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# THE FAMILY

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE  
ON THE CONTEMPORARY HOME

3RD EDITION

JACK O. BALSWICK  
AND JUDITH K. BALSWICK

  
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# 1

## A THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION FOR FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

*The Use of Scripture in Developing a Theology of the Family*

**H**OW CAN WE best use Scripture to learn God's intention for family life during the new millennium? A common approach is to pick out the key verses from the various scriptural passages dealing with the family. These verses are then arranged as one would arrange a variety of flowers to form a pleasing bouquet. However, such a use of Scripture presents problems when Christians come up with different bouquets of verses and then disagree as to what the Bible says about family life. This method of selecting certain verses about the family can be compared to strip mining. Ignoring the historical and cultural context, the strip miner tears into the veins of Scripture, throws the unwanted elements aside, and emerges with selected golden nuggets of truth. Too often, searching for God's truth about the family ends up with a truth that conforms to the preconceived ideas of the miner doing the stripping.

Prominent among the golden nuggets that are typically mined are New Testament regulations regarding family and household relationships (e.g., Eph. 5:22-6:9; Col. 3:18-4:1; 1 Tim. 2:8-15; 6:1-2; Titus 2:1-10; and 1 Pet. 2:18-3:7). These passages indicate early Christianity's concern for order in three basic household relationships: between husband and wife, between parent and child, and between master and slave. New Testament scholar



James Dunn (1996), however, emphasizes the importance of considering the total context of scriptural passages about family life. Dunn notes the problem when scriptural texts are read without considering the social, historical, and cultural context of the time of writing. Although the motive of discovering hard-and-fast rules for household life is understandable, a "problem arises here when we try to make the household codes into timeless rules which can be simply transposed across time to the present day without addition or subtraction" (p. 62). Doing so means that we accept slaves as part of God's intention for family households. Dunn concludes that such an approach is an abuse of Scripture.

In contrast to this approach, we believe it is important to consider relevant biblical references and a theology that offer deeper meaning and concrete principles of living in our complex, postmodern world. Stephen Post (1994) speaks of an "analogical-familial theology." This is the approach we have taken. By way of analogy we base our theology of family relationships on *relationality within the Holy Trinity* and throughout the Old and New Testament descriptions of *God in relationship*.

### Trinitarian Relationality

The process whereby a man and a woman marry and become one yet maintain their individual distinctiveness is a major aspect of marriage. Likewise, the process of children developing into their own unique selves within the context of family unity is an ongoing part of family life. Family scientists and practitioners refer to this as *differentiation*—the process of maintaining a separate identity while simultaneously remaining connected in relationship, belonging, and unity. Interdependency is another way to describe this universal experience that all family members learn to navigate throughout the various stages of life.

We believe human beings are created by a relational Triune God to be in significant and fulfilling relationships. The good news is that Scripture presents a model in the Trinity—God being one, yet composed of three distinct persons. Stanley Grenz (2001, 48) puts it this way: "The same principle of mutuality that forms the genius for the human social dynamic is present in a prior way in the divine being." Building on this truth, our starting point in developing a theology of family relationships is to recognize that, by way of analogy, relationships between family members are to reflect the relationality within the Holy Trinity.

Relationality is the primary way human beings reflect God's image. Genesis 1:26–27 states, "Then God said, 'Let *us* make humankind in our image, according to our likeness . . . So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he cre-

ated them." The *us* connotes the Triune Godhead (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), who in unity created humankind in the image of God (*imago Dei*). Throughout the Bible, *unity* and *uniqueness* are simultaneously described as the relational aspects of the Godhead.

Gary Deddo (1999) has built a strong case for applying trinitarian theology to family relationships. Drawing on Karl Barth, Deddo states that "the nature of the covenantal relationship between God and humanity revealed and actualized in Jesus Christ . . . [is] grounded in the Trinitarian relations of Father, Son, and Spirit" (p. 2). As distinction and unity coexist in the Godhead, so is it to exist among family members. Deddo states, "In the revelation by the Son of the Father through the Spirit we come to recognize the activity of the one God apportioned to each person of the Trinity. The Father is the Creator, the Lord of life; the Son is the Reconciler, the renewer of life; the Spirit is the Redeemer, the giver, the conveyor of this life which is given, sustained and renewed" (p. 36). Family relationships are analogous in human form to this divine model. As the three distinct persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—mutually indwell in a trinitarian fellowship, so are family members to mutually indwell in similar ways.

Miroslav Volf expands on this concept by examining the use of the New Testament Greek word *perichoresis*, which "connotes mutual interpenetration without any coalescence or commixture" (1998, 208–13). For example, in John 10:38 we read, "so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father." While distinct, they mutually indwell in complete unity in the Godhead.

The trinitarian model reflects the nature of relationality (distinction and unity) and becomes a core ideal and a central theme of understanding family relationships. However, we acknowledge that, unlike God, we are not perfect, and therefore in applying these principles, we will have to struggle with our human imperfections. We must look to God for grace and strength to attain personal distinction in relationships. The relational process, be it the initial forming of the marital relationship, nurturing and guiding in the child-rearing years, building new family structures, or dealing with the end of life, involves the fundamental issues of forming unity while embracing each person's distinctiveness. We use the biblical analogy in terms of how the members of the Godhead act in unity through distinctiveness through the themes of covenant, grace, empowerment, and intimacy.

### God in Relationship

Examples of familial descriptive language used in the Old and the New Testaments are the relationship between the Creator God and the created

ones; God as parent relating to the children of Israel; Christ as groom in relation to the church as bride; and the Holy Spirit, who indwells and empowers believers as brothers and sisters in the Lord. God's actions toward Israel are characterized by compassionate loving, disciplining, guiding, pursuing, giving, nurturing, respecting, knowing, and forgiving. Jesus welcomes little children, women, the disenfranchised, and his disciples into close, intimate connection. The Spirit prays in and through us when we cannot find the words to speak.

The establishment of a covenant between God and the nation of Israel has become the foundational focus in developing a theology of the family. Ray Anderson (1982) uses the concept of co-humanity to build a theological anthropology. Beginning with the theological truth that "humanity is determined as existence in covenant relation with God" (p. 37), Anderson applies the concept of covenant to all human relationships. He considers covenantal relationships in the family as a "secondary order, made possible by the primary order of differentiation as male or female" (p. 52). Differentiation achieves the godly purpose of interdependence and cooperative interaction between people.

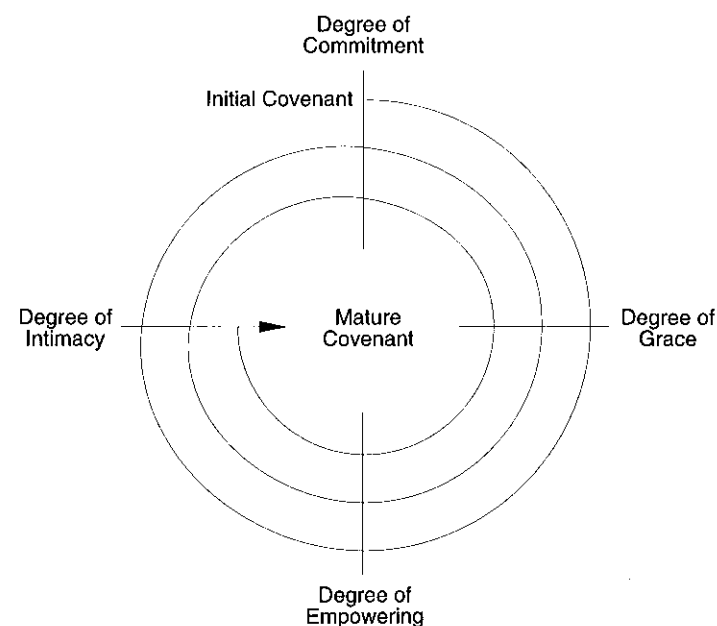
In applying covenant as a paradigm for the family, Anderson and D. Guernsey (1985) highlight the unconditional quality of covenant: "It is covenant love that provides the basis for family. For this reason, family means much more than consanguinity, where blood ties provide the only basis for belonging. Family is where you are loved unconditionally, and where you can count on that love even when you least deserve it" (p. 40).

Similarly, Stuart McLean (1984) suggests the following ways that covenant can be used as a metaphor for marriage and family relationships: (1) people are social and live in community; (2) the basic unit of family and of covenant is the dyad; (3) people living in community experience struggle and conflict as well as harmony; (4) people living in covenant must be willing to forgive and be forgiven by one another; (5) people living in covenant must accept their bondedness to one another; (6) people living in covenant accept law in the form of patterns and order in relationships; and (7) people living in covenant have a temporal awareness as they carry a memory of the past, live in the present, and anticipate the future (pp. 4-32).

### Elements in a Theology of Family Relationships

We build on the concept of covenant and propose a theology of family relationships that involves four sequential but nonlinear stages: covenant, grace, empowering, and intimacy. We further suggest that family relation-

FIGURE 1 A Theological Basis of Family Relationships



ships will be either dynamic and maturing or stagnant and dying. A model of this process of family relationships is presented in figure 1. The logical beginning point of any family relationship is a covenant commitment, which has unconditional love at its core. Out of the security provided by this covenant love, grace develops. In this atmosphere of grace, family members have the freedom to empower one another. Empowerment leads to the possibility of intimacy among family members. Intimacy then leads back to a deeper level of covenant commitment.

The sequential change in figure 1 is depicted by an inward spiral representing the potential for family relationships to grow into ever-deepening levels of mutual commitment, grace, empowering, and intimacy. For example, the relationship between a parent and an infant child begins as a unilateral (one-way) love commitment, but as the parent lives out that commitment, the relationship grows into a bilateral (mutual) love commitment.

For such growth to take place in any relationship, there must be mutual involvement. Growth in family relationships can be blocked or retarded when one person in the relationship is unable or unwilling to reciprocate covenant love, grace, empowering, or intimacy. Thus, growth in a relationship can come to a standstill at any point in this cycle.

Because relationships are dynamic and ever changing, if a relationship does not spiral to deeper levels of commitment, grace, empowering, and intimacy, it will stagnate and fixate on contract rather than covenant, law rather than grace, possessive power rather than empowering, and distance rather than intimacy.

This model is not exclusive to family dynamics but extends to nonfamilial relationships as well. The bonding in familial relationships expands a family member's capacity to be involved in meaningful relationships outside the immediate- and the extended-family system.

The four elements of growth relationships are considered as separate sequential stages for analytic purposes only. In practice, covenant, grace, empowering, and intimacy often overlap in family and community life. Thus, it is futile to press the suggested logical sequence into a strict linear model. However, considering each separate dimension in depth provides a better understanding of how these four principles interact in human relationships.

These relationship principles are derived from an examination of biblical writings that show how God enters into and sustains relationships with humanity. The Bible teaches that God desires to be in relationship with humankind and also longs for humans to be in relationship with the Godhead and others. We recognize, however, that although we are created in the image of God, we are fallen creatures who will fail in all aspects of relationship with God and others. In a sense, no person can ever make a covenant commitment in the way that God covenants with us, nor can anyone foster an atmosphere of grace in the same way God gives grace. Our empowering attempts often resemble possessive power, and our attempts at intimacy pale into insignificance when compared to God's knowing and caring. Yet we are hopeful, because God has been revealed perfectly in Jesus Christ. He is our model and enabler as we live out our lives and relationships according to God's purpose.

### **Covenant: To Love and Be Loved**

The central point of covenant is that it is an unconditional commitment, demonstrated supremely by God to the creation. Although the concept of covenant has a rich heritage in Christian theology, the biblical meaning has been eroded by the modern notion that commitment is no more than a contract. The first biblical mention of a covenant is found in Genesis 6:18, where God says to Noah, "But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark." God tells Noah to take his wife and sons and daughters-in-law, along with all living creatures, and Noah does everything that God has commanded. In Genesis 9:9-10,

God repeats this promise of covenant: "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and with your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you." The covenant was even extended to nonhuman creatures. Next, God makes a covenant with Abram: "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous" (Gen. 17:1-2). Upon hearing this, Abram threw himself down on his face. God continues in verse 7, "I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you." Then in verse 9, Abram's role in the covenant is specified: "God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.'"

What can we learn from these two accounts of God's establishing a covenant with Noah and Abraham? First, we see that God is not offering either of them any choice in the matter. That is, God is by no means saying, "Now I am going to commit myself to you if this is your desire." Instead, the establishment of the covenant was based entirely on God's action. Second, God's offer is in no way contractual; that is, it is not based on Noah or Abram keeping their end of the bargain. God's commitment stands sure, no matter what their response. However, God desires and even commands a response. Does this make God's covenantal offer conditional? Is God free to retract the offer if it is not reciprocated? The answer is a resounding no! The covenant God offers is steadfast and true, "an everlasting covenant," regardless of the response to it. Third, although the covenant itself is not conditional, the benefits or blessings are determined by the response. Both Noah and Abraham are given a choice to respond. If they are to benefit from the covenant, they need to make a freely determined response of obedience. Although the continuation of God's love is not conditioned on their response, the blessings of the covenant are conditional. Now that they receive and respond to God's covenant, they also receive the fulfillment of the promise. Fourth, we notice that God extends the covenant to their families from generation to generation. Neither Noah nor Abram can anticipate obedience on the part of their descendants, further evidence of the unconditional nature of the covenant. In the same way, the blessings of the covenant are conditional, depending on whether the descendants decide to respond to and follow God.

Indeed, the Old Testament account in the book of Hosea conveys the central theme of the covenant relationship between God and the children of Israel. The cycle is as follows: The children of Israel turn away from God and get into all kinds of difficulty. God pursues them with a love that will not let them go, offering reconciliation and restitu-

tion when they respond. Then comes the incredible blessing of being in relationship with the Almighty God, who mothers like a hen and leads with cords of human kindness. The children of Israel reap the satisfaction of basking in the intimate presence and profound connection with their loving God.

The life of Jesus is the supreme expression of unconditional love. It is noteworthy that Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15) in response to the Pharisees' and scribes' criticism of his sitting with sinners. Just as the father in the story welcomes his wayward son home with open arms, Jesus demonstrates unconditional love to a people who have rejected his Father. The unconditional nature of God's love is perhaps most clearly expressed in 1 John 4:19, "We love because he first loved us," and 1 John 4:10–13, "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit." Here is the promise of the mutual indwelling of God's unconditional love in us as we dwell in God's love through the sacrifice of Christ and the presence of the Spirit. And as we have received that unconditional love represented in the unity of the Godhead, we offer that unconditional love to others.

Having discussed the unconditional quality of God's covenant commitments, we now turn to a related consideration—the issue of reciprocity. Whereas the unconditional nature of covenant love is unquestionable, in a familial context the concept of covenant can be used to refer to both unilateral and bilateral relationships. Figure 2 depicts the different types of commitment found in family relationships.

Any covenantal relationship is based on an unconditional commitment. However, covenantal relationships can be either unilateral (one-way) or bilateral (two-way). We have labeled a unilateral unconditional relationship an initial covenant and a bilateral unconditional relationship a mature covenant. All biblical references to the covenant God initiates are examples of initial covenants. It would be erroneous to think of an unconditional unilateral relationship as partial, dependent, or even immature, because from the individual's perspective a personal covenant without restrictions is given. From a relational perspective, unilateral unconditional commitment entails the attractive possibility of someday becoming a two-way street. The desire of God in each initiated covenant is that the unconditional commitment will eventually be reciprocal and mutual.

When a child is born, the parents make an unconditional commitment of love to that child. The infant or young child is unable to make such a

FIGURE 2 **Types of Commitment in Family Relationships**

	Conditional	Unconditional
Unilateral	Modern Open Arrangement	Initial Covenant
Bilateral	Contract	Mature Covenant

commitment in return. However, as the child matures, the relationship that began as an initial (unilateral) covenant can develop into a mature (bilateral) relationship. True reciprocity occurs when parents themselves age and become socially, emotionally, and physically more dependent on their adult child. Here, in a mature bilateral commitment, reciprocal and unconditional love is especially rewarding.

Our ideal for marital and mature parent/child relationships is an unconditional bilateral commitment. As shown in figure 2, there are two types of conditional family relationships. An emerging type, which we call the modern open arrangement, is symptomatic of a society in which people are hesitant to make commitments. A typical example is a person who begins a marriage with the unspoken understanding that as long as his or her needs are being met, all is well, but as soon as those needs are no longer met, the relationship will end. When both spouses adopt this conditional stance, the marriage amounts to a contract, a quid-pro-quo arrangement. The couple believes they have fulfilled the marital contract when they get about as much as they give in the relationship.

In reality, much of the daily routine in family life is carried out according to informal contractual agreements. When we advocate relationships based on covenant, we must recognize the importance of mutuality, fairness, and reciprocal processes that lead to interdependence. Yet there are extraordinary dimensions of loving unconditionally, such as sacrificing one's self for the other and going the second mile even when things aren't equal. It is a matter of being willing to be *unselfish* rather than thinking only of self (*selfish*) or only of others (*selfless*), as Stephen Post (1994) defines the terms. Any mature relationship based on contract alone will forgo the incredible acts of love that far exceed any contract made by two individuals.



### Grace: To Forgive and Be Forgiven

We indicated previously that we have separated the four elements of our theology of family relationships for analytical purposes only. It is especially difficult to distinguish between covenant and grace. By its very nature, covenant is grace. From a human perspective the unconditional love of God makes no sense except as it is offered in grace. Grace is truly a relational word. One is called to share in a gracious relationship with God. Grace means unmerited favor.

John Rogerson (1996) applies to family life the understanding of grace as a natural extension of covenant love. He cites Old Testament texts suggesting that God desires the establishment of structures of grace to strengthen family life. These structures of grace are defined as "social arrangement[s] designed to mitigate hardship and misfortune, and grounded in God's mercy." The following example is from Exodus 22:25-27: "If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate." From his analysis of Old Testament teachings about the family, Rogerson concludes, "What is really important is that theologically-driven efforts were made to counteract the forces that undermined the family" (p. 41).

Family relationships, as designed by God, are meant to be lived out in an atmosphere of grace, not law. Family life based on contract leads to an atmosphere of law and is a discredit to Christianity. On the contrary, family life based on covenant leads to an atmosphere of grace and forgiveness. There must be a willingness to forgive if right relationships are going to develop in family life, according to Borrowdale (1996). Just as the meaning and joy of being a Christian would be deadened if we conceived of our relationship with God in terms of law and not grace, so would meaning and joy be constrained in family relationships. On both the individual and the family level, law leads to legalism, whereas grace offers freedom. In an atmosphere of grace, family members learn to act responsibly out of love and consideration for one another.

The incarnation is the supreme act of God's grace to humankind. Christ came in human form to reconcile the world to God. This act of divine love and forgiveness is the basis for human love and forgiveness. We can forgive others as we have been forgiven, and the love of God within makes it possible for us to love others in the same unconditional way.

One may ask if there is any place for law in family relationships. Are we to believe that when grace is present in the family there is no need

for law at all? Our answer must be the same as that given by the apostle Paul, who writes, "For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes" (Rom. 10:4). It is not that the law itself is bad, for it points the way to God. But because humans are limited and fallen, we can never fulfill the law. Christ is the end of the law because he is the perfect fulfillment of the law. We are righteous by faith alone! No one can keep the law perfectly. We are free from the law because of Christ's perfection and righteousness, which leads to our salvation.

The same can be said concerning family relationships. Through Scripture we can know something of God's ideal for family relationships, but none of us can expect to measure up perfectly to that ideal. In a family based on law, the members demand perfection of one another. Rules and regulations are rigidly set to govern relationships. This kind of pressure for flawlessness adds guilt to the failure that is inevitable in such a situation.

Although the covenant of grace rules out law as a basis for family relationships, family members living in grace accept structure, forms, patterns, order, and responsibility in relationships. In reality, much of the daily routine of family life must be performed according to agreed-upon rules, regularity, and order. The application of the concept of grace in family relationships is a challenge when we are working out family structures, roles, and rules. Grace means that order and regularity are present so that family members' needs are met and their lives enhanced, not as a means of repressing their needs and limiting their lives.

### Empowerment: To Serve and Be Served

The most common and conventional definition of power is the ability to influence another person. In such a definition, the emphasis is placed on one's ability to influence and not the actual exercising of the authority. Most research on the use of power in the family has focused on a person's attempt to influence or control the behavior of another (Szinovacz 1987). An underlying assumption in such analyses is that people using power try to decrease rather than increase the power of those they are trying to influence. They tend to use power in a way that assures the maintenance of their own more powerful position.

Empowerment is a biblical model for the use of power that is completely contrary to its common use in the family or in society at large. Empowerment can be defined as the attempt to establish power in another person. Empowerment does not necessarily involve yielding to the wishes of another person or ceding one's own power to someone

else. Rather, empowerment is the active, intentional process of helping another person to become empowered. The person who is empowered has been equipped, strengthened, built up, matured, and has gained skill because of the encouraging support of the other.

In a nutshell, empowerment is the process of helping another person recognize his or her potential and then reach that potential through one's encouragement and/or guidance. It involves coming alongside a person to affirm her gifts and building her confidence to become all that she can be. In other words, it is helping a person achieve his or her full potential. Sometimes the empowerer must be willing to step back and allow the one being empowered to learn through experience and not by being overly dependent. An empowerer respects the uniqueness of each person and equips that person according to his or her individual ways of learning. Empowerment never involves control, coercion, or force. Rather, it is a respectful, reciprocal process that takes place between people in mutually enhancing ways.

If covenant is the love commitment and grace is the underlying atmosphere of acceptance, then empowerment is the action of God in people's lives. We see it supremely in the work of Jesus Christ. The celebrated message of Jesus is that he has come to empower—"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10b). The apostle John puts it this way: "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13). Ray Anderson (1985b) insightfully exegetes this text by noting that power "of blood" is power in the natural order; and "the will of the flesh" refers to tradition, duty, honor, obedience, and everything that is part of conventional power. In this passage, then, it is clear that the power is given by God and not by either physical or conventional means.

The power given by Jesus is power of a personal order—power that is mediated to the powerless. To us in our sinful and powerless condition God gives the ability to become children of God. This is the supreme example of human empowerment. Jesus redefined power by his teaching and by his relating to others as a servant. Jesus rejected the use of power to control others and instead affirmed the use of power to serve others, to lift up the fallen, to forgive the guilty, to encourage responsibility and maturity in the weak, and to enable the unable. His empowerment was directed to those who occupied a marginal status.

In a very real sense, empowerment is love in action. It is the mark of Jesus Christ that family members need to emulate most. The practice of empowerment in families will revolutionize the view of authority in Christian homes. Sadly, authority in marriage continues to be a controversial issue today largely because of a widely accepted secular view that

power is a commodity in limited supply; therefore, a person must grab as much power as possible in relationships. Whether through coercion or manipulation, striving for power leads to antagonizing competition rather than to the cooperative building up of people. Power becomes a distortion that distances, in contrast to mutual empowerment, which leads to unity.

But the good news for Christians is that the power of God is available to all persons in *unlimited supply*! Ephesians 4 reminds us that unique spiritual gifts are given to everyone for the building up of the body of Christ, "until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (v. 13). In a similar vein, Galatians 5:22-23 contrasts the works of the flesh against the fruit of the Spirit, which is freely given and defined as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In verses 25 and 26, we are encouraged and admonished: "If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another." This is the character of God, and it is available to all family members who draw on the inexhaustible resources in Christ Jesus!

Empowerment is born out of God's covenant love and the incredible grace we find in Christ Jesus. The Spirit of God empowers us to empower others. And when mutual empowerment occurs among family members, each will be stretched in the extraordinary ways of servant love and humility. Family members will grow in the stature of Christ as they mature into the character of Christ in their daily interactions. When they use their areas of strength to build up one another, they are placing unity and interdependency at the heart of their relationships. It has nothing to do with having power over others but rather involves taking great delight in building up one another to become all God wants us to be. This is the essence of what we read in 1 Corinthians 8:1b: "Knowledge puffs up, but loves builds up."

Traditional thinking about parent/child relationships is also based on the false assumption that power is in limited supply. Thus, parents often fear that as children grow older and gain more power, their parental power will automatically be reduced. In contrast, a relationship-empowering approach to parenting begins by reconsidering the nature of power and authority. In the biblical sense, parental authority is an ascribed power. The Greek word for authority, *exousia*, literally means "out of being." It refers to a type of influence that is not dependent on any personal strength, achievement, or skill, but that comes forth "out of the being" of a person. The Greek word for power, *dynamis*, is the word from which *dynamo* is derived. The authority of Jesus flowed from his personhood. It was dynamic.

Parents too have authority over their children that flows from their personhood as they earnestly and responsibly care for their children's physical, social, psychological, and spiritual development. The process of empowering children certainly does not mean giving up a position of authority, nor does it mean that parents will be depleted or drained of power as they parent. Rather, parents and children will both achieve a sense of personal power, self-esteem, and wholeness. Successful parenting involves building a relationship in which children gain personal power and parents retain personal power throughout the process.

Once again, human fears and personal or cultural needs may stand in the way of parental empowerment of children and adolescents. In the frailty of human insecurity, parents may be tempted to keep their offspring dependent on them. In the attempt to use their power over their children, they may inadvertently have a false sense of security in their parental position. When children obey out of fear and under coercion, it is likely to backfire. An emotional barrier develops when children are loyal out of obligation rather than by choice. The parental demand for unreasonable obedience and loyalty may be culturally motivated, but it is often related to selfish needs as well. In contrast, covenant love and empowerment leads to a mature interdependency in which there is both freedom and a continued sense of belonging for adult children. This kind of love remains faithful, honorable, and predictable even when differences threaten to endanger the relationship.

All parents have experienced the temptation to keep a child dependent, which is often rationalized as something we do for the child's own good. Many times, however, the child is kept in a dependent position for the parents' own convenience. Empowering is the ultimate goal, where parents release the child to self-control. Of course, mistakes will be made, and failure will be the occasional consequence of trying out new wings. Parents have a hard time letting their children make mistakes (especially the same mistakes they themselves made when young), so this transition to self-reliance is difficult for parents and children alike. It is important for parents to remember that the key to their authority lies not in external control but in internal control that their children can integrate into their own personhood. When this integration occurs, it is a rewarding and mutually satisfying achievement.

On the community level as well, Christians are called to live according to extraordinary social patterns. Even though we are sinners, God provides us with the ability to follow the empowering principle in our relationships. He empowers us, by the Holy Spirit, to empower others. The biblical ideal for all our relationships, then, is that we be Christian realists in regard to our own sinfulness and tendency to fail, but Chris-

tian optimists in light of the grace and power available to live according to God's intended purposes.

### **Intimacy: To Know and Be Known**

Human beings are unique among living creatures in their ability to communicate through language, a capacity that makes it possible for them to know one another intimately. Our Christian faith is distinct from Eastern religions in its teaching that God has broken into human history to be personally related to us. A major theme that runs through the Bible is that God wants to know us and to be known by us. We are encouraged to share our deepest thoughts and feelings through prayer. We are told that the Holy Spirit dwells within us and that God understands the very groanings within that cannot be uttered (Rom. 8:26–27).

Adam and Eve stood completely open and transparent before God. Only after their disobedience did they try to hide from God out of a feeling of nakedness and shame. In their perfect creatureliness, Adam and Eve had been naked before each other and had felt no shame (Gen. 2:25). The intimacy that Adam and Eve felt enabled them to be themselves without any pretense. They had no need to play deceptive games. Shame is often born out of a fear of unworthiness or rejection. When shame is present, family members put on masks and begin to play deceptive roles before one another. By contrast, as we examine the nature of the pre-fall human family (which is the only social institution that belongs to the order of creation), we find an emphasis on intimacy—on knowing and being known. This is what it means to be a servant, to empty oneself as Jesus did when he took the form of a servant. This is how one is to be submissive and loving in relationships. It is also true that to have any union or partnership or interdependence with another person, one must always be willing to give up some of one's own needs and desires. When family members come to one another with this kind of attitude and perspective, they will find a common ground of joy, satisfaction, and mutual benefit.

When family members experience covenant love, grace, and empowering, they will be able to communicate confidently and express themselves freely without fear. Family members will want what is best for one another. They will make a concerted effort to listen, understand, accept differences, value, and confirm uniqueness.

The capacity for family members to communicate feelings freely and openly with one another is contingent upon trust and commitment. They are not afraid to share and be intimate with one another. John gives us insight into this: "God is love" (1 John 4:16); "There is no fear in love,



COVENANT LOVE MEANS ACCEPTING THE DIFFERENCES  
AND UNIQUENESS OF EACH FAMILY MEMBER.

but perfect love casts out fear" (v. 18). God expresses perfect love, and we can respond in love because God loved us first (1 John 4:19).

This brings us back to the unconditional covenant love that is the cornerstone for family communication and honest sharing without the threat of rejection. As family members offer their love unconditionally to one another, the security that is established will lead to deeper levels of intimacy.

The unconditional love modeled by Jesus gives a picture of the type of communicative intimacy desirable in family relationships. Recall how Jesus, at the end of his earthly ministry, asked Peter not once but three times, "Do you love me?" (John 21). Peter had earlier denied Jesus three times; Jesus was giving Peter the opportunity to assert what he had previously denied and to reaffirm his love three times. Perhaps the relationship between Jesus and Peter had not been the same since Peter's triple denial. Likewise, family relationships become strained as we disappoint, fail, and even betray those whom we love the most.

Forgiving and being forgiven is an important part of renewal. There is a need to confess as well as to receive confession. This is a two-way street that can resolve the unfinished issues between family members. Being willing to admit mistakes and acknowledge being offended by another

person opens intimacy between two people. One need not be ashamed to admit failure and seek reconciliation. Family members should communicate their affection toward one another. Intimacy will bring the relationships to full maturity.

### Applying the Theological Model: From Hurting to Healing Behaviors

In examining biblical themes that have a bearing on the nature of family relationships, we have suggested that (1) commitment should be based on a mature (i.e., unconditional and bilateral) covenant love; (2) family life should be established and maintained within an atmosphere of grace, which embraces acceptance and forgiveness; (3) the resources of family members should be used to empower rather than to control one another; and (4) intimacy is based on a knowing that leads to caring, understanding, communication, and communion with others. These four elements of Christian family relationships are part of a continual process: intimacy can lead to deeper covenant love, commitment fortifies the atmosphere of freely offered grace, the climate of acceptance and forgiveness encourages serving and empowering others, and the resultant sense of self-esteem leads to the ability to be intimate without fear.

Table 1, which represents a summary of our theological model, illustrates how a family that places its allegiance in Jesus Christ can move toward God's paradigm for relationships. Although believers experience different levels of maturity in Christ, each one has a capacity to follow God's way because of the spiritual power within. Inasmuch as all family members are imperfect, with their own individual temperaments and experiences, they progress at different rates in the process of realizing God's ideals of unconditional love, grace, empowering, and intimacy. That is to say, all family members fall on a continuum between hurting and healing behaviors. As long as they move in the direction of healing, they will grow and the family will benefit. When they choose hurting behaviors and move away from God's way, however, the entire family will be negatively affected.

Among the hurting behaviors in a family environment are conditional love, self-centeredness, perfectionism, faultfinding, efforts to control others, unreliability, denial of feelings, and lack of communication. With such behaviors, the focus is on self rather than on the best interests of the other family members. In hurting families, each individual is affected on the personal level. For example, one may not feel loved or worthy of being loved by the other family members. Such individuals are limited

**Table 1**  
**From Hurting to Healing Behavior**

Hurting Behavior	Problem at the Personal Level	Obstacle to Interpersonal Relationships	Behavior Perpetuating the Problem	Healing Behavior: The Cure
From Conditional Love to Unconditional Love				
Conditional love	Feeling unloved	Fear of not being loved	Loving others in order to be loved in return	Unconditional love
Self-centeredness	Feeling unworthy of love	Fear of being thought worthless	Focus on self	Christ-centeredness
From Shame to Grace				
Perfectionism	Fear of making a mistake	Fear of not being accepted	Trying harder	Acceptance
Fault finding	Expectation of perfection in self and others	Fear of being criticized	Blaming others	Forgiveness
From Control to Empowering				
Efforts to control	Lack of confidence in one's ability to influence	Fear of losing others	Overcontrol	Building others up
Unreliability	Lack of control of oneself	Fear of disappointing others	Being out of control	Reliability
From Lack of Feeling to Intimacy				
Denial of feelings	Fear of feelings	Fear of rejection	Avoidance of feelings	Experience of feelings
Lack of communication	Distrust of others	Fear of being hurt by others	Superficial conversation	Open and honest communication

in their ability to love others unconditionally. A vicious circular pattern results. Such problems at the personal level cause the individual to view interpersonal relationships as potential threats. The result is behavior that perpetuates the root problem. For example, an individual who does not know what it is to be loved unconditionally is prone to approach others defensively.

Hurting families tend to withhold grace, often demanding unreasonable perfection and blaming those members who don't measure up. Individuals in these families fear they will make a mistake and be rejected because of their failure to meet the standards. So they try harder to be perfect. What they need is acceptance for who they are and forgiveness when they fail.

Hurting families also tend to control rather than empower their members. Individuals in these families lack the confidence that they can influence others; they fear they will be discredited because of their inadequacies. The result is a desperate attempt to get power by coercing and controlling less powerful family members. What is needed instead is affirmation and validation by the family. Empowerment will build confidence so that all the family members can reach their greatest potential.

Hurting families are characterized at the individual level by their members not being in touch with their feelings. Their fear of rejection keeps them in denial of their emotions. What they need most is a safe atmosphere in which they can express their feelings, thoughts, wants, and desires and be heard and understood by the other family members. Open communication helps each person share more honestly rather than hide his or her feelings and thoughts from others. In turn, this experience increases one's capacity to be known by others and to know oneself at deeper levels.

A cure is needed to break the perpetual cycle found in hurting families. An individual who has been loved only conditionally needs to experience unconditional love in order to feel lovable enough to give love and to support others. The breakthrough comes when one receives God's unconditional love. Being cherished by God gives a sense of self-worth and a new self-perception ("I am lovable"). Drawing on the Holy Spirit and maturing in the faith, the individual now has reason to follow God's paradigm and to adopt healing behaviors.

We have seen that living in covenant love is a dynamic process. God has designed family relationships to grow from hurting to healing behavior; that is, to a maturity analogous to that of individual believers who attain the full measure of perfection found in Christ (Eph. 4:13). This maturing of relationships eventually enables family members to reach out to people beyond the boundaries of the family.