

VERN SHERIDAN POYTHRESS

REDEEMING

SOCIOLOGY

A God-  
Centered  
Approach



*Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach*  
Copyright © 2011 by Vern Sheridan Poythress  
Published by Crossway  
1300 Crescent Street  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law.

This book examines human relationships in a manner analogous to a previous Crossway book that examines language: *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (2009). Where appropriate, some of the wording and structure of the previous book has been utilized in this one. This use is with permission.

Cover design: Studio Gearbox  
Cover photo: Veer Inc.

First printing 2011  
Printed in the United States of America

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-2129-4  
PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-2130-0  
Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-2131-7  
ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-2132-4

#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Poythress, Vern S.

Redeeming sociology : a God-centered approach / Vern Sheridan Poythress.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-2129-4 (tp)

1. Christian sociology. 2. Interpersonal relations—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BT738.P65 2011

261.5—dc22

2010053586

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11  
14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Contents

Preface: Why Relationships?	11
Introduction: Considering Personal Relationships	15
1. The Importance of Relationships	17
<b>Part 1: God's Involvement with Relationships</b>	
2. Relationships and the Trinity	23
3. God Creating Human Beings	30
4. God's Covenants	33
5. God Sustaining Relationships	48
6. Creativity in Relationships	51
7. Exploring Examples of Relationships	57
8. The Regularities of Human Relationships	66
9. God's Rule	71
10. Responding to God's Government	88
<b>Part 2: From Big to Small: Relationships in the Context of History</b>	
11. Small Pieces of Human Action within the Big Pieces	95
12. World History	98
13. The Fall into Sin	103
14. Redemption through Christ	115
15. Peoples and Cultures	121
16. Principles for Cultural Reconciliation	127
17. Good and Bad Kinds of Diversity	133
18. Human Action	143
<b>Part 3: Interpreting Human Relationships</b>	
19. Meanings in Personal Action	155
20. Social and Cultural Analysis	162
21. Interpreting God's Actions	173

22. Cultural Learning	182
23. Human Knowledge within Culture	190

#### **Part 4: Smaller Wholes within Society**

24. Varieties in Society	197
25. Authorities	206
26. Classifications of People	220
27. Social Equality and Inequality	225
28. Episodes	231
29. Transactions	237
30. Action in Steps	240
31. Subsystems for Human Action	243
32. Signs and Their Meanings	253
33. Foundations for Unified Signs	259
34. From Signs to Perspectives	266

#### **Part 5: Applications**

35. A Jigsaw Piece as a Perspective	271
36. Living in Relationships	275

#### **Interaction with Other Approaches to Society and Relationships**

Appendix A. René Descartes's Method	281
Appendix B. Modern Sociology	287
Appendix C. "Scientific" Sociology	294
Appendix D. Empathetic Sociologies	303
Appendix E. Sociological Models	310
Appendix F. Sociology of Knowledge	316
Appendix G. Sociology and Postmodernism	324
Appendix H. Postmodern Theology	327

Bibliography	331
General Index	337
Scripture Index	347

## INTRODUCTION

---

# Considering Personal Relationships

It is not good that the man should be alone.

—Genesis 2:18

What would it be like to live all alone on an uninhabited island? If the island had sufficient food resources, a clever person might survive for a long time. But it would not be good; he would be lonely.

We live in company with fellow human beings. God made us that way. He made us to be in relationships. First and foremost, we are designed to have a personal relationship with God himself. But God planned that we would also have relationships with other human beings, and we would benefit from the cooperation and the comradeship. We benefit as adults, but we benefited even more strikingly when we were infants. In reality, none of us is “self-made.” God made us. And then we had someone to take care of us while we were young. At that point, a relationship was essential.

Human social relationships are wonderful and mysterious. They are so because they are a gift of God to us. They reflect and reveal him. How do relationships reflect God? According to the Bible, God himself is personal. God is one God in three persons. Within God, the persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—have rich personal relations with one another. We are made like God, and that is why we can enjoy personal relationships. When we relate to one another, we rely on resources and powers that find their origin in God. We can appreciate personal relationships more deeply, and interact more wisely, if we come to know God and see his place in these relationships.

Because I am a follower of Christ, I trust in the Bible as the word of God.<sup>1</sup> The Bible is a foundational resource for my thinking about personal relationships. From time to time we will look briefly at other views of humanity and human relationships. But my primary purpose is to help people increase their appreciation for relationships, using the Bible for guidance. If you as a reader are not yet convinced about the Bible, I would still invite you to think with me about relationships. The actual character of relationships does, I believe, confirm what the Bible says.

---

<sup>1</sup>Interested readers may consult many works that show at length that the Bible is the word of God. See, among others, Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948); D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983). It is an important issue, so important that it deserves much more space than we could take here.

# 1

---

## The Importance of Relationships

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

—Ecclesiastes 4:9–12

Personal relationships have a central role in human living. We spend a lot of our time interacting with other people—talking, listening, helping, cooperating in work and in leisure. When relationships degenerate, we may feel the effects keenly: we may hate others; we may quarrel, fight, backstab, envy, covet, lie, slander, steal, and murder. We may suffer when other people hurt us. Relationships can clearly be for both good and ill.

Not only in the family but in almost every other sphere of life we experience human relationships. Education depends on relations between teacher and student and between fellow students. Businesses depend on relations of employer and employee, supervisor and subordinate, and teams of workers in cooperative effort. Communication, news, and entertainment, whether by television, radio, newspapers, or the Internet, involve relationships between communicators, news reporters, entertainers, and recipients. We can enter into relationships in friendships, social organizations, businesses, churches, charities, political parties, governmental organizations, military organizations, and sports.

Large organizations like national governments, big-business corporations, universities, and mass media organizations demonstrate the importance of relationships in another way. Their very existence is closely tied to relationships. They continue to exist because they are maintained through a vast number of internal relationships among those who work in them. And their influence on others relies heavily on what other people know and think about them. A business, for example, depends on people's trust in its reputation and their knowledge of the products that it offers for sale. A national government functions most effectively when the people freely recognize its authority, rather than regarding it as an unwelcome oppressor.

Some activities, such as gardening, do not demand the immediate presence of another human being. But even they gain significance from a larger context of human life in which relationships have an indispensable role. We practice gardening using advice and examples from other people. We may have obtained the seeds or seedlings from a nursery or gardening shop. We may work our garden with benefits in mind that extend to other people. And gardening can be more pleasant if we are talking with a friend while doing it. We could go on. Many of the most significant and precious moments in life gain significance through relationships. So examining our relationships could contribute significantly to reorienting our lives. That is why we are going to take a long look at relationships and their meaning.

### **The Importance of Relationships in the Bible**

The Bible confirms the importance of relationships. It says that in the beginning God created human beings in his image: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). Human beings are created *like God*, and the likeness includes his personal character. Human beings thus have capability for personal relationships, involving knowing, loving, and communicating with others.

The first recorded interaction between God and man shows a personal relationship. God spoke to human beings concerning their task: "And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth'" (Gen. 1:28). This speech showed a relationship of communication and personal responsibility between God and human beings. The personal responsibility came into focus more pointedly when God introduced a special prohibition: "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die'" (Gen. 2:16–17). Adam and Eve, the first human beings, violated their relationship with God when they disobeyed and fell into sin. But

that was not the end of their relationship with God. God gave hope to Adam and Eve through a promise of redemption, which demonstrated a continuing possibility of positive fellowship with God (Gen. 3:15).

Among human beings, family relationships play an important role. God established the relationship of marriage even before the beginning of human rebellion (Gen. 2:18–25). The human race grows through families who bear children and raise them (Gen. 4:1–5:32). Parents have a responsibility to train their children (Deut. 6:6–7; Eph. 6:4). Children must maintain a relationship of respect toward their parents (Ex. 20:12; Eph. 6:1–3).

God also established the beginning of civil government when he gave instructions on how to deal with cases of murder (Gen. 9:5–6). We can see more complex governmental organization in Egypt (e.g., Gen. 41:37–57), in the kings of Israel (1 Chronicles 22–29), and in Babylon (Daniel 1–6). God established these governments and accomplished his will through them, even though they did not always act justly (Gen. 45:5; 50:20; Dan. 2:36–45; 4:34–35; 7:17–27; Rom. 13:1–3).

In the Old Testament God's relations to human beings come to particular expression in *covenants*. We will look at covenants more closely at a later point. Roughly speaking, a covenant is a kind of pact, an agreement that establishes a relationship between two parties. God made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17), and later with the nation of Israel through Moses (Exodus 24). Jesus inaugurated a covenant at the Last Supper (Matt. 26:28). God's covenants with human beings express a commitment on God's part to a special people, and they look forward to a time when God will accomplish final and definitive redemption. Redemption includes the healing of the relation between God and mankind that was broken by human rebellion.

The healing of the relationship was accomplished when Jesus Christ came into the world and carried out his work. Jesus acted to restore a proper relationship of love between God and human beings, and a relation of love among human beings. His teachings have much to say about human relationships in their many dimensions. But his *actions*, especially his death and his resurrection from the dead, took place in order to effect reconciliation in the relation between God and man, and then, as a further result, reconciliation in human relationships with one another: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (John 13:34).

The "gospel" or good news that the Bible proclaims tells how Jesus's work restored relationships, and what we are to do in responding to God and what he accomplished. The Bible's message addresses relationships in all their dimensions.

Our response to the message in the Bible includes a response in changing our relationships. First of all, we need to be reconciled to God, against whom we have rebelled. In other words, our relationship with God needs to be restored. In addition, reconciliation with God has implications for our future relationship

to God and to others. Jesus summarizes our obligations to God in two central commandments, both of which involve relationships:

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he [Jesus] said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matt. 22:36–40)

Living your life as God designed you to live it means living fruitfully in relationships. If you are genuinely carrying out God’s two commands—for relationship with God and relationship with other people—you are pleasing God and fulfilling the true goal of your existence. So relationships are vital in your life.



**“This is a work of first-rate thinking.”**

J. I. PACKER, Board of Governors' Professor of Theology, Regent College

**“A powerful argument against the exclusion of God from sociology and psychology.”**

JOHN M. FRAME, J. D. Trimble Chair of Systematic Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

**“A valuable guide to thinking about godly relationships in our secular world.”**

J. LANIER BURNS, Research Professor of Theological Studies, Senior Professor of Systematic Theology, Dallas Theological Seminary

In their pursuit of social welfare, sociologists and everyday citizens alike have adopted a worldview that fails to account for both the nature of God and the depravity of humankind. Ignoring God and sin has resulted in misguided analyses and ineffective solutions to societal issues. The time has come to rethink the study of sociology as those faulty assumptions have clearly affected the discipline as a whole.

Recognizing that human relationships are derived from the triune relationships within the Godhead, Poythress argues that social interactions must be assessed through a biblical framework that takes seriously the problem of sin. He has thus written this compelling volume to stimulate the reconfiguration and transformation of a worldview gone awry, helping us to think rightly about fallen human relationships and our models for understanding and improving them.

*Redeeming Sociology* advocates a biblically informed approach based on the Trinitarian nature of God, his governance of the world, and his redemption accomplished in Christ—a model that will help to reform the field of sociology as well as the beliefs and behaviors in our own relationships.

VERN SHERIDAN POYTHRESS is professor of New Testament interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary. He has six earned degrees, including a PhD from Harvard University and a ThD from the University of Stellenbosch. He is the author of ten books, including *Redeeming Science* and *In the Beginning Was the Word*.

CHRISTIAN LIVING / SOCIOLOGY