

Introduction to *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling*

I *enjoy* individual counseling. While messy and complex, listening to, engaging with, and entering into a person's soul struggle is an honor. While exhausting and demanding, journeying together with another person to Christ's healing hope is a joy.

Counseling Is Complex; Family Counseling Is Beyond Complex!

However, for many years, like some of you, I *endured* counseling *couples and families*. Counseling individuals is complex enough. Where do you start? What do you listen for? How do you compassionately speak truth in love? How do you relate God's eternal story to people's earthly story?

Marriage counseling is even more complex than individual counseling. Now you have three sinners, saints, and sufferers in the same room—the wife, the husband, and the counselor! Where in the world do you start?

Family counseling? Now you have a whole group of struggling folks gathered together in the same room. What is family counseling even supposed to look like? Do you just counsel the parents? Just the children? Everyone together? What's the goal? What does "success" look like?

In the biblical counseling world, we talk about "counseling the *hard cases*." The idea is that some counseling situations simply require a bit of encouragement and direction, while other counseling cases require an extra measure of wisdom, patience, grace, discernment, expertise, and time. As society breaks down more and more, I experience just about every family counseling case as a "hard case."

I used to teach a lot about Romans 15:14 and God's people becoming "competent to counsel." Now increasingly when I counsel families, I experience myself as "incompetent to

counsel.” That sense of incompetency *in myself* is exactly what has motivated me to write this book—I am writing it first for me. I long to grow more competent *in Christ* and his Word as I counsel the hard cases—all cases—of families in turmoil.

I can relate to those of you who feel family counseling is intimidating. So, for me and for you, I’ve search the Scriptures asking:

“What would a model of family counseling look like that was built solely upon Christ’s gospel of grace?”

Thus the title of this book: *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling*. This is *not* a secular family systems therapy manual. This book seeks to equip God’s people to competently relate Christ’s gospel to family suffering and sin.

Learning How to Relate Truth to Family Life

The answer to feeling intimidated and incompetent is not to ignore the issue—because that is impossible. Family issues are increasingly flooding the church. Marriages are a mess. Families are in disarray. *The pastors and counselors I know are frantically searching for practical, biblical help.*

The answer to feeling intimidated by family counseling is learning how to lovingly help families—especially parents—apply biblical truth to their family’s life. We need equipping in the nuts-and-bolts of the truth-in-love process of helping the distressed family sitting in front of us.

“Biblical”: A GRACE Foundation

I have written *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling* to provide that needed *hands-on* training in *biblical family* counseling. Think first about that word “biblical.” Part 1 of this book (chapters 1-3) offers *A GRACE Foundation for Biblical Family Counseling*. Theology

matters. Christ's gospel of grace makes a daily difference in our families. Christ's eternal story invades and impacts our daily story.

Part 1 introduces you to a GRACE model of family counseling, family life, and parenting:

Five Marks of GRACE-Focused Family Living and Family Counseling.

Figure I:1

Five Marks of GRACE-Focused Family Living and Counseling

- *G* Mark 1: God-Dependent Families—Parental Dedication (The Workout Room)
- *R* Mark 2: Revelation-Based Family Wisdom—Parental Discernment (The Study)
- *A* Mark 3: Affirming Family Relationships—Parental Devotion (The Play Room)
- *C* Mark 4: Care-fronting the Heart—Parental Discipline (The Family Room)
- *E* Mark 5: Equipping for Life—Parental Discipleship (The Living Room)ⁱ

“Hands-On”: A How-To Training Manual

But how? How do we take theology, the gospel, grace, and Christ's story and relate it to the troubled family sitting in front of us? Think of the phrase I used a moment ago: “hands-on.” And consider the sub-title of this book: *An Equipping Guide for Pastors and Counselors*. This is not just a book *to read*. It's a training manual *to use*. After every section in every chapter you'll find training exercises under the heading: *Maturing as a Biblical Family Counselor*. Overall you will have the opportunity to engage in *over 350* such equipping exercises.

This is why Part 2 (chapters 4-13) provides *Practical Training for Biblical Family Counselors: How to Develop 22 Family Counseling Relational Competencies*. See Figure I-2 for a list of those biblical family counseling skills or relational competencies. See Figure I-3 for

a snapshot of the model of biblical family counseling you'll learn (chapter 4 introduces this model which will be the foundation for your equipping in this training manual).

I've never been wild about words like "skills" and "techniques" when used with biblical counseling. A central verse that shepherds my counseling ministry is 1 Thessalonians 2:8.

"We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us."

Paul shares the gospel of God—he models gospel-centered ministry. He also is delighted to share his very own soul because he loves people so much and because they are so dear to him. Paul models truth and love, gospel and relationship. While "relational competency" is still not the greatest phrase, I've chosen it to try to capture the gospel/relationship combination central to biblical family counseling.

- Throughout *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling* you'll learn a *step-by-step relational process for developing twenty-two family counseling relational competencies*.
- You'll learn how to relate Christ's eternal truth to messy, complex families today.

"Family": Equipping and Empowering Parents as Family Shepherds

Consider a third word: "family." Here is the premise central to this book:

Children need good, godly parenting more than they need good, godly counseling.

Another way to put this:

The biblical family counselor must never replace the parents as the primary shepherds in the home.

In *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling*, we want to equip parents in twenty-two family shepherding relational competencies. While we may counsel children in some sessions without their parents—depending on age and family situation—it is my conviction that:

Biblical marriage counselors are counseling parents, in the context of family counseling, to be their children's best biblical counselors and parental shepherds.

This is *not* a book on counseling children or counseling teens—needed books for sure. This *is* a book on counseling the entire family where the primary focus is on empowering parents to shepherd their family. Parents, teens, and younger children are counseled *in the context* of counseling the entire family. We can picture the process like this:

Counsel the Family → Counsel the Parents → The Parents Shepherd Their Children → Counsel Individual Family Members Primarily within the Context of Counseling the Family

You might wonder, “Well then, why not just call it *Biblical Parental Counseling*? “Family” is in the title and is the header of this section for a vital reason. Another premise:

Biblical marriage counseling is not individual counseling with an audience.

The power of family counseling is the ability to observe how the family interacts and how the parents parent—right in front of you. Rather than just hearing second-hand reports of how “Jimmy is disobedient” or “Mom and dad are unfair,” you watch their family dance unfold in front of you.

Additionally, the power of family counseling resides in the ability to “do homework in the session.” Rather than just assigning after-session homework, the parents and children *work on their home* in front of you where you can coach the family and where you can equip the parents to shepherd their children. This “in front of you” aspect is central to the approach you will learn in *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling*.

Some Caveats

Life in a fallen world is really messed up! Sometimes those family messes reside in the heart of an abusive mother or father or both. When you become aware of an abusive parent, you do not start with family counseling, you start with family intervention. The church gets involved—church discipline, church discipleship, church restoration, church

care. The community gets involved—authorities are contacted, children are protected, resources are collected and used.

Sometimes those family messes reside in the heart of a teen. It could be depression. It could be addiction. While the family surely needs and can benefit from counseling, the teen also needs and can benefit from counseling and from a host of other resources.

Figure I:2

Overview of Gospel-Centered Family Counseling 22 Biblical Family Counseling Relational Competencies

Infusing Hope

- ◆ H *Having Hope as a Family Counselor* (Chapter 5)
- ◆ O *Offering Hope to Hurting Families* (Chapter 5)
- ◆ P *Prompting Parents to Tap into God-Given Resources* (Chapter 5)
- ◆ E *Encouraging the Family to See Signs of Christ on the Move* (Chapter 5)

Parakaletic Biblical Family Counseling for Suffering Families

- **Sustaining:** *“Like Christ, We Care About Each Other’s Hurts”*
- ◆ L *Looking at Families Through the Lens of Suffering* (Chapter 6)
- ◆ O *Observing, Openly Joining, and Orchestrating the Family Dance and the Family Dirge* (Chapter 6)
- ◆ V *Venturing Together Across the Family Chasm* (Chapter 7)
- ◆ E *Equipping the Family to Comfort Each Other with Christ’s Comfort* (Chapter 7)
- **Healing:** *“Through Christ, It’s Possible for Us to Hope in God Together”*
- ◆ F *Framing Family Healing Narratives* (Chapter 8)
- ◆ A *Applying Our Identity in Christ* (Chapter 8)
- ◆ I *Integrating in Our Victory Through Christ* (Chapter 9)
- ◆ T *Training in Teamwork on the Family Quest* (Chapter 9)
- ◆ H *Honing Homework That Works* (Chapter 9)

Nouthetic Biblical Family Counseling for Sinning Families

- **Reconciling:** *“It’s Horrible to Sin Against Christ and Each Other, but Through Christ It’s Wonderful to Be Forgiven and to Forgive”*
- ◆ R *Recognizing Destructive Family Narratives* (Chapter 10)
- ◆ E *Enlightening Family Members to Destructive Family Relationships* (Chapter 10)
- ◆ S *Soothing the Family’s Soul in Their Savior* (Chapter 11)
- ◆ T *Trust-Making* (Chapter 11)
- **Guiding:** *“It’s Supernatural to Love Each Other Like Christ, Through Christ, for Christ”*
- ◆ P *Putting on Christ’s Wisdom Perspective* (Chapter 12)
- ◆ E *Empowering Families to Live in Light of Their Victory in Christ* (Chapter 12)
- ◆ A *Activating Application* (Chapter 13)
- ◆ C *Coaching Families* (Chapter 13)
- ◆ E *Emboldening Families* (Chapter 13)

Figure I:3

Comprehensive and Compassionate Biblical Family Counseling

***Parakaletic* Biblical Family Counseling for Suffering Family Members**

- **Sustaining:** *"Like Christ, We Care About Each Other's Hurts"*
- **Healing:** *"Through Christ, It's Possible for Us to Hope in God Together"*

***Nouthetic* Biblical Family Counseling for Sinning Family Members**

- **Reconciling:** *"It's Horrible to Sin Against Christ and Each Other, but Through Christ It's Wonderful to Be Forgiven and to Forgive"*
- **Guiding:** *"It's Supernatural to Love Each Other Like Christ, Through Christ, for Christ"*

Maturing as a Biblical Family Counselor

1. Regarding the theory/theology of family life:
 - a. What reading have you done about family life—biblical teaching about roles of parents, responsibilities of children, parental discipline/discipleship, understanding children, etc.?

 - b. How easy or hard has it been for you to “translate” those teachings into practical, relational ways to help the family sitting in front of you?

2. Regarding the practice/methodology of family counseling:
 - a. What reading have you done in family counseling practices/methods? To what extent have you been able to find biblical resources on the “how-to” of counseling families?

 - b. On a scale of 1-10 (1: “Not prepared to do family counseling” and 10: “I could teach family counseling”), currently how prepared are you to do family counseling?

3. I admit to being intimidated to counsel families due to the complexity of the issues and the intensity of the struggles.
 - a. How does my admission impact your thoughts about using this book? Does it encourage or discourage you? Why?

 - b. If you have family counseling experience, as you reflect back on your past counseling of families, has family counseling been easier or harder than individual counseling? How competent or incompetent have you felt as a biblical family counselor? If you have not yet provided family counseling, as you think ahead to counseling parents and children, are you excited, intimidated, or both?

4. You read several important summaries of the focus of *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling*. For each one (repeated below), do you agree or disagree? How might these premises impact and change your marriage counseling ministry?
 - a. *Children need good, godly parenting more than they need good, godly counseling.*
 - b. *The biblical family counselor must never replace the parents as the primary shepherds in the home.*
 - c. *Biblical marriage counselors are counseling parents, in the context of family counseling, to be their children's best biblical counselors and parental shepherds.*
 - d. Counsel the Family → Counsel the Parents → The Parents Shepherd Their Children → Counsel Individual Family Members Primarily within the Context of Counseling the Family
 - e. *Biblical marriage counseling is not individual counseling with an audience.*
5. Through the *Maturing as a Biblical Marriage Counselor* component of this book, you will have the opportunity to engage in over 2,000 training exercises.
 - a. Some of those exercises will require you to take an honest, biblical look at your life. How willing are you to do that?
 - b. If you are going through this material in a small group lab, how prepared are you to share about your life with those in your training group? What could your group do to make this training experience safe, encouraging, and mutually edifying?

ⁱI also discuss these *Five Marks of GRACE-Focused Family Living and Family Counseling* in *Raising Kids in the Way of Grace*.