

“Nurturing Healthy Relationships”*Genesis 1-4***Contemporary Contact** – *Why focus on relationships?*

Ever seen or experienced this? **SLIDE1** - no signal Or this? **SLIDE2** - We have temporarily lost our signal This kind of thing can happen while we're watching TV or talking on the cell phone right. It's not uncommon to find ourselves in a dead spot or out of range (e.g. while walking on a trail in Port Moody). Unfortunately I think that this sort of thing actually happens with disturbing regularity in many marriages, families, and other relationships. Each of us has known the awkwardness or pain of that moment when connection is missing or lost, and we may not know what to do when it happens and how to reconnect.

BLANK3 Years ago, playwright Moss Hart told a story from his childhood, when his father took him shopping hoping to buy him a Christmas present he would like. As they walked along the streets window shopping his young eyes were drawn to chemistry sets and toy printing presses. But his father, a very poor man, couldn't afford them so each time they would find something Moss wanted, his father would ask the store keeper the price, shake his head, and then move on. Occasionally his father would pick up a smaller, less expensive toy and try to attract his son's attention to no avail. Eventually, they came to the end of the shops without having bought anything. Moss recalled what went through his mind:

“I heard [my father] jingle some coins in his pocket. In a flash I knew it all. He'd gotten together about seventy-five cents to buy me a Christmas present, and he hadn't dared say so in case there was nothing to be had for so small a sum. As I looked up at him I saw a look of despair and disappointment in his eyes that brought me closer to him than I had ever been in my life.

I wanted to throw my arms around him and say, ‘It doesn't matter...I understand....This is better than a printing press...I love you.’ But instead we stood shivering beside each other for a moment...and started silently back home....I didn't even take his hand on the way home, nor did he take mine. We were not on that basis. Nor did I ever tell him how close to him I felt that night—that for a little while the concrete wall between father and son had crumbled away and I knew that we were two lonely people struggling to reach each other.¹

¹ Quoted by Gail & Gordon MacDonald in If Those Who Reach Could Touch, pp. 1-2.

Biblical Contact

Life is meant to be shared. Our need to know and be known, to love and be loved, to be relationally connected is a deep longing and hunger within us. It is worth asking and exploring why this is the case and what the implications are.

Structural Contact

A) Foundational Relationships

Ultimately relationships are so foundational to our well-being because God has made us in his image, and God is intrinsically a relational being, existing as three-in-one (Father-Son-Spirit) from all eternity. “*The most foundational truth I know,*” said Professor and Pastor Darrell Johnson, is that **SLIDE4** “*At the centre of the universe is a relationship. It is out of that relationship... and for that relationship that you and I were created and redeemed.*” We were created in God’s image to be and live **connected**. That is why HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS **SLIDE5** are at the heart of the Bible’s overall message which will be exploring in a broad way this morning and in more detail in the weeks to come.

Though we all appreciate some alone time, no one functions well all alone. There is a reason why solitary confinement is used as a form of punishment whether for a child sent to a “time out” chair or a prisoner put in “the hole”. We were made with social and relational abilities and needs. It is part of what it means to be truly human as the researchers in this clip illustrate. **Video Clip²**

There is nothing is better than a good relationship and nothing worse than a bad one. A bad relationship weighs and wears on us. A good relationship nurtures and sustains us. When we open our Bibles we find that: (a) in the

- **Old Testament Example** – every one of the Ten Commandments speaks about healthy relationships—with God and with one another.
- And in the **New Testament** – Jesus tells us that there is nothing more important than to learn how to love God and others well (Mt. 22³⁶⁻³⁹).

² Show a portion of “In Brief: The Science of Neglect” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bF3j5UVCSCA>

In the beginning, God established four foundational relationships for each person: **SLIDE7** a relationship with **God**, with **self**, with **others**, and with the rest of **creation**.³ These relationships **SLIDE8** are the building blocks for all of life. When they are functioning properly, humans experience the fullness of life that God intended (Hebrew = *shalom*). This is the kind of human flourishing that we see in Genesis 1-2. It's what happens when humans are being & doing what God created us to be and do. Let's look at each of these in a bit more detail.

1) Relationship With God = central & essential (CORE, Foundational) **SLIDE9**

This is our primary relationship, the other three relationships flow out of this one (I love the picture in Genesis 2¹⁰⁻¹⁴ of the river flowing out into all the earth from the centre; cf. “flowing from the throne of God”^{Rev.22:1}; cf. Jesus’ imagery in John 4¹⁴; 7³⁷⁻³⁸). The Westminster Shorter Catechism, (explain⁴) written in the 17th Century, has a short but succinct statement of our primary purpose as human beings’: our purpose is “*to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.*” (cf. Dr. David Ewert’s comment in Greek class that John 1¹ “The Word was with God” = face to face). We were designed to experience the presence of God as our heavenly Father and live in a joyful, intimate relationship with Him as His children.

- recall the “Still Face Experiment” (Gen. 1-2 = walking & talking with God)

2) Relationship With Self **SLIDE10 – unique human ability to be self-reflective, “self-talk”, “self-image” that shape our identity & sense of self = God-given (e.g. “Praise the LORD, my soul...”^{Ps. 103:1}; “Why, my soul, are you downcast...”^{Ps.42:11}).**

To even speak of a relationship with oneself (in a biblical way) is difficult because of the cultural context in which we live—a self-centred culture obsessed with *self-fulfillment*⁵ which claims that the way to true inner peace is to go backpacking through Europe until you “find yourself.” Too many people

³ See diagram in Steve Corbett & Brian Fikkert’s book, *When Helping Hurts*, p. 54.

⁴ Catechesis is the practice of teaching the Christian faith. New converts to Christianity were taught the central truths of the faith during the first four centuries of the Church’s existence (e.g. the Didache), but this practice was largely abandoned with the rise of Christendom. Protestant Reformers sought to revive the practice.

⁵ The phrase *self-fulfillment* is a nineteenth-century one, with no precedence in history until then. See Mark Sayers, *The Vertical Self*, pp.xiv-xv.

only have what Dorothy Sayers call, the “horizontal self” (vs. the “vertical self” whose identity is rooted in God—“I am a child of God”). The secular minded person can only look sideways for one’s sense of identity—thus a horizontal self-identity (i.e. whom am I compared to others—in how I look, what I can do, etc.). When God is given no place or weight or role in informing our identity, people look to others around them for approval and acceptance.⁶

- Cf. Luther’s helpful summary using the Latin phrases *Excurvatus ex se* (turned or bent outward) vs. *Incurvatus in se* (turned or bent inward on oneself)...
- Even long after becoming a Christian and a pastor I discovered that I had the inner bent of being a people pleaser (“approval addiction” is common among pastors & people in the helping professions. We get our primary fix from the accolades of others, or the achievements of our kids, etc.).
- Identity crisis when our services were no longer needed (Who am I?).

But we were created with a vertical identity, as people made in the image of God, as his beloved children (cf. Abraham my friend^{Isaiah41:8}; beloved disciple^{John}).

3) Relationship With Others **SLIDE11** – God created us to live in loving relationship with one another. We are not islands (though in a fallen world we try to be)⁷. We are made to know one another, to love one another, and to encourage one another to use the gifts God has given to each of us to fulfill our *callings* as his partner people. In the creation story each stage of God’s amazing creative work is accompanied by a divine assessment. Look, for example at Genesis 1¹⁰...“And God saw that it was good.” (cf. 1^{5,12,18,21,25}). But in Genesis 2¹⁸ God comes upon a state of affairs in his creation that is “not good” (read it). Human community is a necessity for being who and what God designed us to be. In an age of relational famine, when people are hungry for a caring community, our primary task as Jesus’ followers is not

⁶ “Those with a horizontal view must ensure that they keep communicating the right messages to their peers and society at large. For them, ‘sin’ is not fitting in; ‘hell’ is social irrelevance.” Mark Sayers, The Vertical Self: How Biblical Faith Can Help Us Discover Who We Are in an Age of Self Obsession, p.19.

⁷ See the opening of the movie “About A Boy” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2y6KU02Q6cl>

simply to proclaim the good news, but to demonstrate it in our life together.

But because people are so important to God, he also warns us about the painful consequences of destructive relationship patterns. The toxic effects of envy and pride within one's very own home and family are also played out before us in the opening chapters of the Bible (turn to Genesis 4). Rather than being his younger brother's friend and protector, Cain allows his jealousy and anger to get the best of him. As the firstborn in the family Cain did not take kindly to playing second fiddle to his little brother.⁸ Nor did he welcome the counsel of his heavenly Father who warned and advised him of his need to master his sin and anger. Instead of mastering his jealousy he became mastered by it when he nursed his grudge and killed his brother in cold blood. The first family we find in the Bible is a broken family, torn by violence, anger and abuse. It stands as a shocking and sobering reminder and warning of how bad relationships can become when we fail to make and keep God and his self-giving way as the foundation and fabric of our lives.

4) Relationship With Creation **SLIDE12** – cultural mandate (Gen. 1²⁸⁻³⁰; 2¹⁵)

The cultural mandate of Genesis 1²⁸⁻³⁰ teaches that God created us to be stewards who “care for”^{2:15} his creation (**read**). This includes both subduing hostile forces and protecting what is vulnerable in order to preserve it and to produce abundant life. Note that while God made the world “perfect,” He left it unfinished. This means that while the world was created to be without defect, God *called* humans to **SLIDE13 manage the world** (to turn dreams and possibilities into realities) and to learn to **sustain ourselves** and others via the fruits of our stewardship (healthy interdependence).

Of course, as we have already noted, the grand story of Scripture does not end with creation. In Genesis 3 Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and their hearts were darkened. The Genesis account records that all four of Adam

⁸ It is interesting that the mindset of abusers, those who misuse power and control, is that they think of themselves as CENTRAL, SUPERIOR, and DESERVING—a mindset we find in Cain.

and Eve's relationships were broken **SLIDE14** : their relationship with God was damaged **SLIDE15** (intimacy with Him was replaced with fear); their relationship with self was distorted **SLIDE16** (dignity displaced by shame); their relationship with others was broken **SLIDE17** (the "blame game" started fast and furious so that deep connectedness was replaced by conflict); and their relationship with the rest of creation became distorted **SLIDE18** (from fulfillment in their work to frustration & futility).^{Rom.8:18} Because the four relationships are the building blocks for all human activity, the effects of the fall are seen and felt in every area of life.

If we neglect or refuse to make and keep our Creator as the master of our house and relationships, we should not expect to fare any better than the first human family and human communities. But the turning point in human history happened, Genesis tells us, when (**read Gen. 4²⁶**) "At that time people began to call on the name of the LORD." In the NT God's restorative work happens through the sending of his Son Jesus as the Messiah, the Hero of the story, the one who has the power to break the disconnecting & destructive power of sin in our lives and turn our heart back to their true home. **[ALPHA 1 Video Clip]**

Conclusion / Application

Q - Have you lost your signal, lost meaningful contact in any or all of your foundational relationships? Isn't it about time you got connected?

Do what Cain didn't, make God the master of your heart and house.

Spirit of the living god, be the Gardener of my soul.

For so long I have been waiting... – experiencing a winter of the soul.

But now, in the strong name of Jesus Christ, I dare to ask:

Clear away the dead growth of the past,

Break up the hard clods of custom and routine,

Stir in the rich compost of vision and challenge,

Bury deep in my soul the implanted Word,

Cultivate and water and tend my heart,

Until new life buds and opens and flowers.

Amen.