Theology for Better Counseling

Trinitarian Reflections for Healing and Formation

Second Edition

Virginia Todd Holeman

ivp | InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
www.ivpress.com

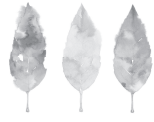
Contents

1

Is All This Fuss About Theology Really Necessary?

Give me the enlarged desire,
And open, Lord, my soul,
Thy own fullness to require,
And comprehend the whole;
Stretch my faith's capacity
Wider, and yet wider still
Then, with all that is in Thee
My soul forever fill!

Charles Wesley (1707–1788),
"Give Me the Enlarged Desire"



I confess. For the years I worked as a licensed professional counselor, I gave no thought to *serious* theological reflection. I had been trained in Christian counseling. I was biblically literate. What more did I need? To me serious theology was dry, dull, boring, and seemingly irrelevant to my everyday life. The topics I assumed interested *real* theologians

held no interest for me. I found little place for serious theology in the midst of my clinical work. God forgive me for my ignorance and naiveté.

A little background information will help you appreciate the full extent of my confession. Before I became a licensed professional counselor, I had earned a degree in Christian ministries. I had to take a few courses in theological and biblical studies as part of my curriculum. The theology courses covered the major doctrinal categories in a systematic way. That is, I learned about the doctrine of God (theology proper), of Christ (Christology), of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology), of the church (ecclesiology), and so forth. My biblical studies classes presented overviews of Old and New Testament. Upon graduation I was hired to work in a local church as its director of Christian education and youth ministries. I used the biblical knowledge and skills I had obtained in graduate school, but I rarely thought of myself as engaging in theological reflection, because in my mind I wasn't a theologian. I could state what I believed about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. I could spell and define the big theological words, such as *omnipotence*, *omnipresence*, and *omniscience*, and even some of the "-ologies"—such as *soteriology* or *eschatology*. Yet I was far more interested in practical and concrete application than systematic and philosophical theology. If one of my professors *had* told me that there was nothing more practical than good theology, *which they probably had*, I had forgotten their exhortation.

Fast-forward a few years, and I had now decided to pursue a degree in pastoral psychology and counseling at a nearby seminary. My goal was to learn all the counseling theories and techniques I could absorb and to waive as many of the required Bible and theology classes as I could get away with. I already had earned a degree from a Christian graduate school in Christian ministry, *and* I was a relatively biblically literate Christian! What more did I need? In spite of my best efforts, I did have to take several regular seminary courses as part of my counseling curriculum. I approached them begrudgingly. I did not come to study doctrine or church history. I could not possibly imagine how these classes could relate to my career as a licensed professional clinical counselor. Classes on specific

books of the Bible were okay. I could see how additional biblical knowledge could fit into my counseling tool bag. But I had no room for more formal theological studies, and I was not challenged to read theological works within my counseling courses. I thought it was enough that I had mastered the model my program taught to me that integrated Christianity and counseling.

Upon graduation, I worked in a Christian counseling practice. As was appropriate and with my clients' permission, I used the Bible, the Christian counseling model I had learned, and books written by other Christian mental health professionals to augment my work with clients. If asked, I would affirm that I counseled from a Christian worldview or that I was a Christian counselor. For the most part that was adequate for the day. Yet there were times when my clients pressed me for more—when they asked important questions that arose from their life circumstances. "Where was God while I was being raped when I was a missionary?" "How could God let this tragedy happen to my loved one?" Some of my clients struggled with *wanting* to forgive someone who had hurt them deeply and unjustly but *could not do so* at that time. They wondered whether God would reject them. Other clients no longer wanted to be threatened or beaten in their own home. They knew God hated divorce, and they felt guilty for contemplating divorce from their abusive and unrepentant spouse. They desperately wanted to obey God, but they also wondered whether that implied God had assigned spouse abuse as their particular cross to bear.

These clients labored to make Christian sense of their suffering, and they were asking for my help. They were not asking for a seminar on theology *but were, in fact, asking hard theological questions*. They agonized over a disconnection between their assumptions of what they believed God *could or should* do for them and their present painful circumstances. Some wrestled with the problem of evil and the justice of God, or the question of theodicy. Others were confounded by a theological dissonance between their understanding of God's sovereignty and their experience of being "trespassed against" severely and unjustly. From one perspective, these clients were living with a conflict between their explicit

knowledge of God and the Christian life and their implicit knowledge of living as followers of Jesus. What had happened to them or their loved ones just did not fit with their "in the bones" understanding of God. As a result they experienced a kind of *theological disequilibrium* or a *theological cognitive dissonance*, which left them discouraged, disoriented, and often distraught.[1] By the grace of God I was able to walk beside my clients as they journeyed through these unexplored and unwelcome theological places. I wish I could say these experiences drove me to read theology more deeply and more personally. They didn't. I was at a point in my professional development where I had a greater craving for more techniques in my counseling toolkit than I had a desire for more theology for clinical reflection.

A few more years and a doctoral degree later, I accepted a faculty position at Asbury Theological Seminary. Here I met my theological Waterloo. I came face-to-face with the realization that I had skated by with *thin* theological reflection for years. If I was going to teach in a counseling program that took theological integration seriously, then I had some important study and personal growth ahead of me. The language of theology is different from that of therapy, and I applied myself to learn this new lingo and to let this new language seep into the core of my being to help me become more of the person (and clinician) God was calling me to become. Broadening my explicit study of theology and biblical study went hand in hand with deepening my relationship with God. I experienced a kind of conversion of my imagination, a "transformation of ideals and perceptions, and a resocialization into a new community of reference and faithfulness."[2]

I began to read books written by *real* theologians. I also formed friendships with faculty colleagues whose areas of expertise were theology or

[1]LeRon Shults and Steven Sandage present a model of spiritual transformation that explores the dynamics of spiritual seeking and dwelling. Life crises, such as the kind that many clients experience, eject them out of spiritual comfort/safety (dwelling) and onto a path of seeking. See Shults and Sandage, *Transforming Spirituality: Integrating Theology and Psychology* (Baker Academic, 2006), 33.

[2]Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Context* (InterVarsity Press, 2011), 88.

biblical studies. Many of these friends also were interested in interdisciplinary dialogue, so while I helped them understand my world of counseling, they helped me understand their world of theological and biblical study. Several of them were kind enough to review things I wrote for publication. I wanted to be sure I represented their discipline correctly. I was becoming more theologically fluent and was able to translate thick theological concepts into everyday language and life for myself, my clients, and my students. Finally I began to think and live theologically at an enriched level.

Lest I misrepresent the scope of my theological forays, I didn't read *everything* in theology (I still find philosophical theology most challenging to understand). Instead I attended to theological topics that resonated with clinical issues and personal interests. The theological and therapeutic turn toward relationality is an example of this kind of convergence.[3] As postmodern therapies and neuroscientific discoveries deepened my understanding of self-identity as "person-in-relationship," theologians expanded my understanding of the Trinity as "divine-person-in-relationship."[4] Theological perspectives on human relationships enriched my study of individual, couples, and family counseling.[5] Several theologians explored theologies of Christian forgiveness at the same time that I was involved with empirical studies on psychological forgiveness.[6]

[3]Therapeutically, the turn toward relationality is seen in an emphasis on the quality of the counseling relationship as a common factor in successful therapy across diverse therapeutic approaches. (I will say more about this in subsequent chapters.) It is also reflected in therapeutic approaches that emphasize attachment theory, such as emotionally focused couples therapy and contemporary psychodynamic therapies. Theologically, you can read more about this in F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Eerdmans, 2003); Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Westminster John Knox, 2001).

[4]For instance, see Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind* (Guilford, 1999); Louis Cozolino, *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy* (W. W. Norton, 2002); Cozolino, *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships* (W. W. Norton, 2006); Barbara Bradley Hagerty, *Fingerprints of God: The Search for the Science of Spirituality* (Riverhead Books, 2009); Warren Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Malony, eds., *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature* (Fortress, 1998); Joel B. Green, ed., *What About the Soul? Neuroscience and Christian Anthropology* (Abingdon, 2004).

[5]Grenz, *Social God and the Relational Self*.

[6]Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Pilgrim, 1997); Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness* (Eerdmans, 1995); Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Abingdon, 1996).

Biblical and theological work on God's justice resonated with my interest in counseling as a form of advocacy for social justice.[7] Other theologians wrestled with human suffering in light of the goodness of God, which contributed to my work with crisis and trauma counseling.[8] Today I could no more think of counseling without a solid theological foundation than I could imagine consulting a medical doctor who had only a rudimentary understanding of anatomy.

Perhaps aspects of your story are similar to mine. You might be a counseling student in a Christian counseling program. You love your counseling classes, and you may tolerate classes outside your discipline (especially if they happen to be theology, biblical study, or church history). Or you could be a licensed mental health professional or a pastor, and you want to strengthen your ability to weave your Christian faith into your counseling practice. On the other hand, you could be a person who is keenly interested in anything related to the integration of counseling and theology.

My first goal in this book is to awaken in you a desire to drink deeply from theological wells so you will be as well-formed theologically as you are clinically. To that end I encourage you to read broadly to become as fluent as possible in your own theological tradition and become as knowledgeable as possible about others. That way you may have a better sense of which theological stream a particular author swims in (e.g., Anabaptist, Baptist, Lutheran, Reformed, Catholic, Wesleyan).[9] If you think through the content of the books on your shelf that speak to the integration of Christian theology and psychology or counseling, authors may or may not make their theological home base explicitly known. And most readers do not mind this at all.

Yet paying closer attention to the particularity of one's theological roots has benefits. In this way you not only know the degree of commonality that different theologies share, but you also become more alert to their

[7]N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (InterVarsity Press, 2009).
[8]Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering* (Augsburg Fortress, 1975).
[9]Hugh T. Kerr, ed., *Readings in Christian Thought* (Abingdon, 1990).

distinctiveness (some subtle and some not so subtle)—which can become a therapeutic hidden bias, especially when clients give consent for the integration of spirituality in their counseling. It is beyond the scope of this work to highlight the uniqueness found in the major or minor streams of Christianity. But I can use information from my own theological home to serve as an example. I hope you will be inspired to deepen your own spiritual walk as you learn more about mine and that you will be challenged to turn to some of the primary sources from your theological home base.

So in the interest of informed consent—my theological orientation is found among the family of theologies that arose from the teachings of John Wesley (1703–1791). Wesley was an eighteenth-century Anglican clergyman who called attention to "practical divinity," or practical theology in today's lingo. Some readers may remember that Wesley's Methodist movement brought about a revival of sorts in eighteenth-century England. Where Wesley's own Anglican Church concentrated its ministry on the well-to-do, Wesley risked ecclesial wrath and took the gospel message *to* the common person, *to* the highways and byways, *to* the poor as well as the rich.[10] He emphasized the importance of interpersonal relationships for spiritual growth. He developed discipleship groups and trained the laity (men and women) to be small group leaders.[11] These commitments resonate with twenty-first-century therapeutic commitments to social justice and community counseling models.[12] Since the 1990s a number of mental health professionals have been writing about the relationships between psychology/counseling and Wesleyan theology.[13]

---

[10]Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Abingdon, 2007).

[11]Warren S. Brown, Sarah D. Marion, and Brad D. Strawn, "Human Relationality, Spiritual Formation, and Wesleyan Communities," in *Wesleyan Theology and Social Science: The Dance of Practical Divinity and Discovery*, ed. M. Kathryn Armistead, Brad D. Strawn, and Ronald W. Wright (Cambridge Scholars, 2010).

[12]Judith A. Lewis, Michael D. Lewis, Judy A. Daniels, and Michael J. D'Andrea, *Community Counseling: A Multicultural-Social Justice Perspective*, 4th ed. (Brooks/Cole, 2011).

[13]For example, see H. Newton Malony, "John Wesley and Psychology," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 18 (1999): 5-18; Brad D. Strawn and Michael G. Leffel, "John Wesley's Orthokardia and Harry Guntrip's 'Heart of the Personal': Convergent Aims and Complementary Practices in

John Wesley was a man of God with an overarching concern for *lived* Christianity. His dual emphasis on "knowledge and vital piety" combined his unswerving commitment to the significance of scriptural truth in the believer's life (personal holiness) with his unswerving commitment to the centrality of *communal* practices of a lived faith in the church's life and mission (social holiness). Although Wesley read widely and wrote ceaselessly, he never published a theological magnum opus. Instead Wesley embedded his theology of God in his sermons and tracts, in his notes on Scripture, and in his copious correspondence with his colleagues, congregants, and critics. Wesley discussed theology in everyday terms, highlighting the concrete difference being a follower of Jesus *should and could* make in one's life. Wesley considered theology a matter of "practical" or "experimental divinity."

Do not confuse Wesley's use of the term *experimental* with our notion of hypothesis testing. Think more of *experiential* than experimental. A notation in the *Wesley Study Bible* provides this comment on John Wesley's use of experience:

> John Wesley's theology, while grounded in Scripture, grew from experience—his and that of others. In the Church of England during Wesley's time, Christians drew upon three sources to discern questions of faith and life: Scripture, tradition (particularly the early history of the church), and reason. To these three, Wesley added, or at least emphasized, experience as a source, highlighting awareness of God's presence and work in the lives of individuals.[14]

Contemporary Wesleyan scholar Ken Collins clarifies that for Wesley "experimental or practical divinity is participatory and engaging. It entails nothing less than the actualization and verification of the truths of Scripture with respect to inward religion (by grace through faith) within

Psychotherapy and Spiritual Formation," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 20 (2001): 351-59; *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 24, no. 2 (2004), for a special section dealing with psychology and Wesleyan theology; Armistead, Strawn, and Wright, *Wesleyan Theology and Social Science*; B. D. Strawn, R. W. Wright, and P. Jones, "Tradition-Based Integration: Illuminating the Stories and Practices That Shape Our Integrative Imagination," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 33, no. 4 (2014): 300-310; Virginia T. Holeman and Anthony J. Headley, "Integration Based upon Wesleyan Theology," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 33 (2014): 335-43.

[14]Joel B. Green and William H. Willimon, eds., *The Wesley Study Bible (NRSV)* (Abingdon, 2009), 547.

the context of the Christian community."[15] Wesley longed for people to experience the *objective reality* of God's amazing love for humanity as revealed to us through the living Word (Jesus Christ) and the written Word (the Bible), and as made known to us through the Holy Spirit. When people received God's love, transformation happened—God's love spilling over in the lives of ordinary men and women in acts of love for their neighbor as a testimony to and as a result of their love for God.

Wesley's emphasis on *practical* divinity is a good fit for theologically reflective counseling. Counseling is one avenue through which Christian mental health professionals can assist others in the process of opening their lives more fully to God *by helping them remove the barriers that get in their way of receiving and sharing God's love*. We typically refer to those barriers as counseling goals. Counselors are *specialists in applied sanctification* when they help Christian clients conform their lives more closely to the image of God. To borrow a Wesleyan term, counseling can function as a *means of grace*, a process through which God can pour God's love into human lives.[16]

The "early Methodists did not emphasize beliefs that differed from other Christian traditions."[17] Like John Calvin (1509–1564), Wesley believed theology was meant to affect the extent to which Christians were able to love God and others *in this lifetime*. And like Calvin, Wesley called people to repent of their sins, to receive God's forgiveness through the cross of Jesus Christ, and to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Wesley was keenly interested in people experiencing the assurance of salvation in their life *and* conforming their life to the heart of God (and not the world; Rom 12:1-2).[18] However, unlike Calvin, Wesley never got around to organizing his theological teaching in a systematic way (e.g., Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*). Instead, as noted above, Wesley liberally wove

[15]Collins, *Theology of John Wesley,* 2.

[16]Brad D. Strawn, "Restoring Moral Affections of Heart: How Does Psychotherapy Cure?," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 23, no. 2 (2004): 140-48.

[17]Green and Willimon, *Wesley Study Bible*, 860.

[18]For differences between Calvinism and John Wesley, see Robert A. Peterson and Michael D. Williams, *Why I Am Not an Arminian* (InterVarsity Press, 2004); Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (InterVarsity Press, 2004).

theology into his sermons, hymns, and many letters. He was so steeped in theology and biblical study that it oozed out when he responded to everyday questions from parishioners. Thinking theologically was as natural to Wesley as breathing. And while we would expect this kind of theological fluency from clergy (such as Wesley), my hope is that Christians who counsel would aspire to a greater degree of theological fluency after reading this book.

In each chapter ahead I develop a section on theological concepts that resonate with clinical concerns. I dip into Wesley's writings at this point. Christians are theologically situated in the same way that they are culturally situated. And unless you work in a theological setting (such as a church or seminary), few of us have had the time, resources, opportunity, obligation, or interest to heighten our awareness of the roots of our theological beliefs and to see how these roots shape our theology. So rather than offer you only generic Christianity in the theological sections, I model how a particular theological starting point brings richness to clinical thinking.

I certainly have not arrived—that is, I am not "bilingual." But I have been working on increasing my theological vocabulary and conversational skills—personally and clinically. To give you an idea of what this looks like in therapy, I include a section on theological reflection in the chapters that focus on application (chaps. 3-8). In these sections I explore theological foundations in general and highlight some Wesleyan perspectives in particular. This explicit use of theology may be a new experience for some readers, and John Wesley is one theologian who does not usually get much air time in Christian counseling texts. Trust me, I am not trying you convert you to Wesleyanism! Instead, I am trying to demonstrate how one's theology shapes counseling. So when you come across a theological concept that is new to you or newly framed, I invite you to name and to consider what your own particular theological understandings are and to reflect on how they may influence your work with clients, especially Christian clients.

My second goal is to present a process model for theologically reflective counseling that will help you to bring theological insights into your work with clients. This model is not based in any specific theological tradition, nor is it attached to any particular theory of counseling. However, one's openness to the work of the Holy Spirit, one's own spiritual formation, and one's theological, ethical, and therapeutic commitments are essential prerequisites for its implementation. I will discuss each of these components more fully in a later section of this chapter. In many respects the model might be considered a type of *meta*model of integrative counseling. I have based the therapeutic scaffolding for it on a common-factors model for couples and family counseling developed by Sean D. Davis.[19] What is new is the way this metamodel, which Davis applied to systemic therapy, provides means for the practical integration of theology into counseling. The model does not dictate the specific therapeutic moves one makes. Instead, it highlights general therapeutic processes that become avenues through which you may hear a client's presenting problem, frame that problem in light of salient theological categories or themes, and bring those theological reflections to bear in the client's work (with the client's permission). In chapters three through eight I highlight selected therapeutic issues that resonate with theological categories and show you how I would apply the model to these client concerns.

A Peek into the Educational Process for Christian Practitioners

Christians pursue training as professional counselors, social workers, marriage and family therapists, psychologists, and so on. The skills for theologically reflective counseling in any of these allied fields often begin in one's master's program. I knew what I had experienced as a master of arts student, and I knew what we did at Asbury Theological Seminary to help our counseling students become theologically reflective practitioners. I was curious to know how other counselor-education programs taught

[19]Douglas H. Sprenkle, Sean D. Davis, and Jay L. Lebow, *Common Factors in Couple and Family Therapy* (Guilford, 2009).

their students how to do on-the-ground theological integration. A few years ago I had the privilege of interviewing faculty and students at seven Christian institutions of higher education (universities or seminaries) that offer master of arts degrees in counseling or marriage and family therapy.[20] I asked faculty how they defined *integration* and how they went about teaching students to be integrative practitioners. I asked students where they experienced integration in their counseling program, how they learned how to do integrative counseling, and what additional educational experiences they would like to have before graduation.

Common teaching strategies emerged from my interviews. Counseling faculty offered prayer and devotional readings in the classroom. Instructors used these practices to heighten students' awareness of the presence of God in their midst as a way to model integration.[21] The counseling students I interviewed identified these as important practices in their own spiritual development. Professors assigned textbooks written by other Christian mental health professionals that combined theology and psychology. Faculty engaged students in theological reflection through classroom discussion and written course assignments. This gave students an opportunity to stretch their theological wings prior to working directly with clients. By and large, counselor-education faculty affirmed that practicum and internship were critical locations for learning practical integration skills. Discussion about on-the-ground integration took place in on-campus practicum/internship group supervision as program faculty reviewed students' counseling audio or video tapes. Research by Randall Sorensen and colleagues supports the importance of personal relationship with mentors who model integration for counselors who are

[20]This research was supported by a generous grant from the 2007–2008 Mid-Career Faculty Colloquy through the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theological Education, Crawsfordsville, Indiana.

[21]Mark R. McMinn, Gary W. Moon, and Angela G. McCormick, "Integration in the Classroom: Ten Teaching Strategies," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 37, no. 1 (2009): 39-47; Jennifer S. Ripley, Fernando Garzon, M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, and Michael W. Mangis, "Pilgrims' Progress: Faculty and University Factors in Graduate Student Integration of Faith and Profession," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 37, no. 1 (2009): 5-14; Terry S. Watson and Elisha Eveleigh, "Teaching Psychological Theories: Integration Tasks and Teaching Strategies," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 42, no. 2 (2014): 200-210.

developing integration skills.[22] Faculty also acknowledged that the integrative skill levels of the onsite practicum or internship supervisors varied greatly and that the students who had field placements in secular settings had little or no opportunity to practice overt integration on site.

Differences in programs surfaced. While all counseling programs tracked students' clinical development, two of the schools had additional processes in place to mentor students' personal and spiritual formation. Although all programs claimed they wove integrative perspectives throughout students' counselor-education program, some schools offered a specific course on the integration of theology and counseling. At seminary-based counselor-education programs students were required to take courses in biblical studies, theology, and church history (the seminary equivalent to general education courses). Seminary-based counseling faculty relied on these courses to introduce students to the content they would need from these disciplines so the students had something more to integrate than what they brought with them into their program. Nevertheless, seminary-based counselor educators acknowledged that in spite of these course requirements, students' ability to build bridges between theology and clinical practice was rudimentary at best.

Differences among students also emerged. Entry-level students had a dissimilar picture of integration from graduating students. New students longed for less theory and theology, and more specific how-tos. They wanted to know how to explicitly integrate Christian beliefs and practices with counseling. Their desire for more distinctly Christian counseling interventions was most likely a reflection of their level of professional development.[23] More advanced students voiced an internalized process of integration and were more likely to report that integration happened

[22]Randall Lehmann Sorenson, Kimberly R. Derflinger, Rodger K. Bufford, and Mark R. McMinn, "National Collaborative Research on How Students Learn Integration: Final Report," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 23, no. 4 (2004): 355-65.

[23]For a discussion on a developmental model of counselor formation, see Cal D. Stoltenberg and Ursula Delworth, *Supervising Counselors and Therapists: A Developmental Approach* (Jossey-Bass, 1987). For information on the scope and shape of explicit and implicit integration, see Siang-Yang Tan, "Christian Faith in Clinical Practice: Implicit and Explicit Integration," in *Counseling and Psychotherapy: A Christian Perspective* (Baker Academic, 2011), 339-62.

"within the person of the counselor." These students had moved from a focus on explicit "Christian" strategies to a concentration on an implicit embodiment of theological realities in terms of *who they were* as counselors and in *how they related* to clients. This represents a shift in emphasis from an accumulation of *Christian information* to the personal and *spiritual formation of the therapist*.

These findings reflect those reported by M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall and colleagues. These researchers conducted a qualitative study to discern student perspectives on integration. They discovered that integration was facilitated through a caring, open-minded faculty, the intentional inclusion of integration within the curriculum, and an institutional climate that modeled the integration of faith and learning. Students embraced integration as a concept through its presentation as propositional content, as an embodied reality, and as a practice.[24]

One thing that stood out to me throughout these conversations was that little, if any, theological reading, *written by theologians*, arose as an important ingredient in counseling courses on the master's level. Two explanations for this come to mind. First, I can testify to the difficulty of finding theologically oriented books to use in counseling courses that were (1) written by a theologian and (2) readily understandable by my nontheologian counseling students.[25] Theology has its own language and style of presentation, and many of my counseling students find theology books difficult to digest (not impossible, just more challenging than their counseling books). Second, sophisticated integration demands that one develop expertise in three disciplines: counseling theories/techniques,

[24]M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, Jennifer S. Ripley, Fernando L. Garzon, and Michael W. Mangis, "The Other Side of the Podium: Student Perspective on Learning Integration," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 37, no. 1 (2009): 15-27.

[25]Theologically oriented counseling texts tend to be coauthored by a counselor or psychologist and a theologian/philosopher. See, for example, John H. Coe and Todd W. Hall, *Psychology in the Spirit: Contours of a Transformational Psychology* (InterVarsity Press, 2010); Shults and Sandage, *Transforming Spirituality*. Three exceptions to this include Kent J. Dunnington, *Addiction and Virtue: Beyond the Models of Disease and Choice* (InterVarsity Press, 2011); Mark H. Mann, *Perfecting Grace: Holiness, Human Being, and the Sciences* (T&T Clark, 2006); and David L. Thompson and Gina Thompson Eickoff, *God's Healing for Hurting Families: Biblical Principles for Reconciliation and Recovery* (Wesleyan Publishing House, 2004).

theology, and biblical studies. Counseling faculty would love to include additional coursework in theology and biblical studies within their degree plans, but they find this just about impossible to do. Within a sixty-semester-hour degree plan, state licensure requirements may account for all sixty hours—and theology and biblical studies courses are not on state licensure boards' radar screens.[26] Students want to become skilled counselors, eligible for licensure. They do not necessarily see themselves as theologians even though they want to become Christian counselors. This places the burden for growing in theological sophistication on the graduate.

I acknowledge that my institutional sample was small (N = 7) and confined to master's-level programs. The schools I visited were not obscure institutions of Christian higher education but schools that tend to be well-known and well-respected in the Christian counseling and psychology community. Nonetheless, these conclusions must be held lightly until further study supports or challenges them. The bottom line: Academic preparation provides a *baseline* for theological reflection and integration. Implication: To develop greater proficiency, counselors need to read theology *after* graduation, and they need a process for transferring theological insights into clinical practice.

What Kind of Theologian Are You Becoming?

Perhaps one of the reasons theology is not more fully embraced (and studied) by counseling professionals is that they may not have developed a large enough picture of theology's sweeping landscape.[27] That certainly

[26]Professional counseling license regulations are determined by each of the fifty states.

[27]Christopher R. Grace and Paul L. Poelstra, "Excellence in Pedagogy: Some Obstacles to Integration for the Christian Psychology Professor," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 23, no. 4 (1995): 237-43. While theological training is not a particular concern in secular counselor education or in training professional psychologists, readers may be interested in the following studies on religion, spirituality, and mental health professionals: Harold D. Delaney, William R. Miller, and Ana M. Bisonó, "Religiosity and Spirituality Among Psychologists: A Survey of Clinician Members of the American Psychological Association," *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 38, no. 5 (2007): 538-46, https://doi.org/10.1037/0735-7028.38.5.538; Mark R. McMinn, William L. Hathaway, Scott W. Woods, and Kimberly N. Snow, "What American Psychological Association Leaders Have to Say About *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 1

would have been my story. My counseling professors during my master's program clearly were theologically proficient (the majority having seminary education), but I did not know *what theological source material* they drew on to construct the models presented in class. I learned the models but not their process for bridging the gap between the disciplines of theology and psychology. The only theology I had been introduced to formally in my counselor training was systematic theology, and in my myopic view that boiled down to the memorization of doctrine. What I had not remembered was the classic definition of theology: *faith seeking understanding*. This is indeed what many clients struggle to do when they are angry at or disappointed in God.[28] So my restricted definition of theology limited my interest in learning more.

Today I have a broader picture of theology, its purpose, and its tasks. For example, Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson define theology in this way: "Christian theology is reflecting on and articulating the God-centered life and beliefs that Christians share as followers of Jesus Christ, and it is done in order that God may be glorified in all Christians are and do."[29] Christian theology has a particular content (God and the God-centered life) that is derived from particular source materials (the Bible, church history, and Christian traditions) for particular purposes (so God may be glorified through the way Christ's followers live). In the broadest sense, *theology shapes who we are and how we live* by helping us better understand who God is and how we can live together as members of God's family in this world God created and loves. Missiologist Andrew Walls offers this insightful summation:

(2009): 3-13, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014991; Eugene W. Kelly Jr., "The Role of Religion and Spirituality in Counselor Education: A National Survey," *Counseling and Values* 33, no. 4 (1994): 227-37.

[28]Julie J. Exline, "Stumbling Blocks on the Religious Road: Fractured Relationships, Nagging Vices and the Inner Struggle to Believe," *Psychological Inquiry* 13, no. 3 (2002): 182-89, https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1303_03; Julie J. Exline, Ann Marie Yali, and Marci Lobel, "When God Disappoints: Difficulty Forgiving God and Its Role in Negative Emotions," *Journal of Health Psychology* 4, no. 3 (1999): 365-79, https://doi.org/10.1177/135910539900400306.

[29]Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Who Needs Theology? An Invitation to the Study of God* (InterVarsity Press, 1996), 49.

> Theology springs out of mission; its true origins lie not in the study or the library, but from the need to make Christian decisions—decisions about what to do, and about what to think. Theology is the attempt to think in a Christian way, to make Christian intellectual choices. Its subject matter, therefore, its agenda, is culturally conditioned, arising out of the actual life situations of active Christians.[30]

Walls's definition highlights the dynamic relationship between theological reflection and Christian living—*real life* is the context out of which a practical theology arises. To help our Christian clients make Christian decisions about "what to do and what to think," counselors need to be able to think theologically.

Grenz and Olson describe theology's two tasks. The first is a *critical* task. Theology analyzes and appraises existing beliefs about God, humanity, and the world in light of the biblical message and historic Christian traditions.[31] Some of these beliefs are affirmed by orthodox Christians throughout the ages, while others become salient to one denomination but not another. This is the stuff of systematic theology and doctrine—to which I had been exposed in my master's education. However, theology has a second *constructive* task. This is the "how shall we then live" side of theology. And this is the task that connects so well to theologically reflective counseling. It is the theological task that speaks to one's present situation, which helps to connect what we believe with how we should live as the people of God during our times of trouble in our various culturally bounded contexts. This makes theological reflection relevant to people in the culture they live in, and it allows Christian truths to challenge and change the very culture it speaks to.

Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green clarify this task as follows: "The theological task is in some ways a balancing act, in which we are asked to go

[30]Andrew F. Walls, "Afterword: Christian Mission in a Five-Hundred-Year Context," in *Mission in the Twenty-First Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission*, ed. Andrew F. Walls and Cathy Ross (Orbis, 2008), 203.

[31]Categories of systematic theology include the study of God, of Christ (Christology), of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology), of the church (ecclesiology), of salvation (soteriology), of the end times (eschatology), etc.

beyond the insights of Scripture in order to address ever-unfolding challenges while at the same time ensuring that our extensions of the biblical witness are consonant with the central insights of Scripture."[32] This is a description of what we do as Christian counselors when we consider how theologically oriented clinical conversations may help *this* client who lives in *this* cultural setting at *this* period of time (historically and developmentally), bringing spiritual and theological resources to bear on their specific presenting problem so Christian truths have an opportunity to challenge those aspects of clients' lives that need to be addressed.

Grenz and Olson also offer a continuum of theological thinking. Points on the continuum include folk theology, lay theology, ministerial theology, professional theology, and academic theology. As you read the description of each following point, consider where you currently place yourself along this continuum and then ask where you might like to place yourself.

At the most basic level is *folk theology*. The folk theologian is highly experiential, subjective, and pragmatic, and avoids serious theological reflection in favor of simplistic faith formulas. Think of this as bumper-sticker theology. The hallmark of this type of theology is an unswerving commitment to informal spiritual beliefs that can be boiled down to a slogan or sound bite, and a resistance or reluctance to holding these beliefs up to critical examination. Folk theology is not necessarily bad theology. The pithy sayings that weave their way throughout folk theology can be very helpful in certain situations. The spiritual motto "Let go and let God" can help a client to release their cares into God's keeping (1 Pet 5:7). And during times of trouble or emotional turmoil these elementary concepts may ground us in God. I have used the image of being held in the palm of God's hand as a source of comfort and strength (Is 49:16) when I felt like my life was out of control, and I have often repeated to myself my favorite crisis-management Bible verse "And it came to pass . . ." (Lk 2:1 NKJV) to remind myself of the temporary nature of crises (very sophisticated theology—wouldn't you say?).

[32]Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 43.

All of us start out as folk theologians. Folk theology begins in our childhood.[33] Early experiences become part of our implicit theological memory when as children we observe, experience, and wonder about the world. If we were raised in Christian faith communities, then we experienced the stories and practices of our church family, which embedded Christian theology in our bones through family participation in a local church. A growing proportion of the population lacks this kind of experience in our increasingly post-Christian world. At some point we embraced the Christian faith as our own and now seek to live in ways that are characteristic of God's redeemed people. Experiences in adulthood then expand our implicit memory, and exposure to Christian teaching enlarges our explicit theological memory.

This combination of implicit and explicit theology helps shape the kind of Christian people we become. In contexts where we have easy access to Christian literature, we have print and multimedia resources at our fingertips to help us deepen our understanding of the Christian life as we interact with members of a Christian community. This is the typical case in most areas of developed cultures (like the United States), but it is certainly not so in all parts of the world. In some developing cultures, printed Christian resources are either not available (not translated into their language) or not readily accessible (translated but expensive). In other contexts the Christian message is primarily shared orally. In orally based cultures, folk theology takes its cues from direct observation of nature and the rhythm of the seasons. So in addition to a normal reluctance or resistance to critical examination of one's faith is an inability to do so because of a lack of exposure to the more Western style of analysis and logic.[34]

---

[33]Catherine Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* (Baker Academic, 2007). See also the curriculum on Godly Play as foundational for spiritual formation of children: Godly Play Foundation, www.godlyplayfoundation.org. In addition, an emphasis on a counselor's own spiritual formation is central in the thinking of Coe and Hall in their *Psychology in the Spirit*.

[34]Ellen L. Marmon, personal communication, August 9, 2011. See also Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2002); E. L. Marmon, "Teaching

Thank God that growth in grace is not dependent on one's reading level. Some of us know saints who never learned how to read or never mastered reading well but who know God intimately, are full of wisdom, and are open channels for the Holy Spirit's work. They are the pillars of their local Christian community. Their theological education is based on lived theology, a hunger to know God more deeply, and a desire to live a life more fully aligned with God's purposes. These saints take advantage of the Christian resources available to them (e.g., guest preachers, radio programs, etc.). Unfortunately, because the printed Bible may not be available or accessible, they also do not have an opportunity to compare what they are hearing with the written Word for themselves (individually and communally), and thereby they may not identify misdirected or even false teaching about God and the Christian life.

Many of our clients are likely to function as folk theologians. Their theological boat *may* be rocking when they call for an appointment. These clients may be like the disciples in Mark 4 who experienced the storm at sea, woke up a sleeping Jesus, and asked him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" (Mk 4:38). In such cases, folk theology may turn out to be inadequate. The collision of unexplainable suffering with folk theology drives many Christians to doubt their faith. Is the counselor's theological foundation *thick* enough to provide a holding environment for clients during periods of spiritual disequilibrium? Is the counselor's theology *complex* enough to embrace life's relentless ambiguities? Is the counselor *secure* enough in their own faith development to allow that counselor to be with the client as the client wrestles with God—without the counselor feeling compelled to defend God or to fix the client's theological perspective?

The next point on the theological continuum is *lay theology*. Lay theologians study theological resources. They are proficient at asking important questions about what, why, and in whom they believe, and they are willing to name and face the theological cognitive dissonance that

Through the Lenses of Orality and Literacy: One Professor's Journey," *Religious Education* 108, no. 3 (2013): 312-27, https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2013.783363.

surfaces between what they believe and how they live. Counselors who aspire to the level of lay theology will read books written by other Christian counselors *and* books written by theologians who are engaged in theology's constructive task. This latter reading will require the Christian counselor to build therapeutic bridges between this theology and the practice of counseling.

Next is *ministerial theology*. The ministerial theologian embodies the same commitment to theological reflection as the lay theologian. The difference is that ministerial theologians have received formal training in theology and biblical studies. Ministerial theology understands how theological thinking has developed over time. Ministerial theologians are familiar with biblical languages and their study tools, and know the categories and vocabulary typically used in theological books.

The final two levels, *professional theology* and *academic theology*, are more indicative of individuals whose life work is theological writing and teaching. Professional and academic theologians serve the church by providing the kind of resources Christian counselors will use to increase their capacity to think theologically and to live a more Christ-centered life.

As you can see, the depth of explicit theological knowledge increases as one moves along the continuum. Most of us began our counselor education as folk theologians with strong Christian commitments. Coursework that included theological resources helped us to attain lay theologian status at the time of our graduation. After graduation a portion of us may have pursued additional theological education through additional study. Yet the mere accumulation of theological facts is not enough for solid theologically reflective counseling. And while I am proposing that knowing and understanding explicit theology is important, I am also affirming there is *more* to theologically reflective counseling than that. As John Coe and Todd Hall suggest in their book *Psychology in the Spirit*, theologically reflective counseling challenges us to become increasingly vivid and vibrant representatives of God's love with our clients, through who we are (implicit theology) and what we know (explicit theology).

Borrowing from the literature on critical thinking, Christian counselors can employ weak-sense or strong-sense theological thinking. Weak-sense theological thinking sees the world in fairly clear shades of black and white. Right action is always easy to identify, and sinful action is always easy to name. Theological ambiguity does not exist. Weak-sense theological thinking culminates in a caricature of biblically based counseling—a "take two verses and call me in the morning" approach to weaving God's truth into troubled human hearts. Integration is as straightforward as lining up specific Scripture verses to match particular life needs, based on an assumption that if a client knows what is right according to the Bible, the client will obey.

Several problems exist with weak-sense theological thinking. First, knowing Scripture doesn't necessarily lead to obedience. Human beings are expert in self-justification, and our ability to rationalize known sin is outstanding.[35] Second, weak-sense theological thinking fails to recognize that people engage Scripture from particular social locations and that this cultural situatedness influences how we understand God and interpret Scripture. It may assume the counselor's theology is right and other theological perspectives are wrong. Finally, weak-sense theological thinking may fail to recognize the theological position from which one *is* counseling, so it becomes a hidden theological bias. As you may have surmised, weak-sense theological thinking can happen at any point along the theological continuum and can result in the indiscriminate dispensing of theological information and advice within a counseling session.

In contrast, one can engage in strong-sense theological reflection. Here one is aware of a broad range of theological positions, topics, and perspectives. One is relatively articulate about one's theological home base and can state why one affirms these theological truths. At the same time a curiosity exists about different theological positions and how theologians wrestle with the kind of contemporary issues that clients bring to counseling. Strong-sense theological reflection is cognizant of tendencies

[35]Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made (but Not by Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts* (Harcourt, 2007).

toward theological egocentrism and ethnocentrism, and seeks to correct these inclinations through open-minded dialogue with others. Strong-sense theological reflection acts as one lens through which a counselor sees a client's story, while concurrently listening for the theological framework in which the client placed their narrative. One only needs to swallow whole the position of a perceived authority to maintain weak-sense theological thinking. Developing strong-sense theological thinking requires a willingness to tolerate theological disequilibrium as one moves from theological assimilation (making theological round pegs fit into square holes) to theological accommodation (creating new categories to allow for the newly encountered theological pegs). It unfolds through study *and* formative interactions with others. These reflective experiences (intellectual, interpersonal, and experiential) can foster Christian spiritual and moral growth.[36]

So far I have proposed that the clinical formation and competency of many Christian counselors outstrips their theological formation and competency. While the reasons for this are understandable (limited space in master's programs, the press for clinical mastery after graduation, limited opportunity for integrative theological reflection after graduation, etc.), this renders counselors vulnerable to weak-sense theological thinking in their work with clients regardless of their location on Grenz and Olson's theological continuum. Four additional factors compel me to urge Christian counselors to commit to ongoing theological reflection. Let's look at each of these factors.

Evaluating systems of therapy. One uses theology when evaluating the degree to which secular systems of therapy align with a Christian worldview. If you received your counselor education at a Christian institution of higher education, then like me you most likely relied on your course texts or your professors to help you determine the degree to which

[36]Kenneth J. Collins, "Spirituality and Critical Thinking: Are They Really So Different?," *Evangelical Journal* 16 (1998): 30-43. A similar process, that of applying differentiation of self to spiritual maturity, is discussed in Brian D. Majerus and Steven J. Sandage, "Differentiation of Self and Christian Spiritual Maturity: Social Science and Theological Integration," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 38, no. 1 (2010): 41-51.

various counseling approaches were compatible with Christianity.[37] With new systems of therapy emerging since graduation, you have to rely on your own understanding of theology to evaluate the degree to which these new approaches fit with a Christian worldview. For example, what theological conclusions have you drawn about mindfulness interventions? On the other hand, if you received your counselor education at a secular institution, then it is unlikely that any theological appraisal was presented by your professors. If spiritual or religious concerns were addressed in your counselor-education program, then Christianity was most likely presented within your course on cultural diversity along with other world religions. In this course it was more likely that Christianity *was evaluated* than it was that Christianity served as a source or standard of evaluation.[38] Theology is also useful when you evaluate approaches to *Christian* counseling. Solid theological reflection will help you to determine whether you concur with the theological premises that underlie various approaches to Christian counseling.[39]

Establishing professional competency. Professional competency is the second reason for sustained theological reflection. All professional ethics codes (e.g., AAMFT, ACA, APA, and state licensure ethics sections) require that therapists work within the scope of their training. Many states also require that counselors display a professional disclosure statement in their office that includes a list of the areas they are competent to practice in. *Competency*, however, is a vague term. If you were required to justify to a licensure board that you were competent in a

[37]For example, see S. L. Jones and R. E. Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Approach*, 2nd ed. (IVP Academic, 2011); Tan, *Counseling and Psychotherapy*; Mark A. Yarhouse and James N. Sells, *Family Therapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal*, 2nd ed. (IVP Academic, 2017).

[38]A growing literature base has developed on the integration of religion and spirituality into psychotherapy. For example, see Jamie D. Aten, Mark R. McMinn, and Everett L. Worthington, eds., *Spiritually Oriented Interventions for Counseling and Psychotherapy* (American Psychological Association, 2011); William R Miller, ed., *Integrating Spirituality into Treatment: Resources for Practitioners* (American Psychological Association, 1999); P. Scott Richards and Allen E. Bergin, *A Spiritual Strategy for Counseling and Psychotherapy*, 2nd ed. (American Psychological Association, 2005).

[39]See, for example, George R. Ross, *Evaluating Models of Christian Counseling* (Wipf & Stock, 2011); Eric L. Johnson, ed., *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views*, 2nd ed. (IVP Academic, 2010).

particular area, what would you do? Documentation of academic coursework, consultation or supervision with expert colleagues, and continuing-education units are some of the ways you might substantiate your competency.[40] What level of theological competency is necessary to offer counseling that is Christian? Clients are assured that licensed mental health professionals have met certain standards about therapeutic proficiency, but no such standard assures clients of the counselor's theological proficiency.[41]

Employing theological empathy. Third, theology is part of our work because we are *Christians* who counsel. According to Grenz and Olson, we step into theological arenas whenever we discuss questions of ultimacy. This includes questions about God, ultimate meaning, and life's purpose. While few clients seek out licensed professional counselors, marriage and family therapists, social workers, or psychologists to discuss their questions about God (pastoral counselors may see this more often), many clients' concerns revolve around issues of meaning and purpose. Earlier in this chapter I defined theology's two tasks: critical and constructive. We engage in the *constructive* task of theology as we work with theologically tinted therapeutic problems. When theological themes are on the clinical table, Christian counselors and clients seek to discern what God is saying about this *particular* issue to this *particular* client at this *particular* time. The goal is to bring theological reflection to bear on the client's clinical concerns *in collaboration* with the client.

Engaging in theological discernment. A counselor is not the only one in a counseling session with theological convictions. Christian clients bring their theological perspectives with them. Sometimes their theology

[40]Siang-Yang Tan, "Developing Integration Skills: The Role of Clinical Supervision," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 37, no. 1 (2009): 54-61.

[41]The American Association of Christian Counselors offers a certification as a Board Certified Professional Christian Counselor (BCPCC) through its Board of Christian Professional and Pastoral Counselors. For more information, see "IBCC Credential Type," Board of Christian Professional and Pastoral Counselors, www.aacc.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/IBCC_Credential_Type_CCC.pdf. The American Counseling Association has endorsed a set of spiritual competencies for counselors; see "Spiritual and Religious Competencies," American Counseling Association, https://aservic.org/spiritual-and-religious-competencies.

helps them cope. At other times their theology may be toxic. Ronnie Janoff-Bulman observes that when our fundamental beliefs about life collide with our experiences, we are thrown into an emotional tailspin.[42] We can no longer account for what has happened to us with our present understanding, and the result is shattered theological assumptions. Take a couple struggling with infertility. They may ask, "Why does God let women who abort their babies get pregnant and we can't?" Or consider clients who are suffering with clinical symptoms related to childhood sexual abuse. They might demand to know, "Where was this loving God of yours when I was being molested?" At appropriate moments, counselors can use theological reflection to help clients explore how clients' theology is interacting with their presenting problem. According to Grenz and Olson,

> Whatever it may look like, our interpretive framework comprises our fundamental belief system and constitutes our basic theology. Our belief system—our theology—therefore, stands in a reciprocal relationship to life. Theological convictions lead us to look at life the way we do and to experience the world as we do. Our life experiences, in turn, bring our theological convictions into the picture and cause us to reexamine, reevaluate and even revise our convictions about God, ourselves, and our world. . . . In the theological enterprise we consciously bring to light the interaction between beliefs and experiences. This includes exploring our beliefs in the light of our experiences. More importantly, it entails discovering the implications of that belief system for how we look at, live in, and experience the world.[43]

We bring our theological convictions into the session. What you believe about human nature and God's grace has an impact on the kind of therapist you are, the kind of therapy you offer, and the kind of meaning you make of life's trials and tribulations.[44] Your explicit and implicit theology becomes one lens through which you view the client's world. On a

[42]Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions* (Free Press, 1992).
[43]Grenz and Olson, *Who Needs Theology?*, 124-25.
[44]Richard Rice, *Suffering and the Search for Meaning*, (IVP Academic, 2014).

rational, cognitive level your explicit theology provides theological categories, themes, or concepts through which you hear clients' troubles. On a nonconscious, out-of-your-awareness level, your implicit theology prompts you to wonder, *What is God up to in my client's heart at this moment in our session?* Psychoanalysts Brad D. Strawn and Earl D. Bland call this wondering an "integrative moment." Counselors become aware of integrative moments when they operate with an "integrative mindset."[45] I will say more about Strawn and Bland's insightful framework for theological integration in the next chapter.

You draw on these foundations as you walk beside the client toward mental or relational wholeness. I believe it is possible for Christians who counsel to be therapeutically and *theologically* competent. It may mean that some will choose to take academic courses in theology, while others will read and study on their own. For all of us it means we are participating in a Christian community that will challenge us to live and think more Christianly, where theology becomes embodied in real life when emotions *and* reason are engaged.[46]

Prerequisites for Theological Reflective Counseling

While becoming more theologically literate is an important aspect of integrative counseling, knowledge alone does not an integrative counselor make. *Who the counselor is* is just as important, and this is reflected in the kind of commitments the Christian counselor brings into the session. Our spiritual, theological, and therapeutic commitments provide the delivery mechanisms for theologically reflective counseling (see fig. 1.1).[47]

Commitment to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit surrounds the counseling enterprise. When Christians counsel, the Holy Spirit precedes them into the counseling room. No human counselor can

[45]Brad D. Strawn and Earl D. Bland, *The Integrative Mindset: Pathways to Practicing as a Christian Clinician* (IVP Academic, 2025).

[46]I owe my colleague Steve Stratton a note of deep gratitude for continually highlighting the vital importance of the Christian community in the formation of theologically reflective counselors.

[47]An early version of this model emerged from conversation with Edward Decker Jr., PhD, professor of Christian counseling at Oral Roberts University.

be more interested in a client's well-being than the wonderful Counselor, the Holy Spirit. Christian counselors respond to the presence of the Spirit in their personal life, rely on the Spirit's support and guidance in their work life, and remain open vessels through which the Spirit of God can work as they recognize God's fingerprints in their clients' circumstances. Theologically, we would say it is all God's grace that truly heals. Like the great theologians before him, Wesley acknowledged and affirmed the priority of God's grace in our lives—captured in Wesley's concept of "prevenient grace." Prevenient grace is the grace from God that prepares the way for God's work in God's world, particularly God's work in human hearts. This grace "comes before any knowledge of God and informs our ability to know right from wrong and recognize sin."[48] Prevenient grace prepares Christian clients for God's intervention in the counseling process.[49] When Christian counselors work with clients who are not followers of Jesus, prevenient grace is still at work, wooing the client to take one step closer to the one true God.

Commitment to Christian formation. In biblical terms, here is where Christian counselors "go on toward perfection [maturity]" by ingesting "solid [spiritual] food," so their faculties are "trained by practice to distinguish good from evil" (Heb 5:14; see Heb 6:1). Notice how this mandate from the book of Hebrews combines explicit and implicit theological formation. It includes a foundation of basic teaching (Heb 6:1-2) or explicit theological knowledge, and the subsequent indwelling of this knowledge (training by practice) in one's being so a particular kind of fruit (discernment) is exercised at the appropriate time—a manifestation of implicit theology. This Christian formation happens within a communal context ("let *us* go on toward perfection," Heb 6:1) in which all are pressing on for a greater capacity to love God and love others ("the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints," Heb 6:10).

[48]Green and Willimon, *Wesley Study Bible*, 860.

[49]G. Michael Leffel, "Prevenient Grace and the Re-Enchantment of Nature: Toward a Wesleyan Theology of Psychotherapy and Spiritual Formation," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 23, no. 2 (2004): 130-39.

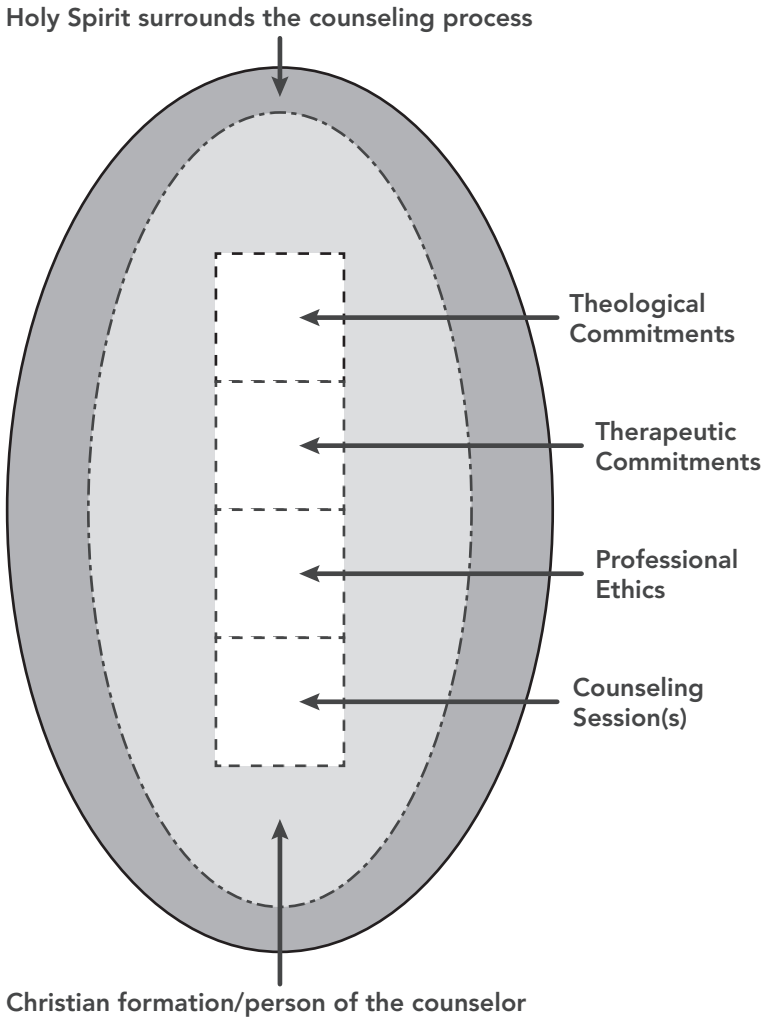


Figure 1.1. Prerequisites for theologically reflective counseling

Discipleship is one church word for this Christian formation process. If you are in Christ and are part of God's new creation (2 Cor 5:17), then you may also desire to have more of yourself transformed to Christlikeness (Rom 12:2); if you are putting away hurtful ways of relating to God and others and are putting on "the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:24), then you are

engaging in processes of Christian formation. This is a lifelong process that brings explicit and implicit theology into alignment so our lives are increasingly a fuller expression of Christlikeness. Explicit theology helps us know intellectually the foundations of our faith. When we engage in thoughtful reflection on our experiences, we grow attuned to the (in) congruence between biblical and theological precepts and our way of being (implicit theology). Ideally this ongoing cycle of action and reflection happens privately and communally.

Individual theological commitments. Theology provides a basic understanding of God and humanity that is foundational for all counseling work. The Bible and our theology help us understand God's design for human beings and their relationships. They identify the human problem and how humans can change. Christian mental health professionals will differ on the depth of theological resources on which to draw. This component may be quite thin if the counselor is a folk theologian, has little understanding of the Bible, or has done little theological study beyond what is available in the popular Christian press. On the other hand, it may be quite rich if the counselor has invested time in theological and biblical study and can function at the lay or ministerial theology level. I want to emphasize at this point that this model does not specify *which* specific theology one embraces. To that end the model is atheological, offering counselors an opportunity to ponder their own theological leanings (explicit theology) and to consider how these theological commitments may or may not influence their work with clients (implicit theology).

Individual therapeutic commitments. For most licensed professional counselors, clinical and counseling psychologists, marriage and family therapists, and clinical social workers, this area is well developed. It may be less developed for those with little formal training in counseling but who have a heart for helping hurting people in one-to-one settings (such as lay counselors). Just as the model is atheological, it is also atheoretical. Plug in your preferred way of case conceptualization. At this point counselors can ask: What degree of congruency exists between my theology and my therapeutic commitments? Is there coherence between what I

believe to be true about God and God's purpose for human relationships and how I work with clients? How do I navigate the tensions that inevitably arise between theological and therapeutic perspectives?

Professional ethical commitments. Counselors' skill in ethical decision-making will vary depending on (1) how counselors have matured in their moral formation, (2) how knowledgeable counselors are about specifics in their professional code of ethics, (3) how well-versed counselors are in thinking ethically about complex counseling cases, and (4) how competent counselors are to work with a client's presenting concern. Regarding the ethical use of explicitly Christian counseling theories and techniques, counselors must discern the following: Do clients ask for Christian counseling, giving clear consent for the use of Christian perspectives and interventions in their therapy? Do clients affirm a kind of global spirituality, desire spiritually informed counseling, but do not want counseling that is expressly Christian? Do clients reject the inclusion of religious or spiritual practices, including Christian practices, in which case counselors are limited to private theological reflection? These are salient questions if Christian counselors are to follow ethical counseling practices.

Practical implementation. All of one's Christian formation, theological reflection, clinical training, and ethical decision-making become the scaffolding that supports the session-by-session and moment-by-moment work with a client. Christian formation provides a perspective on persons and personhood that supports the Christian counselor's capacity to be with the client. The counselor is not intentionally wondering what theological point should be brought to bear on the client's problem. Instead, the counselor can lean into the Holy Spirit, trusting the Spirit will do what the Spirit does best—that is, seek for ways to remove whatever separates God from God's beloved child, the client. At this point the counselor's focus is on the client's presenting problem and the goals that are collaboratively developed to help this client meet the *client's* goals. Here is where the rubber meets the road and the nitty-gritty of integration works itself out, implicitly and explicitly.

You will observe that the boundaries between the segments are permeable (see fig. 1.1). The degree of permeability determines the extent to which data can flow. Boundaries that are too closed prevent counselors from accessing implicit and explicit theological insights. Boundaries that are too porous result in indiscriminate and even inappropriate use of explicit theology in counseling. A counselor can start with theological hunches or insights, and then consider how they align with therapeutic inclinations and ethical commitments and how they ultimately contribute to shaping one's work with clients. Or a counselor might begin with the counseling session and work through the segments by reflecting on the ethical principles that affect a therapist's decisions and by seeking additional therapeutic and theological information. The sidebar below presents questions a therapist might use for theologically sensitive case conceptualization.

If there is coherence and congruity within the theologically reflective counselor, then one can imagine the column will stand *relatively* straight, as pictured in figure 1.1. However, if a counselor's implicit and explicit theology has less connection with their therapy, then the segments may be askew. For counselors who have studied in faith-based counselor-education programs, or for those who have sought supervision in integration, it is more likely that the segments of the column are in *relative* alignment. Conversely, some counselors may have given little thought to how their theological commitments cohere (or do not cohere) with their approach to therapy.

In the following chapters I invite you to think about how *your* theological and therapeutic loyalties shape your work with clients. As I mentioned earlier, at times I will show you how my Wesleyan theological commitments inform my work from family systems, social justice, and crisis counseling perspectives as examples. In chapter two I present a model of theologically reflective practice that accounts for the features I named previously. In chapter three I explore how the connections between trinitarian theology and therapeutic common factors inform our work as theologically reflective practitioners. Chapters four through eight

apply the model of theologically reflective practice to five clinical situations. Chapter four explores how personal holiness strengthens the counselor's ability to challenge clients to assume responsibility for self. Chapter five investigates how social holiness can provide a foundation for counseling as advocacy for social justice. Chapter six discusses how the atonement calls Christian clients to consider repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation in the face of interpersonal offenses. Chapter seven considers how contemplative and meditative prayer practices can inform and provide a Christian context for the clinical application of mindfulness. Chapter eight connects one's view of the end of all things (eschatology) with meaning-making in trauma counseling.

Theologically Sensitive Case Conceptualization

Client-Presenting Concerns

1. What does an assessment of the client's spiritual/religious affinities reveal?
2. What has been the client's experience with Christianity in general and the local church or individual Christians in particular?
3. What Christian commitments does this client hold that can support their clinical work? How might these same commitments set up obstacles?

Ethical Commitments

1. To what degree does the client desire or expect explicit Christian intervention? Has the client given consent for the inclusion of spiritual/religious interventions or conversations?
2. What ethical concerns are present in this clinical situation? In what ways do my personal Christian commitments and the ethical principles of my professional affiliations coalesce or conflict? How will I model responsible and ethical practice with this client given the particulars of the situation?
3. Where am I called by the contours of this situation to act as an advocate on behalf of issues of social justice?

Therapeutic Commitments

1. What treatment approach will best serve the needs of this client?
2. What clinical practices will help clients meet their goals?
3. What spiritual/religious strategies will help this client meet their goals? Are they evidence-based approaches?[a]

Theological Commitments

1. Where might God be already at work in this client's life, especially within the context of the presenting problem?[b]
2. What theological themes relate to the client's counseling concerns?
3. What view of God does the client endorse? What does the client think about God's presence in the midst of their life as it relates to the presenting problem?
4. What Christian practices will help this client achieve their counseling goals and grow in Christian maturity?[c]
5. What characteristics of the client challenge my perception of this person as a child of God and a person of worth and tempt me to respond in ways that do not reflect the Spirit of God living in me?

---

[a]Joshua N. Hook, Everett L. Worthington Jr., Don E. Davis, David J. Jennings II, Aubrey L. Gartner, and Jan P. Hook, "Empirically Supported Religious and Spiritual Therapies," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 66, no. 1 (2010): 46-72, https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.20626.

[b]Howard Stone, "Theodicy in Pastoral Counseling," *Journal of Pastoral Psychotherapy* 1, no. 1 (1987): 47-62.

[c]Sharon E. Cheston and Joanne L. Miller, "The Use of Prayer in Counseling," in *Integrating Spirituality and Religion into Counseling: A Guide to Competent Practice*, ed. Craig S. Cashwell and J. Scott Young, 2nd ed. (American Counseling Association, 2011), 243-60; Chet Weld and Karen Eriksen, "Christian Clients' Preferences Regarding Prayer as a Counseling Intervention," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 35 (2007): 328-41; Sherry Johnson, "One Step Closer: The Implicit Use of Scripture in Counseling (Clinicians' Columns)," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 20 (Spring 2001): 91-94; James B. Hurley and James T. Berry, "The Relation of Scripture and Psychology in Counseling from a Pro-Integration Position," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 16 (Winter 1997): 323-45.

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/theology-for-better-counseling