

LEONARD SWEET

author of *The Gospel According to Starbucks*

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most

HOW WE GOT THE POINT *but* MISSED THE PERSON

Previously released as *Out of the Question...into the Mystery*

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WHAT MATTERS MOST

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To Lyn and “Picasso”



with lasting gratitude for your  
loyalty, laughter, and love.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I write this book with one foot on a banana peel. I'm one of the least qualified persons to publish anything on the subject of relationship. I confess to Cro-Magnon capacities for canalizing and cannibalizing the emotions. I can't tell the difference between a makeover and a makeup. I trudge through the boggy world of relationships like a troglodyte. In the words of the old African American adage, I'm trying to "hit a straight lick with a crooked stick."

There are many who are more qualified than I to speak on these matters. But often those who are most qualified are least likely to work on the subject for fear of misleading or being misled. In other words, they're too smart. I'm too dumb and weak, which makes me unafraid to be wrong and hopeful for the healing that comes from immersing oneself in hot water. Besides, I have no choice. I am compelled to do this. Relationships are more than recreation. They are the very work of being human...and divine.

It seems that I'm either spending my life writing about Jesus or spending my life struggling *not* to write about Jesus. No one knows this better than my doctoral students, who heard this book as lectures and whose contributions are reflected in both text and endnotes. From George Fox University, I thank (Cohort 1) Peter Balaban, Greg Boulton, Eric Brown, Dwight Friesen, Craig Henningfield, Chad Johnson, Donna King, Raymond Leach, Terry O'Casey, Ray Peacock, Earl Pierce, Shane Roberson, Rob Robinson, Warren Schatz, Marty Williams. From Cohort 2, I thank Rick Bartlett, Tony Blair, Doug Bryan, Jason Clark, Winn Griffin, Rick Hans, George Hemingway, Nick Howard, Todd Hunter, Randy Jumper, Eric Keck, Mike McNichols, Ken Niles, Craig Oldenburg, Kevin Rains, Rob Seewald, Rick Shrout, Dwight Spotts, David Wollenburg. From Drew University, I thank Thomas Biatek, William Brown, Kenneth Harrington, Todd Harrington, Alan Lyke, Daniel Meister, and Rachel Shoemaker.

While I was writing this book, my major mentor, Winthrop S. Hudson, died. I have continued to be mentored by certain people, however, some of whom have read the manuscript; others have not. Philosopher Stan Grenz has

shown us all that *classic orthodoxy* and *postmodern* are not oxymoronic. Brian McLaren's superconductive brain and vanguard spirit inspire me to explore the hidden depths and heights of faith. Judge Jesse Caldwell III, who is everything I am not—a master at the art of friendship—continually inspires me with his undentable spirit and inexhaustible creativity. Biblical scholar Loy Witherpoon should not be held accountable for my antique but unique musings on certain passages. But I'm grateful for his heads-up that some of this is about as welcome as a piano at a Church of Christ convention. Joe Myers makes support a sport. My WaterBrook editor, Ron Lee, gave me encouragement when I needed it the most and did his best to minimize Job's (wonderfully mistranslated) warning: "Oh...that mine adversary had written a book" (31:35, KJV). He is every author's dream-come-true editor.

There are as many kinds of teachers as there are kinds of love. My family is perhaps my greatest living mentor. Elizabeth, Thane, Soren, and Egil are like the sidebar quotes in this book. Sometimes they agree with my narrative. Sometimes they don't. But their teacherly treachery blesses me with the magic of high-definition-colors wisdom and everyday affection. My research assistant, Betty O'Brien, endured multiple surgeries on her eyes while I was writing this book. Even though her vision is now severely impaired, she still insisted on bringing this project to its conclusion. Our friendship is one of my life's richest treasures.

My ministry is approaching a ten-year anniversary: The nightmare job of handling my schedule and coordinating my calendar has been done by one person. It is my deep appreciation for her friendship and partnership in my ministry this past decade that I dedicate this book to Lyn Stuntebeck and her sidekick companion, "Picasso."

This book has been a long time coming, partly because I have censored my thinking about the Abraham-and-Isaac story for the past two decades. My worst nightmare is for my faith to depart from classic Christian orthodoxy. When I began struggling with this text, which for me is the most difficult passage in the Bible, I adopted the strategy of desert father Antony (251-312) when he was troubled by the meaning of a demanding text in Leviticus. He withdrew into prayer and silence, begging God to send Moses to teach him the meaning of this sacred text before he said anything.<sup>1</sup> Before Antony, the theologian Origen (185-254) did the same, and during his self-imposed mora-



torium, begged his students to pray with him for “spiritual edification” as he struggled with a hard text.<sup>2</sup>

Not until I discovered that my approach to this story was not original but was part of a living and lively tradition of Jewish exegesis did I venture to speak my mind. If my exegesis is misguided, I ask for your forgiveness and forbearance. As with everyone who tries to make an initial case, or challenges received opinion, I may have overegged my pudding. But if you stay at the table with me, see if you don’t find yourself singing with deeper meaning than ever before this Isaac Watts classic:

Not all the blood of beasts  
On Jewish altars slain,  
Could give the guilty conscience peace,  
Or wash away the stain.

But Christ, the heavenly Lamb,  
Takes all our sins away;  
A sacrifice of nobler name  
And richer blood than they...

Believing, we rejoice  
To see the curse remove;  
We bless the Lamb with cheerful voice,  
And sing His bleeding love.<sup>3</sup>

—LEONARD SWEET  
Drew University  
18 April 2004

## WHERE DID WE MISS THE PERSON AND GET THE POINT INSTEAD?

**W**e know how to save the world. We just don't realize that we know what we know.

The way to save the world is not through more rules to live by, but through right relationships to live for. People are fast losing the art of being with one another. So it's not surprising that the number one problem in the world is people's living disconnected lives. They are detached from God, from others, and from creation. People are losing the art of living with one another.

Relationship is the soul of the universe. And the soul is sick.

How sick? So sick that the worlds of business and finance are proclaiming a biblical truth that the church has lost: "The Right Relationship *Is* Everything."<sup>1</sup> We have entered a relationship economy where high-quality customer relationships are the key competitive advantage. When you purchase a cell phone, the cell-phone company takes a loss. Why? Because they aren't selling cell phones, they're seducing you into a long-term relationship. (Ever try to get *out* of one of these "committed relationships"?)

Real estate developers no longer sell houses, they sell relationships.<sup>2</sup> In more and more cities and suburbs, new houses are designed with a retro look—the most prominent feature being a large front porch. And in more and more new subdivisions, houses are grouped together in a friendly arrangement that caters to neighbors getting to know one another. Walking trails and community greenbelts, neighborhood playgrounds and even community garden plots, all underscore the importance of spending time with other people. You might need a house, but you want a relationship.

When I consider that I'm more intimately involved with two of my credit cards—American Express and Starbucks—than I am with the family that lives three doors down the street, then it's time to rethink relationship. Did you know that American Express keeps a detailed transcript of every conversation they have with their customers? I found this out when the check I used to pay my bill bounced. As soon as I received the overdraft notice from my bank, I called American Express, explained what had happened, and asked what I should do. They told me not to worry; they would simply resubmit the check.

I asked if they would freeze my American Express account until the check cleared the bank. Not at all, they said. As long as I was talking to them, my credit card would work just fine.

A week later my checking account still showed no payment made to my credit card company. So I again called American Express and, once again, they weren't worried about it. They had a record of every call I had made to them, and just to relieve my anxiety, they said they would update my account as if the bill were paid. What mattered, the American Express representative said, was that "we're talking, and as long as that relationship is still strong, we'll work with you and make it as easy as we can."

At the same time I was talking to American Express about my bounced check, I was also dealing with an unpaid monthly bill to the Christian school two of my kids attend. The school provides my children with as good an education as I can imagine anyone's receiving. We have been part of this school from its inception, and to help get it off the ground, we had been making significant donations above and beyond the tuition fees. Since money was tight at home just then due to a two-times-the-estimate construction project, I called the school and alerted them that I'd be late making the current tuition payment, but that I'd get back on track the following month.

They were not happy. If my bill was not paid in full, they informed me, they would not release my kids' report cards. I apologized for adding to their cash-flow problems but reminded them that they knew I was good for the money. I even offered to pay interest on the overdue fees. Penalize me, I said, but not my kids.

Their response was polite but principled: Rules are rules. No payment in full, no report cards.

I have to agree with Chase Bank: "The right relationship *is* everything." But it's not with a bank. Or even with Starbucks or American Express, as much as I rely on them in my everyday life. It's time for individual Christians and the church to become as relationship driven as some of the leading multi-national corporations.

## THE TAIL THAT WAGS THE WORLD

To save the world we need something more biblical than higher standards. We need higher relationships. We need less to be "true to our principles" and

much more to be true to our relationships. To save the world we don't need the courage of our convictions. We need the courage of our relationships... especially the courage of a right relationship with the Creator, the creation, and our fellow creatures. Our problem in reaching the world is that we've made rules more important than relationship.

The inherent tension that exists between rules and relationship is not of interest only when we're talking about Christian witness. This same tension lies at the heart of the church's struggle for identity in an increasingly hostile culture. And a misguided allegiance to rules over relationship also has impoverished the pursuit of the life of faith for every one of us. This book is a first attempt at a corrective. We need to rediscover Christianity's "trimtab factor"—the small but crucial element that orients the course of the entire church, as well as the lives of individual Christians. In fact, it's not an exaggeration to say that this trimtab factor orients all of life. The trimtab we're seeking is the truth of relationship and its power to save.

Philosopher/inventor Buckminster Fuller asked his students to imagine they are on the deck of an ocean liner with one thousand people. Rocks are looming ahead and the passengers must find a way to steer the ship to safety. One person stands on the bow, pointing out the rocks, and the crowd of passengers tries to guide the ship by shifting their weight. They run from one side of the deck to the other in response to the guide's instructions.

But Fuller, a fulcrum figure in science and philosophy, suggested that there's a much better way to guide the ship to safety. In the steering mechanism of an ocean liner is a piece of metal six inches square, called a trimtab.<sup>3</sup> One person moving the trimtab can steer a great ship more effectively than even ten thousand people running back and forth on the deck. The trimtab is the place to position yourself to take action that will maximize your impact on the course of human history.

The more complex our world becomes, the more important it is to find that small trimtab simplicity—to concentrate on the one strategic thing that will steer the world to safety. When things aren't going well, every coach will tell you it's time to return to the basics.

If you would speak to others with authority, you must first speak to God with intimacy.

—PASTOR AND THEOLOGIAN  
JOHN BAKER-BATSEL

When a history of Christianity can be written in which Jesus is largely absent,<sup>4</sup> any coach with his eyes open will tell you, “It’s time to work on blocking and tackling.”

When studies of the gospels can be written without the name of Jesus appearing even once in the index, it’s dribbling, passing, and screening time.<sup>5</sup>

Vice versa, when one reviewer can criticize a textbook on philosophy because “space is given to people whom one might not expect to see considered in any detail,” and he lists as his first complaint the inclusion of Jesus,<sup>6</sup> it’s keep-your-head-down and follow-through-with-the-swing time.

When an average of twelve to fifteen churches in the United States are closing their doors every day, it’s time to find the trimtab.

When atheist Michael Martin can evangelize people into atheism by asking, “Who wants to be like them?” (meaning Christians) and claiming that following Christ involves being “punitive, unforgiving, violent, mean-spirited, hypocritical and inconsistent; and [if we followed Christ] we would tacitly approve of slavery, forsake reason, and have no opinions on the central issues of the day,”<sup>7</sup> it’s definitely trimtab time.

When half of all high school kids are sexually active, and there’s only a 7 percent difference (43 percent) between the sexual habits of non-Christians and conservative Christian teenagers who are involved in a church youth group, it’s time for the trimtab.<sup>8</sup>

When the special millennium edition of *The Economist* begins its treatment of the last thousand years by observing: “Already Christianity, the faith once almost synonymous with Europe, is decaying in its homelands—as its rival, Islam, is not,”<sup>9</sup> it may be trimtab time.

When a Baptist Internet entrepreneur can advise from experience: “Never do business with someone with a fish on his business card,” and when the loudest horns and meanest swerves come from cars with fish on their bumpers, it’s time for the trimtab.

## HOW DID WE GET HERE?

How did we arrive at the place where Christians are providing some of the best arguments *against* knowing Christ? In the words of one Christian leader, “because Christians are largely irrelevant...if there’s a life-changing

message to present, we'll make it boring and put it in a context you're not involved in."<sup>10</sup>

Over a two-thousand-year period, but especially in the last two hundred years, we have jerked and tugged the Christian faith out of its original soil, its life-giving source, which is an honest relationship with God through Jesus the Christ. After uprooting the faith, we have entombed it in a declaration of adherence to a set of beliefs. The shift has left us with casual doctrinal assent that exists independent of a changed life. We have made the Cross into a crossword puzzle, spending our time diagramming byzantine theories of atonement. How did the beauty of Jesus's atoning work get isolated from the wonder of restoring an authentic relationship between God and humanity?

It's time to replant the Christian faith back into the ground from whence it first grew. Henry David Thoreau once warned that words, when derived properly, come with the earth still clinging to their roots. In the case of Christian faith, the soil has been scrubbed off the roots until much of the fruit of the Christian life has lost its juice—leaving it dry and sour and distasteful.

What else would explain why the broader culture now understands Christianity to be tacky and tactless? How else to explain the Christian faith becoming so graceless, artless, joyless, intellectually impoverished, and fearful of the future? Why are Christians the ones who like to hover around the Tree of Knowledge, as pastor and theologian John Baker-Batsel puts it, baiting the serpent and battling each other, rather than being the people who like to play in the garden?<sup>11</sup>

The church may clutch Jesus to its side, but it no longer clutches Jesus to its insides. For the Jews, the unique place where God encountered humans was the temple and (before that) the tent or tabernacle. For Jesus, the unique place where God encounters humans is the human heart. But the church has embalmed Jesus in rules, codes, canonicities, and tradi-

We want more from religion now than rules. We want something to help us find meaning in life when all the rules cease to make sense, when all the old systems break down or fade away. We want a glimpse of God here and now.

—THEOLOGIAN  
JOAN CHITTISTER<sup>12</sup>

tions that have everything to do with the church's saving itself and nothing to do with the church's saving the world. Sometimes it seems as if the Buddha has

more authority for Buddhists than Jesus has for Christians. In fact, Jesus has been so far removed from Christianity that non-Christians are starting to co-opt Jesus as a guide for life. Even some members of the Jesus Seminar are now starting to realize that “Jesus is missing and we miss Jesus.”<sup>13</sup>

When much of the church has devolved into an arrogant, clubby institution that looms so large it obscures a person’s view of Christ, it may be time to return to the Jesus trimtab. No, it *is* time to return.

### WHEN, AND WHERE, DID WE LOSE JESUS?

Given the universal hunger for relationship, and the church’s habit of pushing relationship to the back of the bus, we must answer this question: How did we lose the Jesus trimtab? The simple—but precise—answer is that it got lost in the shift of focus from relationship to object.

The first Christians didn’t proclaim a creed or a statement of faith; they didn’t demand assent to a list of facts; they proclaimed the Cross; they proclaimed the Resurrection; they proclaimed the coming kingdom of Christ.<sup>14</sup>

What is almost unbelievably remarkable is that God chooses friendship, available to everyone, as the means of changing the world, its people, and societies.

—MICHAEL E. WILLIAMS,  
“THE MIDWIVES’ STORY”<sup>15</sup>

They proclaimed Jesus. Faith is not vested in creeds, or invested in institutions, but vetted in relationships.

Western Christianity is largely belief based and church focused. It is concerned with landing on the right theology and doctrine and making sure everyone else toes the line. The Jesus trimtab, in contrast, is relation-

ship based and world focused. It is concerned not so much with what you believe as with whom you are following. It is less invested in maintaining and growing an institution and more invested in Jesus’s passion for saving the world.

We have yanked ourselves from the soil of relationship with God so we can do the work of tidying things up. We are now sanitized and correct, factual and precise, but tragically bereft of relationship. We are disconnected from our source so that we have become sterile. We may be doctrinally correct, but we have become spiritual cadavers.

We don’t need more time off to meditate and conference and “reimagine.”

We don't need to search out a new solution or a reengineered vision for the church. We have the answer already, but we're working hard to silence it. Thankfully, Jesus won't be silenced. So we might as well shut up and learn something.

We need to replant the faith in the rich biblical soil from which it has been uprooted.<sup>16</sup> To that end, this book explores the two most famous father-son stories in the Bible: Abraham and Isaac, the *locus classicus* for what it means to live “by faith”; and the God-the-Father, God-the-Son story that we read throughout the Scriptures. You will also find sideways glances at other father-son stories, including that of the prodigal son.

Getting our roots back into the soil involves asking and answering the trinitarian questions: Why did God create us? What does God require of us? What is the essence of “faith in God”?

The bottom-line benchmark from the ancient Hebrews? Again a simple—yet precise—answer: “To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”<sup>17</sup>

The answer of a Palestinian Jew named Jesus? “For God so loved the world...”<sup>18</sup>

In other words, whether you're reading the Old Testament or the New, the answer is “relationship.”

## AT DAWN WE SLEPT?

For the past decade a variety of voices have claimed that we are living in a “new reformation.” Some have called this the Postmodern Reformation or the Second Reformation or even the Third Reformation.<sup>19</sup>

God does seem to be up to something big, and I confess to having used reformation terminology myself. But I am increasingly bothered by the language of “reformation” and would suggest another way of viewing what the church is going through. Here is why we need new words to describe what God is doing.

First, talk of the Protestant Reformation must be turned into a plural: There were many reformations in the sixteenth century: Karlstadt of Basel; Menno Simons in the Netherlands; Zwingli of Zurich; Calvin in Geneva; Luther and Melancthon in Germany; and many others. If we are to use reformation language to describe what is happening today, we must at least talk



about new reformations, plural, for God is at work on many global fronts and through diverse (and even bickering) ministries today, just like before.

Second, use of reformation language delivers more questions than answers. A reformational paradigm implies reform, but of what? For five hundred years we've struggled with reformational questions: What are the marks of a true church? How do we make a pure church, or a restructured church? A reformational paradigm is inward looking, revolving around the word *come*. Such a paradigm suggests that outsiders should be concerned about the family feuds within the household of faith.

Besides, if we can't get the reformational "issues" right after half a millennium of trying, then having another go at coining new reformational terms and lists and requirements won't help things now.

Watching what God is up to today suggests less a reformational paradigm than a missional paradigm. In other words, rather than a call to take care of family business, yet again, after five hundred years of trying, God seems to be calling us to take care of the world. This raises outward-focused questions such as: How do we communicate with a post-Christendom, anti-Christian culture? How do we let go of the word *come* and instead obey the command of Jesus to *go*? Just as the reformational paradigm made every disciple a minister (the "priesthood of all believers"), the missional paradigm is making every disciple a missionary as well as a minister.

Since mission is not reformation, I would suggest calling this new movement of God a re-Orientaion, partly due to the meaning of the word *Orient*. *Orient* means "east." When Christians started building churches, the first thing they did was get the community of faith "oriented." This tradition of getting oneself oriented has been largely lost to Christianity while being maintained by other faiths, such as Islam. Hotels are increasingly placing little arrows in windowsills to help Muslim guests orient themselves in prayer toward Mecca. So important was such orienting that King Khalid of Saudi Arabia owned a Boeing 747 with a gyroscopically rotating prayer room perpetually oriented toward Mecca.<sup>20</sup>

Our Christian ancestors oriented their churches eastward for theological reasons. First, toward Jerusalem.<sup>21</sup> Second, toward the direction of the returning Christ. But most importantly, toward the person of Christ, a Christ who comes to us in three tenses: the One who is, who was, and who is to come. The

eastward orientation was an Eastering orientation toward a living Christ who is active and at work in our world today. The *gō* of the Great Commission calls us to connect not only to a memorialized Christ or a coming Christ but also to a living Christ. We are to join what Jesus is doing in the world right now.

An Easter faith is not a Resurrection belief, it is a Resurrection reality: “Christ is alive and among us.” An Eastering people are in a relationship with Christ himself, not just his message or his memory. The relationship is with a Person, not with history. It may take the speaking of our name, as it did for Mary, for us to recognize Jesus; or it may take a meal together, as it did for the Emmaus disciples, for us to recognize Jesus. But Easter is about recognizing the risen Christ among us and walking the same way with him.

The center of gravity of global Christianity is shifting from the North and West to the South and East. Western Christianity was tutored by Greece and Rome. It will now learn from Asia. What Christianity learned from Greco-Roman culture (Stoicism, neo-Platonism) was how to express itself in rhetoric and reason. When we start learning from Asia, and the cultures of India, Tibet, and China, we will move beyond the rational to the mystical. As we will see in the chapters that follow, God is a mystery, not a master’s thesis. We have much to learn about the truth of God that is revealed only through relationship.

God is re-Orienting the church to the context of its Founder. Jesus was not a Greek, nor was he a classical thinker. He was a Hebrew, Eastern in thought and culture, relational in practice, and mystical in spirituality. We do not follow a Savior whose life was shaped by Western thought. Perhaps God is now addressing the church’s Western presuppositions, which it took to extremes (rationality, individual freedom, the privileging of “high” over “popular” culture). In this re-Orientation, we see God guiding the church back to its originating but forgotten modes of experiential, participatory, image-rich, and connective spiritualities.<sup>23</sup> What Western Christianity received initially as revelation from God-in-the-flesh has been turned into rationality, a form of divine idea or holy argument—rhetoric

Our Easter faith is that we really do encounter Jesus himself; not a message from him, or a doctrine inspired by him, or an ethics of love, or a new idea of human destiny, or a picture of him, but Jesus himself.

—DOMINICAN  
HERBERT McCABE<sup>22</sup>

not relationship. Could this “re-Orientation” of Christianity be a rediscovering of our very own Christianness?

The Reformation paradigm, which tempts us to replace relationship with reason, is captured in the word *belief*. It is concerned with right thinking and adherence to a particular way of articulating biblical teaching. It involves systematizing and assenting—and excluding those who don’t fully subscribe to the current fashion in creedal statements. Belief is inert. It is intellectual, defensible, and typically irrelevant.

In contrast, the missional paradigm is a way of life—the life of *faith*. It is a quest for discovery. It is nothing less than the pursuit of the GodLife relationship. Faith is kinetic and transformational. It is described in Scripture as following, forgiving, seeking, rejoicing, sharing. It is the life of relating to God, to others, and to God’s creation. To the Western mind it can appear sloppy and unpredictable and meandering. Yes, it is all of those things, and much more!

Belief is Plato; faith is Jesus.

As we consider God’s re-Orientation of Christianity, bear in mind that it is movement, not statement. It is more about exploring than about ensconcing.

Jesus asked his closest followers: “Who do you say I am?”<sup>24</sup> Each of us, if we are to follow him today, must answer this same question. And as we seek the answer, we find that it is less a question than a quest.

The yoking of relationship and quest is deliberate. In the Bible, it is more that God seeks us out for relationship than that we seek God out. In fact, the more we insulate, the more God insinuates. The more we hide, the more God hounds.

We have been losing the battle in finding attributes that distinguish humans from the rest of creation: Crows use utensils, orangutans spell, parrots tally, dolphins and chimps fake and feint, songbirds experience REM sleep just like humans, bird brains can outsmart human brains at finding things. But there is one thing that clearly sets *Homo sapiens* apart. Part of the uniqueness of humanity, beings created in the image of God, is our instinct to seek and to enjoy the pleasures of seeking. It is born in us to dare, to desire, and to delight in the Quest. Questing-made-possible is who we are. Some say it’s our sole advantage as a species.

But the Quest is not a set of questions. The Quest is the mystery of getting lost in the GodLife relationship.

**PART I**

**FAITH IS A  
RELATIONSHIP**

# A LIFE THAT'S BEYOND BELIEF

*Is It Better to Believe, or to Follow?*

*Io sono la Via, la Verita, la Vita*

I am the way and the truth and the life...

Follow me.

—JESUS<sup>1</sup>

Much of history has been determined by personal relationships, especially the “personal” in relationships. Why did USAmerica drop the atom bomb on Hiroshima and not Kyoto? Because Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson had a personal relationship with the city of Kyoto. He spent his honeymoon there in 1926 and loved the Japanese art and culture. Although Kyoto was at first designated as the target for the atomic blast, Stimson intervened with President Truman, and Kyoto was spared.<sup>2</sup>

If you give it some thought, you'll see how your own life has been spared from destruction by personal relationships. One of the most important phrases a leader can hear is this one: “I’ve got your back covered.” Think about who your protectors are. Who are the people covering your rear? Every leader in church history who moved Christianity forward had protectors whose gift was the words “I’ve got your back.”

At the most basic level, of course, your life can be considered “life” and not simply existence because of a relationship with God. And what would become of faith if there were no relationship? The Christian faith is built on the multiplicity and complexity of relationships: God to God, God to human, human to human, human to creation, God to creation. Why would Jesus sacrifice his body and his life for a people that he knew nothing about and cared nothing for? If Jesus’s heart did not beat in rhythm with the human condition, why would he bother?

Amazingly, the segment of the church that’s rooted in the Reformation has lost touch with the key doctrine of that movement: justification by grace *through faith*. Evangelists still preach faith, and pastors continue to urge

parishioners struggling with life's setbacks to "have faith." But in the daily life of faith we have lost sight of faith. Or more accurately, we've developed more of a faith "perspective" than a faith "posture." We're there in theory but not in practice.

The Bible does not cast faith as a spiritual footpath to heaven or an inner stirring that we try to rev up when the chips are down. Neither does Scripture describe faith as a cognitive capacity that God activates to effect our justification. Rather, faith is consistently defined in Scripture, at base, as a set of trust relationships—with God, with neighbor, with the world, with creation.

One of the greatest thinkers on faith in the Hebrew tradition was the medieval philosopher Maimonides. For Maimonides, the knowledge of God was more than *amor Dei intellectualis*—ideas about loving God. Far from a mere idea, faith was a living encounter with the living God. And this encounter with the divine was the summit of any person's existence, life's highest good and goal.

But we don't have to hearken back to a Jewish thinker from the Middle Ages. For Martin Luther, one of the greatest theologians of faith in the history of Christianity, faith was a new kind of relationship that Jesus makes possible. This doesn't mean there are no cognitive components to faith, of course. But for Luther, it was faith's "relational capacity—uniting the believing sinner with Christ—that faith justifies."<sup>3</sup> The gospel is more than our salvation from sin.

Faith is the distinctive word of the New Testament, as much as love and far more so than hope. Faith occurs once or twice in the Old Testament, perhaps two hundred times in the New. So if you think there is nothing new in the New Testament you are mistaken.

—SOCIOLOGIST DAVID MARTIN<sup>5</sup>

The good news is our incorporation into the life of God. We have been raised with Christ so that we "might walk in newness of life"<sup>4</sup> and be raised to new levels of relationship.

In the ancient world, faith did not mean subscribing to the convictions of theology; it meant living in the confidence of relationships. Whether it is Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; or Sarah, Elizabeth, and Mary; or Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; the Bible defines faith in more than cognitive terms. Faith in God is a relationship involving all of who you are and all that is around you. Faith is a lived encounter, a relationship of truth with the divine.

Jesus came to make possible new kinds of relationships with God, with

people, and with the world. When Jesus used the intimate Aramaic word *Abba* in his prayers, never before had God been addressed in such a way. Only Jesus broaches this intimacy with God. Only Jesus opens the door to this approach to God.

And this new understanding of faith goes beyond the example set by Jesus. It is seen first in the nature of God. Is not relationship the essence of the Trinity? We do not sing “God in three thesis points, blessed Trinity” but “God in three Persons, blessed Trinity.” The Trinity does not deal with time, space, matter, doctrine, or reason, but relationships. God is “Communion” and invites us into that same communion.<sup>6</sup> At the core of who we are as humans is an inner drive for relationship with God and with one another. Our greatest need is “not communication,” Eugene Peterson has written, “but communion.”<sup>7</sup>

Christianity tells a “killing the Messenger” story because the messenger was the message. The good news of the gospel is not an announcement or a proclamation, it’s a Person: Jesus the Christ. Jesus is the gospel. God-made-flesh is the gospel. God-became-one-of-us is the gospel. The good news is that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself.”<sup>8</sup> This is relationship at its best, relationship as God defines it.

## FAITH IN THE FLESH

The soil of our faith, the gospel, is the mystery of how in Jesus “the Word became flesh.”<sup>9</sup>

The conceptual became perceptual.

The abstract became mystery.

Statement became story.

Principle became person.

Michael Rie, a Jewish surgeon at the University of Kentucky Medical Center, is active in the bioethics discussion. He tells about one session of dialogue, when a Christian theologian expounded on bioethics from a perspective of God as Reason rather than God as Person. Rie blurted out defensively: “You are blaspheming the name of Jesus Christ.” His defensiveness surprised even himself. But the realization that many theologians were “bent on reducing substantive moral content of their religion to what they took to be the general requirements of moral rationality” alarmed him.<sup>10</sup>

Rie was concerned that these theologians had chosen to construe God as a source of philosophical rational principles, rather than experiencing God as the Person Who confronted Abraham and Moses with very particular moral obligations.<sup>11</sup>

When moral theology is demoted to the level of “what should be embraced by rational persons,” then moral theology is no different from moral philosophy. God is factored out of the equation, and theologians have no reason for being.

Why did God create us? There is only one answer: for relationships. God decided not to have a life of God’s own but to share the divine life with us. God gets lonely when God has no one to walk with in the dew of the day. This is one of the greatest self-disclosures in all of history. Amazing, vulnerable, divine self-disclosure. God created us for companionship.

Ultimate reality can be experienced only in relationships. Hence the Hebrew concept of “covenant.” Hence the Jesus concept of “salvation.” Relationship is one of the things that distinguishes Judaism and its radical Christian revision from other religions: God calls us into a relationship. Christianity is much more than a wisdom tradition or a moral system or a path leading to higher states of existence.

The essence of the Christian faith is as simple and complex as this: God loves us and desires a relationship with us through Jesus, God’s only begotten Son. Our identity is found in Christ—in a relationship, not in an organization or a system or a philosophy. The essence of the physics of faith is reflected in the simplicity and complexity of quantum physics: The universe is not comprised of objects but of relationships between objects. Identity is found not in things themselves, but in their relationships. Superstring physics is based on the inescapable science of the interconnectedness of all things. There is no isolated or disconnected matter.

### **THE NONLOCALISM OF THE LOCAL CHURCH**

Relationships and interrelatedness are as primary in the spiritual realm as they are in the physical world. In theology, what’s important is not things themselves, but relationships between things. In fact, nothing is ever one thing or another, but rather a relationship between things.



God loves you, desires a relationship with you, and hugs all things to himself. Faith goes far beyond the articulation of general principles to live by or universal laws that govern social morality. Biblical thinking is less about principles and places than about patterns and relationships. When Christians become more intent on learning the principles than knowing God, biblical Christianity is abandoned.

What makes us human is the same thing that makes us created in the image of God. We are not isolated entities, self-contained, existing apart from God or from one another or even from God's creation. We are made for "community" and "community" and "ecology," in the words

of Roman Catholic theologian Joseph Sittler. Being created in the image of God, he says, "specifies a relation."<sup>13</sup>

The robot COG at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology agrees with Sittler. COG is the name of the first robot that emerged from Embodied AI (Artificial Intelligence). Embodied AI differs from Pure AI in that the former says that giving a machine intelligence means giving it a body as well, so that it can enter into relationships. Anne Foerst, the theological advisor of the COG project and the first director of the God and Computers Project at MIT, argues that "our humanity does not come from our brains or our body but from our complex interactions with the community. We are human because we must deal with other humans and the rest of creation."<sup>14</sup>

Few were so careless of orthodox formulas as Jesus, and there is something more than a little precious in affecting a greater concern for orthodoxy than his.

—BIBLICAL SCHOLAR  
C. K. BARRETT<sup>12</sup>

## CHRISTIANITY IS NOT WHAT YOU THINK

If science and technology are coming around to agreeing with Jesus and the prophet Micah that the basis of life and humanity is in connections and relationships, where does that leave the life of faith for ordinary Christians in the twenty-first century? For starters, it demands a new focus on "life" and "faith" and a willingness to demote "objects" and "propositions" from their current preeminence. The Jesus trimtab is more than packets of theological information filled with objective rules or objectified rituals. The Jesus trimtab is a

life-or-death relationship with God through faith practices, stories, songs, beliefs, ongoing traditions, upcoming technologies, and the connectedness of a social brain. It is a life posture, not a life principle.

The difference between an object-based church and a relation-based church is the difference between a church that sells itself versus a church that brings

Truth, like love and sleep, resents approaches which are too direct.

—ATTRIBUTED TO W. H. AUDEN

people into a living, lifelong relationship with Christ and one another. A relation-based church is less a place where creeds are dispensed and adherents conscripted than a place

where people can connect with God and with one another, and where their faith journeys can be encouraged and enabled.

## SOCIAL MALNUTRITION

How often have you moved your place of residence? How many different careers have you had? In how many different states do your children and your siblings live? Demographic shifts and economic trends are moving us away from relationships, from the core reality that God built into each one of us. Heightened mobility and disintegrating communities—from dissolving marriages to disappearing places of employment—join together to create our current state of social malnutrition. Yet the more the culture moves us away from relationships, the more the human heart is moved to reach for relationships.

On average, USAmericans move to a different residence once every five years. In an average year, 2.5 million of us move away from our spouses and 3.5 million experience homelessness. In 1930, only 2 percent of the USAmerican population lived alone. By 2000, 10 percent of the 105 million households were individual adults without children, roommates, or other people in the residence.<sup>15</sup> This figure does not include the burgeoning phenomenon of commuter marriages, where spouses in dual careers maintain separate households. Nor can figures convey the psychological consequences to a culture that is always “moving on” and leaving behind relationships with friends, neighbors, coworkers, and employers as if we were kids waving good-bye and going home at the end of summer camp.

In a culture overdosed on empty entertainment, a culture that conditions people to being treated without dignity (in airports, banks, or the DMV), people are searching for a more intimate, more spiritual world. Digital technology makes interaction easier but intimacy harder. People seem to be heavy into relationships, just not with those who are physically present. People are constantly talking with others on cell phones and the Internet, but most people are treating those around them as objects to get past, not as subjects to pass through.<sup>16</sup> The people reached through technology are now more real than the people who are present in physical form.

The more blurred the dividing line between the real and the virtual, the more difficult and troublesome relationships with other human beings become. In the marriage market, a man who is divorced actually has a higher stature among women than someone who has never been married. Divorced means “once married,” which indicates the man at least has demonstrated he can make a commitment.

We live in a smart world where machines are talking to machines (your car is talking to your insurance company through those hidden little black boxes), some toilets are already talking to doctors and laboratories, and biofriendly interfaces are giving us learning agents that know more about us than anyone else in our lives. These technologies are changing our sense of ourselves and our relationships with ourselves and others.

Think about sending and receiving messages. It used to be that the greater burden lay with the person initiating the contact. You had to remember the date of your mother’s birthday, find an appropriate card, locate a stamp, and allow time for the card to travel through the mail. With the advent of e-mail, however, the sequence has reversed itself. The personal, emotional, and financial costs involved in receiving and responding to messages are now much greater than in sending and delivering messages.<sup>17</sup> As anyone knows who sits down each night to a hundred e-mails, some of which are one sentence long but “require” a two-page response, it’s far better today to be at the sending end.

Or consider how potential marriage partners are finding each other. We don’t know how to choose a long-term partner, and we don’t trust our own judgment. We lack relationship readiness, and we lament the lack of psychological intimacy in the marriages of our parents. Hence, television shows like

*Married by America* and *Meet My Folks*. People are open again to the idea of arranged marriages. And in a twenty-first century form of arranged relationship, online dating services function as virtual matchmakers, attracting the participation of one-fifth of all singles in USAmerica.

I have reached an age where my main purpose is not to receive messages.

—UMBERTO ECO<sup>18</sup>

University of Chicago researcher Amy Kass argues that old-style courtship provided a “distanced nearness” that offered intimacy and protection at the same time. Today, she says, cyberspace provides this service: It “encourages self-revelation while maintaining personal boundaries.”<sup>19</sup> Even “one-night stands” hearken back to the “contract” marriages arranged long ago in a world where strangers climbed into bed together without emotional protocols or entanglements.

Our offspring, these cyber-suckled generations mainlining the Internet, are changing how we create and conserve personal relationships.<sup>20</sup> The mechanics of relationship have shifted from “what are we doing today” to “*how* are we doing today?” And complex, new, irregular relationships are emerging, including virtual relationships that have their own satisfactions and limitations. Why do I turn on the *Today* show and not *Good Morning, America*? Because I’m in a “relationship” with Katie, Matt, and Al. I have never met them, but still I’m in a relationship with them. And I feel a lot closer to them than I do to Charles Gibson and Diane Sawyer.

### ANYONE BEEN PROPOSITIONED?

Mother Teresa once was asked about the worst disease she had ever seen. Was it leprosy or smallpox? Was it AIDS or Alzheimer’s? “No,” she said, “the worst disease I’ve ever seen is loneliness.”

In spite of, or perhaps due to, the digital revolution, relationships have become the most valuable, most important form of cultural capital in our globalized world. That’s one reason the rediscovery of a relation-based spirituality is crucial to ministry in the twenty-first century. With Christians now largely indistinguishable from non-Christians in how they live and think, there is no longer a startling freshness to the proclamation of biblical truth

when it is presented as principles and propositions. How a person lives speaks much more loudly than what he or she asserts, now as always. And with Christians nearly identical to all others in the culture, what they say loses its impact. George Barna has argued for building relationships as the only effective foundation for evangelizing teenagers.<sup>21</sup> We can and should apply this truth more broadly: Relationship is foundational to *all* evangelization, not just the challenge of reaching teenagers. People find and experience biblical truth in relationship.

The worst thing you can do to Christianity is to turn it into a philosophical endeavor. Faith is more than beliefs to be learned; it is bonds to be lived. Faith is more than holding the “right” beliefs; it is holding the “right” (that is, the “least of these”) hands. We are judged by the world not on the basis of how “right” we’ve gotten what we believe but on how well we’re living it—on how we love God and people. Elie Wiesel has said, “Christianity did not ‘come true’ during Auschwitz.”<sup>22</sup> More than 20 percent of the German SS officers, the expert killers, were professing Christians. This is a disturbing nightmare, a religion that is so impotent and so removed from relationship that it could not “come true” when millions of Jews were being incinerated. Jesus gave us a relationship test whereby we can know whether faith “comes true.” The test, according to Jesus, is that his disciples are known not by how well they defend orthodox propositions, but by how well they “love one another.”<sup>23</sup>

Abraham Lincoln claimed that America was founded on a proposition and that Thomas Jefferson wrote it: “We hold these truths to be self-evident...” Unlike USAmerica, Christianity wasn’t founded on a statement or even a rational argument. God didn’t send Jesus to deliver a proposition. God sent Jesus to deliver a proposal: “Will you love me? Will you let me love you?” In fact, Jesus not only got on his knees to deliver this proposal, Jesus was nailed to a cross to deliver God’s proposal.