

“The Imago Dei and Mental Health: Toward a Theological Anthropology of Wholeness.”

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Abstract

In a world where mental health crises continue to erode human dignity, the doctrine of the *Imago Dei*—humanity created in the image of God—offers a neglected yet profound resource for psychological healing and theological reflection. This study explores the intersection between biblical anthropology and counseling psychology, proposing a theological anthropology of wholeness grounded in the *Imago Dei*. Drawing upon Scripture, patristic and contemporary theology, and qualitative reflections from Christian counseling encounters in Ghana, the paper argues that a recovery of image-bearing identity can reframe mental health not merely as the absence of pathology but as the restoration of divine likeness.

In counseling practice, many clients wrestle not only with trauma or anxiety but with a fractured sense of self. Beneath the symptoms often lies a spiritual wound — the loss of identity as beloved image-bearers. Through careful integration of Genesis 1:26–27, Psalm 8, and Christ’s redemptive restoration of the image in Colossians 3:10, the study demonstrates that theological anthropology provides both a diagnostic and therapeutic framework for Christian mental health practice. This approach locates healing within the holistic renewal of the mind and the reclamation of divine purpose, where psychology meets pneumatology.

From Ghanaian case reflections, it emerges that when individuals internalize their God-imaged worth, shame begins to lift, and distorted self-perceptions give way to spiritual confidence. The *Imago Dei* thus becomes not only a theological concept but a counseling principle—a living truth that restores meaning amid mental fragmentation. By integrating biblical revelation with psychological insight, the study proposes a model of *wholeness theology* that honors both divine transcendence and human vulnerability. In this vision, mental health care is no longer a secular enterprise supplemented by faith but a sacred partnership between theology and therapy—between the Creator’s design and the counselor’s craft.

From this observation, one can see that the recovery of the *Imago Dei* is more than a doctrinal correction; it is a pastoral revolution. It invites both the Church and the therapeutic community to reimagine mental wellness as participation in divine life, where self-understanding and spiritual formation merge into one redemptive journey toward restored humanity.

Keywords

Imago Dei; Mental Health; Theological Anthropology; Christian Counseling; Spiritual Identity; Psychological Wholeness.

1. Introduction

The question of what it means to be human remains one of the most enduring inquiries of theology and psychology alike. At the heart of Christian anthropology lies the conviction that humanity was created *imago Dei*—in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26–27). This foundational truth affirms that every person possesses inherent worth, moral agency, and relational capacity rooted in divine reflection. Yet, in both contemporary society and counseling contexts, this truth has been obscured by fragmentation—psychological, spiritual, and social. The human person, though created for communion, increasingly lives in disconnection: from God, from others, and from the self.

In many African contexts, including Ghana, mental health is still often viewed through dualistic or stigmatized lenses—either as moral weakness, spiritual attack, or biological malfunction. The Church, while emphasizing salvation, has sometimes failed to nurture a theology that attends to psychological healing as an expression of redemption. The result is a split between faith and emotional life, where believers profess divine image yet live in deep internal shame. The *Imago Dei* doctrine, properly understood, bridges this divide. It locates mental well-being within a theological anthropology that sees humanity as inherently valuable yet in need of restoration through Christ.

From a pastoral perspective, I have often encountered counselees whose struggles with depression, guilt, or low self-worth are not rooted solely in trauma but in disordered identity. A young woman once said in tears, “I know God forgave me, but I still feel unworthy of His love.” Her statement reveals a theological wound: forgiveness without identity restoration. True healing, therefore, demands more than behavioral correction—it requires a reorientation of being, a rediscovery of divine likeness.

Theologically, the *Imago Dei* is not a static attribute but a relational calling. It reflects God’s nature — creative, moral, and communal — implanted within human existence. Psychologically, it corresponds to the development of self-concept, purpose, and belonging. When theology and psychology converse, a fuller understanding of human wholeness emerges. As Lartey (1997) observes, pastoral care becomes most effective when it attends to “the totality of the human condition — spiritual, emotional, and social.” The *Imago Dei* thus serves as a framework for integrating spiritual identity with psychological integrity.

This study seeks to reinterpret the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* as a therapeutic and theological construct for mental health, particularly within African Christian contexts. It contends that the healing of the mind cannot be separated from the healing of the soul, and that restoring one’s divine image-awareness forms the basis for renewed emotional health. By bridging biblical anthropology with counseling psychology, this work proposes a theology of wholeness—where mental restoration is not merely recovery from distress but participation in divine grace.

From this observation, one can see that the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* offers more than metaphysical speculation; it is a pastoral key to the restoration of dignity, purpose, and peace. When individuals and faith communities recover this vision, theology once again becomes therapy, and counseling becomes a sacred act of reminding humanity who they were created to be.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The doctrine of the *Imago Dei* stands as one of the most profound affirmations of human dignity in Christian theology. Yet its implications for psychology and mental health remain underexplored, particularly in the African context where the intersection of faith, emotion, and identity is deeply intertwined with culture and community. This section traces the theological, biblical, and psychological foundations of the *Imago Dei*, situating it as a framework for holistic mental health and Christian counseling.

2.1 Theological Foundations of the Imago Dei

From the early Church Fathers to contemporary theologians, the *Imago Dei* has been interpreted as the defining mark of humanity's relationship to God. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) viewed the divine image as the capacity for reason and moral reflection—traces of the Trinity reflected in the triadic unity of memory, understanding, and will. Thomas Aquinas later emphasized humanity's rational and volitional capacities as mirrors of divine intellect and love. In modern theology, Karl Barth (1958) reframed the *Imago Dei* relationally, arguing that to be human is to exist in *I-Thou* relationship, just as God exists eternally as Father, Son, and Spirit.

This relational understanding profoundly informs the theology of wholeness. If human identity flows from relationship, then psychological health cannot be isolated from communion—with God, with others, and with the self. Sin, in this light, is not only moral transgression but relational rupture. Redemption, then, is the restoration of divine likeness through reconciliation. As Jürgen Moltmann (1981) observed, “The image of God is not lost but marred; in Christ, it is restored through the fellowship of love.”

Within African theology, thinkers like John Mbiti (1989) and Kwame Bediako (1995) expanded this view by situating the *Imago Dei* within communal ontology. African anthropology, they argue, conceives personhood not as an isolated essence but as existence-in-community—“I am because we are.” This perspective aligns with the biblical affirmation that humanity is created not merely as individual beings but as corporate image-bearers entrusted with stewardship and relationship. Theologically, the *Imago Dei* therefore encompasses both individuality and interdependence, reflecting the unity and diversity within the Trinity itself.

2.2 Biblical Foundations: Image, Identity, and Restoration

Scripture presents the *Imago Dei* as both a gift and a calling. In Genesis 1:26–27, humanity is created in God's image and likeness, endowed with dominion, creativity, and moral agency. The Fall (Genesis 3) does not erase the image but distorts its expression, leading to alienation from God and fragmentation within the self. The biblical narrative of redemption is thus the story of image restoration—culminating in Christ, the “image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15).

Christ's incarnation and resurrection reconstitute the *Imago Dei* as both a theological and psychological reality. The New Testament consistently portrays spiritual transformation as the renewal of this image: “You have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the

image of its Creator” (Colossians 3:10). Here, sanctification is not mere moral improvement but ontological reformation—an inner re-creation of identity through grace.

This has direct implications for mental health. When individuals internalize false identities—through trauma, sin, or social oppression—the distortion of self-perception mirrors the marring of the divine image. Redemption, then, involves the recovery of God’s truth about who one is. This understanding parallels the psychological process of self-integration: a movement from fragmentation to coherence, from shame to acceptance, from alienation to belonging.

Psalm 8 offers an anthropological hymn that situates human dignity within divine mindfulness: “What is man that You are mindful of him?” In counseling contexts, this verse resonates deeply with those struggling with insignificance or despair. It invites a theological reorientation of the self—not through self-esteem in isolation, but through being esteemed by God.

2.3 Psychological and Counseling Perspectives

Modern psychology has long grappled with the question of identity and meaning. Humanistic psychology, particularly through the works of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, emphasizes self-actualization, empathy, and unconditional positive regard as the cornerstones of mental health. However, as Paul Vitz (1994) critiques, secular humanism often deifies the self while ignoring the divine source of value. The doctrine of the *Imago Dei* provides a corrective—it affirms the self not as autonomous but as derivative, dignified precisely because it reflects God.

In counseling psychology, integrating theological anthropology allows for a more holistic view of healing. The *Imago Dei* framework affirms that psychological well-being is inseparable from spiritual formation. Earlier Christian counselors such as Crabb (1987), Collins (1988), and McMinn (1996) argued that therapy rooted in biblical anthropology not only alleviates emotional dysfunction but restores the counselee’s awareness of divine identity. In this view, mental health becomes an act of remembering one’s origin and destiny in God—a reawakening of the image in which humanity was first formed.

In practical counseling experiences in Ghana, many clients internalize cultural messages that devalue worth—particularly women, the economically marginalized, and trauma survivors. Yet when guided through Scripture and reflective dialogue, clients often experience a shift from self-condemnation to sacred self-awareness. One woman, after weeks of counseling for depression, remarked, “I used to see myself as broken. Now I see myself as being rebuilt.” Her statement reflects a psychological and theological integration: her healing was not merely emotional but redemptive.

2.4 Theological Anthropology and the Wholeness Model

The theological anthropology of *Imago Dei* thus provides an integrative framework for mental health—a model that sees the human person as **spiritual, psychological, relational, and embodied**. This study proposes what may be termed the *Wholeness Model of Christian Anthropology*, where healing is viewed as the restoration of the image through three dimensions:

1. **Identity Restoration** — The reawakening of divine likeness through renewed self-understanding grounded in God’s love.
2. **Relational Healing** — The rebuilding of trust and empathy as expressions of the relational image of the Triune God.
3. **Purpose Reclamation** — The rediscovery of vocation and meaning as participation in God’s creative and redemptive work.

Each dimension corresponds to both biblical revelation and psychological insight. Identity addresses cognitive distortions and shame; relational healing addresses attachment wounds; purpose reclamation addresses existential despair. Theologically, all three converge in Christ—the perfect image—who restores human wholeness by reconciling creation to its Creator.

From this synthesis, one can see that the *Imago Dei* is not an abstract doctrine but a practical anthropology—a divine mirror in which the human soul finds its reflection, restoration, and release. By weaving together theology and psychology, the study grounds mental health in a sacred anthropology that affirms both God’s transcendence and human worth.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a **qualitative phenomenological design**, which seeks to uncover the meaning and essence of lived experience through the voices of those who embody it. Since the *Imago Dei* is not only a theological doctrine but an existential reality shaping identity, emotion, and spiritual formation, phenomenology provided the most appropriate framework for exploring how Ghanaian Christians experience divine image-awareness in relation to mental health and counseling.

3.1 Research Design and Rationale

Phenomenology, rooted in the works of Edmund Husserl and later adapted by scholars such as Moustakas (1994), emphasizes understanding human experience from the participant’s perspective. In theological and counseling research, this approach allows for a deep engagement with inner narratives, meanings, and faith interpretations that cannot be quantified but can be richly described.

The study explored how individuals within Ghanaian Christian communities understand and experience the *Imago Dei* in moments of emotional struggle, self-doubt, or recovery. The goal was not to test a hypothesis but to illuminate the intersection of theology and psychology through lived testimony. This design aligned with the researcher’s pastoral-counseling background, which privileges personal story as sacred data.

3.2 Participants

Fifteen participants were purposively selected from three Ghanaian regions — Greater Accra, Ashanti, and Central — to represent diverse denominational and gender perspectives. Participants included:

- **Eight lay Christians** (five women, three men) who had received counseling for depression, trauma, or low self-esteem within church or clinical settings.
- **Five Christian counselors or pastoral care workers** trained in both biblical and psychological counseling.
- **Two clergy leaders** (one Pentecostal, one Mainline Protestant) who integrate mental health awareness into their ministry practice.

Ages ranged from 25 to 60 years, with a mean age of 41. Educational backgrounds varied from secondary education to postgraduate theological training. This diversity ensured a nuanced understanding of how the *Imago Dei* is perceived and experienced across gender, vocation, and faith expressions within the Ghanaian church.

Participants were recruited through counseling networks, seminary partnerships, and pastoral referrals. Inclusion criteria required that each participant identify as Christian, be actively involved in a faith community, and have personal or professional experience related to emotional healing or counseling ministry.

3.3 Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

Two primary instruments were used:

1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Each participant engaged in an in-depth interview lasting 45–60 minutes. The interview guide included open-ended questions such as:

- “What does it mean to you to be created in the image of God?”
- “How has your understanding of God’s image shaped your view of yourself in moments of weakness or distress?”
- “In your counseling or ministry experience, how does the idea of being an image-bearer influence healing and growth?”
- The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share personal stories freely, bringing forth theological, emotional, and cultural dimensions of their experience.

2. Reflective Journals and Field Notes

Following each interview, the researcher maintained detailed field notes on tone, affect, and non-verbal cues. Some participants voluntarily kept short reflective journals over two weeks, recording how their awareness of divine image influenced their emotional state or relationships. These reflections added depth to the phenomenological interpretation.

All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were anonymized to ensure confidentiality, with pseudonyms assigned.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically using NVivo 14 software. The analytic process drew from classic qualitative frameworks (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Moustakas, 1994; Boyatzis, 1998):

1. Familiarization with data — reading transcripts repeatedly to identify recurrent emotions and concepts.
2. Generating initial codes — labeling significant statements related to identity, worth, and healing.
3. Searching for themes — grouping codes into conceptual clusters such as restored identity, divine acceptance, and emotional renewal.
4. Reviewing themes — refining overlaps and validating coherence across participants.
5. Defining and naming themes — establishing three overarching dimensions: *Identity Restoration*, *Relational Healing*, and *Purpose Reclamation*.
6. Producing the report — integrating theological and psychological insights with lived narratives to construct the *Wholeness Model of the Imago Dei*.

Phenomenological reduction—suspending personal bias while remaining interpretively aware—guided the analysis. Reflexivity journals ensured that the researcher’s pastoral perspective enriched, rather than overshadowed, participants’ authentic voices.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Given the spiritual and emotional sensitivity of discussing mental health and divine identity, the study adhered strictly to ethical principles of pastoral and psychological research.

Participants signed **informed consent** forms explaining the study’s purpose, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any point. Emotional well-being was prioritized: those showing signs of distress during interviews were gently paused, debriefed, and referred to licensed counselors where necessary.

Anonymity was upheld by removing identifying details from all data. Recordings were stored securely, and only the researcher and supervising committee accessed them. The ethical framework was guided by both the *APA (1992) Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* and biblical pastoral ethics, emphasizing compassion, truth-telling, and respect for human dignity.

3.6 Contextual Reflexivity

In the Ghanaian faith context, the researcher approached the fieldwork as both counselor and theological interpreter. Many participants were more comfortable expressing spiritual metaphors than psychological terminology—phrases such as “God is healing my heart” or “the Holy Spirit restored my peace” often replaced clinical expressions of recovery. Recognizing this, the researcher honored faith language as legitimate data, treating it as symbolic articulation of emotional healing rather than deflection from it.

From this observation, one can see that African Christian narratives of mental health are deeply relational and theological. The process of reflection on divine image was not merely cognitive but communal, rooted in worship, testimony, and the embodied experience of belonging.

4. Results and Emergent Themes

The phenomenological analysis revealed that the experience of the *Imago Dei* among Ghanaian Christians was not understood merely as a theological doctrine, but as an **embodied and emotional journey** of rediscovering divine likeness through faith, pain, and healing. Participants' narratives converged around three interrelated themes: **Identity Restoration, Relational Healing, and Purpose Reclamation**. Each of these dimensions expressed how the awareness of being created in God's image functioned as both spiritual revelation and psychological recovery.

4.1 Identity Restoration: Rediscovering Worth in the Image of God

Many participants described their healing journey as a process of recovering dignity long buried under shame, fear, or rejection. The *Imago Dei* was not a concept they learned in abstract theological discussion—it was a revelation encountered in the midst of brokenness.

A 35-year-old woman who had survived domestic abuse shared, “For years, I felt like I was nothing. But one day during prayer, I heard the Holy Spirit whisper, ‘*You are still My image.*’ That broke something inside me. I realized no one could erase what God had placed in me.” Her words capture the transformative power of theological awareness as a psychological turning point.

For several participants, the rediscovery of the *Imago Dei* replaced self-hatred with sacred self-regard. A pastor who had battled depression after ministry burnout reflected: “When I remembered that I am made in God's image, I stopped trying to prove my value through performance. I began to rest in grace.”

The theme of **identity restoration** consistently emerged as the first stage of emotional and spiritual renewal. Many described it as “remembering who I am before God.” This affirmation counters the cultural and social scripts that often tie worth to productivity, education, or marital success. In a society where stigma and shame can silence mental struggle, reclaiming the divine image became an act of resistance—a theological protest against dehumanization.

From this observation, one can see that *Imago Dei* awareness does not simply affirm identity; it **reconstructs it**. The distorted self-image produced by trauma, guilt, or social marginalization is gradually realigned with divine truth. Healing begins not with external change, but with an inward awakening: the rediscovery of sacred selfhood.

4.2 Relational Healing: The Mirror of Divine Community

The second theme, **relational healing**, flowed naturally from identity restoration. Participants noted that their understanding of God's image transformed not only how they viewed themselves but also how they related to others. The *Imago Dei* became a mirror for empathy, forgiveness, and connection.

A counselor from Kumasi remarked, “When I began to see each client as an image-bearer, I listened differently. Even their anger became sacred ground.” This shift—from judgment to reverence—marked a pastoral transformation in his counseling practice.

Similarly, a 42-year-old male participant who had grown up with a harsh father described how theological reflection softened his resentment: “I realized that the same God-image in me is in him too. It didn’t excuse the pain, but it helped me forgive.” His process illustrates how theological anthropology intersects with emotional regulation and relational repair.

Theologically, this reflects the Trinitarian foundation of the *Imago Dei*—human beings reflect a God who exists eternally in relationship. In practical counseling terms, recognizing the divine image in others reframes empathy as worship. Healing becomes mutual; the self is restored not in isolation but through relationship.

In several cases, participants described reconciliation experiences with family or church members that they attributed to renewed spiritual insight. A young woman who had long felt alienated from her church community due to mental illness said, “When I learned that I am still an image of God, I stopped hiding. Then others started treating me differently too.” Her experience suggests that identity healing can ripple outward into social and communal restoration.

From these testimonies, one perceives a deep cultural resonance with the African communal worldview. Healing in Ghanaian Christian contexts is rarely individualistic—it unfolds within community. The recovery of the *Imago Dei* becomes both a personal and collective act, reaffirming Ubuntu-like theology: “*I am because we are.*”

4.3 Purpose Reclamation: Living as Restored Image-Bearers

The third major theme was **purpose reclamation**, a sense of renewed direction and mission that arose from participants’ healing. Once identity and relationship were re-rooted in divine likeness, many participants reported a desire to live out that truth through service, vocation, and witness.

A 29-year-old teacher who had battled anxiety recounted: “When I realized God had made me in His image, I stopped seeing myself as a failure. I began mentoring girls in my church, telling them, ‘You are God’s masterpiece.’” Her story illustrates the pastoral potential of *Imago Dei* consciousness—it transforms healed individuals into healers of others.

Several pastors described similar awakenings. One Pentecostal minister shared, “I used to preach fire and power, but not healing. Now I preach wholeness. I tell my members that salvation restores your mind, not just your soul.” This theological shift, rooted in the anthropology of divine image, reshaped his understanding of ministry itself.

The pattern across narratives suggests a cyclical process: **identity restoration births relational healing, which leads to purposeful living**. Each reinforces the other, forming a holistic rhythm of divine-human renewal.

Theologically, this reflects Genesis 1:28—dominion as vocation, not domination. To bear God’s image is to participate in His creative and redemptive mission. Psychologically, it corresponds to post-traumatic growth, where individuals find meaning and empowerment after distress. Spiritually, it represents resurrection—the recovery of life and purpose through grace.

4.4 Integrative Insight: The Wholeness Model of the Imago Dei

Across all narratives, the restoration of the *Imago Dei* unfolded as an **integrative healing process** encompassing three dimensions:

1. **Identity Restoration** — reclaiming sacred selfhood through divine affirmation.
2. **Relational Healing** — renewing empathy and forgiveness within community.
3. **Purpose Reclamation** — embodying divine likeness through vocation and service.

This tripartite pattern formed what participants described as “feeling whole again.” In theological terms, this aligns with Christ’s redemptive work as image-restorer (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18). In psychological terms, it parallels emotional integration and existential coherence.

In the Ghanaian context, this model also harmonizes with indigenous understandings of personhood—where health is relational, spirituality is embodied, and identity is communal. The *Imago Dei*, then, becomes both a theological truth and a culturally resonant therapeutic framework.

From this synthesis, one can see that the recovery of divine image is not merely doctrinal affirmation but a lived process of transformation. The *Imago Dei* is rediscovered not in abstraction, but in tears, worship, and reconnection. In the words of one participant:

“When I remembered that I am made in His image, I stopped surviving and started living again.”

This statement captures the essence of the findings: that divine likeness, once awakened, restores the human capacity to love, to heal, and to hope.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the experience of *Imago Dei* in Ghanaian Christian life is not confined to doctrinal articulation but lived as a journey of transformation — a process in which theology and psychology converge to restore human wholeness. Interpreted through the lenses of **theological anthropology**, **trauma psychology**, and **African pastoral theology**, these narratives illuminate how rediscovering the divine image becomes a pathway to healing, resilience, and renewed purpose.

5.1 Theological Anthropology: Restoring the Broken Image

Theologically, the study affirms that the *Imago Dei* constitutes the foundation of human dignity and identity. Yet, in lived experience, this image is often obscured by sin, suffering, or social devaluation. Participants’ narratives confirm that the human cry for meaning amid pain is, at its core, a cry for restored imagehood. Theologically, this restoration unfolds through Christ, the

“exact representation of God’s being” (Hebrews 1:3), who reconstitutes human identity through redemption.

From a pastoral perspective, when individuals rediscover themselves as bearers of God’s image, they reclaim their divine worth independent of circumstance or status. This aligns with Barth’s relational anthropology, which locates the image of God not in human rationality but in communion — with God and others. It also resonates with African communitarian theology, where personhood is affirmed through belonging and participation in life-giving relationships.

A key insight from this research is that **healing begins with theological reorientation**. Many participants moved from shame-based spirituality (“I am unworthy, I am nothing”) to grace-based identity (“I am loved, I am God’s image”). This shift reflects what theologian Miroslav Volf (1996) describes as “embrace” — the moment when divine acceptance restores fractured selfhood. In Ghanaian pastoral settings, where religious guilt and performance-based faith are common, such a reorientation has profound therapeutic significance.

From this observation, one can see that theological anthropology provides a framework for counseling that transcends pathology. It reframes healing not as fixing the self, but as rediscovering divine likeness — a sacred remembering of who one truly is.

5.2 Trauma Psychology: Integrating Pain into Divine Image

The connection between *Imago Dei* and trauma healing emerged vividly in participants’ stories. Many carried deep wounds — abuse, rejection, depression — yet described finding solace when they reinterpreted their suffering through the lens of divine image and redemption. In trauma psychology, such reframing is essential: it transforms pain from chaos into coherence, allowing survivors to reclaim agency and meaning.

The ethical framework was guided by both the *APA (1981) Ethical Principles of Psychologists* and biblical pastoral ethics, emphasizing compassion, truth-telling, and respect for human dignity. This alignment between professional ethics and Christian virtue provided an integrative moral foundation for the study’s counseling practice.

For instance, one woman’s declaration — “No one can erase what God placed in me” — demonstrates a cognitive and spiritual shift. What trauma fragmented, theology helped to re-integrate. The *Imago Dei* thus functions as both theological anthropology and psychological therapy: it restores coherence where trauma has fractured the self.

Moreover, participants’ experiences resonate with the biblical motif of wounded redemption — the idea that healing emerges not through denial of pain but through its transformation. Christ’s resurrected body still bore scars, symbolizing that divine image is not perfection untouched by pain but love transfigured through it. In counseling practice, this insight allows trauma survivors to hold faith and fragility together without contradiction.

Psychologically, the restoration of the divine image nurtures resilience, echoing Frankl’s (1984) insight that meaning discovered through suffering becomes the seed of transformation and

renewal. This anticipates what later researchers would describe as *post-traumatic growth*—the deepening of spiritual and emotional strength after adversity. Spiritually, this mirrors Paul’s confession: “Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16).

5.3 African Pastoral Theology: Wholeness in Community

In the African Christian worldview, identity is inseparable from community. Healing, therefore, must also be communal. The findings revealed that participants’ recovery of self-worth through the *Imago Dei* often occurred within the relational space of faith communities — through shared prayer, testimonies, or pastoral counseling. This reflects the African adage, “*A person is a person through other persons.*”

Within pastoral theology, this communal dimension redefines ecclesial care. The church becomes not merely a preaching institution but a healing community — a space where the divine image is continually affirmed through compassion, inclusion, and forgiveness. One counselor in the study noted, “When I began to see each client as an image-bearer, I listened differently.” This statement captures the pastoral ethic of compassionate presence — ministry not rooted in authority, but in reverence for divine reflection within the other.

African contextual theology deepens this further. The African concept of *ntofo* (wholeness) integrates body, spirit, and community. The *Imago Dei* fits naturally within this worldview: to bear God’s image is to live harmoniously within creation and covenant. Thus, mental health cannot be divorced from spirituality, nor spirituality from relational belonging.

From this perspective, pastoral theology in Ghana must evolve from moral correction to emotional restoration. The wounded parishioner is not simply a sinner to be instructed but a soul to be re-humanized. The counselor or pastor becomes a midwife of divine image, guiding believers to see themselves not through failure but through divine reflection.

5.4 Toward a Theology of Wholeness

Bringing together these perspectives, the *Imago Dei* emerges as a **theology of wholeness** — one that unites faith, psychology, and cultural anthropology into a cohesive pastoral framework. Theologically, it affirms that all healing is participation in God’s redemptive work. Psychologically, it validates emotion, embodiment, and self-awareness as instruments of grace. Culturally, it resonates with African values of interdependence and communal dignity.

This integrative approach challenges both extremes of contemporary ministry: the over-spiritualization that dismisses emotional distress as lack of faith, and the secularization that treats the soul as irrelevant to healing. In the Ghanaian setting, where deliverance ministries dominate and mental health stigma persists, the *Imago Dei* framework restores balance. It invites a theology that honors both spiritual power and psychological process — both prayer and reflection, both faith and therapy.

From this synthesis, one can see that the recovery of divine image is not an event but a pilgrimage. Healing unfolds as believers journey from self-alienation to divine affirmation, from isolation to community, from despair to purpose. The *Imago Dei* becomes not merely a doctrine to affirm but a life to embody — a mirror in which broken humanity rediscovers its sacred face.

6. Faith-Based Implications and Practical Recommendations

The rediscovery of the *Imago Dei* as both theological truth and therapeutic framework invites the African Church—particularly in Ghana—to reimagine its role in healing the mind and soul. The findings of this study indicate that affirming the divine image in every person restores dignity, fosters resilience, and nurtures holistic discipleship. These insights, when integrated into seminary education, congregational practice, and counseling ministry, can transform the Church from a site of religious performance into a sanctuary of healing.

The following recommendations outline how this integration may occur across three key domains: **theological training, ecclesial life, and counseling and pastoral care.**

6.1 Theological Training and Seminary Formation

If the Church is to embody a theology of wholeness, her leaders must first be formed within it. Ghanaian seminaries and theological institutions such as Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon can serve as laboratories for this integration by embedding the *Imago Dei* framework into ministerial formation.

1. Curriculum Development

Introduce a core course on *Theology and Mental Health*, examining biblical anthropology, emotional intelligence, and the psychology of self-worth.

Incorporate modules that explore trauma, lament, and redemption within the African context, helping future clergy interpret suffering through redemptive endurance rather than prosperity or denial.

Encourage interdisciplinary teaching between theology and counseling departments to train leaders who are both spiritually grounded and emotionally literate.

1. Formative Practice

Require reflective spiritual journaling, self-assessment of temperament, and guided retreats focused on personal identity in Christ.

Mentor students through supervised counseling practicums, where the theology of the *Imago Dei* is lived out in empathy and presence.

2. Spiritual Direction and Supervision

Establish pastoral supervision models emphasizing self-awareness, emotional regulation, and compassion fatigue prevention.

Promote “soul care for shepherds” — regular retreat rhythms where ministers reconnect with their identity in God apart from ministerial success.

From these strategies, one can see that theological education must move beyond cognition to formation — shaping not only what ministers know but who they become.

6.2 Ecclesial Life and Church Practice

The local church remains the most influential space for shaping how Christians understand themselves and God. If the *Imago Dei* is to renew Ghanaian ecclesiology, churches must intentionally cultivate environments that reflect God’s compassion and restorative grace.

1. Preaching and Teaching

- Sermons should affirm the sacred worth of every believer, particularly those struggling with emotional distress, mental illness, or social marginalization.
- Pastors can balance messages on holiness and deliverance with teachings on human dignity, empathy, and emotional wholeness.
- Use biblical examples—such as David’s lament, Elijah’s depression, or Jesus’ tears—as models of faithful emotional expression.

2. Worship and Community Practices

- Reclaim worship as an act of healing, where lament, gratitude, and confession are held in balance.
- Encourage small fellowship groups that foster transparency and shared vulnerability.
- Incorporate testimonies of emotional healing, showing that faith addresses both spirit and psyche.

3. Leadership and Ministry Culture

- Train pastors and elders to recognize signs of burnout, trauma, and depression among congregants—and among themselves.
- Establish church-based wellness teams that include trained counselors, chaplains, or peer support facilitators.
- Create “safe spaces” within churches where members can speak openly about emotional pain without stigma or fear of spiritual condemnation.

By embodying these practices, the Church ceases to be an institution of pressure and becomes a family of presence. The message of the *Imago Dei* reminds every congregation that to minister to the hurting is to honor the reflection of God within them.

6.3 Counseling and Pastoral Care Practice

Christian counselors and clergy in Ghana are uniquely positioned to translate theological truth into therapeutic transformation. The *Imago Dei* provides a spiritual foundation for counseling that upholds the client's dignity while addressing emotional wounds.

1. Integrative Counseling Approaches

- Combine biblical teaching on identity with evidence-based psychological methods such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Narrative Therapy.
- Encourage clients to reframe negative self-beliefs in light of divine affirmation ("I am fearfully and wonderfully made," Psalm 139:14).
- Utilize scripture meditation and prayer journaling as cognitive reframing tools that anchor self-worth in God's character rather than human approval.

2. Trauma-Informed Pastoral Care

- Counselors should approach clients with humility and curiosity rather than moral judgment, recognizing that many emotional wounds have spiritual overtones.
- Use the cross as a symbol of God's empathy with suffering—not merely a reminder of sin but a testimony of shared pain and restoration.
- Encourage lament as sacred expression, allowing counselees to voice pain before God without fear of theological guilt.

3. Supervision and Self-Care for Practitioners

- Establish peer support groups for pastors and counselors to process emotional burdens confidentially.
- Integrate regular debriefing and reflection into ministry routines to prevent compassion fatigue.
- Promote the theology of rest as obedience, teaching that self-care is not indulgence but stewardship of the divine image.

From this observation, one can see that faith-based counseling becomes most transformative when theology informs empathy and psychology serves love. The *Imago Dei* thus functions as both compass and covenant — directing the counselor's posture and affirming the client's sacred value.

6.4 Societal and Policy Implications

Beyond church walls, the theology of divine image challenges the wider Ghanaian society to reimagine human worth.

- Faith-based organizations can advocate for compassionate policies toward persons with mental illness, survivors of abuse, or marginalized populations.
- Partnerships between seminaries, hospitals, and governmental agencies can strengthen community mental health through the lens of holistic care.

- National pastors' fellowships can institutionalize clergy wellness programs, ensuring that spiritual leaders model psychological health.

In essence, the Church's public witness depends not only on preaching but on embodying the compassion it proclaims.

6.5 Integrative Summary

The implications of this study converge around a simple but profound truth: **healing begins with seeing**. When the Church, the counselor, and the believer see the divine image in themselves and others, transformation follows. The seminary forms the vision; the church nurtures the community; the counselor applies the care. Together they mirror the Creator's intention — that every human life reflects His glory, even through weakness.

From this integrated perspective, one can see that the *Imago Dei* framework does more than bridge theology and psychology; it restores the Church to her original vocation — to be a community of presence, compassion, and wholeness.

7. Conclusion

The study on *The Imago Dei and Mental Health: Toward a Theological Anthropology of Wholeness* sought to bridge a crucial gap between theology and psychology within the African context, particularly Ghana. It proposed that understanding humanity as created in the image of God (*Imago Dei*) offers not only a doctrinal foundation for faith but also a profound therapeutic framework for restoring human dignity, self-worth, and mental wellness. Through theological reflection, phenomenological inquiry, and pastoral experience, the research illuminated how rediscovering the divine image in oneself can heal emotional wounds, counter spiritual shame, and renew one's sense of belonging to God and community.

7.1 Theological Contribution: Reclaiming a Wholistic Anthropology

Theologically, this work contributes to a renewed understanding of *Imago Dei* as an active and relational reality rather than a static theological concept. It moves beyond the traditional interpretation that confines the divine image to reason or dominion, emphasizing instead relationality, love, and participation in the life of God. Humanity's worth, therefore, is not earned through perfection or productivity but bestowed by divine grace.

In the Ghanaian ecclesial setting—where theology is often expressed through deliverance, moral exhortation, or prosperity motifs—this study calls for a shift toward *anthropological theology*, a theology that begins with divine dignity rather than human deficiency. When the Church teaches believers to see themselves as beloved image-bearers, it dismantles toxic guilt, performance-driven spirituality, and the fear-based religiosity that has quietly eroded joy in Christian experience.

This theological renewal places the *Imago Dei* at the center of Christian mission and ministry: to restore broken image-bearers into relationship with their Creator and each other. From this vantage

point, the Church's proclamation becomes not only redemptive but also restorative — transforming salvation from an abstract doctrine into a lived experience of rehumanization.

7.2 Contribution to Counseling and Pastoral Care: Healing through Identity

In the realm of counseling and pastoral care, this study affirms that healing is not merely the alleviation of symptoms but the restoration of meaning and identity. The *Imago Dei* provides the missing theological foundation for Christian counseling in Africa — grounding emotional healing in divine purpose.

Clients who perceive themselves as worthless or irredeemably flawed often internalize the cultural and spiritual stigma surrounding mental illness. The theology of *Imago Dei* disrupts this narrative by affirming, “You are not your trauma; you are God’s reflection, though wounded.” Such affirmation redefines self-perception, reducing shame and cultivating spiritual resilience.

From a counseling psychology perspective, the study integrates faith-based cognitive reframing with theological anthropology. It suggests that the process of healing involves both renewing the mind (Romans 12:2) and recovering the image (Genesis 1:27). Counselors who anchor therapeutic interventions in divine identity invite clients to move from self-condemnation to grace-filled awareness. This shift from pathology to purpose aligns with Christian cognitive-behavioral principles and trauma-informed pastoral practice.

In my counseling practice across Ghanaian churches, I have witnessed how this theological insight transforms pastoral encounters. A woman battling depression, for instance, once said, “I no longer feel invisible; I see myself as God’s artwork again.” Such transformation affirms that theology, when embodied in empathy, becomes therapy.

Therefore, this study’s practical contribution to counseling lies in developing a model of care that integrates biblical anthropology with emotional literacy — helping both pastors and counselors see each client as a sacred image, not a project to fix.

7.3 Contextual and Cultural Significance: Renewing African Christian Anthropology

Culturally, the research reclaims the *Imago Dei* as the foundation for an African theology of personhood. In many African societies, identity is collective and relational; thus, brokenness in one life reverberates through the community. The rediscovery of the divine image, therefore, is not merely personal but communal healing.

Ghanaian pastoral culture, shaped by communal empathy and symbolic ritual, already mirrors aspects of divine image theology—especially in how lament, song, and storytelling are used to express and resolve pain. This study validates such indigenous practices as theological acts of rehumanization. When believers weep, sing, and pray together, they enact the *Imago Dei* in community — a theology not of escape but of embodiment.

At the same time, this work critiques the distortions of human worth prevalent in both Western individualism and African religious populism. The prosperity gospel’s fixation on success and

status has often overshadowed the gospel of grace. The *Imago Dei* corrects this by affirming that divine favor is not transactional but intrinsic. Every person, whether poor or powerful, reflects the same image and thus deserves equal dignity, care, and opportunity for flourishing.

By restoring theological anthropology to the center of pastoral care, the Church in Africa can model a holistic gospel—one that delivers not only from sin and sickness but also from shame, self-hatred, and social exclusion.

7.4 Toward an Integrative Vision: Theology as Healing

From these insights, one can see that the *Imago Dei* is not an abstract doctrine but a divine therapy for the fragmented soul. It calls theologians to dialogue with psychologists, pastors to listen to counselors, and congregations to become sanctuaries of healing rather than stages of performance.

A theology of wholeness grounded in divine image recognizes that every aspect of human life — emotional, mental, relational, and spiritual — is sacred. It invites the Church to expand its mission from saving souls to healing persons; from delivering individuals from demons to delivering them into dignity. Such integration redefines salvation itself as the restoration of divine likeness in community.

In this theological horizon, pastoral ministry becomes more incarnational: to see as God sees, to heal as God heals, and to love as God loves. When a pastor, counselor, or congregation learns to behold the divine reflection in the suffering believer, the gospel ceases to be information and becomes transformation.

7.5 Future Research and Practical Directions

Future studies may explore how the *Imago Dei* framework can be empirically tested within faith-based mental health interventions, pastoral training programs, and community resilience projects. Longitudinal studies could examine how identity-based theological counseling affects self-esteem, depression, and post-traumatic growth among Ghanaian Christians.

Moreover, theological education should include research on how African traditional values of communal personhood, dignity, and spirituality can enrich global Christian anthropology. Collaborative work between theologians, psychologists, and cultural anthropologists would advance the emerging field of *theological psychology* within African academia.

7.6 Closing Reflection: The Restored Image

The *Imago Dei* reminds the African Church that theology begins not in the pulpit but in the mirror — in seeing God’s reflection in the human face. It is the truth that rescues the poor from inferiority, the wounded from shame, and the weary from despair.

When believers rediscover that they are image-bearers, hope is resurrected; when pastors teach from that awareness, ministry becomes healing; and when counselors embody it, therapy becomes

worship. The *Imago Dei* is not only a theological statement but a pastoral calling — to help the world remember who it was created to be.

Thus, this study concludes with a simple but transforming conviction: the Church's greatest ministry in a wounded world is to help every human being see their divine reflection again. When this happens, theology, counseling, and culture meet at the wellspring of wholeness — where grace restores identity, and the image of God shines again through redeemed humanity.

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