

# The Work of the Holy Spirit and the Christian Therapist

**A WRITTEN INTERVIEW WITH INTEGRATION PIONEER [SIANG-YANG TAN](#) BY BRAD STRAWN**

**STRAWN:** Dr. Tan, you have written widely on the integration of psychology and theology, helping integrators think about principled integration (which includes theoretical-conceptual and research), professional integration (clinical/practice), and personal integration (i.e., the spirituality of the integrator or Christian therapist). In addition, you have made important contributions to the field in areas such as lay counseling, clarifying the difference between implicit and explicit integration in clinical practice, and the importance of informed consent when practicing as a Christian therapist. But as you know, some critics have worried that psychotherapy or counseling, even practiced by Christians, is not really Christian. In other words, what differentiates a Christian therapist from a secular therapist? This is where I think your work on the Holy Spirit is so important. So I want to ask you about your understanding of the Holy Spirit in the realm of professional integration.

**TAN:** The Holy Spirit is essential when it comes to the work of the Christian therapist. The Holy Spirit is called the Counselor, Comforter, Helper, or Advocate in John 14:16–17. The work and the ministry of the Holy Spirit can be understood as taking place in three major ways: the Spirit's power, the Spirit's truth, and the Spirit's fruit.

**STRAWN:** Tell us about those three areas.

**TAN:** First of all is the Holy Spirit's power. As Christians we understand that the Spirit is essential to life and ministry and we are commanded to be continuously filled with the Spirit (Eph 5:18). To be filled with the Spirit is to

yield to the Spirit, allowing the Spirit to take control and shape us to become more like Jesus and to empower us to do the works of Jesus—which can include counseling. As we are in tune with the Spirit, we are given spiritual gifts that enable us to be fruitful in the area of counseling. The spiritual gifts that are most salient for counseling include exhortation or encouragement (Rom 12:8), healing (1 Cor 12:9, 28), wisdom (1 Cor 12:8), knowledge (1 Cor 12:8), discerning of spirits (1 Cor 12:10), and mercy (Rom 12:8).

**STRAWN:** So the source and power of our work as Christian counselors emanate from the Spirit. What about the Spirit's truth?

**TAN:** The Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth teaches and guides us into all truth (John 14:26; 16:13), which includes psychological truth. Because we know that the Holy Spirit inspired God's Word, we can be certain that the Spirit will never contradict the truth of Scripture when interpreted properly. This means, for Christian counselors who are abiding in the Spirit, that they can be certain that the Spirit will enable their work to be consistent with the moral and ethical aspects of biblical teaching.

**STRAWN:** So when the Christian therapist is in tune with the Spirit, that therapist can be certain that his or her practice is truly Christian, Christ centered, and biblically based. What about the Spirit's fruit?

**TAN:** Of course the Spirit produces the fruit of the Spirit, as we see in Galatians 5:22–23: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. When the Spirit is involved in Christian counseling, we can expect that the therapist will evidence such fruit toward his or her clients and that the outcome of the therapy will be a person who is more and more exhibiting Christlike fruit. Shorthand for the Spirit's fruit is *agape*, or Christlike love. The Spirit's fruit of *agape* is powerful in Christian counseling!

**STRAWN:** You have also written about how these three aspects of the Spirit's work need to be in balance.

**TAN:** Yes, while these three aspects are crucial in both Christian life and Christian therapy, they need to be present in biblical balance. Power without love can result in abuse. Power without truth may lead to heresy. But power based in biblical truth and steeped in Christlike love can produce renewal, revival, and deep healing of broken lives.

**STRAWN:** Can you tell us a little bit more about how you see the Holy Spirit's activity in the actual clinical setting?

**TAN:** I talk about this and have written about this in five ways. First, the Spirit can empower the Christian therapist to discern the root of the client's problem through the gifts of knowledge and wisdom (1 Cor 12:8). Second, the Spirit can provide spiritual direction as a therapist and client participate in more explicit integration by using Christian practices such as prayer or engaging Scripture. Third, of course, the Spirit can touch a client and bring powerful experiences of grace and healing at any time during the counseling work. This may be gradual or occur during "quantum change" when epiphanies bring about sudden transformations. Sometimes this happens when the therapist makes use of inner healing prayer with those patients where it is appropriate and there has been informed consent. Fourth, the Spirit can assist the Christian therapist to discern the presence of the demonic. While this is a controversial topic in some areas of Christian integration, I have written that one of the spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit is discerning of spirits (1 Cor 12:10). The Spirit will not only enable the Christian therapist to discern these spirits and make differential diagnoses between demonization and mental illness, but will also help the therapist know when prayer for deliverance should be a part of the therapy or whether a referral to a pastor or prayer ministry team is also called for. Finally, the Spirit is involved in deep spiritual transformation of both client and therapist into greater Christlikeness as they participate in the spiritual disciplines with the Spirit's help and enabling. Some of these disciplines may be practiced in the session and some may be given as homework assignments between sessions. But either way, these disciplines help us access the presence and

power of the Spirit leading to growth and healing.

**STRAWN:** If I am understanding you, then, the Christian therapist/counselor assures that what he or she is doing is Christ-centered and biblically based by staying steeped in the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit. This is what brings about real change—which I think I also hear you saying is growth in Christlikeness for both client and therapist!

**TAN:** Yes, that is correct. The Holy Spirit is crucial for Christian therapy! Of course training and competence and professional ethics and all that are needed, but the Christian therapist will use these in dependence on God the Holy Spirit.

*The content of this written “interview” is taken from Dr. Tan’s writings and approved by him in this format.*



“We used to talk about the 50-minute hour, but what is the use of that 10 minutes? That 10 minutes before the Christian therapist might be thought of as a time you lift up to God this person you’re going to be dealing with and that you also lift up yourself. . . . The issue is—and I’ve become consumed with this—is

spirituality: every minute you have—whether it’s at a stoplight or for 10 minutes before the next therapy session, [we must] not be so preoccupied with what’s happening but be open to the Holy Spirit—that’s what the Spirit is there for!”

+ **H. NEWTON MALONY** is professor emeritus of psychology in Fuller’s School of Psychology. This quote is taken from an [Integration panel](#) convened for the [School of Psychology’s 50th anniversary](#).