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Theological Roots: Synthesizing and Systematizing a Biblical Theology of Helping

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THEOLOGICAL ROOTS

Synthesizing and Systematizing a Biblical Theology of Helping

RON HAWKINS, EDWARD HINDSON, AND TIM CLINTON

We wake, if we ever wake at all, to a mystery.
—ANNIE DILLARD, Teaching a Stone to Talk

The scene was packed with emotion as the son pleaded, “Dad, why didn’t you tell me?” Some weeks earlier, the father had been given a diagnosis of terminal cancer, but he hadn’t wanted to tell anyone.

With tear-filled eyes, he turned to his son. “I didn’t want you to define me by my cancer; I just wanted to remain ‘Dad’ and not become ‘the cancer patient.’ ”

What defines you? What defines your counseling?

In this life, what you believe about God matters. And it matters in counseling. Known as the queen of the sciences, theology is the study of God that encompasses what we believe about God and his existence, his nature, his attributes, his influence, and his involvement in our lives.

Every counselor has a theology that defines and directly influences the counseling process, including a counselor’s perceptions and actions. A comprehensive biblical theology—a theology of soul-care helping—is essential in order to establish the foundations of Christian counseling and to guide the practice of Christ-centered counseling (see Adams, 1970; Benner, 1988; Collins, 1993; Hindson & Eyrich, 1997; Powlison, 1997).

Following is a classic outline of the study of systematic theology as it is usually presented to first-year seminary students in the United States and Europe. This outline will provide a helpful point of reference as we develop our theology of soul-care helping.

Bibliology—the doctrine of Scripture

Theology Proper—the doctrine of God
THEOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN COUNSELING TODAY

Christian counseling is deficient in its theological roots and spiritual practices. There, we've said it. In this and the next chapter, we hope to facilitate some corrective action by filling this deficiency with a God-exalting theology and a program of spiritual formation geared specifically for Christian counselors.

Lamenting the current state of Christian counseling in this regard, Hart (2001) has challenged us:

For some time now, experts have been telling us that the stock market is due for a major correction. Already we are beginning to see the economy “cool” with stocks jumping around like a cat on a hot tin roof. Well, I have the same fears about where we are headed in some of the things we do as Christian counselors, particularly our uncritical adoption of the secular psychological concepts. We have run ahead of our theological foundations in developing our understanding of a “Christian” approach to counseling—and we are due a major correction here as well! (p. 8)

McMinn (1996) recently called attention to the importance of theology in counseling:

Effective Christian counselors also consider theological perspectives at the same time that they engage in the various psychological tasks of counseling. Historical and systematic theology, biblical understanding, and Christian tradition are all valued and considered essential components of counseling. (p. 270)

Effective counselors, in McMinn’s view, are those given to multitasking, the ability to simultaneously and appropriately utilize—for the benefit of the client—the insights and skills gained from the study of theology, psychology, and spirituality (p. 269).

These concerns for building Christian counseling on a biblical-theological foundation are not new. In the 1970s Jay Adams stood Christian counseling on its head from his pastoral theology chair at Westminster Seminary. Convinced that counseling was a pastoral function being usurped by the secular psychological establishment, he insisted that contrary to what some may think, Christians have not suddenly burst upon the scene challenging psychiatrists and clinical and counseling psychologists; rather [the historical facts show that] the latter are the newcomers who moved in to supplant the church in its work of counseling. Historically speaking, therefore, competition is quite an accurate word to describe the situation. (1979, p. x)

Many were upset with Adams’s provocative approach, confrontational style, and antipsychology pronouncements. However, his seminal and prophetic work has sensitized most Christian counselors to the need for greater thoughtfulness regarding the necessary and powerful influence of biblical and theological data by people in helping ministry. Christian counseling is listening, as these concerns are increasingly reflected in the various works of numerous leading authors in our field (Benner, 1988; Collins, 1993; Crabb, 1999; McMinn, 1996; Moon, 1997).

Strengthening counselor competency through multitasking, while necessary, is not easy. Theologians have seldom allied themselves with the challenges related to strengthening counselor competence. Additionally, counselors overwhelmed with meeting the needs of people have seldom had the time to call upon theologians for help. Both have too often lived like disconnected cultures, each with its own set of shibboleths and recommendations for resolving humanity’s ills. Sometimes these two worlds have even expressed distrust and a general low regard for one another.

Multitasking is also demanding because there is so much to learn. Must we do so? The only correct answer is yes! In fact, consciously or without realizing it, every counselor already embraces a theology that impacts his life and practice. Bergin (1991), Worthington (1988), and others have clearly shown that we cannot divorce counseling from its moral, theological, and philosophical roots. This makes it a given that we are all doing theology whenever we practice counseling. The obvious questions, then, are: Are we doing theology well or poorly? Is the theology we are doing—that which inevitably informs our counseling—biblical theology or bad theology? We believe the choices are as black and white as the questions we state. There is a sharp divide between truth and untruth.

Counselor competence is greatly enhanced when we build from a solid theological foundation. It is hard work, but counselors can derive great personal and professional benefits from the study of theology. Not only do we strengthen our
people-caring skills, but we also draw closer to the God who made us and gifted us for our helping ministries, for, at its core, theology is the study of God. Our hope is that Christian counselors will learn and impart to their clients a living and experiential theology that reveals the truth of the personhood of God and of his desire for relationship with us. The only other option is to merely learn about God by studying a sterile systematic theology. This might leave you full of knowledge, but it may also leave you intellectually proud and ultimately bereft of life.

Answering the following questions and reflecting upon the significance of the answers for counseling will provide the structure for this chapter. What is theology? What is at the heart of theology? With all the other challenges demanding our energy and time, why do counselors need to work at theological literacy? Where should counselors who wish to develop multitasking skills and to reinforce their theological understanding begin? How does a counselor apply theology? What principles guide counselors as they seek to arrange theological material in ways that advance counselor effectiveness? What areas of theology are particularly critical for enhancing counselor competence—and why are these areas of theological investigation so crucial to the counseling process?

Theology Defined

The dictionary defines theology as "the study of God, his attributes, and his relationship with man and the universe" (Landau, 1975, p. 763). Internationally renowned theologian Millard Ericson (1985) proposed that we understand theology as

that discipline which strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, based primarily on the Scriptures, placed in the context of culture in general, worded in a contemporary idiom, and related to the issues of life. (p. 21)

Grenz (1994) offered the following amplification of Ericson's definition:

Theology is primarily the articulation of a specific religious belief system itself (doctrine). But it also includes reflection on the nature of believing, as well as declarations concerning the integration of commitment with personal and community life. The Christian theologian seeks to set forth a coherent presentation of the themes of the Christian faith. (p. 5)

Our theology informs and even shapes our worldview. Hence, it logically follows that our theology also informs and even shapes our counseling theory and practice.

According to Sire (1997), a worldview is "a set of presuppositions (or assumptions) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously) about the basic makeup of the world" (p. 17). Looking through the lens of a counselor, Collins (1993) reminds us that "Our worldview determines how we think about human nature, evaluate the causes of emotional problems, decide on treatment strategies, and evaluate counseling progress" (p. 13). The counselor's theology and worldview deal with, among other things, what we believe about God, humankind, and the created universe; about Jesus and salvation; about the Holy Spirit and his work in believers and in the world; about the church; and about the future completion of God's program.

Clearly, Christian counseling cannot be done effectively apart from theological covenants. This is a central reason why we stressed the nature and the importance of covenantal counseling in chapter 2.

The Need for Theology

Counselors and clients are constantly confronted with assertions regarding the truthfulness of opposing ideologies—what we believe and what we value. Multiple voices in our pluralistic society call out for a hearing, asking that the ideas they promote be received as the truth. This has caused many people to be confused and anxious. Others have adopted a relativistic mind-set—giving equal weight to all truth claims. Good theology helps filter out the theological and philosophical error that pervades so much of our world today.

Good theology provides the foundational authority of truth against which we can assess our beliefs and practices. It can assist the truth-finding functions of modern counseling, overcoming confusion and assisting with the management of anxiety. Biblical theology grounds the counselor and those we seek to help in the truth as revealed through the Holy Spirit. Counselors who are intentional in building a worldview grounded in biblical and theological truth are far less likely to assemble assumptions in conflicted bits and pieces. They are also less likely to borrow uncritically from a variety of psychological theories that are often at odds with one another and are at times opposed to the fundamental tenets of our faith.

PoIemtics, Catechetics, and Summarization

There are three important factors in theological reflection:

1. PoIemtics speaks to the need to clarify and distinguish biblical beliefs from proposed alternatives as well as to distinguish truth from error.

2. Catechetics deals with the imparting of instruction and training in skills that promote maturity in Christ (Ephesians 4:11-14).
Theological Roots

3. Summarization involves the systematic arrangement of the major themes of Scripture that clarify God's nature and work.

These attempts to systematize the propositions of Scripture “seek to emancipate theology from any one cultural context in order to produce a statement of truth that is timeless and culture free” (Grenz, 1994, p. 7). This work requires a measure of humility as we seek to keep our personal and cultural biases from distorting our statements on “truth” and to keep ourselves committed to the Word.

As a redeemed people, we are often countercultural since we elevate the Word of the self-revealing God to a position superior to that of human opinion. As Christ-followers, we are under the authority of God’s Word and are called to formulate our identities, ideas, actions, and commitments in submission to the Word.

By virtue of our pivotal ministry in the covenant community, we are often required to transmit theological information to people in desperate need of truth-based thinking. In that position, we must attain to a higher level of theological sophistication than we have in the past. Far too many of us have witnessed the damaging effects of poor theology in counseling and the absence of a clear theological undergirding for many approaches to counseling.

While we, as counselors, may not analyze and debate at the level of the professional theologian, we dare not rest until we understand the significance of the great acts of God for human healing, the power in our traditions, the healing in our sacraments, the value of our covenants, the restorative power of our communities, and the content of our sacred documents. Above all, Christ, his global church, and its long and rich history are relevant to the care and curing of souls. Like teachers in the community of faith and because of our aspirations and givings, we must be humbled by the reality that we are held to a higher level of accountability and will receive a weightier final judgment (1 Corinthians 4:1-2; James 3:1).

Start with the Self-Revealing God

Where do we begin this journey? Some like to begin with the assertion of God’s existence, proceed to an amplification of his character and works, and then offer an examination of the implications of all this for our work. Others would prefer to begin with the Bible, the means of our knowledge of God. They ask how we can begin with God without first studying his revelation of himself in general and in the special revelation of the Scriptures.

Erikson (1985) offers another solution that may help bridge this gap. He proposes that we presuppose both the authority of the Bible and the existence of God as forming a foundational idea. We then proceed to develop the truths and ideas that flow from this core idea and evaluate the confirming evidence for their truthfulness.

On this basis, God and His Self-revelation are both presupposed together, or we embrace the idea of the self-revealing God as a single presupposition. Our starting point would then be something like this: There exists one triune God, loving, all powerful, holy, all-knowing, who has revealed Himself in nature, history, and human personality, and in those acts and words which are now presented in the canonical scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. (p. 33)

This basic proposition can then be broadened into a theological system by identifying the support throughout Scripture for its various assumptive elements. We can examine ideas and proceed to their validation or invalidation based on the degree of support they receive in the Scriptures. Moving forward from God’s special revelation in Christ, we can examine other sources in our quest for the knowledge of God and truth. God has also revealed himself in myriad ways (general revelation) in such areas as nature and science, world history, great art and literature, and human personality (Collins, 1993; Grenz, 1994; Morris, 1976). We may and should examine these for insights into the character of the self-revealing God, while bearing in mind that these sources will be clearly subordinate to the Bible.

Building a Helping Theology: A Wisdom Methodology

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon, the wisest man of his time, sought to answer the question of meaning or profit in life (1:1-3). Writing in the wisdom tradition, he taught that God made man upright, but that man through disobedience has fallen into sin and death (7:20). Hence, there is not a person on Earth who never sins (7:20), and we live in a broken world where there are so many things wrong that they can't be added up (1:15).

Ecclesiastes is of great importance because it describes in detail the deep hurts humans experience in the post-Edenic world (after the Fall of Adam) and offers wisdom’s direction for the successful resolution of the pain (7:11,12). In ministering to these hurts, Solomon advocated a method—a way of doing theology—that flows from divine wisdom and can result in the restoration of meaning for humans who are immersed in vanity and suffering. Listen to the words of the biblical text:

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“Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher, “All is vanity.” And moreover, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yes, he pondered and sought out and set in order many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find acceptable words; and what was written was upright—words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails, given by one Shepherd. And further, my son, be admonished by these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is wearisome to the flesh. Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil. (Ecclesiastes 12:8-14, NKJV)

**Sensitive to Context**

We encourage Christian counselors to embrace a theological method that is in the wisdom tradition and is sensitive to context. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon spoke in the context of his day. He identified elements in that context that were damaging those he sought to help and proposed alternatives rooted in divine wisdom. It is this “wisdom from above” that Solomon believed would, when embraced, lead to heightened meaning and wellness.

Solomon spoke the truth, applicable at multiple levels—to the crisis in his culture (particularly within the covenant community) and within his own soul and spirit. The community he served was struggling with vanity (1:3). Vanity (hebel) reflects an inability to attach a sense of permanence, direction, or meaningfulness to life (Leupold, 1952; Von Rad, 1974). Modern counselors face a similar challenge of communicating empathically as we respond to the needs of the cultures, the communities, and the people we serve. This contextual application is a central feature of our theological method here.

**Centered in the Needs of People**

Solomon’s work was carried out within and on behalf of people who constituted the covenant community. This wise preacher was focused on meeting their needs. The term preacher may be better understood as teacher, counselor, or elder—anyone who convenes a “people meeting” for the purpose of matching knowledge and wisdom to the needs of the people (Leupold, 1952, Wright, 1991). This wise helper was focused on the people and their social and cultural context and followed a theological method that resulted in the acceptance of his teaching. His words were honored, in part, because of their demonstrated efficacy in meeting human needs. Wisdom connected the teacher to the continuous service of the community as a whole and to its constituent parts represented by each person.

The apostle Paul also viewed this work as essential to the life and work of the believing community. In Paul’s ecclesiology every member of the church is at some level a helper, able to speak intelligently about what God has done for him or her through the Word and the Spirit. Paul advocated that each member be invested in the growth of others in the body (Ephesians 4:1-16). He insisted that all believers be filled with goodness and care for one another, and he taught that this is a required ministry for all people in the community we call the church (Romans 15:14).

Covenantal community and the responsibility for attending to member maturity is at the heart of the New Testament assembly envisioned by the author of Hebrews (10:24-25). Members of the assembly come together for the purpose of encouraging one another and stirring up one another to love and good works. The theological method advanced by Solomon focused on suiting the words of Scripture to the needs of people in such a way that men, women, and children are put on the path to wellness, impressed with the relevance of God’s Word for meeting the challenges of their daily lives.

**Rooted in Divine Wisdom**

As counselors, we should convene our sessions deeply aware of how dependent we are on divine wisdom. We all live in a fallen world, and those we serve are burdened with the task of finding meaning in life and are struggling with their bondage to sin.

Solomon understood the need for personal wisdom as the crucial prerequisite for guiding the covenant community (Ecclesiastes 12:9-10). It was his confession of personal inadequacy and his subsequent petition for divine enablement that resulted in his unusual anointing with wisdom (1 Kings 3:5-14). A similar confession and petition is required of all who would desire to obtain this type of wisdom—a wisdom that comes to us through Christ, the Scriptures, and the Spirit as a free gift from God (1 Corinthians 1:30; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; 2 Timothy 3:15-16). James 1:5 reminds us, “If you need wisdom—if you want to know what God wants you to do—ask him, and he will gladly tell you” (NLT). Solomon’s competence as a king required the gift of this wisdom received from Yahweh, Israel’s shepherd. Every counselor today equally needs this divine gifting from the Holy Spirit—the church’s paraklete—to assure our competence (Ecclesiastes 12:11; 2 Timothy 3:16).

Those who seek direction in life often ask, “What shall I do? Where can I find meaning?” What a privilege we have to offer wisdom from God that directs people into the way of value and meaning (Ecclesiastes 12:9-10). Wisdom enables Covey’s (1997) “sharpening of the saw” that allows counselor and client to live life with a degree of connection and impact.
Grounded in the Authority of the Scriptures

Solomon also advanced the central place of the Scriptures in the theological method (Ecclesiastes 12:9-12). While many sources, such as professional journals, writings of church fathers, and programmed treatment manuals, promise to help people discover meaning or significance, Solomon counseled caution with these extrabiblical sources. The true answer to meaning and profit is found in the counsel of the words that have been given by Yahweh, our loving Creator. Any extrabiblical materials should be used judiciously, and only after the counselor is confident that such materials honor the goal of facilitating Christlikeness and are fully consistent with the truths of Scripture.

The words that are acceptable have come from God himself and are at the heart of wisdom’s message. Counselors must be careful not to add anything to these instructions that dilutes or compromises their power to speak truth to broken people living in a broken world. The counsel given by the counselor is authoritative only to the extent that it is a faithful exposition of the truth received in the special revelation found in Scripture.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul gave similar counsel to Timothy. Struggling with fear (2 Timothy 1:7), Timothy was told by his aged mentor to give great energy to the study of God’s Word, correctly handling the word of truth (2:15). The Word had demonstrated its power to save and would now demonstrate that it had the power to make him wise for overcoming his fear. In fact, the Scriptures in their totality are given by divine inspiration and contain the doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction required for bringing Timothy to full maturity in Christ (3:15-17). Second Peter 1:3 reminds us: “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.”

Counselors must proceed with extreme caution as they grapple with truth. Assertions regarding “absolute truth” can be dangerous, and truth is sometimes used in the service of pride and in the reduction of theology to an academic exercise divorced from the practical needs of the community of faith. This so-called “truth” only serves division, argumentativeness, and a convenient theology that doesn’t result in a heart broken and able to minister to the needs of the communities we serve. God’s wisdom, the humility required for its reception, and a willingness to submit to the authority structures of the covenant community deliver Christian counselors from such aberrant misappropriations of truth.

Permeated with Passion, Compassion, and Practicality

Counseling requires a model for doing theology that is rich in passion, compassion, and practicality. Deeply invested in our work, we perspire over the inspired “givens” in the Scriptures (2 Timothy 2:15; Luke 4:4; Hebrews 4:12; John 5:39; 2 Timothy 3:15; Ecclesiastes 12:9-10). We ponder, seek out, and set in order the passages from God’s Word that meet client needs. Counselors summarize and systematize the various parts of God’s Word into a harmonious whole, focused on meeting the needs of the individual and his culture. It is this passion for applying truth in real-life ways that meets real needs.

Tillich (1951) embraced this challenge in his theological method and characterized his theology as an “answering theology.” In his view, the helper moves back and forth between two poles. One pole is the Bible. This assures that the theological method is embedded in authority. The other pole is the context of our lives, which includes the cultures, traditions, and systems that impact or have impacted our attributions and interpretations. This assures that the theological method is wedded to relevance. Attention to these two poles assures that counselors are employing a theological method that allows them to speak with compassionate authority to real needs.

Characterized by Flexibility

The model Solomon proposed meets the need for flexibility in the application of theological truth. Theology, systematically expressed and artfully arranged to meet needs, comprises two clearly differentiated types of words to accomplish two very different purposes. There are words that secure and stabilize people like deeply embedded nails or tent stakes (Ecclesiastes 12:11). These are a delight to deliver and are frequently received with joy. There are also goading words of reproof and correction that are equally needed and yet are often more difficult to speak and more difficult to receive (Ecclesiastes 12:11; 2 Timothy 3:16).

Counselor competence demands that we deliver both nails and goads in language that is compassionate and is contemporary and sensitive to context (Anderson, 1995; Grenz & Olson, 1996; Horton, 1994). Attention to the contextualization of transcendent truth secures for it a degree of relevance that enhances one’s ability to speak with clarity to the needs of hurting people in successive generations. Paul practiced this responsibility to be relevant and flexible in his evangelistic and discipling ministry. At Mars Hill his passion for relevance in the communication of the gospel dictated his choice of subject matter and demonstrated his flexibility and concern for contextualization (Acts 17:16-34).

The primacy of flexibility in context is seen in Paul’s directives to the believing community in 1 Thessalonians 5:14 governing discipleship and counseling. Here, Paul advised action according to the situational and personality needs of the believing person. He counseled admonition for rule breakers, comfort for the timid, support for those troubled with life-dominating sins, and patience for all. A
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ing life's decisions in a manner consistent with God's character and expec-
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To accomplish these goals it is necessary to affirm the existence of the infinite, per-
sonal, creator God. This God creates ex nihilo—out of nothing—a testimony to
his creative omnipotence (Genesis 1:1; 2:7). He is Almighty God and rules in his
sovereignty over nations, time, and all of creation in a way that brings to pass with-
out equivocation his predetermined purposes (Psalm 48:1-14; Ecclesiastes 3:11).
All that he creates is good, exists for his glory, and bears the mark of his creativity
(Psalms 15:1-4). God is.

Nowhere is his glory more fully evidenced than in the creation of humanity—

A Theology for Living
According to Volf (2001), systematic theology should be "a transforming theology
applied to real-life issues." This theology is not a rigid, sterile system of proposi-
tions to be learned in rote fashion. Rather it is an experiential and living theology,
rational yet practical, and eminently useful for teaching and for life-changing
learning.
We now turn our attention to some key doctrines and their application to
counseling. This exercise—the doing of living theology—is a lifelong journey for
all of us.

Theology Proper: The Existence and Character of the
Infinite and Personal God
What do you know and believe about God? Laney (1999) believes that knowing
God better "will help us deal with our doubts, prepare us to better cope with unex-
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ing life's decisions in a manner consistent with God's character and will" (p. 15).
To accomplish these goals it is necessary to affirm the existence of the infinite, per-
men and women. He is a pursuer-God, no matter what our condition may be. This explains God's invasiveness and helps us understand why he searched for Adam, why he covered humanity in its shame, and why in the fullness of time the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost (Genesis 3:8-9; Luke 19:10). Healing power resides in such a rich view of God's inexhaustible, investing love.

God's compassion, however, does not compromise his holy transcendence. We affirm that while man is on the earth, God is in heaven (Ecclesiastes 5:2). He is a holy and sovereign God, the commandment-giver, the Judge over all creation, the Issuer of consequence—altogether separate from his creation. He possesses all power and blends together the events of our lives in a way that is beautiful and is always done for his glory and our good (Ecclesiastes 3:11; Romans 8:28). He feels no obligation to provide us with an explanation for his action or perceived inaction, and he often leaves us to trust in his faithfulness, mercy, and lovingkindness, which are amply attested to in Scripture.

At times we are forced to suspend our limited reasoning powers and adopt a submissive reverence for his authority that knows its inception in trust and faith (Ecclesiastes 3:14). Like Joseph, we are sometimes able to see God's purpose in the difficult circumstances of our lives and say, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Genesis 50:20). More often he moves in ways that are past our knowing. Equipped with the knowledge of God's character and unfailing love, we can affirm on the authority of the Word that he is, in all circumstances, too loving to be unkind and too wise to make a mistake. However, his utilization of men and women in his missioning, and his engagement of us in his purposes, is the cause of both our greatest joy and our greatest pain (2 Corinthians 1:3-7).

Our understanding of the character of God shapes our response to the needs of people as well as the message of hope and deliverance that we bear. We must work to possess a knowledge of God that expels ignorance and tears down lies that have been the source of untold misery. Godly counselors can help establish in the minds of people with an accurate knowledge of the character of God. Guinness (1977) challenges that sometimes when I listen to people who say they have lost their faith, it strikes me as less surprising than they suggest. If their view of God is what they say, then it is more surprising that they did not reject it much earlier.

Some people have a view of God so fundamentally false that it is a lie. Their picture is not of God but an idol. (p. 92)

Some client caricatures of God are not just unattractive, they are so ugly as to be scary—ghoulish distortions that make God seem more like a monster than the loving Father that he is. Our theological competence as counselors determines our ability to articulate correctly the character of God to our clients and to establish the significance of his character in meeting people's deepest needs and expanding their hope for ultimate transformation.

ANTHROPOLOGY: THE DIGNITY AND FALLLENNESS OF HUMANITY

Is humanity (male and female) created straight from the heart and hand of God, or are we the product of a billion years of evolutionary randomness? Is the nature of man innately good and able to achieve whatever the mind can imagine? Or do evil and the power of sin constantly thwart our attempts to do good and solve our deepest struggles?

The answers to these questions and others like them shape our mission and efforts in the therapeutic encounter (Allen, 1984; Custance, 1975; Hoekema, 1986). Answering questions like these with ideas formed independently of Scripture will lead to a tragic undertreatment of crucial issues at the core of human personality (Hart, 1992; Menninger, 1973; Mowrer, 1960). Scripture is emphatic in its description of the human condition. “We simply cannot come to a biblical understanding of man...if we do not come to grips with the awfulness of man in rebellion, separation and death. We are profoundly fallen” (Allen, 1984, p. 102). All have sinned, and in our union with Adam, we have fallen into the abyss of death, which opened as a consequence of his choice (Romans 3:23; 6:23).

We have previously spoken of male and female as image-bearers. Even in fallleness, humanity bears the mark of God's image. According to Allen (1984), “We are in danger of overstating the results of the Fall if we judge that man after the Fall is no longer a creature of dignity bearing the image of God” (p. 104). Hence, we live in a paradoxical state—carrying dual conditions within our single personage that emphasize both the dignity and fallleness of humanity. The redeemed, it should be noted, are twice special: (1) through God's invasive and gracious superintendence in our genesis, and (2) by God's bestowal of supernatural gifts through the Holy Spirit in our re-genesis or new birth (Psalm 139:13-16; 1 Corinthians 12:6-11). Thus, our specialness as humans resides not in what we may do but in who we are, because God who formed us placed his image and his gifts within us.
This is not to diminish the fact that we are equipped by God to do something significant. Humanity is an instrument in his divine hand; God bequeathed to the male and female a marvelous purpose: to multiply, replenish, subdue, have dominion! These words are part of a creation mandate given by the Creator to his beloved team (Genesis 1:26-28). Adam and Eve came to the challenge with their own distinctiveness, prepared by God for an impact requiring their unique contributions. Fulfilling divine mandates always requires a team effort—the parts working in concert, each part bearing its own weight, contributing its distinctive qualities for the accomplishment of the assigned mission (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; 1 Corinthians 12:1-31). Autonomy and distinctiveness give birth to our significance, but also to reflection on self, position, rights, responsibilities, and freedom of choice.

The Christian counselor must be able to diagnose correctly the theological malady that is at the core of humanity's dilemma. Created upright and empowered with the imagination resident in the divine image at the core of human personality, male and female are free to dwell on what-ifs (Genesis 3:1-6; Ecclesiastes 6:9). However, in the service of autonomy, desire is free to wander, and because of our sinful bent, the tragic result is idolatry, rebellion, and disobedience to divine commandment. Unless we repent and turn, we will become destructive, abandon our postings, and vandalize the very shalom of God (Ecclesiastes 10:4). The friend of God becomes his enemy (Romans 5:8).

Vanity, sin unbridled, the parched quest for profit, and the vexing reality of a world encased in death, shatters shalom. The whole planet is engulfed in the intermixture of the times, washing antiphonally over its death and brokenness (Ecclesiastes 3:1-13). People seldom understand that the gift of pain is God's loving goad designed to break them loose from the groaning of this life and to pull them toward home (Ecclesiastes 1:13; 3:10; Hosea 2:14-15; Luke 15:17-18).

The Christian counselor has heard the curative prescription from God. The diagnosis offered regarding humanity's potential and fallenness is accurate; the prescription for treatment is a radical and God-provisioned one. Misdiagnosis will only serve to widen the chasm between Creator and created and will prolong the experience with sin and its devastating wages.

**Christology: The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. . . . The Word was made flesh. . . . and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1,3,14, KJV)

Jesus Christ is central to the resolution of humanity's fallenness (Romans 5:8; Hebrews 1; Erikson, 1991; Yancey, 1995). Eternally preexisting with the Father and Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ is God (Colossians 1:15-19). In Christ's incarnation we have heard from God, for Christ is the ultimate revelation of the self-revealing God. The birth of Jesus Christ bears witness to God's promises realized in our material, real-time universe as a testimony to his faithfulness and his miracle-working power. We know that the Incarnation took place outside of normal means: The Son conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary was the direct result of the miraculous, life-giving work of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:34-38).

The birth of Jesus Christ became the template, the firstfruit of the grand paradigm for what God will do again and again in his work of reclaiming those fallen in Adam (John 3:3-8). He will plant life where there was none and will, through the supernatural work of the Spirit, create new beginnings independent of human involvement. It can be sheer joy for the Christian counselor to reflect on and share the implications of the birth of Jesus Christ for new beginnings in the lives of clients.

Jesus is in mission because God refuses to give up or to give over his creation to Satan and his work as destroyer (1 John 3:8). God will work in anything—pain, suffering, beauty, even rebellion—to win the hearts of men and women. We dare not underestimate the cosmic proportions of the spiritual battle that is at the core of Adam's fall and Jesus' death (Ephesians 6:10-17). Jesus came to destroy the works of evil, to be God's Word to Satan as well as God's Word to the fallen sons and daughters of Adam. He is the second Adam; he is fully human and fully God (Romans 5:12-21).

In his humanity, Jesus Christ came as a fellow sojourner, one who would be tempted in all matters as a man and yet remain without sin (Isaiah 53; Luke 4:1-13; Hebrews 4:15). This second Adam gives birth to a new race. In the power of his resurrection, Christ leads a new exodus and brings a new Israel out of the Egypt of this world. He is the Passover Lamb, and his death is the death of the sinless Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Hebrews 9:11-28; 1 John 2:1-2).

He died in our place, taking the wrath of God for our sins (Isaiah 53:1-7). We have redemption and the forgiveness of sin because of his death at Calvary (Ephesians 1:7). God is completely satisfied with the substitutionary blood atonement of his Son, just as he was with the Passover blood in Egypt (1 Corinthians 5:7). The blood of Jesus Christ is the covering on the mercy seat that separates the believing sinner from the condemnation of the law (1 John 2:2). In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting men's sins against them but creating a new creation. The old has gone; the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:16-19)!

Faith in Christ's work results in the imputation of a new righteousness: Christ's
righteousness becomes ours. As a result, we (in Christ) can now stand before God forgiven and cleansed (Romans 5:12-21). God has made Christ to be for us our righteousness, holiness, and redemption (1 Corinthians 1:30). When we confess our sins, he is faithful to continue the forgiveness first experienced in our conversion (1 John 1:9). Beyond that, he delights in his role as advocate—the atoning sacrifice—for the believing sinner (1 John 2:2).

The cumulative impact of what Jesus Christ does for the believing sinner results in the creation of a new person empowered to taste of life in a new and healthful manner. That person is in union with Jesus Christ.

Union with Christ is really the central issue in the message to be shared with clients. Pink (1971) began his work on union with these words: "The present writer has not the least doubt in his mind that the subject of spiritual union is the most important, the most profound, and yet the most blessed of any that is set forth in the sacred scriptures" (p. 7). This new relationship, rooted in grace, is the free gift of God for all who receive it (Ephesians 2:8-9). We cannot work our way to God, for he has worked his way to us. Grace is the basic theological tenet that is at the core of all Christian ministry, especially counseling (Hindson & Eyrich, 1997; Seamands, 1989).

In the ascension of Christ, Christian counselors find a witness to his ongoing investment in the lives of the redeemed. We can share with clients that Jesus Christ, from his position at the right hand of the Father, is unceasingly praying for his people (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25). In fact,

[in Christ, the eternal Christ, who suffered, rose, ascended, who is seated now at God's right hand supreme over all the forces of the universe: in Christ, in the heavenly sphere wherein He now abides, in the region of spiritual activities, all spiritual blessing is ours: in Christ God has blessed us. (MacArthur & Mack, 1994, p. 130)]

Believing clients are encouraged by the knowledge that the One who was tempted in all things, even as they are, ascended to heaven and eternally intercedes for them. Additional encouragement comes from the reality that the ascended One is coming again as Judge and ultimate righter of all wrongs. Our futures are secured by his power; we who are in the second Adam will ultimately enter into the fullness of all God intended for the first Adam (Acts 1:11; 2 Thessalonians 1:4-10). The new heaven and the new earth are the inheritance of all who are in Christ.

What a message of hope to share with anxious, troubled, and fallen people who stream into our offices. In the first Adam we all are dead, but in Christ we are made alive. Hence, we must "argue that Jesus' teachings set the agenda...for He addressed those concerns that are most fundamental to human nature and the development of wholeness within persons" (Weyerhaeuser, 1988, p. 317). Therefore, a central element in our counseling is our witness to the significance of the words and work of Jesus Christ for the client's journey toward wholeness. In giving that witness, we expectantly work to see faith awakened, hope born, and God's love flooding the lives and relationships of persons once cold and dead.

**Pneumatology: The Power and Ministry of the Holy Spirit**

When Jesus spoke to his disciples about his departure, they were deeply troubled. He comforted them by saying, "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you" (John 14:16-17, NASB).

MacArthur and Mack (1994) explain that

the word helper in verse 16 is the Greek word parakletos, meaning someone called to another's aid. It describes a spiritual attendant whose role is to offer assistance, succor, support, relief, advocacy, and guidance—a divine Counselor whose ministry to believers is to offer the very things that so many people vainly seek in therapy! (p. 134; see also chapter 2 of this book)

This is the same Holy Spirit who hovered above the waters in Genesis and brought order out of chaos (Genesis 1:2). In the Gospels, he entered the tomb where the body of the Lord Jesus lay in death, broke death's bondage, and brought Jesus back from the grip of death (Romans 1:4). He entered the womb of the Virgin Mary and, without human agency, quickened the egg in her womb, giving genesis to the God-man (Luke 1:26-38).

Our conceptualization of the resources available for empowering change in people's lives is dramatically impacted by our understanding of the Holy Spirit's power to transform (Carson, 1987; Pache, 1954; Williams, 1994). We enjoy and depend upon the presence of our empowered ally. While we may work with those who don't know God or are estranged from him, the Holy Spirit is always at work to win their hearts—convicting them of what is right and wrong and of a coming judgment (John 16:5-15). When we are working with members of the covenant community, he is the One who, from his position as indweller, empowers people for radical change. Humbled in a partnership with the divine, we must seek always to be in step with the Spirit—to not lag behind or rush ahead of him. When we work in harmony with the Spirit, we frequently witness the miracle of regeneration and subsequent transformation.
As we counsel, speaking to the hearts of broken men and women, we view all who are in Adam as prisoners of death (Ephesians 2:1-3). We believe that people come to life only through the quickening process of the new birth. The Holy Spirit alone can make one alive, implant faith in unbelieving hearts, enable the embrace of the gospel, call to the Savior, and seal us to God forever. In performing these acts, the Holy Spirit lays the foundation for the future, for the complete transformation of the people in whom we are seeking to encourage growth (2 Corinthians 3:16-18).

The Holy Spirit is just beginning his work when he invades us for the purpose of regenerating and indwelling. He comes also to equip us for ministry. He accomplishes this through the imparting of gifts as he determines (1 Corinthians 12:11). Ministering out of these gifts is a cause of great joy for Christ’s disciples, creates impact for the church in mission, and brings glory to God in his church.

The indwelling and equipping are accompanied by empowerment for ministry, spiritual warfare, and fruit bearing. This work of the Spirit empowers the believer and provides opportunity to foster loving relationships in the community of faith. The work of the Spirit occurs against the adversarial demands of the world, the flesh, and the devil. The process that follows regeneration and brings defeat to these anti-God forces is the process of sanctification.

Sanctification follows regeneration and is the process by which the Holy Spirit progressively conforms the regenerated person into the likeness of Christ (Romans 8:29; 12:1-2). It is the process by which the Spirit produces personal holiness within our hearts and lives. A major agency in sanctification is the Word of God. Jesus said to the Father, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17).

Paul commanded the Colossian believers to make certain that “the word of Christ dwell[s] in you richly” (Colossians 3:16). When we allow the Word to dwell in us richly, Colossians 3 assures us, our lives will result in singing, thankfulness, and submission. In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, we see the same results from obedience to the command to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18–6:9). The Word of God is the primary catalyst assuring that the Spirit of God is working to further the processes related to sanctification. Sadly, we, though regenerated, can limit the Spirit’s work through the choices we make. One example is when we speak corrupting words, which grieves the Holy Spirit and hinders his sanctifying work in believers’ lives (Ephesians 4:29-30).

The Holy Spirit, through regeneration and sanctification, produces spiritual and behavioral changes in people. How humbling to be allied with the One who has the power to produce such radical change in the lives of people! The Holy Spirit’s work magnifies the influence of our efforts beyond the normal and puts us in step with the desires and purposes of God.

**Ecclesiology: The Role of the Church**

Transformation as a process is hindered or fostered within the structures and resources provided by community. Transformation is a family process. In regeneration, we are connected not only to Jesus but also to his body—our new family, the church (1 Corinthians 12:13). “Fundamentally, the church of Jesus Christ is neither a building nor an organization. Rather, it is a people, a special people, a people who see themselves as standing in relationship to the God who saves them and to each other as those who share in this salvation. Stated theologically, the church is a people in covenant” (Grenz, 1994, p. 605).

The church is also a separated community. The people of God are carved out from humanity, living as God’s treasure. God’s redemptive acts in history, which parallel and portend our own redemption and deliverance, fill us with hope and form the core of our new identity (Deuteronomy 6:20-25; 7:17-26).

This identity is further shaped within the context of intimate community (John 17:6-19). In the covenant community people are cared for, encouraged, exhorted, and supported for growth in spite of their failures (Hebrews 10:24-25). For many people, this is the first experience with grace-based acts in history, which parallel and portend our own redemption and deliverance, fill us with hope and form the core of our new identity (Deuteronomy 6:20-25; 7:17-26).

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The spiritual reparenting required is often best accomplished through cell groups that assemble for the purpose of Bible study, encouragement, exhortation, worship, and the practice of a series of spiritual disciplines within a circle of accountability (Foster, 1988; Willard, 1998). In keeping with our giftedness, no member of the believing community is excused from involvement with these groups or the means of personal spiritual growth they seek to establish (Ephesians 4:14-16).

The reparenting ministry that is at the heart of discipleship is the work of the entire church. Central to the life of the covenant community is a commitment to challenge and call forth holy change. This involves a call to repentance and an openheartedness that accompanies confession and repentance for wrongs committed (2 Corinthians 6:11–7:16).

Reparenting fallen sinners, who have inherited sin patterns from the Adamic connection and from sinful family systems, is difficult work. It requires a community focused on establishing in its members behaviors that imitate the standards established in the second Adam. It requires submission to and partnership with caring members of the body of Christ who speak lovingly but truthfully to sin issues while jealously guarding the flame ignited in salvation (Ephesians 4:20-32). These guardians of the flame are an open-hearted, transparent, and prayerful...
group who are dominated by a vision for the restoration and maturity of the one-
time offender (Isaiah 42:3; Luke 17:4; Galatians 6:1).

As a result, various approaches must be employed with different members of
the body. “The entire process of helping needs to be adapted to the status and
needs of the client” (Egan, 1998, p. 62). The unruly need to be confronted and
rebuked. They have made an idol of their own opinions. The timid (the “little of
soul”), like Timothy, need to be comforted. It is inappropriate to begin by rebuk­­
ing Timothys for timidity and fear; they first require words of encouragement.
The weak require a commitment of God’s family to support them through the
myriad challenges related to overcoming a life-dominating sin. All of these kinds
of people will require large doses of patience from fellow members of the body
(1 Thessalonians 5:14).

Having heard God’s marching orders given in the Great Commission
(Matthew 28:19-20), we understand, perhaps better than many in the present-day
church, that the army is hurting. “People today are much more wounded. They
suffer from relationship wounds (consider the high percentage of marriages that
end in divorce); emotional wounds (broken, dysfunctional families leave long
trails); the wounds of abuse (sexual abuse alone has been perpetrated upon one
quarter of all female baby boomers); the wounds of drug and alcohol addiction;
and so much more” (Murren, 1991, p. 220). The church must awaken to the care
of the family and to a renewed focus on discipleship that meets the needs of people
where they really are and not where we would like them to be.

Eschatology: A Secured Future
As Jesus taught in John 14:1-6, much of counseling is helping people see and live
beyond their circumstances, which is a top-down perspective. Who doesn’t wish
for a better tomorrow? Frankl (1984) learned the stark reality of this truth in a Nazi
concentration camp:

The prisoner who had lost faith in the future—his future—was doomed.
With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let
himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay. Usually
this happened quite suddenly, in the form of a crisis, the symptoms of
which were familiar to the experienced camp inmate. We all feared this
moment—not for ourselves, which would have been pointless, but for our
friends. Usually it began with the prisoner refusing one morning to get
dressed and wash or to go out on the parade grounds. No entreaties, no
blows, no threats had any effect. He just lay there, hardly moving. If this
crisis was brought about by an illness, he refused to be taken to the sickbay
or to do anything to help himself. He simply gave up. There he remained,
lying in his own excreta, and nothing bothered him anymore. (p. 83)

Grasping the idea of a certain future secured for us through the finished work
of Jesus Christ removes the fear and anxiety, rooted in uncertainties, regarding our
tomorrows. “All predicates of Christ not only say who he was and is, but imply
statements as to who he will be and what is to be expected from him. They all say:
‘He is our hope’ (Colossians 1:27). Hope’s statements of promise anticipate the
future. In the promises, the hidden future already announces itself and exerts influ­­
ence on the present through the hope it awakens” (Moltmann, 1993, p. 18). Hope
allows the present to be filled with the shalom that God provides for those who are
at rest in his sovereignty, promises, and faithfulness.

Hebrews 11 is commonly called the “faith hall of fame” chapter in the Bible.
It contains the records of the lives and actions of people of faith. Each one was able,
by faith, to reach into a yet unrealized future and live as if God’s promises were
present experience. “They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them
and welcomed them from a distance” (Hebrews 11:13). This pulling of a prom­­
ised future into the present transformed the way in which these people experienced
the circumstances of their lives.

Paul referenced this transformation when he said, “Brothers, we do not want
you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who
have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). It is understood that believers who lose loved
ones will experience grief, but they will not experience it like their unconverted
peers. Hope promises a trumpet in the future, and a returning Jesus who will unite
all who are in him for a joyful experience of eternity in his presence. This future
reality transforms the believer’s experience of something as painful as death.

Jesus, because of the joy he clearly saw in his future, was able to endure the
cross (Hebrews 12:1-2). Jesus understood the need of his disciples for a future. He
promised them that where he was going, he would one day take them (John
14:1-4). He promised them a future. Jonathan understood David’s need for a
future and said to him, “You will be king over Israel.... Even my father Saul knows
this” (1 Samuel 23:16-17). Paul told the Corinthians that when the earthly tent
(people) they presently occupied collapsed, they had a building of permanence in
heaven prepared for them by God (2 Corinthians 5:1-8).

Finding meaning in this life is not a luxury. We might say that meaning is a
kind of spiritual oxygen that enables our souls to live. It involves a “going
beyond” — a transcendence of whatever state we are in toward that which completes it. The meaning of present events in human life is largely a matter of what comes later. Thus, anything that “has no future” is meaningless in the human order. That is why we try to avoid it as much as possible. It stifles us. (Willard, 1998, p. 386)

The power of a secured future for healing and wholeness in the present is the heart of our message (1 Corinthians 15). Members of the family, the church of Jesus Christ, born and changed through the ministry of the Spirit, have a future— an eternal future. When we are able to help clients grasp that future, they gain a platform for assurance and stability that impacts every area of their intra- and interpersonal worlds.

**Instruments of Healing**

What an awesome God we serve! As Christian counselors positioned for powerful healing ministries in the church and in the culture, we find ourselves cooperating with the Holy Spirit as he works in the lives of the unregenerate, convicting and convincing them of the truth. Challenged to see every person perfect in Christ, we become conduits through which the Spirit leads people from death to regeneration to maturity in Christ. We have the joyful opportunity to connect people to church communities where the power of healing relationships brings freedom from habitual, hurtful relational patterns.

In your counseling, don’t neglect, stifle, or taint the work of God. Working in harmony with him, we have the privilege of engaging people in relationship with the Word of God and with the spiritual disciplines that will enrich their experience of God’s shalom.

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**Roots of Spirituality**

**Chapter 5**

Spiritual Formation in Scripture, the Church, and Counseling

Edward Hindson, George Ohlschlager, and Tim Clinton

That there is a crying need for the recovery of the devotional life cannot be denied. If anything characterizes life in the modern church, it is the absence of spiritual discipline… Yet such disciplines form the core of the life of devotion. It is not an exaggeration to state that this is the lost dimension in modern Protestantism.

—Donald Bloesch, *The Crisis of Piety*

Tim: The room at Duke University Medical Center was charged with high emotion. It was the night before what physicians call the “new birth,” my father-in-law’s near-experimental treatment of stem cell infusion (his own cells) to halt the advancing bone-marrow cancer that was killing him. A mixture of anticipation, anxiety, confusion, occasional nervous laughter, and hope were all present as we discussed and considered the next day. Finally we stopped and prayed, asking God for peace and an abiding sense of his presence in our midst.

Immediately the Spirit of God came upon us all, filling the room and calming us, offering joy, hope, and relief. In that moment we all looked at one another in wonder—it was clear that everyone there knew the presence of God was upon us. The anxiety, confusion, and fear washed out of that room like dirt washed down a drain, and we praised God and gave him thanks for his wonderful love and care shown to us that night.

God cares for us (1 Peter 5:7) and longs to be in relationship with each one of his human creation. He longs to know us and to be known intimately by us. We are the beloved of God. We are God’s loving workmanship, for if anyone be in Christ he is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). “While God loves us just the way we are, he loves us too much to leave us that way. Because he loves us he wants to see us ‘become like his Son’ (Romans 8:29)” (Oliver, Hasz, & Richburg, 1997, p. 17).