

# *An Evangelical Relational Theology*

## *A Personal Relationship with God As Theological Leitmotif*

**Derek Flood**

*Theology is something that should be done in community, and this is all the more true with a relational theology, so I invite your comments, contribution, and feedback here. Just follow this link to the [COMMENTS](#) section. Thanks.*

Relationships are at the core of who we are as humans. From Shakespearian dramas to the current top ten music charts, nearly every artistic expression is about relationship: songs of love lost and found, tales of our deepest longings and greatest tragedies. Whether it is an individual broken heart, or whole families and society's devastated by relationships gone bad, relationships reflect our deepest human struggles. They are the source of our most profound joy and pain. Relationships are what we are willing to kill and die for. What we long for most. What keep us up at night. It is in relationship that we find out who we are as humans, and what matters most in life.

Relationship is at the heart of the Christian faith, reflecting the fact that we as humans have been made for relationship. Jesus identifies the central message of the law and prophets relationally,

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Mt 22:36-40)

From love to hate, relationship is at the depths of sin and at the heights of moral virtue. Compassion, sacrifice, forgiveness, trust... betrayal, murder, adultery, revenge. Each is rooted in relationship. It is at the heart of both ethics and worship. All throughout Christianity's history, relationship has been the heart pulse of a vibrant faith. We see it in the aching prose of Augustin's "Confessions", the wounded and intimate visions of Julian of Norwich's "Revelations of Divine Love", and the stirring chords of John Newton's "Amazing Grace". It fills both the pages of hymnals and the shelves of Christian bookstores.

Talk about relationship with God is common in popular Christian culture. Spend time in Evangelical circles and you will hear people speak of our need for a "*personal relationship with Jesus Christ*" and stress that "*Christianity is about relationship not religion*". We can see that relationship truly is at the heart of both the biblical witness and the popular imagination. Relationship is so central to both who we are as humans and to Scripture that one can hardly think of a more fertile soil for theological reflection. But because it so easily appeals to us, there is also a danger in this becoming little more than a cliché or good PR. The idea of personal relationship needs to be brought out of the world of unreflected slogan, and examined with intelligence and depth, so that it consequently effects how we as Evangelicals think and act.

Throughout its 2000 year history, there have been two parallel movements within the Christian faith. On the one hand we find throughout the history of the church a focus on cultivating an intimate living

relationship with God (what Wesley would call “heart religion”) in devotional and renewal movements such as mysticism and pietism. Parallel to this we also find what can be characterized as a more intellectual theological focus, exemplified in the council of Nicaea which sought to work out the intellectual borders of orthodoxy. Both sides of this coin – a vital faith and biblical orthodoxy – together have long made up the core of what it means to be an Evangelical. Stanley Grenz, who I am deeply indebted to for many of the ideas in this paper, describes this in his “*Revisioning Evangelical Theology*” as a living relationship with God *cradled* in a biblical understanding. In other words, our personal story of salvation is connected to the larger Gospel story of God's coming among us in Jesus. Evangelicalism may of course entail more than this, but certainly not less.

At times these two steams would find themselves in conflict. On the one side were those who focus on right biblical doctrine as the heart of what it means to be “orthodox”, and on the other those who focus on a vital relationship with God as the heart of what it means to be “born again”. Today there is a tendency to characterize the biblical side of this coin as cold, dogmatic, and judgmental. Many people thus describe themselves as “spiritual not religious” placing themselves on the relational side of the fence. In contrast to this cultural drift towards relationship, I would like to suggest that we in fact need both together for a healthy faith, and that the absence of either is fatal. Doctrine absent of love, as Paul said, is as hollow as a clashing cymbal. But at the same time, love when divorced from its biblical context easily becomes little more than a reflection of our own culture's fallen values.

For example some have criticized the term “personal relationship” as being too focused on the individual aspects of faith. Such an understanding of personal relationship it is argued, reflects the individualistic, romanticized, and consumerist notions of our own culture, rather than the focus of love in the Bible which is always other-directed. Here we can see that when we remove relationship from its biblical context we end up simply mirroring our own culture's self-focused understanding of relationships. It is vital that a relational theology be rooted in a biblical understanding of relationship that reflects the heart and mind of Jesus. While salvation begins personally and intimately in our adoption into God's family, it cannot end in a myopic self-focused faith. As we spend time in loving communion with Jesus, we come to have his heart and compassion for the lost, the condemned, the sinner. Personal relationship with God begins individually, but then flows over into all of our relationships, caring for the least, loving our enemies, and showing the fruit of that genuine personal connection.

The idea of a *personal* relationship with God should not be taken to mean a privatized faith. A relational faith, by its very definition, is inherently social. As the epistle of John so powerfully says, if we say we love God, but do not love our brother, then we are deceiving ourselves. We cannot say we love God if we do not love those around us. Traditionally people have tended towards one or the other: either an intimate relationship with God that was so inwardly directed that it shut itself off from the needs in the world around it, or a faith that cares for the poor and the least but is detached and lifeless when it comes to God. As relational beings we need both the personal and the social to be fully ourselves. As Wesley said, there is “no holiness but social holiness”. If we take our definition of what it means to be holy from Jesus, then holiness does not mean separation, but a radical solidarity with the poor, the least, the unclean, and the sinner, sacrificing and striving for their liberation. As Christ shows us, the mark of holiness is love.

A relational focus entails that we place love as our highest priority above orthodoxy – placing righteousness over “being right”. As Paul says, if we have all the correct doctrines in the world, but

have not love, we are nothing. Biblically speaking, to approach doctrinal controversy with out love is a far graver sin than it is to be unorthodox. The shameful bloody history of Christendom is the sad testament to this fact. Countless people have been brutally tortured and slain in the name of upholding right doctrine. There is nothing right about that. The mark of good doctrine is the fruit it bears. A relational faith cares more about relationships and people than it does about being right. In fact, according to Scripture, a theology that is unloving is not right One cannot separate truth from love any more than one can separate the head from the heart. Cut off the head and the body dies. If it is not loving, it is not true.

## WHAT IS TRUTH?

If a vital living faith and biblical orthodoxy and the two pillars, how does this effect how we arrive at ultimate truth? What are the foundations of an Evangelical relational theology?

The Gospel tells the story of how in Jesus, God had come and dwelt among humanity, and in this relational encounter the disciples had found life. They were witnesses to this story, to this gospel, in order that we might encounter the same living Christ relationally as they had. As the Apostle John writes,

This we proclaim concerning the Word of life...We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. (1st Jn 1:1-4)

Martin Luther has said that the Bible is the manger in which Christ is found. Without the manger you will not find Christ, but you dare not confuse Christ with the manger. We love the Bible because in it we find Jesus, but we do not have a relationship with a book, but with the living Word, Jesus Christ. The Bible is the witness to that relational self-disclosure of God in history, with the primary goal not being a collection of intellectual information or doctrinal propositions about God, but in encountering us relationally with Jesus Christ so that we may come into vital salvic transforming relationship with God. Scripture is not an end in itself, but points us to that relationship.

The propositional truths contained in Scripture all have the purpose of relationship. They tell us about God's character, and where we stand in relationship to God. The Bible is thus filled with propositional truths that all point us to a living relationship. With this relationship understood as the central focus of Christianity, the role of Scripture comes into focus. In the Bible we encounter the story and message of Jesus, the personal revealing of God's heart to us relationally. Scripture is normative because it shows us what relationship should look like. It tells us how to see in our dark world through the eyes of hope, faith, and compassion. It shows us how to understand ourselves and others, not in terms of our own instincts towards self, but in the image of Christ who gave his life for the least. It shapes how we see ourselves and our world and what relationship should look like.

It is important to stress here that rooting theology in relationship is not the same as rooting theology in individual or collective experience. While our experience may indeed point to the objective reality of God, this view has been rightly criticized as subjective since it bases truth in human perception rather than in its source. In contrast, relationship is rooted in God's personal disclosure in revelation. Rather than beginning with subjective human experience, it begins with objective Divine self-revelation. In terms of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience), Scripture provides

the interpretive lens through which we can understand our *experiences*. Its story gives us the larger context in which to understand our stories, as part of that larger Gospel story. Scripture provides the starting point from which the trajectory of *tradition* begins, and acts to pull us away from the danger of worldly *reason* towards the godly wisdom of the cross which at first glance can appear as foolishness (1 Co 1:18-25). Reason when it begins in fallen and subjective human assumptions cannot lead us to God because our thinking is just as landlocked in sin as is all of our experience, but through God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ we can learn - as we abide in that relationship - to have the "mind of Christ". This entails learning to think in the counter-cultural and counter-intuitive way of Jesus where we lose our life to find it, and the greatest is a servant.

Again, returning to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, Scripture is primary because it informs *experience*, shapes *reason*, and is the source from which *tradition* develops, as well its constant spur to reformation. As the reformation motto has it: *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei* (the Reformed church is a church always reforming according to the word of God). But if Scripture is the foundation, we might ask: the foundation of what? What is the edifice that we seek to construct upon this foundation? The goal of biblical theology is not to construct a house of doctrine, but to enable Christlike relationship, and the means to that is God's relational self-disclosure contained in Scripture. Thus in understanding the purpose of Christianity as relationship, and theology as a servant to help the church live this out in right relationship to God and others, we see that Scripture acts at the center point of the Quadrilateral not to define abstract doctrinal formulas, but to shape how we *reason*, how we *experience*, and the direction our *tradition* develops out of and into. In other words, the goal of Scripture is to relationally encounter us with God's own self-revelation Jesus Christ.

While Scripture is central in all of this, it too has a servant function to lead us into relationship. Scripture is primary in the sense that it is the head servant that leads us to Christ. It is primary not in defining a picture of absolute reality as a man-made foundation of knowledge upon which we can rest our faith, but rather it is primary in leading us to encountering that Absolute Reality relationally who holds us up. The foundation is not a doctrinal system, it is Jesus Christ. This distinction is crucial, because our faith is not rooted in a static book, but in the living reality of the Lord Jesus which that book is a witness to. Jesus did not say "I have the truth" but "I *am* the truth" (Jn 14:6). Jesus is the living Truth that makes the pages of Scripture come alive.

Our faith is not so much about ascribing to timeless truths as it is about encountering the living Truth in the person of Jesus Christ in relationship. Those timeless truths contained in Scripture may help us in guiding us into right relationship, but it is relationship which is their focus and goal. Thus the purpose of the Quadrilateral is not to provide foundational criteria from which to derive truth *independent of God*, rather they are tools to help us to *listen* to what God is wanting to relationally communicate to us. In this relationship we can experience God's grace in our lives, we can come to have the mind of Christ, and we can take part in the community of faith where we live out Christ-likeness.

#### IT'S ALL RELATIVE

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral begins with the two pillars of the Catholic church: Scripture and tradition, and adds to these the two accepted methodological criteria of the Enlightenment: reason, and experience (experience here meaning in Enlightenment terms empirical evidence, reflecting Wesley's term "experimental faith" but also for Wesley reflecting the personal aspects of a vibrant living faith

which he calls “heart religion”). In this we can see the cultural setting Wesley was in: wanting to be true to his catholic faith, while at the same time being optimistic about the new possibilities and insights of modernism. Our current postmodern context gives us a less optimistic take on the Quadrilateral than Wesley had, not only revealing the fallibility and corruption of tradition and institutions of power as the Enlightenment had, but also the subjectivity and cultural bias of both reason and experience. Along with these three, the Bible has likewise been attacked as a fallible human document.

In reaction to this, Fundamentalists sought to show the inerrancy of Scripture. The problem is that even if we begin with the assumption of an inerrant and infallible Bible, by the time the manuscripts are translated into another language and culture, and then read by people who themselves are fallible and liable to error, there are so many levels of potential miscommunication that the idea of Scripture being inerrant or infallible becomes rather moot. Even if the Bible is infallible (which I affirm), we are not. So where does this leave us? It leaves us aware of our own fallibility, and in need of relational trust in the Absolute One. As our own foundations are stripped away, we are left with Jesus Christ as the foundation we cannot hold and which we did not build. Ultimately an affirmation of the infallibility or inerrancy of the Bible should not be a statement of human-based certainty, but of a God-based trust. Trusting God to be able to preserve and use Scripture to speak truth into our lives despite our limitations, and even more, to reveal God's heart and will to us relationally.

In this relational perspective, Scripture is not understood as the objective source of absolute truth that we build upon *independent* of God, but rather it encounters us relationally in the middle of our limitations and fallibility as subjective people with a living relational God who *is* Absolute Truth. We indeed have a sure foundation, not built on *our* having truth, but in Truth having us. This surety in dependency strips us of our triumphalism and hubris. Because of our human fallibility, we cannot claim to have a monopoly on truth, but Truth can have a monopoly on us when we open our lives up to the one who is Truth. Because we remain - even with the witness of Scripture at our fingertips - fallible human beings, we can get it wrong. But our faith is not held up by our perfect formulations or in *anything* we do, rather it is God who holds us up even in our weakness and dependency. Truth is not something we triumphantly hold, but Someone we humbly seek.

This understanding of God not only interacting with Scripture *initially* in its inspiration (God breathed), but *relationally* in its illumination (God breathing life into the page and revealing its truth to our hearts) has been highlighted by Karl Barth who makes Christ the foundation from which to understand Scripture. In this context, this means that the basis of the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture is not in the text itself so much as it is in the Spirit's ability to faithfully communicate Truth to us through the text, despite our limitations and sinfulness. Our foundation thus is in Christ. Christ is the eternal Logos of God, the Word that existed before a single word was ever written, and to whom all Scripture points. In this we see that truth is not abstract and static, but personal and alive. We know truth through being in a living active dependent relationship to the Truth who is Jesus. The Word of God in this sense is not found in static facts in a book, but in the *rema* word of God that breaths life into Scripture so that it becomes a sacrament for us where we can encounter the living God.

## RELATIONSHIP AS LEITMOTIF

The term “leitmotif” comes from the German and literally means a “guiding motif”. It originated as a musical term which referred to a reoccurring theme woven throughout a musical drama often

associated with a particular character or idea. Similarly Irenaeus speaks of Christ as the “scarlet chord” or “thin red line” that traces its way throughout all of Scripture. In the theological sense in which I am using the term here it refers to the overarching and reoccurring guiding theme found throughout the drama of God's story. This motif, or dominant theme is “leitend” in that it provides the tune, the theme, the interpretive framework from which to understand the whole storyline of theology and doctrine. In this sense one can think of relationship as the backbone that holds together the whole body of thought, or as the rock foundation upon which the house is built. We can thus expand on a relational understanding incorporating subtle and various metaphors and ideas in the same way in which the human body involves much more than a spine, or a house involves more than its foundation. So I do not wish to propose that we limit ourselves to relational language. Rather at the heart of all language about God, lies the foundation of relationship. It is the baseline through the entire spiritual symphony, pounding in your chest. It is the heart pumping life to the body, remove relationship, and the body dies. Relationship is not only the goal of theology, it is also the leitmotif, i.e. the central guiding concept and interpretive framework through which all doctrine and Scripture must be understood. This is perhaps best demonstrated with a few examples.

**Justification/Sanctification** Take for instance the doctrine of justification by faith outlined in the book of Romans. In the Reform tradition, salvation has been understood within a judicial framework. In this legal context justification is understood as our being declared not guilty, and then we begin the process of sanctification (inner change). Justification is understood in legal terms whereas sanctification, since it deals with inner healing, is understood in more relational ones. Arthur Walkington Pink, a classic proponent of this view writes in his *Doctrine of Sanctification*,

Justification respects its object in a legal sense and terminates in a relative change—a deliverance from punishment, a right to the reward; sanctification regards its object in a moral sense, and terminates in an experimental change both in character and conduct—imparting a love for God, a capacity to worship Him acceptably, and a meetness for heaven.

Thus we see that there is a dichotomy in understanding justification in legal terms while seeing sanctification in relational terms which creates an artificial divide between the two. Justification is portrayed as legal acquittal detached from our life and from God's working in us. A much better paradigm for understanding all of this is an entirely relational one. Just as in printing, type on a page that is “set in place” is referred to as being “justified”, so also justification in our lives involves a positional change where we are brought out of darkness and into God's family, and thus “set right”. Understood in this relational context justification is a change of identity, a relational change of who we belong to. We are no longer slaves to sin, but are liberated out of that estranged identity, and now belong to God. Being placed in our new identity, sanctification naturally flows from justification as we grow in love. Understanding the concept of justification by grace in Paul's epistles from this relational framework fits much better with the entire thrust of his writing and terminology, whereas in a legal paradigm the terms quickly become confusing and problematic.

**Sin** Likewise, sin understood in a legal context focuses on transgression. Understanding sin in relational terms leads to a much deeper understanding of the gravity of sin which has to do with our alienation and separation from Life. Sin in this context is again an issue of relational identity – whose we are. Outward transgressions and self-destructive behavior are really only symptoms of a life estranged from God. A relational understanding of sin as separation indicates that our solution is not found in law or performance, but in restored relationship.

**Humanity** We as humans are made for relationship, and outside of relationship cannot be truly ourselves. We have a relational identity, a social self. As babies we begin life as self-focused and gradually learn to see ourselves as beings in relationship as we learn to love and be loved. That relational love from our parents shapes our self-image, who we are. Our very identity as humans is found in relationship. This relational identity is not only found in our fundamental need to be loved, but also in our need to love others, to break out of our dehumanizing autonomy and understand who we are in terms of a we-orientation rather than me-orientation. A me-orientation, whether it takes the shape of insecurity and self-loathing, or pride and selfishness is the very root of sin. This root of sin in humanity is the break in our relational identity. Sin ultimately entails cutting ourselves off from our relational identity by becoming self-focused, or self-loathing. Healing sin therefore involves not simply a change in action, but more deeply a change in our identity from autonomy to a restored relational identity. We are truly human - in the image of God - when we love.

**Faith** Faith and belief are often approached in scientific terms as the affirmation of a fact that one has no evidence for. In this context faith can take on the characteristics of a magical force that we conjure up by sheer will power. If we have enough of it we can move mountains. Understood relationally faith and belief are simply about trust. To believe in God is not simply to affirm a fact, but to engage in a trust relationship. The same goes for knowing. Knowing in a biblical context is not about intellectual surety, but relational knowing, about the surety and intimate familiarity of trust. To know truth does not mean we possess independent absolute knowledge, but rather is a statement of trust that we are known by Truth.

**Works** Being born again involves going from a self-focused identity separated from God, to a new creation as our true relational selves reconciled and adopted into God's family. This new relational identity changes the nature of works: Outside of a relationship with God we are self-focused, and works have the purpose of self-justification. We try to earn our way into God's love, but love is not bought, it is given. With our relational identity in Christ, works are no longer about self-justification, but about *social* justice, about agape love. The works Christ did, he did not for himself, but for others. This *justice for others* was the focus his Gospel of good news to the poor. We too, because we are loved, in turn love God, ourselves, and others.

**Truth** Jesus said "*I am the Way, the Life, and the Truth*". Truth is not an abstract static fact, but a living person. Truth is relational. Cross referencing Jesus' statement we can see that truth is a *way*, and that truth is *life*. Truth is a *way* in that it is interactive and prescriptive. Thus we see Jesus say to one person "go home"(Mt 9:5-6) and to another "leave home" (Mt 8:21-22). Truth speaks relationally and prescriptively into our lives in order to tell us what our next step on the way is. Truth is that which brings *life*. We can say something that is factually accurate, but if it is said without love, if it produces death in a person, then this is not truth. Truth liberates, redeems, heals, loves, and brings life out of darkness. Truth can be painful, but in the context of a relational understanding we can see in Jesus that there is no contradiction between truth and love. Jesus is the Truth (Jn 14:6), and he is love (1 Jn 4:8). Life here is not understood in a biological sense, but in the relational sense of sharing in the abundant life of God. Similarly, the Way is is personal and relational. We do not follow a fixed path, or an impersonal philosophy, but follow Jesus as he leads us relationally.

**Gospel** Evangelism is about reconciling people into relationship with God. It is therefore not so much about conveying information, as it is about encountering people with Jesus relationally. In this our very communication of the Gospel takes on relational form as well: The gospel is conveyed most powerfully

not in what we say detached from relationship, but in how we live out Christ before people and show grace by our lives. As the old hymn goes, “*they will know we are Christians by our love*”. We are the Bible they read. *What* we are communicating is relational, and *how* we communicate it is relational. This does not rule out preaching and conveying information, but it puts it in the context of speaking truth in our relationships with others in order to open people's hearts to a relationship with God. A relational approach to evangelism not only involves individual salvation, but addresses the larger societal relationships as Jesus did with his message of good news to the poor.

The ministry of Jesus was not only of forgiveness of sins, but addressed every aspect of our humanity: physically (healing the sick), mentally (casting out demons), morally (forgiving sins), and socially (caring for the poor and least). Likewise we must understand the Gospel in terms of reaching out to people both as individuals and as people in society, encountering all of who they are with Christ. The Gospel is at once personal and social, as are we. Thus a relational approach to evangelism not only involves individual salvation, but salvation on a larger societal and social scale as well – the redemption of all creation.

**Predestination** We are as humans predestined for a relationship with God. It is what we were made for. Likewise the idea of being elected and chosen should be understood relationally to indicate God's love for us. We are desired, sought, courted, by God to be his bride. So a relational reading of Romans 8 would be: God intimately knew us in our inmost being as he knit us together in our mother's womb (foreknew), he intended for us to come to him through Jesus and to shaped in his image (predestined), and so God calls and draws us by grace (called), sets us right by bringing us out of estrangement and into relationship (justified), and in that relationship we are glorious. The idea of predestination is thus not about predicting or determining the future, but about God's loving intent in creating us for relationship and intimate knowledge of us as his beloved creation.

**God's Divine Nature** Omnipotence ultimately means that we can trust God. It does not mean that nothing bad can happen, nor does it mean that God exercises meticulous control. It simply means that although we will have trouble in this world, we can trust that God is bigger than our darkness. God's omniscience means that we are intimately known by God. The focus being biblically on God knowing us relationally, knowing our hearts better than we know ourselves. Omnipresence means that God is here, with us, in us, closer than close. It means we are never alone. As the psalmists cries out: Where can I go from your presence? If I fly up to the heavens or make my bed in the depths of Hell, God is there in the darkness.

**Divinity of Christ** The incarnation is about God's self-revelation of his very being to us relationally. It is about personal self-disclosure for the purpose of bringing us into relationship. It reveals that God is with us in our doubt, suffering, and even in our wretchedness. God is among us, Emanuel.

**Trinity** One person described the Trinity as so complex and precarious that if one were to speak about it for more than two minutes they would be in heresy. The main point of the Trinity is relationship. It shows loving relationship as inherent within the Godhead. Relationship is part of God's very being. The Trinity also describes the primary ways that God *relates* to humanity as Father, Son, and Spirit. The point of the Trinity here is not to understand it in the terms of some complex mathematical formula, a sort of divine Pythagorean theorem, but to recognize that the Trinity is all about relationship – who God is and how God relates to us.

Detailing how a relational interpretive framework would play out in all of Scripture would of course be a monumental task, but I hope that the above examples, while only a brief sketch, can nevertheless serve as a catalyst to further exploration. Regardless of whether the language that Scripture evokes is the judicial court (justification), the slave market (redemption), or even botany (abide in the vine) each motif is at heart pointing towards relationship. Relationship is the leitmotif through which all Scripture and doctrine should be understood.

*Theology is something that should be done in community, and this is all the more true with a relational theology, so I invite your comments, contribution, and feedback here. Just follow this link to the [COMMENTS](#) section. Thanks.*