

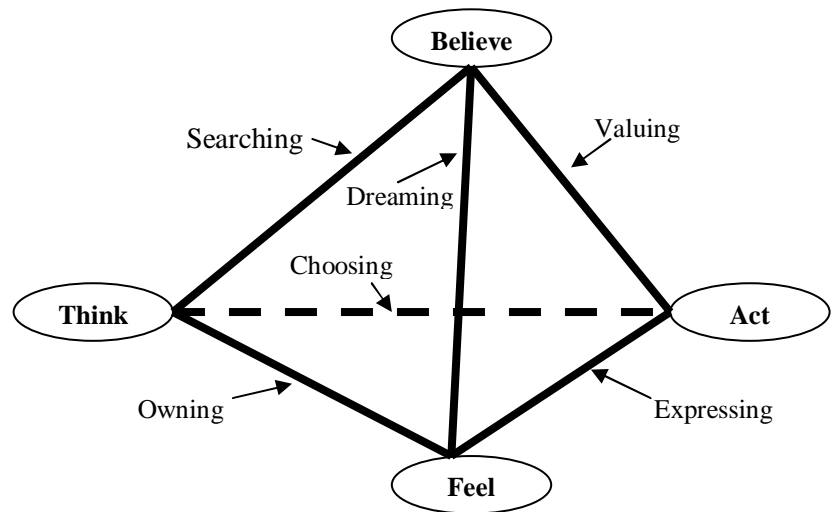
Body Soul Spirit Continuum in Christian Counseling

by Lance Echo-Hawk, MA LPC, LMHC

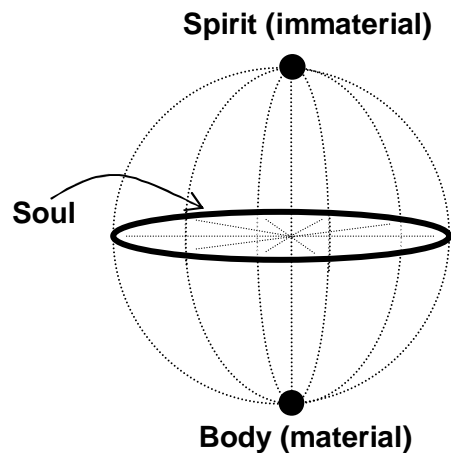
I recently left the secular clinical setting and started a private practice as a Christian counselor. In doing so I have now organized my thoughts on spirituality and counseling into a practical model. For you who are theologically minded I would like to give credit to Millard Erickson and refer you to his book, “**Christian Theology**”, 10th printing, 1993, and in particular—his material on *An Alternative Model: Conditional Unity*. I have borrowed from his ideas and incorporated them into my own thinking, hopefully without doing his ideas harm. He presents the case for a unified human nature composed of material and immaterial components. As an analogy, he compares the union of spirit and body to the chemical compounds, such as sodium and chloride. As a compound their individual identities are lost, although they can be separated—turning the compound of table salt into separate parts with characteristics very different from salt. So, too, the unity of spirit and body can be broken but the natural and intended state is that of a materialized spirit (rather than a disembodied spirit).

Kearney’s Model

Before going further, however, let’s look at Kearney’s model for a point of reference. Kearney developed a geometric model of human attributes in his counseling book, “*Within the Wall of Denial*.” He describes it as a three-sided pyramid, or a triangularly-shaped teepee, to help you visualize it. The words circled at each corner point represent a quality descriptive of a core human attribute and the lines connecting them represent tasks to be performed by the integrated or congruent personality living them out. I like his model and have found it useful in counseling but would expand it



for my own application (at the risk of making it overly complicated and therefore of not much practical use!).

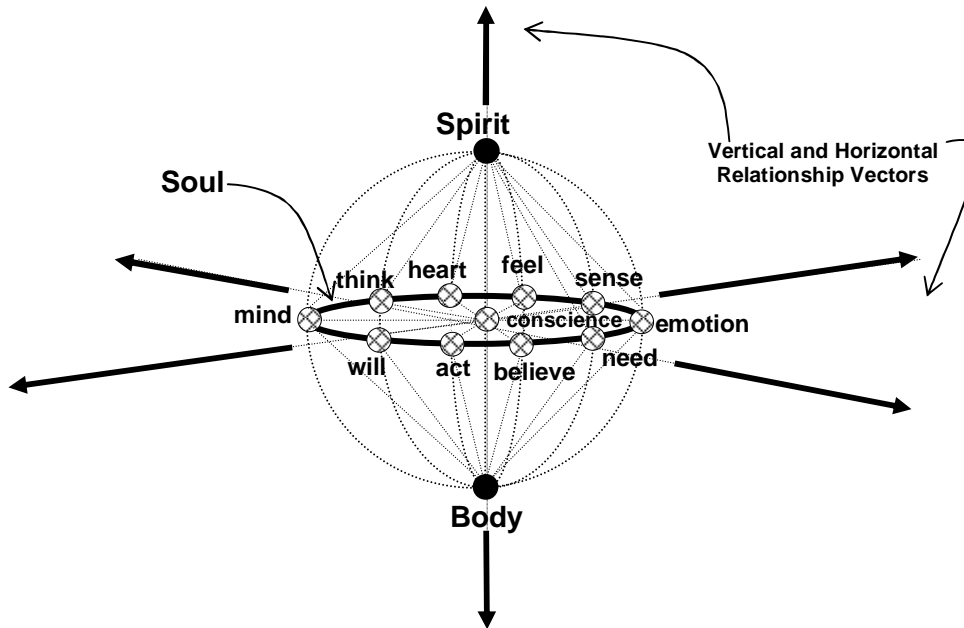


However, I would replace the word “Believe” with the word “Spirit” and would change the geometry from a pyramid to that of the northern half of a sphere. Then I would add a southern hemisphere with the word “Body” at the southern pole. The “equator” would represent the “Soul,” the seat of the mind, the will, the emotions, etc.—those attributes that make us human. Longitudinal lines and the lines running through the core would all interconnect and fill in the shape of the sphere to make it a solid. The intent of the drawing is to represent the fully functioning unified human being. By divine design these parts are meant to be a unit. The separation of one so-called part

from another would be to destroy the design and diminish the fluid functioning of the unit.

A Biblically-Based Model

A more fully developed diagram shows greater detail regarding aspects of the human soul and its relational nature. The arrows (or “force” vectors) extending from the sphere in the vertical and horizontal directions are meant to indicate relationship connections vital to the functioning of the represented whole person.



I see the nature of humans as something occurring along a continuum. We are immaterial beings at one end of a continuum and material beings at the other, the body corresponding to the latter and the spirit to the former. Think of the above sphere as a 3-D continuum oriented on a vertical axis. Between the axis end points exists a seemingly infinite array of interconnected qualities that I will refer to as *soul*, (these are now more my thoughts than those of Erickson) composed of mind, cognition, heart, will, action-taking, emotions, sensory awareness and management, conscience, faith, belief, feelings and emotion, etc., all various aspects of the human soul—visually represented by a sphere in complex space where the end points are as noted (immaterial/spirit, material/body). The rest of the form takes shape by every interconnection between the two polar caps. Each interconnection is linked together forming an inseparable unit. The unity of this sphere is not meant to be broken. Anything that does so violates the design and integrity of the “sphere”, that is, the whole person.

Kearny’s model referred to above omits the physical component which, to me, is too big of a factor to leave out of a counseling model. In my view, his model is a *functional model* that demonstrates how certain core qualities are meant to operate in the human personality. My adaptations attempt to go one step further by claiming to reflect not only functioning, but also to illustrate the design of human nature, making it more of a *structural model*. My model attempts to show how function flows out from innate structure.

Biblical Human Perspectives

It seems to me that there’s a need to have at least two, and maybe three, perspectives on human beings. As taught in the Bible, we will one day be radically and fundamentally “changed” and, logically, the

psychology that describes us now will cease to do so. The problem that I see is this; the change has already begun. We are individually in a state of affairs something like the state of the Kingdom of Heaven—*already but not yet*. We have, as Christians, the “earnest [money]” of the Holy Spirit abiding within, sealing us for a new future with a new nature of being. The abiding presence of the Spirit is not insignificant but is, in fact, profoundly altering. But the full transformation has not yet come. We are caught between two natures as described in the Bible (Romans chp 7). So really the challenge for Christian counselors is to understand human psychological makeup in at least three levels: the current condition of the unregenerated nature, the changes produced by regeneration (living now in a fallen body but with the Spirit abiding within), and the fullness of the coming new nature (what the fully regenerated person will be). Each of these states of being has huge impacts on us now as we seek God’s ways in our lives and try to live that out.

The past, present, and future have impact on our lives and on our psyches. The human psyche holds a record of the times of our lives when we did not know or walk with Christ, as well as what it means to walk with Him now. I believe that these three “frames” of experience (past, present and future) must be reconciled to each other and integrated into our walk with Him now. The past, (corresponding to the old and unregenerated nature) can hold a power over us to determine how we interpret the experiences of the present. Breaking the hold of this power is often what brings people into counseling. The present, for the Christian, corresponds to the “already but not yet” walk with the Spirit abiding within. The present is a stage upon which a constant battle between the old and new nature plays out. And the future, corresponding to the fullness of the new nature (as promised by the soon coming resurrection), has a power acting upon us now—calling us forward and shaping us as we go.

My Goal as a Christian Counselor

Christian counseling and spiritual formation should, in terms of outcome in my mind, have lots of overlap. Healing from emotional wounds and spiritual growth are complimentary and parallel journeys for many. I believe that counseling is about facilitating innate mechanisms of healing and growth given to us by the Creator. If our lives are attuned to His ways we will benefit. Note the following verse.

The Holy Bible, New International Version:

Eph 3:16 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

The diagram above illustrates certain core attributes of the “inner being.” Counseling is the process of supporting the person seeking healing for these qualities when the struggles of life have caused them injury. As the passage says, it is through a primary relationship with Jesus Christ that true power is brought to this need. The evidence that human woundedness has been transformed by spiritual empowerment through knowing Christ is love. Also taught in this passage through the paradoxical statement (that there is a knowing of this love that is unknowable¹) is this; knowing Christ in the innermost being is experiential and involves the whole person (in community with the Body of Christ²). It is more than a head knowledge. The successful Christian counseling experience, in my opinion, is meant to facilitate this outcome. Knowing Christ with your whole being is the answer and the goal.

¹ Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary

² New International Bible Commentary

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