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Heutagogy as a framework for Christian discipleship: the triadic role of biblical wisdom literature, the teachings of Jesus Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit

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Abstract

Heutagogy—also known as self-determined learning—empowers individuals to take charge of their personal growth by fostering proactive approaches to self-development. In a Christian context, self-enacted spiritual growth can operate within a range of personal, denominational, and/or hermeneutical understandings of discipleship. Moreover, self-determined learning transcends diverse Christian traditions, mirroring different expressions of the role and work of the Holy Spirit in capacitating Christian discipleship. This conceptual paper contributes to the literature by expounding and advocating heutagogy as an under-appreciated framework for facilitating spiritual growth. To construct its argument, the paper draws on three sources: biblical wisdom literature, the teachings of Jesus Christ, and selected expressions of the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christian believers.

Keywords Heutagogy · Spiritual growth · Theoretical research · Biblical wisdom literature · Christ's teachings · Holy Spirit

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1 Introduction

Heutagogy, derived from the Greek *heuriskein*, meaning to discover, is an educational approach that emphasises learner autonomy. Pioneered by Hase and Kenyon (2013), heutagogy, or self-determined learning, was originally an extension of andragogy or adult learning (Agonács & Matos, 2019). Contrary to traditional andragogy, the learner, rather than the teacher, is the central proactive figure. The learner self-determines the learning content, the methodology, the pace of learning and, as appropriate, the assessment (Hase & Kenyon, 2013; Hukkinen et al., 2023). Learning is thus tailored to the learner's specific needs and desires, making it more meaningful and relevant (Agonács & Matos, 2019).

Implementing heutagogical principles and practices in a Christian context establishes an environment that honours the agency of the individual disciple. Each disciple is encouraged to tailor the content, methodology and momentum of learning to be the most meaningful and relevant for their unique background and context for optimal spiritual growth. Within a Christian heutagogical framework, disciples are encouraged to discern and obey the Holy Spirit's leading and collaborate with their local faith community. The teachings of the faith community and scripture are thus used and leveraged for growth, and the collective and individual spiritual journeys are enhanced.

This article proffers heutagogy as a framework for Christian discipleship, discussing the triadic influence of biblical wisdom literature, Jesus Christ's teachings, and the Holy Spirit's contemporary guidance. This framework champions individual agency and sketches correlations between enhanced well-being and health outcomes (Glassner & Back, 2020; Segar, 2015). Applying it may also liberate disciples from potentially legalistic confines associated with denominational rites and dictates by emphasising personal initiative, agency, and self-directed learning to optimise spiritual growth (Hukkinen et al., 2023; Kross et al., 2005).

This article is organised as follows. After outlining key definitions, assumptions, boundaries and aims (Sect. 2), the remainder of the article is structured into three main parts—biblical wisdom literature (Sect. 3), the teachings of Jesus Christ (Sect. 4), and selected expressions of the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christian believers (Sect. 5). Accordingly, Sect. 3 will first discuss how the 'fear of the Lord' distinguished Hebrew wisdom from the surrounding nations, fostering holistic growth and setting ancient Israelite learning apart through its characteristically integrative approach. Next, Sect. 4 will present Jesus Christ as the embodiment of wisdom, reaffirming the legitimacy of wisdom literature for contemporary believers. Bridging the sacred-secular divide, Jesus variously urged his hearers towards self-determined learning. He also foretold that believers would know the Holy Spirit and be led into truth, a statement which also assumes the agency of disciples as proactive learners. Correspondingly, Sect. 5 will show how the work of the Holy Spirit may support and inform a heutagogical Christian context. Such a framework places the responsibility of growth on disciples and reaches beyond aspirations of self-advancement or self-actualisation towards prioritising loving God and others as the ultimate evidence of holistic spiritual maturation. Collaboration and cooperation within the Christian community organically increase as disciples actively steward their spiritual growth. Penultimately, the article will critically analyse heutagogy as a framework for Christian discipleship, synthesising pertinent implications, opportunities, and limitations. This discussion also includes a brief commentary on selected correlations between heutagogy and enhanced human health and well-being

outcomes (Sect. 6). Finally, a succinct conclusion will enunciate the main points of this article and recapitulate its contribution to the literature (Sect. 7).

2 Definitions, assumptions, boundaries and aims

This section delineates key definitions and assumptions inherent to the discussion, presupposing God as the ultimate source of spiritual growth (1 Corinthians 3:6). It is written for a Christian readership and assumes disciples have chosen to follow Jesus and are thus on a sanctification journey. It also accepts that there are variations in denominational understandings of the Holy Spirit's role in sanctification. As such, disciples may adopt hermeneutics and values that harmonise with their denomination and faith tradition. This precept contrasts with typical value-neutral coaching ideology. It also emphasises the disciples' expectations, outcomes and applications, thus shifting the focus from self-advancement and personal fulfilment to loving God and others (Santos, 2021). In synthesis, boundaries set by the disciple, the congregation, the denomination, and scripture combine to support spiritual growth. Self-determined learning in such a context has the potential to maximise spiritual growth.

Several terms require definition in the Christian context. 'Coaching' is typically conceived as a conversation in which the coach guides the coachee to discover their pathway and action steps (Webb, 2019). 'Non-directive' interaction refers to a coach refraining from offering advice or guidance that relies on open-ended questions that support the coachee (Collins, 2009; Stanley & Clinton, 1992; Thomson, 2009; Van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Webb, 2019). Participants thus proactively 'self-determine' their learning and spiritual growth (Webb, 2019).

Self-determined learning in a Christian context allows the disciple to choose the learning content, methodology, pace of learning, and real-life application as per their discernment of the Holy Spirit's guidance. Self-determined learning may take on several forms, including teaching, preaching, small group activity, and collaboration (Blaschke, 2018). Collaboration and cooperation within the congregation and beyond may increase as the disciple matures (Hase & Kenyon, 2013). In the process, the disciple is deemed to be the agent best suited to determine their own learning needs and thus actively engages in collaboration and cooperation (Dick, 2013; Hase & Kenyon, 2013). External suggestions, such as mentor advice, can hinder heutagogical learning by being unrealistic, unworkable, or contrary to the disciple's learning needs. The disciple's control over learning pathways and content allows progress to be monitored, ensuring self-determined learning outcomes are achieved or modified as needed (Cho et al., 2021). This approach mitigates the potentially negative influences of guilt or fear (Hukkinen et al., 2023; Martínez de Pisón, 2022; Segar, 2015).

This article posits that the disciple responds to a call to spiritual growth because the decision to follow Jesus has diverted their life-trajectory away from self and towards keeping the two greatest commandments of loving God and loving others (Mark 12:28–34) (Santos, 2021). The disciple's growth may impact vocational, financial, relational, emotional, and other life areas, but these remain subservient to Jesus' two greatest commandments, loving God and loving others (Mark 12:28–34). Self-advancement is no longer the learning focus (Ens, 2016; Jesurathnam, 2020).

Moreover, this article propositions God as the ultimate source of spiritual growth (1 Corinthians 3:6) (Fee, 2014). Specifically, Jesus is seen as the author and perfecter of faith

(Hebrews 12:2), sometimes utilising lessons from adverse circumstances (Lim, 2019). The disciple and Christian community also play a vital role in spiritual growth (1 Corinthians 3:6–7, Colossians 3:16), by cooperating with God in the growth process (Philippians 2:12–13) and utilising the Holy Spirit's leading and power (Galatians 5:16) to support the disciple's sanctification (Lim, 2019). In the process, the disciple and the community collaborate. Ultimately, the disciple becomes "confident … that [God] … will carry [their sanctification] to completion" (Philippians 1:6).

Furthermore, this article assumes that believers are consciously choosing to follow Jesus and, in the process, mature their faith, which presupposes a desire to love and obey God (John 14:15, 23). This includes internal and external transformation and covers all aspects of life, reaching beyond traditionally 'religious' spheres (Deuteronomy 6:5). This article also assumes that each disciple can discern the Holy Spirit's leading in accordance with their hermeneutic and cooperate with this guidance. Spiritual growth is not a one-size-fits-all process, as it encompasses multiple pathways and repetitive learning episodes. Sanctification thus generally follows an upward trajectory, characterised by increasing conformity to scripture and love of God (Greenman & Kalantzis, 2010). In this frame of reference, stunted growth is also conceivable and may be underpinned by thoughts or actions contrary to scripture and the Holy Spirit's leading.

Christian denominations have varying perspectives on the Holy Spirit's role in sanctification but broadly agree that it is the Holy Spirit's gracious work based on Christ's atoning sacrifice (Dieter, 1987). Wesleyans emphasise "entire sanctification", where disciples must choose holiness in every situation (Wesley, 1725/2015, locs. 404, 385, 420, 630). The Reformed tradition, however, believes that perfection is unattainable in this life due to humanity's sinful nature, with sanctification being a lifelong process (Calvin, 1536/2009 III, 7–10). Pentecostals assert that while positional sanctification occurs at conversion, overcoming sin requires another "baptism of the [Holy] Spirit", thus focusing more on service than purification (Dieter, 1987, loc. 2106; Horton, 1987).

Boundaries in heutagogical education are typically determined by negotiation between the learner and the learning institution (Abdullah, 2001; Dick, 2013). Boundaries within a heutagogical Christian framework provide ongoing support for the disciple. For example, a congregation generally supports a disciple's personal holiness boundaries while the denominational boundaries protect the disciple's theological purity (Milne, 2003). Accordingly, boundaries are set by the disciple, the congregation, the denomination, and scripture. The disciple sets learning and growth boundaries. The congregation sets relational boundaries and encourages the disciple's growth. The denomination sets theological boundaries via its faith statement. Finally, alongside the Holy Spirit's work, scripture may be seen as the foundation and ultimate authority for spiritual growth, thus representing the overarching philosophical boundary for the disciple, the congregation, and the denomination.

Within the heutagogical framework suggested by this article, the disciple's biblical values and hermeneutic are adopted, rather than a value-neutral ideology typically associated with coaching (Fatien et al., 2023). A heutagogical framework is more consistent with the disciple's Christian ethos and, in turn, supports their orthodoxy, piety, and Gospel focus. It also minimises the focus on self, mitigating Santos' (2021) concerns about coaching in church contexts that promote prosperity theology and material triumphalism (Santos, 2021). A heutagogical framework thus creates a fertile environment for self-determined learning to enhance spiritual growth.

The heutagogical framework's assumptions, definitions, and boundaries perpetuate a dual focus. The ultimate focus is honouring God through loving obedience (Mark 12:28–30) (Burnett, 2022). The penultimate focus is spiritual maturation. These two foci

are intertwined because God desires loving obedience (Deuteronomy 6:1–6,) (Barth, 1993). The disciple thus avoids goals that may contradict God's Word. Spiritual growth goals that correlate with the disciple's understanding of the Word and perception of the Holy Spirit's leading support the dual focus of self-determined learning of a Christian heutagogical framework. Such goals may include self-denial (Luke 9:23), sacrificial living (Romans 12:1), or benefitting others at a cost to oneself (Philippians 2:3–4).

A final note about the wider educational context is warranted. Heutagogical learning adds to and overlaps with other learning approaches that similarly emphasise learner autonomy and self-efficacy, including project-based learning (Cole, 2024), inquiry-based learning (Nzomo et al., 2023), and rhizomatic learning (Khine, 2023; Ossiannilsson, 2023). Rhizomatic learning is an interesting alternative for self-development. Based on the seminal works of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), and using the botanical metaphor of the rhizome, rhizomatic learning follows a non-linear process based on the learner's interests rather than a prescribed curriculum. Like heutagogical learning, rhizomatic learning questions conventional approaches to instructional pedagogies, which typically entail a hierarchy with the teacher being above the student (Khine, 2023; Ossiannilsson, 2023). But there are also differences. While rhizomatic learning is primarily about exploring knowledge non-linearly, self-determined learning centres on the learner autonomously controlling all aspects of their learning, including the content and method. Set within the wider educational context, the heutagogical learning framework presented in this article contributes to the body of literature on innovative contemporary learning, which scholars have described as needing new paradigms and pathways to inform and influence human behaviour (Luetz & Green, 2021; Sapolsky, 2018; Simmonds, 2024).

In summary, heutagogy is conceptualised in this paper as a framework for spiritual growth that rests on the assumption that loving God and others, before self, is the most important focus for self-directed learning. In this frame of reference, self-determined learning encourages the disciple to discern the Holy Spirit's leading regarding sanctification while maintaining the boundaries set by the disciple, the congregation, the denomination, and scripture. As a framework for Christian discipleship, heutagogy may leverage the triadic role of biblical wisdom literature, the teachings of Jesus Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit, thus focusing the spiritual growth of Christian disciples on expressing love for God and people. This article now discusses these three sources of heutagogical growth.

3 Wisdom literature

After surveying several definitions of wisdom, this section will introduce the 'fear of the Lord' as a distinguishing feature of Hebrew wisdom that sets the context for holistic growth. Wisdom literature actively engages the reader, mainly through reflection; thus, it expects the reader to accept responsibility for their own learning. This section concludes that wisdom literature aptly informs and supports the heutagogical context propositioned in this article and thus enhances spiritual growth.

Definitions of wisdom vary across philosophy and religion (Gugerell & Riffert, 2011; Zhang et al., 2023). Socrates viewed wisdom as acknowledging one's limited knowledge (Claassens, 2006), while Aristotle saw it as both theoretical and practical by combining scientific knowledge with applied reasoning (Aristoteles, 2009; Trowbridge, 2011). Wisdom can also manifest as power, restraint, generosity, or pursuit of understanding (Strandjord, 2014) and may manifest in a person, situation, or action (Sternberg, 2019). Common

elements include moral vision and contentment beyond material gain (O'Grady, 2019), with wisdom integrating individual ideas into a selfless vision for the benefit of the whole community (Yang, 2014). Wisdom often encompasses theoretical and practical aspects, with different worldviews shaping its application (O'Grady, 2019; Stump, 2003). Defining wisdom thus helps to clarify similarities and differences.

For the ancient Israelites, the 'fear of the Lord' (Proverbs 1:7) was the distinguishing theoretical foundation for gaining and executing wisdom (Block, 2016; Waltke, 2004). It was the guiding principle and essence of wisdom (Kidner, 2008). Fearing God included a response of "trusting awe", worship, and obedience (Block, 2016, p. 72; Waltke, 2004). This kind of semantic 'fear' distinguishes it from criticisms of the efficacy of fear as a motivator for spiritual growth (Carey et al., 2013; Taubman Ben-Ari et al., 2000). The fear of the Lord derived from reading the Torah, the Law given by God within a covenantal relationship (Block, 2016; Corbin, 2022; Solansky, 2014). Trusting awe was undergirded by wisdom literature and drew the believer towards God with a desire for loving obedience, producing worship, and turning from evil, even when God's ways seemed indeterminate (Ecclesiastes 11:5) (Block, 2016; Corbin, 2022; Hinkle, 2017). It also encouraged discernment of ways to obey God without being legalistic or relativist (Ens, 2016). The fear of the Lord contrasted with hard-heartedness (Proverbs 28:14, 19:23) and was understood to instigate security, protection, and fullness of life. The fear of the Lord united the emotional, intellectual, and practical in the believer within a covenantal framework. As such, the fear of the Lord could be said to evoke a conceptual framework for self-determined learning for spiritual growth.

Hebrew wisdom, like all wisdom, contains theoretical and practical aspects. Practically, it is perceived as the ability to think and act rightly by utilising experience, knowledge, and virtue (Tozlu & Onal, 2003). This includes rightly executing judgements between two or more options (Tozlu & Onal, 2003). Hebrew wisdom became synonymous with Torah (Sirach 24:23) (Barton, 2020), even though wisdom may have pre-dated Torah (Barton, 2020). Wisdom can thus be conceived as an explanation and application of Torah within a God-centred community (Ens, 2005; Hinkle, 2017), which in turn foreshadows Christian spiritual growth within a Christ-centred community (1 Corinthians 1:17–25, 3:19, Colossians 2:20–23, James 3:15, 17). Wisdom is taken to mean a "trusting awe" of God leading to a life of worship expressed in obedience (Block, 2016, p. 72). Such wisdom inspires a life that is "pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (James 3:17).

The fear of the Lord mitigated secular-sacred dualism (Jesurathnam, 2020). All actions, magnanimous or mundane, stemmed from a fear of the Lord (Jesurathnam, 2020). Wisdom literature portrays a distinction between the Creator and the created order, focusing on all actions under the Creator's rule. The wisdom literature often revealed a right and wrong pathway for the many decisions of life (Cox, 2009; Jesurathnam, 2020). The disciple was encouraged to experience tradition, ask questions, and modify their actions for faithful living (Melchert, 1998). Learning was integrative because everything existed within God's created order (Proverbs 8) (Thomas, 2002).

Bridging the sacred-secular divide allowed wisdom to influence all of life, impacting personal areas, ethics, and community (Backfish, 2019). As such, wisdom was personal, by stimulating piety and habitual practices, and also communal, by impinging on the inter-relational domain. Gaining wisdom and being hostile to others was incongruent. In practice, however, wisdom could be elusive (Backfish, 2019). The biblical Book of Proverbs spans a multitude of topics about everyday life, including friendship (17:17), happiness (1:7), marriage (31:10–31), speech (11:13), work (6:6–11), old age (20:29), and death and

dying (8:36). Such diversity is unsurprising in light of the covenantal relationship that the ancient Israelites entered into (Deuteronomy 6:5).

Wisdom literature focuses on character formation, often by encouraging personal reflection (Davis, 2020; Goldstone, 2017). This is often hypothetical rather than hortative, as evidenced in the Greek paradigm, where learning did not necessarily result in action (Ens, 2005). Wisdom literature bypasses the need for teachers to exercise authority by encouraging the reader to reflect. The Book of Proverbs, for example, invites readers into a multitude of situations which address the everyday life topics listed above (Melchert, 1998). Readers were/are encouraged to see truthfully and use their imagination to grow in spiritual maturity (Melchert, 1998). Focusing on two lines, readers were/are invited to meditate on each line's meaning and the relationship between the two to fill the gap created by the proverb (Jones, 2003). As such, readers could consider the text and its context, seek understanding, and become personally invested in the text (Huynh & Grossmann, 2020; Jones, 2015).

The wisdom literature's structure and content shift the responsibility of learning directly onto the reader, thus engaging their desire for self-transcendency and responsible agency (Treier, 2019). Structurally, wisdom literature often offered a choice between two pathways (Proverbs 6–7), as personified by wisdom or folly (Melchert, 1998). Enigmas, as in Job and Ecclesiastes, were also presented for readers to ponder (Treier, 2019). The sages refused to idealise the world, instead encouraging readers to live responsibly in the fear of the Lord (Melchert, 1998).

In summary, wisdom literature informs a heutagogical framework for Christian spiritual growth where the 'fear of the Lord' is the distinguishing characteristic of ancient Hebraic wisdom, bridging the secular-sacred divide. It fosters an all-of-life focus that is more concerned with character transformation than external conformity. It encourages responsibility for self-directed learning by inviting reflection that draws on the text, its context, and the reader's circumstances.

4 Jesus continued the wisdom tradition

The Gospels depict Jesus as the embodiment of divine wisdom, thus affirming the legitimacy of the wisdom tradition for contemporary believers. This section explores how Jesus' teachings and ministry foster a paradigm of self-determined learning, bridging the gap between the sacred and the secular realms. Jesus, through his life and work, mirrors the teaching style of ancient sages, urging his followers to take ownership of their learning journey. By examining the Gospel's use of language and Jesus' interactions with his audience, we unveil his expectation for hearers to engage actively in the learning process. By contextualising Jesus' approach within current diverse learning pathways, Jesus' active engagement with his disciples empowers believers to seek spiritual growth through a variety of avenues, echoing the timeless wisdom tradition.

Scholars view Jesus variously as a Jewish prophet (Sanders, 1985), a holy man (Vermès, 1981), a marginalized Jew (Meier, 1991), and as the ultimate expression of divine wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:24, 30) (Hindson & Mitchell, 2023; Witherington, 2000). Jesus, like wisdom, is eternal, the Creator, and the beloved of God (Proverbs 8:22–31) (Hindson & Mitchell, 2023; Melchert, 1998). New Testament authors frequently use wisdom language to describe Jesus. The Apostle Paul, for example, presents Christ as embodying God's wisdom, contrasting wisdom with foolishness (Proverbs 2:3–6; Melchert, 1998). The Gospels also align Jesus with wisdom, with Luke paralleling him to Proverbs 9 (Luke 7:35),

Matthew referring to Jesus as God's wisdom (Matthew 23:34), and John depicting him as wisdom incarnate (John 1:1–14; Jacobson, 2021). By portraying Jesus as God's Wisdom, New Testament writers equate seeking Jesus with seeking wisdom and spiritual growth (Jacobson, 2021).

Contextualising Jesus' teaching within his entire life and works allows teachings towards self-determined learning to be applied within a Christian heutagogical framework. Jesus came in the Father's name to do God's will (John 5:43, 6:38) (Carson, 1991). This involved adopting a God-perspective to all of life, calling for repentance and belief in him (Mark 1:15, John 6:40), and for his listeners to receive eternal life (John 3:16, 10:10) (Corbin, 2022). Disciples existed in continuous relationship with Jesus (John 15:1–17) and grew in loving obedience (John 14:15, 23) in all areas of life. Like wisdom literature, Jesus abolished the sacred-secular divide by encouraging learning and growth in all areas of life (Ens, 2016).

Jesus paralleled important aspects of the sages' wisdom teaching (Jacobson, 2021). He used many of the sages' literary techniques, including two-line proverbs (Matthew 6:26, 28, 7:9), to evoke imagination and engagement by his hearers (Melchert, 1998). He embedded God's rule over creation and often used imperatives (Matthew 7:1, 12) to provoke similar contemplation to that of the original wisdom literature (Melchert, 1998). Jesus' ministry to the needy and his invitation to follow him (Matthew 11:28–29, Mark 1:17) paralleled wisdom's call to simplicity (Corbin, 2022). Jesus' life and ministry suggest that wisdom literature's precepts and implications can be applied by present-day disciples.

Like the wisdom literature, Jesus places the responsibility for learning onto readers (and hearers) (Luke 4:14ff, 10:25–37) (Melchert, 1998). On four occasions, Jesus called on readers to learn from him (Matthew 9:13, 11:29, 24:32, Mark 13:28). The active voice of the word *manthánō* (learn) highlights Jesus' expectation for readers to accept responsibility for their own learning (Vine et al., 1996). Similarly, the word *ginōskō* (know) (Matthew 12:6, 24:33, Luke 12:56, John 8:55, 7:26) suggests that knowledge is obtained through the work of the Holy Spirit and not merely by intellectual pursuit (Vine et al., 1996). This individualised learning process is determined by the learner under the Holy Spirit's guidance. Jesus also continued to make the Father known (John 17:26) to all disciples (Louw & Nida, 1989a, 1989b). As such, each disciple would be responsible for assimilating Jesus' teachings into their life.

Jesus' expectation for readers (and hearers) to accept responsibility for their own learning is most clearly seen in his exhortation to "consider carefully what you hear" (Mark 4:24, Luke 8:18). In Mark 4:24, Jesus used the phrase *blepete ti akouete*, (see! what you hear). *Blepete* (see) can refer to intellectual or spiritual perception (Kittel et at., 1985; Louw & Nida, 1989a, 1989b). The present active tense of this verb increases the force of the exhortation; thus, it is a command, not a suggestion. Those who hear Jesus must consider the spiritual import of his words. Each listener is responsible for their hearing and learning, thus reflecting principles of heutagogical growth.

Jesus' emphasis on self-determined learning should be considered in the light of diverse learning pathways in Jewish culture of the time (Chazan, 2002). Learning involved collaboration with family, mentorship by a Rabbi, studying scripture, and reading other materials. While collaborative learning took place within the family, it also extended to the neighbourhood and synagogue, and included mentorship (Chazan, 2002; von Siemens, 2022). Synagogue gatherings focused on worship, education and leadership with respect to understanding Torah (Chazan, 2002; von Siemens, 2022). Rabbinic teaching, particularly within the schools of Shammai and Hillel, encouraged discussion of the rabbi's interpretation of Torah. Given the variety of Torah interpretations and learning pathways (Regev,

2006; Safrai et al., 1988), robust engagement in halachic controversy was expected because Torah study was seen as a "holy duty", thus highlighting opportunities for self-determined learning (Chazan, 2002, pp. 945–946; Zlotowitz & Scherman, 2001). Without Jesus mandating a specific learning pathway, learners could choose one best suited to their context and needs.

Jesus, the embodiment of wisdom, continued the wisdom tradition within his life and mission, centred on discipleship. Jesus taught in the style of the wisdom sages, used similar techniques, and sought to proactively engage his hearers, thus he anticipated self-determined learning by his earliest followers as they formed conclusions about him, his ministry, and God's calling on their lives. Jesus shifted the responsibility for learning from the teacher to the learner (Melchert, 1998).

5 The Holy Spirit continues the work of Jesus and the wisdom tradition

This section links the Holy Spirit's work to Jesus' work and the wisdom tradition by situating the Holy Spirit within the context of salvation. It argues that the Holy Spirit's continuing work informs heutagogical learning in the Christian context as disciples come to know him and are guided by him into the knowledge of all truth. It also discusses pertinent heutagogical underpinnings that encourage an all-of-life focus that reaches beyond the confines of areas traditionally described as 'spiritual' or 'religious'.

As taught by Jesus in the Farewell Discourse (John 13–17), the Holy Spirit's work in the New Testament was salvific (Calvin, 1536/2009; Grace, 2009). 'Salvific' here refers to conversion and transforming from regeneration to complete sanctification. It parallels the salvific work of wisdom in wisdom literature (Bennema, 2002). Following the earlier definition of wisdom as an explanation and application of Torah among Christ's contemporary disciples, wisdom similarly informs Christians who have received salvation through the Holy Spirit (Barrett, 2017; Bennema, 2002; Ens, 2005; Hinkle, 2017). Wisdom was the source of this "wisdom-knowledge-truth" that led to salvation (Breck, 1994, p. 94). Those without wisdom accessed regeneration and conversion via the Holy Spirit (Barrett, 2017), which explains the emphatic and repeated call for wisdom throughout Proverbs 1–9. Those who responded to wisdom's rebuke received the Holy Spirit (*ruach*, spirit) (Proverbs 1:23, NASB, cf. NIV) and were led to all truth (Barrett, 2017; Breck, 1994). "The destiny of every [person] is linked to his relationship to Wisdom" because in Old Testament times wisdom led people to God's truth, just as the Holy Spirit leads contemporary disciples into all truth (Barrett, 2017, p. 12). Jesus and the Holy Spirit can be conceived as embodiments of the function of divine wisdom in the lives of disciples, thus informing the Christian heutagogy in this article. It will now be shown that the Holy Spirit continues Jesus' work as the third agent in this article's heutagogical framework.

Jesus used the adjective *allon* (another) when referring to the promised Holy Spirit (John 14:16–17) (Shillington, 2012; Vine et al., 1996). Conversely, *heteros* (another) denotes another of a different quality (Shillington, 2012; Vine et al., 1996). The Apostle Paul, for example, was astonished that the Galatian church turned to another (*heteros*) Gospel that was "no Gospel at all" (Galatians 1:6–7). By using *allon*, not *heteros*, Jesus considered the Holy Spirit to be like him, an equal though different, *paraklētos* (Counsellor) who would continue his work in and through his disciples.

Two further points verify that the Holy Spirit continues Jesus' work in relation to self-determined learning. Jesus taught that the disciples would know the Holy Spirit and would

be guided by him (John 14:15–16) (Cameron, 2015). The wider context of John 13–17 conveys personal relationship. Just as the Father knew the Son and vice-versa (John 10:14–15, 27), the disciples would know the Holy Spirit, and through him, they would also know the Son and the Father (John 14:20) (Carson, 1991). The Holy Spirit would also guide them (Kittel et al., 1985; Cameron, 2015), thus the disciples would discern the Holy Spirit's leading regarding sanctification, making guidance and learning both personal and relevant (Cartledge, 2018).

Crucially, Jesus also taught that the Holy Spirit would guide the disciples into all truth (John 16:13), which directly associated his work with divine wisdom. The word *hodēgéō* (John 16:13) means to guide or shepherd (Exodus 13:17; 15:13; 32:34). This same word, *hodēgéō*, is also used for wisdom's guidance (Proverbs 6:22). The Holy Spirit is directly identified with wisdom in the book of 'Wisdom of Solomon' (1:6–7, 7:7–8, 22–25) (Fiddes, 2014). Jesus thus built on a long tradition of accepting God as Israel's Shepherd (Hoeck, 2013). The Holy Spirit's shepherding was thus similar to that of God in the Old Testament (Hoeck, 2013).

In particular, the Holy Spirit would shepherd disciples 'into all truth' (John 16:13). Jesus revealed that the Holy Spirit would speak only what he hears (John 16:13b) and make it known to the disciples (John 16:14). The Holy Spirit thus guides Jesus' followers and learners into a fuller understanding of his words and their implications for appropriate living in contextually relevant and unique ways (Boice, 2005; Mol, 2008).

The Cornelius episode (Acts 10:1–48, 11:1–18, 15:7–11) draws these various themes together within the context of the Holy Spirit's salvific work. A contextual understanding of the passage also reveals areas where self-determined learning may have been utilised to stimulate spiritual growth. The following account exemplifies how the Holy Spirit can guide different protagonists in the same story to individualised heutagogical learning. The Holy Spirit is the agent who convicts the world and draws people into faith (John 16:8–11). In guiding Cornelius into faith, the Holy Spirit first steered the Apostle Peter away from his religious prejudice, wherein he considered all non-Jews to be unclean (Acts 10:28). Typically, an orthodox Jew would not associate with a Gentile. God led Peter directly via a Holy Spirit-inspired vision (Acts 10:11–16) to accept that God's plan included Jews as well as Gentiles (Acts 10:34–35, 15:7–11). Only after this revelation could Peter preach to non-Jews. Cornelius was a devout God-fearing Gentile centurion (Acts 10:2, 22) who gave generously to the poor (Acts 10;2, 4, 22, 31) and prayed constantly (Acts 10:2, 4, 30, 31) but had refused proselytisation (Woodall, 2016). Acts presents Cornelius in Levitical terms as a devout worshipper offering up prayers and alms to God as equivalent to Jewish sacrifices (Bruce, 2009). Through prevenient grace, the Holy Spirit led Cornelius to be a God-fearer (Acts 10:2), to send for Peter, to listen to his message, and, ultimately, to believe the Gospel message (Boice, 2005). As Cornelius and his household heard the message, the Holy Spirit "fell upon them" (Acts 10:44), showing they had believed and understood the truth.

In addition, the passage holds heutagogical significance in other respects. This is reflected on several occasions, including Peter's conviction that Gentiles are not unclean (Acts 15:9). At each stage of his growth, Peter cooperated with the Spirit's leading. Heutagogical discipleship encourages such cooperation and supports the disciple's active engagement. The Holy Spirit also led Cornelius to be charitable, to worship God in contextually relevant ways, and to avoid proselytisation (Acts 10:2). In the absence of synagogue attendance and rabbinical teaching, it is reasonable to assume that Cornelius faced various decisions, which heutagogical learning could have informed, including who to be charitable towards, how to worship God, how to interpret the scriptures, and how to grow his family in their love of God. Cooperating with the Holy Spirit's leading and self-determining

pathways for learning and growth supports the Holy Spirit's work in the disciple to engender growth.

This section has shown that contemporary disciples can expect to be led by the Holy Spirit into all truth, which incorporates a deeper relationship with God through Jesus in contextually relevant and unique ways. This typically results in transformational growth as the disciple's beliefs, assumptions, inner thoughts, and outward actions become increasingly aligned with God's Word. This conclusion was reached by showing that the Holy Spirit's work is directly linked to the wisdom tradition within a salvific context. The Holy Spirit's work was also shown to be a continuation of Jesus' salvific and sanctifying work. These threads were drawn together by examining the Cornelius episode in the book of Acts. The Holy Spirit's ongoing work in disciples informs heutagogical learning in a Christian context because each disciple may know the Holy Spirit and be shepherded by him into all truth.

6 Heutagogy as a framework for Christian discipleship: implications, opportunities, and limitations

Biblical wisdom literature, Jesus Christ's teachings, and the Holy Spirit's work inform the heutagogical framework for Christian discipleship. This section details the implications of such a framework for Christian discipleship. The 'fear of the Lord' adopted within this framework supports critical self-reflection, which leads to inner transformation and outward change. Heutagogical learning is pivotal to fostering character change by promoting self-reflection. The heutagogical framework encourages exploration and discovery, which helps bridge the sacred and secular divide. By transferring the responsibility of learning to the disciple, a heutagogical framework engages the learner by advancing the agency of the disciple and stimulating critical thinking, self-reflection, and metacognition, which collectively enhance spiritual growth.

Learning in wisdom literature informs the discipleship framework in this article. The fear of the Lord was the distinctive feature of wisdom literature. The pervasive use of 'the fear of the Lord' in Proverbs (14 occurrences) indicates that this literature was more concerned with character transformation than external conformity. Likewise, Christian spirituality incorporates the fear of the Lord and is more concerned with inward transformation, typically producing outward change. Transformation occurs through "the expansion of consciousness through the transformation of basic worldview and specific capacities of the self … facilitated through … critically analysing underlying premises" (Elias, 1997, p. 3). Transformation happens when beliefs, assumptions, and ideologies are critically assessed (Payette, 1969; Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012). Through this process, the disciple sets new goals and strategies for maturation, which results in proactive learning (Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012). Such reflection encourages the disciple to embrace God's perspective as they progress to new beliefs, assumptions, and conduct necessary for growth (Payette, 1969). A heutagogical context creates the necessary "critical mirror" for the disciple to critically self-reflect within the context of the fear of the Lord to discern the Holy Spirit's leading towards transformational change (Payette, 1969, p. 7; Penman, 2021).

Self-reflection, a key component of heutagogical learning, supports character transformation (Penman, 2021; Travers et al., 2015). For the ancient Israelites, reflection was a means of progressing from knowing the wisdom literature to attaining wisdom. Wisdom literature encouraged reflection on its content with respect to the reader's experiences,

challenges, learning, and spiritual growth. The learner was consciously encouraged to incorporate their learned truths into their life (Huynh & Grossmann, 2020; Jones, 2015). The Israelite was moulded through these reflections (Melchert, 1998). Current research suggests that reflection allows the formation of new thinking and habits, effectively buffering potential emotional distress from lived adversity (Kross & Ayduk, 2017; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008; Penman, 2021). Heutagogy allows self-reflection through journaling and guided mentoring sessions to stimulate and enhance spiritual growth (Travers et al., 2015).

A Christian heutagogical environment actively engages disciples by preferencing exploration and hypothetical thinking, as seen in wisdom literature, above hortative instruction. Disciples are encouraged to grasp the fullness of learning and to be moulded by their perception of the Word and the Holy Spirit's leading. Research suggests that goal-setting and personal motivation, generally via self-reflection, play a crucial role in developing wisdom (Ferrari et al., 2019). Heutagogical learning thus favours dialogue over discourse, formation over information, reflective learning over memorisation, and action over words (Ens, 2016). Open-ended questions from the mentor and journaling by the disciple stimulate reflection. Such reflection empowers disciples to consider all areas of their lives to maximise spiritual growth.

Heutagogical learning leans on a naturally proactive disposition and is informed by the sages, Jesus' teachings, and the Holy Spirit's ongoing work in disciples. It has been shown that both the sages and Jesus transferred the learning responsibility to the learner (Melchert, 1998; Treier, 2019). Contemporary disciples can expect to be led by the Holy Spirit into a deeper relationship with God as they increasingly understand the practical implications of the teachings of Jesus Christ in their lives. The Holy Spirit contextualises wisdom and Christ's teachings by leading disciples into "all truth" in relevant and meaningful ways (John 16:13). Disciples need to proactively appropriate this learning into their lives.

In summary, Holy Spirit-led heutagogical learning honours the agency of the individual and the Holy Spirit's unique work in each disciple so that Jesus' ongoing work can be more fully appropriated in the disciple's life. A one-size-fits-all approach to spiritual growth cannot cater for individual differences of personality, context, or vocation. Each individual has different spiritual growth needs and capacities. Heutagogical principles and practices support the agency of the individual by allowing disciples to steward their sanctification meaningfully (Hukkinen et al., 2023). Recent research positively correlates heutagogical learning with increased academic progress, greater learning engagement, heightened motivation, and positive emotions (Glassner & Back, 2020; Khan & Thomas, 2022). Enhancing the agency of the individual supports critical thinking and problem-solving skills, self-reflection, and metacognition, which is the process of thinking about one's thinking, monitoring, and assessing one's understanding and performance, all of which positively support and encourage spiritual growth (Blaschke & Hase, 2015; Chiranjeeiv, 2017; Hase, 2016). When critical thinking, problem-solving skills, self-reflection, and metacognition are applied to Christian discipleship, disciples can expect to grow more rapidly and comprehensively and—crucially—experience greater joy and well-being, because they feel more empowered to meaningfully steward their spiritual growth towards ends that have personal significance.

A Christian heutagogical framework also encourages an all-of-life focus on spiritual maturation. This principle is informed by wisdom literature, Jesus' teachings, and the Holy Spirit's leading. Learning for the ancient Israelites was integrative through all of life because everything existed within the created order and under the Creator's rule (Proverbs 8) (Thomas, 2002). Jesus' life and ministry similarly modelled this principle. The Holy

Spirit's ongoing guidance also covers the entirety of life. Disciples are thus encouraged to explore all areas pertinent to their spiritual growth. Spiritual growth is not limited to areas traditionally perceived as 'spiritual' or 'religious'. Such areas may include prayer, Bible reading, worship, evangelism, service to others, and fellowship (Benner, 2002). Self-determined spiritual growth goals thus inherently incorporate an all-of-life focus as the disciple perceives the Holy Spirit's guidance and conviction. Inversely, the absence of heutagogy in Christian discipleship has contributed to "a spiritual malaise in which passive learning has become the main staple for many church members or attendees" (Hukkinen et al., 2023, p. 1).

The biblical principles of learning embedded in wisdom literature, the Gospels, and the ongoing guidance of the Holy Spirit inform this article and support the concept of a heutagogical Christian framework. The wisdom literature's emphasis on the 'fear of the Lord' encourages character transformation through an all-of-life focus, as does the life and ministry of Jesus. The sacred-secular divide is minimised. Self-reflection by the disciple is encouraged to maximise the learning potential and transformational impact. Thinking is encouraged beyond hortative instruction. The Holy Spirit's ongoing leading of contemporary disciples encourages genuine on-going spiritual growth and transformation rather than mere external conformity.

7 Conclusion

This article contributes to the body of literature on innovative contemporary learning, which scholars have described as needing new paradigms and pathways (Luetz & Green, 2021; Simmonds, 2024). Areas identified for innovation include Christian curriculum development (Benson, 2021; Kemp, 2021), embodied pedagogy (Buxton et al., 2021), prophetic perspectives (Burns & Cruz, 2021), and indigenous in-service theological training (Winchester et al., 2024), among others. With Christian education research remaining largely "in its infancy" (Luetz & Green, 2021, p. 1), the current conceptual paper makes a welcome contribution to the literature on self-determined learning in the area of Christian discipleship and spiritual growth.

Expounding the triadic role of biblical wisdom literature, the teachings of Jesus Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit, this article has proffered heutagogy as an under-recognised framework for facilitating Christian discipleship. Known also as self-determined learning, heutagogy empowers individuals to take charge of their personal growth by fostering proactive approaches to self-development. In a Christian context, self-enacted spiritual growth may operate across a range of personal and theological understandings of discipleship. Moreover, it may transcend diverse Christian traditions and accommodate different understandings of how scripture and the Holy Spirit may capacitate Christian discipleship.

To construct its argument, this conceptual paper engaged three sources: biblical wisdom literature, the teachings of Jesus Christ, and selected examples of the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christian believers. First, Old Testament wisdom literature expresses Hebrew percipience as a fundamental philosophical basis for heutagogical spiritual growth. Second, the New Testament portrays Jesus as the embodiment of the wisdom of God, thus exemplifying, illustrating, and perpetuating the precepts of the wisdom tradition and leveraging it for spiritual maturation. In his teachings, Jesus recurrently encouraged his hearers towards proactive and self-determined learning. Finally, the Holy Spirit is introduced as a life-giving agent tasked with continuing, revealing, and appropriating the
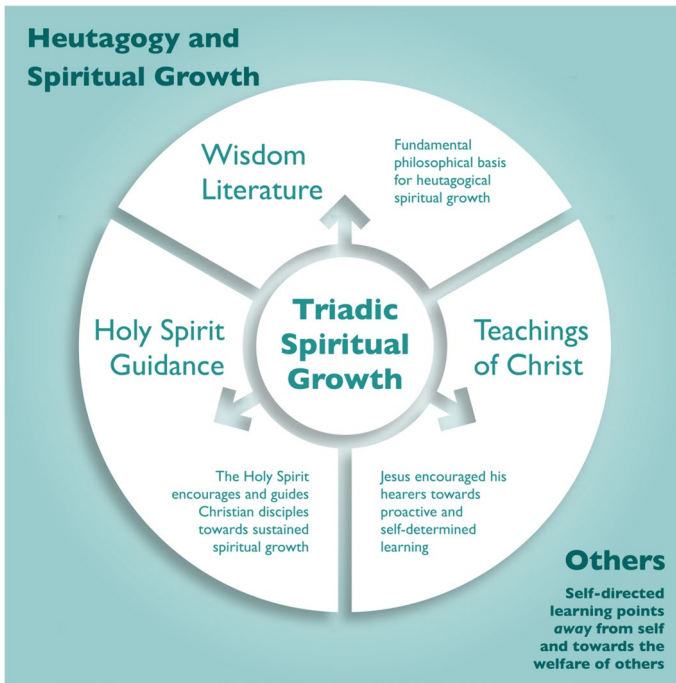
Fig. 1 Schematic representation of heutagogy as a framework for Christian discipleship, reflecting the triadic role of biblical wisdom literature, the teachings of Jesus Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit; concept by authors

teachings of Christ in the lives of Christian disciples towards sustained spiritual growth. Crucially, under the guidance of this triad, self-directed spiritual growth is progressively 'self-less', pointing not towards but rather away from oneself and towards loving God and others. In synthesis, under the guidance of biblical wisdom literature, the teachings of Jesus Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit, contemporary disciples can effectively and enduringly inform and empower their spiritual growth, thus appropriating and transposing the timeless work of God for the beneficence of others. Counterintuitively, self-directed learning ultimately points Christian disciples *away* from their self-interests. In the final analysis, disciples who leverage heutagogy become empowered to authentically calibrate their lives to embark on a self-directed journey of spiritual growth that unequivocally points away from self and towards the welfare of others.

This paper contributes to the literature by expounding and advocating heutagogy as an under-appreciated framework for facilitating spiritual growth (Fig. 1). Given that heutagogical learning proactively favours dialogue over discourse, formation over information, reflective learning over memorisation, and action over words (Ens, 2016)—evidently facets of universal human experience—suggests opportunities for theory-praxis inquiry that reach well beyond the scope of the current paper. Though analysed and synthesised here predominantly for a Christian readership, heutagogy may be uniquely applied in other faith contexts, which is conceptualised here as a fertile opportunity for future research.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no conflict/s of interest.

Ethics Approval This article pertains to a wider study for which ethics approval was confirmed according to the guidelines of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007- Updated 2018), developed jointly by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), the Australian Research Council (ARC), and Universities Australia and published by the Australian Government (2007). https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/natio nal-statement-ethicalconduct-human-research-2007-updated-2018 (accessed 30 November 2023). The study was approved (Approval #093) by the Alphacrucis University College (AC) Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC no. EC00466) on 29 November 2022. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Effective 1 January 2024, the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 (updated 2018) has been revoked, and the study applied the ethical guidance from the 2023 National Statement. https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research-2023 (last accessed 17 September 2024). NB: The current study does not report any empirical findings. The authors declare that all data supporting this theoretical research are available within the paper.

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