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The journal publishes refereed manuscripts of research, theory, and practical approaches regarding the role of the Spirit in counseling. Some from a Christian tradition may refer to this specifically as the Holy Spirit, one component of the relational (Trinitarian) godhead that facilitates and embodies mechanisms of positive change which appear non-reductionistic. Individuals may incorporate diverse ways of knowing and interpreting the Spirit and its role in positive change, and the Spirit is collectively assumed to be at the center of such change. Further, individuals from various traditions may hold unique experiences of the Spirit in counseling, and the journal recognizes, celebrates, and welcomes these voices. The purpose of this journal is thus to build bridges among faith traditions by increasing dialogue about experiences of the Spirit in counseling.

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EDITORIAL

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Expanding Our Horizons

Haley R. French

With the publication of this second issue of *Salubritas*, the editorial team and I are grateful for the opportunity to continue developing a distinctive space for research, scholarship, dialogue, and reflection on the practice of Spirit-empowered counselors. As has been observed in recent years, and will be touched on in this issue, there is an abundance of Christian counseling literature that speaks to a more universal, etic perspective on being a Christian practicing in the fields of psychology and counseling, but yet, there remains a dearth of information at the more local, emic level that would help us to understand what it looks like to practice as a Christian counselor from a particular stream of Christianity (Johnson et al., 2013). The growing body of scholarship on the integration of religion and spirituality (R/S) in counseling (for the sake of properly integrating and honoring the client’s beliefs and values) is necessary and encouraging, but there remains a need for counselors to self-reflect and critically inquire into their own worldviews, theologies, and ecclesial practices, to know how those things might be shaping their clinical work in distinctive ways.

As part of the apparent changing of the tides in the broader area of integration studies—concerning the relationship between psychology/counseling and Christianity—there is, and continues to be, a movement away from a top-down application of typologies, models, and the understanding of integration in abstraction. Instead, the newer generation of integrators is asking what integration looks like from the ground-up; personally, contextually, practically, and with attention to embodied practice (see Neff & McMinn, 2020). This move will necessitate a greater level of reflection on the spiritual formation, identity, and practices of the counselor, and, as such, certain questions may arise: Who am I as an integrator? How am I already integrating? How does my worldview shape how I counsel? How do my specific theological values and beliefs mold what I do in the counseling session? So on and so forth. To really answer these questions in a meaningful way, we must be aware and critically reflect on the formative influences in our lives.

To this point, this is an opportune moment in time for this journal to be in existence. We are carving out a space for Christian counselors—and especially for those who self-identify, broadly speaking, with Pentecostal or Charismatic (P/C) Christianity (i.e., Spirit-empowered Christianity)—to develop a greater self-understanding of the relationship that exists between their spirituality and their
clinical practice as counselors, and to, in turn, offer truly distinctive counseling approaches, methods, and treatment implications.

Spirit-empowered Christians are known to attune to their lived, affective experiences and willingly share testimonies from the life of faith, especially concerning their encounters with the Spirit of God (see Smith, 2010). But, historically, they have been less inclined to systematize their thoughts and articulate them in academic prose, perhaps due to residual, anti-intellectual sentiments from early Pentecostalism that saw intellectual endeavors as being in opposition to things of the Spirit (e.g., see Nel, 2016). While this has dramatically changed in recent decades due to the devoted work of P/C scholars in the theological and biblical disciplines, there is far more ground to cover for Spirit-empowered practitioners in other disciplines, including counseling. We need more Spirit-empowered clinicians thinking and writing about their professional work, their practices, and their professional identity and formation in a theologically informed way that considers their specific spiritual and religious contexts, and the traditions and practices that constitute them.

To this point, this second issue of the journal is an exercise in expanding the horizons of what we know and understand about counseling, psychology, and related research from a Spirit-empowered perspective. To borrow a concept introduced by hermeneutic philosopher, Hans Georg Gadamer (1975/2004), it is through genuine conversation between dialogue partners that we have the potential to experience a ‘fusion of horizons’; that through which the distinct vantage point that constitutes our reality (contextually, culturally, theologically, etc.) is broadened, expanded, and transformed because we have been enabled to grasp the ‘otherness of something’ (Finlay, 2011, p. 59). This is where a co-construction of knowledge can occur. I see the articles in this second issue as conversation partners—for one another, for readers, for the broader community of P/C Christians, and those from many other Christian traditions—to assist us all in experiencing the broadening of our horizons, and specifically our understanding about what it means to be Spirit-empowered counselors and caregivers.

In particular, this issue brings the following to the conversation: an overview of specific elements of P/C spirituality and their relationship to counseling, a model of healing and transformation effected by the Spirit, a particular intervention for use by Spirit-empowered counselors, a possible method of measurement for spirituality and its relationship to personality traits, and implications for issues around professional ethics, diversity, and counselor education.

The issue begins with an article by Edward E. Decker, Jr., Haley R. French, and Stephen Parker, in which specific elements of Pentecostal spirituality are explored in relationship to counseling. Acknowledging the inexistence of a formalized Pentecostal approach to psychotherapy, along with the contextualization of all clinical work (both theologically and psychologically), the
authors introduce five organizing elements from a Pentecostal spirituality that significantly shape the work of the Pentecostal counselor. These include: a pneumatological imagination, narrative structures (prayer and Scripture), counselor affections (gratitude, Godly love and compassion, and courage), Spirit empowerment, and Spirit-directed change. This article serves as a launching point for the issue and a hopeful means of advancing the conversation about what type of relationship exists between Spirit-empowered spirituality and the work of the counselor.

In the next article, Bill J. Buker furthers his exploration of ‘Spirit-centered counseling’—counseling that is sought to be guided by the mind of the Holy Spirit—wherein God’s redemptive patterns are brought forth and realized through the transformative wisdom of Jesus. He presents the CPR model—connection, perception, and redemption—as a means for facilitating this transformative wisdom of Jesus in the counseling process, and to assist counselees in exiting repetitive cycles of struggle. Central to the model is the concept of second-order change, wherein a marked shift occurs from one’s taken-for-granted epistemological assumptions (particularly as informed by broader cultural norms), to the construction of new perspectives informed by the wisdom of Jesus. Resonating with these ideas, the third article by Angela L. Watson explores the potential for using self-affirmation interventions that are biblically-based and guided by leading of the Holy Spirit for the purpose of effecting change in clients’ schemas and identity. With the increase in mental health needs across the globe, changing norms, and recent dramatic events, people may identify their need for change but find the prospect psychologically threatening. Watson discusses the potential of self-affirmation theory and practices that can aid counselors in helping Christian clients to seek a renewed mind, and to develop the ability to respond adaptively to change.

The fourth article by Jayne Ann Harder, Andy S.I.D. Lang, LeighAnne Locke, J. Bryan Osborne, Aleksandra Turtova, Enrique F. Valderrama-Araya, Stephen R. Wheat, and H.R. Wörner explores the relationship between spiritual intelligence and personality traits. New observations in this study show that the personality trait of honesty-humility (H-H) in the HEXACO model of personality demonstrates a statistically significant negative correlation between honesty-humility and negative emotionality/neuroticism; and honesty-humility as a significant negative factor in determining overall spiritual intelligence, including personal meaning production, transcendental awareness, and conscious state expansion. These findings indicate the potential for managing negative emotional states (e.g., anxiety) through the practice of spiritual disciplines, and indicate a need for additional research that explores the relationship between the
development of spiritual intelligence traits and the impact on personality change, such as might occur through the counseling process.

The next three articles explore important dimensions of counselor ethics and counselor education. In the fifth article, Edward E. Decker, Jr. issues a critical call for ethical practice amongst Spirit-empowered counselors. Due to the experience of ‘Spirit-enablement’, as occurs through the subjective (and fallible) human sensation and perception system, Decker reminds Spirit-directed counselors that they must proceed with caution in their professional work, being certain not to assume exemption or inoculation from ethical pitfalls in the name of being ‘led of the Spirit’. Decker discusses counseling ethics, generally, including the differences between aspirational value ethics and practice-oriented, principle ethics. Additionally, Decker explores the distinctiveness of Christian counseling ethics which result from the reading of Scripture and associated theological perspectives. The example of Jesus and selected Pauline admonitions are discussed. Practical strategies are presented for how to cautiously and ethically act upon the perceived leading of the Spirit in the counseling process.

In the next article, Sandra K. Richardson, Yasmine A. Godinez, and Lemuel J. Godinez highlight injustices that are being experienced by People of Color within the United States, and the shifting cultural and racial landscape across the country. They provide a thorough overview of the developments that have taken place within the mental health field to address these concerns, including, but not limited to, the establishment and implementation of many professional codes of ethics, required counselor education courses on diversity in counseling, etc. While emphasizing the value of these efforts, the authors address persisting concerns and areas of weakness in counselor education and training. Along with a call to improve this dimension of counselor education programs, the authors appeal specifically to Spirit-empowered counselors who have a greater mandate to love and serve their neighbors. Highlighting the scriptural precedent for this mandate, the authors focus upon the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit as the means for empowering the Christian counselor to fulfill the mandate to love one’s neighbor. The article concludes with practical strategies by which the Spirit-empowered counselor can achieve or demonstrate greater competency in serving diverse clientele.

The final article was co-authored under my supervision by two current ORU graduate counseling students, Jessica P. Vetal and Kyle N. Stueber, and recent alumna from the counseling program, Jaymi E. Davis. It explores the importance of counseling education that emphasizes the role and ministry of the Holy Spirit. Noting the recent challenges of COVID-19, widespread sociopolitical tensions and volatility, the authors reflect on the challenging, but unique opportunity they have as emerging counselors at this time in history. In light of these tenuous times and the challenges they pose for new counselors, Vetal, Stueber and Davis discuss the distinctives of Christian counseling education programs that prioritize excellent
professional training and Christian spiritual formation. Moreover, they present three theological realities and concepts that have significantly shaped their own educational journeys and preparation for entrance into the counseling profession. These include the ministry of the Holy Spirit in and through the counseling process, which they feel aids them in bridging the gap from education to practical application; the imago Dei as a guiding framework for understanding the counseling process as a participation in the redemptive work of God; and the missio Dei as the hermeneutical lens through which they can truly and effectively value all counselees as those who are made in the image of God.

Again, this issue is an effort to continue expanding our horizons and to meaningfully contribute to the Spirit-empowered community and beyond. With growing readership in over 35 countries, exceeding 1,500 downloads of various articles and/or whole copies of our inaugural issue of Salubritas in 2021, we celebrate the future of this publication and the unique contributions that are being published now, and are yet to come.

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References


PENTECOSTAL SPIRITUALITY AND COUNSELING

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Abstract

The relationship between pentecostal spirituality and counseling remains underdeveloped. This article applies various aspects of pentecostal theology and spirituality to counseling. After briefly orienting readers to pentecostalism and defining pentecostal spirituality, the authors identify five elements of pentecostal spirituality that illumine the way pentecostal clinicians think about and practice counseling and therapy: a pneumatological imagination, narrative structures, counselor affections (dispositions), Spirit empowerment, and Spirit-directed change.

Introduction

Several perspectives characterize the literature on spirituality in counseling. On the one hand are articles that develop specific strategies (e.g., Richards, Hardman, & Berrett [2007] on the use of theistic spirituality for women with eating disorders), while on the other hand are various proposals for looking at spirituality in counseling through specific “lenses” (e.g., Jankowski [2002] on the use of postmodern spirituality in counseling, and O’Hanlon [2015] on using a solution-oriented spirituality). In assessing the various lenses through which spirituality in counseling is viewed, Strawn and Wright (2014) argue that all clinical work is contextualized by specific traditions both psychologically and theologically; thus, the Christian clinician’s practice in actuality is informed and guided by a specific Christian tradition rather than some generic Christianity (see McMinn [2011] on using a specifically Christian spirituality for counseling). In this regard, Johnson, Worthington, Hook, and Aten (2013) note that “a formal Pentecostal/charismatic model of psychotherapy has not been developed yet” (p. 339). This article seeks to identify and articulate the contours of a pentecostal perspective of Christian
spirituality and how this shapes pentecostal counselors’ approach to the counseling endeavor.

After a brief overview of pentecostalism and pentecostal spirituality, we propose five elements of pentecostal spirituality derived from interaction with recent pentecostal scholarship that we suggest inform the praxis of pentecostal counselors in significant ways: a pneumatological imagination, narrative structures, counselor affections, Spirit empowerment, and Spirit-directed change.

**Pentecostal Spirituality**

Writing in the forward to Lee and Poloma (2009), Post identifies that 36% of all adults attending a protestant church in the United States, and one-third of all Catholics, consider themselves to be pentecostal by virtue of their adherence “to a pentecostal worldview in which the Holy Spirit is deemed an active force in daily life” (p. i). Thus, unless indicating a specific religious denomination, we use the lowercase pentecostal to refer to the diversity of people who “are radically open to the continued operations of the Spirit,” (Smith, 2010, p. xvii) no matter the group in which they worship. As Anderson (2007) notes, “despite the diversity of pentecostal expressions, the emphasis on divine encounter is always there” (p. 188).

There have been limited efforts among pentecostal counselors to develop a clinical approach derived from their tradition. Although some pentecostal clinicians have begun to reflect theologically on their therapeutic tasks (e.g., see Decker; 1996, 1997; French, 2019; McMahon, 2019; Parker, 2014, 2016; Serrano, 2003; Vining, 1995, esp. 86-94), there remains a need for further engagement between pentecostal clinicians and the broader work of pentecostal theologians; particularly those who are the forefront of contributing a new wave of pentecostal scholarship that engages theology and its tasks in dialogue with more traditional theological categories (e.g., see Land, 1993; Macchia, 2006; Smith, 2010; Yong, 2002). Part of this new, explicit, pentecostal theological reflection includes articulation of what a pentecostal spirituality looks like.

While the emphasis on a divine encounter lies at the heart of pentecostal spirituality, it is perhaps more common for pentecostals to speak of the “practices” that are central and formative to their spirituality (e.g., prayer, exuberant praise, the laying on of hands). These beliefs, practices, sensibilities, and values, as named by Albrecht and Howard (2014), enable pentecostal spirituality to be defined as “as a way of perceiving, interacting, and behaving in the world” (Castelo, 2017, p. 21).

We follow another pattern of pentecostal spirituality adopted from French (2017) who defines pentecostal spirituality as “a passionate, affective, and particularly embodied practice of Christianity that is marked by a radical openness to the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit” (p. 265; cf. Smith, 2010). She concludes
that a Spirit-filled life—the lived religious experience that is pentecostal spirituality—is predicated upon the fact that the indwelling Spirit actively transforms a person into the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18) in order to express the Spirit of God; the Holy Spirit. Using the works of pentecostal theologians Land (1993), Smith (2010), Yong (2002) and others, this article identifies five aspects of a pentecostal spirituality that inform pentecostal clinical practice. These five elements of pentecostal spirituality are not presented in an order that implies importance. We see all of them as interactive and reciprocal in their influence; they all result from the deeply personal and passionate relationship with the Spirit of God; the Holy Spirit.

How Pentecostal Spirituality Informs the Pentecostal Counselor

Extant literature suggests that Christian counselors unanimously believe—although often understood tacitly—that the Holy Spirit is available to clients and counselors to empower them for personal or spiritual growth or service, both in a variety of ways as well as under specific conditions (Decker, 2002). What we propose here is that what distinguishes pentecostal counselors from other Christian counselors within the broader Christian counseling community are the pneumatological assumptions that the pentecostal clinician maintains, and the spirituality that those assumptions promote.

The Pneumatological Imagination

The imagination has been variously appropriated by theologians (Brueggemann, 1978), ethicists (Fesmire, 2003), sociologists (Mills, 1959) and social psychologists (Sweeney, 2018). For our purposes the definition from Webster’s online dictionary (n.d.) 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 a person rather than perceived from input from the external world.

In seeking to articulate a pentecostal perspective on the imagination, the work of Amos Yong (2002) is helpful. The term *pneumatological imagination* indicates 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 epistic frameworks, Yong stipulates that “knowing as a pneumatic process” arises “out of the experience of the Spirit”; it is “mysteriously (and) graciously received as a gift of the Spirit” (pp. 120-121).
Another scholar of pentecostal spirituality, Smith (2010), considers the pneumatological imagination to be a specific construal of the world, an implicit understanding that constitutes a “take” on things (p. 79). As such, the pneumatological imagination is central to a worldview that both includes as well as transcends rational, intellectual, propositionally determined elements of theology. It is a worldview that embraces what cannot be fully understood but that is nonetheless real and capable of being experienced, and has indeed been experienced, personally, as well as vicariously, especially through the narrative of Scripture and personal testimony, where people have experienced healing, deliverance, and personal transformation.

The influence of the pneumatological imagination on clinical practice may be seen by noting that because of his or her pentecostal spirituality, the counselor who counsels as a pentecostal has the opportunity to experience the dawning of a new consciousness and a perception of reality in which the whole of the individual’s being-in-the-world is interpreted through this pneumatological construal (e.g., see Bridges Johns, 2010; Castelo, 2017; Cox, 1995; Lee et al., 2013; Smith, 2010; Yong, 2002). This new perspective offers a new set of “glasses”—epistic and hermeneutical lenses—through which to view the persons seeking counseling, the situations and circumstances involved in the counseling endeavor, and indeed, the counseling process itself. The pentecostal counselor’s distinctiveness is therefore to experience the Holy Spirit as a collaborator in the provision of therapy in an immediate, specific, and practical manner (e.g., see Vining & Decker, 1996; French, 2017; Parker, 2016). In this regard, the Holy Spirit is thought to be “in, through, and under” counseling theory, specific counseling approaches, and interventions as the Spirit illumines, guides, and transforms the use of theory, interventions, and specific approaches, into a truly trialogical encounter involving the Spirit, the counselor, and the person(s) seeking counseling (Kim, 2010).

By way of example, Rennebohm and Thoburn (2017) integrate psychological data with theological positions from the Christian tradition. Two theological sources are of interest to Rennebohm and Thoburn: process theology, with its articulation of God’s perpetual invitation to step from the past into the future, and the pneumatology of Jürgen Moltmann (1992) who emphasizes the companionate, indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit identified as the “Spirit-in-process” (p. 131). For the counselor whose imagination has been pneumatologically transformed, the Spirit “facilitates a kenotic meeting of client and clinician to form a working alliance, foments an emotionally rich environment in which the necessary or needed corrective emotional experience takes place, and serves as midwife to the required, necessary changes” (Rennebohm & Thoburn, pp. 131, 133).
Narrative Structures

The second aspect of a pentecostal spirituality that influences pentecostal clinical practice is the narrative structures that inform pentecostals who counsel. This element of pentecostal spirituality is central to the way pentecostals think about themselves and their work in several ways. For instance, Spittler (1988) notes the value of an oral tradition and Smith (2010) speaks of the development of an affective narrative epistemology. Similarly, Land (1993) refers to the “pentecostal narrative” whereby pentecostals participate in the story of God (p. 71); they expect to speak to God and expect to speak to others through testimony and prophecy.

Although narrative structures that guide clinical practice are not unique to pentecostals, the narratives themselves tend to be. This can be illustrated through the use of a “testimony,” a central aspect of pentecostal spirituality. Testimonies capture the dynamic sense that God is active and present in our world and in our personal experience (Smith, 2010), and gives one opportunity to "re-story" one’s life in empowering ways (Parker, 2016, p. 62). Cesar (2001) speaks of such testimonies as “the invasion of reality by the magic of speech” that “simultaneously allows one to ‘comprehend the world which has been created’ and to ‘foresee the possibilities of creations which have not yet come to be’” (p. 31). In speaking of the narrative structures that inform a pentecostal spirituality and pentecostal clinical practice, there are two in particular that deserve more attention.

Prayer

According to Land (1993), part of the narrative structure of pentecostal prayer is the notion that it involves three forms of prayer: prayer with words that are understood, prayer without words, and prayer with words that are not understood (pp. 171-172). Prayer with words that are understood is a form of prayer pentecostals share with all Christian groups. The benefits of such prayers have oft been noted (e.g., Johnson, 1999; Koonz, 2011; Loder & Neidhardt, 1992; Worthington et al., 2013).

A particular form of such prayer found among pentecostals is often called “praying through.” Praying through may be defined as creative praying (Dobbins, 2000). Koonz (2011) identifies praying through as a “prayer for the intimacy of the Spirit that heals and transforms” (p. 152). The goal of praying through might be described as the acquisition of a new narrative that allows one to participate in a new story of movement toward personal wholeness (Decker, 2001; Dobbins, 2000). A new meaning of the self in relation to the world and God emerges. The new order of meaning is able to alter or replace the old frame of reference and reorder the elements of self-understanding. It should be noted that praying through as a counseling intervention is most often used in conjunction with a local pastor,
a specific “altar call” to come forward for prayer following a church service, or in the privacy of one’s own home (Decker, 2001; Mathew, 2008).

Prayer without words is derived from Romans 8:26, “And the Holy Spirit helps us in our distress. For we don’t even know what we should pray for, or how we should pray. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings [“Sighs” in some biblical translations] that cannot be expressed in words” (New Living Translation, 1996). One way prayers without words may occur is through weeping, “to express deep sorrow...by shedding tears” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). What is understood about such prayers is that they are spoken to God and received by God; furthermore, God is perceived to be present in these prayers which are understood as occurring through the Spirit’s intercession. Pentecostals would affirm McMartin’s (2015) comments that the Holy Spirit is the perfecting cause in (all of) creation, and therefore “preserves, upholds, and provides for what the Spirit has made” and that God “not only preserves life, but fills it up with enablement for a robust form of existence” even in “in the midst of chaos” (p. 222).

Finally, prayers in words that cannot be understood is considered to be a hallmark of pentecostal spirituality. Often called “speaking in tongues”, Land (1993) characterizes the narrative structures that inform the way pentecostals think about this form of prayer in the following way: it is “a form of prayer which is especially edifying to the individual”; furthermore, such prayer affirms God’s presence in the midst of God’s people (Macchia, 1992, 1993). Such assurance of the Spirit’s presence in the world is thought to translate into hopefulness, courage, confidence, and assurance of the Spirit’s work in the counseling context for those counselors who practice as pentecostals. However, as French (2019) notes, this is an aspect of Christian counseling that requires further development, particularly as understood from lived experience. Decker found that student counselors-in-training in a pentecostal seminary counseling program subvocalized this kind of prayer during the counseling session yet seemed to understand its meaning. For example, “I did not know what to do except to silently pray in the Holy Spirit...praying in the Holy Spirit helped,” and again, “I began to pray and asked the Holy Spirit to give me the words to say. The words came to me (and I spoke with assurance)” (personal communication, March 2, 2006).

**Scripture**

The second narrative structure that informs pentecostal spirituality concerns Scripture. Consistent with all of Christianity, pentecostals believe the truth that “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (New International Version, 2011, 2 Timothy 3:16). Because Scripture is the word of God it can be used in explicit ways in counseling with Christians who desire that their faith be part of the therapeutic process, by both pentecostal and non-pentecostal counselors (Tan, 2011).
Pentecostal narratives about Scripture tend toward a more dynamic reading that takes the work of the Holy Spirit as not only inspiring the words but making them come alive to contemporary readers. In the words of Yong (2002), current pentecostal spirituality sees Scripture through the lenses of the pneumatological imagination—reading Scripture through the “eyes” of the Spirit—so that the general patterns and principles of the Spirit’s activity are revealed in the written word through the meta-narratives of Scripture and the life and ministry of Jesus. Of particular importance to pentecostals in this way of reading Scripture are the life-changing experiences noted there. The narratives of the individuals who were changed following the Pentecost event indicates to those counselors, who counsel as pentecostals, that the Spirit can bring change to those who seek help, and that change is often rooted in and inspired by the narratives of Scripture.

Counselor Affections

The third aspect of a pentecostal spirituality with implications for clinical work is the “religious affections.” Pentecostal theologian Steven Land (1993) speaks of the religious affections as more than emotions or mere feelings; affections are “abiding dispositions” that holistically dispose a person (emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally) “toward God and the neighbor in ways appropriate to their source and goal in God” (p. 136). Land’s definition draws heavily from John Wesley, the 18th century English cleric, whose understanding of the affections has been summarized by the Wesleyan scholar Maddox (1994) who notes that for Wesley, “these dispositions, in true Christian action, are not inherent human possessions. They emerge in conjunction with the empowering Presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives” (p. 132).

In arguing that, when rightly understood, the affections become dispositions, Land (1993) identifies three of these in particular as characteristic of pentecostal spirituality: gratitude, compassion, and courage. Each of these dispositions has implications for the pentecostal counselor, and they are consistent with two of the empirically based principles of therapeutic change identified by Castonguay and Beutler (2006). These include: participant factors—characteristics of the patient or therapist that (a) exist solely with the person of the patient or therapist, and (b) represent qualities that are manifest in life beyond psychotherapy, and relationship factors—those general qualities of the therapeutic interaction and therapist’s interpersonal relationship skills that serve to enhance, or impede, the process of change or client improvement (p. 8).
Gratitude

Gratitude is expressed in thanks and praise for the ongoing action of God in the life of the pentecostal counselor and in the life of the person they are counseling. It is expressed by way of testimony and praise, but it also is expressed “not only by what is said, but also by what is done” (Land, 1993, p. 140). This is consistent with the spiritual traits of grateful people identified by McCullough et al., (2002) who found grateful people to be more spiritually inclined and to perform more prosocial behaviors.

The disposition of gratitude in counseling by pentecostals is evident in other ways as well, such as through expressions of thanksgiving to God for the opportunity to use one’s talents and skills to assist others, or in helping one persevere in difficult circumstances (French, 2019). Gratitude also shapes the pentecostal counselor’s attitude toward clients both in being thankful to God for the clients brought one’s way, and in being thankful for all that clients teach them to be better helpers.

Godly Love & Compassion

Land (1993) notes that to speak about compassion is to mention that “the heart of Pentecostal spirituality is love” (p. 176). Pentecostal theologian Frank Macchia (2006) stipulates that “the outpouring of divine love acting upon us is the ultimate description of Pentecost: ‘God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit’” (New International Version, 1978, Romans 5:5) (p. 256). Pentecostals also point to verses in the New Testament that remind us that the Holy Spirit was given to prompt believers to remember all that Jesus taught (John 14:26); most notable, to “love each other as I have loved you” (New International Version, 2011, John. 15:12).

Since Godly love does not remain within the person but flows out to others, as “the heart of Pentecostal spirituality” this love “contributes to the compassionate drive of Pentecostals toward the world” (Land, 1993, p. 176). Interesting in this regard is research conducted by Sutton et al. (2014) who found, among a student population (n=265) of a small midwestern university affiliated with a pentecostal denomination, that “Pentecostal-Charismatic spirituality…made a significant and unique contribution to understanding the compassionate dimension of benevolence beyond that explained by other variables” (p. 120). Similarly, French’s (2019) work records several interviews where pentecostal counselors describe the Holy Spirit awakening compassion in them that went beyond their natural inclinations toward various clients.

Courage

Courage is spirituality expressed as confidence and hope (Land, 1993, p. 139); it is “borne out of confidence in God” (p. 156). The confidence and hope held by
Pentecostal counselors is due to God’s Spirit as seen in specific situations and contexts in Scripture, in history, and in the experience of Christian believers here and abroad. As Decker (1997) stipulates “...it is unmistakable. The experiences of the Divine by persons of the past as revealed to us by the Bible, and the testimony of our brothers and sisters through the centuries enable us to discern and expect experiences of the Divine in the present” (p. 79). This promise is for both counselors and clients, as the Spirit poured out as divine enablement and empowerment (discussed below) enables counselors to exhibit effective helping skills and a sense of presence even in the most difficult of counseling situations. Such courage and perseverance often results in hope for the troubled client.

**Spirit Empowerment**

This fourth element of pentecostal spirituality expands upon the understanding of pentecostal spirituality as “marked by a radical openness to the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit” (French, 2017, p. 265). In reflecting on how pentecostal spirituality influences the pentecostal counselor’s clinical work, one must note it is his or her relationship with the Spirit and a distinctive perception of reality—the pneumatological imagination—together with personal dispositions formed and shaped by the Spirit, that informs how the pentecostal goes about engaging in the therapeutic process. Decker (1996) proposes that one way this empowering shows up in counseling is as the enhancement of understanding and interpretation (p. 63). Furthermore, he suggests that the Spirit enhances one’s understanding and interpretation through four epistic components of human sensation and perception: knowledge, discernment, illumination, and revelation—all ways of knowing involved in meaning-making activities guided by the Holy Spirit (Decker, 1996, pp. 62-67; Decker, 2002, p. 25). For instance, French (2019) found that counselors who self-identify as pentecostals shared commensurate experiences of the Spirit aiding in the process of counseling through “directive leading, divine insight, and wisdom and knowledge that these clinicians (have) attributed to the Holy Spirit and perceived to exceed or enhance their natural abilities” (p. 134).

**Spirit-Directed Change**

This fifth element of pentecostal spirituality points to the transformative nature of pentecostal spirituality and may be defined as God, through the Holy Spirit, encouraging the process of personal, and spiritual growth so as to actively determine what needs to change, and to empower the ability to make the change so that healing and restoration may take place.

While the empowerment of persons, identified above as Holy Spirit empowerment, is directly related to the empowerment of persons for specific
actions within the counseling endeavor, Spirit-directed change identifies the active involvement of the Spirit throughout the counseling process working both within the persons involved, as well as the situations and circumstances that involve the counseling and change processes.

This change most commonly involves the abiding internal presence of the Holy Spirit, effecting needed change in a person’s life. When viewed through the lens of the grace of God, Spirit-directed change looks very much like the Type I changes suggested by Miller and C’de Baca (2001). These are changes that are of the “educational” variety in which change occurs a little at a time. Other times this inner work of the Spirit may come by way of miraculous intervention. One can think of these miraculous interventions as akin to the quantum change identified by Miller and C’de Baca (2001) or Loder’s (1989) transforming moment. Parker (1997) refers to this as “the Spirit’s work via (a) transrational means of knowing” (p. 58).

Summary and Discussion

This article suggests that what distinguishes pentecostal counselors from other Christian counselors within the broader Christian counseling community are the pneumatological assumptions that the pentecostal clinician maintains, and the spirituality that those assumptions promote. It further suggests that one’s experience with the Holy Spirit and the ensuing personal dispositions that develop, lead pentecostal counselors to embrace Godly love, gratitude, compassion, and courage as central to the counseling endeavor. For the pentecostal counselor, prayer, Scripture, and other narrative structures are central as well.

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References


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SPIRIT-CENTERED COUNSELING AND SECOND-ORDER CHANGE: THE CPR MODEL

BILL J. BUKER

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Keywords second-order change, spirituality and counseling, epistemology, conventional wisdom, mind of the Spirit, Spirit-centered counseling

Abstract

Building upon a previous exploration of Spirit-centered counseling, which described its purpose as expanding the redemptive pattern of God’s story by following the transformative wisdom of Jesus (Buker, 2021; Decker et al., 2021), this paper offers a model that conceptualizes how such a process might be facilitated. Depicting it via the three general phases of connection, perception, and redemption (CPR), the CPR model draws on the concept of second-order change to describe the epistemological shift that occurs when the transformative wisdom of Jesus is embraced. Spirit-centered counseling is portrayed as helping clients experience similar shifts by deconstructing the taken-for-granted epistemological assumptions that inform perception, especially their source in the conventional wisdom of culture, while constructing new perspectives based on the transformative wisdom of Jesus. The goal is to help clients, caught in repetitive cycles of struggle, enter and expand the redemptive pattern of God’s story.

Introduction

Of the three general ways in which the Spirit appears to be involved in human affairs—prevention, intervention, and redemption—the emphasis in the Pentecostal tradition of my upbringing was intervention. While some attention was given to prevention as indicated by our prayers for protection, little seemed allotted to redemption. Intervention was the primary focus as reflected in our passionate efforts to impel the Spirit to intervene in undesired situations to produce
preferred outcomes. This tended to be the principal strategy in our attempts to help and only when those efforts failed did we seem open to the third and, I would argue, most common way in which the Spirit works, redemption.

By redemption, I am referring to a specific pattern embedded in God’s story that is characterized by resilience in the face of despair. From managing simple frustrations, similar to a GPS response of “route recalculation” whenever we make a wrong turn, to the more profound image of a Phoenix rising from the ashes, this pattern reflects the power of redemptive responses to produce transformative effects. Involving the phases of creation, fall, struggle, redemption, and transformation, this redemptive archetype is not only reflected in God’s story but also serves as a template for our own.

Set in motion whenever we embark on a new initiative with hopes and dreams for how it will unfold, e.g., education, career, business, ministry, marriage, or family (creation), the redemptive pattern recognizes the all too common reality that expectations rarely go as intended (fall). When disappointment intrudes and our attempts to salvage our plans prove unsuccessful, the pattern enters a phase of conflict. This typically involves repeated attempts to address whatever we perceive as the problem (struggle). Whenever those strategies do not produce the desired results, rather than attempt a new approach, we tend to intensify our current efforts. This stubborn determination reflects the commonsense tendency to act consistently with the reality our perception creates (Keeney, 1983; Watzlawick et al., 1974). As long as our view of a situation remains the same, so will our responses. While we may think we are trying different tactics, they are likely variations of the same basic approach. Though well-intended, our persistence eventually creates a sense of stuckness, even chaos. In such situations, a qualitatively new response is needed (redemption) if the pattern is to get unstuck and move toward a new creation (transformation). Ascertaining what that might entail, however, can be difficult, primarily due to the limitations that our underlying epistemological assumptions place upon our capacity to know and perceive (Bateson, 1972; Keeney, 1983).

Since we can only perceive what our assumptions allow and since our perception influences our actions, the struggle phase of the redemptive pattern tends to be characterized by repetitive behaviors producing similar, even worsening results. The resultant “here we go again” experiences of frustration and confusion are common denominators of what motivate clients to seek counseling. As counselors attempt to help, they often discover that before new approaches to the struggle can be identified a change in perspective is often necessary, but to facilitate such a perceptual shift, the underlying assumptions influencing perception must be addressed. This task is never easy as these deeply held premises generally operate
outside of conscious awareness and are taken for granted, thus making them resistant to change (Watzlawick et al., 1974). When modified, however, they produce new ways of knowing and seeing that lend themselves to fresh responses. Such is the nature and challenge of the deep second-order change that the Spirit is presumed to desire and the CPR model is designed to facilitate.

**Spirit-Centered Counseling**

As the term will be used in this paper, “Spirit-centered counseling” refers to approaches to counseling that seek to be guided by the mind of the Spirit (see Buker, 2021; Decker et al., 2021). Inspired by the Apostle Paul’s admonition that those who live by the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit (Romans 8:5), Spirit-centeredness is defined as the cultivation of a mindset distinguished by the capacity to know and see in ways that are consistent with the passion and purposes of God (Keener, 2016). Cultivating this mindset involves a deep change that is essentially epistemological in nature produced by a shift in the source from which the underlying premises influencing perception are drawn, from the conventional wisdom of culture to the transformative wisdom of Jesus. Corresponding to the Apostle Paul’s emphasis on renewing the mind (Romans 12:1-2), this shift may be best described via the concepts of second and even third-order change (Bateson, 1972; Keeney, 1983). Recognizing that all successful therapy involves second-order change (Fraser & Solavey, 2007), the following model conceptualizes this process in three overlapping phases for which the acronym CPR is used. Representing the processes of connection, perception, and redemption, the CPR model seeks to facilitate a particular type of deep change guided by the premises that inform the mind of the Spirit.

**The CPR Model**

For the purpose of simplicity, the three phases of CPR are discussed sequentially, but in practice overlap such that all three exert mutual influence and often unfold simultaneously. Each phase corresponds to one of Spirit-centered counseling’s three orienting assumptions, which have been depicted as ontological, epistemological, and functional (Decker et al., 2021). CPR’s first phase, connection, is concerned with cultivating a deep understanding of people based upon the ontological assumption that the Spirit’s activity permeates everything. Each client, whether a professing believer or not, is considered exposed to the Spirit’s influence. In assuming that the Spirit is active in all persons, connecting
with our clients involves recognizing the Spirit’s movement in their lives and the value and purpose that such activity implies (Rohr, 2021).

Perception, as the second phase of the CPR model, is informed by the epistemological assumption that the Spirit’s activity can be discerned. Its focus is on detecting that activity relative to a client’s situation and is enhanced by understanding the principles and premises by which the mind of the Spirit is informed as reflected in the wisdom of Jesus (Buker, 2021). This discernment capacity is deemed critical to identifying new perspectives and responses.

CPR’s third phase, redemption (redemptive response), is an application of the functional assumption that the Spirit’s activity involves bringing order out of chaos. Within the redemptive pattern, chaos is created during the period of struggle whenever attempts to control problems only serve to make them worse, often creating positive feedback loops that eventually spin out of control (Watzlawick et al., 1974). The order the Spirit seeks to facilitate is presumed to be the product of renewed minds whose epistemological assumptions find their source in Jesus’ transformative wisdom (Decker et al., 2021).

In short, Spirit-centered counseling seeks to assist clients in identifying redemptive responses to their problematic situations by facilitating deep perceptual shifts. As an epistemological process (Bateson, 1972; Dell, 1985), client experiences are reframed through the premises of Jesus’ transformative wisdom, of which the mind of the Spirit is also presumed to operate. Clients’ receptivity to this approach requires a strong therapeutic connection, solidified by a deep understanding of their experiences. Thus, each aspect of the CPR model is essential to positive outcomes and necessitates that counselors be adept in exercising the competencies involved, to which we now turn.

Connection
CPR’s first phase, connection, is concerned with cultivating the therapeutic relationship which, as outcome studies attest, is critical to the overall effectiveness of the counseling process (Duncan et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2013; Sprenkle & Blow, 2007). Research further reveals that the key variable to forming quality connections is the person of the counselor (Miller et al., 2013). In trying to determine what it is about counselors that seems to matter most, Miller et al. (2013) turned to the fields of expertise and expert performance where researchers have been investigating why some performers produce consistently better results than others. Their findings revealed a single underlying trait—deep, domain-specific knowledge. It appears that those who are the best at their craft know, perceive, and remember more than the others. Their instincts seem informed by a deeper level of understanding that goes beyond mere skill development. This
discovery suggests that when it comes to identifying the key variables to counseling outcome effectiveness, rather than arguing about specific interventions or common factors, a more helpful approach is to understand how the best do what they do (Miller et al., 2013). Toward that end, a consideration of the ultimate example of Spirit-centeredness, Jesus himself, seems apropos. What can we learn from him about forming connections? How is the deep understanding contained in his transformative wisdom conducive to developing therapeutic relationships?

**Jesus and Connection**

A simple answer I would like to propose is that Jesus’ connections were informed by a mindset that viewed people relationally rather than behaviorally. Instead of evaluating others on the basis of individual performance, he focused on both their personal and collective experience, especially contextual influences, as indicated by his harsh criticism of the ‘powers that be’ (Matthew 23). This relational perspective reflects the capacity to see systemically. While people may be distinct, they are not separate (Becvar & Becvar, 1999). Rather, their behavior is governed by their connections to each other and the larger systems of which they are a part (Capra & Luigi, 2014). Jesus’ relational mindset distinguished him from the religious elite and seemed to explain his interactional style, which was often a target of their criticism. One such occasion stands out for the insight it provides.

Upon calling Mathew the tax collector to be his disciple, Jesus shared a meal with him and a few of his friends. The Pharisees reacted with disapproval, accusing Jesus of associating with “tax collectors and sinners” (*New International Version*, 2011, Matthew 9:10). In addressing their criticism, Jesus responded by giving an assignment. He indicated that they should go and learn what it means to desire mercy and not sacrifice (Matthew 9:13). By implication, he seemed to be suggesting that successfully completing this assignment would result in a deeper understanding of his connection with people, especially those they considered outcasts.

**Mercy versus Sacrifice.** The religious leaders, as experts of their sacred texts, would have immediately recognized Jesus’ assignment as a quote from the Old Testament prophet Hosea (Hosea 6:6), whose legacy included his infamous marriage to a prostitute named Gomer. Through the dynamics of their marital relationship, God sought to illustrate his own struggles in connecting with his people Israel (Hosea 1:2). When Gomer violated her conjugal vows and left Hosea, God directed him to go buy her back and it was in the context of redeeming his unfaithful wife that God instructed him to tell the people, “I desire mercy not sacrifice” (*New International Version*, 2011, Hosea 6:6).
Shortly after recording the incident just cited, Matthew’s gospel describes another situation where Jesus repeated this same admonition to the Pharisees. On that occasion they accused his disciples of breaking Sabbath laws to which Jesus responded by reiterating his previous assignment, “if you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent” (*New International Version*, 2011, Matthew 12:7). By referencing this quote again, it appears that Jesus is accentuating its importance. To grasp its insight, a consideration of the cultural and historical contexts may be helpful.

From cultural and historical perspectives, the contexts of both these events (Matthew 9:9-13; 12:1-14) contain actions and comments that reflected the purity system of Jesus’ day (Blomberg, 2005; Borg, 1994). Purity systems were and still are common within cultures. They serve to distinguish the “righteous” from the “unrighteous” in providing rules and requirements by which to classify a population (Borg, 1994; Patterson et al., 2012). Based on birth and/or behavior, purity systems create distinct boundaries between those considered pure and acceptable versus outcasts and sinners. In operating according to the performance principle, purity codes consist of dos and don’ts that are created and enforced as a means of determining who will be granted full inclusion into cultural/religious institutions. This produces a performance-based lens through which assessments and classifications are made, primarily on the basis of image and behavior. The outcome is the creation of an exclusive system in which those deemed acceptable are embraced and those judged unacceptable, marginalized. As a result, the performance-based, image-driven premises of the purity code become the basis of a culture’s conventional wisdom, which forms the mindset into which its inhabitants are socialized (Borg, 1994). Jesus’ actions constituted a direct challenge to the purity system of his day, thus suggesting that he was operating according to an alternate social vision, one based on different assumptions and one that may explain his emphasis on mercy over sacrifice (Patterson et al., 2012). These radically different mindsets often play out in a battle over how to interpret and apply Scripture (Borg, 2001).

**Jesus and Scripture.** In both contexts, Jesus’ reference to Hosea served as a challenge to the Pharisees’ hermeneutic by suggesting that their performance-based interpretation of Scripture was blinding them to its larger intent (Borg, 2001). In focusing on the letter of the law, they had failed to capture its spirit. Such is the danger purity systems promote. They tend to create a perceptual lens that overly focuses on minutiae to the extent that the larger themes and intentions of Scripture are often obscured, as reflected in Jesus’ oft quoted criticism that the Pharisees strained at gnats but swallowed camels (Matthew 23:24). This tendency seems to be reflected in these examples.
In Jesus’ first reference to Hosea, the immediate context involved a meal that he was sharing with “many tax collectors and sinners” (New International Version, 2011, Matthew 9:10). The Pharisees’ disapproval of Jesus’ company may have been bolstered by the possibility that this meal was a celebratory event involving intimate fellowship rather than just an ordinary dinner, as suggested by the small detail that they were reclining at the table as opposed to sitting (Blomberg, 2005; Borg, 1994). Additionally, in referring to these table guests with the disparaging labels of “tax collectors and sinners,” they not only classified them as outcasts and thus, inappropriate company for someone who was supposed to be righteous, but also revealed their own performance-based, image-driven mindsets. Jesus’ response reflected a different perspective. He first offered a couple reframing statements by suggesting it was not the well who needed a physician but the sick, and that he had not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance (Matthew 9:12-13). Then through assigning them the task to go and learn what it meant to desire mercy not sacrifice, he refocused these religious leaders on the intent or spirit of the law, which he later clarified as being concerned with the larger relational issues of justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23-24).

In Matthew’s second mention of Jesus’ reference to Hosea, the immediate context involved his disciples’ actions in picking heads of grain to eat on the Sabbath, behavior the Pharisees deemed unlawful. Their appraisal was apparently based on their purity code that included specific dos and don’ts for what was considered appropriate on the Sabbath. Rooted in an effort to protect their identity as God’s people and transmit their Jewish traditions, of which remembering the Sabbath by keeping it holy was central (Exodus 20:8), these religious leaders had developed meticulous rules to which everyone was expected to adhere (Borg, 1994; Wright & Bird, 2019). While their initial motivation may have been sincere, in the process of implementation they seemed to have lost sight of the law’s intent. This is clarified in the gospel of Mark where his account of the same incident includes Jesus’ reminder of the spirit of this commandment through his statement, “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (New International Version, 2011, Mark 2:27).

When the emphasis is on specific behaviors, such as those contained in a purity code, it produces an evaluative perspective that tends to obscure the law’s more important relational intent (Matthew 23:23-24). Take the Sabbath commandment for instance. In directing us to remember the Sabbath to keep it holy, God emphasized the importance of rest, comparing it to the seventh day on which he rested after creation (Exodus 20:8-11). The intent behind this commandment was to provide for a regular rhythm of relaxation and renewal after
a week of work. But, rather than allowing people to rest in ways they found meaningful, these religious leaders constructed a set of rules that dictated what did and did not constitute rest and respect for the Sabbath. Essentially, they took what was intended as a gift and made it a prison, thus distorting its purpose. Perhaps the most ironic and tragic illustration of what can happen when the letter is prioritized over its spirit occurred at the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry.

At the conclusion of his earthly ministry, Jesus was arrested by the religious elite who brought him to Pilate, the Roman governor at the time, since he had the power to issue the death sentence that they desired. In John’s record of this event, he notes that to avoid ceremonial uncleanness, the religious leaders refused to go into the governor’s palace, lest they be defiled and unable to celebrate the Passover (John 18:28). Apparently, they had completed the ceremonial washings required for involvement in this annual remembrance of the Exodus event, but, according to their purity code, if they entered Gentile space it would make them unclean, thus disqualifying them from participation. The irony of this situation is painful. While attempting to keep the law of God, they were seeking to crucify the son of God. It begs the question, how many times in our attempts to keep the law of God do we end up crucifying the children of God? Rather than showing mercy, we sacrifice.

Grasping the insight contained in Jesus’ assignment helps us appreciate how he saw people and interacted with them. It underscores the difference between a performance-based mindset and a relational perspective. Viewing people in the context of their relationships is conducive both to forming meaningful connections and to understanding their experience.

**Perception**

When cultivating a therapeutic relationship, counselors seek to understand and validate their clients’ experiences while simultaneously processing them through their own counseling model. For instance, counselors who use a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) model would look for evidence of cognitive distortions or irrational beliefs (Beck, 2020), those who employ a Narrative Therapy model would notice indications of a preferred story and exceptions to the client’s problem-saturated description (Combs & Freedman, 1996), and those who work from a systems framework would pay attention to the repetitive patterns and recursive feedback loops in which clients seem trapped (Becvar, 1999). While the insights that various counseling models provide are useful, Spirit-centered counselors are also concerned with discerning the Spirit’s perspective, which is assumed to be informed by the transformative wisdom of Jesus (Buker, 2021). As a result, Spirit-centered counselors pay particular attention to their clients’
epistemology in terms of how they seem to know what they know. What underlying assumptions appear to be influencing the meaning they are constructing from their experience? To what extent do their perceptions reflect premises that are consistent with the mind of the Spirit? In other words, do the descriptions of their concerns appear to be influenced more by the relational premises that inform the transformative wisdom of Jesus or the performance-based assumptions inherent in culture’s conventional wisdom?

For example, let us imagine that a middle-aged husband came to counseling because he had just been arrested for his third DUI (Driving Under the Influence), subsequently lost his job and is currently facing serious legal issues along with the threat of divorce. He is wallowing in anxiety and self-condemnation, berating himself for having been so “stupid and weak,” and admitting that he “knew what was right” and “should have made better choices.” He is adamant in emphasizing that this time he is going to permanently change and is committed to proving to everyone, from his former employer to his wife, that he has learned his lesson and is still a person of value who once again can be trusted. He says that there are others who have “done a whole lot worse and still bounced back to be successful” so he is going to do the same.

In this client’s description, several issues stand out to which a Spirit-centered counselor would pay attention. On the positive side, this client seems to be taking an honest look at himself and accepting responsibility for his actions. He is not blaming anyone or making excuses but rather appears to be humbling himself and resolving to do better. While these encouraging responses should be affirmed, his self-assessment and proposed solution reflect the performance-based, image-driven values of culture’s conventional wisdom. Even though he is honestly embracing responsibility, he condemns himself as “stupid and weak,” and to prove his value, believes he has to demonstrate the ability to make permanent changes. Additionally, he compares himself with those who have done a lot worse and implies that his ability to feel better will depend on re-earning the validation of important others, such as his former employer and wife. This assessment and proposed solution suggest that he is operating on the assumption that his identity and worth are connected to his performance and image.

Spirit-centered counselors would not argue that this client’s behavior does not matter or that change does not need to occur. Their interest would be in clarifying the mindset informing his self-assessment and change strategy. While clients are certainly free to choose the wisdom by which they will be guided, Spirit-centered counselors want them to be aware of how their underlying assumptions influence their meaning-making processes and lend themselves to markedly
different perceptions and actions. These distinctions are especially important when considering the goal of finding a redemptive response that positions clients for transformation.

In working with this husband, a counselor would want to understand the history of his experience. How has he sought to manage his drinking behaviors in the past, especially after the first two DUIs? Since those attempts at change were obviously unsuccessful, what was the problem? If he is like many of us when in the struggle phase of the redemptive pattern, the initial challenge is stopping the insanity of continuing to engage in the same type of behaviors while expecting a different result. This is where our underlying mindset plays a key role.

If this husband is operating on performance-based assumptions, then any attempt to manage his drinking will reflect some version of the premise that he can and should do better, meaning that his strategies for change will ultimately depend upon his personal ability to make and maintain the desired choices. As a result, if he wants to be perceived as successful and significant, he will need to work harder to control his behavior or at least project that image. Although he may think he is attempting a new strategy for success, if it is based on his own capacities, then to that extent it is just another variation of the same performance-oriented premises and as such, an example of first-order change. Calling attention to the role these underlying assumptions are playing, especially in informing his perception and response, will be critical to facilitating second-order change.

The Competency of Second-Order Change

Effectively facilitating second-order change involves a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitude. It requires knowledge of the various levels of change, the skills to strategically address deeply held assumptions, and an attitude of expectancy motivated by the redemptive possibilities that faith, hope, and love inspire (Fraser & Solovey, 2007; Watzlawick et al., 1974). Within the context of the CPR model, this competency is vital to inviting clients into the redemptive pattern of God’s story.

Knowledge. First and second-order change are distinguished by the level at which change occurs. First-order change reflects responses to problems that are based on our initial perception of the issue. Many times, those actions are effective and no deeper change is required, but whenever they are not, we tend to discover the truth of the proverb, “the more things change, the more they stay the same” (Watzlawick et al., 1974, p. 7). This proverb reflects the reality that change can occur at the superficial level of our behavior yet repeatedly produce or exacerbate the same outcome. When this occurs, it becomes important to examine the underlying assumptions that are driving our behavior. Since these embedded premises generally operate outside of awareness, clients are typically oblivious to
their influence. They can feel perplexed, even infuriated, often expressing exasperation to the counselor with some variation of the phrase, “I’ve tried everything I know to do but nothing has worked.”

From the perspective of second-order change, this frustration is understood to be the result of a perception that has remained constant. In other words, the underlying assumptions that are influencing how clients view their situations have not changed, and thus, their options for action have been limited by what their perception allows, essentially trapping them in patterns of behavior that are simply variations on the same theme. Second-order change occurs when those taken-for-granted assumptions shift, thus allowing for fresh perspectives to emerge and qualitatively different responses to be identified. Such a shift can significantly change how a situation is seen, and therefore, how meaning is ascribed. When working with clients whose perception is informed by the conventions of culture, the deep change that Spirit-centered counselors are seeking to facilitate is related to the source of those epistemological premises.

Sources of Epistemological Premises. There are basically two sources of epistemological assumptions with which Spirit-centered counselors are concerned—those that are based on the conventional wisdom of culture and those that are rooted in the transformative wisdom of Jesus. These two sources lend themselves to differing perceptions and descriptions, primarily due to their conflicting definitions of success and significance (see Table 1). In distinguishing between the two, it is important to pay attention to how clients seem to define the four A’s of appearance, achievement, affluence, and authority (Borg, 1994). Conventional wisdom tends to be reflected in an emphasis on performance and image, and often uses the language of compare, compete, criticize, and control. On the other hand, the relational nature of Jesus’ transformative wisdom tends to be concerned with God’s perspective and expresses itself in acts of compassion, humility, gratefulness, responsibility, and advocacy. In attempting to facilitate a shift from perceptions informed by one source of epistemological assumptions to the other, interventions designed to facilitate second-order change are helpful.
Skills and Attitudes. The skills required by the competency of second-order change are essentially those involved in interventions designed to address the taken-for-granted assumptions that operate outside of conscious awareness. For these skills to be effective, however, they should be applied with the right attitude. As Fraser and Solovey (2007) remind us, interventions are relational acts. In other words, technique and relationship need to be considered as a unity such that effective interventions are outgrowths of meaningful therapeutic connections. Skills that are applied without a genuine attitude of caring are experienced as manipulative and condescending, but when used compassionately, serve to enhance the relationship, and facilitate positive self-esteem (Miller et al., 1991). When it comes to demonstrating the competency of second-order change, no one combines skills and attitude better than Jesus.

Jesus and Second-Order Change

Probably the most common strategy for facilitating second-order change is reframing. This technique recognizes the basic human need to make meaning of life’s experiences, which often occurs through the method of classification (Watzlawick et al., 1974). Whenever we encounter something new, we seek to classify it into what we think is its appropriate category. Once classified, its meaning is constructed and options for responding are determined. For instance, if an adolescent daughter begins to ignore family rules by breaking curfew and

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**Table 1**

**Sources of Epistemological Assumptions**

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<tr>
<th>Conventional Wisdom</th>
<th>Transformative Wisdom</th>
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<td>recognition by culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affluence</td>
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<tr>
<td>possessions, leisure activities, status</td>
<td>contentment, eternal riches, generosity</td>
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<td>Authority</td>
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<td>power, exerting control</td>
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engaging in behaviors deemed inappropriate, even wrong, the parents are likely to place her conduct into the category of rebellious actions. Once classified as such, the response of the parents will be determined by how they believe rebellion should be addressed. In most families, this would involve some type of disciplinary action. If the discipline they impose is effective in restoring their daughter’s behavior to a more compliant state, then their first-order strategy would be considered successful. But, as previously noted, problems tend to emerge whenever initial strategies prove ineffective.

Once the daughter’s actions are placed into the class of rebellious behaviors, it will be difficult for the parents to see them as anything else. Consequently, their responses will continue to reflect what they believe is the appropriate way to handle rebellion. This means that if her conduct does not change, disciplinary actions are likely to increase in frequency and intensity. Unfortunately, this ‘more of the same’ strategy often results in what is referred to as a positive feedback loop or vicious cycle where the more the parents discipline, the more the daughter rebels, to which the parents discipline more severely to which the daughter continues rebelling, and so forth (Becvar & Becvar, 1999).

Reframing as a technique seeks to take this same situation and, without changing any of the facts, place it into a different class or frame (Watzlawick et al., 1974). In so doing, it aims to change the meaning of what is taking place so that new responses can be identified. Using this example, a potentially helpful reframe might involve suggesting that the daughter’s behavior reflects maturation and a natural desire for independence. While not minimizing the potential risks in her actions, it removes them from the classification of rebellion and places them within the framework of human development. Once classified differently, new responses become apparent. In other words, how parents would respond to a maturing young lady would probably be different than how they respond to a rebellious adolescent. Rather than discipline, which requires a power differential, they might attempt coaching, which necessitates connection. While the reframe suggested in this example is not guaranteed to be effective, as each situation is unique, it serves to illustrate how a shift at the deeper level of underlying assumptions can change perception, and thus, reveal a new response.

Arguably one of the best examples of reframing found anywhere is Jesus’ response to the religious leaders who were wanting to stone a woman they had caught in the act of adultery (John 8:1-11). These leaders had placed her actions into the class of lawbreaking behaviors, which in her case had serious implications. Since her conduct had violated one of God’s Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:3-17), it necessitated capital punishment. The performance-oriented assumptions
informing their perception focused on her behavior and the consequences it deserved so as they picked up stones to administer the death penalty, their actions reflected the belief that they were maintaining purity by standing for righteousness and enforcing the law. When Jesus was asked what he thought, he responded with a relational reframe that shifted everyone’s perception from the woman’s behavior to their own. In responding, “he who is without sin, cast the first stone” (New International Version, 2011, John 8:7), Jesus did not change the facts of the situation, he simply placed the action of throwing stones into a different frame. He removed stoning from the class of righteous, law enforcing behaviors and placed it into the relational category of self-examination, thus changing its meaning. Now if anyone threw a stone, rather than signifying “I’m standing for righteousness by enforcing the law,” it meant “I have no sin.” Since no one could honestly claim that status, no stones were thrown, and the lady’s life was spared. Such is the power of a good reframe and in this situation, an example of what it means to prioritize mercy over sacrifice.

A strategy sometimes used to set the stage for reframing is the confusion technique (Watzlawick et al., 1974). It involves intentionally responding unpredictably in a manner that is designed to throw a person off balance. When thrown off balance people instinctively seek to regain a steady state as quickly as possible. This means that they become especially receptive to whatever comment or action comes next in the hope that it will enable them to regain a sense of normalcy. For instance, in working with a client who was struggling with suicidal ideation due to a harsh view of God, which left him feeling chronically inadequate and worthless, I responded by saying, “rather than killing yourself, why don’t you kill your God?” Although it was something of a risky statement, I felt that we had a good enough connection to take the chance. It worked as an unpredictable response in throwing him off balance, thus increasing his receptiveness to my follow-up, which was the point I was trying to make regarding the subjectivism of his image of God. Since it was a product of his own creation, influenced by his experience growing up as a preacher’s kid in a holiness tradition, it could be examined and potentially expanded if he was willing.

Jesus was a master of the confusion technique. Repeatedly, he engaged in unpredictable actions, often making outrageous declarations that threw people off balance and captured their attention. In the case of the woman caught in adultery, when asked what he thought, Jesus bent down and began to write in the ground with his finger. We are not told what he wrote but this action seems unusual enough to have tweaked curiosity such that it likely served to set the stage for his response. Other examples include statements such as “if your hand offends you, cut it off” (New International Version, 2011, Matthew 5:30), and “unless you eat
my body and drink my blood, you have no part of me” (New International Version, 2011, John 6:53-59). In both instances, Jesus was setting the stage for important reframes. The first reference comes from his famous Sermon on the Mount in which he was setting the stage to redefine righteousness, and in the second, he was setting the stage to redefine discipleship.

On another occasion, in an example of a second-order change technique known as ‘prescribing the symptom,’ Jesus unbalanced his hearers by instructing them to turn the other cheek and “if anyone wants your coat, give them your cloak also and if they want you to go one mile, go two” (New International Version, 2011, Matthew 5:38-42). If a person actually engaged in this unpredictable behavior, it would certainly have had an unbalancing affect such that, as Wink (1998) suggests, the injustices being inflicted would be exposed. In all of these situations, Jesus was challenging the performance assumptions of the culture’s conventions by reframing them based on his transformative wisdom, yet on each occasion, probably due to what must have sounded paradoxical if not illogical, most of his audience seemed to miss the point. Such is the challenge of facilitating second-order change.

Along with reframing and the confusion technique, there are many other interventions devised to facilitate second-order change such as the strategies of blocking, accepting, normalizing, restraining, reversing, and expanding (Fraser & Solovey, 2007). While the ministry of Jesus provides helpful examples of all these methods, the limitations of this article do not permit further examination of them lest we not have room to discuss the final component of CPR, redemption. This phase comprises both the goal and process of Spirit-centered counseling.

Redemption

Redemption, as used in this context, refers both to a pattern and to a response. As a pattern, it constitutes the archetype of death and resurrection, losing life to find it that is embedded in God’s story and Jesus’ transformative wisdom. As a response, it is similar to the related concepts of resilience (Walsh, 1998) and repair (Gottman, 1999), in its focus on the possibilities inherent in crises and the processes by which they are realized.

As noted earlier, the pattern of redemption begins to unfold whenever we set something in motion with hopes and dreams only to discover that our plans are not going as intended. Similar to what God experienced when the creative process he initiated and pronounced good fell apart (Genesis 3), so also our sincere intentions often encounter obstacles, detours, and setbacks that leave us frustrated.
and confused. When our initial attempts to salvage these situations fail to produce the desired result, our emotions intensify, typically involving experiences of disorientation, anxiety, rage, and depression. At this point, a sense of desperation often emerges making us vulnerable to overreactions and their subsequent regrets, as we attempt to exert control.

In banishing Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and preventing them from returning (Genesis 3:23-24), God may have been acting in their best interests but soon discovered that the situation was becoming increasingly dire with the passing of time. From Cain killing his brother Abel (Genesis 4:1-16) to every inclination of the human heart being evil all the time (Genesis 6:5), his creative story was going from bad to worse. As it continued to progress in an undesired direction, God became deeply troubled and not only regretted having set this story in motion (Genesis 6:5-6), but also made another choice that he came to lament. That decision was to wipe out all living creatures with a flood and start over with Noah’s family (Genesis 6:7-8), a strategy over which God later repented and promised, as signified by a rainbow, never to execute again (Genesis 8:21; 9:8-17). In what must have been a painful realization, he discovered that in spite of such drastic measures, nothing had changed.

While tragic, who cannot relate to having made similar decisions only to regret them later? We either regret having set our plans in motion (e.g., marriage, career, family), or we regret how we reacted when we realized that they were not unfolding as intended. But, in spite of the chaos created by our ineffective attempts to produce desired outcomes, the silver lining is that first-order strategies often have to be exhausted before we become willing to consider the possibilities that second-order change can offer (Fraser & Solovey, 2007; Watzlawick et al., 1974). This process appears in God’s story through several events, including his decisions to make a covenant with Abraham and give his law to Moses.

With Abraham, God sought to establish a relationship that would produce an offspring through whom he could ultimately redeem creation, and through Moses he provided guidance in the form of laws designed to create a holy and separate nation who would serve as a light to the Gentiles. Since these outcomes were dependent upon actions that Abraham and his descendants were to take, they essentially constituted a performance-based strategy, the ineffectiveness of which God’s covenant people quickly exposed. Rather than being an influence for good on those around them, they tended to be influenced for evil by their neighbors and fell into a repetitive cycle characterized by common phrases found in the book of Judges (3:12-15)—“they did evil,” “they cried out,” “he gave them a deliverer,” “again they did evil,” “again they cried out,” etc. (New International Version, 2011).
Such is the nature of ineffectual first-order patterns characteristic of the struggle phase in the redemptive pattern.

**Redemption and Second-Order Change**

In conceding that “the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure, who can understand it” (*New International Version*, 2011, Jeremiah 17:9), God appeared to be acknowledging that a deeper order of change was necessary if creation was ever going to fulfill the hopes and dreams that had motivated its inception. Toward that end, God formulated a redemptive response. As is the nature of second-order change, redemptive responses generally appear paradoxical, involving death-type experiences. Life as it is currently being engaged drastically changes.

By saying through the prophets that we needed a new heart (Jeremiah 24:7; Ezekiel 18:31, 36:26), and later through Jesus that we must be born again (John 3:7) and whoever wants to find life must first lose it (Matthew 16:25), God seemed to be emphasizing that the way forward would necessitate a transformation that could only be adequately described through employing analogies of death and rebirth. In practical terms relevant to Spirit-centered counseling, this process involves a redefining of success and significance that shifts identity from a basis on performance to that of relationship. Such a shift requires surrender, a letting go of control, or as May (1994) describes it, a movement from willfulness to willingness.

This redemptive process is exemplified well in the 12-step approach to addiction recovery, especially the first step which necessitates an acknowledgement of powerlessness and a lack of control, an admission that runs counter to the performance-orientation of conventional wisdom (Buker, 2003).

Rather than encouraging continued effort to control behavior, the 12-steps take a relational approach. They facilitate second-order change by allowing people to exhaust their first-order change strategies and eventually hit bottom, at which point it is hoped that they will finally admit powerlessness rather than attempt yet another performance-based strategy. For those who can humble themselves with such a candid admission, the recovery process continues by acknowledging that a Higher Power exists whose help is available for those who surrender control. It continues by requiring an honest look at self, a confession of moral failings to a trusted ally, an attempt to make amends wherever possible, a commitment to ongoing accountability, and a pledge to help others do the same (e.g., see www.aa.org/the-twelve-steps). Moving through these steps cultivates a systemic mindset that reorients identity from its previous reliance on personal autonomy and accomplishments to a recognition of connectedness to God and others. In so
doing, it grounds identity in a relational network that accepts interdependency and seeks to fit within and expand God’s redemptive story.

**Conclusion**

To summarize, the competencies required to expand the redemptive pattern of God’s story are essentially those related to forming therapeutic connections and facilitating second-order change, with one caveat. As clinicians who are seeking to be Spirit-centered, special attention must be given to the discernment practices through which we cultivate ears to hear and eyes to see what the Spirit is saying and doing. While basic knowledge of the Spirit’s patterns in Scripture and history is helpful, as is a deep understanding of the transformative wisdom reflected in Jesus’ life and ministry, ultimately Spirit-centeredness necessitates that we experience the same epistemological shift that we are seeking to facilitate in our clients. The degree to which this is personally occurring is likely a determining factor in our capacity to detect the Spirit’s activity and the witness or resonance (Brown, 2004) with which it is discerned. In fact, allow me to be so bold as to state that a performance-based, image-driven mindset is inherently incapable of acting redemptively. Our ability to facilitate a redemptive process is directly related to the extent to which our perception is informed by the transformative wisdom of Jesus. Toward that end and for the benefit of our clients, may we lose our lives to find them.

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**References**


**Notes:**

1 Borg suggested that a culture’s conventional wisdom, into which it socializes its members, could be summarized by the three A’s of Appearance (how they should look in order to be attractive), Achievement (what they should accomplish in order to be recognized, and Affluence (what they should possess in order to be admired), to which I added a fourth, Authority (the level of power and control they should be able to exert to be considered significant).
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IDENTITY, SCHEMAS, AND ADAPTIVE CHANGE

Self-Affirmation for Use by Spirit-Empowered Christian Counselors

ANGELA L. WATSON

Keywords self-affirmation, schemas, motivation, Spirit-empowered, counseling

Abstract

Recent dramatic events, coupled with increased connectivity via technology, have led to many shifts in global culture. These shifts have been accompanied by an increased awareness of mental health needs, including those of Christians. Although people may realize they need to make important life changes for their mental and behavioral health, it is not always clear where they should begin. Moreover, when they recognize a need for change, this experience is often perceived as threatening. People’s innate discomfort with uncertainty then requires that they fight both the temptation to avoid the truth about themselves and the practical obstacles that naturally make growth difficult. Many Christian counselors and clients acknowledge their need for help from the Holy Spirit to discern what changes need to be made and also how to implement these changes for their health and well-being. This process often requires transforming schemas to accommodate clients’ new insights into the self and interactions with the environment. Self-affirmation consistent with an applied biblical hermeneutic can help focus these clients on Christ-like values and steady them in the face of ambiguity and change. Grounding themselves in God’s truth can thus be instrumental for clients actively seeking to renew their minds and motivate themselves to pursue necessary change as they seek God’s best for their lives.

Introduction

The last decade has seen an increase in mental health issues. Already at peak levels prior to the pandemic, mental health concerns have increased as people have
become less concerned about stigmas historically associated with seeking therapy (Baines, 2022; https://www.mhanational.org/issues/state-mental-health-america; https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/01/special-kicking-stigma). This development presents a unique challenge for mental health professionals, including Spirit-empowered counselors,\(^1\) whose growing number of Christian clients desire treatment that integrates a biblically-based applied hermeneutic (e.g., Baucke, & Seifert, 2022; Lloyd et al., 2022; McBain, 2021). Moreover, technology-supported communication and connectivity, especially via the popular use of social media,\(^2\) illuminate recent challenges to cultural values and the need to support people who are negotiating changing ideals (e.g., Kagema, 2022). Value-focused self-affirmation\(^3\) is one tool that can help people who are working to achieve mental health (Cohen & Sherman, 2014).

### The Holy Spirit as the Ultimate Mental Health Advocate

Increasing awareness of mental health has created new opportunities for Christian counselors to participate in the spiritual growth of their clients. Specifically, in supporting their clients’ work toward healthy, adaptive outcomes, the counselor enters the change process with the client, not only open to but actively seeking help from the Holy Spirit to empower both counselor and client in doing this work (French, 2021). Mental health professionals in the Spirit-empowered community carry out their praxis with the aim of bringing God’s healing power to the counseling relationship. This restorative process relies on the active role of the Holy Spirit to facilitate important transformative changes through the soul work done with clients (Appleby & Ohlschlager, 2013; Buker, 2021; Decker et al. 2021; Sisemore, 2013; Timbers & Hollenberger, 2022; Worthington et al., 2013).

According to scripture, a marker of Christ-followership is the gift of a *new heart* (Ezekiel 36:26-27; Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:10) along with the invitation to change the way one thinks so that schemas (see below), or understandings of truth, align with God’s values instead of conforming to the pattern of thinking prevalent in the popular culture (Romans 12:2). Christians are admonished in Proverbs 4:23, “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (*New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*, 2021). Scripture teaches that the renewal of the thinking mind sparks the transformative process by which Christians learn God’s will (Romans 12:2) and how to live out their creative purpose as expressions of the divine personality (Ephesians 2:10). This goal to pursue God’s will for intentional wholeness in mind, body, spirit, work, rest, play, and relationships extends to all Christ followers and reaches across the lifespan. Thus, helping people to integrate robust, biblically-informed schemas regarding their identity as God’s children with proven mental and behavioral health practices supports whole-person well-being (Buker, 2021; Timbers & Hollenberger, 2022; Watson, 2011; Watson & Watson, 2013).
The Need for Change and Perceived Psychological Threat

Clients generally initiate counseling treatment to address a perceived problem, which often proceeds by helping clients sort through their thoughts, feelings, and desires, considering how their beliefs and habits of mind and action may inform their present circumstances and indicate the need for change, or an adaptation, in response to the problem. Sometimes this is a simple, straightforward task in which an adaptive change is made with relative ease. Often, however, the process is arduous. For many, recognizing a need for change is only the first step in a long journey that will challenge their sense of identity as they examine their schemas—or the beliefs they have held—and the decisions they have made based upon these beliefs up to a crisis point. It is not uncommon to feel uncomfortable during this time and to perceive information about the problem as psychologically threatening (e.g., Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Nash et al., 2011; Putarek et al., 2019; Steele, 1988). Negotiating this uncertainty can result in a range of negative outcomes spanning from disappointment, frustration, and despair. Alternatively, this “gift of crises” can yield potential gains in character, resilience, faith, and hope (Buker, 2021, p. 45).

Whether treatment outcomes are evaluated positively or negatively depends in part upon how the need for change is approached. Problems are typically accompanied by ambiguity, and the unknown can be perceived as threatening to the self’s sense of identity and security (e.g., Gray, 1987; Nash et al., 2011; Putarek et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2021). Unless dealt with effectively, this perceived threat may inadvertently tempt clients to protect themselves in a dysfunctional way by avoiding issues instead of resolving them (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Reminding people of who they are and what they value can help steady them in the face of a problem so that they can embark on the adaptive change process. For example, Schumann et al. (2014) found that simply asking people if they affiliated with a particular religion decreased their hostile responses when they were exposed to an experimentally-manipulated threat. Self-affirmation is another way to direct participants’ attention to their values in ways that facilitate “Spirit-centered” responses (Buker, 2021, p. 33). Integrating a biblically-informed schema for one’s identity as a child of God lends the Christian client additional support to face the change process. Importantly, self-affirmation is not intended to target self-esteem, but rather works to refocus client attention away from the perception of an overwhelming psychological threat to instead work productively toward necessary changes (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Napper et al., 2009). In fact, when participants realize they are being led to self-affirm, interventions tend to be less effective (Sherman et al., 2009). The purpose of this article, then, is to discuss value-focused
self-affirmation as a tool to help clients move forward and enact important adaptive changes. In agreement with the goals set forth by Walker et al. (2021) to “build bridges,” this proposition is set forth specifically:

(a) to…advance the conversation about the nature of change in the Spirit-empowered world, (b) to build bridges between science and faith in scholarship, and (c) to understand better the integration of the Spirit into the change process to improve our counseling interventions. (p. 4)

The following questions will guide this discussion. First, how do schemas inform one’s worldview and behavior? Second, can value-based self-affirmation support clients’ sense of self-integrity and thus facilitate needed accommodations to their existing belief systems? Third, how can a biblically-informed schema regarding identity be useful for Christian counselors supporting this work?

**Schema Transformation and Change**

Even when change is desired, the process is difficult. Moreover, the ability to learn from experience can be a double-edged sword as experiences inform people’s understandings about the way the world works and how they fit into it. Although this process is usually adaptive, occasionally the environment provides messages that may be better left unlearned or that lead to adaptations that help one function in the short term but may not serve one’s long-term best interests (e.g., Liu & Huang, 2019; Voisin et al., 2019). In addition, when clients are influenced by their culture, they may come to the counseling relationship with conflicting values, even when these values do not serve their best interests and well-being. Postmodern society is dominated by convincing voices that espouse values and subsequent actions that recommend them (Schwartz, 2018). Yet, these values may be difficult for some clients to integrate with their own sense of identity (e.g., Kagema, 2022).

Piaget (1932; 1936) famously dubbed the learning process a cognitive dialectic that begins when children interact with their environment and collect information they mentally represent in schemata, or schemas, for future use. When a new experience fits neatly into an existing schema, the child assimilates the new information and moves on; however, when new experiences challenge their working understanding of the way things are, they must accommodate this discrepancy by modifying the inadequate schema to restore cognitive equilibrium. Although this simple idea has been variously challenged, adapted, and modified, most cognitive frameworks still borrow from this dialectic in explaining at least some aspects of mental and behavioral health functioning (e.g., Chen et al., 2022; Lyddon, 1990; Morra et al., 2007; Suizzo, 2000). Regardless of how old
they are, human beings never stop learning from experiences and the learning itself represents a change at the neural level that has the potential to develop and express itself in complex behaviors. As we grow in experience, our knowledge increases. Yet, adults are more likely to strive for assimilation than accommodation, even when new information suggests that edits to schemas are needed (e.g., Amedi et al., 2005; Luczak & Kubo, 2022). Furthermore, these kinds of changes reflect multi-factorial processes that involve complex interactions both within the individual and between the individual and the environment (e.g., Finn et al., 2017; Momi et al., 2021; Voss et al., 2017). Although we now realize that the human brain retains plasticity beyond childhood, it is still clear that children are the master learners while adults struggle to make new connections that may require dramatic restructuring of existing schema(s) (Buker, 2021; Chen et al., 2022). This may explain, at least in part, why Jesus told his disciples, “Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (*New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*, 2021, Matthew 18:3).

Yet, people often move through life without considering their ways of knowing and being, the assumptions that underpin these ways, or the inconsistencies that may lead to dissonance and can disrupt healthy and adaptive functioning (e.g., Chui et al., 2022; Colonnello et al., 2019; Drigas et al., 2021; Soon, 2020; Sweegers et al., 2015). Thus, unless schemas themselves are changed to accommodate new information, then clients in therapy will likely have trouble remembering insights later, making it difficult to put them into action in meaningful ways (e.g., Lyddon, 1990). This hearkens to the effort required for formation tasks described in the epistle of James when the apostle admonishes his readers to be doers of the word and not hearers only who “…are like those who look at themselves in a mirror…and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like” (*New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*, 2021, James 1:23b-24).

It should be noted that, on some level at least, the most common mental health tasks involve understanding, developing, and refining one’s sense of self in terms of who that self really is and what options that self actually has available to move forward (Morawski, 2022). After all, the self is truly the only person over whom the client inarguably has a clear authority and responsibility. Tangentially, to grow up into God’s image as Christ followers, every Christian must learn a new way of understanding one’s identity in God’s new creation through Jesus’ work on their behalf: “Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new” (*New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*, 2021, 2 Corinthians 5:17)! Whether people are cognizant of their schemas or not, the stories they tell themselves about who they are and about the world around them informs the way
they respond to perceived psychological threats. When holding multiple beliefs and concomitant values in their awareness, clients can focus their attention upon their true values, which can strengthen them to make needed adaptive changes (Cohen & Sherman, 2014).

**Is Self-Affirmation Theory Appropriate for a Spirit-Empowered Context?**

Steele (1988) posited that when people perceive a threat to their sense of self-adequacy and integrity, they will try to restore that sense of self-adequacy and integrity. As previously mentioned, for many people, simply recognizing a problem can seem threatening in itself and the self-affirmation tendency explains how responses may be either adaptive or maladaptive depending upon how one attempts to restore self-integrity. According to self-affirmation theory, when people faced with a stressor evaluate themselves as adequate, competent, and good enough, they are more likely to respond to a perceived threat appropriately and make the necessary changes to respond accordingly. Unfortunately, however, when people faced with a stressor evaluate themselves as inadequate, incompetent, and not good enough—as is often an artifact of navigating a mental health crisis—they are less able to separate themselves from these painful self-evaluations. Consequently, their energies will more likely be diverted toward neutralizing the negative personal evaluations symbolized by the perceived threat through avoidant behaviors, rather than responding intelligently to the implications of the threat itself (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Lannin, Ludwikowski et al., 2019; Lannin, Vogel et al., 2019; Logel et al., 2019; Steele, 1988).

A lifelong challenge for Christians, particularly those who are who are high meaning searchers, is integrating a biblical understanding into schemas that can accommodate new information. These schemas must acknowledge human shortcomings (e.g., Romans 3:23) as the starting point for redemption and transformation (e.g., Romans 3:24-26), without getting mired in either a sense of inadequacy when things go wrong (e.g., 2 Corinthians 3:5-6), or a sense of self-righteousness when things go right (e.g., Ephesians 2:8-10). McGregor et al. (2022) note that “chronic meaning search could be a kind of over-idealism that distracts people from making progress on vital, real-world goals—a maladaptive addiction that prevents immersion in the here and now that is necessary for actually obtaining meaning.” Moreover, in a particularly maladaptive expression, “idealistic devotion can also sometimes tilt into smug sanctimony or self-righteous hate” that is used as a crutch to motivate meaning searchers toward action and change (p. 14).

On the other hand, low meaning searchers may fall into complacency and the kind of lukewarm inaction that stunts needed growth. Resolving these kinds of misunderstandings are critically important not only so that Christians perceive truth, but also because God’s plan is more generous than they can conceive for
themselves (e.g., Ephesians 3:20-21). At crisis points when an experience cannot be assimilated into existing schemas and requires a more difficult accommodation instead, this aspect of renewing one’s mind introduces higher stakes: A change in thinking and behaving must take place if a person is to move away from worldly conceptions of what it means to be either self-centered or other-centered, and instead toward what Buker (2021) describes as a “Spirit-centered” paradigm for mental health instead (p. 33).

**Self-Affirmation Interventions**

A self-affirmation intervention is simply an exercise in which participants are led to reflect on some aspect of their global self-adequacy, integrity, and/or morality. The affirmation is generally carried out prior to an activity that will likely draw on personal resources for successful performance, although self-affirming is not usually related to the upcoming performance activity itself. As noted earlier, those involved in a typical self-affirmation intervention may not realize that the exercise is a form of self-affirmation at all. In fact, the effectiveness of self-affirmation tends to be less effective if participants are aware of the self-affirming purpose (Sherman et al., 2009).

A range of studies have indicated the effectiveness of self-affirmation interventions. These include but are not limited to the following: lowered threat response to psychological help-seeking (Lannin, Ludwikowski et al., 2019; Lannin, Vogel et al., 2019), increased empathy and helping (Kim & McGill, 2018), improved intergroup conflict resolution (Sherman et al., 2017), improved creativity despite job insecurity (Jiang, 2017), reduced relational aggression in adolescents (Armitage & Rowe, 2017), lower epinephrine levels induced by exam stress for college students (Cohen & Sherman, 2014), healthier food choices and awakening cortisol levels in dieting women (Logel et al., 2018), better psychosocial responses for bicultural students (Liu et al., 2021), increased class participation for college students (Sereno et al., 2020), and improved emotion and cardiovascular responses (Chen et al., 2020).

Interestingly, the most effective self-affirmation interventions seem to be values-based (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Lannin, Ludwikowski et al., 2019; Lannin, Vogel et al., 2019; Logel et al., 2019). In these types of interventions, participants typically reflect on important values and personal standards they have internalized, often in terms of social relationships and religious values. Self-affirming prepares participants to make an adaptive change. Cohen and Sherman (2014) suggest this activity often unearths an unexpected source of strength that is
drawn upon long afterward, providing a broader view and putting a perceived threat to the self into a more adaptive perspective so healthy changes can take place.

McGregor et al. (2022) take this notion a step further when they observe that the usefulness of this newly perceived source of strength is in fact a connecting thread throughout psychological and philosophical theorizing. For meaning searchers, in particular, “self-transcendence can confer what feels like a kind of higher power that makes people more magnanimous” and consequently braver in facing the need for change (p. 2). For the Spirit-empowered counselor and client, this so-called higher power is often recognized as the Holy Spirit, at work on their behalf, loosing people from anxiety and complacency alike that keep them stuck in maladaptive ways of knowing and being, freeing them to see themselves instead as God sees them: cherished loved ones who are worth the precious cost of saving and well worth the effort of ongoing transformation from glory to glory (e.g., Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 3:18).

In their comprehensive review of self-affirmation theory interventions, Cohen and Sherman (2014) observe that effective psychological interventions, such as counseling treatment, influence the change process in much the same way any formative experience does. Ideally, counseling experiences will positively impact individuals, causing them to interact with their environments differently. Self-affirming thus helps set the stage to initiate a “cycle of adaptive potential” through therapy that will reinforce and perpetuate adaptive changes (p. 340). During this change process, people continue to construct cognitive narratives for themselves to make sense of the world and their place in it. In this storytelling activity, they intuitively search for ways to protect their sense of self-integrity. The Christian counselor can help them do this in ways that affirm their own self-integrity even while they accommodate new information to adapt and grow (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Steele, 1988).

Although people can (and do) construct stories that distort the truth about themselves, distortions are often unintentional as people generally prefer stories that fit within the parameters of reality (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). After all, an inspiring description of someone will be convincing only if the description is believed to be true. Thus, self-affirmation’s “goal is not to appraise every threat in a self-flattering way but rather to maintain an overarching narrative of the self’s global adequacy” (Cohen & Sherman, 2014, p. 336; see also Sherman et al., 2009; Steele, 1988). For Christians, this belief is bolstered by the power of the Holy Spirit at work on their behalf to make them competent (2 Corinthians 3:5). People tend to be more tolerant of their shortcomings and mistakes—and thus more open to the need for change—when their self-assessments reassure them that they are adequate overall, even if they are not perfect. Thus, a value-based self-affirmation prior to therapy lowers resistance and increases the probability of activating the adaptive potential cycle (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Putarek et al., 2019).
**Approach or Avoid: Considerations for Meaning Searchers**

According to reinforcement sensitivity theory (Gray, 1987), some individuals are more highly influenced by the behavioral activation system (BAS), which is associated with proactive striving and the motivation to approach challenges, while others are more sensitive to the behavioral inhibition system (BIS), which is associated with risk-avoidance and the motivation to avoid challenges. An optimal balance between these two systems’ functions should allow people to evaluate threats in light of their values to help them choose appropriate, congruent actions (Putarek et al., 2019).

McGregor et al. (2022) propose that when people are by nature more oriented to search for meaning in life, a self-affirming focus on self-transcendent values such as peace, justice, kindness, and compassion are more adaptive in supporting the change process than self-enhancing values like appearance, power, money, and status. The authors suggest that these self-transcendent values stimulate the BAS of motivation that spurs meaning searchers on toward brave and magnanimous action, while quieting the BIS that is more inclined to fear, worry, and ruminative inaction. On the other hand, they found that for people who are less likely to search for meaning, a self-affirming focus on self-transcendent values actually led to less motivation to approach important challenges. Because approach motivation is necessary for the change process that clients seek as they come (and keep coming) to counselors for, discerning these nuances to protect against a one-size-fits-all approach to intervention is essential.

McGregor et al. (2022) suggest that some people are more naturally inclined to search for meaning. This may include many religious people, who do not simply experience temporary states of meaning searching, but actually possess a stable personality trait that disposes them toward meaning searching. Regardless, with Steger et al. (2006), McGregor et al. (2022) observe that meaning searching may be accompanied by anxiety, insecurity, and distress over uncertainty as well as less mindfulness and secure attachment. These patterns are typical of BIS activation (Gray, 1987; Putarek et al., 2019) and may explain both why high meaning searchers (such as some sincere Christians) can seem immobilized by anxiety and why a focus on self-transcendent values can help quell the negative effects of BIS control and trigger the reciprocal BAS instead. In practical ways, devout Christian clients could benefit from biblically-informed schemas that encourage the healthy approach motivation necessary for making important changes.


**Caveat: When Self-Affirmations Are Not Appropriate**

For self-affirmation to be effective, the problem situation must include a psychological threat to the individual’s sense of self. In other words, awareness of a problem often causes people to feel that they are somehow inadequate when they are not. This perceived threat to global adequacy and self-integrity then blocks agency that would otherwise develop via the cycle of adaptive potential if the perceived threat to the self were successfully countered (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). For example, self-affirmation interventions have been effective in overcoming stereotype threat, a psychological threat in which people know they have been stereotyped by others due to a characteristic they were born with (e.g., ethnicity, gender, ability level, etc.). Kim et al. (2022) recently found that performance differences disappeared after women were self-affirmed even though they had consistently performed lower than men on quantitative tasks in the past. On the other hand, a self-affirmation intervention would not be considered appropriate when the obstacles to well-being are clearly problem-based (e.g., an unsafe neighborhood, dysfunctional workplace, abusive partner, etc.). In these cases, therapy goals would be better focused upon a realistic locus of control and an appropriate problem-focused strategy for change (e.g., Öztürk, & Maçkali, 2022).

In addition, as previously discussed, individual differences must be considered in evaluating treatment needs for clients who not only begin therapy with different needs, but also are at different points in their developmental trajectories. Clients need help discerning where to focus their own soul work in the present moment. For example, Voisin et al. (2019) found that some women seemed to use stereotype threat to prime themselves as a prepotent response to challenge and thus, self-affirming harmed their subsequent performance on multiplication tasks in one study and mental rotation tasks in another. Similarly, Liu and Huang (2019) found that for Chinese high school students who were highly motivated to obtain others’ approval, self-affirming resulted in increased task avoidance and lower performance outcomes at school. The latter two studies are not included to suggest that these extrinsic motivational foci are by any means ideal; rather, the results confirm the need for assistance from the Holy Spirit for a wholistic understanding of each client and their existing schemas before an effective intervention can be implemented (Buker, 2021; Timbers & Hollenberger, 2022; Watson, 2011).

**Implications**

Taken together, the academic literature highlights three key issues. First, global culture is rapidly changing, and the awareness of mental health needs is increasing among the world’s citizens, including Christians (Baucke & Seifert, 2022; Kagema, 2022; Lloyd et al., 2022; McBain, 2021). Second, Christian counselors and their clients need the help of the Holy Spirit to discern the needs of the moment and to
implement appropriate change interventions (Appleby & Ohlschlager, 2013; Buker, 2021; Decker et al. 2021; French, 2021; Sisemore, 2013; Timbers & Hollenberger, 2022; Worthington et al., 2013). Finally, self-affirmation theory, rightly discerned, may be a useful tool for clients renewing their minds to align with a more Spirit-centered paradigm and approach important challenges accordingly (Buker, 2021; Cohen & Sherman, 2014; McGregor et al., 2022).

**Ideas for Practice**

The implicit nature of constructing and referencing schemas about the self and the role that self plays in the world makes the identification and reconstruction of these schemas a challenging process (Chui et al., 2022; Colonnello et al., 2019; Drigas et al., 2021; Morawski, 2022; Soon, 2020; Sweegers et al., 2015), and may subvert efforts to change and grow. Self-affirming is one possible way to facilitate better perspective-taking, motivate people to approach important challenges, and make needed changes (e.g., Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Steele, 1988). Although there are different ways to lead people in self-affirming (see Napper et al., 2009; Zhu & Yzer, 2019), values-based self-affirmation interventions have proven to be among the more effective approaches (e.g., Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Lannin, Ludwikowski, et al., 2019; Lannin, Vogel, et al., 2019; Logel et al., 2019; McGregor et al., 2022). In developing their 32-item scale to prompt self-affirmation, Napper et al. (2009) drew from the 250-item Values in Action (VIA) Strengths scale (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) to highlight worthwhile values and they found their new measure was comparable to other established self-affirmation tools. In a rigorous psychometric follow-up study, Zhu and Yzer (2019) developed and tested an 11-item brief version of Napper et al.’s scale. They found that their brief scale format, along with the 32-item scale (Napper et al., 2009) and a frequently used essay induction prompt, were all effective for initiating values-based self-affirming (Zhu & Yzer, 2019). Given that many Christians desire to live their lives based on a biblical worldview, they may find stability in values derived from scripture rather than secular culture (e.g., Kinnamon & Matlock, 2019; Worthington et al., 2013). See Appendix A for a sample of scriptures that align with Zhu and Yzer’s (2019) brief attribute scale format self-affirmation induction (brief scale affirmation task, or B-SAT) as one example of how scripture might be integrated with other validated methods for self-affirmation.
Conclusions

Change is an inevitable part of life, but Christians can be cheerful knowing that God has given them the Holy Spirit to lead them in overcoming challenges (John 16:33). When believers experience blessing, they can rejoice and give thanks. Yet, even when they encounter crisis, they can learn to be confident in God’s faithfulness, knowing the Lord’s power is made perfect in their weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Although mental health professionals do not always know what is best, or what interventions will lead to effective change, they do know the One who knows all things. Spirit-empowered counselors can be assured that their Advocate is working on behalf of their clients for good, leading them over and through each crisis (Romans 8:28). As Christians renew their minds and learn to think about themselves the way that God does, their schemas and the actions that flow from them are transformed. The residual effects generated through the Creator’s divine fractals (Buker, 2021) result in cycles of adaptive potential (Cohen & Sherman, 2014) that overhaul human lives, further opening the way for the Holy Spirit’s creative power. This process engenders hope, revealing what it can look like for God’s will to be done here and now as the Creator conceived it in the initial design, on earth as divinely as it is carried out in heaven.

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Notes:

1 For the purposes of this discussion, “Spirit-empowered” will refer to the biblical idea that God is present, active, and facilitative in people’s lives, including but not limited to the soul work carried out via a counseling intervention. Thus, a Spirit-empowered counselor is one who believes this tenet and approaches the counseling context accordingly (see Decker et al., 2021, pp. 10-11).

2 The prevalence of social media that celebrates ordinary life can also trigger feelings of inadequacy in followers (e.g., Liu et al., 2022). The contemporary self-help industry is booming as people strive to pursue their elusive “best lives” and negotiate the challenges this goal presents both in its idealistic rendering (e.g., https://livemybestlife.com/) and in its more problematic shadow (e.g., https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Living%20My%20Best%20Life). According to marketing research from Grand View Research, the global personal development market size was worth $41.48 billion in 2021 with a growth prediction of 5.5% between 2022-2030 (https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/personal-development-market). To be their best, many people deconstruct their lives in an effort to become better humans (e.g., https://betterhumans.pub/how-to-deconstruct-your-present-habits-to-design-better-habits-2d89922d1d60).

3 Self-affirmation theory is defined in the American Psychological Association (APA) dictionary as follows:

The concept that people are motivated to maintain views of themselves as well adapted, moral, competent, stable, and able to control important outcomes. When some aspect of this self-view is challenged, people experience psychological discomfort. They may attempt to reduce this discomfort by directly resolving the inconsistency between the new information and the self, by affirming some other aspect of the self, or both. Self-affirmation theory has been used as an alternative to cognitive dissonance theory for explaining some phenomena. See also dissonance reduction; self-consistency perspective. [originally proposed by U.S. psychologist Claude M. Steele (1946– )]. (https://dictionary.apa.org/self-affirmation-theory)

4 The contemporary interest in self-improvement can focus attention in ways that may not result in better mental health. Carl Cederström and André Spicer illustrate this unintended outcome in their own comedic journey, Desperately Seeking Self-Improvement: A Year Inside the Optimization Movement (2017). These real-life business professors documented their rigorous efforts to develop latent human potential with mixed results, concluding that although the intentional pursuit of a worthwhile life did result in many accomplishments that may have been valued by others, it did not automatically lead them to more congruence or personal fulfilment. In her thoughtful pre-pandemic analysis of the self-improvement ideal, Alexandra Schwartz (2018) suggests these kinds of deflating results may simply be the logical consequence of allowing cultural norms to dictate the standards by which one evaluates the worthiness of one’s life and, by extension, the self. Taken together, these observations beg the question of
whether the collectively increased attention to self-improvement has helped people or if this pre-occupation with improving the self may instead have resulted in maladaptive functioning, perhaps even increasing a need for clinical intervention?

For example, when a child encounters a Labrador Retriever for the first time, she learns that it is a dog. When she later meets a Boston Terrier, she learns that it, too, is a dog and assimilates this information into her schema. However, when she is introduced to a British Shorthair kitten and mistakenly assumes it is a dog, the environment will eventually correct her misunderstanding and she must accommodate the new information, quickly modifying her schema for dogs and creating a new schema for cats. This correction will assist her in her future interactions and subsequent discussions about common household pets.

This preference for assimilation even when dissonance occurs is thought to contribute to many of the cognitive biases that negatively impact interpersonal relationships such as stereotypes (https://dictionary.apa.org/stereotype) and fundamental attribution errors (https://dictionary.apa.org/fundamental-attribution-error).

A discussion of experience-related changes in the nervous system lies beyond the scope of this study (see Voss et al., 2017).

The popularity of Al Franken’s lovable but beleaguered Stuart Smalley, first introduced on the Saturday Night Live television show, led to the tongue-in-cheek publication of Stuart’s daily self-affirmation journal (Franken, 1992; Franken & Wilson, 1991). The journal chronicles the character’s efforts to employ a seemingly endless stream of trite self-help platitudes (e.g., “that’s just stinkin’ thinkin’,” “denial ain’t just a river in Egypt,” “and that’s… okay,” etc.) to shore up his battered self-image. The satire provides a humorous and sometimes poignant depiction of how this fictional character’s environment has contributed to his mental health challenges as he struggles to combat his own negative self-evaluations. Whether intentional or not, the highly public nature of Stuart’s mental health journey may have contributed to flawed assumptions about self-affirmation theory. Notably, Stuart’s coping strategies, however amusing, could inadvertently lead casual observers to presume that self-affirmation is merely repetitious and occasionally incongruent self-talk.

For example, if a father learns he may be laid off at work, this information would reasonably be considered threatening. If he interpreted this threat as an indictment against his adequacy as a person, he might be tempted to put the threatening information out of mind by playing video games, ignoring the implications of unemployment, and hoping the problem will go away. Alternatively, he might try to secure his own position by actively undermining his colleagues so that possible negative evaluations of his work were deflected onto his coworkers. Both responses would be considered maladaptive and are also inconsistent with biblically-informed schemas about one’s identity as a child of God. On the other hand, if he did not interpret this threat as a personal attack on his inherent worth, but instead rightly perceived it as a threat to providing for his children, he might respond more proactively by investigating deeper into his job security in his current position and exploring other employment prospects that could be pursued if job loss did occur. These responses would be considered adaptive and are also consistent with biblically-informed schemas about one’s identity as a child of God.

High meaning searchers can be defined as people in search of a sense of coherence and purpose to harmonize their thoughts, feelings, actions, and experiences (see Steger et al., 2006).

Scriptural interpretations may also be understood in different ways. For instance, in a report by Barna (2021), over half of American adults purported to have a biblical worldview, but only about 6% really did. Moreover, among those respondents who claimed a biblical worldview, there were widespread inconsistencies between their understanding of the bible and what the
bible actually teaches. Based on the assumption that many Christian clients will subscribe to a perspective that is sympathetic to biblical teaching, values accurately derived from an applied biblical hermeneutic should have a stabilizing effect for many, especially when working through beliefs about the nature of God, the self, the world, and the relationships shared among all (Morawski, 2022; Worthington et al., 2013). In addition, this work should be useful in bridging religious practices associated with the Christian faith and commonly accepted secular understandings of psychological health and well-being (e.g., Watson, 2011; Watson & Watson, 2013).

12 Low meaning searchers can be defined as people who feel they already possess the presence of sufficient meaning (see Steger et al., 2006).

13 Approach motivation is the motivation to approach a challenge as stimulated by the BAS rather than the motivation to avoid a challenge as stimulated by the BIS (see McGregor et al., 2022).

14 Just as a pastor who tries to reassure fervent and existentially anxious parishioners with messages of assurance may neglect to challenge more carnally-minded congregants or, conversely, who may effectively motivate worldlier members while terrifying the sensitive devout, the counselor must recognize the unique needs of each client to craft an intervention appropriate for that one.

15 The preference for intrinsically motivated goal pursuits is prevalent in the achievement motivation literature, especially Deci and Ryan’s (2000) self-determination theory (SDT) that posits people need to feel autonomous in their pursuits, competent to achieve their goals, and related to the people important to them as they proactively live their lives (Howard et al., 2021; Ntoumanis et al., 2021). Most studies corroborate SDT’s framework for predicting intrinsic motivation and well-being for psychologically healthy people (Howard et al., 2021; Ntoumanis et al., 2021). Yet, questions about achievement motivation remain as researchers explore not only what people are motivated to accomplish and how that makes them feel, but also why they are motivated to do so in the first place (Sommet & Elliot, 2017).

16 In John 16:13-15, Jesus describes the work of the Spirit: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for . . . he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (New Revised Standard Updated Version, 2021). For the Spirit-empowered individual, then, a healthy process is facilitated as the Holy Spirit guides the individual into truth (John 16:13), leading to freedom (John 8:32) and faithful, obedient action (James 2:14). One way the Spirit-empowered counselor supports this process is by helping the client to connect with Christlike values that de-center and realign one’s understanding of the self, neither as devalued and marginalized nor grandiosely located front and center; rather, as an integral part of the Lord’s beloved and interdependent creation (Colossians 1:15-23).

Appendix A

The following are examples of scriptural support that align with Zhu and Yzer’s (2019) brief attribute scale format self-affirmation induction (brief scale affirmation task, or B-SAT) that comprises the 11 items below. All biblical

1. **I love to learn new things.**
   a. Proverbs 9:9: Give instruction to the wise, and they will become wiser still; teach the righteous, and they will gain in learning.
   b. Proverbs 1:7: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

2. **My friends can trust me.**
   a. Proverbs 11:13: A gossip goes about telling secrets, but one who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a confidence.
   b. Luke 6:31: Do to others as you would have them do to you.

3. **I always try to keep my word.**
   a. Deuteronomy 23:23: You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth.
   b. Matthew 5:37: Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

4. **I am always curious about the world.**
   a. Proverbs 1:5: Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance,
   
   b. Proverbs 16:16: How much better to get wisdom than gold! To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver.

5. **There are people in my life who care as much about my feelings and well-being as they do about their own.**
   
   b. Proverbs 17:17: A friend loves at all times, and kinsfolk are born to share adversity.

6. **I value my ability to think critically.**
   a. 2 Timothy 2:7: Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.
   
   b. Romans 12:2: Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

7. **My friends value my good judgment.**
a. Psalms 119:99: I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation.
b. Colossians 3:16: Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

8. I can express love to someone else.
a. 1 Peter 4:8: Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.
b. Ephesians 4:1-2: walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,

9. I treat all people equally, regardless of who they might be.
a. Romans 2:11: For God shows no partiality.
b. 1 Timothy 5:21: In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels, I warn you to keep these instructions without prejudice, doing nothing on the basis of partiality.

10. I must stand up for what I believe in, even in the face of strong opposition.
a. 1 Thessalonians 2:4: But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.
b. Ephesians 6:13: Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.

11. Despite challenges, I always remain hopeful about the future.
a. Psalms 130:5: I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in His Word I put my hope.
b. 1 Peter 5:10: And the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.
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SPIRITUAL INTELLIGENCE & PERSONALITY

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Keywords spiritual intelligence, personality traits, HEXACO, SISRI-24, college students

Abstract

This study quantifies the relationship between measures of spiritual intelligence and personality traits. A random sample of 240 undergraduate students from a mid-sized private Christian university in the West South-Central United States were administered both the SISRI-24 survey instrument for spiritual intelligence as well as the Pathway U survey for HEXACO personality traits. Statistically significant positive correlations were found between critical existential thinking and openness to experience; personal meaning production and extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness; transcendental awareness and extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, and conscientiousness; and conscious state expansion and extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, and conscientiousness. Statistically significant negative correlations were found between negative emotionality and personal meaning production, transcendental awareness, and conscious state expansion. Interestingly, honesty-humility was found to be significantly negatively correlated with overall SI-score, personal meaning production, transcendental awareness, and conscious state expansion in a multi linear regression analysis but was not a significant factor when taken alone. These results inform those who wish to develop spiritual intelligence by taking individual personality traits into account.
Introduction

Human beings enter the world as infants and progressively develop over the course of life in a variety of dimensions, including cognitive, personality, emotional, physical, and spiritual. Gardner (1983) coined the term “multiple intelligences” to acknowledge the variety of facets involved in human intellect. These multiple intelligences are dynamic and connected. For example, numerous studies support the claim that mathematical and musical intelligences are positively correlated (Bergee & Weingarten, 2020; Kusuma & Dwipriyoko, 2021). Other studies note correlations between measures of spiritual intelligence and personality (Asghari Sharabiani et al., 2019; Hossein et al., 2012; Mahasneh et al., 2015).

Whole-person care is concerned with the development and treatment of the whole human being; spirit, mind, and body. Understanding how multiple intelligences interact informs our thinking on how students mature and allows for patient-centered counselors to provide the physical, behavioral, emotional, and social services required to improve overall well-being. For example, how does personal meaning production (a measure of spiritual intelligence) associate with the degree to which a person experiences environmental stresses as anxiety-causing, hostile, and dangerous (a measure of personality)? Or how does the ability to access higher states of consciousness (a measure of spiritual intelligence) correlate with the ability to get along with other people (a measure of personality)? This study examines the connections between spiritual intelligence and personality.

Spiritual intelligence, a term first introduced in organizational management by Zohar (1997) and later defined as the brain’s unitive processes to reconceptualize experience and produce meaning (Zohar et al., 2000), quickly gained popularity beyond the business domain, motivating research in religious studies (Amram, 2007; Halama et al., 2004), psychology (Mayer, 2000), well-being (Emmons, 2000), and health (Koenig, 2013). In its immense capacity to influence and impact the individual and society, spiritual intelligence may come in many different degrees and expressions: developed or undeveloped, conscious or unconscious, naïve or sophisticated, beneficial or distorted (Vaughan, 2002). In attempting to harness the inner intelligence potential and impact its constituencies, each professional framework seems to apply a slightly different set of interpretation lenses. For example, Emmons (2000) focuses on the practical facilitation of spiritual data in everyday problem solving, while Mayer (2000) seeks an accurate definition of the concept, challenging the practicality of the previous research and stressing the need for proper measurement of the phenomena. The four-factor model, also known as the Spiritual Intelligence Self-Report Inventory (SISRI-24), proposed by King and DeCicco (2009), is based on cognitive abilities, not necessarily religious approaches, and encompasses the four core components:
critical existential thinking, personal meaning production, transcendental awareness, and conscious state expansion.

Spiritual intelligence is correlated to happiness (Jahangir et al., 2020), plays an important role in reducing mental health problems like depression and anxiety (Jahangir et al., 2020), and correlates with mental health in general (Arnout, 2020; Pant & Srivastava, 2019; Vaughn, 2002). Spiritual intelligence has been linked with higher resiliency and in turn to better mental health via enabling people to be overcomers in the face of mental stresses, tension and depression—changing the threats of life into opportunities (Arnout, 2020; Ebrahimi et al., 2012). Spiritual intelligence is the adaptive use of spiritual awareness to facilitate the process of problem-solving and to endure the stresses of life and motivates people to achieve personal goals (Robinson et al., 2016).

In the multifaceted dialogue on spirituality, Emmons (2000) markedly builds the case for spirituality as a problem-solving and goal-attainment intelligence that transcends mere phenomenological existence and is thus embedded in the pragmatic fashion of simple solutions. In his view, spirituality is “the personal expression of ultimate concern” (p. 4) and is closely related to religion, which according to Tillich (1963) is “the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life” (p. 4). In other words, this ultimate concern drives the goal attainment and motivation that can justify the membership of spirituality in Gardner’s multiple intelligence model (Gardner, 1993). Despite Mayer’s (2000) objection to naming spirituality an intelligence and instead of defining it as consciousness, researchers in the field, such as Vaughan, Amram, Zohar and Marshall, Koenig, and King, have kept a steady interest in the concept’s ability to motivate growth processes and problem-solving capacity.

**Spiritual Intelligence Self-Report Inventory SISRI-24**

King and DeCicco (2009) consider spiritual intelligence and religion as two distinct but related psychological concepts and offer a reliable four-factor model of assessing spiritual intelligence, widely recognized as SISRI-24. Several recent studies utilize SISRI-24 to examine the relationship between personality traits and spiritual intelligence and find a statistically significant correlation between some of the personality traits and spiritual intelligence (Amrai et al., 2011; Beshlideh et al., 2011; Farsani et al., 2013; Mahasneh et al., 2015; Sood et al., 2012). Since the current study follows the work of previous research in utilizing SISRI-24, this section briefly discusses the assessment model.

In SISRI-24, spiritual intelligence is defined as “a set of mental capacities which contribute to the awareness, integration, and adaptive application of the
nonmaterial and transcendent aspects of one’s existence, leading to deep existential reflection, enhancement of meaning, recognition of a transcendent self, and mastery of spiritual” states King (2008, p. 54). The model consists of four components: (1) critical existential thinking, (2) personal meaning production, (3) transcendental awareness, and (4) conscious state expansion.

Critical existential thinking relates to the individual capacity to contemplate meaning critically and arrive at original conclusions or personal philosophies that integrate the knowledge of science and unique experiences. The concept finds significant support in Gardner’s (1983, 1993) extensive theory of multiple intelligences and the research on spirituality (Wink & Dillon, 2002) and spiritual intelligence (Vaughan, 2002). Some current discussions of critical existential thinking suggest its application to any life issue as part of one’s existence and patterns of behavior (Green & Noble, 2010). In self-estimates of intelligence, Furnham et al. (2005) demonstrate that existential intelligence is a reliable factor in predicting overall intelligence.

Like critical existential thinking, personal meaning production is considered a component of spirituality and the individual ability to create personal meaning and purpose in all physical and mental experiences (King et al., 2001; Wink & Dillon, 2002). Emmons’ (2000) concept of sanctification embodies the personal meaning of production. Reker et al. (1987) define the personal meaning as “having a purpose and striving toward a goal or goals” (p. 44), and as essential to coping with the developmental crisis. The ultimate mastery of purpose is the individual ability to infer purpose in all events and experiences (King & DeCicco, 2009).

Transcendental awareness involves the capacity to perceive transcendent dimensions of the self, others, and the physical world (Farsani et al., 2013). King and DeCicco (2009) draw on Pascual (1990) to position the key aspect of the transcendental self to the concept of spiritual intelligence. Self-transcendence is described by Le and Levenson (2005) as “the ability to move beyond self-centered consciousness and to see things … with a considerable measure of freedom from biological and social conditioning” (p. 444).

Conscious state expansion is the ability to enter spiritual states of consciousness at one’s judgment, supported by Maslow’s connection between expanded states of consciousness, religion, and spirituality (Maslow, 1964). Behind the expanded or altered states of consciousness is the potential mental ability of the individual to meditate and relax (Emmons, 2000). Vaitl et al. (1964) note that such altered states of consciousness are “to some extent under our own control” (p. 32), which is a key point in the conscious state expansion.

Mahasneh et al. (2015) investigate the relationship between spiritual intelligence (SISRI-24) and the big-5 personality traits (neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness), thus finding positive and statistically significant relationships between all of the spiritual intelligence dimensions and several of the big-5 personality traits, with critical existential thinking being the spiritual intelligence
factor most easily predicted using linear correlation with personality traits ($R^2 = 0.120$, $F = 19.373$, $p < .05$). The only nonsignificant correlations are between neuroticism and both personal meaning production and transcendental awareness. Also, Mahasneh et al. (2015) note the growing interest in spiritual intelligence as being motivated by its phenomenal capacity to influence culture, people, and society but still indicate the need to differentiate its conceptual framework between religion and spirituality, defining the former as the sacred and the latter as the experiential search for meaning.

**HEXACO Personality Traits**

The HEXACO model of personality traits has six factors including a measure of Honesty-Humility that is not part of the classic Big-5 personality traits model of personality. These six factors are Honesty-Humility (H), Emotionality (E), Extraversion (X), Agreeableness (A), Conscientiousness (C), and Openness to Experience (O). The personality-descriptive adjectives that are associated with these traits are: sincere, honest, faithful, loyal, and modest/unassuming *versus* sly, deceitful, greedy, pretentious, hypocritical, boastful, and pompous for Honesty-Humility (H); emotional, oversensitive, sentimental, fearful, anxious, and vulnerable *versus* brave, tough, independent, self-assured, and stable for Emotionality (E); outgoing, lively, extraverted, sociable, talkative, cheerful, and active *versus* shy, passive, withdrawn, introverted, quiet, and reserved for Extraversion (X); patient, tolerant, peaceful, mild, agreeable, lenient, and gentle *versus* ill-tempered, quarrelsome, stubborn, and choleric for Agreeableness (A); organized, disciplined, diligent, careful, thorough, and precise *versus* sloppy, negligent, reckless, lazy, irresponsible, and absent-minded for Conscientiousness (C); and intellectual, creative, unconventional, innovative, and ironic *versus* shallow, unimaginative, and conventional for Openness to Experience (O) (Ashton & Lee, 2007).

Since the initial development of the HEXACO Personality Inventory in the early 2000s, it has been used to study various aspects related to psychology, including religiosity (Saroglou et al., 2005), and matters related to mental health and well-being (see Anglim et al., 2020 for a recent meta-analysis). The HEXACO traits have also been shown to have moderate advantages over the Big Five in predicting psychological well-being (Aghababaei & Arji, 2014), and counselors utilizing a growth-mindset view of all intelligences (Dweck, 2006, 2008) can focus on spiritual development to ultimately profit the whole person (McCrae & Costa, 1991; Piedmont, 2001).

This study aims to explore the relationship between spiritual intelligence and personality traits by documenting statistically significant correlations.
Methods

Participants and Recruitment

Spiritual intelligence data were collected using King and DeCicco’s (2009) SISRI-24 survey instrument from N = 240 (62.5% female; mean age 19.3 yrs) students taking the institution’s elementary statistics course, a course required by all majors, from the spring (N = 150), summer (N = 1) and fall (N = 89) semesters of 2021. Students were offered a small amount of extra credit for completing the survey instrument. Next, Pathway U (2022) personality data that all students had entries for, due to it being required in the institution’s freshman ‘university success’ course entitled Introduction to Whole Person Education. The data were then de-identified before being provided to the research group for analysis.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Characteristics of the Study Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The research related to human use has been complied with all the relevant national regulations, institutional policies, and in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration, and has been approved by the authors’ institutional review board (IRB#: F2018-14).

Instruments

Spiritual intelligence Self-Report Inventory (SISRI-24)

The Spiritual Intelligence Self-Report Inventory (SISRI-24) is designed to measure a person’s level of spiritual intelligence. This questionnaire has 4 dimensions: Critical Existential Thinking, Personal Meaning Production, Transcendental Awareness, and Conscious State Expansion. The instrument has as its name suggests, 24 items which are scored using a 0-4 Likert scale, corresponding to the following: (1) not true at all with me, (2) is not true with me, (3) quite true to me, (4) very true to me, and (5) is true to me. The level of spiritual intelligence is a score with higher scores corresponding to higher levels of spiritual intelligence. Validation and reliability were carried out by King (2008) from the original item
of the 84-item questionnaire, which was reduced to 24 items of study on 305
university students consisting of 231 females and 74 males and obtained an alpha
of 0.92. As a measure of internal consistency, King reported values for Cronbach’s
alpha for the subscales of Critical Existential Thinking, Personal Meaning
Production, Transcendental Awareness, and Conscious State Expansion of 0.78,
0.78, 0.87, and 0.91, respectively (King, 2008). In this current research effort,
values for the same reliability coefficient were calculated and found to be .79, .76,
.74, and .84.

HEXACO-60

The HEXACO-60 instrument (Ashton & Lee, 2009), a shorter version of the
HEXACO Personality Inventory—Revised (Ashton & Lee, 2008), comprises 10
items that measure the six HEXACO dimensions. Each facet of each dimension is
covered by 2-3 items. The 5-point Likert scale ranges from “strongly disagree” to
“strongly agree.” The HEXACO-60 dimensions have been found to show adequate
scale reliability and validity (Ashton & Lee, 2009). Cronbach’s alpha could not be
evaluated since Pathway U reported only summary scores for each dimension.

The de-identified dataset is available from figshare under a CC0 license
(Harder et al., 2022).

Results

The first analysis to be performed was that of determining the spiritual intelligence
and personality trait levels of the participants in the study as measured by the
instruments used. Standard descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation
for spiritual intelligence and personality trait levels for all participants were
calculated and are presented below in Table 2 and Table 3, respectively. Also
presented are values for male and female participants.
In order to investigate the relationship between spiritual intelligence and personality traits, a correlation matrix was created and is presented in Table 4. Positive correlations were found between spiritual intelligence traits and the personality traits of extraversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience. Negative correlations were found between spiritual intelligence traits and the personality traits of negative emotionality and honesty-humility. Conscientiousness was positively correlated with all spiritual intelligence traits.
apart from critical existential thinking. Most of the correlations demonstrated statistical significance at the level $p < 0.05$.

**Table 4**

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations with Confidence Intervals*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Negative Emotionality</th>
<th>Extraversion</th>
<th>Agreeableness</th>
<th>Openness To Experience</th>
<th>Conscientiousness</th>
<th>Honesty-Humility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential</td>
<td>[-0.21, -0.04]</td>
<td>[-0.13, 0.13]</td>
<td>[-0.06, 0.20]</td>
<td>[0.08, 0.33]</td>
<td>[-0.20, -0.05]</td>
<td>[-0.20, -0.07]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking</td>
<td>[0.04, -0.02]</td>
<td>[0.07, 0.31]</td>
<td>[-0.02, 0.27]</td>
<td>[-0.07, 0.19]</td>
<td>[-0.14, -0.08]</td>
<td>[-0.16, -0.11]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>-0.19**</td>
<td>0.22**</td>
<td>0.27**</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.26**</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning</td>
<td>[-0.31, -0.07]</td>
<td>[0.10, 0.34]</td>
<td>[0.15, 0.38]</td>
<td>[-0.07, 0.19]</td>
<td>[0.14, 0.38]</td>
<td>[-0.16, 0.11]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendental</td>
<td>-0.14*</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
<td>0.19**</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>[-0.27, -0.02]</td>
<td>[0.10, 0.34]</td>
<td>[0.08, 0.33]</td>
<td>[0.07, 0.31]</td>
<td>[0.01, 0.26]</td>
<td>[-0.14, 0.13]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscious State</td>
<td>-0.19**</td>
<td>0.17**</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expansion</td>
<td>[-0.31, -0.07]</td>
<td>[0.04, 0.29]</td>
<td>[0.10, 0.34]</td>
<td>[-0.02, 0.23]</td>
<td>[0.05, 0.30]</td>
<td>[-0.26, 0.00]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: $M$ and $SD$ are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. Values in square brackets indicate the 95% confidence interval for each correlation. The confidence interval is a plausible range of population correlations that could have caused the sample correlation (Cumming, 2014). * indicates $p < .05$. ** indicates $p < .01$.*

The evaluation of the predictability of spiritual intelligence using personality traits was performed using multiple linear regression analysis. The results are provided in Table 5 (see p. 81). An initial regression analysis was run to evaluate predictability of the total Spiritual Intelligence score as a function of Personality Traits. The model indicated that the 12.2 percent of the total Spiritual Intelligence score can be explained by Personality Traits (adj $r$-squared = 0.122, $F = 8.266$, $p < 0.001$). Further models were generated specifying each Spiritual Intelligence trait as a dependent variable with the six personality traits acting as independent variables. A review of each model’s output was performed, and the model rerun to include only personality traits that demonstrated a statistical significance using $p < .05$ using a best subsets technique.
The model specifying critical existential thinking as the dependent variable and narrowing the independent variable to openness to experience demonstrated statistical significance (adj r-squared = 0.039, F = 10.78, p = 0.012).

This indicated that with this group of participants, openness to experience accounted for a 3.9 percent variance in critical existential thinking. Using personal meaning production as the dependent variable and using extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and honesty/humility as independent variables, the model reflected statistical significance (adj r-squared = 0.13, F = 8.809, p < .001) and that these four personality traits account for 13 percent of the variance. With transcendental awareness as the dependent variable and using extroversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience as independent variables, the model reflected statistical significance (adj r-squared = 0.094, F = 9.294, p < .001) indicating that these three personality traits accounted for 9.4 percent of the variance in this Spiritual Intelligence trait. Finally, using conscious state expansion as the dependent variable and using extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and honesty-humility as independent variables, the model reflected statistical significance (adj r-squared = 0.1169, F = 7.92, p < .001) and that these four personality traits accounted for 11.7 percent of the variance.
### Table 5

**Results of Regression Analysis Predicting Personality Traits**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual Intelligence</th>
<th>Personality traits</th>
<th>Adj. R-Squared</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total SI Score</td>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>0.1221</td>
<td>3.2721</td>
<td>3.444</td>
<td>0.000696***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>4.2112</td>
<td>2.687</td>
<td>0.007803**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Openness to Experience</td>
<td>2.3170</td>
<td>2.542</td>
<td>0.011750*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Honesty-Humility</td>
<td>-2.7725</td>
<td>-2.141</td>
<td>0.033489*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Existential Thinking</td>
<td>Openness to Experience</td>
<td>0.0393</td>
<td>1.335</td>
<td>3.283</td>
<td>0.00118**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Meaning Production</td>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.8192</td>
<td>3.113</td>
<td>0.00212**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>1.2944</td>
<td>3.066</td>
<td>0.00246**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>0.8691</td>
<td>2.833</td>
<td>0.00507**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Honesty-Humility</td>
<td>-0.7752</td>
<td>-2.12</td>
<td>0.03522*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendental Awareness</td>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>0.09429</td>
<td>0.9552</td>
<td>3.045</td>
<td>0.00259**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>1.2342</td>
<td>2.607</td>
<td>0.00971**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Openness to Experience</td>
<td>0.7757</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>0.01503*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscious State Expansion</td>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>0.1169</td>
<td>0.8196</td>
<td>2.466</td>
<td>0.014498*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>3.226</td>
<td>0.001464**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>0.9126</td>
<td>2.355</td>
<td>0.019477*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Honesty-Humility</td>
<td>-1.5692</td>
<td>-3.397</td>
<td>0.000818***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The objective of this study was to explore the relationship between spiritual intelligence and personality traits by documenting statistically significant correlations. The work of previous studies including those by Beshlideh (2011), Amrai (2011), Sood (2012), and Farsani (2013) is well-documented by Mahasneh et al. (2015) and details both positive and negative statistically significant correlations found between certain personality traits and spiritual intelligence components. The correlation matrix for this current study is presented in Table 4. There is a positive and statistically significant relationship between the spiritual intelligence components of personal meaning production, transcendental awareness and conscious state expansion with the personality traits of conscientiousness, extraversion and agreeableness. These results align closely with those found by Beshlideh (2011) and Amrai (2011). Results also showed a negative and statistically significant relationship between personal meaning production, transcendental awareness, and conscious state expansion with the personality traits of negative emotionality. Hossein et al. (2012) and Asghari et al. (2019) report similar results with a negative correlation with spiritual intelligence factors and neuroticism and positive correlations with spiritual intelligence factors and conscientiousness, extraversion and agreeableness, and both conclude that personality factors can be predictors of spiritual intelligence.

Results of this current study show critical existential thinking had positive significant correlation to openness, and no significant correlation to conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, negative emotionality, or honesty-humility. Correlation between critical existential thinking and personality traits is not as consistent among studies of undergraduate students. Beshlideh et al. (2011) and Mahasneh et al. (2015) both reported a statistically significant correlation between critical existential thinking and conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness.

The results of this current study largely confirm previous efforts to quantify the association between personality and spiritual intelligence. Intriguing new observations include that measures of personal meaning production, transcendental awareness, and conscious state expansion all appear to negatively correlate to measures of negative emotionality/neuroticism and that, maybe surprisingly, honesty-humility is a significant factor determining overall spiritual intelligence, personal meaning production, transcendental awareness, and conscious state expansion when included in multi linear regression analysis.

Widiger et al. (2009) define neuroticism as an inclination to experience negative emotional states, respond poorly to environmental stress, or undergo minor frustrations that are hopelessly overwhelming. The neuroticism personality trait can have a devastating impact on an individual’s mental, emotional, and
physical health. Although this study does not assert that the inverse relationships between neuroticism and spiritual measures are causal, it would be worth exploring these connections to develop possible new therapies. For example, our research suggests that a person suffering from anxiety might very well benefit from the practice of spiritual disciplines. Likewise, spiritual disciplines may positively contribute to other measures of personality development, such as agreeableness (the degree to which a person is pleasant and gets along with others), extraversion (the degree to which a person is truly interested in other people), and conscientiousness (the degree to which a person can plan ahead and self-motivate). The development of a person’s unique personality is represented by an extension of intended changes of organized thought and behavior patterns over time. If we take a growth-mindset view of all intelligences (Dweck, 2006) and allow for the possible intentional development of personality traits (Dweck, 2008), we move forward in the hope that individuals are capable of growth, and that a focus on spiritual development ultimately profits the whole person. This has implications for counselors facilitating the development of spiritual intelligence and personality traits to improve well-being (Muris, 2022; Wigglesworth, 2013). For example, further research needs to be done to see if it is possible to facilitate development of spiritual intelligence traits in counseling through personality changes and/or vice versa?

### Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between spiritual intelligence and personality traits and found results that largely confirm previous efforts to quantify the association between personality and spiritual intelligence, including that: there is a positive and statistically significant relationship between the spiritual intelligence components of personal meaning production, transcendental awareness and conscious state expansion with the personality traits of conscientiousness, extraversion and agreeableness; and a negative and statistically significant relationship between personal meaning production, transcendental awareness and conscious state expansion with the personality traits of negative emotionality.

New observations include that measures of personal meaning production, transcendental awareness, and conscious state expansion all appear to correlate negatively to measures of negative emotionality/neuroticism and that honesty-humility is a significant negative factor determining overall spiritual intelligence, personal meaning production, transcendental awareness, and conscious state expansion. This finding, in particular, calls for further research to explore potential implications. Much of the previous research utilized the Big-5 model, which does not include the honesty-humility trait. Current studies on the HEXACO Honesty-Humility trait suggest that the H-H factor predicts prosocial behavior (Brazil,
Characteristics such as sympathetic empathy were found to be positively associated with the HEXACO H-H trait (Brazil, 2022). Hilbig (2014) discusses the specific facets of the HEXACO H-H trait related to cooperativeness and notes that the HEX-HH tends to actively cooperate as opposed to reactively cooperate. Continued research on these fine-grained facets of the HEXACO H-H trait may assist in further dissection of the finding related to honesty-humility as a significant negative factor to determine overall spiritual intelligence and aid in understanding more fully which facets of the trait contribute to this significance.

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References


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The Ethics of Spirit-Centered Counseling

Edward E. Decker, Jr.

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
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 epistic 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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References


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
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THE SPIRIT EMPOWERING COUNSELORS TO BE CULTURALLY COMPETENT IN A RACIALLY AND ETHNICALLY CHANGING SOCIETY

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Keywords multicultural competence, multicultural counseling, race and ethnicity, counselor education, U.S. Demographics, minority populations, mental health, love commandments, professional associations, accreditation

Abstract

Significant change in the counseling field begins in counselor education programs. Concerns of biased, incompetent, and ineffective counseling services for culturally diverse clients plague the mental health profession (ACA, 2021; Sue & Sue, 2016). Rapid shifts in the racial and ethnic demographic composition of American society and the overt expression of hate and violence on the lives of People of Color place a greater demand on mental health professionals to pursue and acquire multicultural competencies (Brown, 2020; Embrick, 2015). Cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills are needed to establish meaningful therapeutic relationships, to provide effective treatment, and to effectively advocate for culturally diverse clients (CACREP, 2016; Sue & Sue, 2016). These competencies assist counselors in positively impacting client relationships, therapeutic progress, and overall well-being. Counselor education programs should be taking the lead in preparing students to effectively serve these increasingly diverse populations. Christian counselors and Christian counselor educators have an even greater responsibility in this endeavor which is fundamentally rooted and anchored in the commandments and principles of love (AACC, 2014).

Introduction

Communities throughout the nation are frequently being stunned and traumatized by witnessing the overt mistreatment of lives of men and women representing
racially diverse populations. Incidents of violence and racially charged hate crimes against People of Color continue to plague the nation (Brown, 2020; Embrick, 2015). George Floyd was publicly killed by a police officer who knelt on his neck, Ahmaud Arbery was fatally shot while on jogging through a neighborhood, Breonna Taylor was shot to death by police raiding her home, Freddie Gray sustained a severed spine leading to his death while being transported by police, and Sandra Bland was found dead hung in her jail cell three days after being arrested for a traffic stop. Recently, ten Black people were shot and killed in a grocery store and this “mass shooting was the deadliest in the United States so far this year, and one of the deadliest racist massacres in recent American history” (Fadulu, 2022, para. 7).

While Black Americans remain the most targeted group in terms of hate crimes, anti-Asian hate crimes have increased 339% in the past year (Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, 2021). More than 9,000 anti-Asian incidents have been reported since the Coronavirus pandemic began (Tang, 2021). Hate crimes against Latinos have pushed the overall number of such crimes to an 11-year high (Gamboa & Associated Press, 2020). The Federal Bureau of Investigation (2021) reported that 61.8% of victims were targeted because of the offenders’ race/ethnicity/ancestry bias.

In addition to being hate crimes, the crimes listed above are racist because they are acts of violence perpetrated against People of Color (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021; Kendi, 2019). Kendi (2019) asserts that acts of racism are born from racist ideas and policies that permit inequality and discrimination. Several definitions suggested by Kendi further define racism and racist ideas. Kendi indicates that “racism is a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequalities” (p. 17). Racist ideas are considered “any idea that suggests one racial group is inferior or superior to another racial group in any way” (p. 20). Therefore, “racism is a powerful collection of racist policies that lead to racial inequity and are substantiated by racist ideas” (p. 20), which ultimately lead to and foster acts of violence against People of Color.

Several decades of widely pronounced concerns and activism highlighting racist and discriminate clinical practices against racially diverse populations have risen to the forefront of the mental health profession (Jones & Seagull, 1977; Rosenthal & Berven, 1999; Sue, 2010; Wampold, Casas, & Atkinson, 1981). Consequently, the American Counseling Association’s (ACA, 2021) position statement on nondiscrimination urges its members to “help advocate for equity and fair treatment for all people and groups in order to end oppression and injustice affecting clients, students, families, communities, schools, workplaces, governments, and other social and institutional systems” (para. 3). Therefore, ethical standards of professional behavior and educational guidelines have been developed stipulating that counselor educators are required to train students to counsel through the lenses of multiculturalism (ACA, 2014; CACREP, 2016).
Educators also have an ethical responsibility to demonstrate and model multicultural competencies in order to prepare students to effectively respond to these widespread concerns (ACA, 2014; Sue, 2010; Sue & Sue, 2016). However, what has been repeatedly demonstrated is that many counselor educators were not sufficiently trained themselves in multicultural counseling (Carter, 2001; Hill, 2003; Sue, 2010; Wallace, 2000).

The need for cultural sensitivity and training in multicultural counseling is even more critical for Christian counselors who are called upon to go into every person’s world taking God’s healing power (AACC, 2014). This endeavor ultimately represents an explicit demonstration of one’s Christian character, values, and genuine care for others as an imperative and intentional response of love. Christian counselors have been given this loving capacity as “God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us” (New International Version, 1973/2011, Romans 5:5). The Spirit also empowers us to witness and demonstrate love to people of all races and nationalities (Acts 1:8).

**Rapid Diversification and Demographic Shifts**

Training and education in multicultural counseling begins with an understanding of race and ethnicity in the United States as well as the demographic shifts that have occurred. Becoming aware of and sensitive to the impact of these changes can help prepare and equip students to effectively work with culturally diverse clients (Meyers, 2017; Sue & Sue 2016).

**Race and Ethnicity in the United States**

“Every U.S. census since the first one in 1790 has included questions about racial identity, reflecting the central role of race in American history from the era of slavery to current headlines about racial profiling and inequality” (Parker et al., 2020, para. 1). Race is usually associated with biology and linked with physical characteristics, covering a relatively narrow range of options. Ethnicity is a broader term than race. The term is used to categorize groups of people according to their cultural expression and identification. Commonalities such as racial, national, tribal, religious, linguistic, or cultural origin may be used to describe someone’s ethnicity (Morin, 2021).

From 1790 to 1850, U.S. census takers chose from only three racial categories: “free Whites”, “all other free persons”, and “slaves”. “Free colored persons” was added in 1820 and in efforts to count the multiracial population, “Mulatto” was added in 1850 (Parker et al., 2020). Most notably, census takers
determined the race of Americans up until 1960. They were instructed to determine race by how individuals were perceived in their community or by their share of “Black blood” (Parker et al., 2020.) Using the “one drop rule,” by deliberate design, anyone with even one Black ancestor was counted toward the “Negro” race. This categorization scheme had several economic and political benefits for “Whites” and significantly restricted the rights and boundaries for People of Color (Hickman, 1997).

Beginning in the year 2000 when the categories listed under “race” expanded while others were removed, Americans finally had the option to identify with more than one race. In the most recent census of 2020, respondents had the option for the first time to enter detailed origins in the write-in fields (Parker et al., 2020). Today, the U.S. Census Bureau collects race data for a minimum of five racial groups: White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and a sixth category—Some Other Race. Noticeably missing from the list of racial groups listed on the 2020 census is the largest minority population in the United States, Hispanics. Federal policy does not define “Hispanic” as a specific race but two-thirds of Hispanic adults say being Hispanic is part of their racial background and when given the option they identify as “other race” and write-in “Latin American, Hispanic, or Mexican” (Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2020, para. 1).

Demographic Shifts in the United States

With shifts in American demographics, society, and culture, the categorization and identification of race in the United States has changed over time. The U.S. population continues to become racially diverse and all of the nation’s population increase since 2010 is the result of minority population gains (Frey, 2021). According to a Pew Research Center analysis of the 2020 U.S. Census Bureau population estimates, the fastest-growing racial or ethnic group in the U.S. from 2000-2019 is Asian American which grew by 81% (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021). The 2020 census bureau estimates that White people are still the majority race, representing 60.1% of the U.S. population. Although, for the first time in decades, the White population diminished in growth in 2019 (Johnson, 2020). Demographic growth among other racial groups were 18.5% Hispanic, 12.5% Black, 5.8 % Asian, and 2.2% of two or more races, and .9% native peoples (Johnson, 2020; Krogstad, 2020). By 2045, it is estimated that these racial and ethnic minority populations will outpace the White population and there will no longer be a single majority racial group (Poston, 2020).
Sue (2008) responded to these demographic shifts predicting that:

Overt expressions of racism and hate crimes may be increasing as the demographics of the United States changes toward a majority of Persons of Color. Many Whites are beginning to realize that in several short decades, they will become a ‘numerical’ minority and that demands for change in our economic, political, social and educational systems may result in a revamped society that alters the power structures of this nation. (p. VI)

More recently, Courtland Lee, a previous ACA president, declared that there has been “a culmination of White reaction to the changing demographics in this country” as the U.S. continues to become more diverse (Meyers, 2017, para. 5). He notes that “racist viewpoints have become more publicly prevalent and acceptable” with increased reports of intimidation and harassment as part of what is termed a “national outbreak of hate” (para. 6).

**Counselor Education Training Programs–The Call to Lead**

As cries of racial bias and social injustice against People of Color are heard throughout traumatized communities and the mental health profession, they are also being echoed in the classrooms of higher education training programs. Ciercie West-Olatunji, former ACA president asserts that “Bias in the counseling field begins in counselor education programs” (Meyers, 2017, para. 18). If emotional awakenings of one’s knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors related to race, culture, and ethnicity come only after repeatedly witnessing painful incidents of racial violence, injustice, and discrimination, then institutions of higher education have waited much too long to act in preparing students to effectively treat and advocate for culturally diverse clients (Sue & Sue, 2016). Researchers contend that colleges and universities should take the lead in educating and training students in acquiring knowledge, awareness, and skills necessary to effectively address numerous difficult racial and social challenges facing people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (Meyers, 2017; Ponterrato et al., 2001; Richardson, 2008; Wallace, 2000).

**The Early Call for Multicultural Counseling Competence**

As far back as the 1960s there have been concerns about the need for providing effective culturally sensitive treatment in the mental health profession. Numerous findings during the 1960s documented traditional counseling practices from the
dominant culture as being irrelevant, demanding, and oppressive toward those who were culturally different (Lee, 1991; Sue, 1982; Sue et al., 1982). The 1980s witnessed unprecedented growth in the attention devoted to multicultural (cross-cultural) issues in education training programs, and in the counseling literature (Ponterotto & Casas, 1991). Sue (1982) developed a tripartite model of multicultural competence that has served as the dominant framework for how mental health professionals can provide effective counseling services to individuals from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. In the early 1990s, Sue et al. (1992) called attention to the diversification of America, as evidenced by a growing multiracial, multicultural, and multilingual U.S. society. However, the disparities in service delivery had not changed. Sue’s tripartite model was transformed in 1992 into a set of competency guidelines called the Multicultural Counseling Competencies (MCC) (Sue et al., 1992). “The MCC operationalized multicultural counseling as a multidimensional construct with 31 original competencies undergirding the awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary for therapists to be able to provide culturally competent services” (Shin et al., 2016, p. 1189). The MCC competencies were adopted by the ACA and were later revised to incorporate a connection between multicultural and social justice competencies (ACA, 1995, 2015). They have continued to provide guidelines for multicultural counselor training as well as the criteria by which multicultural training outcomes are assessed (Tomlinson-Clarke, 2013).

**Professional Counseling Associations**

Professional counseling associations are independent associations that set standards of professional conduct for practicing counselors (Sangganjanavanich & Reynolds, 2015). Over the last 30 years, the ACA has progressively responded to the call and need for culturally sensitive practice as evidenced in the various revisions of its ethics codes. The 1995 ACA ethical codes suggested counselors respect cultural differences, and the 2005 edition expanded the guidelines of multiculturalism (ACA, 1995, 2005). The current 2014 codes further promote “honoring diversity and embracing a multicultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts” (ACA, 2014, p. 3). The Association of Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC), a division of ACA, shares and promotes these same ethical values (ACA, 2014).

**Christian Professional Association Standards and Principles**

Christian mental health associations have also gradually acknowledged the disparities in mental health treatment of culturally diverse groups and the need to address racial and ethnic cultural issues and shifts in the United States. The Christian Association for Psychological Studies (CAPS, 2005) ethical principle 4.2 states that “members do not condone or engage” in any form of discrimination.
The National Association of Christian Counselors (2008) and the American Association of Christian Counselor (AACC, 2014) ethical standards highlight the importance of counselors being culturally competent and valuing the dignity and worth of clients as being created in the image of God acknowledging culture, racial, and ethnic diversity as factors to be considered in delivering counseling services.

**Counselor Education Accreditation Standards**

Counseling accreditation agencies set minimal educational standards which counseling training programs must meet in order to receive accreditation for university degree programs (Sangkanjanavanich & Reynolds, 2015). The Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) (2016) has recognized the need for culturally sensitive practice and requires counselor education training programs seeking accreditation to integrate multiculturalism and diversity content into their curriculum including teaching “strategies for identifying and eliminating barriers, prejudices, and processes of intentional and unintentional oppression and discrimination” (p. 9).

Even with this increased emphasis on cultural diversity training by CACREP, in a recent study of 500 ACA practicing counselors, Barden, Sherrell, and Matthews (2017) indicated “that there were no differences between the self-perceived multicultural competence of counselors who graduated from CACREP accredited programs and those who did not” (p. 209). Students from CACREP accredited schools are expected to receive ongoing exposure and training in multiculturalism, therefore it was unclear how the educational programs of the participants actually approached this training and preparation.

**Developing Multicultural Competence: Awareness, Knowledge, Skills**

Many of the racial and ethnic concerns pertaining to multicultural competencies emphasize the importance of properly training the dominate culture because of the disproportionately large number of White practitioners in the mental health field compared to other racial minority groups who are working with diverse clients. However, the journey of becoming culturally competent is a lifelong process that exists on a continuum of learning, growing, and self-reflection for all helping professionals regardless of race and ethnicity (Sue & Sue, 2016). For many counselors, this uncharted territory can be filled with obstacles of apprehension, defensiveness, and fear.

Culture consists of patterns of human behaviors, attitudes, customs, thoughts, languages, values, and beliefs that bind a racial, ethnic, social, or religious group within a society and is communicated from one generation to another (Jones, 2004; Matsumoto, 2000; Sue & Sue, 2016). Multicultural/Diversity Competence is a “counselor’s cultural and diversity awareness and knowledge
about self and others, and how this awareness and knowledge is applied effectively in practice with clients and client groups” in order to promote their physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing (ACA, 2014, p. 20).

Sue and Sue (2016) suggest that learning to effectively counsel diverse populations requires intentional self-reflection, a broadening of perspectives, as well as changes in behavior. This ongoing developmental process whereby no one actually “arrives” consists of acquiring multicultural awareness, knowledge and skills. Multicultural awareness necessitates becoming aware of one’s own biases, prejudices, assumptions, and values related to racial and ethnic minorities and other diverse groups (ACA, 2014; Sue & Sue, 2016). This task often evokes defensiveness and resistance within individuals who, though are well-intended, have not understood how their differences and views can and will affect the manner in which they serve culturally diverse clients. When counselors are not aware of their own prejudices, stereotyping, discriminate worldviews, or bigotry, counseling may serve as an instrument of cultural oppression rather than liberation (Arredondo et al., 1996; Sue & Sue, 2016).

“Multicultural knowledge refers to a counselor’s knowledge about various cultural norms and values that affect the counseling process. Counselors demonstrating cultural knowledge understand how cultural norms influence personality and manifestations of psychological symptomatology” (Barden et al., 2017, p. 203). This also means striving to understand the worldview of each client without making negative judgments about individuals and counselors acknowledging how their own worldview is helping or hurting clients (Arredondo et al., 1996; Sue & Sue, 2016).

Counselors can then work to develop skills and implement culturally sensitive interventions that aid in the client’s well-being within his or her context (Sue et al., 1992). These multicultural skills are demonstrated behaviorally, such as when counselors actively seek out culturally sensitive educational workshops to enhance their training and proficiency, or when counselors practice culturally sensitive counseling strategies and develop goals consistent with the life experiences of clients (Barden et al., 2017).

**Cultural Diversity Courses: Challenges and Attitudes**

Although the development of multicultural competence among many counselors has been insufficient, some dimensions have changed. Barden et al. (2017) replicated a study by Holcomb-McCoy and Myers (1999) which assessed the multicultural competence of professional counselors. The results of their national study 20 years later had similar results when surveying 500 ACA members. Their findings indicated that professional counselors appeared to be competent in awareness of their own cultures and of their own cultural biases, although counselors were still limited in their knowledge related to specific cultures (of
others). Therefore, effective training and development are still needed in the areas of multicultural knowledge and multicultural skills. The researchers noted that this discrepancy may indicate that counselor training programs continue to be focused on “increasing counselors’ awareness of their cultural background and personal biases, but are deficient in training counselors to be cognizant of their clients’ worldview” (Barden et al., 2017, p. 208).

**Undertrained Faculty**

For several decades, most higher education training programs were initially slow to respond to the call for multicultural training and failed to effectively integrate such competency training into their curriculum (Carter, 2001; Carter, 2003; Hill, 2003; Hobson & Kanitz, 1996; Ponterrato et al., 2001; Sue et al., 1992; Wallace, 2000; Whitfield, 1994). Therefore, many professional counselors and counselor educators who were trained during the 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s and early 2000s were not beneficiaries of the current professional standards and mandates for competency training in multiculturalism. Unfortunately, some faculty who are currently assigned to teach cultural diversity courses are actually incompetent themselves and lack self-awareness, sensitivity, knowledge, skills and cultural humility (Barden et al., 2017). They struggle with knowing how to teach, support, and interact meaningfully with a culturally diverse student body dealing with serious personal and systemic concerns (Meyer, 2017; Sue, 2010). Consequently, serious concerns still exist that counselor educators may not fully understand the devastating repercussions of implicit bias, racism, oppression, and prejudice that plague society, clients, and the mental health field (Brown, 2004; Sue, 2010; Sue & Sue, 2016).

**Cultural Diversity Courses**

Most higher education counselor training programs currently offer one or two cultural diversity courses (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005; Vazquez & Garcia-Vazquez, 2003). Even though these cultural diversity courses offerings are beneficial for students, they are not sufficient to gain the level of cultural sensitivity and competencies necessary for developing a broad conceptual framework for viewing diversity and multiculturalism (Barden et al., 2017). When investigating the multicultural competence of practicing professional counselors, Holcomb-McCoy and Myers (1999) found that even though the participants viewed having a multicultural course as helpful, they generally perceived their multicultural competence training to be less than adequate. Given that participants perceived themselves to be culturally competent, the results of the study indicated inconsistencies and highlighted gaps in understanding of how professional counselors actually acquire cultural competence. The researchers found that
“professional counselors’ counselor preparation programs did not adequately prepare them to work in diverse settings” (Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999; Barden et al., 2017, p. 205). Therefore, many practicing counselors continue to struggle with resistance, defensiveness, self-exploration and understanding themselves and others as racial/cultural beings and are threatened by conversations, worldviews, and life experiences of culturally diverse clients (Sue & Sue, 2016).

In a study evaluating the self-perceived cultural competency of practicing helping professionals and their cultural competency training, Richardson (2008) noted some participants expressed disapproval about the controversy sparked by the tone and language used in the multicultural competency survey itself including specific terms such as “race”, “discrimination”, “cultural deficiency”, and “prejudice” (Richardson, 2008). Some participants complained that actually asking the questions themselves perpetuates the racial and cultural problems we are currently experiencing. Resistance and reflective discomfort such as these depict attitudes and beliefs that can perpetuate additional barriers to effective teaching and learning (Sue & Sue, 2016).

**The Holy Spirit’s Role in Multiculturalism**

The resistance and reflective discomfort described above is nothing new. Scripture reveals challenging attitudes, resistance to change, and the lack of acceptance of culturally diverse people were also prevalent in the early days of the church. As God began to establish and expand the church, the Holy Spirit took the leading role in reaching people of all backgrounds to create a multiracial, multiethnic church called the body of Christ (Acts 2). The Spirit was actively involved in bridging the distinct racial and ethnic gaps which separated people from each other and from God. As the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit was being manifested and on full public display on the day of Pentecost, Jews and converts to Judaism were present in Jerusalem from every nation. They heard these newly Spirit-filled believers from Galilee speaking about the wonderful works of God in their own diverse native languages. As with many people today, when unexpected (perhaps unwanted) and sudden change occurs, they too were amazed, perplexed and wondered, “What can this mean?” It was very obvious that these racial, cultural, and spiritual shiftings were uncommon and disturbing to them. As the Apostle Peter boldly spoke up to this multicultural, multiracial audience, he interpreted what the visitors were hearing by telling them what had been prophesied by Joel centuries ago concerning God’s inclusive plan of salvation and outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Joel 2:28-32). Peter declared “In the last days, God says, ‘I will pour out my Spirit upon all people’”… and “everyone [emphasis added] who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (*New International Version*, 1973/2011, Acts 2:1-17). No longer would the previous demarcation lines of racial, ethnic and cultural separation of their day be acceptable.
As the outpouring of the Holy Spirit continued throughout the book of Acts, the heavenly mandate of racial and cultural acceptance did not go without resistance. For example, it took the transforming power of the Holy Spirit to help Peter overcome his own reluctant attitude and cultural bias towards Gentiles as he wrestled with these changes. However, he eventually declared “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right” (*New International Version*, 1973/2011, Acts 10:34-35). Furthermore, the traditional laws and customs of the Jewish religious society were challenged from within, as vehement disagreements and contention arose between the apostles and religious leaders because God had now opened the way of salvation and grace to the Gentiles (Acts 15:1-2). It seems as if these religious leaders wanted everyone to be like them and act like them in order to be fully accepted in the church and to be considered righteous (by their standards). Further evidence of the difficulty of the early church managing cultural differences can be found through the remainder of the New Testament.

As the Holy Spirit was instrumental in initiating the removal of discriminating racial and religious cultural barriers in the early church, the Spirit continues to be actively involved in God’s plan for accepting, loving, helping, healing, and saving people of every race, ethnicity, and nationality (John 3:16).

**The Commandments to Love: A Greater Mandate**

Christian counselors are professionally trained and governed by secular requirements, principles, and standards of the mental health profession. Many of these secular codes are fundamentally consistent with biblical standards of Christian professional associations and are rooted in Judeo-Christian principles (Sanders, 2013). However, the highest standard and mandate for the Christian counselor to aspire to in multiculturalism is rooted in the commandment of love. Love and compassion are (or should be) the intrinsic motivators for accepting, interacting with, and providing treatment to others, including those who are racially and ethnically diverse (AACC, 2014). As Christian counselors, obeying the commandments to love is a Christian mandate and personal responsibility.

When Jesus was asked to answer what he considered to be the greatest commandment, He identified not one, but two: Love of God and Love of neighbor (Matthew 22:35-40, 46; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28, 40). Jesus was not the first or only teacher to highlight love in Scripture (Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Leviticus 19:18); other Jewish near-contemporaries coincided with the idea (Dunn, 2011). However, for Jesus, love seems to have functioned as a type of ‘lens’ or ‘worldview’ through which he not only read and interpreted scripture—a hermeneutic of sorts—but also for how he used this perspective to relate and interact with others.
In fact, Jesus elevated love to be the standard by which Scripture interpretations were upheld or suspended (Dunn, 1990).

**The Lens of Love**

Love can be defined as the lens through which we see all humans as worthy of respect, dignity, and wholeness (Calhoun, 2018). Love is self-giving and is the personal disposition for the good of others. Turning love into concrete actions towards our neighbor is what seems difficult. C. W. Vanderbergh’s pithy poem is quite telling:

To love the whole world

For me is no chore;

My only real problem’s

My neighbor next door (Sweeting, 1995).

**So, Who Then is My Neighbor?**

Most people find it quite difficult to love their neighbor and “others” as Jesus did. Even among Christians, this unselfish requirement can be very selective and challenging especially when one is socially conditioned to think that one’s neighbor is racially and culturally inferior and insignificant (Zou & Cheryan, 2017). A lawyer asked Jesus how he might inherit eternal life. After Jesus asked him to reflect on scripture, the lawyer proceeded to recite the dual love commands—love of God and neighbor—so Jesus replied: “Do this and you will live.” The man then famously answered, “And who is my neighbor?” (which may reveal his reluctance and defensiveness towards the acceptance of “others”) (New International Version, 1973/2011, Luke 10:25-29). The lawyer wanted to know the profile of his neighbor, perhaps as a simple follow up to his original question, but Blight (2008) notes that various commentators suspect he wanted to justify his lack of love for others. Instead of describing the “generic profile” of a neighbor, Jesus answered his question by sharing a parable that depicts the profile of true love among brothers—a love that crosses the boundaries of heritage or race. In some contexts, the lawyer’s question may have been shrewd, but from the vantage point of love, it was misguided and irrelevant. The parable depicts a Jewish man who was attacked, stripped, beaten and abandoned to die, but is unselfishly rescued by a Samaritan. The origin of the Samaritan people is disputed, but their heritage and culture were without doubt despised by Jews of the first century (Anderson, 1992). The wounded man was ignored by neighbors that not only shared his cultural heritage, but being priests and Levites, they were perhaps more morally liable to help than others. In this parable, the Samaritan who was hated and marginalized is the one
who actually displayed love for his neighbor. The one who was not considered a brother, indeed ‘stuck closer than a brother’ (Proverbs 18:24).

**The Competency of Love**

The capacity, ability, skill, or ‘competency’ of love for Christian counselors should be the core moral and spiritual principle that is foundational for all cross-cultural counseling relationships (AACC, 2014). In fact, the original call to love others as oneself was embedded in the commands to look after the rights of the alien, the poor and marginalized, and those in need (Leviticus 19:33-34, 25:35-36). For if you only love those who love you, what reward will we get? And if you only greet (serve) your own people, what are you doing more than others? (Matthew 5:46-47). No matter how “other” or diverse our neighbor may be, from the vantage point of love, they are still a dignity-deserving neighbor.

Jesus did not regard the differences of people as a barrier for connection, but rather as the very thing that qualified them for relationship with him. To that end, Jesus did not conform to the social or religious institutional standards of his day. He went around doing good and healing all people who were oppressed (Acts 10:38). Perhaps as Christian counselors, we too can act with beneficence as Jesus did, and challenge the attitudes and institutions that would demarcate people, keeping them marginalized, victimized, and oppressed (AACC, 2014; Sanders, 2013). Perhaps we too, like Jesus, can reach out to connect and serve those who are suffering—regardless of our racial and ethnic differences—and further demonstrate the full competency of our love. Perhaps that is the mandate after all.

**The Spirit of Love**

Love is not reserved for Jesus alone. It becomes the *sine qua non* (indispensable, without which nothing can be done) among his disciples —especially in light of Jesus’ own example (Bretzke, 1998; John 13:34; 1 John 4:7-11). Jesus had indicated how much God loved the world (John 3:16), how much he loved his sheep (John 10, 17), and the radical extent and outworking of that love—to lay down one’s life (John 15:13). The disciples further witnessed the humility embedded within Jesus when he washed their feet (John 13:12-17) and provided an example of how they should love and serve each other (John 13:34-35). The ultimate expression of His love was later demonstrated when He died on the cross for everyone (John 19-21).

This love, the type that compelled Jesus to surrender his life is not exactly “human love”—but Godly love. Godly love is a longing of the human heart (Christian, 2007, p. 171; Lee & Poloma, 2009; Lee et al., 2013). Of course, human love is better than no love at all; but Godly love is ultimately grounded in who God *is*. Christianity asserts that the “center and sustainer of all reality is a
thoroughly loving God. God is love.” Indeed, God’s love is unconditional and “showers… [on] his children beyond measure” (Christian, 2007, p. 171).

Jesus makes provision for the disciples to follow his example of love by giving them the Holy Spirit’s empowering presence. Godly love is impossible for disciples to practice without the sending or receiving of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is Love. In describing the essence of the Spirit, Jürgen Moltmann (2001) writes, the “Holy Spirit is the loving, self-communicating, out-fanning and out-pouring presence of the eternal divine life of the triune God” (p. 289). Therefore, Godly love is not the acceptance of others by an exertion of the will, but a consequence of the Spirit’s present nature. It was through the empowerment of the Spirit that Jesus surrendered his own life (Ellingworth, 1993; Hebrews 9:14), and it is with the Spirit’s help that we too must surrender ours. Even in personal relationships, choosing to love is a radical surrender of the selfish self-preserving barriers that Moltmann (2001) calls, “self-sufficiency” (p. 287). Without these segregating barriers between human relationships, the Spirit can move freely through us as a wellspring of life towards others.

The presence of the Spirit is not only to the advantage of all disciples in general (John 16:7), but of the individual counselor in particular, since it is the Spirit that can lead to all truth (John 16:13). It is the Spirit who convicts persons, structures, institutions and anything in the “world” of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:8); and it is the Spirit’s presence that ultimately brings freedom to the blind and the bound (2 Corinthians 3:17; Dunn, 1970). It is the Spirit that brings to the counselor the capacity to love. As people are hurting due to racial hatred, violence, and social injustices, it is the healing power of Godly love, the delivering power of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit-empowered loving presence of the Christian counselor that brings comfort and relief.

The radical nature of this love in Jesus’ praxis and ministry is what we believe should be the foundation, core motivation, and empowering dynamic for all Christian counselors and counselor educators in their pursuit of multicultural competencies and professional relationships. Godly love is the Christian counselor’s mandate. Inasmuch as the Holy Spirit materializes Godly love, it is the Spirit’s presence that equips and empowers the Christian counselor today.

Accomplishing the Mandate to Love

It is our responsibility as Christians in the counseling profession to earnestly reflect upon what we already know, may already be doing, or need to do to contribute to the mental health field as Jesus radically changed the world by fully demonstrating God’s love (John 3:16). We have been gifted with the Holy Spirit’s presence who equips us to follow Jesus’ example by enabling us to accomplish the mandate to love in our own clinical practice and beyond (John 14:26).
As we know, professional counselors are capable of complying behaviorally with many of the professional codes and standards without having a genuine conviction, conversion, or loving persuasion of the heart. However, the Christian counselor’s actions towards others should be intrinsically motivated by God’s higher standards of love and compassion. “A spirit-empowered disciple selflessly demonstrates the love of Jesus with those in need of hope and justice—sharing God’s compassion…” (Snead, 2019, p. 23). Therefore, we recommend various ways Christians can demonstrate the mandate to love in their own counseling practice, especially when working with racially diverse clients.

Initially, this process should begin with viewing all clients through the lens of God’s love by acknowledging the inherent value and worth of all people and their need to be treated with dignity as God’s creation because He made everyone in His own image and likeness regardless of race and ethnicity (AACC, 2014; Genesis, 1:27; Sanders, 2013). Therefore, counselors need to realize that “multiracial and multiethnic individuals and families illustrate the cultural richness of our diverse nation” (Waters & Asbill, 2013, para. 6), and they will likewise be represented as worshipers in heaven around the throne of God (Revelation 7:9-10).

Christian counselors need to acquire and maintain a posture of cultural humility in response to the mandate to love. Cultural humility consists of a dynamic and lifelong process of focusing on self-reflection and personal critique, acknowledging one’s own biases about culturally diverse people, which is an act of true love for the sake of others (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). It can be difficult to evaluate one’s own heart and motives (Collins, 1980), but for Christians, this requires inviting the Holy Spirit to help us engage in an honest self-appraisal and evaluation of the deeply held assumptions, personal views, biases, and prejudices we may possess about racially diverse people (Romans 8:26). This degree of self-exploration can be an intimidating process; however, it would provide an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to search the heart, reveal and remove the hidden fears, apprehensions, and the reluctances that prevent us from truly loving, valuing, and accepting people who need and are deserving of our professional services (Romans 8:27). Christian counselors who are willing to embark upon this kind of sobering self-appraisal should do so in the context of a “discerning and wise accountability group that includes consultation and supervision” necessitating a willingness to be open and receptive to feedback (Sanders, 2013, p. 64).

Additionally, accomplishing the mandate to love consists of pursuing specific multicultural training and education with a genuine interest to learn about the unique differences of racially diverse people. This training should include learning ways of adjusting traditional counseling approaches and techniques to provide more culturally sensitive and appropriate interventions (Barden et al., 2017).
Making a conscious decision and effort to expand our awareness, knowledge, and skills conveys a sincere interest and concern for the well-being of clients within their own cultural context to effectively care for their specific treatment needs (Sanders, 2013; see also CAPS, 2005).

Christian counselors can further demonstrate the mandate to love by pursuing opportunities to serve clients who they may not typically accept or otherwise counsel due to racial and ethnic differences, following Jesus’ example of stepping out beyond the cultural norms of his day such as when he went to minister to the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). Reaching out and going beyond the narrow confines of one’s own racially segregated social environment and clinical practice parameters to embrace diverse clients helps counselors resist the conveniences of catering to the partiality and favoritism that has historically plagued the mental health field (Acts 10:34). Therefore, Christian counselors must pursue meaningful relationships (inside and outside of their professional settings) with racially diverse individuals and groups, make partnerships with Communities of Color and connect with their community leaders in order to more effectively serve them (Terwalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). This relationship building display of Godly love represents one’s heartfelt effort to build bridges, close cultural and racial gaps, and begin demolishing the current barriers that prevent potential clients from receiving the help they need (Sue & Sue, 2016).

The love mandate can also be exhibited by carving out a viable financial path for clients to receive counseling services. Understanding and being sensitive to the restraints that financial discrepancies and disparities cause for many culturally diverse clients is imperative. Jesus found ways to provide and meet the needs of the poor, those who were marginalized and less fortunate, and he also instructed his disciples to do likewise (John 6:1-14; Mark 6:32-44). Similarly, finding ways of making counseling services affordable by providing payment options such as a sliding scale and/or pro bono services displays the sensitive and sacrificial efforts of the Christian counselor (Sanders, 2013).

Finally, as both Jesus and the Holy Spirit serve to advocate for humanity and Christians today (1 John 2:1; 1 Timothy 2:5; John 14:16), the Christian counselor can help bear the burden of clients who may feel helpless in overcoming obstacles on their own. Becoming advocates and intervening to help clients navigate and overcome the complexities and limitations of oppressive systems includes using one’s voice, positions of power and influence, and resources to help eliminate the racial and systemic barriers they are facing (Sue & Sue, 2016).

Embarking upon these recommended actions with a heart that is motivated and inspired by Godly love serves as our Christian witness and exhibits evidence that we are truly functioning as disciples of Christ in clinical practice (John 13:35). “For if we don’t love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see?” (New International Version, 1973/2011, 1 John 4:20b). Therefore, we aim to
view, love, and serve others as we ourselves want to be treated, thereby fulfilling the great mandate to love (Mark 12:31).

**Conclusion**

Shifting racial and ethnic demographics continue to broaden in the United States, and the need for culturally competent counselors has become even greater. Counselor education programs must be at the forefront of preparing students to become multiculturally competent in order to effectively address the trauma, conflicts, and struggles that are ailing racially and ethnically diverse clients. Effectively training students to be culturally competent will serve as a significant step toward bridging the existing gaps and discrepancies in the mental health profession. Counselor educators can become more effective in teaching students by actively pursuing additional multicultural competency training for themselves. Christian counselors have the highest calling and mandate to love God and to love their neighbor. They also have the unique opportunity to be first responders in serving and advocating for culturally diverse clients by intentionally demonstrating a competency of love that is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

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STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN COUNSELING EDUCATION

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Abstract

This article examines the unique position in which emerging counselors find themselves, as they seek to enter the professional field amidst a worldwide pandemic and numerous other national and global hardships. From a student perspective, the authors survey the distinctive traits of Christian counseling education, Christian counseling, generally speaking, and the importance of theological and spiritual formation for the emerging counselor. More specifically, the authors discuss three theological concepts that have been identified as critical in the development of their Christian counselor identity, foundation, and future practice. The first theological consideration is the essential role and ministry of the Holy Spirit who provides supernatural peace, joy, and comfort, aiding emerging counselors in their ability to be competent therapists in tenuous times; bridging the gap from education to practical application. The second concept considered is the imago Dei, as the hermeneutical lens by which the Christian counselor affirms the worth of all human beings created in the image of God, enabling the counselor to provide empathy and unconditional positive regard for all clients. The third consideration is the missio Dei, or mission of God, as a core conceptual belief by which to understand the role of the Christian counselor, and counseling profession, as a redemptive participation in and with the Spirit of God.
Introduction

It has been said that the pandemic will be over when we no longer use the word “Covid” in our everyday conversations. However, one can assume that the word “Covid” will be the topic of conversation long after the public health crisis is officially over. The initial COVID-19 outbreak of 2020 resulted in devastating losses that have manifested in a myriad of forms. To this point, Moreno and colleagues (2020) highlight that COVID-19 has resulted in an increase in known risk factors for mental health problems. Together with unpredictability and uncertainty, lockdown and physical distancing have led to social isolation, loss of income, loneliness, inactivity, limited access to essential services, increased access to food, alcohol, and online gambling, and decreased family and social support. These conditions have also been shown to induce mental health problems in previously healthy people and negatively affect those with pre-existing mental health disorders. The demand for mental health services significantly increased during the pandemic, as demonstrated by a 90% increase in calls to a national mental health service between September 2019 and April 2020 (Titov et al., 2020). Although advancements in accessibility to mental health treatment have been made through services like telehealth, the profession has had difficulty keeping up with the demand for counseling professionals, which is even higher than in pre-pandemic times (Rogers & Spring, 2021).

The current pandemic has also fueled increasing tensions between groups and individuals of different thoughts and experiences (e.g., Dimock & Wike, 2020; Gersma, 2021; Heltzel & Laurin, 2020). Every issue seems to have the potential to become a ‘hero’ versus ‘villain’ dichotomy, further dividing a world already in chaos (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019). From issues around health, science, and prevention, to matters of race, gender, and sexuality, the potential for division is great, thus negatively impacting persons’ ability to pursue common ground (e.g., Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Chua, 2018; Craig et al., 2020; Richeson, 2018). Such contention has also profoundly impacted Christians in the church, leading to ecclesial rifts (e.g., Baucham, 2021; Chan, 2021; McFarlan, 2020). No professional counselor was prepared for these radical challenges. The long-term impact and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and other recent sociopolitical and cultural issues are yet to be determined, particularly as they relate to mental health. However, it could be suggested that emerging counselors who are entering the field now are uniquely positioned to navigate and help address the aftereffects of a global pandemic.

To this end, we (the authors) wish to speak about the importance of receiving Christian, faith-based counselor education and training at this crucial point in history. Having entered our graduate studies at the height of the pandemic, we recognize the importance of professional training that not only equips us
therapeutically, but also emphasizes the role and ministry of the Holy Spirit, the *imago Dei* and our identity in Christ, and our biblical mission as understood through the *missio Dei*. These three elements have grounded us in our pursuit of becoming professional counselors and assist us in navigating the profoundly tenuous times in which we live. We likewise foresee these elements as being foundational to our future work as counselors. This article will explore these three areas, preceded first by a brief consideration of the distinctiveness of Christian counseling education and Christian counseling, generally, that explicitly values biblical and theological integration.

**Distinctiveness of a Christian Counseling Program**

According to Carter (1999), as the new millennium came in, Christian counseling was a growing entity that responded to people seeking guidance for religious-based issues. Christian counseling has grown and become more representative and inclusive to individuals inside and outside the church (Bondi, 2013). A lot has changed since 1999, and the counseling profession, overall, has continued to evolve; a profession that is projected to grow by 11% between 2020 and 2030 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). For counselors to be effective, there must be a solid educational foundation. For Christians entering the counseling profession, in particular, counseling education that values the integration of a biblical worldview and theological emphasis is of high importance, in addition to satisfying the mandated counseling coursework directed by state licensing boards (Alleman, 2015).

Additionally, some Christian counseling programs may have their own distinctive emphasis. As an example, the Master of Arts in Professional Counseling (MAPC) program at Oral Roberts University (ORU), in which the three authors of this article are students, explicitly emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit in forming personal and professional identities. The program’s mission statement is as follows:

The Master of Arts in Professional Counseling program (MAPC) is designed to prepare students for professional licensure and qualify them for the specialized ministry of counseling in the contexts of clinical settings, the local church, and community or faith-based agencies. The program enables students to thoughtfully integrate and ethically implement the most effective models and theories of counseling with a coherent Biblical/theological perspective and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit’s activity. Since helping hurting people is an essential element of the gospel, this program equips students to
therapeutically respond to the opportunities of global diversity in facilitating healing and wholeness in all areas of life. (Oral Roberts University, n.d., p. 6)

Within the available degree tracks (e.g., LPC, LMFT, LADC), there are additional courses intended to help students establish a deeper understanding of the Holy Spirit, knowledge of Scripture, and training in how to engage with counseling literature and clinical practice from a Christian worldview. Students that obtain a master’s in professional counseling from ORU will take the required classes for licensure, such as Counseling Methods and Professional Ethics, coupled with courses like Theology of Counseling and Christian Approaches to Counseling that prioritize integration and do not demand the bifurcation of one’s identity between being a Christian and a counselor. All the while, the program does not sacrifice the fundamentals required for state licensure; striving to provide a well-balanced set of courses designed to prepare emerging counselors well for the national examination process and professional licensure.

In the end, Alleman (2015) notes that the fundamental purpose of Christian education programs is to prepare students to engage the world from a Christian-centered perspective. Christian counseling programs, in particular, focus on building up the spiritual person as well as the counselor (Alleman, 2015). Christian counseling programs also affect how counselors practice and integrate Christian and professional ethics (Sanders, 2013). While there are growing efforts to develop, in all counselors, the competencies needed to effectively and ethically counsel peoples from various spiritual and religious backgrounds (see the ASERVIC competencies, ACA, 2022), there are distinctive features and principles that guide the practice of Christians in the counseling profession.

**Christian Counseling: What is it and What Does it Entail?**

Christian counseling has distinct features that separate it from non-Christian counseling. While this statement, and topic overall, require far more discussion than this paper will allow, we wish to briefly note that the foundational differences of Christian counseling (versus secular counseling) are its affirmation of the lordship of Jesus Christ, and its reliance on the Holy Spirit (Tan, 2011). Moreover, the Christian counselor affirms that God has spoken to humanity (and still speaks), has provided salvation and the forgiveness of sins through his Son, Jesus Christ, and is both Creator and sustainer of the universe (Collins, 2007). Therefore, God is believed to be active and present, in all places and at all times (i.e., including the counseling session), and the Christian counselor is believed to be able to discern and participate in this divine action (see Decker et al., 2021, p. 9).

To this end, Collins (2007) proposes that Christian counselors have four distinct features: unique assumptions, unique goals, unique methods, and unique
giftedness. These features explain characteristics of Christian counselors that are distinctive. The unique assumptions explain the beliefs Christians have as related to the specific attributes of God (e.g., as already noted above; God as Creator and sustainer, Jesus as Savior, etc.). Unique goals consider the goals of spiritual growth and maturity as well as practices of confessing one’s sins. Some unique methods seen in Christian counseling may be the addition of prayer, or the working through of behaviors contradictory to biblical principles. Christian counselors look at their abilities as a gift from God and therefore rely on the Spirit of God when using their counseling skills (see also Collins, 1996). All of these aspects are important when distinguishing Christian counselors from their secular counterparts.

Furthermore, Holeman (2012) notes that counseling is just one avenue in which Christians who are mental health professionals can assist others from a spiritual perspective, especially as relates to issues in their relationships with themselves and God. The approach by which counselors do this may be different, but the goal is to implement the morals and ethics of Christ (Sanders, 2013). As stated earlier, some methods of Christian counselors look much different from that of other counselors. There is an emphasis on spirituality and one’s relationship with their Creator that makes Christian counseling not only distinctive but also unique (Tan, 2011). Thus, theological competency and understanding helps the Christian counselor to provide care to clients that is not only clinically and therapeutically informed, but also adequately assists clients as they spiritually wrestle with questions of ultimacy and navigate the “relevent ambiguities of life” (Holeman, 2012, p. 25).

In light of the above, however, it is important to briefly acknowledge that not all professional Christian counselors, or Christians who counsel (depending on their preferred self-identification), work in faith-based contexts or with professing Christian clients. Thus, there is a need for professional sensitivity and ethical competency in determining when and if ‘explicit’ or ‘implicit’ integration is most contextually appropriate. Explicit integration involves the overt inclusion of spiritual and religious content in therapy and includes the use of prayer, Scripture, sacred texts, and the referral of clients to religious leaders. Implicit integration is more covert in nature, wherein the counselor does not directly discuss Christian content in therapy, or utilize spiritual and religious methods (e.g., prayer, the reading of sacred texts), but rather practices generally from a theistic worldview and principles. The counselor may also engage in intrapersonal integration in which the Christian counselor may silently/internally pray for a client during session, drawing upon his or her personal religious and spiritual experiences (Tan, 1996; see also Walker et al., 2004).

We recognize the differences between these types of integration, and the value that each offers. Ultimately, the Christian professional counselor must be sensitive
to the needs and beliefs of their clients and the contexts in which they work, and when and where explicit integration is not ethically and professional permissible, the Christian counselor can still implicitly operate from a theistic, biblical worldview that affirms God’s presence and redeeming action through the counseling process.

Theological Considerations for the Emerging Counselor

As has been discussed to this point, there are many core beliefs of Christian counselors that encourage them in both how and why they participate in the field of counseling. The essential distinctives of a Christian, faith-based counseling program are also established on these core beliefs and practices. In this section, we attempt to highlight and explain why the ministry and work of the Holy Spirit and the theological concepts of the *imago Dei* and *missio Dei* are particularly essential for the work of the emerging counselor, as we have come to discover and learn in our own counselor education.

The Holy Spirit and Counseling

Jesus promises the coming of the Holy Spirit as the result of his inevitable departure from earth. Jesus states:

> But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid. (*New International Version*, 2011, John 14:27)

Within each of these promises, we are reminded that the Holy Spirit will be there to provide truth and peace. We are only to ask with our hearts, and He provides this Advocate (John 14:16). Other translations (e.g., King James Version) use the word “Comforter,” which we believe is the ultimate description of what it is to be in God’s presence. Moreover, Romans 14: 17-19 states:

> For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. (*New International Version*, 2011)

The Holy Spirit provides the ultimate comfort, in the form of peace and joy, for our souls here on earth, and commands us to make every effort to continue His
work in us. This we see as the essential catalyst for the emerging professional counselor to enter the counseling field.

Empowered through baptism in the Spirit, the Spirit enables us to pour out what has been poured into us (French, 2019). The ultimate gift of the Spirit is purpose and peace, in abundance, that pours out to all that encounter a person empowered by His presence. This very peace is supernatural because it can be encountered regardless of the circumstance of the individual encountering it. A person in the depths of worldly tangles can be provided peace within that very struggle. “The valley of the shadow of death” will always be a part of our lives, yet we shall fear no evil (New International Version, 2011, Psalm 23:4). That supernatural ability to live without fear in the midst of worldly hardships and threats is reflective of the supernatural working of the Spirit.

**Supernatural Peace in the Chaos of the Natural**

The Holy Spirit brings the presence of God, not in a metaphorical description but an absolute sense (Moltmann, 1997). Humans have a finite capacity for empathy, peace, grace, love, and compassion for others (Rossi et al., 2012). However, in the infinite kingdom of God, the Holy Spirit provides a supernatural capacity to comfort others. As the Apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we receive from God” (New International Version, 2011). Through the Holy Spirit, God’s gift to humanity is compassion and comfort. As we receive it from God, it flows from us to those with whom we interact. We have an expectation of this incredible gift of the Spirit in all aspects of our lives, including the counseling room (Psalm 139:7-8; 2 Cor 1:21-22). One author, Olthuis (2006), words it perfectly when he writes, “...No matter how deep the darkness, often in the face of our own anxieties and doubts, we are encouraged to enter the darkness with others, knowing we are not alone” (p. 75). Our belief is that this gift manifests in abundance and pours out to all that encounter a person empowered by the presence of His Spirit (John 3:34; Olthuis, 2006). Moreover, it is the Holy Spirit who brings forth the “renewal of life” being sought in the setting of therapy (Moltmann, 1997, p. 24; see also Callaway & Whitney, 2022, p. 91). If we wholly lean on Him, we find the breath of God and utilize it to bring complete renewal to a life that can be impacted by His very presence alone.

Optimistically, we believe that those walking with the Holy Spirit find a way to bring His work out of the unseen and into the forefront of our conscience. We begin to encounter His work in every facet of their lives. An example we as interns and students encounter, as professed by many colleagues within the ORU program, is the paradoxical balance between the overwhelming nature of course content and
the tense surrounding culture, and the sense of peace we are provided by the power of the Holy Spirit that surpasses all understanding (Philippians 4:7). We find ourselves walking through life in a state of prayer, seeking the lens that allows us to see the work of the Spirit. Moltmann (1997) interprets such prayers as “a plea for the Spirit’s coming” (p. 11). Ephesians 6:18-19 states:

> And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people. Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given to me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel. (New International Version, 2011)

The implications of this interpretation are that when we, emerging counselors, go to prayer on behalf of the feelings of inadequacy faced when transitioning from the classroom to the counseling room, we are pleading for the Spirit to fill that gap, especially as we are entering the professional field at a crucial moment in history when the needs of humanity are abundant.

We are still in the midst of the seemingly endless tension of making meaning out of human suffering (Hall et al., 2010). Within this struggle, we need to rely on the Holy Spirit. The truth is that although we are trained theoretically for future intense interactions, we are novices in knowing how to navigate someone else’s suffering. The realization of the presence of the Holy Spirit is the limitless bridge to that gap, and the more we train ourselves to rely on His presence and to attune to His action in our midst, the smaller the gap becomes. The Holy Spirit’s presence assists us in preserving our peace, renewing our spirits, and providing consolation and guidance in the many moments we feel uncertain of how to proceed with our clients (Decker et al., 2021). When our spirits are renewed, and we are provided a peace in the process, we can more quickly recall and apply the training, skillset, and knowledge found within our education and field of study.

**The imago Dei as the Critical Lens for Christian Counselors**

The fundamental, philosophical question we all face when we concern ourselves with the pain of others is “why?” Why do we feel it is necessary to care for others so much that we have created entire professions out of it? By what moral standard, outside of one based on our Christian belief system, do we elevate the needs of others over the pursuit of self? It may seem crude to ask, but outside of the moral framework of the Bible, is there any lasting motivational factor that will sustain us in the professional counseling field as we encounter and help clients navigate the pain of this life? The motivation for the believer is based on a concept that dates to the creation itself. Genesis 1:26 states: “Then God said, ‘Let Us make mankind in Our image, according to Our likeness…” (New International Version, 2011). Here
are we introduced to the theological concept of the *imago Dei*; a Latin translation of ‘image of God’, a phrase considered to be coined by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, although the concept has been developed and written about dating back to Philo in the second century (Simango, 2016). From the point of creation, our identity is forever linked with the likeness of the God we worship (Barth, 2009). If our identity cannot be separated from God, then every person who enters the counseling room is to be valued in the highest regard as a fellow image-bearer and creation of God.

The *imago Dei* as a hermeneutical lens provides a crucial and transformative tool for the counseling room. Hearkening back to the beginning of this article, we noted the increasingly dichotomous thinking that characterizes our current society and culture, including that of the church. The dehumanization of others who hold opposing views is so prevalent in our daily lives and social interactions—especially as evidenced in politics, social media, etc. (e.g., Baucham, 2021; Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Chua, 2018; Craig et al., 2018; Kreps & Kriner, 2020; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019). It seems especially important to caution emerging counselors about the dangers of formulating an oppositional and dichotomous lens from/through which they treat clients. Such an approach conflicts significantly with a Rogerian approach, which encourages the counselor always to maintain unconditional positive regard and empathy (Rogers, 1957). Even more importantly, such an approach contradicts the greatest commandments to love God and to love our neighbor (Matthew 22:36-40).

Fortunately, a biblical worldview and theology of persons and personhood provide us with a hermeneutic that destroys the development of dichotomous thinking that might prevent the counselor from operating with unconditional positive regard for all clients. Regarding our understanding of the theology of personhood, it is essential to be aware of how God views and remembers all of us (Deuteronomy 31:6; Psalm 139:13-16; John 3:16;). Swinton (2000) emphasizes, “To be remembered by God is to realize that we are of eternal worth and value in God’s sight. In remembering someone, we acknowledge the person as worthy of memory, and acceptable as a full person” (p. 127). It is our commitment to God that drives us into a community with others, regardless of what we create to separate ourselves. It is this theology of personhood that we embrace as emerging counselors.

The theological concept of *imago Dei* reminds us that before all other endless identities are formed, specifically ones that emphasize our differences, there existed (and still exists) a core identity that eternally connects all of us (Galatians 3:28). Humans are, first and foremost, created in the image of God (Peterson, 2016). Therefore, believers are to do nothing but love one another unconditionally, as God loves us in the same way (John 13:34). In Malachi 2:10, an excellent question
is posed: “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously with each other?” (New International Version, 2011). The difficulties we face in identity formation result from missing our true identity as God’s creation and His image-bearers. Within a Christian-based counseling program, such as ours, we have this crucial theology and hermeneutical lens by which to see clients and incorporate them into the counseling setting. We are fortunate to have fully realized our inherent value as those created by and in the image of God as we learn to have genuine compassion for future clients; a tool that is distinctive to our program (and likely others like it), undergirded by biblical principles and a Christian worldview (Oral Roberts University, n.d., p. 5).

Within the counseling field, there exist the ethical standards by which we are called to operate. ACA (American Counseling Association) code A.1.a, the first code listed, states, “The primary responsibility of the counselor is to respect the dignity and promote the welfare of clients” (ACA, 2014, p. 4). What can provide more of a solid foundation of dignity than having the internal belief that all humans are made in the image of the God we worship? While secular counseling programs and ethical standards can strongly promote the respect and welfare of clients, we suggest that a biblical theology of personhood is that which can empower the Christian counselor to respect their clients and promote their welfare truly; beyond what counselors can accomplish simply in their own strength and through abiding by ethical standards alone. For, to see all clients as image bearers of God confronts any proclivity to approach clients in a dehumanizing way, as to do so contradicts our core beliefs and values as Christians. So, when we encounter clients on the opposite side of any issue, we must rely heavily on the Holy Spirit to give us a godly perspective of those persons as his creation and image-bearers and to treat them with dignity borne out of the love of God.

The missio Dei and the Counseling Profession

Christian Counseling education programs, such as the one offered at ORU, present a unique approach to the formation of the helping professional. As emerging counselors who are Christians, we believe and are taught that our training and skills are being developed to participate in God’s greater purpose. That greater purpose was given to us by Christ, saying, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed…” (New International Version, 2011, Luke 4:18-19). Christ proclaimed his mission that was given as a result of the Spirit of God coming ‘upon’ him. Therefore, those who proclaim Christ and share in his body will also share in the same mission. This is accomplished through the gifting of the very same Spirit (John 14:26-27).
Translated from Latin, *missio Dei* means ‘Mission of God’ (Schwanz & Coleson, 2011). Moltmann (1997) succinctly explains, “God’s mission is nothing less than the sending of the Holy Spirit from the Father through the Son into this world, so that this world should not perish but live” (p. 19). It is through the Holy Spirit that the mission of God can be carried out on the earth. How does a counselor participate in this mission to bring life? Hardy (2011) urges students to understand the importance of preparation for the mission. Our understanding is expressed in his sentiment:

> I am not missional simply because I state God’s mission. I am not missional simply because I have a desire to participate in God’s mission. I am not missional simply because I can do things that are labeled missional. No. I am missional, first, because I am in a dynamic relationship with the missional God who formed me. I am missional, first, because I was formed for mission. (p. 178)

Hardy (2011) asserts that we are missional to the extent that we are dynamically relational with God. This means that the breadth of our relationship with God allows for greater participation in His mission. Without a deep relationship with the Father, we are not fully equipped to participate in His life-giving.

Tying this back to our training to become counselors, we have found that the additional spiritual preparation provided to us through our program at ORU has allowed us to attune to and more fully open ourselves to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The countless hours we devote to reading theories, practicing techniques, and developing a professional identity are paired with the time taken to secure a solid theological position that will guide our future practice. This process of spiritual formation, and in some cases, reformation, requires us to lean into our partnership with the Paraclete. Through this, we will step out of our training and into the professional field as conduits through which the empowering work of the Holy Spirit can be made known. The joy and confidence we have in knowing that we are participating in the *missio Dei* is what allows the wellspring of life to overflow through us and into the counseling session.

**Practical Implications**

So how do the *imago Dei* and *missio Dei* integrate with the practical knowledge gained during the graduate experience? As previously stated, emerging counseling students are faced with a gap between the theoretical knowledge gained in pursuing
a master’s degree and applying spirituality in a personal, yet ethical, capacity in therapy. In the space between education and application, there must be a sustained and disciplined reliance on, and relationship with, the Holy Spirit. To counsel in a way that is profoundly shaped and informed by a theology of the *imago Dei*, and an understanding of our purpose through the *missio Dei*, the counselor must be aware of the need to develop a robust and dynamic relationship with the Holy Spirit; the One who enables us to love as God has loved us (1 John 4:7-12), and the one who empowers Christ’s disciples to participate in God’s redeeming mission (2 Corinthians 5:17-20). Developing a strong theology from which counselors can understand the partnership between the Holy Spirit and the counseling process is essential, not only for the sake of theological knowledge, but for the transformation of one’s praxis, too.

As the relationship with the Paraclete develops, it permeates every aspect of the developing counselor’s life. As Holeman (2012) explains:

> Being a theologically reflective practitioner includes the capacity of *living theologically* throughout your clinical work. When theological reflection gets in your bones, it shapes who you are with others, including your clients. Theological integration at this level happens in the person of the counselor and is made manifest in the counseling relationship. (p. 75)

Regarding the above point and counseling education, we suggest that a significant benefit of enrollment in a Christian-oriented counseling program, such as the one in which we study, is the spiritual formation that occurs throughout the process. Peers and staff are united in the pursuit of a deeper relationship with God. The intentional process of placing oneself in a posture of complete reliance on the Spirit is critical to the developing helping professional. As we continue toward obtaining our degrees, gaining licensure, and beyond, it is the Holy Spirit who empowers us to go into the field and empower others (Decker et al., 2021).

In sum:

> Provided that theologically reflective practitioners remain grounded in God, seek to be open to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and conduct their work in a manner that is God-honoring, client-respecting, and ethically appropriate, then the Holy Spirit can do what the Holy Spirit does best—help people more fully embody the image of God in their daily lives. (Holeman, 2012, p. 77)
Conclusion

In summary of the exploration of the framework, implication, and applications of the emerging counselor’s interaction with a Christian belief system, their education, and journey into the professional world, we consider it necessary and advantageous to utilize tools provided by the foundation of the Christian belief system. The emerging counselor, empowered by Holy Spirit, has a foundational expectation to maintain empathy, unconditional positive regard, and a mission to bring life to this world, which is well-informed and supported by the theological concepts and doctrines of *imago Dei* and *missio Dei*.

The emerging counselor, who is trained in compliance with the highest educational standards for professional counseling (i.e., CACREP standards), and who is also equipped with a biblical and theological understanding of creation and personhood and God’s redemptive mission in the world (in which the counselor is empowered to participate), is able to embody the full potential of the counseling profession. The key tenets described above revealed themselves to be crucial during the profoundly tenuous times of the pandemic. The field is inevitably going to grow, change, and challenge all who choose to enter it. However, it is our proposition that the tools described above, which are made available to all who believe and follow Jesus, elevate the essential abilities of the counselor to empathize, endure, and press forward within the ever-growing chaos of the surrounding world.

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John Swinton is Chair of Divinity and Religious Studies at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. He has extensively published in the fields of practical theology, mental health studies, and disability theology. Becoming Friends of Time (2017) won Christianity Today’s book award of merit for theology and ethics, and Dementia: Living in the Memories of God (2012) won the 2016 Michael Ramsey prize for theological writing. He also serves on the editorial board of various pastoral journals, including The Journal of Religion, Disability and Health; Contact; The Scottish Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy; and The Journal of Healthcare Chaplaincy.

Finding Jesus in the Storm explores the spiritual lives of Christians with mental health challenges. The book aims to provide readers with detailed descriptions of what it is like to live with depression, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder and still live faithfully as a Christian. The book uses a hermeneutical phenomenological method to develop these detailed descriptions by conversing between four horizons: the author’s horizon; the horizons of the Christians living with mental health challenges; the horizon of the field of mental health care; and the horizon of Scripture, Christian tradition, and reflection in the life of the church community (p. 46). These horizons shape the theological reflections and the narratives in the book.

The book is divided into five sections. Section one lays the groundwork for the study, providing an introduction and presenting the research methodology. Section two speaks about the ambiguities surrounding clinical diagnosis. Swinton claims that clinical diagnostic descriptions are too thin to capture people’s experiences of mental illness and that they have the power to negatively impact people’s lives by shaping assumptions and attitudes about mental health. Swinton argues that the diagnostical process should not be confined to the medical field but should also be immersed in social, spiritual, and theological projections.

Section three is on the topic of depression. Swinton begins by observing that biological, linguistic, and spiritual descriptions of depression tend to be “thin.” When he uses the term “thin,” he uses it to describe what happens when language
is used so frequently that it loses its meaning and becomes unhelpful by failing to convey the extent of the experience (p. 75). Swinton then begins to draw on rich, thick descriptions of depression and elaborates upon emergent themes to redescribe depression more fully.

Section four is about hearing voices and schizophrenia. He begins with a conversation about schizophrenia and describes it as a medical construct designed to make sense of a person’s experiences that have become troublesome to the individual or those around them (p. 120). Framing schizophrenia in this way allows him to place it into the broader spectrum of the human experience of voice-hearing. This begins a historical and cultural epistemic conversation. The conversation concludes that hearing voices is not unique, nor is it necessarily always a negative experience or something that the individual’s society and community disdains. Swinton shows that cultural and societal interpretations of the experience will dramatically affect whether the hearer’s voice-hearing experience has a positive or a negative outcome.

Section five speaks about bipolar disorder. Again, Swinton explains how descriptions tend to be thin and do not fully describe the experience. He then sets about portraying a detailed description of bipolar disorder. One point Swinton makes is that the sins of others manifest in the experiences of those living with severe mental health challenges (p. 199). His discussion at this point is part of a larger conversation on the topic of societal sins and systemic evils and their impact on mental health.

Section five’s last chapter delivers the book’s conclusion and provides a detailed description of health and healing. Swinton discusses healing from cultural, theological, biblical, liturgical, relational, and testimonial perspectives. The overarching point is that being in good health does not only constitute the absence of a physical or psychological diagnosis. Being in good health also involves living faithfully in a relationship with Jesus even when experiencing deep distress (p. 206).

John Swinton’s vast experience in ministry and healthcare is evident in this work. The book demonstrates his expertise in theology, mental health, and spirituality. The breadth of his scholarship and the way he approached his topic will be refreshing to readers whose understanding of mental and physical health might be dominated by Western biomedical understandings and interpretations. Swinton’s hermeneutic phenomenological methodology provides thick descriptions of mental health. The methodology will supply the reader with a robust interpretative framework to understand and process the mental health conditions and may lead to more positive outcomes. Swinton’s expanded definition of health and healing is illuminative and speaks toward the tendency to view health and healing as the absence of physical or psychological infirmity. With this being said, listening to the testimonies of everyday believers, which Swinton
does here, and reflecting on what they tell us theologically, will enrich the reader’s views on theology and counseling.

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Kutter Callaway earned two PhDs, one in theology and one in psychology, both from Fuller Theological Seminary. William Whitney earned a PhD in theology and a master’s in marriage and family therapy, both from Fuller, with a second PhD underway at the time of this book’s writing. Callaway now teaches theology and culture at Fuller; Whitney teaches psychology at Azusa Pacific University and is a practicing therapist. These two authors are thus extremely qualified to speak to the integration of theology and counseling. The integration literature, per se, had not yet seen a volume written by professional theologians (p. 5), and Callaway and Whitney have addressed this gap.

Primary questions for these integrationists are: What is God up to in the world, and how can we join him? Exploring these leads to further questions: Can we join him specifically through counseling, and if so, how? What is counseling, what role does science play, how do theology and science interrelate, and how is God at work through all of these processes? These questions are addressed with depth, yet at an introductory level accessible to undergraduate students.

As a starting point, the authors offer a definition of theology. “Theology is something you do; it involves seeing the world with wisdom and discernment” (p. 21). To do this, one will need resources, and they identify five: Bible, church, tradition, experience, and culture (p. 21). These resources serve as lenses, like the eye doctor’s phoroptor, to help bring clarity and focus for the one doing theology.

Callaway and Whitney note that, with their five resources, they have slightly modified a theological framework, dubbed relatively recently the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, which has been used for a couple of centuries by evangelicals (p. 37). The quadrilateral is so-named due to its four resources: scripture (this is seen as primary, with the other three aiding its understanding); tradition (i.e., church fathers, the creeds [Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian], and saints through the ages); reason; and experience (i.e., the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, in Wesley’s original). In their modification, Callaway and Whitney have added one and slightly changed the original four: reason is not mentioned, possibly elided into experience; tradition is split between church (described as one’s local congregation) and
tradition (described alternately as one’s denomination and as the church fathers); and experience does not necessarily relate to the witness of the Holy Spirit. They describe the Bible as authoritative and at the same time functionally equal to the other lenses (p. 38), whereas the quadrilateral gives scripture primacy.

The culture of the theologian, Callaway and Whitney’s fifth hermeneutic, is a lens through which the theologian views all things, which may result in the theologian joining into the subject matter of the theology, at times. In the traditional position, God is the subject, the theologian is the indirect object (to whom God reveals himself), and one’s culture is more like a canvas than a lens. Here, culture and theologian play a more passive, though enlivened, role. These modifications may cause pause for some, and it could be debated whether they are slight or significant. In both views, the relational dynamic between God and theologian is central. How the hermeneutical lenses (whether the traditional four or their expanded five) play out in counseling may differ, such as relates to cultural advocacy and, possibly, authority structures, as two examples.

After providing their definition of theology, the authors explore central themes of Christianity and how these apply to counseling. Included are creation, the Trinity, general and special revelation, providence, grace, pneumatology, and Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection. Though the likely audience of the book may be Christian undergraduate students familiar with these terms, the authors explore them beyond preceding experience. They also link each theme with its implications for psychology. This part of the book reads like an enticing invitation. The reader may sense excitement even, as details of God’s goodness, presence, lifting people out of darkness, and providing hope emerge in present day counseling applications.

One especially strong section of the book discusses the interplay of science and religion in history and philosophy, where the authors bring important parts of the story to light, from Galileo to Nietzsche. For example, though Christians did famously decry Galileo’s discovery of heliocentricity in our solar system, Christians also ardently supported him in this discovery. That is to say, historically, conflict existed between people, but not between science and religion; this conflict is a modern invention (p. 131). Likewise, the authors show that, although Nietzsche famously said, “God is dead,” this was not a triumphant declaration but a tragic prediction of what occurs when science is elevated beyond the role it can bear, from descriptive to prescriptive (p. 138). Indeed, for a moral imperative to exist, God must exist. If God is dead (“killed” by science), then civilizations and individuals are not far behind; this was the cry of Nietzsche’s madman (p. 138). The relationship between science and faith became complicated in the past century. The authors have untangled the thought-roots of that conflict, which frees current researchers, theologians, and counselors to move forward with improved freedom and outcomes.
A weakness of the book for this reviewer was voice that shifted, at times. For example, the section on science and faith took a humble, educational voice, leading the reader to potent discovery. The section on theologies from marginalized groups took a declaratory voice, by contrast, while presenting somewhat simplistic definitions of these theologies (perhaps in an effort to compress great swaths of material into small space). Leaps of application followed, with the implied assumption that the reader would leap likewise, creating potential awkwardness or confusion for readers who may have a different type or pace of discerning. Throughout, the voice waivered periodically between leading the reader to discovery and telling the reader what to think. The preference would be for the former throughout.

Callaway and Whitney have written an important contribution to the integration literature. Counseling faculty in graduate and undergraduate programs will enjoy using selected portions or the entire book to help educate their students and to spur further discussion.

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Freud stated, “When a man is free of religion, he has a better chance to live a normal and wholesome life.” The authors of *Embodying Integration* state that “psychology can be beneficial to the church and that spirituality has something to say about well-being” (p. 2). In *Embodying Integration*, Mark McMinn and Megan Anna Neff make a case for a counseling approach informed by a Christian perspective.

Since Freud first associated his antipathy toward Christianity, people of faith have attempted to bridge the perceived divide between psychology and theology. Those making these attempts may be called integrationists. *Embodying Integration* draws from the rich history of integration models while making new contributions to how psychology and theology inform each other.

One appealing aspect of the book is that a father and daughter wrote it: Mark McMinn, a seasoned integrator, and his daughter Megan Anna Neff, a counselor with additional training in theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. The tone of *Embodying Integration* is tender given the relationship between the authors.
Throughout the book, there are short asides entitled *Author Dialog* in which father and daughter discuss the subject material in a warm and conversational style. This allows the authors to embody the book’s thesis: “integration as conversation” (p. 5).

The authors resist offering an integration model and instead ask, “What if integration was more a verb than a noun?” (p. 5). For the authors, integration is not a theory of counseling, or any particular intervention but rather the act of participating in a healing conversation with clients. The conversation itself is integration. It seems this approach has many benefits for those who seek to integrate Christian belief with the practice of counseling, although there is much it lacks.

One benefit is how the book takes life’s complexity and uncertainty seriously. The book articulates a theology of suffering, which many Christian communities need. The book also acknowledges the reality that many Christian counselors face in today’s political and social climate. Modern Christian counselors have various issues to sort through, which previous generations did not. Space is made for Christian counselors to grapple with today’s issues as well as the problems of living.

Neff and McMinn outline a gentle conversation style with clients characterized by empathy, curiosity, and lament. Both authors overflow with genuine and sincere care and positive regard toward their clients. This posture, which both authors have toward their respective clients, is informed by the theology outlined throughout the text. And this theologically defined posture of the therapist is the thrust of the entire book.

Because of this, many readers will experience the book as more of a theology text than a counseling text. The book dives deep into the wisdom tradition of lament, various theodicies, the story of Jeremiah, a review of Ecclesiastes, ancient Near Eastern creation narratives, the *imago Dei*, theories of atonement, missiology, and soteriology. The authors also report the influence of open theism, liberation theology, feminist and womanist theory, Latinx theology, and “theology from below.”

A criticism of the book is in its stated objective of offering no model for what Christian counseling is or does in the therapy room. Instead, it offers a theologically informed posture the Christian counselor takes toward the client in conversation. The author states, “. . . many students don’t need apologetics anymore when it comes to integrating psychology and Christianity. They don’t need models and views that tend to simplify complexity into categories. They are looking for conversation…” (p. 6). It may be the case that students need both models for understanding and implementing meaningful conversation. This approach would not oversimplify or invalidate lived experience.

This lack of a model or clearly defined approach to Christian counseling may leave some readers puzzled about exactly how Christian counseling differs from any other counseling style. The authors do well in utilizing Christian language to
give theological meaning to the counseling process. But, this gives meaning to the therapist’s work, not the client’s work. The author’s resistance to answering the real-world questions of Christian counselors exacerbates this problem. The author discusses this with his students, “Shall we pray with our patients? Is it ok to refer to Scripture? Should we bring up church involvement? Is there ever a place for talking about theology in psychotherapy? Honestly, I think I have consistently frustrated these students with my lack of answers.”

Again, the author states, “…getting into a theological dialog would not be helpful or ethical” (p. 166). This approach will confuse many Christian counselors who see no ethical dilemma in creating a safe place for clients to explore their deepest questions of spirituality and theology in Christian terms. Christian counselors do not impose beliefs, but they certainly do prompt clients to seriously consider their most deeply held beliefs about the world, themselves, their relationships, their purpose, their identity, and their faith. This prompting may sometimes include psychoeducation causing many clients to challenge, reframe, or replace irrational beliefs with more adaptive ones. But, the author, to the dismay of CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) therapists everywhere, takes issue with this approach as well, stating, “The point of counseling is not to correct wrong belief…” (p. 165) and “The task of the counselor is rarely the cognitive task of correcting theology…” (p. 166).

The book encourages conversation as integration everywhere, except in theological conversation. This is odd for a book about integration between psychology and Christianity. Most Christian counselors will agree that there is a place for appropriate faith-related self-disclosure where informed consent has been provided and where it meets the needs of the client. And certainly, there is an ethical way to provide theological psychoeducation when the client benefits from alternative lenses to see their lived experience.

*Embodying Integration* will be a helpful addition to the library of most Christian counselors. The therapist’s posture toward the client, as outlined by the authors, and the eternal meaning of the therapist’s work are helpful in the daily work of counseling. In addition, the book’s final pages beautifully detail the work of the Holy Spirit embodied in the work of the therapist. However, what the book contributes in theological language and meaning for the therapist’s experience of their work, it lacks in modeling what this work means for the client and exactly how the counselor is to work for the client’s benefit.

In many ways, the battles early integrationists fought have been won. Nearly all models of psychotherapy make room for spirituality. It is taken for granted that a client’s religious worldview will inform their lived experience. The authors explore what this means for the therapist and what it means for the client. Overall, the book is recommended as a theological work trying to understand the role of a
counselor from a Christian perspective. But, as a book outlining integration between psychology and Christianity, it seems the conversation must continue.

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