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## The Ethics of Spirit-Centered Counseling

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## The Ethics of Spirit-Centered Counseling

Cover Page Footnote

# THE ETHICS OF SPIRIT-CENTERED COUNSELING

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**Keywords** *ethics, Holy Spirit, counseling*

## Abstract

At present, no ethical standards exist for Spirit-centered counselors. This article is an initial delineation of these standards. Professional ethical standards are reviewed, and specific guidelines identified. Attention is given to value ethics as “nonobligatory ideals to which professionals aspire” and to principle ethics as a set of obligations and a method that focuses on moral issues with the goal of solving a particular dilemma or set of dilemmas and establishing a framework to guide future ethical thinking and behavior. Standards for Christian counseling ethics as identified by Sanders (1997) and the AACC are compared and contrasted with professional counseling ethics as postulated by professional counseling organizations. Finally, using 1 Corinthians 13 and 14, as well as Galatians 6, specific ethical attitudes and actions that should govern Spirit-centered counseling activities are described.

## Introduction

“Christians should never presume that their faith inoculates them against the ethical dilemmas and moral temptations that face the rest of the world,” so states Sanders on the second page of his book about Christian counseling ethics (Sanders, 1997, p. 12). As a professor of counseling, I have seen many students and professional counselors who believe that being a Christian somehow exempted them from professional ethics. Because “they are led by the Spirit” in their counseling endeavors they are inoculated against ethical dilemmas and the resulting or potential consequences of their behavior. I want to be very clear about this: counselors, pastors, pastoral counselors, marriage and family therapists, social workers—anyone working in the general counseling field—are legally required to

know the current ethical guidelines and legal responsibilities for their professional association. In addition, counselors are also required to know the professional ethics that have been established for their counseling specialty by the state(s) in which they practice.

Spirit-centered counselors should also adhere to the ethical considerations that guide all counselors in the provision of counseling, but because of the nature of Spirit-enablement they need to exercise a special caution. The divine enablement from the Spirit involves the human sensation and perception system. It is exactly because the human sensation and perception system is involved in discerning the Spirit's guidance that specific ethics are required because the insight resulting from an interaction with the Spirit is always subject to human fallibility and interpretation. For it is with our mind and an unfathomable combination of physical sensations, cognitive affirmations, and the basic mechanisms of human communication, that divine insight—an enhanced understanding of the person(s), situation(s) and context(s)—is received and communicated by the participants of the counseling session. In addition, each person who is a part of the divine-human encounter just described is enmeshed in a life-context that carries with it its own sense of significance and importance. Such relevance, which is often out of the consciousness of the persons involved, predisposes and orients persons toward particular ways of receiving and communicating the divine-human encounter.

For several reasons, the first of which is that as Spirit-filled persons whose counseling practices are centered in the work of the Spirit (i.e., 'Spirit-centered counselors'), we are representatives of God who are continuing our Lord's ministry of healing. Second, as professionals we are obligated to provide the highest standards of care in order to enhance the well-being of those under our care, and ethical guidelines help us to do that. Third, ethical guidelines provide us as persons with a template for the actions and attitudes essential to being a professional. A Spirit-filled professional, as Parker (2016) reminds us, "includes being a contributor to the betterment of society (e.g., being salt and light Matt. 5:13-16)" (p. 58).

I begin this paper with a brief review of counseling ethics in general and the philosophical and theoretical basis central to their creation. Next, I discuss Christian ethics establishing how they differ from general counseling ethics. Finally, I suggest some ethical guidelines for Spirit-centered counselors, again highlighting how they may differ from the other ethical guidelines cited in this paper, and why.

## **Counseling Ethics**

The hallmark of a profession is the recognition that the work its members carry out affects the lives of their clients. It is this recognition that led professional counseling associations to establish professional standards which counselors must

meet. The results are statements of professional ethics that are the “acceptable or good practice according to standards of performance according to agreed upon rules defined as acceptable by the (counseling) profession” (Cottone & Tarvydas, 2016, p. 6). Corey et al. (2015) provide what may be the best definition of counseling ethics:

Ethics pertain to the beliefs we hold about what constitutes right conduct ... they are moral principles adopted by an individual or group to provide rules for right conduct, [they] represent aspirational goals, or the maximum or ideal standards set by the professional associations, national certification boards, and government boards that regulate professions. They are conceptually broad in nature and generally subject to interpretation by practitioners. (p. 7)

The definitions of counseling ethics given above had previously been codified in 2014 by the American Counseling Association (ACA). The ACA Code of Ethics lists five aspirational professional values (see Appendix A) that serve as the conceptual basis for a list of six principles that the ACA intends to govern counselor ethical behavior (see Appendix B).

The ACA Code of Ethics (as well as those of other professional counseling associations) asks counselors to consider two questions “Who should I be?” and “What shall I do?” (Corey et al., 2015, p. 14). The question “Who should I be?” focuses on the character traits, or more precisely, the *values* of the counselor. Corey et al. (2015) refer to *value ethics* as “nonobligatory ideals to which professionals aspire rather than on solving specific ethical dilemmas” (p. 14). They are based on the belief that counselors are motivated to be virtuous and caring. Generally, these statements are professional values “that empower diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals” and “provide an important way of living out (one’s) ethical commitment” (ACA, 2014, p. 3). “What should I do?” as a counselor refers to *principle ethics*. Corey et al. (2015) refer to principle ethics as “a set of obligations and a method that focuses on moral issues with the goal of solving a particular dilemma or set of dilemmas and establishing a framework to guide future ethical thinking and behavior. (They) typically focus on acts and choices” (p. 14). The ACA codes are similarly stated, as are the codes for the American Psychological Association (APA, 2016), the National Association of Social Work (NASW, 2021), and the Association of Marriage and Family Therapists (AAMFT, 2015).

In addition to the professional ethics identified above, ethical standards exist with particular specialty practices in mind, for example, rehabilitation counseling (CRCC, 2017), and school counseling (ASCA, 2022). Still other codes of ethics

have been developed to manage cultural trends such as the deep interest in spirituality in counseling (Cashwell & Watts, 2010) and internet counseling (Roboson & Roboson, 2000).

While an awareness of ethical codes is crucial, formal codes cannot take the place of an active, thoughtful, creative approach to ethical responsibility. “Codes prompt, guide, and inform our ethical considerations, they do not shut it down or replace it” (Pope & Vasquez, 2011, p. 3); they are to guide the counselor’s decision making especially where no ideal course of action exists. When no ideal course of action exists, an ethical dilemma occurs. In these situations where the code is not clear and consistent about the ethical course of action, and they often are not, a decision-making model is necessary. In fact, the ACA (2014, p. 19) mandates counselor competency in using ethical decision-making models (EDMs) and professional associations who are a part of, or are associated with the ACA, are held to these same standards. Although the ACA does not require that counselors use a specific EDM, it does require that counselors use a “credible model of decision making that can bear public scrutiny of its application” (ACA, 2014, p. 3). To this end, the ACA has provided a suggested guide to ethical decision making (Forester & Davis, 2016).

In summary, then, counseling ethics are intended to serve as a standard to which counselors aspire as well as a guide to govern behavior. While the standards are similar from one counseling association to another, counselors are expected to know and to demonstrate proficiency in the standard of the professional association governing their professional activities. Likewise, counselors are to know the ethical standards of practice, or specialty practice, with which they are involved. Furthermore, counselors are expected to know how to recognize an ethical dilemma and to be proficient in the use of an ethical decision-making model when confronted with an ethical dilemma.

### **Christian Counseling Ethics**

Christian counseling ethics certainly have much in common with those of non-Christian counseling ethics. In fact, some Christian counselors ask, “Aren’t the ethical guidelines of my professional organization Christian?” Well, yes and no. Current codes represent a gradual accumulation of experiences that are shaped by contemporary social values, economic pressures, and political developments. New developing codes are affected by social trends reflected in breaches of social ethics, lawsuits filed by offended clients, and legislative responses to philosophies of consumer rights organizations. None of these are necessarily biblical standards. But professional ethical standards are *generally* consistent with Christian values. For example, caring for others, treating others with respect, and respect for diversity are certainly Christlike and should be emulated by Christians. These are principle ethics. They ask and answer the question “What should I do?” But in another way,

professional ethics are unlike Christian ethics. The professional ethics of professional counseling organizations like those mentioned above (ACA; APA; AAMFT; NASW), and the ethical guidelines of specialty practice organizations (rehabilitation counselors, school counselors, et al.) are based on various philosophical points of view, like utilitarianism which suggests that counselors consider how actions may lead to the greatest good for the highest number of clients (Mills, 1863/2004, as cited in Warburton, 2013, p. 5), or social constructivism that redefines the ethical decision-making process as an interactive process. Ethical decisions are made within a social context and are socially compelled (Corey et al., 2015).

In contrast, Christian counseling ethics are based on Christian theological perspectives that grow from our reading of scripture. For example, Christians believe that the triune God creates and relates to people in their humanness, seeking to draw all persons into an abundant life (2 Peter 3:9; John 3:16-17, 10:9), and when they are estranged, God seeks to reconcile them through Christ who is the incarnation of God (John 1:1-14; Colossians 1:19-20). Further, Christians believe that people are the incarnation of Christ to the world (Colossians 1:27; Matthew 10:40; 2 Corinthians 5:18) and are called to demonstrate the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the presence of the Spirit to all people, but in the specific focus of this paper, to those who seek them out for counseling.

The American Association of Christian Counselors (AACC) has developed eight Foundational Principles (see Appendix C) that do not appreciably deviate from general ethical guidelines for counselors but very clearly codify Christian theological perspectives (AACC, 2014). Included in the AACC's foundational statements and subsequent ethical standards are value ethics ("Who should I be?") such as compassion—an orientation to beneficence and humility. Christian counseling values are seen through the lens of the entirety of scripture that states unequivocally the value of each person, of relating to each person with respect and deference, and of lifting up the lowly. These are principle ethics that answers the question "What should I do?" Christian counselors are to follow the example of our Lord to love people with the love of Christ, loving our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:31). And as the Apostle Paul admonishes, "(let the light) which is within you produce only what is good and right and true" (*New Living Translation*, 1996, Ephesians 5:9).

For Christians, perhaps the most comprehensive statement of ethical attitudes and behavior—of aspirational value ethics, and practice-oriented principle ethics—is found in Galatians, where Paul's admonition to the Galatian believers provides a specific orientation to attitudes and actions toward people other than oneself. There, Paul reminds people who would be followers of Christ to live by the Spirit's power (5:16-25), and to guard against becoming conceited (5:26). In the last

chapter of Galatians Paul encourages people to be gentle, self-regulating, and concerned for others; to be humble, realistic, and responsible; and to be givers, persistent and aware of the cosmic task to which we are called (Galatians 6:1-10). This encouragement to action applies to Christian counselors, including, for example, the provision of pro-bono counseling services from time to time with the recognition that by incarnating the presence of Christ the counselor provides, as the common statement proclaims, “a God with skin on,” thereby aiding in the task of reconciliation to self and others to which we Christians are called.

None of the biblically oriented virtue or principle ethics identified above substitute for knowledge of specific ethical codes and the legal responsibility of counselors. In fact, they imply that Christian counselors are to respond to ethical dilemmas using the specific codes of the agencies with which they are licensed as well as their Christian values. Fortunately, these do not often conflict. However, when there are “conflicting responsibilities” Christian counselors should “... act peaceably and humbly in [the] outworking [of the conflict] ... in a way that honors God and their role as Christian counselors, [attempting] to harmonize biblical, clinical, legal, ethical, and client interests, [securing] proper consultation and [taking] action that defines and offers a better and harmonious standard of professional conduct” (American Association of Christian Counselors, 2014, pp. 51-52).

While the AACC guidelines suggested above are strongly encouraged, they do not carry with them the power of legal enforcement. However, the ACA does have legal recourse regarding their statements related to the dilemma of being asked (or required) to counsel someone of a different orientation to faith. Because of the increasingly diverse world in which we live, developing personal competency in working with religious and spiritual issues is not only a legal necessity, but also an ethical value. This value incorporates in it both guiding questions of “Who should I be?” and “What should I do?”

Christian counseling ethics then are primarily about “the personal godliness of the counselor” (Bufford, 1997, p. 119), about character, and how Christians treat others. Christian ethics also encourage Christian counselors to become aware of and to stay aware of the tasks to which Christians are called: binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming freedom to the captive, releasing those imprisoned in darkness, and providing comfort to those who mourn (Isaiah 61:1-2).

## **The Ethics of Spirit-Centered Counseling**

The central premise of this article, and indeed a defining theological presumption, is that the Spirit—the Holy Spirit—empowers counselors to do the work to which they are called. Jesus spoke of this when he promised the Holy Spirit to his disciples and said “I will ask the Father and he will give you another counselor ... He is the Holy Spirit who leads you into all truth ... because he *lives with you ... and will be*



(*is in you*)” [emphasis added] (*New Living Translation*, 1996, John 14:16-17). A belief that the Spirit empowers and equips counselors to develop as counselors is not the belief of Spirit-centered counselors, only. This belief is true of all Christian counselors. Spirit-centered counselors, however, read the scriptures “through the eyes of the Spirit,” (John 14:16-17) which is a metaphorical way of identifying how the Spirit influences the reading of the Bible. This is not a different interpretive method but a distinct manner in which the Bible is read through the prism of the book of Acts, which as Keener (2016) indicates, provides for a theological reflection of scripture that promotes a dynamic, experiential reading of the biblical text. In fact, this is a key component of a Spirit-centered way of thinking, that the veracity of God’s word links the experience of God’s people in the past to the experience of God’s people in the present (Decker, 1997, pp. 69-81). Reading scripture in this way—“through the eyes of the Spirit”—increases one’s ability to expect that the Spirit applies biblical truth and promises not only to our everyday experiences and circumstances, but also to the counseling endeavor.

A second theological presupposition is the use of a pneumatological imagination. The imagination is one of those things that everyone seems to understand until he or she tries to explain it. For purposes of this article, the definition from The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2022) serves as a starting place. There, *imagination* is defined as “the act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality.” Key to this definition is the recognition that the product of the imagination is generated from within the mind of the person rather than perceived from input other sources.

Amos Yong (2002) proposes the term *pneumatological imagination* to indicate a way of knowing that sees the human imagination as shaped and formed in distinctive ways through the continued engagement of the Spirit. While recognizing that the pneumatological imagination is one of many different epistemic frameworks, Yong stipulates that “knowing as a pneumatic process” arises “out of the experience of the Spirit” (p. 22).

Spirit-centered counselors believe that it is the pneumatological imagination—the Spirit of God working within the counselor—that enables persons who are open to the movement of the Spirit to understand that basic human senses such as hearing and seeing can be placed in service of the Spirit, and that one’s perceptual processes enable them to become aware of the Spirit. Decker (1996) defines these perceptual processes as including auditory, kinesthetic, affective, and cognitive experiences, as well as visual, tactile, olfactory, and equilibratory experiences (pp. 89–93).

Herein lies a dilemma. Conflict often emerges when people with strong moral (or religious) preferences approach a morally laden decision (an ethical

dilemma) without regard for, or understanding of, the degree to which diversity exists in moral preference alignment (Haidt, 2012).

In order to reduce the conflict described by Haidt (2012), Spirit-centered counselors should be firmly grounded in the ethics of human service. And as mentioned previously in this paper, they should follow the ACA and the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) guidelines concerning competence in addressing spiritual and religious issues in counseling. In this regard, all counselors are compelled to develop competency dealing with religious issues as a particular area of diversity. Lauren Shaler (2019) suggests following a simple three-point outline to aid counselors in respecting the diversity of faiths often seen in counseling. First, Shaler suggests listening. What information are you learning about the person? Second, she suggests that counselors think. Imagine what it must be like to be the other person seeking counseling from you either by choice or assignment. Try to see the client's situation from their perspective. Third, ask questions to demonstrate empathy and to determine how the person's faith is helping or hindering their faith. Shaler's suggestion includes the admonitions to do no harm, to avoid exploitation, to treat people with dignity, and to value diversity. Christian counseling ethics stipulate the importance of being humble, of acting in concern for community, and above all, acting in Christian love (Sanders, 1997, pp. 217-312).

Specifically, the admonition of the apostle Paul to the Corinthian church seems apropos for Spirit-centered counselors who wish to nurture within themselves ethical responses to Spirit empowerment. Love, genuine care, and concern are to be the motivation for all that is done (1 Corinthians 13). What is said and done should bring clarity, not confusion (1 Corinthians 14:12, 26b). The spiritual and psychological well-being of the person or persons seeking counseling should be always uppermost in the mind of the counselor (1 Corinthians 14:27-28). Discretion is to be used as to when and how an intervention that arises from the knowledge, revelation, illumination, and/or discernment prompted by the Spirit is enacted (1 Corinthians 14:32-33; Decker, 1996, pp. 65-66). Discernment may require staffing a case with other professionals. On some occasions it is wise to say in a paraphrase of Acts 15:28 "it seemed good to us and to the Holy Spirit." And what is communicated should always be communicated tentatively. Once again, the admonition of the apostle Paul is instructive, "Now we know only a little, even [our forthtelling] reveals little! ... [because] now we see things imperfectly, as in a poor mirror [and] ... All that [we] know [may be] partial and incomplete" (*New Living Translation*, 1996, 1 Corinthians 13: 9, 12).

In conjunction with the other instructions from Paul's writing listed above, the use of tentative statements—"I wonder if..." or "Could it be..."—help to create a context or atmosphere within which Spirit-centered counseling may be practiced and people may receive the help they seek without fear of embarrassment, or worse yet, victimization. Additionally, agencies and organizations that

encourage a Spirit-centered approach to counseling have an ethical obligation to provide supervision or to suggest that a trusted colleague be consulted. The agency or organization must supervise the content of the counseling endeavor, the process by which the counseling is undertaken, and the counselor him or herself. As stipulated above, the content of the counseling endeavor should always be in service of the person seeking counseling; for her or his presenting problem. The process and procedures by which counseling is practiced should exemplify both the ethical standards reiterated above as well as admonitions of Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:12, 26b, and Galatians 6:1 where gentleness and empathy are to govern behavior. As to the evaluation of the counselor, an analysis of the pericopes in Acts 3 (especially verses 11-16) and Acts 8: 9-25 provide the necessary criteria: correct motive. Johnson (1992) and Bruce (1988) both indicate that Peter and John (Acts 3:1-26) deflected the adoration and attention that came to them following their ministry to the crippled beggar. They sought to bring praise and glory to Christ. In contrast, Acts 8:9-25 records Simon's desire to obtain the empowerment he saw demonstrated in the ministry of Phillip by offering him money (vv. 18-19). Again, both Johnson and Bruce identify that Simon's desire for the possession of the power to produce signs and wonders was a symbol of the disposition of his heart. His motives were wrong.

What should we do with what we know, with Spirit-inspired knowledge, discernment, and what the Spirit may reveal or inspire? In order to be certain that it is the Spirit leading, we should seek to know how the Holy Spirit speaks to us personally. If not, we become "a loud gong or clanging cymbal" (*New Living Translation*, 1996, 1 Corinthians 13:1). We should always keep in mind the well-being of the person seeking counseling, we should utilize ethical behavior, the same used by human service professionals, and we should always seek to bring glory to God. Finally, we should judge the thoughts and intents of our hearts. Our motives must be pure, not oriented toward power or privilege, but fully oriented to cooperating with the Spirit to bring healing, reconciliation, and restoration to those who seek us out for help.

## Conclusion

Counseling ethics are composed of two important types of ethics. Value ethics describe who counselors should be. Principle ethics describe what counselors should do. Statements and codes of professional ethics use both value ethics and principle ethics when considering counseling licensing and legal statutes. Statements of ethics and principles, and the legal codes that support them, are written to protect the public and in doing so to govern the attitudes and actions of counselors. Christian counselors are guided not only by the statements and codes

of ethics adopted by licensing organizations, but also by the entirety of scripture, the example of Jesus, and the admonition of the apostle Paul. The same is true for Spirit-centered counselors.

What is unique to Spirit-centered counselors is the use of the pneumatological imagination that leads the counselor to read and interpret Scripture “through the eyes of the Spirit.” This reading of scripture reinforces for Spirit-centered counselors that the experiences of the people of God in the past are available to the people of God in the present. Not only does this reading of scripture orient the Spirit-centered counselor to “what they should do,” but it also gives clear direction as “who they should be.”

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## **Appendix A**

### **Values for ACA Professional Ethical Standards**

1. Enhancing human development throughout the life span.
2. Honoring diversity and embracing a multicultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts.
3. Promoting social justice.
4. Safeguarding the integrity of the counselor–client relationship.
5. Practicing in a competent and ethical manner.

## **Appendix B**

### **ACA Principles for Ethical Behavior**

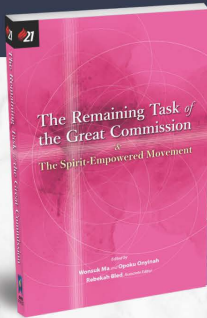
1. Autonomy or fostering the right to control the direction of one’s life.
2. Nonmaleficence or avoiding actions that cause harm.
3. Beneficence, or working for the good of the individual and society by promoting mental health and well-being.
4. Justice, or treating individuals equitably and fostering fairness and equality.
5. Fidelity, or honoring commitments and keeping promises, including fulfilling one’s responsibilities of trust in professional relationships; and
6. Veracity, or dealing truthfully with individuals with whom counselors come into professional contact.

## **Appendix C**

### **Eight Foundational Pillars of the AACC Ethical Standards**

1. Compassion in Christian Counseling – A Call to Servanthood
2. Competence in Christian Counseling – A Call to Excellence
3. Consent in Christian Counseling – A Call to Integrity
4. Confidentiality in Christian Counseling – A Call to Trustworthiness
5. Cultural Regard in Christian Counseling – A Call to Dignity
6. Case Management in Christian Counseling – A Call to Soundness
7. Collegiality in Christian Counseling – A Call to Relationship
8. Community Presence in Christian Counseling – A Call to Humility

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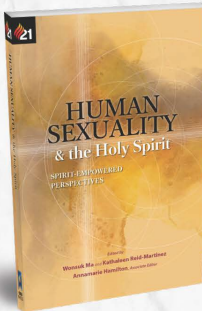
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## HUMAN SEXUALITY & the Holy Spirit

SPIRIT-EMPOWERED PERSPECTIVES

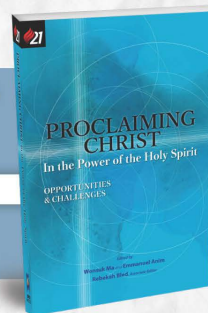
Wonsuk Ma and Kathaleen Reid-Martinez  
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## PROCLAIMING CHRIST In the Power of the Holy Spirit

OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES

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