

# St Andrew's Weekend Adventure

## Building Better Relationships



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# Building Better Relationships

## 1. Theology and Relationships

### The Importance of Relationships

The subject of relationships is fascinating - not least because we all spend our lives living in them - and sometimes falling in and out of them.

Relationships are vital for our health. In 1959 the American Psychologist Harry F Harlow showed that baby monkeys developed better even with a cloth and wire surrogate mother than with no mother at all!

Similarly, on very rare occasions, human children have been discovered who have grown up wild - like in the legend of Romulus and Remus who were supposed to have founded Rome after being brought up by wolves. Unfortunately, the wild children of reality don't found great cities. In fact, they seem to have trouble in adjusting to human civilization at all. Some studies also suggest that if a child does not learn to speak by a certain age it has trouble learning at all.

### The Relational God

But we don't have to look to the realms of psychology or sociology to understand the importance of relationships. A Trinitarian theology tells us that relationships are not just a pleasant addition to real life but reflect the underlying reality of everything there is.

There is an old English folk song called *Green Grow the Rushes, O!*, a counting song where you go from one to ten. But it is actually a religious song - each number has a religious significance. The first verse is "One is one and all alone and evemore shall be so", which is meant to be a description of God, and it is a very widespread understanding of God. It is how Muslims or Jehovah's Witnesses think of God, and they think it is much superior to the Christian view, which they say has three Gods.

But it is a *wrong* view of God. And because it is wrong it is, in the end, unhelpful, because it misses out on the fact that God is himself relational.

### The Problem with Monism

The theology of *Green Grow the Rushes, O!* is technically an example of what is called 'radical monism' - God is one, and all alone, for ever and ever. And it has its adherents because it has an attractive simplicity.

Many of us, if we're honest, have been confused at some stage by the problems involved in understanding the doctrine of the Trinity. It seems an unnecessarily complicated view of God. But radical monism also has its problems.

To begin with, you can't call the god of radical monism 'he', because 'he' is a relational term - without a she, 'he' is meaningless. For the same reason you can't call god 'she' either - because *that* is ALSO a relational term. But if a god is not a he or a she then that god is an 'it'. And we instinctively feel that an 'it'

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is something *less* than what we are - specifically, something less personal. To us personality is always *gendered*.

Again, it is difficult to imagine something that is literally 'all alone' and yet at the same time having self-awareness. The awareness I have that I am 'me' depends on having things around me to which I can relate and react.

Solitary confinement is a punishment *in itself*. And even benign isolation has a powerful effect. Put someone in an isolation tank where they float in saline solution with no visual or auditory or physical stimulation and they go loopy. Experience and experiment tell us that human beings are not designed to be 'one and all alone'.

### The Implications of the Trinity

However, some people - I suspect Muslims for a start - would say, "That is because human beings are weak. We are not great like God. You cannot imagine that God could not cope with being alone." But what this response does is to elevate 'strength in aloneness' into the highest value. God becomes like the Clint Eastwood character in a cowboy film. Ordinary mortals are like the towns-people - weak, needing relationships to keep them going. But God is strong, and strength means being alone.

In this view, relationships with other people become not merely secondary but a sign of weakness - an indication of how we are *less* than God.

But this overlooks what the Bible means when it says God made man *in his image*. If we are in God's image, then surely the importance of relationships to us should indicate something about the importance of relationships to God. And in fact, approaching things the other way round, the doctrine of the Trinity says that God is relational, which is why we are relational.

The doctrine of the Trinity is therefore not a puzzle to keep theologians happy but an explanation of why the world is the way it is. The doctrine of the Trinity says God is relational *within himself* and so *relationships* reflect the *ultimate reality*.

By contrast, being alone and aloof is being *less* than godly. The 'Clint Eastwood' god of radical monism - the god who is one and all alone and evermore shall be so - is not the true God, but an idol who makes relationships a sign of our weakness and who ultimately (I would suggest) encourages selfishness and inhumanity amongst his followers. Such a 'god' will not mind when its followers kill in its name, because relationships are secondary, 'weak', things.

### Why a Trinity?

The doctrine of the Trinity says that relationships are there from eternity. But it says something else as well. It is an interesting question to ask why God is a Trinity, not a 'bi-unity' or a 'quad-unity'. And I think the answer is that a Trinity is the minimum number necessary to ensure that the eternal relationship of God is an 'open' relationship.

Some couples, especially young couples, can be a bit nauseating because they are wrapped up in themselves. Their love for one another is so intense it excludes other people. But where there is a third person, the love of two people has to be open to another. You see this with parenthood. Two people

fall in love, get married, then along comes a child and suddenly the loving couple have to love someone else as well.

In the same way, I would suggest that the reality of the Trinity keeps the love of the Godhead open. A couple can get wrapped up in one another. Within in a triplet, one of two things happens. Either the two gang up on the one - which is what we see in human relationships. Or the two have to be always open to the one - which is what happens in the godhead.

### Male and Female as the Image of God

Putting relationships on a theological basis is important when we go on to consider ourselves, because, as we have already mentioned, Genesis 1:26-27 says we are the image of God:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." <sup>27</sup> So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

The doctrine of the Trinity tells us that engaging in relationships generally is part of the way in which we image God - whether it is the relationships of the family or the football team. But this passage suggests to us that *particular* relationship of male and female contains a particular reflection of God's nature.

The difficulty for Christian theologians has been working out what this means. Some have suggested that the male and femaleness is accidental - just something we need to be in order to reproduce. These people will often say things like "God is beyond gender" or "There are no sexes in heaven". However, in Eph 5:22 onwards, the apostle Paul speaks about the relationship between husband and wife, in relation to Christ and the church. And he sets this in the context of Gen 2:24, which he quotes in 5:31-32:

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." <sup>32</sup> This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

Paul's argument is that Gen 2:24, is only fully understood in the light of the revelation of Jesus, and this in itself helps us understand Genesis 1:26-27. What we see is that the gender relationships of Genesis 1:26-27 are *not* about something *within* the godhead - between the various members of the Trinity - but about the relationships God has *beyond* himself - he creates, but he draws his creation into relationship with himself.

### Union with Christ

Thus as human beings in their own right, both Adam and Eve 'image' God. But as human beings in a gendered relationship Adam and Eve image God and his creation in relationship - and even here there is more than we might assume!

So in Genesis 2:22 we see that Eve takes her existence *from* Adam, so that she is both separate from him and yet dependent on him. And then in 2:24, the two of them come back into union through the act of marriage where the two become one flesh. However, in 1 Corinthians 6:16-17, Paul relates this same concept to the Christian in relation to Christ:

Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." <sup>17</sup> But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

So our relationship with Christ includes a *union* with him, paralleled in human experience only by the union of a man and woman.

### Completing the Picture

This, I am sure, is one reason why Genesis 2:18 God says, "It is not good for the man to be alone." It is "not good", not because the man is lonely but because the image of God in Man is not yet complete.

Clearly, single people can be fully functional as people, which is why you can remain single and still live Christianly. And as single people they bear the image of God individually. Genesis 9:6 prescribes the death penalty for murder because "in the image of God has God made man" - and to put it crudely, you don't have to murder a married couple to destroy the image of God. But having said that, singleness *in itself* does not express the fulness of God's character. At a human 'imaging' level, that is done through marriage.

However, it is *not* true to say there is no marriage in heaven because the *ultimate* reality is the union with Christ, not the union with another human being. The Bible constantly tells us that in once sense, heaven *is* a marriage - the marriage between Christ and the Church. So I take it that when Jesus that the resurrected are not married or given in marriage, he means there will be no place for *inter-human* marriages, because they will have done their job. And just as the Temple became obsolete when Jesus died on the cross, so human marriage will become obsolete when the marriage between Christ and the Church takes place.

### The Marriage Union

This understanding, first that relationships find their theological origin in the Trinitarian godhead, and secondly that male-female relationship find their origin in God's relationship with his people, obviously have profound implications for the way we view relationships generally and marriage in particular.

For example, the marriage union is vastly more significant than just a legal contract or a bit of paper to legitimize living together. Marriage reflects and expresses the nature of God himself, particularly God as he is towards his own creation in general and his redeemed people in particular.

Again, the marriage covenant is a reflection of the covenant of salvation that God with his people. And therefore the human marriage covenant is meant to be unbreakable because the divine Covenant is unbreakable. God does not cast us off when we sin against him and so we should not cast one another off.

The fact that it happens, and that sometimes we overlook the fact that it happens, doesn't make it right.

Or again, we can begin to see why sex outside marriage is wrong - not because the church is a spoilsport, but because sex is the basis of the 'one flesh union' which reflects Christ's union with the church. When Paul writes about Christians going to prostitutes in 1 Corinthians 6:16 he talks about what happens then in the same way Genesis talks about what happens between a husband and wife - "the two become one flesh". Sex works, whether you mean it to or not. So the couple who have sex outside marriage will have as it were 'used up' the potential of sex to be effective for good within a marriage. It is like trying to use a piece of sticky-tape twice - it loses something every time you use it!

In this regard, it is worth asking whether the rising divorce rate is not actually linked to the rising incidence of sex before and outside marriage, which consequently weakens the effectiveness of sex in creating the 'one flesh' union of marriage.

### The Purpose of Marriage

And all this theologising about relationships in general and marriage in particular should make us realize why things have gone so wrong and with human sexuality.

I am arguing that the picture the Bible gives us is that through marriage, including specifically sexuality at the heart of marriage, we are uniquely connected to something specifically related to the nature of God himself and to his own relationship with us. So we shouldn't be surprised to find that when things go wrong with the world they go *very* wrong with sex and marriage, and hence with family life and hence with all the social benefits that healthy families are supposed to bearing about and so on.

### When Things Go Wrong

The marriage relationship should therefore reflect the relationship between God and his redeemed people. That being so, we need to ask ourselves how and why things go so wrong.

We can see how wrong things go when we read on into Genesis 3. At the end of Genesis 2 we have the man and woman in an idyllic relationship. Genesis 2:25 says,

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

This is clearly meant to contrast in the reader's mind with our own situation where shame frequently *is* part of the sexual experience and is certainly our reaction to unwelcome nakedness - either our own or other people's's.

### Seeing Like the Serpent

Just *how* much of a contrast it is with what follows, however, is only brought out in the Hebrew. In Genesis 2:25 the Hebrew says the man and his wife were both *arumim*, translated naked. But in the next verse - which of course

in the original Hebrew isn't in another chapter, but just runs straight on - we read that the serpent is more *arum* (translated crafty or subtle) than any other creature God had made.

It seems there is a deliberate play on words here, contrasting the man and woman in their innocence with the serpent in its craftiness *arum* - crafty / *arom* - naked

However, when the man and the woman give in to temptation they see themselves as the serpent sees them (3:7):

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

So when God asks them in 3:11, "Who told you that you were naked?" the answer is, the serpent told them.

### Fractured Lives

The immediate consequence of this is a breakdown in relationships. The first thing to go, of course, is the relationship with God. When the man and the hear the sound of God walking the garden in the cool of the day they try to hide themselves.

The next relationship to go is that between the man and the woman. In 3:12, the man blames "The woman you put here with me", which is also, of course, another way of blaming God - you created her, look what she's done!

Then in 3:16, the woman is cursed in her relationship with her husband:

To the woman he said, "[...] Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."

Finally, in 3:17-19, the man is cursed in relation to the ground which he was originally sent to keep. Now, instead of a garden it will bring thorns and thistles for him.

### A Controversial Thesis

However, it is with 3:16 that we move into a controversial area in understanding how marriage relationships work.

This is not a straightforward verse but it becomes a good deal easier to understand if we compare it with 4:7 where God is talking to Cain about sin. There he says, "It's desire is for you, but you must master it."

So in Genesis 3:16 where the words are almost identical we should read it in the same way - "Your desire will be for your husband, and he must master you".

Here begins the war between the sexes! But we should notice that in the war between Cain and his sin, Cain is the loser, in spite of what God says. So when God says to Eve, "he - your husband - must master you", we mustn't assume he will be successful.

Relationships between men and women have therefore gone fundamentally wrong in ways which, to an extent, God has determined. We experience his judgement in our broken relationships. In particular, the relationship between men and women in marriage is one where there is an imbalanced struggle which the man doesn't necessarily win just because he usually has bigger muscles.

### Questions to consider

#### 1. Look at 1 John 4:7-9

a. Why couldn't the statement "God is love" be made about a God who was 'all alone'? What difference does this make to the way we think about God or ourselves?

b. What are the practical implications of what God has done and why?

#### 2. Look at John 8:2-6

a. What relationships are involved here and what has gone wrong with these relationships?

b. Look at John 10:25-39. Is part of the Pharisees' problem an over-emphasis on the one-ness of God?

3. How do you respond to the idea that the marriage relationship 'images' God in relation to his people? How is this helpful in understanding marriage and society?

#### 4. Look at 1 Corinthians 7:25-28

a. If marriage images God, why is it a 'preferred option' for Christians to remain single?

b. Have married people missed out on something

## 2. Relationships Between Men and Women

### Introduction - Four Strands

When we consider how we can build better relationships in general - and better relationships between men and women in particular - we have a problem.

However, it is a problem to which there are some solutions. Specifically, I think there are four biblical strands which need to be drawn together when we look at the strengths and difficulties of marriage.

### The Fit Helper

The first strand is the notion of the 'fit' or 'suitable' helper. Genesis 2:18 introduces the first negative note in the Bible. Up to this point, everything has been declared good, and the summary at the end of Genesis 1 is that it is *very* good.

But in Gen 2:18 God says it is "not good" for the man to be alone. And as a result he resolves to make what is described as a 'suitable helper'.

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

However, the word for 'helper' is used elsewhere for *either* the help provided by God *or* for the help provided by an ally in time of war. Psalm 115:9 is typical

O house of Israel, trust in the LORD - he is their *help* and shield.

It would therefore be entirely legitimate to translate the word 'helper' as 'strengthened'. And this explains why the animals are brought before Adam, because in a pre-industrial world, animals are the natural source of human 'strengthening'.

But the strengthening the man needs is not an augmentation of his physical powers. Nor is it mere companionship - in which case another man would have done the trick. What he needs is a *complementary* helper - a helper *keneged* - 'as over against' him.

So there is to be difference as well as *similarity* to him. This is expressed by the way that she is made from the man. That she is from him says she is one with him - and this is expressed in the remark about the two becoming 'one flesh'.

But she is also different from him - woman, and *not* man. And this is what the man needs. She is not there to do his chores for him - you could train a monkey or buy a dishwasher to do that. She is there to strengthen him - to make him what he is only more so.

### Commitment

The second strand is that this process of strengthening and being strengthened only works with *commitment*, ie when Genesis 2:24 applies,

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

The interesting thing about this verse, of course, is that it isn't what happened. Men didn't leave their families to join with their wives. Instead it was the other way round. So this verse should make us sit up and take notice.

The word 'leave' means to forsake or abandon, and implies for the man a commitment which transcends his natural bond with his father and his father's household.

Similarly, cleaving means 'binding strongly to'. So these two actions - leaving and cleaving on the part of the man - are necessary if the strengthening the woman provides is to be effective.

And notice also how leaving and cleaving precedes the 'one flesh' union of sexual intercourse.

Unfortunately, many men don't seem to be aware that this is how it works. Men will often complain that women seem obsessed with commitment, but they don't seem to realize that commitment is in their own self-interest. The woman whose man makes clear his leaving other relationships and cleaving to her is the woman best placed to be what he needs.

By contrast, many marriages which go wrong do so because the man is not committed to his rôle. He wants a wife, but he doesn't want to be a husband - so he insists on having his 'independence', in other words he hasn't done the leaving and cleaving, and then he is surprised that his bride doesn't become the wife he wanted.

### Submission

The third biblical strand, however, which we have already begun to look at, is the post-fall struggle between women's desire to master their husbands and men's reaction to that.

The desire to master the husband is not, I would suggest, a desire for power *over* the husband. Women do not actually *want* a husband they control - but they think of control as the way to get what they want - and specifically to get the *husband* they *want*.

This, I think, is a case of God giving a wrong desire its full rein. The nature of the Fall is described in Genesis 3:6,

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

The fruit is desirable, not only in itself, but 'for gaining wisdom' - which is surely a good outcome. But if the woman is going to become wise, she understandably also wants a wise husband, so she persuades him to eat. This is made clear by God's judgement of Adam in 3:17: "you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, you must not eat of it".

The Hebrew here literally says, "you listened to the voice of your wife" - a phrase which elsewhere means *obeyed*. In Ex 19:5, for example, God says "If

you listen to my voice" (NIV, obey me fully) "you will be my treasured possession". Clearly the woman didn't just offer Adam the fruit - one way or another she said to him, 'Eat this', and he did what he was told. She wasn't trying to get control - she was trying to get wisdom for them both. But now God says, "That is going to affect the whole of your relationship".

### The Outworking in Marriage!

And that is the pattern we see in marriage. Often the manifestation of it is quite amusing. Oak Hill theological college in London, for example, produces an annual magazine like *Societas* where every student gets about fifty words to say something about themselves.

One student, who apparently is well-known for his conservative views on women's ministry, said how much he loved his beautiful new wife, and then said how the photo of himself was a memorial to the shirt he was wearing which did not succeed in passing the gates which guard the way to the matrimonial wardrobe. In other words, his beautiful new wife had binned his favourite old shirt.

Now I'm sure she didn't mean to undermine her marriage when she did this. I'm sure what she wanted was not a husband under her thumb, but a husband who was well dressed. But think of the message as far as he is concerned: "You have bad taste in clothes. I have better taste in clothes. I know you like that shirt, but I don't. In your best interests, I'm going to stop you doing something you like, because I obviously know better than you do."

I'm guessing at what she thought she was doing - but I know the effect on him. Given the chance to say fifty words publicly about himself and his hopes, he talked about his wife and the shirt she took away from him.

Most men's underwear is bought by women, which I guess means most married women buy their husband's pants. Guys, who else in your life bought your pants before your wife did? Answer, when you were single, you did, and before that your mum did. Congratulations - you are now married to your mum.

Women take over men's lives - not because they want a man who does what they tell them, but because they think taking over is the best way to get what they want. However, in the process, they begin to adopt attitudes towards men which make matters worse. And so you will hear women talk about men in literally 'belittling' ways. You will actually hear women say things like, "I've got two boys - three if you count my husband."

Of course, none of this is intended to demoralize him, but subtly it does. A man who goes out to work and makes decisions for others and himself, and then comes home to someone who buys his pants and chooses his shirts is not a man in his own home.

Fortunately, there is a very simple solution to this and it is given in Ephesians 5:22, "Wives, submit to your husbands ...". It goes on, "as to the Lord", but the crucial bit is the first bit - submit to your husbands.

I used to struggle with what this meant, and I'm sure a lot of people still do. But I now think it is very simple - it means give up doing what it says in Gen 3:16. Every time you think you need to direct or control or manipulate your husband - don't.

This is difficult - but it will be good for both of you. I suggested in comparing Genesis 3:16 with 4:7 that just as Cain did *not* resist sin, so there is no guarantee Adam would resist Eve. And this is what we observe in practise.

If I'd gone into that Oak Hill student's room and said to him, "Bin the shirt, mate, it doesn't suit you", (a) he would have thought it was a very odd observation for a man to make and (b) he would probably have ignored me - unless I could give him a very good reason for binning the shirt!

In other words, he would have responded to me like an equal and an adult. But when his wife says, "I really don't like that shirt, why don't you let me throw it out and get you another one", he rolls over, even though he likes the shirt! But this is not the 'equal and adult' reaction - an imbalance has entered into their relationship.

And every time something like that happens, the imbalance increases. The woman wants a knight in shining armour. But what she is creating is either a snail who will withdraw further and further into his shell as the only way of getting away from her, or a cornered rat who will turn on her and bite!

The answer is, submit - give it up. Let him be the man he is, and he will be the man you want. At the same time, men must learn not to roll over.

The 39 Articles tell us that the Apocrypha can be read "for example of life and instruction of manners". This is what the Apocrypha says about the power of women in 1 Esdras 4:24,

<sup>13</sup> Then the third, who had spoken of women and truth (and this was Zerubbabel), began to speak: <sup>14</sup> "Gentlemen, is not the king great, and are not men many, and is not wine strong? Who is it, then, that rules them, or has the mastery over them? Is it not women?" <sup>15</sup> Women gave birth to the king and to every people that rules over sea and land. <sup>16</sup> From women they came; and women brought up the very men who plant the vineyards from which comes wine. <sup>17</sup> Women make men's clothes; they bring men glory; men cannot exist without women. <sup>18</sup> If men gather gold and silver or any other beautiful thing, and then see a woman lovely in appearance and beauty, <sup>19</sup> they let all those things go, and gape at her, and with open mouths stare at her, and all prefer her to gold or silver or any other beautiful thing. <sup>20</sup> A man leaves his own father, who brought him up, and his own country, and clings to his wife. <sup>21</sup> With his wife he ends his days, with no thought of his father or his mother or his country. <sup>22</sup> Therefore you must realize that women rule over you!

"Do you not labour and toil, and bring everything and give it to women?" <sup>23</sup> A man takes his sword, and goes out to travel and rob and steal and to sail the sea and rivers; <sup>24</sup> he faces lions, and he walks in darkness, and when he steals and robs and plunders, he brings it back to the woman he loves. <sup>25</sup> A man loves his wife more than his father or his mother. <sup>26</sup> Many men have lost their minds because of women, and have become slaves because of them. <sup>27</sup> Many have perished, or stumbled, or sinned because of women. <sup>28</sup> And now do you not believe me?

"Is not the king great in his power? Do not all lands fear to touch him?" <sup>29</sup> Yet I have seen him with Apame, the king's concubine, the daughter of the illustrious Bartacus; she would sit at the king's right hand <sup>30</sup> and take the crown from the king's head and put it on her own, and slap the king with

her left hand. <sup>31</sup>At this the king would gaze at her with mouth agape. If she smiles at him, he laughs; if she loses her temper with him, he flatters her, so that she may be reconciled to him. <sup>32</sup>Gentlemen, why are not women strong, since they do such things?"

A word to men - we need to learn not to be such a soft touch!

## Sacrifice

Now what else about the men? In the battle between the sexes, their calling is to lay down their lives for their wives as Christ lay down his life for the church. So in Eph 5:25-28 we read,

<sup>25</sup>Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her <sup>26</sup>to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, <sup>27</sup>and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. <sup>28</sup>In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies.

Notice that the driving force of Christ's relationship with the church is love, and love is essentially expressed in sacrifice - Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her.

There is an element of 'enlightened self-interest' here, as Paul goes on to argue in 5:28-29,

... He who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup>After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church

It is common sense to put yourself out for your wife, because she is your own body. What is good for her is, ultimately, good for you. However, not enough men bother finding out what *is* good for her.

By and large, men are more motivated by achievements than by relationships. It is not that they don't enjoy relationships, but they don't rely on the quality of their relationships to feel fulfilled in life. The parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:16 is an excellent example:

<sup>16</sup>And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. <sup>17</sup>He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones ...'"

This is a very male reaction - What do I need? More barns! He is focussed on achievement - even though here it is the wrong achievement.

However, this is an instance where men need to be a bit more subtle when we apply Matthew 7:12: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you". If you are dealing with other men, that's fine because what you'd like is what they'd like.

But if you are dealing with women you need to put yourself in their shoes and do what they'd like. Now this isn't impossible (though it feels impossible). We just need to apply the same learning skills we would to anything else.

When Christ loved the church, he began with the question, "What does the church need?" and then provided it. So men need to find out what women need and then provide it.

## Responsiveness

What is it women need from men? The short answer is responsiveness and responsibility.

Earlier we noted that the Fall was attributed to the man listening to his wife - but that was 'listening to' in the sense of obeying. Not listening in the sense of being responsive, however, is asking for trouble

Now I am still looking for a justification for some of this, so you can put this down as 'common sense' for the moment. However, I notice that the Song of Songs, which is devoted entirely to romantic love, is a dialogue, so there at least is some biblical encouragement.

However, men and women use speech differently. Men enjoy talking to one another and sharing facts and expressing ideas. Women enjoy hearing and being listened to and sharing experiences and expressing feelings.

Men are called to sacrifice themselves for their wives and a considerable amount of that sacrifice involves learning how they work. We are instinctively like Henry Higgins: "Why can't a woman be more like a man?"

But because a woman isn't like a man, you need to work out what she needs before you seek to provide it. Men, for example, think flowers are romantic, but they aren't if flowers aren't what she needs at that point. She may want a conversation more than flowers.

## Responsibility

And the other thing that women particularly want from men is responsibility. One of the worst things that can happen to the family in the Bible is to lose the man - for a family to become merely orphans and widows, for then they lose their protection and their security - their protector as well as their provider.

People will often say single mothers manage as well as the married. Well, I grew up in two one-parent families losing my mother when I was seven and my father after he remarried when I was fourteen and I can tell you there's a big difference between having one parent and having two - not least for the parents.

Women sometimes object to the idea that they should submit to their husbands - but submission does not mean allowing him to give the orders, but rather allowing him to give the lead.

I have often heard women complain about husbands who don't take enough responsibility for the home and family life. I have never heard a woman complain of a man who takes too much responsibility.

## Conclusion

The Bible holds out the relationship between men and women as a crucial relationship central to what it means to be human beings in the image of God.

As a result of sin, that image has been distorted - it is difficult to live out the image when the curse is getting in the way. And yet in Christ we are redeemed and able to tackle even the worst of our sinful problems.

We may not entirely succeed, but biblical wisdom can point us in the right direction.

### Questions to Consider

- a. How has the woman's rôle as man's 'helper' been misunderstood
- b. Why has this misunderstanding occurred and how can it be corrected?
- c. Are men bad at commitment? If they are, what do you think are the reasons for this and how might they improve?
- d. Would it be fair to say that men tend to give in to their wives? If it is, why does this happen? Should they do so less and in what ways?
- e. What sacrifices do men need to make for their wives?
- f. How should women 'submit' in a marriage?
- f. How does the biblical view of the marriage relationship help us to address modern dilemmas like the 'age of consent' for young people, or the rights and wrongs of homosexuality?

## 3. Parenthood and Theology

So far we have focussed on the relationship between men and women, and particularly the relationship of marriage, first because there is a distinct theological significance to this.

But second, biblically the family is the basic building block of other social relationships. In the Exodus, when Israel was broken up into administrative groups, the smallest unit was the family.

But a family is clearly more than a relationship between just two people - usually children come along and husband and wife suddenly discover they are also parents.

And it the experience of parenthood which shapes the rest of our lives. Indeed, we can say there is a *theological* significance to parenthood, just as there is to marriage.

### The Bible and Parenthood

In the Bible we find parenthood to be at the heart of the Christian revelation. In the Old Testament, for example, God is revealed as having a 'fatherly' aspect. Psalm 103:13 says,

As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him ...

Again, in Isaiah 63:15, God is depicted as the *father* of Israel:

But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name.

The same thought is found in Isaiah 64:8 and Malachi 1:6. But God also has a *motherly* aspect. Isaiah 66:13 says,

As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem.

However, at this point we are some way short of the Trinitarian view of 'God the Father', Instead, the 'fatherhood' of God seems to be a figure of speech.

### The Old Testament

However, if we look at, for example, Exodus 4:22-23, we do find something more like the familiar NT picture. There God says to Moses to tell Pharaoh:

This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, "Let my son go, so he may [serve] worship me." But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son.

We could say we are still in the realms of figures of speech - but there is an intimacy here, similar to that found in the Lord's Prayer, for as Pharaoh's son is to him, so Israel is to God.

A similar intimacy is found in God's promise to David in 2 Sam 7:12-15,

When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. <sup>13</sup> He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. <sup>14</sup> I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. <sup>15</sup> But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you.

Once again, this notion of 'fatherhood' seems more than just illustrative - which is reflected in Psalm 2:7 which is a Psalm about the Messianic king:

I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" [literally, "I have begotten you"]

So far, however, the fatherhood of God seems to be a way of talking about his *relationship* with others, rather than his *nature* in himself. It is not in that sense a Trinitarian fatherhood.

### The New Testament

The New Testament, however, clearly reveals the Fatherhood of God as something fundamental to his nature, not just an aspect of his relationship to his people.

On the one hand, the New Testament picks up the Old Testament material about God as father of the Messianic King and applies it to Jesus. So at Jesus' baptism, the voice of God is heard from heaven saying, "You are my Son ... with whom I am well pleased" (Mk 1:11, etc)

But also through his own teaching, especially as recorded in John's gospel, Jesus reveals that there is a 'father-son' relationship within the godhead which goes far beyond either a metaphor or the relationship of God with his creatures.

So in John 17:1-5, Jesus prays,

Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. <sup>2</sup> For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. <sup>3</sup> Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. <sup>4</sup> I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. <sup>5</sup> And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.

### The Nature of Fatherhood

What this and similar teaching does is to establish that parenthood - specifically here the 'father-son' relationship - is not a merely biological event.

Nor is it merely a sociological construct. Today we don't call males who bring up children 'fathers' but 'carers' to keep everyone happy. But both common sense and the biblical material shows us that fatherhood is more than caring.

Instead, being a father, or being a son, expresses an theological reality. Just as with marriage, it is *not* that our language about God is based on our experience of human experience, but the other way round, our human institutions are based on, and are supposed to reflect, divine realities.

We see a hint of this in Ephesians 3:14-15, which in the NIV reads,

For this reason I kneel before the Father, <sup>15</sup> from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.

But the footnote reads, "from whom all *fatherhood* ... derives its name", and this certainly reflects the Greek, where the *patria* is named after the *pater*. The best way to look at this, perhaps, is that God's fatherhood determines the nature of his family - we are the people whose God is 'Father God'.

### Mothers

But what about mothers - and indeed daughters? In one sense, of course, mothers and daughters are simply female parents and children, just as fathers and sons are simply male parents and children.

What is true for fathers is true for mothers. We see this in the Old Testament injunctions about honouring your parents. The commandment in Exodus 20:12 says,

Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

Again, Exodus 21:15 says, "Anyone who attacks his father or his mother must be put to death" and Exodus 21:17, "Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death."

There is no sense in which a mother is a *lesser* of parent, even though she is clearly a *different kind* of parent. So in the book of Proverbs, it says:

Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. (1:8, see also 6:20)

Both father and mother demand a similar respect and exercise a similar rôle in relation to their children.

### Daughters

The rôle of daughters was clearly influenced by sociological expectations, but we needn't be too embarrassed by them.

Towards the end of Numbers comes some significant material concerning the attitude of Israel to women specifically as *daughters* - 27:1:

The daughters of Zelophehad son of Hopher, the son of Gilead, the son of Makir, the son of Manasseh, belonged to the clans of Manasseh son of Joseph. The names of the daughters were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah. They approached <sup>2</sup>the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders and the whole assembly, and said, <sup>3</sup>"Our father died in the desert. He was not among Korah's followers, who banded together against the LORD, but he died for his own sin and left no sons. <sup>4</sup>Why should our father's name disappear from his clan because he had no son? Give us property among our father's relatives." <sup>5</sup>So Moses brought their case before the LORD <sup>6</sup> and the LORD said to him, <sup>7</sup>"What Zelophehad's daughters are saying is right. You must certainly give them property as an inheritance among their father's relatives and turn their father's inheritance over to them." <sup>8</sup>"Say to the Israelites, 'If a man dies and leaves no son, turn his inheritance over to his daughter.'" [etc]

Normally, the inheritance of land did pass to the son. But if there were no sons, it simply passed in its entirety to the daughters.

So although sociologically girls *were* treated differently in the Old Testament they are *potentially* co-inheritors of land, and theologically therefore not just of land but of the Kingdom of God.

### Mother in Theology

But what about the *theological* foundation of motherhood? We find a theological basis for fatherhood in God's fatherhood. What about mothers?

The Roman church has tended to find it in Mary, but we find that unsatisfactory. However, there is a theological basis for motherhood though it tends to get overlooked by evangelicals.

In Galatians 4:21-26 we read this:

<sup>21</sup>Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?

<sup>22</sup>For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. <sup>23</sup>His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise. <sup>24</sup>These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. <sup>25</sup>Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. <sup>26</sup>But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.

Theologically, therefore, the theological expression of 'motherhood' is found not in feminizing God but in recognizing the significance of the church.

### The Significance of Parenthood

The point of all this background work, however, is to emphasise that the experience of parenthood - both as being parents and as being children - is not just a sociological construct but a *theological* one.

The implications are that you mess with parenthood at your peril. You mess with being a father or mother at your peril and equally you mess with being a child at your peril.

If, for example, we try to have children without accepting the responsibility of parenthood, or if we try to be parents but rewrite the manual without reference to the Bible we not only risk making a mess of things but we are actually going against what God has revealed to us.

And this is important to remember because parenthood is very difficult - it is difficult being a child of parents who are sinners and it is difficult being a parent of children who are sinners.

### Parents and Children

However, the fact that we are all sinners does not put parents and children on an equal footing. Parenting and being parented each work in one direction only.

Parents, for example, have the responsibility to provide for and care for their children. In 2 Corinthians 12:14 Paul writes,

Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. <sup>15</sup>So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well.

We have already seen the biblical pattern in the Old Testament quotations about God's fatherhood and motherhood earlier - God is tender as a father towards his children, he comforts his people as a mother comforts her children. Indeed, the bond of motherhood is presented ideally as unbreakable. In Isaiah 49:15, God says,

Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!

The concept of the neglectful or forgetful mother is regarded as almost unthinkable - but even though it is sometimes possible for human beings it is impossible for God.

God's parental love is shown above all in the relationship of the Father to Jesus. It is shown in *trust*:

The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. (John 3:35)

It is also shown in sharing *adult* responsibility:

For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these. <sup>21</sup>For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. <sup>22</sup>Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, <sup>23</sup>that all may honour the Son just as they honor the Father. (John 5:20-23)

And since Jesus is the perfect Son of the Father, we see the Father's love in the Son's love for us:

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. (John 15:9)

### Good Parenting

To have good parents then, is to have someone who will guide you and lead you and trust you. It is also to have someone who will take responsibility for you and provide for you, even at cost to themselves.

Unfortunately, you often find situations where the parents see the children as getting in the way of their own enjoyment. So you get all kinds of parental neglect. There are the cases of child abuse that come before the courts, but there are the other cases of parents who just quietly neglect their children in preference to their own work or even their hobbies.

Of course, in later years it works the other way. In 1 Tim 5:4, Paul writes,

... if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God.

### Good Children

The relationship between Jesus and his Father also tells us how children should behave. In John 5:19, Jesus says,

I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.

Indeed, the perfect child is the perfect imitator of the father, just as the perfect father is the perfect instructor of the son. It is the Bible itself which gives us the idea, like Father, like Son. So in John 8:42, we read,

Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. <sup>43</sup> Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. <sup>44</sup> You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

### Godly Discipline

However, because we live in a fallen world, just as we don't have perfect parents, so we don't have perfect children, and therefore part of the rôle of parenting is disciplining.

Discipline cannot be considered in isolation - the secret of good parenting is not good discipline, the secret of good parenting is good parenting. But discipline forms part of that because children are not innately wise or good. So Prov 22:15 says,

Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him.

So often our understanding of passages like this get bogged down in discussions about physical punishment - is it OK to smack a child and so on. The Bible basically says "Yes it is". Proverbs 23:13-14 says,

Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die. Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death.

*But* the real point at issue is not the rod - it is the discipline. The *undisciplined* child is a risk to himself - not just to his physical well-being but his spiritual well-being. But disciplining should not be confused with smacking or beating. A child can be smacked without being disciplined, and a child can be disciplined without being smacked - indeed, if you haven't stopped smacking your child once it is more than several years old something is seriously wrong.

### Responsible Children

The presumption of the Old Testament is that children need to be taught right from wrong - but there is also a presumption that they will learn to do the right thing before they reach adulthood.

The prophecy of Immanuel in Isaiah 7:14 is based on this presumption:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. <sup>15</sup> He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. <sup>16</sup> But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.

The point of the prophecy is that deliverance will come quickly - before a child reaches the age of discretion. In Jewish tradition the age for *Bar-Mitzvah* is twelve or thirteen. At this age the responsibility for the boy's religious life becomes his own - the father prays a prayer saying "Blessed be he who takes from me the responsibility of this boy".

That is a much higher expectation than we put on our own children - but is it worth suggesting that high expectations can produce high results? And isn't one of the problems with the way we bring up children spiritually that it is all instruction and no responsibility?

### "As Obedient Children"

Of course, there is one other biblical element that would make this picture more easily workable - and that is the obedience of children to their parents. The NT makes this point explicitly twice:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. <sup>2</sup>“Honour your father and mother”—which is the first commandment with a promise—<sup>3</sup>“that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.” (Eph 6:1-3)

Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. (Col 3:20)

By contrast, *disobedience* to parents is seen as a sign of the degeneracy of sin. 2 Tim 3:1 says,

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. <sup>2</sup> People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy ...

At this point, some of the children may be groaning, but Paul makes the point that obedience to parents is actually in your own interests: “Honour your father and mother” is the first commandment with a promise - do this and it will go well for you.

Of course, it helps to have parents who are the sort of parents you'd want to obey. In Eph 6:4 he continues,

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

And in Col 3:21 he says,

Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

The reason he specifically mentions fathers here, and not parents or fathers and mothers in spite of the Good News Bible, is that fathers have a special responsibility to set the tone of the family, especially when it comes to discipline.

### The Disobedient Child

Of course, even the most loving parents with the best discipline and teaching cannot guarantee obedient children. Children are sinful, just as much as parents, and some children just are incorrigible.

But as we close this session it is worth noting the Old Testament verdict on such children, found in Deut 21:18:

If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him, <sup>19</sup>his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders at the gate of his town. <sup>20</sup>They shall say to the elders, “This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a profligate and a drunkard.” <sup>21</sup>Then all the men of his town shall stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you. All Israel will hear of it and be afraid.

This is a terrible warning - obedience to parents seems tedious and tiresome when we are young, even with the best of parents. Hebrews 12:10-11 makes this wise observation:

Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. <sup>11</sup>No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

The discipline of a human parent is imperfect, and even when it is good enough it often won't seem like it at the time. The value even of *good* discipline is often only appreciated later.

But no discipline, or the refusal of discipline by children, is a frightful as well as frightening thing. It indicates not just the breakdown of society, but the breakdown of a crucial relationship - the parent and child.

Disobedience to one's parents is as serious a thing as child abuse. But the courts don't see it that way! On the other hand, obedience to one's parents is the path of self-interest and blessing.

### The Obedient Child

And this is a calling for all of us. 1 Pet 1:14 calls on us all to be 'obedient children' in relation to our heavenly father because in this way we take on the character of the Son. It is impossible to be a true child without being an obedient child, just as it is impossible to be a true parent without being an obedient parent.

As society changes, so Christians have here a unique opportunity to model something quite different from the world around us.

We should not be known just for our discipline. Indeed, if we are known for our methods of discipline it shows we have in one sense failed, for what we should be known for is the love of Christian parents for their children and the obedience of Christian children to parents.

### Questions to Consider

- a. What is the most difficult thing about being a parent?
- b. What is the most difficult thing about being a child?
- c. Do Christian parents expect too much or too little from their children by way of spiritual development and responsibility?
- d. Can children and parents develop a 'joint policy' on discipline and obedience?
- e. Theologically, we are all God's children, and the kingdom of heaven belongs to 'such as these'. How should we express our 'childhood' before God?

## 4. Building Better Relationships in the Church and Society

### Introduction

So far, although our heading has been 'Building Better Relationships', we've concentrated entirely on the family. This has been deliberate because in biblical terms the *family* is the basic building block of society. We need to distinguish, of course, between the family and the *household*. There are many pressures today to say that the family can be many things and many domestic arrangements. But actually that isn't true either in theory or in experience.

In biblical times, the household was different from the family, consisting of a much wider circle of people and relationships. And so today, many people live in households which are not families. But the family is constituted by covenantal ties in one plane and generic ties in another.

In a family, a man and woman are covenanted to one by the bond of marriage, and they are related to their children by parentage. And these *family* relationships are far different from household relationships. Very few of us would go a hundred miles even to meet someone our parents shared a house with thirty years ago. How many of us wouldn't be prepared to cross half the globe to meet a brother we never knew we had?

So family *proves* itself to be stronger and more fundamental than mere friendship or household. And we shouldn't be surprised by this because families have a theological support and justification which explains their prominence and significance.

Families reflect something about God, and therefore embody something about the nature of reality itself. And therefore it is reasonable to suggest that the better our *family* life, the better our societal life.

### A Dead End Trail

Many years ago there was an unfortunate trend amongst evangelicals in the UK to play down the old individual virtues. We were told it mattered far more that society and institutions should be 'just' than that individuals should be too fussy about their own morality in areas like honesty or sexuality.

My response to that is you can't build a straight wall with bent bananas. I've never *quite* been able to think why I came up with that! But hopefully you see what I mean - if the individual ingredients are shoddy, the final result will be shoddy.

Police corruption, for example, will not be solved by making the Police Force *institutionally* just. It will be solved by having honest and just people joining the police and remaining honest and just. And as we can't neglect individual morality, neither can we neglect the family if we want to have good relationships in society. And as the Church is itself a society, we need righteous individuals and healthy families to build a righteous and healthy church.

### Family and Church

We know from Romans 16:15, 1 Corinthians 16:19, Colossians 4:15; or Philemon 2 that the early church used to meet in people's houses. Again,

Romans 16:10 and 11, or 1 Corinthians 1:11 or 1 Timothy 4:19 show us that just as today *households* were crucial units in the makeup of the church.

We also know from passages like Acts 16:15 and 33 and 1 Corinthians 1:16 that people got baptized by families and households. I'm sure that this wasn't on the basis of individual professions of faith. I don't think the children *were* given the choice, though I can't prove that exhaustively. It just seems to me, given the biblical view of marriage and family, these households were baptized because they were not merely a sociological unity but theological *unity*.

Again, the church itself is likened to a household or family. So Galatians 6:10 or Eph 2:19 speak of the 'household of faith or of God' (NIV 'family of believers').

Or again, in 1 Timothy 3:4-5, good household management skills are made a condition for church management, since the two organizations are directly comparable. So in 1 Tim 3:15 the church is specifically called the 'house [NIV household] of God', not in the sense of being the building, but the community, just as in v 12 deacons are also to be good managers of their 'house'.

None of this should be very surprising. The person who is disorganized at home will be disorganized in other areas as well. The well-organized person will be organized generally. But notice that organization isn't limited to tidiness (though I suspect it includes that). It also includes good relationships - the deacon is to be a one-woman man with good relationships with his children (1 Tim 3:12), just like the elder or overseer in 3:4-5.

And you'll notice also that this passage follows the very tricky stuff in 1 Timothy 2 about whether and how women can teach, which strongly suggests to me that the issue of women's ordination is not best tackled in relation to the *institutional* church, meeting in its own building and having its own rules and regulations, but in relation to the family and household as the building blocks of the church and society.

### Building Better Relationships

But having said all that, better relationships don't just happen. Ephesians 2:19 says that we have been brought together as members of God's household which is also the Temple of the living God built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets with Jesus as the cornerstone. A happy and effective church doesn't happen automatically. Ephesians 4:3 says we must make every effort to keep the unity a reality. Vv 4-6 say there is only one Lord, one faith, one baptism, etc, but that one-ness is easily disrupted when put in our hands.

And But the one-ness is a unity of 'individuals united in the truth'

