

Agency and Human Flourishing in Professional Pastoral Supervision

A Framework for Tele-Supervision

Workshop Essay for Participants: Developing Supervisee Agency, Exegetical Crossover (Ephesians 4:22–24), Self-Determination Theory, and Co-Design Integration using <https://onyx.professionalsupervision.me>

1. Introduction: Digital Fatigue, Remote Oversight, and Human Flourishing

In contemporary ministry and clinical practice, professional supervision serves as an indispensable vehicle for maintaining ethical oversight, promoting reflective practice, and safeguarding practitioner well-being. However, the widespread shift toward remote tele-supervision - most notably videoconferencing platforms such as Zoom, Teams, Meet, etc.- presents a profound operational dilemma. While tele-supervision maintains essential professional standards and logistical accessibility, it frequently introduces subtle forms of digital fatigue, cognitive strain, and relational distance that can inadvertently impede active supervisee engagement. Supervisees can slip into passive observation rather than active, self-directed reflection, transforming a sacred space of mutual discovery into a transaction of administrative compliance.

Addressing this challenge requires a shift in how supervisors conceptualise oversight. Frameworks focused on human flourishing emphasise that true well-being is not merely the absence of distress or the fulfilment of administrative checklists, but the realisation of a state in which all aspects of a person's life align with God's good creation intent (VanderWeele, 2024). According to the human flourishing literature, at the centre of this flourishing stands **human agency** - the active, volitional capacity of individuals to align their choices, actions, and professional practice with meaningful intrinsic goals. Rather than treating supervision as top-down evaluation, this paper argues that professional supervision should be intentionally structured to cultivate supervisee agency as both a theological imperative and a psychological necessity.

2. Theological Foundations: Christological Anthropology and Pauline Agency

2.1 Grounding Human Identity in Union with Christ

Any rigorous theological account of human agency must begin not with human self-effort or autonomous self-construction, but with a robust Christological anthropology. As Marc Cortez (2017) contends, Jesus Christ represents the definitive revelation of true humanity; thus, human identity and capacity must be defined through Christ rather than through secular therapeutic models alone. In the Pauline corpus - most explicitly in the Letter to the Ephesians - human flourishing is anchored in the foundational reality of *'union with Christ'*. Constantine Campbell (2012, 2023) identifies *'union with Christ'* as the indispensable theological ingredient of Ephesians, arguing that believers are organically connected to Jesus and participate in his death, resurrection, and present exalted status.

This Christological grounding alters the direction of human effort. In secular frameworks, agency is frequently viewed as the self-generated engine required to establish identity and worth. In contrast, Pauline anthropology establishes an unshakeable divine *indicative*: believers have already received every spiritual blessing in Christ and are seated with him in the heavenly realms (Eph 1:3, 2:6). Human agency is therefore not a desperate attempt to earn status or master performance, but the grateful, Spirit-empowered outworking of a secure, received identity. Grounded in this status, agency becomes the capacity to live out one's vocational calling with freedom and confidence.

2.2 Exegesis of Ephesians 4:22–24: Putting Off and Putting On

The biblical dynamic of agency is articulated in Paul's exhortation in Ephesians 4:22–24: *"You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."* Exegetically, Paul employs the infinitival verbs *apothesthai* ('to put off') and *endysasthai* ('to put on') to describe a decisive, ongoing exercise of active responsibility (Campbell, 2023; deSilva, 2022).

As Campbell (2023) observes, while the *'new self'* is an objective reality created entirely by God's grace, believers are explicitly commanded to actively *'put on'* this reality in their daily walk/life. Paul reinforces this imperative throughout the letter, urging believers to *"live a life worthy of the calling you have received"* (Eph 4:1) and to *"be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise"* (Eph 5:15). Scripturally, agency is neither passive resignation nor self-reliant willpower but rather is a Spirit-empowered responsibility where the Holy Spirit redeems human decision-making from *'deceitful desires'* (Eph 4:22), freeing the supervisee to make conscious, wise, and holy choices that align with their divine calling.

3. Psychological Alignment: Self-Determination Theory and Human Flourishing

3.1 The Three Basic Psychological Needs

The biblical vision of active, Spirit-empowered agency finds empirical corroboration in contemporary social science, particularly within **Self-Determination Theory (SDT)** developed by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci (2000, 2001, 2008). SDT posits that human psychological health and flourishing depend directly upon the satisfaction of three innate, universal psychological needs:

- **Autonomy:** The experience of volition, choice, and self-endorsement in one's actions, feeling that one's behaviour emanates from within rather than being coerced by external forces.
- **Competence:** The feeling of mastery, effectiveness, and growth in executing tasks and navigating professional responsibilities.
- **Relatedness:** The sense of secure connection, mutual trust, and belonging within a supportive community or professional alliance.

When applied to supervisory environments, where supervision supports autonomy, supervisees demonstrate higher intrinsic motivation, greater resilience under stress, and deeper reflection (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Conversely, excessively controlling the supervisory space would induce anxiety and defensive compliance. In Paul Vitz's (2020) hierarchical meta-model of the person, these psychological needs occupy the levels of subjective experience and rational interpretation. While secular psychology views autonomy as an ultimate self-governing end, a theological lens reframes autonomy as Spirit-empowered volitional freedom - the redeemed capacity to willingly align oneself with truth, virtue, and God's call.

3.2 Intrinsic Goals versus Extrinsic Pressures

SDT research further distinguishes between **intrinsic goals** (such as character growth, meaningful relationships, and community service) and **extrinsic goals** (such as wealth, status, image, or pleasing institutional authorities). Ryan, Huta, and Deci (2008) demonstrate that individuals who organise their lives around intrinsic pursuits consistently report higher subjective well-being, lower depression, and greater vitality. Conversely, an over-reliance on extrinsic motivators correlates with chronic anxiety and vocational fatigue.

In professional supervision, supervisors often encounter practitioners suffering from spiritual dryness, emotional depletion, and professional isolation (Terry & Cunningham, 2020; Bickerton & Miner, 2021). Spiritual dryness - defined as the painful sensation of God's absence and the feeling that spiritual practices have become empty chores (Büssing et al., 2020; Gerundt et al., 2022) - frequently stems from an over-identification with external performance metrics. When ministry or clinical work becomes performance rather than a response to grace, agency erodes. Re-establishing agency through intrinsic reflection buffers against vocational burnout and restores spiritual vitality.

4. Practical Application: Co-Design Frameworks

4.1 Co-Design Methodology in Supervision

Translating theological exegesis and psychological theory into concrete supervisory practice requires a collaborative methodology. Supervisors are tempted to fall into the 'paternalistic trap,' where they unilaterally diagnose problems and prescribe solutions, even if they do so without stating it to the supervisee. However, if present, this dynamic undermines supervisee autonomy and fosters passive dependency. In contrast, evidence-based co-design frameworks (such as those outlined by Butler et al., 2022) position the supervisee as an active co-architect of their professional growth plan.

In a co-designed supervisory session, the supervisor acts as a facilitator rather than an authoritative director. Together, supervisor and supervisee explore baseline challenges, identify systemic or personal roadblocks, and collaboratively formulate actionable goals. By actively involving the supervisee in problem-solving and strategy selection, supervision honours their agency, strengthens intrinsic motivation, and fosters long-term professional resilience.

4.2 Interactive Tool Integration: **ONYX.PROFESSIONALSUPERVISION.ME**

To bridge the physical distance inherent in digital tele-supervision (e.g., Zoom sessions) and combat passive 'screen fatigue,' supervisors can leverage dedicated live reflection tools such as **<https://onyx.professionalsupervision.me>**. Rather than relying solely on verbal dialogue or static slides, interactive digital tools transform remote oversight into an active, shared canvas.

Specifically, platforms like ONYX enable supervisees to engage in real-time co-design through three key practical mechanisms:

- **Real-Time Self-Assessment & Noticing:** Supervisees complete interactive diagnostic reflection prompts during or prior to the session, identifying areas of stress, spiritual dryness, or professional growth. This active input puts the supervisee in the driver's seat of the agenda.
- **Collaborative Well-Being Mapping:** Using live shared visual interfaces, supervisor and supervisee map out intrinsic goals, support structures, and boundary-setting strategies, creating a shared artifact that represents mutual commitment rather than top-down instruction.
- **Longitudinal Agency Tracking:** Digital tracking features allow supervisees to review their own progress across sessions, reinforcing their sense of competence and self-efficacy as they observe tangible growth in their practice over time.

By embedding interactive tools like ONYX into tele-supervision, supervisors turn a potential barrier into an asset for active engagement, ensuring that remote oversight remains dynamic, participatory, and profoundly empowering.

5. Conclusion & Actionable Reflection Questions for Workshop Attendees

Cultivating human flourishing in professional supervision requires prioritising supervisee agency. As grounded in Ephesians 4:22–24 and confirmed by Self-Determination Theory, agency is neither self-reliant egoism nor passive compliance; it is the Spirit-empowered, volitional capacity to live out one's vocational calling in response to a received identity in Christ. By abandoning passive, screen-to-screen supervision in favour of collaborative co-design, supervisors empower supervisees to transition to sustainable, Christ-centered flourishing.

Workshop Reflection & Discussion Questions for Practitioners:

- In what ways might your current tele-supervision structure inadvertently encourage passive compliance rather than active supervisee agency?
- How does Paul's vision of 'putting off the old self and putting on the new self' (Eph 4:22–24) reshape your understanding of supervisee responsibility and grace?
- How can you better support your supervisees' basic psychological needs for Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness during remote sessions?
- What practical step can you take in your next session to co-design a growth plan using interactive tools like ONYX?

6. References

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