Welcome to Week 7 of COUN 506. Our topic for this week is “Sin, Confession, and Redemption in Counseling.” This is an area that is unique to Christian counseling. As we’ll explore in this lecture, counseling from a secular point of view does not include a worldview that would even speak of sin. It does speak of a “concept of sin,” but not of Sin.
When looking at the Integrative Concepts that we have endeavored to put together for this course, we want you to be well-informed as Christian counselors regarding psychology, theology, and spiritual formation, and about the meta-theories that represent these disciplines. So now we are going to suggest some language that might be used to talk about sin, and the dynamics related to sin. For instance, in the language of psychology, a psychologist would speak of psychopathology. They would speak of sin as sickness and would speak in terms of an “external attribution.” By this they mean that the responsibility for the sickness lies outside that person’s control, so it’s not their fault.

From the perspective of Christian spirituality, we speak of sin; we speak of personal responsibility, which is an “internal attribution.” And there are two types of sin. One is the personal experience of sin that occurs when we make sinful choices. The other is sin with a
capital “S,” which refers to the universal human experience of fallenness and brokenness and alienation from God. In theological terms, we speak of evil. This is a “cosmic attribution.” Here, it is believed that the nature of the world is evil; that even in the perfect Garden of Eden, the serpent was there. So they speak in concepts such as: the natural evil versus the moral evil, or the fallenness found in the world versus the evil in individual lives and choices that people make.

Have you ever wondered whatever became of sin? We don’t hear sin discussed much from the pulpits anymore, and very little perhaps in the counseling room, but it’s an important subject. On this slide there are a number of dynamics under the heading “Concept of sin,” which is a psychological term. It’s the notion of unhealthy guilt dynamics. This is where a therapist is working with a client who is suffering from the effects of immoral behavior, or behavior that has contradicted this person’s conscience, but the therapist feels that they are burdened with guilt. So the real problem is not the behavior of the individual, but the way the person thinks about their behavior. Psychologists such as Albert Ellis would agree with this “concept of sin.” Right and wrong are seen as the way the individual perceives them to be, because there are no absolute right and wrong.

So in the psychological model, the goal of counseling is to minimize one’s sensitivity to sin, to help them feel less guilty and feel less ashamed, to be okay with who they are and accept their behavior.
Now look at the **theological concept of Sin**, and a representation of the dynamics that come out of a Christian worldview. The Bible speaks many times of the universal human condition of sin. In Romans 3:23, Paul writes, “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” And while Sin is a universal problem, it is also a personal problem. **Personal sin is the cause of our cognitive and emotional problems.**

Another idea is that **Right and wrong are matters of God’s law.** They are not individually determined, but are objective truths. From the perspective of theology, sin is the problem in our lives, so the goal of counseling is to heighten our sensitivity to sin to help lead us into confession and repentance of our sins.
As Christians, when we speak about sin, we speak of sin with a capital “S,” which is the universal experience of sin and fallenness in the world, but also sin with a little “s,” or sins that we commit on a personal level. **Original Sin** involves the matter of human heredity, going all the way back to Adam. All of us have struggled with a core of rebellion towards God because we are fallen, and are under the shadow of “universal” sin. This involves our falling short of the glory of God. We are not where God intended us to be, and until we are resurrected in our new bodies, we will always fall short of His glory. Another problem humanity has is our inclination towards some type of idolatry. Idolatry is having anything or anyone in the central place in our life instead God. For some people it is money, for others it is sex, for some it is work, for others it is fame. So idolatry becomes another expression of universal sin.

All people are alienated from God at some level. Outside of Christ, we are not only alienated from God, but from ourselves and from other people. It is only in Christ that we find the reconciliation that we all require to live lives of stability. And, original sin leads to a cycle of perversion in our lives. Notice the text from the first chapter of Romans, where Paul writes of the idolatry of nature by people which then led to a cycle of perversion. This is what idolatry sets into motion, leading to all sorts of perverse acts.
Nature of Sin (cont.)

Personal sins

- Personal choice
- Rebellion
- Numbness or insensitivity
- Appropriate guilt
- Deception
- Bondage
- Lovelessness
- Prayerlessness

Now let’s look at some descriptions of what it means to suffer in personal sin. Personal sin is a choice, an expression of our inner rebellion towards God. Sometimes that rebellion takes the form of active disobedience, but it can also become a numbness or insensitivity to God’s leading in our lives. When we sin, God designed us to feel appropriate guilt. Not the neurotic guilt for something we have not done, but an appropriate guilt for our sin behavior. Personal sin involves the fact that every person is self-deceived at some level. Every person deals with not being fully honest with God, with ourselves, or with others. Because of that deception, sin leads to bondages. The Bible is very clear that we’re either a slave of Christ or we’re a slave to sin, and the more we engage in sin, the more enslaved and more in bondage we become. Personal sin also leads to cycles of lovelessness and prayerlessness.
The chart in front of you labeled “Attributional Style,” is to give you some thoughts and ways of categorizing the whole notion of personal responsibility, or ways in which we attribute responsibility for the behavior of people. For those who lean toward an external attributional style, they would see that they have little to no freedom in their behavior. In terms of being responsible, they are in fact the victim, and the emotional response that they seek from you, the counselor, would be one of sympathy. And because of these factors, they feel that they have been victimized by others; that other people or circumstances are at fault. For those who have an internal attributional style, they see themselves as having the freedom to choose. The choices they have made were their choices, so they are responsible for their actions. Because of their freedom and responsibility, their emotional response is likely to be one of anger and blame, or guilt and shame. The causation is themselves, since they understand that they are responsible for what has happened. This third column is the Cosmic attribution style. Here, since we also have the freedom to choose, if we sin, we begin to lose our freedom. We become slaves to sin. In terms of responsibility, people admit that we’re totally dependant on God, and that without God we really are helpless. So when we sin, our emotional response is one of conviction and a desire for forgiveness. And since the whole human race is fallen, we all fall short of the glory of God.

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<th>Degree of Freedom</th>
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Let’s bring McMinn’s counseling map into this again. In considering Client Self-Awareness, we want to help clients become aware of their attributional style. In counseling, who does the client believe is responsible for the problems they are having? Do they see themselves as responsible, or internal? Or do they blame others, leaning more externally? Does God figure into their situation, being more cosmic? Does the client have a sense of right and wrong, or some sense of a conscience and moral development? What are their Theistic or humanistic values: who’s responsible for their problems? For instance, do they believe in a Sovereign God who has a moral standard? Or is it more humanistic, where people have grown up believing that human beings are in charge of their own lives and in charge of the world, and are completely free-functioning individuals. Are there any bondage and addictions issues. Part of what drives addictions is the denial that there really is a problem. They believe that they are in control and so make rational explanations for their problem behavior.
Moving to the **client’s awareness of needs**, are they **seeking to be okay or be forgiven**? In other words, do they simply want to feel better about themselves, are they hoping that you’ll see their situation through the “concept of sin” perspective, that you will help to reduce their guilt and their inner angst about their sin? Or are they sincerely repentant, taking responsibility for their behavior, and seeking to be forgiven? Is the client feeling remorse or feeling repentant?

People are often remorseful because they got caught in their sin, because they fear the consequences and the punishment that they now will face. We want to help clients to move beyond simply feeling remorseful, and help them experience true repentance: a desire to change their self-centered life for reconciliation with God and other people. Do they have an awareness of their need for God, or are they focused on counseling as being the ultimate solution. As Christian counselors we want clients to see that counseling is only a tool, only a pathway to God. We want to help them become more aware of their need for God, not for us. Do our clients accept the consequences for their actions, and do they express a willingness to accept responsibility for any harm they may have caused others.
As we finish up this segment, let’s look at healing relationships, where one of the indicators to look for is the client’s openness to discuss moral matters of conscience. Are they willing to talk about how they really feel about the rightness or wrongness of what they’ve done? Are they moving toward confessing their sins? Is there an honesty on the part of the client? Are they capable of being honest about things that are painful, perhaps shameful, maybe illegal?

This is key because if they cannot be honest with themselves and honest with us, they will not be honest with God so true healing can really take place. How do they handle confrontation? Can we actually use the “Sin” word without them getting mad and angry so they can begin to heal? Is the client open to some form of penance if it is appropriate and called for? Do they desire to do what they can to repair any harm they have caused others? Well, this concludes Lecture One of week seven, and I encourage you to review the concepts on sin that we have discussed.
Welcome to this second lecture of week 7 in COUN 506. This time we will focus on counseling methods related to confrontation and confession. This is a critical unit because real change never takes place until we confront our problems and are able to confess our sin so that we might receive God’s forgiveness and grace. And it’s a challenge to the counselor because it is easy to assume that we have to figure all of this out. That if we just build the right kind of therapeutic relationship, people will be able to trust us enough to allow us to confront them, and then will feel comfortable enough to confess what is really going on. Some of that is true. The therapeutic relationship is vitally important. But, the good news is that it is God is who ultimately responsible to work through our relationship with clients to bring them to a point of confessing their sins and of reconciling themselves to God and to others and ultimately to self.
Let’s take a moment to review what the Bible says about how God works in the lives of people to help us through confession of our sins and though the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 7:10 that “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.” We are seeking to promote in our clients a godly sorrow. We desire for them to get in touch with the deep hurt they are doing to themselves and to God. But our job is to deal with the people in front of us and let God deal with the sin.

And so it’s important for us to help our clients understand that conviction for sin and sorrow for sin and repentance are gifts from God! For many people, healing cannot begin because they are determined to remain in control of every dimension of their lives, and their main motive for coming to counseling is to be more in control of their lives. But the spiritual principle is really quite the opposite: we have to admit we are powerless. We have to acknowledge that we cannot do it by ourselves; we need help. Now this is a challenging truth to communicate to people who are not Christians and who are coming from a humanistic or secular worldview where the greatest good is seen as being in full control of your life. So this requires a step-by-step building of trust, and a careful working through the details of change that God can bring. To do this, we employ the process of redemption and reconciliation. The good news is that God is faithful and is always working to bring each person to a point of reconciliation. As John wrote in 1 John 1:9: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”
Now we are going to shift to looking at the therapeutic dynamics of hospitality in relationships. We’ll go through this rather quickly since we’ve talked about it before, but it is important to remember the power of welcoming those who are strangers, strangers to themselves, to God, and to other people, and the healing that it carries. Hospitality is the willingness to take a risk for the redemption of a person who is known to be a sinner. And hospitality involves both elements of receiving and of confrontation, working together in a dynamic balance.

Since it can be difficult to fully discern sometimes when to welcome and encourage and when to confront, prayer is an essential part of extending hospitality. Welcoming sinners is a powerful and life-changing experience that some client’s have never had before.
When it comes to confronting sin, it’s important to discern the best ways to go about it. The key is to understand what level of trust you have built with a client. But this also takes understanding of your temperament as a counselor. Remember when we spoke in an earlier lecture that every person falls somewhere between being more encouraging or more confrontive? Your temperament will affect your ability to confront with openness towards your client, your comfort level in doing so, and the manner in which you confront them, but also how they will receive you when you confront them. One form of confrontation is silence.

Silence that is intentional on the part of the counselor, silence in which you keep a neutral body language, in which you keep a blank or a neutral face to avoid giving approval or disapproval. Just simple silence. Sometimes you can take the next step by pondering, like in the old detective show “Columbo.” The detective would investigate crimes by “wondering out loud” about the details of a crime scene and would eventually have the suspects talking about what they had done. That’s a fine technique for gently confronting behavior, comments, self-talk, and the thinking patterns of clients, by “wondering out loud.” Then a third form of confrontation is to ask direct questions about the behavior of your clients. Since we want them to keep ownership of their decisions, we ask open-ended questions where they have to answer for themselves about the rightness or the wrongness of their actions, about the choices they have made, and the kinds of consequences these choices have produced.
Where you have developed a high level of trust with a client, and if you have the experience in counseling, sometimes using direct censure can lead to change, but it does pose a risk. A client may withdraw after direct censure. They may feel condemned and judged. They may stop speaking, or you may get an angry reaction. Usually when people speak of confrontation, this is the only way that they think of, to “tell it like it is,” sometimes relying upon a Bible verse. But this is one form that you should use carefully and sparingly. Another form of confrontation is what Brewer refers to as “Acherit,” an English translation of a Hebrew word which roughly means, “in the end.” For instance, in Proverbs 14:12, Solomon writes, “there is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end (Acherit), it leads to death.” If we can help our clients to visualize the trajectory of their thoughts or behaviors all the way to the end, it can be a great way to confront the nature of their behavior. We would simply ask questions like, “And then what happens?” “And then what happens?” “And then what happens?” And last but not least, prayer can be a form of confrontation. To partner with your client, sometimes silently without their knowledge and sometimes with them, to come against spiritual bondage and spiritual attacks, shows an awareness on your part as the counselor that in Christian counseling we are engaged in spiritual warfare.
As counselors, we are also healers, so we must constantly ask ourselves, “is what I’m doing causing any harm to my client?” Is confrontation in the best interest of this client at this time? We should not be confronting sin in a client’s life because we’ve had enough of it, or because we are just sick and tired of this person’s behavior or comments. No, the professional and ethical requirement is that we confront in a way and at a time that is in the best interest of the client. Counselor self-awareness becomes an important ethical concern here, and it helps to ask ourselves these questions: What is my attitude and my personal motivation for confronting here? Am I angry with the behavior of this person? Do I feel like I need to set this person straight? Am I struggling with a judgmental attitude or with arrogance? Do I have the best interest of the client at heart right now? Because of the type of relationship that counseling is, we need to remain aware of the power dynamics that are at work. Continually check yourself by pondering: “Am I responsibly using power without creating dependency or imposing my will on the client?” How am I using my power? Am I using it responsibly? We also must remember that redemption is always the goal that we have in mind in Christian counseling. We are not simply wanting someone to feel conviction and guilt, but that they to come to a new or a renewed relationship with God.
In the past, people used to go to the church to confess their sins, but in the 21st century they are more likely to come to a counselor. So we should be aware of the various forms of confession that we may experience.

Often you will hear a positive confession. This is when the client may say: “I believe this about God, I believe this about myself, I believe this about life,” and so on. It’s a positive confession about the core values they hold.

Sometimes, we will hear a restorative confession, where the client confesses and repents of their sins by sharing them with another person and seeking forgiveness. We may encourage our clients to develop the spiritual discipline of self-examination. This is something that we as counselors also need to do, spending time thinking over the past day, examining our heart, thinking through what occurred during the day, thinking through our relationships with those around us at home, at work, at church, and anywhere else we came in contact with another person. Clients also have a tendency that when they are confessing, they are really seeking comfort.

They want to hear that they are okay. So it is important for us to let them know that God loves them regardless of the problems that they are having, that we care for them, and see their value as human beings. And finally, there is denial. Sometimes people are just not willing to confess. Sometimes they are paralyzed in their lives, paralyzed in their shame and bondage, and not willing to admit to themselves or anyone else the kinds of sins and problems and consequences that they are having in their lives.
Just as there are several ways people confess, there are several resistances to confession that people deal with. We may resist confessing our sins and our problems because we don’t want to admit that we need others.

Sometimes for believers, we wrestle with spiritual pride. It is sort of a “Pharasaical” quality where we feel that we wouldn’t do this, we wouldn’t do that, and that we are better than other sinners. But where there is spiritual pride, there is also self-deception where we are lying to ourselves by believing that we are better off than we are.

Sometimes people are so ashamed of what they have done or of what they have thought that they are fearful to tell anyone. They just can’t imagine how we will react, how we will feel about them, if we know what they really think, or what they have really done, or who they really are. This is the opportunity for us to explain again what therapeutic trust is, and the importance of confidentiality, to help a person get past that kind of paralyzing shame and fear. Sometimes it comes in the form of embarrassment, being seen as a failure. Sometimes people are resistant to confession because they have a faulty understanding of God’s nature. They see Him as some great big human being with a white beard, up in the sky, who just can’t wait to condemn them and to send them to hell.

And the last factor has to do with the history of an individual. Many people have experienced the church and their family as graceless communities, and carry around the pain of not being accepted. It is important to offer a relationship of grace in the counseling room, where people can feel comfortable to confess their sins because they will be welcomed and forgiven. I hope that these lectures on sin, confrontation, and confession have been helpful to you. Again, take the time to review and reflect on how you might apply these principles to your life and to your counseling work.
Week eight: lecture one

Welcome to this final lecture of COUN506, and we're going to focus on issues of ethics, professional practices, and personal integration. In case you are wondering, the issues of ethics and professional practices have everything to do with issues of integration. Jesus said, “You will know them by their fruit.” Dr. Falwell always said that if it was Christian, it should always be better. So as Christian counselors, we have a greater responsibility than our secular colleagues to be above reproach in the way that we conduct ourselves, and the way that we carry out our calling and profession.
There are numerous practices, precautions, and prayerful attitudes that can help each of us across a lifetime of counseling to stay on track. Listed here are four such practices on which we’re going to focus for the next few moments. I agree with McMinn when he states that a careful informed consent policy and professional disclosure is an earmark of Christian counseling.

First, it is important that every Christian counselor, whether in a full-time counseling as a licensed professional, a lay counselor in your church, or are a counseling pastor, to have a professional disclosure and informed consent statement.

Second, we need clear ethical standards of how we are going to practice day to day. This provides us with a clear sense of how to conduct ourselves in a way that is going to anticipate and avoid obvious problems and create the most therapeutic environment for our clients. You can find an excellent source of ethical standards through the American Association of Christian Counselors, or the AACC.

Third, we need to have a clear confidentiality policy and practices that states how we are going to honor the confidentiality of our clients.

And fourth, we need to have practices of self care and spiritual formation in place to keep us at our best and growing in the Lord for the long-term so we do not burnout early.
In case you have never prepared an informed consent before, here are several elements that are very important to include in this type of a document. I strongly encourage you to spend some time as you are preparing to enter counseling at any level to have these statements in place before you see your first client. Or if you are already working in some capacity in counseling and you have not done so yet, I would urge you to develop your professional disclosure and informed consent documents as soon as possible. Having this kind of document in place where you have clients sign after they have read it can save you many headaches in the future. Here is a list of what this document should include: An accurate and clear description of your training and qualifications, and licensure if you have it. What the “ground rules” are on how you will see clients, such as the times and the days of week that you will see people and the number of sessions that you set as a maximum or minimum. You should also describe the kinds and to what depth of problems you will counsel.

It is very important to not exceed your training and ability in counseling. You want to make sure that you are not counseling someone in an area that you have not been trained in, which would be unethical. You also will want to articulate your referral policy. As mentioned earlier in a previous lecture, you are not obligated to meet with every client that comes to you for help, especially if it is in an area where you do not have training or experience. We’ll go into greater detail about confidentiality in a few moments, but one of the first items that a potential client should see when they come to your office is a statement of how you handle issues of privacy and confidentiality.
They need to know upfront what the limits of confidentiality are. They also need to be aware of their right to refuse services, and to have access to their records. You need to give them a description of your Worldview. As a Christian, it is important to let your clients know that and to let them know the way this impacts your approach to counseling and the counseling techniques that you may use. And lastly, you need to include a statement of your expectations of clients in terms of their attendance and to be on time, their use of session time, their diligence to participate, that you expect them to do any homework given, and certainly the fees that they might be paying.

**Ethical Standards for Practice**

*We are to be as “wise as serpents and as innocent as doves”*

- Hedges against inappropriate behavior or accusations of impropriety.
- Standards about objectivity and handling of secrets in family counseling.

It is essential as a counselor to always be thinking ahead about your ethical standards of practice.

First, it is important that you consider the worst possible case scenarios, not to be negative, but to be aware. As Jesus warned us, “be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” We need to have some hedges against inappropriate behavior. For instance, a counselor should never invite someone for counseling in their home late at night, or at all.

While I’m sure this sounds obvious, as you get into the profession you will be amazed that this behavior happens quite frequently. Anticipate situations that might promote inappropriate behavior or accusations of impropriety.

Next, think through what your standards might be in terms of ensuring your own objectivity in handling secrets in family counseling. To do family counseling well is a great act of ministry to a
hurting family, but it is important for YOU to not become part of the problem. You want to be able to state clearly ahead of time how you are going to handle confidentiality and how you are going to distinguish between privacy and secrets, and then follow through on those policies.

Another standard you need in place is a clear rationale for handling conflicts of moral values.

When **you are faced with an irreconcilable difference with a client**, it is important for you to refer that client to another counselor. One example of this might be having a client who is homosexual and who is seeking approval from you for their behavior. At some point you may have to refer the client if this becomes a complete, non-negotiable moral conflict for you.

**It is also important to be sensitive to your blind spots.** All of us have prejudices and biases. It is part of being human. Part of your self-awareness is to know what yours are and to look for warning signs that you are behaving in a biased way. A key practice here would be to make some kind of provision for accountability, such as professional supervision. All professional counselors should be in some kind of accountability relationship.

And lastly, **every counselor should have a rationale for how and when to employ spiritual interventions.** We have talked before about the use of Scripture, prayer, and confession in the counseling process, and about the spiritual dynamics of the therapeutic relationship, so
it’s important for you to have a sense of how you are going to use these interventions at the proper time.

Let’s turn for a few moments to look at how an ethical counselor makes decisions. In another class we had talked about, “Doing no harm.”

This is always our first requirement as professional and as Christian counselors: to do no harm to our clients.

And secondly, to know who the client is, especially when you are working with couples or families. It is sometimes an important question to know who is the client and in whose interest are you going to place as a top priority. We also need to consider as you are working with a client, what is in the client’s best interest. Not necessarily “what does the client want?” but “what does the client need?”

Next, are there any inherent risks or dangers of which you need to be aware? Does this person present a danger to themselves or others? Are there any factors in this person’s family or relationships that are a risk or danger of which you need to be aware? Then, is the work that
you are doing and the way that you are making decisions in line with Christian morals and values? As much as we want to help people, we aren’t helpful to them if we violate our own core values to do so. And this also includes our professional standards and codes of ethics. It is never justified for a counselor to violate the professional standards and ethics of the practice of counseling.

Christian psychologist Larry Crabb has encouraged counselors to ask ourselves every time we meet with a client several questions: Not “how is this client doing, but how am I feeling?” “How am I reacting to this person?” These become important depth questions for understanding something about our motives, reactions, about our own enmeshment with a client. It also helps to keep us out of potential problems, such as not dealing with sexual attraction to a client in the ethical way.

And certainly as a part of ethical decision-making in Christian counseling is to pray regularly for guidance from the Holy Spirit.

Confidentiality Concerns

- **Informed consent**: Outline confidentiality policy.
- **Therapeutic contract**: Detail how confidentiality is handled and in what areas it cannot be kept.

It is a simple fact that if we cannot hold confidences then we cannot practice counseling. People cannot trust those who will not keep their secrets, and yet, some situations do arise where it is clear how to handle certain secrets that have been shared with us.
For instance, if a client shares that they have been sexually abusing their child, we are required by law in all 50 states to call the police and report it to Child Protective Services immediately. Or if a client tells you they are planning to murder their spouse, you are ethically required to let that spouse know they may be in danger. So there are several situations in which you must break confidences. As part of their informed consent, it is important to let your potential clients know before they start counseling what those circumstances are where there confidences might be broken.

As a part of the therapeutic contract, we also need to detail the way in which confidentiality is going to be handled when it is NOT one of the areas where it must be broken. This is especially important when working with couples or families, when trust issues may be a great part of the conflict they’re having. For instance, you may be working individually as well as together with a couple and hear personal matters. Do you share them with the other spouse or not? What are you going to do with this information? You need detail to the clients how those matters are going to be handled before you start the process.

Confidentiality Concerns (cont.)

- Secrecy vs. Privacy: Need to know? Part of the problem?
- “Accountability with Discretion.” (Karpel)
- Triangulation and Collusion Traps.

To help explore the difference between secret-keeping and privacy, we need to ask ourselves questions like: “Does the other member of the couple need to know? If I keep this information private, am I engaging in collusion with this person in keeping a secret from their spouse? Is secrecy already a problem in this relationship? Am I promoting behavior that will only worsen the relationship in the long run?” These kinds of therapeutic questions help us anticipate
discussing confidentiality in the beginning of the counseling relationship when you are doing couple and family counseling.

Karpel uses the term “accountability with discretion” as his way of talking about the confidential relationship of a counselor with clients in a family or couple situation. He recommends that the counselor negotiate with couples ahead of time as to what sort of discretion they may want to give the counselor in guiding them to divulge information that has been kept from the other, and in doing what is in the best interest of the couple’s healing. Lastly, we must watch out for “triangulation” and “collusion traps” because these are common problems when couples and families try to make the counselor take sides. This is done to draw the counselor into the conflict, to make YOU part of the problem, or to have you engage in a collusion of secret-keeping.

George Ohlschlager is a licensed social worker and an attorney who has studied and written on the most common legal and ethical pitfalls in Christian counseling. I will list them here so that you might be aware of them and be better prepared as you are training to become a counselor so you can avoid the sorts of problems on this list.

The first is counseling beyond your competency. You must recognize the limits of your training and expertise and qualifications.
Or giving advice against medical treatment. Our colleagues in the medical field are indeed that, our colleagues. We are never empowered as professional, pastoral, or lay counselors to contradict the advice of a medical doctor.

To become sexually involved with clients is obviously inappropriate. Some counselors exceed their licensure or training by inappropriately using psychological tests. If you have no training in it, don’t do it.

One pitfall that very often occurs is the improper care of records. Have a system, and a plan for the locking up and the care of client records, and know who is helping you to handle those records so that their confidentiality can be protected.

Sometimes counselors get into trouble because they fail to recognize danger or violence, so when some terrible tragedy happens, the counselor is blamed because they were professionally negligent.

Some Christian counselors with a certain point of view about spiritual warfare and spiritual dynamics, try to diagnose psychotic clients by mislabeling them as demon possessed. Misrepresenting your credentials is simply lying about yourself, and that can get you into serious ethical, and maybe legal, problems.

The last few are very easy to recognize as wrong: never recommend for or against divorce; do not violate confidentiality except in the prescribed situations, and never make the professional mistake of labeling all problems as strictly spiritual.
Finally, let’s look at how to be an effective counselor and enjoy a long and fulfilling practice, which falls under the self-care of a counselor and intrapersonal formation category. Here are several ways that you can use to take care of yourself, because you should never underestimate what a challenging profession you are entering in by becoming a counselor. To see hurting people day in and day out can wear you down. So it is so important to anticipate that you need refreshment, that you need a support system, and that you need some time for self-care. It is a measure of wisdom when we who are engaged in Christian counseling receive our own counseling from time to time, sometimes in the form of accountability partners and professional supervision, and sometimes in the form of actual therapy.

It is also important that we be intentional about our individual and family’s prayer life and spiritual formation.

It is a good idea to look for a support group for counselors in your area. I would urge you to find a personal mentor, someone who is a Christian counselor, a pastor, or elder who has been counseling for a long time, and who can be an encouraging figure for you. I encourage you to always keep your clients in prayer. You must also continue your training. None of us will ever reach the point where we know it all or where we have had enough training. There is always some new insight, new research, and new writings that can be helpful and renewing to us and to our clients.
We must remain aware of the compassion fatigue and burnout that comes from the wear and tear that we experience when dealing with hurting people on a daily basis.

And it is important to be intentional about your wellness practices, to be concerned about your daily rest, about exercise, about proper nutrition, about having some forms of recreation, and being diligent in keeping a reasonable work schedule.

Well, this concludes the lecture series for COUN 506: Integration of Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling. It has been a blessing for me to be able to share with you some of my own and other experts training and insights in this course material, and I pray that it has been a blessing to you.