

Counselor Identity and Christian Imagination: Striving for Professional Case Conceptualization and Artistic Contextualization

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Counselor educators in faith-based institutions face a challenge to instill a Christian worldview and nurture spiritual formation. This undertaking must percolate throughout the programmatic array of experiences designed to develop students into professional counselors. When relating faith matters to practice, there are professional norms and ethical guidelines. This paper proposes a pedagogical pathway to interface evidence-based counseling, Christian convictions and a professional role. C. S. Lewis described reason as “the natural organ of truth” but imagination as “the organ of meaning.” Shaping a worldview and stabilizing professional identity is a dynamic process of stimulating reasoning, stirring imagination and creating metaphors. For counselor educators within CAPS, our training programs reflect the longstanding organizational priority of producing mental health professionals who are ready to exhibit spiritual competencies from diverse doctrinal traditions with astute self-other awareness and respect. This requires unpacking the process of moving from convictions to case conceptualization to artistic contextualization. Counselor educators strive to deepen faith-anchored wisdom so that counselors act justly, respectfully and responsibly in one’s practice context.

Counselor educators in faith-based institutions face an *epic* challenge. Training clinically proficient therapists who will live out convictions of faith takes place within an influential cultural climate that determines what it knows through Experience, Participation, Images, and Connection (EPIC) (Sweet, 2000). EPIC epistemology is not a mindset that elevates worldview convictions with moral absolutes that have the propensity to isolate or divide. The Christian subculture anticipates that beyond the transmission of curriculum content, its university faculty will enhance student identity development across multiple domains—personal, intellectual, vocational, professional, and spiritual (Rhea, 2011). Embracing this developmental opportunity is a marvelous privilege. Counselor education as *ministry* is a worthy vocation. Nevertheless, courage, clarity, and a clear strategy are required

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to produce professional counselors who identify not only as “spiritual” but as earnest disciples of Jesus Christ (Smith & Smith, 2011).

The mission and academic ethos of faith-based institutions stir faculty to inculcate a Christian worldview—theological convictions—the necessary habits for spiritual formation.¹ Faith-based universities articulate a vision for how revelation, tradition, religious routines, and communal experience impacts its constituents. Identity sculpting in Christian education is a grand, Spirit-directed, transformational endeavor. It may run under different banners: spiritual formation, discipleship, conformity to Scripture, sanctification, the Spirit-filled life, having the mind of Christ, worldview realization, or cultivation of Christian virtues.

The pivotal question for this paper focuses on complex identity development. How can counselor educators amplify a call to identify with Christ as Lord so that it is heard throughout the array of experiences designed to progressively advance learners towards becoming professional counselors? The intent is to describe methods counselor educators can bring into supervision to promote dual identity commitments (professional affiliation and Christian service). There is a way to reconcile what can appear to be “dueling” identities.

The Foundation and Realization of Counselor Identity

By definition, a career in the growing field of counseling entails allegiance to a distinct guild within the wider set of mental health disciplines (Chronister, Chou, & Chan, 2009). Accrediting bodies endorse a core curriculum, establish credentialing criteria, articulate ethical principles, and prescribe the sequence for apprenticeship. Each component moves the learner towards independent practitioner status where the priority is to assist clients within a diverse and pluralistic culture. Standardization regarding the overall role, function, and knowledge base of counselors contributes to the achievement of one's professional identity. Identity as a counselor is accomplished by uniting ("integrating") one's personal attributes with advanced training in the skills, knowledge, perspectives, and attitudes associated with the established professional community (Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010). The "therapeutic self" is intra- and interpersonal as it represents the merger of the professional self (roles, decisions, ethics) with the personal self (values, morals, perceptions). The Preamble to the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2014) grounds this identity on these core values:

1. enhancing human development throughout the life span;
2. honoring diversity and embracing a multi cultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts;
3. promoting social justice;
4. safeguarding the integrity of the counselor–client relationship; and
5. practicing in a competent and ethical manner (ACA, 2014, p.3)

Counselor educators in Christian faith-institutions who associate at the Christian Association for Psychological Studies (CAPS) have consistently affirmed these professional values. Faith-based educators advocate for the realization of these goals in ways that cohere with a Christian identity.

Qualitative research into professional development has laid out a typical progression through a series of transformational tasks and processes (Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010). Initially, learners define the counseling enterprise by mimicking instructors. Gradually an internalized comprehension is achieved. Along the way, a reliance on others to dictate one's professional growth activities

gives way to a self-articulated plan with marked areas of preference. Lastly, one's native, intuitive helping skills merge with system-level endorsed techniques, theories, and practice conventions. Professional identity development continues to evolve after graduation and advanced field work (Moss, Gibson, & Dollarhide, 2014). The counselor's attitude toward this chosen career moves from a naïve idealism to a sustainable realism. Motivation for people helping shifts from a track headed for burnout by a constant struggle to meet the expectations of others to one that takes a rejuvenating route that has a sensible balance between life interests, self-care, and occupational duties. Eventually, the compartmentalization of an assortment of discrete treatment strategies is abandoned for a comprehensive method of counseling that fits one's unique style and outlook. This practitioner orientation will have its niche and acceptance within larger mental health community. In sum, professional identity development (i.e., acculturation) moves the locus of control from external to internal and association from a detached, uninformed outsider to a savvy insider with all the "rights, privileges and responsibilities that pertain thereto."

Counseling educators in faith-based institutions recognize the merits of standardization and definitive articulation of professional identity that has occurred in the field of counseling. Controversy does surface. There is a trend associated within the revised ethical guidelines within the professional culture that minimizes the mutual, value-laden aspects of the helping process. Faith identity is a pivotal resource in the client's worldview and a discretionary personal value for counselors. In select scenarios, this perspective runs counter to the comprehensive Christian service identity our institutions commit to groom. This is where the distinct cultures of the two communities collide. When it comes to bringing faith traditions or spiritual outcomes into counseling praxis, there are prescribed role expectancies (i.e. ACA Code of Ethics, 2014; CACREP standards, 2009), and evidence-based techniques (Pargament, 2011). There are measureable counselor competencies (i.e. Culture and Worldview, Counselor Self-Awareness, Human and Spiritual Development, Communication, Assessment, and Diagnosis and Treatment; Dailey, Robertson, & Gill, 2015; Sauerheber, Holeman, Dean, & Haynes, 2014; Hathaway, 2013; Cashwell & Young, 2010; Robertson, 2010; ASERVIC, 2009). The identity struggle can be intensive.

Devout disciples understand that Christian culture has a distinguishable depiction of reality, view of history, ideals, and social justice. Christianity embraces a transcendent and theological dimension to worldview construction (Johnson, 1997). It is an international, multi-ethnic, religious community with great diversity, distinct beliefs, and historical importance. Is it judicious to accept the notion that Christianity in its entirety can be cast as the “counselor’s personally held values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors” (ACA Code of Ethics, 2014, A.11.b.)? Wright (1992) once warned Christ followers to be on guard against absorbing the myth that Christianity can ever be portrayed as a private worldview. That claim itself represents a competing worldview. Christianity offers a story of the whole world, seen and unseen. It is a public truth. Its telling is redemptive for its unfolding story unites history with destiny, humanity with reality. It grounds the drama of life entirely within a theological surround. Counselor educators recognize worldview clashes and enable the next generation of counselors to face the tension that these entail.

The modest purpose here is to address a holistic pedagogy for identity development. It is not possible to unpack details on why and when a professional and faith identity may conflict or how divergent views of morality create practitioner dilemmas. For decades it has been articulated that for all the benefits that ethical guidelines provide, they represent culturally-biased perspectives that may (inadvertently or prescriptively) minimize the significance of other culturally valuable worldviews (Pedersen, 1997). Fortunately, it is reasonable from the vantage point of both cultures to place importance on “honoring diversity and embracing a multicultural approach” and respecting “the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts” (ACA Code of Ethics, 2014, preamble). This dialogue will need to be pursued with less posturing and more engagement to unravel how professional standardization can move forward without degrading the integrity of those with a dedication to a specific faith identity. The challenge for educators in faith-based settings is to purposefully address the pressures, conflicts, and opportunities that arise when professional identity development and a deeper identification with one’s Christian faith are embedded degree objectives.

The Formation of a Christian Identity

Efforts to create viable options for mental health professionals to exercise competence within the boundaries of a Christian identity have been ongoing for as long as ACA has been in existence. The Christian Association for Psychological Studies (CAPS), in its 60 year history, has compiled credible research regarding the intricacies of internalizing faith and clinical practice (Garzon, Hall, & Ripley, 2014; Strawn, Wright, & Jones, 2014; Stevenson, Eck, & Hill, 2007). The *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* (JPC) dedicated an entire volume to “Traditioning Integration” (Beck, 2014; Dueck, 2014; Holeman & Headley, 2014; Parker, 2014; Strawn, Wright, & Jones, 2014; Tisdale, 2014; Watson, 2014). There are diverse traditions within Christianity and this is yet another layer of complexity.

There is a credible theoretical research base regarding “integration” to foster a robust professional and Christian identity. Caution is required when making applications to counselor education. Considerable material in this literature stems from training PhD/PsyD psychologists (e.g., scientist-practitioner orientation; required dissertation; lengthy academic exposure). There are unique features to a counselor identity (e.g., educator-guidance orientation; graduated supervision for practitioner skill acquisition; compact academic time-frame). The terminal degree for counselors is the Master of Arts with well-defined content specification and extensive fieldwork. One view in the CAPS literature is that “integration” is absorbed via optimal experiences of attachment-based mentoring relationships (Sorenson, 1997). The attachment paradigm does offer an underlying framework to unify counselor education, field preparation, and spiritual self-reflection (Greggo & Becker, 2010). According to the dominant integration transmission view, professors and mentors grant access to their spiritual and professional journey with its stability, struggles, uncertainties, and convictions. Obviously, there are wide opportunities for such relationships in longer, residential degree programs.

There is initial evidence that programmatic intentionality can overcome the obstacle of less direct faculty exposure (Garzon, Hall, & Ripley, 2014). Faith-based learning can be maximized by a combination of learning experiences including: (a) professor humility and transparency (caring, welcoming, approachability and dedication); (b) pedagogical strategies (exposure to alternate

Table 1*Summary of Priorities & Convictions for Five Approaches That Relate Counseling and Christianity*

Approach	Priority in Counseling Encounter	Counselor Conviction
Levels of Explanation	Makes optimal use of evidence-based techniques to provide bio-psycho-social-spiritual care.	Each academic discipline offers its distinct perspective; faith is personal.
Integration	Scripture retains its authority over science and ethical standards define best practice.	Interdisciplinary work that benefits all sides is Christian stewardship.
Christian Psychology	Draw from the deep well of Christian theology and tradition to cultivate Christ-like character.	Christianity establishes a unique, Theocentric, biblical psychology.
Transformational Psychology	Seek the Holy Spirit; spiritual direction can supplement care yet maintain clinical integrity.	Clinicians conduct psychology “in the Spirit” for the benefits of clients.
Biblical Counseling	Realize the Gospel and recognize the sufficiency of Scripture; counseling is applied exegesis.	Christian ministry elevates Scripture to fully restore and redeem.

faith/discipline perspectives, exploration of special/general revelation, consistent exposure to faith/culture matters), (c) comprehensive curriculum coverage (all courses address theological themes related to the subject area; and (d) institutional climate (community life, campus ethos, corporate worship). As counselor educators within CAPS, there is accountability to one another to ensure that our respective degree programs seek to discern and institute best educational practices to produce counselors ready to exhibit spiritual competencies with astute self-other awareness and respect (Robertson, 2010; Hagedorn & Gutierrez, 2009). Developing these competences along with a distinct identity as a Christ follower requires particular theological skills and cognitive capacities. Identifying these sets the framework to consider educational strategies that intentionally co-mingle professional and faith development.

Faith-Practice Interface Options

Carter and Narramore (1979) outlined the classic categories for how the disciplines of psychology and theology are perceived to crash or complement one another. This publication arose during an era when all-encompassing theories were competing for dominance and confidence in the total objectivity of science was especially strong. Skepticism about the inherent benefits of religion and spirituality was a feature of the modernist agenda that honored objectivity over subjectivity. The positions were an articulation for psychology of Neibuhr's (1951) classifications for how Christianity historically responded to culture:

Christ against culture; Christ of culture; Christ above culture; Christ and culture; and Christ transforming culture. Subsequent decades have seen a revolution in epistemology. That is, in the criteria that govern the limits and validity of methods employed to establish knowledge. Disputes persist over the optimal way to structure the relationship between science and religion. Stated differently, what emphasis should be placed on available theoretical material along with its accompanying empirical research? How should theology, biblical revelation, and Christian tradition be positioned to have its rightful place?

Johnson (2010) offers an historical overview of the movements in Christian counseling amidst this shifting philosophical background (i.e. modernism to postmodernism). Currently, the multi-perspective book, *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views* (2nd edition) (PC5V) is a leading resource to explore the contemporary models that “interface” or relate the broad discipline of modern psychology to the historic Christian faith (Johnson, 2010). Prominent proponents articulate each position along the spectrum. The interactive format offers a comprehensive exchange on ways to connect, segregate, or prioritize material from psychological/social science, biblical sources, and Christian theology.

Mental health professionals can visualize these positions at the client service level through another multi-author project. *Counseling and Christianity: Five Approaches* (CC5A) (Greggo & Sisemore, 2012) illustrates the same views applied along a representative range of treatment methods (see Table 1). This project is done in

the style of a qualitative research investigation as the proponent of each distinct view offers expert consultation on how to counsel. The common case scenario includes complex concerns that are immediately evident. The intent is to give readers a comparison to recognize through example how each position transfers into ordinary, yet exemplary, counseling care.

After working through CC5A, students frequently raise a pertinent question. Does one's view regarding epistemology—prioritizing authoritative sources from modern science and Christianity—really matter for counselor-client conversations? The dominant culture elevates personal choice. Being immersed in EPIC epistemology, learners may draw heavily from experience, participation, images, and connection. Thus, this “so what” question regarding beliefs and distinctions deserves to be addressed. Is it worth trading the epistemology of dominant culture for one of these five views? For counselors, should pragmatism (what works), personal autonomy (what clients want), and effectiveness (what brings change) have precedence over, or be entirely separate, from theory, theology, ideals, and values? Further, since each of the five approaches can be shown to align with longstanding Christian doctrinal and philosophical platforms (i.e., traditions), adopting any of the positions may not represent a threat to orthodoxy.

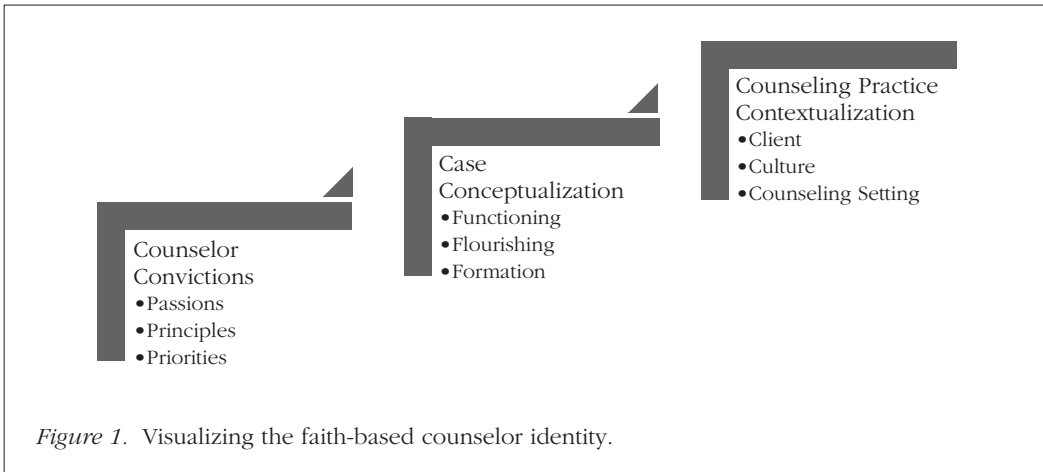
When downplaying the importance of an overarching Christian approach, students point to the similarities between these in action. The distinctions may not be as sharp in CC5A as the debate in PC5V would indicate. For example, in CC5A each consultant demonstrates compassion for the client, triages appropriate concerns, adopts a treatment plan, acknowledges the impact of past trauma, and is attentive to comments that hint that there is a risk of suicide/self-harm. In this type of application effort, two dynamics act as gravitational forces to pull clinicians with distinct foundations towards common ground. These soften the surface distinctions between the epistemological positions on how to navigate between theology and social science.

First, the regulating influences of conventional practice narrow the options regarding clinical decisions. There are customary ways to deliver care that transfer across clinic and ministry settings alike (i.e., structuring appointments; assessing requests and presenting concerns; managing resources; ensuring client immediate safety, etc.) In the ordinary course of extending services, counselors use procedures to organize the chaos

a client experiences. The initial phase introduces an orderly routine for intentional conversation where the focus is directed toward relieving struggle. No matter the epistemological approach, helpers will take steps to promote talk as therapeutic, establish a routine for dialogue, and make the interpersonal exchange productive for change. The customary policies that counselors implement are not all that different from a medical or pastoral consultation. Social expectations and professional norms move unique counseling encounters along a common current.

Second, the counselor-client interaction itself does fashion the direction of care. Taken in the abstract as a cohesive theory, each of the five views portrays its ideal platform to relate material from social sciences disciplines with biblical content. In the world of ideas, there is no messy interference from a human person who has a way of making known his perspective, personality, and patterns of behavior. Clients and counselors have a mutual, social influence upon one another. Further, in a specific clinical scenario, the therapist becomes a participant observer in the client's social world and must make contact with a client interpersonally. Together the dyad tackles an agreed upon change agenda. Mutual choices influence the subsequent flow of events, experience, and attribution. Even though the case scenario is hypothetical, dealing within those clinical conditions demands that good clinicians become responsive to critical details and behavior patterns. Those familiar with Bandura's concept of reciprocal determinism—environment, individual, and behavior impacting each other—will recognize the parallel (Bandura, 1978). As each consultant tailors the approach to fit specific circumstances and dynamics, interactive effects generate energy and exert influence. Thus, the commonality of the single case draws out parallels between the perspectives.

Despite the case realities that highlight the overlap between these perspectives, each approach does reveal a clinician's identity on the horizon of conviction. These premises matter. A counselor makes nearly imperceptible choices moment by moment on what to assess, where to pursue, how to attune, and when to turn the conversation. It is one's underlying convictions that establish the very priorities and principles that guide those moves (See Figure 1). Surely, training acquaints helpers with effective questions and sharper listening skills. Still, counselors are often coached to distinguish



instincts and “trust one’s gut.” This lingo attempts to boost counselor confidence to act on one’s interpersonal (heart) impulses. After each move, the clinical mind actively seeks to gain an increasingly accurate portrait of the relational patterns, strengths, disturbances, and signals of emotional vulnerability. Those therapeutic decisions arise from self-awareness and inner convictions.

For the disciple, such convictions emerge from a heart that is tuned to transpersonal as well as intra and interpersonal dimensions. Convictions stem from our faith, doctrine, and attending to the Great Counselor (Jn. 14:16). Further, the desire to sit in sacred space, to come alongside and envision another’s experience, flows from the passion that fuels vocation—our calling and desire to serve our God. All this transpires in the invisible inner worldview of conviction where beliefs, spiritual life routines, rhythms of worship, and meditation on the Word actually matter (Ps. 1; Ps. 119). Convictions are potent, like mustard seed faith that can move a mountain or uproot a mature tree (Mt. 17:20; Lk. 17:6).

For decades, intensive and often divisive controversy between Christians has erupted over the question of whether it is best to “integrate” therapeutic strategies or speak directly from Scripture. Left out of this disciplinary dichotomy is the place of role: is this pastoral or professional or some combination (Greggo, 2014)? Beyond the counselor’s service position, consider the setting and then the specific client. It is my contention that counselors need to be less concerned with discipline integration and more

dedicated to what Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga (1984) depicted as a blend of integrity and integral wholeness (i.e., integrality). Self-identity as a Christian professional gives us confidence and boldness that distinguishes our perspectives, performance, and practice.

When counseling, our convictions regarding Scripture, science, Christianity, wisdom, and the Holy Spirit do matter—a great deal. For evidence, contrast the prevailing cultural perspective of Moral Therapeutic Deism with Redemptive Trinitarian Theism (Vanhoozer, 2009). Christian identity exemplifies a total commitment to Jesus Christ and the Gospel. That is, a conviction that God is actively doing good in the world through the Son and the Holy Spirit to bring about a consummation of history that will reveal his glory. Vanhoozer (2009) defines theology as the joyful science of getting understanding and forming the mind of Christ in his disciples. Theology allows Christ followers to grasp our place in the wonder of God’s ongoing activity in his creation. Scripture is the basis for theology, for it records God’s speaking, acting, and doing. Absorbing Scripture is the means to acquire the mind of Christ, the ultimate goal of Christian identity. Therefore, co-curricular activity in faith-based institutions is where counselors-to-be are granted a guided opportunity to articulate a basic but cohesive doctrine of theology. These convictions reveal and structure worldview. This is necessary to inspire ongoing communion with the Lord who by grace makes our hearts secure (Pr. 4:23; Ps. 112: 7-8).

The Construct of Christian Imagination

C. S. Lewis (1969) offers a remarkably insightful linguistic paradigm by promoting Christian imagination. Reason, “the natural organ of truth,” is distinguished from imagination, “the organ of meaning.” Consider how Lewis poses these terms in his own words.

But it must not be supposed that I am in any sense putting forward the imagination as the organ of truth. We are not talking of truth, but of meaning; meaning which is the antecedent condition both of truth and falsehood, whose antithesis is not error but nonsense. I am a rationalist. For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition. It is, I confess, undeniable that such a view indirectly implies a kind of truth or rightness in the imagination itself. I said at the outset that the truth we won by metaphor could not be greater than the truth of the metaphor itself; and we have seen since that all our truth, or all but a few fragments, is won by metaphor (p. 265).

Theologian, Kevin Vanhoozer (2014) is convinced that Lewis offers a persuasive case regarding imagination as a vital ingredient in doing theology, thinking “Christianly” and living wisely. Yet, when it comes to unpacking Lewis’ message, Vanhoozer concedes that this quote is a rather hard saying. Despite the density of this construal, Vanhoozer’s commentary is worth expanding.

Imaginative metaphors are not a mere means to find language that likens one thing to another. Rather, this organ of meaning has the capacity to creatively discover, decipher, and decode patterns. Recognizing hidden relationships makes it possible to synthesize matters that may on the surface appear entirely unrelated. The claim to fame of the organ of reason is its astonishing power to analyze, dissect, isolate, and identify. Reason empowers human beings to break experience into little pieces. Reason can expertly crack open the mind as if it were an eggshell, exposing white and yolk. Consider what is even more incredible. The imagination excels at putting Humpty Dumpty back together again!

The imagination can envision an appetizing whole (i.e., frying up those gooey pieces sunny-side up; fashioning a gourmet omelet with pecorino cheese and fresh basil; mixing vegetables with whites only for a healthy alternative). Our imaginations equip us to discern meaningful patterns, generate insight, and combine loose pieces into a coherent whole. Is it not such fusion that drives the compulsion beneath the call for “integration”? Integration is championed as a stewardship function that is demanded by the “unity of truth” principle. Creativity is visualizing novel, holistic patterns. Imagination not only generates a narrative of meaning for identity, it shows a way forward to ethically perform our part in God’s drama (Vander Lugt, 2014; Smith, 2011; Vanhoozer, 2007). Christian imagination is fueled by a thriving relationship with the Son, the infinite creator and the one who continuously binds all fragments together (Col. 1:15-17). The Son is the powerful magnetic source, “the sun,” for the internal solar system that keeps comprehensive organization schemas in systematic rotation.

Metaphors are the linguistic tool that perturb, capture, and invigorate the counselor’s clinical and Christian imagination. Vanhoozer (2014, p. 95) explains: “Metaphors minister understanding by forming meaningful associations.” As a theologian, Vanhoozer defines Christian theology as the means to accurately and more fully grasp reality because the transcendent and triune God is at the center of the consideration (Vanhoozer, 2010). Counselor educators shape a theological worldview by introducing intriguing metaphors that activate reason and accelerate the imagination to perceive *shalom*—what a harmonious whole could actually be!

For a biblical precedent, recall that Jesus was an incredible communicator. Jesus is the Parable Teacher. Sunday school teachers say that parables are earthy stories with a heavenly meaning (e.g., a story about something one already knows to comprehend something one desires to know). Literally, a parable is proverb, riddle or comparison that conveys wisdom (Osborne, 2006). As a literary form, the short parable story is in essence an extended metaphor. Parables have historic meaning that can be heard in perpetually fresh ways.

Again Jesus said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the

smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade. (Mk. 4:30-32)

When Jesus came to establish his earthly kingdom, he did not proceed in the way that anyone expected. The kingdom of the Great King began in obscurity, but it develops and spreads. His kingdom will culminate in glory. This Mustard seed parable is recorded in all three synoptic Gospels (Mt. 13: 31-32; Mk. 4:30-32; Lk. 13: 18-21). In Mark's account, Jesus first probes his listeners. Those who initially heard Jesus' voice echoing alongside the Sea of Galilee may not have been able to articulate details of photosynthesis. Listeners did not have the science to reason what gave this small seed its impressive potential. The naturalistic explanation for the makeover from seed to plant to fruit was not accessible. The supernatural explanation was essential to their worldview. Mix a seed, soil, moisture, and divine intervention will yield a plentiful harvest. Indeed, Jesus was not speaking about the botany behind mustard crop agriculture. Jesus was offering a poignant perspective on the growth of his kingdom.

The Gospel writer informs readers that when Jesus spoke, he did not disclose his complete motives, purposes, or intent to every listener. Was his methodology to hide knowledge? Was Jesus keeping a secret? Actually, his style of communication agitated a curiosity in those ready to receive. Simultaneously, his words issued a message of judgment for those whose hearts persistently refused to hear (Mk. 4:12; Is. 6:10). The parable is a wisdom encounter mechanism. That is, it yields different responses from varying audiences (Osborne, 2006). Seed is being sown; what kind of soil will you be (Mk. 4:14-20)? Jesus provoked his hearer's imagination, speaking to mind and heart thus engaging inner schemas in the process. Jesus heated the imagination. His listeners would not merely recall facts. His aim was to form kingdom-oriented mental structures, pathways to understand his ministry and positive responses to his invitation to join a movement. Jesus taught in parables to crowds who were hearers. Religious leaders heard this story via a hollow spirituality that rendered them deaf. Jesus then entered into intensive dialogue with his disciples who were to be doers.

Let's draw a lesson from Jesus on pedagogy—the art of teaching. The Parable Teacher uses

miniature stories—extended metaphors—to promote new thought patterns, issue subversive challenges, expand perception, bypass cultural bias, and produce wisdom. The Parable Teacher taught to develop Spiritual Intelligence—kingdom sightedness; an appetite for wisdom, an inner ear to hear the Holy Spirit whisper the reality of Jesus. Meditating on parables equips disciples to hear his kingdom call and imagine what Jesus might actually be pulling together. The Christ follower looks to observe how the Holy Spirit is blowing like wind through the trees. The organ of meaning sharpens its sensitivity to discern kingdom activity. A disciple of Christ can distinguish patterns with sacred meaning beneath the surface of the ordinary.

Counselor educators are constantly provoking growth in two identity domains: promoting professional competence and kingdom service. Our mission is to equip learners with an up-to-date, multidisciplinary science. This permits them to analyze human experience with a newly acquired, heightened reasoning capacity. Spiritual formation exercises strengthen theological, biblical, and relational structures. Christian tradition sets an ample foundation to support a theological worldview. Reason is granted new capacities. Beyond this, the disciple's imagination locates meaning beneath the surface of the ordinary and seeks the wisest way to actively participate in furthering the kingdom. Hall (2014) challenges educators to use cognitive scaffolding techniques to familiarize learners with the process of bringing Scripture and theology into direct contact with material from their scholarly discipline. In matters of application, such as counseling, it is profoundly critical to expose the imaginative process of combining operations at a variety of levels since significant life themes, values, and ultimate meaning are at stake.

The parable selected for illustration focuses on the kingdom of God, a generative theological theme. Counselor educators would do well to review how particular faith communities address this important biblical concept (Strawn, Wright, & Jones, 2014.) Mental health professionals tend to display little investment in positions on eschatology. Our occupational mandate is to bring hope into immediate experience and not leave it hanging in the distant future. Nevertheless, our teaching objective is to inspire our students to imagine what happens when we pray “thy kingdom come?” This biblical theme holds the key to coming to terms with the relationship between

Christianity and culture. It may be useful to ponder the implication of theological matters related to how the Lord rules in the “common kingdom” and in the “redemptive kingdom” (VanDrunnen, 2010). Our God is Lord of all; that is, the king of all kingdoms. While Jesus is preparing a future home for his family, the Creator God preserves the natural, social, and political order for his purposes (Johnson, 1997). As a mental health professional and Christ follower, my professional role may bring me to serve “neighbors” in the common kingdom with love as unto the Lord (Lk. 10:25-37). In other instances, this therapist may host change dialogue within the redemptive kingdom with fellow disciples who seek to pursue both wellness and spiritual formation. With this perspective, it can be prudent to operate within the expectations of my profession in the continuous service of one Master (Mk. 12:12-17).

Our theological heritage will direct how we understand the presence of God’s kingdom in the present era. Theological positions vary in their form, progression, continuity/discontinuity, and the stages between the “now” and the “not yet.” Despite variations, counselor educators need to be cognizant of the language faith communities apply to the relationship between the Christian church and the broader culture (i.e., secular/sacred; saints/seekers; neighbors/redeemed family; sons of God/children of the devil). It may be productive to picture educational encounters as “immersion language institutes” dedicated to develop a high level of linguistic fluency. It is a necessity for counselors invested in living out the Christian faith to be competent to adeptly translate between a trio of vernacular linguistic systems: (a) the common dialect of contemporary culture (e.g. individualistic, pluralistic, materialistic); (b) the specialist dialect of our professional culture (e.g. health, symptoms, diagnosis, intervention, self-determinism, multiculturalism); and (c) the religious dialect spoken in our Christian subculture (e.g., ideally collectivist, human beings created *imago Dei* yet fallen, redeemed and under restoration; Rhea, 2011).

Professional identity entails assimilation into the culture of the guild. Every culture comes with a worldview—an underlying grid of beliefs and values—that is reflected in the language employed. The mental health field is a subculture of the broader humanistic culture. Moving through each curricular and apprenticeship gate towards the rank of professional counselor requires demonstration of proficiency in speaking its technical language, grasping the nuances of

understanding and applying the implicit/explicit norms of that culture. It is in speech, thought, and communication patterns that one exhibits counselor identity. A reasoning skill for Christian clinicians is to hear with a discerning ear, attentive to worldview innuendos and to see with Spiritual Intelligence so that the best course for Christ honoring service can be pursued with authenticity and creativity.

Two implications for counselor educators in faith-based institutions should be highlighted. First, our mission is to assist learners to internalize a heightened awareness for how metaphors and language enable the bilingual processing of experience through the organ of reasoning (identification and analysis) and imagination (meaning and synthesis). Counselor educators campaign for a professional identity that is realized with Christian imagination. Second, the time is ripe to adopt the culturally fitted term “contextualization” over the overworked and overtaken term “integration” to reconcile our dual identities. Our training intent is not to integrate—merge disciplines—but to equip leaders to live a Christian identity wisely in a professional capacity with multicultural fluency.

Clinical Scenarios as Imagination Primers

The optimal educational use of unsterilized clinical scenarios across the curriculum and fieldwork provides a realistic context to practice clinical/theological reasoning as well as embrace an imaginative synthesis (see CC5A, 229-250 for examples). Having a strategic method to explore complex cases advances case conceptualization and “artistic” contextualization. Consider these definitions (note that the qualifier “artistic” will be explored in the concluding section).

Case conceptualization is the systematic collection and strategic combination of case data (presenting concerns, history, personal attributes, interpersonal tendencies, support systems, and resources) to generate a plausible set of working hypotheses on what could produce change. Case conceptualization as a term is being used here as it is typically applied throughout the mental health literature. Counselors do quality assessment and actively listen before taking a deliberate appraisal step towards a wide-angle view that connects the dots between presumed cause and effect. These loosely held ties form the basis for how counseling attempts to untangle those knots. Here is the novel consideration. The counselor

with a faith-perspective simultaneously attends to theological issues, themes and potential (Holeman, 2012). These insights may or may never become an overt aspect of care. Still, this is a lens for the counselor with a faith identity to comprehend how to optimally come alongside the client. Further, by making this a routine part of the internal, case conceptualization sequence, the counselor with a faith identity is in a better position to make an informed decision on what to do with this aspect of the appraisal. This fulfills ASERVIC (2009) guideline four (4) in regards to a continuous evaluation of the influence of a counselor's own beliefs and values in reference to the client and the counseling process.

For the counselor, three terms aide conceptualization: flourishing, function, and formation. The counselor is foremost ready to see health and strengths, then build. Thus, conceptualization begins by thinking over how to foster growth, development, and healthy flourishing. Should a mental health concern become evident, ways to restore functioning are considered. Finally, the spiritual formation of the client is contemplated in light of Scripture and the leading of the Holy Spirit. Again, this third area is not intended for automatic use or to be foisted in any improper way upon unreceptive or unaware clients. Rather, this is how counselors keep in touch with one's faith identity in preparation for giving all clients the very best service.

Contextualization is a unique term borrowed from the multicultural arena. Contextualization in Christian circles is the process of communicating the Gospel in word and deed in thoughtful ways in specific sociocultural settings (Chang, Morgan, Nyaulu, & Priest, 2009). The application of this word can easily be misunderstood because it is associated with evangelism in other cultures. Done with multicultural awareness, contextualization brings faith to others with honor and without unnecessarily disrupting their values and routines. The intent is never to undermine or bypass the ACA ethical code regarding imposing a counselor's views on the client in any way, shape or form. Rather, the contention is that those with a Christian identity will practice in a professional manner that represents the highest ideals of service and love of neighbor. This could be labeled "contextual theology". Therapists host conversations to nurture and heal that respect, cohere, and acknowledge the expectations of culture, institution, clinic, and most of all, clients.

This does not compromise or bypass convictions; it merges them with wisdom.

The service delivery setting is relevant. Counseling is a wide profession and sessions are hosted in ministry settings where clients are intentionally seeking input that will bolster their own Christian faith. In the public sphere, counselors apply their ability to recognize the nuances of language, the desired purpose, and how best to be light and salt in one's role and in the moment. This is where the spiritual competencies outlined by ASERVIC give explicit direction. Counselors need to recognize what the sponsoring organization (i.e., university, medical setting, social service agency, clinic, etc.) intends in terms of its service values. Contextualization describes the customized approach that a counselor with a faith identity will use to care for a unique client, with a defined concern, in a given context (Greggo & Sisemore, 2012). For counselors, this means adjusting role, function, and perspective to fit the setting and clientele (Chronister, Chou, & Chan, 2009). For Christ followers, this is a matter of spiritual intelligence, stewardship, and genuine compassion.

Counselor supervision involves guiding novices to recognize how terms, concepts, and phrases reveal common culture, the technical perspective of the discipline, or theological themes. Counselor training in a faith institution includes the development of linguistic fluency to move back and forth between cultures. The organs of reason and imagination are put to use. Look through different theoretical and theological lenses to see the implicit beliefs or values. It is often when pondering a multifaceted case from a theological, social justice, cultural perspective that counselors realize why achieving change is not as easy as might initially appear. Our hope is to access faith-anchored wisdom to act justly, respectfully, and responsibly in one's practice context. Our effort is to distinguish patterns with sacred meaning beneath the surface of the ordinary.

The "Art" of Artistic Contextualization

The Parable Teacher once spoke to a crowd by the Sea of Galilee. He asked, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it (Mk. 4:30)?" For counselor educators in faith-based institutions, there are questions our communities ask; What shall we say counseling that is truly Christian is like? What

images help to visualize how to counsel in ways that further the kingdom of God? Is counseling for the kingdom defined by how a problem is discussed or defined?; is it about the counselor/counselee connection?; is it defined by the purpose of the exchange, the intentions of those who host the encounter or the profession of the counselor? These queries are variations on a theme. There is a need for metaphors that can help us manage the tension between an identity within the professional culture and an identity with the Christian community on the journey of discipleship. In short, our teaching task is to tie what is already known in ways that will open eyes to see what they wish to know.

The parable that I often enlist adds “artistic” to contextualization. What is quality counseling with a Christian foundation? Counseling that is Christian is much like great art. What makes a thing art? What factors and features make art great?

Awaken a mental picture of the widely known masterpiece by Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519). The *Mona Lisa*, an oil painting from the early 1500's, may be the most recognized and adored painting in the world. What makes this portrait a timeless masterpiece? If it qualifies as art because of the subject, there is much that will remain a mystery. Tradition says that this is Lisa Gherardini, wife of a Florentine cloth merchant, who may have been in mourning following the death of a daughter. Does this become art because of da Vinci's clever way of making the background landscape so proportional to the subject's view? Was it his brush stroke, color choices, or how this portrayal is posed and balanced? Is it the way da Vinci captures subtleties of who she is as a person? Does artistic flair emerge from the view of the artist? Or, is it found in having a prominent place in the premier art museum Louvre. There are literally thousands who flock to see the *Mona Lisa* every opening day. The explanation of the centuries regarding the portrait's appeal is that it's all about her smile. Has da Vinci put happiness on canvas? The answers to these questions can establish criteria to evaluate other artistic efforts.

Focus your imagination on another iconic masterpiece, *Don Quixote* by Pablo Picasso, (1881-1973). Don Quixote sits astride his horse Rocinante with his squire Sancho Panza faithfully by his side and on his donkey. Windmills are nothing but small objects in the background. Picasso's style was not to reproduce how life and nature might literally appear to the eye.

Abstract forms exaggerate and capture qualities within the image. What makes this pure black and white piece with its many distortions and few details so stunningly moving? What makes this art? Is it the reference to a classic work of literature? Is it the glory of the quest? Picasso and da Vinci are centuries apart in how each would display qualities of being artistic.

Leave the world-class museums behind and stretch the imagination one more time. Visualize a striking piece of urban graffiti. This is “art” where it's not supposed to be. Placement is iconoclastic. Graffiti draws attention and communicates emotion. In this genre, artists do not reveal names. Can graffiti really be art? Can it be great? Its cartoonish flair makes it difficult to hold back a smile. Or, it may evoke anger when it contains gang symbols along the very street where blood has flowed. Can the qualities of graffiti fit with the artistic criteria noted in a da Vinci or Picasso piece?

The term “artistic” brings out associations that range from artist to subject; from placement to style; from color to contrast; from how well reality is captured to how much passion is condensed into its message; from how it repels to how it soothes. The pattern beneath the surface in great art may be distilled but absolute rules are elusive. Foundations can be shaken as new school reinvents old. When it comes to what makes something art or artistic, there may not be a pure, objective, factual, finite, or even a final answer. What makes great art is not easy to define. That's the point.

Considering what might occur if one of the masterpieces or graffiti could be displayed over your couch as the centerpiece to your home? Would this blend with or clash against your home décor? The décor might need adjustment to match a new art acquisition. Placement matters when it comes to art. Likewise, context counts when it comes to quality counseling. Artistic contextualization is doing what's right and best while recognizing an underlying sacred pattern of compassionate care beneath the surface. This requires discernment in the moment, within oneself, with a person, and in a particular setting.

What forces make counseling great and authentically Christian? An argument could be made that it is all about what is discussed, the subject and words spoken, the content of counseling (i.e., how the actual text and subtext matches the Text). The case could be advanced that it is all about the connection, the contact, or

the significance of a clinical relationship (i.e., embracing in ways that our Lord would embrace). Finally, it is certainly important to consider the destination, the direction, or the goals established for the therapeutic contract. The change under consideration could bring those involved into closer communion with self, others, and if fitting, with the Lord. Finally, the setting or host might be what makes counseling Christian. Perhaps it is a necessity to have a plush office in a prestigious medical complex or academic institution. Or maybe artistic counseling only happens on cozy couch in the church basement. Perhaps counseling that is uniquely Christian occurs when it is hosted by believers gathered into a religious community under pastoral authority. Conversely, it may only be counseling when the helper has credentials from the state.

In regards to art, the saying may hold “that beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” Alas, pure subjectivity cannot be the standard when a professional identity has identifiable competencies for bringing spirituality into counseling with descriptive knowledge, skills, and attitudes. In addition, individual preferences cannot hold as the criteria when searching for factors that aide a Christian to bring convictions into one’s vocation. When the qualifier Christian is linked to counseling activity, there is one and only one beholder to please. Talk as healing is done within the Lord’s common and redeemed kingdom. Counselors enter the consultation room with awareness that it is a private and confidential space. Still, the Lord is there. He beholds what is said and not said, what is done or left undone. This is his museum. The Christian imagination considers how the Lord is honored with what he sees. Christian theology may not always be front and center; but it never leaves the gallery. The space for serving clients is foremost an activity governed by the parameters of one’s professional affiliation. A Christian worldview can be expressed in this vocation. When Jesus was teaching about who truly showed love for him, he commented on those who gave food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothing for those in tatters, hospitality to strangers, healing to the sick, and physical presence to prisoners (Mt. 25).

Counseling educators who teach in faith-based institutions help clinicians-to-be enter a vocation that merges professional identity with a lifelong walk as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Graduate training is the prime season to pause to consider convictions deep within. How does one come to

know what we know and how in turn does that reality speak into clinical practice? Various Christian traditions give direction on soul care, occupational activities, and service that further the kingdom of God. Ponder what makes art great. Use Christian imagination to give meaning to our vocations. Many factors come together to make a counseling encounter a celebration in the kingdom. Counselors can metaphorically take off one’s shoes and stand in awe on sacred ground as clients open their souls. What makes this holy ground is how the Holy Spirit expresses care. The prayer of a counselor educator can be that our students and supervisees will enter into client’s stories, no matter how tragic, strained, or beautiful with openness to how the Holy Spirit is moving. Our teaching displays ways to locate meaning beneath the surface of the ordinary and to actively participate in growing the kingdom.

Notes

¹For illustration and disclosure, the university where this author is affiliated unapologetically affirms commitment to inerrant Scripture as the final authority for faith and life (<http://www.tiu.edu/about/core-values/>). The priority to encourage academic excellence within a specialty degree is never separated from nurturing faithfulness to the Gospel—the good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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