

The Healing of Relationships

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When relationships between people are strained or broken, each of us has our thoughts as to what may be wrong and as to what may be done to remedy the situation. It is easy enough, particularly when it is others who have the problem, to think we may know how things can be resolved. The truth is rather that there is a hiatus in humanity in which we all share. It is also true that any situation we encounter proves to be more complex than we thought it would be. It takes God to understand all the dynamics of a human being in their situation. And it takes God to bring salvation or healing to our broken relationships.

I once heard a writer comment on the way in which Paul deals with a matter of personal relationships in the letter to the Philippians. He calls his readers to have the mind of Christ, that is, to count others as more significant than themselves and to consider the interest of others rather than their own. He then proceeds to describe the mind of Christ: unprotective of his equality with God; wholly self-giving and taking the form of a slave; obedient to the extent of a degrading death. The commentator suggested that to use this outpouring of Christ's life to teach us to humbly serve others was like using a steam hammer to crack a walnut. (We may relate better to the image of a pile driver thumping away at a pylon.)

Some of us will know that it takes a steam hammer to crack some 'nuts', particularly when it comes to ourselves! But is this not precisely the way we must always come to matters of personal relationships? We are made in the image of God. As such, there are factors at work in our relationships that will only yield to divine reasoning and to God's own engagement with us. The pride in our fallen-ness needs to be encountered by the dignity of Christ's humanity (which is to say, his humility).¹ It is this engagement and this healing that we need to consider.

Given that relating to one another in love is so basic to what our life is about, it becomes the source of our deepest pain when relationships are not in order. It is often the way in which the Lord alerts us to our need of him and his word. Appropriately, therefore, we are warned not to heal the wound of the Lord's people (or ourselves) lightly:

¹ I am indebted to Noel Due for this helpful contrast.

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How can you say, 'We are wise,
and the law of the LORD is with us'?
But behold, the lying pen of the scribes
has made it into a lie.
The wise men shall be put to shame;
they shall be dismayed and taken;
behold, they have rejected the word of the LORD,
so what wisdom is in them?
Therefore I will give their wives to others
and their fields to conquerors,
because from the least to the greatest
everyone is greedy for unjust gain;
from prophet to priest,
everyone deals falsely.
They have healed the wound of my people lightly,
saying, 'Peace, peace,'
when there is no peace.
Were they ashamed when they committed abomination?
No, they were not at all ashamed;
they did not know how to blush.
Therefore they shall fall among the fallen;
when I punish them, they shall be overthrown . . . (Jer. 8:8–12).²

To heal a wound lightly would be to cover over wounds that will continue to fester. Relationships thrive where there is love, righteousness, honour and so on, and so these are the things that must be addressed, that is, where people are willing to be addressed by what God says about our relating.

RELATIONSHIP IN HOPE

Isaiah is shown a vision of a day when the peoples of the earth 'shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea' (Isa. 11:9). He was acquainted with the selfishness and social disorder of his own day and did not have glib solutions or empty hopes to offer, but he knew that Israel's Lord would not allow his creation to wither and die. His new King David would reign, by the Spirit, in wisdom and understanding and with true justice. The wicked would be destroyed and the godly live without threat in the earth over which God reigned supreme.

It is helpful to have this vision clearly in mind lest we become domestic, banal and expedient in our thinking and expect no more from God than pleasantness and the avoidance of crises. God has in view nothing less than the health and salvation of humanity and the renovation of the entire creation. What we are receiving now through the gospel is not an amelioration or containment of our awfulness but the foretaste of this final victory of God over every evil. In the light of this, we may look realistically at the indifferent array of human relationships, delight in what is true and real and weep over what is amiss. But we may also pray, together with the early church, 'that times of

² Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the English Standard Version.

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refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord' (Acts 3:20a), and that the world may see, in the community life of his people, what he is about.

PRESUPPOSITIONS

I have some pre-suppositions that it may be helpful to declare!

Firstly, human relating is intended to reflect the relationship of Father, Son and Spirit, and to be the overspill of God's relating to us out of that communion. We are made in his image. Our relationships don't have 'a life of their own', and the idea that they are in some way 'our property' expresses the pride we first learned in Eden. Our task is to know who God is and what he is doing with and for us and to represent that relating to others in our own affections and actions. Any other kind of relating is a form of idolatry—a loving of the creature rather than the Creator.³

Secondly, because some of our most painful experiences are because of strained relationships, it is not surprising that a whole industry has risen up to deal with the fall-out from relationship problems, if not the healing of them. We may be tempted, as believers in God, to add our programme to those already on offer, but then again, perhaps not! Much that is on offer in the community may be commendable and what we have to say does not need to be seen as an alternative to anything. It is what it is, the salvation and blessing of God on his people, and it does not need to be compared to anything else.

Thirdly, we may think of relationship healing as a process and, in life, this is how it may appear to be. However, our starting point as those who have received the gospel of Christ is that God has acted decisively to restore us to himself and to one another and that it is to this health that we are called, not as a process but as a participation in

³ Conrad Cherry, in *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal* (Anchor Books, New York, 1966, pp. 179f.) summarises the thought of Edwards:

Yet virtue must consist chiefly and primarily in love to God not only because otherwise one is inconsistent with a proper notion of God. Above all, when a system of morality does not define virtue as essentially love to God—when it, rather, drags in this aspect of virtue as the factor which 'will give a beauty' to virtuous benevolence to mankind—morality verges on idolatry. Loving chiefly the creature rather than the Creator 'puts down' God to an 'inferior place'; it subordinates the source of all being to an 'infinitely inferior object.' Put another way, if virtue does not have its basis in disinterested benevolence to God, one's love is idolatrously selfish and one's morality is shallow. Self-love is quite capable of stimulating man to love a '*particular person, or private system.*' Man may, out of self-love or private interest, love any number of particular beings. And the problem of such love is not simply a problem of lack of *breadth*. Edwards does believe that love to God will appropriately *extend* one's love to intelligent existence in general; yet one may extend his affection into the widest possible circles—beyond self, children, and family 'to a longer circle,' and still his love may be 'exclusive of Being in general,' i.e., rooted in love of self rather than in love of Infinite Being. What Edwards sees as the ground of true virtue, what he views as alone transcending selfish love, is the propensity of heart directed toward God, toward the source of all beings, rather than toward either a part of or a collected sum of created beings. Apart from disinterested love toward God, one's love lacks *depth*. For no love limited to individual beings and unfounded on affection toward God—let that restricted love 'be more or less extensive, consisting of a greater or smaller number of individuals'—reaches into the reality which comprehends and upholds the totality of particular, finite beings. Only love to God gives depth to one's morality by giving depth to one's love of creation. And only the human love which is basically disinterested love to God overcomes the setting up of the human-human self-interest and the creature loved on the basis of that self-interest—in the place of the Divine. A morality founded on benevolence toward the source of existence is qualitatively, not simply quantitatively, different from a morality founded on the self or the self's love of its particular objects.

In the light of his understanding of the nature of faith, it is clear that Edwards in his treatise on virtue is calling for religious faith as the foundation of morality. Human virtue consists chiefly in the disinterested love to God included in faith.

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health. Our engagement with people as they come to the truth may be a process but we bear witness to a healing which can come in a moment and which is sure and complete, even while human apprehension of it may be gradual. Having received this healing, of course, there is a process of maturation in living in what God has given, but this can never take the place of the gift.

From one point of view, everything in the Bible has to do with the healing of relationships so, for clarity, I have limited what I want to say by presenting and speaking to five propositions that I believe are true to the gospel and true in life as we experience it.

HEALED RELATIONSHIPS BEGIN AS A ONE-SIDED AFFAIR

It seems fairly obvious to say that a healed relationship requires two parties to agree. If all we had was ourselves, I suppose it would be true but, then, God has been relating to us without the luxury of our agreement throughout our history, and the story of our reconciliation with him is wholly his doing.

Paul says that God showed his love to us ‘while we were still sinners’, and that ‘while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son’ (Rom. 5:8, 10). We may say that he has created a reconciliation-in-Christ for us to receive. By nature of the case, the reconciliation must be received but the initiative and the dynamic of the reconciliation are wholly God’s. Our starting point for a human relationship is not ourselves and another person or group of people but God’s call to us as we approach a relationship. We come to others in the manner he has come to us. The Bible does not give us an ideal to implement. Rather, we are commanded to love, to have a proper view of ourselves, to serve, to forgive and to do many other things that arise from the new relationship with God that we have in Christ.

Jesus says, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’. This is what our Father does in sending his rain on the just and unjust. ‘You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matt. 5:44, 48). The same pre-supposition underlies his parable of the unforgiving slave who is forgiven a major debt and then accosts the slave beneath him for a minor one (Matt. 18:21–35). The anomaly of a slave not acting generously, reflecting the generous way he has been treated, is shocking to the other slaves and they are ‘greatly distressed’. It is unacceptable to the master who acts ‘in anger’ and argues, ‘should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’

Sometimes, a confrontation is required and Jesus tells us the spirit in which this is to be done. The whole point of going to this person and telling him his fault is to gain a brother. We are to talk to the offender personally. If he doesn’t listen to a private entreaty, he may listen to two who visit him. And if not, the whole church is to be involved. If the danger in which the offender stands is not serious enough to finally involve the whole church, perhaps the matter should not have been raised in the first place. The need under consideration here is not that the offended person should get justice but that the offending person needs an opportunity to act justly. A spirit of wanting to gain a brother is the best opportunity for this to happen. We may pick up the spirit of this kind of relating when we hear Jesus saying, while on his way to the

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cross, ‘do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children’ (Luke 23:28). The issue in his mind was not the injustice he was suffering but the injustice for which others would have to answer.

By nature of the case, a healed relationship consists in two parties being reconciled to each other but the will to bring this about and the actions that lead to it usually begin with one party. When we are addressed by Christ in the gospel, and when we comprehend what has happened to us, there is a desire to seek reconciliation, we can find a ‘soft answer that turns away wrath’ (Prov. 15:1) and show love that ‘covers a multitude of sins’ (1 Pet. 4:8). We will not succeed in gaining the friendship of everyone but we will have brought the love of God to bear upon a relationship and have left the door open for the other party to respond.

It is quite a revelation to discover that love does not depend on agreement. The gospel has secured us in the Father so that we don’t need the approval and agreement of others in order to approach them, serve them, honour them and even receive from them. Because of the love given to us, the needs of others can become more important than our own. This is the beginning of all healing of relationships.

EVERY BROKEN RELATIONSHIP IS A CALL TO KNOW THE FATHER

Paul tells us that he kneels ‘before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named’ (Eph. 3:14–15). He kneels⁴ in worship and is expectant of what the Father will do in those for whom he prays. The letter has given us the reasons⁵ why he kneels in worship. Forgiveness has ushered us into the Father’s eternal purpose (1:3–14). Reconciliation means that the animosity between Jew and Gentile is gone and that we are now one household for the Father (2:11–22). There is a mystery to reveal—that all nations can now receive what God had promised to Israel (3:2–13). These things are reason enough to have us all kneeling before the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, deeply contented, submissive and full of hope.

Paul identifies the Father as the one ‘from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named’ (3:14).⁶ We know him as ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1:3) because the Son has determined all that we know about this Father. But now, Paul says that all families, whether they are biological, cultural, national, religious or any other sort of family, are named *from* this Father. This seems to mean that all family-hood has its origins in and is under the authority of the Father. No experience of family, anywhere, is apart from this Father. Moreover, no personal or social relationship can claim ‘a life of its own’ where it is not subject to the redemption announced in Jesus’ name. No wonder Paul kneels!

⁴ Bowing, as distinct from the normal Jewish standing for prayer (e.g. Mark 11:25; Luke 18:11, 13) may be an indication of deep need or feeling (Luke 22:41; Acts 7:60; 20:36).

⁵ I take it that the three occurrences of ‘For this reason . . .’ (1:15; 3:1, 14) are linked and, by reference to what preceded them, give us the reasons for his kneeling in 3:14.

⁶ The fact that he has just referred to Jews and Gentiles being formed into one household with a common inheritance, could have raised the matter in his mind. But then, he links it with families in heaven as well. He seems to say that there is no experience of family-hood that does not have to do with the one who names it—meaning that he is its origin and its authority.

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We could observe that being in awe of, and being submissive to and trusting of God are not natural traits of sinners. Something has happened to the proud human spirit. How great is the grace of our Father to bring us through all the experiences of life to know him! Clearly, Paul anticipates that this knowing of the Father will yield quite different relationships in homes and society. He prays for us to be enabled by the Holy Spirit, to know the love of Christ, and to be filled with God. Then he calls us to live worthily of this calling, in gentleness and in patience and spells out how this must happen in the experiences of households. Paul says we are to 'be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God' (Eph. 5:1–2). The letter has much to say about our being beloved (1:4; 2:4; 3:17, 19) and about our living in love (4:15–16).

Our families have been a witness to this Fatherhood, sometimes good and sometimes otherwise, and never perfect. Then again, we have all had responses to this human fatherhood. This matter is so important that God made relationships with parents an integral part of his covenant with us: 'Honor your father and your mother' he commands (Exod. 20:12). Where we will not honour our parents, of necessity, our relationship with the Father is compromised. We need a revelation of the heavenly Father to break into this situation.

Behind many an unhealthy relationship lies an unresolved hostility about what happened between a child and their parents. The presenting issue may be with an employer or neighbour or spouse, but the anger is already present, waiting, as it were, to be provoked. Whatever provoked this anger in the first place, whether it was the unreasonable or uncaring parents or the rebellious child, is not the main issue. The fact is that the child has never forgiven the parents and so the rage is maintained and spills out into other relationships. They are still bound by their anger. The same may occur between siblings or between any people in a close relationship where the other person has had authority. Trying to deal with a broken relationship when another hostility is feeding into the situation is problematic, if not impossible to deal with.

If all our relationships have over them the authority of the Father, we can be sure that nothing has occurred that is apart from him (not even the falling of a sparrow, as Jesus said). We can also be sure that nothing has happened that is apart from his purpose to bring us to himself, and nothing that is beyond his redemptive action. Certainly, no situation is 'out of bounds' for our praying and seeking the Father's intervention. We need to forgive those who have done wrong. We need to turn from the rejection of authority if that has been part of the problem.

We tend to think that events can be traced back to the good or bad that people have done and forget the word of Jesus concerning the blind man he healed: 'It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him' (John 9:3). Is not this a more hopeful way to come at relationships? What does the Father have ready to pour into our otherwise restless, reactive and self-serving relationships?

Every new crisis in human relationships takes us back to the Father. We are not sufficient of ourselves. Only he has 'the whole picture' and only he has the grace for us to be able to deal with things truly and redemptively and eternally. Parents cannot rely on their loving to nurture their children well. Spouses cannot rely on their affections to remain faithful to each other. The same is true for every relationship.

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Something had gone deeply wrong in the relationships of the woman Jesus met in Sychar. She had had five husbands and now what we would call a defacto husband, a matter of great shame at that time. There is no indication as to who was to blame for her sorry life. As the story proceeds, we realise that Jesus knew her situation from the beginning of their encounter. But his focus is not on the woman's situation but on the Father who seeks true worshippers. 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is [speaking] to you . . .' he said, and then taught her about true worship of the Father, and the Father who sought true worshippers (John 4:10, 21–24). She was deeply moved by his knowing her situation, but this in the context of his offer of water, and then, true worship, regardless of her fractured and shamed life.

Jesus had begun teaching Israel about 'Your Father in heaven' from early in his ministry. This is the most frequently occurring phrase in his Sermon on the Mount. He could see his countrymen labouring under a hypocritical leadership that prescribed piety when it should have proclaimed the freedom of the Father's gifts for his children. The constant reference of Jesus to 'your Father' points to him being the Fountainhead of true living, a fact that would be acknowledged by others when people saw their good works and gave glory to their Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16). There is no ultimate healing of relationships that does not involve people being blessed children of the Father, so this is the matter to which we must keep returning.

Being a peacemaker has to do with being children of the Father. The children will be acknowledged as such in the coming kingdom (Matt. 5:9). In the context of the Sermon on the Mount, this must mean having the qualities that are referred to there by Jesus: being poor in spirit, meek and gentle, being hungry for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, and—not to be forgotten—being ready to rejoice when persecuted. God himself is the source of this peace and that is why peacemakers are called his children. They have learned from him. And, in the Sermon, it is Jesus himself who is showing the way, as the beloved Son of the Father, and as the one who will make peace by his blood (Eph. 2:15–27; Col. 1:20). Don Carson quotes Broadus, 'There is no more godlike work to be done in this world than peacemaking'.⁷ Perhaps we should add that there is no area of life where it is so necessary to know that it is God who does this work.

PROPITIATION IS AT THE HEART OF LOVING

Every culture has its way of avoiding love and putting something else in its place—respect, justice,⁸ charity, libido, pleasantness, ambition, sport, music, even 'quality time' or 'communication' or anything to keep the pain of our loss of love from ourselves, or at least, from others. The fact remains that, without love, there is no reality or permanence in our relationships. Human relationships are not a matter of method and skill but of affections, and affections that are focused on the Lord and the promise of life he has

⁷ D. A. Carson, 'Matthew' in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8 (Matthew, Mark, Luke), F. E. Gaebelein, ed., Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1984, p. 135.

⁸ Christopher Koch, in *The Year of Living Dangerously*, has photographer Billy Kwan saying, 'What then must we do? We must give and give, wherever we can. I have decided that Tolstoy was wrong, and that political solutions are for those with no hearts, only consciences—and consciences go rotten: hence tyrannies' (ch. 10, p. 129).

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given to us. Jesus summarised the law of God as love for God and for neighbour (Matt. 22:37–40).⁹

In fact, we cannot endure the loss of love and seek to fill it with surrogates that, by nature of the case, cannot satisfy and so they become a craving, and a source of anger when they are not satisfied. The apostle Peter says believers in Christ have purified their souls by obedience to the truth ‘for a sincere brotherly love’ (1 Pet. 1:22). Many a relationship becomes strained because of idols entertained, whether openly or secretly. Other things are blamed for the breakdown but the real cause is that the person’s mind and heart are preoccupied with the demands of a lust and so there is no affection left for the person by their side. Ultimately, only the power of the gospel in the power of the Spirit can break this idolatry, addiction or lust, but it must be overcome for love to flow freely.

John has a similar thing in mind when he writes that ‘all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions¹⁰—is not from the Father, but is from the world’ (1 John 2:16). The driven-ness of people in pursuing their lusts (or idols, as suggested by 5:21) tells us that what they are chasing is not something given freely and generously by the Father. We may say, ‘they are on their own’. They need to know the Father, and to know that he provides for them richly out of his generosity.

John says that ‘love is from God’ (1 John 4:7). This observation came after a command that we love one another. The implication is that we can now love because ‘love is from God’. The central action in God’s love finding its outworking in us is the work of propitiation through Christ’s death.

There is no person, nor any day for any person, nor any relationship, that does not need this truth. We must all deal with what happened in Eden and in the story that emerged from it (Genesis 3–11). The development of the tragedy is worth documenting because it opens up the story of each person in Adam. I will put it in the first person plural, and the present tense, given that it is our story:

- Satan incited us to pride and autonomy, to wanting to be ‘like [as] God, knowing good and evil’. This turned out not to be as attractive as it seemed.
- We now have to deal with the guilt of rejecting the word of God.
- We now experience shame—the loss of our true glory—and must hide and cover our loss.

⁹ In *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1992, p. 564), Leon Morris writes:

Anyone who loves God and people wholeheartedly is not going to come short in religious observances, nor in doing what is proper to other people. In short, when anyone loves in the way Jesus says, there is no heed for a host of hair-splitting definitions of when an obligation has been discharged and when it has not. As I have written elsewhere, ‘Jesus swept aside all such pettifogging nonsense with his revolutionary insistence on the centrality of love and for good measure he added that the teaching of the prophets is included in this command. At one stroke he did away with any understanding of the service of God that sees it as concerned with the acquiring of merit or with an emphasis on liturgical concerns. What matters can be summed up in the one word: love.’ This does not, of course, mean that all other commandments may be ignored and that all that one must do is love. The commandments of God are serious and must be observed. But Jesus is saying that it is only when we love that we can truly obey them and that without love we do not really understand what the commandments mean. In one way or another all the commandments are expressions of God’s love. Love is the thrust of them all, and it is only as we love that we fulfil them.

¹⁰ The same word for ‘life’ (*bios*) is used in 1 John 3:17 suggesting that here, he has in mind an arrogant trust in the affairs of this present world. Rather, this world’s assets are to be at the service of our loving service of others.

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- Threat of retribution looms. We are now without hope and without God in the world and experience fear.
- We must find new ways of relating. We evade questioning, and justify ourselves by accusing others.
- Some (Cain in the Genesis story) reject the promise of a child who will bruise the tempter's head.
- When this happens, anger reigns and this is followed by violence, revenge becomes a way of life and generations descend into violence and social unworkability.
- God's grace preserves the race but our hearts remain the same.
- We build kingdoms to secure ourselves apart from the presence of God.

In Eden, Satan seemed to have won the day, but God had announced the provisions that would lead us toward the day when he would reverse what Satan instigated.

The Elder John takes us back to this story when he says, 'the Son of God appeared . . . to destroy the works of the devil', and 'We should not be like Cain' (1 John 3:8, 12). The only way back to the love for which we have been created is to receive the love of God revealed through propitiation. He explains how this love comes to its goal in us (1 John 4:17–19). Its progress, in relation to our topic, may be best traced by taking John's statements in reverse order:

- 'We *love* because he first loved us.' Love is the whole of God's requirement of us so we must come to him in the way he has provided for us.
- 'whoever *fears* has not been perfected in love.' The continuance of fear signals that love has not yet come to its goal in us.
- 'fear has to do with *punishment*.' Fear is present because, through lack of faith in Christ and obedience to his command to love, we are left exposed to God's wrath (cf. 1 John 3:18–22).
- 'perfect *love* casts out fear.' This perfect love must be God's love, through Christ bearing God's wrath in our place, and now coming to its goal in us (1 John 4:10, 12).
- 'There is no *fear* in love.' We can reassure our hearts when they are condemned because we believe in Christ and love our neighbour (1 John 3:18–22).
- 'as he is, so also are we *in this world*.' Christ lived before the Father in this world without fear, and this is now true for us who are in him.
- 'we have . . . confidence for the *day of judgment*.' The day we need to have confidence about is the last day. Assurance about this day casts its wonder back into the present and we are free to love.

Only the salvation of God can deal with the judgement of God under which we stand. This is what God has done in propitiation and so God has provided for humanity to live in love.

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Eduard Thurneysen claims that the only content of a pastoral conversation is the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.¹¹ He continues:

No situation exists, however difficult, into which God cannot open a door and find a way. This is what forgiveness means. It is the work of God (John 9:3) by virtue of which sin, in all its seriousness and with all its consequences, is canceled out in Jesus Christ; it is a settled matter, neither to be rehashed nor to be feared again. Sin is no longer to be taken seriously now, but only the work of God; it means that man, now really accepted by God and no longer left to himself, may and must go on living; it means that with the forgiveness of sins a new day has dawned for him. He is placed under the governance and guidance of God. Jesus Christ has taken over his life; he has made it his own life so completely that he now bears all responsibility for it. Such is Jesus Christ's acceptance of the responsibility for my truly sinful life that the Catechism can say: 'He preserves me so that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair of my head can fall; yes, everything must also serve me to my salvation.' Thus we speak, and not only speak, but think and live within the Christian community by the forgiveness of sins.

WIDENING OF AFFECTIONS IS TO BE THE WAY OF OUR PRESENT LIFE

Paul had a somewhat tortured relationship with the Corinthians. His second letter in our New Testament is possibly the fourth he wrote to them and, even within the letter, there appear to be different strands of relationship in evidence: is he pleased with them, or still troubled? He claims that his heart is open wide to them and that they are not restricted by him. They are restricted in their affections and he calls on them to widen their hearts (6:11–13). Similar appeals come in other letters, especially in Galatians (4:19) but also in a more general way elsewhere (Phil. 1:8–9; 1 Thess. 3:12; 4:9–10; 2 Thess. 1:3).

How, then, were the Corinthians constricted? Were they suffering an emotional block of some kind or just needing an exhortation to do a little better? Rather, as Paul shows, they were deeply affected by 'super-apostles' whose ministry was impressive in worldly terms and appealed to the pride native to their fallen humanity (11:5). The behaviour and accomplishments of these false teachers seemed to them to have to put Paul's service in a poor light and they now wanted to believe that he had constricted them in their progress and experience. Paul avers that, in fact, the opposite is true.

'For the love of Christ constrains us', he says (5:14). He explains that his actions are either for God or for the Corinthians, not for himself (5:13). He says that Christ died so we would all live for him instead of for ourselves (5:15). He commends himself to them 'in every way', including great endurance, kindness and genuine love (6:4–6). He opposes this to having a superficial view of people, or a view 'according to the flesh'. He is not saying that we need to look beneath people's outward presentation but that we need to see them according to what Christ has done for them and according to how he has newly created all who have turned to him.

Paul's appeal continues: 'We have spoken freely to you . . .' (6:11). That is, he has proclaimed to them the love of Christ in his reconciling work. Here is love working at

¹¹ *A Theology of Pastoral Care*, trs. J. A. Worthington et al., John Knox Pr., Richmond, 1962, p. 147. We may not be happy with the extreme form of this claim, but it is certainly true that no effective change takes place in any of us apart from the forgiveness of sins.

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the only level that is real. By nature of the case, ministries that are based in appearance can only deal with superficialities and cannot produce anything eternal. When he asks them to widen their affections, he is not asking them to be more loving to him, he is asking that they consider whether what these false apostles are saying is true, or whether the message Paul has brought them is what truly goes to the heart of their situation and brings them to God and to one another in love. 'We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.' When Paul tells us that he is constrained by the love of Christ, there is an implied exhortation to us all to receive and to live by this same love. Don't receive this grace in vain (6:1)!

Only the gospel can widen our affections. So, let our thinking and actions be constrained by this love of Christ! Start from the point of view that we died in the death of Christ. Live for him. Refuse to see any person as what they are in themselves and, rather, see them as the object of Christ's saving death, and see fellow believers as God's new workmanship.

We tend to see things according to our own affections and mind-set. If the love of Christ has captured our own affections, if we know God made Christ to be sin for us, then what we see in other people will be quite changed, and what we feel we can do for them will be broadened.

WE CAN NEVER AVOID THE ORDERS OF CREATION (OR ONTOLOGY)

When Paul sets out what we may call his social ethics in Ephesians, he specifically tells us about husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves. Elsewhere, he speaks about authorities and subjects. In Ephesians in particular, the whole subject is raised under the heading of being filled (a verb) with the Spirit, part of which is submitting (one of several infinitives) to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:18–21). The entire Christian community, when it is filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit, is ordered by submission to Christ and to one another.

As a subset of this general mutual submission, he specifies: '... wives to your husbands' (with no further infinitive). Then, husbands are to love their wives as Christ does his church. Children are to obey their parents and parents are to avoid provocation and to nurture their children in the truth. Slaves are to obey their masters eagerly and masters are 'to do the same to them'; that is, 'rendering service with a good will as to the Lord'. All have duties to perform for the other. What a remarkable community! Is this order idyllic, or archaic, or perhaps a recipe for disaster? How can Paul address churches and tell them to live in such a manner?

Our tendency is to focus on the problems of a harsh authoritarianism, the natural result of living in Adam, and it seems inconceivable to the natural mind that authority and submission could be thought of as a general motif under which to address human relationships.¹² But Paul does so, and proclaims that this is the outflow of the work of the Spirit. We could say that the way of the Father for his creation is established

¹² It is probable that Genesis 3 acknowledges the problems we will have with authority when God announces that the woman's desire will be for her husband (to rule him) and he will lord it over her.

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through the work of Christ and the Spirit. Pride insists on a place above our calling, but grace restores humility and a true estimate of our place in life.

The abuse of authority and submission pollutes the relationships for which we are created. An abusive parent, husband, employer or ruler does untold damage to those under their care and to the free flowing of community life, and defames the name of God in whose image we are made. On the other hand, denying the validity of authority and submission in the various relationships of life destroys those relationships. We are what we are in the given place we have in life and not apart from that.

Let us take the case of a husband and wife, given that Paul spends most of his time on this matter. He links his argument with creation: ‘. . . a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’. He argues that this creational order has been fulfilled in Christ being Bridegroom to his church. Christ has understood what husbanding is all about and prepared a bride for himself by laying down his life for her. He did the task of a slave for his disciples by washing their feet, a sign of the greater washing he was about to perform for them, and for the church, his Bride. Or, to use the phrase from Philippians, he took the form of a slave (Phil. 2:7). His Lordship was not compromised by this action; rather, it was established. His dignity is in his innocence and love, not in position and pride. So Paul tells husbands to love their wives, three times in Ephesians 5, and to do so as Christ loved the Church.

Paul also asks wives to submit to their husbands, ‘as to the Lord’. He does not make the actions of either husband or wife to depend on their spouse but on Christ. Inevitably, we need to take action as we are able, to protect ourselves or others from abusive behaviour; but to deny the validity of submission, *as we are able under the Lord to do so*, is to deny the creation God has so wonderfully made for our enjoyment and maturity. A wife who is not secured under the authority of her husband does not understand the meaning of her personhood and must fight to secure herself in other ways. If she does not honour her husband, she has no basis on which to expect the obedience of their children. Then again, the security of a child relates directly to the love that a husband has for his wife and the willingness of a wife to honour her husband. The integrity of love between a mother and father is the most important gift parents can give to their children.

Geoffrey Bingham writes, ‘Each hierarchy is a dynamic social entity of love which is purposive and functional in the will of God, so that all relationships are in unity and are essential to the true working of the entity and the fulfilment of the will of God’.¹³

Parents bring true authority to their children as they tell them the story of the Lord’s presence and power in this world and expect them to be obedient to this revelation. We could argue that every command is a preparing of them to hear the command of God in the gospel, not just a means of keeping order—though that is the result. Children have no chance of coming into their spiritual inheritance (living long in the land the Lord is taking them to) unless they obey and the easiest time to learn this is when they are children. The actual security of a child (not just as a feeling of security) is dependent on their relating to the authority under which they were born. This is true, not only when they are young but throughout their life. Obedience to

¹³ Geoffrey Bingham, *All Things Are Yours*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1996, p. 127.

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parents is preparation for obedience to the Father and his Son and Spirit, and preparation for the other relationships that will secure the future. There is more at stake than human rights. We are the image of God.

Slavery was common in the first century world.¹⁴ Many people were employed in this manner and some were well employed so that they lived better than other people who were free. Many of the members of the early churches were slaves, judging by the emphasis given in addressing them in New Testament letters. However, the fact that slavery was common did not make it desirable and, in many cases, it was harsh. However, Paul judged that the truth of love-authority and love-submission could be expressed in the institution of slavery. The question is not who had the right to give commands but what service each owed to the other in love for Christ.

It may be that the idea of mateship, so cherished in Australian life, is a sentiment or a camaraderie that tries to exist without reference to authority, that is, without reference to a father, or to *the* Father. In fact, everyone needs to acknowledge the authorities placed above them. If that obedience requires something that is outside of the Father's will, their obedience must be to the Father first and this will register as disobedience, but our reasoning would be that we should obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29). We are still obedient in being disobedient.

The disciple Peter, not known for being 'a shrinking violet', learned from Christ that he did not have to anxiously defend himself. Much of his letter (1 Peter) demonstrates the new spirit that arose from having a conscience at peace and the assurance of a Father in heaven. He now tells us to 'Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution' (2:13), including slaves when suffering unjustly (2:18–19). He says this is what Jesus revealed when he bore our sins, and adds, 'By his wounds you have been healed' (2:22–25).¹⁵ He recognised that the relationship difficulties we have are much more to do with our own sickness than with our situations. He was personally grateful for the healing that had come through the gospel and encouraged his readers to share this freedom with him.

CONCLUSION

Our review of the healing of relationships has taught us that we may hope in God for our families and communities. It has taught us not to get locked into a justice or demand mentality but to trust the work of God in Christ and by the Spirit to bring fresh life into tired and tawdry relationships. We never need to be determined by what has happened in the past because forgiveness enables us to begin again. We can accept that there is no simple answer to problems because we are made in God's image and are always dealing with God as we deal with one another. If we understand the practical fact that God is our Father, we may be deeply settled even while many unresolved issues remain. We have seen that God has not given up on any of his purposes for humanity and that in the coming age, no-one will harm another because

¹⁴ See *Slave of Christ: A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ* by Murray J. Harris (NSBT, vol. 8, IVP, Downers Grove, 2001) for a helpful treatment of slavery in the first century world and the usage of this term by Christ and the apostles.

¹⁵ The healing refers back to Isaiah 53:5.

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they will all know the Lord. The Father will be 'all in all'. It is the certainty of this that spills back into the present. We may live in this present world, among many who see things differently to ourselves, and not feel that we have to prove our view of things to be right, but to live in the truth and let the witness of that have its own effect. And we may pray for times of refreshing to come from above.