

Relationships

A Mess Worth Making

Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp



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The Shortest and Most Important Chapter of This Book | 1

Writing a book is always a journey of unexpected turns. Try as you may to chart your course, you never wind up exactly where you've planned. This chapter is one of those unexpected turns. As we finished writing this book, we realized that we should explain to you *how* it was written. What you are about to read is a book on relationship that was written *in* relationship. When we coauthored *How People Change*, we divided up the chapters and wrote separately. However, we decided to write this book together. We worked at Tim's house—Tim at the computer and Paul pacing back and forth across the room. We discussed our way through sentences, paragraphs, pages, and chapters. When we finished, we both agreed that this process was one of the most unique and enjoyable ministry experiences of our lives.

What resulted from our collaboration is not just an examination, but an actual example of broken people in broken community experiencing the reconciling grace of God. We have written as flawed people in close relationship who have experienced God's grace in daily life and ministry. We have not written out of the wisdom of success, but out of the wisdom of striving. A brief history of our relationship will illustrate this point.

About five years ago, Paul was working at the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation leading the department for local church-based training. The faculty of CCEF came to see that this job was too big for one person and decided to hire a seasoned pastor to partner with Paul. It was decided that Tim was just the kind of man to fill this role. The two of us began our work with excitement and mutual appreciation. However, problems arose when we, as two leaders who had known each other only from a safe distance, began working together in the same room! It became apparent that, although we shared a vision, we had very different personalities and gifts. It didn't take long for sin, weakness, and failure to rear their ugly heads. Minor offenses and

major misunderstandings began to get in the way of our mutual appreciation—and the work God had brought us together to do.

This was a crucial moment. Would we give in to disillusionment and discouragement, or would we commit ourselves to do what we regularly teach others to do? We decided that our only choice was to trust Christ the way we ask others to, and give him an opportunity to work *in* us so that he could work *through* us.

We are quick to say that we are not heroes of relationship. In fact, the opposite is true. Our aim is that this book will help you look through the shattered glass of our sin to see the glory of a Redeemer who is ever-present, always at work to rescue and change us. We want you to know that the men who wrote this book are just like you in both struggle and potential. We are sinners with the capacity to do great damage to ourselves and our relationships. We need God's grace to save us from ourselves. But we are also God's children, which means that we have great hope and potential—not hope that rests on our gifts, experience, or track record, but hope that rests in Christ. Because he is in us and we are in him, it is right to say that our potential *is* Christ!

We are well aware that we are smack-dab in the middle of God's process of sanctification. And because this is true, we will struggle again. Selfishness, pride, an unforgiving spirit, irritation, and impatience will certainly return. But we are neither afraid nor hopeless. We have experienced what God can do in the middle of the mess. This side of heaven, relationships and ministry are always shaped in the forge of struggle. None of us get to relate to perfect people or avoid the effects of the fall on the work we attempt to do. Yet, amid the mess, we find the highest joys of relationship and ministry.

We want to affirm to you that what you will find in this book is true. We know it is true not only because we have examined the book's theology and found it to be orthodox, but also because we have tested the book's God and found him to be faithful again and again. What the book has to offer is not the wisdom of two men who have arrived, but the worship of two needy men who want to point you to the unfathomable and accessible resources of the God who has been with us and is with you. He is near, with, and in you. This means there is hope for you, even in relationships that leave you confused and disappointed.

May you experience his grace daily, as we do.

Why Bother? | 2

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

*Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from the words of my groaning?*

*O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, and am not silent.*

Psalm 22:1-2

"I had such high hopes for our friendship. What went wrong? I thought I had finally found someone I could trust."

"I can't believe you are questioning my integrity after all the things I have done for you. It's not like I am the only one who has failed in this relationship. You've hurt me, too."

"You see, this is what you always do. I come to you and you turn the table on me. You are so good at making other people feel guilty for your failures! The problem with you is that you are much better at recognizing other people's faults than you are your own. You don't have a clue how much you have hurt me. You betrayed our trust when you told them what I said."

**It is clear to you that no relationship
ever delivers what you dreamt it could.
Your fantasy collides with reality,
and reality bites!**

"You never told me I couldn't say anything about what you shared with me. I didn't know you would be so sensitive about it."

"I thought you cared enough for me that I wouldn't have to tell you not to talk to someone else! I thought our relationship was as important to you as it is to me."

"You see, that's the problem. You always act like you are more committed to this relationship than I am. So you watch me like a hawk, just waiting to pounce on any hint of failure."

"Why does it always go here? We can't even have a discussion about the weather without it ending in accusation."

Sound Familiar?

As you eavesdropped on this conversation, did it sound familiar? You may not have used the same words, but you have probably felt the same way at some time in your life. These words may remind you of a specific relationship and a particular person. You've felt the sting of hurt and disappointment. You know that you have disappointed others too. It is clear to you that no relationship ever delivers what you dreamt it could. Your fantasy collides with reality, and reality bites!



"I can't believe you would do such a thing for me! It is so encouraging that I did not have to go through this alone."

"I've gotten as much as I have given. Your friendship has been a constant source of encouragement."

"Yeah. You know, when we first met, neither one of us had any idea what God would do through our friendship."

"What I appreciate is that while it hasn't always been easy, you have been committed to dealing with our problems and disagreements in a constructive way. Your honesty is refreshing."

"And you've modeled patience and a willingness to listen, even when it was hard. God has used you in my life to help me speak honestly, but in a more godly manner."

"I suspect it won't always be this comfortable, but it is encouraging that we are committed to dealing with our future problems this way."

Familiar Words?

You may not have used these exact words either, but we hope you can identify with this experience of mutual friendship and encouragement. God has put people in your life and placed you in theirs. When you look back, you can see their imprint on your character. There have been times when you were very glad not to go through life alone. You have been greeted by patience and grace, even after a failure. And you too have been willing to forgive and have experienced the blessing of doing so.

Two Worlds

Elise was so thankful for the circle of friends God had given her. The first couple of months had been extremely lonely after she moved out of state to take a new job. Before moving she had never imagined how much she would miss her church and friends. The one thing that kept her going was Kurt's commitment to follow her, so they could continue their relationship and get married in the not-too-distant future.

It wasn't long before Elise began to connect with people at a good church. She had become particularly close to Amanda and Marta. She was thankful that God had brought them into her life. Things seemed like they were going well: she had friends nearby and Kurt would be with her soon.

Then things began to change. First, Kurt's daily text messages weren't daily anymore. Then the weekly emails stopped arriving. Elise began to panic when she waited for the Friday night phone call (the highlight of her week) and it never came. She called Kurt on Saturday to ask him if everything was okay. He said he was fine, but he clearly wasn't. The next week was marked by even less contact—just a couple of short text messages. Then on Monday a lengthy email came, but not the one Elise wanted. Kurt wrote that he had reconsidered. He wasn't going to move to where she was, and he thought they should just "move on." Elise was crushed. Not only had Kurt ended their relationship, but he had done it by email!

**Some of our deepest and most painful
hurts have been in relationships.
There are times when we wish
we could live alone and other times
when we are glad we don't.**

For the next several days, Elise tried to surround herself with friends since all she did was cry when she was alone. Their love and support kept her going. On one side, Amanda and Marta had been unbelievably kind and understanding. But on the other, Kurt had left her feeling betrayed. She didn't think she would ever get over it. She wondered whether relationships were worth the risk of this kind of pain.

We all live in these two worlds in some way. Some of our deepest joys and most painful hurts have been in relationships. There are times we wish we could live alone and other times we are glad we don't. What is certain is that we all have been shaped significantly by relationships that are full of both sorrow and joy.

Take a moment to reflect on the relationships in your life. Think about the relationships in your family while you were growing up. What were the unspoken rules your family followed? How did you handle conflict? What was the typical method for solving problems? Were there regular patterns of forgiveness? Did you ever see forgiveness sought and granted? What were the normal ways you communicated? Who typically had the floor? Did you grow up in a quiet or loud family? What was conversation like around the dinner table? Were there certain taboo subjects or was

everything fair game? How was anger expressed? Was it handled in a positive way? In the busyness of family life, how much investment was made in keeping relationships healthy? Were people motivated positively or with threats and guilt? Was your home a place to relax, or did you feel like you were walking on eggshells? To what degree was serving one another modeled and encouraged within the family? What kind of relationship did your family have with the surrounding community?

Your answers to these basic questions can show you how your family shaped your views on relating to others. Have the values of your family become your values? Have the struggles of your family become your struggles? Our family of origin is just one of many influences on our view of relationships. You have not become who you are all by yourself, which is why relationships are so important. They are inescapable and powerfully influential. The difficulty is that sin and grace coexist in all of them. Sin gets in the way of what grace can do, while grace covers what sin causes. Our relationships vividly display this dynamic mixture of gold and dross.

Oh No! Not Another Book on Relationships!

Since your local bookstores are already crammed with books and magazines about relationships, why take the time to read this one? What can we offer that would interest both the most naïve and most jaded people? We want to highlight the unique lens God gives his children to look at their lives. This lens will help you make your way through the intersection of sin and grace in relationships. Without it, you will remain naïve or grow cynical. When you face problems, you will be left only with human wisdom and techniques that produce short-term solutions, but can't promise lasting personal and interpersonal change. The fatal flaw of human wisdom is that it promises that you can change your relationships without needing to change *yourself*. When that perspective rules, you end up settling for far less than what God desires for your life and your friendships. As Christian author C. S. Lewis observed,

Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.¹

In our human wisdom, we would settle for relational détente, but God wants to bring us to the end of ourselves so that we would see our need for a relationship with him as well as with others. Every painful thing we experience in relationships is meant to remind us of our need for him. And every good thing we experience is meant to be a metaphor of what we can only find in him. To quote C. S. Lewis again, this primary vertical relationship is foundational to everything the Bible says about relationships.

When I have learnt to love God better than my earthly dearest, I shall love my earthly dearest better than I do now. In so far as I learn to love my earthly dearest at the expense of God and *instead* of God, I shall be moving towards the state in which I shall not love my earthly dearest at all. When first things are put first, second things are not suppressed but increased.²

It's probably clear that what Lewis is describing is not always evident in your life. It's not always evident in ours either. There are many indicators that reveal our tendency to reverse the order of things and put second things first. This is why we struggle with:

Letting go of a moment of hurt
Getting angry at the way our teenagers complicate our lives
Becoming defensive when challenged
Avoiding conflict out of fear
Being too political at work
Being resigned to broken relationships that could be healed
Gossiping about people
Lying out of fear of what others will think
Compromising our convictions to win others' approval
Pursuing comfortable relationships and avoiding difficult ones
Doubting God when our relationships are messy
Envyng other people's friendships
Controlling relationships out of a desire for security
Blowing up at people when our agendas are trampled
Living in bitter isolation in the face of disappointment

That is why the topic of this book is so important. All of us need a clearer sense of what it means to put first things first and how Jesus enables us to do that. We also need to understand what practical changes are needed to create a new agenda for our relationships and what concrete steps we need to take as we seek to please God.

**Every painful thing we experience
in relationships is meant to remind us
of our need for God.**

A Biblical Lens on Relationships

Because this topic is so comprehensive and has been written on extensively, we want to start with eight biblical facts that summarize the way God wants us to think about our relationships. These facts will shape the way we approach everything in this book. They won't be specifically discussed in every chapter, but they are the foundation for our model of healthy, godly relationships.

You were made for relationships

This fact takes us back to the beginning. It asks the basic questions, "Who are we, and how important are our relationships?" In Genesis 2:18, God says that it is not good for man to be "alone." This statement has more to do with God's design for humanity than Adam's neediness. God created us to be relational beings because he is a social God. God lives in community within the Trinity as Father, Son, and Spirit, and he made humanity in his image. Genesis 2 is not speaking primarily to Adam's experience of being lonely as much as it is revealing his nature as the person God created him to be. Because God created a communal being—someone designed for relationships—creation is incomplete without a suitable companion. While Genesis 2 does address how male and female complement each other, the implications are broader to include all human relationships. In addition, the word "helper," used here for Eve, speaks throughout Scripture of the complementary nature of all human relationships. "Helper" is used primarily to describe a companion, not a fellow laborer.

The reason we know this is true is because the word "helper" is often used to describe God's relationship with his people. When used this way, it does not refer to God as our coworker or employee, but as our ultimate companion who brings things to the relationship that we could not bring ourselves (Psalms 27:9; 33:20-22). So God is not

addressing Adam's workload, but rather the fact that he is a social being who lacks a suitable companion. Just as human beings were created with a vertical need for God's companionship, they are also created for the horizontal companionship of other people.

We all look for strategies or techniques that will free us from the pain of relationships and the hard work good relationships demand.

Genesis 2 points to the fact that relationships are a core component of who God has designed you to be. Relationship is so important to God that he brings his creative work to a climax by creating Eve. Together she and Adam can experience community—vertical and horizontal—in the presence of the living God.

In some way, all relationships are difficult

While the first fact is exciting, we still have to deal with reality. All of our relationships are less than perfect. They require work if they are going to thrive. Quickly on the euphoric heels of Genesis 2 comes Genesis 3, where the entrance of sin brings frustration and confusion into relationships. In Genesis 3, man and woman engage in accusation and slander. Genesis 4 gets even worse, with a man murdering his own brother.

While many of us have not committed murder, we still live on the continuum between murder, accusation, and blame. No wonder our relationships are so messy! Our struggle with sin is constantly revealed in them. If you want to enjoy any progress or blessing in your relationships, it will require you to admit your sin humbly and commit yourself to the work they require.

Each of us is tempted to make relationships the end rather than the means

When we reflect on Genesis 1–3, it becomes clear that the primary relationship Adam and Eve were intended to enjoy was their relationship with God. This vertical communion with God would provide the foundation for the horizontal community they were to have with each other. Everything God made pointed Adam and Eve to the primacy of their relationship with him. All of creation was to function as an arrow

pointing to God. But in our sin we tend to treat people and creation as more important. The very things God created to reveal his glory become instead the glory we desire. This is where we see, with C. S. Lewis, that our desires are too weak, not too strong. We settle for the satisfaction of human relationships when they were meant to point us to the perfect relational satisfaction found only with God. The irony is that when we reverse the order and elevate creation above Creator, we destroy the relationships God intended—and would have enabled—us to enjoy.

There are no secrets that guarantee problem-free relationships

We all look for strategies or techniques that will free us from the pain of relationships and the hard work good relationships demand. We hope that better planning, more effective communication, clear role definitions, conflict resolution strategies, gender studies, and personality typing—to name just a few—will make the difference. There may be value in these things, but if they were all we needed, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection would be unnecessary or, at best, redundant.

Skills and techniques appeal to us because they promise that relational problems can be fixed by tweaking our behavior without altering the bent of our hearts. But the Bible says something very different. It says that Christ is the only real hope for relationships because only he can dig deep enough to address the core motivations and desires of our hearts.

At some point you will wonder whether relationships are worth it

At some point each of us will become discouraged and disappointed with a relationship. The health and maturity of a relationship are not measured by an absence of problems, but by the way the inevitable problems are handled. From birth to death, we are sinners living with other sinners. A good relationship involves honestly identifying the sin patterns that tend to trouble it. It also involves being humble and willing to guard yourself and the other person from these sin patterns. Because human conflict is the result of the spiritual battles in our hearts, wise relationships always seek to be aware of that deeper struggle. Even in times of peace, you must be vigilant regarding the way your relationships can be hijacked by the underlying desires of your hearts, which are subtly and constantly shifting.

How do you deal with relational disappointments? Do you blame, deny, run away, avoid, threaten, and manipulate? Or do you speak the truth, exhibit patience, approach people gently, ask for and grant forgiveness,

overlook minor offenses, encourage and honor others? Let's admit that these questions touch us where we live from day to day. True Christian maturity does not get any more practical and concrete!

God keeps us in messy relationships for his redemptive purpose

This sixth fact reminds us that the very thing we would naturally seek to avoid is what God has chosen to use to make us more like him! Have you ever wondered why God doesn't just make your relationships better overnight? We often think that if God really cared for us, he would make our relationships easier. In reality, a difficult relationship is a mark of his love and care. We would prefer that God would just change the relationship, but he won't be content until the relationship changes *us* too. This is how God created relationships to function.

**Have you ever wondered why
God doesn't just make your
relationships better overnight?**

What happens in the messiness of relationships is that our hearts are revealed, our weaknesses are exposed, and we start coming to the end of ourselves. Only when this happens do we reach out for the help God alone can provide. Weak and needy people finding their hope in Christ's grace are what mark a mature relationship. The most dangerous aspect of your relationships is not your weakness, but your delusions of strength. Self-reliance is almost always a component of a bad relationship. While we would like to avoid the mess and enjoy deep and intimate community, God says that it is in the very process of working through the mess that intimacy is found. Which relationships are most meaningful to you? Most likely they are the ones that involved working through difficulty and hardship.

The fact that our relationships work as well as they do is a sure sign of grace

One of the biggest impediments we face in relationships is our spiritual blindness. We frequently do not see our sin, nor do we see the many ways in which God protects us and others from it. God constantly protects us from ourselves by restraining our sin. We are a lot like Elisha's servant in 2 Kings 6:15-22. He was overwhelmed by the enemy army that surrounded him until God opened his eyes to see the far more formidable army of angels God had sent to protect him. Why was it the servant could see only

the enemies surrounding Israel, but not “the hills full of horses and chariots of fire” from the Lord? It was the spiritual blindness of unbelief.

How do you measure your potential in relationships? Do you measure the size of the problems or the magnitude of God’s presence in your midst? Considering our sin, it is amazing that people get along at all! Each night the evening news begins with a litany of murders, rapes, and robberies that suggests that our communities are very dangerous places. Yet it often fails to cite the thousands of good things people do to make those same communities livable. Our view of our relationships can be just as slanted. We tend to see sins, weaknesses, and failures, rather than the good things God is accomplishing. If you look for God in your relationships, you will always find things to be thankful for.

Scripture offers a clear hope for our relationships

Does the challenge and mess of relationships leave you discouraged? Does the biblical honesty about human community shock you? Are you feeling overwhelmed by the hard work relationships require? If so, you are ready for this last fact: The shattered relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at the cross provides the basis for our reconciliation. No other relationship ever suffered more than what Father, Son, and Holy Spirit endured when Jesus hung on the cross and cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Jesus was willing to be the rejected Son so that our families would know reconciliation. Jesus was willing to become the forsaken friend so that we could have loving friendships. Jesus was willing to be the rejected Lord so that we could live in loving submission to one another. Jesus was willing to be the forsaken brother so that we could have godly relationships. Jesus was willing to be the crucified King so that our communities would experience peace.

In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus brought reconciliation in two fundamental ways. Jesus reconciled us to God, which then becomes the foundation for the way he reconciles us to one another. As C. S. Lewis said, Christ restores first things so that second things are not suppressed but increased! When God reigns in our hearts, peace reigns in our relationships.

This work will only be complete in heaven, but there is much we can enjoy now. The New Testament offers hope that our relationships can be characterized by things like humility, gentleness, patience, edifying honesty, peace, forgiveness, compassion, and love. Isn’t it wonderful that God’s grace can make this possible, even for sinners in a fallen

world! This hope challenges whatever complacency and discouragement we might have about our relationships because there is always more growth, peace, and blessing that God's grace can bring, even here on earth. The hope of the gospel invites us to a holy dissatisfaction with all of our relationships, even—especially—those with few major problems.

Our Goal and Hope

As you read this book, please keep in mind that our goal is to be as honest as the Bible is about relationships. If we succeed, this book will map onto your experience. In addition to being honest, we hope to be as positive as the gospel is about the potential of relationships. This will give you the encouragement you need to tackle the rewarding but difficult work of redemptive relationships. If you wonder, *Why bother?* the answer is, "Because God did."

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1. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), 3-4.
 2. C. S. Lewis, *Letters of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), 248.

No Options | 3

*The man and his wife were both naked,
and they felt no shame.*

Genesis 2:25

We had just moved to a new home and we were far from being settled. Life on every side seemed complicated and chaotic. Our schedule seemed ridiculously demanding. Our children ranged in ages from two to eleven, and they all seemed out of sorts. The weeks went by so fast, it seemed like I started putting on my trousers on Monday and it was Saturday before I got them zipped up!

Sure, we had family worship every morning and a fairly relaxed family dinner in the evening. We were dedicated to doing things as a family, but it all just seemed like a stressed-filled blur of duty. My wife and I tried to spend time together as a couple, but we hardly communicated any enthusiasm for our relationship. We were exhausted and had allowed irritation and impatience to come between us.

I had been elected to do a late-night run to the grocery store because, once again, we had little to put in the children's lunches for school the next day. I finished shopping and was waiting for the light to turn green so I could make my way home, when I began to think what it would be like to be single! I'm serious. I was completely overwhelmed and discouraged with the most important relationships in my life, and I wondered how I could successfully deal with what was on my plate.

The minute the thought crossed my mind, I was horrified! I love my children and I am privileged to know and be loved by my wife. I wouldn't want to live a second without them. But at that moment those relationships seemed so difficult and demanding. I loved my family, but that night in the car I hit the wall of the reality of relationships in a fallen world.

Everyone has hit that wall called, "Why bother with other people?" We reach points in our relationships where we wonder if they are worth it. A wife decides it's not worth opening up to her husband anymore. An employee goes to work, shuts his door, and only comes out when it is time to go home. A teenager comes home from school and goes to his room until he is cajoled to join the family for dinner. Someone probably dropped out of a small group this week because she didn't think it was worth the hassle. Family gatherings are reduced to people sharing the same geographical space, devoid of any meaningful relationship. The church meeting becomes a formality with little or no attempt to share in the lives of others. Neighbors live side by side for years, but no one knows anything significant about the other.

What do all of these people and scenarios have in common? They have all faced the difficulty of having relationships with flawed people in a broken world, and they have opted to check out. Is this a valid response? Is it okay to keep to ourselves so that we don't get hurt and don't hurt anyone else? What's wrong with playing it safe?

Yet something keeps dragging us back to other people. We know we are less than human when we are all alone. Why does the employee who works in isolation wonder what others are doing outside his office? Why is the teenager jealous when he sees his parents pay attention to his brother or sister when *he* made the decision to shut them out? Why does the person who chose to live apart from others describe his experience in terms of "loneliness"?

We know we are less than human when we are all alone.

We live with this tension between self-protective isolation and the dream for meaningful relationships. Where are you on the continuum right now? Are you moving away from others because of a recent hurt? Are you moving toward others because you have been alone too long? What tendency do you observe in your life? Do you typically move in the direction of isolation or immersion? Do you tend toward independence or co-dependence? Every relational decision we make is moving in one of these directions. We are tempted to make a relationship either less or more than it was intended to be. Without a biblical model to explain the place relationships should have in your life, you will likely experience imbalance, confusion, conflicting desires, and general frustration. You just don't know how to navigate the minefield. Even the best relationships can surprise you with the challenges they present.

Two Extremes

While most of us don't tend to live at either of these extremes, we do move in the direction of isolation or immersion in all our relationships:

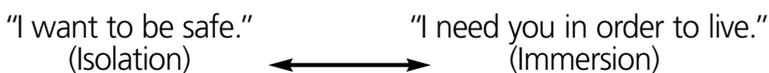


Figure 3-1

Where we are on the continuum varies with each relationship, but for most of us, our problems tend to cluster on one end of the continuum or the other. In most cases, whatever problems we have in relationships tend to fit one of three relational profiles.

The frustrated relationship

Here one person moves toward isolation while the other moves toward immersion. One dreams of being safe; the other dreams of being close and intimate. Imagine how differently these two would prepare for a vacation. The person seeking isolation is packing a stack of books, while the person seeking immersion is filling the schedule with activities to do together! How does it feel to live in this type of relationship? The isolationist feels smothered; the immersionist feels rejected. Since both of them regularly have their expectations frustrated, the relationship is perpetually disappointing. Each person thinks his perspective and expectations are fair and reasonable, so the shared disappointment eventually leads to anger.

The enmeshed relationship

Here both people move toward immersion. They ride the roller coaster of each other's emotions. Because they are so dependent on each other, they can be easily hurt when the other does not meet their needs. Because their expectations for the relationship are so high, they tend to live in isolation from other people. If these two were to take a vacation, they would spend every waking moment together. While you might think that similar expectations would lead to peace and harmony, it actually produces more problems—at least in this kind of relationship. Because each is looking to the other to satisfy very high relational expectations, they both become highly sensitive, easily hurt, and critical. Much of the energy in the relationship is spent dealing with minor offenses, real or perceived. Each feels hurt because his or her expectations of the other person are never completely fulfilled. They feel discouraged too because, no matter how hard they try, they never seem to measure up to the other's expectations. This kind of relationship is exhausting because the work required makes peace impossible.

The isolated relationship

Here both people move toward isolation. Each person is very aware of the dangers of relationships and constantly opts for safety.

Conversations are limited, safe, and impersonal. They tend to stay away from self-disclosure. The ideal vacation for these two would involve lots of time alone with minimal interaction. Each would read a different book, immersed in his or her own private world. This kind of relationship is complicated because the desire for safety and independence collides with the longing for relationship. Because they are communal beings made in God's image, both people long for some form of connection, no matter how small it may be. And although they both want safety, their desire for it separates them, making the relationship empty and disappointing.

In each scenario there is a relational impasse. In the frustrated relationship, the movement is away from the other. In the enmeshed relationship, the move toward the other is so extreme that it is impossible to satisfy expectations. In the isolated relationship, the movement towards safety precludes real relationship.

**While relationships are not
inherently dangerous, the expectations
we bring to them can be.**

Do you recognize yourself in any of these profiles? Though all relationships are unique, you probably see qualities that characterize your relationships to some degree. (You can probably also think of relationships between other people that fit one or more of these descriptions.) The interesting point about each profile is that each is an unbalanced relationship because each person tends to make too much or too little of the relationship. Isolationists conclude that relationships are too difficult; they are not necessary and the effort is not worth it. ("I don't need relationships to be me.") On the other hand, immersionists are convinced that relationships are everything. ("Without relationships, I am nobody.") These conclusions are rooted in people's hearts and expectations. When things go wrong in relationships, the problem often starts there. So while relationships are not inherently dangerous, the expectations we bring to them can be. This is why it is important to ask questions about what God intended for this area of our lives. We need to ask, "What purpose does God intend relationships to serve in my life? As a person created in his image, what should my relationships look like?"

Our Communal God

All books on relationships raise the same questions we have asked so far. Unfortunately, however, most go on to answer these questions only from a horizontal perspective. But if it is true that people are made in the image of God, the first thing we need to do when we talk about relationships is to ask vertical questions. You will gain a greater understanding of the purpose of relationships not by examining humans, but by looking to God. Miroslav Volf begins with God to come to a conclusion about the essence of being human.

Because the Christian God is not a lonely God, but rather a communion of the three persons, faith leads human beings into the divine *communio*. One cannot, however, have a self-enclosed communion with the Triune God—a “foursome,” as it were—for the Christian God is not a private deity. Communion with this God is at once also communion with those others who have entrusted themselves in faith to the same God. Hence one and the same act of faith places a person into a new relationship both with God and with all others who stand in communion with God.¹

Does this seem impractical and irrelevant? What in the world does the doctrine of the Trinity have to do with my relationship with my wife or coworker? The reason it seems jarring to inject God and theology into a discussion about human relationships is because we commonly misunderstand theology. We see theology as a systematic study of religious thought that has little to do with everyday life. But, rightly understood, theology is the real life story of God’s relationship to us and our relationship to one another lived out in a broken world. By this definition, whether you “think” theologically or not, you are “doing” theology every day in the decisions you make, the words you speak, the feelings you have, and the attitudes you nurture in your heart. All of these responses are rooted in your perspective on the nature of God, yourself, your relationships, and the world around you. These “perspectives” are theology because they inform and frame the way you live your life. The question is not whether you are a theologian, but what kind of theologian you are!

All people assemble a set of “facts” that they believe are true. These facts function as a lens that is used to interpret life and relationships. The Bible is the only reliable source for these

life-interpreting facts. The ultimate fact is the existence of God. Because we were made in God's likeness, we cannot talk about the nature of human relationships without first thinking about the nature of God. The biblical story presents us with a God who is three persons in one. This is the foundation for understanding what it means to be made in the image of God and fully human. John 17:20-26 shows the way the Bible connects God's nature with ours and his purpose for us. It is even more poignant as Jesus' prayer for his people as he contemplates his death.

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

"Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

As Jesus looks back on his public ministry and all it was meant to accomplish and forward to the cross and all it was ordained to produce, his focus is riveted on community! Of all the things Christ could pray for at this moment, he prays for the unity of his people. Let's consider the assumptions that are the basis for Christ's prayer and the framework for relationships.

God is the only properly functioning community in the universe

As Jesus communes with the Father, he reflects on the relationship that Father, Son, and Spirit have had for all eternity. He longs for his people to experience the same things in our community with God

and one another. Christ's words echo the realities present in the Genesis account of the creation of humanity. As Anthony A. Hoekema says, "The first thing that strikes us as we look at Genesis 1:26 is that the main verb is in the plural: 'Then God said, "Let us make man."'"² We are given a glimpse into the divine community as Father, Son, and Spirit commit to make the human community in the image of the triune God. John 17 brings greater clarity of God's design given in Genesis 1:26 by describing the intimate unity God intends and its purposes. It gives insight into Christ's design and function for the church. God knows how to help us with our struggles with community because he is a community.

The Trinity is the only adequate model for human community

When Jesus reflects on God's purpose for human community, the only adequate pattern he can find is the community between Father, Son, and Spirit. In essence he is saying, "Father, the only example of the community we have designed for our people is the community we have experienced together." When our relationships aren't working as they were designed, we can look to this model.

Does it surprise you that God presents himself as a model for human community? It can be surprising because we tend to think of God as an individual. While God is one, the Bible also says that he exists in three persons.

**The biblical teaching of the Trinity
is very practical for relationships.**

The biblical teaching of the Trinity is very practical for relationships since God himself is a model of loving, cooperative, unified community where diversity is an asset, not a liability. If God is making us into his likeness, we can be encouraged that he will give us the grace to live like this in community with one another.

People made in God's likeness were made for community

Christ's prayer reflects God's word in Genesis 2:18 as he looks at his glorious creation before the fall: "It is not good for the man to be alone." Human community was not only Christ's plan for his disciples; it was also God's plan for all people from the very beginning. Even though we are flawed people in flawed relationships, we are created

to be social beings. Community with one another is not just a duty; it is an aspect of our humanity.

God has a two-fold purpose for human community: personal growth and witness to the world

Christ's prayer is that his people would grow and reflect his glory to a watching world. The ultimate flaw in the three kinds of relationships described earlier is that each is driven by personal desire rather than God's purposes. As we live together, we must always keep the bigger agenda of God's glory in view. Our relationships must be shaped not by what we want, but by what God intends.

Sin's self-centeredness cuts us off from God and others

Jesus would not be praying for us and moving toward the cross if we could manufacture this kind of community on our own. In John 17:17, he prays for our growth. Christ's starting point is the same as the apostle Paul's in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15—that sin turns us inward, away from God's grace and others: "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." The night I imagined being single revealed a shocking selfishness in me. I wanted life to be comfortable, predictable, and easy. I wanted that because I thought that would be best for me.

True human community only arises out of communion with God

Jesus' language on this point is striking. He welcomes us into this divine community with Father, Son, and Spirit so that we can experience community with one another. That evening in the grocery store parking lot, my problem was not just that I didn't love my family as I should. My problem was that I didn't love God as I should. That weakened my love for my family. My panic was about more than being overwhelmed in my responsibilities; it revealed a lack of trust in God. We can't move toward community with one another until we have been drawn into community with God. The image here is of two concentric circles of relationship as opposed to two separate circles. The circle of human community can only thrive within the larger circle of community with God. Jesus prays that we would know that the Father's love for us is the same as his love for Jesus! (John 17:23). What a welcome into divine community!

Think of it as illustrated in Figure 3-2.

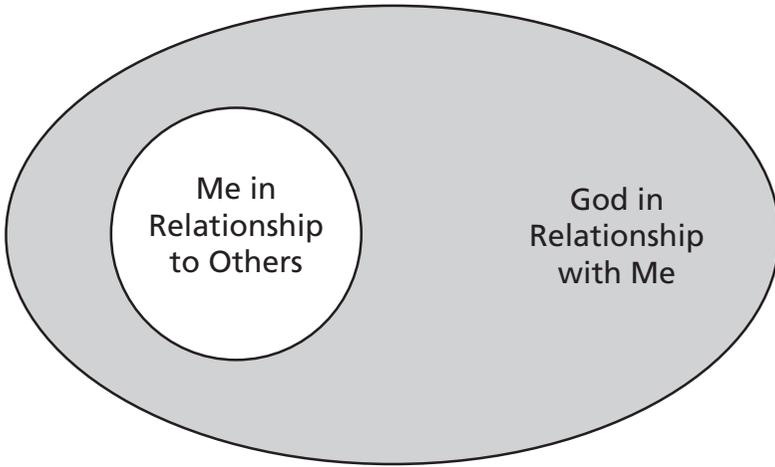


Figure 3-2

Christ's resolve confirms the commitment made by Father, Son, and Spirit before the creation of the world

Jesus is not manufacturing a new idea for human relationships or the church. His prayer reflects what God's design has always been. I had become discouraged as a father and a husband because I had lost sight of God's design. People made in God's likeness will reflect that likeness and glory only when they live in committed community. As Jesus looks to the cross and the ultimate defeat of sin, he knows that his death and resurrection will not only reconcile individual sinners to God, but also individual sinners to one another. Jesus' death and resurrection create an entirely new community that will come to full expression in eternity. (See Ephesians 2:11-22.)

God will dwell in community with his people so that they can know community with one another

As Jesus prays, he knows that the guilt of sin separates us from God and others. That is why he goes to the cross. But he is also aware that the ongoing presence of sin will make living in community impossible if we are not empowered in an ongoing way. John 17:22 is significant because the glory Jesus is talking about is the glory of the Holy Spirit, which allowed him to minister in a fallen world. He gives this same glory-Spirit to us because without the Spirit we can do nothing.

That night in my car, I had not properly measured my potential. My potential to be successful at what God had called me to do was not based on my track record or my responsibilities. It was tied to the

grace given to me in Christ. Jesus would give me all I needed to live with my family. Jesus faced the unthinkable so I would have the power to live in relationships of love.

Do you see what is going on here? As Jesus prays to the Father for the creation of a new human community, he is anticipating what will happen to his own relationship with his Father as he dies to bear the sins of his people. His cry on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is a cry of broken communion among the members of the Trinity. The perfect, eternal love relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit was ripped apart to allow us to be restored to God and reconciled to one another.

The Image of God Is a Community

When you look at the various stages of a person’s life, what do you observe? We are dependent on our mothers from the moment of conception. As soon as we’re born, we need our family’s care to survive. Even as we grow more self-sufficient, we still seek out human companionship. As teenagers we desire the acceptance of our peers and begin to experience the pull towards deeper, longer lasting, and more committed relationships. As adults we live in a variety of intersecting communities: family, church, neighborhood, and work. As we get older, we look back on our lives and remember the web of relationships that has been ours. Our fondest memories and deepest hurts involve relationships. Finally, one of our saddest moments is when death robs us of a loved one.

What does this survey of a person’s life demonstrate? Despite the fact that we are selfish people in a fallen world, our lives still reveal God’s likeness. God is a community and we as his creation reflect this quality. Moreover, he brings us into community and places the desire for community within us. Ultimately, we can never escape our essential nature—who and what God designed us to be. This relational characteristic is central to who we are; it leads us to do great good and great evil. This was demonstrated by the terrorism and heroism that took place simultaneously on September 11, 2001. The hatred of one community for another led to death and destruction; but the love other people had for their community produced amazing acts of courage, kindness, and self-sacrifice.

What does all this biblical and experiential data tell us? That you cannot talk about human beings made in God’s image without talking

about relationships. Yet it is often the first thing we overlook. Only when human beings live in community do we fully reflect the likeness of God.

**Only when human beings live
in community do we fully reflect
the likeness of God.**

Are You Denying Your Humanity?

Are relationships optional for you? The arguments from Scripture and daily life say, "Absolutely not!" If my identity as a human being is tied to community, then to deny, avoid, escape, misuse, exploit, or destroy it is to deny my own humanity. You deny your humanity every time you avoid someone, when you get angry with your children, when you opt for isolation over facing your hurt, when you exploit another human being, or when you give way to bigotry. James 3:9 says, "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness." Whenever you curse another person, you are destroying the thing you were both created for: God-shaped community. Ultimately, you are cursing the God who made the person, which means you have denied not only another's humanity, but your own as well.

In contrast, every time you move toward someone in compassion, you affirm your humanity. You do this every time you care about someone else's story as much as your own, seek or grant forgiveness, or function as a peacemaker. Every time you affirm the humanity of another, you honor the Creator who made you both. Because of the coexistence of sin and grace, we all shift between denying and affirming our humanity. One moment you are comforting your child and the next you are gossiping on the phone! In an attempt to serve someone, you argue with your spouse about the best way to accomplish your good deed!

John Calvin said, "For errors can never be uprooted from human hearts until a true knowledge of God is planted therein."³ If there are problems in your relationships, the solution starts with God. Typically, we start with what we want. But starting with yourself and your own perceived wants and needs will bring you into collision with another person doing the same thing. It will doom the relationship. Only

when we start with God—someone bigger than ourselves—can we escape the destructive results of our own selfishness. Human relationships are most satisfying when we enter them not just to please ourselves or even the other person, but to please God. The circle of human community is only healthy when it exists within the larger circle of community with God.

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1. Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 173.
 2. Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 12. While there are other aspects to what it means for humanity to be in God's image, the emphasis in this passage is on God as a divine community creating a human community.
 3. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol.1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 73.