hidden within your earliest childhood memories.<sup>1</sup> (Emphasis and ellipses in original.)

The fact is, your basic personality and underlying identity is as permanent and unalterable as the grain in a piece of oak. You can, however, grow and learn. You can undergo a life-changing conversion, you can adapt and change your behavior in various ways, but your old human nature never changes.<sup>2</sup> (Emphasis added.)

In addition they say, “One of the striking truths about memory exploration is that we all decide at a subconscious level what we will remember and what we will block out.”<sup>3</sup>

Leman and Carlson repeat this material when interviewed by Dobson on his broadcast. Leman says:

This book is unique and it’s so simple. Think of it this way. Conjure up an early childhood memory out of your past and we can tell you specifically how that memory affects your life today, how it will affect who you might marry, the kind of job you might gravitate towards, the kind of problems you might have in the world.<sup>4</sup>

In response, Dobson says, “You are the child you used to be,” to which Leman says, “True. The little boy or girl you used to be you still are.” Leman also says:

Yes, you can change your behavior, but what we want to tell you is the wood grain remains. And you must fight it one day at a time, just like the Alcoholics Anonymous people fight alcoholism one day at a time.<sup>5</sup>

## The First Five or Six Years.

In a different interview with Dobson, Leman says:

The first five or six years in life----the one thing we as psychiatrists and psychologists agree on is--  
--those are the formative years.<sup>6</sup>

Dobson agrees by saying, "Yes," and Leman continues:

I say to parents, be aware that by the time your little three-year-old, you know, hits that tender age of three, 60 percent, perhaps, of their lifestyle, the way that they're beginning to see life, has already been formed.<sup>7</sup>

A similar statement was also made by psychiatrist Dr. Paul Meier when he was interviewed by Dobson on the topic of "Christian Child Rearing." In that interview Meier says, "Most of our children's personality traits are laid down by the sixth birthday."<sup>8</sup>

Such a viewpoint is not foreign to Dobson. He makes similar statements in his books. For instance, in *Dare to Discipline*, he says:

There is a critical period during the first four or five years of a child's life when he can be taught proper attitudes. These early concepts become rather permanent. When the opportunity of those years is missed, however, the prime receptivity usually vanishes, never to return.<sup>9</sup>

This particular point of view is basically Freudian. Freud would applaud Leman's and Carlson's statements and also Meier's and Dobson's.

Freud believed in and taught about the power of early life experiences. Other theorists, such as Adler, expanded and modified those theories. The function of the subconscious is also Freudian. In fact, the above quotations are good expressions of Freudian psychology. It is unfortunate that Leman, Carlson, Meier, Dobson, and others rarely identify the psychological sources for what they say. However, if they did, what they say might be questioned.

Freud's theory of infantile sexuality lurks behind what Leman and Carlson say regarding early childhood memories and how "your personality and underlying identity is as permanent and unalterable as the grain in a piece of wood," after those early years. According to Freud's theory of infantile sexuality, the first five or six years of life pretty much determine the rest of a person's life.

Freud believed that every human being is confronted with four stages of development: oral, anal, phallic, and genital. He taught that the four stages of infantile sexuality follow one another and occur at certain ages in normal development. The oral stage is from birth to eighteen months; the anal stage is from eighteen months to three years; the phallic stage is from three to five or six years; and the genital stage continues through puberty. All four stages have to do with sexuality, and Freud related adult characteristics and mental-emotional disorders to childhood experiences within the various stages. He believed that if a person failed to pass successfully through each stage or experienced a trauma during one of the stages, there would be inexplicable damage to his psyche.

Freud's theory of infantile sexuality is also related to his theory of psychic determinism, both of which are within his theory of the unconscious. According to his theory of psychic determinism, each person is what he is because of the effect of the unconscious upon his entire life. Freud believed that "we are 'lived' by unknown and uncontrollable forces."<sup>10</sup> He theorized that these forces are in the unconscious and control each person in the sense that they influence all that the person does. Thus, he saw people as puppets of the unknown and unseen unconscious, shaped by these forces during the first six years of life.

Freud contended that as each child passes from one psychosexual stage of development to another, his psyche is shaped by the people in his environment and especially by his parents. Psychic determinism establishes a process of blame that begins in the unconscious and ends with the parents. Freud removed a person's responsibility for his behavior by teaching that everyone has been predetermined by his unconscious, which was shaped by the treatment given him by his parents during the first few years of his life.

### **Research Refuting the First Five-Years Myth.**

In his book *The Psychological Society*, Martin Gross summarizes the work of Dr. Stella Chess, professor of child psychiatry at New York University Medical Center. Gross says that a potent conclusion that evolves from Chess's work is that "the present psychiatric theory that the first six years of life are the exclusive molders of personality is patently false."<sup>11</sup> (Emphasis his.)

Social psychologist Dr. Carol Tavris discusses research about constancy versus change in an article titled "The Freedom to Change." Referring to Freud and his psychoanalytic therapy, she says:

Now the irony is that many people who are not fooled by astrology for one minute subject themselves to therapy for years, where the same errors of logic and interpretation often occur. . . . Astrologists think we are determined at birth (or even conception) by our stars; psychoanalysts think we are determined within a few years of birth by our parents (and our anatomy).<sup>12</sup>

Tavris cites research that opposes the idea of Freudian determinism and describes the work of Dr. Orville Brim of the Foundation for Child Development in New York. She says, "Most of Brim's career has been devoted to charting the course of child development and its relation to adult personality." She reports that Brim is convinced that "far from being programmed permanently by the age of 5, people are virtually reprogrammable throughout life." She quotes him as saying, "Hundreds and hundreds of studies now document the fact of personality change in adulthood."<sup>13</sup> In direct contradiction to the claims made by Leman et al, she also quotes Brim as saying:

Social scientists are unable to predict adult personality from childhood or even from adolescence in any important way. We can't blame the methods anymore, and we can't say that people who don't fit the predictions are deviant, unhealthy or strange. They are the norm.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to Brim, Tavris discusses the work of Dr. Jerome Kagan, a professor at Harvard University. Kagan, together with Howard Moss, wrote a classic book in the field titled *Birth to Maturity: A Study in Psychological Development*, which agrees with Meier and Minirth's views. However, after further research, Kagan made a 180-degree turn in his ideas of child development. After taking a second look at *Birth to Maturity*, Kagan and Moss "could find little relation between psychological qualities during the first three years of life . . . and any aspect of behavior in adulthood."<sup>15</sup> According to Tavris, "Kagan now believes that few of a baby's attributes last indefinitely, unless the environment perpetuates them."<sup>16</sup>

Brim and Kagan later wrote a book together titled *Constancy and Change in Human Development*. They say:

The view that emerges from this work is that humans have a capacity for change across the entire life span. . . there are important growth changes across the life span from birth to death, many individuals retain a great capacity for change, and the consequences of the events of early childhood are continually transformed by later experiences, making the course of human development more open than many have believed.<sup>17</sup>

In letters to us, Brim and Kagan declare that what evidence there is, and there is a good amount of it, shows a continuing change in personality over the lifespan.<sup>18</sup>

We also wrote to Dr. Bernard Rimland, who is the director of the Institute for Child Behavior Research in San Diego. In his reply he says that the idea “that the personality is the product of the individual psychosocial experiences . . . is totally unsupported by any scientific evidence that I’ve been able to find.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Pseudoscience of Memory Recording.**

Leman and Carlson indulge in some psychological pseudoscience when they say, “The view of life you picked up back when you were just a little tyke is non-erasable.” And then they say:

Every experience we’ve had since birth has been recorded and tucked away safely in our brains. Like the most sophisticated computer in the world, the brain retrieves the memories we need when we need them.<sup>20</sup>

In a different interview with Dobson, Dr. Donald Joy uses a different metaphor for the brain. He says:

The woman’s brain works like a computer. . . . the left hemisphere in the male is more like what I call an old fashioned adding machine.<sup>21</sup>

However, Dr. John Searle, in his Reith Lecture “Minds, Brains, and Science,” talks about the shortcomings of using the computer metaphor for the brain. He says:

Because we don’t understand the brain very well we’re constantly tempted to use the latest technology as a model for trying to understand it.

In my childhood we were always assured that the brain was a telephone switchboard. (“What else could it be?”) And I was amused to see that Sherrington, the great British neuroscientist, thought that the brain worked like a telegraph system. Freud often compared the brain to hydraulic and electro-magnetic systems. Leibniz compared it to a mill, and now, obviously, the metaphor is the digital computer. . . .

The computer is probably no better and no worse as a metaphor for the brain than earlier mechanical metaphors. We learn as much about the brain by saying it’s a computer as we do by saying it’s a telephone switchboard, a telegraph system, a water pump, or a steam engine.<sup>22</sup>

What Searle is getting at is the fact that the brain is not a mechanical piece of technology.

In his book *Remembering and Forgetting: Inquiries into the Nature of Memory*, Edmund Bolles says, “The human brain is the most complicated structure in the known universe.”<sup>23</sup> In introducing his book he says:

For several thousand years people have believed that remembering retrieves information stored somewhere in the mind. The metaphors of memory have always been metaphors of storage: We preserve images on wax; we carve them in stone; we write memories as with a pencil on paper; we file memories away; we have photographic memories; we retain facts so firmly they seem held in a steel trap. Each of these images proposes a memory warehouse where the past lies preserved like childhood souvenirs in an attic. This book reports a revolution that has overturned that vision of memory. Remembering is a creative, constructive process. There is no storehouse of information about the past anywhere in our brain.<sup>24</sup> (Emphasis added.)

After discussing the scientific basis for memory and how the brain functions, he says, “The biggest loser in this notion of how memory works is the idea that computer memories and human memories have anything in common.” He goes on to say, “Human and computer memories are as distinct as life and lightning.”<sup>25</sup>

Medical doctor and researcher Nancy Andreasen says in her book *The Broken Brain* that “there is no accurate model or metaphor to describe how [the brain] works.” She concludes that “the human brain is probably too complex to lend itself to any single metaphor.”<sup>26</sup>

### **Interpretation of Memories?**

Leman and Carlson do some memory interpretation on Dobson’s program. As an example, Dobson tells about an early life memory. Leman and Carlson go on to tell that early life memories (“crib memories”) and sensory memories (such as “smells, textures, and colors”) indicate creativity. They conclude from Dobson’s example that “he is, in fact, creative.” Unfortunately for Leman and Carlson, early memory interpretation has about as much validity as dream interpretation.

Dr. Jeffrey Masson says:

Interpreting another person’s dream is at best a subjective and hazardous undertaking. . . . Any therapist’s claim to “understand” another person’s dream is foolhardy.<sup>27</sup>

We would say that Leman and Carlson’s early life memory interpretation is “at best a subjective and hazardous undertaking” and any claim to “understand” another person’s early life memory is foolhardy. They present no valid support for such a claim either in their book or in the Dobson interview.

### **Prediction from Memories.**

Even more outrageous is the following interchange between Dobson and Leman. Dobson asks, “Can you predict from a memory?” Leman answers emphatically, “Absolutely! You really can.” Leman then gives an example of how this works with procrastinators. He says:

They don’t realize it, but the secret of why they behave that way is locked in their early childhood memory. And you asked before, can these things be predictive? They sure can be. Because the woman who has a critical father is going to end up with a behavior that’s going to be very consistent with procrastination.<sup>28</sup>

Not even Sigmund Freud would risk predicting behavior. However, Leman and Carlson are certain enough to say, “Absolutely!” in response to Dobson’s question about predicting from a memory. If Leman and Carlson have research to support their early life memory interpretation and predictions, they should provide it. In instances of such stupendous promises without visible support, it is better to assume that the information is false.

### **Remembering and Forgetting.**

Another problem with the interview is that Dobson quotes some studies on the brain, which were conducted by two neurosurgeons. He says:

It was obvious that with this electrical stimulation you could access everything that was there. It’s all there. . . . It’s locked in. . . . Everything you have experienced is there in the brain.<sup>29</sup> (Emphasis added.)

Based upon current scientific information it is doubtful that any neuroscientist would say, "Everything you have experienced is there in the brain." Dobson no doubt believes this, but he should not be so categorical without supporting evidence.

The Oxford Companion to the Mind discusses the problems associated with forgetting. You will not find anything like the above Dobson statement in that book. The book does raise such questions as: How would one know whether the memories are still there or gone? What is the evidence of what is known as memory "storage loss"?<sup>30</sup> One would have to know more about the brain than is currently known in order to determine whether or not Dobson's statement is true. Yet, Dobson says it with Dobsonesque confidence.

We looked at a number of other books regarding memory storage loss, including Remembering and Forgetting<sup>31</sup> and The Broken Brain.<sup>32</sup> No book we examined had such a statement. Dobson's categorically confident statements are eagerly accepted by a public that would often rather be told something with certainty than to have to use their gray matter to deal with issues that are not black and white.

Leman and Carlson's formula is a combination of the power of early life memories in present life, the relative permanence and unalterability of a person's basic personality, and the brain functioning like a computer to retrieve subconscious memories that are non-erasable. This is a fictitious formula, a false facade, and a flimsy foundation. Yet Dobson, as he often does, publicizes and promotes their work without first proving it.

### **The Birth Order Myth.**

Leman also has a book titled The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are. He says, "Whatever your family was, you are."<sup>33</sup> Dobson has said, "The Birth Order Book has sold over a half-million copies." In response to the declining birth rate, Leman says, "A greater proportion of first-borns and only children will make us a society of flaw-pickers, yuppies, and achievers." In answer to the question asked by Christianity Today, "Can most church pastors who do a fair amount of counseling use birth-order after reading a book or two?" Leman answers:

Absolutely. I have tried to train pastors in a seminar called "Counseling Families When You Don't Have Much Time." This is an economical way to get behind the eyes of someone in the church and understand their family and their plight in life.<sup>34</sup>

Dobson interviews Leman on another program and refers to The Birth Order Book as "very relevant to parenting." He says to Leman, "I agree with your Birth Order Book," but to his credit Dobson disagrees with the subtitle, "Why You Are the Way You Are." However, after some discussion, the two agree that the subtitle is not meant to be an absolute. At the end of the broadcast Dobson says, "I think you have a real winner here. . . . Keep writing."<sup>35</sup>

Concerning birth order, Leman tells Dobson:

The difference that is evident in kids lives between the first-born child, the second-born child in the family, you can almost guarantee they're going to be the opposite. As we go down the family branch we see that each child branches off in a very unique way.<sup>36</sup>

Dobson brings up the question of research by saying, "You really base the book on research. It's not just impressions you have." Leman replies, "There's hard research to substantiate there is something to birth order." He then says:

We find that people in certain occupational areas and expertise in life, such as architecture, accounting, engineering, those structured occupations tend to be first-born children. As we go

through the family constellation and go through second children, youngest children, we find that people go into much more people-oriented vocations.<sup>37</sup>

Leman also says, “The biblical characters in the Bible prove out birth order very well.”<sup>38</sup>

It is obvious that Leman is enthusiastic about the relationship between birth order and personality. However, contrary to what he says, the research has not proven it. Science magazine featured a special report by John Tierney on “The Myth of the Firstborn.” Tierney says, “Birth order theory makes an appealing neat way to categorize human beings-----like astrology, but with scientific trappings.” He declares:

After reviewing 35 years of research-----some 1,500 studies-----Cécile Ernst and Jules Angst of the University of Zurich reach a simple conclusion: On a scale of importance, the effects of birth order fall somewhere between negligible and nonexistent.<sup>39</sup> (Emphasis added.)

One wonders about the “hard research” to which Leman might be referring.

### **Promises, Promises, Promises.**

In addition to the subtitle of Leman’s book, the following is found on the cover of the book:

FIRST BORN? MIDDLE CHILD? BABY OF THE FAMILY?  
FIND OUT WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOUR CAREER, YOUR KIDS, AND YOUR  
MARRIAGE. . . .<sup>40</sup>

Also, on the cover of the book are the following:

THE COMBINATION THAT MAKES THE PERFECT MARRIAGE MATCH  
THE CAREER CHOICE THAT FITS YOU BEST  
HOW TO MAKE YOUR BIRTH ORDER WORK FOR YOU  
AND MUCH, MUCH MORE. . . .<sup>41</sup>

These are outrageous direct and implied promises that are based upon opinion, not fact. Leman says in the book, “Birth order has nothing to do with astrology, but it definitely affects your personality, whom you marry, your children, your occupational choice, and even how well you get along with God.”<sup>42</sup>

While birth order has nothing directly to do with astrology, there is a similarity. Both astrology and birth order lack scientific support for their validity. Also, *Unlocking the Secrets of Your Childhood Memories* lacks proper scientific support, and like astrology both of these books are based upon opinion unsubstantiated by research.

Where is God in all of this? As usual, almost totally absent. Read *Unlocking the Secrets of Your Childhood Memories* and *The Birth Order Book*. See if you can find God there beyond a few passing references. Nor is He given any preeminence on the Focus on the Family programs which are devoted to psychological notions.

In both *Unlocking the Secrets of Your Childhood Memories* and *The Birth Order Book* the premises upon which they rest are false. A false foundation can only result in false theories, techniques and methodologies, which is the case with these two books. Even people who love psychology should look askance at such books. Once more no caveat emptor (buyer beware) from Dobson. He interviews Leman, promotes the popularized pseudoscience and then goes on to the next psychologist and psychologizer.

## Notes

1. Kevin Leman and Randy Carlson, "Childhood Memories: The way we were (and still are today)." *Focus on the Family*, August 1989, p. 6.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
4. Kevin Leman interview, "Childhood Memories: Understanding Yourself," Focus on the Family Radio Broadcast, CS 481, side 1
5. *Ibid.*, side 2.
6. Kevin Leman interview, "Birth Order," Focus on the Family Radio Broadcast, CS 181, side 1.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Paul Meier interview, "Christian Child Rearing," Focus on the Family Radio Broadcast, CS 145.
9. James Dobson. *Dare to Discipline*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1970, p. 9.
10. Sigmund Freud. *The Ego and the Id*. Translated by Joan Riviere; revised and edited by James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1960, p. 13.
11. Martin Gross. *The Psychological Society*. New York: Random House, 1978, p. 254.
12. Carol Tavris, "The Freedom to Change," Prime Time, October 1980, p. 28.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Orville G. Brim, Jr. and Jerome Kagan. *Constancy and Change in Human Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 1980, p. 1.
18. Letter on file.
19. Letter on file.
20. Leman and Carlson, "Childhood Memories," *op. cit.*, p. 7.
21. Donald Joy interview, "The Innate Differences between Males and Females," Focus on the Family Radio Broadcast, CS-099, 1984, 1986.
22. John Searle. *Minds, Brains and Science*. The 1984 Reith Lectures. London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1984, pp. 44, 55-56.
23. Edmund Bolles. *Remembering and Forgetting*. New York: Walker and Company, 1988, p. 139.
24. *Ibid.*, p. xi.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 165.
26. Nancy C. Andreasen. *The Broken Brain*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1984, p. 90.
27. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson. *Against Therapy: Emotional Tyranny and the Myth of Psychological Healing*. New York: Atheneum, 1988, p. 119.
28. Leman, "Childhood Memories," interview, *op. cit.*, side 1.
29. *Ibid.*, side 2.
30. Richard L. Gregory, ed. *The Oxford Companion to the Mind*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 261, 264-265.
31. Bolles, *op. cit.*
32. Andreasen, *op. cit.*
33. Kevin Leman, "Christianity Today Talks to Kevin Leman." *Christianity Today*, 18 October 1985, p. 49.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Dobson and Leman, "Birth Order, *op. cit.*
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*
39. John Tierney, "The Myth of the Firstborn," *Science*, December 1983, p. 16.
40. Kevin Leman. *The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are*. Old Tappan, NJ: Spire Books, Fleming H. Revell Company, 1985, front cover.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

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## BOOK CHAPTERS

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