

# What is the Theological Basis of Professional Supervision?

Some during our consultation have suggested that it would be helpful if we spend some time engaging in a theological reflection about the matter of Professional Supervision further than that already provided in *Professional Supervision - a Guide for Queensland Baptists*. So here are some thoughts from a pastoral practitioner. I am not a theologian and so am not claiming to have all the best answers on this subject and would welcome other's contributions so that together we can better make sense of the current world we minister in with all its complexities and opportunities. I am also not seeking to prove through this reflection that Professional Supervision is better than any other support mechanism (e.g. Mentoring or Coaching), but simply to reflect on whether it might be consistent with a biblical framework of ministry for our QB pastors. In doing so, I am seeking to address concerns raised about Professional Supervision.

Where to start ... I think there are three different approaches that I have pondered on here. One relates to God's work in our individual circumstances and lives. A second relates to the law as it has been laid down either directly by God in Scripture or through other authorities such as Governments and the like. And the third relates to the nature of the work of Professional Supervision.

Let me start with the first of these... God's continual work in our lives.

## **God's personal and specific work in our individual lives.**

It is wonderful isn't it to have a God who knows everything about us (Luke 1:7) and who also knows the beginning from the end (Is 46:10, Jer 29:11, Rev 22:13). He knows our cares, our worries as well as the complexities of our life. He knows what we need, when we need it and how it is best delivered to us for our benefit and His glory. Our God is definitely a personal God.

And part of His personal approach is his interest in our personal formation and sanctification. God has a plan and a purpose for each of us – to become like his Son (Phil 3:10, Eph 4:13, 1 Thes 4:3ff). If He knows what we need and what is beneficial for us, those around about us and our churches, then He also knows the changes in our lives that must occur for these benefits to be realised. In his perfect time, His Holy Spirit reveals the issues that need to be addressed in our lives. We believe that this revelation could come through general revelation or specific revelation. And as specific revelation, it could come through His inspired Scriptures, through His Spirit's promptings to us or to others as they minister into our lives. We see examples of this right through Scripture as people receive encouragement, counsel and correction from God through many and various means.

We would believe that God could use anyone or anything to communicate his truths or will to his people. With Balaam he used a donkey. With many leaders in the Old Testament, he empowered prophets. With others, there were godly men and women such as Mordecai who acted as wise counsellors. If we reflected on our own experience, we would recognise that God has at times spoken through many different people including through our QB mentors, through our church leaders, through members of our congregation, through family and friends, through colleagues, through Godly men and women God has placed along our path and maybe even likely through strangers who have had words of knowledge or wisdom for us. This does not even begin to consider authors past and present who God has used to enliven his word and will in our lives.

God is working in our lives to bring about his plans and his purposes to bring us to maturity in Christ (Eph 4:13, Phil 1:6, James 1:4).

This of course, also implies another basic position that we hold – that we are not mature or complete in all things. There is more growth to experience and more refinement needed. There is more we need to repent of. There are

more insecurities, dysfunctions, areas of pride or independence that need to be dealt with. We are in the process of being sanctified, but we are not there yet (Phil 1:6, 1 Thes 5:23-24). Yet, Paul would encourage us to keep aiming for perfection (Rom 12:2, 2 Cor 13:11).

What does this mean then for us? If we are still broken and in need of God's transforming power, the question that remains for us is whether we are willing for God to address the things in our lives that are holding us back, hindering our ministry or creating a blockage in our relationship with God. This often comes down to the issue of pride that holds us back from humbly submitting ourselves to the refiner's work (James 4:6). Sometimes it's an issue of pride regarding who we believe God could or should use in this work (1 Pet 5:5-6). Could He use an unlikely person like Cornelius to help to teach us an important lesson like what Peter learnt in Acts 10? Could He use a donkey to protect us from disobedience like Balaam was about to choose to do (Num 22)? Could He use a Professional Supervisor to encourage, challenge or inspire us? I believe that the answer should be – Yes. If we are focussed on obedience and submission to God, we should humbly be willing to allow God to do His work in His way in His time with no limits or boundaries put before Him.

Some have questioned whether we as pastors should allow a Professional Supervisor to be in a position to "influence" us. I believe strongly that Professional Supervision is just one space where we can be open to allowing God to bring transformation into our lives. Obviously, wisdom demands that we need to test all things we believe that God might be speaking to us, but humility means we need to be open to hear and receive them in the first place.

#### **The place of government and their associated law in our lives today.**

As we approach this topic, we start with the premise from our understanding of the gospel that we are not saved by keeping the law, but are saved by grace (Rom 3:24, 11:6, Eph 2:5-8, Tit 3:7). None of us can keep the law perfectly and so we are not able to use that as a means of salvation. Faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to be saved (Gal 2:15-16, Rom 3:24, Heb 11:6).

So what should our attitude to commands and laws be? Should we ignore the law because we are saved purely by faith? Paul would say no definitely not (Rom 3:31, 6:15-18). Paul actually would maintain we should obey those who have authority over us and he gives many examples of this. Children should obey parents (Eph 6:1). Slaves (employees) should obey their masters (employers) (Eph 6:5). We are called to obey our leaders (Heb 13:17) as well as those in authority over us which includes secular governments (Rom 13:1-5, 1 Pet 2:13f). Jesus even submitted to human authorities as shown in his willingness to pay the temple tax (Matt 17:24f) and his teaching on paying taxes to Caesar (Matt 22:17f). And it goes without saying that we are called to obey God's commands as given in his Word (1 John 2:5, 3:22, 24, 5:3).

Logically this raises many questions, one of which is about which commands or laws take precedence if by chance some are contradictory. We could all after all point to laws which conflict with what we might identify as God's immutable commands or standards.

Before answering this question, it may be worth a quick reflection on why God gave the law. And I would propose that the basis for God's law is rooted in who God is (His nature and character) and how he desires that we relate to Him as God and others around us in the light of who He is. That is why law in our Jewish and Christian heritages always centres on relationships.

Before the fall, people lived in a perfect relationship with God – they knew who He was, and they lived out their lives in perfect relationship to Him as their maker and their God. We know that after the fall, people went their own way and did their own thing. They knew of God and his standards (Gen 4:6-7) but they chose to do evil instead (Gen 6:5) and the relationship with God and those around about them suffered.

God sought to re-establish these relationships through establishing covenants, and eventually established the law (the Torah). Why was it given? Not as means of salvation, because no one could keep the law perfectly. But Paul holds that the law was given so that we could be conscious of our sin (Rom 3:19-20) and aware of how far from God's standard we are. Living after the Cross, a knowledge of this should naturally lead us to repentance and to the gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection as the only hope for us.

The law was therefore offered up as a reminder, but in that, there was still an expectation of compliance – that the people would obey, because this was God's desire and his standard. As a reflection of His character and nature, He desired us to model our lives on Him. A great example is the regular commands to care for the vulnerable in our society – like the widows, orphans and aliens (Ex 22:22, Deut 10:18, 14:29, 24:17-21, 26:12, etc.). These commands reflect God's heart and concern for all, especially the weak and vulnerable. They reflect Godly principles and characteristics of love, care and justice. They are Godly laws because they reflect who God is. The commands were given not to make people's lives hard or difficult. They were given because people (in general) were not caring for the vulnerable naturally or normally and so they had to be reminded of this imperative again and again and again.

Before we move on, we should of course reference the two great commandments which Jesus said sum up God's absolute standard and the sum of his total legal statute. Jesus pointed to this in Matt 22:37-40 where he said that love for God and love for your neighbour are the bedrock of all other commands. We would recognise that we have failed miserably to keep both commands, and so again, we should be prompted to look to Jesus for our solution.

### **Godly Laws vs Ungodly Laws**

The example of the widows, orphans and aliens above raises for me the concept of "*Godly Laws*" which presumably also assumes you can have "*Ungodly Laws*". I would suggest that Good laws or *Godly laws* are those which reinforce, encourage or enact behaviour that supports Godly principles or characteristics. We could think about any number of principles or characteristics like peace, justice, truth, love, compassion, order or creativity that may form a "Godly" basis for modern laws.

To take a modern day example, the Workplace Health and Safety Laws I would argue are based on Godly principles. We may not like all the regulatory aspects of them or the detail of the records we must keep complying with them, but if you distil these laws down to their essence, why are they there? I would argue that the motive of the legislatures who designed them was not to make our lives more difficult as employers, though there would obviously be an acknowledgement that this would be a result. I believe that the real motive for their existence is in the deep desire to protect and care for employees (physically, emotionally and psychologically). We of course could argue whether the measures put in place achieve this goal or whether they are the best way to achieve this goal. But I don't think we could argue about the underlying motive for caring for others. Most workplaces in Australia, do not have slaves, but we have employees, who in the past have been and often sadly in the present still are being exploited, abused and left weak and vulnerable. Because our forebears and many of our contemporaries did not act in accordance with God's revealed character and nature and seek to protect the vulnerable, our Governments have sought to introduce laws to reduce the risk of abuse.

Since these laws reflect God's heart and God's concern, we could ask the question "Are they Good?" I suspect some would still answer – No, I don't like the work they create for me – which sounds like a bit of a self-centred response. So maybe the better question would be "Are they Godly?" Do they seek to uphold and share a common desire to bring about God's desires as we see them articulated in Scripture? I would suggest that they do and so as Christians seeking to bring about God's kingdom on this earth as it is in heaven, I would suggest that we should support such legislation.

I could apply similar arguments to Child Safety Legislation that has emerged over the last couple of decades. These are Godly also because of the ends they are seeking to bring about. We might not like the minutia of these laws and how they are applied, but we surely would not prefer the alternatives they seek to prevent.

It is important to note here that no laws can bring perfect results and so no law is perfectly effective. Our government laws are not perfect in this regard. I would suggest the laws as laid down in the Torah are not perfect in this regard either which is why the Religious leaders in Jesus' day were able to identify all manner of loop holes and ways to bypass the requirements of the law. I would think that seeking to close loopholes it is a never-ending frustration to law makers past and present and is the reason why Legal statutes, Acts, Regulations and Codes of Practice never get smaller or simpler, they only get larger and more complex. Laws are a poor substitute to a perfect heart of obedience.

And here is where it would be lovely to be able to return to the two great commandments and just trust everyone to live these out perfectly. If only we all perfectly obeyed these fundamental principles, we would not have a need for a police force, military or a legal system.

So what about *ungodly laws*? How do we handle these? We see examples of such laws in Scripture with Daniel who refused to stop praying to God (Dan 6). Another was with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who refused to bow down and worship an idol (Dan 3). And a third was the pronouncement of death to the Jews which led Esther to approach Xerxes. The apostles faced ungodly commands also when they were told by the Jewish authorities to stop teaching about Jesus (Acts 5). None of these edicts were based on Godly principles and we see different responses in each. Daniel did not make a song and dance about his disobedience but continued his practice of devotion privately much like the underground church in China today. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were forced to make a public stand about something they disagreed with, and they faced paying the ultimate price for their faithfulness. In the case of Esther, the Jews as a people turned to prayer and fasting (Esther 4:16) and Esther privately presented her case to the king. For the apostles, they chose to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29f) and again suffered persecution as a result.

We need to obviously be careful about what we label as "*Ungodly laws*" since it is all too easy to throw the baby out with the bath water here. The recent Covid restrictions around limiting meetings are a classic example. Some have suggested that these were Ungodly as they hindered our ability to meet (Heb 10:25) or worship. And some locally and overseas even espoused open defiance of the regulations imposed. But I would suggest that the motive for these restrictions was seeking to ensure the safety of the public. It was a good motive and not an attack on religion that led to these requirements. I was encouraged to see churches in Australia being creative in how we could continue to meet virtually and continuing to facilitate worship despite the restrictions imposed across all of society. We know that the size of the gathering is not the limiting factor for God's spirit to move (Matt 18:20), it is the attitude of our heart. And we also saw God do amazing things in these times of lockdown – things we could never have imagined possible.

It would be clearly a wrong position to take for us to automatically label all secular (local, state or federal) laws as ungodly. Jesus' instructions were clear that we were to "give to Caesar what is Caesars (Matt 22:21). Paul taught that we needed to obey Civil authorities (Rom 13:1-5, 1 Pet 2:13f). I think that we need to do our homework thoroughly and transparently to assess whether individual laws, regulations, standards and policies line up with godly principles. And if they do not, then we must consider what our God honouring response to these should be.

### **The Concern about submission to secular influences.**

In some discussions about Professional Supervision, the concern has been raised about whether we will be opening ourselves up to secular influences. While I don't want to present any significant theological reflection here apart from what we have already covered, I think some clarification may be helpful.

We have already discussed that God does expect us to submit to Secular authorities. When Scripture calls on us to submit and obey parents, masters, leaders, governments, it does not provide qualifiers depending on whether they are believers or not. The call is to obey those in authority, even if they are secular. And so, there is presumably some good that comes from this.

Having said that, our expressed intention from the beginning is that the Professional Supervisors who will be working with our pastors will be committed and mature believers. We have clearly specified that any Professional Supervisor working with our Pastors must be trained and qualified as Professional Supervisors and that they should be familiar with the ministry context of Baptist Pastors.

While not explicitly stated, we will be encouraging our pastors to look for people who are mature in their faith, experienced in ministry, committed to a local church, committed to their faith, Godly and wise to fill these roles. To be even qualified to train as a Professional Supervision (Pastoral) through St Mark's College, you need to be able to demonstrate you are actively ministering and able to use the learned skills in a Pastoral context.

Our ideal will be to see experienced and respected Baptist pastors being trained as Professional Supervisors. This is occurring and we currently have sufficient Baptist Pastors already trained to meet our expected needs. Our hope is that in the future, more pastors will receive training to increase the pool and the choice of Professional Supervisors on offer.

There may be unique situations where a Pastor will seek a Professional Supervisor who is not a believer because of unique skills or experience of that supervisor. In this instance, approval will need to be sought and we will need to be convinced that they meet the requirements set down by Ministerial Services before approval is given.

### **Application to the Nature and Work of Professional Supervision**

This of course leads us to the subject at hand – the recommendation of Professional Supervision for our Pastors (Recommendation 16.45 of the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*). Is it Good? Is it Godly?

When you read the Royal Commission reports in relation to Professional Supervision, it's motivation for making this recommendation is to increase the level of accountability Ministers have for their ministry. The reason why this is seen as important is the need to provide better protection for children and other vulnerable people under our control or influence. The Child Safe Standard 5 on which Recommendation 16.45 forms a part is all about human resource management. It is ensuring that people are suitable and supported. The independence of the Professional Supervisor is key in this as it brings a level of objectivity and lessens the risk of collusion or covering up unacceptable behaviour (whether it be physical, emotional, psychological or spiritual). In explaining why this standard has been implemented, the Commissioners refer to a Case Study undertaken on the Institutional Review of the Anglican Church in which Bishop Tim Harris stated that the Diocese of Adelaide was working to:

bring that culture of accepting some supervision and accountability and transparency to those who have been trained in earlier times, and in some cases developing wider levels of peer accountability or, in some cases, reporting and debriefing on the practice in a more intentional way<sup>1</sup>

Referring to other case studies and consultations where lack of accountability, transparency and supervision have directly led to the abuse of minors, the commission is clear that this recommendation and others similar to it (e.g. Recommendations 10.6, 12.19, 16.5, 16.25, 16.46) are being put in place because historically, there has not been sufficient transparency and accountability to protect children. It would be naïve for us to assume that children were the only ones who have been put at risk by a lack of accountability in the past.

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<sup>1</sup> Bishop Tim Harris, quoted in Final Report, Making Institutions Child Safe, Vol 6, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017, p. 180.

We have already said that protection of the vulnerable is a godly motivation. But are accountability, transparency and supervision of ministry practice and behaviour based on Godly principles? I would say yes.

**Accountability :** In terms of accountability, we are obviously accountable to God or Christ for the work we do as his under shepherd. And we will give an account for our work in this respect as an individual (Rom 14:10-12) and as leader (Heb 13:17). Hebrews 13:17 also indicates that we must submit to and obey our leaders set over us and so Paul gave an account to the Jerusalem council about his ministry and theology to gain their ongoing endorsement of his ministry (Acts 15). Although it was the Antioch church that commissioned Paul and Barnabas to ministry (Acts 13:3), it was the council of apostles and elders based in Jerusalem under the leadership of Peter and James who oversaw (at least to some extent) the orthopraxy and orthodoxy of the early churches. In some ways, they reflect the role QB takes on in our association of churches.

In addition to being accountable to our leaders we also have a mutual accountability to each other. When God asked Cain where his brother was, the implication was that there was a mutuality of care for each other (Gen 4:4). This is apparent in Paul's teaching also where we are instructed to instruct each other (Rom 15:14) and admonish each other (Col 3:12-17). This is clearly evident in Paul's confrontation of Peter in Antioch (Gal 2:11f) where Paul was a ministry peer, not one with any official authority over Peter. Our model of Congregational governance is firmly rooted in the premise that congregations are accountable to their leaders, but our leaders are also accountable to their congregations because of our belief in the priesthood of all believers and the ability of all our members to discern God's voice and interpret his Scriptures for themselves.

As pastors, there are obviously many reasons we would offer ourselves up to be accountable to others. Some have to do with maintaining correct doctrine and teaching so that we will not lead others astray from God's truth (1 Tim 1:3, 4:16, Titus 2). Others have to do with not causing others to stumble or fall (Rom 14:13, 1 Cor 8:9, 10:32, 2 Cor 6:3). Others have to do with maintaining a good witness for Christ in the eyes of others (1 Thes 2:10). Accountability in these contexts is for the sake of those we minister to. Of course, there are other facets that focus the benefits for each of us personally such as how we will be judged by Jesus at the end of time (1 Pet 4:5). But "for the benefit of other's" seems to be a significant motivation for us seeking to be accountable.

Seeking to live to a high standard is clearly a godly principle. Being accountable to this end is also a godly and good principle and the scope of who we are to be accountable to is broad. It might be noted that accountability is always best offered by us individually rather than demanded of us by others.

**Transparency :** Transparency is also a biblical concept. We would link transparency to openness or honesty. The Bible condemns those who hide their sins and guilt (Prov 28:13). But by contrast, when we confess our sins, we receive forgiveness and cleansing (1 John 1:9). James would even suggest confession to each other is a necessary part of our health and healing (James 5:16). We know that we can sin in secret and that in every list of sins in Scripture includes those that are visible and those that are not (e.g. Gal 5:19f, Col 3:5-8, Rom 1:1:29f). But Paul reminds us that as followers of Jesus, we have been taken out of darkness and are brought into the light (Eph 5:8-14). We are to walk in the light where all evil is exposed for what it is.

But transparency is not just a moral thing. We should be transparent about our weaknesses and struggles. David models this in the Psalms for us as he wrestles with his weaknesses. Paul lists his life struggles (2 Cor 11:23-29), not to boast about them, but to recognise that he has weaknesses in and through which God can work (2 Cor 11:30, 12:10). Together we are to be transparent and be willing to bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2) but also share one another's joys (Rom 12:15). Transparency is a good thing.

**Supervised Practice:** And lastly, being supervised is a biblical concept. Supervision in its widest (non-technical) understanding is linked to the concepts of being trained or apprenticed and having your work overseen and monitored. In a typical work or ministry environment, the purpose of such supervision is to enhance the value or quality of our work as well as to help us grow in competence and confidence. We see this in the life of Samuel as he grew in the temple – he was supervised and trained in his life and ministry. We see this in the life of priests who were trained in the ceremonial law and practices related to temple worship. We see this in the experience of the Disciples who spent 3 years with Jesus watching and learning, before being released into ministry themselves. In this release, there was the chance to try what they had learned and then come back to debrief with Jesus and learn some more. We see this in the life of Paul as he was taken under the wing of Barnabas and trained for the ministry. Paul then took his own young proteges on and even when he released them to their own ministry, he kept checking back on them and providing input and support. This is how we come to have the Pastoral Epistles. The role of the Elders in the early church as overseers had a role of supervision of others who were a part of and ministering on behalf of the local church. Supervision (formally or informally) is a foundational part of our practice of discipleship or mentoring. And discipleship is more than just a means of acquiring practical skills for ministry. It is a way of developing character and ministry.

### **Relationship to the Normative, Restorative and Formative Functions of Professional Supervision.**

Each of these three practices which Professional Supervision seeks to provide are good and godly. And if we look at these practices of accountability, transparency and supervision of practice as discussed above, we see that they correlate closely to the key Normative, Restorative and Formative functions of Professional Supervision.

The normative function of Professional Supervision is very closely tied to the concept of accountability and somewhat to the concept of transparency as discussed above. We as leaders need to be accountable for and honest about our beliefs, our ministry practice and our wider lives. Paul writes to Timothy (1 Tim 4:16)

*Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.*

It is not just our doctrine that is important, but our life as well, our behaviour, if you prefer. We need to live lives that are above reproach (1 Tim 3:2) for the glory of God and so that our witness is not damaged. These things (our doctrine, behaviour and life) will be compared generally against Godly standards as we jointly understand them as well as against the specific requirements of our church policies and procedures and the wider policies of Queensland Baptist including the Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice.

The Formative Function of Professional Supervision is closely linked to the supervised practice discussion above where discipleship, development and growth is the focus. This function requires a humble spirit which accepts that we have room to grow and develop. Our growth may include growth in competence or gifting, in emotional resilience or in spiritual maturity. I would suggest that transparency also plays a part in Formation in identifying areas of deficiency or even sinful attitudes or behaviour that may need to be address. We can of course hide our flaws and struggles. But this is not being transparent and is counterproductive to God's desire to bring maturity and growth to us.

The Restorative Function primarily sits within the transparency concept above. It seeks to identify our brokenness (either morally or otherwise) and then to bring healing and health to that which needs it. Sometimes this may involve repentance. Sometimes this may involve tender loving care. Sometimes this may involve challenge. Sometimes this requires a change of perspective. But it always requires an openness to God's Spirit to come and to restore.

And so we would hold that even at its foundational basis, Professional Supervision enables and encourages godly reflection on and practice within the life and ministry of a Pastor.

### **Conclusion**

So where does all of this leave us. I believe that God is active in each of our lives to bring us to maturity in Christ. This work of formation or sanctification is a gradual and continuing one which we must willingly enter into. It is also one in which God can and does use many people, experiences and things to communicate his truth, will and purpose to us. There is no reason why God could not use Professional Supervisors to be a part of this if we are humbly open to his Spirits move through them.

I also believe that God's laws are given for our good, to help us relate to God and others well. These are needed because sinful people by nature are selfish and do not love God or others as we should. In the light of this, God also establishes governments over us for this same purpose. Through them we see order and protections put in place that benefit all of us but especially the most vulnerable. We would acknowledge in many cases that the laws introduced by these authorities are things that are Godly and good because they seek to legislate behaviour that at its basis is God honouring. The need for such authorities is an indictment upon the human condition and our failure to live up to our created purpose. I would also acknowledge that there is also the possibility of ungodly laws being imposed on people and in these instances, we need to decide what our reaction will be for God's ultimate glory.

I would argue that the laws and recommendations related to child safety have godly principles at their heart. The motivation of the Commissioners in regards Professional Supervision is based on the biblical principles of accountability, transparency and supervision. As presented in Scripture, these principles are not just beneficial, but are essential for us as Pastors. Professional Supervision as proposed has the potential to be a wonderful addition to our pastor's and churches support networks and is clearly in line with what we believe God would want for each one of us.

As I said at the outset, this is not meant to be the final word on these topics or the only perspective that is worth considering. I only offer up my thoughts to start the conversation. We would love to hear your reflection on these matters so together we can discern God's good, pleasing and perfect will (Rom 12:2).

Blessings,

David Elvery  
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Note: Many others have reflected on the theological basis of supervision and have highlighted different aspects to what has been presented above. If you would like to read any more of these, please contact me.