

— EDITOR —
AMY BAKER

FOR THE

SOULS OF

CHILDREN

— A BIBLICAL —
COUNSELOR'S MANUAL

“Every child struggles to find his or her way in life, but for children dealing with a disability, finding the way can seem filled with dead ends. How do we shepherd a child through those difficult seasons? In *Caring for the Souls of Children*, you will find a rich resource of wise insights, seasoned advice, and solid biblical guidance to help children view their limitations from God’s point of view. I give this much-needed book a double thumbs-up!”

Joni Eareckson Tada, Founder and CEO, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

“Some books overpromise, but not this one. On all the most pressing issues in counseling (and parenting!) children, *Caring for the Souls of Children* delivers with grace and wisdom. I highly recommend this resource.”

J. Alasdair Groves, Executive Director, Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF)

“This wonderful book about counseling children (and teens) fills an important gap in biblical counseling resources. We are reminded that children experience the same kinds of problems and fears that adults do and thus need our help. This book will be of great practical use as the authors present many realistic counseling situations in which they walk the reader through a wise, compassionate, and biblical way to help hurting children. This resource will be a of great help to pastors and counselors who work with children and teens. I plan to highly recommend it to all of my students.”

Jim Newheiser, Director of the Christian Counseling Program and Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary; Executive Director, The Institute for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship (IBCD)

“As a longtime biblical counseling pastor and now professor, I have waited over thirty years for a book like this! Amy Baker and her team provide a one-stop shop of readable, gospel-centered, biblically-driven strategies to help counselors and

caring adults minister to kids facing all sorts of struggles. Children need Jesus; this book helps us bring him to them.”

Robert D. Jones, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary;
author of *Pursuing Peace* and *Anger: Calming Your Heart*

“If you work with children in any capacity, you need *Caring for the Souls of Children*. This counseling manual is a rich, robust resource addressing the vast array of issues related to child soul care. It provides introduction to methodology and theory, addresses common but often overlooked aspects of counseling children, and delves into the darkest challenges a counselor will face with instruction for counseling topics like self-harm, trauma, and post-suicide counseling.”

Curtis Solomon, Executive Director of the Biblical Counseling Coalition

“Dr. Amy Baker and her team of writers have greatly served the church of Jesus Christ by assembling this important book. The chapters are both practical and theologically robust. Surely the Lord is pleased when counselors give special care to ministering to children. These truths will also be helpful to parents, teachers, and children’s ministry leaders.”

Steve Viars, Senior Pastor, Faith Church, Lafayette, IN; author of *Loving Your Community*

“Whether to counsel children and how to counsel children are some of the most common questions within the biblical counseling movement, yet there have been few resources available on this topic. Thankfully, a team of well-qualified counselors and trusted authors have worked together to fill a gap in the biblical counseling literature. If you counsel and you have struggled knowing how to serve the children in your community, then this resource is a must-read.”

Rob Green, Pastor of Counseling and Seminary Ministries, Faith Church, Lafayette, IN; author of *Tying the Knot* and *Tying Their Shoes*

CARING FOR THE
SOULS OF CHILDREN

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A BIBLICAL COUNSELOR'S MANUAL

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AMY BAKER, EDITOR

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Part 1

Foundation and
Methodological Issues

CHAPTER 1

THE SOUL OF A CHILD:

AN INTRODUCTION TO COUNSELING CHILDREN

AMY BAKER

The parents of eleven-year-old Maya¹ were concerned because Maya seemed to be withdrawing from friends and family. She no longer asked to spend time with her friends, and at home she had begun isolating herself in her room. Although she had been a good student in the past, now she didn't complete her homework unless compelled by her parents, and she no longer seemed to care about her grades. Fights with her two older sisters were becoming increasingly common, and she had begun lying to her parents.

Maya's brother was killed in a car accident when he was six years old and Maya was seven. A drunk driver had swerved off the street and hit the boy in the family's front yard, killing him instantly. It took a while, but over time it appeared everyone in the family accepted what had happened and gradually moved on with life—until Maya began to visibly disengage from everything that had been important to her.

Now Maya's parents feel stuck. They don't feel like they can reach her. They have brought their daughter to biblical counseling in hopes that someone outside the family will be able to connect with Maya. Maya and her family became regular church attenders within the last two years, and Maya made a profession of faith some time ago. While Maya was

a bit nervous about counseling, she was not completely resistant to the idea of talking with someone.

It was my privilege to meet with Maya, while another counselor worked with Maya's parents. As I met with this precious child, I was struck anew with the profound thoughts and questions in an eleven-year-old's soul. We often think children need a completely different approach to counseling than adults. It is certainly true that we need to tailor interactions with them to the development and understanding of the child; we won't talk with and interact with a child the same way we would with an adult. But despite the differences in how we communicate and draw a child out, my observations after years of working with children demonstrate:

- Children struggle with the *same* desires adults struggle with.
- They are lured by the *same* lies adults fall prey to.
- They find hope in the *same* source adults find hope—in our Lord and Savior.

For children, the struggles, desires, and hopes are no different than for those of us who are adults. Therefore, the counsel we provide for them should lead them to the same place—the good news of Jesus Christ.

Children, like adults, wrestle with profound thoughts and questions and need to see how the gospel connects to them in their current struggles. At one point in our counseling, I asked Maya to draw a picture for me of her relationship with God. The picture she drew was gut-wrenching.

Her picture had four frames.

- In frame one, she depicted herself kneeling by her bed to pray to God.
- In frame two, she showed God responding to her prayer by saying, “Hmm . . . her. Her prayers don’t matter.”
- In frame three, she depicted herself searching for answers by reading the Bible, questioning why she couldn’t find answers.
- In her final frame, she drew God responding to her Bible study by asking, “Why should I give her answers?!”

As we discussed this, Maya told me she didn’t believe God responded to everyone this way, just her. She was convinced she was different. Maya shared that she didn’t think she was precious to God. Maya also said that she didn’t think God always means what he says in the Bible.

I concluded from these remarks that it would be fruitless to immediately direct Maya to passages that show the depth of God’s love for her. I felt certain that Maya would be convinced these passages might be true for everyone else, but not for her.

The Help We Need Is the Help Children Need

Along with other resources, I decided to have Maya look at the book of Job with me. Even as I directed her to Job 1, I was internally asking myself if I was being unwise. Job is not the easiest book in the Bible to digest, and here I was asking an eleven-year-old girl to study it.

Nevertheless, I went ahead and told her the story of Job—a man who was suffering and didn’t understand what God was doing. As we dug deeper, it became apparent this was exactly the truth Maya needed to hear as she wrestled with the tragedy of her brother’s death.

As counselors, we need to be reminded that the answers from Scripture are not too hard for children to grasp.

After looking at Job 1, Maya initially observed that, like Job, God was letting Satan into her life, but, unlike Job, she was not keeping faith. Maya also shared that Job got answers, but she didn’t get answers.

Then we looked at Job 3, where Job questions what God is doing. We talked together about how Job didn’t understand God or what he was doing.

Over the next few sessions, we continued to look at Job. We spent time in Job 9 and 10, looking at some of the conclusions Job drew about God, about life, and about himself.

- Job 9:14–20—God won’t answer my questions.
- Job 9:21—I despise my life.
- Job 9:22—There is no difference in how God treats the wicked or the blameless.
- Job 9:23—God mocks the despair of innocent people.
- Job 9:25–28—Even if I decide I’ll act like I’m happy, God will still be against me.
- Job 9:29—Since God has already decided I’m guilty, what’s the use of trying?
- Job 9:30–31—Even if I tried to clean myself up, God would just make me dirty again.

- Job 9:32–35—If I could go to court and get an impartial judge, the judge would tell God I’m good.
- Job 10:1—I loathe my life.

I asked this eleven-year-old to identify where she had similar questions and thoughts. To my surprise, Maya was able to reframe each of Job’s responses to a similar struggle in her own soul. Maya identified similar thoughts to all these things.

Like adults, children need to wrestle with sin and suffering and be led to see a sovereign, merciful God at work.

Eventually we moved to the end of Job and God’s response to him. I observed that God didn’t answer Job’s questions; rather, God revealed himself. Following this, we looked at Job’s response:

Then Job replied to the LORD:

“I know that you can do all things;
no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?’

Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me to know. (Job 42:1–3 NIV)

I paraphrased Job’s response in the following way: “God is at work doing things far more wonderful than I can understand or imagine. I need to trust him.” As part of her homework, I asked Maya to write this on a card and reflect on this response several times each day.

When Maya came back the following week, she had done an excellent job of thinking about Job's response, and she had made some connections between Job's response to her response and her life. This gave her some hope. When I asked Maya to continue to reflect on this paraphrase for another week, she confided that she intended to write it out on another card and put the first card on the wall by her bed.

This was not the sum of our counseling. We also looked at Christ, who was dearly loved by his Father yet cried in agony on the cross, "Why have you forsaken me?" Our discussion of Job was a tiny snippet in a process that would take months to complete. And even when we stopped meeting, the book wasn't closed. Maya, like all of us, is a work in progress. God in his kindness guides us in our walk with him, step-by-step. Maya will face new questions as she gets older, just as all of us find we need to ask for more and more wisdom.

But for eleven-year-old Maya, the struggles, the desires, and the hope were no different than for those of us who are adults. That's the core thesis of this book, and that's the reason we boldly proclaim that Christ is our Light and God's Word is sufficient for all counseling, regardless of age group.

The Core of Counseling Children

Throughout this book, you'll hear from a number of counselors who are convinced of the same premise—the struggles, the desires, and the source of hope for children are no different than the struggles, desires, and source of hope for adults. Again, while taking into account the developmental level of a child and the best way to convey this truth, we want to encourage counselors and parents to boldly trust in

the sufficiency of God and his Word to help struggling children. (See chapter 3, Counseling Children of Different Age Groups, for a discussion of taking into account children's age and stage of development.)

From this starting place, we want to lovingly help the children we counsel become individuals who find God to be exceedingly magnificent, trustworthy, and good. Then as a result, they can live with the desire to be a more and more accurate image of his beauty by loving him and others, using the Word of God to teach them (as it does us) how to do this.

The specific presenting problem that prompts children to come to counseling is merely the laboratory set up by God to facilitate this process. These individualized "labs" may seem to have features constructed from nature (the child's biology, e.g., autism, learning disabilities) or from nurture (the child's environment, e.g., abuse, divorce), but it would be a mistake to believe these are controlling features. Both nature and nurture are under the hand of the all-wise Creator, who provides everything needed for life in his Word—for with him is the fountain of life (Psalm 36:9).

So, as we prepare to meet with children, we know we will talk about suffering, we will talk about sin, but our foremost topic will be our Savior because in his light, we see light (Psalm 36:9). In Part Two of this book, we'll discuss how you might do this in a variety of areas where children struggle.

It saddens us to think that those who want to come alongside children would mistakenly believe children somehow need different answers to life's problems than adults need. Christ is our Light! He is *the* way, *the* truth, and *the* life. There is not a separate way for children that differs in essence from the way for adults. Christ is the way.

Decisions on Meeting with a Child Individually

It might surprise you to learn that in a book on counseling children, we would not normally suggest counseling the child as the first option. We would normally encourage counseling for the parents—to equip them to counsel their child. Here’s why: We want to do everything we can to help parents with their children. God has entrusted these precious souls to parents, and God gives the parents preferential status in bringing these children up (status he has not given to the schools, the government, the church, youth workers, or biblical counselors). God has conferred to parents the primary oversight—and resulting blessing—of these children. So, as counselors, we want to view it as our first responsibility to equip the parents to carry out this privileged commission from God. The implication of this is that whenever possible, we want to meet first with the parents to equip them to help their child. At times, this may be all that is needed.

However, we believe it’s possible for helpers to become unbalanced in this position, to the point where children in need are neglected. There are many reasons why directly counseling children can be important. For example, we would certainly want to consider direct counseling for the child in the following situations:

- When the parents need significant help with their own issues before being equipped to help their child, and we want the child to get immediate help
- When the parent-child relationship is so poor that the child will no longer respond to the parent
- When a judge orders counseling specifically and directly for child

- When a child won't open up in front of a parent (perhaps due to abuse, anger, or fear)
- When parents have no interest in following God but are willing to allow their child to get biblical counseling
- When a young teen has started asking his or her youth pastor or teacher questions about life, and the parents see this as a positive opportunity to allow the child to learn to seek wise counsel from mature believers

In situations where we can best serve the family and the child by meeting with the child directly, our goal would usually be to have at least one parent present as we work with the child. This is what I was able to do with Maya. Maya's parents were deeply concerned about Maya but felt out of their depth in handling the pressing issues they were observing in her life. I wanted her parents to know what Maya and I were discussing so they could follow up and gain confidence in their discussions with Maya.

So, while we may first investigate equipping the parents, there will be times we want to meet with the parents and the child together, and other times when we will meet with the child alone.

Progressive Growth

If asked, I believe many of us might report that we feel inadequate when it comes to counseling children. Years ago, when I began to work at a Baptist Children's Home (BCH), I was given the responsibility of meeting as counselor and social

worker with some children in the care of BCH. I felt way out of my league in this role. What should I say? What should I do?

When I entered the counseling room with these children, I needed help from the same gospel I hoped to unpack for them. Both the children and I entered the meeting in the care of the One who holds the power of the universe in his hands and who would never use that power to do evil against us. Instead, he was willing to use our very weaknesses and vulnerability as a conduit for pouring out his own grace and power in our lives.

Both these children and I started from the same page—we were loved by a Redeemer who would never abandon us in the middle of a session. Instead, he would work all things together to transform us into his image, the image of One who loved so completely that he would withhold nothing good but *would* powerfully and kindly withhold anything which would not be good (Romans 8:28–32).

I made a lot of missteps in my time with those children. But, although I was a flawed representative, God also mercifully allowed me to be his servant ambassador:

- To children who had been abused
- To children facing the death of a parent
- To children who were angry and rebellious
- To children who would never be reunited with their parents
- To children who would be reunited with their parents but would return to homes full of conflict and hate

While I was tempted to despair over my inadequacies, God never wavered in his promise that he would use even my

missteps for his own good purposes (Romans 8:28–29; see also Isaiah 46:3–4, 8–13). He will do the same for you.

We hope that the chapters that follow will help you be better equipped for the opportunities God entrusts to you in counseling children. We want to encourage you not to wait until you feel completely confident before you minister to hurting children, but to let your sense of inadequacy push you to deeper dependence on the Lord as you strive to be his faithful messenger of hope. Let me encourage you with this modified quote from Joe Thorn, which he wrote in a blog about praying for your pastor,² but which I believe applies equally to those who want to counsel children:

Counselors often struggle with feelings of failure after they step away from the counseling room. Counseling days can be times of doubt and frustration for many counselors. Pray that you would be so satisfied with what you have in Christ that even if you lost your way while counseling you would remain confident that Christ has neither lost you nor his word. Ask God to give you such confidence in the Spirit's power and the Scripture's sufficiency that should your counseling fail to live up to your standards, your hope remains steadfast for God can use any person's counseling, no matter how deficient, as long as she or he gives the people the word. Pray that you would have the mindset that "success" is simply faithfulness to God, and fruitfulness determined by God.