

THE EQUIPPING MARRIAGE AND FAMILY COUNSELORS SERIES



GOSPEL-CENTERED
Marriage
Counseling

An Equipping Guide
for Pastors and Counselors

ROBERT W. KELLEMAN, PhD



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Robert W. Kelleman PhD., *Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling*
Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2020. Used by permission.

© 2020 by Robert W. Kellemen

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kellemen, Robert W., author.

Title: Gospel-centered marriage counseling : an equipping guide for pastors and counselors / Robert W. Kellemen, PhD.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Baker Books, [2020] | Series: The equipping marriage and family counselors series

Identifiers: LCCN 2020003207 | ISBN 9780801094347 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Church work with married people—Handbooks, manuals, etc. | Marriage counseling—Religious aspects—Christianity—Handbooks, manuals, etc. | Pastoral counseling—Handbooks, manuals, etc. | Bible—Psychology—Handbooks, manuals, etc.

Classification: LCC BV4012.27 .K45 2020 | DDC 259/.14—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020003207>

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scripture quotations labeled ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2016

Italics added to direct Scripture quotations reflect the author’s emphasis.

The names and details of the people and situations described in this book have been changed or presented in composite form in order to ensure the privacy of those with whom the author has worked.

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



Contents

Acknowledgments	7
Foreword by Dr. Jeremy Pierre	9
Series Introduction	13
Introduction	15

Part 1: A Theological Primer for Biblical Marriage Counseling

1. Marriage God's Way 23
2. Marriage My Way . . . or the Highway! 39
3. Marriage Christ's Way 53

Part 2: Practical Training for Biblical Marriage Counselors: How to Develop 22 Marriage Counseling Relational Competencies

4. Mapping Biblical Marriage Counseling: Our Marriage Counseling GPS 75
5. Infusing HOPE in the Midst of Hurt: Resurrection-Focused Marriage Counseling 91
6. Comforting Each Other with Christ's Comfort: Sustaining in Marriage Counseling, Part 1 113
7. Clinging Together to Jesus in the Storm: Sustaining in Marriage Counseling, Part 2 129
8. Interpreting Life from a Faith Perspective: Healing in Marriage Counseling, Part 1 143
9. Tuning into the Bible's Faith Story: Healing in Marriage Counseling, Part 2 161
10. Dispensing Grace: Reconciling in Marriage Counseling, Part 1 179

11. Superabounding Grace: Reconciling in Marriage Counseling,
Part 2 199
 12. Discipling Disciple-Makers: Guiding in Marriage Counseling,
Part 1 217
 13. Growing in Grace: Guiding in Marriage Counseling, Part 2 233
- Commencement 249
- Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling Commencement: Marriage
Counseling Prayer and Praise 255
- Notes 259
- Resources for Marriage and Marriage Counseling 260

Acknowledgments

My motivation for writing *Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling* began while I was serving as counseling pastor at Bethel Church in northwest Indiana. Many pastors, ministry leaders, and lay leaders from Bethel journeyed with me as we counseled, disciplined, and shepherded many couples. I want to thank each of them for their co-ministry, encouragement, and friendship: Pastor Steve DeWitt, Pastor Brad Lagos, Pastor Mark Culton, Pastor Dexter Harris, Pastor Dan Jacobsen, Pastor Jared Bryant, Pastor Chris Whetstone, Pastor Gary Butler, Pastor Dustin Rouse, and ministry leaders/lay leaders Ken Barry, Lauri Mollema, Gail Morris, Skye Bryant, Jennifer Culton, Laura Sauerman, Caitlin Marsee, Joy Katts, Amanda Wilson, and Melissa Anderson.

Before, during, and after I wrote *Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling*, I've been serving alongside the ministry team at Faith Bible Seminary in Lafayette, Indiana. Thank you for your ministry in my life: Pastor Steve Viars, Pastor Brent Aucoin, Pastor Rob Green, and Kirk Fatool.

Foreword

The book you're holding in your hands is unique—and uniquely helpful. As you read through its pages, you will find at least two ways *Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling* is not typical, and neither is its author, Dr. Bob Kellemen.

First, this book is not typical in how it approaches marriage. So many marriage help books convey a view of marriage that doesn't include much beyond the couple's own interests in the relationship. They don't go any further than trying to offer solutions to the problems a couple is aware of. Yes, in this book you will find guidance for approaching the problems a couple presents to you in the counseling room. You will read suggestions for addressing the specific dynamic that exists between *this* couple, the history of their interactions, and the goals that they can set for their future. You will gain insight into the particular troubles that arise in marriages—anger, disappointment, self-pity, distance, loss, and pain unique to each spouse. But you will also find that Bob views these problems through a wider lens that takes in parts of the scene often left on the periphery.

In this wide-angle view, Bob equips us to see marriage according to the broader purposes of God and to address the couple in light of realities they're probably not considering when they first come for help. They are usually seeing marriage primarily as an arrangement that ought to balance the values they want—shared domestic labor, agreeable companionship, long-term security. If they are willing to go through the process of marital counseling, it's often because they recognize these values are worth the effort to trudge through the difficulties that brought them for help. In other words, the benefits of staying together are worth the annoyances, drawbacks, and pain.

This book will demonstrate that marriage counseling is about *helping them see their marriage from a larger set of eyes*. God tells us his perspective of marriage from the Bible's opening chapter in Genesis to its closing chapter in Revelation. It is a perspective that supersedes ours in every way—beckoning our small concerns for marriage upward into a larger epic. An epic

that involves two people displaying in their little time and place the ancient love of the Almighty God—and even more specifically, the love of Jesus Christ for his bride, the church.

In *Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling*, Bob insists that the epic purposes of God are the only true way a couple can see their own marriage correctly. Marriage is the uniting of two distinct persons into one flesh, where both spouses give of themselves for the magnification of the other. Such love can only happen through the transformative power of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is why the gospel is so central to the counseling process. Only by receiving the love of God through faith can a spouse act like Jesus to the other. As an experienced biblical counselor, Bob doesn't let you forget this throughout his book, even while he remains thoroughly practical.

Speaking of practical, that is the second way this book is unique. Bob offers a number of strategies for addressing different types of troubles in a marriage. Each provides a fresh angle of approach suitable to a number of different needs. Bob's experience in the counseling room and his desire to see marriages reflect the beauty of Jesus's love are strongly displayed.

These strategies involve different ways of helping couples reshape the way they see and respond in their marriage. Bob may surprise you in how he accomplishes this. For example, one of his strategic focuses is on resurrection—the truth that because Jesus died for the sins of his people and proved his victory over sin by being resurrected from the dead, Jesus therefore has authority to lend this victory to whoever would grab hold of it.

Jesus's resurrection power can change everything in a marriage, freeing each spouse to live not for themselves but for the wider purposes of God. Resurrected people don't act the same. The concerns that once preoccupied them fade into lesser importance. Tendencies that were once glaring don't stick out as much. Differences that once seemed insurmountable lose their threat. The couple suddenly becomes aware of goodness they'd been overlooking: hidden graces in the other, higher purposes in working through conflict, deeper joy in laboring through the bleak seasons.

Insight into those different seasons a marriage can go through is why this book will be so helpful to you. Some couples you counsel will need you to think carefully about *sustaining* their marriage—helping them to move from anger with each other to actually caring about and empathizing with each other. Others will need biblical *healing*—finding gospel hope *together* through Christ's grace and truth. Some will need the hard work of *reconciling*—repenting of sinful actions and attitudes and granting forgiveness to each other. Still others require the work of biblical *guiding*—leaning into Christ's resurrection power to put on new, Christlike ways of relating to each other.

A good counselor will meet a couple where they're at but won't let them stay there. In *Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling*, Dr. Bob Kellemen will

guide *you* as you guide *them*. I'd encourage you to follow along with him. His approach is not typical, and that's why it's so uniquely helpful in relating the gospel to the heart of the marriage relationship.

Jeremy Pierre, PhD, chair of the Department of Biblical Counseling and Family Ministry; Lawrence and Charlotte Hoover Associate Professor of Biblical Counseling, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Series Introduction

As an equipper of pastors and counselors, I hear all the time how intimidating marriage and family counseling is. Recently, an experienced pastor shared with me:

Marriage counseling? I'm clueless. I feel like I'm standing in traffic on an expressway, with cars going both ways, half of them the wrong way, most of them swerving out of control. I have no idea how to move from my good theology of marriage to actually helping the troubled couple sitting in front of me.

Family counseling? Don't even get me started on that. By the time family members get to me, they're so angry that they aren't listening to each other. And half the time they don't even want to listen to me!

The Purpose of This Two-Book Series: Filling the Gap

The contemporary Christian world churns out books—great books—on marriage and the family. Theory of marriage and family? Tons of books. Books for couples? Scores of books. Books on the family and parenting? Boatloads.

However, even in the biblical counseling world, we have next to nothing available about *procedures*—the how-to of counseling hurting couples and families. *Pastors and counselors desperately need help in relating their theology to marital messes and family chaos.* They need training manuals on the nuts and bolts of the procedures and processes of helping the couple or family sitting in front of them.

Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling and *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling* step into this void. This two-book series of equipping guides provides practical, user-friendly training for pastors, counselors, lay leaders, educators, and students.

Not Your Parents' Counseling Books

These two books walk you as the reader through step-by-step training to develop your *skills and competencies* in marriage and family counseling. In fact, “reader” is the wrong word. “Participant” is better.

Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling and *Gospel-Centered Family Counseling* are workbooks—think of them as working books or even workout books. Thus the subtitle *An Equipping Guide for Pastors and Counselors*. Chapter by chapter, skill by skill, as a participant you will use the questions, exercises, role-play directions, sample dialogues, and much more to develop your competency and increase your confidence as a biblical marriage and family counselor.

Introduction

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 have equipped pastors and counselors for marriage counseling. Still, I have 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 everywhere?

But even the complexity of marriage counseling was not enough to motivate me to craft this manual. My motivation arose a year before this book project started. I was serving as a lead elder at our church when our counseling pastor informed the 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 files: “In my forty years of pastoral ministry, 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 and to God that I was an *incompetent* marriage counselor without Christ. For years, I had highlighted Romans 15:14 when equipping people to be competent counselors. But now there was something freeing about acknowledging my own incompetence and pursuing competence in Christ.

Second, not only did I start devouring the materials I had developed to equip others for biblical marriage counseling but I also started updating and upgrading those notes—scouring God's Word for wisdom.

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 any marriages.

How You Can Benefit from This Book

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 am picturing you—a *trained biblical counselor*—who likely had one class on marriage counseling theory and theology but no lab class to specifically train you how to provide effective biblical marriage counseling.

I am picturing you—a *layperson* (a nonprofessional counselor who is not a vocational pastor)—who loves people and marriages but feels overwhelmed when trying to help a brokenhearted couple.

I am 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 loss 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 with a hands-on focus for training in marital therapy. But you are not interested in a worldly way to help Christian marriages. Neither am I.

There is a reason I included the phrase *Gospel-Centered* in this book's title. This is *not* a secular marital therapy manual. I have examined Scripture and asked myself, What would a model of biblical marriage counseling look like that was built solely upon Christ's gospel of grace? This book is my answer to that question.

How You Can Use This Book

I have written *Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling* to provide *hands-on* training in *biblical* marriage counseling. Think first about that word “biblical.” Part 1 of this book 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 them to the troubled couple sitting in front of us? Think now of a second phrase: “hands-on.” And consider the subtitle of this book: *An Equipping Guide for Pastors and Counselors*. This is not just a book *to read*. It is a training manual *to use*. After every section of every chapter you will find training exercises with the heading *Maturing as a Biblical Marriage Counselor*. Overall you will have the opportunity to engage in *hundreds* of such equipping exercises.

This is why part 2 of this book provides practical training for biblical marriage counselors by developing twenty-two marriage counseling relational competencies. See figure I.1 for a list of those gospel-centered counseling skills.

I have never been too wild about words like “skills” and “techniques” when used in conjunction with biblical counseling. A central verse that shepherds my counseling ministry is 1 Thessalonians 2:8: “Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.”

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 in the world, I have chosen it to try to capture the combination of gospel and relationship that is central to biblical marriage counseling.

Throughout *Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling* you will learn a step-by-step process for developing twenty-two marriage counseling relational competencies. You will learn how to relate Christ’s eternal truth to messy, complex marriages today. For that to happen, please prioritize time for responding to the *Maturing as a Biblical Marriage Counselor* training exercises. You can use these individually. They are also ideal for small group lab usage—where you receive counseling training in a group setting.

You will quickly notice that many of the interactive questions relate to your own life. *Maturing as a biblical counselor* is never just about developing counseling competencies. It is also about growing in Christlike character.

When using *Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling* in a small group lab setting:

- Read the assigned chapter *before* the lab meets. Do not use lab time for lecturing on the content. Interact briefly about how the content

relates to the practice of marriage counseling, but reserve most of the lab time for the following suggested activities.

- Respond in writing to the Maturing as a Biblical Marriage Counselor questions *before* your small group meets.
- During your small group lab interact about the questions.

Figure I.1

Overview of Biblical Marriage Counseling

22 Gospel-Centered Marriage Counseling Relational Competencies

Infusing Hope

- H** Having Hope as a Marriage Counselor (chap. 5)
- O** Offering Hope to Hurting Couples (chap. 5)
- P** Promoting God's Perspective (chap. 5)
- E** Enlightening Couples (chap. 5)

Parakaletic Biblical Marriage Counseling for Suffering Spouses

- **Sustaining:** Like Christ, we care about each other's hurts.
 - C** Coupling with the Couple (chap. 6)
 - A** Assisting the Couple to Become Intimate Allies (chap. 6)
 - R** Renewing the Couple's Trust in the God of All Comfort (chap. 7)
 - E** Engaging the Couple through Empathetic Encouragement (chap. 7)
- **Healing:** Through Christ, it's possible for us to hope in God together.
 - F** Fighting Satan's Lying and Condemning Earthly Narrative (chap. 8)
 - A** Applying Christ's Truth and Grace Eternal Narrative (chap. 8)
 - I** Inviting Couples to Crop the Life of Christ into Their Marital Life (chap. 9)
 - T** Trialoguing about Christ's Truth and Grace Eternal Narrative (chap. 9)
 - H** Healing Individually and Together in Christ (chap. 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 (chap. 10)
 - E** Exposing Marital Heart Sins (chap. 10)
 - A** Applying Truth Relationally (chap. 11)
 - C** Calming the Conscience with Grace (chap. 11)
 - E** Enlightening Couples about Biblical Marital Reconciliation (chap. 11)
- **Guiding:** It's supernatural to love each other like Christ, through Christ, for Christ.
 - L** Leaving the Past Behind (chap. 12)
 - O** Ongoing Gospel Growth (chap. 12)
 - V** Victorious Together through Christ (chap. 13)
 - E** Exalting Christ Together (chap. 13)

- The questions related to your life provide opportunities to counsel one another during your small group meeting. A premise of this book is that *we become effective biblical counselors by giving and receiving biblical counseling in community.*
- The questions related to marital counseling situations provide opportunities for role-playing marriage counseling. They also provide opportunity for real-life marriage counseling of each other if spouses are part of the training group or invited into parts of the group time.
- After role-play or real-life marriage counseling, offer feedback to one another so you can grow together as biblical marriage counselors.

My motivation to write this book is likely the same as your motivation to read it. We 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.

Maturing as a Biblical Marriage Counselor

1. Regarding the theory/theology of marriage:
 - a. What reading have you done about married life—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 or 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 to 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 you or discourage you? Why?

 - b. If you have marriage counseling experience, as you reflect 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 hundreds of 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?



PART 1

A Theological Primer for Biblical Marriage Counseling

CHAPTER
ONE

Marriage God's Way

Introduction: Solution Focused or Soul-u-tion Focused?

Picture Travis and Britney. They have been married for over a dozen years—at least ten of those years have been filled with communication difficulties and unresolved conflicts. They have seen several counselors, read a batch of marriage books, attended marriage conferences, and spent a weekend at a marriage restoration retreat center.

As you engage with Travis and Britney about the history of the work they have done on their marriage, you detect two common themes. They have concluded that:

- We fight because we miscommunicate with each other. We need better communication skills.
- We fight because we misunderstand each other. We need better teaching about roles and responsibilities in marriage.

You mentally file away those facts as the three of you begin interacting about Travis and Britney's latest eruption of conflict. As they each tell their story, you notice they could successfully teach a seminar on marital communication, roles in marriage, and spousal needs. But you detect something more significant—they each use their skills and knowledge in self-centered and self-sufficient ways. Travis tends to use his communication skills to manipulate and corner Britney—almost like a prosecuting attorney grilling a witness. Clearly there is a heart issue at work. Travis's training in communication skills has created *a more effective manipulator*.

Having been placed on the witness stand, Britney is quick to expose the myriad ways Travis fails to fulfill his roles and responsibilities and fails to

meet her God-designed marital longings. She is even quicker to describe the ways she has applied biblical marriage principles—to no avail. As you listen, you wonder if you are hearing self-righteousness that seems to communicate, “I’ve done my part. I’ve been a good wife. Now it’s up to God to fix Travis and for Travis to get his act together!” Britney’s training in marital roles, responsibilities, and desires has created *a more self-sufficient sinner*.

Between meetings with Britney and Travis, you prayerfully review your notes. You scribble down, “How can such good tools like biblical communication principles and a biblical understanding of marital roles be so misused?” Then you jot down your summary. “Travis and Britney’s self-diagnosis: We lack fulfillment in our marriage because of our miscommunication and misunderstanding. Their self-prescription: The solution to our marriage problems is to work harder at applying communication skills and good teaching.”

Travis and Britney have a *solution-focused* approach to their marriage—which leads to self-centered goals. If we could discern the thoughts and intents of Travis’s heart, this is what we might hear: “Marriage is about meeting *my* needs. If better communication gets Britney to meet my needs, then I’m all for that!”

Solution-focused marriage counseling also leads to self-sufficient efforts. Britney thinks, “Working on my marriage is a self-improvement project. If I become a good enough wife, then Travis will come around and meet my needs.”

Travis and Britney have misdefined the ultimate purpose of marriage, misdiagnosed the core problem in their marriage, and misunderstood God’s prescription for marital healing and health. They need marriage counseling that is *soul-ution* focused. They need to hear the heart of God about the heart of marriage. They must begin to grasp the purpose, problem, and prescription of marriage—from God’s perspective. They need a gospel-centered heart understanding of creation-fall-redemption.

- *Creation—God’s Ultimate Purpose for Marriage* (chap. 1). God’s Marital Design: Shifting from self-centered marital goals to gospel-centered marital goals.
- *Fall—Our Core Problem in Marriage* (chap. 2). Our Marital Heart Disease: Confessing that problems in the home begin with problems in my heart.
- *Redemption—Christ’s Central Prescription for Marital Healing* (chap. 3). Christ’s Death for Sin and Our Death to Self: Surrendering to the reality that problems in my heart require Christ-dependence, not self-dependence.

Maturing as a Biblical Marriage Counselor

Solution Focused or Soul-u-tion Focused?

1. Travis and Britney had two diagnoses for their marriage problems: (a) We fight because we miscommunicate with each other. We need better communication skills. (b) We fight because we misunderstand each other. We need better teaching about roles and responsibilities in marriage.
 - a. What are the strengths of each of these diagnoses?

 - b. What are the weaknesses of each of these diagnoses? What is missing? What heart issues might they need to consider?

2. Travis uses his communication skills in a self-centered way to manipulate Britney—his training in communication skills has created a *more effective manipulator*. If you were counseling Travis, how could you help him see the way he is misusing biblical communication tools? How could you address his heart issues?

3. Britney uses her understanding of marital roles and longings in a self-sufficient way to self-righteously applaud herself and to judge Travis—her training about marital roles has created a *more self-sufficient sinner*. If you were counseling Britney, how could you help her see the way she is misusing biblical principles? How could you address her heart issues?

4. Had you ever thought about and contrasted *solution*-focused marriage counseling and *soul-u-tion*-focused marriage counseling, or are these new ways of thinking about marriage counseling? We are just beginning to describe the differences. So jot down your preliminary, working definition and description of each.

a. *Solution*-focused marriage counseling

b. *Soul-u-tion*-focused marriage counseling

Seeing the Gospel-Centered Marital Foundation in Ephesians

Ephesians 5:21–33, where Paul discusses marital roles and relationships, has to be the most often explored passage by biblical marriage counselors. That is true in my ministry. Yet Paul does not start Ephesians in chapter 5. So we should not start marriage counseling or our understanding of marriage in Ephesians 5 but rather in Ephesians 1:1 and following.

Glorifying God: Ephesians 1:1–23

When we start where Paul starts, our marital narrative changes. This is vital because the first calling of a biblical marriage counselor is to help couples define or redefine marital reality. Apart from Scripture, our marital reality contains a self-centered focus: *Marriage is about meeting my needs. Marriage is about making me happy.* In contrast, Paul’s marital narrative teaches that marriage is all about glorifying God.

Paul begins with a hymn of praise to the Trinity (1:1–14). Everything in life, including marriage, is to be to the praise of the glory of the Trinity’s grace. Paul continues by praying that we might grasp the Trinity’s grace-love and avail ourselves of Christ’s resurrection power.

These realities change our marital narrative from “It’s all about me” to “It’s all about him—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” These truths change our

marital focus from “I can make my marriage work on my own” to “We need Christ’s resurrection power in our marriage so our marriage can glorify God.”

Guilty before God: Ephesians 2:1–3

Paul next moves to our absolute need for God and his grace. We are totally depraved—dead in our trespasses and sins, self-centered to the core, and objects of just judgment.

In ourselves, we are helpless and hopeless. Sin is not just a sickness; it is a terminal disease that has already taken our spiritual life. These realities change our marital narrative from “Our marriage requires a better strategy for changing my *wife*” to “Our marriage requires *my* humble repentance of *my* sinful self-sufficiency and self-centeredness.”

Grace from God for Salvation and Sanctification: Ephesians 2:4–5:17

Thankfully, beginning in Ephesians 2:4 and continuing through 5:17, Paul transitions using the two greatest words in the English language: “But God.” Though we were dead in sin, through our Father’s grace we are resurrected to new life in Christ—grace for salvation. Paul does not stop there. From 2:10 through 5:17 he hammers home the point that the grace that saves is the grace that sanctifies. “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (2:10). We are saved by grace apart from works, but we are saved by grace to do good works empowered by God for the glory of God.

Our old marital narrative claims, “Marriage is a self-improvement project done in my strength for my benefit.” Our new biblical marital narrative insists, “Marital health begins with saving grace. Marital growth continues with God empowering us to put off the old self-focused ways and to put on the new death-to-self ways.”

Growth through God’s Spirit: Ephesians 5:18–20 and 6:10–20

Because the fleshly inclination to make life work on our own is so strong, Paul continues the theme of growth through God’s Spirit in Ephesians 5:18–20 and 6:10–20. Sometimes we fail to notice how Paul surrounds family life with spiritual empowerment. This is because we think Paul’s teaching on the family ends with instructions for parents and children in Ephesians 6:4. However, in ancient Near Eastern culture the home included three couplets of relationships: husband and wife (5:21–33), parent and child (6:1–4), and master and servant (6:5–9). In Paul’s day, teaching on these three relationships was known as the household code.

With this reality in mind, now consider what immediately precedes and immediately follows Paul’s teaching on the home:

- *Be filled with the Spirit.* “Instead, be filled with the Spirit” (5:18).
- *Be empowered by the Lord.* “Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in his mighty power” (6:10).

Paul sandwiches family living between the reality that we must be filled with the Spirit and be strong in the Lord. I never lead a couple to explore Ephesians 5:21–33 without *first* reading these verses that surround Paul’s marital principles. I tell couples:

Contextually, it’s appropriate to paraphrase these verses like this. “*Husband and wife*, if you are to fulfill the roles, responsibilities, and callings of a spouse, then first you must be filled with the Spirit. If you want your marriage to follow the God-honoring pattern of Ephesians 5:21–33, then first, *husband and wife*, you must be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power for your marriage. You must first put on the whole marital armor of God.”

The old marital narrative says, “The solutions to our marital problems are within our own strength.” The new marital narrative says, “The soul-utions to our marital problems are God-dependent; they require the filling of the Spirit and the power of the Lord.”

Maturing as a Biblical Marriage Counselor ***Seeing the Gospel-Centered Marital Foundation*** ***in Ephesians***

1. Most of us as biblical marriage counselors naturally head to Ephesians 5:21–33 as our main go-to passage for marriage counseling. But in this chapter I suggest that we start with Ephesians 1:1–5:20 and 6:10–20.
 - a. How could having that as a starting point help you as a marriage counselor build a biblical foundation for marriage?
 - b. How could having that as a starting point reorient the couple to biblical marital narratives and biblical purposes for marriage?

2. In Ephesians 1:1–23, Paul highlights *glorifying God*. This can change our marital narrative from “It’s all about me” to “It’s all about him.” And from “I can make my marriage work on my own” to “We need Christ’s resurrection power in our marriage so our marriage can glorify God.” How could you interact with couples using this passage to explore their understanding of the purpose of marriage and God’s power to fulfill that purpose?

3. In Ephesians 2:1–3, Paul emphasizes our being *guilty before God*. This can change our marital narrative from “Our marriage requires a better strategy for changing my spouse” to “Our marriage requires *my* humble repentance of *my* sinful self-sufficiency and self-centeredness.” How could you interact with couples using this passage to help them see their absolute need for God’s grace in their life and in their marriage?

4. In Ephesians 2:4–5:17, Paul focuses on *grace from God for salvation and sanctification*. This can change our old marital narrative that says, “Marriage is a self-improvement project done in my strength for my benefit.” It can create a new marital narrative that says, “Marital health begins with saving grace. Marital growth continues with God empowering us to put off the old self-focused ways and to put on the new death-to-self ways.” How could you interact with couples using this passage to help them see their need for God’s power in order for their marriage to change?

5. In Ephesians 5:18–20 and 6:10–20, Paul surrounds his marital teaching with the ideas of being filled with the Spirit and being strengthened by God’s mighty power. How could you interact with couples about these passages to help them put off the old marital narrative that says, “The solutions to our marital problems are within our own strength” and put on the new marital narrative that says, “The solutions to our marital problems are God-dependent; they require the filling of the Spirit and the power of the Lord”?

The Ultimate Purpose of Marriage: Glorifying God

In Ephesians, Paul casts a biblical vision for marriage: *the grand purpose of every marriage is to glorify God*. Messed up, messy marriages have a great opportunity to bring God glory. When change occurs, a couple can become a praise testimony to the glory of God’s grace at work in their marriage. The Bible reveals at least three ways that marriages glorify God.

Marital Purpose #1: Every Marriage Is Meant to Represent the Trinity

In the beginning, God created us male and female in his image. He blessed Adam and Eve, the husband and wife, and commanded them to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth, subdue it, and rule over it (Gen. 1:26–28). Adam and Eve, male and female, husband and wife, were created to reflect God. Within the Trinity there is unity, diversity, and equality. Within every marriage there is to be unity, diversity, and equality—distinct but equal.

God designed marriages to reflect the intimacy within the Trinity. John 1:1 echoes Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” That little word “with” means “in the presence of; face-to-face with.” Father, Son, and Holy Spirit experience the intimacy of eternal communion.

Another little word—“was”—is also instructive. John could have used a past tense that indicates a snapshot: if we happened to travel back in time to the beginning, perhaps we might catch the Trinity in a moment of togetherness. Instead, John uses a past tense that indicates continuous action, which pictures an ongoing video: *whenever* we happened to travel back in time, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit would *always, forever, continuously* be in never-ending soul-to-soul communion. To reflect this intimacy, God created image bearers—male and female—who could unite and become one.

Marital Purpose #2: Every Marriage Is Meant to Reflect Christ and the Church

From Ephesians 5:21–33, every biblical marriage counselor knows that marriages are meant to reflect Christ and the church. A wife’s respectful, loving relationship with her husband reflects the church’s relationship to Christ. A husband’s sacrificial, shepherding love for his wife reflects Christ’s relationship to the church. When the onlooking world observes a Christian marriage, they are to step back in awe and give praise to God for the eternal loving relationship between Christ and his bride.

Marital Purpose #3: Every Marriage Is Meant for Couples to Nurture Each Other to Become More Like Christ

The husband-wife relationship is meant to be the most fertile ground for growth in grace. Husbands are to shepherd their wives so they increasingly reflect the beauty and purity of the Lord (Eph. 5:25–32). Wives are to live such godly lives that even without words their husbands are won over to Christ and become more like Christ (1 Pet. 3:1–6).

In Colossians 3:18–19, we find a shortened version of Paul’s household code: “Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.” In the context immediately preceding those instructions, we see Paul encouraging us to minister to one another. Contextually, we could appropriately paraphrase Paul, “*Husbands and wives*, let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. *Husbands and wives*, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:15–16, author’s paraphrase).

When counseling couples, I like to say:

God is calling the two of you as husband and wife to be each other’s *best biblical counselor*. You’re to be each other’s most vital one-another minister, most important encourager, most intimate spiritual friend. You’re to speak and live gospel truth in love with one another so that you both grow up together in Christ.

Our marriages have the calling, opportunity, and privilege of being living pictures of the Trinity, of Christ and the church, and of maturing image bearers. The purpose of marriage is to reveal God’s glory as we represent the Trinity, reflect Christ and the church, and enhance the maturity of our spouse. This should make a daily and an eternal difference in our marriages and in our marriage counseling.

Maturing as a Biblical Marriage Counselor *The Ultimate Purpose of Marriage*

1. Marital Purpose #1: Every marriage is meant to represent the Trinity.
 - a. If you are married, what difference could it have made in your last marital disagreement if you and your spouse were consciously aware of the truth that your marriage is meant to represent the Trinity’s relationship of oneness?

b. As a marriage counselor, what difference could this truth make in your next marriage counseling session with a couple in conflict?

2. Marital Purpose #2: Every marriage is meant to reflect Christ and the church.

a. If you are married, during your last public interaction, what difference could the truth of displaying to the world the love between Christ and his bride have made?

b. As a marriage counselor, what difference could this truth make in your next marriage counseling session with a troubled couple?

3. Marital Purpose #3: Every marriage is meant for couples to nurture each other to become more like Christ.

a. If you are married, when you ponder the purpose of your interactions with your spouse, what difference could it make if you focused on your calling of helping your spouse to become more like Christ?

b. As a marriage counselor, what difference could this truth make in your next marriage counseling session with a struggling couple?

4. The purpose of marriage is to reveal God's glory as we represent the Trinity, reflect Christ and the church, and enhance the maturity of our spouse.
 - a. If you are married, what daily and eternal differences could this make in your marriage?

 - b. What difference could this make in your goals as a marriage counselor?

A Gospel-Centered Application of the Four Pillars of Oneness in Marriage

Every pastor and biblical counselor wants to help couples enjoy a God-glorifying, mutually meaningful marriage. In doing so, many of us have used the four pillars of marital oneness—leave, cleave, weave, and receive—from the creation narrative in Genesis 2:23–25.

Why, then, are so many Christian marriages still struggling? Perhaps because we have used these four pillars to focus on solutions instead of on gospel-centered soul-u-tions. I confess I did that for several years of marriage ministry. Here I want us to learn how to use these pillars to address *heart motivation* when seeking to build oneness in marriage.

Oneness in Marriage Pillar #1: Leaving

In Genesis 2:24 we read, “That is why a man leaves his father and mother . . .” The Hebrew word translated as “leave” means to sever, cut, or untie. Today we might say “cut the apron strings”—meaning to cut the umbilical cord of dependence upon parents. Throughout the first five books of the Old Testament, Moses uses this Hebrew word with the idea of forsaking, especially forsaking one allegiance for another.

Husbands and wives are to shift their *core* loyalty from parent to spouse. There will always be a parent-child loyalty and fidelity, even as an adult child

to adult parents. However, the core loyalty, the principal commitment, now transfers to our spouse as our most important human devotion.

Why is leaving vital from a gospel-centered, Spirit-dependent perspective? Ponder how this idea might be misused without a gospel-centered reality. “Finally! I’m free from Mom and Dad!” The heart implication is still, “It’s all about me! Leaving and shifting loyalty is all about my freedom.”

Consider how to apply leaving from a gospel-centered point of view. “Our core loyalty to each other displays our core loyalty to Christ. Our marriage relationship is ultimately all about being marital ambassadors who show the world how Christ and his bride are faithfully devoted to each other.”

The biblical principle of leaving can be applied to a self-centered heart or to a Christ-centered heart. The marital application will be entirely different depending on the heart motivation. Does that mean we cannot make practical applications? Not at all. But be sure to hear our central point—*address the heart first*. Apply truth to a heart growing in Christlikeness instead of applying truth to a hard, self-centered heart.

When I teach on leaving, I start with heart motivation, and then I share three “*in-law bylaws*” as one possible way to apply this principle.

In-Law Bylaw #1: Other-Centered. Seek to understand and appreciate your spouse’s family of origin—their culture, way of doing things, likes and dislikes, etc.

In-Law Bylaw #2: Christ-Centered. Seek to create one new family culture to honor Christ—merge, blend, and integrate your two different families of origin into one new, united “you.”

In-Law Bylaw #3: Marriage-Centered. Prioritize the husband-wife relationship over all other human relationships—honor your parents, love your children, encourage your church, and engage your community, but prioritize your marriage for God’s glory.

There is no magic in these three applications. They are my current best attempt to contextualize these biblical principles—with a gospel-centered focus. You can collaborate with your counselees to apply the pillar of leaving to their marriage—in gospel-centered ways that uniquely glorify God.

Oneness in Marriage Pillar #2: Cleaving

Moses continues in Genesis 2:24, “and is united to his wife.” The Hebrew word translated as “united” has the idea of attachment, permanence, keeping together, bonding, and tying a knot. We might picture it as superglue or Gorilla Glue. The word is used in the Old Testament for the attachment of muscle to bone and for the life-and-death grip of the hand to a sword in combat.

I recall participating in a wedding early in my ministry. The pastor who performed the majority of the ceremony was from India, as was the couple. During the ceremony, the minister looked at the groom with utmost seriousness and said, “What God has joined together, let no one separate.” Then, making eye contact with the bride, he repeated, “What God has joined together, let no one separate.” The silence in the sanctuary was deafening. Looking at the parents and then at the rest of the gathered celebrants, he repeated a third time, “What God has joined together, let no one separate.” I was trembling at this point—and I was not the one getting married! The sacredness of that moment and the sanctity of the marital vows crushed down on me in a fresh way. Marriage is a permanent cleaving together.

Even this sacred truth of cleaving can be misapplied when our hearts are hard. If we could read the mind of the bride or groom, they might be thinking, “Finally! I can feel loved. Someone will be devoted only and always to *me!*” At one level, the *longing* for marital love is pure and proper. But we can poison that pure longing by turning it into the *demand* that *I* be loved so that *I* feel like a somebody.

What might cleaving sound like from a gospel-centered, Spirit-dependent perspective? “Lord, thank you that we can focus on loving each other. May our love be a reflection of your faithful covenant loyalty to us in Christ. When folks marvel at our commitment, may we point them back to your eternal commitment and our eternal security in Christ.”

For the soft heart clinging to Christ, what are some practical implications of cleaving to one another? Consider these *four gospel communion and communication principles* from Ephesians 4:25–32.

1. *Speak truthful words with love* (4:25). “Father, as we cleave together, empower us toward the *mutual ministry* of speaking gospel truth to each other for your glory.”
2. *Speak controlled words with patience* (4:26–28). “Father, we are not ignorant about Satan’s schemes. He wants to use our anger to separate what you have joined together. In our anger, help us not to sin, but to seek sanctification *together* in Christ.”
3. *Speak encouraging words with wisdom* (4:29–30). “Father, help us to *know each other so well* that our words uniquely and specifically bring life to each other.”
4. *Speak gracious words with humility* (4:31–32). “Father, when sin seeks to separate, remind us of your forgiving grace; grant us strength to *give each other grace.*”

Oneness in Marriage Pillar #3: Weaving

Adam spoke poetic words of weaving in Genesis 2:23: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.” Moses spoke similar words in Genesis 2:24: “and they become one flesh.” Moses is portraying the merging of two into one. This idea is not just physical, sexual union, though the act of marriage does portray that oneness. The Hebrew word translated as “flesh” (*basar*) is consistently used for the whole person—body, soul, and spirit. Moses is speaking not only of bodily oneness but also of soul oneness.

The Old Testament illustrates this concept of oneness using the image of strands of silk woven into a beautiful, resilient tapestry. In modern times we seek to illustrate this concept with the unity candle, where two separate flames merge to form one new flame. In weaving, two independent beings become interdependent and intertwined in one glorious tapestry.

Even this beautiful portrait can be marred by our sometimes ugly hearts. Without a gospel-centered perspective, our attitude toward weaving may simply be, “Finally, someone will love me and be one with me—complete me—and my self-image and self-esteem will blossom!” There is nothing wrong with marital completion, but that longing can be marred by a self-centered focus. Or we might think of weaving as, “Finally, fun sex without guilt!” As Scripture says, the marital bed is undefiled and meant to be joyous. However, if the primary or only goal of marriage is sexual pleasure *for me*, then I have missed the gospel beauty of marriage—even of marital sexuality.

To the gospel-centered, Spirit-dependent heart, the mindset behind weaving can be, “Thank you, Lord, for the marital joy of oneness in body, soul, and spirit. May I bring my spouse pleasure in every way, and may our mutual oneness reflect the Trinity’s eternal dance of unity!”

To gospel-centered hearts, I’ll sometimes share three tapestry principles.

1. *Realize that to unravel is to ruin.* Distance, discord, divisiveness, and divorce all tear apart body, soul, and spirit, because the two are now one.
2. *Discover who you are together in Christ.* God has fearfully and wonderfully made you as individuals. Now as one, seek to discern and celebrate your joint identity in Christ.
3. *Weave together one shared husband-wife grace narrative.* Your marriage is one page in Christ’s grand redemptive narrative. What’s the title of your grace narrative?

Oneness in Marriage Pillar #4: Receiving

Moses concludes his inspired creation narrative of the first marriage with the idea of receiving. “Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame” (Gen. 2:25). Naked and unashamed portrays intimacy in the sense of *into-me-see*. Another person sees into my soul and does not judge me but accepts, treasures, and values me. The idea is grace-knowing—awareness of my flaws, faults, imperfections, blemishes, weaknesses, and sins without rejection. And awareness of my uniqueness, beauty, strengths, gifts, and Christ-likeness without demanding that I have to be perfect to be accepted, wanted, and valued.

For Adam and Eve, originally there was no sin to cause any shame. Unlike them, we need a Romans 5:8 grace-knowing approach to our spouse: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Without a gospel-centered focus, receiving can become a demand that my spouse wink at my sins, ignore my faults, and accept me without seeking to help me toward maturity in Christ. With a gospel-centered, Spirit-dependent mindset, because we are safe and secure in Christ, we invite our spouse to speak into our life—with challenge when needed, with encouragement when desired, or with affirmation when appropriate.

To a couple with soft hearts, I’ll share *three intimacy instructions*.

1. *Risk openness*. To be seen, you must be vulnerable and transparent, real and raw. Because you are secure in Christ, you can risk exposure with your spouse—so you can grow together in grace.
2. *Respond graciously*. This involves applying Matthew 7:3–5 to your marital relationship—being willing to see and address the log in your own eye.
3. *Restore humbly*. When your spouse fails Christ or you, this means applying Galatians 6:1 (responding gently and humbly) with a desire not to protect your spouse’s self-image but to promote the image of Christ in both of you.

As marriage counselors, will we use biblical marriage principles in a solution-focused, spouse-centered way? Or will we help couples use God’s truth for God’s glory in a soul-union-focused, gospel-centered manner?

Maturing as a Biblical Marriage Counselor

A Gospel-Centered Application of the Four Pillars of Oneness in Marriage

1. I confessed that in the past I had used the Genesis 2:23–25 principles of leaving, cleaving, weaving, and receiving in a solution-focused way instead of in a gospel-centered way—addressing the heart first. In which way have you used Genesis 2:23–25?

2. We started the sections on leaving, cleaving, weaving, and receiving with a discussion of the biblical, gospel-centered meaning of each pillar. If you are married, which of the four pillars seems most important to you in your marriage? If you are a counselor, which seems most important in your marriage counseling ministry?

3. With each of the four pillars, we compared and contrasted a self-centered mindset with a gospel-centered mindset. Think about couples you have counseled—how might they seek to apply these principles from a self-centered perspective? From a gospel-centered perspective?

4. At the end of each section on the four pillars of oneness in marriage, we shared some practical implications. These are simply my current best attempt to apply the biblical marital concepts in our modern context. What gospel-centered practical implications might you make for
 - a. Leaving?

 - b. Cleaving?

 - c. Weaving?

 - d. Receiving?