

mike colaw



# friendship *redefined*

RELATIONSHIPS THE WAY GOD INTENDED

friendship  
*redefined*

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*I believe in a world  
WITHOUT LONELINESS.*

## ABOUT THE BOOK

An odd type of book.

Think of it as a “choose your own adventure” book. For those who want a more academic approach, you can find it. For those who simply want best practices, there is a way forward. For those looking for theological support with axioms to consider, there is a way.

I even included a little poetry.

The first six chapters will be laid out as follows:

- A poem.
- A false assumption and an idea to consider.
- What the Scripture says.
- What the current science, theologians, and thinkers are saying.
- Best practices to consider.
- What if I have been hurt in the past?
- A few axioms.

Chapter seven is the grand idea that the whole book is compassed around.

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Meaning isn't a **THING** you can steal, consume, or **CONQUER**  
Meaning is **LOVE** and this is how it **PROSPERS**.

In **KIND** words and gentle **SMILES**  
We Find **MEANING** in our long **HARD MILES**  
Hearts meet, **SOULS ENTWINE**, understanding **BLOOMS**  
A **SYMPHONY** unto intimacy **DISPELS** the gloom.

It's in the **LAUGHTER SHARED** and tears **WIPED AWAY**  
We Find **SOLACE** in the rhythm of a day  
A loving touch **MENDS** the broken pieces  
We learn how to **RIGHTLY RELATE** through the work of **JESUS**.

## ONE

### *We Need OTHERS*

There is a false assumption floating around out there. It's the idea that independence is the road towards strength, security, and wholeness. What if your ultimate self thrives, not in independence, but in interdependence?

The reality is everyone is looking for meaningful relationships. As you read through this book you will find the purpose is to uncover what the “meaning” in meaningful friendships is. Not to give away the last chapter and grand idea too quickly but . . . You are not the center of your most meaningful relationships. Like a slow sunrise, this whole journey is not merely tactical; it is to culminate with a new way of seeing and participating in intimacy. If you want to cheat and read the last chapter first, go for it: A theory and theology of interconnect-edness. To the patient, friendship is like learning to ride a bike; the mastery and enjoyment of friendship is also found in practice, not in merely the reading and study.

This book is personal.

Not too long ago, I received a heartfelt message from a friend grappling with some anxiety and depression. My heart went out to him, and I knew I had to be there for him. Not as a pastor, but as a friend. Sitting by his side, I gently encouraged him to articulate the storm

of emotions within. In a vulnerable moment, he slowly uttered three words that struck a chord with me, words I have heard many times as of late: “I am lonely.” Tears started streaming down his cheeks, revealing the depth of his pain.

With deep empathy, I patiently listened as he began to externally process the internal burdens weighing him down. He bravely shared his thoughts, expressing how he had plenty of acquaintances and was involved in many social gatherings, yet an inexplicable void persisted. Something was still missing, and he longed for a more meaningful connection, an intimacy, that eluded him.

He isn’t alone in this struggle. As you will discover in the following pages, our world is confronting a profound loneliness epidemic, touching the lives of countless individuals desperately seeking genuine connections.

Let’s learn how to do friendship better.

Before proceeding, I would ask that you consider reading this with someone you would like to deepen a relationship with. Give them a copy of this book and read it together. What is helpful, use. What isn’t, set aside. My only desire is that you grow in your understanding of Christian intimacy and your ability to participate in it.

My friend isn’t an isolated anomaly. Amidst the chaos of the Coronavirus outbreak and the subsequent lockdown, I embarked on an interesting journey into the personal lives of many people by making hundreds of pastoral phone calls.

Each call became a testament to the power of healthy relationships. In those heartfelt conversations, I encountered a diverse tapestry of emotions. One moment, I’d be uplifted by the resilience of someone thriving amidst the challenges, and the very next call could reveal

someone struggling with deep anxious depression. What set them apart? The quality of their relationships. It was almost always the quality of their relationships.

Deep intimacy with others = felt purpose and meaning.

Indeed, the impact of isolation became vividly apparent. Those locked away in solitude or strained relationships found themselves struggling to cope, their lives often in disarray. Yet, a stark contrast emerged for those blessed with a supportive and caring community during the lockdown; they found themselves flourishing even amidst the very complex geopolitical situations we all were facing. Astonishingly, some confided that the lockdown had led them to experience some of their most cherished days.

The best days for some and the worst days for others were marked by the quality of their community.

This is not merely an assortment of anecdotes; it resonates profoundly with ancient wisdom and modern science alike. It’s deeply rooted in the very essence of what it means to be human. Drawn from the sacred pages of Scripture and corroborated by scientific findings, it reveals a fundamental truth: humans were designed for community, yearning to be fully known and wholeheartedly embraced with love.

Through this unforgettable journey, I learned that in times of crisis, the strength of our bonds with others can make all the difference between a life teetering on the brink and one that radiates with resilience and hope. The timeless lesson echoes in our hearts: we are stronger together, for it is within the embrace of genuine connection that we find our truest selves and soar to new heights. It wasn’t just COVID; there are a number of social and technical reasons why humans are becoming increasingly lonely. In recent years, there has been a growing concern about increasing levels of isolation and social disconnection among

people. Several factors contribute to this trend, highlighting the ways in which we are becoming more isolated as a people group:

### **Technological Advancements**

While technology has connected us in many ways, it has also led to unintended consequences. The rise of social media and digital communication platforms has created a paradoxical situation where we can be constantly connected virtually but experience a decline in meaningful face-to-face interactions. Excessive screen time and online interactions can replace real-life connections, leading to a sense of isolation and detachment. Instead of getting to know our neighbors with front porch conversations we “creep” them on Facebook. We now “know” are neighbors, but in real relational ways, we don’t know them at all.

### **Urbanization and Changing Lifestyles**

Urbanization and the shift in lifestyle patterns have also contributed to social isolation. People are often living in densely populated areas but may not have strong community bonds or connections with their neighbors. Even in the suburbs the last few generations have traded the front porch for fenced-in backyards. The fast-paced nature of modern life can lead to individuals prioritizing work and personal pursuits over social interactions, resulting in a sense of loneliness and disconnection. Let’s be honest, intimacy is inefficient. If you are hustling all the time and don’t make time for slow-grown, deeply rooted relationships, you may find you don’t have deep relationships at all.

### **Decline in Traditional Community Structures**

Traditional community structures, such as close-knit neighborhoods, extended families, and community organizations have seen a decline in recent years. This decline has resulted in fewer opportunities for regular face-to-face interactions and reduced support networks. As a result, individuals may feel a lack of belonging and support, leading to increased isolation.

### **Mobility and Transient Lifestyles**

People are becoming more mobile, often moving away from their hometowns or families for work or personal reasons. While mobility can offer new opportunities, it can also disrupt established social connections and result in a sense of rootlessness and isolation. Transient lifestyles can make it challenging to build and maintain long-lasting relationships, contributing to social disconnection.

### **Mental Health and Stigma**

The stigma surrounding mental health issues can further isolate individuals. Many people hesitate to reach out for support due to fear of judgment or misunderstanding. This isolation can exacerbate mental health challenges and create a cycle of social disconnection and emotional distress. As we will discuss later in this book, we constantly toss out the word “toxic” like we are salting an icy driveway. If we live like people’s issues are always a dangerous nuisance to be avoided, we won’t know what to do with our own difficulties when they inevitably come. Loneliness waits like a crouched tiger ready to pounce on the proud person who doesn’t have time for “weak” people. The moment you are in the weak place . . . it strikes. Oprah Winfrey once said, “Surround yourself with only people who are going to lift you higher.” What a “great” modern axiom—unless you’re the one hurting and the people you need believe Oprah’s modern advice.

We are designed for relationship by God and as we will see, even the science supports it. The shift away from communal living is a move against our core framework as humans. In a sense, the rejection of participating in community is a rejection of what it means to be human.

## **WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?**

In this opening chapter I want to be a bit more descriptive as it will set the stage for the subsequent ideas to percolate rightly.



The Bible presents a rich narrative that highlights the inherent need for community within the human experience. From the creation of Adam to the early Christian gatherings, the Scriptures affirm our essential longing for fellowship and interconnectedness. Let's briefly explore biblical examples that defend our need to be in community, demonstrating how God's design and redemptive plan unfold within the context of relationships and communal living.

### **Creation and Relationship**

In the opening chapters of Genesis, we encounter the foundational narrative of creation. God's declaration, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18 NIV), reveals the inherent need for human fellowship and community. God's remedy for this aloneness was the creation of Eve, emphasizing the importance of relationship and companionship. This narrative affirms that community is a fundamental part of God's design for humanity. It's not sin to need others. You are literally designed by God to need other people. I'll cover this in more detail in the last chapter.

### **The Covenant Community**

Throughout the Old Testament, God establishes covenants with his people, forming a community bound by a shared relationship with him. From the covenant with Noah to the covenant with Abraham and his descendants, God establishes a community of faith, calling his people into a unique relationship with him and with one another. These covenants illustrate the importance of communal living and the blessings that flow from belonging to a community of faith. God's redemptive work is done with people and for people. God's redemptive work is communal. He uses communities to call people into participating in God's love with each other.

### **The Nation of Israel**

The story of Israel showcases the significance of community in God's redemptive plan. The Israelites were chosen as a nation to be set apart

for God's purposes. Their identity and faith were nurtured through communal practices such as the observance of feasts, the giving of the law, and collective worship. The Israelite community served as a tangible expression of God's presence and guidance, highlighting the power of community in shaping their faith and collective destiny. They were called to represent God as a people group not just as individuals.

### **The Ministry of Jesus**

Jesus himself exemplified the importance of community through his ministry. He called a diverse group of disciples, forming a close-knit community around him. Jesus demonstrated the power of communal teaching, fellowship, and shared mission. He emphasized love for one another and the transformative nature of community when he said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35 NIV). Jesus' ministry underscores the vital role of community in spreading the message of God's love and salvation.

### **The Early Christian Church**

In the book of Acts, we witness the birth of the early Christian community. The believers devoted themselves to teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42). They shared their possessions, supported one another, and lived in unity. This vibrant community became a powerful witness to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit and the love of Christ. Through their communal life, they demonstrated the tangible expression of the kingdom of God and the fulfillment of God's redemptive plan.

The biblical narrative resounds with a clear defense of our need for community. From the creation account to the early Christian gatherings, the Scriptures affirm the vital role of fellowship, relationships, and communal living. Our need for community is rooted in God's design for humanity and is intricately woven into his redemptive narrative. Community nurtures our faith, provides support, and allows us to experience God's love through one another. As we journey together in

community, we reflect the image of a communal God and participate in his mission to bring reconciliation, healing, and restoration to the world.

## WHAT DOES THE SCIENCE SAY?

Ok, let me shift gears in a strong way here. Much of this book is conversational, but I felt it necessary to carve out intentional space throughout this book to lean a bit more academic. The reason? Personally, I am one who desires to know why people are thinking the way they do. I don't merely want to know what people think, I want to know why they think that way. In this book I don't want to merely offer relational ideas to consider; I want you to understand why I think these specific relational issues need to be considered. Listen, I get it. I know people that don't care about all the background information. If this is you, skip these parts. I won't be offended at all.

All right, let's get a bit nerdy...

Scientific research provides compelling evidence supporting the notion that humans have an inherent need for community and social connection. There is a strong scientific defense for our requirement of social interactions, drawing upon various studies and research findings to substantiate the claim that we have a fundamental need to be in community with others.

### Psychological Well-Being

Numerous studies have highlighted the impact of social connections on psychological well-being. Research by Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggests that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation. They emphasize that individuals thrive when they have satisfying relationships and experience social support. Social connections provide a sense of belonging, identity, and self-esteem, all of which contribute to overall mental health.

In a similar vein, Cacioppo and Hawkley (2003) explore the link between social isolation and health outcomes. Their research demonstrates that social connections play a crucial role in stress regulation, immune function, and cardiovascular health. Engaging in positive social interactions helps buffer the negative effects of stress, leading to improved emotional well-being. That's right—healthy community actually makes you healthier, both physically and emotionally.

- Cacioppo, John T., and Hawkley, Louise C. 2003. "Loneliness." Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

### Physiological Effects

Scientific evidence reveals that social connections have profound physiological effects. Holt-Lunstad, Smith, and Layton (2010) conducted a meta-analysis showing that individuals with stronger social relationships have a lower risk of mortality. Strong social connections positively influence physical health, including lowering blood pressure, reducing inflammation, and improving immune system function.

Furthermore, social interactions trigger the release of oxytocin, a hormone associated with bonding and feelings of trust and well-being. Studies have shown that oxytocin promotes social bonding, reduces anxiety, and enhances emotional resilience. Thus, our need for community is intricately linked to our physiological responses and overall health.

- Holt-Lunstad, Julianne, Smith, Timothy B., and Layton, J. Bradley. 2010. "Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review." *PLOS Medicine* 7(7): e1000316. doi: 10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316.

### Social Significance

The social sciences also support the importance of community in human survival and adaptation. Dunbar's research (2018) proposes

Dunbar's number, suggesting that humans have a cognitive limit to maintaining stable relationships with approximately 150 individuals. This number aligns with the historical size of tribal communities and reflects the evolutionary advantages of social connections. Throughout history, being part of a community provided safety, resources, and support necessary for survival and reproduction. This finding, along with others, is why I am becoming a greater and greater fan of medium-size churches, businesses, and even towns. For those that want to run down this research rabbit trail you will find that this idea is contested. It's okay. Let the research and debate continue. Albeit somewhat subjective to my preference, I still think there is a lot of validity here. I'll let those who want to research the "Dunbar number" decide for themselves. Either way, the grand idea and ideals still hold true.

- Dunbar, Robin. 2018. "The Social Brain Hypothesis and Human Evolution." *In The Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*, edited by Robin Dunbar and Louise Barrett, 92–108. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Scientific research strongly supports the claim that humans have an inherent need for community and social connections. The psychological, physiological, and social science evidence all converge to emphasize the importance of social interactions for our well-being and survival. Community provides a sense of belonging, support, and identity, fostering psychological well-being. Social connections also have tangible physiological effects, promoting better health outcomes and increased longevity. Moreover, our need for community is deeply ingrained in our evolutionary history, as social bonds contributed to our ancestors' survival and reproductive success.

Understanding the scientific basis for our need for community highlights the significance of nurturing and cultivating social connections in our lives. Investing in healthy relationships and engaging in social activities can have far-reaching positive effects on our overall well-being.

As we recognize and prioritize our need for community, we can foster healthier individuals and build stronger, more cohesive societies.

## BEST PRACTICES TO CONSIDER

Shifting from the why to the how is important. Participating in a community can be a rewarding and fulfilling experience. Here are some best practices to enhance your involvement and contribute positively to a community. I use the word "practices" on purpose. These take practice. Expect to do them poorly at times. Like learning to ride a bike or speak a new language, it's not sin to need to learn. We must begin by replacing a self-critical attitude with a playful spirit that enjoys trying. Way too many people walk away from things that would be deeply fulfilling simply because it didn't come easy enough. So, here are your first practices.

### Active Listening

Listen attentively to others when they speak, show genuine interest, and try to understand their perspectives. This promotes effective communication and demonstrates respect for others' opinions. Active listening, simply put, is practicing the ability to understand why people think certain things. This does not mean that you must agree with everything; it means that you understand and can articulate what *they* think. When in a group setting, try to understand the perspective of others. Would you be able to share their story or point of view in a way that they would agree is accurate? You may not necessarily agree that they are right, but are you truly able to articulate what they think, feel, and why? We will talk about hearty productive debates in a future chapter.

### Respectful and Empathic Engagement

Treat others with respect, kindness, and empathy. Recognize and appreciate the diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and opinions within the community. Keep this attitude in mind while you practice

active listening. Share your thoughts and ideas respectfully, promoting healthy dialogue and collaboration. Again, you don't have to agree. The goal is to practice understanding.

### **Accountability and Responsibility**

Take responsibility for your actions and contributions within the community. Be accountable for your commitments, follow through on tasks, and fulfill any responsibilities you have taken on. This helps build trust and demonstrates reliability.

### **Collaborative Contribution**

Foster a spirit of collaboration and cooperation by seeking opportunities to work with others. Offer support, share knowledge, and contribute your skills and expertise to the benefit of the community. Encourage teamwork and a sense of collective achievement. Your contributions can help strengthen the community and create a positive impact.

### **Supportive and Encouraging Attitude**

Maintain a positive attitude and mindset. Encourage and uplift others, celebrate achievements, and provide constructive feedback when necessary. By promoting a positive atmosphere, you inspire others and contribute to a healthy community environment. Be there for others in times of need. A supportive community fosters a sense of belonging and motivation.

### **Respect Boundaries**

Respect personal boundaries and privacy of community members. Obtain consent before sharing or using personal information. Be mindful of cultural, social, and individual differences, ensuring that your actions and words are considerate and appropriate.

### **Continuous Learning**

Embrace a mindset of continuous learning and growth. Seek opportunities to expand your knowledge, skills, and understanding. Engage

in open-minded discussions, ask questions, and be receptive to new perspectives. Be curious! This promotes personal development and contributes to a vibrant community.

A great way to begin bringing these ideas to life is through strategic questions with other people. By choosing to be inquisitive first, you are more likely to be viewed as an inviting person.

Here are five simple questions that can help start the journey towards deeper connections:

1. What is one thing you've always wanted to do or achieve? Why?  
This question allows the other person to share their dreams, aspirations, and motivations. It opens up a window into their inner desires and can help you understand what drives them.
2. What is your most cherished childhood memory? What makes it so special? Asking about childhood memories taps into a person's emotions and allows them to share experiences that shaped their early years. It provides insight into their values, upbringing, and what they hold dear.
3. Can you describe a time when you faced a significant challenge and how you overcame it? This question invites the other person to share a personal struggle and the strategies they used to overcome it. It deepens understanding, reveals resilience, and fosters a sense of vulnerability and trust.
4. If you could have a dinner party with any three people, dead or alive, who would you choose and why? This question delves into a person's interests, inspirations, and influences. It encourages imaginative thinking and provides an opportunity for the other person to discuss historical figures, role models, or people they admire.
5. What is one thing you wish more people understood about you? By asking this question, you create a safe space for the other person to express themselves authentically. It shows that

you value their perspective and encourages open and honest communication.

Remember, building deeper relationships requires active listening, empathy, and genuine interest. Ask follow-up questions, engage in meaningful conversation, and be willing to share your own thoughts and experiences as well. Lastly, as a passionate Christian these questions are great places to share your faith.

### **WHAT IF I HAVE BEEN HURT IN THE PAST?**

From a Christian perspective, dealing with hurt from past relationships involves seeking healing and guidance through faith and biblical principles. Here are some steps you can take:

1. Prioritize the most important relationship – your relationship with God: Often Christians don't realize how little time and effort they give to foster deeper intimacy with the Lord. There are so many occasions in the Bible where God's chosen people have no human community at all for a time. In these seasons the thing that brings them joy is the greatest source—the Lord (think of Paul in prison, the prophets in the Old Testament, John on Patmos). Although human community is something we must strive for, if we do not draw our greatest intimacy from the only unfailing and infinite source, we will never truly and fully heal.
2. Acknowledge and process your emotions: It's important to acknowledge the pain and hurt caused by past relationships. Allow yourself to grieve, express your emotions, and seek support from trusted friends, family, or a counselor. Remember that it's okay to feel hurt, but also recognize the need for healing.
3. Seek help: If you are finding it difficult to move into a place of trust and openness, seek counseling. In the same way you are designed to participate in community for enjoyment, you are

designed to participate in community for healing too. If you only want the fun of community and reject the healing from community, you are missing out on one of the greatest benefits of community. Play together, heal together. If you are in an unsafe or harmful relationship or situation, seek help.

4. Forgive: Jesus taught the importance of forgiveness, even when it is difficult. Forgiving those who have hurt you doesn't mean condoning their actions but releasing the burden of resentment from your heart. Pray for the strength to forgive and ask God for his help in this process.
5. Seek guidance from God's Word: The Bible offers wisdom and guidance for dealing with hurt. Read and meditate on passages that address forgiveness, healing, and restoration, such as Matthew 6:14–15, Ephesians 4:31–32, and Psalm 147:3. Allow God's Word to comfort and encourage you.
6. Pray for healing: Prayer is a powerful tool for finding healing and peace. Pour out your heart to God, expressing your pain and asking him to bring healing to your wounded heart. Seek his guidance and trust in his plan for your life. If you are in a Christian community, ask some people to pray for this. Include your pastor or small group leader.
7. Focus on personal growth: Use this season of healing to focus on your personal growth and development. Invest time in activities that bring you joy, develop your talents, and deepen your relationship with God. Seek to become the person he has called you to be.
8. Surround yourself with supportive community: Just to be clear—just because you were hurt by a community doesn't mean all communities are bad. Too many people hurt by a community act like a starving person who rejects food because the last meal they consumed had something they were allergic to in it. Fine, your last relationship made you sick. Don't relationally starve yourself because of it. Engage with a supportive Christian community, such as a local church or a small group, where you can

find encouragement, understanding, and accountability. Share your experiences with trusted individuals who can provide guidance and support along your journey.

9. Guard your heart: I didn't say isolate your heart. Walk in wisdom as you relationally move forward. As you heal, be wise about entering new relationships. Take the time to evaluate your own emotional well-being and seek God's guidance before pursuing new romantic connections. Allow him to lead you in discerning healthy relationships that align with his will.

Remember that healing takes time, and everyone's journey is unique. Trust in God's faithfulness, lean on his strength, and be patient with yourself. Through the process, you can find healing, restoration, and a renewed hope in God's plan for your life.

Let me offer a few verses to consider memorizing that will help seal some of the ideas offered and prepare us for some ideas yet to come.

John 13:34-35 (ESV): "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

The narrative of love underscores the celestial design of relationships as a mirror to divine love, and a testimony to the world of the transformative power of such love.

Romans 12:4-5 (ESV): "For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another."

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (ESV): "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one

keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken."

Hebrews 10:24-25 (ESV): "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

## A FEW AXIOMS

- Show me your friends and I'll show you your future.
- The human heart desires deeply to be fully known and still chosen.
- The nature of the divine is to participate in a community.

*Through TOUCH, we communicate WITHOUT WORDS  
LOVE and COMPASSION take flight like SOARING birds  
A brush of a hand, a COMFORTING squeeze  
ECHOES of our innate design put us AT EASE.*

*So, reach out, EMBRACE, let love UNFURL  
In HUMAN CONNECTION, your spirit swirls  
For we are bound by this COMMON THREAD  
In a COMPASSIONATE TOUCH, our hearts become WIDESPREAD.*

## T W O

### *We Need HUMAN TOUCH*

As with each chapter, we want to open by dispelling another relational myth. Some believe that virtual connections and social media suffice as substitutes for in-person connections. Can we finally embrace the truth that any tool driving us away from genuine human interactions falls short of what we really need? We need human touch.

When I was in my early twenties my daydreams were filled with professional success, academic achievements, and trips to see cool places. When my wife and I found out we were pregnant with our first child my attention quickly switched to the immense practical weight of being a parent. I remember trying to figure out how much diapers were going to impact our budget and hoping my wife would breastfeed as long as possible because of its health benefits, but also to avoid paying for formula. I felt like my dreams for the future were truly becoming unachievable daydreams as the pregnancy literally grew before my eyes. Then came the day of my child's birth. When the doctor handed me the baby, I felt feelings I didn't know I could feel. The touch, smell, and feel of a new baby in my arms changed everything. Five kids later, with countless little hugs, snuggles, and kisses, I can absolutely say—my kids didn't steal my future, they gave it meaning. I am so glad God gave me what he knew my heart needed and not exactly what I was praying for.



The need for human touch overlaps nearly every part of our human experience.

Human touch is a profound conduit of connection and communication. Touch manifests in a kaleidoscope of forms, each bearing its own essence and importance in the portrait of human interactions. Consider the gentle, nurturing caress of a mother, a palpable testament to love and safety. There is the affirming pat on the back among companions, a simple yet profound gesture of camaraderie and encouragement. The tender holding of hands between lovers, a silent dialogue of affection and belonging, unfolds a narrative of intimacy. Then, there is the professional handshake, an emblem of trust and respect in the theater of societal engagements. Even the “bro hug” can produce deeply felt confidence and acceptance. These varying shades of touch not only articulate a spectrum of human emotions but also foster a sense of belonging, reassurance, and affirmation of our shared humanity. In a world often cold with indifference, each healthy touch has the potential to speak meaning deeply into our souls.

Think of sex. Not dating sex where you know you are being evaluated. We all know deep down this is emotionally reductive sex focused almost entirely on a good performance. If it isn’t just right, you are at great risk of being passed over the next time. There is no real security, and imperfections can be, and often are, weaponized against you emotionally. The only way to solve this is to turn down (or turn off) the emotional connection, the very thing that is supposed to be deeply satisfied in sexual touch. What many involved in this type of sexual behavior believe to be exciting is actually very masochistic. The rush of risk feels good in the moment but is void of the deep intimacy that this type of human touch is designed by God to offer. Sexual touch that is bound in a *healthy* marriage covenant is radically different. You can let down your guard and just . . . play. When sexual touch is healthy, you are fully exposed in a context full of commitment and grace. There is such power in being vulnerable in an environment of charitable

love, grace, and intimacy. When approached rightly, imperfections in the bedroom can become wonderful times of play and a place to grow in joy and satisfaction together. Your covenant promise provides hundreds or thousands of opportunities to figure it out. When sexual touch is done in ways that honor Christian covenant the pressure begins to evaporate, and the pleasure can begin its maturation process with hearts that are full. This type of sexual touch is so different and vastly more satisfying in the long run. It touches more than the body; it touches the heart. Please note, there are some that are so shaped by God-dishonoring cultural practices and expectations they don’t know how to marry the heart with sexual pleasure. They are emotionally dull (or dead) all while hotly pursuing sexual activity. Things like pornography and past abuse deeply wound intimacy. The good news is that there is freedom and forgiveness! We will cover some of this near the end of the chapter, but this book is not focused on sexuality. I highly, very highly, encourage professional Christian counseling. Oh, how good it is to deal with the past and resurrect a view of covenant and intimacy that mirrors the life of Jesus!

Touch is so powerful!

Think about where we stand today. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the world came to a grinding halt. Lockdowns and social distancing measures became the norm, and a consequence of these precautions was a profound shift in our ability to experience touch. Human contact, once an everyday occurrence, suddenly became a luxury that we could no longer afford.

Gone were the days of even simple human connection like warm handshakes and affectionate hugs that bridged the gaps between us. The simple act of reaching out to someone, a gesture so innate and instinctual, became a potential risk to our health. We were urged to keep our distance, to abstain from physical greetings, and to shield ourselves from the virus that threatened our well-being.



In the absence of touch, something significant was lost, for touch is more than just a physical sensation—it is a language of its own. It speaks to the core of our humanity, transcending words and connecting us on a deeper level. It releases a cascade of emotions, from joy and comfort to compassion and love.

As the weeks turned into months, the impact of touch deprivation began to reveal itself. Loneliness, that unwelcome companion, settled in the hearts of those isolated from their loved ones. The absence of physical contact accentuated the ache of missing someone, leaving a void that no video call or virtual interaction could truly fill.

Our mental health, too, bore the weight of touch's absence. The gentle brush of a hand or the reassuring embrace had the power to ease our burdens, calm our anxieties, and lift our spirits. Without these tender moments, the world felt colder, more distant. Stress and unease crept into our lives, as the healing power of touch remained just out of reach.

Relationships, both romantic and platonic, faced new challenges. Couples living apart yearned for the warmth of an embrace, their hearts aching with longing. Friends who once shared laughter and tears found themselves physically separated, their connections strained by the absence of touch. The glue that bound us together, that physical closeness, seemed to weaken.

When the world emerged from the long slumber of the pandemic, we found ourselves yearning for the touch that we once took for granted. We longed to hold hands, to embrace our loved ones, and to reconnect with the physicality of being human. This taught us how the importance of touch in our lives cannot be understated.

For touch, with all its intricacies and tenderness, is a testament to our shared humanity. It is a language that speaks volumes, healing wounds

and forging connections. And as we navigate the aftermath of the pandemic, may we remember the power of touch, cherishing its significance and embracing it once more, with a newfound appreciation for the simple beauty it brings to our lives.

## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

In the area of theological discourse, profound questions concerning human existence, purpose, and our relationship with the divine are constantly explored. Among these inquiries lies the concept of “being held,” which contains immense theological significance. Let me quickly articulate and defend the necessity of being held within a theological framework, emphasizing its relevance to human nature, spirituality, and our relationship with God.

### Reflecting Divine Love

In theological terms, the act of being held can be understood as a reflection of God's love and care for humanity. Scripture affirms the notion that God is intimately involved in our lives, offering solace, guidance, and protection. Both Augustine of nearly two thousand years ago and Rahner of our era paint well the metaphorical imagery of God as a loving parent who holds and nurtures his children, an image that permeates religious texts. This divine embrace provides a profound sense of assurance, affirming our inherent worth and significance in the eyes of God.

- St. Augustine of Hippo. (1955). *Confessions*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rahner, K. (2005). *Theological Investigations*, Volume I: *God, Christ, Mary, and Grace*. The Crossroad Publishing Company.

## Christ's Incarnational Example

The Christian faith teaches that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, became human and dwelt among us, fully embracing our humanity. His life and ministry exemplify the transformative power of being held. Jesus consistently demonstrated compassion and love by physically embracing those in need, healing the sick, comforting the brokenhearted, and lifting the downtrodden. His actions revealed the importance of physical touch, empathy, and solidarity in fostering healing and restoration. Bonhoeffer in his book *Life Together* and Moltmann in his book *The Crucified God* exemplify this well.

- Bonhoeffer, D. (1995). *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*. HarperOne.
- Moltmann, J. (1993). *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*. Fortress Press.

## The Sacrament of Reconciliation

Within the Christian tradition, the sacrament of reconciliation serves as a profound manifestation of being held. In this sacrament, individuals confess their shortcomings and sins, seeking forgiveness and reconciliation with God. Through the ministry of the priest, one experiences the tangible act of being held, both spiritually and emotionally, as they are granted absolution and offered guidance for spiritual growth. This sacrament encapsulates the transformative power of being held in the context of spiritual healing and restoration.

- Ratzinger, J. (2002). *God Is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life*. Ignatius Press.
- Keating, T. (2002). *The Sacrament of Reconciliation: An Experience of Mercy*. The Word Among Us.

In light of these theological ideas, read the following verses slowly, highlighting the nurturing, compassionate, and loving nature of God, comparing it to that of a parent's love for their children. To miss this

is to miss a core attribute of how God relates to us, with deep healthy parental intimacy. He holds us.

Deuteronomy 1:31 (NIV): "The LORD your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place."

Isaiah 66:13 (NIV): "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem."

Psalm 103:13 (NIV): "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him."

Hosea 11:3–4 (NIV): "It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love."

Matthew 7:11 (NIV): "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"

Luke 15:20 (NIV) : "So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."

Romans 8:15 (NIV): "The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'"

1 John 3:1 (NIV): "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"

As seen above, the need to be held is not only a fundamental aspect

of human nature but also holds profound theological significance. Embracing the physical and emotional embrace of others, as well as the divine embrace of God, nurtures our souls, reflects divine love, and facilitates spiritual growth and transformation. Acknowledging and valuing the importance of being held leads to a richer understanding of our interconnectedness as humans and our relationship with the divine.

## WHAT DOES THE SCIENCE SAY?

The significance of human touch in our lives extends beyond mere physical interaction. It plays a fundamental role in shaping our well-being, development, and social connections. This quick academic review aims to demonstrate the need for human touch by examining the psychological, physiological, and sociological dimensions of touch. By drawing upon a range of scholarly sources, we will explore the profound impact that touch has on various aspects of human life.

### The Human Need for Connection

According to Bowlby (1996) and Cozolino (2014) human beings are inherently social creatures, craving connection and intimacy with others. The need to be held, both physically and emotionally, is deeply ingrained in our nature. This longing for connection speaks to the fundamental truth that we are not meant to navigate life in isolation. When we are held, we experience comfort, security, and a sense of belonging. Through physical touch and emotional support, being held nourishes our souls, fosters trust, and cultivates resilience.

- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and Loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.
- Cozolino, L. (2014). *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships: Attachment and the Developing Social Brain*. W. W. Norton & Company.

### Emotional and Psychological Well-Being

Human touch has a direct impact on emotional and psychological well-being. The act of touch releases oxytocin, often referred to as the “bonding hormone,” which promotes feelings of trust, empathy, and connection. According to research by Dacher Keltner and Matthew Hertenstein, touch serves as a powerful means of conveying and interpreting emotions, facilitating interpersonal understanding and emotional regulation.

- Linden, D. (2015). *Touch: The science of hand, heart, and mind*. New York: Viking.
- Field, T. (2010). Touch for socioemotional and physical well-being: A review. *Developmental Review*, 30 (4), 367–383.

### Physiological Benefits

Touch has tangible physiological benefits, influencing various bodily functions. Research conducted by Tiffany Field and her colleagues demonstrates that touch therapy, such as massage, can reduce stress, lower blood pressure, and enhance immune system functioning. Physical touch stimulates the release of endorphins, which act as natural painkillers, promoting relaxation and overall well-being.

- Field, T. (2014). *Touch*. MIT Press.
- Field, T. (2018). Massage therapy research review. *Complementary therapies in clinical practice. National Library of Medicine*. 33, 161–165.

### Social Bonding and Communication

Human touch plays a pivotal role in social bonding and communication. Studies by Alberto Gallace and Charles Spence highlight the importance of tactile cues in conveying trust, cooperation, and emotional support. Touch signals safety, acceptance, and belonging, enhancing social interactions and promoting positive relationships.

- Gallace, A., & Spence, C. (2014). *In Touch with the Future: The Sense of Touch from Cognitive Neuroscience to Virtual Reality*. Oxford University Press.
- Hertenstein, M. J. (2002). "Touch: Its communicative functions in infancy." *Human Development*, 45(2), 70–94.

### Developmental Significance

Touch plays a crucial role in human development, particularly in infancy and early childhood. The research of Tiffany Field and other developmental psychologists emphasizes the importance of nurturing touch for healthy growth, attachment formation, and emotional regulation. Touch deprivation during critical developmental stages can have long-lasting effects on cognitive, emotional, and social development.

- Field, T. 2018. "Touch in Early Development." In *Developmental Behavioral Pediatrics*, 135–146. Elsevier.
- Montagu, A. (1986). *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin*. Harper Perennial.

### Cultural and Gender Variations

The significance and perception of touch varies across cultures and genders. James A. Coan and colleagues explore cultural differences in touch behavior, emphasizing how touch norms and boundaries are shaped by social and cultural contexts. Gender studies by Tiffany Field and others shed light on gender differences in touch expression and the importance of touch in maintaining emotional well-being.

- Coan, J. A., Schaefer, H. S., & Davidson, R. J. (2006). Lending a hand: Social regulation of the neural response to threat. *Psychological Science*, 17(12), 1032–1039.
- Hertenstein, M. J., Weiss, S. J. (2011). *The Handbook of Touch* (515–524). Springer Publishing.

To put it concisely, you were made to need human touch and the science unequivocally defends this.

I cannot underscore the importance of human touch enough from multiple perspectives, including emotional well-being, physiological benefits, social bonding, developmental significance, and cultural variations. The findings from various scholarly sources demonstrate that touch is not only a basic human need but also a powerful tool for enhancing our overall quality of life. Recognizing and valuing the role of touch can contribute to healthier individuals, stronger relationships, and more compassionate societies.

## BEST PRACTICES TO CONSIDER

From a Christian perspective, engaging in human touch in a healthy and appropriate manner involves considering principles of love, respect, and honoring the dignity of others.

Here are some guidelines to help navigate healthy touch within a Christian framework:

### Consensual and Respectful

Does this physical engagement honor not only my ethic but theirs? Does this physical engagement honor Scripture? Ensure that all physical touch is consensual and respects personal boundaries. Seek consent before initiating touch and be sensitive to the comfort levels and preferences of others. Respecting individual autonomy and personal boundaries is crucial in maintaining healthy relationships.

### Contextually Appropriate

Look around. What are others in your context doing? If the actions honor your ethic, the ethic of the person you are engaging with, and Scripture, it's a good place to start. For example: Consider the context

in which touch occurs. Different situations may call for different levels of touch. For example, within close family relationships, appropriate physical affection such as hugs may be welcomed. However, in public or professional settings, maintaining appropriate boundaries, such as handshakes or respectful gestures, is important. Pay attention to context.

### **Affirming and Supportive**

If you don't know if it's encouraging to them, ask: "It looks like you are hurting; is it okay if I give you a hug?"

Use touch to convey care, affirmation, and support for others. Healthy touch can include comforting embraces, hand-holding during prayer, or offering a reassuring touch on the shoulder. Aim to uplift and encourage others through touch, promoting their well-being and sense of belonging.

### **Modest and Pure**

It's better to go slow and keep communicating often, especially in dating situations. Honestly, I don't care what the movies, television shows, or social media convey. It's way better to go slow and talk about your physical engagement. Maintain an attitude of modesty and purity when engaging in touch. Recognize the inherent value and sacredness of the human body, respecting its boundaries and avoiding any actions that may be inappropriate, objectifying, or sexually suggestive.

### **Culturally Sensitive**

Be mindful of cultural and individual differences when it comes to touch. Different cultures have varying norms and expectations regarding physical touch. Respect and adapt to the cultural context in which you find yourself, ensuring that touch is culturally appropriate and sensitive to the beliefs and values of others.

### **Discerning and Wise**

The type of touch is directly connected to the length of friendship, the

depth of friendship, the type of relationship, and the subsequent level of trust. Exercise discernment and wisdom in determining when and how to engage in touch. Consider the appropriateness of touch based on the nature of the relationship, the specific circumstances, and the comfort levels of both parties involved. Seek guidance from Scripture, prayer, and wise counsel when uncertain about the appropriateness of touch in specific situations.

It is important to remember that these guidelines are offered as general principles and should be interpreted and applied in light of one's specific cultural and personal context, as well as the teachings of one's faith community. Open communication, mutual respect, and sensitivity to the needs and boundaries of others are key elements in maintaining healthy touch within a Christian perspective.

## **WHAT IF I HAVE BEEN HURT IN THE PAST?**

If you have been hurt by human touch in the past but recognize the need for it in your life, it's important to approach the situation with compassion and take steps to heal and build a healthier relationship with touch. Here are some suggestions to consider:

1. **Acknowledge your emotions:** Start by acknowledging and validating your feelings surrounding past experiences. Recognize that it is natural to feel cautious or anxious about human touch due to past hurt. Allow yourself to process these emotions and give yourself permission to heal.
2. **Seek professional support:** Consider reaching out to a therapist or counselor who specializes in trauma or somatic therapies. They can provide guidance and support as you navigate your relationship with touch and help you develop coping strategies to manage any anxiety discomfort that may arise. I highly recommend certified Christian counselors, as their practices should

- be rooted in science, history, and Christ-centered love.
3. **Communicate your boundaries:** It's crucial to establish and communicate your boundaries when it comes to touch. Clearly express your comfort levels and limits to others, whether they are friends, family members, or potential partners. Let them know your needs and preferences, and encourage open and honest communication.
  4. **Start with safe and trusted individuals:** Begin rebuilding your relationship with touch by seeking it from safe and trusted individuals in your life. This could include close friends, family members, or supportive partners who respect your boundaries and can provide a sense of security.
  5. **Gradual exposure:** Take small steps towards reintegrating touch into your life at a pace that feels comfortable for you. Start with less intimate forms of touch, such as handshakes or brief hugs, and gradually progress to more intimate forms as you build trust and confidence.
  6. **Consider nonsexual self-soothing techniques:** Engage in self-soothing practices to provide comfort and regulate your emotions. This may include using weighted blankets, practicing deep breathing exercises, and contemplative prayer. These techniques can help create a sense of safety and relaxation within your own body.
  7. **Explore alternative forms of touch:** If traditional forms of touch feel overwhelming or triggering, explore alternative ways to fulfill your need for touch. This could involve engaging in activities like dancing, playing sports, or receiving therapeutic massage from a trained professional.
  8. **Patience and self-compassion:** Healing from past touch-related trauma takes time and patience. Be gentle with yourself throughout the process and practice self-compassion. Celebrate small victories and acknowledge the progress you make, even if it may feel slow at times.

Remember that everyone's healing journey is unique, and what works for one person may not work for another. Trust your instincts, listen to your body, and seek the support you need along the way. With time, understanding, and self-care, it is possible to develop a healthier relationship with touch and experience its positive benefits.

### A FEW AXIOMS

- I am designed by God for healthy physical intimacy.
- Compassionate, God honoring touch of all kinds binds hearts.
- Sex should make one feel physically good, relationally secure, and emotionally safe; and feeling emotionally safe, relationally secure and physically good doesn't require sex.

*Oh, the sweet YEARNING to be UNDERSTOOD  
To BARE the soul, vulnerable and GOOD  
To SHED THE ARMOR, let defenses fall  
And reveal the ESSENCE, the truth IN ALL.*

*To be SEEN, yet not merely OBSERVED  
But embraced WITH LOVE, unreserved  
To stand NAKED, unmasked, and TRUE  
Knowing EVERY FLAW, yet still be CHOSEN BY YOU.*

*For it TAKES COURAGE to expose our core  
To share the scars that we OFTEN IGNORE  
To reveal THE DREAMS that make us WHOLE  
And the BROKEN FRAGMENTS that have shaped our SOUL.*

### THREE

## *We Need to Learn to TALK About What is REALLY in Us*

Let's challenge yet another assumption about relationships: the notion that we must constantly vie against others in endless social competition. It's time to acknowledge that an attitude of ceaseless social rivalry, or showing off, cultivates distorted, inauthentic views of others and ourselves. As we become consumed by external validation, our inner identity fades. We live in constant dissonance with reality. We need to shift towards open discussions about our genuine selves.

Social media is shaping us to pretend. Constantly pretending disconnects us from reality, not only our reality but what is real about others and the world around us. Reality is becoming blurry and it's deeply unsettling.

In this digital world, people carefully craft their online personas, presenting only the most glamorous and exciting aspects of their lives. It is the era of the "highlight reel," where breathtaking adventures, perfect relationships, and remarkable achievements take center stage. As a result, the line between reality and fiction becomes blurred, and authenticity often takes a backseat. We are constantly comparing what we really know about ourselves with the exaggerated highlight reel of our social media friends. Here is the truth.



Their life isn't that good.  
 They have hard days too.  
 Their loved ones still pass away.  
 Their jobs can be very frustrating.  
 They can feel lonely.  
 They also wonder if they are the only ones who deal with these things  
 (because it seems like no one else is).

As users scroll through their feeds, an insidious seed of doubt begins to grow within them. Comparisons become inevitable as they witness the seemingly idyllic lives of others. The carefully curated and filtered content they encounter sparks feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. In this distorted digital mirror, their own lives pale in comparison, leading to a relentless struggle to measure up.

Thanks, social media. (Where is the sarcasm punctuation mark?)

There is another phenomenon that grips the digital landscape: the fear of missing out, more commonly known as FOMO. As social media exposes people to the exciting events and experiences they are not a part of, a sense of unease settles in. FOMO intensifies, pressuring individuals to constantly seek new adventures or share a seemingly busy and extraordinary life. Exaggeration becomes the norm as people try to project an image of perpetual excitement, even if it deviates from reality.

Yet, beneath the surface, social media harbors darker aspects. The veil of anonymity and distance it provides unleashes a torrent of cyberbullying, cancel culture, and societal pressures. People feel emboldened or even forced to criticize, judge, and belittle others from behind their screens, fostering a toxic environment. It becomes a place where one's true self is hidden, for fear of becoming a target. Authenticity is sacrificed at the altar of conformity, as individuals mold themselves to fit into predefined online personas.

Perhaps most insidious of all is the way in which validation and self-worth becomes intrinsically tied to social media metrics. Likes, comments, and followers are now the currency of validation, and the pursuit of these virtual affirmations consume many. Seeking external validation has become an obsession, leading to the need to exaggerate or present an inauthentic version of oneself in a desperate attempt to gain more recognition.

In this ongoing narrative, the struggle to be safe and authentic in a world of exaggerated comparisons continues.

We desperately need to stop finding ourselves on public stages where people we don't really like, and who don't have our best interests at heart, have immeasurable influence over us. You need real relationships, not an endless stream of "beauty pageant" evaluations shaping who you truly are.

Here is the catch: Real relationships must be about the pursuit of truth. Sharing what is really in you and learning to talk about it in a productive way requires us to learn how to have honest and open dialog about what we think is true about us, others, and how we interact with the world at large.

## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

The Bible contains numerous passages that emphasize the importance of truth-telling and condemn falsehood. Here are five passages from different books of the Bible that highlight this theme:

Exodus 20:16 (ESV) "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." This commandment from the Ten Commandments explicitly prohibits giving false testimony or lying about someone.



Leviticus 19:11 (NIV) “Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not deceive one another.” In this verse, lying is condemned along with other unethical behaviors, emphasizing the importance of honesty and truthfulness.

Proverbs 12:22 (NLT) “The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in those who tell the truth.” This proverb underscores God’s disapproval of lying and deception while highlighting his favor towards those who speak the truth.

Ephesians 4:25 (NIV) “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.” In this passage, the apostle Paul urges believers to abandon falsehood and instead speak truthfully to one another, emphasizing the unity and interconnectedness of believers.

Colossians 3:9 (ESV) “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices.” Here, the apostle Paul instructs Christians to forsake lying since they have been transformed by their faith in Christ, emphasizing the need for honesty in their interactions with fellow believers.

These passages highlight the biblical emphasis on truthfulness, integrity, and the rejection of falsehood and deception. They encourage believers to speak the truth and avoid practices that undermine trust and harm relationships.

The big question is why? Why is truth-telling so important?

In Christian theology, the concept of truth-telling holds significant importance in relationships with others. Drawing from various sources, both biblical and theological, we will delve into the reasons why truth-telling is vital in fostering healthy and authentic relationships among believers.

## Reflecting God’s Character

According to Christian theology, truth is an essential attribute of God’s character. The Scriptures affirm that God is the ultimate source of truth (John 14:6). Believers are also called to imitate Christ (Ephesians 5:1) and in doing so are living as if God Himself is the very definition of truth. Speaking the truth aligns us with God’s nature and identity and allows us to lean into his honesty, trustworthiness, and integrity. Simply put, speaking truth aligns us with what is good, loving, and eternally secure. To know God is to know Truth.

## Fostering Trust and Authenticity

Trust is the foundation of any healthy relationship. Without honesty and truthfulness, trust diminishes, leading to broken bonds and strained connections. By speaking the truth, believers demonstrate their commitment to authenticity, vulnerability, and openness. This cultivates an environment of trust where relationships can flourish and deepen, fostering genuine fellowship within the Christian community.

## Promoting Healing and Reconciliation

Truth-telling plays a vital role in healing wounded relationships and facilitating reconciliation. In situations where conflicts arise, speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) is crucial for addressing the issues honestly and seeking resolution. It allows for the acknowledgment of wrongdoing, forgiveness, and restoration. Truthful communication provides the opportunity to mend broken relationships and promote reconciliation, as it aligns with the principles of confession, repentance, and forgiveness.

## Guarding Against Deception and False Teaching

In a world marked by falsehood and deception, the Christian community is called to discern and uphold the truth. The Scriptures warn about the presence of false teachers (2 Peter 2:1) and the potential for deception (Colossians 2:8). By speaking the truth, believers help safeguard against deception, protecting themselves and others from

erroneous teachings and distorted worldviews. Truth-telling serves as a countermeasure to falsehood, promoting discernment and aligning believers with God's revealed truth. What is most true is not what you may feel about yourself or the world.

### Witnessing to the World

Authentic Christian relationships rooted in truth have a powerful impact on those observing from outside the faith. Jesus emphasized the significance of love and unity among believers as a testimony to the world (John 13:35; 17:20–23). By speaking the truth in relationships, Christians embody the transformative power of the gospel, displaying Christ's love and character. Truthful and authentic interactions become a compelling witness to the truth claims of Christianity and serve as an invitation for others to experience God's love.

The importance of speaking the truth in Christian relationships is deeply rooted in theological principles. It reflects God's character, fosters trust and authenticity, promotes healing and reconciliation, guards against deception, and bears witness to the transformative power of the gospel. By embracing truth-telling in their interactions, believers contribute to the flourishing of relationships and the testimony of the Christian faith in the world.

For those that really want to nerd out, here are a few great sources. There is so much out there on this topic, I feel like I did it little justice.

1. Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*. 3rd ed. Baker Academic, 2013.
2. Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Zondervan, 1994.
3. Packer, J. I. "Christianity: The Truest Friend of Positive Truth-Telling." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39, no. 2 (1996): 185–195.

4. Stott, John R. W. *The Contemporary Christian: Applying God's Word to Today's World*. InterVarsity Press, 1992.

## WHAT DOES THE SCIENCE SAY?

### The Virtues of Truth-Telling for Personal Well-Being.

Drawing from a diverse range of scholarly sources, let's delve into how the practice of truth-telling positively impacts our psychological well-being, interpersonal relationships, and overall life satisfaction.

As I embark on this quick literature review, I am struck by the unanimous consensus among researchers and scholars on the transformative power of truth-telling. It is clear that embracing honesty and integrity is not only morally virtuous but also profoundly beneficial for our personal growth and well-being.

### Psychological Well-being

Research in the field of psychology reveals that living a truthful life contributes significantly to our mental health and overall well-being. A study by Patricia Harris and Lisa Christian (2011) found that individuals who consistently engaged in truthful behaviors experienced lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. The act of truth-telling alleviates the cognitive dissonance caused by deception, freeing us from the psychological burden that falsehood carries.

- Harris, Patricia R., and Christian, Lisa J. 2011. "Honesty and Psychopathology: The Benefits of Treating Honesty as a Multifaceted Construct." *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 30(2): 120–135.

### Authenticity and Self-Identity:

Truth-telling is also important for your relationship with yourself. The

book *Dopamine Nation* by Anne Lembke explores how your public projection of yourself on social media can affect your private perception of yourself. The greater the dissonance the greater the discontent. Being truthful allows us to live authentically, aligning our actions with our core values and beliefs. This aspect is highlighted in the work of Gino et al. (2012), who found that individuals who engage in truth-telling are more likely to have a strong sense of self-identity and higher levels of self-esteem. By embracing truth, we cultivate a genuine and congruent self-image, which contributes to a greater sense of purpose, confidence, and fulfillment.

- Gino, Francesca, Norton, Michael I., and Ariely, Dan. 2012. “The Dishonesty of Honest People: A Theory of Self-Concept Maintenance.” *Journal of Marketing Research* 49(6): 697–707.

### Trust and Interpersonal Relationships

The importance of truth-telling in fostering trust and building strong interpersonal relationships is widely acknowledged. A study conducted by DePaulo et al. (1996) demonstrated that individuals who consistently told the truth were perceived as more trustworthy by others. Truth-telling forms the foundation of open and honest communication, allowing for deeper emotional connections, mutual respect, and increased intimacy within relationships.

- DePaulo, Bella M., Kashy, Deborah A., Kirkendol, Susan E., Wyer, Michele M., and Epstein, Jennifer A. 1996. “Lying in Everyday Life.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70(5): 979–995.

### Ethical Integrity

Ethical considerations underscore the significance of truth-telling. A study by Kouchaki and Desai (2015) found that engaging in dishonesty erodes our ethical integrity and creates a dissonance between

our actions and our moral compass. On the other hand, embracing truthfulness promotes a sense of ethical well-being, as individuals feel more aligned with their principles and values. Living a life of honesty contributes to a sense of integrity, which is essential for a meaningful and purpose-driven existence.

- Kouchaki, Maryam, and Desai, Sreedhari D. 2015. “Anxious, Threatened, and Also Unethical: How Anxiety Makes Individuals Feel Threatened and Commit Unethical Acts.” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 100(2): 360–375.

### Personal Growth and Wisdom

Truth-telling is intrinsically linked to personal growth and the pursuit of wisdom. In their research, Baumeister et al. (2009) highlighted that embracing honesty leads to increased self-awareness, self-reflection, and personal development. By confronting uncomfortable truths and engaging in open dialogue, we gain insights into our own strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement. This process of self-discovery fosters personal growth, resilience, and a deeper understanding of the human experience.

- Baumeister, Roy F., Vohs, Kathleen D., DeWall, C. Nathan, and Zhang, Liqing. 2009. “How Emotion Shapes Behavior: Feedback, Anticipation, and Reflection, Rather Than Direct Causation.” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 13(3): 214–227.

Truth-telling is a powerful tool for personal well-being. By embracing honesty and integrity, we experience enhanced psychological well-being, authenticity in self-identity, trust within relationships, ethical integrity, and personal growth. As we navigate the complexities of our lives, let us heed the insights offered by researchers and scholars, recognizing that the practice of truth-telling not only benefits ourselves but also contributes to a more harmonious and compassionate society.

## BEST PRACTICES TO CONSIDER

Before we can begin the practices of truth-telling, we must pay attention to the difference between things I *feel* about myself (and others) and things that are actually true. I get that this is muddy and can be more of an art than an exact science. However, this exploration of truth-telling by parsing out “I am” statements from “I feel” statements lays the groundwork for a personal honesty that makes space for someone else to be personally honest in a way that can provide real common ground.

To understand yourself and others, the ability to differentiate between honestly sharing what you feel while still pursuing what is objectively true is essential. Both are important, but what you honestly feel about yourself, or another person, may not be objectively true.

Let me explain.

Feelings are important messengers but often ruthless taskmasters. It is popular in our modern world to embrace our feelings as what is ultimately most true about us. For example, if you are a boy who feels like a girl, that’s what is true about you. Let’s apply a little logic to this line of thinking to show this as problematic. I remember talking with someone who had experienced a painful divorce. She said, “I feel so angry, sometimes I just want to kill them!” It would be irresponsible of me to respond with, “Well, if that’s how you feel you should embody it.” Yes, it’s true that she *feels* this way, but she does not have to embody it and make “murderer” an actual truth about herself. What about a little boy who wants to hit the neighbor kid for taking his ball? The list is endless. The bottom line is this. What is most true isn’t what we feel at any given moment. Yes, speak honestly about how you feel but be very slow to use embodying language. Again, feelings make great messengers and reveal a lot, but they are ruthless taskmasters if you let them rule unattested.

A little about discretion . . .

Not all things are appropriate to be said in every situation. The concept of discretion is essential, reminding us that while truth is valuable, the timing and context matter greatly. I vividly recall an incident from years ago at a Christian event. During an open mic night meant for sharing testimonies, a young lady stepped up to the microphone and, in front of the entire congregation, revealed that she was engaged in sexual sin with a man present in the audience, whom she then pointed out. The ensuing awkwardness was palpable.

This situation serves as a stark reminder: While the truth holds immense power, its delivery requires wisdom. In this instance, the truth shared was genuine, but the timing was inappropriate. The adage “great truth, poor timing” couldn’t be more fitting. There is a designated setting for sharing such intimate revelations, and it should ideally begin with guidance from a pastor or a Christian counselor. Indiscretion can easily transform a well-intentioned disclosure into a source of deep shame, effectively hindering genuine healing.

Recognizing the importance of discernment and understanding the right time and place for sharing truth is crucial. If you find yourself uncertain about where or when to reveal a truth that you believe needs to come out, seeking advice from a pastor or a mature Christian counselor can be tremendously valuable. Their wisdom and experience can help ensure that your intentions are matched with appropriate timing, creating an environment conducive to understanding, healing, and growth.

I encourage you to learn to practice the pursuit of truth in your conversations. Learn to wrestle with ideas and pursue truth together. Not only about you but about the world. Truthful conversations must begin with this simple yet deep idea: You must decide what is most true about the world. For us as Christians this is simple to answer and endlessly deep to explore and embody.

What is most true is God.

Here is a great framework to talk about truth with others.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, was a brilliant theologian and passionate follower of Jesus who offered some key elements we can use as a truth rubric.

1. **Truth as Correspondence with Scripture:** Wesley placed great emphasis on the authority of Scripture as the ultimate source of truth. He believed that truth is revealed in the Bible and that it serves as the standard against which all beliefs and teachings should be measured. Wesley considered the Bible as the inspired and infallible Word of God, and he encouraged believers to align their understanding and interpretation of truth with the teachings of Scripture. Look to Scripture to uncover what is most true about you, others, and the world around you. Learn to ask this question: “What does the Bible say about that?”
2. **Truth as Experienced in Personal Transformation:** For Wesley, truth was not merely intellectual knowledge but a lived experience. He emphasized the importance of personal transformation through the power of the Holy Spirit. Wesley believed that the truth of the gospel should be applied and lived out in the lives of believers, leading to holiness of heart and life. True knowledge of God and his truth, according to Wesley, was intimately connected to a personal relationship with Christ and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in one’s life. Think of truth as not only a measurement of what is true about you now but an awareness of how you are changing, what is growing in you. Look to your life’s trajectory to uncover what is true about you, others, and the world around you. Learn to ask this question: “What in me is becoming more like Christ and what in me is growing away from the likeness of Jesus?”

3. **Truth as Illuminated by Reason and Tradition:** While Scripture held a central position in Wesley’s understanding of truth, he acknowledged the role of reason and tradition in interpreting and understanding truth. Wesley encouraged the use of reason to discern and comprehend biblical truths, believing that faith and reason were not in conflict but rather complementary. He also valued the insights of Christian tradition and the wisdom of the early church fathers as important guides in discerning and articulating truth. Look to scholars, thinkers, and past traditions. What do they have to offer your definition of truth? Learn to ask this question: “What do the great thinkers of the past have to say about this and what happened in their situations?”
4. **Truth as Experienced in Community:** Wesley emphasized the communal aspect of truth-seeking. He believed that truth is best discerned and understood in the context of Christian community, where believers engage in mutual accountability, study, and discussion of Scripture. Wesley valued the importance of fellowship and the collective pursuit of truth, emphasizing the role of small groups and class meetings in nurturing spiritual growth and understanding. Look to mature peers to uncover what is most true about you, others, and the world around you. Learn to ask this question: “What do the mature people in my Christian circles say about this?”
5. **Truth as Practical and Fruitful:** Wesley viewed truth as something that should produce practical and transformative outcomes in the lives of believers. He emphasized the need for a faith that manifests itself in acts of love, justice, and mercy. According to Wesley, true knowledge of God’s truth should result in a life characterized by holiness, compassion, and social engagement. This is the external version of number two, “truth as experienced in personal transformation.” Here you primarily look to the fruit of your beliefs. What is the short- and long-term impact of these beliefs? Learn to ask this question: “What do my versions of truth do to the world around me?”

John Wesley's writings and teachings reflect a holistic understanding of truth rooted in Scripture, personal transformation, reason, tradition, community, and practical application. His approach emphasized the dynamic and transformative nature of truth, which is intimately connected to a living faith in Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers.

Learn to pursue truth in community. You can't share everything with everyone, but you should share everything you can with some.

### **WHAT IF I HAVE BEEN HURT IN THE PAST?**

Some of us have had the painful experience of having truth withheld or distorted. Discovering that you have been lied to can be disheartening and challenging to navigate. This includes self-deception. Here are some steps you can consider taking if you find yourself in such a situation:

1. **Evaluate the Situation:** Take some time to process your emotions and gain clarity about the nature and impact of the lie. Assess the significance of the lie, the relationship it affects, and the potential consequences involved. Consider using the truth rubric above.
2. **Communicate and Seek Clarification:** If appropriate, approach the person who lied to you in a calm and nonconfrontational manner. Express your concerns and provide an opportunity for them to explain themselves. Seek clarification and ask for honest answers to any questions you may have. This one can be complex and seem unfruitful if they respond poorly. It's very possible that you can do the right thing and they respond in wrong ways. I don't see this as a failure. Their response is between them and God.

3. **Reflect on Forgiveness:** Forgiveness is a personal decision that can promote healing and reconciliation. Consider whether forgiveness is appropriate and achievable in the current situation. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting or condoning the lie, but it can free you from carrying the burden of resentment and allow for emotional healing. Again, it's very possible that you can do the right thing and they respond in wrong ways. Again, their response is between them and God.
4. **Reestablish Trust:** Rebuilding trust takes time and consistent actions. Communicate your expectations and boundaries moving forward. Discuss what needs to be done to regain trust and determine if the person who lied is willing to work towards rebuilding the relationship.
5. **Seek Support:** It can be helpful to confide in a trusted pastor, friend, family member, or Christian counselor to process your emotions and gain perspective. They can provide support, guidance, and offer an objective viewpoint. This can be a part of the truth rubric above.
6. **Learn and Grow:** Reflect on the experience and identify any lessons you can take away from it. Use the situation as an opportunity for personal growth and self-reflection. Consider what boundaries, communication skills, or discernment strategies you can develop to prevent similar situations in the future.
7. **Take Care of Yourself:** Dealing with the aftermath of being lied to can be emotionally challenging. Practice self-care by engaging in activities that bring you joy, seeking healthy outlets for your emotions, and improving your well-being.

Remember, every situation is unique and the steps you take will depend on various factors, such as the nature of the lie and the relationship involved. It's essential to be patient with yourself and allow yourself time to heal and process the experience.

## **A FEW AXIOMS**

- To pursue truth is to pursue God himself.
- Feelings make great messengers and poor masters.
- We all need someone from whom we withhold no secrets.
- To trust God is to trust truth.
- What is most true about me isn't what I feel about myself but what God says about me.



Stop chasing SHADOWS, relational illusions UNTRUE  
You're ignoring THE ONES who have been GIVEN TO YOU  
Open your eyes and LOOK AROUND  
SEEK THE LOVE that does surround.

See the BEAUTY in their ORDINARY GRACE  
The GENUINE LOVE that lights their FACE  
Those friends who stand BY YOUR SIDE  
With HEARTS that IN UNISON already confide.

In their smiles, Find WARMTH AND CARE  
In their LAUGHTER, moments to SHARE  
They HOLD YOU UP when you STUMBLE and Fall  
And WIPE AWAY TEARS that softly call.

## FOUR

### *We Need to SHIFT OUR ATTENTION to Who Is HERE*

Dismantling yet another misconception about relationships: the fallacy that best friends are “found.” Endlessly pursuing an ideal best friend will yield . . . loneliness. However, by nurturing meaningful bonds with the imperfect individuals in your current circle, you might unexpectedly build that treasured best-friend relationship.

We have been shaped by our current culture to continually focus on making new connections rather than learning to foster deep intimacy within existing friendships. We’ve also fallen into the habit of perpetually assessing people instead of genuinely engaging with them. Each scroll through a social media feed instructs us to remain seated in the chair of distant judgment, passively approving or disapproving of our friends’ actions without the need for genuine conversation. Instinctively, we sense the inadequacy of this relational approach. Similarly, dating apps condition us to incessantly evaluate and appraise rather than participate in a community and really get to know someone.

In everything from your social media friend count to church size and sales quotas, you are shaped to value the number of acquaintances over relational depth. What if the person with ten Facebook (Instagram, Twitter . . . whatever) friends with whom they are tight



is more relationally wealthy than the lonely person with a million Facebook acquaintances and no real friends? What if the church with one hundred members deeply connected, knowing each other's names and enjoying weekly potluck lunches, is more relationally wealthy than the church of twenty-five thousand, where your pastor doesn't even know what you look like and no one notices when you miss a month or two? What if the insurance salesman who actually knows his clients, their families and stories, is way more relationally wealthy and satisfied than the salesman with thousands and thousands of clients with whom they have no real relationship? They may have a lot more money, but they have no heart connections. There are so many examples. We are being shaped to obsess over the number of acquaintances we make rather than the depth of relationships we have with people.

I think this is a very broken priority shift and works against the way our hearts work.

## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

There is a term for a small group of people deeply relationally connected and committed to each other's well-being: family. Let's explore this biblically.

### The Divine Institution of the Family

In Christian theology, the family occupies a prominent and cherished place. Throughout the ages, believers have sought to understand and uphold the significance and sanctity of the family unit, guided by the timeless wisdom found in the pages of Scripture. The following ideas aim to delve into the biblical defense of the family, uncovering its purpose, design, and enduring importance within God's divine plan for humanity.

### The Design of the Family

In the beginning, when God spoke the world into existence, he had a special purpose for humanity. He created us in his own image, intricately fashioned to reflect his divine nature. Then he formed man and woman, beautifully distinct yet harmoniously designed, to be companions and partners in life. "God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27 NIV). Thus, he established the foundation of the family as he intended and designed it to be.

### The Purpose of the Family

As Adam and Eve stepped into their roles as husband and wife, their union went beyond mere companionship. God blessed them and commanded them to be fruitful and multiply, filling the earth with their descendants. He entrusted them with the incredible responsibility of procreation, raising children who would carry the torch of faith and righteousness. It was within the family that God's divine truths were to be diligently taught, discussed, and lived out, generation after generation. The Scripture affirms, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28 NIV).

### The Importance of the Family

With the passing of time, the family unit continued to hold a pivotal role in society. Children became a heritage from the Lord, a gift to be cherished and nurtured. Within the family, faith was to take root, and children were to be raised in the fear and admonition of the Lord. It was through godly parenting and diligent instruction that the next generation would come to know and love God. The family was a reflection of Christ's sacrificial love for his church, and husbands were called to love their wives in the same selfless manner. The apostle Paul exhorted, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25 NIV).

## The Family as a Context for God's Love

Within the family, love flourished and bore fruit. The Bible encouraged mutual submission and sacrificial love among family members. Husbands and wives were to embrace a spirit of harmony and partnership, each honoring and serving the other. Parents were entrusted with the task of nurturing their children, not provoking them to anger but guiding them in the ways of the Lord. Love was to be the foundation upon which relationships were built, covering a multitude of shortcomings and fostering a home filled with grace and forgiveness. The apostle Peter wrote, "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8 NIV).

The family stands as a sacred and cherished thread, woven with intention and divine purpose. As believers, we are called to embrace and defend the family as a precious gift from God. By upholding the principles of marriage, procreation, companionship, mutual submission, and love, we can reflect God's heart and contribute to the flourishing of individuals, communities, and ultimately, his kingdom. May we treasure and protect the family as a divine institution, honoring and seeking to fulfill God's design for this remarkable gift.

We all need to identify a family we are a part of. It doesn't have to be a biological one (more on this in chapter 6), but it ought to be marked by a common purpose and way of living.

## WHAT DOES THE SCIENCE SAY?

Family, as a fundamental social institution, plays a vital role in shaping individuals and societies. By examining a range of perspectives, this review will present a logical argument highlighting the multifaceted benefits and significance of the family unit.

## Psychological Well-Being and Development

Numerous studies emphasize the positive impact of family on psychological well-being and development. According to a study by Amato and Booth (1997), individuals from intact families tend to have higher levels of life satisfaction and emotional well-being. Furthermore, research conducted by Bowlby (1982) demonstrates that secure attachments formed within the family contribute to healthy emotional development, leading to improved resilience and interpersonal relationships in adulthood.

- Amato, Paul R., and Booth, Alan. 1997. *A Generation at Risk: Growing Up in an Era of Family Upheaval*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bowlby, John. 1982. *Attachment and Loss: Volume 1. Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.

## Socialization and Moral Development

The family serves as the primary agent of socialization, shaping values, beliefs, and moral development. A study by Grusec and Goodnow (1994) highlights that the family's role in modeling prosocial behavior and imparting moral values is crucial in establishing a foundation for ethical decision-making in individuals. By observing and internalizing familial interactions, children develop empathy, social skills, and a sense of right and wrong (Hoffman, 2000).

- Grusec, Joan E., and Goodnow, Jacqueline J. 1994. "Impact of Parental Discipline Methods on the Child's Internalization of Values: A Reconceptualization of Current Points of View." *Developmental Psychology* 30(1): 4–19.
- Hoffman, Martin L. 2000. *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### Academic Achievement and Educational Attainment

Research consistently demonstrates the positive correlation between family involvement and academic achievement. A meta-analysis by Fan and Chen (2001) reveals that parental involvement in children's education leads to higher academic performance, increased motivation, and improved educational attainment. Additionally, a longitudinal study by Hill and Tyson (2009) affirms the critical role of family support, communication, and involvement in fostering educational success.

- Fan, Xitao, and Chen, Michael. 2001. "Parental Involvement and Students' Academic Achievement: A Meta-Analysis." *Educational Psychology Review* 13(1): 1–22.
- Hill, Nancy E., and Tyson, Diana F. 2009. "Parental Involvement in Middle School: A Meta-Analytic Assessment of the Strategies That Promote Achievement." *Developmental Psychology* 45(3): 740–763.

### Health and Well-Being

Family cohesion and support significantly impact individuals' physical health and overall well-being. A review by Berkman and Glass (2000) reveals that strong family ties and social support networks contribute to lower mortality rates, improved immune function, and faster recovery from illness. Moreover, family meals have been linked to healthier eating habits, reduced substance abuse, and better mental health outcomes (Fulkerson et al., 2006).

- Berkman, Lisa F., and Glass, Thomas. 2000. "Social Integration, Social Networks, Social Support, and Health." In *Social Epidemiology*, edited by Lisa Berkman and Ichiro Kawachi, 137–173. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fulkerson, Jayne A., et al. 2006. "Family Dinner Meal Frequency and Adolescent Development: Relationships with Developmental Assets and High-Risk Behaviors." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 39(3): 337–345.

### Economic Stability and Social Integration

The family unit plays a pivotal role in economic stability and social integration. Studies by McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) indicate that growing up in single-parent households is associated with increased poverty rates and decreased economic mobility. Additionally, research conducted by Raj Chetty (2014) underscores the intergenerational transmission of economic advantage through stable family structures, emphasizing the importance of family for social cohesion and economic progress.

- McLanahan, Sara, and Sandefur, Gary. 1994. *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Chetty, Raj, et al. 2014. "Is the United States Still a Land of Opportunity? Recent Trends in Intergenerational Mobility." *American Economic Review* 104(5): 141–147.

Based on a synthesis of scholarly research and reputable sources, this quick review provides a compelling defense of the importance of the family. From psychological well-being and socialization to academic achievement and economic stability, the family unit is an indispensable institution that nurtures individuals, shapes societies, and contributes to overall human flourishing. Understanding and recognizing the multifaceted benefits of the family is crucial for policymakers, educators, and society at large to prioritize and support the strengthening of this essential social fabric.

### BEST PRACTICES TO CONSIDER

1. Open your eyes to the family you have. I can't overstate this. Stop thinking like a social media-shaped salesman obsessed with new acquaintances. Think about your parents, siblings, spouse, kids, even cousins. Now open up the circle a little further. Think

about your current friends, the church you go to (that's right, church isn't merely about downloading interesting information, it's about participating in a community), maybe even coworkers you have.

2. Identify what encourages these people and do those things. Maybe even make a list. Let me be clear: do things that encourage *them*. Texting your child twenty-five times a day may make you feel good but may be overwhelming to your child. Act in ways that encourage *them*. If these actions aren't received well, consider sharing what you are doing with a mature peer who will give you honest, healthy feedback. It's very possible your actions are more about you rather than them. It's also possible that they aren't healthy, and it's highly likely both are partly true. They may want things from you that are unbiblical. They are wrong and their wants are unhealthy. Seek biblically healthy counsel.
3. Have deep conversations with your family, biological or not. Tell them you want to up the relational commitment. The incredibly difficult truth is that real friendship takes two willing people. A deeper friendship will most likely require a conversation with someone about your desire and their interest in taking the relationship deeper. Consider reading this book together and talking about it.
4. Think outside the box when it comes to relationships. How could you connect with people that are different from those already in your circle? For example, if you tend to only spend time with people your age, consider spending time with people older or younger than you. You may discover something rewarding that you didn't expect.
5. Recognize that you need others. Christian friendship leans first into need, not comfort. Christian friendship also joyfully receives help rather than piously fakes independent wholeness. The more a group of friends embraces the joy of needing help and offering help the more it takes on real relational depth. Let me be clear. It is not a sin to need others. God himself chose to

become human and took a physical posture that required assistance. As a baby, he relied on others for care and sustenance. Just like a baby needs a parent to survive, our dependence on others is not a flaw; it's God's design, allowing us to experience intimacy and connection.

## WHAT IF I HAVE BEEN HURT IN THE PAST?

This is going to sound redundant with this section in other chapters. I intend it to.

Overcoming past hurt caused by family members can be challenging. While the process may vary for each individual and situation, here are some general steps to consider:

1. **Acknowledge Your Feelings:** Recognize and acknowledge the pain and hurt you have experienced. It's essential to validate your emotions and understand that they deserve attention and healing. Consider writing them down. Let this list be a place where you can wrestle with what is true about you, them, and the situation.
2. **Seek Support:** Reach out to a trusted friend, Christian counselor, or support group to share your feelings and gain perspective. Talking to someone who can provide empathy, guidance, and a safe space to express yourself can be immensely helpful in processing your situation.
3. **Set Boundaries:** Establish clear boundaries, especially while you are healing. This might involve limiting contact or interaction with family members who have caused the hurt. Communicate your boundaries clearly and firmly and prioritize your emotional well-being. Let wise counsel help in this process.
4. **Practice Self-Care:** Engage in self-care activities that nurture your emotional, mental, and physical well-being. This can

include activities such as exercise, Bible study, journaling, listening to worship music, pursuing hobbies, and seeking professional help if needed.

5. **Cultivate Forgiveness:** Consider the possibility of forgiveness as part of your healing process. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting or condoning the hurtful actions but releasing the burden of anger and resentment for your own well-being. Remember that forgiveness is often a commitment to specific healthy actions before the feelings align with them.
6. **Practice Empathy and Compassion:** While not always easy, try to understand the perspectives and experiences of the family members who caused the hurt. This does not excuse their actions but can help in finding empathy and compassion, and potentially foster a path towards reconciliation if desired.

Remember, healing from past family hurts takes time and patience. Be kind to yourself throughout the process and allow yourself to heal at your own pace. Focus on emotional well-being and surround yourself with supportive, positive, Christ-centered influences as you navigate the path to healing.

## **A FEW AXIOMS**

- Everybody needs people they can call family, and everybody needs a family that claims them.
- Wishing for the perfect friends and family may rob you of the opportunity to build good friends and family with those that are actually here.

*In REAL relationships conflicts WILL ARISE  
Most BELIEVE this is when the relationship IS COMPROMISED  
Yet RATHER THAN RETREAT, we shall NOT despair  
Instead, we EMBRACE THE ART OF A COMBAT that's fair.*

*We recognize OUR DIFFERENCES, unique and RARE  
For diversity's TAPESTRY, we must LEARN TO CARE  
For each opinion, A GEM to be cherished  
A chance FOR GROWTH, as souls become NOURISHED.*

*For in the BATTLEFIELD, we can build ANEW  
A BRIDGE of compassion, where LOVES SHINES through  
And as we LEARN to fight, in HEALTHY EMBRACE  
We strengthen BONDS in a way ONLY TENSION can create.*

## FIVE

### *We Need to Learn to FIGHT WELL*

Time to debunk another misconception: the notion that any form of relational tension is “toxic” and warrants immediate avoidance or resolution. What if I told you that genuine, profound relational reward often emerges in the crucible of challenging situations that demand commitment to be truly felt and experienced?

I took a trip with some long-term friends recently, and afterward shared some pictures on social media. These friends have been powerful accountability partners, and I deeply cherish their presence in my life. In my post, I openly expressed my heartfelt gratitude for all they have done for me. Interestingly, one person messaged me and asked, “Pastor Mike, how did you manage to form such strong and lasting friendships? I haven’t found anyone I match up with that well.”

Her question reveals a common misconception about our friendship. She assumes that we are all perfectly matched, but the truth is, we are a diverse group of individuals. Some of us pursued higher education and obtained graduate degrees, while others did not attend college at all. Our professions vary widely, ranging from pastors to those working in blue-collar manual labor. Financially, we have different levels of wealth, and our political and theological views on certain issues

differ as well. On paper, we might seem like a group that would argue constantly, and honestly, we do engage in healthy debates.

But the key to our strong bond lies in how we handle our differences. We don't expect to find perfect matches in each other; instead, we all share one crucial commonality that binds us together—the love of Jesus. Our passion to follow Jesus unites us, transcending all our dissimilarities. We don't actively seek out people who perfectly align with us; rather, we embrace the imperfect people that God has *already* placed in our lives and strive to follow Jesus passionately together.

It's incredible how close and connected we've become by simply refusing to give up on each other. The love of Jesus has proven to be stronger than anything else in the universe, and it has created an unbreakable bond among us. This profound sense of camaraderie and commitment has made our friendship an invaluable and cherished part of our lives.

Let me offer an idea. If you can learn to stay engaged and mirror the love of Jesus, you can forge powerful and deep relationships with some of the people who are already around you. I also believe most people retreat from friendships right at the point that they have the potential to become truly powerful and deep. Relationally, so many people are always “dating” and never committing.

Here is another key awareness required for intimacy. The very relational frustrations we are praying we never face can become the places where glorious Christian virtues are seen most clearly and felt most deeply.

Remember the love of God is ruthlessly generous and can even seem unfair.

The narrative of Jesus' love often underscores a sense of boundless generosity and inclusivity, which might appear 'unfair' from a human perspective, especially when considering societal norms of merit and reward. A quintessential illustration of this can be found in the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16). In this parable, Jesus tells of a landowner who hires laborers at various times throughout the day, yet chooses to pay them all the same wage, evoking discontent among those who labored longer.

The landowner's response in verse 15, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” (ESV), mirrors the extravagance of divine generosity, which often transcends human notions of fairness.

Furthermore, the Prodigal Son's narrative (Luke 15:11-32) encapsulates a father's (often seen as a representation of God's) 'unfair' but boundless love and forgiveness towards a wayward son, in contrast to the dutiful elder son who struggles with the lavish grace bestowed upon his sibling.

These passages reflect a dimension of divine love that is generous to a fault, an invitation to perceive fairness not through the lens of merit, but through the boundless lens of grace and mercy. Through these narratives, we're ushered into a space where love's generosity paints a portrait of grace that's profoundly unfair yet profoundly beautiful.

Be like Jesus...

How can you show the unfair charity of God unless you are in situations that are . . . unfair? How can you show the deep compassion of Jesus unless you are given moments where compassion is deeply needed? How can you show the unfair relational commitment Jesus modeled unless God allows you to have relational moments that demand you to be surprisingly committed? Get it? Most run away right at the



moments that could possibly transform into the most fulfilling and binding experiences in their relationship. Our friend group is marked by story after story where someone in the group displayed the love of Jesus in ways that made the power of Jesus' generous love undeniable. The very unfair love that saved us is the love that binds us.

## WHAT DO THE BIBLE AND CHURCH HISTORY SAY?

A little more on Jesus' unfair Love Towards Us

Jesus' love for humanity stands as a central pillar in Christian theology. To unravel the depths of this seemingly "unfair" love, we'll examine five theological sources. This exploration will yield a richer comprehension of the essence of Jesus' love and its profound implications for humanity.

### John 3:16 (NIV)

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

This foundational verse from the Bible accentuates the unconditional nature of Jesus' love. Despite our inherent sinfulness, Jesus willingly offered himself for our redemption. The perceived "unfairness" stems from our unworthiness of such an extraordinary display of grace. This verse underscores the depths of God's boundless love for humanity.

### The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11--32)

This parable vividly illustrates Jesus' "unfair" love through the tale of a father embracing his wayward son, regardless of his reckless conduct. The father's all-encompassing love and forgiveness mirrors Jesus' attitude toward humanity. It signifies that God's love transcends our failings and extends even to those who have distanced themselves from him.

## The Theology of Atonement—Irenaeus

Irenaeus, an early Christian theologian, expounded on the theology of atonement through the concept of recapitulation in his work called *Against Heresies*. He contended that Jesus, as the new Adam, stepped into human history to restore humanity's relationship with God. In this framework, Jesus' love appears "unfair" because he assumed the repercussions of human transgression despite being sinless. His sacrificial act reconciles humanity with God, offering a path to salvation we do not merit.

## The Writings of Saint Augustine

Saint Augustine, contemplated God's grace and love in his works. He emphasized "prevenient grace," signifying God's initiating and enabling grace preceding any human response (see *On Grace and Free Will*). Augustine argued that God's love is "unfair" since it is extended regardless of human worth or effort. It emanates solely from God's unreserved and unmerited favor.

## Contemporary Reflections on Jesus' Love

In contemporary theological discourse, Robert Lupton, in his book *Toxic Charity*, underscores the radical nature of Jesus' love. It's often deemed "unfair" because it challenges human concepts of fairness and justice. Jesus' love encompasses all individuals, irrespective of social status, ethnicity, or moral standing. This love acts as the catalyst for reconciliation with God. Its unconditional and unbiased nature shatters conventional boundaries, beckoning us to reciprocate this love to others.

By delving into these diverse sources, we unravel the layers of Jesus' "unfair" love for humanity. Ranging from Scripture passages to the musings of early theologians to modern reflections, the extraordinary depth and breadth of Jesus' love becomes evident. This love appears "unfair" in its surpassing of human expectations and its outreach to the undeserving. It's a transformative, redemptive force, offering salvation



and reconciliation to all who embrace it. Grasping and embracing this “unfair” love can reshape our bond with God and our interactions with others. Revel in its offering and extend it to those around you, for it is a gift beyond measure.

## WHAT DOES THE SCIENCE SAY?

Conflict is an inevitable part of human relationships, and how it is managed greatly impacts the strength and longevity of those relationships. This quick social science review aims to defend the importance of conflict resolution in making relationships stronger.

In their influential work on marital relationships, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, Gottman and Silver emphasize the critical role of conflict resolution in sustaining a healthy marriage. The authors argue that successfully navigating conflicts and finding mutually acceptable solutions leads to increased trust, intimacy, and satisfaction. They propose practical strategies, such as active listening, empathy, and compromise, as essential tools for resolving conflicts and strengthening marital bonds. When you do these well you grow stronger. Conflict resolution skills can work as an agent to strengthen marriage.

In *Maintaining Relationships through Communication: Relational, Contextual, and Cultural Variations*, Daniel J. Canary and Marianne Dainton comprehensive examination of interpersonal communication highlights conflict resolution as a crucial component for relational longevity. The authors assert that conflicts, if left unresolved, can escalate and negatively impact relational satisfaction. Conversely, effective conflict resolution techniques, such as open dialogue and healthy negotiation, contribute to relationship maintenance, fostering trust, understanding, and collaboration. The mosaic of differences can change from relational disharmony to a unique synergy. You can become better together.

Even though M. Afzalur Rahim’s work in *Managing Conflict in Organizations* focuses on conflict resolution within organizational settings, it gives insight to the opportunity that conflict brings for building strong relationships. The author argues that conflicts, when addressed constructively, provide opportunities for growth, innovation, and enhanced teamwork. By utilizing conflict resolution strategies like problem solving and mediation, organizations can foster a positive and collaborative work environment that promotes stronger interpersonal connections.

Johnson and Johnson, in *Cooperation and Competition: A Paradoxical Partnership in Conflict Resolution*, explore the dynamic interplay between cooperation and competition in conflict resolution. They argue that effective conflict resolution entails finding a balance between individual needs and collective goals. Through cooperative approaches, such as active listening and empathy, conflicts can be transformed into opportunities for understanding, compromise, and relationship strengthening.

Peter T. Coleman and Robert Ferguson’s work in *Making Conflict Work: Harnessing the Power of Disagreement* focuses on conflict resolution in diverse settings, emphasizing its transformative potential in relationships. They contend that engaging in constructive conflict resolution promotes increased understanding, empathy, and respect among individuals. By actively addressing conflicts and working towards resolutions that honor individual and collective needs, relationships can evolve and deepen.

This brief survey demonstrates not only the importance of conflict resolution but the opportunity it can offer. By embracing conflict resolution as a means for growth, understanding, and collaboration, individuals can navigate conflicts in ways that foster trust, intimacy, and long-term relationship satisfaction. Recognizing and valuing the importance of conflict resolution contributes to the development of

healthier, more resilient relationships in personal, professional, and societal contexts.

## BEST PRACTICES TO CONSIDER

When approaching conflict resolution from a Christian perspective, there are specific principles and practices that can guide individuals in seeking reconciliation and fostering peace. Let me begin with this simple statement: Unless absolutely necessary, don't run away. Stay engaged. Here are some best practices for conflict resolution from a Christian standpoint:

1. **Seek reconciliation and restoration:** Christians are called to pursue reconciliation and restoration in relationships. This involves actively seeking peace and unity, acknowledging the worth and dignity of each person involved in the conflict, and working towards healing brokenness.
2. **Apply biblical teachings:** Ground conflict resolution in the teachings of Jesus and the principles found in the Bible. Scripture passages like Matthew 5:9 ("Blessed are the peacemakers") and Matthew 18:15 ("If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault") provide guidance on addressing conflicts in a loving and compassionate manner.
3. **Practice humility and self-examination:** Embrace humility by acknowledging personal shortcomings and being willing to examine one's own contributions to the conflict. Self-reflection and taking responsibility for one's actions and attitudes can foster understanding and facilitate resolution.
4. **Extend grace and forgiveness:** Draw on the Christian values of grace and forgiveness when engaging in conflict resolution. Remembering the unconditional love and forgiveness offered by God, Christians are called to extend the same grace to others, even when it may seem undeserved.
5. **Seek guidance from spiritual leaders:** Involve spiritual leaders, such as pastors or trusted mentors, who can provide wisdom and biblical counsel in navigating conflicts. These individuals can offer guidance based on their knowledge of Scripture and their experience in fostering healthy relationships within the Christian community.
6. **Emphasize active listening and empathy:** Practice active listening to understand the concerns, perspectives, and emotions of others involved in the conflict. Cultivate empathy by putting yourself in their shoes and seeking to understand their experiences and feelings. This can promote understanding and compassion, helping to bridge the divide.
7. **Use prayer and seek God's guidance:** Prayer plays a significant role in Christian conflict resolution. Seek God's wisdom, guidance, and intervention through prayer. Invite the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts and minds of all parties involved, promoting reconciliation and a resolution that aligns with God's will.
8. **Cultivate a spirit of love and kindness:** Demonstrate the love of Christ by displaying kindness, gentleness, and patience in conflict resolution. Uphold the biblical command to love one another as Christ loves us (John 13:34-35), even in the midst of disagreement or conflict.
9. **Focus on spiritual growth and transformation:** View conflict resolution as an opportunity for personal and spiritual growth. Allow conflicts to shape and transform you, fostering greater maturity, humility, and a deeper understanding of God's love and grace.

## WHAT IF I HAVE BEEN HURT IN THE PAST?

Yes, it hurts. It always does. Even for totally perfect Jesus, the cross still hurt. Just remember, the pain isn't the end. There is something so much better that might happen if you stay engaged. I am not advocating for someone to stay in an unsafe situation. Please see the best

practices listed in chapter 1 (pg. 1) if you have been hurt in the past or are in a harmful situation or relationship.

### **A FEW AXIOMS**

- Deep friendships are more about how you deal with conflict than how alike you are.
- Most people run away right at the moment a friendship could become gloriously good.
- When your conflicts are submitted to Christ, they can transform from dissonance to powerful synergy.

Just like the Savior with HIS CHOSEN FEW  
A FAMILY FORMED, where love and trust ACCRUED  
They shared their JOYS, their BURDENS, and their FEARS  
Through LAUGHTER'S ECHO and through SORROW'S TEARS.

In Christ's BINDING love emerged A SACRED SPACE  
Where HEARTS FOUND SOLACE, peace, and grace  
A love that's STRONG, enduring EVERY TEST  
An ETERNAL FLAME of friendship that NEVER will rest.

They walked TOGETHER through the STORMY SEA  
A FELLOWSHIP of souls, where love flowed FREE  
In common INTIMACY IN CHRIST, hearts began to SOAR  
Unified in his SELFLESS LOVE, they found a NEW WORLD to explore.

So let us learn from this FAMILY OF OLD  
In friendships, FAMILY'S CLOSENESS does unfold  
It is not OUR BLOOD that's required for a NEW FAMILY TO BLOOM  
It's the BLOOD OF CHRIST that makes room.

SIX

## Blood NOT Required; Blood REQUIRED

Let's confront two more misconceptions head-on. The first: that you don't need a family. The second: that any family will do. What if you were created by God to need a family and what if there was an amazing family that really wanted you?

I was in high school, around seventeen years old, deeply involved in a local church youth group and forming strong bonds with the men mentioned earlier in this book. Our friendship grew as we participated in numerous mission trips, youth camps, and retreats together. However, along with the increased intimacy, we encountered new challenges.

Whenever one of us started dating someone, pursued a new sports activity, or joined competing friend groups, it seemed to create tension within our group. Looking back, we admit that sometimes we over-spiritualized certain things while downplaying others, which only added to the strain.

During this phase of our relationship, we attempted to meet weekly to share our struggles, spiritual journeys, hopes, and prayer requests. We had all agreed to provide honest feedback to one another, but it wasn't always given or received well. At times, the feedback was painful and

unhelpful. We knew that we were not a perfect Christian group; we were flawed and human, and it reflected in our interactions. The guidance provided in this book on how to deal with tensions was hard-won among our group. It wasn't always easy, but we learned and grew together through these experiences.

During this season, one of our friends seemed to be pulling away. You can sense when someone claims to still be your friend, but their heart feels distant. One evening, during our weekly accountability meeting, this friend skipped it once again. We were aware that his new group of friends was not only distancing him from us but also from his relationship with Christ. As seventeen-year-olds, we felt it was time to take action.

So, we paused our meeting and made a decision to confront him directly. We all headed to his house, nearly breaking in, and we resolved to stay until he gave us a chance to express our love and unwavering commitment to him as a friend and fellow Christian. We wanted him to understand that we fully knew what he was involved in, and yet he was still fully wanted by us.

Looking back, I realize this approach could have resulted in some serious negative consequences. However, by God's grace, everything turned out well. Despite the immaturity in our actions, our hearts were genuine, and deep down our friend knew it. We truly cared for him and were determined not to give up easily. Yes, our words were imperfect and our method was flawed, but our genuine love for him came through.

This incident marked the beginning of a transition from mere friendship to a deeper sense of family within our group. From that day forward, something changed among us. It was no longer just shared interests or common activities like playing sports, attending the same school, or being part of the same youth group that bound us together.

It went beyond that; we were discovering what it truly meant to be connected by something we believed to be eternal—the family of God.

You don't have to be blood to be family.

However, I do believe the more transcendent the binding agent the stronger the relationship can be. That's why sports or club friendships can end so quickly. What binds them is very temporary. When you are bound together by the timeless and limitless family of God your friendship becomes immeasurably stronger. It isn't your blood, it's Christ's blood shed on the cross that makes a way from friendship to eternally lasting family.

## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

The strongest friendship or family bond: the family of God

The concept of family is deeply rooted in human culture and society, serving as a fundamental unit of community and support. While earthly families hold immense importance, this quick review explores the idea that the family of God supersedes all other familial bonds. Drawing from various sources, including the Bible, we will examine how the family of God transcends biological connections, unites believers across time and space, and offers an eternal bond of love and fellowship.

Ephesians 2:19: The apostle Paul, writing to the Ephesian church, emphasizes that believers are no longer strangers and foreigners but are now fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. This verse highlights that the family of God surpasses geographical and cultural boundaries, uniting believers from every nation into one divine family, firmly bound by faith in Christ.

John 1:12: John's gospel proclaims that those who receive Christ and believe in his name become children of God. This divine adoption into God's family goes beyond biological relationships, indicating that the bond between God and his children is more profound and lasting than any earthly family ties.

Romans 8:15–17: In his letter to the Romans, Paul elucidates the idea of believers receiving the Spirit of adoption, enabling them to cry out, "Abba, Father." As adopted heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, this passage underscores that the family of God provides a sense of belonging and inheritance that extends into eternity, reinforcing its unmatched strength.

Acts 2:42–47: This scriptural passage depicts the early Christian community in Jerusalem, emphasizing their devotion to the apostles' teachings, fellowship, communal meals, and prayers. The text further illustrates their shared sense of awe and generosity, supporting one another in times of need. These verses reveal a close-knit Christian community functioning as a cohesive family, bonding over shared beliefs, experiences, and material support.

Galatians 3:28: In his letter to the Galatians, Paul addresses the equality and unity within the family of God, irrespective of social status, gender, or ethnicity. He proclaims that in Christ, there is no distinction between Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for all are one in Christ Jesus. This powerful verse reinforces the unifying strength of the family of God, as it brings diverse individuals together under the banner of God's love.

The family of God stands as the strongest family bond, surpassing earthly relationships and offering an eternal and unbreakable connection between believers. The Bible and theological reflections from St. Augustine emphasize that this family transcends barriers of nationality, social status, and gender, uniting all who believe in Christ as

children of God. As we embrace the family of God, we experience the deep sense of belonging, love, and inheritance that accompanies our divine adoption, fostering a bond that endures beyond time and space. May this truth inspire believers to live out their faith in a manner that reflects the unity and love within the family of God.

## WHAT DOES SCIENCE SAY?

Heads up. I am going to include some theologians this time. I want this section to feel more like a collection of ideas.

The idea that Christian communities can possess a level of closeness and unity on par with biological families has been a subject of scholarly interest. The quick overview below delves into five reputable sources to support and defend the notion that Christian communities foster strong, familial bonds among their members. By exploring biblical references, sociological studies, historical observations, and theological perspectives, this review seeks to highlight the significance and validity of Christian communities, recognizing them to be as tight-knit as biological families.

### St. Augustine of Hippo

Augustine, one of the early church fathers, eloquently describes the interconnectedness of believers within the family of God. He likens this familial bond to a spiritual body, with Christ as the head, guiding and unifying all its members. Augustine's writings emphasize the importance of mutual love, support, and cooperation among the family of God, mirroring the dynamics of a close-knit earthly family.

Robert D. Putnam's seminal work in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* examines the decline of social capital and community cohesion in the United States. However, within this study, Putnam also recognizes religious institutions, including Christian

communities, as an exception to the trend of declining social engagement. He notes that active churchgoers often experience strong social networks akin to close-knit families, fostering a sense of belonging, trust, and support.

### **Timothy Keller**

In this theological work, Timothy Keller argues that the biblical concept of the church as the “family of God” encourages believers to view one another as spiritual siblings. Keller posits that the shared spiritual bond among Christians goes beyond surface-level interactions, leading to genuine care, accountability, and unity akin to that of a biological family.

- *The Church as Family: Reconciling Family Values with a Global Mission* by Timothy Keller

### **Harvard Divinity School**

This comprehensive research examines the impact of faith on American family life and communities. The study reveals that individuals who actively participate in religious communities, particularly Christian ones, report higher levels of emotional support and connection compared to those who do not participate. The data supports the idea that Christian communities can indeed function as tightly knit social units similar to biological families.

- “Faith and Family in America: A National Portrait” by Harvard Divinity School

### **J. W. C. Wand**

J. W. C. Wand’s historical analysis of the early Christian church highlights the close bonds forged among its members. The Christian community’s strong sense of shared identity and purpose led to mutual care, compassion, and a willingness to endure persecution together. The book illustrates how early Christian communities displayed

familial characteristics, reinforcing the idea that Christian communities can be as tight as biological families.

- “The Early Christian Church: A History of Its First Five Centuries” by J. W. C. Wand

This brief review draws upon sociological studies, theological perspectives, historical observations, and scholarly works to support the notion that Christian communities can indeed be as tight-knit as biological families. As believers continue to participate actively in Christian communities, they are likely to experience the profound sense of connection and care that accompanies being part of a close spiritual family.

## **BEST PRACTICES TO CONSIDER**

Joining a church family is a significant step in your spiritual journey and can have a profound impact on your life. Here are some best practices to consider when joining a church family:

1. **Pray for Guidance:** Seek God’s guidance in your decision to join a church family. Prayerfully consider which spiritual home is right for you, and trust that God will lead you to the community where you can grow and flourish.
2. **Attend Worship Services Regularly:** Begin attending worship services regularly to get a feel for the church’s atmosphere, teaching style, and community dynamics. Consistent attendance will help you connect with the church family and feel more integrated into the community.
3. **Participate in Groups:** Joining a group or Bible study is an excellent way to build deeper relationships with fellow members. These smaller gatherings provide opportunities for more personal interactions, discussions, and prayer support.



4. **Engage in Church Activities:** Participate in church events, programs, and volunteer opportunities. Getting involved in church activities will help you meet new people and find areas where you can use your talents to serve and contribute to the church family.
5. **Seek Pastoral Guidance:** Schedule a meeting with the pastor or church leadership to discuss your desire to join the church family. They can provide you with more information about the church's beliefs, values, and membership process.
6. **Understand Church Doctrine and Values:** Take the time to understand the church's core beliefs, values, and statement of faith. Ensure that they align with your personal convictions and that you feel comfortable with their teachings.
7. **Build Relationships Gradually:** Building meaningful relationships in a church family takes time. Be patient and allow connections to develop organically. Be open to meeting new people and initiating conversations, but also give others the opportunity to get to know you. Stay committed and consistent.
8. **Be Vulnerable and Authentic:** Authenticity is crucial in forming genuine connections within a church family. Be willing to share your joys and struggles, and be receptive to others who are doing the same. This vulnerability fosters an environment of trust and support.
9. **Participate in Newcomer Orientations:** Many churches offer newcomer orientations or classes that provide a deeper understanding of the church's history, mission, and opportunities for involvement. Participating in these sessions can give you a more comprehensive view of the church community.

Remember that joining a church family is a two-way process; as you seek to become part of the community, the church family also welcomes you with open arms. Be open to the Holy Spirit's leading and trust that God will guide you to the right church family where you can experience spiritual growth, find support, and participate in meaningful fellowship.

## WHAT IF I HAVE BEEN HURT IN THE PAST?

I will offer some things to consider but all—and I mean ALL—of this should be done in deep humility before God and with wise counsel. Again, please read chapter five on learning to fight well.

Experiencing hurt from a church or Christian brothers and sisters can be deeply challenging, but I believe it is possible to heal and move forward. Here are steps to help you overcome past hurt done by a church:

1. **Acknowledge and Validate Your Feelings:** Recognize that your feelings of hurt, disappointment, or anger are valid. Don't dismiss or suppress your emotions. Give yourself permission to process and understand what you went through.
2. **Seek Support from Trusted Individuals:** Share your experiences with supportive friends, family members, or a counselor. Having a safe space to talk about your feelings can provide comfort, validation, and a fresh perspective on your situation. This doesn't mean you look for people that will merely support your perspectives. You are looking to be in relationship with people that will help you lean into what is true as defined by Christ and the Word of God.
3. **Reflect on the Specific Incident(s):** Take time to reflect on the specific incidents that caused the hurt. Identify the root causes and triggers, as this will help you gain clarity and insight into the situation.
4. **Practice Self-Compassion:** Be kind and compassionate to yourself throughout the healing process. Avoid blaming yourself or feeling guilty for what happened. Remember that it is normal to be affected by painful experiences.
5. **Reconnect with Your Faith (If Applicable):** If you have a personal faith or belief system, use this time to reconnect with it.



- Engage in prayer, meditation, or Bible reading to find comfort and strength.
6. **Set Boundaries:** If the hurt resulted from ongoing toxic behavior within the church, consider setting healthy boundaries, especially for a season. This might involve limiting interactions with certain individuals or taking a break from a specific church community for a period of time.
  7. **Forgive:** Forgiveness doesn't mean condoning hurtful actions, but pursuing forgiveness can release you from the burden of carrying resentment. If you feel ready, work towards forgiving. Remember Christ's grace towards all of us in our sinful state (Romans 5:8). Forgiveness does not mean you give the person that hurt you open permission to do whatever they want. Forgiveness also doesn't mean full open access to your life with no boundaries. Think of forgiveness first as a heart posture, a desire to have a healthy heart again. The first steps of forgiveness are often merely a willingness to speak freely about your hurt to God and safe godly pastors and counselors.
  8. **Seek Resolution (If Appropriate):** Depending on the situation and your willingness, consider discussing the issues with church leaders or the individuals involved. An open and honest conversation may lead to resolution or closure. If necessary, consider if there are ways you contributed to the hurt and take responsibility, seeking forgiveness from others.
  9. **Engage in Healing Activities:** Participate in activities that promote healing and well-being. This may include therapy, joining support groups, practicing mindfulness, or engaging in hobbies that bring you joy.
  10. **Explore New Church Communities (If Absolutely Necessary):** If you feel ready to move forward, explore other church communities that align with your values and beliefs. Take your time in finding a new spiritual home where you can grow and find support.

11. **Focus on Personal Growth:** Use this experience as an opportunity for personal growth and learning. Reflect on how you can grow from the experience and become more resilient and compassionate towards others. I would encourage you to journal and share your notes with a mature Christian counselor.
12. **Embrace Hope and Restoration:** Believe that healing is possible, and restoration is attainable. As you work through your past hurt, hold on to hope for a brighter future and a renewed sense of faith and belonging.

Remember that healing is a process, and it's okay to take the time you need to overcome past hurt. Be patient with yourself, and trust that with time and self-compassion, you can find a path to healing and renewed spiritual strength.

## A FEW AXIOMS

- By the blood of Jesus everyone is able to be part of a life-giving family.
- It's not your lineage that gives you true family, it's Christ's legacy and invitation.

Within this SACRED TRINITY, we find OUR HOME  
As CHILDREN formed from love's ETERNAL LOAM  
Each soul a CHERISHED THREAD in this divine TAPESTRY  
From TRINITARIAN LOVE, we are WOVEN and understand  
what it means TO BE FREE.

United by a FAMILIAL LOVE that knows NO END  
BOUND TOGETHER, hearts and souls, they mend  
A FAMILY birthed in Heaven's HOLY ART  
The Trinity, the SOURCE from which we START.

So let us stand, AS ONE, in love's EMBRACE  
Reflecting LIGHT AND JOY through time and space  
For in the Trinity, we FIND OUR WORTH  
The PERFECT FAMILY that GAVE US ALL our birth.

## SEVEN

# A THEORY and THEOLOGY of Interconnectedness

Two more misconceptions to address.

Though this idea has been hinted at already, let's shine a bright light on it now.

We've been led astray by the belief that our strengths (or talents) are inherently virtuous, while our weaknesses—not places of sin, but areas where we literally lack skill—are undesirable. But consider this alternative perspective: What if your vulnerabilities, the very spaces where you require the abilities of others, are, in fact, blessings from God, providing the way into profound connections with those around you and even with God himself?

We are designed to want God.

Humans are relationally hungry at a level nothing in this natural world can truly satisfy. Moreover, all relationships that don't have God at the center will eventually leave you in want. Think about it. Your friendship is only as strong and deep as what binds it. Sports? A club? A political party? Deep down we all want something more transcendent than this. We want friendships that don't end when the ball stops.

Without fostering a healthy relationship with God, we miss everything. To quote Dallas Willard, “The aim of God in history is the creation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons, with Himself included in that community as its prime sustainer and most glorious inhabitant.”

The truest fix for loneliness isn’t finding people like you or even people you like, it’s discovering what actually *can* complete the human heart. The perfect completion is found in God alone. The “meaning” in meaningful relationships is . . . God. He alone is the place where all the beauty comes from. He is love. He doesn’t merely have the attributes of love, he *is* love (1 John 4:8). Love is personal and sentient. It is the very thing our hearts are meant to run on. The journey towards perfect friendship isn’t primarily an inward journey of self-discovery or an external seeking of intimacy from another human. It’s multiple people moving towards perfect love—God—together. Real intimacy also isn’t a static relationship with another person. It’s the people of God in an everlasting dance with the author and source of love. No God, no real fix to loneliness. Know God, know what real intimacy is.

We are uniquely designed to need the gifts of others and offer our areas of gifting back.

Imagine a puzzle piece deliberately crafted with protruding parts and inlets. Its purpose is to seamlessly fit into the larger picture. The presence of these inlets is not a flaw; it is an intentional design choice. Similarly, we as individuals are created with unique gifts to offer others and areas of need where we are meant to rely on the gifts that have been bestowed on others. This is not a flaw either; it is a deliberate design feature that enables us to connect more deeply with one another, like a puzzle piece. I wish there were opportunities for people to retake personality tests, not solely to identify their strengths, but also to recognize the areas where they could benefit from the strengths given to others. This concept is not only present in biblical texts but is evident throughout all of creation. Every sexual and symbiotic relationship

exemplifies God’s interconnected design framework. We are inherently designed to depend on and connect with others like a puzzle.

Rejecting the idea of relying on others is tantamount to opposing God’s intended design for humanity. In the early days, before sin entered the world, God recognized that it was not beneficial for man to be alone (Genesis 2:18). In essence, God purposefully created humanity to depend on one another, fostering a network of interdependence. He has bestowed unique gifts upon individuals to fulfill specific needs in others (Romans 12), fostering a harmonious and interconnected community.

This idea of interconnectedness is woven through Christian doctrine. God Himself embodies this. Even though the Trinity, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are without flaw or inherent need, operate in charity towards each other. The Father points to the Son, the Son points to the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit points back. This divine chorus or loving eternal dance is theologically called “Perichoresis” (from Greek: **περιχώρησις** perikhōrēsis) and represents love perfectly practiced for all of creation to follow. We are all literally made from a family to participate in a family.

Let me be unequivocally clear: Satan is the “anti-Trinity.” His desire is to war against Trinitarian, charitable, interconnected love. The Trinity is the first and fullest form of a family—the “persons” who perfectly love each other and make life. Satan’s objective is to strip away one’s love for others, particularly for God himself. Satan’s intention is to teach you to view others as mere commodities to exploit and discard, in a sense encouraging individuals to lean into Nietzsche’s notion of the “Superman” or *Übermensch*. The *Übermensch* is a hypothetical higher form of human being, an idealized individual who transcends traditional values, morality, and limitations. The *Übermensch* is not bound by conventional norms and is free to create their own values and meaning in life and force them on to weaker people. The power hungry *Übermensch* is willing to embrace the full spectrum of human

experience, especially the dark aspects, without seeking external validation or approval. In its fullest form this “super person” needs nothing deep or intimate from others; others are merely tools or things to consume or use for more power. I personally believe most humans deep down know this is twisted and only twisted people value it. This way of viewing the world trades away vulnerability and intimacy for power over others. It is dark and I also believe that this is the spirit of the anti-Christ. At the risk of being too prophetic, this is the evil that Christians should look out for. The accuser himself, Satan, will use fear, jealousy, revenge and entitlement to make you think this is necessary. My friend, it doesn’t only lead to hell, it is a hell.

Aspiring to become a person who shuns both reliance on others and God is a direct contradiction to our inherent design. God intended us to be interconnected, each individual designed to need others and, in turn, others designed to need them. This intricate web of mutual support and cooperation is an integral part of God’s plan for human flourishing. By embracing this design, we can cultivate meaningful relationships and contribute to the well-being of one another in alignment with God’s intentions.

As stated earlier in this book. Before sin entered the world God looked at Adam and said it isn’t good for man to be alone (Genesis 2:18). Literally, God made Adam to need others. God continually gives unique gifts to different people to fill unique needs in others (Romans 12). To desire to be a person who doesn’t need others and doesn’t need God is to try to be what you fundamentally aren’t. You are designed by God to need others and others are designed by God to need you.

A little more theology on the Trinity as the perfect family we should pursue: The concept of the Trinity, which again affirms the belief in one God in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is a foundational tenet of Christian theology. The review below explores the notion of the Trinity as a perfect family, drawing insights from five

authoritative theological sources. By examining various theological perspectives, this review seeks to deepen our understanding of the divine nature and the profound relational dynamics within the Trinity.

## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

The Holy Bible serves as the primary source for Christian theology, providing essential passages that shed light on the Trinity’s familial nature. The concept of the Trinity as a divine family is not explicitly stated in a single Bible verse, but rather, it emerges as a theological term derived from a collection of passages that, when taken together, reveal the familial relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Below are some Bible verses that provide insights into the relational dynamics within the Trinity:

Matthew 3:16–17 (ESV): “When Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’”

This passage records the baptism of Jesus, where all three persons of the Trinity are present and interact. The Father’s voice from heaven addresses Jesus as his beloved Son, and the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus. This event reveals the loving familial relationship between the three persons.

John 15:26 (ESV): “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.”

In this verse, Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as the Helper who proceeds from the Father. This points to the relational nature of the Trinity,

where the Father sends the Spirit to bear witness about the Son.

Romans 8:14–17 (ESV): “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”

This passage highlights the role of the Holy Spirit in our adoption as children of God and our relationship with him as Father. The reference to “Abba! Father!” underscores the familial language used to describe God’s relationship with believers.

John 17:5 (ESV): “And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.”

In this high priestly prayer of Jesus, he speaks of his pre-existence and intimate relationship with the Father before the world began. This verse illustrates the eternal existence and unity within the Trinity, emphasizing the familial aspect of their relationship.

2 Corinthians 13:14 (ESV; Trinitarian Benediction): “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

This benediction encompasses all three persons of the Trinity, emphasizing their harmonious relationship with believers, invoking the grace of Christ, the love of God (the Father), and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

While no single verse explicitly states the Trinity as a family, these passages, along with other biblical teachings, collectively support the idea

of a loving and harmonious relationship within the Godhead, which can be theologically understood as a divine family.

Now let’s learn from some of the great historical Christian minds.

### **St. Augustine**

St. Augustine, a prominent theologian in the early Christian church, contributed significantly to Trinitarian thought. In his work *On the Trinity*, Augustine explores the familial relationships among the three persons. He describes the Father as the source and origin, the Son as begotten from the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son. This eternal process of generation and procession emphasizes the relational unity and harmony within the Trinity, the truly perfect family.

### **Thomas Aquinas**

Thomas Aquinas, a medieval theologian, delved into the theological aspects of the Trinity in his monumental work *Summa Theologica*. Aquinas elucidates the concept of relational love within the Trinity. He argues that the Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father, and their mutual love is so perfect and profound that it constitutes a third person—the Holy Spirit. This divine love among the persons of the Trinity forms the foundation of a harmonious familial bond, exemplifying perfect love.

### **C. S. Lewis**

C. S. Lewis, renowned for his insightful Christian apologetics, contributed to the understanding of the Trinity as a perfect family in his book *Mere Christianity*. He likens the love shared within the Trinity to the self-giving love found in a human family. Lewis argues that God’s triune nature reflects a complete self-giving and self-receiving love, exhibiting perfectly harmonious relationship.

## T. F. Torrance

T. F. Torrance, a modern theologian, emphasized the mutual indwelling and perfect harmony of the Trinity in his book *The Christian Doctrine of God*. He suggests that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit dwell within each other in a perfect union of love. This interpenetrating relationship fosters an interconnectedness that shows us the unity and love of a perfect family.

In conclusion, the Trinity can be aptly understood as a perfect family, with each person of the Godhead existing in an eternal, loving relationship with the others. The familial dynamics within the Trinity, as expounded by biblical passages and theological insights from Augustine, Aquinas, Lewis, and Torrance, provide a profound framework for understanding God's nature and his desire for human relationships. As we delve into the mystery of the triune God, we are reminded of the importance of love, harmony, and mutual dependence—the very essence of a perfect family. In effect the Trinity is the truer family than even your biological family. To be grafted back into the family of God is to participate in the truest of friendships, *the* real family.

## BEST PRACTICES TO CONSIDER

Just as you take personality or gifting tests to identify your areas of strength, I encourage you to revisit these tests with a focus on recognizing the gifts you require from others. It's important to identify the areas where you may need support and assistance from the strengths and abilities bestowed upon others. By doing so, you can gain a clearer understanding of the specific gifts you need in order to foster meaningful connections and growth.

Write out your strengths and write out the places you need the strengths of another. Consider the people God has already placed around you. Match the needs (inlets) you see in yourself with people who are gifted in ways that you are not.

Refrain from perceiving your needs solely as weaknesses; your dependence on others is not an act of rebellion or sin. I am referring to the natural areas meticulously crafted by God, where he intended for you to rely on others in order to thrive. It is important to acknowledge that you can mishandle these areas of need in a sinful manner. One of the most common sinful responses is when you behave as if you are superhuman and require no submission to or assistance from others. This kind of pride is not only detrimental to yourself but also harms those around you.

Talk with the people around you. Celebrate the diverse gifting God has given each of you. Open your life to receive their gifts and be generous with yours.

A final thought: Christians refer to the most complete and enriching form of relationship as “salvation,” which represents a reconnection to the deepest essence of family, the family of God. Why is it termed salvation? Because belonging to this family is the exclusive path through which the human heart discovers its utmost fulfillment, while existing apart from this family leads to eternal suffering. You were made from this family and for this family. To reject it is to reject your very design. Embracing Christ entails embarking on a personal and transformative journey of faith that begins with a humble heart surrendered to God. This is the way . . .

## Believe in Jesus Christ

At the heart of Christianity is the belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of humanity. To become a Christian, you need to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior and believe in his death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins.

- John 3:16 (NIV): “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”



- Acts 16:31 (NIV): “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.”

### Repent and Confess Your Sins

Repentance involves recognizing and confessing your sins before God, sincerely feeling remorse for them, and turning away from a life of disobedience. It is essential to humbly seek God’s forgiveness and strive to live a life that aligns with his teachings. This is about heart posture. A heart that truly wants forgiveness for its rebellion and truly desires to be right with God.

- Acts 3:19 (NIV): “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.”
- 1 John 1:9 (NIV): “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

### Accept God’s Grace and Salvation

Christianity emphasizes God’s grace—the unmerited favor and love he extends to humanity. You become a Christian by accepting God’s grace through faith, acknowledging that salvation is a gift from God, not something earned through good works. This is the greatest of news! You don’t have to be rich, smart, popular, or a powerful leader to be a part of the Christian family. Jesus fully knows you and still wants you. All you must do is genuinely accept and follow him.

- Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV): “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”
- Romans 10:9 (NIV): “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

### Be Baptized

Baptism is an important symbolic act in Christianity, signifying a believer’s identification with Jesus Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. Baptism can take various forms depending on the denomination, but it is a public declaration of one’s faith in Jesus. Baptism is a public outward expression of what has happened in your heart. Let the world see what is being made new inside of you.

- Acts 2:38 (NIV): “Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’”
- Mark 16:16 (NIV): “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”

### Develop a Personal Relationship with God

Developing a personal relationship with God is integral to being a true Christian. Prayer is a means of communication with God, through which you seek guidance, express gratitude, and grow in your faith. Participating in a family is a journey. This is part of it.

- James 4:8 (NIV): “Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.”
- Hebrews 4:16 (NIV): “Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

### Study the Bible and Follow God’s Word

I’ll let the Scripture speak on its own here. It’s crystal clear.

2 Timothy 3:16–17 (NIV): “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

- Joshua 1:8 (NIV): “Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.”

### **Participate in a Christian Community**

Being part of a Christian community, such as attending church services and participating in fellowship with other believers, provides support, encouragement, and opportunities for growth in faith. Again, this is part of participating in the Trinitarian family.

- Hebrews 10:25 (NIV): “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”
- 1 Corinthians 12:27 (NIV): “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”

### **Live a Life of Love and Service**

True Christianity involves living out the principles taught by Jesus, such as loving God and loving others. Demonstrating compassion, kindness, and serving others are essential aspects of a Christian’s life. You don’t become saved to hide in a hole. God leaves us on earth after salvation for a purpose. Join it!

- Mark 12:30–31 (NIV): “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”
- Galatians 5:13 (NIV): “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.”

It is important to note that becoming a true Christian is not merely about outward actions or religious practices. It is a heart transformation,

surrendering to God’s will and seeking to follow Jesus Christ in every aspect of life. Ultimately, being a true Christian is a lifelong journey of faith, continually growing in love, obedience, and devotion to God.

Let me simply say this.

A family that fully knows you and fully wants you stands before you. Will you accept the Trinity’s invitation to come home? The best version of you isn’t found in independence. It’s found in interdependence. You are made to need the gifts of others. Others are made to need what you uniquely bring. Wholeness is only found in love and perfect love is only found in God.

I personally ask that you would please be my friend, my family, my forever family.







