

RELATIONSHIPS *and* EMOTIONS *after* CHRISTENDOM

PRACTICAL HELP FOR CONSTRUCTIVE RELATIONSHIPS



JEREMY THOMSON

PART OF THE AFTER CHRISTENDOM SERIES

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Relationships

Relationships are central to human life and personal identity. From our origins in human conception,¹ gestation and birth, through infancy, childhood and adolescence, to adulthood, maturity and old age, relationships are determinative of who we are. Some people suffer early relational poverty or deprivation and may struggle to form beneficial relationships of their own as a result. Others are born with what are later diagnosed as personality disorders (on the autistic spectrum, etc.) that make the formation and conduct of social relationships particularly difficult. Loneliness is a common feature of much modern life, exacerbated by changes in employment practice, rising rates of family breakdown and mobility factors. Yet these phenomena underline the importance of functional social relationships for human wellbeing.

Nevertheless, an important feature of Western societies in the last couple of centuries has been a developing individualism, the assumption that each person can be treated as an isolated individual, whose independence must be respected and whose interests must not be transgressed by social institutions such as the various arms of government lest they be labelled as the ‘nanny’ state, still less by other people who might share their neighbourhood. Modern liberalism, the roots of which can be traced to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment,² is grounded in the importance of individual freedom.

There is a Christian form of individualism that reflects the more general trend in Western societies; it can be characterized by the separation of a person’s relationship with God from that person’s wider human relationships. For example, when I took part in or led prayers of confession and absolution that are common within the Anglican tradition, I was often aware of a palpable sense of congregational relief after having ‘got our sins off our chests’ to God, but I wondered if there might be any change in the human relationships involved. Would those parents who had an argument in the car on the way to church find a way to address the strained relationship on the way home as a result of confessing it to God? It was only later when I encountered the Anabaptist stress on human relationships as essential components of one’s relationship with God that I began to develop a more holistic spirituality.

I will devote much of this chapter to a discussion of Jesus’ relationships. There follow briefer sections on theological perspectives on relationships and on contemporary relationships.

Jesus’ Relationships

Much of what Jesus shows us about social relationships appears in his teaching, and key elements of this will be discussed in Part Two, but these cannot be isolated from the way he himself conducted relationships. So here I want to highlight Jesus’ relational practice as reflected in the gospels.

Surprisingly few studies of Jesus’ conduct of relationships have been written.³ As in the

previous chapter, there are some important methodological questions to be confronted in exploring this topic. Unlike many modern biographies, the gospels do not provide exhaustive detail about their principal subject.⁴ The selection and compilation of their materials was made to present the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed, and so an investigation of these accounts for insights into Jesus' relationships requires some adjustment of focus, but it does not go against their authorial intent since this gospel is inherently relational. The adjustment of focus is aided by attention to the literary character and context of the gospels, and to various cultural insights into the first-century Middle East.

Literary studies of the gospels as narratives have employed established topics of plot, events and characters, though the topic of character has received significant attention only in recent decades.⁵ Questions have been asked about the legitimacy of applying contemporary literary methods to ancient texts such as the gospels. Cornelis Bennema argues that there is evidence that character in ancient Hebrew and Greek literature could be complex, change and show personality, and that it is legitimate to use insights from the study of character in modern literature to study ancient characters, so long as necessary precautions are taken. It is inevitable that modern terms for character traits are inferred from ancient texts (terms unrecognizable to their original authors and audiences), just as in related fields of human experience, such as morality. We should recognize that this is a hermeneutical move since, 'in the reconstruction of characters, the interpreter merges two horizons and bridges a vast cultural gap'.⁶

Kelly Iverson helps to orient our study of relationships with this description of narrative character depiction:

The Gospel narratives purport to convey information about real people (e.g. Luke 1:1-4; John 20:30; 21:24). But the people presented in the Gospels are not 'real' in the fullest sense of the term. The characters are constructs presented by a narrator within a story. Information regarding characters is revealed selectively by the narrator, whether that selectivity corresponds to the amount, depth or arrangement of information. While the complexity among biblical characters differs, real people are complicated beings who cannot be understood in their totality. Even though the Gospel narratives attempt to portray real people, there is an inherent flattening of all characters, real or otherwise. However, in the genius of literature, people who are imperfectly known in the real world can be perfectly comprehended in the narrative world. By exposing a person's inner thoughts and feelings – that is revealing information typically unattainable in the real world – characters may achieve varying degrees of transparency. As Culpepper notes, 'The implication of this observation for the study of the Gospels is powerful: the Gospels, in which Jesus is a literary figure, can make him known to readers more profoundly than he, as a person, could have been known by contemporaries.'⁷

Attention to literary character requires awareness of the literary context of a whole book, with its themes and motifs. So the shift in focus from the topic of character to the topic of relationships must bear in mind the wider literary context of any particular interaction between characters. On the other hand, literary character is revealed to a significant extent through the

relational interactions between characters.⁸

The amount of specific detail in the gospels that illuminates Jesus' (or any other character's) conduct of relationships is small, and requires readers to 'fill in the gaps' from the overall impression of Jesus that the gospels provide.⁹ For instance, we are told that Jesus satirized his critics as calling him 'a friend of tax collectors and sinners' (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34); so we assume that Jesus must have spent time in the company of social 'undesirables', and he is often portrayed in conversations over meals, but we can only imagine how he might have initiated or developed these relationships. Did he meet these people on the streets and in the markets? Did he seek them out in their homes or haunts, or did they come to him? How did the conversations begin? What tones of voice, what body language, what physical touch might he have used? What misunderstandings occurred, and how were they resolved? I imagine that Jesus had the ability to get quite close to these people, taking quite unusual initiatives, and involving various risks; that he used good listening skills and showed empathic insight into people's lives, while occasionally challenging certain behaviours; that he retained his integrity and maintained appropriate boundaries.¹⁰

I have decided to categorize the relevant gospel materials according to longevity and degree of relationship. First, a great proportion recount Jesus' relationships of short duration, consisting of brief conversations that might have lasted minutes rather than hours, though some of these indicate a more extensive back-story. Second, as an adult, Jesus enjoyed some significant friendships, both within and beyond his discipleship circle. Third, Jesus' longest-standing relationships were with members of his close family; these relationships are considered last because they are informed by the other materials as well as underlying them psychologically and spiritually.

Is there an angle of vision that helps us to understand what is going on within Jesus' relationships? One important factor might be the flow of power. Although Jesus' power (*dynamis*) is sometimes named in the gospels, another linked term appearing more often is his authority (*exousia*).¹¹ But I am not convinced that an exclusive attention to power is helpful, at least in a good proportion of cases. Another angle of vision might be that of need; so when Jesus met the woman at the well (John 4), the conversation began with his need for water, and then turned to her need for living water. In this same conversation, Jesus transgressed social conventions in talking to a Samaritan woman; such a move happened frequently in Jesus' short-term relationships. A rather different angle of vision would be that of love; Jesus is said to have loved some people he met and some of them loved him. So, in considering Jesus' relationships, it may be helpful to bear in mind an array of angles of vision: love, power, need, social convention, and more.

Brief encounters

Helpful studies have been written about the numerous encounters between Jesus and people, often in obvious need, though sometimes in hidden need.¹² For reasons of space I have been very selective, and cannot consider the wider field of more tenuous, though still significant, relationships with the synagogue attenders, crowds, and so on. I have chosen to consider just a few in which various angles of vision are particularly interesting.

Two marginalized Jewish men

Luke often juxtaposes two stories for comparison, so let us consider Jesus' healing of a blind man as he approached Jericho (18:35–43), together with his encounter with Zacchaeus as he was passing through Jericho (19:1–11). In the first incident Jesus heals someone who is oppressed, while in the second he extends acceptance to an oppressor.¹³ In both cases Jesus declares that (God's) salvation has come.

The blind beggar hears the crowd going out of the town to greet Jesus on his way into it (an indication that the famous rabbi would be expected to dine at a banquet and spend the night). Having found out that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by, he starts shouting: 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' The crowd try to shut him up, but the man shouts even more loudly. In sharp contrast to the crowd, Jesus stops and orders them to bring the man to him. Jesus' question, 'What do you want me to do for you?' may appear superfluous or demeaning, but Kenneth Bailey explains how in Middle Eastern society a beggar occupies a social niche that enables those with money to honour God with their gift, and thereby the supplicant has a means of support. But if healed, a beggar (with no education, training or employment) will have no obvious means of support; he will face new responsibilities and challenges. So Jesus is asking if this man is willing to accept a new way of life. The beggar answers specifically about his sight, and Jesus grants his request, saying, 'Your faith has saved you.' The man regained his sight and followed Jesus, glorifying God. The reaction of the crowd is important; they had tried to marginalize the beggar, but Jesus effectively told them off; they now join in God's praises, having accepted the rebuke.

Rather than turn aside to accept the prepared hospitality in Jericho, Jesus indicates that he will not stay the night by passing through the town, deeply disappointing the community. At this point Zacchaeus makes a move. He was the rich town tax collector; he and his family would be considered unclean, despised and hated for collaborating with the exploitative tax system. Zacchaeus wanted 'to see who Jesus was', but was a short man and afraid of the crowd (collaborators had to watch their backs), so he ran and climbed a tree. He must have been powerfully motivated, since Middle Eastern adults do not run in public otherwise they will be shamed, and rich men do not climb trees. He chose a sycamore tree because of its low branches and large leaves; such trees were only allowed some distance from the town, so he was assuming the crowd would have dispersed by the time Jesus reached the tree. But he was wrong. How does Jesus know Zacchaeus' name and occupation? Presumably, the remaining crowd had seen him in the tree and were insulting him. Jesus would be expected to side with the crowd, join in condemning their oppressor, and perhaps call on him to repent and to travel to Jerusalem for ceremonial purification before returning to a new life of keeping the law.

Having signalled his intent to pass through Jericho, Jesus changes his mind and invites himself into the house of the town collaborator. Zacchaeus happily agrees and welcomes Jesus into his home. But in the Middle East guests do not invite themselves; the community selects the host who can provide the appropriate level of hospitality that will bring honour to the community. So the crowd begins to grumble; Jesus will be defiling himself in that unclean house. 'Jesus shifts the crowd's hostility against Zacchaeus to himself. Zacchaeus is the recipient of a costly demonstration of unexpected love.'¹⁴ During the meal Zacchaeus stands to

give a formal response to thank Jesus for braving the crowd's hostility, and in traditional Middle Eastern style exaggerates his plans for financial reparations in order to demonstrate his sincerity. Finally, Jesus accepts this declaration of intent and pronounces, 'Salvation has come to this house.' Presumably Zacchaeus began to make reparations the next day, and some in Jericho (though not all) would have begun to have a new opinion of him.

Social status, cultural expectation, physical healing, power, love – all were at play in these incidents. The blind man was largely powerless, though he asserted himself with the crowd when he got his opportunity. The diminutive tax collector was rich, yet was as socially trapped as the blind man; he also asserted himself physically but fell foul of the crowd. Jesus checked out the blind man's motives, and gave him what he asked for; he tested Zacchaeus' curiosity with an astonishing command, and went into the tainted home. In each case the crowd was a significant player in the public relational dynamic. In the first case Jesus challenged the crowd, and his rebuke was accepted; in the second case Jesus rebuffed the crowd, reaching out to the object of their hatred, and they took his change of mind badly.

A persistent Gentile woman

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus makes several journeys into Gentile territory, recounted in 5:1–20; 7:24 – 8:10; and 8:22 – 9:29.¹⁵ I have selected the first episode of the second expedition (Mark 7:24–30) because it recounts a particularly vivid interaction between Jesus and a Gentile woman.¹⁶ It follows a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees and some of the scribes from Jerusalem over the matter of ritual purity (7:1–13).

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.' (Mark 7:14,15)

The disciples privately ask Jesus to explain this parable, and he does so (7:17–23). His teaching about what does and does not defile sets up Jesus' next excursion into Gentile territory; in this first episode the narrator emphasizes that the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophoenician, and highlights Jesus' mission strategy with the shocking saying about children and dogs. I used to think that Jesus was taking some time out in Tyre, as he had attempted earlier in a deserted place (6:31–4), and that this explained his not wanting to be disturbed by the woman. But the following journey via Sidon to the Sea of Galilee in the region of the Decapolis (7:31)¹⁷ indicates that the healing of the deaf man (7:32–7), and the feeding of the four thousand (8:1–10) are also of Gentiles. This suggests that Jesus was deliberately engaged with Gentiles in a concerted tour, driving home to his disciples that his mission went beyond the established bounds of God's people.

So why did Jesus take care to avoid attention by staying inside a house (7:24)? Gentiles from the region of Tyre had previously come to Jesus (3:8), so it seems that he wanted to avoid celebrity-seekers; only the really determined would seek him out. This woman heard about him on the grapevine, sought him out (knocked on the house door?), and begged him to help her daughter who suffered from an unclean spirit. We are not told in what way this affected the

child's behaviour, but it must have been extremely distressing for her mother. Her intrusion would normally be construed as an affront to Jesus' honour status since no woman, unknown, unrelated and a Gentile, would normally dare to invade his privacy. Jesus' response was, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs' (7:27). This strikes contemporary readers as offensive,¹⁸ and seems inconsistent with Jesus' previous delight in healing, which included the woman with a haemorrhage and Jairus' daughter (5:21–43).¹⁹ But Jesus' language is metaphorical, referring to the distinction between Jews (children) and Gentiles (dogs), and it is vital to notice that the children are to be satisfied *first* – the Jewish people had priority in Jesus' ministry, but this did not entail an outright refusal of Gentiles. Five thousand Jews had already been satisfied (*chortazō*, 6:42) and four thousand Gentiles would soon be satisfied (8:8). From Jesus' perspective, his statement was ironic, designed to test the woman's response, although from her perspective it might have been perceived as reluctance.²⁰

The Gentile woman would not have understood the contextual implications of Jesus' words within Mark's narrative, but she clearly grasped and accepted her 'secondary' status. This feisty woman took Jesus' imagery and turned it to her own advantage: 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' This was not simply a clever play on Jesus' idiom; it chimes with God's blessings of the Gentiles through his people in the past (how well did she know the Jewish Scriptures, we wonder?). Her cheek or chutzpah broke down Jesus' apparent resistance, and he told her that she had achieved her goal – her daughter was already whole. Dick France says that Jesus 'appears like the wise teacher who allows, and indeed incites, his pupil to mount a victorious argument against the foil of his own reluctance'.²¹ This was a challenge met with panache. I think they were both smiling.

This comports with Jesus' teaching elsewhere, 'Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you' (Luke 11:9), and his depiction of prayer in terms of the story of the persistent widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1–6). It is all too easy for people to adopt a passive approach to life, to circumstances and even to afflictions. In many brief encounters, Jesus' interlocutors took significant initiatives to meet him, and he responded by taking the relationship to an intense level of engagement.²²

Something shifted in the power dynamics of this brief encounter. The Syrophoenician woman knew that she was the supplicant, the one in need of Jesus' power. She accepted her powerlessness and outsider status, but her love for her daughter and her conviction that Jesus had the requisite healing power meant that she would not accept his resistance. Her faith, though not named as such, is evident in her posture before Jesus and her calling him 'Lord', and when Jesus did grant her request, she took him at his word and went home to find the demon gone from her daughter. This woman is a model disciple compared with the disciples whose hearts are hardened at this point (Mark 3:5; 6:52; 8:17). Her persistent faith overcomes obstacles, like other supplicants in this gospel: the paralytic whose companions dig a hole in the roof (2:1–12), the haemorrhaging woman who violates a social taboo to touch Jesus' clothes (5:24–34), blind Bartimaeus who refuses to be silenced by the crowd (10:46–52). 'The leading characteristic of Markan faith is sheer dogged perseverance.'²³

Jewish opponents

The gospels recount numerous challenges and confrontations between Jesus and his Jewish opponents (and even with his own disciples). Why was this the case? There is a sense in which such aspects of Jesus' career are intensified by the character of the material – the less controversial incidents would have been less memorable and perhaps less revealing of who Jesus is, and so did not meet the selection criteria of the gospel-writers.

Mark recounts controversy early in his gospel, when Jesus pronounces forgiveness of sins to the paralysed man (2:1–12). Perceiving that some scribes were questioning his power to speak in such a way, Jesus confronts their question explicitly, and expresses his authority to forgive by his act of healing. The scribes were soon joined by Pharisees in criticizing Jesus' eating with sinners and tax collectors (2:15–17); Jesus responds with a forthright statement of his mission to sinners. Next, the Pharisees question Jesus directly about his plucking grain on the Sabbath (2:23–8), and he responds with a biblical precedent followed by a third personal assertion of authority. The scene is set for a hardening of attitudes within the synagogue (3:1–6); the Pharisees watch Jesus in order to gather evidence of his Sabbath transgression. Jesus challenges his critics directly once more,²⁴ with anger and grief, and heals the man's hand; in response they conspire with the Herodian²⁵ party to destroy him. Thus is the fundamental conflict set up between Jesus and the established religious leaders in the Judaism of his day.

When Jesus eventually arrives in Jerusalem, he makes a prophetic demonstration against the corruption of the temple (11:1–25). This incident introduces a set of political²⁶ controversies; the chief priests, scribes and elders ask Jesus directly about his authority, and Jesus parries with a question of his own about John the Baptist (11:27–33). He follows this up with the parable of the wicked tenants of the vineyard, which is an obvious pronouncement of judgement upon them (12:1–12). The Pharisees appear in combination with the Herodians (12:13–17), and attempt to entrap Jesus with their question about paying taxes; Jesus challenges their intent ('Why are you putting me to the test?'), and comes up with a wonderfully wrong-footing reply.

This confrontation appears in similar terms in Matthew's Gospel, but it is supplemented by Jesus' devastating tirade against the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:13–33, though this follows warnings to disciples against these opponents in verses 1 to 12, and so the objects of his wrath may not have been present to hear it. Jesus characterizes them as 'hypocrites', 'fools', 'blind guides', 'snakes', 'brood of vipers' (he used 'brood of vipers' before at Matt. 12:34, as had John the Baptist at Matt. 3:7), and concludes, 'How can you escape being sentenced to hell?' This astonishing blast of invective must be understood in relation to Jesus' grief concerning the impending destruction of the city of Jerusalem that follows (Matt. 23:37–9). He stands in the ancient prophetic tradition of extreme language against Israelite leaders who opposed the Lord.

In the Synoptic Gospels there is little attempt by Jesus to enter into dialogue with his opponents. At first sight this might seem rather strange – is there no place for listening to opponents, attempting to explain one's very different perspective? But we must remember that Jesus was dealing with people who already regarded him as subversive and dangerous; as someone who must be 'put in his place' because of his radical activity, as much as his teaching. William Herzog II helps to understand the relational dynamics involved, especially the honour / shame culture of the time:

Having little ascribed honor, Jesus had to contend for acquired honor in public debate (honor-shame ripostes) and to perform signs that evoked donations of honor from the crowds. These signs were primarily healings and exorcisms, but they were never done for mere effect; they were part of a larger conflictual context and political strategy. Healings and exorcisms are about power; who channels God's power, who mediates God's power, and on whose behalf it is exercised. Any claim to mediate God's redeeming power (healings) or liberating power (exorcisms) was inherently a challenge to those who, in their own estimation, held a monopoly on that power through temple and Torah.²⁷

I suspect that the minimal dialogue with opponents is a feature that may also be partly attributed to the literary shaping of the first three evangelists; in slightly different ways each sets up Jesus' story in the very stark terms of the conflict that led to Jesus' death.

The Fourth Gospel presents a rather different, more dialogical Jesus. Here the incident in the temple is placed close to the beginning, establishing his role as replacement temple (John 2:13–22), and this leads into a fascinating dialogue between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews (3:1–21). Jesus goes up to Jerusalem for a festival and heals a man on the Sabbath; in response, the Jews²⁸ start to persecute him (5:16). Jesus retorts, 'My Father is still working, and I also am working', which provokes the Jews further to kill him (5:17,18). Yet Jesus seeks to explain himself at length, anticipating their objections as he goes (5:19–47).

Cornelis Bennema makes the important point that 'the hostility of "the Jews" is not monolithic or impenetrable'.²⁹ Jesus engages the Jewish leaders in extensive self-explanation and dialogue in Galilee (6:41–59), which results in a dispute among the Jews themselves about Jesus' teaching. On another occasion in the temple he engages with the crowd and their leaders (7:14–44), and Nicodemus speaks out in Jesus' defence (7:45–52) – he later joins Joseph of Arimathea in preparing Jesus' body for burial (19:39–42), though exactly what he believes by the end of the gospel is left unclear. Yet again there is extensive debate about Jesus' identity (8:12–59), including an outcome that 'many believed in him' (8:30), but Jesus immediately probes their 'belief' further, provoking more antagonism, culminating in his categorical condemnation of them, 'You are from your father the devil' (8:44). The lines have been drawn, yet Jesus appears in the temple and engages in dialogue with the Jews once more (10:22–39). After Lazarus' resurrection, many of 'the Jews' believe in Jesus, though some go to inform the Pharisees, with the result that the council decide that Jesus must die (11:45–53). The narrator reflects upon the unbelief of the Jews in terms of fulfilment of prophecy (12:39–41), and then says, 'Nevertheless many, even of the authorities, believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God' (12:42,43). Bennema concludes, 'Thus, Jesus was not only able to penetrate the hostile attitude of his opponents but also able to win some over (whether publicly or secretly)'.³⁰

A significant proportion of Jesus' narrated encounters consist of his confronting of Jewish authority figures. Did he have an abrasive character, or was it that his commitment to the kingdom of heaven so oriented his perspective and perceptions that he 'put his finger on' what was disoriented about these people's lives, to the extent of direct opposition to God? I have

known a few people who appear quite comfortable with challenging or confronting others – not that they are naturally abrasive or enjoy conflict, but they do not become anxious in the process. This equanimity seems to flow naturally from their secure sense of self. So I think that Jesus' secure sense of self enabled him to challenge or confront those who rejected God's will.

We must conclude that Jesus' actions and words placed him at extreme loggerheads with his opponents. In the Synoptic Gospels this conflict is presented in very stark terms, whereas in the Fourth Gospel Jesus debates with his opponents in a more open way; indeed he puts himself at risk to do so on a number of occasions, and sometimes succeeds. The oppressive behaviour of the established leaders of God's people and their resistance to Jesus' embodiment of God's will meant that they were his deadly enemies; they were instrumental in achieving his execution by the Roman authorities. In the minds of the gospel-writers their guilt is plain. Vehement language is necessary in such circumstances; some relationships cannot be placed on a more constructive footing unless radical realignment is undertaken.

Extended friendships

The gospels provide a major window on Jesus' conduct of extended relationships through their depiction of several disciples, especially Peter, James and John. However, these materials would require a book of their own to do them justice, so I will not make a sketchy attempt here. Instead, I will discuss several other important figures who have extended relationships with Jesus.

John the Baptist

Luke tells us about the family relationship between John and Jesus in his introductory birth narratives. Their mothers, Elizabeth and Mary, are relatives, rejoice together at what God is about in their lives, and spend considerable time with each other during their overlapping pregnancies (Luke 1:36,39–55,56); they seem close. Thus it is possible that the two boys had contacts through their family connections while they were growing up, but we cannot know this for sure.

Once John had grown up he spent time in the wilderness before receiving the word of the Lord and 'proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Mark 1:4–8; Luke 1:80; 3:2–3; cf. Matt. 3:1–12). John wore clothing reminiscent of the prophets, and had an uncompromising message: God's people had failed, requiring radical rethinking and lifestyle change. Baptism was not normally undergone by Jewish people, and thus it was a radical departure for John to baptize any of his fellow Jews; it was an acknowledgement that there was something wrong about their existing condition. John had a profound impact on the crowds who came to hear and be baptized, so that they wondered if he was the long-expected Messiah, but he explicitly rejected this identification, witnessing to another, coming one, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:7–17).

There are brief accounts of Jesus' baptism by John in Mark 1:9–11 and Luke 3:21–2. Matthew tells us about John's amazement when the one for whom he prepared presented himself for baptism; if anything, he says, 'I should be baptized by you.' Jesus had no need to

repent, yet his very first action was to humble himself, to identify with the band of those acknowledging the failure of God's people, and in this way 'to fulfil all righteousness' (Matt. 3:13–15). Already Jesus was not conforming to John's expectations; the salvation of God was not to come primarily through judgement, but through humble association with the unrighteous. Jesus was endorsing John's mission, yet was also reshaping it.

The Fourth Gospel tells us more: John declares that Jesus is 'the Lamb of God', explains that he had not realized the true identity of Jesus until he had carried out this baptism and observed the descent of the Spirit,³¹ and points two of his disciples to Jesus (John 1:29–37). Later John's disciples question him about Jesus, so he reminds them that he had been clear about his own preparatory role, and memorably describes himself as the 'friend of the bridegroom' (John 3:22–30). In these significant interactions at the start of Jesus' ministry, there is an impression of mutual respect between John and Jesus, as well as clarity of role difference. This is confirmed when Jesus is later asked why his disciples eat and drink while John's disciples frequently fast and pray (Matt. 9:14,15; Mark 2:18–20; Luke 5:33). Jesus responds, not by denigrating fasting, but simply by portraying his own ministry as a time of messianic feasting, picking up the bridegroom imagery. There was potential for rivalry between John and Jesus, but they remained in solidarity with each other.

Sometime later, John was arrested and imprisoned on Herod's orders because he had criticized Herod's marriage to his brother's wife (Mark 6:18), and so there was no further opportunity for conversation between John and Jesus. But there is the account of John's doubts while in prison, which prompts him to send word to Jesus, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' (Matt. 11:2–19; Luke 7:18–35). That mismatch between John's assumptions about the coming one and Jesus' fulfilment of his calling was gnawing away during John's debilitating and frustrating incarceration. Jesus' response was carefully worked out; he sends John's disciples back with instruction to recount what they have seen of his ministry (of healing and good news to the poor). Jesus' way of wording the impact of his ministry on ordinary people would have called to mind Isaiah 35:4–6 (cf. Isa. 29:18; 61:1):

'Here is your God . . .

He will come and save you.'

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,

and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

then the lame shall leap like a deer,

and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

Jesus signals that John's expectations have been somewhat misplaced if he looked more for judgement or vengeance in Jesus' ministry than for mercy and grace. His final words, 'And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me' (Matt. 11:6) amount, not to a rebuke of John for his doubts, but to a gentle, if authoritative, exhortation to renewed faith. Jesus understands the source of John's doubts, demonstrates how his ministry conforms to Isaiah's vision, and calls on John to stay faithful. Once John's messengers have departed, Jesus turns to the crowds and speaks movingly about this faithful prophet, illuminating the differences between John's ministry and his own, while contrasting both with the people of 'this generation' (the Pharisees

and lawyers in particular). Jesus' message to John in his dark time was not a peremptory challenge, but a gentle call to shift perspective.

After John's execution in prison, his disciples went and told Jesus the sad news. Matthew makes it clear that Jesus' response was to withdraw to a deserted place (Matt. 14:12,13; cf. Mark 6:30–32). This is a little glimpse of Jesus' grief; how the oppressed feel when one of their outspoken leaders is casually extinguished at the whim of a vain ruler. Jesus continued to uphold John's memory when he said, 'Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased' (Mark 9:13). In debate with Jewish leaders, Jesus referred to John's testimony to himself, characterizing him as 'a burning and shining lamp' (John 5:33–5). More pointedly, in the temple he asked the chief priests, the scribes and the elders, 'Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' (Matt. 21:25; Mark 11:30; Luke 20:4). As the confrontation with his opponents reached boiling-point, Jesus endorsed John's ministry once more, and continued towards his forerunner's martyrdom.

Despite the brevity of the gospel materials concerning this relationship, it is clear that there was a significant personal bond between Jesus and John. Although significantly different, their missions were closely related, and they were both willing to pay the ultimate price for their prophetic ministries. John was clear about the limitations of his role compared to that of Jesus, and demonstrated remarkable humility towards him. Jesus spoke with pride of his faithful friend.³²

Martha, Mary and Lazarus

We have more gospel material about these three siblings than about any other characters apart from the leading disciples. Their intimate relationships with Jesus are extensively portrayed in John 11:1 – 12:8, and the sisters appear more briefly in Luke 10:38–42. I will draw extensively on a recent study of Martha and Mary by Mary Stomer Hanson that seeks to extricate these sisters from the chauvinistic straitjacket that has usually been imposed upon them.³³

Traditional applications of *Luke 10:38–42* tend to polarize would-be disciples' priorities between attention to Jesus' words (good) and service in the kitchen (not so good), and yet nowhere in Luke–Acts is practical service negatively assessed, so such polarization cannot be in Jesus' mind. Here is Hanson's translation of the passage (pp. 31,32):

As they were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha received him. She had a sister called Mary, who also was one who sat at the Lord's feet, always listening to his words. But Martha was constantly torn apart concerning much ministry. She suddenly approached him and said, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister regularly leaves me to minister alone? Tell her therefore that she may give me a hand.' But the Lord answered her saying, 'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and agitated concerning much, but only one thing is needed: For Mary has chosen good and it will not be taken away from her.'

Martha received Jesus, but 'in her house' does not appear in the oldest Greek texts, let alone

‘kitchen’; so the implication is that Martha received Jesus’ message as much as his person (in contrast to those who did not receive Jesus earlier in Luke 10:10). She had a sister, Mary, who was also one who attended to Jesus’ words (though she was not literally sitting at his feet at the time, cf. Acts 22:3) – thus both sisters were disciples, but Mary was in the habit of leaving the village, engaged in a roving ministry, and that is why she does not speak in this incident. Martha is described as ‘torn apart’ by ‘much ministry’, yet this ministry is not specified – it was not necessarily bed-making or meal preparation. Warren Carter has argued that Martha was distracted by responsibilities of leadership and house ministry (cf. Phoebe’s role as a *diakonia* in Rom. 16:1).³⁴

Overall, there is enough evidence that Martha’s activity does not have to be restricted to a narrow definition of service. She may very well be a leader of an assembly place for early followers of Christ, instead of, or in addition to, providing as hostess the comforts of a temporary home for Jesus.³⁵

Martha approaches Jesus with an agitated question, seeking to oblige him to act on her behalf.³⁶ She assumes that Jesus knows where Mary is and pleads with him to get her to return and share her burden. Jesus is aware of the problem, but he waits for Martha to bring it up, and he resists taking the side of the one asking for help. He shows great concern and emotional sensitivity by twice using her name. This is how Hanson understands the passage:

Now Jesus names her real issue, which Martha either did not recognise about herself, or was repressing. Martha may think she needs help, but Jesus knows that serious worry is what is eating at her. By prolonging the interchange, the narrator allows both characters to be more complex and rounded. The reader knows that Jesus is deeply perceptive about Martha’s many issues, and Martha realises that Jesus does care, more than she knew. The focus of the first part of his answer is on Martha, and her worries and turmoil, not on Mary. Jesus does not tell her what she is supposed to do with her worry, or that he will do something about it; the narrator allows her no comfort. Jesus’ answer then focuses on Mary. She has made a ‘good choice’ and it will not be taken away from her (10.42). Martha’s only consolation is that Jesus is aware of her worry and cares. She is also assured that Mary is blessed by Jesus in her occupation. What is the ‘good’ that Mary selected? The ‘good’ that Mary has chosen is that she is following Jesus, her call as she heard it, in the missionary ministry with Jesus. Martha wishes her sister would abandon this ‘good’ to be with her. Martha cares more about her ‘peace of mind’ than her sister’s risky *diakonia* for Jesus. (p. 91)

Martha speaks her mind boldly and forthrightly, with reproach even. Jesus does not take this as an affront; he responds gently, with insight, while maintaining Mary’s chosen path.

In *John 11:1–44*, the evangelist introduces the three siblings (11:1,2) by announcing that Lazarus was ill, and giving their home as the village of Bethany. Next he identifies Mary as the one who anointed Jesus with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair (we will return to this later), and reiterates that her brother Lazarus was ill. The action begins with the sisters’ message to Jesus, ‘Lord, the one you love is sick’ (11:3, NIV). Despite this love, Jesus does not

respond to their message immediately, but talks about the larger perspective of God's glory, and that of the Son of God.³⁷ Jesus' love for all three is explicitly affirmed, even as he deliberately delays his journey to Bethany. After this Jesus begins the journey with his disciples, despite their warning of the danger of venturing near to Jerusalem.

Jesus eventually approaches Bethany four days after Lazarus' death (11:17). Even before he enters the village, the news reaches Martha, who must have been longing for Jesus' arrival. She goes to meet him and begins the conversation: 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' This is very direct, almost an accusation ('What took you so long?'), but also a statement of faith ('You would have healed him'), and her faith confronts even the hopeless situation ('Is it possible you could raise him, as you have other people?'). Jesus responds, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' Jesus is picking up on Martha's suggestion with an enormous, ultimate claim about himself, affirming that he himself is life, and thus holds the power over death. He asks Martha to voice her commitment to him in such terms, and she overflows with conviction: 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world' (a rather different confession, but probably linked). Lazarus remains in the grave but Martha's faith in Jesus appears complete.

Martha returns to the house and passes on Jesus' call to her sister (11:28). Mary is jolted out of her immobility (she is being consoled by many from Jerusalem) and quickly goes to Jesus, bringing the mourners with her. She kneels at his feet, and utters the same words with which Martha began – perhaps they had said them over and over to themselves in the last four days: 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' There was something so abject in Mary's grief that when Jesus saw Mary and those with her weeping, 'he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved'.³⁸ He asks to be taken to the tomb, and there he weeps also. Mary's companions remark on Jesus' love for Lazarus and some raise the same question about Jesus' healing power. The narrator underlines Jesus' disturbance as he arrives at the tomb. Jesus' grief at his friend's death and his friends' grief seems to be augmented by rage at death itself, and anticipation of his own death.³⁹

Jesus tells those present to take away the stone covering the cave-tomb (11:38). Martha has been thinking about the awful reality of the decomposing body of her brother, and blurts out, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.' Her earlier confession of faith in Jesus was not quite as complete as it sounded. Jesus responds, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' This is not quite what he had said earlier, but it was implied – it was in Jesus' mind from the outset (11:4). So they take away the stone. Jesus then looks upward and speaks to the Father so that the crowd might believe⁴⁰ the Father sent him, and calls out to Lazarus. This is a loud cry, a precise, triumphant command from Life himself, penetrating death itself and overturning its havoc in one body. How can we imagine the processes of decomposition flung into reverse? The heart was shocked into rhythm, the blood supply restored, the organs and muscles functioning, the brain synapses firing. If we cannot imagine the biology, how flabbergasted were the bystanders when the dead man emerged from the tomb, still covered in the cloth wrappings? Jesus insists that they touch the resurrected man: 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

Although Lazarus is a key figure in this chapter, he is dead for much of the account, and there is no face-to-face interaction between him and Jesus, apart from that astounding final meeting, which is not even narrated. Yet even in death, Lazarus hears and responds to Jesus' voice; note the enactment here of Jesus' earlier claim that 'all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out' (5:28,9, ESV). Lazarus is described as loved⁴¹ by Jesus, but we know nothing about their previous relationship, apart from the passage in Luke 10:38–42. How did they meet? What drew Jesus to Lazarus, Martha and Mary (each of whom was presumably unmarried)? We can only speculate about these factors in their relationship. While Jesus had developed a particular bond of love with Lazarus and his sisters, the expression of his love for them was shaped by his wider priorities – the glory of God (John 11:4), and the disciples' belief, about which Jesus says he is glad (11:15). Within that outlook, Jesus engaged fully with the sisters' bereavement. As in Luke's narrative, Martha is 'confident, blunt in her opinions and articulate in stating them'.⁴² Jesus hears out her challenge, and moves her faith beyond its already advanced strength. Mary is almost beyond words and Jesus is moved by her weeping – he does not stand aloof, but shares in that grief before overturning it.

All four gospels include a story of a woman anointing Jesus (John 12:1–11; cf. Matt. 26:6–13; Mark 14:1–9; and Luke 7:36–50), and it is important to account for the similarities and differences between them.

- Luke's story appears to take place in the region of Galilee (see 7:11; 8:22,26), whereas Matthew's, Mark's and John's are all set in proximity to Jerusalem.
- Although the host is named Simon in both Luke and John, it was the most common masculine name at the time. Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7 could not have been the Simon designated 'the Leper' in Matthew 26 and Mark 14 since an unclean leper could not be a Pharisee.
- Luke records his story as a lesson on the woman's forgiveness in contrast to Simon's emphasis upon her sin. John's emphasis is upon anointing, which fits his kingship / service theme in his passion narrative.

Having reviewed various proposals to account for these factors, Hanson argues that John, Mark and Matthew narrated the same event.⁴³ Mark and Matthew did not provide the name of the woman, perhaps because they did not know it or, more likely, they wanted to protect the characters still living when they wrote. It seems likely that the John 12 account, though written last, depended on eyewitness testimony because it contains details not available in the other accounts.⁴⁴ Hanson goes on to propose that Mary anointed Jesus twice, first around the time of her conversion early in Jesus' ministry (Luke's account), and this gained her fame with frequent retelling (she may have already been notorious). This would explain the flag in John 11:2 regarding Mary's (previous) anointing of Jesus better than reading it as an anticipation of 12:1–11, as most commentators do. Mary anointed Jesus on this second occasion in thanksgiving for the life of Lazarus and in anticipation of Jesus' coming death.

I will adopt this view, and thus return to that first incident when Jesus was invited to eat at the house of Simon the Pharisee. 'She [Mary] stood behind him [Jesus] at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued

kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment' (Luke 7:38). This must have been a startling occasion. Here is a woman with a reputation as a 'sinner'⁴⁵ (which was known to Simon), making her way into his house taking a jar of ointment with her, clearly intent on an astonishing act. While Mary continues to anoint Jesus, he sets his host a question and then, turning deliberately towards her, exposes the inadequacy of Simon's hospitality (likely intended) in contrast with Mary's tenderness. Very deliberately he pronounces to her, 'Your sins are forgiven', and again, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

There must have been a previous encounter between Jesus and Mary that was the origin of her great devotion to him, and which caused her to act as she did. Was this Mary the one called Magdalene, 'from whom seven demons had gone out', mentioned among the women who were with Jesus at Luke 8:2, and later at the cross and empty tomb (John 19:25; 20:1–18)? Although this notice follows immediately after the anointing in Simon's house, Luke makes no explicit connection between these two women, and there is a geographical mismatch in that Magdala was in Galilee, whereas Bethany was in Judea. Nevertheless, Hanson (pp. 46, 95) makes a good case for Martha and Mary having a base initially somewhere in Galilee (accounting for the Luke 10 incident), and later moving to Bethany when Lazarus became ill. The identification of the two Marys has often been made in the Christian tradition, and it is tempting because the incidents at the cross and tomb would further flesh out Mary's relationship with Jesus. However, I will resist it because it goes beyond the evidence, and so we must remain curious about Mary's back-story and how she first met Jesus.

Mary's past as a 'sinner' would throw further light on Martha's worry in Luke 10:38–42. Mary had a past history of 'troublesome' behaviour, and Hanson thinks that Martha is acting like the older sister with their parents apparently deceased: 'It was never about Martha needing help with her diaconal duties in the community and Jesus knew it. He understood totally that Martha just wanted Mary within her eyesight. That is why Jesus totally bypasses concern about her overwhelming service, but addresses her worries' (p. 115).

By the time of Lazarus' death, Mary seems to have followers around her whom she led to Jesus, indicating that she had become something of a leader among Jesus' followers in the vicinity of Jerusalem. These were the Jews in the house at Bethany consoling Mary, who went with her to Jesus, and thus became witnesses to Jesus' raising of Lazarus.

Now, some time following the raising of Lazarus, as Passover approached, Jesus returned to Bethany, and the family gave a dinner for him (John 12:1,2). On this occasion it is clear that Martha was serving food, while Lazarus was one of those dining at the table with Jesus. Mary took a large amount of extremely expensive perfume, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. Judas protested about this apparently wasteful action, but Jesus defended Mary, saying, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.' A footnote to this story is that great crowds came to see Lazarus, and that he was a marked man, since the chief priests felt their authority was undermined by the evidence of Jesus' power that he embodied (12:9,10).

We should consider the parallel accounts in Matthew and Mark, which are very similar to each other; Matthew's appears to have slightly abbreviated Mark's. Matthew and Mark provide the additional detail of location in Bethany; the house of Simon the leper; he was presumably a friend, and Martha was helping with the catering (or perhaps the earlier gospels

had ‘changed’ the location as a means of protecting the identity of Lazarus, Martha and Mary). The chronology is late in Jesus’ final week in Jerusalem, whereas in John’s account it comes earlier. Otherwise the details cohere very well, apart from Mary’s anointing of Jesus’ head, rather than his feet, as in John’s account; and this can be explained in terms of difference in theological emphasis.

There is no spoken interchange between Mary and Jesus in this incident, yet it is freighted with Mary’s devotion and Jesus’ appreciation. Mary had more insight into Jesus’ person and the outcome of his career than anyone else. The profound nature of Mary’s first encounter with Jesus had made a huge impact on her, and by this point in the story her eyes were open to Jesus’ identity in a way that no one else had grasped. Once again she demonstrated her love in a dramatic and extravagant exploit that overthrew convention. With great respect Jesus accepted Mary’s extraordinary absorption with himself, defending her against criticism, and honouring what she had done.

From these stories it is clear that Mary, Martha and Lazarus were among Jesus’ closest friends and followers. Something that I have only recently realized is that Mary’s anointing of Jesus’ feet is soon followed by Jesus’ washing of his disciples’ feet (John 13:4ff.). Did Mary’s act of devotion inspire Jesus’ demonstration of love?

The beloved disciple

Another important figure who clearly had a close relationship with Jesus is the character identified simply as ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’. He is characterized as such in four scenes in John’s Gospel: at the upper room supper (13:23–6), at the cross (19:26,27), at the tomb (20:2–10), and beside the sea (21:4–24). Other unnamed disciples appear with John the Baptist at 1:35–40⁴⁶ and in the high priest’s courtyard at 18:15,16, and a good case can be made for identifying these with the one given the unusual designation. Some scholars have even argued that Lazarus was the ‘beloved disciple’, and that Lazarus was a key source for the author of the Fourth Gospel.⁴⁷ However, Richard Bauckham has argued persuasively that:

the distinctive narratives of the Gospel of John derive not simply from the Beloved Disciple himself, but from a particular circle of disciples of Jesus in which the Beloved Disciple moved. The circle includes a few of the Twelve, especially Philip and Thomas, but not the inner circle so prominent in Mark. Other disciples who were not members of the twelve were just as prominent in this circle. It is notable that four of these lived in Jerusalem or its vicinity (Nicodemus, Lazarus, Martha and Mary), a fact that supports the supposition that the Beloved Disciple himself was a Jerusalem resident. Attempts to identify the Beloved Disciple with one of this Circle who is named in the Gospel (Lazarus, Thomas, or Nathanael) fail because they require us to think that the Gospel sometimes refers to the Beloved Disciple as an anonymous figure and sometimes names him.⁴⁸

Although this beloved disciple was not Lazarus, Bauckham has made a strong case that he was the author of the gospel (21:24) and the letters attributed to ‘John’. It seems he was the character known to later traditions as ‘John the Elder’, not the son of Zebedee and brother of

The first specific appearance of this beloved disciple is at the supper gathering of the disciples just before the Passover. Jesus has been washing the disciples' feet, and begins to speak about one who will betray him, becoming 'troubled in spirit' (13:18–21). Although Jesus understands this betrayal is prefigured in Scripture, he does not accept it fatalistically, as something to be accepted with detachment; it disturbs him profoundly that someone so close could be treacherous. Although readers of this gospel have already been alerted that Judas would betray Jesus (6:70,71; 12:4–6), the other disciples have no clue who is being referred to (imagine their consternation), so Peter motions to 'the one whom Jesus loved' to ask Jesus, and he does so. Jesus' response is momentous – the dipped bread is highly symbolic, an intimate gift to Judas; it is at this juncture that Judas is 'entered' by Satan. Yet at the time, not even this beloved disciple realized the significance of Jesus' instruction to Judas, 'Do quickly what you are going to do' since 'no one at the table knew why he said this to him' (13:28).

The beloved disciple next appears at the cross along with several women (19:25–7). The twelve have long gone; Mary, Martha and Lazarus are absent (or not mentioned), but these few remain. Their words, actions and feelings are left without description through those interminable hours. Jesus' final social act before he dies is to reset the relationship between his mother, who has seemed somewhat distanced since the wedding at Cana (see below), and his closest of followers. There is no reason to suppose that these two knew each other until this moment. There was no breath for long sentences; only for two brief statements of new perspective: "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.' They were a new family.

Although Peter was absent from the scene of execution, he must have been staying near the beloved⁵⁰ disciple, because Mary Magdalene found them both early on the first day of the week with some distressing news, such that they set out together for the tomb (20:1–10). The beloved disciple outran Peter (was he younger?), looked into the tomb (the stone had been removed), and saw the linen cloths lying empty. Peter arrived, went into the tomb, and saw not only the wrappings but the headcloth lying separately. Then the other entered, saw and believed; and they returned to their homes. If there was some understandable lack of togetherness in the astonished race to the tomb, it was the other disciple who, when he followed Peter into the tomb, began to grasp the significance of the empty cloths.

In the gospel's final scene, the 'disciple whom Jesus loved' is in the boat with Peter and several other disciples (21:3,7), and recognizes Jesus standing on the shore. Peter takes his word for it, puts on some clothes and jumps into the sea. After they have eaten breakfast, Jesus engages Peter in an extensive and painful interchange that revisits Peter's triple denial in the high priest's house (discussed in Chapter 8), and concludes with Jesus' call (for the first time in this gospel), 'Follow me'. The narrator makes sure that readers catch the significance of all this, even as he records Peter's question, 'Lord, what about him?' referring to the disciple who is already literally following Jesus (21:20). Jesus' response is to return the focus to Peter's story: 'What is that to you? Follow me!' The narrator scotches a rumour that arose from Jesus' saying, and goes on to identify himself (21:23,24). There is no conversation between Jesus and the beloved disciple here; simply the indication that he follows and testifies to Jesus.

In each of these four scenes, there is an implied comparison between Peter and the disciple

whom Jesus loved. At the supper, it is obvious that Peter is not as close to Jesus as is this disciple; at the cross the disciple is present, while Peter is absent; at the tomb it is the disciple who believes (nothing is said about Peter's response); beside the seashore the disciple first identifies Jesus, and later Peter is called to follow where the disciple is already doing so. But for our purpose we should note that we are simply told that Jesus had a disciple who could be described as 'beloved'; that close, loving friendship was valued by Jesus.

Close family

We know very little about Jesus' family background, apart from the two genealogies in Matthew 1:1–17 and Luke 3:23–38. Four women with interesting backgrounds appear in the early part of Matthew's genealogy,⁵¹ but we cannot infer anything of relational significance from them. So we will proceed to focus on three sets of Jesus' close relationships, with Mary and Joseph in his early life, with Mary and his brothers in his later life, and with his heavenly Father and the Holy Spirit.

Mary and Joseph: the early years

Luke's Gospel introduces Mary as 'a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David' (1:27). We know nothing of the back-story – how this couple came to be engaged; all we know is that their progress towards marriage was interrupted and problematized by an angel. First, Gabriel greeted Mary, and she was understandably perplexed. Next, Gabriel reassured Mary and gave her the astounding news that she would conceive and bear a child – and that this child would be the long-awaited Messiah (1:32,33). Since she was a virgin, Mary's response was an understandable 'How can this be?' She would have known the stories of divine announcements of impending remarkable pregnancies from the Scriptures, but in all those cases there were human fathers. So Gabriel explained the divine action essential in this otherwise impossible case (1:35–7).⁵² Mary graciously accepted this unique interruption in her life, in her body, in her betrothal.

Luke gives us insight into Mary's response to this astonishing annunciation in his account of her visit to Elizabeth (1:39–56), following up Gabriel's reference to her relative (1:36). Mary travelled a good way from Nazareth to a Judean town in the hill country and greeted her. Elizabeth (with her baby) responded with joy, wonder and blessing. Mary delivered a profound psalm, declaring her praise, joy, and faith in Israel's justice-bringing and promise-keeping God. She remained with Elizabeth for about three months before returning to Nazareth. If Elizabeth was six months pregnant when Gabriel visited Mary (1:26), it makes sense to assume that Mary remained with Elizabeth until the birth of John, sharing in wonder, joy and companionship. So Luke provides us with a few glimpses of the thoughts and emotions coursing through Mary during those nine months of her pregnancy. Advances in medical and psychological understanding of the relationship between mother and foetus have demonstrated the significance of the mother's experiences (including emotional health) for the healthy development of the baby.⁵³

But what would Joseph have been thinking? As in Luke, Matthew's account (1:18–25)

introduces the couple as engaged, not yet living together, and says, ‘Mary . . . was found to be with child.’ How did this news come out? Mary could not have told Joseph of her visitation by Gabriel, since his first response to her pregnancy was to call off the engagement. He knew he was not the father and thus Mary must be guilty of outrageous infidelity; understandably he felt betrayed and angry.⁵⁴ He could have exposed her to public condemnation and disgrace, but instead planned a quieter end to the relationship. Matthew describes Joseph as a righteous or just man for his compassionate resolve (1:19). Precisely at this point he receives an angelic message in a dream explaining that Mary’s conception was by the Holy Spirit, with a succinct summary of her future son’s destiny, and instruction to continue into marriage (1:20–22). When Joseph awoke he went ahead with the marriage, though the couple had no sexual relations until after the child was born (1:24,25).

Thus Matthew alerts us to the social implications of this pregnancy – the glances, the gossip, the ostracism, the remarks that Mary and Joseph would both endure as their engagement continued⁵⁵ and Mary’s pregnancy became obvious. Goodness knows what Mary’s father and mother must have thought!⁵⁶ Some in Nazareth may have wanted Mary stoned, citing Deuteronomy 22:23,24 but Joseph courageously stood up for Mary, no doubt having to live with the common conclusion that they had slept together; as Kenneth Bailey says, ‘He was able to reprocess his anger into grace.’⁵⁷ Matthew’s account barely mentions the birth of Jesus, but Luke narrates the journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem (2:1–7). Since men would normally represent their families for official or legal business such as the imperial census, Joseph must have believed that Mary could not be left in Nazareth without his protection while he travelled to Bethlehem for registration.⁵⁸

Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth is extremely brief (2:7), but its significance is emphasized in the following appearance of angels to shepherds outside Bethlehem and their visit to Mary and Joseph and the child (2:8–20). Following Jesus’ circumcision and naming, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple to present him to the Lord. They were met by the righteous and devout Simeon, who took the baby in his arms, praised God, blessed the family and said to Mary: ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too’ (2:34,35).

This child, who would embody God’s salvation, was destined for controversy, and Mary would suffer in the process. Simeon was followed by the prophet Anna who praised God and spoke ‘about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem’ (2:38). Luke concludes this scene by noting the family’s return to Nazareth, where the child grew up (2:39,40).

But Matthew (2:1–23) complicates this glimpse of Jesus’ early days with the story of the visit of the wise men to the child with Mary in Bethlehem (Joseph is not mentioned at 2:11). Once the magi had departed, Joseph received another dream-vision, instructing him to flee with Mary and the child to Egypt; this he did and they remained there until King Herod died. A further dream-vision prompted the family’s return, though Joseph avoided Judea and they settled in Nazareth in Galilee; his own caution is interestingly linked to his dream experience in 2:22. Thus Joseph took his fatherly role responsibly, and continued to follow divine guidance in caring for the child and his mother.

The only incident provided of Jesus' youth is when, aged twelve, he remained in Jerusalem following a Passover pilgrimage (Luke 2:41–51). Mary and Joseph appear to have been unconcerned that Jesus was not with them, assuming he was somewhere in the travelling group. This indicates that they were not overly anxious as parents, and could trust him to be relatively responsible for himself. However, having looked for him among the group without success, they became concerned and returned to Jerusalem. After three days' searching, they were desperate when they found him in the temple, and Mary voiced their feelings: 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' Jesus' response is a precursor of so many later rejoinders to others' questions – he operates out of a different set of assumptions: 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' This must have been painful to hear; Joseph was reminded that he was not Jesus' father, although he had taken on that role. Mary was confronted once more with the reality of Jesus' strange origins. They did not understand Jesus' reply; already his sense of self had moved beyond their grasp. Yet he went with them to Nazareth and 'was obedient to them'. Presumably he realized that he would have to move more slowly towards his calling, and accept some restrictions during his teenage years.

The very first thing that Luke tells us about Mary is that she asked herself what Gabriel's greeting could mean (1:29). Later, when Luke recounts the shepherds' visit to the baby in the manger, he notes, 'Mary treasured [the shepherds' account of the angels'] words and pondered them in her heart' (2:19). Finally, after the desperate search for Jesus twelve years later, Luke says that his mother stored all these things in her heart (2:51).⁵⁹ Our narrator is pointing out what a thoughtful and meditative woman Mary was. She would have cared for her growing son with the concerns and pleasures of any mother, but there would have been additional hopes and anxieties, fuelled by those early revelatory encounters.

We know very little about the relationship between Joseph and Jesus. It seems that Joseph died before Jesus began his ministry, since he does not appear in any of those later accounts. Later, at the synagogue in Nazareth, people said of Jesus, 'Is not this Joseph's son?' (Luke 4:22);⁶⁰ in the parallel passages he is called 'the carpenter's son' (Matt. 13:55), and even 'the carpenter' (Mark 6:3). While we cannot be certain, it seems that in his early adulthood Jesus had previously either worked with his 'father' in the building trade or followed in Joseph's occupation.⁶¹ They may well have walked the few miles north from Nazareth to Sepphoris, one of the capital cities of Galilee, in order to work there.⁶²

Mary and Jesus' brothers in later life

Following Jesus' calling of the twelve disciples (Mark 3:13–19), he deliberately distances himself from his human relatives. When he returns home his ministry is such an attraction to the crowds that eating is impossible. 'When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind"' (Mark 3:21).

There follows Jesus' dispute with the scribes who thought he was Beelzebul, but next Mark returns to his family:

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called

him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.’ And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’ (Mark 3:31–35; Matt. 12:46–50; Luke 8:19–21)

Here Jesus’ family were concerned that he was going too far.⁶³ They were reacting to the superficial judgements expressed by cynical onlookers. Having dealt with the scribes, Jesus refused to respond to his family’s appeal to return to their ‘fold’, to step back from his radical project of recreating Israel. He declared an alternative family constituted on the implementation of God’s will. At some point this statement would have found its way back to the family, and it would have been received as a rebuff. Yet Jesus’ mission was always going to require stark choices; having tried to rein Jesus in, his family had to hear his stark alternative formulated around the doing of God’s will.⁶⁴

Thus, during his public ministry Jesus largely detached himself from his family for the sake of his calling to engage on a large scale with his people and Gentiles in Galilee and beyond. Although a number of women are noted as being present at the cross (Mark 15:40,41; Matt. 27:55,56; cf. Luke 23:49), Mary is not mentioned, as she is in John’s Gospel, leaving the impression that this detachment continued until the end of Jesus’ life.

John recounts a significant interchange between Jesus and Mary at the wedding in Cana of Galilee (2:1–11). When the wine ran out she said to him, ‘They have no wine.’ Jesus responded, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.’ Here Mary appears to prompt Jesus to do something to avert embarrassment of the party organizers; Jesus seems reluctant to intervene. Bennema points out the significance of social conventions in first-century Mediterranean culture, and understands Mary as acting as broker on behalf of the groom’s family, providing access to her son, though she probably did not expect Jesus to perform a ‘sign’ (in this gospel he had done none at this stage).⁶⁵ Thus she intrudes on Jesus’ social space, and he responds by dissociating himself from his mother’s interests; he refuses to be drawn into the local game of honour and patronage. Mary seems to accept this, and to re-evaluate her relationship with Jesus. She alerts the servants to impending action: ‘Do whatever he tells you’, and Jesus instructs them to fill six stone water jars – thus committing himself to intervene in his own way. So Jesus does take action, but discreetly (the steward receives the praise), and thus without increasing his own family honour.

It is interesting to compare this incident with a later encounter between Jesus and his brothers in John 7:1–10. Here the brothers advise Jesus to leave Galilee and go to Judea ‘so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing; for no one who wants to be widely known acts in secret. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.’ Jesus responds that he will not go to the festival because his ‘time has not yet fully come’. Yet Jesus did go to the festival; not publicly, but in secret. So here again Jesus appears initially reluctant to follow his family’s suggestion, yet later does so, albeit in a low-key way. In this case the narrator comments that Jesus’ brothers did not believe in him (v. 5). What kind of ‘not believing’? It seems the brothers recognized Jesus’ powers, but imagined that he should use them in a spectacular fashion, whereas Jesus refused to impress people in that way. Both of these

passages are instances of the two levels of meaning found in John's Gospel: Jesus' mother and brothers have some inkling of his powers, but they do not really understand his way of exercising that power.

Only in the Fourth Gospel does Mary appear at the foot of Jesus' cross (John 19:25–7). Our imaginations of this scene may be filled with famous paintings or statues of Jesus' mother filled with grief at the suffering, ignominy and impending death of her son, crushed by the cruel power of Rome. It must have been an apparently interminable horror. Yet the narrator does not dwell on this; instead he records Jesus' care for his mother in giving her into the protection of the beloved disciple.⁶⁶ Jesus addresses Mary as 'Woman', as he had in the only other incident in which she appears in this gospel; if she had (partially) misunderstood him then, he had not stopped caring for her, and so provides a home for her with the disciple to whom he was closest. Wes Howard-Brook comments, 'Jesus uses the power of the cross to form new relationships, to heal wounds, to generate new communities just when all seems dust and ashes.'⁶⁷

Thus the gospels show us that some distance developed between Jesus and his close family while he was engaged in his ministry. It was not a case of outright opposition, yet they did not grasp the radical nature of his mission – who did? Happily, after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, Luke tells us that Mary and Jesus' brothers were part of the disciple-led community in Jerusalem (Acts 1:14). By this point they had joined the group of those who believed in Jesus, and James would later become leader of the early church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:12–21).

Heavenly Father and Holy Spirit

Already in the birth narratives, readers have been alerted to Jesus' divine origins. He is conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:18,20; Luke 1:35), and will be called Son of the Most High, Son of God (Luke 1:32,35; cf. Matt. 2:15). The amount of gospel material on this subject is large, so I must focus on those parts that illuminate the dynamic of the relationships concerned, first in the Synoptics and then in the Fourth Gospel.⁶⁸

When Jesus was baptized by John, it is said that 'he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him' (Mark 1:10; cf. Matt. 3:16; Luke 3:21,22). He also heard these words: 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased' (Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22; cf. Matt. 3:17). James Dunn comments, '*Jesus' baptism by John was probably the occasion for an experience of God which had epochal significance for Jesus*, even though that significance may only have been fully grasped after some reflection by Jesus.'⁶⁹ Yet Dunn goes on to say, 'He may have come to the Baptist already with some sense of God's fatherly care and calling.'⁷⁰ I would argue that, if the incident of Jesus talking to Mary and Joseph in the temple about 'my father's house' is anything to go by, this baptism was a dramatic affirmation of Jesus' relationship with his heavenly Father.⁷¹ The descent of the Spirit at the baptism, on the other hand, was a significant empowerment for the start of public ministry. Jesus' experience of the Father was already vital; it was inauguration of his ministry that required a step-change.

How did Jesus acquire that early sense of himself as God's Son, his awareness of his divine identity? How Jesus could be both human and divine is a theological mystery, and we

can only speculate how and when he became aware of it. Perhaps his awareness of the Father was always there, but how did he come by the words to articulate it? He must have acquired words in the same way any child would, through parents and other care-givers. Mary and Joseph would have told the stories of Israel, said prayers together as a family and taken their children to synagogue on Sabbaths and festival days. Education for boys started about age six, with the scribes teaching Hebrew, basic literacy and numeracy.⁷² Did Mary tell Jesus about the events surrounding his conception and birth (Luke tells us that she pondered these things), and thus enable him to articulate his divine identity?⁷³ Can you imagine a conversation between a 7- or 8-year-old Jesus and his mother about such things?

There are few references to the Holy Spirit in Mark's Gospel, and these are in the mouths of John or Jesus (the narrator only refers to the Spirit). The first occurs in John's proclamation that the coming one 'will baptize you with the Holy Spirit' (1:8). Jesus' first reference to the Holy Spirit comes as his deliverance ministry developed, when he warned that 'whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness' (3:29f.). Second, Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as the one by whom David declared Psalm 110 (12:36), indicating a profound view of scriptural inspiration (cf. the contrast between the word of God and human tradition at 7:13). Third, Jesus promised his followers the Holy Spirit would speak through them when they were put on trial on his account (13:11). Ben Witherington and Laura Ice reason from these passages that Jesus 'refers to the Spirit as a person, and not merely a power or force or even just as another term for God'.⁷⁴

Jesus taught the disciples about their Father in heaven in many places (e.g. Matt. 5:45,48; 6:4,8,18,26,32; 7:11) and taught them to pray 'Our Father' (Matt. 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4), yet he distinguished his own relationship with the Father from theirs: 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of *my* Father in heaven' (Matt. 7:21, *my* emphasis).

Jesus spent time praying (Mark 6:46; Matt. 14:23; Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18), though we are rarely told of what this consisted. In one startling passage we read:

At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.' (Luke 10:21,22; cf. Matt. 11:25–7)

In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want' (Mark 14:36; cf. Matt. 26:39; Luke 22:42). Here is a glimpse of Jesus' intimacy with the Father,⁷⁵ the frankness with which he expressed his trepidation at his coming ordeal, and his ultimate commitment to his Father's purposes.⁷⁶

After the resurrection, Jesus commissioned the disciples with this promise: 'I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high' (Luke 24:49), a promise that is fulfilled in the coming of the Holy Spirit

recounted in Acts 2. In Matthew he instructed them to ‘make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ (28:19). Thus in the Synoptic Gospels we observe strong relationships between Jesus, the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Throughout the Fourth Gospel, the relationship between the Father and the Son is emphasized from 1:14–18 onwards, and often supplemented with reference to the Spirit (e.g. 1:32–4; 3:34,35). In his controversies with the Jewish leaders, Jesus frequently referred to his relationship with the Father: ‘Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise’ (5:19ff., cf. 6:37–46,57; 7:28,29; 8:18,19ff.; 10:15–18,25–30,36–8). The Son and Father are clearly distinct here, but united in their purpose and character.

At Lazarus’ tomb Jesus prayed, ‘Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me’ (11:41f.). At the conclusion of his public ministry in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus reflected, “‘Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again” (12:27,28).

In the supper conversation (13:1 – 16:33), the narrator continued to speak about the Father–Son relationship (13:1–3), while Jesus told his disciples much more about his relationship with the Father (14:2,6,10–14,20–24,28,31; 15:1–10,15–16,23,24; 16:3,15,23–8,32) and their future, very personal relationship with the Holy Spirit (14:15–17,26; 15:26; 16:7–14). He then prayed extensively for his disciples so that their unity might reflect the love between Father and Son, and thereby embody Jesus’ glory, soon to be fully exhibited on the cross (17:1–26). At his arrest, he rebuked Peter for using the sword: ‘Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?’ (18:11). Finally, on the evening of the day of resurrection, Jesus came to the disciples and said, “‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:21,22).

In all four gospels Jesus is portrayed as enjoying a close relationship with his Father;⁷⁷ they speak to each other frequently, intimately, frankly. Jesus is concerned for his Father’s reputation; he is committed to carrying out his Father’s commission, and to extending it through his disciples. He is empowered to do so by the Holy Spirit – indeed driven by the Spirit (Mark 1:12; Matt. 4:1; Luke 4:1) – as would be his disciples.

Theological Perspectives on Relationships

Jesus embodied the kingdom of God through numerous relationships of different durations. His conduct varied according to each person he encountered. An important overall conclusion presents itself: relationships were fundamental to Jesus’ identity and mission. If this is the case, then the conduct of our own relationships is worthy of sustained attention on the part of Jesus’ followers. In this section I provide theological grounding of all our relationships from the fields of Old Testament theology, Trinitarian theology, and spirituality.

The relational nature of all being in the Old Testament

Terence Fretheim, an eminent Old Testament scholar, has worked with a wide spectrum of creation texts (in the Law, Prophets, Wisdom literature and Psalms) to produce a basis for the relational nature of all being. He begins by speaking of creation as having three interrelated points of reference: the beginning of the world, the end of the world, and the times in between (or 'continuing creation'). Of the last, he observes that:

several texts witness to God's having established the basic and dynamic infrastructure of the world once and for all, guaranteed by a divine promise (Gen. 8:22; 9:8–17; see Jer. 31:35–37; 32:17–26). God does not, say, make a daily decision to sustain the creation. Because God keeps promises, the future of the creation is assured without particular divine action to that end. God created a reliable and trustworthy world and, while God will be pervasively present . . . God lets the creation be what it was created to be, without micromanagement, tight control, or interference every time something goes wrong. At the same time, one must not translate a reliable creation into a fixed and static system. Elements of unpredictability and open-endedness, what Eccl. 9:11 calls 'chance', are an integral dimension of the ways things work in God's creation. Not everything has been predetermined; genuine novelty is possible in God's world, both for God and for God's creatures. And, as Genesis 3 soon informs us, God's creation does not preclude creaturely possibilities that are negative, even antireational.⁷⁸

Fretheim then asserts the fundamental relational character of creation in the Old Testament, something more basic than the common emphasis on covenantal conceptuality.⁷⁹ First, Israel's God is by nature a relational, social being (Gen. 1:26; 3:22; 6:1–4; 11:7; Isa. 6:8; Jer. 23:18–23; Prov. 8:22–31).⁸⁰ Then this relational God freely enters into relationships with the creatures, as can be observed in the metaphors used of God (husband–wife; parent–child, etc.); in the giving of the divine name to Israel (Isa. 65:1,2); in the anthropomorphic / anthropopathic language used of God (God thinks, wills and feels), and in the prohibitions of idols (Ps. 115:5–7). Next this relational God has created a world in which all creatures are interrelated as in a spider's web; each created entity is in symbiotic relationship with every other, and in such a way that any act reverberates out and affects the whole, shaking this web with various degrees of intensity (Gen. 3:17; 6:11–13; 13:10–13; 19:24–8; Exod. 7 – 11; Jer. 4:22–6; Hos. 4:1–3; Job 38 – 41). God so relates to this interrelated world that every movement in the web affects God as well; God will get caught up in these interconnections and work within them for the sake of the future of all creatures. God works from *within* a committed relationship with the world and not on the world from without in total freedom. Finally, God shares power with his creatures (Gen. 1:11–13,20,22,24,28; Pss 65:12,13; 8), including attending to human prayer (Exod. 32:7–14), such that the future is not all blocked out (Jer. 22:1–5); God allows human will to stand against God (Isa. 30:1; Ezek. 2:5; Zech. 1:13); and God is genuinely affected by what happens to the relationship (Gen. 6:6,7; Jer. 9:10,17,18; 12:7–13). Yet the divine–human relationship is asymmetrical, especially in that God has freely entered into relationship with creation, and Israel in particular, and is irrevocably committed to unswerving faithfulness.⁸¹

Implications of Trinitarian theology for human being

The development of Trinitarian theology in the third and fourth Christian centuries was a major achievement, yet its implications for human being were not explored at that time. Indeed, sight of Trinitarian theology was largely lost after the early centuries of the church, and it received only passing consideration at the Reformation.⁸² However, many theologians rediscovered the doctrine of the Trinity in the later twentieth century⁸³ by returning to that early establishment of a radical new ontological principle: ‘that there can be a sharing in being’. God was not a simple, singular being, but three persons, ‘a being in communion’.⁸⁴

There are limits to what this doctrine can tell us about human relationships, so it must be augmented by other biblical and theological insights. Yet that insight into the nature of being is important. Kevin Vanhoozer summarizes its implications for understanding human beings:

Several implications for theological anthropology follow from this trinitarian conception. Most importantly, personhood, not substance, comes first in the order of being. Second, persons are not autonomous individuals. Whereas individuals are defined in terms of their separation from other individuals, persons are understood in terms of their relations to other persons. This reverses Aristotle, for whom relation is subordinate to substance (that is, relations are what take place between individual substances). Aristotle presupposes that the individual substance is already complete, already potentially what it is, irrespective of its relations. On this view, relations are not constitutive of being. A trinitarian view, on the other hand, affirms that persons are what they are by virtue of their relations to others. For instance, I am a child in relation to my parents, a husband in relation to my wife, a father in relation to my children, a neighbour in relation to those who live near me, a teacher in relation to my students, a creature in relation to God and a disciple in relation to Christ. Some of these relations are free: I chose to marry my wife and I chose to become a teacher. Other relations are involuntary, for example, my being created by God and being born to my parents.

In the augustinian tradition, one’s relation to oneself was constitutive of one’s personhood. We speak, for instance, of ‘knowing one’s mind’. Yet these internal relations alone do not define the person. Persons are embodied, and thus are partly constituted by their ‘external’ relations to others as well. All human beings are born into particular families, cultures and communities which have their own traditions, histories and language. At the same time, persons are individuals, and not merely cogs in a vast social machinery. Even in the intimacy of a marriage relationship, persons do not lose their individuality but strive for a unity which respects differences. The human creature is neither an autonomous individual nor an anonymous unit that has been assimilated into some collectivity, but rather a particular person who achieves a concrete identity in relation to others. Human being is inherently social. A trinitarian approach to theological anthropology avoids defining persons as relations, however, for such a definition would make it difficult to speak of relations *between* persons. The person is rather an irreducible ontological reality that cannot be defined in terms of something else. Perhaps the best way to render persons is to describe, in narrative rather than concept, how they typically relate and what they characteristically do. One of the primary ways in which humans relate is through language.

Human being as communion is largely a matter of being in communication.⁸⁵

It may help to simplify this somewhat. If human being is made in the image of God, we may ask, ‘What is God’s being?’ We tend to think of being in materialistic terms – at secondary school in the 1960s, I was trained to think that the basic building-blocks of existence are matter, stuff, atoms, particles, and that they related to each other in mechanistic ways. But what if all being is basically relational? What if the relations between beings are even more constitutive of those beings than atoms? During the twentieth century, science came to recognize the relationality of matter in important ways.⁸⁶ If God’s being is essentially constituted by the relationships between Father, Son and Spirit, then human being is essentially constituted by relationships we have – with God, with people, with the world.⁸⁷

Spirituality of relationships

I have come to believe that the way I go about my social relationships is an expression of my spirituality; spirituality is not a special interest, or reserved for particular activities. David Augsburger helped me to articulate this by distinguishing between three kinds of spirituality.⁸⁸

- *Mono-polar spirituality* is an inner, subjective encounter with one’s own universal self, with essential human-ness. Such is common in the contemporary fascination with spirituality that is often detached from religion.⁸⁹
- *Bipolar spirituality* is *both* an inner subjective experience of coming to know one’s own true self *and* an objective experience of the existence of God. Such is the kind of Christian spirituality in which I was brought up: taught to pray and read my Bible regularly, attend church and keep focused on Christian fellowship.
- *Tripolar spirituality* has three interdependent dimensions: ‘it is inwardly directed, upwardly compliant, and outwardly committed. The spirituality of personal transformation (the inner journey), the experience of divine encounter (the God-ward journey), and the relation of integrity and solidarity with the neighbor (the co-human journey with friend and enemy, with neighbor and persecutor) cannot be divided.’⁹⁰

In the first part of this chapter I have focused upon the ‘outwardly committed’ component of Jesus’ tripolar spirituality, with some attention to the ‘upwardly compliant’ component; in the following chapter I will focus on the ‘inwardly directed’ component. There will be some inevitable overlaps that demonstrate the wholistic nature of such a spirituality.

Contemporary Relationships

There appears to be an increasing inability among many in Western societies to relate in satisfactory, workable ways. Many adults seem to have major problems in establishing or sustaining workable relationships of various kinds: intimate couple, wider family, neighbour, workplace, and so on. This may be due to the increasing complexity of many people’s lives, requiring an ever-expanding range of skills with which they may be handled, but there are also indications that significant numbers of parents are failing to pass on to their children fairly

fundamental relational skills. In some families each member eats meals in a separate room, while watching TV programmes or on social media. In fact, some people fear relationships, especially close ones. They may have grown up in difficult or abusive relationships, or they may have had hurtful experiences of relationships as adults.

The study of relationships between babies and parents shows that babies frequently take the initiative with their carers in terms of eye contact, physical gestures and oral sounds. In general, ‘good enough’ parents⁹¹ respond to these initiatives (and take many of their own) and provide feedback and interaction that encourages the child to develop all manner of skills in communication and other aspects of life. However, if carers fail to provide such interaction, the infantile impulse towards relationship can be stultified and lost.⁹² So we can observe that babies appear to have an innate drive (and perhaps need) to relate, but that the development of the skills required to build relationships requires encouragement, nurture, reciprocation and modelling from carers.

Central to the development of adult relationships is the activity we call dialogue, in which people listen and talk to each other. Conversation is an art that has to be learned, so that participants genuinely hear each other, rather than simply wait for an opening to make their next statement.

For the most part, we see our conversations as either opportunities to trade information or arenas in which to win points. Difficulties that might otherwise be resolved or even dissolved persist. And often we simply do not have the wherewithal to genuinely consider new possibilities, new options. Such miscommunication or misunderstanding condemns us to look elsewhere for the creative intensity that lies dormant within and between us.⁹³

So many activities in contemporary society are designed on the basis of a large number of spectators, or members of the audience, viewing and listening to a presentation from the front. This is the case in business seminars, popular entertainment and many core church activities. Most ‘services of worship’ take place in such a way as to inhibit social relationships. This is the case across the spectrum, from the traditional communion liturgy with hymns and an organ, to the ‘time of worship’ led by a band with an inspirational speaker; the congregation are largely passive receivers of a performance. The activity of the Holy Spirit, who dwells amidst God’s people as they relate together, is so often constrained by such arrangements, no matter how gifted or inspired individual leaders may be. Churches should adopt a different way of congregating that promotes dialogue, and that nurtures conversation among members or participants.⁹⁴ One reason why many people are alienated by contemporary churches is that they require conformity to a passive model of participation, commonly called ‘attendance’.

How much attention do we give to our relationships today? How much time and thought do we give to our friends or to our enemies – to our part in each relationship? And to reflecting on their part in the relationship? What could we do to help those people we might come across who struggle with or fear relationships? I conclude this chapter with two ways in which readers might explore and reflect on their relationships.

A relational rule of life

This challenging rule of life was written for professional managers by Michael Schluter and David Lee, so it has a particular focus.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, it is worth considering at least some of these aphorisms in all our relationships.

1. Process situations relationally

Develop the habit of evaluating situations from a relational perspective.

2. Practise presence in your conversations

Avoid thinking forward to the next task or next conversation. Instead, enjoy the moment and engage with what's happening. Give feedback that assures the other person you're really listening.

3. Develop a story with everyone you meet

Every relationship has its own special history. Make sure you review this and plan constructively. Where has the relationship gone up to now? Where are you hoping it will go in the future?

4. Cultivate relational intelligence

Be aware of what others are thinking and feeling. Read and interpret the signals. Is a person accepting what you're saying? If not, why not? What's going on relationally when you interact?

5. Find ways of closing the parity gap

Subtle power differentials – physical, financial, reputational – can be at play and make a powerful impact on a relationship without you being aware of it. Do you find yourself compensating when you interact with someone younger, poorer, smaller, of a different gender or in a wheelchair?

6. Gather information about others and retain it

Deliberately broaden your knowledge of other people or organizations. Fill in the blanks in your knowledge so you get a well-rounded picture. Register and evaluate information that comes to you from third parties; remember it.

7. Think from the other side

The person who calls you only when they need something does not appreciate the need for shared objectives. Ensure that your conversations with others are mutually beneficial and that both sides have an incentive to continue the relationship and profit from it. If the relationship matters, call even if you have nothing to ask for.

8. Take time to plan your day relationally

What are the key relationships on your timetable? Take a few minutes every morning to think over who you are going to meet and how that meeting will build that relationship. Cultivate a sense of caring for the other person by reviewing their situation in advance. Is a phone call good enough or do you really need to go in person?

9. Do a relational evaluation

At the end of the day, take a few moments to review what's happened in your relationships. Have your conversations gone badly or well, and what can you learn from that? If you want, make this an exercise in diary-keeping.

10. Value relationships above everything else

What is the most important thing in your life? If you say 'My car', you probably need a

psychotherapist! The reality is that relationships matter above everything else. The challenge for most of us is to keep it in mind in the crucible of commercial competition.

Personal reflections on relationships

Reflect on relationships today

- What aspects of contemporary culture erode or promote relationships and the significance of relationality?
- In your experience, how do Christian leaders promote a relational view of human beings? How might they do this better?
- How significant are social relationships in your own spirituality?

Reflect on your own experience of relationships

- Think about ‘helpful’ social relationships you have had or observed in others – did they just happen, or were they cultivated? What skills were practised and what effort was involved, and by whom?
- Think about ‘unhelpful’ social relationships you have had or observed in others. What made them unhelpful? What was missing? Do you have any insights as to why they developed like this?
- What steps could you take to invest more in selected social relationships?