Introduction to *Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling*

I always enjoy radio interviews related to my books. Interviewers typically start by asking, “What motivated you to write this book?” For *Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling*, my answer relates both to *me* and to *you*.

Like many biblical counselors and pastors, I have an adequate level of comfort, confidence, and competence as a counselor of *individuals*. I also have provided a good deal of marriage counseling, and for over two decades I’ve equipped pastors and counselors for marriage counseling.

Still, I’ve experienced marriage counseling as exponentially more complex and messy than individual counseling.

Where do you start? How do you sort through all the “he said; she said”? How do you help couples move forward when they are so focused on past hurts? How do you make headway when painful emotions are strewn and thrown everywhere?

But even the complexity of marriage counseling was not enough to motivate me to craft this marriage counseling manual. My motivation arose a year before this book project started. I served as a Lead Elder at our church when our Counseling Pastor informed our elder team that he wanted to move to part-time status. My fellow elders looked at me and said, “Why don’t you do a job share, Bob? Counseling's in your blood.” So...I agreed.

I met with our Counseling Pastor so he could walk me through cases he wanted to transition to me. I'll never forget his words as he handed me three thick file folders. “In my nearly-forty years of pastoral ministry,” he shared, “these are three of the toughest marriage counseling situations I’ve ever worked with.”
My first thought, “What have I gotten myself into!?” My second, more arrogant, thought, “I teach pastors how to do this marriage counseling stuff. These may be his most difficult marriage counseling cases, but I’m a pretty competent counselor…”

You know where I’m headed next. He was right. These three cases were among the most complex marriage counseling cases I had ever experienced in my three decades of ministry.

Two things started happening. First, I began admitting to myself, God, and anyone who would listen that I was “an incompetent marriage counselor without Christ.”

For years, I had highlighted Romans 15:14 about training people to be competent counselors. But now there was something very freeing about acknowledging my incompetence-in-me and pursuing competence-in-Christ.

Second, I started devouring the material I used to equip others for biblical marriage counseling. Not only that, I started updating and upgrading those notes—scouring God’s Word for wisdom for marriage counseling.

So, what motivated me to write Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling? I wrote this book first for me! I needed God’s help and wisdom if I had any hope of being a competent marriage counselor for those three difficult marriages—and for all other marriages.

How You Can Benefit from Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling

I also wrote this book for you.

I’m picturing you—a pastor—who perhaps had one class on counseling, and possibly zero classes on a gospel-centered, how-to approach to marriage counseling.

I’m picturing you—a trained biblical counselor—who likely had one class on marriage counseling theory/theology. But you probably had no lab class specifically on training you how to provide effective biblical marriage counseling.
I’m picturing you—a “lay person” (not a vocational pastor, a non-professional counselor)—who loves people and marriages. But you feel overwhelmed when trying to help a brokenhearted couple.

I’m picturing you—educators—who teach pastors and counselors in a Christian college or seminary setting. When you search the evangelical publishing landscape, you can find hundreds of books about marriage. Yet, even with your level of academic awareness, you are likely at a lost to identify Christian books that equip your students with a biblical, practical, step-by-step process for learning how to help struggling marriages. You have to turn to the secular publishing landscape to find books focusing on hands-on training in marital therapy. But you’re not interested in a worldly way to help Christian marriages. Neither am I.

That’s why I included the phrase Gospel-Centered in the book title. This is not a secular marital therapy manual. In this book, I’ve examined Scripture asking myself:

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

**How You Can Use This Equipping Guide for Pastors and Counselors**

I’ve written Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling to provide hands-on training in biblical marriage counseling. Think about that word “biblical.” Part 1 of this book (chapters 1-3) offers A Theological Primer for Biblical Marriage Counseling. Theology matters. Christ’s gospel of grace makes a daily difference in our marriages. Christ’s eternal story invades and impacts our daily story.

But how? How do we take theology, the gospel, and Christ’s story and relate it to the troubled couple 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 Marriage Counselor*. Overall you have the opportunity to engage in over 300 such equipping exercises.

This is why Part 2 (chapters 4-13) provides *Practical Training for Biblical Marriage Counselors: How to Develop 22 Marriage Counseling Relational Competencies*. See Figure I-1 for a list of those biblical marriage counseling skills or relational competencies.

I’ve never been too 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’s also 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 in the world, I’ve chosen it to try to capture the gospel/relationship combination that is central to biblical marriage counseling.

- Throughout *Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling* you’ll learn a step-by-step relational process for developing twenty-two marriage counseling relational competencies.

- You’ll learn how to relate Christ’s eternal truth to messy, complex marriages today.

What motivated me to write *Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling*? My motivation to write is likely the same as your motivation to read this book.

We each want to glorify God by growing as biblical marriage counselors who apply Christ’s gospel of grace to help hurting and hurtful spouses to become Christlike and Christ-honoring spouses.
Figure I:1

Overview of Biblical Marriage Counseling

22 Biblical Marriage Counseling Relational Competencies

Infusing Hope

♦ H Having Hope as a Marriage Counselor (Chapter 5)
♦ O Offering Hope to Hurting Couples (Chapter 5)
♦ P Promoting God’s Perspective (Chapter 5)
♦ E Enlightening Couples (Chapter 5)

Parakaletic Biblical Marriage Counseling for Suffering Spouses

➢ Sustaining: “Like Christ, We Care about Each Other's Hurts”

♦ C: Coupling with the Couple (Chapter 6)
♦ A: Assisting the Couple to Become Intimate Allies (Chapter 6)
♦ R: Renewing the Couple’s Trust in the Father of Compassion (Chapter 7)
♦ E: Engaging the Couple through Empathetic Encouragement (Chapter 7)

➢ Healing: “Through Christ, It’s Possible for Us to Hope in God Together”

♦ F Fighting Satan’s Lying and Condemning Earthly Narrative (Chapter 8)
♦ A Applying Christ’s Truth and Grace Eternal Narrative (Chapter 8)
♦ I Inviting Couples to Crop the Life of Christ into Their Marital Life (Chapter 9)
♦ T Trialoguing About Christ’s Truth and Grace Eternal Narrative (Chapter 9)
♦ H Healing Individually and Together in Christ (Chapter 9)

Nouthetic Biblical Marriage Counseling for Sinning Spouses

➢ Reconciling: “It’s Horrible to Sin Against Christ and Each Other, but Through Christ It’s Wonderful to Be Forgiven and to Forgive”

♦ P Probing Theologically (Chapter 10)
♦ E Exposing Marital Heart Sins (Chapter 10)
♦ A Applying Truth Relationally (Chapter 11)
♦ C Calming the Conscience with Grace (Chapter 11)
♦ E Enlightening Couples About Biblical Marital Reconciliation (Chapter 11)

➢ Guiding: “It’s Supernatural to Love Each Other Like Christ, Through Christ, for Christ”

♦ L Leaving the Past Behind (Chapter 12)
♦ O Ongoing Gospel Growth (Chapter 12)
♦ V Victorious Together Through Christ (Chapter 13)
♦ E Exalting Christ Together (Chapter 13)
Maturing as a Biblical Marriage Counselor

1. Regarding the theory/theology of marriage:
   a. What reading have you done in marriage counseling theory—biblical teaching about roles in marriage, desires of husbands and wives, problems in marriage?
   b. How easy or hard has it been for you to “translate” those teachings into practical, relational ways to help the couple sitting in front of you?

2. Regarding the practice/methodology of marriage counseling:
   a. What reading have you done in marriage counseling practices/methods? To what extent have you been able to find biblical resources on the “how-to” of counseling couples?
   b. On a scale of 1-10 (1: “not prepared to do marriage counseling” and 10: “I could teach marriage counseling”), currently how prepared are you to do marriage counseling?

3. I admitted to being incompetent to counsel without Christ.
   a. How does my admission impact your thoughts about using this book? Does it encourage or discourage you? Why?
   b. If you have marriage counseling experience, as you reflect back on your past counseling of couples, has marriage counseling been easier or harder than individual counseling? How competent or incompetent have you felt as a biblical marriage counselor?
   c. If you have not yet provided marriage counseling, as you think ahead to counseling couples, are you excited, intimidated, or both?

4. Through the Maturing as a Biblical Marriage Counselor component of this book, you will have the opportunity to engage in over 2,500 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?