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Theocentric Therapy within the Christian Context

Madeline Foong Yee Wong, ^{a, b, c, d, *} & Guo-Hui Xie ^{a, b, c}

^a Merlion Academy, Singapore

^b Early Years Research Association of Singapore

^c Open Ministry, USA

^d Neuro LAT, Singapore

*Corresponding author Email: madelinewfy@gmail.com

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Abstract: The main goal of the Christian Theocentric Therapy (CTT for short; also known as biblicotherapy, not to be confused with bibliotherapy) centers around God as the One who provides (Jehovah-Jireh), heals (Jehovah-Rapha), and protects (Jehovah-Nissi). Based on the first of the two great commandments articulated by Jesus Christ (as recorded in the gospels according to Saint Mark and also Saint Matthew): the first one concerns the human relationship with God while the second involves human inter-relationship. The former is termed theocentric while the latter is called anthropocentric. This paper focuses on the first commandment from which the four tenets of CTT are derived: (i) heartfulness, (ii) soulfulness, (iii) mindfulness, and (iv) strengthfulness. It aims to provide an introductory understanding of theocentric therapy in the Christian context, and how it is facilitated in the therapeutic process of counseling.

Keywords: Christian, Counseling, Jesus Christ, Theocentrism, Therapy

1. Introduction

Let us begin this paper with a brief exploration of the word 'theocentric'. The word 'theocentric' is a compound word consisting of the prefix 'theo-' (God) and the suffix '-centric' (i.e., 'centered around'). Hence, Christian Theocentric Therapy (CTT for short; also known as theocentric counseling) refers to the theory and practice of Christian therapy/counseling (CT/C for short), also termed as biblicotherapy – derived from the Greek word 'biblica' which means 'books' and adopted by an English theologian John Wycliffe (b.1328-d.1384), who translated the Bible (i.e., 66 books in both the Old Testament and New Testament) from Latin into English. Biblicotherapy should not be mistaken for bibliotherapy, which is "[A] non-pharmaceutical treatment offered as psychological support ... which can be described as the process of reading, reflecting, and discussing literature to further a cognitive shift" (Monroy-Fraustro et al., 2021, p. 1) in supporting good mental health, and is often adapted to supplement other types of therapy (see also Pardeck & Pardeck, 2021, for more detail). CTT includes both biblical counseling and Christian counseling. At this point, we want to reiterate that biblical counseling – also known as biblical pastoral counseling (Cook, 2022) – is not synonymous with Christian counseling, although the two terms are often used interchangeably in literature (Barrow, 2022).

Peteet (2019) described biblical counseling – formerly known as nouthetic counseling which was first coined by a Presbyterian pastor, Jay E. Adams (b.1929-d.2020) – as "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" (p. 846). Lelek (2018) explained that biblical counseling aims to establish a relationship with another person through the Word of God, with the work of the Holy Spirit and by the grace of Jesus Christ. It seeks to build a contextualized understanding of the counselee (past and present) and will view him/her through the Scriptural lens. In other words, biblical counseling emphasizes the precept that God wants to heal by transforming a person's life instead of only focusing on their problems, and it also examines one's life through biblical principles rather than secular values.



According to Hull and Romig (2021), Christian counseling, unlike biblical counseling, is an "integration of (secular) psychology/counseling with a Christian worldview and theological training" (p. 20). This is the essential factor that sets Christian counseling apart from secular counseling per se. Jeremy and Hutagalung (2019) extended the definition of Christian counseling as "a ministry that God entrusted to Pastor or a trained-church member" (p. 2102) to help counselees to develop their self-identity and to repent and change from their misbehavior (sin). They argued that "[T]he beginning of one's conduct is in their mind" and "[B]y that conduct one's character can be known. Therefore, mind is the beginning of the character building" (Jeremy & Romig, 2019, p. 2102). In addition, the environment constitutes a situation as one of the most important factors of building or changing the character of a counselee. Jeremy and Romig (2019) argued that "[C]ounseling can be made as the environmental situation to build or to change character" (p. 2102) of the counselee. That is to say, the focus of Christian counseling is on the whole person (the mind) and not just on symptoms, with the use of the Bible and also involves praying more often.

While biblical counselors work mainly with believers, Christian counselors do not just accept Christians as their clients, but also people of other faiths as well as atheists. Both biblical counseling and Christian counseling endeavor to recognize the centrality (Acts 17:28) and originality (Revelation 1:8) of God (i.e., based on theocentrism or theocentricism) in the process and practice of counseling (Yang, 2018).

As mentioned earlier, we want to reiterate that CTT or biblicotherapy is offered to both Christian as well as non-Christian counselees who seek and need spiritual guidance, emotional support, and advice to help them as follows:

- (1) To understand their current environmental situation (good or bad things in life), but God is still in control and to assure the counselee that s/he can trust God for "we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28¹; New International Version/NIV, 2011);
- (2) To know and recognize the resources available to them, because God will never abandon them no matter what the counselee may feel or experience (see John 14:18) and God "will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Phillipians 4:19²; NIV, 2011); and
- (3) To explore and share their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, working together by encouraging and praying for one another and building each other up (see 1 Thessalonians 5:11): This becomes the action the counselees can take to address their concerns or problems. To delve deeper into the concept and application of biblicotherapy, we have to go into the specialized area of biblicapathology, which examines the causes and effects of sin and deals with the scriptural examination of sin (see Willmington, 2018, for an in-depth study) for better understanding of a client's concern or problem to help him/her. However, it is not within the scope of this paper to discuss further about it. We shall keep it in mind for another paper.

Next, to understand theocentric CT/C, we need to have at least some understanding of what theocentrism is all about. Briefly, theocentrism (or theocentricism) is the belief that God is the central aspect of existence, as opposed to anthropocentrism (i.e., the belief that human beings are the central or most important entity in the universe; for more detail, see Jones, 1917/2003) and existentialism (i.e., the existence of the individual as a free and responsible agent determining his/her own development through acts of the will, or as a form of philosophical inquiry that "explores the problem of human existence that centers on human thinking, feeling, and acting"; see Larvin, 1917, p. 43; also see Macquarrie, 1972, p. 14-15, for more detail). In the theocentric view, the meaning and value of actions done to people or caused by nature (i.e., the environment) are all attributed to God. The tenets of theocentrism (e.g., humility, respect, moderations, selflessness, and mindfulness) are many and they can lend themselves to a form of environmentalism (Hoffman & Sandelands, 2005).

2. The Most Important Commandment in Christian Theocentrism

When Jesus was asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" (Mark 12:28; NIV, 2011), He answered, "The most important [commandment] is, Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you

^{1,2} All biblical verses cited in this paper are taken from the New International Version (NIV) of the Holy Bible (Biblica, 2011; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic).



shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29-31; NIV, 2011). These are the two key commandments given by Jesus Christ Himself to the people around Him. The first constitutes what we would call the theocentric commandment; the second is the anthropocentric commandment. In this short article, our focus is on the theocentric commandment. The four key phrases on loving God are: (i) with all your heart, (ii) with all your soul, (iii) with all your mind, and (iv) with all your strength. These have become the four tenets of Christian theocentrism which includes TC/C.

Let us explore each of the four tenets here and, more importantly, understand and apply them: To love the Lord your God with ...

- "All your heart":

According to Heeren (2019), "[T]o love God with your heart means to love God with your emotions. Praising Him with your happiness, smile, and gratitude is easy when things are going well. Like when you perceive an answer to prayer or one of life's good gifts comes your way" (para. 8). However, when things are not going so well, do we still love God with *all our hearts*?

Heeren (2019) explained that when Jesus said "... *all your heart*", He means *at all times* ... even when God seems silent, even when He tells us to wait, and even when He says "no" to our requests. This also includes even when bad things or misfortunes happen in our lives. We have to continue "to love God even when bad things happen or when good things don't happen is key to a life of contentment" (Heeren, 2019, para. 8). Of course, we will be angry and saddened by the bad things or misfortunes, but we just have to see through that bad circumstance, whatever it might be, putting our trust in God for He will surely comfort us (see 2 Corinthians 1:3-4) and will never leave us nor forsake us (see Hebrews 13:5).

This is heartfelt love for God.

- "All your soul":

Pratt (2017) explained that to love the Lord with all our 'soul' means "loving the Lord on good days and bad days and all days in between" (para. 6; also see Heeren, 2019, for cross-reference). In other words, that means to love God eternally because He first loved us (see 1 John 4:19) and also "of His extravagant love for us!" (Pratt, 2017, para. 7).

Pratt (2017) went on to elaborate that "Loving God with all our life is not a wishy-washy love. It is not controlled by feelings. It is a love born out of a decision and a choice. It is a commitment to love God with and in every part of our lives!" (para. 7).

This is soulful love for God.

- "All your mind":

According to Piper (2008), there are three key components to intellectual love for God, i.e., "(i) dedicating our minds to knowing Him; (ii) thinking clearly and truly about Him so that we do not have false ideas in our minds; and (iii) not being satisfied with merely an intellectual awareness of His attributes, character, and acts but intentionally devoting that mental effort to serve the affections (emotions) for God" (para. 1).

Piper (2008) went on to elaborate that should we fail "to move from intellectual awareness of God and right thinking about God to an emotional embrace of God, we haven't loved God with our mind" (para. 2). In other words, that is to say, our mind has yet to love God until it hands off our thoughts to the emotions where they are embraced. Only then both the mind and the heart are working in harmony, and we should experience this unique feeling as both intellectual and affectional love for God.

That is mindful love for God.

- "All your strength":

According to the explanation provided by the Right from The Heart (RFTH) Ministries (2008), "[W]e need to love God with all of our strength. That means all of our energy" (para. 2). Interestingly, Apostle Mark has used the word 'strength' to mean 'ability' here. "It means that God has given all of us talents and abilities ... [A]nd when



we use those talents and abilities in church, or in vocation, or in relationships with others, we can approach it one of two ways – we can seek glory for ourselves or look to glorify God” (RFTH Ministries, 2008, para. 2).

That is strengthful (HarperCollins Publishers, 2014) love for God. Figure 1 below provides a diagrammatic summary of all four tenets:

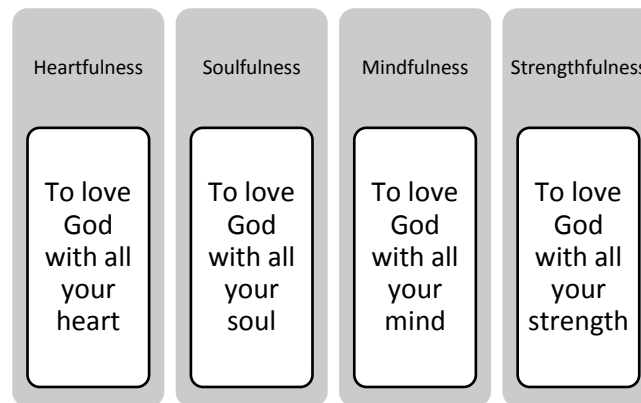


Figure 1. A Diagrammatic Summary of the 4 Tenets

3. Where does Mindfulness fit into Christian Theocentric Therapy/Counseling (CTT/C)?

Vinney (2020) has provided a general psychological definition of mindfulness by referring to it as “a state of being in the moment while non-judgmentally acknowledging one’s thoughts and emotions” (para. 1). Mindfulness is generally practiced by Buddhists and Hindus in their religious meditation and it has also been introduced in various forms of therapy, such as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, mindfulness-based cognitive behavioral therapy, and mindfulness-based stress reduction therapy (see Olivine, 2022, for detail). Many findings from psychological research (e.g., Jha et al., 2010; Moore & Malinowski, 2009; Ortner, Kilner, & Zelazo, 2007) suggest that mindfulness-based practices can lead to many benefits, including stress reduction and increased psychological well-being. However, several research studies (e.g., Britton et al., 2021; Farias, Wikholm, & Delmonte, 2016; Wilson et al., 2015) have also indicated that in some cases involving mindfulness practice may lead to negative outcomes. For instance, a study done by Wilson et al. (2015) found an increase in false-memory susceptibility of participants involved in mindfulness.

It is important to take note that mindfulness itself, contrary to what most people think and believe, has nothing to do with religion and is not religious (Kane, 2022). When exactly mindfulness came into CT/C is not clear. Many Christian practitioners in mental and spiritual wellness have practiced mindfulness separately from their religious activities, in the same way, mindfulness can be applied in exercise or therapy/counseling. Kane (2022) has highlighted that “some Christians are uncomfortable with the new-age spiritual or secular associations mindfulness has in some circles. So, the concept of ‘Christian mindfulness’ has emerged as a way of squaring mindfulness practice with a Christian worldview” (para. 4).

In the Christian mindfulness practice, several elements from secular or New Age mindfulness practices have been discarded, and they include “emptying the mind, focusing too much on the self (instead of God), the pantheistic worldview that all is one, and escaping reality through meditation” (Kane, 2022, para. 5; also see Wong, 2022).

4. The Four Tenets of Christian Theocentric Therapy/Counseling (CTT/C)

The CTT/C does not depend on mindfulness alone. There are three other equally important factors not to be forgotten and they have to be taken into consideration as well. They are heartfulness, soulfulness, and strengthfulness. Though they might sound, read or spell strange, we have already provided a brief description of each of them in the previous section. CTT/C incorporates all four key tenets in expressing reverence to God and love for Him (see Figure 2).



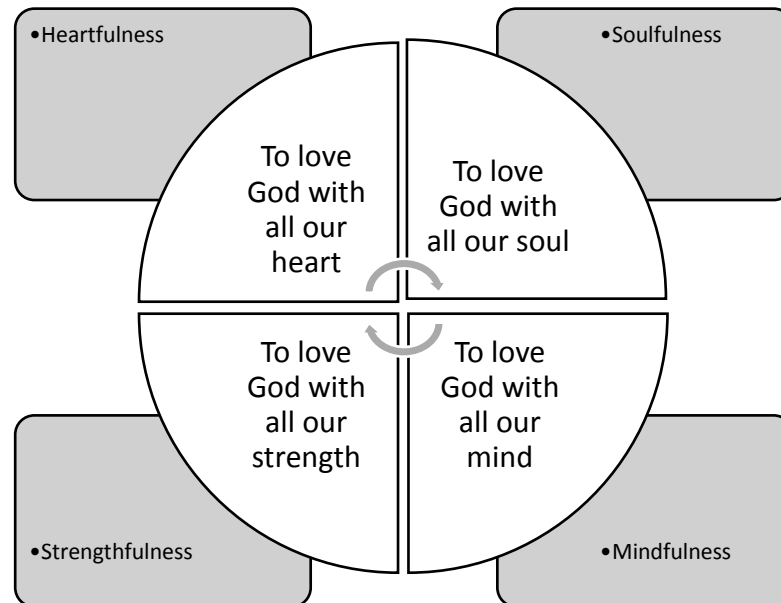


Figure 2. The Four Tenets of Christian Theocentric Therapy

In the application of CTT, when working with a client, a Christian therapist/counselor (Ct/c) would rely on the four tenets (as elaborated in the previous section) to facilitate the process of therapy/counseling with the key emphasis on God as Jehovah-Rapha (more properly, Yahweh-Rapha), which means 'The Lord Who Heals' in Hebrew. Jehovah-Rapha (which appears in Exodus 15:26) is one of the many different names of God found in the Old Testament.

5. Application of the Four Tenets in Christian Theocentric Therapy/Counseling (CTT/C)

The four tenets are each carefully facilitated by a Ct/c and are applied during the CTT/C to help in directing a client's attention to God. We have provided an example for each of the tenets to show how it is applied in the CTT/C.

- Tenet #1: Heartfulness

The Ct/c directs the client's focus on loving God with "all your heart" to put his/her full trust in God for He will surely comfort us (see 2 Corinthians 1:3-4) and He will never leave us nor forsake us (see Hebrews 13:5).

For example, in the case of a man, who is the sole breadwinner in his family of six, who has lost his job as a result of Global Inflation, sought CTT/C for solace. The Ct/c working with him not only to comfort and assure him that God would never abandon or forsake him but at the same time, needs to do something more: to provide the poor hungry man with the essentials (e.g., canned food and milk powder) so that he could bring home to share with his family. Take note that "[T]he generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor" (Proverbs 22:9; New International Version, 2011). Likewise, as mentioned in the Gospel of Saint Luke (Luke 3:10-11; NIV, 2011), the crowd asked John the Baptist, "What should we do then?" And he answered them, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same." So, any Ct/c should provide tangible assistance in addition to intangible counseling or therapy, and yet "[T]rust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight" (Proverbs 3:5-6; NIV, 2011).

- Tenet #2: Soulfulness

The Ct/c directs the client's focus on loving God with "all your soul" to place his/her full commitment to love God with and in every part of one's life (also see Matthew 22:37).

For example, in another case where a woman, who could not forgive her husband for committing adultery, came to seek help from a Ct/c. This is a very sensitive issue for any Ct/c to manage and the case must involve both the woman and her husband's willingness to come together for marital reconciliation. The Ct/c needs to be scripturally firm and remind the couple that "[M]arriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral" (Hebrews 13:4; NIV, 2011). At the same time, it is necessary to caution the husband that "a man who commits adultery has no sense; whoever does so destroy himself" (Proverbs 6:32; NIV, 2011).

- Tenet #3: Mindfulness

The Ct/c directs the client's focus on loving God with "all your mind" to give his/her full dedication to one's intellectual awareness of God and right thinking about God to an emotional embrace of God (see [Philippians 4:8](#)).

In the case of a male adolescent, who displays wayward behavior, has been brought by his parents to see a Ct/c for help. Wayward behavior refers to one's conduct of turning away from what is right or proper and choosing to be rebellious, willful, or disobedient. To counsel such a child requires the Ct/c to involve the family (including parents and siblings as the client himself). Very often, Christian parents forget about the biblical instruction as provided in Proverbs 22:2 (NIV, 2011): "Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old, they will not turn from it." The late American evangelist, [Dr. Billy Graham \(b.1918-d.2018\)](#), once said, "A child who is allowed to be disrespectful to his parents will not have true respect for anyone."

Kevin DeYoung (b.1977-d.-), an American Reformed theologian and author, has this to say, "God doesn't provide many specific instructions about the parent-child relationship, except that parents should teach their children about God (Deuteronomy 6:7; Proverbs 1-9), discipline them (Proverbs 23:13; Hebrews 12:7-11), be thankful for them (Psalm 127:3-5), and not exasperate them (Ephesians 6:4). Filling in the details depends on the family, the culture, the Spirit's wisdom, and a whole lot of trial and error."

When working with the wayward adolescent, in this case, it is important for the Ct/c not to be judgmental or the client would choose not to come for the session or be cooperative throughout. While it is good to remind the teenage client of Ephesians 6:1-3 (NIV, 2011), "[C]hildren, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother' – which is the first commandment with a promise – so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth", one must not become too nagging or the client would choose to tune out throughout the counseling session.

- Tenet #4: Strengthfulness

The Ct/c directs the client's focus on loving God with "all your strength" to use his/her ability or talent to glorify God (see [1 Peter 2:12](#)). This is an important step not to be ignored. Tapping on the client's ability or talent is surely a good way for the Ct/c to establish a therapeutic alliance or rapport with him/her. [Chery \(2022\)](#) explained that "God created everyone with unique abilities and talents to help serve our brothers and sisters in Christ. Sometimes we're not even aware of the talents that we're given by God until we run into different struggles in life" (para. 1).

For example, we have been working with one young man who was diagnosed with autism when he was still a child. His special gift is drawing and painting, and he has drawn/painted many picturesque places such as the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and the Marina Bay Sands in Singapore. With encouragement from his counselor, the young man has helped to design Christmas cards to sell and raise funds for his church project to help other needy families.

It is also very important for every Ct/c to always remind himself/herself that s/he is not the expert in all aspects of life, only to fall into the trap of a God Complex like what has been observed in many medical professionals ([Kirby, 2017](#)) and this often would contribute to medical gaslighting ([Dandaraw-Seritt, 2021](#)). There is a lot for us to learn from our clients and our clients also have a lot to teach us about their varied experiences in life. Hence, establishing a good godly therapeutic alliance with a client should be top on the list of dos for all Ct/cs. The therapeutic alliance is "a measure of the therapist's and the client's mutual engagement in the work of therapy" ([Stubbe, 2018, p. 402](#)). It represents an essential element for attaining success in treatment, regardless of the specific treatment modality employed to work with the client ([Horvath & Symonds, 1991](#)).



6. Conclusion

The Christian Theocentric Therapy/Counseling (CTT/C) centers around God based on the first of the two great commandments mentioned by Jesus Christ. It provides the four tenets that constitute the theocentric base in Christian therapy or counseling (CT/C): heartfulness, soulfulness, mindfulness, and strengthfulness. Its goal for a Christian therapist or counselor (Ct/c) is helping a client to "[S]eek the LORD while He may be found; call on Him while He is near" (Isaiah 55:6; NIV, 2011) for Jesus Christ has given the assurance that "[A]sk and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7; NIV, 2011).

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