

# Building better relationships

Six Bible studies to help local churches think and live relationally as a way of life and mission



## Introduction

The following studies are part of Jubilee Centre's 'Building a Relational Church' initiative. Our hope is that they will help deepen understanding of the inescapably relational nature of Christianity and what this means in practice, and therefore encourage all of us to live a truly relational life. J.H. Oldham wrote: 'All true life is meeting'. He means by this that we are most alive, most authentically and fully human, when we engage deliberately in rather than run away or hide from relationship with others.

In particular, these studies focus on three types of or contexts for relationship: (a) our relationship with God, (b) our relationships within the church family, and (c) our relationships in the wider community.

We focus upon relationships as the essence of Christianity, or of 'true life', because when Jesus was asked which was the greatest commandment, he replied:

*'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. Matthew 22:37-40*

Love describes a right relationship. The sum of the Christian view of the 'good life', then, is this: give everything you've got to enjoying and building right relationships with God and others.

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Note to leaders: The estimated time length of each study is approximately 1 hr 15 mins. You will need to judge how much time should be spent on each section. The studies are designed to give an overview. Try to avoid getting bogged down and keep the pace up, without closing down an important conversation, of course.

## Study 1: A relational God, a relational story

*The aim of this study is to understand that God is relational 'on the inside', i.e. as trinity and that the story of the Bible is a relational story through and through.*

### Discussion starter

Look out at our culture: what messages do you pick up from politicians and others in the public eye about what really matters or makes people happy? To what extent do you think they are right?

### A relational God

*Read John 5:16-23*

1. Look carefully at the detail of this passage. What clues does it give us about how the Father and the Son relate to one another? What roles does each have? In what way do they show love or concern for one another?
2. Why do you think it matter that God is trinity not, like Allah, singular?

### A relational story

*Read Gen. 1:26-27 and Gen. 2:20b-25*

3. What do these passages suggest it means to be made in the image of God? (Don't wander off what the text actually says - this is a big topic!)

*Read Gen. 3:6-19*

4. How would you describe the effects of the fall relationally? Recall what happens in Gen. 4.

*Read Matthew 27:46, Romans 6:4-10 and John 17:3*

5. Consider Jesus' 'cry of dereliction' (Matthew 27:46). What is going on relationally in, and as a result of, the death and resurrection of Jesus? How is eternal life described in John 17:3?

*Read Revelation 21:1-5*

6. From a garden to a city: how is the future portrayed in this passage? What are the relational overtones of this picture of our future?

### 'So what?'

How might you persuade a non-Christian that the 'good life' was actually all about relationships? What arguments or evidence could you use?

If well-being is all about right relationships (with God and others), how should this insight re-align your priorities? If 'time is the currency of relationships', what does the way you use time say about your priorities? Are any changes in order?

## Study 2: Living 'out of' relationship with God

*The aim of this study is to understand that our relationship with God is fundamental to all others and to reflect on what it means practically to be in relationship with God.*

### Discussion starter

Ecclesiastes 3:11 says God has 'set eternity in the hearts of men.' Augustine said: 'Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.' What evidence is there that makes you think these claims might, in fact, be true? Why do you think God made us like this?

### The priority of relationship with God

Read Psalm 62

1. List the various ways David describes God or his relationship with God in Psalm 62.
2. What is the nature of the opposition David faces?
3. Look carefully at this Psalm to find reference to things or people *other than God* that we might place our confidence in. Why is each misguided?

### 'So what?'

What other things or people are you tempted to rely upon too heavily?

'He is my rock' (vv.2, 6-7): Think of a time in your life individually or corporately (as a family or church family) when you hit 'rock bottom'. Did you find God there? If not, why not?

Why, generally speaking, do you think Christians down the ages have found the Psalms so helpful for their own relationship with God?

### Life in God

Read Romans 8:1-17

5. Recall what makes life in the Holy Spirit possible (vv.1-3).
6. Contrast the benefits of living life through the Spirit versus living a life controlled by the sinful nature.
7. Why is relationship with God so important for the conduct of every other relationship?

### 'So what?'

How, practically, can we help one another to live 'out of' our relationship with God, i.e. to live in the Spirit?

What are the purposes of prayer in the Christian life? (You may like to refer to Bible passages you know or the example of biblical characters like Moses, Daniel or Jesus.) Do you find praying easy or hard? Do you get much out of it?

How is a commitment to the priority of relationship with God expressed in church life and church services? Are our corporate meetings effective in drawing us God-ward? Are you nourished by them?

## Study 3: A royal priesthood and holy nation

*The aim of this study is to understand who we, as church families, are and what kind of community we are supposed to be. Is the way we relate to one another sufficiently attractive to 'in-drag' outsiders.*

### Discussion starter

What does your ideal church look like? What does it offer? What does it 'feel' like? Think of anything good you have ever experienced or heard about in any church. Throw out as many ideas as you can. Don't spend too long discussing each one!

### Who are we? Identity and purpose

*Read 1 Peter 2:4-12*

1. What does Peter mean by likening Christ to a cornerstone (v.7)?
2. How do you become part of this 'spiritual house', this 'holy nation'?
3. What is the purpose of the church according to these verses?

### Detour

Consider what it means to be a 'royal priesthood' by looking at a similar description of Israel in Exodus 19:6, a passage which describes the purpose of Israel immediately prior to the giving of the law at Sinai. Priests both taught the law and performed sacrifices on behalf of the people. Who do you think Israel-as-a-nation was meant to serve as a 'kingdom of priests'? Who are we, the church, meant to serve as a 'royal priesthood'?

*Read 1 Peter 4:10-11*

4. Why, according to these verses, has God given various gifts to his church? Toward what overarching end?

### What kind of community?

*Read Colossians 3:12-14*

5. What is it that has brought this new community into existence? (v.12)
6. Humility: Consider Phil. 2:3-4. What does humility entail? Why do you think this is so important for our relationships? What tends to happen when it is absent?
7. Patience and forbearance: Why does Paul draw attention to these qualities? Why, in practice, are they necessary? What tends to happen when they are absent?

### 'So what?'

Handling interruptions: a relational barometer. How do you handle a person (a child perhaps) who interrupts you when you are doing an important task or when you are under pressure? If relationships are the really important thing, how should you?

8. Forgiveness: Why is forgiveness not optional (see v.13b, also e.g. Matthew 6:12)? Why does Paul assume it is necessary? What tends to happen when it is absent?

9. What do you think is the difference between forgiveness and forbearance? What is the relationship between forgiveness and humility?

*Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7*

10. Love: Compare this passage with Colossians 3:12-14. Review the characteristics of love carefully and slowly. As a group tell about at least one positive (and true!) example from the life of your church of each characteristic in action.

**'So what?'**

Given our wider purpose of mission to the world, why does it matter what sort of community we are?

How attractive do you *actually* think your church community is to an outsider? Consider the potential of churches in your area to influence the community in the light of the quote above.

Think of your non-Christian friends. Can you think of at least one whom you would not feel comfortable inviting to your church? Share with the others why not. Be honest.

Think of at least one practical step you can take this week to improve one relationship you have with a church member.

## Study 4: Learning from the relationships of Jesus

*The aim of this study is to consider lessons from the way Jesus conducted his own relationships for how we, both individually and as a local church family, ought to conduct our own. Is the way we relate to one another sufficiently attractive to 'in-drag' outsiders?*

### Discussion starter

Think of a relationship you value and are prepared to discuss. What do you think are the *practical ingredients* (as opposed to personal qualities) that make that relationship work well? List as many as possible. You may like to refer to appendix 1 for ideas.

### Relationships in practice: prioritising relationships

Read Luke 6:12-16 and 9:28

1. What does 6:12 tell us about how Jesus viewed the decision he was about to make?
2. What do these verses tell us about Jesus' 'relational strategy'?

### 'So what?'

Imagine time-for-relationships as a box. Squeeze it from the top and bottom and you get a thin, wide rectangle. Squeeze it from the sides and you get a thin, tall rectangle.

Are your relationships many-and-shallow or few-and-deep? Which relationships should you invest more time into? Should you limit the time you give to some relationships? How easy or hard do you find it to draw boundaries in your relationships? Why?

### Relationships in practice: spending time together

Read John 1:40-42 and John 21:15-19

3. These passages describe the earliest and last (before Jesus' ascension) recorded contact between Jesus and Peter over a three year period. What role do you think *spending a lot of time together* played in building that relationship? Why does time matter so much for building relationships?
4. Think of other episodes recorded in the gospels in which Jesus and Peter were both present. What role do you think seeing each other in *many different situations* played in building that relationship?

### 'So what?'

Think about the quality of your relationships with others in your church. How much time do you spend together? Do you see one another in different situations or contexts? If these practical ingredients really matter, think of specific things that could be done in your church to build relationships in these ways.

## Relationships in practice: 'outcasts' or the 'influential'?

*Read Luke 19:1-10*

5. What relational qualities do you think Jesus possessed that would enable an outcast like Zacchaeus to 'welcome him gladly'?

*Read James 2:1-5*

6. Contrast the example of the church James writes to with the example of Jesus.

### **'So what?'**

Do you think 'outsiders', 'sinners' or the 'poor' would feel welcome or intimidated in your church? Why?

## Relationships in practice: having a common objective

*Read Luke 10:1, 17-21*

7. Why do you think Jesus sent out the seventy-two?

8. How did they all feel when it was over? What positive impact do you think this 'training mission' had upon the relationship between Jesus and his disciples and between the disciples themselves?

9. Why do you think, in practice, working together toward a common objective strengthens relationships?

### **'So what?'**

What do you stand to gain individually and as a church family by getting involved in local mission? What specific projects or activities in the community are you involved in? What do you think you would like to get involved in?



## Study 5: A relational community - rest, opportunity, roots

*The aim of this study is to understand why Christians need to engage with those aspects of our society and culture which are damaging lives and relationships, and what, with reference to the model of early Israel, an agenda for action in our communities might involve.*

### Discussion starter

Think about the *general* state of relationships in British society today, e.g. in marriages, in families, in the workplace, in neighbourhoods, and between segments of the community (e.g. young and old, across racial/ethnic/religious boundaries, between rich and poor). Do you like what you see? Try to be positive not just negative.

### Why work for the ‘common good’?

*Read Matthew 5:13-16*

1. What does Jesus expect his followers to do and why? What is the ultimate objective of our ‘good deeds’?

*Read Luke 10:25-37*

2. What reason can you draw from this parable for active engagement in the community?

*Read Jeremiah 29:7 and Esther 4:12-14*

3. What reasons are given in these passages for working for the common good?

### Input - Israel as a model of the kind of society God looks for generally

As noted in the introduction to these studies, Jesus tells us that the law and prophets ‘hang’ on the twin commands to love God and love neighbour.

This means that all the teachings of the law and prophets are geared toward these two overarching objectives. The laws of the OT are designed to create and preserve a particular kind of society: one that embodies love (or a right relationship) with God and love (or right relationships) with others.

Jesus clearly affirms in Matthew 5:17-20 that the basic values and goals of the law still express what God wants people to be like ‘until heaven and earth disappear’. The God-given wisdom-laws of e.g. Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy still have a great deal to teach us about what makes for a ‘relational society’. The NT, by contrast, is primarily concerned with the internal life of the church.

When we need study these ‘obscure’ passages of the OT we ought to be asking straightforward questions like: Why was this law given? What is it seeking to achieve or prevent? What does it tell us about how to establish right relationships in society? What kind of practices does it suggest will undermine right relationships in society?

We have found that asking questions like these yields many insights on key issues such as care for the elderly, indebtedness, the well-being of families, how to deal with criminal behaviour and so on. In this way, early Israel functions like a template or model against which we can evaluate how we as a society are doing. Are similar contemporary laws or institutions building or undermining relationships?

The remaining passages in these studies try to help us do this.

## Learning from Israel: the Sabbath

Read Exodus 20:8-11

4. Who does this wisdom-law apply to and for what reason?

5. Jesus affirms that the 'the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath' (Mark 2:27) and does not, fundamentally, dismiss the relevance of this social institution. Think about it. Why might the social institution of a *shared day off for rest, family and worship* be a good idea?

### 'So what?'

What might be the consequences of neglecting this pattern?

Who, currently, suffers through the neglect of this pattern? What might be the impact on children whose parents work?

What could your church do on behalf of families affected by weekend working?

## Learning from Israel: the Jubilee

Read Leviticus 25:8-17

6. What were the people meant to do at the year of Jubilee?

7. Recall that there was a roughly equal distribution of land to each family when Israel entered Canaan. What does the Jubilee do in relation to that original parcelling out of the land?

8. If you had to lease your land in the intervening period since the last Jubilee (vv.15-16), why might you feel like the Jubilee was a proclamation of liberty (v.10)? What's so good about getting your land back (v.13)?

### 'So what?'

A leg up in life. The return to the family land gave people in an agrarian society, once per generation, a basic *productive resource or asset* and prevented long-term cycles whereby the rich just get richer and the poor keep getting poorer. This resource + creativity + hard work = a real opportunity. For everyone.

What, other than land, might be the basic resource or asset people need today to have real life opportunities? (See the quotes below for ideas!)

Discuss what life might actually be like for the poorest people in your town. Why do many seem trapped, unable to rise above their circumstances?

How practically might your church bring 'liberty' or fresh hope to such families or individuals?

9. The Jubilee was also designed to re-unite extended families in a particular geographical location. What do you think the positive impact of this would have been upon the whole community?

**'So what?'**

How far apart do you live from other members of your family? In your group, who has the most scattered family?

Today we are 'hyper-mobile', we move often and commute long distances. Why do you think being committed to a place for the long-term is so relationally important? How might our 'hyper-mobility' be damaging our communities? (See the statistics below for ideas!)

What practical steps can you take to further root your life, and the life of your family, into your geographical community? (Consider e.g. where your house is, where you work, where you shop, etc.)

## Study 6: A relational community - money, children, sex

*The aim of this study is to further consider what, with reference to the model of early Israel, our agenda for building a relational society might involve.*

### Discussion starter

Building relationships and evangelism. In what ways might a strategy for building better relationships provide opportunities for evangelism?

Recall study 1. Why is it crucial that we never lose sight of the priority of relationships with God through Jesus?

### Learning from Israel: debt and interest

*Read Deut 15:1-11, Deut 23:19 and Lev 25:35-38*

1. Why do you think debt was cancelled every seven years?
2. What, in Deut 15:7-8 and Lev 25:35-38, is given as the primary purpose of lending?
3. What explicitly relational reason is given for lending without interest in Lev 25:35-38? Whose attitude and actions is lending in this way meant to reflect (v.38)?

### 'So what?'

Today, lending is almost always undertaken for commercial not charitable (or relational) reasons. Although the modern economy has benefited from ready access to loans (capital), how might debt be damaging our family and community relationships?

Do you know people in your town who might feel trapped by debt? Discuss their circumstances (anonymously).

A concern to build relationships in your town cannot ignore 'debt slavery', particularly among the poorer segments of the community. How might local churches work to bring release, or hope, to those who are trapped?

### Learning from Israel: children and families at risk

*Read Lev 20:1-10*

### Input - Leviticus 20

The entire chapter of Leviticus 20 is about offences which threaten the family. This is why from v.9 we see a long string of sexual sins, the more obvious concern of the chapter, prefaced with a reiteration of a form of the commandment to honour your father and mother. To sin sexually is like cursing your father and mother. (For now, look beyond what appears to us very harsh punishment and concentrate on the particular sins or crimes which lead to those punishments.)

4. What sin against the family is identified in vv.1-5?

5. Why do you think this sin is so serious that if the people 'close their eyes' and fail to act (v.4) God himself will act to purify the community (v.5)? How does this sin threaten the community?

**'So what?'**

Consider our children today. In what ways might we, as a society, neglect or 'sacrifice' our children to other gods?

Recent reports by the Children's Society and UNICEF have highlighted exceptionally low levels of well-being among Britain's children - the worst of industrialised countries. What does this tell us about how our families are functioning and the future of our communities? What could be done locally to serve children at risk from other 'gods'?

6. How does the sin of v.10 threaten the welfare of families and communities? What is the impact of adultery on our families and communities?

**'So what?'**

A concern to build relationships in your town cannot ignore the extensive relational fallout from sexual sin. How might the church seek to build healthy relationships or minimise the damage in this area? How can marriages be supported? How might you go about educating the young people in your area about sex and relationships in keeping with biblical principles?

## Conclusions

7. What obstacles do we face in our desire to build a more relational community? How might those obstacles be overcome? How should we cope with disappointment or frustration?

8. Try to summarise a range of possible actions your church individually, or together with other local churches, could take to build (or build further) better relationships in your town.

## Learn more and stay in relationship with us!

If you would like to keep thinking about how biblical teaching can be applied to contemporary social issues please visit our website: [www.jubilee-centre.org](http://www.jubilee-centre.org)

You can register there to receive our free quarterly mailing, which consists of a long essay on a particularly current issue (*Cambridge Papers*) and a six page mini-magazine (*Engage*) with short articles and news about our ongoing work.

Also for more ideas and resources on how to think relationally, and apply Relational Thinking in different areas of public life, visit [www.relationalthinking.net](http://www.relationalthinking.net)

Jubilee Centre  
3 Hooper St  
Cambridge CB1 2NZ  
01223 566319  
[info@jubilee-centre.org](mailto:info@jubilee-centre.org)

## **Appendix 1 - Useful tools for thinking about our relationships**

The Jubilee Centre's sister organisation, Relationships Foundation, has identified five dimensions of relationships - the 5Ds for short. Whether we are aware of them or not, they are influencing our relationships for better or worse.

The 5Ds provide important tools for thinking about what makes for good relationships.

The 5Ds look at the *context* within which relationships take place, or, if you like, the *ingredients* or *conditions* which make strong relationships much more likely. If the conditions are right we are more likely to nurture and enjoy rounded, mutually beneficial relationships.

The 5Ds have been tested in such different environments as the NHS, prisons, businesses, Christian mission organisations, churches and charities. We have not found a situation in which they do not offer insight!

So what are the 5Ds?

1. **Directness** is all about the *quality of our communication* with another person. It asks questions like: how well does information flow between us? How open and honest is our communication? It recognises that face-to-face contact offers the greatest potential for high quality communication - that type of communication in which we feel we have really encountered another person. It is essential to love and trust, which is why we travel to see family or to close a business deal.
2. **Continuity** is all about the *frequency and length of contact* in a relationship. It takes time to get to know people, or as Michael Schluter says: 'Time is the currency of relationships'. The best relationships require stability and are built upon a shared history.
3. **Multiplexity** describes the breadth of knowledge in a relationship that comes from spending time with a person in a *variety of situations*. Seeing how a person reacts in different situations gives you a much broader view of that person and so enriches that relationship. A concern for multiplexity is why businesses encourage social events or team-building days. Only seeing people at church on Sunday morning over coffee will inhibit the growth of our church relationships.
4. **Parity** is concerned with the *balance of participation* in a relationship and with *differences of power or influence*. Where there is a lack of fairness, lack of mutual effort and input, or lack of respect a relationship will be damaged or inhibited - it discouraged involvement or openness. Where there is parity, even if there are different roles and responsibilities, there will be mutual affirmation and appreciation. Of any human institution, parity ought to characterise the 'body of Christ'.
5. **Commonality** is all about *sharing common objectives, interests or purposes*. Our strongest friends are often those with whom we have the most in common (shared interests); where there is 'nothing in common' relationships usually founder and become distant. This is not to say that diversity is not welcome, only that under girding that diversity and giving it richness is a basic shared goal. The church is a wonderful picture of a wide range of people united around a common goal - or united with a great, shared relationship with God.