

**A Christian counseling model can't just be about admonishment. That approach only leads to shame and human efforts that are doomed to fail. But when the gospel is brought to bear in the counseling relationship, the counselor becomes an instrument of grace in the hands of a faithful God.**

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Psychological Healing Begins with the Counselor

“CAN YOU RECOMMEND a good Christian counselor?” we get asked time and time again. This is perhaps one of the most challenging questions to answer. Is the person looking for pastoral counseling or professional counseling? For some who ask, the underlying question is, “Do you know of a counselor who is a Christian but who never discusses faith?” For others, it suggests a desire for a counselor who will actively use the Word of God in every session.

That really gets to the heart of the bigger question: What is the proper way for Christians to counsel? Can a believing counselor ethically talk about the Bible in a professional session? What about pastors who have had little to no counseling training? Graduate students wrestle with how they can live out their faith in the counseling profession while maintaining proper ethical standards and not imposing their beliefs on counselees. They wonder, *Is it possible to counsel ethically from a biblical worldview?*

This quandary has long been a topic of debate—so much so that experts in the field of psychology have established five prominent models in an attempt to answer it. Existing models include the levels-of-explanation approach, Christian psychology, integration, transformative

approach, and nouthetic counseling, also referred to as biblical counseling. The levels-of-explanation and nouthetic counseling perspectives fall on opposite ends of the psychology spectrum.<sup>1</sup> Christians within the biblical counseling perspective argue that psychology is completely secular and has no place in Christian counseling. This approach asserts that there are no applicable truths within psychological theories.<sup>2</sup> On the opposite extreme, levels-of-explanation counselors view faith as personal, having no place in the counseling room, and instead rely solely on psychological principles. They do not ever use the Bible in counseling. The other three approaches—Christian psychology, integration, and transformative approach—fall between these two extremes.

While counselors are often asked to share their theoretical orientation for counseling, rarely are they asked how their Christian faith impacts their counseling. Yet that is an essential part of the counseling relationship. But for many counselors, even if they are asked, they may not be able to pinpoint exactly how to answer. Throughout our more than forty years of working as counselors, we've realized that counselors need more training in how to respond both biblically and ethically while simultaneously respecting the various worldviews of their clients.

According to a 2019 study, 94 percent of pastors surveyed said they counsel their parishioners on a regular basis.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, a majority of pastors viewed their counseling training in seminary as inadequate, stating that they felt ill-prepared for half of the counseling needs they face in ministry.<sup>4</sup> Since pastors often stand on the front lines when it comes to counseling, it is imperative that we provide them with resources to equip them in this endeavor. Research shows 76 percent of pastors will refer church members to a professional counselor after two sessions.<sup>5</sup>

As counselors we have to learn to let our faith guide our counseling without imposing our beliefs on our clients. Grace-based counseling provides a framework to do so.

We would be remiss if we did not clarify that *all* counselors—pastoral, lay, and professional—should counsel *only* within our realm of training. This is an ethical mandate that all of us, both lay and professional, need to follow. Pastors and lay counselors need to know when the needs of their parishioners are outside their scope of practice and when to refer. Nearly half of all Americans will meet diagnosis criteria for at least one mental disorder in their lifetime, and in a given twelve-month period, more than 25 percent of Americans will meet that criteria.<sup>6</sup> Given these high numbers, it is important for clergy and lay counselors to have a list of qualified Christian professionals to whom they can refer counselees when needed.

Unfortunately, Christian counseling varies greatly in content and in its biblical orientation, as we can see in the existing five approaches to Christian counseling. We hope this book will help pastors feel better prepared to counsel when appropriate, and to discern what counselors in their area mean when they say they are “Christian counselors.”

Some pastors and lay counselors are afraid of incorporating psychological principles into their counseling for fear of “dumbing down the Scriptures” or of contradicting the Bible itself. While this is a legitimate concern, it is important to note that God is the creator of all truth, including true psychology. True science aligns with biblical teaching; if a question arises about whether or not to apply a particular psychological principle in the counseling context, Christians need to look to Scripture for discernment and guidance.

## **A NEW MODEL**

Throughout the following pages, we will examine each of the existing models. As we look at each, we will more clearly be able to see the need for an alternate model. Far too many people have sought help from Christian counselors only to feel worse than before. Many are told that the trauma they experienced is somehow their fault, leaving them with

further guilt and shame. Some counselors focus solely on sin and admonishment. While this is important, they often neglect to share the role of grace, which fosters healing. Apart from grace, admonishment leaves clients feeling only shame and judgment.

These current models never flesh out the element of grace in a way that helps the counselee, leading to healing and restoration. That's why we propose a new model of counseling: *grace-based counseling*. As the name implies, grace-based counseling is drenched in grace: grace that illuminates broken lives; grace that floods the soul with hope; grace that pays the long overdue bills of the heart.

What makes this book different from other books written about Christian counseling? The answer is simple. Other books focus mainly on the methodology or the how-to of therapy. Grace-based counseling, however, begins with the counselor. If the counselor is not experiencing God's grace in their daily life, he or she cannot be a conduit of God's grace to the one who is hurting.

So then what is the litmus test for the counselor or pastor who has the privilege to come to the aid of one who is "stuck" in life? The counselor comes . . .

1. Prepared spiritually. He or she filters all counseling through three verses: Philippians 2:5 (has the mind and attitude of God); Philippians 4:13 (conducts all therapy via the power of God); and Colossians 3:17 (does all to the glory of God).
2. Prepared physically (organized; handouts ready; etc.).
3. Prepared to face adversity.
4. Prepared to inspire and illuminate the client.
5. Possessed with a pure heart. His or her baggage is dealt with and resolved. (Consider Matthew 7:5—How can you take the speck out of someone's eye if you have a log in yours?)
6. Prepared by being confident. As God's chosen leader, Gideon did

not have the confidence to lead (see Judg. 6:15). But the most important thing was how God saw him (v. 12)—He saw him as a valiant warrior. Christian counselors need to view themselves as valiant warriors for God.

We believe counselors need to extend grace in the counseling session. Of course counselors can't transmit what they haven't received. It's the counselor who has been wrapped in the arms of God's grace who can adequately share God's grace. Only a counselor who has been impacted deeply by the grace of God can expel the inspirational grace of God in the counseling office.

The Lord bestows grace on us by giving us what we do not deserve. He does this by speaking wisdom and truth into our lives. Many speak of the need to balance grace with truth, but this is impossible. Balance is simply the wrong idea. Balance is a solution for many issues;

***Second chances,  
third chances, fourth  
chances, and beyond:  
these are what light  
the spiritual fire in the  
hearts of the counseled.***

however, in regards to grace and truth, we are not seeking a balance. Instead think of these concepts this way: grace ceases to be grace apart from truth. Jesus was full of both grace and truth (John 1:14). Grace and truth are not opposing principles in need of balance; instead, they are united as one. Both are equally necessary for abundant living. As some psychological researchers attest, "Grace first requires an awareness of sin, a need for forgiveness, and the need for God's strength in the midst of our weakness."<sup>7</sup>

The grace described here is not a cheap grace, but one that is rich in the acknowledgment of truth—grace is always undeserved. Grace-based counseling does not negate personal responsibility or the



consequences of sin, but instead extends hope and freedom to people who are suffering.

Jesus' response to Peter after the resurrection demonstrates grace. Just as predicted, Peter denied Jesus three times. The disciple likely felt intense sadness, and perhaps guilt. What is noteworthy is Jesus' reaction to seeing Peter post-denial. Jesus did not shame or guilt him for his actions. He restored Peter's relationship with Him, and said, "Peter, do you love Me, because if so, we've got work to do. I need to build My church" (see John 21:15; our translation).

Jesus extended grace to Peter. He could have rebuked him but He didn't. He presented Peter with a second chance to follow Him. Second chances, third chances, fourth chances, and beyond: these are what light the spiritual fire in the hearts of the counseled. We share truth. We share grace. We share the strength, relief, and hope of a second chance. With the grace of God we say, "You don't have to live like this anymore. There is a better way. There is the way of grace."

Not every counselee will come for help because of willful sin. Many have been wronged by others, have experienced hardships, or have pathology that is physiological in nature. Grace is still applicable. Remember the story of Naomi in the book of Ruth. After losing her husband and her two sons, she felt defeated and shamed. She felt abandoned by God. But if you remember, God showed His grace to Naomi by restoring her family line through a kinsman-redeemer, Boaz. God showed favor in her life that was undeserved. This is grace.

Christian psychologists conducted a study to determine whether the concept of God's grace influenced the counseling setting. They created an official tool to measure grace, the Richmond Grace Scale, and began to conduct research studies to test the new scale. Overall, their studies determined that grace plays a substantial role in how effective a counseling session can become. Counselees who did not hold to understanding the concept of grace showed more signs of depression and mental

health issues than those who did understand the grace of God.<sup>8</sup> The findings of this study validate the importance of grace-based counseling.

While Christian psychologists acknowledge grace as a uniquely Christian construct, they admit to rarely discussing it.<sup>9</sup> Grace-based counseling seeks to build a new approach to counseling where grace and wisdom are foundational.

Grace is more than a mere construct; it is imperative for counseling through a biblical lens. Grace is *more*. Grace is more restorative. Grace is more comforting. Grace is more relief and more rest for the weary and distraught. Grace as the centerpiece for this model of counseling brings light and life to the troubled and suffering. Without grace, there is only emptiness with occasional, temporary relief. With grace, there is real and lasting change. A counselee's perspective can indeed be radically transformed by the balm of God's grace.

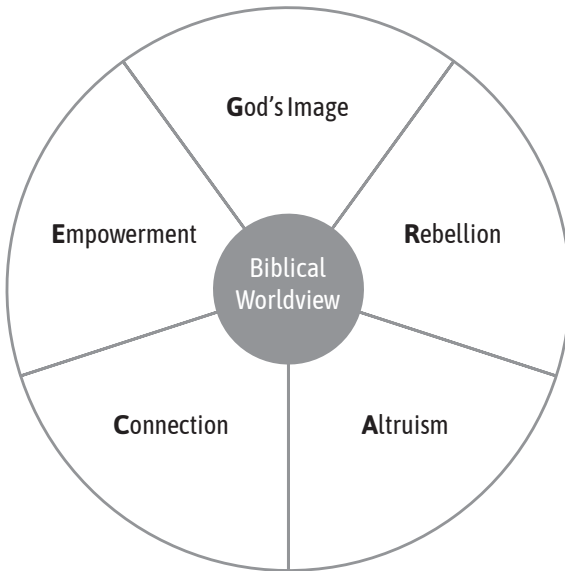
## **THE FIVE TENETS**

Before continuing, we want to emphatically state that we believe in the inerrant sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures. Since the Bible contains the only absolute truth, all psychological principles and counseling techniques should be tested through Scripture to discern the biblical application. First Thessalonians 5:21–22 states that we are to “examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil.” The “everything” in these verses include psychological theories and scientific facts.<sup>10</sup> Christian psychologists must study the Bible and strive to pursue the Lord's example in order to discern a proper application of Scripture and theology within psychology.

It is not only important to us that grace-based counseling be grounded in theology, but it must also have a clear theoretical orientation. Grace-based is based on the following five tenets, which spell out the acronym *GRACE*:

**God's Image**  
**Rebellion**  
**Altruism**  
**Connection**  
**Empowerment**

The grace-based counseling model is best understood by five spokes of a wheel surrounding a hub that represents the counselor's biblical worldview.



The figure above illustrates the grace-based model of therapy. The hub is the internalization of a biblical worldview. We believe the truth of John 16:13: "He [the Holy Spirit] will guide you into all the truth." As we as counselors grow in our knowledge of God and His Word, we are better able to offer godly counsel. We need to learn to filter our thoughts, our words, and our actions so they align with Scripture. As we do so, we operate from a biblical worldview. This worldview is central

to all we do in our attempts to help others. If we stray from biblical teaching, our counsel ceases to be Christlike.

As counselors, we have a responsibility to feed and nurture our own walk with God in order to continually sharpen our biblical worldview. When we do so, the Holy Spirit guides us as we build upon each of the five tenets of grace-based counseling. These tenets drive our philosophy in two distinct ways: (1) how problems develop, and (2) how they can be treated. We will expound upon each of these tenants in the following chapters.

## **THE GOAL OF COUNSELING**

The term *grace* is a derivative of the Greek word *charis*. The Greek word *charism* is closely related to *charis*; charism refers to an extraordinary gift from the Holy Spirit and is often used in reference to healing. The goal of counseling is to bring healing in the lives of others. While God is able to miraculously heal instantaneously, more often the healing is a lengthy process.

Counseling is a means by which God heals. Healing can be defined as “a process in the service of the evolution of the whole personality towards ever greater and more complex wholeness.”<sup>11</sup> Healing is not merely freedom from physical ailment, but involves meaning and personal growth. Grace-based counseling asserts that as we grow in holiness, we also grow in wholeness. As such, grace-based therapy is different from the healing that comes from secular counseling because it is dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit. Any healing that comes is through the presence of the Holy Spirit in the counseling session.

Healing is not exclusively dependent on the counselor explicitly sharing from the Word in the counseling session, but instead is contingent upon the counselor’s ongoing dependence on the Spirit to guide the counselor in wisdom.

The incarnational presence of Christ in the life of the counselor has

the potential to promote healing. The incarnation refers to the fact that Jesus, who is fully God, became fully man in order to serve and to save lost mankind. After the resurrection, Christ sent the Holy Spirit as a helper to believers. The presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers is actively working in the process of sanctification; Christians are motivated to change by the presence of the Holy Spirit and by a desire to become more Christlike.

The interaction between the counselor and the counselee can be incarnational as the Holy Spirit works through the therapeutic relationship.<sup>12</sup> Through that therapeutic relationship, the counselee moves toward wholeness and health. The incarnation also influences the lives of nonbelievers due to the effects of God's altruism in granting common grace.<sup>13</sup> Common grace is the belief that God shows favor to all people, causing the sun to shine on both the just and unjust (Matt. 5:45). God not only provides healing for His children, but He altruistically sheds His common grace on all of humanity. We elaborate on this in chapter 5.

A medical doctor, Arthur Kleinman, professes: "The empathic understanding that ensues from a strong therapeutic alliance allows physician-healers to actively and intentionally guide patients in re-writing their life narratives to affirm normalcy, establish acceptance, discover meaning, make new connections to the world, transcend suffering, and experience healing."<sup>14</sup> The same is true for counselors. As we help counselees to find meaning in suffering, they are able to move toward healing. The healing benefits of counseling impact the counselee *and* the counselor.

Grace-based counseling is a new model of counseling based on grace and wisdom. The Lord bestows grace on us by giving us what we do not deserve by accurately speaking wisdom and truth into our lives. This book is designed as a guidebook for practicing grace-based counseling. Through the first half of the book, we propose a theological and theoretical foundation for the model, while in the second half, we focus on

application and include practical tools for assessment and intervention. Because this model is man-made, we understand that it will have limitations. It is our hope that this model will serve as a framework to assist so that believers in the profession reap the benefits of counseling from a biblical worldview.

## CHAPTER 2

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# At the Hub: The Counselor's Heart

WHEN COUNSELORS CONGREGATE at conventions, it doesn't take long for them to ask, "What theory do you use in counseling?" For many counselors, even Christian ones, their *approach* to counseling becomes the focal point of the discussion. The focal point, or hub, of grace-based therapy, however, places the initial emphasis on the counselor's worldview (his or her motivation, values, doctrinal stance, and lifestyle) rather than what particular theory they use in a counseling session. In counseling, worldview has an incredible impact on each session. And when we use the grace-based counseling framework, faith, hope, and love become the guiding forces of each session.

For many years, there has been a Hatfield-McCoy kind of feud between those who champion the nouthetic approach to counseling versus those who choose to use the various theories taught at most universities, otherwise referred to as "secular counseling." Grace-based therapy, however, while not neglecting theory, places a greater emphasis on the heart of the counselor himself. In the New Testament, the word *heart* is defined as the "compilation of the thoughts and feelings"<sup>1</sup> of the mind (where the left and right brain agree with each other). In

other words, the totality of oneself, the “real you,” is exposed. When we as counselors grow in our knowledge of God, our biblical worldview expands as well.

## **HOLDING A BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW**

What do we mean by a biblical worldview? Besides knowing the content and especially the absolutes of Scripture (e.g., morality), a biblical worldview is encapsulated in a biblical understanding of man’s origin, the meaning and purpose of life, and how our eternal destiny is determined. And yet few Christians today describe themselves as having a biblical worldview. Research shows that only 17 percent of Christians who consider their faith important and attend church regularly actually have a biblical worldview.<sup>2</sup> This shows that believers have a disconnect between what they are learning at church and how they are applying it in the real world. Even though a central element of being a Christian is to embrace biblical principles and incorporate them into one’s worldview, Barna’s research uncovered vast pluralism in the worldviews of practicing Christians:

- 61 percent agree with ideas rooted in New Spirituality.
- 54 percent resonate with postmodernist views.
- 36 percent accept ideas associated with Marxism.
- 29 percent believe ideas based on secularism.<sup>3</sup>

These numbers are staggering.

How many counselors who claim to have a biblical worldview actually embrace the Bible as totally inspired by God, and will read and study its contents on a daily basis? If a counselor does not follow the command found in 2 Timothy 2:15, which says, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth,” and doesn’t crave to



learn more about Christ (see Matt. 5:6), that counselor cannot be called a “biblical counselor.” (Note: Here we are not referring to nouthetic counselors but counselors who claim to be practicing Christian/biblical counseling. Nouthetic counselors tend to negate the truths of psychology and draw solely from the Scriptures; they typically do not hold to the belief that all truth is God’s truth as we do.)

As we mentioned earlier, grace-based therapy emphasizes the importance for counselors to counsel others as if Christ Himself were directly speaking to them (see 1 Cor. 2:16). In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul gives those of us who are Christian counselors insight into what it means to counsel from a biblical worldview:

***Grace-based therapy, however, while not neglecting theory, places a greater emphasis on the heart of the counselor himself.***

Though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. . . . To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified. (vv. 19, 22–27)

So what are God’s standards for those who practice counseling based on a biblical worldview? The passage above teaches:

1. A Christian counselor must be “free from all men” (v. 19). This means we are not bound to a counseling methodology that has to

fit the cultural and political correctness of our day. Romans 12:2 admonishes us, “Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think” (NLT). Galatians 1:10 also teaches us that we are to seek favor from God over people.

2. A Christian counselor must be a servant. “I have made myself a slave to all” (v. 19). A Christian counselor is there for the counselee, not vice versa.
3. A Christian counselor must be empathic and caring, never elevating himself or herself above the counselee; the counselee sets the goals for counseling. “I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some” (v. 22). This phrase also indicates that we counsel from “their bent,” not ours. There is an underlying proclivity toward certain behaviors in each of us. It is the duty of the counselor to discover those proclivities, identify with them if possible, and then use that knowledge and identification to help the counselee move toward positive choices that are emotionally, spiritually, and physically healthy.
4. A Christian counselor must realize that the ultimate goal and objective of therapy is to advance the kingdom of God. We achieve this by providing sound principles derived from Scripture that can help the believer and nonbeliever alike through the difficult issues they face. “I do all things for the sake of the gospel” (v. 23). Grace-based counselors believe that ultimate change comes from a theocentric rather than an anthropocentric worldview.

This passage also gives counselors an exhortation on how to prepare ourselves as professionals in order to best serve our counselees. First, a Christian counselor must think ahead in preparation on how best to serve the counselee so the outcome is victory. First Corinthians 9:24 admonishes the Christian counselor on how to prepare for this

profession: “Run in such a way that you may win.” This verse can relate to the counselor as well as the counselee. For the counselor, “to win” mandates that we be proactive by protecting ourselves from falling into any kind of trap that will cause us to lose our credibility. Therefore, a Christian counselor must be a good example to his or her counselees by exhibiting self-control. “Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things” (1 Cor. 9:25). Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23), and furthermore, it is a sign of a life in submission to God.

Next the Christian counselor must carry a broader vision both for himself or herself and the counselees. “They [run] to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable” (v. 25). Even when financial remuneration is a factor, it must never be the primary motivational force for our practice. A Christian counselor sees each session with a counselee as a divine appointment. Grace-based counselors also live out grace by donating some time from their schedule to those who cannot afford counseling. A Christian counselor must come to the session prepared, with a strategy in mind. “I run in such a way, as not without aim” (v. 26). Part of that preparation involves time spent in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit for specific wisdom for each counselee’s problem.

Last, a Christian counselor must be known for his or her integrity. Besides having this reputation, being in good condition physically, mentally, and spiritually helps us be able servants to others. “I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified” (v. 27).

## **PUTTING A BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW INTO PRACTICE**

While the emphasis on the integrity and worldview of the counselor is similar to that of transformational psychology, the grace-based counseling model does not stop there. We believe that the “hub” contains the counselor’s worldview. We also believe the hub is at the center of a wheel that has five spokes in order to function properly. We have

developed the acronym GRACE, which we mentioned in chapter 1, to help counselors remember these five foundational tenets of the grace-based model. We will elaborate on each of these tenets in the following chapters, but before we move on, we want to offer some final thoughts for those who want to practice grace-based counseling from a biblical worldview perspective:

1. We as counselors are not to *impose* our faith, but rather *expose* our faith in the counseling setting. The goal is to let the conversation take its course as the counselor follows the Holy Spirit's leading on what to say and how to proceed.
2. Christian counselors may be the first expression of Jesus that a counselee ever sees. Philippians 2:5 admonishes us as counselors to have the mind of Christ. We should be so in tune with Him that what we say will edify and encourage our counselees.
3. A word of caution, however, comes from James 3:1: "Let not many of you become teachers [counselors] . . . knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment." A Christian counselor is often called upon to teach and instruct their counselees and must realize the obligation he or she takes on when engaged in the process of helping a hurting person. The Greek word *teacher* means one who has mastered the subject, one who is trained to expound truth to another. To be negligent in "speaking the truth in love," as Ephesians 4:15 tells us, will incur stricter judgment. In 2 Timothy 4:3, Paul warns against being the kind of counselor/instructor who simply tells, in our case, counselees what they want to hear. The Bible says this is simply tickling ears—an approach that yields no lasting benefit for others.
4. Our vocation is a high calling, and we cannot take it lightly. Though our work often drains us emotionally and physically, it is also one of the most rewarding fields of work. Each of us who gives our life to this vocation receives blessings now and in eternity.

5. We must note that in most cases, counseling from a biblical worldview does not mean that we treat each session as a Sunday school lesson where Scripture is expounded upon. Rather, counseling from a biblical worldview means that directly or indirectly we counsel our counselees (Christian and non-Christian) using God's recipe for successful living (absolutes and principles that are found in Scripture) when directing them through their issues.
6. Finally, we can sum up a prayer for each person who seeks the calling to be a Christian counselor: "As a bondservant of God, I commit to integrate God's revealed truths and principles directly or indirectly when counseling others. I further commit to live in such a way that I am known for my integrity, empathy, and compassion for those I counsel. At the close of my service, may it be said of me that I finished well."

With the initial focus on the theology and worldview of the counselor in place, we are now able to begin identifying the five tenets of the GRACE model, starting with G, "God's Image."

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