Gospel-Centered Counseling

How Christ Changes Lives

Robert W. Kellemen and Zondervan Publishing

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Bob Kellemen’s *Gospel-Centered Counseling* is a masterpiece. It clearly and compellingly sets out a theological framework in which to build our counseling practice. And it makes the connection to Christian concepts and the Bible very clear. But it also sets forth with every theological concept a way to see how it relates to the nitty-gritty, real-life, real-time elements of counseling. Theology shapes and defines how we do counseling.

Here’s some backstory: I love people, and I love helping people. But for years, all I ever ran into in the evangelical publishing world was psychology books written by well-meaning Christians, who told me a lot about people, but not much about God. The connection to God, the Bible, Christ, sin, suffering, human motivation, the world, the flesh, the devil was well-intentioned, but often superficial. As a young seminary student, I wrote in my journal a list of biblical concepts that I had never seen in a counseling textbook. I was craving for someone to show me how to relate the Bible to the care of souls. That was 1990s. Little did I know at the time that there was something called the Biblical Counseling Movement.

As a pastoral intern, fresh off my first year of seminary, a stack of books were handed to me by the senior pastor on my very first day. I don’t remember much else of what I read, but one book really stood out to me that summer—Jay Adam’s *A Theology of Christian Counseling*. It was bit like a bomb, sitting at the foot of a mountain, that when detonated, shattered my needs-based worldview. All that was left was a huge crevice on the side of the mountainside of my soul.

Reading Adam’s *A Theology of Christian Counseling* instilled several principles that have stayed true to this day. And Bob Kellemen’s *Gospel-Centered Counseling* instills those same principles today.

Here’s the first one: *Theology matters*. Theology is literally “the study of God” (theos—God; ology—study of). It is essentially the study of all things related to God. Because the Bible is God’s Word, we come to understand God most clearly through his Word. We come to understand Jesus, humanity, sin, suffering, hope, and every category that matters to human living through the Bible. God has revealed himself in the Bible, and told us everything we need to know him and to grow in our relationship with him. Theology matters because *a careful study of the Bible will help us to know God and rightly understand all that he has made*.

Here’s the second principle: *Sound theology leads to sound practice*. If counseling is the care of souls, it leads to a lot of talking, crying, complaining, helping, sorting, thinking, praying, and doing. Underneath every counseling practice lies some form of theology; that is, some understanding of God, sin, suffering, Christ, humanity, etc. Even if you don’t consider yourself a theologian, you are one. You have adopted some view of these things which leads you to do what you do in the counseling office. Again, theology matters. It’s an inescapable reality. But now we see even more why it matters—our theology is the foundational cornerstone on which we building our counseling theory and practice.

Fast forward to 2014. A few weeks ago, a copy of Bob Kellemen’s *Gospel-Centered Counseling* arrives. Not since my reading of Adam’s book have I found something this good—a solid biblical foundation on which we can build our counseling philosophy and practice. Suffice to say, I’m not trying to make Bob Kellemen into the next Jay Adams. Far be
it from me! Jay is unique as the founder of the modern day biblical counseling movement. The writing of his first book *Competent to Counsel*, and his formation of the Christian Counseling Education Foundation (C.C.E.F.), both in the late 1960s, and then later on, his formation of the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors (renamed the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors), all set him apart as a giant figure of which we are all in a huge amount of debt.

Probably a better way to state things—Bob's book *Gospel-Centered Counseling* is built on the shoulders of Jay's work. It is a theologically rich counseling guide for the next generation. It starts out by setting a thorough theological framework which Bob works through over the course of the book:

- The Word: Where do we find wisdom for life in a broken world?
- The Trinity/Community: What comes into our mind when we think about God? Whose view of God will we believe—Christ or Satan's?
- Creation: Whose are we? In what story do we find ourselves?
- Fall: What's the root source of our problems? What went wrong?
- Redemption: How does Christ bring us peace with God? How does Christ change people?
- Church: Where can we find a place to belong and become?
- Consummation: How does our future destiny with Christ make a difference in our lives today as saints who struggle against suffering and sin?
- Sanctification: Why are we here? How do we become like Jesus? How can our inner life increasingly reflect the inner life of God?

Theologically-rich, isn't it? Hand this book to a young seminary student or counselor, who is pinning away, trying to figure out the connection between the Bible, his faith, and counseling, and you will handed that young lad a gold-mine.

Bob understands that theology matters and that sound theology leads to sound practice. And he makes that very clear in this outstanding book.

Patiently read. Consider. Absorb the theological concepts. Find a friend and share these ideas—use the companion discussion/application guide. Share in church. Pray about it. Put your theology into practice. Then praise God and thank him for giving us his Word and a rich theology that helps us to understand how to care for hurting souls.

—Deepak Reju, Ph. D., Pastor of Biblical Counseling and Families at Capitol Hill Baptist Church (Washington, DC), President of the Biblical Counseling Coalition, Author of *The Pastor and Counseling* and *On Guard: Protecting and Responding to Child Abuse at Church*
Introduction

Changing Lives with Christ’s Changeless Gospel Truth

We’ve all heard of brilliant surgeons with horrific bedside manners. We’ve likely known some scholarly people whose relational skills could use a little development. On the other hand, many people know what it’s like to care deeply, but do not know what to do after the hug. Perhaps we’ve experienced friends who can cry with us, but seem unsure how to offer much additional help.

God calls us to love well and wisely. That’s why, in biblical counseling, we must weave together truth and love—comprehensive biblical wisdom and compassionate Christlike care.

That’s the design of the Equipping Biblical Counselors’ Series. In Gospel-Centered Counseling and Gospel Conversations, I unite Paul’s ministry theme of Scripture and soul in 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 own lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.”

My prayer for this two-book series follows Paul’s wisdom and relationship prayer in Philippians 1:9-11. “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ.”

My passion follows Paul’s truth and love passion in Ephesians 4:15-16. “Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

Equipping in biblical counseling is not either/or: either be a brilliant but uncaring soul physician, or be a loving but unwise spiritual friend. God calls us to be wise and loving biblical counselors. Gospel-Centered Counseling and Gospel Conversations offer you a comprehensive and compassionate approach to one-another ministry.

Keep Reading If...

Keep reading if you see yourself in any of the following portraits...

Picture with me a committed Christian sitting at Starbucks with her best friend and fellow church member. Her heart is pounding as she silently prays, “Lord, please give me wisdom.” Her friend has finally opened up about the fear, anxiety, and panic she experiences daily, and shared, “I know the Bible talks about trusting the Lord and taking all my anxiety to Him. But how in the world do I relate who God is and what His Word says to my fears?” I’m writing Gospel-Centered Counseling and Gospel Conversations for this committed Christian friend and thousands like her—for folks like you—who want to know what to do after the hug.

Picture with me a pastor stepping out from behind the pulpit. He’s just finished confidently preaching on James 4:1-4 and the source of relationship problems. During the meet-and-greet time after the service, a visitor, not knowing that this is typically time for casual chit-chat, asks the pastor, “How could my wife and I apply your message to our marriage? We’ve seen a divorce attorney, but we’d like to save our marriage. Could you
help?” While looking poised on the outside, inside the pastor is thinking, “They taught me how to preach in seminary, but not how to help a struggling couple to change.” I’m writing *Gospel-Centered Counseling* and *Gospel Conversations* for this pastor and thousands like him—for folks like you—who long for the same confidence and competence in the personal ministry of the Word that you have in the teaching ministry of the Word.

Picture with me a couple called by their church to lead their congregation’s new one-another equipping ministry. It’s designed to train “the average person in the church” to be “competent to counsel.” Sorting through literally hundreds of excellent books on counseling, the husband says to his wife, “So much great material. But where do we begin? My head is swimming with information, but at the same time drowning with overload.” His wife, nodding in agreement, replies, “We need something that ties this all together, that guides us from the big picture to the nightly lesson. You know, like the *Evangelism Explosion* training manuals do for sharing our faith.” I’m writing *Gospel-Centered Counseling* and *Gospel Conversations* for this couple and thousands like them—for folks like you—who long for a *focused local church counseling curriculum*. For folks who want a best-practice approach for equipping God’s people to change lives with Christ’s changeless truth so they can care like Christ.

**Not “Smurfy” or Trendy, but Eternal and Daily**

In *Gospel Wakefulness*, Jared Wilson tells about a gospel-loving friend who asked him, “Do you remember *The Smurfs*? Do you remember how they used the word ‘smurfy’ for everything? If something was great, the Smurfs said it was smurfy.” His friend then wondered whether “all the gospel-centered this and gospel-driven that is just our version of ‘smurfy.’”

It’s a legitimate concern. Is “gospel-centered” like “smurfy”? Are we just jumping on the proverbial bandwagon? Mimicking the popular lingo? Enjoying being trendy by dropping a gospel buzzword into every other sentence?

I’d prefer to think gospel-centeredness reflects Paul who said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). I’d prefer to believe that gospel-centeredness echoes the author of Hebrews who penned every sentence in Hebrews as a word of gospel encouragement (Hebrews 13:22) applied to the life of believers enduring suffering and battling besetting sins.

The KJV version captures well our potential attitude toward gospel-centeredness: “Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart” (Ephesians 6:6, KJV). We could be gospel-centered in a way that’s trendy, or in a way that’s eternal. We could be gospel-centered in a way that’s “smurfy,” or in a way that applies Christ’s changeless truth in our changing times to change lives.

I’ve been equipping biblical counselors in the local church and seminary settings for three decades. I summarized those thirty years in *Soul Physicians*:

I have doggedly pursued the fundamental question: *What would a model of biblical counseling and discipleship look like that was built solely upon Christ’s gospel of grace?* What does the gospel offer? What difference does the gospel make in how we live, how we relate, and how we offer help?

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I have had a life-long passion for gospel-centered counseling—applying God’s eternal plan of salvation and sanctification in Christ to our daily lives and relationships.

What does gospel-centered counseling mean? When I joined three-dozen counseling leaders in a year-long process to craft the Confessional Statement of the Biblical Counseling Coalition, we united to describe counseling centered on Christ and the gospel.

We believe that wise counseling centers on Jesus Christ—His sinless life, death on the cross, burial, resurrection, present reign, and promised return. Through the Gospel, God reveals the depths of sin, the scope of suffering, and the breadth, length, height, and depth of grace. Wise counseling gets to the heart of personal and interpersonal problems by bringing to bear the truth, mercy, and power of Christ’s grace. There is no true restoration of the soul and there are no truly God-honoring relationships without understanding the desperate condition we are in without Christ and apart from experiencing the joy of progressive deliverance from that condition through God’s mercies. We point people to a person, Jesus our Redeemer, and not to a program, theory, or experience.3

What does gospel-centered counseling look like? It will take me two books—Gospel-Centered Counseling and Gospel Conversations—to answer that question. But here’s a one-sentence summary:

Gospel-centered counseling promotes personal change centered on the Person of Christ through the personal ministry of the Word.

The Résumé of the Gospel-Centered Counselor

We not only need to know what gospel-centered counseling looks like. We also need to know what the gospel-centered counselor looks like and what equipping in gospel-centered counseling includes.

To answer these questions, imagine that you’re forwarding your résumé to the Divine Counselor. What characteristics would you highlight to demonstrate your qualifications to be a gospel-centered biblical counselor?

Fortunately for us, the apostle Paul already completed the résumé of an equipped gospel-centered counselor. “I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge, and competent to instruct one another” (Romans 15:14). Building off of this verse, Gospel-Centered Counseling and Gospel Conversations seek to equip you to mature in the “4Cs” of Character, Content, Competence, and Community:

- Christlike Character: Full of Goodness—Spiritual Maturity (Being)
- Biblical Content: Complete in Knowledge—Wisdom Applied to Life (Knowing)
- Counseling Competence: Competent to Instruct—Christlike Ministry (Doing)
- Christian Community: Brothers/One Another—Biblical Community (Loving)
I’ll weave this four-dimensional equipping map throughout both books. However, *Gospel-Centered Counseling* will especially help you to develop the biblical content—wisdom applied to life—necessary to counsel effectively. It offers you theology for life.

**Theology for Life: Gospel-Centered Counseling**

I present full-day seminars on *How to Care Like Christ*. The morning sessions highlight a theology of biblical counseling where we explore life’s eight ultimate questions from a biblical perspective. The afternoon sessions emphasize a methodology of biblical counseling, where I introduce four core biblical counseling relational competencies. I recently had a pastor at an Evangelical church say, “Could you either skip the theology part or rush through it, so that we can spend the bulk of our time on the practical stuff?”

I wasn’t shocked because I understood where he was coming from. We often teach theology in such a way that it *separates* truth from life. So, I began to illustrate for him a few of the ways I would help his people see that theology is *practical and relevant*, that truth is for life, that God’s Word is robust, real, raw, relevant, and relational. I was grateful when he said, “Well, if that’s what you mean by theology, then don’t you dare skip it!”

His fear was a valid fear—that equipping in one-another ministry would just be a “brain dump”—all about information transfer. He wanted the assurance that when I equipped his people it would be content related to life—all about transformation in Christ.

**Making Biblical Counseling Truly Biblical**

Everybody talks about the personal ministry of the Word, but how do we make biblical counseling truly biblical? How do we design equipping in one-another ministry so that it is truly transformational? In three decades of equipping, I’ve found that a crucial way to move from information to transformation is to probe the Bible’s wisdom about life’s ultimate questions.

Michael Horton, in *The Gospel-Driven Life*, notes that the working assumption of contemporary Christianity is that modern culture—whether sociology, education, or psychology—properly interprets human identity and the ideals of proper human function, but lacks the methods for obtaining those goals.4 In other words, we assume the world at least gets the questions right, even if they fumble the answers. Horton rightfully questions whether the world even gets the questions right.

This is where we typically introduce the Bible as the “answer to life’s questions.” This is where the Bible becomes relevant to people “where they are” in their experience. Accordingly, it is often said that we must *apply* the Scriptures to *daily living*. But this is to invoke the Bible too late, as if we already knew what “life” or “daily living” meant. The problem is not merely that we lack the right answers, but that we don’t even have the right questions until God introduces us to his interpretation of reality.5

In *Gospel-Centered Counseling*, we turn to God’s Word not only to find answers for daily living; but first to discover God’s ultimate questions about life. This forces us to address the question, “Do I define the Jesus story or does it define me?”6
The Bible’s Eight Ultimate Life Questions

In my study of Scripture, I’ve found that the Bible’s grand gospel narrative defines for us eight ultimate life questions. Here’s how these questions are typically ordered and often worded by students of the Bible and life.

- The Word: “What is truth?” “Where can we find answers?”
- The Trinity: “Who is God?” “How can we know Him personally?”
- Creation/Understanding People: “Who are we?” “What makes people tick?”
- Fall/Diagnosing Problems: “What went wrong?” “Why do we do the things we do?”
- Redemption/Prescribing God’s Soul-u- tion: “How do we find peace with God?” “How do people change?”
- Sanctification: “How does the change process occur?” “How does change happen?”
- The Church: “What is God doing in the world today through His people?” How can we help one another to change?”
- Consummation: “Where are we headed?” “How does our future destiny impact our present reality?”

These are excellent, biblically-derived questions about life. Through my study of a gospel-centered approach to biblical counseling, I’ve tweaked the ordering and the wording just a bit. Together, these eight ultimate life questions seek to answer the biblical counselor’s foundational question: “What would a model of biblical counseling and discipleship look like that was built solely upon Christ’s gospel of grace?”

- The Word: “Where do we find wisdom for life in a broken world?”
- The Trinity/Community: “What comes into our mind when we think about God?” “Whose view of God will we believe—Christ’s or Satan’s?”
- Creation: “Whose are we?” “In what story do we find ourselves?”
- Fall: “What’s the root source of our problem?” “What went wrong?”
- Redemption: “How does Christ bring us peace with God?” “How does Christ change people?”
- Church: “Where can we find a place to belong and become?”
- Consummation: “How does our future destiny with Christ make a difference in our lives today as saints who struggle against suffering and sin?”
- Sanctification: “Why are we here?” “How do we become like Jesus?” How can our inner life increasingly reflect the inner life of Christ?”

Two hallmarks of the modern biblical counseling movement have always been the sufficiency of Scripture and progressive sanctification. In my outline of life’s eight ultimate questions, those two issues serve as bookends. By starting with the Word of God, we humbly submit to God’s wisdom about life in our broken world. By ending with sanctification, we acknowledge that we build our answer to the question, “How do we
become like Jesus?” upon God’s answers to all the preceding questions—upon God’s grand redemptive narrative.

Many theologians and biblical counselors have summarized the Bible as a CFR Narrative: Creation, Fall, Redemption. This summary offers a wonderful picture of the grand movement of the Bible’s gospel story.

My six questions between my two bookends offer an expanded, robust portrait of the biblical narrative for biblical counseling. Instead of CFR, it is the “CCFRCC Narrative of the Drama of Redemption.”

- **Bookend One: The Word**—The Sufficiency of Scripture for Biblical Counseling
  - Prologue: Community—Before the Beginning/Eternity Past
  - Act I: Creation—In the Beginning
  - Act II: Fall—The End of the Beginning
  - Act III: Redemption—Eternity Invades Time
  - Act IV: Church—In the Fullness of Time
  - Epilogue: Consummation—After the End/Eternity Future
- **Bookend Two: Progressive Sanctification**—The Goal of Biblical Counseling

In *Gospel-Centered Counseling* we will explore chapter by chapter each of life’s ultimate questions as they relate to your life and ministry as a biblical counselor. At the end of each chapter, we’ll provide you with a tweet-size summary that captures God’s gospel answer to life’s ultimate questions.

**How to Care Like Christ: Gospel Conversations**

I began by saying that the comprehensive biblical wisdom of the soul physician must morph together with the compassionate Christian care of the spiritual friend. *Gospel-Centered Counseling* seeks to equip you to become a wise physician of the soul who understand people, diagnoses problems, and prescribes God’s soul-utions—biblically.

But we can’t stop there. Ministry is always about truth and love because Jesus is full of grace and truth. The second book in this series, *Gospel Conversations*, provides an intensive, relational, hands-on equipping manual. Through it you will develop twenty-two biblical counseling relational skills so you can care like Christ. It provides four biblical/church history compass points for speaking truth in love—gospel conversations:

- **Sustaining**: “It’s Normal to Hurt”—Learning how to weep with those who weep by offering biblical sustaining care for hurting people.
- **Healing**: “It’s Possible to Hope”—Learning how to give hope to the hurting by offering biblical healing comfort and encouragement for suffering people.
- **Reconciling**: “It’s Horrible to Sin, but Wonderful to Be Forgiven”—Learning how to be a dispenser of Christ’s grace by offering biblical reconciling care-fronting for people struggling against besetting sins.
- **Guiding**: “It’s Supernatural to Mature”—Learning how to disciple, coach, and mentor by offering biblical guiding wisdom for people growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ.
Together, these two books explore how Christ changes lives as the foundation for how to care like Christ. The goal of Gospel-Centered Counseling and Gospel Conversation is to further equip you for the gospel-centered process of seeing lives changed through the changeless truth of Christ’s gospel of grace.

Welcome to the journey. Let’s jump in!

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Endnotes

1Jared Wilson, Gospel Wakefulness, 213.

2Robert Kellemen, Soul Physicians, 3.

3The Biblical Counseling Coalition Confessional Statement:
   http://biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/about/confessional-statement/.


5Ibid.

6Ibid., 116.