

Pastoral Counseling Between Theological Foundations and Integrative Perspectives

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ABSTRACT: This study explores pastoral counseling as a theological and integrative discipline that necessitates a firm foundation in biblical doctrines while remaining open to the contributions of the human sciences. Drawing from three major theological themes—Creation and Revelation, the *Imago Dei*, and Divine Providence and Common Grace—the article highlights how Christian theology shapes a holistic understanding of the human being, the nature of suffering, and the possibilities of healing and transformation. By emphasizing the biblical narrative and Christian anthropology, the study advocates for a counseling approach that honors both the authority of Scripture and the usefulness of interdisciplinary insights. Theological foundations not only sustain the identity and mission of pastoral counseling, but also open the way for meaningful dialogue with psychology and other fields that seek human well-being. Pastoral counseling is thus affirmed as a ministry of care and redemption, grounded in the grace and presence of God, and carried out in partnership with the *missio Dei* to restore and heal humanity.

KEYWORDS: pastoral counseling, integration, creation and revelation, *Imago Dei*, divine providence, common grace

Introduction

Divine revelation, at the center of which is Holy Scripture, is the epistemological foundation of Christian theology and, by implication, pastoral counseling. The Bible is not merely a source of doctrinal authority; it also provides a coherent and comprehensive perspective on the nature of God, His relationship with creation, and how He works in history. In this sense, pastoral counseling, as a theological and practical endeavor, is necessarily grounded in the content and principles revealed in Scripture. At the same time, paradoxically, Scripture itself recognizes the possibility of access to a partial but valid knowledge of the truth, even outside its canonical content. This knowledge is accessible through what systematic theology defines as "general revelation" or through such realities as divine providence, common grace, and innate moral sense. Through these channels, God has left the way open for human understanding of aspects of the created world and human behavior, even outside the explicitly revealed framework. This has led

many theologians from different confessional traditions to reflect on the relationship between special revelation and knowledge gained through the human sciences.

Theological divergences have led to different emphases between biblical and scientific foundations. Some approaches have advocated the exclusive supremacy of scriptural revelation, while others have argued for a constructive dialog between theology and the social sciences to gain a broader understanding of the human person and human suffering. In the context of pastoral counseling, this tension translates into a constant challenge: preserving the theological identity without excluding the valid input of psychology or other related disciplines.

In this endeavor, it is essential to reaffirm and integrate those major theological landmarks that provide consistency and specific delineation to pastoral counseling. Notions such as divine revelation, providence, common grace, or the wisdom of the Holy Spirit are indispensable elements in the construction of an authentic pastoral paradigm. These not only provide the theological foundation for the counselor's work, but also guide spiritual and ethical discernment in the process of accompanying those who are suffering.

Thus, pastoral counseling is not reduced to the simple application of psychological intervention techniques in an ecclesial context but finds its meaning and legitimacy in the assumption of these theological foundations. It is only by integrating them in a profound way that fidelity to the pastoral mission and to the vocation of Christian ministry can be assured.

Creation and Revelation: Theological Premises for an Integrative Approach to Pastoral Counseling

There is a profound correlation between the act of creation and the process of divine revelation, since the created reality becomes the privileged framework through which God makes himself known. Thus, creation is not only an expression of the divine will, but also an active medium through which the divine reveals his character, intentions, and providential action. In Christian theology, this self-communication of God is understood as having two main forms: general revelation and special revelation (Erickson, 2013).

Throughout the history of theological thought, the categorization of revelation has known various conceptual formulations. Initially, the distinction was between natural revelation, understood as the revelation of the divine through the phenomena and structures of the natural world, and supernatural revelation, defined by God's extraordinary interventions in the order of the world. Subsequently, a more nuanced terminology came to prevail, preferring the terms general revelation and special revelation, which emphasize not so much the means of revelation as its scope and purpose.

General revelation is the epistemological foundation of the knowledge of God through the observation of creation. Manifestations of the beauty, harmony, order, and complexity of nature are perceived as indications of divine wisdom and majesty. Thus, for the believer, created reality is not an impersonal system but a living expression of a personal Creator (Berkhof, 1996). Traditionally, this form of revelation has been valorized as an argument for God's existence and for the recognition of his attributes (Demarest, 1982).

However, the appeal to creation as a source of theological knowledge raises certain methodological difficulties. Alister McGrath (2001), in analyzing the relationship between theology and science, draws attention to the fact that nature itself is an interpretive construct, which implies an inevitable hermeneutical mediation of religious experience. Accordingly, it is preferable to understand general and special revelation not as two separate sources, but as complementary dimensions of the same divine intention of self-communication.

In addition to its epistemological role, general revelation also expresses God's relational character toward creation (Callaway & Whitney, 2022). Even after the ontological fracture produced by original sin, God did not withdraw his presence from the world, but reaffirmed his commitment to creation through a universal covenant (Genesis 8:22), promising to maintain the natural order and provide the resources necessary for life. The doctrine of creation, in this perspective, is not limited to the original moment, but involves ongoing action: God creates, sustains, restores, and perfects all that he has brought into being (King & Whitney, 2015).

Within the Trinitarian framework, the role of the Holy Spirit is particularly important, understood as a vitalizing and regenerative principle that keeps the connection between Creator and creation alive despite the corrupting effects of sin (Reeves, 2012). The Holy Spirit "illuminates and unravels the mystery of revelation for the human mind" (Szasz, 2018). Out of this constant concern for creation flows the concept of *missio Dei*, which describes God's sovereign initiative to act in the world for restoration, reconciliation and eschatological fulfillment (Bosch, 2011). Pastoral counseling becomes, in this context, a privileged framework for human participation in the *missio Dei*.

At the same time, although general revelation is particularly valuable, it is limited in the depth and completeness of the knowledge of God. What is offered through creation is essentially an anticipation and confirmation of the divine presence, not an exhaustive communication of God's plan (Grenz, 2000). Despite these limitations, the believer is encouraged to seriously investigate creation, using the means offered by the natural sciences and the humanities, not as a substitute for scriptural revelation, but in complement to it (Collins, 1977). It is important to emphasize that Scripture does not set out to be an encyclopedic treatise or a manual for solving all existential problems (Faw, 1995). Rather, the Bible offers a coherent meta-narrative of creation, fall and redemption that can ground a theological frame of reference relevant to personal life and pastoral counseling

(Welch, 1997). This approach allows for the integration of psychological and sociological methods and tools of analysis in line with Christian values and teachings.

From this perspective, Christian theology does not conflict with science but seeks a fruitful dialogue with it. Both fields are engaged in exploring the same reality—the universe and the human being—although they use different methods. Therefore, Christian counselors are called to show openness to the results of scientific research, discerning wisely what can be integrated into counseling practice without compromising fundamental biblical values (Steve Viars, 2012).

In this sense, the collaboration of pastoral counseling with the humanities is not a compromise, but a form of active participation in the *missio Dei* (Neff & McMinn, 2020). God, in his love, reaches out to human beings through a variety of means, and pastoral counseling is a privileged context in which this outreach is realized through empathy, support, and spiritual guidance. To participate in this ministry is to fulfill the mandate of creation, that is, to manifest responsibility for all that God has made (Wright, 2010), with the human being at the center of concern (Kellemen, 2014).

In conclusion, a deep understanding of the doctrines of creation and revelation provides the Christian counselor with the conceptual framework necessary to interact critically and constructively with the humanities. This theological articulation fosters the development of interdisciplinary pastoral counseling that is capable of responding to the complexities of contemporary human reality while remaining faithful to the biblical foundation of the Christian faith (Callaway & Whitney, 2022).

***Imago Dei*: Theological Foundations and Implications for Pastoral Counseling**

An essential dimension of theological anthropology is the concept of *imago Dei*, which directly reflects God's intention to confer upon human beings a special dignity, honor, and unique calling within creation. From a biblical and theological perspective, humans are bearers of God's image, which implies both an honor conferred by the Creator and a profound moral and existential responsibility (Lewis & Demarest, 2010).

The interpretation of the concept of *imago Dei* has undergone remarkable diversity throughout the history of theological thought, depending on the era, cultural context, and doctrinal approach. Some interpretations have focused on the physical characteristics of man, while others have emphasized his intellectual, spiritual, or relational dimensions. The hermeneutical spectrum is thus very broad, and the understanding of human nature has decisively influenced the ways in which the image of God reflected in man has been conceived. Broadly speaking, theological interpretations of *imago Dei* can be grouped into two broad categories: the substantial and the relational. The substantial approach emphasizes the

intrinsic traits and capacities of human beings – reason, will, moral conscience, creativity – while the relational approach highlights man's ability to enter into communion with God and his neighbor by virtue of the original divine calling (Miller, 2011).

Regarding the constitution of the human being, Christian theology has oscillated between several paradigms. The trichotomist model postulates a composition of body, soul, and spirit, each with a distinct but interconnected function (Erickson, 2013). The more simplified dualistic model proposes a dichotomy between body and soul (Moreland & Rae, 2000). In addition to these classical models, in the contemporary era, a holistic perspective on the human person is gaining ground, integrating the physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions into a unified whole (Yong, 2007). This holistic view avoids the fragmentation of the human being and emphasizes the interdependence between body and soul, between biology, psychology, and spirituality. From this perspective, man's likeness to God is expressed in a dynamic relational framework, in which the human reflects the divine without identifying with it. Man is created "in the image of God," but he is not God (Green, 2012).

American theologian Meredith G. Kline (1999) identified three dimensions of the divine image reflected in man in Scripture: a formal one (referring to his visible, physical nature), a functional one (referring to his official vocation to rule over creation), and an ethical one (involving moral responsibility). On the other hand, John M. Frame (2006) proposes a comprehensive approach to the image of God, comparing it to a reflection in a mirror: man reflects the entire divine character, from reason to affectivity, from will to corporeality. In such a view, the entire structure of the human person becomes an expression of the divine image, and the image of God is not one aspect among others of humanity, but its very essence. Thus, man not only bears the *imago Dei*, but is entirely an expression of this image (Joustra, 2017).

In the relational paradigm, the *imago Dei* is the theological foundation of the communion between man and God. This relationship is manifested through the capacity for mutual communication, through freedom of choice, but especially through the divine call addressed to man since creation (Vanderploeg, 1981). Through this relational capacity that man distinguishes himself from other created beings (Howe, 1995) and reflects the personal attributes of God. The superiority of human beings in relation to the rest of creation is expressed through rationality, morality, language, and self-awareness, traits that derive directly from the relationship with God and constitute manifestations of His character imprinted in man (McMinn, 2008). However, the relationship with God also develops through the cultivation of formative spiritual disciplines, which contribute to the believer's maturation and to the shaping of the divine image in his life (Johnson, 2017).

The restorative dimension of the divine image in man becomes possible through the saving work of Christ, who restores what has been damaged by sin

(Grenz, 2000). Christ, through his incarnation, death, and resurrection, becomes not only the Savior, but also the archetype of restored humanity, and the Holy Spirit actively contributes to the process of restoration (Fowler & Ford, 2021). In John F. Kilner's theology (2010), *imago Dei* refers to the status conferred on man, while the image of Christ represents the standard to which humanity is called to aspire. Thus, Christ becomes the key to an authentic understanding of human identity (Welz, 2016). This understanding depends on understanding the identity of Christ, which is not easy but fundamental (Brie, 2018). Therefore, the doctrine of *imago Dei* has a dual function: it gives the Church the responsibility to affirm the identity and vocation of Christians in the public sphere (Robinson, 2011) and, at the same time, it imposes an ethic of respect for human dignity and support for each individual on their path to reconciliation with God (Kilner, 2015).

In terms of pastoral counseling, the traditional approach has often correlated the image of God with the reality of sin, which has led to an excessive emphasis on deviant behaviors or pathologies (Callaway & Whitney, 2022). Subsequently, a paradigm shift occurred with the introduction of perspectives from positive psychology, which emphasized the development of human potential, inner resources, and virtues (Entwistle & Moroney, 2011). In this context, Christian theologians and psychologists began to explore the synergy between theology and positive psychology, considering that both disciplines can contribute to promoting a healthy and balanced view of the human being (Charry & Kosits, 2016).

In particular, the Christian perspective on positive psychology offers an integrative approach, capable of harmonizing the positive dimensions of life with the recognition of the reality of sin and the need for salvation (Hackney, 2007). Thus, the concept of *imago Dei* becomes a fundamental element for both anthropology and psychotherapy (Vanderploeg, 1981). This understanding contributes to the articulation of a coherent view of the spiritual dimension of human beings, highlighting their religious nature and their fundamental orientation toward the transcendent (Benner, 1985).

An excellent example of an integrative approach is the book by Mark McMinn and Clark Campbell (2007), which proposes a correlation between the modes of interpretation of the *imago Dei* and the major psychological paradigms. In this sense, the image of God in man is understood in functional (actions), structural (traits), and relational (interactions) terms, and these dimensions correspond to the major directions in psychology. Based on these correspondences, pastoral counseling can adjust its interventions according to the type of problems identified: symptoms, cognitive patterns, or dysfunctional relationships (McMinn, 2011). Thus, pastoral counseling is not only an act of psychological support, but an expression of the Church's involvement in the world, a concrete manifestation of the divine call to serve people.

Care for souls is a sacred vocation and a gift given by God to the church community (Phillips & Benner, 1996). It involves a shared responsibility, a

culture of care, and an openness to people's spiritual, emotional, and relational needs. Pastoral counselors, in their capacity as ministers and shepherds, work with human beings created "in the image of God" (Dayringer, 2012), and where the divine image is overshadowed by suffering, sin, or trauma, they are called to contribute, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, to its restoration (Hoekema, 2009).

Divine Providence and Common Grace: Theological and Pastoral Implications

Understanding divine providence can often become a challenge, especially in light of human experiences marked by failure and suffering, even when the goals pursued are intrinsically good (Oliver, 2017). This existential tension raises profound questions about how God intervenes in the world and in people's lives, as well as how His action corresponds to a coherent moral and spiritual order. Traditionally, the doctrine of providence is defined as God's ongoing work through which He not only maintains creation in existence, but also sovereignly guides it toward the fulfillment of His eternal purposes (Erickson, 2013). This work involves simultaneously sustaining, guiding, and governing the world.

Providence cannot be understood apart from divine grace. There is an intrinsic connection between these two dimensions: God's active care for the world—that is, providence—is possible and manifests itself precisely because of His grace (Strong, 2019). Grace, in the common theological sense, is defined as the undeserved favor offered by God to human beings, a manifestation of divine goodness that is not conditioned by human merit. In the biblical context, providence appears in many forms, suggesting the complexity of the divine presence in history and in personal life (Fergusson, 2018). Thus, God intervenes to limit evil, to make possible the manifestations of goodness, truth, and beauty, and to allow universal access to certain dimensions of created reality (Callaway & Whitney, 2022).

This conceptual framework also includes the doctrine of common grace, systematically developed by Reformed theologians such as Abraham Kuyper, who was himself influenced by the thinking of Jean Calvin. Kuyper (2009) argued that God has hidden in creation a multitude of spiritual, intellectual, and cultural treasures, waiting to be discovered and valued by man. These "treasures" are expressions of common grace—a form of grace that, although it has no salvific effects, nevertheless reflects divine goodwill and is accessible to all people, regardless of faith (Berkhof, 1996). Although Calvin did not frequently use the term "common grace," Herman Kuiper (1928) identified three dimensions of this grace in his theology: general, universal, and covenant. These forms express different aspects of the interaction between God and His world in a way that transcends the community of believers.

However, there is considerable debate in theological circles regarding the distinction between providence and common grace. Some theologians choose to equate them, asserting that common grace is the manifestation of providence. Others, however, insist on a clear separation, considering that equating the two risks diluting the specificity of common grace (Engelsma, 2014). The doctrine of common grace finds its justification in the observation that two dimensions of human experience coexist in the world: one specifically Christian, which explicitly recognizes divine blessings, and another natural, characteristic of those who do not share the faith but who nevertheless live under the influence of values such as truth, goodness, and beauty (Berkhof, 1996). Thus, common grace does not diminish the imperative need for redemption through Christ's sacrifice but emphasizes the universality of divine blessing in creation (Strong, 2019). Analogous to the relationship between general revelation and special revelation, theologian Bruce Demarest (1982) proposes a division between innate knowledge, which comes from common grace, and knowledge acquired through special revelation. Thus, common grace is a theological concept resulting from the observation that the original blessing of God's creation extends to all people (Boer, 1990). In this context, it is essential to distinguish between the grace that brings salvation and common grace, which maintains and sustains human life in its everyday dimension (Johnson, 2017).

In pastoral counseling, these two doctrines—providence and common grace—do not merely play a theoretical role, but provide an important epistemological foundation. They explain how people, regardless of their spiritual condition, can access essential truths about life, relationships, and suffering (Muehlhoff, 2021). However, because of the influence of sin on human reason (the noetic effects of sin), any knowledge derived from common grace must be filtered and evaluated in light of biblical revelation (Lambert, 2016). Neglecting common grace can lead to an exclusivist attitude, in which all forms of extra-biblical knowledge are viewed with suspicion or rejected as erroneous. This perspective ignores the capacity of the human mind—even in its unregenerate state—to perceive fragments of truth (Kuyper, 2011). Calvin himself recognized this capacity and argued that God has given man, even outside the sphere of salvation, intellectual capacities to discover truth (Mouw, 2001).

Such an understanding is particularly relevant in the realm of pastoral counseling. There are Christian counselors who take a rigid stance, promoting the exclusive use of Scripture and rejecting any contribution from the human sciences—especially psychology—without taking into account the fact that the Bible is not an exhaustive counseling manual (Johnson, 1992). However, a balanced approach involves recognizing that God can also offer wisdom through means considered secular. These sources should not be elevated to the level of biblical revelation, but neither should they be rejected *a priori* (Powlison, 2000). They should be critically

analyzed in light of Christian teachings and used constructively for the good of those who are suffering.

Within creation, God's blessings manifest themselves in many forms—material, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. Pastoral counseling, in this sense, can be seen as a divine gift, a concrete expression of His grace (Daalen, 2012). The pastoral counselor thus becomes an instrument of common grace, through which the person in difficulty receives help, support, and encouragement (McMinn et al., 2006). In this context, counseling becomes a space of grace, where sin and weaknesses can be confronted without condemnation, and restoration can be possible through love and truth (McMinn, 2004).

In conclusion, the doctrines of providence and common grace are two essential theological foundations for effective, authentic, and Bible-based pastoral counseling. These doctrines offer not only a deep understanding of the relationship between God and the world, but also motivation for practical action. They emphasize the limits of human knowledge, the necessity of divine grace, and God's invitation to abundant life (Hodge et al., 2020). Ultimately, pastoral counseling becomes a living expression of the "virtue of grace" (Bufford et al., 2015), a form of ministry that reflects the character of God and contributes to the restoration of human beings in communion with their Creator and their neighbors (Frame, 2006).

Conclusions

This article has argued for the need to reconstruct pastoral counseling within a framework that takes equal account of the theological foundations of biblical anthropology and the integrative perspectives offered by the humanities and social sciences. This synthesis has resulted in a balanced and contextualized model of pastoral intervention, capable of responding to contemporary challenges without abandoning fidelity to scriptural revelation.

On the one hand, the theological foundations—revealed through the doctrines of creation, *imago Dei*, and divine providence—provide not only an ontological and epistemological basis for understanding human beings but also a hermeneutical framework for approaching suffering, crisis, sin, and restoration. Man is seen not as a mere psychosomatic being but as the bearer of the image of God, created for relationship yet marked by the fragility of the fallen condition. This understanding generates a counseling approach that does not reduce the person to a symptom but values them in their entirety—body, soul, and spirit.

On the other hand, the integrative perspective, anchored in the recognition of common grace and active providence in all spheres of human knowledge and experience, allows pastoral counseling to be open to the validated contributions of psychology, sociology, and other related disciplines. This openness does not imply a relativization of biblical truth, but a mature affirmation of the fact that God can

also work through secular means for the benefit of those created in His image. In this sense, pastoral counseling becomes a practice in which spiritual discernment and interdisciplinary competence coexist and intertwine creatively.

Therefore, pastoral counseling, when situated between these two coordinates—theological and integrative—takes on the qualities of a redemptive and restorative act. It is not limited to offering emotional comfort or moral advice but becomes a concrete expression of the work of the Holy Spirit, who accompanies, heals, and transforms lives. The pastoral counselor is, in this context, a mediator of grace and truth, an instrument of reconciliation between the person and God, between the person and themselves, and between the individual and the community.

In conclusion, articulating pastoral counseling that draws on the theological depth of biblical revelation and the richness of interdisciplinary resources is not only possible but necessary. In a fragmented world thirsty for meaning, such an approach offers a coherent narrative in which man is valued, crisis is understood, and hope is restored under the sign of an active providence and a revelation that continues to illuminate the darkness of the human heart.

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