

COUNSEL WITH CONFIDENCE

COUNSEL WITH CONFIDENCE

A Quick Reference Guide
for Biblical Counselors
and Disciplers

Joel James

COUNSEL FOR THE HEART 
A RESOURCE for WORD-BASED TRANSFORMATION and PRACTICAL DISCIPLESHIP



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APPRECIATION FOR *COUNSEL WITH CONFIDENCE*

Counsel with Confidence is the most up-to-date, quick reference for biblical counseling yet. Joel James has taught and practiced biblical counseling faithfully for more than twenty years, and I applaud his expertise in putting this book together. Both trained biblical counselors and lay people in the church will find it an excellent short resource for counseling and discipleship. The book's concise entries are time-saving, insightful, biblical, and practical, which make this reference guide a must-have for any bookshelf.

John MacArthur: Pastor, Grace Community Church; President, The Master's University & Seminary

I often receive requests from pastors and Christian counselors on helpful tools to make their counseling more effective and biblical. Joel James has written a very good tool for this very purpose. I believe it will be the type of a book you will find yourself using over and over again in your ministry. I commend Joel on his foresight in taking the time write such a book and I highly recommend it to you!

Dr. John D. Street: Professor, The Master's University & Seminary; President, Association of Certified Biblical Counselors

Counseling is one of the most practical ways we shepherd the people in our churches out of the confusion and chaos caused by their sin, the sin of others, or the many poor decisions that haunt them. The difficulty I find is that often people delay seeking help for so long that the tangled, knotty issue they drop on my desk has become very complicated or entrenched, and I don't know where to begin helping them. Sometimes the egg is so thoroughly scrambled I feel like all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't help me put this person's life back together again. Joel James' *Counsel with Confidence* provides a practical

and insightful set of principles I can apply to the wide range of scenarios I encounter. I love how this catalogue neatly arrays the pertinent Scriptures like so many tools in a toolbox, which spares me trying to think on my feet about which passages to start with. I can see how this resource will be a go-to guidebook on how to sort through the information counselees present, what questions to lead with, and what practical advice to give that will help them apply the Bible to their situation. I will keep this volume on my desk alongside my other indispensable tools: my Bible, my counseling notebook, and the box of tissues.

Clinton Archer: Pastor, Hillcrest Baptist Church, Durban, South Africa

“Joel, where have you been?” That is the thought that went through my mind as I made my way through the contents of *Counsel with Confidence*. If only this book had been in my hands earlier, I would have been a more competent and confident counselor—confident in the Holy Spirit and in the Scriptures—as I wrestled with how to help God’s people out of their troubles. Here is a book that should be on every pastor’s desk to enable us to be physicians of souls who will not be ashamed on the last day. Oh that it had been published a little earlier!

Conrad Mbewe: Pastor of Kabwata Baptist Church and Chancellor of the African Christian University, Lusaka, Zambia

Joel James’ *Counsel with Confidence* is my first “go to” resource for discipleship and biblical counseling. It is a trustworthy resource for counseling because it simply points the church to the sufficiency of Scripture for everyday living. From parental to pastoral contexts, *Counsel with Confidence* highlights biblical truth that our hearts and minds must engage with in the challenges of life in a broken world.

Scott Maxwell: Pastor, Grace Bible Church, Tempe, Arizona

I have often looked for a smaller but sturdy reference guide for biblical counselors who either don't have time for a longer, more detailed description of counseling issues, or who are wanting to brush up their skills with a clear but compact resource for helping others. One finds both of these things in Joel James' *Counsel with Confidence*. Picture yourself needing a quick help of biblical passages on a particular subject for your counseling, or a synthesis of brief descriptions on where to wisely go with a counselee. Or perhaps you just want to keep current on the wide variety of counseling topics you'll be facing in ministry. All of these and more are at your fingertips in this book. Read and use this book with help and profit. You'll be grateful you did.

Lance Quinn: Senior Pastor, Bethany Church, Thousand Oaks, California; Board Member, Association of Certified Biblical Counselors

Regardless of experience, counseling in the church often appears to be a Gordian knot. At first glance, there can seem to be no good option except to cut the rope and unravel the pieces. Dr. James provides sound advice for dealing with the challenging needs that face every congregation. He has the uncanny ability to combine biblical clarity and brevity in every spiritual issue that he tackles. When it comes to meeting needs in a truly biblical way, Joel James gets it—never degenerating into simplicity. His thoroughness remains so faithful to the biblical principles that it avoids formulaic answers. In fact, the author's acknowledged limitation of the book—its failure to provide a formula for counseling—is one of its greatest strengths. What sets this work apart from others in its field is the fact that it was born out of pastoral ministry for the further effectiveness of church ministry.

Jerry Wragg: Pastor, Grace Immanuel Bible Church, Jupiter, Florida

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INTRODUCTION: READ THIS FIRST!

As a young pastor many of my counseling sessions ended in the following manner: After we prayed, I would walk the person out, smile, and wave as he or she drove away—the very picture of pastoral competence and confidence. But as soon as the person’s car was out of sight, I would dash back to my office and snatch off my shelf a book like *The Christian Counselor’s Manual* by Jay Adams, desperate to discover what an experienced counselor had to say about the person’s problem. My biblical counseling class in seminary was excellent, but no class can prepare a counselor to address every problem in which people entangle themselves.

I usually turned to Jay Adams for help because he is biblical and has an amazing knack for addressing complex problems in a few short pages. In a handful of paragraphs, he would draw attention to key biblical texts, develop several life-changing principles, and supply helpful insights about how to deal with a person wrestling with fear, worry, depression, anger, and so on. In short, his books gave me a much-appreciated push start.

Twenty years later, I still remember how helpful those push starts were, and that’s why I’ve written this quick reference guide: you might need a push start as much as I did. When you were learning to ride a bicycle, the hardest part was the first few pedal strokes—those wobbly seconds before you built up enough momentum to maintain your balance. A generous push from your dad was just what you needed to avoid ending up in a heap of elbows, knees, handlebars, and spokes. Counseling is similar. Sometimes you need something to give you some momentum, something to give you the confidence that you’re on the right track. If you’ve ever felt like that, this book is for you.

PASTORS AND LAY PEOPLE

If you're a pastor, discipling and counseling are part of your weekly ministry. Christians can get themselves into extraordinary messes due to foolishness and sin, and they naturally turn to their shepherd for solutions. However, for some pastors, the mere thought of counseling makes them break out in hives. Or perhaps you enjoy counseling, but your seminary training was psychologically driven, and thus, biblically defective. Or maybe you just need a push start with a complicated case.

But lay people also counsel and disciple, not just pastors. For example, the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome, "Concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another" (Rom. 15:14). Because of their spiritual maturity and sturdy Bible knowledge, Paul believed that the Roman believers were able to admonish or counsel one another. They weren't apostles or pastors; they hadn't graduated from a doctoral program in biblical counseling. They were just ordinary, mature, Christ-loving believers who could and did counsel. You might be in that category; by no means would you call yourself a counseling expert, but you have a compassionate heart and a desire to help people solve their problems in a biblical, Christ-focused manner. And as a result, people regularly seek you out for advice or discipleship. You often help others "to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:12). In a word, you *counsel*.

And the truth is, whether you are a pastor or a lay person, counseling people entangled in sin can be daunting. When you sit down with a person for the first time, you often have no idea what his or her problem is. It could be anything from anger to the signs of the zodiac. Preachers normally have a week to prepare their sermons; counselors are supposed to know everything instantaneously. But, of course, we don't.

For example, knowing how to counsel a severely depressed person is not necessarily intuitive Christian knowledge. A number of thoroughly biblical books have been written on the subject of depression, but you might not have time to read them before a friend shows up on Tuesday night asking for help.

And when she pours out her heart, the answer, “Come back in six months when I’ve had time to prepare,” doesn’t seem quite fitting. She needs help now. Browsing in your local Christian bookstore will probably turn up a number of pamphlets on depression, but in my experience, they are often disappointingly vague. When someone is coming over in three hours, you need specific, concrete, biblical guidelines *now*. That’s what this book is for.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

In these pages you’ll find, in summary form, biblical wisdom for dealing with most of the common problems that you’ll face in counseling or discipling. In short, you’ll find a helpful push start: a stimulating quote or two, some key verses addressing the subject, the primary theological issues involved, pitfalls to avoid, important questions to ask, biblical solutions to offer, and a brief list of resources offering more help.

Of course, whole books have been written on subjects like depression, anger, eating disorders, and marriage conflict, addressing those topics from a rigorously biblical perspective. I strongly encourage you to read them: they’ve helped me, and they’ll help you too. However, you probably don’t have the resources or time to purchase and read all those books, and that’s why this reference guide can be valuable. To be helpful, a quick reference guide needs to be *quick*, so I’ve refused to give in to my usual impulse to say everything that could be said on a subject. Hopefully both that brevity and the breadth of topics covered will be beneficial to you.¹

If you are a pastor, you can use this book for your own benefit; however, you might also want to encourage your elders, deacons, youth leaders, and cell-group leaders to get a copy. They counsel and disciple all the time, and the more biblically and skillfully they do it, the better for your flock. In my church most of the forest-fire problems, such as serious marriage conflict, end up at

¹ This book has been distilled from more extensive lecture notes from our Grace School of Ministry Biblical Counseling Course. If you want more help on a specific subject covered in this book, you can download many of those notes free of cost at www.gracefellowship.co.za/resources.

my front door. That's natural. I'm the pastor. But it's also true that my elders and other mature, biblically knowledgeable people in my congregation soak up a lot of our counseling long before it gets to me. That's Romans 15:14 in action—mature Christians able to admonish. Having a copy of this book will help your lay leaders and disciplers fulfill a similar role in your church.

HOW *NOT* TO USE THIS BOOK

COUNSELING IS NOT A FORMULA

There are aspects of every counseling situation that are the same—God, Christ, the gospel, sin, repentance, forgiveness, and so on. However, there are also things about each person and counseling situation that are unique. Therefore, a paint-by-number approach to counseling will never be successful. That's the inherent weakness of a book like this, and I want to acknowledge it up front. Therefore, avoid using the guidelines in this book as if they were Mr. Fix-It formulas that, if followed exactly, will guarantee success. As you use the principles in these pages, you'll need to be prayerfully reliant on the Holy Spirit—flexible, wise, creative, and compassionate—carefully applying God's Word to each person's particular problem.

Furthermore, you'll need to direct the people you're helping to Jesus Christ, rather than just help them follow a "formula." Counseling is first and foremost about encouraging Christians to pursue a vital, living relationship with their Savior: "Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him" (Col. 2:6). Both faith in Christ's substitutionary sacrifice on the cross and daily dependence on Him are essential to biblical change. In order to make this book a *quick* reference guide, I haven't restated those truths under each topic. To do so would be gloriously repetitive, but repetitive nonetheless. Therefore, I'm trusting you to keep in mind that all the principles and guidelines in the world won't help a counselee if Christ isn't at the center of his or her life. In fact, before you put this book on your shelf to await your first counseling emergency, I urge you to read the chapter entitled "A Biblical Theology of Change." It's only a few pages long, and in it you'll find a summary of the essential theological truths that underlie all the individual guidelines and principles of

this book. In fact, if you aren't an experienced counselor, the whole section, *Counseling 101*, might give you a valuable survey of the counseling and discipling task.

A THANKFUL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Few if any of the principles in this book are original to me. Therefore, let me enthusiastically acknowledge and thank the men who have done so much to help me become a more skillful counselor. Among others, those men include Jay Adams through his small army of books; Wayne Mack, who taught my counseling class at seminary; and friends and mentors such as Lance Quinn, Stuart Scott, John Street, Carey Hardy, and Jerry Wragg, who have both taught me these principles and exemplified them in their lives.

1

COUNSELING 101

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF CHANGE

KEY QUOTE

*Counselors may understand that counseling is a theological task or they may not. They may be good theologians or bad ones, but make no mistake: they are theologians who are neck deep in a theological enterprise. (Heath Lambert, *The Biblical Counseling Movement After Adams*, 21)*

SEVEN THEOLOGICAL TRUTHS THAT GUIDE BIBLICAL COUNSELING

All counseling must be determinatively shaped by the following truths or it is not biblical.

1. *The gospel of Jesus Christ is the foundation of biblical change* (2 Cor. 5:17; Rom. 5:1; 6:16-18; 8:13). The gospel brings spiritual new birth, and it orients, guides, empowers, and dominates all of the Christian life following regeneration (Col. 2:6).
2. *Change is always possible for believers in Jesus Christ* (Phil. 1:6; Rom. 6:17-18). No Christian is so entrenched in sin, so dominated by his past, genetics, or anything else, that he cannot be changed by the work of the Holy Spirit.

3. *The Word of God applied by the Spirit of God is the primary tool for change* (John 17:17; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; Ps. 119:1, 24, 133). Living and active, inerrant, God-revealed, Christ-commended, Spirit-empowered—when it comes to changing people, there is nothing like the Bible.
4. *The heart is the place where real, long-lasting change takes place* (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 10:5; Prov. 4:23; Mark 7:21-23; Matt. 12:34). The *heart* is where a person thinks, considers, analyzes, evaluates, feels, decides, and chooses—the mission control center of life, the real person on the inside, the inner man. Counseling is about changing a person's heart or moment-by-moment thinking.

One of the things that you will quickly discover is that when most people seek change, they seldom have the heart in view. They want change in their circumstances, change in the other person, or change in their emotions . . . But when the focus is put only on the outward circumstances, the solutions are seldom more than temporary and superficial.
(Paul Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, 109)

5. *God's plan for practical daily change is: **put off** / **be renewed** / **put on*** (Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:8-14). That plan includes the following components:

Put off:

- Use the Bible to identify sin (Ps. 19:10-11; 119:9).
- Acknowledge personal responsibility for that sin, and ask forgiveness for it (James 1:14; 1 John 1:9).
- Be willing to change (Ps. 119:10, 30-32).
- By God's grace, stop doing the sin (1 Peter 4:1-3).
- Organize life to make it hard to do the sin again (Rom. 13:14).

Be renewed in your mind:

- Pursue a thorough biblical reorientation of your thinking by studying God's Word (Deut. 5:29; Ps. 95:10; Prov. 4:23; Rom. 12:1-2).

Put on:

- Replace sinful thoughts, words, and actions with their godly opposites (Rom. 12:21; Eph. 4:25-32; Col. 3:10-17).
6. *Sanctification is a joint, divine-human effort* (Phil. 2:12-13; 1 Cor. 15:10). While regeneration, justification, conversion, and glorification are completely the work of God, sanctification is a God-empowered joint effort. Understanding that, biblical counseling avoids the extremes of mystical passivity, on one hand, and legalistic self-reliance on the other.
 7. *Sanctification is a corporate project, requiring church life and input from other believers* (Rom. 15:14; Gal. 6:1; Eph. 4:15-16; Heb. 10:24-25; Prov. 12:15). True change does not take place in the counseling room, but in the church, as a person is actively involved in both serving and being served by the body of Christ.

RESOURCE

A Theology of Christian Counseling, Jay Adams

THE CENTRALITY OF JESUS CHRIST TO COUNSELING

There is a reason our faith is called *Christianity*. We don't worship a moral system or venerate a set of religious rituals. We aren't adherents to a philosophical, utopian ideal or a set of counseling principles. We are followers of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Our lives aren't ours; they are His. That truth is central to all of counseling.

KEY TEXTS

1 Cor. 3:23	2 Cor. 5:15	Rom. 14:8	Luke 6:46
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KEY QUOTES

*Jesus is Lord (1 Cor. 12:3). That is the single, central, foundational, and distinguishing article of Christianity . . . Nothing is knowingly held back, nothing purposely shielded from His lordship, nothing stubbornly kept from His control. (John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 25, 225)*

*The repentance that Christ requires of His people consists in a settled refusal to set any limit to the claims which He may make on their lives. (J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, 72)*

Christianity is an all-sufficient relationship with an all-sufficient Christ. There's no reason anyone who believes God's Word should struggle with such a self-evident truth.
(John MacArthur, *Our Sufficiency in Christ*, 19)

TWO TYPICAL, WRONG VIEWS OF CHRIST HELD BY COUNSELEES

1. *A domesticated Jesus.* The “Jesus” the counselee believes in embraces the counselee’s casual attitude toward sin and sympathizes with the counselee’s worldly standards, motivations, and goals. Far from being Lord, his Jesus is a self-esteem coach, an all-affirming therapist, or a good luck charm for success in business and health.
2. *A distant Jesus.* The counselee views Jesus as a distant, unreal, historical and theological figure. He is immensely respected to be sure, but He has little or no significance for daily life.

In contrast to those wrong views, Christianity is a love relationship with the God-man, Jesus Christ. Counselees who view Jesus as distant must be taught to come to love their *Savior*. Counselees who view Him as a self-esteem coach or as the genie of the lamp who gives worldly wishes need to be taught to see Him as *Lord*.

A BIBLICAL VIEW OF CHRIST

- He is the *Creator* who made and owns all people, and they are morally accountable to Him (Col. 1:16).
- He is the *Sustainer* of the physical universe, sovereign over all its events and beings (Col. 1:17).
- He is the *Heir* of the physical universe: everything a Christian owns is actually Christ’s (Col. 1:15–16).
- He is the completely sufficient *Revelation* of God (Col. 2:3, 8–9).
- He is the *Savior* of sinners (Col. 1:14, 22; 2:12–13).
- He is the central *Message* of God to the world (Col. 1:28).

- He is the *Source* of all spiritual growth (Col. 2:6–7, 19).
- He is the *Example* of spiritual maturity (Col. 3:12–13)
- He is the *Ruler* of the universe (Col. 2:10).
- He is the *Judge* and *Rewarder* of men (Col. 3:24–25).
- He is *Lord*; therefore, the primary aim of every Christian is to serve and please Him (Col. 3:17, 24).

Colossians 3:11 . . . but Christ is all, and in all.

Colossians 1:18 . . . so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.

The fact that Christ is Master or Lord is essential to counseling. Without His lordship we would have no universal standard by which to judge people's behavior, no authority by which to call people to change, and no promise of effectual help to bring about that change. But because Christ is Lord, we have all those things. Typically, counselees who do not understand or who refuse to submit to the lordship of Christ wander from one self-devised plan for living to another, with all the attendant, destructive consequences. Such people must be taught that Christ is Lord and that the stability, peace, and joy they crave come only from believing in, surrendering to, and obeying Him. In short, the goal of counseling and discipleship is to systematically bring all areas of a person's life into submission to Christ's lordship.

THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

Counselors need to be convinced of what the Bible teaches about itself: when applied by the Holy Spirit, the Bible is completely sufficient to address people's deepest spiritual and emotional problems.

KEY QUOTES

Since Scripture itself claims to be a sufficient resource for meeting emotional and spiritual needs, I suggest that those who are saying it is not are in serious error. (John MacArthur, *Introduction to Biblical Counseling*, 324)

I cannot exhort you strongly enough to remain ever mindful of the usefulness of the Bible for changing Christians. It will do the job, if only given the opportunity. (Jay Adams, *How to Help People Change*, 202)

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF THE BIBLE

It is . . .

1. *Inspired* (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21). The Bible is utterly unique because God is its ultimate Author: what it says, God says.

When they actually came to the point of putting pen to paper, the words were fully their own words, but also fully

the words that God wanted them to write, words that God would also claim as his own. (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 81)

2. *True* (Ps. 119:128, 142, 160; John 17:17). God knows everything and He never lies. Therefore, the Bible is absolutely true, categorically distinguishing it from any merely human book.
3. *Unchanging* (Ps. 119:89, 160). There are over 250 different registered forms of psychoanalysis, and they consistently and vehemently disagree with one another in theory and practice. In contrast to the erratic, conflicting, and transient ideas of men, God's Word, standards, and counsel are gloriously unchanging.
4. *Insightful* (Ps. 119:99-100; Isa. 8:20). No man or woman has more insight than God. Since the Bible is incomparably insightful, integrating it with human systems of psychology will always be a process of dilution, not enhancement.
5. *Practical* (Ps. 119:105). God's Word is not a book of theoretical or arcane philosophical musings, mutterings, and meditations. It deals in a highly practical manner with the real problems of daily life, as anyone who has read the book of Proverbs can testify.
6. *Effective* (Ps. 119:133; John 8:31-32; Rom. 6:17; James 1:21-25). When applied by the Holy Spirit, God's Word effectively deals with the deepest human problems, including life-dominating sins.
7. *Nourishing* (1 Tim. 4:6). For those who are starved emotionally and spiritually, God's Word provides life-sustaining nourishment. Secular systems cannot nourish Christians' souls because they fail to direct people to God and Christ (John 6:35).
8. *Surgical* (Heb. 4:12-13). One of the accusations frequently raised against the Bible is that the Bible can only deal with counseling problems in a superficial manner. Using the Bible to deal with serious life problems is, allegedly, like putting a Band-Aid on a gunshot wound. In contrast, God says that His Word penetrates and lays bare the deepest aspects of a man's being. Wherever integrationists got the idea that the Bible is a superficial tool for changing man, it wasn't from the Bible.

9. *Accessible* (Deut. 30:8-14). The keys to successful Christian living are not found in an elite, arcane psychological system. The principles that change lives are accessible to believers because the Bible is accessible to believers.
10. *Sufficient* (Deut. 30:15-16; Ps. 1:2-3; 2 Peter 1:3; Ps. 119:24; 2 Tim. 3:16-17). The Bible is completely sufficient to equip Christians for the work of helping people deal with their spiritual and emotional problems.

The Scriptures have the power to perfectly fit out the man of God for his task. He need never feel inadequate so long as he has the Bible. If he is inadequate, it is not because the Bible is inadequate but simply because he does not know his Bible adequately. (Adams, *How to Help People Change*, 30)

SHOULD CHRISTIANS TRY TO INTEGRATE PSYCHOLOGY AND THE BIBLE?

1. According to God, such integration is unnecessary (Prov. 2:6; Col. 2:2-3; 1 Peter 2:2).
2. According to God, such integration is forbidden (Col. 2:8; 2 Cor. 11:2-3; Deut. 4:2; 12:29-30; Lev. 18:3-4; 1 Cor. 3:18-20).

RESOURCES

Counseling: How to Counsel Biblically, John MacArthur and The Master's College Faculty

PsychoBabble, Richard Ganz

Deceptive Diagnosis, David Tyler and Kurt Grady

A SUMMARY OF THE COUNSELING PROCESS

Biblical counseling can be defined as *using the Bible in wise and appropriate ways to bring God-glorifying change to God's people*. It applies the theological truths, commands, and promises of the Bible to the problems of daily life, so that people change more and more into conformity to the character of Jesus Christ, living more and more for His glory in biblical wisdom, righteousness, peace, stability, and strength.

How Do I Do It?

Wayne Mack divides counseling into the following eight intermingled, but distinct stages (see *Introduction to Biblical Counseling*, chapters 10–16):

1. Involvement—building a relationship with a person that facilitates change
2. Inspiration—inspiring counselees with biblical hope
3. Investigation—gathering information about the person and his situation