

# The Ministry of the Holy Spirit

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Life is a mess of sin and suffering. When people find themselves in over their heads, they come to us, the counselors, and quickly, *we're* in over *our* heads with them. What do they want? Often they want relief from the pain or practical advice for how to break sin patterns. Sometimes they're aware that there's more to it, something deeper.

What do we want for them? If we're thinking biblically, then we'll want to provide some immediate, practical help. But we also know that the roots of their problems are likely deeper than they are aware, and that God is often up to something greater than merely cleaning up the messes as we see them and in the ways that we would clean them.

We know that biblical counseling will involve prayer and Scripture—we can't go far without those. Yet if we're not careful, even prayer and Scripture can be deployed in the counseling process as mere techniques—the technologies of biblical counseling—rather than as means of engaging with the living God who alone is sufficient for the needs at hand.

## Case Study: A Young Married Couple

Suppose a young married couple comes to you seeking help. Let's call them John and Emily. Since their wedding night, they've found intimacy difficult. And the trouble is not just in the bedroom; it's in every room of the house.

Emily is terrified of sex. She's also defensive and resistant to talking about certain issues in her past. John is disappointed and tempted to push for what he wants. After all, he reasons, marriage is supposed to include sex, right? In their hurt, fear, and anger, they've said words to each other they can never take

back. Clearly, these matters will take time and patience to resolve. You commit to working with them over a period of months.

One day, Emily hints at something painful about her relationship with her stepfather. She's beginning to trust you, so you delicately invite her to say more. What spills out is a tear-filled story of a childhood spoiled and traumatized by a stepfather who would visit her bedroom at night to touch her in ways she was too young to understand, but that made her feel dirty nonetheless. You're horrified as you hear about this helpless girl overpowered by a selfish and deceitful man.

Later, John's secret comes out. He thought marriage would fix it, but it hasn't, especially given their sexual difficulties. It's getting worse, in fact. Pornography.

He's beginning to trust you, too. So, he confesses, eyes always to the floor. He admits to his despair after years of failure, even at times entertaining thoughts of suicide. He's overwhelmed by what he now knows about his wife's past. He knows that his sin multiplies her pain. This increases his shame and the distance between them.

## **What Do You Want?**

Surely you long for Emily to know the love and affection of a gracious heavenly Father. But you know this might be hard for her to grasp. You long for her to see that, in Christ, God calls her clean and holy, not contaminated. But she's felt broken, defiled, and ashamed for as long as she can remember. So this, too, will be hard for her to grasp.

You want John to know freedom from this bondage—to assure him that there's hope, and that it doesn't all ride on his summoning his long-lost will-power to stop it. You'll want him to see how what Jesus has already provided for him is better than what he seeks in pornography. You want him to be convicted of his sin, not just regretful for the consequences. You want him to repent from the heart, and to walk faithfully in freedom. You know the process will probably require identifying the sin beneath the sins, the idolatry that fuels his behavior. This undoubtedly lies darkened beneath layers of slippery self-deception. In the end, you want him to rest in Christ's work for him—complete forgiveness and cleansing from sin's shame.

## What Does the Holy Spirit Want?

This is only the tip of the iceberg, of course. There's much more going on in John and Emily and between them, and much more help that you hope to offer.

Scripture should help, right? Let's assume that you're well-versed. As they talk, you can think of plenty of relevant passages. But will those verses connect and make a difference?

Thankfully, biblical counselors are becoming aware of the naiveté and malpractice in the prescription "take two verses and call me in the morning." So, let's suppose you're more sophisticated, more compassionate, more engaging, and more nuanced. You can weave their stories into God's story. Will that help?

Yes, but there's more. You see, what you want for them—the truths you hope they will see, the love of God you long for them to embrace and extend to others—the reason you want those things is because there is One who wants John and Emily to have those things even more than you do. The Holy Spirit.

In fact, *rather than asking about the role of the Holy Spirit in counseling, we should be asking about the counselor's role in the Holy Spirit's counseling!* Yes, there will be Scripture. Yes, there will be prayer. Yet, it is good for us to focus on the Holy Spirit's personal presence, agency, and efficacy. We should not reduce *Him* to the topic of "prayer in counseling," nor to "Scripture in counseling."

By taking this more personal approach, we'll be reminded that prayer is not just a technique of spirituality; it is conversation with our Redeemer, a person. Further, the Spirit is at work even before we pray and in ways for which we may not even know how to pray. He does more than we ask or think (Ephesians 3:20). We'll also be reminded that the Scriptures are not magical formulae that work apart from our understanding; they are meaningful communications from a personal God about Himself that we might know Him. It is the Spirit who opens our hearts and minds to know God through the Scriptures.

Counseling that lacks this dependence on the Holy Spirit ceases to be Christian. Jay Adams is emphatic here:

Ignoring the Holy Spirit or avoiding the use of Scriptures in counseling is tantamount to an act of autonomous rebellion. Christians may not counsel apart from the Holy Spirit and His Word without grievously sinning against Him and the counselee.<sup>1</sup>

Siang-Yang Tan agrees:

The role of the Holy Spirit in counseling is therefore a crucial one. He is the ultimate source of all true healing and wholeness. All true Christian counseling needs to be done in the Spirit, by the Spirit's power, truth, and love, under the Lordship of Christ, and to the glory of God.<sup>2</sup>

### Biblical Counseling Is a Triologue

If the Holy Spirit is the primary counselor, then biblical counseling is not merely a dialogue between a counselor and a counselee. Rather, it is a triologue in which a counselor participates in the Spirit's work already underway with the counselee.<sup>3</sup> The Spirit is actively engaged in counseling, working directly on the counselor and the counselee, and through each to help the other. Consider the following triologue diagram and some conclusions we may draw from it.<sup>4</sup>

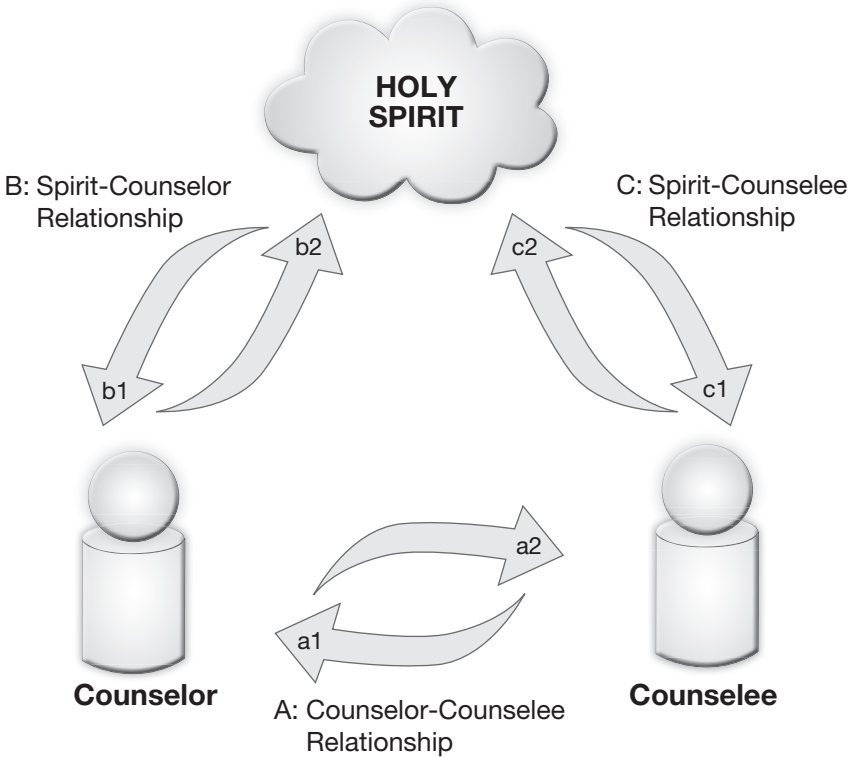


FIGURE A

## God-Centered

First, the diagram reminds us to remain God-centered in our counseling. Our ultimate goal is to help counselees to know and love God. You might even say that the goal of biblical counseling is *to promote communication between the Spirit and the counselee* (C1 and C2 in Figure A). All of the change and growth in Christlikeness that we'd wish to see as a fruit of our counseling will happen in the context of one's relationship with Him, as the counselee learns to receive His grace in its many forms (forgiveness, comfort, guidance from God's Word, and much more), and respond in faith in its many out-workings (love of God and neighbor, repentance, obedience). As Paul Tripp says, the difference between biblical counseling and any non-Christian form of counseling is that our ultimate hope for change does not rest in a system but in a personal Redeemer.<sup>5</sup>

## The Spirit at Work Through the Word

Second, the Spirit is at work on the counselee. We now turn our attention to two more lines in Figure A: from Spirit to counselee (C1), and from counselor to counselee (A2). It's hard to capture everything you might want to say in a single diagram, but if we could add red for the work of the Spirit and blue for the work of the counselor, then the line from counselor to counselee (A2) would be purple, or perhaps a red-and-blue braid.

The questions we now face are: Is it the counselor's words, knowledge, skill, and compassion that make the difference? Or is it the Spirit? Or, if it's both, then how might that be? And how can we as counselors be intentional about that participation? It will help us to answer such questions if we take a step back and observe the relationships between the Spirit's work, our words of counsel, and God's Word.

God works through words. He created everything by speaking, and sustains it always by His powerful word (Hebrews 1:3; 11:3). He also ordained that language would be a primary means of revealing Himself to us, resulting in Scripture. His ultimate self-revelation, however, came in the *person* of Jesus Christ. Now the gospel is a proclamation—words—about that person and His work. These are not merely descriptive words, however, for the Spirit causes them to bring about life and faith in the hearts of believers.<sup>6</sup> It is the Spirit

alone who opens the eyes of our hearts to the revelation of God, and it is He who accomplishes something in us by this revelation. John Calvin made essentially the same point:

The simple and external demonstration of the Word of God ought, indeed, to suffice fully for the production of faith, did not our blindness and perversity interfere. But such is the propensity of our minds to vanity that they can never adhere to the truth of God, and such is their dullness that they are always blind even to his light. Hence, without the illumination of the Holy Spirit the Word has no effect.<sup>7</sup>

The more we receive God's Word by faith, the more effect it has upon us, and the more we are transformed.<sup>8</sup> In other words, to be counseled biblically—or to be disciplined in general, really—is to receive God's Word more and more deeply as the Spirit drives it deeper into the heart. The Spirit works through the Word to change us; He acts upon us and *accomplishes* something.

The way human speech works bears some similarity to the way God's speech works. It does more than string together words: it conveys intent, and it can also accomplish things.<sup>9</sup> Consider as an analogy the words spoken by a minister at a wedding: "I now pronounce you husband and wife." These words do not merely *describe* the couple as married; they *make* the couple married. The same words could be written in a letter by the husband to his wife on their first anniversary: "I remember how I felt when the minister said, 'I now pronounce you husband and wife.'" In that case, the very same words are spoken in a different context with a different intent. In the wedding, the minister's intent is to pronounce the couple married; in the anniversary letter, the husband's intent is to remind his wife of that special moment. What is *accomplished* by those words in each case? In the wedding, the minister's words result in a new marriage; in the letter, the same words result in the enjoyment of a memory.

It matters what words counselors say, why they say them, and what they hope to accomplish by speaking. As biblical counselors we want to intend what the Spirit intends and to participate in what the Spirit means to accomplish. The kinds of things biblical counselors hope will happen in their counselees are the very things the Spirit *does* to them through the Word.

This is not to say that, if the Spirit works through the Word, then biblical counseling should consist in merely reading Scripture as if it were magical.

Quite the contrary, this insight moves us away from a merely magical-propositional orientation to the Word, and into a relational orientation. Merely hearing the syllables of Scripture will not suffice for change, nor will a mere understanding of its concepts. Rather, the Spirit illuminates the Word for believers so that they might understand it spiritually, leading to a knowledge of God and to Christ dwelling in their hearts through faith (1 Corinthians 2:13; Ephesians 3:16-17).

The Spirit works to drive the seed that is God's Word deep into the heart, where it will take root and produce life (Luke 8:11; 1 Peter 1:23). Therefore, every method a counselor uses that helps a counselee to receive the Word more deeply turns out to be an expression of the Spirit's own agenda.

### How We Pray: Client-to-Spirit, Counselor-to-Spirit

Ed Welch says that all counseling is a variation on a single theme: knowing and praying for the counselee. Of all the questions the counselor might ask, then, the central guiding question in the counselor's mind is, "How can I pray for you?"<sup>10</sup> Our prayers will be informed by knowing (1) the Spirit's person and work, and (2) what we need. We ask Him to do that which He loves to do, that for which we are so needy. We turn our attention now to the arrows going up from counselor and counselee in Figure A.

Let's return to John and Emily from our opening case study. Recall: Emily has shared with you through tears that she was violated many times by her stepfather. One thing you might want for Emily is for her to know God's comfort amidst her terrible suffering. He is, after all, "the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction" (2 Corinthians 1:3).

Does the Spirit want to comfort Emily? Certainly. Among the many good things He has for her, comfort is one. Is this what He wants to minister *now*, though? This is an opportunity for prayer: *What do You want for Emily now?*

Suppose you conclude that comforting Emily in this moment is what you want and probably what the Spirit wants, too. You now know, when you speak, what your intent will be—to comfort—and as clearly as you can prayerfully discern, it is the Spirit's intent as well.

Now, what do you say? What words should you choose? You may mention, read, or have Emily read 2 Corinthians 1:3: "Blessed be the God and

Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.” You may expound it by helping her to understand Paul’s situation and how it relates to her own. You may ask her questions about the passage that deepen her reflections upon it. You may tell stories of how God has saved His people from trouble in the past: rescue from Egypt in the Exodus, restoration after captivity in Babylon. You may “let the redeemed of the Lord say so,” sharing how He has comforted you. By any means available—Bible, story, metaphor, illustration, crying with her—you attempt to help her know this God of all comfort.

The question is, will Emily finally receive God’s comfort by all of this? Will your labor bear its fruit? Will your message accomplish what you intend? If only you select the right passages of Scripture, if only you expound them correctly, skillfully and personally—will she get it? If you identify and deconstruct lies and distortions in her view of God along the way, hoping to clear her vision—will this suffice?

In the end, what we want for Emily is not merely cognitive nor conceptual. We do expect the Spirit will work through Emily’s cognitions, so we should strive to communicate skillfully so that she may understand. *But we want more.* We want a personal God to act personally upon Emily in this moment, deeply assuring her of His love for her and stirring her affections for Him.

At some point, no doubt, it will be time for John to be convicted of his sin with pornography.<sup>11</sup> He may already be convicted before he comes to see you. Or, he may only be confessing the most superficial awareness of the sin while lacking conviction about the deeper sins of the heart that underlie his behavior. Following a similar pattern as you did with Emily, you identify this goal prayerfully, concluding that this is the work the Spirit has in mind for John now.

You may choose words to help him face the gravity of his sin, to help him count the cost of his sin against Emily and against God—the betrayal, broken trust, spiritual adultery, idolatry. Since your goal is not to preach, but to help John see what he’s not seeing about God and his own sin, you might choose words in the form of questions. You may help him to see the dark reality that he has probably in some way supported the sexual slave trade and human trafficking that have likely been involved in producing the images he’s seen. You may help him to see the consequences he is bringing to his own body and brain.

Your intent in all of this is that John would experience a deep conviction that drives repentance from the heart, resulting in a forsaking of this sin. But



your words have limits. You can convict him in the external, objective sense of presenting the case against his sin, like a trial lawyer. But you can't do the work deep in John's heart that must be done to spark the necessary change. That is a work of the Spirit (John 16:8). Your work is to speak as the Spirit leads and to pray that He convicts. It is not simply that you "get out of God's way" and let Him convict. It is, rather, that you participate in His work while recognizing that He is the one who gives your words their force and effect to accomplish what He intends.

Much of the prayer that we've suggested so far would go unnoticed by a video camera in the counseling room. It has been more like continuous communication, remaining in tune and attentive to the Spirit, not consuming any real time in the counseling session. It's all happening as quickly and fluidly as a musician might play along while reading sheet music. For the practiced musician, the time between seeing what next notes to play and playing them with appropriate feel is usually unnoticeable.

In addition to the counselor's prayer throughout, he may also look for opportunities to invite the counselee to pray. Remember that, ultimately, we want to nurture the counselee's relationship with God (Relationship C in Figure A). At key moments in the conversation, it may be appropriate to pause and ask, for example, "Have you confessed this to God? Would you like to take a moment to do that now?"<sup>12</sup>

Or, we may pause and ask the Spirit to help us see what He wants us to see in that moment—*Holy Spirit, what would You like us to see now?*—and then wait quietly, listening for a few moments. While we should pray like this with confidence and expectation that the Spirit will help us, we should be somewhat tentative about concluding exactly what He has said and how to apply it. We are not here trying to bypass the human thought process to get to some other-worldly and authoritative "Thus saith the Lord." Rather, we ask that the Spirit would work through our thoughts and emotions to illuminate.<sup>13</sup> After praying, we might ask, "Does anything come to mind?" If so, we discuss it, and we receive and apply whatever we might normally affirm. Sometimes this will lead us down unexpected paths. Yet if it bears fruit that is Christ-exalting and biblical—like we'd hope for any of our methods—then we trust that the Spirit has helped us, and we're thankful.

## The Counselor's Skill and Method

If the Holy Spirit is the primary counselor, then of what importance is the skill and training of the human counselor? Our attention turns now to the relationship between counselor and counselee (Relationship A in Figure A). We discussed this in part already when we pointed out above that the Spirit works through God's Word and the words spoken by the counselor.

The familiar notion of "getting out of God's way" is helpful as a reminder that the Spirit is primary in counseling, but if we're not careful with that idea, it can also lead to some distortion in our understanding of the relationship between the Spirit's work and the counselor's. A dualism is when two ideas or principles that truly belong together as a unified whole are separated and then pitted against each other. What then happens is that some affirm the first idea to the exclusion of the second, while others affirm the second to the exclusion of the first.

In this case, we have two ideas that belong together: (1) the Spirit is at work and is the primary counselor, and (2) the counselor is at work and his skill is important. If these two ideas are pitted against one another and one is taken to the exclusion of the other, we end up with one of two distortions—the counselor is reduced to either a medium or a mechanic.

A medium is a passive conduit for some other spirit's communications. Biblical counselors make this mistake when they overestimate the authority of their own words or when they underestimate the amount of interpretation that is involved in communicating God's Word or any of the promptings that the Spirit may bring to mind.

A mechanic fixes cars with his own hands. He may consult a manual, but his are the only hands at work. Counselors make this mistake when they overestimate the efficacy of their skills and methods. Biblical counselors err in this way when they treat the Bible like a car manual and people like machines.

As much as we may need to remember to get *out* of God's way, we must also remember to get *in* His way—meaning, we should prayerfully seek to understand the Spirit's "way" in any situation and go there, following His lead.

Jay Adams harmonizes these two ideas well:

The Holy Spirit ordinarily effects his characterological work in the lives of believers through the means of grace. He uses the ministry of

the Word, the sacraments, prayer and the fellowship of God's people as the principal vehicles through which he brings about such changes...Methodology and technique, skill and exercise of gifts are all consonant with the work of the Spirit. What makes the difference is one's attitude and inner motivation: does he do what he does in reliance upon his own efforts, in dependence upon methods and techniques, or does he acknowledge his own inability and ask the Spirit to use his gifts and methods?<sup>14</sup>

If it's true that the Spirit produces new life through the seed that is God's Word, then the counselor's skill in handling that seed is important, just as for a farmer planting seed in hopes of a good crop (Luke 8:11-15). Understanding it and applying it well will matter. Understanding the environment will matter. Choosing good timing and planting seed in fertile, cultivated soil will matter. Protecting seeds from being choked out by weeds or thorns that threaten to choke out the life in those seeds will matter.

Yet all of these "farming skills" are used in dependence on the Spirit, who ultimately is the one who causes growth (1 Corinthians 3:6-7). Siang-Yang Tan summarizes: "Training and competence in counseling or therapy skills are still needed, but such skills are used in dependence on the Holy Spirit."<sup>15</sup>

### **The Spirit Empowers the Counselor (and the Counselee)**

We turn now to the Spirit's empowerment of the counselor (B1 in Figure A). One place in Scripture where human skill and the Spirit's empowerment come together is in the appointment of Bezalel to construct the tabernacle. "I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship" (Exodus 31:3). Bezalel was no doubt a skilled, talented artisan already.<sup>16</sup> God, in His own creativity and wisdom, had designed and prepared one such as Bezalel for this task. Still, Bezalel's skill would need to be empowered by the Spirit of God. This filling of the Spirit would not replace his ability, intelligence, and craftsmanship; rather, it would empower and extend them to do far more than Bezalel could ever do in his merely human, albeit God-designed, capacity. *The result was not Spirit-filled-instead-of-skillful; it was Spirit-filled-skill.*

The language used to describe Bezalel's endowment is worthy of closer

examination. The Hebrew word *hokmah*, which the ESV translates “ability,” is “essentially a high degree of knowledge and skill in any domain. . . . The nearest English equivalent that encompasses its semantic range is ‘expertise.’”<sup>17</sup> This word, along with the others used here (*tebunah*: practical, applied competence; *da’at*: knowledge in the broadest sense), picks up many layers of meaning in Proverbs, where the sage demonstrates deep understanding—theoretical, practical, and ethical—in many areas of life. His way of life and his way of knowing are grounded in the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom, knowledge, insight, knowledge of God, spiritual vitality, confidence, hatred of evil, and the love of good (Proverbs 1:7; 2:5; 8:13; 9:10; 10:27; 14:27; 19:23).

Isaiah brings together the same ideas in his prophecy about the Messiah in Isaiah 11:2: “The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.”<sup>18</sup>

Here again, we have “wisdom” (*hokmah*), “understanding” (*binah*: intellect, intelligence, problem-solving, and conceptual thinking),<sup>19</sup> “counsel and might” (a single idea in two words, referring to a king’s ability to “gather data for decision making and the forcefulness to make decisions,” especially military ones),<sup>20</sup> and “knowledge” (*da’at*), all grounded in the fear of the Lord. The phrase “the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,” especially in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, is very similar to that found in Exodus 31:3 for Bezalel.

What is Isaiah saying about the Messiah? That he would be a wise king like Solomon, powerful like David, yet peaceful and ushering in peace for the people. He would return God’s people to shalom. He was to be unlike any human king on the scene at the time, most of whom in Israel had either been “craven, cynical, pompous [and] spiritually bankrupt,” or arrogant and oppressive like the Assyrian kings.<sup>21</sup> Reading through the rest of Isaiah 11, you find that the Messiah’s rule of Israel’s returning exiles results in a veritable heaven on earth. So grand is that vision as to lead Bible commentator John Oswalt to conclude:

This picture cannot be applied to any human king. It is either an unattainable ideal or the figure envisioned is somehow superhuman. That it is the latter is supported by the vision of the return which is

linked to the Messiah's reign (vv. 10-16). That return is not merely an ideal, nor is the Messiah. He is a reality, but a superhuman one.<sup>22</sup>

What would distinguish this king from the others? What would mark Him as the Messiah? "The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him." So it's mind-blowing that in Ephesians, Paul would be so bold as to adopt the language of Isaiah 11:2 and pray that God would give to the average Joe Ephesian "a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him" (Ephesians 1:17).<sup>23</sup> He prays similarly for the Colossians: "We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all *spiritual wisdom and understanding*" (Colossians 1:9, emphasis added).

Notice here that Paul is not just praying for their counseling toolboxes to be filled with such apparatuses as "wisdom" and "knowledge" and "revelation." He is praying that they would receive the great gift of the Holy Spirit. *He* is the spirit of wisdom and revelation.<sup>24</sup>

But notice, too, that he's not just praying for the counselors among those Ephesians and Colossians. He's praying for all of them. Every Christian has received the great gift of the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13; Matthew 7:11). The Spirit helps us to walk in His ways, to know God, to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and to be transformed as we behold Him (Galatians 5:16-17; 2 Corinthians 3:17-18; 4:6).

We have every reason—with the Spirit thus empowering both the biblical counselor and the Christian counselee—to pray fervently and expectantly with Paul:

...that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen (Ephesians 3:16-21).