



INTEGRATING THE PREMACK PRINCIPLE AND HENRI NOUWEN'S SPIRITUALITY: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR ADOLESCENT PASTORAL COUNSELING

Witono^{1*}, Juliana Hindradjat²

^{1, 2}Kharisma Theological College, Bandung, Indonesia

**Email*: witonowong@gmail.com

Abstract

Psychological wounds among adolescents in church contexts often manifest in emotional dysregulation, relational difficulties, and disrupted spiritual development. While pastoral counseling has traditionally emphasized relational presence and spiritual formation, such approaches frequently rely on adolescents' intrinsic motivation, which may be fragile during periods of psychological distress. Conversely, behavioral strategies that support habit formation are often viewed with caution in pastoral settings due to concerns about reductionism and theological incompatibility. Using a qualitative conceptual research design, this study employs a narrative literature review and conceptual-thematic analysis to explore the theoretical feasibility of integrating the Premack Principle, a behavioral reinforcement strategy, with Henri Nouwen's contemplative-relational spirituality within adolescent pastoral counseling. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature in behavioral psychology, pastoral theology, and spiritual formation, the synthesis suggests that while significant paradigmatic tensions exist between external reinforcement and grace-oriented spirituality, these approaches also demonstrate points of conceptual convergence. On this basis, the article proposes a preliminary integrative framework that reframes behavioral reinforcement as temporary scaffolding embedded within pastoral presence and spiritual formation. Rather than claiming empirical effectiveness, the study offers a propositional conceptual foundation to inform theological reflection, pastoral practice, and future empirical research in adolescent pastoral counseling.

Article History:

Received: December 4, 2025

Accepted: January 15, 2026

Published: January 30, 2026

Keywords:

Adolescents;

Pastoral Counseling;

Premack Principle;

Henri Nouwen;

Spiritual Formation

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence constitutes a critical developmental period characterized by rapid psychological, emotional, and spiritual changes.¹ Within church contexts, many adolescents experience psychological wounds arising from a convergence of internal and external stressors, including family instability, academic pressure, peer rejection, bullying, and prolonged exposure to digital environments.² These experiences often disrupt emotional regulation, weaken relational trust, and complicate the formation of a coherent spiritual identity. As a result, adolescents who carry such wounds may struggle to participate consistently in pastoral programs and spiritual practices, experience alienation within faith communities, and find it difficult to integrate personal suffering with their understanding of God and self.

Pastoral counseling and youth ministry have long sought to respond to these challenges by emphasizing empathy, acceptance, inner healing, and spiritual formation. Within Christian pastoral traditions, healing is commonly understood not merely as symptom reduction but as a holistic process involving emotional restoration, relational reconciliation, and spiritual transformation.³ Approaches inspired by contemplative spirituality and relational pastoral care provide adolescents with spaces of safety, presence, and meaning-making. However, such approaches often rely heavily on adolescents' intrinsic motivation and emotional readiness—capacities that may be fragile or inconsistent among those experiencing psychological distress. Consequently, spiritually formative practices are frequently recommended without sufficient attention to the developmental and behavioral conditions that enable adolescents to sustain them over time.

At the same time, structured psychological interventions that emphasize behavioral change and habit formation have demonstrated usefulness in supporting adolescents' self-regulation and daily functioning. Behavioral strategies offer clarity, predictability, and concrete guidance that can help adolescents translate therapeutic intentions into consistent actions.⁴ Nevertheless, within pastoral and ecclesial contexts, behavioral approaches are often viewed with caution. They are

1 John W. Santrock, *Adolescence*, 17th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2019), 157-59.

2 Jennifer E. Lansford and Perna Banati, *Handbook of Adolescent Development Research and Its Impact on Global Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 241.

3 Neil Pembroke, "Christian Pastoral Care as Spiritual Formation: A Holistic Model for Congregational Ministry," *Religions* 16, no. 618 (2025): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16050618>.

4 Vincent Petit, *The Behavioural Drivers Model: A Conceptual Framework for Social and Behaviour Change Programming* (Amman, Jordan: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2019), 20.

frequently perceived as mechanistic, transactional, or incompatible with theological emphases on grace, relationality, and spiritual authenticity. This tension has contributed to pastoral practices in which behavioral techniques and spiritual formation are treated as parallel or even competing domains rather than as potentially complementary dimensions of adolescent care.

Within the broader field of counseling and pastoral psychology, various integrative models have attempted to bridge psychological and spiritual perspectives. Approaches that combine cognitive-behavioral therapy with spiritual resources,⁵ narrative pastoral counseling,⁶ and spiritually integrated psychotherapy,⁷ demonstrate that psychological processes and spiritual formation need not be mutually exclusive. These models have significantly advanced holistic understandings of care by emphasizing meaning-making, identity reconstruction, and theological interpretation of lived experience. However, much of this literature privileges cognitive or narrative processes and offers comparatively limited attention to the role of concrete behavioral scaffolding in supporting adolescents' consistency in therapeutic and spiritual practices. For adolescents whose emotional regulation and daily routines are disrupted, this limitation remains particularly consequential.

At this conceptual intersection, the Premack Principle merits closer examination. Originating in behavioral psychology, the Premack Principle proposes that high-frequency or preferred behaviors can be used to reinforce lower-frequency or less-preferred behaviors.⁸ The principle has been widely applied in educational and therapeutic settings to support habit formation, reduce avoidance, and enhance engagement, particularly among adolescent populations. From a developmental perspective, such reinforcement strategies may function as temporary scaffolding that supports adolescents' emerging capacities for self-regulation. Yet, when considered within pastoral contexts, the application of behavioral reinforcement raises critical theological and ethical questions. Spiritual practices such as prayer, silence, and reflection

5 Marianna de Abreu Costa and Alexander Moreira-Almeida, "Religion-Adapted Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: A Review and Description of Techniques," *Journal of Religion and Health* 61, no. 1 (2022): 443–66, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-021-01345-z>.

6 Betül Gülcan Çakmak, "Spirituality in Narrative Therapy: A Review Study," *Spiritual Psychology and Counseling* 7, no. 3 (2022): 315–36, <https://doi.org/10.37898/spc.2022.7.3.175>.

7 A.E. Schmidt and T.S.J. O'Connor, "Exploring Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy as a Modality: How It Is Evolving in the Ontario, Canada Context and the Relevance of Contributions from the Fields of Theology and Spiritual Care," *Journal Pastoral Care Counsel* 78, no. 3 (2024): 66–78, <https://doi.org/10.1177/15423050241275475>.

8 Ungvarsky, Janine, *Premack's Principle (Relativity Theory of Reinforcement)*, 2025, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/psychology/premacks-principle-relativity-theory-reinforcement>.

are not merely instrumental activities but expressions of relationship, meaning, and spiritual formation. Uncritical use of reinforcement risks framing these practices as transactional tasks rather than as formative encounters.

In contrast, the spirituality of Henri Nouwen offers a deeply relational and contemplative vision of pastoral care that has been widely influential in ministry and counseling contexts. Central to Nouwen's thought is the concept of the wounded healer, which emphasizes vulnerability, empathy, and presence rather than technical mastery or behavioral control.⁹ Healing, in this perspective, emerges through compassionate accompaniment and the acknowledgment of shared human woundedness before God. Nouwen's understanding of spiritual formation further highlights practices such as prayer, silence, and community as spaces in which individuals come to recognize their identity as beloved by God. For adolescents navigating psychological distress, this spirituality offers a powerful counter-narrative to performance-oriented environments and affirms acceptance without coercion.

Despite its theological depth, Nouwen's spirituality offers limited operational guidance regarding how adolescents can sustain formative practices amid fluctuating motivation, emotional dysregulation, and fragmented routines. Adolescents in early stages of pastoral care may find unstructured contemplative practices inaccessible or overwhelming. This observation does not diminish the value of Nouwen's spirituality but points to a conceptual gap between spiritual vision and developmental application. Similar gaps appear in broader contemplative and relational approaches to pastoral care, where the *telos* of formation is articulated with clarity but the embodied and repetitive dimensions of practice remain under-theorized.

Taken together, these observations reveal a broader conceptual tension within adolescent pastoral counseling. While existing integrative models have successfully connected psychology and spirituality at the level of meaning and interpretation, they often insufficiently address the behavioral conditions that enable adolescents to inhabit spiritual practices consistently over time. Conversely, behavioral strategies capable of supporting engagement and routine remain under-theorized within pastoral frameworks due to concerns about reductionism and theological misalignment. The specific theoretical dialogue between the Premack Principle and Henri Nouwen's contemplative-relational spirituality, therefore, remains largely unexplored and raises

⁹ Yolanda Dreyer, "Beyond Psychology: Spirituality in Henri Nouwen's Pastoral Care," *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 59, no. 3 (2003): 715–33, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v59i3.670>.

distinctive conceptual questions regarding the relationship between structure, grace, and spiritual authenticity in adolescent pastoral counseling.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore the theoretical feasibility of integrating the Premack Principle and Henri Nouwen's spirituality within adolescent pastoral counseling and to propose a preliminary conceptual framework that holds behavioral structure and spiritual formation in constructive tension. As a qualitative conceptual study based on a narrative literature review and conceptual–thematic analysis, this article does not claim empirical effectiveness. Rather, it seeks to offer a theoretical point of departure for theological reflection, pastoral practice, and future empirical research concerned with the ethical and developmentally sensitive integration of behavioral and spiritual dimensions in the pastoral care of adolescents.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative conceptual research design based on a narrative literature review and conceptual–thematic analysis to explore the theoretical feasibility of integrating the Premack Principle and Henri Nouwen's spirituality within pastoral counseling for psychologically wounded adolescents.¹⁰ The research does not generate or analyze primary empirical data but synthesizes interdisciplinary literature from behavioral psychology, pastoral theology, and spiritual formation to identify conceptual patterns, points of convergence, and paradigmatic tensions between behavioral reinforcement and contemplative–relational spirituality. Relevant sources were identified through searches in Google Scholar, ATLA Religion Database, and PsycINFO using keywords related to the Premack Principle, adolescent counseling, pastoral care, and Nouwen's spirituality, with emphasis on peer-reviewed publications from 2000–2025 and seminal works where necessary. The analysis involved close reading, thematic grouping of core concepts, and critical comparison across disciplines, resulting in a preliminary integrative framework that reframes behavioral reinforcement as temporary scaffolding embedded within pastoral presence and spiritual formation. Given its literature-based and exploratory nature, the proposed framework is presented as propositional rather than prescriptive and is intended to inform future empirical research and context-sensitive pastoral practice.

¹⁰ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications Inc., 2014), 452-453.

CONCEPTUAL FINDINGS AND THEMATIC SYNTHESIS

In line with the qualitative and conceptual orientation of this study, the findings presented in this section are derived from a thematic synthesis of interdisciplinary literature rather than from empirical data collection. These conceptual findings reflect dominant patterns, recurring limitations, and paradigmatic tensions identified in scholarly discussions on psychology–spirituality integration, behavioral reinforcement, and pastoral spirituality in relation to adolescent counseling within church contexts.

Conceptual Findings on Psychology–Spirituality Integration

The first conceptual finding concerns the prevailing orientation of existing models that integrate psychology and spirituality in counseling and pastoral care. The literature indicates a strong dominance of cognitive and narrative approaches, which emphasize meaning-making, belief restructuring, and the reinterpretation of personal experiences through spiritual or theological narratives. Models such as spiritually integrated cognitive-behavioral therapy and narrative pastoral counseling have contributed substantially to holistic perspectives on healing by demonstrating that psychological processes and spiritual resources can be mutually supportive.

A closer comparison between spiritually integrated cognitive-behavioral approaches and narrative pastoral counseling further clarifies the nature of this dominance. Spiritually integrated CBT frameworks tend to prioritize cognitive restructuring, emotional regulation, and coping strategies, often supplemented by spiritual beliefs, values, or practices as cognitive resources.¹¹ Within this orientation, spiritual elements are commonly incorporated as content that supports adaptive thinking patterns, resilience, and meaning-making. While such approaches offer conceptual clarity and clinical applicability, behavioral components are frequently treated as secondary outcomes of cognitive change rather than as structured practices requiring sustained external support.

Narrative pastoral counseling, by contrast, centers on the re-authoring of personal stories through theological and spiritual narratives. Healing is understood to emerge from dialogical reflection and the reinterpretation of lived experiences within redemptive frameworks.¹² This approach offers important strengths in affirming agency, identity, and spiritual meaning,

¹¹ de Abreu Costa and Moreira-Almeida, “Religion-Adapted Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.”

¹² Gülcan Çakmak, “Spirituality in Narrative Therapy.”

particularly through pastoral presence and relational engagement. However, the literature suggests that narrative approaches similarly presuppose a level of reflective capacity, emotional coherence, and narrative stability that may be difficult for psychologically wounded adolescents to sustain. Behavioral consistency and daily practices are often assumed to follow naturally from narrative transformation rather than being intentionally structured or scaffolded.

Taken together, the literature on both CBT–spiritual integration and narrative pastoral counseling reveals a shared reliance on cognitive and interpretive processes as primary drivers of change. This convergence reinforces the finding that psychology–spirituality integration has largely operated within cognitive–narrative paradigms, while offering limited engagement with the practical question of how adolescents with disrupted routines, emotional dysregulation, and low intrinsic motivation can be supported in the embodied and repetitive dimensions of therapeutic and spiritual practice.

Consequently, the literature synthesis also reveals that many integrative models devote insufficient attention to the role of concrete behavioral structures in sustaining adolescents’ engagement over time. Implicit assumptions regarding emotional stability and intrinsic motivation often remain unexamined. For psychologically wounded adolescents, whose daily lives are frequently marked by fragmentation and avoidance, such assumptions may not hold. As a result, spiritual practices are often recommended without adequate consideration of how adolescents can practically inhabit these practices within their developmental and psychological constraints, highlighting a significant conceptual gap in the existing integration literature.

Conceptual Findings on the Premack Principle

A second conceptual finding emerges from the literature on the Premack Principle within educational and therapeutic psychology. The Premack Principle is consistently described as an effective mechanism for supporting habit formation, increasing behavioral consistency, and reducing avoidance by linking less-preferred behaviors to more-preferred activities.¹³ Within adolescent populations, such reinforcement strategies are frequently interpreted as forms of developmental scaffolding, providing external structure during periods when internal regulation and motivation are still forming. The literature suggests that, when applied developmentally,

¹³ Jessica L. Herrod et al., “Applications of the Premack Principle: A Review of the Literature,” *Behavior Modification* 47, no. 1 (2023): 219–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01454455221085249>.

reinforcement does not replace agency but temporarily supports adolescents' capacity to engage in behaviors that contribute to longer-term growth and stability.

Beyond its instrumental function, the literature also highlights that the Premack Principle operates most effectively when situated within relationally supportive environments.¹⁴ Studies in educational and therapeutic settings emphasize that reinforcement gains meaning through trust, clarity of purpose, and the perceived benevolence of the guiding authority. This relational dimension complicates simplistic portrayals of reinforcement as purely mechanical, suggesting that behavioral structure is never value-neutral but is always embedded within broader relational and interpretive frameworks. For adolescents, particularly those experiencing psychological wounds, reinforcement may function less as control and more as a stabilizing rhythm that reduces anxiety associated with uncertainty and failure.

At the same time, the literature identifies significant conceptual limitations when the Premack Principle is considered in isolation, particularly within pastoral or spiritual contexts.¹⁵ As a strategy grounded in external reinforcement and observable behavior, the principle carries the risk of reductionism if detached from considerations of meaning, agency, and relational depth. Several scholars caution that uncritical application of reinforcement may instrumentalize practices that hold intrinsic spiritual value, reframing prayer, reflection, or communal participation as transactional tasks rather than formative disciplines. Such instrumentalization risks undermining the very spiritual motivations that pastoral counseling seeks to cultivate.

These concerns do not lead the literature to dismiss behavioral reinforcement altogether but instead point toward the necessity of conceptual reframing when behavioral principles are introduced into faith-based counseling settings. The key conceptual issue identified is not whether reinforcement can support engagement, but under what conditions it can do so without compromising spiritual authenticity. This finding prepares the ground for integrative approaches that situate the Premack Principle within relational, theological, and formative horizons rather than treating it as a standalone technique.

Conceptual Findings on Nouwen's Spirituality

14 Michel Hersen, ed., *Encyclopedia of Behavior Modification and Cognitive Behavior Therapy* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications Inc., 2005), 966.

15 William L. Croll, "Some Limitations on the Premack Principle," *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society* 3, no. 5B (1974): 375–76, <https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03333503>.

The third conceptual finding relates to the literature on Henri Nouwen's spirituality and its enduring relevance for pastoral counseling. Central to this body of literature is Nouwen's concept of the wounded healer, which is widely interpreted as a relational paradigm that privileges vulnerability, empathy, and presence over technical expertise or problem-solving.¹⁶ Healing is understood to emerge not through corrective intervention but through compassionate accompaniment and the acknowledgment of shared human woundedness before God. For adolescents who experience mistrust, shame, or emotional isolation, this pastoral posture is consistently identified as particularly meaningful, as it counters experiences of judgment, performance pressure, and relational conditionality.

Beyond its relational orientation, the literature highlights Nouwen's emphasis on spiritual formation as a process through which individuals come to recognize and inhabit their identity as beloved by God. Contemplative practices such as silence, prayer, and communal belonging are framed not as techniques for self-improvement but as formative spaces in which identity is received rather than achieved.¹⁷ Scholars note that this emphasis offers a powerful alternative to outcome-driven and achievement-oriented environments, providing psychologically wounded adolescents with a theological and spiritual counter-narrative that affirms unconditional acceptance and belonging.

At the same time, the literature also identifies a recurring limitation in the practical appropriation of Nouwen's spirituality, particularly in work with adolescents who struggle with emotional regulation, avoidance, and motivational instability. While contemplative practices are theologically rich, they often presuppose capacities for attentiveness, patience, and inner stillness that may be underdeveloped or compromised during periods of psychological distress. Without additional forms of support, such practices may be experienced as inaccessible, overwhelming, or even alienating, especially in the early stages of healing.

Importantly, this limitation is not presented in the literature as a theological deficiency within Nouwen's spirituality itself, but as a gap between spiritual vision and developmental application. The scholarship suggests that while Nouwen provides a compelling account of the

16 S. Philip Nolte and Yolanda Dreyer, "The Paradox of Being a Wounded Healer: Henri J.M. Nouwen's Contribution to Pastoral Theology," *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 66, no. 2 (2010): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v66i2.861>.

17 Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: Harper One, 2015), 123.

telos of spiritual formation, he offers limited operational guidance regarding how adolescents might be supported in sustaining formative practices over time. This finding parallels concerns identified in broader contemplative and relational spiritualities, where depth of meaning is prioritized but the embodied and repetitive dimensions of practice remain under-theorized. As a conceptual finding, this observation underscores the need for complementary frameworks that can support engagement and consistency without compromising the relational and theological integrity central to Nouwen's vision.

Conceptual Findings on Paradigmatic Tensions

The final conceptual finding concerns the paradigmatic tensions that arise when behavioral reinforcement strategies and contemplative–relational spirituality are brought into dialogue. The literature consistently highlights tensions between external reinforcement and intrinsic motivation, raising concerns that behavioral rewards may undermine authenticity or internal desire. Similarly, theological discussions often frame discipline and grace as potentially competing values, with apprehensions that structured behavioral expectations may conflict with unconditional acceptance.¹⁸ Another recurring tension involves control versus relational freedom, particularly in pastoral contexts where authority must be exercised without coercion.

These tensions are not peripheral but constitute central conceptual challenges for any attempt at integration. The literature suggests that neglecting these tensions risks either psychological reductionism, in which human formation is collapsed into observable behavior, or spiritual romanticization, in which inner transformation is presumed without adequate attention to developmental and behavioral realities. Accordingly, the identification of these paradigmatic tensions constitutes a key conceptual finding of the present study and provides the analytical foundation for the interpretive and integrative discussion that follows.

The nature of these tensions can be further illustrated through a recurring conceptual scenario described implicitly across the literature. Consider a psychologically wounded adolescent who is invited to engage in daily prayer or reflective journaling as part of pastoral counseling. From a behavioral perspective, structured reinforcement may be proposed to support consistency,

18 Gideon Ngi Nganyu, "Theological and Psychological Integration in Christian Psychotherapy: A Critical Review of the Literature and Implications for Church-Based Practice," *Greener Journal of Social Sciences* 15, no. 1 (2025): 75–82, <https://doi.org/10.15580/gjss.2025.1.022525031>.

particularly during early stages when avoidance and emotional fatigue are prominent. From a spiritual perspective, however, concerns arise that such reinforcement may render the practice instrumental, thereby compromising sincerity or freedom. At the same time, the absence of any structure may leave the adolescent unable to sustain the practice, reinforcing feelings of failure or inadequacy. This illustrative tension reveals how external support and inner freedom are frequently positioned as mutually exclusive, despite both being directed toward healing. As reflected in the literature, such scenarios underscore the conceptual difficulty of integrating structure and spirituality without either controlling the individual or idealizing intrinsic motivation.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Conceptual Findings

The conceptual findings presented above indicate that the current landscape of psychology–spirituality integration in adolescent counseling is characterized by both significant promise and persistent limitations. While integrative models have demonstrated that psychological intervention and spiritual formation can be mutually supportive, the dominance of cognitive and narrative orientations reveals an implicit assumption that adolescents possess sufficient internal readiness to sustain reflective and spiritual practices. For psychologically wounded adolescents, whose emotional regulation and daily routines are often disrupted, this assumption remains conceptually problematic.

This observation aligns with, yet also extends, recent integrative studies that have sought to bridge psychological structure and spiritual meaning. For example, Captari and colleagues' work on spiritually integrated psychotherapy emphasizes the importance of aligning therapeutic techniques with clients' spiritual values, particularly through meaning-making and cognitive reframing.¹⁹ While such approaches offer strong ethical and relational sensitivity, they continue to locate transformation primarily within internal cognitive and interpretive processes, offering limited attention to the developmental conditions that support sustained behavioral engagement. The present findings suggest that without intentional behavioral scaffolding, such integrative

19 Captari, L. E., Sandage, S. J., and Vandiver A. R., "Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapies in Real-World Clinical Practice: Synthesizing the Literature to Identify Best Practices and Future Research Direction," *Psychotherapy* 59, no. 3 (2022): 307–20, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pst0000407>.

efforts may remain inaccessible to adolescents experiencing avoidance, fatigue, or emotional instability.

Similarly, studies within pastoral psychology that draw on narrative and relational paradigms—such as those emphasizing pastoral presence, accompaniment, and identity formation—have significantly enriched understandings of spiritual care for wounded individuals. Scholars influenced by Nouwen’s spirituality and relational pastoral theology highlight the centrality of vulnerability, mutuality, and shared humanity in healing relationships.²⁰ However, as reflected in the literature synthesis, these approaches often presume that relational depth and narrative coherence will naturally translate into consistent practice. The present findings complicate this assumption by foregrounding the gap between relational insight and behavioral sustainability, particularly among adolescents whose developmental capacities for consistency are still emerging.

More recent interdisciplinary discussions on spiritual formation and habit formation offer partial convergence with the concerns raised in this study. Emerging work on embodied spirituality and formative practices acknowledges that spiritual growth is mediated through repeated actions and structured rhythms. Yet even within this literature, behavioral structure is often discussed descriptively rather than developmentally, with limited engagement with psychological principles that explain how such practices can be supported during periods of distress. The present conceptual analysis contributes to this conversation by clarifying that the challenge is not whether structure matters, but how structure can be framed theologically and pastorally so that it supports rather than undermines spiritual authenticity.

Taken together, these dialogues position the present study as a mediating contribution within the broader integrative discourse. Rather than rejecting cognitive–narrative or relational approaches, the findings suggest that their effectiveness may be enhanced when complemented by developmentally sensitive behavioral scaffolding. This interpretation sets the stage for the proposed integrative framework, which seeks to hold behavioral structure and spiritual formation in productive tension rather than resolving them through reduction or idealization.

20 George W. Marchinkowski, “To Be Wounded and yet Heal. How Two Wounded Healers Helped Henri Nouwen Find Solitude,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 44, no. 1 (2023): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v44i1.2839>.

Proposed Integrative Framework: Premack Principle and Nouwen’s Spirituality

In response to the conceptual gaps and paradigmatic tensions identified in the preceding findings, this study proposes a preliminary integrative framework that brings the Premack Principle and Henri Nouwen’s spirituality into dialogue within adolescent pastoral counseling. The framework is not presented as a technical model or manualized intervention but as a conceptual orientation that reframes behavioral reinforcement within a relational and spiritual horizon. Central to this proposal is the understanding of the Premack Principle as temporary behavioral scaffolding that supports adolescents’ early engagement and consistency in practices they may initially resist due to emotional dysregulation or avoidance, without instrumentalizing spiritual outcomes.²¹ Nouwen’s spirituality provides the theological and pastoral grounding for this scaffolding through the posture of the wounded healer and the *telos* of spiritual formation as identity recognition rather than performance.²² To clarify the internal logic and relational dynamics of this integrative proposal, the core dimensions of the framework are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Conceptual Integrative Framework of the Premack Principle and Nouwen’s Spirituality in Adolescent Pastoral Counseling

Dimension	Premack Principle (Behavioral Perspective)	Nouwen’s Spirituality (Pastoral Perspective)	Integrative Interpretation
Primary Orientation	Behavioral reinforcement to increase engagement and consistency	Relational presence grounded in vulnerability and compassion	Behavioral structure is oriented toward relational and spiritual formation rather than mere compliance
View of the Adolescent	Developing capacity for self-regulation and habit formation	Wounded yet beloved person seeking meaning and acceptance	Adolescents are understood as both developmentally forming and spiritually valued
Role of Practice	Less-preferred behaviors supported through preferred activities	Spiritual practices as spaces of encounter and formation	Practices are scaffolded initially and gradually internalized
Motivational Basis	External reinforcement as temporary support	Intrinsic motivation rooted in identity as beloved	External motivation serves as provisional scaffolding toward intrinsic spiritual motivation

21 Jessica L. Herrod, “The Effects of the Premack Principle on On-Task Behaviour, Challenging Behaviour, and Correct Responding” (Dissertation, University of Georgia, 2022), 2-4.

22 P. Jose Thomas Karickal, “From Professional Functioning to Personal Confession: Henri J.M. Nouwen’s Contribution to the Contemporary Spirituality of Pastoral Care” (Dissertation, Universität Würzburg, 2006), 81.

Dimension	Premack Principle (Behavioral Perspective)	Nouwen's Spirituality (Pastoral Perspective)	Integrative Interpretation
Counselor's Role	Structuring environments to support consistency	Wounded healer offering empathic presence	Counselors balance structure with relational discernment
Understanding of Discipline	Instrumental and goal-oriented	Relational and formative	Discipline is reframed as a servant of grace rather than its opposite
Risk if Isolated	Reductionism and instrumentalization of meaning	Romanticization and lack of structure	Integration mitigates risks by holding structure and meaning together
Intended Outcome	Habitual engagement in practices	Spiritual formation and identity integration	Gradual movement from structured participation to internalized formation

As summarized in Table 1, the proposed integrative framework brings together behavioral scaffolding, pastoral presence, and spiritual formation as interrelated rather than competing dimensions of adolescent healing. The table illustrates how the Premack Principle contributes structural support for consistency and engagement, while Nouwen's spirituality provides the relational and theological grounding that preserves meaning, agency, and grace. Interpreted integratively, reinforcement is neither an end in itself nor a mechanism for producing spiritual outcomes, but a provisional support that enables adolescents to participate in formative practices within a context of empathic presence. As emotional stability and relational trust increase, the framework envisions a gradual shift from externally supported participation toward internalized motivation and spiritual awareness. In this way, the framework holds discipline and grace in productive tension, allowing behavioral structure to serve spiritual authenticity rather than undermine it. This integrative logic provides the basis for considering the theological and practical implications discussed in the following section.

Theological and Practical Implications

From a theological perspective, the proposed integrative framework challenges persistent dichotomies in pastoral counseling, particularly the tendency to oppose discipline and grace as mutually exclusive realities. Within many ecclesial discourses, structure and behavioral guidance are often associated with legalism, control, or conditional acceptance, while grace is understood as spontaneous, unstructured, and resistant to discipline. The present framework offers an

alternative theological interpretation by suggesting that structured support can function as an expression of grace when it is oriented toward healing, relational restoration, and freedom rather than compliance or performance. Grace, in this view, is not negated by structure; rather, structure becomes a servant of grace when it is relationally grounded, pastorally discerned, and temporally limited.

This reframing resonates with pastoral and formation-oriented theologies that emphasize human growth as a gradual, embodied, and relational process.²³ Spiritual formation is not conceived as an instantaneous transformation but as a journey that unfolds through repeated practices, relational accompaniment, and the patient integration of wounded aspects of the self. For psychologically wounded adolescents, whose capacity for self-regulation and intrinsic motivation is often compromised, grace may be experienced not primarily as the absence of expectation but as the presence of supportive guidance that makes participation in formative practices possible. Within this theological horizon, discipline is reinterpreted not as coercive control but as a form of care that acknowledges human fragility and developmental limitation.

The framework also contributes to theological reflection on pastoral authority and vulnerability. By situating behavioral scaffolding within Nouwen's vision of the wounded healer, the use of structure is explicitly subordinated to empathic presence and shared humanity. Pastoral counselors are not positioned as technicians who manage behavior but as companions who discern when and how structure may serve healing. This posture guards against the instrumentalization of spiritual practices and affirms that authority in pastoral relationships is exercised relationally rather than hierarchically. Such an understanding aligns with theological accounts of leadership that emphasize accompaniment, humility, and attentiveness to the lived experiences of those being served.

From a practical perspective, the proposed framework invites pastoral counselors and youth ministers to exercise greater intentionality and reflexivity in the design and facilitation of counseling processes. Rather than assuming adolescents' readiness to engage consistently in spiritual or therapeutic practices, counselors are encouraged to assess emotional regulation, motivational capacity, and contextual stressors as part of pastoral discernment. Behavioral supports, including reinforcement strategies inspired by the Premack Principle, may then be

23 Mia M. Maurer et al., "What Is the Process of Personal Growth? Introducing the Personal Growth Process Model," *New Ideas in Psychology* 70 (2023): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2023.101024>.

employed selectively and transparently to facilitate early engagement without coercion. Importantly, such supports are not applied uniformly but are adapted to individual needs, cultural contexts, and stages of healing.

The framework further implies that spiritual practices should be introduced as relational invitations rather than moral obligations.²⁴ By embedding behavioral scaffolding within pastoral presence, counselors can help adolescents experience practices such as prayer, reflection, or journaling as accessible and supportive rather than overwhelming or evaluative. Over time, as trust and emotional stability increase, the gradual withdrawal of external reinforcement becomes a critical ethical practice. This withdrawal signals respect for adolescents' emerging agency and prevents dependence on external motivation, thereby preserving the integrity of spiritual formation as an internalized and meaningful process.

Ethically, the framework underscores the importance of discernment, transparency, and accountability in the use of behavioral strategies within pastoral settings. Counselors must remain attentive to power dynamics, particularly when working with vulnerable adolescents, and must avoid rigid or manipulative applications of reinforcement. Cultural sensitivity is also essential, as assumptions about motivation, authority, and spiritual practice vary across ecclesial and sociocultural contexts. The framework therefore does not offer prescriptive techniques but invites reflective practice shaped by theological awareness and ethical responsibility.

Taken together, these theological and practical implications suggest that the integration of behavioral structure and pastoral spirituality is neither a compromise nor a dilution of faith-based counseling. Instead, it represents a constructive reorientation that enables pastoral care to respond more faithfully to the developmental and psychological realities of adolescents. By holding discipline and grace in relational and developmental tension, the proposed framework opens a pathway for pastoral counseling that is both theologically grounded and practically responsive, while remaining attentive to the limits and responsibilities inherent in faith-based care.

It is important to emphasize that the integrative framework proposed in this study is not intended as a set of prescriptive techniques or procedural interventions. Rather, it functions as a theological–developmental orientation that invites pastoral counselors to reflect critically on how

24 Anna W. Wright, Joana Salifu Yendork, and Wendy Kliever, "Patterns of Spiritual Connectedness during Adolescence: Links to Coping and Adjustment in Low-Income Urban Youth," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 47, no. 12 (2018): 2608–24, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-018-0886-6>.

behavioral structure and spiritual formation may be ethically and relationally integrated within adolescent pastoral counseling. As such, the framework is offered as a conceptual lens for discernment rather than a manual for application, remaining attentive to contextual, relational, and developmental sensitivities.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite its conceptual coherence, the proposed framework remains limited by its literature-based and exploratory nature, as it does not yet account for variations in cultural context, severity of psychological trauma, or ecclesial setting, nor does it offer empirical evidence regarding effectiveness. Future research is therefore needed to examine how the framework functions in practice within diverse church-based counseling contexts. One promising direction involves the use of single-case design (SCD) methodologies, which are particularly suitable for pastoral settings where individualized accompaniment is central and large sample sizes are often impractical; such designs may illuminate developmental changes in adolescents' engagement, consistency, and internalization of spiritual practices as behavioral scaffolding is gradually introduced and withdrawn. In addition, qualitative action research offers a contextually sensitive approach aligned with pastoral practice by involving counselors, youth ministers, and adolescents as co-reflective participants, enabling close examination of how the framework is adapted, ethically discerned, and negotiated within specific ecclesial cultures. Complementary mixed-method pilot studies may also be employed to integrate qualitative insights with cautious descriptive indicators of engagement, without reducing spiritual formation to standardized outcomes. Importantly, such empirical engagement would not replace the conceptual contribution of the present study but would serve to refine, contextualize, and critically test its theoretical claims across diverse pastoral and cultural settings.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the theoretical feasibility of integrating the Premack Principle and Henri Nouwen's contemplative-relational spirituality within adolescent pastoral counseling through a qualitative conceptual analysis of interdisciplinary literature. Rather than offering an empirically validated model, the article clarifies a central conceptual challenge in pastoral care, namely how behavioral structure and spiritual formation may be held together without reducing

spirituality to technique or presuming intrinsic motivation beyond adolescents' developmental capacities. The primary insight of this study lies in reframing behavioral reinforcement as temporary scaffolding embedded within pastoral presence and spiritual formation, allowing discipline and grace to function in constructive tension rather than as opposing forces. At the same time, the analysis underscores that such integration is neither automatic nor unproblematic and requires ongoing theological and ethical discernment to address risks of instrumentalization and power imbalance. As a conceptual contribution, the proposed framework functions as a theoretical point of departure that may inform theological reflection and pastoral practice in adolescent pastoral counseling, while inviting future empirical inquiry in diverse contexts to further examine, refine, and responsibly contextualize the integration of behavioral and spiritual dimensions.

LITERATURE

- Captari, L. E., Sandage, S. J., and Vandiver A. R. "Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapies in Real-World Clinical Practice: Synthesizing the Literature to Identify Best Practices and Future Research Direction." *Psychotherapy* 59, no. 3 (2022): 307–20. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pst0000407>.
- Croll, William L. "Some Limitations on the Premack Principle." *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society* 3, no. 5B (1974): 375–76. <https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03333503>.
- Dreyer, Yolanda. "Beyond Psychology: Spirituality in Henri Nouwen's Pastoral Care." *HTS Theologische Studies/Theological Studies* 59, no. 3 (2003): 715–33. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v59i3.670>.
- Gülcan Çakmak, Betül. "Spirituality in Narrative Therapy: A Review Study." *Spiritual Psychology and Counseling* 7, no. 3 (2022): 315–36. <https://doi.org/10.37898/spc.2022.7.3.175>.
- Herrod, Jessica L. "The Effects of the Premack Principle on On-Task Behaviour, Challenging Behaviour, and Correct Responding." Dissertation, University of Georgia, 2022.
- Herrod, Jessica L., Sara K. Snyder, Joseph B. Hart, Sarah J. Frantz, and Kevin M. Ayres. "Applications of the Premack Principle: A Review of the Literature." *Behavior Modification* 47, no. 1 (2023): 219–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01454455221085249>.
- Hersen, Michel, ed. *Encyclopedia of Behavior Modification and Cognitive Behavior Therapy*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications Inc., 2005.
- Karickal, P. Jose Thomas. "From Professional Functioning to Personal Confession: Henri J.M. Nouwen's Contribution to the Contemporary Spirituality of Pastoral Care." Dissertation, Universität Würzburg, 2006.

- Lansford, Jennifer E., and Prerna Banati. *Handbook of Adolescent Development Research and Its Impact on Global Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Marchinkowski, George W. "To Be Wounded and yet Heal. How Two Wounded Healers Helped Henri Nouwen Find Solitude." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 44, no. 1 (2023): 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v44i1.2839>.
- Maurer, Mia M., Jason Maurer, Eva Hoff, and Daiva Daukantaitė. "What Is the Process of Personal Growth? Introducing the Personal Growth Process Model." *New Ideas in Psychology* 70 (2023): 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2023.101024>.
- Nganyu, Gideon Ngi. "Theological and Psychological Integration in Christian Psychotherapy: A Critical Review of the Literature and Implications for Church-Based Practice." *Greener Journal of Social Sciences* 15, no. 1 (2025): 75–82. <https://doi.org/10.15580/gjss.2025.1.022525031>.
- Nolte, S. Philip, and Yolanda Dreyer. "The Paradox of Being a Wounded Healer: Henri J.M. Nouwen's Contribution to Pastoral Theology." *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 66, no. 2 (2010): 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v66i2.861>.
- Nouwen, Henri J. M. *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit*. New York: Harper One, 2015.
- Patton, Michael Quinn. *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications Inc., 2014.
- Pembroke, Neil. "Christian Pastoral Care as Spiritual Formation: A Holistic Model for Congregational Ministry." *Religions* 16, no. 618 (2025): 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16050618>.
- Petit, Vincent. *The Behavioural Drivers Model: A Conceptual Framework for Social and Behaviour Change Programming*. Amman, Jordan: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2019.
- Santrock, John W. *Adolescence*. 17th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2019.
- Schmidt, A.E., and T.S.J. O'Connor. "Exploring Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy as a Modality: How It Is Evolving in the Ontario, Canada Context and the Relevance of Contributions from the Fields of Theology and Spiritual Care." *Journal Pastoral Care Counsel* 78, no. 3 (2024): 66–78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15423050241275475>.
- Ungvarsky, Janine. *Premack's Principle (Relativity Theory of Reinforcement)*. 2025. <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/psychology/premacks-principle-relativity-theory-reinforcement>.
- Wright, Anna W., Joana Salifu Yendork, and Wendy Kliewer. "Patterns of Spiritual Connectedness during Adolescence: Links to Coping and Adjustment in Low-Income Urban Youth." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 47, no. 12 (2018): 2608–24. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-018-0886-6>.

