

# A Case for the Holy Spirit in Christian Counseling Praxis: The 5E Model

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## Abstract

Christian counseling has faced ongoing debates over its validity. Due to challenges between theological and psychological fields, its ethical integrity has also been questioned, with many practices still lacking sufficient research to ensure safety and effectiveness, despite attempts at professional regulation. This article introduces The 5E Model of Christian Counseling. It is a novel approach that emphasizes the pivotal role of the Holy Spirit in a journey of healing toward wholeness in Christ, with the aim of flourishing in one's community. The 5E Model integrates Churchill's (2010) exploration of biblical divine epiphanies in the OT with established counseling modalities and personal experience, positioning the Holy Spirit and the client at the center of the client's unfolding story. The model provides a Spirit-led, structured approach consisting of five distinct

steps: Evaluating, Externalizing, Exploring, Emending, and Empowering. Together, these steps form a clear path for Christian counselors to collaborate with the Holy Spirit in guiding clients toward Christlikeness and flourishing within their communities. The significance of this model lies in its potential to bridge gaps in existing counseling practices by offering an approach that supports clients in both their spiritual and psychological journeys. The 5E Model lays the groundwork for future empirical research by defining the scope and nature of the Christian counseling the model addresses and identifying key areas for further investigation. The South African Theological Seminary will incorporate this model into the training of Christian counselors.

## Conspectus

### Keywords

The 5E Model Christian counseling, Holy Spirit, community, Christlikeness, flourishing

### About the Author

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Bible-based. Christ-centred. Spirit-led.

## 1. Introduction

As Christian counseling evolved through the mid-twentieth century up to the present, debates around its validity and ethical sustainability were sparked by supposed inconsistencies between theology and psychology. Professional bodies were organized in an attempt to formalize the field, at best, or dictate it, at worst. Counseling practices were and still are generated to meet the immediate needs in diverse contexts but often without sufficient research to support safe practice.

As Christian counseling becomes increasingly utilized, it is crucial to develop models that are biblically, theologically, and psychologically robust. The 5E Model of Christian Counseling is an approach that addresses this need by offering a comprehensive framework that emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in the counseling process. This article provides a theoretical foundation for the 5E Model, delineating the scope of Christian counseling it serves and detailing each step of the model, with a particular focus on the Holy Spirit's involvement.

Christian counseling exists at the intersection of psychology and theology, offering a distinct approach to addressing the human condition within the framework of the Christian faith. It serves as a tool to accompany individuals on their journey toward healing and wholeness in Christ. At the South African Theological Seminary, Christian counseling is a Spirit-led journey alongside people towards healing in Christ and living their God-ordained purpose as redeemed bearers of God's image, flourishing in their community.

Within this field, numerous models of practice have emerged, varying in both effectiveness and emphasis. The 5E Model of Christian Counseling stands out by practically emphasizing the pivotal role of the Holy Spirit in each of its steps. The five steps—Evaluating, Externalizing, Exploring, Emending, and Empowering—facilitate the journey from self-awareness

to self-discovery through self-discipline. This model provides a structured approach that centers on the Spirit's work, guiding clients with a clear focus on Jesus Christ throughout the counseling process. This article starts with an overview of The 5E Model of Christian Counseling. Next, the foundational principles are discussed, and then the theological position. After that the theoretical position is the focus, looking at the conscience from both theological and psychological perspectives. To end with, the 5E Model is demonstrated, emphasizing the initiative of the Trinity, the client's journey, and the counselor's facilitation in the process.

## 2. Overview of The 5E Model of Christian Counseling

The 5E Model of Christian Counseling aims to guide individuals from self-awareness to self-discovery through self-discipline. It is rooted in the divine invitation to salvation and transformation, whereby the Holy Spirit engages people through micro-narrative cycles across their lifespan. The model serves those who are navigating life towards Christ or are already on the journey to Christlikeness. It focuses on individuals who do not require a psychiatric diagnosis for mental illness<sup>1</sup> but seek spiritual and psychological growth under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

## 3. Foundational Principles

It is the Holy Spirit who facilitates self-awareness<sup>2</sup> by exposing a problem within the client. The Spirit reveals the client's nature as God's image-bearer

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1. In this case clients are referred to mental health professionals.

2. Self-awareness takes place when someone becomes aware of an area of their lives that God wants them to practice repentance or forgiveness and/or to accept his will. (See §6.2.1 for more).

(self-discovery)<sup>3</sup> and empowers the client with the necessary self-discipline for transformative growth towards their divinely intended identity. The 5E Model of Christian Counseling assists Christian counselors and their clients in discerning the Spirit's work and cooperating with him.

As individuals become aware of their challenges (self-awareness), many learn to listen to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and progress towards Christlikeness. This process is referred to in this model as a micro-narrative cycle—a segment of their life narrative aligning with God's overarching metanarrative. Some individuals may require assistance in navigating through a micro-narrative cycle when unresolved issues hinder their progress, leading to distress or stagnation. People living in the knowledge of their own sin waste away (Ps 32:3–5), their health is affected (Ps 38:3–5), and they are unable to flourish (Prov 28:13). Furthermore, the consequences of living in a fallen world, compounded by the effects of others' sins, can result in emotional and psychological turmoil, physical trauma from betrayal or violence, fractured relationships, and fear (Ps 55:12–14, Jer 20:10, Mic 7:5–6).

For the purposes of this model, the conscience serves as the crucial interface through which the Spirit of God connects with the human spirit. When distorted or blocked, the conscience impedes the individual's ability to reflect, listen, and make constructive choices, often exacerbating challenges and occasionally leading to significant psychological distress.

The 5E Model of Christian Counseling integrates insights from Churchill's (2010) exploration of biblical divine epiphanies and incorporates principles from narrative therapy (Morgan 2000, White 2007, White and Epston 1990), logotherapy (Costello 2019, Frankl 2006, Shantall 2004),

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3. Self-discovery is an ongoing progressive realization of who one is in Christ through purposeful kingdom living (§6.2.3)

and biblical counseling.<sup>4</sup> With God as the initiator of the interaction and transformation, the model centers on the client's conscience and its journey of connection with the Spirit. The 5E model places the Holy Spirit and the client, rather than the counselor, at the forefront of the therapeutic process. The steps of Evaluating, Externalizing, Exploring, Emending, and Empowering are crafted from these therapies to aid Christian counselors in partnering with the Spirit within God's metanarrative, fostering spiritual connectivity between humanity and the Triune God (Gal 4:4–7, Rom 8:14–17).

#### **4. Theological Position**

The theological assumptions underpinning the 5E Model include the understanding of the Trinity as inherently social, relational, and communal (Harper and Metzger 2012, 22). God actively pursues humanity through creation, incarnation, and the Church. Due to humanity's choice of independence, sin subsequently entered the narrative. However, God continues to unfold his metanarrative through Israel, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the birth of the Christian Church via the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the writing and preservation of the Holy Scriptures. God remains in a dynamic relationship with his creation, guiding them on a transformational journey that culminates in Christ's second coming and the wedding supper of the Lamb.

God has not distanced himself from his creation; rather, he actively searches for, knows, loves, and gives himself for humanity. Every day of every person is known by God even before they come into being (Ps 139). Before

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4. Biblical counseling asserts that Scripture is a sufficient and relevant authority in counseling conversations (Association of Certified Biblical Counselors n.d.)

the foundation of the earth, God was mindful of humanity, intending for them to be “created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph 2:10 NIV).<sup>5</sup> Despite humanity’s depravity, individuals are afforded the opportunity to be found by and respond to the grace of God. When someone makes the choice to enter a relationship with God it is as John Mahoney, quoted in Levering (2021, 196), states: “man is ultimately alone with God in the sanctuary of his conscience.”

In postmodernism culture, ignorance prevails as humanity is under the power of sin (Rom 3:9–19). As people live by the flesh and not the Spirit, their conscience is desensitized and becomes less responsive to the Spirit of God.<sup>6</sup> To resist the Spirit is to experience bio-psycho-social-spiritual dissonance between one’s created design and a fallen lifestyle, which negatively influences the conscience. This leads to progressive blindness—blindness to the standard that God has set and a lack of self-awareness in how one is measuring up to that standard. The inherent corrupted human nature gives power to the flesh, requiring God’s grace to redeem it from condemnation (Calvin 2006, 1311). Those who accept Christ and have his righteousness imputed to them enter a process of sanctification—the Spirit bringing awareness to layers of the self that require his personal transformational touch. The “conscience becomes a sharpening of the vision of *phronesis*”<sup>7</sup> (Weidenfeld 2011, 254). It can be argued that the conscience is shaped and transformed for greater wisdom and discernment, as it is influenced by the Spirit, who communes with the spirits of humans (Rom 8:16, 1 Cor 2). The rules and norms of God’s kingdom become the standard

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5. Unless otherwise indicated all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

6. For helpful discussions on the Holy Spirit and sin, see Grudem (1994, chs. 24, 30).

7. Weidenfeld (2011, 254–276) explains Heidegger’s appropriation of Aristotle’s *phronesis* expressing it as existential practical insight and authentic self-awareness emphasizing the role of conscience in circumspection, guiding individuals towards an authentic existence.

against which self-awareness is held to account through the conscience. In this sense, Aristotle’s *phronesis* (Aristotle 2022) finds true expression when self-awareness, as defined by this article, is held up against God’s commands and statutes.

The Mosaic Law made humans aware of God’s standards and their need for a Savior (Rom 7). There is relevance in considering God’s initiative in divine encounters that may awaken an awareness of one’s fallen state. The purpose of this awareness is the revelation of God, the realization of one’s need for a Savior, and the recognition and acceptance of the invitation of Christ into God’s family. This article integrates the work of Timothy Churchill (2010) on the narrative structure of the divine-human encounters throughout the OT. When God encounters humanity, a narrative pattern is evident: “introduction, appearance, message, departure, and conclusion” (Churchill 2010, 37). In his book (2010, chs. 2, 5), he proposes that there are two event patterns, one initiated by God and the other by people. This article suggests that even human-initiated encounters are prompted by God lovingly reaching out through the sinful nature of humanity to fulfil his plans and purposes.

When God reaches out, both the conscious and subconscious are touched. While logic and intellect may distort the reality of God pursuing humanity on a conscious level, subconsciously every human will be touched and respond in one of two ways. They will either respond by their fallen nature (the DNA of Adam) or by the nature they have from being created in God’s image, as they long for alignment with God, which generates self-awareness. The 5E Model borrows from the patterns of biblical narratives (Churchill 2010, 37–40) as a tool for the Christian counselor’s toolbox. The 5E Model of Christian Counseling is Bible-based, Christ-centered, and Spirit-led, situating the etiology of problems in sin—either the sin of the client, the sin of others perpetrated against the client, or living in a fallen

world. God has worked in humanity and continues to do so. Those who choose to accept the sacrifice of Jesus begin a transformational journey with the Holy Spirit. For those who cannot yet hear the call, or for those who have heard but are stagnating, Christian counseling comes alongside them in a journey of finding wholeness in Christ and flourishing.

## 5. Theoretical Position

Wholeness and flourishing do not necessarily equate to perfect health. The World Health Organization (2020, 1) defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” Christian counseling integrates this bio-psycho-social model and adds *spiritual* wellness, emphasizing the spiritual component inherent in humanity. This study contends that achieving the WHO’s complete well-being is not necessary for wholeness and flourishing in Christ. It suggests that the conscience, a non-physical aspect of humanity, can relate to God’s Spirit, facilitating spiritual wellness towards wholeness in Christ, and flourishing in their community.

Borrowing from Logotherapy (Frankl 1988, Graber 2019, Shantall 2020), the 5E Model considers the attributes of the spiritual aspect of humanity, such as the capacity to choose, be responsible, and self-transcend. This part of the human can override instinct where free will exists, encompassing both freedom and responsibility (Fabry 2021, 1–10). This model views the conscience as the medium through which the Holy Spirit engages humanity. This interaction makes spiritual transformation possible. The Holy Spirit’s influence on human wellness through such transformation is foundational for incorporating cooperation with the Holy Spirit in Christian counseling.

### 5.1 The conscience from a psychological perspective

The word *conscience* comes from Latin. Throughout history, humanity’s understanding of the nature and purpose of the conscience have adapted according to the circumstances of the time (Strohm 2011, 17). Sigmund Freud’s personality theory was based on the dynamic between three internal constructs, the id, ego, and the superego.<sup>8</sup> Throughout his work, Freud battled what he considered the bad conscience, or “punitive father” (Strohm 2011, 90), pitting it against moral truth and suggesting that its sole purpose was to inflict suffering on the ego through guilt and anxiety in an often vain effort to abate the id’s impulses. He named it the ego-ideal or superego claiming that the more moral a man is, the more he will suffer from his conscience (91–94).

From Freudian thought one understands that the superego was motivated by aspirations to meet society’s ideal as well as influential voices from one’s past, e.g., parents, grandparents, and the church. This study agrees that conscience uses a standard and inflicts this upon the heart and mind of the person. It further adds that considerable distress and moral challenge befall those without a Spirit-led ethical compass to guide their actions, and who lack the support of the Spirit to navigate their moral failings.

As religious thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries integrated—somewhat unsuccessfully—the idea of conscience with morality, Freud continued his battle with the conscience, as did Dostoevsky

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<sup>8</sup>. According to Freudian theory, the id represents innate, instinctual drives that seek immediate gratification of basic needs, the ego serves to mediate and balance these impulses with the constraints of reality, and the superego embodies societal and moral values, including the conscience, which punishes deviations from these internalized standards (Sayers 2020, 142–144).

and Nietzsche.<sup>9</sup> These three considered conscience as an unnecessary burden and did not see conscience “as an unproblematic agent of self-improvement or an unstinting advocate of public morality” (Strohm 2011, 59). In their anti-conscience protest, it is often unclear if the enemy was conscience per se or the institution of the church towards which many of their arrows were shot. While not succumbing to the latter, all three warmed—even if only a degree or two—to conscience in their later works. Freud, cited in Strohm (2011, 72), says, “a man, when he cannot be satisfied with his ego itself, may nevertheless be able to find satisfaction in the ego-ideal [conscience] which has been differentiated out of the ego.” Apparently, the conscience does have the capacity for “self-regulation and self-esteem” (72).

Although Nietzsche was committed to dismissing the impositions of conscience and pushing for science over religion, he conveyed his desire—and even the possibility—for a redeemed conscience with high regard for integrity (Strohm 2011, 97). Perhaps Augustine’s fourth-century capacity to observe his own thoughts and actions, which Perkins, quoted in Strohm (2011, 88–89), later called, the “second self” might answer Nietzsche’s assailing conscience, offering a monitor for both action and thought. Even so, for each of those mentioned above, as a construct of the mind conscience bore him battle, not peace, in the aftermath of thought or action. The measuring rod of guilt, religion, and/or authoritative figures of one’s

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9. These philosophers influenced the position of conscience in the field of psychology. Freud considers conscience as part of the superego inflicting conflict on the inner man (Strohm 2011, 90–94). Fyodor Dostoevsky, however, regards conscience as a deeply personal struggle with spiritual and ethical crises within a person’s character, causing existential conflict. Friedrich Nietzsche rather considered conscience as an oppressive force imposed by religious and societal constructs, oppressing human desire and individuality (Stellino 2015).

past did not offer conscience a clear directive to motivate the man towards flourishing.

Cognitive behaviorist Jean Piaget (1932) introduced the idea of a conscience that is dependent on cognitive development upon which moral theorist Lawrence Kohlberg (1981) built the development of the moral self. Erich Fromm (2013) introduced the idea that the conscience responds to displeasing authorities, even God—though supporting the humanistic conscience. Later philosophers encouraged delving deeper to comprehend the conscience in its tangible and real existential complexity and earnestly sought an understanding of its existence. Conscience exists, can monitor thought and action, is influential and influenced, and, as a human capacity, it can err. If one’s thoughts and actions are shaped by the conscience what (or Who) is afforded the power to shape the conscience and to what end? This article argues that the Holy Spirit can engage the conscience in a transformational journey toward flourishing in Christ. This connection is where the pivotal role of the Holy Spirit in a Christian counseling process can be explored.

## *5.2 The conscience from a theological perspective*

Grudem (1994, 9) argues that “all people ever born have some knowledge of God’s will through their conscience,” although this perception is distorted by living in a fallen world. Even unbelievers possess a conscience that is sufficiently aware of right and wrong, though it is significantly limited without God’s grace in Jesus. A conscience may be “suppressed or hardened [due to] cultural influences and personal circumstances” (Grudem 1994, 95) and can be seared and defiled (1 Tim 4:2, Titus 1:15).

Through original sin, the fallen conscience operates independently from God. It is neither the voice of God, as suggested by the Vatican, nor is it “of the devil,” as asserted by Bonhoeffer (Burkholder 2022, 83–84).

Rather, the conscience is that aspect of human nature that makes us fully human and serves as the place where Christians encounter the Holy Spirit, being responsible before God (Levering 2021, 5). It may become blinded over time through habitual sin, which can explain humanity's capacity for atrocities. However, it can also be the voice calling individuals "to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil," according to the *Gaudium et Spes*, quoted in Levering (2021, 13). The conscience can retain the holy Scriptures and draw upon them as the law written on the hearts of God's children (Rom 2:15). Its efficacy hinges on the centrality of the cross, where restoration and sanctification are found in Christ.

The conscience calls humanity back to its original design as God's creatures, engaging in a process of realignment within God's metanarrative—his rule (Levering 2021, 16). Since humanity cannot affect this realignment on its own, God has to call them to it. Individuals who respond to this call enter the common life of believers, a collective conscience, which is influenced by individual Spirit-led choices (Millar 2022a, 273–274). George Tyrrell, an influential Jesuit priest and theologian who was excommunicated from the Catholic Church for his progressive Modernist views, advocated that the conscience is an "ethical ideal" that ought to be acknowledged as "divine" (Levering 2021, 21). He suggested that "in the measure that one yields oneself to the guidance of Conscience, its direction (and therefore its self-revelation) becomes more abundant, more clear, and more delicately discerning" (21). Tyrrell further argued that "all Christian doctrine, rooted in a 'revelation' that speaks to one's conscience, must be measured by conscience" (21). While this article acknowledges the capacity of conscience from the former statement expressed by Tyrrell, it does not accept the latter. The conscience should not be the ultimate measure of individual or collective truth. The conscience errs; it is not infallible (Frankl 2000, 118). This highlights the pivotal role of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture refers to a weak conscience (1 Cor 8:7) that can be guilty (Heb 10:22) or corrupted (Titus 1:15). Though it may possess the capacity for self-reflection and conviction (Rom 2:15), it is not inherently trustworthy. German biblical scholar Rudolf Bultmann, cited in Levering (2021, 26), suggests that the conscience is connected to both the mind (*νοῦς*), which Scripture commands to be subjected to Christ (2 Cor 10:5), and the capacity to discern right from wrong and engage in self-awareness. Bultmann claims that for the conscience to be obedient to God and realize its full potential, God has given the Holy Spirit to the "deepest self...our conscience" (Levering 2021, 27). This article argues that a mature conscience is only achievable through the Spirit's influence when he connects to the human spirit, potentially overriding emotion and thought. Conversely, repeated sin can diminish the sensitivity of the conscience (Grudem 1994, 95). According to Brosend (2020, 550),

We shape conscience by telling stories. The stories are grounded in scripture and theology, in experience and observation, and help the listener experience various dimensions of our core commitments as they discern what their own core commitments are. The stories are indeed wings to the soul, the way we tune our hearts.

It is also relevant to consider the views of Berkhof, cited in Grudem (1994, 441), on the dangers of living in dissonance with the testimony of the Holy Spirit, who illuminates the grace of God in the conscience. The conscience is cleansed by Christ's blood (Heb 9:14) and Jesus is recognized as the only Lord of the conscience, bound by the Scriptures (Grudem 1994, 1072). The conscience, influenced by the Holy Spirit, is transformed towards flourishing in Christ. A person whose conscience is disconnected from the Holy Spirit may struggle through the transformation process and seek assistance from

a Christian counselor. The 5E Model of Christian Counseling provides a facilitation process aimed at centering the Holy Spirit and the client within the client's story, promoting flourishing.

## 6. Application of the 5E Model

Although all three perspectives unfold simultaneously, The 5E Model of Christian Counseling is considered below from three perspectives: the Trinity working in humanity through divine initiatives, the journey of the client through a micro-narrative cycle, and the journey of the counselor with the client through the steps of the 5E Model.

### 6.1 *The Trinity's divine initiative journey*

The Trinity is always at work in humanity. God is “a social rather than a solitary being” (Chester and Timmis 2008, 40). He wants to be known by his creation which was designed to be in a relationship with him (Tyler 2019, 28), Humanity's *imago Dei* finds its completion in its “communal and relational” identity (Harper and Metzger 2012, 22). Humanity is an extension of the Trinity's love and exists because God is social, relational, and communal. Churchill's (2010) work on biblical divine initiatives offers a framework for exploring God's consistent pursuit of his creation in the biblical narratives. His five stages—introduction, appearance, message, departure, and conclusion—are adapted for Christian counseling praxis in what the 5E Model calls *micro-narrative cycles*.

#### 6.1.1 Stage 1: Introduction

According to Churchill (2010, 37), the introduction of a biblical divine initiative in biblical narratives is the background and setting of God's interaction with humanity. For Christian counseling praxis, the first stage is similar, though not as obvious. The client may not be aware of where God

initiated the interaction, though they are often cognizant of where or when they became aware of the problem. It is a self-awareness<sup>10</sup> phase for the client in which the Christian counselor facilitates the client's evaluation<sup>11</sup> of the problem and helps them see what God is revealing about the background and setting of his initiative.

#### 6.1.2 Stage 2: Appearance

In Churchill's (2010, 37) work, the appearance stage in a biblical divine initiative is the initial contact between the heavenly beings and the humans. For Christian counseling praxis, the appearance of God in one's life is not usually the reason the client sought assistance from a Christian counselor. The client's presenting problem is generally the catalyst that draws them into conversation with the counselor. However, the counselor knows that the Spirit must be involved in the life of the client for them to seek healing and wholeness from a Christian counselor. The counselor facilitates the externalization<sup>12</sup> of the problem so that the client can clarify their identity separate from the problem and discern, by the Spirit, the next steps in their healing. This too is part of the self-awareness phase of the client's journey.

#### 6.1.3 Stage 3: Message

The message stage of biblical divine initiatives (Churchill 2010, 38) may include confrontation but always involves interaction. In Christian counseling praxis, the message stage may involve conviction towards repentance, forgiveness, and/or acceptance of God's will. The message is discerned as the problem is deconstructed, and the client's choices are

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10. See §6.2.1

11. See §6.3.1

12. See §6.3.2



considered. Exploring<sup>13</sup> the Spirit's message creates an awareness of God's invitation and the client's responsibility in the healing journey.

#### 6.1.4 Stage 4: Departure

Churchill (2010, 38) explains that the departure stage of a biblical divine initiative is the departure of the parties involved in the interaction. For Christian counseling praxis, the departure includes emending<sup>14</sup> one's story to align with God's plans and purposes for the client's life. The client is departing from the effects and influences of the problem, and possibly even the therapeutic journey, but not from God's pursuing love. Self-discipline<sup>15</sup> is required to stop, think, listen, and choose God's will, and thus, the self-discipline phase of the client's journey is part of the departure stage of the divine initiative.

#### 6.1.5 Stage 5: Conclusion

The conclusion of a biblical divine initiative illuminates the immediate effects of the encounter (Churchill 2010, 38–39). In Christian counseling praxis, a micro-narrative cycle concludes with the client understanding more of who they are in Christ and the life they are called to live. The conclusion stage of God's initiative is thus the self-discovery<sup>16</sup> phase of the client's journey where they are empowered<sup>17</sup> to consider their choices, commit to what God is leading, and celebrate who they are becoming as a self-transcending participant in the kingdom of God.

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13. See §6.3.3

14. See §6.3.4

15. See §6.2.2

16. See §6.2.3

17. See §6.3.5

## 6.2 *The client's journey through a micro-narrative cycle*

### 6.2.1 Phase 1: Self-awareness

Humanity is distorted because of the DNA of Adam. However, they are invited into the family of God by the redeeming death and resurrection of Jesus (Rom 3:23–24). Self-awareness is the first phase of the counseling encounter for the client, when they become aware of God who works in sinful humans. This event is the divine catalyst for self-awareness, when humans have a chance to use their unique human capacity for free will to respond. Self-awareness takes place when someone becomes aware of an area of their lives where God wants them to practice repentance or forgiveness and/or to accept his will. Their response determines their growth and movement towards Christlikeness.

### 6.2.2 Phase 2: Self-discipline

Life is a continuing conversation between God and humanity within his metanarrative (Millar 2022a, 278). While this conversation has a beginning, it has no end for those who call on the name of Jesus. He communes with his people (John 14:23, Rev 3:20), made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and facilitated by the Spirit of God. Christian counselors are invited to enter this conversation to assist in reconnecting communication between the Spirit and a broken, hurting, or struggling client. For the client, there is a message in this micro-narrative cycle that continues their conversation with God. The counselor helps facilitate the connection or re-connection between the Spirit of God and the client's conscience.

A client with a problem is experiencing self-awareness and may be hurt, broken, or struggling. If they cannot repent, forgive, and/or accept God's will, they may not live the fullest possible version of themselves (self-discovery) on this side of the eschaton. The Christian counselor enters

an existing micro-narrative cycle where there is an ongoing conversation involving the person and the Spirit. The divine-human interaction may not be discerned by the client due to the dominant influence of the problem. Regardless, there is a message from the Spirit to the client that needs to be uncovered.

The message stage of the counseling encounter involves the counselor entering a conversation with the client, not to find the message for them, but to facilitate the clearing of their conscience so they can discern the message themselves. This is done by evaluating the problem within God's plans and purposes for humanity (the metanarrative). The problem is externalized so that the divinely initiated message might be explored.

The counselor then facilitates the emending of the client's story to realign with God's plans and purposes. They empower the client to take responsibility for a self-disciplined life, continuing the conversation with the Spirit, and discovering more of their identity as a child of God in the body of Christ. The journey between self-awareness and self-discovery clears the conscience and discerns the message through self-discipline toward Christlikeness by progressing through the model's 5Es: 1) Evaluating, 2) Externalizing, 3) Exploring, 4) Emending, and 5) Empowering.

### 6.2.3 Phase 3: Self-discovery

Self-discovery is an ongoing progressive realization of one's identity in Christ through purposeful kingdom living. Flourishing in one's community involves embodying one's redeemed image as God's image bearer and embracing the Spirit's leading in uniquely designed tasks (Eph 2:10). According to Messer (2021, 285),

Human flourishing is understood as the fulfilment of God's good purposes for human creatures and includes the dimensions of relation

with God, relationships with others, living a physically embodied and integrated life, and living out a particular vocation in a particular place and time.

Within Churchill's (2010, 38) biblical divine initiatives the departure stage is the separation of interacting parties, and the conclusion is the stage that "resolves the epiphany by describing the immediate effects of the appearance on the recipient." In Christian counseling, sessions and micro-narrative cycles may end, but the process remains connected to God's metanarrative through ongoing self-discovery. "Through the inbreaking of the Holy Spirit in the context of love, a person may begin to flourish in both the 'already' and 'not yet'" (King and Baer 2022, 38). Marguerat (2015, 375) adds that the Spirit of God connects to the world through the spirit of mankind. Regarding the flesh and spirit, he (375) notes that "These two forces compete for the human body. Yet, such a dualism is not by nature ontological but historical: one remains capable of choosing between remaining a prisoner of mortal flesh or letting the Spirit of God dwell in him (Rom 8:10)."

Aligning one's life with God's revelations through choices made by the spirit, not the flesh, fosters continuous self-discovery. Each micro-narrative cycle aligns more of the self with God's metanarrative. A conscience that is deeply connected to the Spirit keeps individuals aware of both what Jesus saved them from and what he saved them for (King and Baer 2022, 38-49). A transforming believer is a flourishing individual who desires God above all (Ezek 36).

Christian counseling should align with God's plans and purposes for individuals, much like chapters within a larger story or micro-narratives within God's metanarrative. Self-discovery is an unfolding journey of stories toward flourishing in one's community. However, considering flourishing as an end goal is a mistake, as it is as elusive as happiness when pursued

directly. Flourishing is a fruit of self-discovery when the goal is loving God and others. This progressive reality naturally leads to self-transcendence, encompassing identity in Christ, freedom with responsibility, and collective existence towards Christlikeness.

## *6.3 The counselor's facilitation journey*

### 6.3.1 Step 1: Evaluating

The Evaluating step is an evaluation of the problem in light of Christlikeness. It is a collaborative process between the client's knowledge and the counselor's active listening to understand the problem in relation to God's ideal. Since the Holy Spirit initiates change, it is believed that the Spirit reveals both the intricacies of the problem and the truth of life in Christ (John 14:26, 1 Thess 1:5–6). This step is not for counselors to dictate to clients about their problem or Christlikeness, but to facilitate the client's evaluation of the problem in light of Christlikeness, guided by the client's knowledge and the Spirit.

Objectivity for both the counselor and client is rarely attainable. Therefore, the process involves considering what the client has become aware of in relation to God's plans and purposes. Evaluation occurs in two parts: evaluating the problem and evaluating the divine initiative. The evaluation is done by the client through Spirit-led questions posed by the counselor. The client first considers their knowledge of the problem. This is self-awareness—things the Spirit has illuminated that require transformation. Then they consider their knowledge of God's plans and purposes. This is self-discovery—their identity as a child of God, created for good works.

Active listening (Motzkau and Lee 2023, 3–25), especially double listening, is crucial in Christian counseling. This involves considering both the client's and God's perspectives. For the Christian counselor, double

listening means facilitating the client's understanding of their story through conversations that evaluate their current self. This process focuses on what is said and facilitates evaluation rather than interpretation. It assesses the introduction and appearance stages of the divine initiative in the client's micro-narrative in relation to God's metanarrative. Attention has necessarily been given to parallel stories.

### 6.3.2 Step 2: Externalizing

By the time a Christian counselor is consulted, the problem often becomes deeply integrated into the person's identity, resulting in a problem-saturated view of life, including relationships with God and others (Kwok 2016, 201–212). In this state, discerning the Spirit's message within the micro-narrative is challenging. Therefore, facilitating the externalization of the problem helps clients gain perspective on its context, history, and influences, enabling them to make responsible choices such as repentance, forgiveness, or acceptance. This process enhances their ability to discern the divine initiative through a more receptive conscience.

For the Christian counselor, double listening involves facilitating a conversation that distinguishes the client's identity from the problem, focusing on its current context. This approach emphasizes attentiveness to the client's words, facilitating externalization rather than interpretation. Double listening is crucial as it allows the counselor to hear not only the problem's power, history, and effects (Morgan 2000, 33–44) but also to identify gaps in the problem-saturated narrative where the issue is less prominent. These gaps reveal the Spirit's influence, as the problem does not overshadow the conscience as much. Insights from this process are integrated into the subsequent steps of the counseling model.

In the Externalizing step, questions prompt the client to view the problem as a separate entity, such as “imagin[ing] the problem being a

‘thing’ that is sitting somewhere else in the room” (Morgan 2000, 18). This approach allows the conscience to better recognize the problem’s history, effects, and context. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for the client to identify where the Spirit has been active during the introduction and appearance stages of the micro-narrative cycle. This stage often reveals where the problem entered the client’s life and where the Spirit and conscience have been in communion. As the client investigates the problem through externalization, they “establish a context where the [client] experiences themselves as separate from the problem” (Morgan 2000, 24). From this context, the client can reconsider their identity in Christ as a child of God, made in his image. The conscience can connect or reconnect with the Spirit of God to discern the message of the micro-narrative cycle in the next step.

It is important to note that externalizing is a learned skill. A Christian counselor who understands and responsibly applies this exercise will effectively manage this step. Neglecting or misapplying externalization—by focusing on the person rather than the problem—can lead to missing crucial information needed for subsequent steps. Essentialist approaches that shift the conversational power from the client to the counselor can undermine the client’s responsibility and empowerment in later steps of the model. Externalization does not dismiss emotions or alternative perspectives but directs attention to specifics that aid in separating the problem from the person. This step is crucial for providing clients with resources and opportunities not accessible while immersed in a problem-saturated narrative (Morgan 2000, 13–14; White 2007, 39). It helps clients shift from viewing themselves as victims to recognizing their inherent worth and responsibility to follow the Holy Spirit toward Christlikeness.

### 6.3.3 Step 3: Exploring

The Exploring step is akin to uncovering a part of a story that exists but is untold. It is as if a conversation is taking place, and some of the words or phrases have been left out and need to be discerned. Those who are unable to discern it due to, for example, trauma, shock, illness, and hurt, look for a Christian counselor to assist in uncovering the message and responding to the Spirit’s invitation, and so live by the Spirit and not by the flesh. Once the problem has been externalized, the client may discern the message from the Spirit more clearly.

The message of the micro-narrative cycle is based on the Spirit’s initiation of transformation towards Christlikeness—the preferred self. Once the problem is externalized, the client is in a better position to consider the preferred self. In narrative therapy, this is a version of themselves and their story that they would prefer (White and Epston 1990, 14, 76; Morgan 2000, 127; White 2007, 103). In Christian counseling, the preferred self is who God has designed them to be, and where they are most likely to flourish (2 Tim 1:9).

During the previous step (Externalizing), the counselor asked questions specifically about the problem—its influences, and effects. Then double listening included hearing the answers to these questions, while also listening for gaps and weaknesses in the problem-saturated story—times when the problem was not as dominant. In these gaps, the Spirit’s work is most evident to the client, as the problem does not clutter the conscience as significantly. While the counselor did not ask questions about it in the previous step, they do in this step, listening for the emerging message regarding the preferred self—as God prefers them to be.

Now the counselor listens to the client’s words and asks Spirit-led questions that link the Spirit-leading in the counsellor to the client’s recently spoken words. They ask about knowledge that informs the problem

or preferred-self. Borrowing from the narrative practice of deconstruction, the Christian counselor questions the underlying ideas, beliefs, and assumptions that inform their problem or preferred-self (White and Epston 1990, 14, 76; Morgan 2000, 127; White 2007, 103). In *Christian counseling*, the preferred reality is that God's plans and purposes take precedence over the problem-saturated story. The client, and not the counselor, is to discern the plans and purposes of God in so far as they have been revealed through this and previous divine initiatives.

It is assumed that the same Spirit in the counselor and client, who is also present in the session, is consistent with God's plans and purposes (John 16:13, Rom 8:26–27). Thus, the Spirit-led question will link the client to the message that the Spirit is revealing (1 Cor 2:10–11) and the client can begin to discern. This is done by giving attention to what has been externalized; not interpreting but facilitating an exploration of that which informs the problem. As the problem is deconstructed through Spirit-led questioning, the message emerges.

Counselors who are led by the Spirit discern the Spirit through their conscience. Even the most spiritually disciplined Christian counselor's conscience may err as it is human to err (Shantall 2020, 43, 260). The Christian counselor might interpret the Spirit incorrectly, so the leading of the Spirit must be brought into the session in the form of a question that links to the client's present conversation, using the client's words. In doing so, the potential for misleading is reduced, and the client is connected to what the Spirit is revealing to them, even though they were not initially fully able to discern it.

#### 6.3.4 Step 4: Emending

The Emending step falls into the departure stage of the divine initiative. It is not exactly like the biblical divine epiphanies of the OT where the parties

physically depart (Churchill 2010, 38), but there is a departure of sorts. A shift in influence transpires in this stage as the problem becomes less dominant. As the voice of the problem becomes less central in the client's journey, the conversation between the client and the Spirit through the conscience becomes more pronounced.

Emending refers to correcting or improving a written text (Collins English Dictionary n.d.). In this Christian counseling model, this word is used with the sense of aligning, correcting, improving, enhancing, or clarifying. The model uses the word to explain the response of the client to the message they discerned in the Exploring step. The message in the micro-narrative cycle is an invitation of sanctification towards Christlikeness. Sanctification is a realignment of the sinful person with God's original design, including a new heart (Ezek 36:26), a clean conscience, and an effective, empowered life (Heb 13:18, 1 Tim 1:5). Emending is the response of the client to the message of sanctification that invites them to take responsibility and be self-disciplined. Clients are invited to stop, think, listen, and choose their response to the message (Millar 2022b). The Christian counselor facilitates a meaning-centered conversation, much like the Socratic dialogue utilized by Viktor Frankl (Costello 2019, ch. 3), towards flourishing as a child of God.

Flourishing includes embracing the unique tasks that God ordained before the foundation of the world (Eph 2:10, 2 Tim 1:9). The response to the message is the step forward from who the client is today to who they are becoming as they conform to the image of Christ through conscious acts of obedience and surrender to God (Rom 8:28–30). This often includes repentance, forgiveness, and/or acceptance as responses to messages concerning one's own sin, perpetrated sin, and/or living in a fallen world.

For the Christian counselor, this step involves listening to be able to facilitate the client's re-authoring of their preferred story. The client's

preferred story is one that aligns or realigns with the metanarrative of God—his plans and purposes for their life. The counselor bears the message in mind, while also considering the tension between the client’s self-awareness and self-discovery as they listen to the client’s chosen self-disciplined response.

In Logotherapy, Socratic dialogue is useful in the search for meaning (Fabry 2021, 11–36). For Christians, meaning is found in Christ—living in a relationship with God and living as the person God designed them to be. The usefulness of Socratic dialogue, as discussed by Costello (2019, 51–73) and Fabry (2021, 11–36), is that it considers the spiritual reality of the client, and what the client already intuitively knows. Thus the aim of Christian counseling, similar to Logotherapy, is “not [to] tell [clients] what the meanings in their lives are, but rather to elicit the wisdom that is hidden within the spirit of each [client]” (Fabry 2021, 11). As the Spirit communes with their spirit (Rom 8:16, John 3:5–8) the Christian counselor facilitates the invitation of the Spirit to respond to the message by the spirit and not the flesh.

In this step, it can be tempting for the Christian counselor to give advice to the client regarding what needs to be aligned and how to do it. This would be a mistake because it is based on the counselor’s own personal life experiences, fallible conscience, culture, environment, and other influencing narratives. Furthermore, it does not facilitate the connection between the client and the Spirit, which is essential in the sanctification journey. The Spirit and the client co-author the client’s preferred self, realigning the client’s story with the metanarrative of God. The responsibility, however small, lies with the client.

### 6.3.5 Step 5: Empowering

To exist is not enough. Trying to live well is not enough. It is when lives have a purpose that humanity flourishes (Shantall 2004, 111). However, flourishing as individuals in and of itself is not the focus, “but rather... sharing [forever] in the divine beatitude as members of the family of God” (Levering 2021, 195).

In Churchill’s (2010, 38) biblical divine initiative stages, the Empowering step falls into the concluding stage of the biblical divine initiative. It is the conclusion of a micro-narrative cycle that has borne fruit through conversation and action with immediate effect on the client. However, the Empowering step is more than simply leading a life separated from or less influenced by the problem. It is living as the preferred self in a unique God-intended life. It is hearing God’s invitation, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” and being empowered to respond, “Here am I, send me!” (Isa 6:8).

Each one has a unique role to play in the plans and purposes of God. Each one belongs (2 Tim 1:9). All are included (1 Tim 2:3–6, John 3:16–17). According to Viktor Frankl (1986, 294), being human is living a fulfilling life of meaning and purpose through self-transcendence, from which even self-actualization and happiness may ensue, though they cannot be pursued.

It is within the context of self-transcendence that individuals experience the areas of life where meaning is available. For example, self-discovery, choice, uniqueness, and responsibility are often experienced through self-transcendence. (Graber 2019, 80)

When a client’s preferred self—which according to God’s design would be self-transcending—is lived out in their community, it is a life lived free and responsible, in the ongoing discovery of God, self, and others. The Christian

counseling encounter ought not omit this vital step in the journey towards Christlikeness.

Reducing or removing the problem through the previously mentioned steps does not necessarily alter a person's life trajectory since the next problem is just around the corner. One is called to live a life of self-discovery as a unique person, created and empowered for specific tasks. The conversation between the client and the Spirit continues, facilitated by the Christian counselor. Empowerment is not what the counselor does, but what the client is empowered by the Spirit to be. They can then choose to live their unique God-ordained life. Living as anyone else negatively affects one's journey toward Christlikeness, which makes flourishing unlikely. Obedience to God aligns one with their God-ordained preferred self, fostering ongoing self-discovery. In this stage, the client considers their values, skills, goals, and passions in line with God's metanarrative.

Mersch, quoted in Levering (2021, 11), asserts that "Our whole moral organism must be transformed, every aspect of our being. Baptism accomplishes this, but we must cooperate and grow in holiness. We do so as 'parts and members of one another' in Christ." Each micro-narrative cycle offers clients the chance to be empowered for self-transcendent living, where meaning and purpose are achievable, flourishing is probable, and closeness to Christ and others is attainable. The 5E Model journey involves clearing the conscience, connecting to God, and obeying his revelations, which align with his plans and purposes. This naturally leads to self-knowledge and the consequent need for God, thus enabling Spirit-empowered self-transcendence (Shantall 2020, 247–266). Living according to God's design does not promise a problem-free life. It rather offers a life of flourishing, with the capacity to suffer well and live as the best possible version of oneself. Herein lies healing, restoration, and wellness.

Living a self-transcendent life for the kingdom of God is part of the Empowering step. This model recognizes what Frankl calls the client's freedom of will (Graber 2019, 65–66) and its implications for the empowering of the client by the Spirit. For the Christian counselor, this step is facilitated to encourage and reinforce the client's following of the Spirit through the conscience so that the will is subject to the Spirit. The counselor helps the client to consider their choices so they can live a self-transcendent life. The client's own sin, sin perpetrated against them, the effects of living in a fallen world, and circumstance interface with freedom, but never completely remove the freedom to choose. Even if only the freedom to choose one's attitude towards a situation remains, each individual is still able to determine the trajectory of their lives, and who they will become (Frankl 1986, 109–118). This step focuses on the Spirit leading clients to self-transcendence and Christlikeness.

## **7. The Need for Further Research**

Further research is necessary to investigate the impact of both individual and collective responses to the Spirit's promptings, which leads to a progressive awareness of one's identity in Christ and purpose on earth. A comparative analysis between individualist and collectivist cultures would be particularly valuable, especially concerning the model's efficacy within the multi-cultural church. Western concepts of conscience should be critically examined in the African context, alongside African ideologies that resonate with the model. Additionally, the model's limitations for unbelievers and those who do not regularly attend church must be scrutinized. Furthermore, the role of implicit knowledge derived from both the DNA of Adam and the image of God in the transformation journey warrants detailed exploration. Empirical research on the model's efficacy should include these concerns.

## 8. Conclusion

God's overarching metanarrative centers on his communion with creation through Christ, facilitated by the Holy Spirit. Humanity, affected by sin and the fall, journeys through a bio-psycho-social-spiritual landscape in need of healing and redemption. The 5E Model of Christian Counseling facilitates this journey by incorporating self-awareness and self-discovery, through self-discipline, aligning clients' lives with God's metanarrative through micro-narrative cycles of growth and transformation.

Christian counselors are called to participate in the Holy Spirit's ministry, helping individuals reconnect with God and pursue Christlikeness. The 5E Model serves various practitioners, including Christian counselors, pastoral counselors, biblical counselors, and Christian psychologists. It is also adopted by the South African Theological Seminary for training lay-Christian counselors and as part of its Bachelor of Theology program. By providing a structured, Spirit-led approach to counseling, the 5E Model aims to enhance the effectiveness of Christian counseling by emphasizing the pivotal role of the Holy Spirit in supporting clients to achieve holistic growth and flourishing.

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