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# Beyond Prescriptivism: Reimagining Scripture's Role in Christian Counselling for Transformation

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## Abstract

Christian counselling invites a hermeneutical approach that is not only faithful to Scripture but theologically sound and psychologically safe. This study is situated within evangelical Christian counselling in South Africa and focuses specifically on how Scripture is interpreted and integrated in counselling practice. Responding to this invitation offers Christian counselling participation in theological discourse that questions whether Christian counselling aligns with sound biblical hermeneutics. This paper argues that misalignment often takes place when counsellors view the Bible as a prescriptive counselling manual, overlooking its deeper message. Further to this, misalignment transpires when Scripture is omitted entirely from counselling sessions.. To avoid both, evangelical Christian counselling must align with hermeneutical training for ethical practice. By centring the Bible as an authority alongside ethically and psychologically safe integrated praxis, Christian counselling can facilitate transformative sessions. The paper conducts a qualitative study using literature analysis, interviews and thematic analysis.

The study aims to offer insights into the faithful integration of Scripture in counselling that is both theologically rigorous and supportive of the client's psychological needs. The primary research questions asks: How might Christian counsellors more faithfully integrate Scripture in transformative Christian counselling praxis? Supporting questions consider prescriptivism, dismissivism, hermeneutics, and the redemptive use of Scripture. The study contributes a practical-

theological framework for faithful, contextually sensitive, and ethically responsible scriptural integration.

## Introduction

The debate surrounding the integration of psychology and theology is ongoing and it encourages a healthy tension within Christian counselling. This debate mostly centres on whether counselling should rely on Scripture exclusively or exclude it from counselling completely. Despite these seemingly opposing views, both sides are ultimately hoping for the same thing–healing in Christ. The central problem addressed in this article is that Scripture is often either over-applied in prescriptive ways or under-applied in ways that detach counselling from its Christian theological identity.

This paper explores an approach beyond prescriptivism and dismissivism that is especially significant in the South African context where Christian counselling operates amid religious plurality, trauma, inequality, and complex histories of spiritual authority and harm[1]. The discussion highlights misuse of Scripture and proposes a framework across counsellor, practice, and session. The purpose of this study is to develop a practical-theological account of Scripture's role in Christian counselling that avoids both rigid prescriptivism and functional dismissivism.

In this article, prescriptivism refers to the rigid use of Scripture as if biblical texts function as direct counselling techniques without sufficient attention to genre, context, interpretation, or client complexity. By dismissivism this article refers to the functional minimising, avoidance, or exclusion of Scripture from counselling practice, even where counselling is explicitly Christian. This article is limited to evangelical Christian counselling and does not attempt to represent all Christian traditions, counselling models, or African contexts.

[1] Dames and Dames, "Pastoral Care and Counselling".

## What is Christian Counselling and where has the Bible featured up to this point?

The distinction between biblical counselling and Christian counselling is frequently blurred in both conversation and literature, yet they represent fundamentally different approaches. Biblical counselling, as defined by Peteet is,

…a fundamentalist approach to mental illness which, in contending that truth can be known only through revelation in Scripture, rejects mainstream psychology and psychiatry as humanistic, secular, and antithetical to Christianity. Fundamentalist, highly literal interpretations of the Holy Scripture are often reflected in positions on gender roles, divorce, substance use, and domestic violence.[2]

While both biblical and Christian counselling share the goal of guiding individuals from brokenness to wholeness in Christ through the Holy Spirit's transformational work, biblical counselling rejects the integration of psychology with theology[3], whereas Christian counselling embraces it. According to Hull and Romig, Christian counselling operates within a Christian worldview and theological training, integrating psychological and theological principles to provide care not only to believers but also to those outside the faith[4]. Christian counsellors, particularly those with professional training, utilise various therapeutic models from both secular and Christian traditions to support clients' emotional and psychological well-being[5]. Within South Africa, this distinction is especially important because Christian counselling frequently overlaps with pastoral care, ministry practice, and community-based forms of support[6].

[2] Peteet, "Approaching Religiously Reinforced Mental Health Stigma," 846.
[3] Johnson argues that the "absolute sufficiency" of Scripture for all mental health concerns in Biblical counselling is not held by everyone in the movement ("A Doxological Necessity," 239).
[4] Hull and Romig, "The Changing Landscape of Christian Counsellor Education," 20.
[5] Blain, "What Is Christian Counseling?"
[6] Dames and Dames, "Pastoral Care and Counselling in Current Times."

For the purposes of this discussion, the definition most aligned with the topic is that of the South African Theological Seminary (SATS), which describes Christian counselling as "a Spirit-led journey alongside people towards healing in Christ and living their God-ordained purpose as redeemed bearers of God's image, flourishing in community"[7]. This definition is adopted because it explicitly names healing in Christ, vocation, community, and spiritual formation, all of which are central to the present study.

## What's the Problem?

The problem is not whether Scripture belongs in Christian counselling but how it is interpreted, mediated, and embodied without causing theological distortion or psychological harm. Christian counselling exists where theology and psychology intersect. It is a field that integrates psychological insight with a Christian worldview and theological training. This integration is based on the theological belief that God is the Creator of all truth. Thus, properly understood science does not oppose his divine purposes. Psychology, approached with discernment, can illuminate aspects of human nature aligned with biblical truth.

The integration of theology and psychology sustains ethical integrity that nurture mind and spirit, illuminating God's redemptive love. This integrative approach, however, brings a tension between overuse and neglect of Scripture requiring discernment to avoid harm and oversimplification. Harm includes spiritual coercion, theological distortion, oversimplified interpretations of suffering, and the neglect of legitimate psychological or medical needs.

### *Prescriptive Scriptural Practices*

When practitioners take an anti-psychology stance, prescriptivism ensues. This reinforces traditions that reject psychological integration. The nouthetic tradition[8] allegedly claims that "Scripture is sufficient for all that a counsellor needs in counselling to help those they are serving" [9]. This kind of

[7] Millar, "A Case for the Holy Spirit".
[8] Nouthetic counselling can be described as an approach that treats Scripture as entirely sufficient for counselling, often rejecting psychological integration and applying biblical texts prescriptively to address mental health concerns.
[9] Hathaway, "Introduction," 258.

prescriptivism often comes from a skepticism of psychology because it is based on Enlightenment secularism[10]. Here, skepticism refers to suspicion that psychological knowledge is secular, dangerous, or incompatible with biblical faithfulness.

When counselling is grounded in prescriptivism, it may oversimplify the mental health struggles of those seeking help, especially when Scripture is prioritised without sound exegesis and hermeneutics. Hathaway clarifies that hermeneutics is "the science of the rules of exegesis…."[11] Without careful application, however, prescriptive approaches open avenues of misuse of Scripture. Johnson raises his own concerns in this regard, specifically in relation to prayer and fasting (Matt 6:2–8) and legalism (Gal 2:16, 3:2). He warns against what he terms "orthodox idolatry" or "bibliolatry", asking whether an excessive veneration of Scripture leads to the rejection of "other relevant, creation-graced sources of knowledge" as impure[12]. These terms describe a distorted use of Scripture, not a dismissal of biblical authority.

This critique echoes Matthew 23:4, where Jesus condemns the imposition of heavy, cumbersome loads that misrepresent God's intent. Rigid prescriptivism distorts God's intent and overlooks knowledge that could serve his kingdom. Heberle draws from Anton Boisen's reminder to counsellors to explore the inner world of humanity as "living human documents"[13]. While this is an invitation to include experience and knowledge in the counselling encounter, Herberle emphasises continual integration of sound hermeneutics amid interpretive complexity[14]. Belief in the Bible with a sound hermeneutic is both theoretical and practical. From his experience, Heberle suggests a self-investigation into one's own self-hermeneutic to be more self-aware in order to reduce imposing views on both the text and the client[15].

In African pastoral and counselling settings, where biblical hermeneutics recognise orality and where spoken religious words can carry divine spiritual

[10] Hathaway, "Introduction," 258.
[11] Hathaway, "Introduction," 258.
[12] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 251.
[13] Boisen cited in Heberle, "Hermeneutics," 1.
[14] Heberle, "Hermeneutics," 7.
[15] Heberle, "Hermeneutics," 8.

authority[16], the misuse of biblical language may be especially potent and therefore requires careful hermeneutical accountability.

### *Dismissive practices*

Christian counsellors may minimise or dismiss the role of Scripture in practice due to contextual, secular, and professional pressures. Concerns over licensing restrictions, ethical constraints, and fear of proselytising contribute to this trend. Three key challenges emerge: a misunderstanding of one's scope of practice, professional pressure from secularism, and professional drift. Prescriptivism and dismissivism should therefore be understood as opposite distortions of the same underlying problem: the failure to integrate Scripture through responsible hermeneutics and practical wisdom. Ethical sensitivity requires discernment concerning consent, appropriateness, timing, and scope.

### *Issues with Dismissive Practices Explored*

The first issue, a misunderstanding of one's scope of practice, arises when counsellors begin to align too closely with psychological frameworks and, in so doing, lose sight of their distinctive Christian mandate[17]. According to the definition outlined in the introduction, Christian counselling is a Spirit-led journey toward healing in Christ, centring on his redemptive work and flourishing in community. When hermeneutical integrity is neglected, Christian counselling becomes ethically compromised, losing its biblical anchor.

The second challenge is professional pressure from secularism, which Johnson refers to as the Secular Revolution–a dichotomy between biblical knowledge and empirical knowledge[18]. In this environment, Christian counsellors risk being "taken captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ" (Col 2:8).

The third issue, professional drift, occurs when counsellors neglect theology, allowing personal views to replace sound biblical exegesis[19]. Proverbs 16:2 warns that "all a person's ways seem pure to them, but motives are weighed

[16] Hombana, "Hearing the Text, Seeing the Text."
[17] Peteet, "Approaching Religiously Reinforced Mental Health Stigma," 846.
[18] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 235.
[19] Hathaway, "Introduction," 257–58.

by the Lord". Without a biblical framework, assessment and treatment approaches risk becoming human-centred rather than Christ-centred.

The absence of a biblical foundation for counselling creates vulnerability for clients. Without Scripture as a framework, counsellors risk harm; Christian counselling must be built on the foundation of biblical truth. Paul reinforces this necessity in 2 Timothy 3:16–17, stating that "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work".

Johnson underscores the restorative nature of God's work, emphasising that Scripture testifies to his relentless pursuit of his children "in hundreds of ways"[20]. A practice lacking psychological training is at greater risk if it also lacks biblical depth. Johnson acknowledges the difficulty of advancing a Christian approach to counselling within a secular psychological climate, noting that, "the secular imaginary… makes envisioning an alternative extremely difficult"[21].

The research questions thus remain: How might Christian counsellors more faithfully integrate Scripture into transformative Christian counselling praxis? And how may Scripture be integrated within the counsellor, the practice, and the encounter?

## The Research

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design in order to explore how Christian counsellors experience, interpret, and integrate Scripture in practice. The final sample comprised of nine participants who self-identify as evangelical Christians and were registered with the Council for Pastoral and Spiritual Counsellors. Inclusion criteria required participants to have a minimum of one year of professional experience as registered Christian counsellors, hold at least a master's degree, maintain affiliation with a recognised professional Christian counselling organisation, be over the age of 25, and be actively engage in counselling practice with a caseload of at least

[20] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 254.
[21] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 246.

three clients per week. The participants were male and female, and represented four different ethnicities. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews designed to elicit participants' lived experiences, theological reasoning, and practical decisions regarding the use of Scripture in counselling. Ethical procedures included consent, confidentiality, and anonymisation.

Systematic thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's phases of familiarisation, coding, theme development, theme review, and analytic definition[22]. The study is limited by its small sample and focus on evangelical counsellors.

## The Counsellor: Primary Integrity in Christian Counselling

A Christian counsellor is first and foremost a Christian before being a counsellor. "Being a Christian counsellor is not just applying the principles of Christianity, you have to *be* Christian" asserted P7[23]. This distinction underscores the responsibility to cultivate faith and spiritual maturity. P5 appealed to Christian counsellors to "live a life one hundred percent according to Scripture". The integrity of Christian counselling is built on the counsellor's personal faith, theological grounding, and commitment to biblical truth.

Participants emphasised daily Scripture engagement and transformation through it. "If you don't know Scripture, you can't bring Scripture into the session", asserted P1. P6 shared their concerns that "using Scripture at any moment has risk. I might think I am using it right but might be using it according to my own biases". What makes a Christian counsellor trustworthy, according to P4, is "my relationship with the Lord". It is a humble journey with the Scriptures; being challenged by Scripture such that "you are Christ for the client." Such language should be understood analogically, referring to Christlike presence and witness rather than any replacement of Christ himself.

[22] Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology."
[23] Participants are identified as P1-P9 to ensure anonymity.

### *The Bible as the Counsellor's Measuring Rod*

"Scripture informs my view of people. Our journey towards wholeness is a journey towards reclaiming that image of God in you", postulated P7. A Christian counsellor's values, ethics, and moral compass must be anchored in a consistent and unwavering standard–Scripture. The Bible serves as this measuring rod. Without Scripture, the Christian counsellor lacks knowledge of who God is, the redemptive work of Christ, and the Holy Spirit's role in transformation. P7 shared this sentiment based on the "responsibility I feel towards God for the people that he sends to me."

In 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul highlights, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." Handling Scripture correctly is not an academic discipline per se, but a spiritual practice requiring theological study and discernment. There is a need for a dependence on the Holy Spirit. P5 summated, "Commit yourself to study. Learn and read."

### *The Role of Responsible Hermeneutics in the Life of a Counsellor*

P3 emphases the responsibility of depth and integrity in Christian counselling imploring Christian counsellors to be "digging into the Word himself". In contexts of spiritual authority, maturity and humility safeguard against misuse. Hathaway confirms that "a person who can't interpret the Word of God cannot counsel biblically"[24]. It is important to properly interpret the Bible to ensure that Scripture is not misapplied or reduced to simplistic self-help principles. "It is not about having all the answers," claimed P4, to which P2 added, "it is about delving into Scripture personally and properly, using commentaries, learning the words that don't make sense." Smith outlines six key components of responsible hermeneutics that can be integrated into the counsellor's personal Bible study, aiding in the faithful integration of Scripture in their own lives and their practice:[25]

1. Literary analysis: understanding the genre and structure of the passage.

[24] Hathaway, "Introduction," 257.
[25] Smith, *A Practical Guide for Studying God's Word*.

2. Historical context which examines the cultural and historical background.

3. Verbal study to analyse the original language and meaning.

4. Christological focus: identifying how the passage relates to Christ.

5. Theological insight extracts doctrinal meaning.

6. Personal application for application of the passage ethically and responsibly.

Scripture is often approached for inspiration alone. Hathaway argues that theological foundations must be built on proper hermeneutics rather than interpreted by subjective explanations or current presenting cultural trends[26]. P4 shared their experience, "When it's about the client, Scripture motivates change. But when it's about the counsellor, people get hurt." Each participant had studied theology and presented a case for ongoing theological study. "If who I am and how I interpret the Bible doesn't help them live and love God more and more, then I am wrong somewhere," declared P4.

### *A Call to Deep Theological Engagement*

Joshua 1:8 and Psalms 1:2–3 remind believers, including Christian counsellors, to cultivate deep, personal engagement with Scripture. P5 claimed that, "You can't water down Scripture, you become ineffective." The cultivation understood by the participants is through disciplined study, which includes Spirit-led discernment. This can help guard against distorted interpretation. The ethical and professional dimensions of a counsellor's ministry can be strengthened by a growing understanding of the Word of God, enhancing a practice that is deeply connected to biblical truth, not personal or public opinion. P7 encouraged Christian counsellors to allow Scripture to show them their biases and prejudices—even their "denominational background, lean, or bent." When revealed, counsellors can present these biases to the Holy Spirit for their own ongoing spiritual transformation.

[26] Hathaway, "Introduction," 260–61.

This engagement is about embracing a posture of surrendering to God and centring Jesus as one embraces the Holy Spirit's transformative work. A surrendered life bears fruit, equipping the counsellor to serve in a way that is both ethical and spiritually grounded. P6 appealed to Christian counsellors: "I would like to see Christian counsellors study theology, delve deeper into the study of theology, to help them interpret in a more responsible way."

### *Practical Application: Strengthening the Role of Scripture in Counselling Praxis*

From the analysed data based on the transcribed words of the participants and the theoretical framework, the concept of incarnational counselorship refers to counselling as an embodied expression of Christian faith. It is a way of being present where truth is embodied. As Jesus himself embodied the love of the Trinity extended to creation through connecting with humanity, "the practical application of love through meaningful actions can potentially bridge the gap between theological concepts and the lived experiences of people"[27].

Themes of embodied faith, spiritual connection, and a lived integrity shaped the data analysis are based on Scripture, which offers "the foundation of what we do and why we do it" (P7). "Believe in the God that you purport to work under", which is more than "memorised scripture but knowing what it means" (P7). Counsellors are invited not to hide their Christian identity.

Faithfully integrated Scripture in Christian counselling praxis incudes commitment to a disciplined Bible study routine. It includes a daily exegetical work that deepens their knowledge and understanding of Scripture. One strategy is regular hermeneutical reflection on passages before meaningful use in sessions. Counsellors should approach Scripture as humble servants of Christ, not as counsellors searching for a quick-fix resource for a session. It is divine revelation through the work for Scriptural exploration that shapes both the counsellors' personal faith and their professional ministry. Reliance on the Holy Spirit is paramount for insight and to guard against human perspectives that do not align with God's purposes.

[27] Nanthambwe, "Embodied Grace," 2.

It is not easy. “To surrender myself to the authority of Scripture was a wrestle” declared P9. Over time however P9 now claims, “I take responsibility to be informed, to keep informed of interpretation of Scripture integrating according to personal conviction … it is a living document in living relationship with the living God.” Prioritising sound hermeneutics in spiritual formation safeguards practice and upholds ethical standards.

Ultimately, being led by the Spirit in counselling necessitates a deep knowledge of who he is through the truth of Scripture. “I never want to lose the fascination I find in God’s word, the newness” asserted P3. P9 added, “We have to stay fresh in the Scripture.” As Scripture shapes the counsellor, it shapes the client. Scripture is “identity over confidence” and one can “speak the truth in love, it flows out of you, part of your being as a counsellor” offered P8.

P6 urged, “I would like to see Christian counsellors study theology to help them interpret in a more responsible way and use it more effectively.” By embedding sound biblical hermeneutics into their spiritual and professional formation, Christian counsellors safeguard their practice against misappropriation of Scripture and ethical compromise. P4 reminded Christian counsellors that they are to be “living the Bible.” It is not enough to merely read it. P4 asked, “Are the ethics and the Bible in me?” P7 challenged counsellors, “Do you know when the Holy Spirit is nudging you? How?” Ultimately, to be led by the Spirit in counselling requires knowing who he is through the truth of Scripture.

## The Counselling Practice: Building a House on a Solid Foundation

“Jesus shifts the atmosphere. This room belongs to God,” asserted P8. A room built on a solid foundation is one of “accountability through integration and collaboration,” imparted P1. At the level of practice, the question is how beliefs about Scripture are embedded in supervision, referral, collaboration, and ethics[28].

For ethical integrity and professional identity, Scripture offers biblical authority through themes of faithfulness and moral grounding. A biblically grounded

[28] Dobson, “Ethical Considerations,” 3, 9.

framework informs practice. According to Johnson, the central role of Scripture in Christian counselling is truth that equips believers for "every good work" (2 Tim 3:17), noting that it reveals the fundamental principles of governing human life[29]. "Sound theological, biblical bases are important in counselling practice," asserted P3 as they claimed that "a shallow study of the Bible doesn't work." Theology forms the foundation and structural integrity of Christian counselling. Psychology can be integrated in a way that does not compromise the load-bearing theological structures. Hermeneutical integrity is thus essential for biblical interpretation as well as discerning the validity of psychological principles in light of Scripture.

In Christian counselling there is both philosophy and method, not just technique. Philosophy shapes the method. Sound biblical hermeneutics goes a long way in preventing the misuse of Scripture. Holding onto theological integrity directly influences the method and technique. In this way, the Bible does not become a prescriptive handbook but serves as the framework that holds the structure together.

Imagine Christian counselling as a well-constructed house with a firm foundation build on sound biblical principles. It should include strong load bearing walls–essential uncompromised theological and ethical convictions– and structural beams that support biblical truths. Now imagine that the walls and windows are the integration of psychological insights that can bring clarity and perspective, without compromising biblical integrity. Practically, this includes referral pathways, collaboration, and ethical reflection.

As Hathaway argues, if Scripture is truly God's authoritative Word, then all psychological claims must be evaluated in light of it[30]. However, when psychological research appears inconsistent with Scripture, it is the responsibility of the Christian counsellor to critique both the validity of the research and their own exegetical interpretation[31].

[29] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 238.
[30] Hathaway, "Introduction."
[31] Hathaway, "Introduction," 262.

### *Knowing Your Foundation and Framework*

"Scripture is the foundation of what we do and why we do it," maintained P8. A weak foundation cannot withstand complex counselling encounters. A strong biblical hermeneutic ensures that the counsellor rightly understands God, humanity, and redemption. The Bible reveals who God is and who we are: people created in God's image and called to reflect his wisdom; fallen, yet redeemable through Christ. Scripture also tells God's metanarrative, the grand story of redemption with which counselling should align.

As stewards of this theological house, counsellors must ask: What is the foundation of my practice? Is it firmly built on Scripture, or does it lean too heavily on secular philosophy? As the lamp on a lampstand in Jesus' description of Christians brings light to all in the house (Matt 5:14–16) there is a responsibility in praxis. Scriptural exegesis includes a rigorous engagement with Scripture, relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit to ensure accurate interpretation.

Similarly, Christian counsellors must establish non-negotiable theological and ethical principles drawn from careful exegesis, avoiding proof-texting or vague assumptions. At the same time, there is wisdom in recognising areas of flexibility–certain methods, assessments, and interventions can be adjusted, while core theological convictions must remain unshaken[32].

Scripture is sufficient for its divine purpose; counsellors must avoid both exaggerating and diminishing its role[33]. "Scripture holds and determines our ethics… we are accountable to sound ethics" described P4 when issuing the metaphor of theology and psychology being like two legs, "they walk together." For P4, Scripture is this framework mentioned above, and the integration is, as P8 confirms, that which "Christian counsellors are accountable for, that requires diligence."

[32] Hathaway, "Introduction," 264.
[33] Hathaway, "Introduction," 264.

A biblically grounded practice also requires clarity regarding scope: Christian counsellors are not exempt from recognising trauma complexity, psychiatric need, or situations that require multidisciplinary referral[34].

### *The Integration of Psychology and Theology*

Integrating theology and psychology requires careful discernment, as both contribute to a holistic understanding of humanity. P3 affirmed that "psychology and theology intersect, yes, but they don't go into the same spaces," while P6 added, "There is a road between the two… I can hold both theology and psychology in the deepest parts of my heart." To think God's thoughts after him requires evaluating psychological insights through Scripture's lens, maintaining a high view of biblical authority. A biblical foundation does not require rejecting psychology. God's world, will, and Word will never contradict one another. Psychology, when rightly applied, can function as the walls and windows of the house, providing practical insights that allow the practice to function effectively. However, when a counselling practice is built primarily on secular psychology, sociology, or anthropology, it becomes unstable and spiritually unsafe. The Bible remains the stabilising element, ensuring that psychology is used wisely within biblical truth.

Johnson contends that, if Christians are to think all of God's thoughts after Him, then it follows that both theological and psychological fields should be explored–provided they align with God's creation grace and biblical authority[35]. While psychology may provide valuable knowledge, God alone is omniscient, making Scripture the ultimate source of unchanging truth.

### *The Role of the Holy Spirit*

P7 maintained that "self-awareness is about knowing one's own biases and prejudices, hangups and denominational background lean or bent and presenting that to the Holy Spirit." The person and practice reveal ethical, hermeneutical, and spiritual complexity. If counsellors are to "believe in the God that you purport to work under," as P7 claimed, then, as P8 reminded, the counsellor "cannot separate ethics and Scripture. One can't practice outside of your foundation of your practice… Scripture is foundational in the practice." In

[34] Dames and Dames, "Pastoral Care and Counselling in Current Times."
[35] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 238.

the interpretation thereof, according to P6, "it is the Holy Spirit that guides and teaches."

The Holy Spirit is not an optional feature in Christian counselling; he is the presence of God who guides and sustains the practice. The Spirit reveals the truth of Scripture (1 Cor 2:12–14; John 14:26), ensuring the theological foundation remains sound. He grants wisdom and discernment to counsellors (Isa 11:2; John 16:13), enabling them to distinguish what is biblically and ethically right (1 Cor 2:10–11; Rom 8:27). Most importantly, the Spirit empowers transformation, making counselling spiritually restorative (Rom 8:11). A proper hermeneutic reveals that the Holy Spirit is a person in the Trinity–one with whom we have a living relationship. The counsellor-client relationship and the transformation that occur within a Spirit-led practice are made possible through dependence on the Holy Spirit, who ensures right interpretation of Scripture and ethical effectiveness.

### *Practical Application: Strengthening the Biblical Framework of Christian Counselling*

For faithful integration of Scripture into Christian counselling that is transformative, counsellors should be continually assessing their theological foundation. This incudes holding to Scripture as central to their praxis rather than cultural trends. They should assess which theological structures are non-negotiable when integrating psychology. The guidance of the Holy Spirit is fundamental in the strengthening of a biblical framework, allowing his wisdom to dynamically transform their practice.

Spirit-led practices offer a safe healing journey. This is especially evident when counsellors are continually reinforcing their theological foundations, ensuring that their work remains faithful to Scripture and responsive to the ever-dynamic complexities of their clients. As Johnson succinctly states, "Being in Christ, Christians are able to practice science redemptively, seeking the triune God, and His knowledge and His love, at every step of the scientific process, for His glory"[36].

[36] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 236.

## The Counselling Encounter: Walking Towards Wholeness in Christ

"It's about relationship and conversation. Bring heaven to earth don't try get people into heaven," appealed P4. Continuing, P4 asserted that when Scripture is about the counsellor, "people get hurt." P3 invited Christian counsellors to "strive to relook at Scripture and its effectiveness in counselling and in your own life and the contribution to the person's life." P2 asserted that Scripture is not to be exploited in sessions and that people should be invited to "process Scripture in light of God's love." P2 suggested, "Ask yourself the question, will Scripture bring them closer to Christ, or cause harm? Do we gather or scatter?" The study revealed through various themes that Christian counselling is a sacred, relational journey toward healing, growth, and wholeness in Christ.

In South African contexts marked by communal identity, trauma, poverty, and diverse spiritual vocabularies, the counselling encounter requires special attentiveness to how Scripture is heard, trusted, responded to, or resisted.

While Christian counsellors may work with both believers and unbelievers their core mission remains the same: to facilitate transformation toward Christlikeness through the Word, the Spirit, and the grace of Jesus Christ. Even when faith is not explicitly expressed, the counsellor remains anchored in Christ, perceiving the client through God's eyes rather than through human brokenness. The calling to become more like Christ with a cultural mandate to "subdue" and "have dominion" over the earth (Gen 1:28) as an image bearer of God is a bio-psycho-social-spiritual development. Johnson affirms, "Proper physiological, relational, cognitive, and emotional development provides the creational platform for humanity's holy imaging of God, at least on earth"[37].

The counsellor's role is to see the client through God's perspective, rather than through the distorted lens of human brokenness. This process occurs through the Word of God, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the grace of Jesus Christ, integrating theological and psychological research.[38]

[37] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 238.
[38] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 238.

While secular psychological insights can be valuable as walls and windows in the metaphorical house, the Christian counsellor must critically examine their root. Johnson argues that if God created humanity for His glory, then all avenues of knowledge should be explored responsibly and ethically, to align with who he is and his divine purpose–generating more glory.[39] This includes responsible counselling skills in the counselling encounter.

### *The Dynamics of the Counselling Encounter*

The research illuminated kingdom resources–divine tools and sacred models viewed through scriptural lenses–forming a sanctuary framework within a biblical worldview. The Christian counsellor integrates theology and psychology, discerning how to ethically facilitate healing within a biblical framework. Effective Christian counselling relies on the Holy Spirit's discernment, sensitivity to the client's faith journey, and wisdom in integrating Scripture. P4 stated, "My ethics is to bring heaven to earth, not try to get people into heaven."

Discernment from the Holy Spirit guides the counsellor in asking questions that heal rather than harm and prevents the God complex–taking on the role of expert in the client's life. Sound scriptural and psychological hermeneutics keep the counsellor within ethical boundaries. P5 maintained that "Scripture must be applicable to the session," adding, "I bring in additional Scripture, then they must decide for themselves." For P7, integration should avoid shame, offering clients "the power to choose and have boundaries.

Sensitivity to the client's faith journey ensures respect while gently inviting them deeper. Peteet observes that psychiatrists, patients, and religious communities do not always agree on the labels assigned to symptoms.[40] A sound biblical hermeneutic integrated with psychological discernment helps counsellors facilitate a healthier understanding of God and self.

Wisdom in integrating Scripture involves knowing when and how to introduce it, while considering cultural and contextual factors. There will always be healing practices that align with Scripture and those that do not. Discernment

[39] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 240.
[40] Peteet, Approaching Religiously Reinforced Mental Health Stigma."

is required, and the wisdom of 1 Thessalonians 5:21 can help: "Test everything hold fast to what is good." Peteet cautions against discouraging medical care and equating mental health struggles with spiritual failure[41]. A more faithful practice includes a collaborative approach that integrates carefully chosen Scripture and psychological principles to support healing while remaining ethical. Practitioners should value the intrinsic good in spiritual practices and community support, yet remain alert to potential harm such as delayed treatment, trauma from exorcism, or internalised shame.

Not all models include direct Scripture references, yet all should be biblically grounded and ready to integrate Scripture wisely when appropriate. "How they [clients] enter my space and how they leave will be determined by how carefully I use Scripture–even if I don't say it out loud," offered P6.

### *The Responsible Use of Scripture in Sessions*

Hermeneutical discernment in Christian counselling is the ongoing effort to apply Scripture faithfully in real life, holding together biblical truth and practical wisdom. A sound biblical hermeneutic is essential–not only for the counsellor's personal study but also for shaping their professional practice – avoiding reductionism and fundamentalist misrepresentation of God's word.

### *1. When the Counsellor Introduces Scripture*

"There should be no imposition of Scripture," claimed P9, "It is complex to integrate Scripture. You must have patience within the process." Counsellors should avoid using the Bible prescriptively, introducing it only when it prayerfully aligns with the client's journey and nurtures transformation. When it is contextually relevant, Scripture can be brought in meaningfully. P9 suggested that the counsellor introspects, "Is it fitting? Will it bring clarity?"

Counsellors may invite clients to reflect on a passage related to their struggle, explore biblical metaphors such as lament in Lamentations or restoration in Psalms, or encourage prayerful study and return with reflections. The Psalms and Lamentations may be especially helpful where clients need language for grief, protest, confusion, waiting, or trust, because these texts legitimise suffering without reducing it to personal failure. In practice, such texts may be

[41] Peteet, "Approaching Religiously Reinforced Mental Health Stigma."

used as prompts for reflection, emotional naming, prayer, journalling or collaborative discussion rather than as directives imposed on the client. "If you love the Scripture and how it is shaping them, then present the Scripture in such beauty," summated P9.

### *2. When the Client Brings Scripture into the Session*

P8 suggested that counsellors should "see where God is in the person in front of us" and "be curious, ask them to help you understand it [the Scripture that they bring]." When clients share Scripture–often from places of pain–it becomes a sacred moment requiring a Spirit-led ear to reach the person behind the problem.

Counsellors should respect clients' beliefs and values. Where significant disparities arise, a referral may be necessary. When clients reference Scripture through misinterpretation or struggle, the counsellor's task is not correction but understanding what the passage means to them–how it shapes their emotions, choices, or pain. The counsellor can invite the client to consider the context related to their chosen passage, trusting that the Holy Spirit can and does lead toward deeper understanding.

For example, if a client misuses Scripture in a way that reinforces self-condemnation, the counsellor can gently ask, "When you read this passage, how does it make you experience yourself and God?" And then, "Would you be open to exploring another passage that speaks to this theme in a different way?"

### *3. When Scripture Has Been Used Harmfully in a Client's Life*

Having worked with clients who have experienced harm from the misuse of Scripture, P9 declared, "I get quite irritated with the way Scripture is forced, misused, or Bible bashed." Some clients may have experienced spiritual abuse— "coercive control and misuse of power in a religious context"[42]—or received harmful interpretations of Scripture. In such cases, the counsellor's role is not to impose an alternative interpretation but to help clients process the emotional and theological impact of those experiences.

[42] Oakley et al., "Responding Well to Spiritual Abuse," 189.

Instead of immediate refutation, the counsellor can invite a conversation by asking, "I wonder if we can take a step back and explore what this verse means in its broader context—would you be open to that?" As P8 appealed, "Don't force it! Don't abuse Scripture. You are walking on holy ground."

Wong and Xie remind Christian counsellors to try to understand the client's context so that Scripture can be used redemptively[43]. This helps client rediscover the depth and truth of meaningful passages for themselves through Spirit-led reflection. P9 paused, shook their head and spoke slowly and deliberately, "The motive is what's important. If you're concerned for them, then be ethical with Scripture." Where spiritual abuse or trauma is present, counsellors should prioritise safety, pacing, and consent before engaging disputed biblical material.

### *The Holy Spirit's Role in the Counselling Encounter*

P7's concern was posed through the question "Do you know when the Spirit is nudging you?" to which P6 asserted, "You need to know the difference between your conscience and the Holy Spirit." Confirming their contribution, P8 declared, "The Holy Spirit must speak loudest."

Christian counselling is a divine partnership between humans and the Spirit of God. Relying on the Holy Spirit is what keeps counsellors attuned to God's voice. This reliance informs their discernment of the right timing, the most helpful words, useful techniques, and the posture they are to assume within the session. Without this reliance on the Spirit, the counselling risks becoming purely psychological. A Holy Spirit-led counsellor does not force change but creates a space where God can be glorified and Scripture becomes a means of grace rather than a tool of coercion.

### *Practical Application: Strengthening Scripture's Role in the Counselling Encounter*

"Clients need to be heard. Scripture comes in gently, as a reflection" offered P3. Allow people to "process Scripture in light of God's love" (P3). Invited them to "read the verse aloud, if that is what has more meaning for them" (P5). P6 cautioned that "using Scripture has risks", to which P7 recommended, "allow

[43] Wong and Xie, "Theocentric Therapy within the Christian Context," 1.

the client to bring the Scripture." P9 did not shy away from integrating Scripture into the session, though claims that "it is complex to integrate Scripture. Discernment and guidance of the Spirit are necessary."

Actionable practices include seeking client consent before scriptural engagement, documenting the rationale for Scripture use in ethically sensitive cases, using lament texts where appropriate, and building referral or supervision structures for cases involving trauma, abuse, or severe psychological distress.

To integrate Scripture faithfully in transformative Christian counselling praxis, counsellors must develop expertise in exegetical and theological study, ensuring that Scripture is approached with accuracy and responsibility for God's glory. It is equally essential to remain attentive to the Holy Spirit's guidance when Scripture arises in a session, discerning whether its use will be beneficial or potentially harmful. Not every session needs a Bible verse. Wisdom is required in discerning when and how to introduce a Scripture competently that will be meaningful and helpful.

Reflective questioning supports healing without oversimplification. It is most helpful when clients are invited to wrestle with, grieve over, and deeply process their experiences in ways that are authentic and Spirit-led. It is certainly possible to uphold both the integrity of Scripture and the uniqueness of the client and their journey through safe healing encounters that lead to wholeness in Christ. Herein lies the sacred moment where Scripture wisely introduced or discovered opens the door for psychological healing and deepened theological insight.

## Conclusion

In response to the main research question, the study argues that Scripture is most faithfully integrated in Christian counselling when it is interpreted through sound hermeneutics, embodied by a spiritually formed counsellor, and applied with discernment, consent, and contextually sensitivity. A biblically coherent framework for sound Christian counselling practice is the responsibility of the practitioner. Johnson reminds counsellors that "God's psychological knowledge and wisdom is the ultimate archetype and source of

everything valid in any human psychologies and vastly exceeds them all in quality and quantity"[44].

It is recommended that the church explicitly engage incarnational counselorship within a sound Scriptural framework to better serve their congregations, especially in sub-Saharan Africa where the application of embodied grace[45] is needed. The commitment to truth does not exclude interdisciplinary competence. Rather, it motivates spiritual formation in counsellors. This includes professional counselling practices built on sound biblical hermeneutics and wisely integrated psychological practices. Concrete recommendations for training and practice include stronger formation in hermeneutics, clearer attention to scope and referral, trauma-sensitive use of Scripture, and greater practical use of biblical genres such as lament in counselling work.

The calling for Christian counsellors is to integrate exegetical excellence with ethical integrity while remaining aware of their own spiritual limitations and how these influence the care that they provide. Studying the Bible cannot remain an academic task but should become a spiritual discipline. Moving away from prescriptivism invites counsellors to be adaptable without losing their biblical anchor. Christian counsellors must build their practice on solid theological foundations. This is where Scripture shapes ethical care with integrity and dignity, holding onto the created worth and well-being of every individual–each one deeply loved by their Creator.

[44] Johnson, "A Doxological Necessity," 247.
[45] See Nanthambwe, "Embodied Grace," 3.

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