

Relational Christianity

One approach to Christianity can be called “relational” to differentiate it from organizational, systems, or mechanical Christianity. Today it is not uncommon for Christians to see their religious life in terms of their relationship to a church system. They often view this relationship in terms of what the system requires, what criteria they have to meet, and what doctrines they have to accept.

In contrast, the New Testament describes a Christian life more in terms of our relationship with God (through Christ Jesus) and with each other. Today we can think of the manager of an organizational business enterprise as the one who establishes the rules and measures the performance of the employees. All too often church leaders follow this business model of administration. A more biblical model of a leader is an older and wiser Christian who can shepherd through teaching and teaches using persuasion as an older brother in Christ.

The word “brother” is representative of the familial terms (mother, brother, father, sister, children, parents) which are used in the bible as illustrative of our Christian relationships. In order to understand the biblical use of these relational terms, we need to try to understand what they meant at the time they were written and not so much use our current understanding. For example, today a “brother” may be thought of fondly as the guy with whom we shared a residence and went on vacations with in our youth. However, it is likely that a brother had his own friends, classes, interests, and activities. If one’s brother had his own room, it was likely that you had a closer relationship with the person who sat next to you in school than your brother.

A friend loveth at all times, and a brother is born for adversity. - Proverbs 17:17

The relationship one had with his brother in ancient times was much closer than one typically has today. In a world with no police, unemployment insurance, medical insurance, or welfare, your family was the only resource to sustain your life. Without TV, movies, video games, or cell phones, the activities, interests, and concerns of family members represented that with which time was invested. The biblical use of the word “brother” carries with it a much deeper relationship than someone today who is remembered fondly when a Christmas or birthday card is sent.

One example of this decrease in familial experience can be seen in the observations of a man of the WWII generation. He spoke condescendingly of his parents generation, seeing them as somewhat provincial, saying that for them, their friends were their siblings and cousins. Whereas for his generation, he was more a “citizen of the world”. The man did not understand that as a CEO of a major corporation his “friendship” was sought for the advantages it could produce and that his personal investment in global relationships diverted his attention from and impoverished his own family.

To better understand what Christianity was supposed to have been, we need to first understand what has happened to families in general so that when we use familial terms we may better be able to approximate their original meaning. However, even before a fundamental look at familial relationships, we need to consider the influences of the natural world and the environment it establishes for families.

Chapter 1 - In the Beginning

The natural world that God created was perfect and much different from the world we know today. The world we have today still carries the curse that was the consequence of the first sin.

And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. - Genesis 3:17-19

One might question if God was angry, vengeful, or spiteful to so punish all of us for one sin. However, such conjecture is based on a view that man's greatest good lies in the direction of his comfort and ease. A different perspective might see what God did as loving protection.

Consider two wealthy fathers of young men who both rebel against their fathers. One father chooses to cut off all funds from his rebellious son. The other father allows his son to continue access to his funds. The first son has to find a job to earn the money he needs to eat. The second son continues to finance whatever indulgences and whims he fancies. The difficulties the first son encounters help him come to understand reality and truth. The delusions and dissipations of the second son carry him increasingly further from truth.

Because we lost our spiritual life and through it our connection with God, we are like men suddenly blind. We have only our desires to lead us and without a connection to God, those desires lead us into self-destruction.

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. - Genesis 2:17

And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. - Genesis 6:5

It is the difficulties and hardships we encounter that limit the destruction we would inflict on ourselves. It is our family that is the primary insulation we have against the brutality of the natural world. However, we also have an enemy who desires to enslave us in a system of control that he operates. He has been working for centuries to advance his plans to take us captive.

Satan has used technology to create an alternative to the natural world called society such that many people are so removed from the natural world and its limiting discomforts and difficulties, that to them the only "real" environment is the social world. While a family is beneficial to deal with the natural world, it often becomes an embarrassing hindrance when dealing with the artificial or social world.

Chapter 2 - The Family in the Natural World

If we consider the world God created and then cursed (for our protection after sin), we can see dangers and hazards at every turn; drought and flood, predation of beasts, death, enslavement, or robbery by other humans, and disease and injury. Into this world humans are born helpless and ignorant.

In the ancient world infant mortality rates were often over 50%. Our families were where we were protected, nurtured, instructed, and our character shaped by discipline. Our growth was not to provide us with the means to strike out on our own and build a life for ourselves. It was to be an integral part of the family eventually caring for parents who had once cared for us.

The Prodigal Son illustrates for us the necessity of family in the ancient world.

And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. - Luke 15:13-19

It is interesting to note that upon his return, the prodigal was received with love but was not to receive any more in the way of family assets. He had squandered his inheritance and would live out the rest of his life at the sufferance of his brother.

But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found. - Luke 15:30-32

Life in the natural world could be brutal. Family life in dealing with the natural world focused everyone's attention on each other such that there were no secrets. Family life exposed everything about a person for the scrutiny of others. There is a sort of brutal honesty in such an environment.

In contrast, modern life has so many distractions that a child can grow to adulthood without anyone knowing him well at all. In the natural world character is demonstrated in adversity. In the modern world character is often less important than achievement, appearance, and acquisition all of which can be presented on a Facebook page for the admiration and envy of others.

Relationships today are often based on fragmentary, superficial, or even false information about another person. As a result, there is no depth. The desire one might have for a deeper relationship is often frustrated by the inability of people to even understand what that would entail.

The deeper relationships more common when we lived in the natural world are usually not sought and even avoided now because to do so would expose us to the discomfort, awkwardness, and brutal honesty of seeing each other as we truly are.

The modern world is differentiated from the natural world in several ways. Most notable are the material and technical devices that provide comfort, entertainment, and ease of living. However, also associated with these changes is a social world in which most can maneuver without having to reveal much of who they really are. There are even strong social customs that discourage attempts at such sharing.

Since God constituted the world and families to offer difficulty as a means to motivate us to both seek him as well as abandon that with which we destroy ourselves, Satan has worked to offer an alternative to the natural world and familial relationships such that an alternative to difficulty seems achievable.

Chapter 3 - Diabolical Plans

To better understand how family relationships came to be so different from how they were in times past, we need to understand how Satan has maneuvered humans over time to achieve his objectives.

We do not have much information about Satan. We do know that he tricked Adam and Eve. We have to surmise that his motive was to gain some advantage. We do know that man was given dominion over the earth and that now Satan sets the course for the world. These two pieces of information may point to Satan's ambitions.

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. - Genesis 1:26

Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: - Ephesians 2:2

We also have a picture into some of Satan's ambitions;

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. - Isaiah 14:12-14

We do know that God is in opposition to collectivism;

And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. Genesis 11:6-7

We know that one of the ways Satan is more limited than God is that he cannot be everywhere at once;

And the LORD said unto Satan, Whence comest thou? Then Satan answered the LORD, and said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it. - Job 1:7

Given our understanding of Satan's ambitions, his limitations, his previous actions, and his authority over the world, we may not be too far afield in constructing the following scenario.

Satan has an idea that he is able to build an empire for himself. This requires humans to be collectivized such that he will be able to leverage his influence over each person (even to the extent of determining if a person is allowed to buy or sell anything).

Satan has introduced technology such that the difficulties of the natural world could be reduced. At the same time mankind could be guided into the cultivation of a social world. This process was already well underway 400 years ago as observed by Shakespeare.

All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players: they have their exits and their

entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages. - William Shakespeare

Chapter 4 - The Family in Transition to the Social World

There was little reason for people to forsake the traditional family living arrangement as long as long as life was bucolic or pastoral. However, the agricultural and industrial revolutions so changed the economic landscape that relatively sovereign family life was to be forever changed. Even those resisting these changes were pressured with changes in land laws and restrictions on hunting designed to drive people out of their homes and into factories.

It is difficult to understand the enormous changes this transition wrought. Money now became the measure of most things. A father, mother, or even child became measured in the salary they could bring in. Serfs were thrown off the land as it was much cheaper to pay wages and let them fend for their own survival regarding food, clothing, and shelter.

One measure of the impact this change had on families was the change in birth rate which has been continually declining since 1800. Throughout the nineteenth century a view gained traction that the difficulties people had as a result of the escalating rate of change could be solved through social action. This could be seen with various utopian community attempts, religious cults, abolition and temperance movements, and fraternal organizations. By the end of the century the “progressive” mind-set was entrenched and in control of public policy. In a way, business had become a universal father and government a universal mother. People were beginning to see themselves not so much in relation to God (or even nature), but more in relation to human organizations (sadly, even some Christians came to see their primary relationship to be with the church organization over God, Jesus, or other Christians).

The twentieth century saw the completion of urbanization and the emergence of suburbanization. As people migrated from rural areas, they lost a significant connection with the natural world. At the beginning of the twentieth century public education became mandatory. The removal of children from homes was very detrimental to the institution of the family. Children were age segregated and forced to spend 12 years being made increasingly compliant to the parental replacement authority figures of teachers and then employers.

Women were also targeted, as they might object to the implication that they were too stupid to raise the children God gave them. They were diverted from the outrage they might rightly feel as their role as honored wives and mothers was being destroyed. The indoctrination of feminism told them that they were not losing something but gaining “freedom” as they had been exploited slaves in their families and they had nothing to lose but their chains (to quote Marxism). Strangely this “freedom” was to be achieved by becoming slaves in factories and offices.

The use of media such as magazines and newspapers increased in pervasiveness with radio, movies, and then television so that a growing tidal flood of social opinion surrounded each person as a current that was hard to swim against. By the time the twentieth century was ending, divorce rates had skyrocketed, single mothers were the normative, marriage was delayed or even ignored, and even homosexual encounters were considered “family” relationships.

Chapter 5 - The Modern Family

Today It is unusual to have more than one sibling, to have even one grandparent in residence, to know or even have met a cousin, aunt or uncle. Many homes are like boarding houses where four people, each with their own work (or school), friends, activities, and interests, share an occasional meal.

Most relationships with friends are with those we know as a result of proximity at work or school, those with whom we share an interest or activity, or those who are simply interested in our Facebook page. In a society defined by consumption and entertainment, relationships are not only superficial, but tend towards only that which sustains pleasurable feelings.

One way humans were enticed into the social world from the natural world was through the comforts and prosperity incrementally offered as inducements to accept an increasingly collectivized life. This process has so changed us that we have come to consider our comfort so important that even the prospect of a brief encounter with someone less than pleasant can be a horrifying possibility. College students today are increasingly called "snowflakes" because they seem to be emotionally fragile and "triggered" by anything they consider unpleasant to such an extent they need to recover in a "safe space".

One might contrast the natural world (based on truth) with the social world (based on feelings). The natural world has room for God and others. The feeling world only has room for self. Like for the drug addict or the alcoholic, life becomes more and more focused on the next source of stimulation. Relationships become more and more superficial and sought in terms of their ability to supply pleasurable feelings.

To get some insight as to how relationships came to be viewed in terms of the feelings they could provide, we can take a look at what happened in the US in the 1950s. Suburbia was the successful marketing of an idea to WWII veterans who had become nostalgic for a romanticized ideal of country life. Knowing the frustrations of concentrated urban apartment life, they were attracted to the assumed freedom and idyllic life they imagined for their families. As if to underscore this hopeful pursuit of what they imagined to be a better life, one can observe the brief reversal in the declining birth rate during the 1950s and early 1960s.

Fueled by the prosperity and consumptive consumerism incumbent to the last one standing after WWII, the children born into suburbia in the US had significantly less paternal influence (as fathers were commuting to work away from home) while maternal influence had been subverted by "experts" such as Dr. Spock who told mothers that discipline was harmful to children and that their native maternal affection was sufficient to raise healthy happy children. As a result, a generation was raised who came to value less the idea of truth, moral or any other absolutes, or any other restrictions on what pleasures they might seek. Having been bred to be ultimate consumers, they valued that which made them feel good. The idea of "sex, drugs, and rock and roll" became a permanent fixture in society.

The adoption of feeling good as the highest human aspiration was a significant change, however, many today do not fully appreciate what a difference it makes. Feeling good puts self at the center of all things. What is best for the family puts others at the center. When we seek what is right, true, and good, we begin to put God at the center.

A dilemma (from the Greek meaning a "double proposition" such as a problem offering two possibilities, neither of which is unambiguously acceptable or preferable) is a good way to describe relationships. On the one hand most of us have a desire to have a close relationship with another person. On the other hand the quote by Sartre that "Hell is other people" reflects the difficulty of such closeness.

Elizabeth Elliot had a radio program called Gateway to Joy. This was a ministry to women. She once said that half the letters she received were from women who desperately wanted to be married and the other half were from women who desperately wished they were no longer married. This also captures a little of the problem of relationships.

Relationships can have various depths and some (like marriage) can be difficult to end. Because relationships expose our deeper real selves, a certain degree of trust is required to open up and there is the potential for being hurt. The phrase "once burned, twice shy" captures some of the reluctance to open up to a relationship if one has had a previously painful experience.

If we knew ourselves and others accurately, relationships would be less of a problem. Often it is our assumptions, expectations, and desires that lead us to make poor relationship decisions. Contributing to this lack of clarity is a world where truth is held in less regard than feeling good. People who deceive themselves and others by projecting a persona or play a role that they wished were true can cause much relationship confusion.

Many of the problems that plague relationships should, theoretically, be less for Christians. Christians are supposed to be able to receive wisdom directly from God. They should have access to discernment. Christians should be led by the Holy Spirit and have reduced influence from our basic selfish nature. The reason this is so often not true for Christians is that few even know about, much less seek, Christian maturity.

Chapter 7 - The Foundation of Relationship

The bible describes the heart as a sort of repository where our desires and values reside. It contains that which motivates us and influences our decisions. In a way, we fill it with that which we see and hear. However, the content of the heart is often measured by what we say.

A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh. - Luke 6:45

Even in superficial relationships or business relationships our character (the configuration of our heart) is an important component. If we are reliable, trustworthy, honest, and have integrity, we are more likely to be seen as someone with whom deeper relationships can be built. If we consider the natural state of fallen man, we can see how unlikely it is that we would have admirable character qualities without the intervention of God.

To understand what we have within us naturally to bring to the table (as a basis for relationship) we can consider the first temptation. We can observe three stages. The first is to disconnect us from God by means of doubt.

Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? - Genesis 3:1

The result of this was to get Eve to answer for God in her own strength as evidenced by her not being accurate.

And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. - Genesis 3:2-3

Our doubts make us vulnerable to being deceived. Once we have been lured away from God, our own desires can be appealed to so that we accept almost any deception.

And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: - Genesis 3:4

The clincher becomes that which appeals to us without God. We may see God as powerful, and having everything. Because we would like to have things as well, we are particularly vulnerable to promises of godhood. (This is perhaps what drives Satan himself).

For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. - Genesis 3:5

Apart from God our focus becomes self. This limited vision sees only what it can gain. If we consider God through the lens of truth rather than envy, God is not best seen by what he has, but by what he gives.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. - John 3:16

It is Satan who takes and God who gives. Satan lures us with what we can gain and in so doing uses us for his own purposes. God shows us that in giving, love becomes a lasting foundation, the basis for building something permanent

This illustrates two very different ways to approach life. Consumption sees self at the center and draws in all to feed it. Provision sees the needs of others as a priority and giving draws away from self. The hunger of consumption is never satisfied and grows in isolation. Seeking to provide for and build up others is the expression of love which overflows the heart abundantly.

Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. - 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

The natural world limits the degree to which we wish to pursue selfishness. For example, those who wish larger harvests have to work harder to plant, cultivate, and harvest more. Human endurance can only accommodate so much of a desire for more. In the artificial world of society, relationships can be exploited for selfish ambition such as with slavery, fraud, and deception.

The path of the alcoholic perhaps best illustrates where selfishness takes us. At first, many tolerate the foolishness associated with drunkenness. However, as friends and family are neglected and then exploited, tolerance turns into avoidance. The person whose selfish pursuits has alienated everyone, may find himself face down in the gutter and still see no reason for change.

If the focus of our life is what we want and what we can get, we will see people in terms of their usefulness to us. If we see ourselves as complete with few needs, we are free to consider how we might help or be of service to others. It is this selflessness (love) that is the solid foundation upon which real, deep, and lasting relationships can be built.

The opportunity God offers to all for a new and eternal life in Christ is the basis from which we can grow in love. It becomes the foundation of our ability to build solid, lasting, and deep relationships.

Jesus answered and said unto him, If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him. - John 14:23

And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you: - 1 Thessalonians 3:12

Chapter 8 - The most important relationship

If we consider what is most important in life, we might think of wealth, health, family, social position, or our accomplishments. However, we know we came into the world with nothing and we will leave it the same way. We can try to make our life enjoyable and satisfying, but it will finally end. The one possibility we have to secure a life beyond this one is to be born again into the life of Jesus.

Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. - John 5:24

Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning. If that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also shall continue in the Son, and in the Father. And this is the promise that he hath promised us, even eternal life. 1 John 2:24-25

However, a relationship has to be built on the interest of two parties. If only one person has an interest, then there can be no relationship. God has a desire to have a relationship with every person.

Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. - 1 Timothy 2:4

God has taken the first step in a relationship with each one of us. It is a step based on love.

But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. - Romans 5:8

The objective of this invitation to relationship is reconciliation. God has the desire to have a relationship with us that is similar to the relationship he had with Adam and Even before they sinned.

To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. 2 Corinthians 5:19

However, most people (particularly in the modern age of comforts and advantages) have no belief or interest in God.

Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. - Matthew 7:13-14

Even some of those who do show an interest in God accept a presentation of him as a distant or remote character whose anger is only appeased by sacraments or other acts to be willing to accept a person as a Christian. Such people often are crippled in their desire to have a relationship with God because they do not understand God's desire for them or his love.

Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. 1 John 3:1

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. - Romans 8:39-39

Chapter 9 - A Father's love

If one were to visit earth and learn about fathers from watching TV (or earlier from listening to radio) one would get a consistent picture of fathers as being a sub-species of human that is clownish, bumbling, and inept. The father it would appear is in need of constant correction, supervision, and management because of the damage he causes.

The reason for this is that Satan infuses this image into society to accomplish several objectives. He needs to weaken families so that people will see themselves more in relation to society. If fathers can be pictured as a joke, their words, advice, and counsel, will be given little regard.

In contrast to the contemporary image of fathers as a joke in society, we get a different picture for most of history. A father's work enabled a family to survive. His protection kept them safe, and wisdom helped them learn and grow. A father's sons worked with him as more than apprentices who would learn how to work and how to live from the example and instruction of their father.

There was a closeness of family life of which we only get fragments of today as it was almost universal in days gone by.

And he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee. - Luke 11:7

In addition to physical closeness and time spent with his children, the father of days gone by would see his every act as an investment in the future of his family. Children were not an intrusion into his private life. Children were his life.

Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish,

will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him? - Matthew 7:9-11

Jesus gives an illustration of our relationship with God using a father as an example. He describes the earthly father as having natural affection, care, and love for his children. This then is used to expand into consideration of how much greater affection, care, and love God has for his children.

A man once described the joy he felt when his five year old would hear his car pull up at home after work and run out to welcome him home with a hug and a kiss and a declaration of, "I love you Daddy". He then thought about the times when she didn't because of her preoccupation with someone else or some activity and thought of how it reflected on his own neglect of God.

The expression, "Get married and settle down" is often used to describe the transition of a man's life from the selfishness of youth to the responsibilities of adulthood. Sometimes a man might have regrets for the lost pleasures of youth or chafe at the obligations of responsibility. However, when children are born so helpless and dependant, it is not unusual for even the most reluctant father to see the rest of his life as a pouring out into the lives of his children.

The ability to understand a father's love is limited today by fatherhood so often being an accidental by-product of recreational fornication. There is also a disconnect between fathers and their children through school and the father's absence from the home for his employment. Sadly, the relationship between a father and child is often reduced to an occasional financial transaction.

A father may have a desire to provide his children with instruction, guidance, character development, and self-discipline, but have no idea himself what to say or do. That so many fathers have come to such a state of deficiency is a testimony to the effectiveness of Satan's plans. However, it makes understanding a relationship with God even more difficult as the example of our earthly fathers is so often crippled.

Chapter 10 - Our Heavenly Father.

Jesus instructs his disciples to pray by beginning "Our father who art in heaven...". This is a declaration of relationship. There is a general sense of God as our father in that it is he who gives us life, sustains it, and concludes it.

Who knoweth not in all these that the hand of the LORD hath wrought this? In whose hand is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind. - Job 12:9-10

Seeing his days are determined, the number of his months are with thee, thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass; - Job 14:5

For Christians, there is a deeper relationship with God as our father. This is because we are "born again", our spiritual nature, (that Adam and Eve had before the fall) has been regenerated and through this we obtain eternal life in Christ.

Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him. - 1 John 5:1

And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father. - Galatians 4:6

It is love that defines our relationship with God as our father. His love, mercy, and patience towards us is difficult to fully comprehend.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. - John 3:16

But thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth. - Psalm 86:15

But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. - Romans 5:8

No matter how much love God our father extends to us, no relationship can be only one-sided. We have an obligation to draw nearer of heavenly father.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not! - Luke 13:34

God requires of us that we reciprocate his love.

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. - Mark 12:30

Love is essentially that which abandons selfishness and embraces selflessness.

Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. - 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Since when we become Christian we still carry with us the influence of the flesh (selfishness), the love of God may work to bring encounters across our path to help us be conformed to the image of Christ.

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. - Romans 8:28-29

Sometimes the encounters we have are not comfortable.

And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? - Hebrews 12:5

As we consider how much God the Father desires a relationship with us as his sons, we can begin to learn about relationships in general. Since we live in a time when families have been crippled and relationships in general made superficial, it can be helpful to reflect on what God desires in his relationship with us.

Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen. - Matthew 28:20

Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. - Hebrews 13:5

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. - John 10:27-28

Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them. - Hebrews 7:25

Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you. - 1 Peter 5:7

Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. - Matthew 10:29-30

Jesus answered and said unto him, If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him. - John 14:23

Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. - 2 Corinthians 6:17-18

For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. - Romans 8:15

Chapter 11 - Degrees of Relationship

While the family represents the potential for the deepest of human relationships, there are many relationship levels reflecting differing degrees of investment.

The comedian Jerry Seinfeld once joked about having such limited time that to add a new friend would require one of his present friends to pass on. This observation reflects a condition of relationship which is the spending or investing of resources such as time, personal information, interest, a willingness to be called upon, and the extension of trust that one's investment won't be wasted.

There is a degree of familiarity resulting from proximity such as with classmates, neighbors, or coworkers. While proximity may establish acquaintanceship, deeper relationship has to proceed from a desire for it on the part of both parties.

For the Christian, our foremost relationship is with God. The ultimate goal of our relationship with God

is for us to become so much like Jesus, that we could be called “one”. In this we have the example of Jesus and the Father.

And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are. - John 17:11

Our relationship with God starts when we believe in the gospel and trust in Jesus. It is at this point we become “born again”, the Holy Spirit, Jesus, and the Father all reside in us, and we have extended to us everything we need to become like Jesus. The problem with our relationship with God is on our side. Too often we are negligent, distracted, and half-hearted.

It is common for a young man or woman to spend a lot of time with their friends. However, after they marry, their friends discover that the relationship they had lessens because they have a new priority in their life. The depth of relationship can change (usually decrease) as a result of moving, changing jobs, or even just having new interests.

It is relatively easy to form friendships in ones youth as there frequently is the time available for shared interests, activities, and even adventures. As one grows and takes on responsibilities ones values change and what one sees as important can result in a neglect and even forsaking of old friends. Sometimes this can be beneficial, especially if ones friends were a harmful influence. However, it is also possible to neglect those whose friendship was beneficial. For example, it is not uncommon over time for one to lose ones enthusiasm for God.

Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent. - Revelation 2:4-5

Often a relationship between two coworkers will fade if one of them takes a different job. It may have been two women who frequently went shopping together or two men who went fishing, but if the element of proximity changes, the basis for the relationship is removed and slowly joint activity diminishes until it fades completely. Parents of an “empty nest” also understand how even familial relationships change.

In the TV mini-series Band of Brothers the relationship between men who had come to depend on each other for their very survival is portrayed as deeper than the relationship one would have with a brother. However, at the end of the war, they already are beginning to go their separate ways. Even as intense and close as it can be, a relationship based on circumstance will fade when the circumstances change.

The bible uses the illustration of marriage to describe our relationship with God. In the Old Testament Israel was frequently called an adulterous wife (for her abandonment of God and practice of idolatry) and in the New Testament Christians are called the bride of Christ. The reason for this is that our relationship with God (unlike a transient relationship with a coworker) is one that once entered into is supposed to last forever.

In a marriage, one anticipates an ever deepening relationship as love grows and two people draw increasingly closer to each other. However, many do not experience this deepening relationship. Often it is because of divided interests. This also frequently limits our relationship with God.

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold

to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon. - Matthew 6:24

Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God. - James 4:4

It is understood that we will have multiple relationships. However, it is expected that we will not have poisonous relationships (such as friendship with the world). Within those relationships we have that are healthy, we need to consider which has priority. The phrase “God, family, work” has been used to show a relationship priority in life.

If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. - Luke 14:26

The Greek word hate (miseō) is used here to clearly differentiate the priority we are to give to our relationship with God. An often overlooked perspective here is that we are unable to have a deeper relationship with our family without a deeper relationship with God. It is only through our relationship with God that we can grow in selfless love that becomes the means of deeper relationship of any kind.

Chapter 12 - Self - The Relationship Killer

There are some exploitive relationships where one person constructs a relationship building on the trust of another to gain some advantage and then move on. Con-men, manipulators, even sociopaths can all lie in order to use others for their own benefit. This sort of intentional use of people for selfish gain is contemptible. However, these sort of people more clearly show the damage caused by selfishness.

What is more common but less clear is the life lived less intentionally but just as effectively for self also has a limited ability to achieve any depth in a relationship. For example, a college upper class-man might target a freshman girl for seduction only to discard her when he was through. In contrast a freshman boy might start dating a freshman girl and after they take their relationship to the level of fornication, decide that he needs to move on. Both leave a girl exploited. However, the damage caused by the second boy seems less egregious because it was less well thought out (intentional).

Even in something as mundane as a business relationship, the person who seeks at every turn his own advantage may find that others are less comfortable doing business with him.

It is naught, it is naught, saith the buyer: but when he is gone his way, then he boasteth. - Proverbs 20:14

Even when people can moderate their selfishness and achieve working business, romantic, and even familial relationships, there is a limit as to the depth of relationship. This is because deeper relationship is only possible with love. Here we need to clarify that biblical love is not the same thing as the emotional sensations associated with sentiment, romance, or affection. These sensations, if pursued directly, often cause greater selfishness.

Biblical love is essentially selflessness. Love is basically giving of oneself. The less love we have, the more taking we do. In a relationship if both people are takers, things will not last. If only one person is a giver, resentment may build.

Those who follow Christ are supposed to be growing in Christ-likeness which includes love. This should result in deeper closer relationships because each person should be seeking to give more than take and thus seek the good of others.

As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith. - Galatians 6:10

Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. - Philippians 2:3

Chapter 13 - Social relationships

In modern society, many relationships are pursued for advantage. One might have some commodity such as fame, money, prominence, the ability to be entertaining, social grace, power, influence, or physical attractiveness that creates in others a desire to have or deepen a relationship with you. Others might have a deficit such as physical unattractiveness, social awkwardness, poverty, unsettling mannerisms, or obtuseness that are barriers to relationship.

Our initial relationships are in our family with parents and siblings. This developmental experience shapes our perceptions of relationships for later in life. For example, the person who has unpleasant early family relationships may leave one wounded with a desire to avoid relationships when he is older. Even when early relationships go well, one can find difficulty if he tries to extract from friendships the relational connection which can only be fulfilled from marriage and parenthood.

The artificial environment of society also shapes one's view of relationships. Public education leaves an institutional imprint on children not too dissimilar to the effect of prison. Navigating institutional requirements can be easier through relationship with a fellow inmate. Such relationships can be helpful to endure institutional processing and essential to survive the attention of a bully or gang. Some see in this institutional imprint something positive they call socialization. By this what is usually meant is the social dependency that arises among age segregated children such that they are impaired from developing social skills outside of their age group. One manifestation of this imprint can be seen on a Saturday afternoon at a shopping mall as a gaggle of teenage girls congregate as if they were a single multi-legged creature.

The expression "go with the flow" describes how most people live life. Relationships are formed frequently out of convenience such as within one's neighborhood, social class, or work group. For this reason, Satan finds people easy to guide in the direction he would have them go. For his part, all he has to do, once he has people conforming themselves to those around them, is to use the media present a picture of the world that most will then adapt themselves to.

Within the human heart is a natural desire for relationship with other humans that was designed by God to be fulfilled in a family. Satan found it necessary to weaken and even destroy families so he has supplied substitutes to distract us from seeking that which God intended.

The proliferation of what is called "social media" is an interesting phenomena. One can picture the natural desire for relationship spread so wide and thin that one thinks he has many friends when he is really only chasing illusions and shadows of people while also presenting himself as a caricature. So

much time is spent reading factoids about people and posting banal and superficial comments that little meaningful in a relationship is accomplished. Any attempt at relationship depth using these tools is often seen as creepy.

The presentation of oneself to the world through a construct is an interesting extension of what Satan has already accomplished. For example, many women have come to believe that they cannot appear in front of other people without wearing their makeup. They have come to believe that a mask is necessary for them to be accepted by others.

Rod Serling would sometimes introduce a Twilight Zone show he had produced using the phrase "Submitted for your approval". This captures a little of how we often see ourselves in the social marketplace. We can package and present ourselves to others hoping, if not securing the admiration or envy of others, we at least could achieve acceptance or tolerance.

We get an impression that during the time of Jesus that this marketing of oneself was less widespread than it is today.

For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise. - 2 Corinthians 10:12

While there were those "packaging" themselves, most were engaged in the brutal honesty found in daily work and family life of the times.

Chapter 14 - Christian social relationships.

Most Christians inherit a Christian denomination or select one. As a result, just as with a school classroom, one finds a group of people (who attend the church) who are potentially available for relationship. Sadly, one usually finds, like the new kid in a classroom, that "relationship" is available if one is entertaining, wealthy, or has other value. If one is odd, poor, or otherwise repulsive, one can expect only cursory contact with others. This is not a new phenomena.

For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: - James 2:2-3

Christ would have us to love one another. This is greatly hindered by a lack of love (as a result of an excessive consideration of self). This also hinders our ability to clearly see truth. For example, we can completely miss the needs of a poor person.

If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? - James 2:15-16

It is also easy to fail to discern that the rich person may also have spiritual needs. For example, we are told that riches are deceitful. It may be likely that a rich person has come to think more highly of

himself than he ought or that he has difficulty in fully trusting in God.

There was an elderly lady at a church who when a visiting stranger asked how she was doing financially admitted that she was having some difficulty. She had attended the same church for 30 years. Her best friend at the church was not aware she was having difficulty. The church leaders would probably have been angry with her for not letting them know she was in need.

This church situation is not unusual. Relationships (like those in the world) tend to be superficial. The organizational nature of most church administration often requires a member to take aggressive action to initiate a system response (like a machine that requires a lever to be pulled to start its operation).

The problem with regular Christian social relationships is that they are little different from those of the world. Few Christians know of, much less seek, a deeper relationship with Jesus and are at a loss to understand why their Christian relationships seem so unsatisfying. What is often called “fellowship” seems little different than one would expect at a picnic or even a cocktail party.

Chapter 15 - The Preferability of Superficial Relationships

The movie *Fitzwilly* had a character of a wealthy upper class elderly woman define a psychiatrist as someone to whom you told things that you would never tell your mother and if you did, she would have the common decency not to believe you. This captures a little of why we prefer to avoid getting to know people on a deeper level. There is that in all of us that is unattractive.

The phrase “fair weather friend” carries with it an understanding that a relationship is superficial and will evaporate if circumstances (such as the weather) become difficult. In times of prosperity, our comforts and preferences draw us into social relationships that are pleasurable and do not expose us to that which might be too demanding.

This is why churches that operate in a mechanical way are more appealing than churches that have a focus on relationships (like house churches). In a situation where there is no mask to wear, part to play, or diversionary activity, we are exposed to each other and have to face the truth that there is nothing in us that is commendable. Christians are admonished to love each other several times in the bible. This may be because we are so un-lovable.

Even modern family life can allow us to hide our own real flawed character as well as insulate us from the flawed qualities others have. With superficiality, while we lose relationship depth, we gain the opportunity not to be burdened with the truth of the shortcomings of others as well as hiding our own.

Many house churches fail to thrive simply because seeing each other in unavoidable truth can be too unsettling. It can be sad to see Christians flee from truth because it makes them uncomfortable. Seeing ourselves in truth can only be accomplished through humility. Seeing others in truth can only be accomplished in love. Often what is called Christian fellowship is just superficial worldly social interaction that hides us and protects us from truth. Real Christian fellowship exposes us and others to such scrutiny that only love can accomplish it.

If we consider the courage it would require, the discomfort we would have to endure, and the assurance we would lose if we were to embrace brutal honesty, we can understand why people hide from real or

deep relationships. Like an addict that knows the heroin he injects in his arm is destroying him, we may even come to see our lives as similarly unhealthy.

For the Christian raised in the world and immersed in the culture of the world, the idea of relationship depth (either with God or others) can seem so alien as to be unsettling. It may be that only as the word of God works in one's heart and mind over time that truth can be recognized and then tolerated and finally sought.

Chapter 16 - Christian Relationship

An example of Christian fellowship can be seen in the encounter between John the Baptist and Jesus before either was born.

And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. - Luke 1:43-44

There is a connection between Christians in the Holy Spirit. The more mature the Christian and the deeper his faith, the greater the response to others who are also led by the Holy Spirit. A man once traveling in Eastern Europe encountered at a railway station a small band playing a Christian hymn and a woman passing out tracts to the collected group listening to the band. When the woman came to the man to offer him a slip of paper with information about a Christian meeting, the man responded by showing her a New Testament he had in his pocket. The woman became enthusiastic in pointing to the information about the meeting. Neither person could speak a word of each others language, but both knew that they were brother and sister in Christ.

There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. - Ephesians 4:4-6

Worldly relationships are based on consumerism (seeking that which makes us feel good). By definition they are superficial and false. Christian relationships should be based on truth. This is usually unattractive and uncomfortable. The reason that Christians can have real and deep relationship is because that the love of Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the growing desire to serve others creates a resonance with other Christians that supercedes discomfort.

Too often Christianity is known for its divisions, disputes, smugness, rules, and contempt for others. This is because so many that claim Christ resist growing in truth and love. This is made worse in the modern age because our prosperity disinclines us to trust in God and rather see in our own strength a more certain future.

Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me. But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions. - Matthew 19:21-22

It is in the surrender of self (growth in love) that the path to deeper Christian relationship can be found. Like all relationships, it needs to be two sided. However, it begins with a decrease of self so that we can be more filled with the Holy Spirit and show the life of Christ in us.

And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. - Luke 9:23

And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again. - 2 Corinthians 5:15

He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. - 1 John 2:10

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. - 1 John 1:7

Many of the bible verses that describe Christian fellowship sound like empty platitudes and foreign to our ears because we have not grown in faith sufficiently to have experienced their truth. This is often because we have come to see the Christian life as binary (we are either a Christian or not). Our churches often perpetuate this view as if once a person has completed the requirements (baptism, special prayer, sacraments, confession, etc) he has achieved the status of Christian, and that there is nothing left to do. Sometimes a presentation of “extra credit” Christianity is given that is attributed to special “saints”.

In reality, there is so much more to the Christian life that involves growing in truth and love such that the biblical description of fellowship is not some distant ideal, but an everyday reality. Organizational church systems are not able to foster relational growth as even well intentioned classroom instruction falls short. Frequently the scripted events, programs, and activities of organizational church systems actually hinder the individual relationships of which Christian fellowship is to be built.

It falls to each Christian to take responsibility to seek out instruction from those older and wiser Christians who have these deeper relationships and learn from them how to live the deeper Christian life that is the basis for real and deep Christian fellowship. It also falls the the Christian to seek out those other Christians to whom he can minister and serve.

Chapter 17 - Identifying Unhealthy Relationships

Even as children we can have what is called a “dysfunctional home”. If we are Christian as a child or become Christian later in life, it can be difficult to reconcile a painful childhood with the love of God. However, that no matter the circumstances, God is faithful and his purposes are for the best. Joseph who was sold into slavery by his brothers testifies to this.

But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive. - Genesis 50:20

When my father and my mother forsake me, then the LORD will take me up. - Psalm 27:10

If we can hold to a solid perception of truth, we can see those things that are unhealthy for what they really are and are better able to avoid their damaging effects. For example, the Christian who grows in the discernment of truth may come to see abusive parents not so much as evil monsters who made him

feel bad, but as sad people whose lives were out of control at the inflammation of their passions.

It is best to recognize those with whom relationship would be unhealthy or even hazardous and avoid them.

Do not deceive yourselves: "Evil companionships corrupt good morals." - 1 Corinthians 15:33

If one has not the discernment to avoid what politically has been called "entangling alliances", one may discover that one is already in a relationship that is toxic. While friendships and acquaintanceships can exert a corrupting influence, they can also be reduced and ended. Marriage can be a different matter. God hates divorce. Therefore the greatest care should be taken to discern the character of the person you wed.

Chapter 18 - Forgiveness

A relationship between two people (especially one that has grown deeper) can be broken when trust is betrayed. Since God does nothing that requires forgiveness and we always do, our relationship with God is a good place to start to examine the process of forgiveness. There is a two step relationship with God. The first step is for us to become a Christian when we trust in Jesus and receive the judicial forgiveness of all of our sins (past, current, and even future). This establishes a relationship between us and God. The second step is our walk with God. It is in this walk that we can draw nearer (and make our relationship deeper) or drift further (and make our relationship more distant). When we grow in distance from God, we follow the flesh, are drawn to the world, and grow in our sin.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. - 1 John 1:9

While all of our past, current, and future sins have been judicially forgiven, they still keep us from drawing closer to God in our relationship with him. For example, a person might steal \$1,000 from a neighbor and be sentenced to 30 days in jail. When he gets out and goes home, he has paid the penalty for his crime, but his relationship with his neighbor is still broken. In a similar way, all our sins have been forgiven, but our relationship remains broken.

God offers a restored relationship after we sin based on our "confession". The word confess is made up of two Greek words "homo" and "logos" conveying the idea that when we can say the "same words" that God would about our sins, we bring ourselves into alignment with truth and can receive a restored relationship. God is perpetually ready to forgive the daily sins of ours that build a barrier between him and us.

The idea of human relationship forgiveness was inquired of by Peter in an attempt to show his readiness to extend mercy.

Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven. - Matthew 18:21-22

Two important words in this exchange are "forgive" (not simply overlook or dismiss) and "brother"

(indicating the degree of relationship). What is often not appreciated is that forgiveness cannot be extended unilaterally. It has to be requested. This requires the person guilty of betrayal to admit it and express regret and a desire to restore the relationship. Given human nature, this is unlikely to happen seven times much less seventy times seven.

Forgiveness between humans can be tricky. The reaction to the hurt of betrayal is often to want to hurt the other person. This creates a sense of betrayal in the mind of the betrayer and so both parties may be waiting for the other to ask for forgiveness.

We can see some of the obtuseness to truth that can occur with a walk distant from God using David as an example. When David was young (David 1.0) he was fleeing for his life from King Saul. He wrote some beautiful Psalms that clearly showed a heart totally devoted to God. When David was older (David 2.0), he had grown so distant from God that he had a man killed so he could take the man's wife for himself. He did not even think he had done anything wrong until God sent Nathan to tell him. David was overcome with sorrow and regret and Psalm 51 was written by him to express that sorrow.

To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba. Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest. Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me. Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. - Psalm 51:1-7

When David declares that he has only sinned against God, he may still show an ignorance of the broader effect of his actions. We get a picture of someone being a little more aware of the effect of his sin on others with the Prodigal Son.

I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. - Luke 15:18-19

An alcoholic attending AA meetings may only slowly begin to consider the breadth of his actions on others as he goes through the "steps" to make amends. This is representative of our general lack of awareness or preoccupation with the error of others that can cause us to fail to seek forgiveness. In a situation where two people have hurt each other, seeking forgiveness when the other person only sees your fault and not his own can be difficult. In this situation, if a person can overlook the failure of another to recognize his error, a relationship may not be restored, but repaired enough to function.

The discretion of a man deferreth his anger; and it is his glory to pass over a transgression. - Proverbs 19:11

If we consider the deepest human relationship (marriage) and its most common and deepest injury (adultery), we begin to see the depth of pain the betrayal of trust can inflict. There are people for whom such actions are considered recreational who honestly cannot understand why anyone would be upset. This begins to show the monumental difference in perspective that people can have. This also shows how important it is for a Christian to marry someone who has the same ability to perceive, honor,

respect, and value a marital relationship.

Relationship with God is difficult because of our constant failures. Relationship with other Christians is even more difficult because we focus on the flaws of others more than our own. When we apply the cold light of truth to ourselves, we begin to grow in humility. This allows us to begin to tolerate others who, like us, are deeply flawed. It is only as we grow in selfless love that we are even able to tolerate each other and show to the world that of God which can so transform the human heart as to make loving Christian fellowship achievable.

That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. - John 17:21

Forgiveness is needed to repair relationships but tolerance and forbearance are needed to sustain relationships and deepen them. The consumer mind-set so common in today's society inclines us to be discontent with whatever we are presented with that does not appeal to us. This is destructive to relationships of any kind and so much more so to deeper relationships.

Chapter 19 - The Purpose of Relationships

Existence itself establishes a basis for relationship that is defined by birth, marriage and death. In a prosperous consumer society many only tolerate the circumstances created by their birth (family) and as soon as possible and seek to escape restrictive relationships. For these, starting a life for themselves opens the possibility of having only pleasurable and enjoyable relationships..

If one considers a "purpose" to life, there are two choices. The first is that our existence is the result of the intention of a creator. The second choice is that our existence is a result of random chance so that, with no other purpose, we are then free to do whatever we feel like because we establish our own purpose. This second choice is attractive and most select it because it justifies whatever one wishes do to.

For Christians the purposes of the creator (God) become integral to our existence. If we consider that we were known and work was planned for us from before the world was created, we can begin to see that our relationships exist to facilitate that which our creator has purposed.

even as, in His love, He chose us as His own in Christ before the creation of the world, that we might be holy and without blemish in His presence. - Ephesians 1:4

For we are God's own handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for good works which He has pre-destined us to practise. - Ephesians 2:10

Out of the self-directed purpose of life comes the consumer perspective which often sees the purpose of relationships with other people as to provide access to resources to be exploited. The Christian perspective sees relationship with others in terms of children to be sought, cherished, nurtured, instructed, and even disciplined, husbands to be respected and obeyed, wives to be loved and cherished, and parents to be honored and obeyed.

Beyond family relationships, the Christian can see others as either fellow Christians with whom

relationships can be formed or as those who are not Christian with whom business can be conducted and civility and courtesy be maintained, but with whom no real relationship can or should be formed.

If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. - Romans 12:18

I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. - 1 Corinthians 5:9-10

Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? - 2 Corinthians 6:14

Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God. - James 4:4

For the Christian, deeper relationships beyond those with God and family should be formed with other Christians. We can have a relationship with an older wiser Christian who can teach us how to grow in our faith. We can have a relationship with a less mature Christian that we might be able to instruct. More common than instructional relationships are those in which we can minister to each other.

The imprint of the modern world often leaves us with a distorted emphasis on the material. If we allow this to influence consideration of our Christian relationships, it can limit how we see the needs of others such as seeing ministry opportunities in solely financial terms.

If we consider some biblical admonitions impacting Christian relationships, we can begin to see that there needs to be a network of relationships such that both material and other needs are known and can be responded to.

Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. - Galatians 6:2

Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; - Romans 12:10

Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way. - Romans 14:13

For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. - Galatians 5:13

With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; - Ephesians 4:2

And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you. - Ephesians 4:32

But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. - 1 Thessalonians 4:9

There are some contemporary denominations like Amish , some Mennonite, and Apostolic Lutheran whose members have the large families such as were common prior to the industrial age. In the

assembly of these Christians, one can observe the network of relationships (both inter and intra familial) through which the biblical admonitions of “one another” can be more easily be followed. This is because broad relational connections have already been established.

Sadly for most modern Christians, even family relationships are so thin as to not be able to support such an investment in each other. We are subsequently not able to extend to our brothers and sisters in Christ the richness and depth of our family relationships because they themselves are so anemic.

Even if our own Christian maturity is sufficient to recognize the value of prayer as a ministry for others, we may not have the depth of relational connection from which to have access to information that could help us know for whom and what to pray. What is even more sad is that we may have grown so accustomed to relational poverty that if something deeper is offered, it can cause us the discomfort of the unfamiliar such that we retreat from those to whom we could minister.

Chapter 20 - Seeking relationship

Unlike our relationship with God which is open and available all the time, or family relationships into which we are born, relationships with other people often begin with a tentative inquiry to see if there might be reciprocal interest.

A fellow once expressed his hesitancy in asking a girl out. He was fearful of rejection. He was told that if he imagined the worst possible reaction to his inquiry (it was suggested that it might be the girl climbing on top of a table, pointing at him, and laughingly ridiculing him in front of others), he might respond with gratitude that she would so soon reveal her character deficiencies before he wasted time and money on her. This helped him to gain some perspective that rejection was not to be feared as much as the thought and could even be beneficial.

Initial dating inquiries are usually made in the most general terms. For example, the suggestion that one might be interested in getting together for coffee at some unspecified point in the future can be floated out and if the response is affirmative, one might move to suggesting something specific. However, if the response is to decline citing schedule difficulties or other obstacles, one can move on without having risked much.

If the Christian desirous of relationships with other Christians reaches out to inquire if anyone is interested in a friendship relationship, he may be disappointed to discover a lack of interest on the part of other Christians. Modern Christian practice often sees “religious” life restricted to church activities, events, and programs. Hearing of Christ or faith outside of these zones can seem “creepy” to many who profess to follow Christ.

The mature Christian may have to face superficial one-sided relationships where he is only tolerated to suggest obliquely some element of Christian life, and then only occasionally. At some point the mature Christian may just withdraw from time spent in just the same way as it would be spent with those who do not believe. The Christian who hungers for the deeper things of the Lord may not be satisfied with a relationship in which he starves.

While the biblical presentation of Christian fellowship is within the context of extended family and

network of believers, today truncated families and superficial relationships tend to focus opportunities for ministry on scripted roles within an organizational system context. Since most Christians see “ministry” in terms of organizational component function, there will often be reluctance to a solicitation of relationship unless it excludes a Christian context. This is because most see such references as only being appropriate in church.

In today’s society many have daily schedules that are completely filled. Even if they had an interest in Christian friendships, they have no time for them. One may find only 2% of Christians open to accepting an inter-personal relationship (friendship) in which Christ, the bible, or faith has any role. Some think such discussion only appropriate in church, others that a person may be trying to manipulate them or make them feel inferior, and some may be fearful that any discussion could foster doubt or error. As a result, one may have to visit many churches to find even one person who would be open to Christian friendship.

The mature Christian may not be seeking a relationship with other Christians so much for himself (like the consumer relationships of the world), but rather a connection through which the leading and working of the Holy Spirit can be observed and appreciated. For example, in a group of Christians one might observe the sullen teenager, isolated elder, or frantic mother to whom an expression of interest might be appreciated.

Chapter 21 - Taking the Initiative

In response to the bible verse “Love one’s neighbor as ones self” Jesus was asked “Who is my neighbor”. To this question Jesus responded with the parable of the good Samaritan.

Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise. - Luke 10:36

While the question was asked to try to trip up Jesus, the answer example is illuminating. Here “neighbor” is not defined by proximity, class, or ethnicity. It is a choice. The recognition of a need, the assessment of the wherewithal to meet the need, and the choice to take action to help another all combine to show mercy and express love.

Reaching out to help someone in need establishes a relationship (however brief it may be). Within the body of Christ the ability to reach out requires a knowledge of the circumstances and needs of others. This can only come from the investment we make of ourselves in the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Some (perhaps most) other Christians would prefer not to be open to such relationships even if they had the time.

Seeking to initiate, form, and maintain relationships with other Christians requires that a Christian take the initiative for how he integrates his faith into his daily life. This can be difficult to consider especially if a person is only familiar with adding church activities to his life as opposed to living for Christ. Frequently with church activity, one follows the direction and requirements of others (sort of like living on automatic pilot). Living for Christ requires operating one’s life more on manual control.

It might feel safe to wrap ourselves up in the assurance our church gives us that we have met all their requirements. However, we will all stand before Jesus to give an account and it will not be for our

faithfulness to our church, but our faithfulness to him.

Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire. - 1 Corinthians 3:13-15

At the end of the tribulation those who are lost will be judged for how they acted individually.

I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. - Matthew 25:43-45

We should consider how much the Christian life depends on what we do as individuals

Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. - Philippians 2:3

Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. - 1 John 4:7

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: - James 1:19

If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work. - 2 Timothy 2:21

For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; - 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4

That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; - Colossians 1:10

Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. - Phillipians 2:4

And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you. - Ephesians 4:32

One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. - Romans 14:5

Churches often mean well, but in reducing Christianity to a system of rules, requirements, and obligations, the fullness, vitality, and power of the life of Christ is restricted in the life of a believer and he is crippled in the life Christ would have him live as well as the relationships through which he could minister to others.

Often it is when a Christian matures that he recognizes he needs to take control of his life and, because he is responsible to Christ for how he lives it, direct his life in the way Christ would have him go.

Chapter 22 - Christian Maturity

The bible describes those who have not grown in their faith and describes them as negligent.

And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? - 1 Corinthians 3:1-3

Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing. For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. - Hebrews 5:11-14

Paul tells the Corinthians that carnality (the influence of the flesh) is an indicator of their lack of maturity. We are supposed to take advantage of the life of Christ in us.

I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me. - Galatians 2:20

Paul was concerned about the Galatians who were being diverted to attempt to follow the law (the flesh) such that he considered the possibility that they had not even achieved Christian infancy.

My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you, - Galatians 4:19

We can see in the contrast between the Spirit and the flesh an indication of levels of Christian maturity.

This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would. - Galatians 5:16-17

One indicator of Christian maturity can be seen in whether a Christian is being fed the word of God through his church or if he is able to feed himself. The purpose of the Church was to prepare a Christian to reach maturity, not keep him in perpetual infancy.

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: - Ephesians 4:11-13

We can be driven to seek Christian relationships to satisfy a longing we have. This is more common among less mature Christians. The more mature Christian seeks relationships through which he can

minister to others. This taking in versus giving out is also reflective of the difference between the flesh and the Spirit.

We can consider Jesus as the example and object of our of maturity. As we become more like Jesus, we mature and seek less and less for ourselves and increasingly more for the good of others.

And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again. - 2 Corinthians 5:15

Chapter 23 - Not Being Offensive

Since relationships are difficult enough (especially in today's society), we need to insure that there is not that within us which causes other people to be offended. This does not mean that we adopt an artificial persona to exude charm. However, we need to recognize those things that we do or say that are needlessly off-putting.

1. Unnecessarily critical. If we are inclined to injudiciously express our observations, others may see us as self-righteous, intemperate, and judgmental. Such observations, if they are accurate and helpful, are best reserved for a time when they might be asked for.

A fool uttereth all his mind: but a wise man keepeth it in till afterwards. - Proverbs 29:11

2. Idiosyncratic. There are habits, manners of speech, or dress that we have that can irritate and annoy others. It is the nature of the unsaved or those less mature in their Christian faith to draw their comfort from their surroundings more than from God. As a result, anyone who is less able to blend in to those surroundings is often given a wary glance and a skeptical look. Care should be taken not to be unnecessarily unsettling.

And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. 1 Corinthians 9:20-22

3. Burdensome. One can be seen as appearing to require too much time or effort to sustain a relationship. This can be difficult to gage as people are not always willing to disclose their discomfort level. We might come across as emotionally needy or clingy and make someone feel that we are demanding too much of their time.

Withdraw thy foot from thy neighbour's house; lest he be weary of thee, and so hate thee. - Proverbs 25:17

4. Abrasive. A habit of telling people they are wrong may not contribute to the depth or length of a relationship. If such observations cannot be contained, they might better be packaged as suggestions or offered for possible consideration.

To speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, shewing all meekness unto all men. - Titus 3:2

Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man. - Colossians 4:6

5. Indulgent. A person may enjoy drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, or gambling. However, he should be aware that not everyone considers such activities as pleasant and may find that some are less inclined to relationship with those who pursue them.

Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. - Philippians 4:5

6. Pushing too hard. Sometimes even good intentions can lead a person to offer unsolicited advice, become pushy, or even allow exhortation to become coercion. If we think another person is in error or has insufficient understanding, we should not allow ourselves to presume to be their teacher. There is danger that smugness can lead to contempt.

And art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness, An instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, which hast the form of knowledge and of the truth in the law. - Romans 2:19-20

And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: - Luke 18:9

7. Negligent. Relationships are dynamic and are either growing or fading. Inattention, either through concern with other relationships and activities or the intentional dialing back to end or diminish a relationship can be welcome or hurtful. We should give consideration to those with whom we have established relationships to make sure that they are not feeling “jerked around”.

Thine own friend, and thy father's friend, forsake not; . - Proverbs 27:10a

By removing or reducing that in us that can offend others we do not want to follow a path that conforms us to the world so that others find us acceptable. Rather we are maturing in Christ such that that of self which poisons relationships begins to diminish as it is replaced by the selflessness of love for others.

Chapter 24 - Not Taking Offense

Because relationships are two sided, we need to consider that in addition to removing that within ourselves that is offensive, we have to be able to tolerate that in others that might offend, annoy, or unsettle us.

One can often observe the joy that grandparents take in small children that is sometimes missing with young parents. This reflects a little of the maturity, selflessness, and perspective that the accumulation of experience over the years can produce. If we focus too much on our tasks, goals, and objectives, we may not be able to “stop and smell the flowers”. In addition to missing joy in life, we may see the world more in terms of annoyances.

We can see from the bible an example of two sisters. One stops what she is doing to listen to Jesus. The

other works to prepare food for the visitors. The second sister did not chose to do her work out of selfless love, but out of obligation and was resentful that her sister was not helping her. The response of Jesus was that the first sister was not negligent but in choosing to postpone the work had prioritized things in order of importance to her.

Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me. And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.
- Luke 10:38-42

There are frequently instances in which we encounter the need to select or prioritize what we are to do. For example, if a man comes across a grass fire, he makes a determination of what direction it is headed, what the wind is doing, what types of vegetation are burning, and what lies in the path of the fire. From this he can decide where his actions can best be applied and what can be allowed to burn until he can get to it.

Many people today start their families apart from their own parents. They enjoy the freedom from criticism and unsolicited advice they would receive if their parents were in residence. However, they often miss the perspective that their parents could provide that would help them see what was truly important in life. The song "Cats in the Cradle" tells a sad story of a man who did not have time for his son until he was older when his son did not have time for him. Young people prepared by school for work often have the extended selfishness of childhood coupled with an exaggerated view of material significance such that they have a lower value of relationships, even within their own families. The phrase, "Too soon old, too late wise" captures a little of this.

Much of this distortion impressed upon youth comes from systems instituted by Satan for this express purpose. The Christian has an advantage in access to the wisdom from God and discernment that the Holy Spirit can provide, he has the opportunity to see in life that which is of real value.

One advantage older people have is that they can more clearly see that their life is drawing to a close. This often helps put into perspective what is really important. A woman once was reluctant to attend her twenty year High School reunion. This was because at the ten year reunion she was not comfortable with everyone strutting about trying to impress each other with their income, social importance, material acquisitions, and achievements. When she returned from the twenty year reunion, she commented that people were much more relaxed as the ambitions they had ten years earlier had been largely abandoned and were able to adapt to value other things in life.

It is important to understand the influence of modern life on younger people as it explains much of the difficulty young Christians have with relationships in general. The combination of limited time, selfish interests, intolerance of annoyances, and (like Martha) a disproportionate focus on tasks, work to impoverish young Christians so that they remain isolated from those who would be able to help them.

In addition to time and tolerance, the Christian should be prepared to extend mercy and compassion. This grows out of a maturing love (selflessness) that indicates that we are growing in Christ-likeness.

And Jesus, when he came out, saw much people, and was moved with compassion toward them,

because they were as sheep not having a shepherd: and he began to teach them many things. - Mark 6:34

Compassion, understanding, and tolerance can be employed up to a point. Those who are unsaved or Christians who are unwilling to go on to Christian maturity, can become a hazard to our own faith that hinders our own growth in the Lord. For this reason, we should discern those relationships that have the potential for mutual edification and those that have the potential to be dangerous.

And whosoever will not receive you, when ye go out of that city, shake off the very dust from your feet for a testimony against them. - Luke 9:5

Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you. - Matthew 7:6

Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. - Galatians 6:1

If we consider that those of us who are Christian represent the “foolish things of the world”, we should expect that we will annoy each other more than normal. This makes the admonition (frequently given) that we love one another especially important.

But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; - 1 Corinthians 1:27

As a general guideline, we should view the extension of tolerance and forbearance to others in terms of what aids in the building up of the body of Christ. Sometimes loving admonition is also appropriate.

From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love. - Ephesians 4:16

Chapter 25 - Great Expectations

There is that within the human heart that draws from possibilities an expectation of something desired. This can be seen in the ministry of John the Baptist. His ministry was in part to prepare people to expect the Messiah.

And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not; - Luke 3:15

However, our expectations can also form from selfish desires. This is how people can become hopeful to win the lottery, get a big promotion, move to Hollywood to be a movie star, or Nashville to be a famous singer.

The baby boom generation was targeted by Satan through the saturation of the radio airwaves with thousands of teenage “love” songs that stirred the passions and expectations of young people and drew

them increasingly into lives of indulgence and self-centeredness. This frequently manifested in the expectation that a marriage would be a source of constant romantic emotional stimulation. When one or both people enter a marriage relationship with the expectation that they will be provided a constant stream of satisfaction, they can be deeply disappointed when their expectations are not met.

Christian relationships can also suffer from unrealistic expectations. A common source of disappointment is when a person holds to a particular doctrine or practice and expects that any other Christian would also see such a doctrine or practice as superior.

The key to avoiding expectations that could result in disappointment, frustration, or even embarrassment is to discern the difference between hope and certainty. The bible frequently exhorts us to follow the path of truth.

For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. - Romans 12:3

When a person is immersed in organizational Christianity he pretty much comes to know what to expect. Relational Christianity is much less predictable because people are less predictable than systems. This is much more so when dealing with Christians who are relatively immature. Just as one might expect a small child to be selfish and petulant, one would expect a young adult to be less so.

The more mature Christian should expect that his path through life will be guided by the Holy Spirit and that on this path he will encounter various people for various purposes. Such encounters may result in opportunities to minister to others, be ministered to, give or receive instruction, or even form relationships of various depth and length.

Chapter 26 - Acquaintanceship, the Foundation of Relationship

Computer dating services seek to establish relationships between people who have never met by pre-screening for similar interests or characteristics. However, most relationships grow from those with whom we are already acquainted. Those we work with, classmates, neighbors, or fellow church members often constitute a pool of people from whom a deeper relationship might arise.

At the most basic level of acquaintanceship are those people we recognize, but of whose name we are uncertain. The next level would be someone whose name we have come to know, but have little other information. The next level might be like the security guard at work whom we pass each morning and make a brief comment about the weather or the local sports team.

It is when we start to know more about a person such as the names and ages of their children, their personal history, or future plans and ambitions, that we begin to build a relationship. The biggest reason for acquiring this information is the time spent together.

Curiosity can start a relationship as one asks questions about another, one shows interest. However for a relationship to grow, interest needs to expand into concern. The expression of concern is a signal that one might be trusted with that which is potentially embarrassing.

For the Christian, a church can provide many acquaintances from which he would expect to find those with whom he could develop deeper relationships. One might be surprised that Satan has been so successful with providing prosperity and entertainment as well as constraining time, few people will have the time or be interested in deeper relationship. Often few have burdens that one can share and most feel their participation in church events fulfills their Christian requirements.

The more mature Christian may have to exist in relational poverty until such time as someone encounters difficulty in his life or is moved by the Holy Spirit to draw nearer. However, usually this stirring is directed to the pastor or pastoral staff such that there is little for the average Christian to do to live his faith within organizational Christianity.

Chapter 27 - The Evolution of Relationship

The TV mini-series “Band of Brothers” presents us with a group of men randomly assigned to a particular group by the Army and through training and combat become as close as brothers. However, after the war is over, they begin to go their separate directions.

Even family relationships change. People can become estranged, relocate geographically, follow different lifestyles, philosophies, or religions. Even marriage (which is supposed to last a lifetime) can be terminated.

Christians are supposed to treat each other as family. Not limited to the anemic family relationships of today, but the deeper, closer, and vital family relationships of the past.

Rebuke not an elder, but intreat him as a father; and the younger men as brethren; The elder women as mothers; the younger as sisters, with all purity. - 1 Timothy 5:1-2

It is interesting to note that there is no description of a cautious growing relationship of incremental trust. There is an openness as one would have with ones own family members to be extended to those who are in Christ. There is provision to expel those who would betray or corrupt this trust.

I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. - 1 Corinthians 5:9-11

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us. - 2 Thessalonians 3:6

The relationships described in the New Testament do not seem to picture a slow growing closer or drifting apart. They seem more binary in that there is either a relationship or not. This may be reflective of fewer barriers to deeper relationship such as less social mobility or more difficult circumstances in the ancient world.

The depth of relationship is a function of trust. Today, without necessity, time, interest, or opportunity it is unlikely that Christian acquaintanceship will develop into Christian relationship. Since much of the

Christian life is predicated on ministering to each other to build up the body of Christ, the mature Christian seeking opportunity to fulfill this role the Lord has for him, may have to seek outside of an organizational system for those to whom he can minister.

Chapter 28 - Barriers to Relational Christianity

For the Christian unsatisfied to live within the strictures that organizational Christianity imposes, he will have to understand the effects of the damage Satan has inflicted on both Christianity and the world in general. Like the combat medic seeking the wounded on the battlefield that can be helped, the mature Christian will have to negotiate around this wreckage to identify those who may be assisted. Most of those injured by Satan would argue strongly that there is any deficiency much less injury. As a result, ministry can only be offered to a few. It is a testimony to the skill of Satan that he so often is able to get his victims to remain victimized and often even insist on greater victimization.

1. The organizational church. Most of the Christians found in this circumstance are satisfied that there is no deficiency in their walk with the Lord. There might be some among the odd, fringe, or elderly to whom relationship could be extended.

Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away. - 2 Timothy 3:5

2. The decimated family. The mobility and prosperity of modern life has diminished our need of each other to such an extent that it is often difficult to find closeness with another even within our own family. Having been reduced to superficial familial relationships, it is often impossible to consider our relationship with other Christians in deeper terms. Husbands and fathers should consider that “provision” for the family also includes helping them recognize, cultivate and grow in Christian relationships. Spiritual starvation can be as hazardous to eternal life and physical starvation is to physical life.

But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel. - 1 Timothy 5:8

3. The profession of religion. Often a discussion about Christianity, the bible, or Jesus ends when a person declares his denominational affiliation. It is as if the person declares the subject has been addressed and is no longer of any interest to him.

Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth. - John 9:41

4. The scarcity of time. Eight hours of work (nine with lunch), a commute of up to two hours, eight hours of sleep, and household chores leave little time for anything else, much less people and relationships.

Wherefore he saith, Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light. See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil. _ Ephesians 5:14-16

5. The Potemkin mask. It is told that Grigory Potemkin had phony villages placed along the route that

Empress Catherine II of Russia took on a trip to the Crimea to deceive her into thinking that the peasants were more prosperous than was the case. Ever since the term “Potemkin” has been used to describe a “false front”.

In modern society we can come to have a component of artificial presentation that we rely on to gain social acceptance. By this one act, we can come to resist relational closeness as it might reveal that which we believe should remain hidden. Seeing ourselves in truth helps us be humble and protects us from crippling fear and the self-deception of pride.

For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. - James 1:23-24

6. The soft life. One measure of our prosperity is the degree to which we are able to provide ourselves comforts. If one considers that most kings in history did not have indoor plumbing, hot water, year round availability of seasonal food, 24 hour entertainment, or air conditioning and central heating, one begins to see in modern life the indulgence of comfort unprecedented by even the most rich and powerful in history. This elevation of personal comfort is not compatible with the discomfort of getting to know other people.

But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. - Matthew 11:8

Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: - Revelation 3:17

7. The herd mentality. Public education accomplishes many things for Satan. However, one that may not be fully appreciated is the social dependency that inhibits independent thought and action. Comfort is found in social acceptance and conformity.

They are like unto children sitting in the marketplace, and calling one to another, and saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned to you, and ye have not wept. - Luke 7:32

Chapter 29 - Searching for Relational Christianity

It would be nice to look up the “Relational Church” in the phone book, drive to the location, and step into good Christian fellowship. While not common, one can encounter churches that are welcoming, solicitous, and friendly. This conviviality can often mask a significant accommodation with the world. Since this sort of encounter is rare enough, it can easily be mistaken for genuine relationship. One indicator that it may not have any depth is that once amusing anecdotes and humorous banter is exhausted, there becomes a growing disinclination to associate.

Churches that are less worldly and more serious about learning God’s word and growing in faith are sadly often less welcoming and more judgmental than more worldly churches. There can be several reasons for this. Some feel they have the right way and either feel superior or protective against “error”. Others attempt to be “good” in their flesh and can be frustrated and judgmental of others. Still others become so ossified with procedures that are unquestioned that they amble through joyless motions set

in place centuries earlier.

Most Christians think of churches as the place where Christianity is done. The primary expression of Christianity is to listen to a sermon and sing three hymns. Secondary Christianity would involve activities like choir, Sunday school, a fellowship meal, or even a bible study. The Christian led to seek a deeper faith, greater maturity, and closer relationship with other Christians will likely find that he will have to take the initiative to reach past these well-intentioned organizational offerings.

A man who had complained about church structure was once asked what his alternative system would be. He was unable to respond because he did not see Christianity as describable in system terms. While church systems can be frustratingly restrictive and limited, an alternative like house church can be scary and intimidating.

If a few people meet in a house, one will likely encounter different ideas of doctrine, unusual personalities, unsettling opinions, and closer scrutiny than one would receive in a typical church. One can easily understand the attraction of existing church structures as they insulate us from each other so that we are not required to face that which is unpleasant about each other.

Many recoil from the brutal, real, and personal effects that close encounters with others can entail. However, in such encounters is truth. While masked, ritualized, and scripted encounters can be more pleasant, there is little depth or opportunity to minister to each other.

Relational Christianity almost has to be sought outside of church systems by individuals seeking other individuals. One has to switch from "automatic" and take manual control of his Christian life. While he may attend a church (or several churches), he is looking for others with who he can experience the deeper Christian life through relationships. Give the state of contemporary society and Christianity, this network of relationships will most likely be fragmentary and sporadic. However, there is so much more satisfaction in real, deep, and mature relationships that, once experienced, are difficult to abandon.

During the cold war with Russia, there was a story cited about persecuted Christians in Russia. It was said the once two Russian soldiers with machine guns broke into a secret Christian prayer group. They demanded to know if everyone was Christian. A few people said no and were allowed to leave. Then the soldiers asked if everyone left was a Christian and they said yes. The soldiers then said, "Now, we will pray with you".

The first 300 years of Christianity saw deeper relationships and greater love shown between believers. This was often a result of the periodic persecution Christians were subjected to. Now that Christianity is falling into disfavor again, deeper relationships may again become more common. Sometime the early Christians would identify each other by use of secret signs like the drawing of a fish.

Today one can "salt" one's conversation with Christian or biblical references as if "fishing" for a nibble. If in conversation with someone from another church or even outside of church a person responds, further inquiry might reveal another person thirsty for the living water of Christ that can flow between believers.

In the kingdom age it will be easy to identify those who follow Christ.

And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; - Mark 16:17

In the church age it is not so easy.

For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? - 1 Corinthians 3:3

Chapter 30 - Signs of Maturity

It can be difficult for the immature Christian to even know he is immature. Without developing discernment, much can be hidden in the Christian life. Worldly churches can seem pleasant and inviting. Those who have grown some in faith may try more rigid or serious churches and “tough out” the lack of friendliness or love. Since there is no denomination that establishes churches filled with only mature Christians (and if there were, they probably would not accept us), we are almost forced to seek out advanced Christianity through a relational network we build ourselves.

As we become acquainted with other Christians we can make assessments as to which of four categories they might fall into.

1. Those open to being helped by us.
2. Those open and able to teach us.
3. Those open only to superficial relationship.
4. Those engaged with system requirements and closed to relationships.

While we might be seeking those in category 2 for instruction and from whom we can learn, our experiences with the other categories can also be instructional. We might expect a pastor to be in category 2 only to discover that he is actually in category 4. We might think a person in category 1 to whom we could minister only to discover that they are in category 3.

Those in category 2 from whom we can learn the most are generally not inclined towards the formal classroom instruction we have come to think of as where learning takes place. Rather they convey their closeness with the Lord through example. There are some things that we should be able to discern that would help us identify those who might help us towards our own maturity.

1. Concern for others over concern for self
2. Patient endurance
3. Kindness
4. Wisdom
5. Truth
6. Love
7. Christ-likeness

Each of the attributes of Christian maturity are attributes of Christ and should be increasingly found in us as we grow and mature. As we grow, sadly, we will find fewer and fewer Christians more mature than us. In this Jesus is also an example for us. He was a servant to all and only had his relationship with the Father to sustain him.

Our Christian growth starts with taking from the example of more mature Christians and progresses as

we become more like Jesus with more giving to those who are just beginning to seek growth. What we would seek in our relationship with others are the attributes of Christ. Our own maturity should be increasing such that we are able to be an example to others.

It is through our personal relationships with others that this process of becoming like Jesus is accomplished. The path of relational Christianity is the path that Jesus followed. It is not easy or comfortable. It is frequently filled with the loneliness of those rejecting us, distracted with selfish interests, and even outright hostility. However, this often drives us to a closer relationship with Jesus and the experience of deeper love.

Paul describes some of the power of deeper love.

For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again. - 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

The word “constraineth” is *sunechō* meaning “pressed or held together” often translated “compelled”. It is through our deepening relationship with Christ that we find his love surrounding us and convincing us to let go of the selfishness that is the primary barrier to our sharing the love of Christ with other Christians.

As we enter the deeper world of Christian love we experience that of God which is only known through relationships. We can get a glimpse of how this is experienced with the reaction of the two on the road to Emmaus.

And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures? - Luke 24:32

It is through our relationships that hearts are “knit together” in love. This results in the full assurance of understanding.

That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ; - Colossians 2:2

The depth, fullness, and riches of the Christian life are to be found in our relationship with other Christians as our hearts are “knitted together” in love. As one experiences the deeper Christian life of relational Christianity, it is confirmation of the riches to be found in a closer walk with our Lord and his love given and received with other Christians.