

CHAPTER SIX

RICH IN RELATIONSHIPS (I) INVESTING IN FRIENDSHIP

→ **Strategy:** The rich single life exhibits a love for others that produces meaningful friendships radiating the deep glow of fellowship.

“It’s a Wonderful Life” is my favorite movie of all time. For those of you who have never seen it (both of you), Jimmy Stewart plays George Bailey, an ordinary guy from Bedford Falls. Time after time, year after year, George gives up his dreams for the sake of his responsibilities. One Christmas Eve, life comes crashing in around him. When all he has built seems futile, George resolves to end his life by leaping from a bridge. At the last moment, Clarence Odbody, his guardian angel, steps in and shows him what life would be like in Bedford Falls if George had never been born. Through Clarence’s intervention, George sees that because of his impact on others he truly is “the richest man in town.” In the closing scene a grateful George picks up a book left for him by Clarence and reads the parting inscription, “Remember, no man is a failure who has friends.”

“If a man does not make new acquaintances as he advances through life, he will soon find himself left alone. A man, Sir, should keep his friendship in constant repair.”¹

— Samuel Johnson

That line is always a guaranteed tear-jerker in my family—I suppose because it rings so true. George Bailey discovers that sharing our lives with one another yields a value and richness far beyond even our greatest accomplishments. People

everywhere want to make a difference in the lives of others and to experience the benefits of meaningful human relationships. We all want friendship.

Meditate on Ruth 1:1-18. How would Ruth’s expression of commitment have affected Naomi following the loss of her husband and sons?

How deep does this desire run? In a recent poll of religious belief among people age 18 to 28, most said they felt it was more important to be accepted by others than to believe in God! The greatest needs that faith should meet, according to this group, include “not being judged,” “avoiding ridicule,” “finding an unshockable ear who will always love me no matter what,” and having “someone

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1 At which of these church events would you find it easiest to meet new potential friends?

- Sports leagues and activities
- Service or evangelism events
- Large social gatherings such as picnics
- Small-group meetings
- Retreats

who will always be there and never betray me.”² As if anticipating the desperation for friendship expressed in this poll, Aristotle once wrote, “Without friends, no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods.”³

But what everyone wants, few can define. What is friendship? Who is my friend? Who is not? Do I need to change myself to be accepted by others, or should I demand acceptance on my own terms? Can only extroverts have friends? Does everyone need a

“best friend”? Where can I find friends like the ones in the beer commercials? Questions like these can perplex and confuse us in our attempts to experience that mystical thing called friendship.

Living a George Bailey Kind of Life

You as a Christian single are probably wrestling with some of these questions. Maybe you lack close friendships and aren't sure how to develop them. Maybe you don't

““ God brings His own friends together in remarkable ways. He delights in a good friendship....Friendships cannot be over-emphasized in the single life. They should be many and varied, always growing in depth, always increasing in number.”⁴ ”

— Margaret Clarkson

know how to overcome problems in the friendships you do have. Maybe you've been hurt in a friendship gone bad and want to try to start over. My hope is that this chapter will provide helpful insights into the nature and purpose of friendships as the Bible defines them. The things we

cover should apply to same-gender friendships, as well as friendships between men and women. In the next chapter we will look at male/female relationships as they move beyond being “just friends.”

The Essentials of Christian Friendship

Three essential characteristics distinguish a biblical approach to friendship from the secular approach that dominates our culture. Biblical friendship is initiated by God, governed by covenant, and designed for fellowship.

Initiated by God. One of the jarring truths of the Bible

For Further Study:

Read John 3:16 and 1 John 3:16. What one idea connects these two verses with similar addresses?

is that, apart from God's grace, no one can receive or give real love. I don't recommend sending that little nugget around the interoffice e-mail, but it is true nonetheless. As natural-born sinners wrapped up in self, we have nothing in us to generate a love that is not sin-infested and self-promoting. Scripture clearly shows that our ability to love comes from God. "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins....We love because he first loved us" (1Jn 4:10,19). We all want to love and be loved, but our ability truly to do so begins with God's initiative and example of what love should look like.

Friendship is one specific expression of love from God; God often relates to his chosen ones as a friend (Ex 33:11, Jas 2:23). So, to enjoy true friendship, we must first understand true love. Paul's familiar exposition on love in

“ Through him alone do we have access to one another, joy in one another, and fellowship with one another.⁵ ”

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer

1 Corinthians 13 provides ideal guidance on how to practice friendship God's way. For a fresh look at this passage, let's read a portion of it from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the New Testament:

No matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love. Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, doesn't have a swelled head, doesn't force itself on others, isn't always "me first," doesn't fly off the handle, doesn't keep the score of the sins of others, doesn't revel when others grovel, takes pleasure in the flowering of the truth, puts up with anything, trusts God always, always looks for the best, never looks back, but keeps going to the end. Love never dies.⁶

For Further Study:

Read 1 John 4:8-21. Why must those who love God also love their brother?

What are some practical implications of letting God's love define our friendships? Can we choose to befriend only people who seem to be compatible with us? Can we let prejudice tell us to avoid those who are not like us? Can we pursue friendships to improve our social standing? Can we test a friend's loyalty and then break off the friendship if he or she flunks the test? Can we just "not like" certain people? Clearly, the love of God in our hearts will war against any of these sinful motivations. Instead, in response to the love he has given us, Jesus calls us to a humble, sacrificial, and faith-filled adventure in love. As

Jesus told his disciples, “Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:12-13).

Governed by covenant. A covenant, like a contract or treaty, is a binding agreement between individuals. It contains promises and requirements and—if it is broken—consequences. There are more than 300 references to the concept of covenant in the Bible. The major biblical covenants include the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic Covenants. Most importantly, through his atoning death and resurrection, Jesus Christ established the New Covenant, which is the basis for our faith. In these great covenants God is the primary party. He both establishes the terms of the covenant and fulfills them.

For Further Study:

Read 1 Samuel 20. What promises were made by Jonathan and David in their covenant of friendship?

2 Which of the following assumptions (implied covenants) do you bring into your friendships?

- A friend will consistently return my phone calls
- A friend will tell me the things that trouble his/her heart
- A friend will remember the important things about me (like my birthday)
- A friend will know when to give me space
- A friend will _____

_____ (fill in the blank)

I find it helpful to think about friendship as involving a kind of covenant “lite.” As applied to friendship, covenant means those basic understandings underlying our relationships as Christians. (We’ll discuss covenant as it applies to marriage in Chapter Eight.) Now, do we sign a pre-friendship agreement with everyone we run into in church? Of course not. Most often our “covenant” understanding is just that—an unspoken understanding of expectations and limitations between two people in relationship.

We all make implied, covenant-like agreements all the time. If you drive me to a party, I can reasonably assume

you’ll give me a lift home, unless we agree (modify the covenant) otherwise. Have you ever given a gift and not received a thank you in return? Didn’t you feel just a little put out? Why? Because you had an expectation that a gift received requires a thank you. It’s not like you put on a little card, “This gift requires a written thank you on personal stationery within 72 hours.” You just expect it.

Of course, the implied covenants in some friendships can become quite intense. There can be great expectations regarding how much time we’ll spend together, how much free access I have to you, how you will treat me, and so on. Relationships like these have given rise to the concepts found in today’s self-help jargon: co-dependency, toxic relationships, the need for boundaries, and the like. If you were to poke around the innards of a “co-dependent

Meditate on James

2:23. Is there any reason you can't consider yourself a friend of God?

relationship," I think you would see a whole host of implied commitments and expectations that define the relationship—a friendship "covenant" gone berserk.

So the issue is not *whether* we form relational mini-covenants, but whether we form them according to God's ways. Basically, God has a simple, all-purpose, three-word formula for Christian friendships: love one another. That's it. Jesus said it (Jn 15:17), Paul said it (Ro 13:8), Peter said

it (1Pe 1:22), and John said it (1Jn 4:11). Of course, there is some fine print to this formula. I have given you a little of it in the selection from 1 Corinthians 13 above. (See 1 John 4:7-21 for the total package.) While loving one another God's way can seem overwhelming, let us remember that in

“ Friendship between earthly friends consists much in affection; but yet, those strong exercises of affection, that actually carry them through fire and water for each other, are the highest evidences of true friendship.⁷

— Jonathan Edwards

both his empowering and his example, it is God who gives us the ability to love.

Covenant love binds us into relationships. If we develop our friendships and maintain them with covenant love, disagreements will never destroy them. We won't demand something from a friend that we can get only from God. If marriage enters the picture and we're the odd man out, we won't resent it; we will rejoice. If a friend stumbles in temptation, we will be faithful to continue to love him unconditionally, even while holding the standard of righteousness in plain sight. If a friend suffers loss, we will suffer with him: "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity" (Pr 17:17). We will realize that in the family of God all relationships are eternal. Regardless of changes in status, location, or accessibility, we will faithfully honor a relationship in whatever way appropriate across the years.

I recently took my kids to the Mall area of Washington, D.C. As we walked toward the stark, sober granite of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, I told them that relatives and friends of the deceased soldiers whose names cover "The Wall" often visit there. As we walked the path that runs alongside the memorial, we noticed a man sitting cross-legged next to it. He was weeping, deeply and unashamedly. We quietly passed by, and in a few minutes looked back. He was gone. Left in his place leaning against the wall was a small pad of paper. On the pad was scribbled the following message.

Meditate on Ecclesiastes 4:9-12.

Are there any areas in your life where independence may be depriving you of important help through friendship?

For Further Study:

Read John 11:1-44. In what ways did Jesus demonstrate friendship toward Mary, Martha, and Lazarus?

“Hi Dude, I bet you’re surprised I’m here. I haven’t forgotten you. Ever since that foxhole I’ve wondered why it was you that bought it and not me. I remember when they built this thing I swore I’d get here and find your name. It’s taken 20 years, but here I am. I miss you. I hope someday we’ll hook up again, somewhere. Rock on, Bro.”

I don’t know if this vet was a Christian, but he understood something. He understood the value of shared humanity. He understood sacrifice. He understood the importance of commitment. To some degree, he understood covenant. May we as covenant friends love one another as God loves us.

Designed for fellowship. Christian friendship should produce fellowship. Notice I didn’t say, “Christian friendship *is* fellowship.” It’s not. There are many aspects of our friendships that are enjoyable and beneficial, but which are not fellowship. I recently invited a friend over to play a

Civil War computer game. For three hours we did battle. The only words spoken were about strategy, and lamentations when strategy went awry. It was an excellent time—intense, bonding, satisfying—a great memory for our mental scrapbooks. But it certainly wasn’t fellowship.

So what is fellowship?

There is no way I can exhaustively discuss fellowship in this context, so let me recommend a great concise treatment of the subject by John Loftness in the book, *Why Small Groups?* In his chapter, “Fellowship Rediscovered,” Loftness defines fellowship:

[Fellowship is] participating together in the life and truth made possible by the Holy Spirit through our union with Christ. Fellowship is sharing something in common on the deepest possible level of human relationship—our experience of God himself.... Opportunities to fall in love, get married, procreate, pursue a career, go bungee jumping, play baseball, or go to school are all open to humanity in general. But only Christians can experience fellowship.⁹

Two truths stand out in this definition. First, *fellowship directly produces spiritual fruit in our lives*. Many activities can build friendships, but some of those activi-

“ To reduce a Christian understanding of fellowship to drinking coffee after the service, engaging in recreational activities or the fulfillment of a particular work project, is superficial, if not erroneous. Such activities may stem from fellowship but are not fellowship in themselves.⁸

— D.J. Tidball

For Further Study:

Read Galatians 2:8-10. What caused the other apostles to extend fellowship to Paul?

3 In a typical one-on-one interaction, what percent of your behavior involves talking about and focusing on yourself, and what percent involves listening to and focusing on the other person? As a goal, what would you like the two percentages to be?

	Typical	Goal
Focus on me	_____	_____
Focus on another	_____	_____
Total	100%	100%

ties may (and should) also help us grow as individual believers. We can't "do" fellowship, but we can experience it. Fellowship may result from something as pleasant as sharing a testimony or praying together, or from something as unpleasant as confessing our sin. Whatever the event, when God uses a friendship to increase my spiritual maturity, I have had fellowship.

Because God is involved, fellowship can occur in unlikely ways. It doesn't even require relational closeness or a shared history—I can have deep fel-

lowship with a Christian whom I have just met. Nevertheless, friendships remain vital to our relational diet because they give us the *best* and *most frequent* opportunities to experience fellowship. A lack of friendships will inevitably result in a lack of fellowship.

“ Fellowship with God, then, is the source from which fellowship among Christians springs; and fellowship with God is the end to which Christian fellowship is a means.¹⁰ ”

— J.I. Packer

A second truth about fellowship is this: *Fellowship can only occur among Christians.* This is the major reason we ought never to let our closest relationships be with those who do not walk with Christ. Paul warns us of as much. “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.

For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?... What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?” (2Co 6:14-16). You may love to hang out with the guys at the office, or with your sorority sisters from old Party U., but if these represent your primary friendship network, you'll get some good times, but you won't get fellowship.

Please take a moment to think about your relationships. Do you get most of your relational enjoyment from hanging out with people who don't know Christ? Do you believe that career success requires you to focus primarily on business relationships? Perhaps you've tried to connect with some Christians you know, but they seem to be less like you than your non-Christian friends, so you're tempted to go with what is more comfortable. The good pastor Charles Spurgeon encourages you, “In your choice of friends, choose those who are the friends of God.”¹¹ Spurgeon's contemporary, J.C. Ryle, puts it a little more

Meditate on 1 John 1:1-4. How would John's personal experience of Jesus Christ have allowed him to experience deeper fellowship with others?

**Meditate on
1 Corinthians 15:33.**
How should this verse
affect your choice of
friends?

bluntly, “Never make an intimate friend of any one who is not a friend of God.”¹²

My plea is that, in your relationships, you would value fellowship as your overriding goal. Only friendships in Christ can produce fellowship. Make these your primary investment.

Taking the 1 Timothy 4:12 Challenge

“The only way to have a friend is to be one.” Here is a worn-out cliché—repeated by everyone from Ralph Waldo Emerson (who originated it) to Mr. Rogers—that actually has some biblical relevance. Paul says much the same

thing in Philippians 2:4.

“Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” Unlike credit-card applications, friendships don’t just inundate you whether you ask for them or not. Each believer carries a God-given respon-

“ Friendship is not a reward for our discrimination and good taste in finding one another out. It is the instrument by which God reveals to each the beauties of all the others.¹³

”

— C.S. Lewis

sibility to move beyond the cocoon of self in search of friendship. But how do we position ourselves to become the kind of friends God would have us be?

The Apostle Paul wrote two letters to a young man named Timothy. From his youth, Timothy had apparently been raised in the faith by Paul and was now a close associate and fellow pastor. By all indications, Timothy seems to have been a single man, probably in his thirties when Paul wrote to him. In the first of these pastoral letters, Paul encourages Timothy with the following, “Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe” (1Ti 4:12, NAS).

Some people apparently considered Timothy a pastoral lightweight, so Paul urges him to set a spiritual example. It may seem surprising that Paul doesn’t focus Timothy on private pieties such as prayer and study. Instead, he pushes him out into the nitty-gritty of the relational world. “Prove your stature by your love,” he seems to be saying. You don’t have to be called to be a pastor to see the relational value in Paul’s instructions. This verse can be a kind of blueprint for how we can prepare ourselves to be the friends we ought to be.

For Further Study:
Read Philippians 2:1-4.
List the ways Paul
encourages us to relate
to one another.

4 What is one statement your speech repeatedly makes about you that you regret? Here are a few sample entries to get you thinking:

- My motto is: Why should I ask a question when I can render an opinion?
- I am "The_Human_Internet@megabrain.com"
- If you can interrupt me when I stop to breathe, you can sometimes shut me up.
- Small talk is the best talk.

Write your entry in the space below:

Meditate on Proverbs

17:9. How can you promote love when someone brings you gossip about someone else?

Set an example in speech. Our speech has an amazing ability to reveal our hearts; it is the loud-speaker of our lives. It broadcasts who we are—for better or worse—far beyond our ability to control it. Our speech can alienate people or get us in a heap of trouble without our even knowing it. James warns us that the same tongue that blesses can curse as well (Jas 3:9-10). But our speech can also encourage, edify, and inform. Believers are encouraged to "let your conversation be always full of grace" (Col 4:6), and we're reminded that "the lips of the righteous nourish many" (Pr 10:21).

What does your speech say about you? Are there any ways you speak that hinder your relationships?

- Do you express your pride by talking too much?
- Do you offend others by talking too loudly?
- Do you disrespect others by interrupting?
- Do you listen (as opposed to just taking a breath between paragraphs)?
- Do you ask questions or just state opinions?
- Do you complain?
- Do you argue?
- Do you gossip? Proverbs 16:28 says, "A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends." Gossip (like its cousin, slander) is the sharing of information about others which is not your business to share. The fruit of gossip and slander is always damage to reputations, relationships, and the cause of Christ. If you play the role of "water-cooler reporter" or "rumor central" among your friends, take a look at Romans 1:28-32 and 2 Corinthians 12:20. You'll see that the Bible puts gossip in with some pretty ugly company.

Gossip cannot be trivialized or overlooked. Scripture actually commands church discipline for unrepentant gossiping, and it is important to note that the Bible specifically warns single women ("unmarried widows" in the text) about the temptation to gossip (1Ti 5:13).

Why the emphasis here on the sin of gossip? Because most pastors will tell you that nothing destroys long-standing friendships and ruptures Christian community like gossip. Once gossip has been passed along, there is no

way to undo its damage. Please don't do it, and don't tolerate it in your midst! If you are tempted to gossip, pray for that individual or situation instead. If you have gos-

“ Why, indeed, do we converse and gossip among ourselves when we so seldom part without a troubled conscience?¹⁴

”

— Thomas à Kempis

siped, the only scriptural solution is to go to the people you have talked to—as well as to the person or persons you gossiped about—and confess your sin. If someone comes to you with gossip, put out the fire.

Serve that person by gently

confronting the sin, and help him or her to discern the best way to proceed. Call one another to a level of maturity, love, and trustworthiness that will make gossip rare in your midst.

Set an example in conduct. In 1 Timothy 4:12, “conduct” literally means “manner of life”—our accumulated habits, tendencies, quirks, and ruts. It's what we do when we aren't thinking about what we're doing. What does your manner of life say about what's important to you? Do people decline rides in your car rather than try to dig a way through the rubble? Does everybody leave your parties by 9:00 p.m. because they're fed up with you following them around shoving coasters under their glasses?

More importantly, what example do you set in your ingestion of the prevailing culture? Do people come to you for reviews of the latest R-rated movies? Do your friends value you as a walking *People* magazine? Rather than being a cultural trend-setter, why not instigate among your friends a regular evaluation of your collective media intake? My friends and I often bring our tolerance for compromise in our media diet under the lamp of shared scrutiny. Paul gives some great guidelines in this area in 1 Corinthians 10:23-24; 31-33. Check them out.

Set an example in love. We have already discussed love extensively, so no need for further expansion here. One point of application, though. What is the “clique consciousness” of your church singles group? Are you an “inny” trying to maintain your “innyness”? Or are you an “outy” lobbing sarcasm bombs at the clique du jour? Does it really matter? While true cliques are factions—sinful institutions that must be dismantled—I have found that cliques often exist only in the eye of the beholder, and our preoccupation with them just distracts us from God's better pursuits. Set an example of love and move beyond the childishness of clique consciousness (see 1Co 13:11).

For Further Study:

Read Philippians 1:27-28. How does our manner of life affect our witness to the world?

Meditate on

1 Corinthians 10:23-24; 31-33. How should these passages influence the way you and your friends relate to movies, music, and other cultural media?

For Further Study:

Read Proverbs 22:11. What personal characteristics will give us favor with others?

5 Romans 12:13 tells us to “practice hospitality.” Which of the following is most like the kind of hospitality you practice?

“Sue held a formal state dinner last night...”

“Feel free to pick over whatever you find in the fridge...”

“Well, we can always watch a video...”

“Tonight’s topic on ‘Point/Counterpoint’ is...”

“Meet me in the chat room...”

Meditate on Proverbs

27:6, 9. Do you consider the rebuke of a friend a faithful wound or an irritating jab? Do you appreciate the earnest counsel of others regarding your character weaknesses? If so, why?

““ Seems like you know when I need you
Seems like He knows who to send
You never come as a prophet
Just an open-hearted friend
Faithfully wounding my pride
Bringing me back to His side
Sharing the word that you hide in your heart
You are a true friend, pointing me to Him
Lifting my downcast eyes
Turning my wandering gaze to the sky
Proving your love again
You are a true friend¹⁶

”

— Twila Paris

Set an example in faith. In the 1 Timothy passage, “faith” means a personal devotion to God that works itself down into our attitudes and actions. This is not super-spirituality, but a street-level trust in God. One reliable indicator of our faith is our attitude toward receiving correction from others. This acquired discipline will never make anyone’s Top Ten list of favorite activities, but it is vital for our growth and friendships. A friendship that cannot sustain the weight of loving correction will never experience the heavier glory of fellowship. In fact, Puritan

Charles Bridges counsels us that, “Rebuke, kindly, considerately, and prayerfully administered, cements friendship, rather than loosens it.”¹⁵

Our goal should go beyond simply tolerating confrontation; by God’s grace we can get to the point where we desire it, and even begin to see those who bring it as the best kind of friend. John Wesley demonstrated this in a reply to a letter of criticism received from someone he didn’t even know. Wesley’s gracious response indicates a depth of a faith that is attractive to all: “I am exceedingly obliged by the pains you have taken to point out to me what you think to be mistakes. It is a truly Christian attempt, an act of brotherly love....For what is friendship, if I am to account him my enemy who endeavors to open my eyes, or to mend my heart?”¹⁷

Set an example in purity.

The word Paul used here literally means “moral purity and innocence.” The same Greek word appears later in this letter, when Paul tells Timothy in no uncertain terms to relate to the young women “as sisters, with absolute purity” (1Ti 5:2). Later I will address some implications of this verse for courtship interactions, but its primary context has to do with the overall spectrum of relationships.

Brothers, it is in this mat-

6 The 1 Timothy 4:12 Challenge calls us to grow in five areas. Rate the following areas by numbering them 1 through 5, where 1 is the area in which you are doing the best, and 5 being the area in which you need the most work.

Speech Number: _____ Grade: _____

Conduct Number: _____ Grade: _____

Love Number: _____ Grade: _____

Faith Number: _____ Grade: _____

Purity Number: _____ Grade: _____

What letter grade would you give yourself in each area?

ter of purity that you want to distinguish yourselves from the world in the clearest possible terms. The norm of the world is for men to be just a little dangerous, to preen and posture toward women so as to pique not only their curiosity, but a little apprehension, too. The kingdom man, by contrast, is defined by meekness—mature strength governed by a mature will. The meek will inherit the earth, and the pure in heart will see God (Mt 5:5,8). It is the pure quality in meekness that causes people to trust us implicitly, and to desire our friendship.

Handling Conflict: Life in Sanctification House

Meditate on

Colossians 3:12-17.

How can you and your household or friendship group apply Paul's instruction in this passage?

Many of the most mature, godly men and women in our church live in one of several single-gender households of up to five church members each. In some cases every member of such a household carries significant job and ministry responsibilities. You might think that bringing all this character and gifting under one roof would produce veritable oases of harmony and good cheer. Well, not exactly. It seems that in the house rules these folks

“ This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.¹⁸

”
— John the Apostle

somehow always forget to include “Thou shall not irritate thy fellow housemates.” The result? Relational problems. We’ve come to call these our “Sanctification Houses”—you can enter, but you can’t survive without changing.

What makes a singles’ household a Sanctification House is the same thing found in dorms, small groups, and singles ministries everywhere: conflict—the inevitable result of sinners walking out life together in friendship. How do you deal with conflict in your

relationships? Do you withdraw and send out little “hurt” signals? Do you get angry and vengeful, and turn a conflict into a test of wills? Or maybe you keep all your relationships just superficial enough to dodge those pesky meaningful commitments that make you care about how you treat a friend?

No matter how we try to avoid the yuckiness of conflict (and I’ve tried almost every tactic), it *will* find its way into our friendships because our natural self-orientation to life is constantly inviting it to move in, rent-free. In Chapter Two we discussed how to deal with this permanent tendency to focus on ourselves. I’d like now to offer a few suggestions on how to handle such self-generated relational conflict biblically.

In this section I am deeply indebted to Ken Sande for his outstanding book, *The Peacemaker*. It is one of my perennial Top 5 recommendations to people I counsel. I’ll just discuss some main points here (so make sure you read the book). *The Peacemaker* describes four biblical steps to resolving relational conflict.

Glorify God. During conflict, our habit should be to focus on the question, “How can I glorify God in this situa-

“ If you do not ‘glorify God’ when you are involved in a conflict, you will inevitably glorify someone or something else. By your actions you will show that you either have a big God or that you have a big self and big problems....If you do not focus on God you will inevitably focus on yourself and your will, or on other people and the threat of their will.¹⁹

— Ken Sande

tion?” This instantly takes our focus off ourselves and places it on God, who provides answers to even the most difficult relational challenges. Purposing to glorify God sends us to the Scriptures for perspective, to our knees for help, and to the Cross for mercy. Focusing first on God allows his immensity to dwarf our immediate problems. If all parties to the conflict seek to

glorify the Lord, the path to resolving disputes opens wide. Let’s make glorifying God our greatest goal in our conflicts.

Get the log out of your own eye. In Matthew 7:1-6, Jesus encourages us to first examine how *we* contribute to offense, and *then* focus on the other person’s offense. Focusing first on our sin will lead us to humility, repentance, and mercy—things that God will bless. For a long time I interpreted this passage as saying, “If you want to gain the right to judge someone else’s sin, judge your own sin first.” I was looking for a license to judge! One day, in wrestling with this passage over a conflict of my own, I

THE SEVEN A'S OF CONFESSION

How ironic that we can lose some of our best friends because we won't acknowledge our contribution to relational problems, or we do it so poorly that nothing really gets resolved! We must understand that it is very rare to have relational breakdown where all the fault lies with just one person. When we understand this, we will want to learn how to confess our sins to those whom we have sinned against. This is humility, a steady bridge of reconciliation on the road to fellowship. Ken Sande teaches The Seven A's of Confession, a great tool for how to acknowledge our sin. Here's an adaptation of this tool.

1. **Address** everyone involved. Often our sin is against one person. Other times, such as when we gossip, many people may be affected. We should "complete the circle of confession" by going to everyone we can who might have been affected by our wrongdoing.
2. **Avoid** "if," "but," and "maybe." The opportunity to confess can also be the opportunity to practice a little spin control. Don't let your confession of sin come out sounding like a plea bargain.
3. **Admit** specifically. Don't say, "I'm sorry I hurt your feelings." Say what you did to hurt the other person, such as, "I know my unkind words hurt you." It is usually best to confess using categories of sin from the Bible. Rather than saying "I was upset," say "I was angry." Trying to find a biblical term for what you have done can sharpen your sense of conviction.
4. **Apologize**. An apology is *not* giving a reason for your action, it's an acknowledgement of how your behavior affected someone else. To apologize is to own the damage you've done. This tells the offended party that you are not just embarrassed by your behavior, but grieved by its effect on others.
5. **Accept** the consequences. In the Old Testament, people who had sinned sometimes wore sackcloth and ashes to signify their awareness of the consequences of their sin. In a world that seeks to insure against all consequences of wrong-doing, we can make quite a statement of humility by accepting the legitimate fruit of our sin without complaint.
6. **Alter** your behavior. This is more commonly called repentance. Repentance isn't sorrow or emotional catharsis, it is a decision and attendant actions to change what is necessary to make sure the sin is not repeated. Repentance doesn't atone for our sin, but it does demonstrate our desire to "go and sin no more" (Jn 8:11).
7. **Ask** for forgiveness. Sometimes we can feel badly about what we've done and even admit it to the person we have wronged. But we can often forget to actually *ask* that person to forgive us. "I'm sorry" is an acknowledgment of our bad feelings, but it is not asking forgiveness. Also, be sure to *ask* forgiveness, never demand it. And realize it may take a person a while to be able to forgive us from the heart. To be forgiven is not a right you hold, it is an act of mercy by another toward you.

For Further Study:

Read Matthew 18:15-22. Do you understand the biblical process for helping another person deal with his or her sin against you? Do you follow this process?

Meditate on Matthew

5:23-24. What should you do if you have a conflict with someone just before your Sunday church meeting begins?

finally saw that the goal is not judgment but ministry.

Jesus is teaching that if you want to help someone with something harmful to him or her, you first need to deal with the thing that's harmful to you. During a conflict, the right to judge another person is never given to us. And the obligation to minister to one another is never removed.

Go and show your brother his fault. At times this step has appealed to me, as if it's supposed to be the fun part. It's not, and even thinking that way reveals a sinful, holier-than-thou motivation. Nor is this step about venting my anger and bitterness. It nearly always takes two people—each contributing their sin—to create a conflict. So in any conflict there must be a way for the specific offenses to be expressed, acknowledged, and dealt with. By God's grace, we *can* confront the sins of others in a helpful, non-judgmental way. We can also go and ask someone whether he or she has an offense against us.

As I develop the humility to tell others clearly and graciously of their sins against me, the same humility allows me not only to hear their offense against me, but to seek to repent of it. As I grow in the sincerity and completeness of my confession to others, a wonderful thing begins to happen. I experience fellowship.

Go and be reconciled. During the Cold War, the United States had a policy toward communist countries known as *détente*—literally “relaxing of tension.” If you're like me, you can live with conflict, it's the tension that gets on your nerves. But the Bible calls us to a far greater resolution than mere *détente*. It calls for reconciliation. Ken Sande says that to seek reconciliation is to “replace hostility and separation with peace and friendship”²⁰ Obviously, true reconciliation must involve the efforts of all parties to a conflict, so Paul encourages us, “As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Ro 12:18).

There are many things we can do to pursue peacemaking. We can forgive the other person; resolve to speak well of him or her; remain open to any effort at reconciliation; or get someone else involved in the manner of Matthew 18:15-16. Even if all our efforts fail to produce mutual reconciliation, we can live in the peace that we have glorified God and loved the way Jesus loves us.

The Hard-Won Prize of Friendship

Melanie is a member of our church, and a resident in a Sanctification House. She recently had an experience in

friendship that seems like a great way to sum up what we have just covered. Here is Melanie's story.

"I had an acquaintance of about four years (we'll call her Mary) who needed a place to stay for four months until she graduated from college. She heard we needed a roommate and asked if she could move in. Due to past conflicts with her during college, I was hesitant, but figured that she may have changed and that I, along with my other roommates, should give her the benefit of the

““ May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

— Psalm 19:14

doubt. (Already, I was thinking I was better than she was.)

"Within two weeks of her arrival, she and I had four major conflicts. Each time, Mary froze up and would not discuss anything until she was ready to, while I

wanted everything resolved instantly. This mismatch in resolution styles only compounded the problems.

"By the time the fourth conflict poked through the door, Mary was sorry she had moved in and I was kicking myself for letting her. After each falling-out I would sort of apologize for my part and sort of work a little harder to avoid conflicts. (The best way to do this was to not come out of my room in the morning until she left for work, and make sure I was in bed at night before she got home from class.)

"I got angry at the very thought or mention of her, and felt as if she definitely had a lot more apologizing to do before I could even be civil to her. I knew my words and actions were a poor testimony of my commitment to Christ. I am ashamed that, after walking closely with the Lord for nearly five years, this was the condition my heart was in, but I would be lying if I said otherwise.

"One weekend I unexpectedly realized that the only way this wall of resentment was going to come down was by me taking up my cross and dying to my pride and self-righteousness. Ouch!!! It hurt. It took three days of wrestling with God before I could do what I knew he was calling me to do. God clearly showed me through his word that I needed to humble myself for his glory, inside and out, and make amends with Mary by confessing the sin in my heart. I had to also demonstrate in a practical way that I was genuinely willing not only to forgive, but to love her as a sister in the Lord.

“I did not want to obey, but after a few days of praying (and crying), I knew it was time. It still was not easy, but I bought Mary a small gift and took it to her bedroom. I gave it to her, saying it was meant to symbolize a genuine effort at a new friendship, and I asked her to please forgive me for the selfishness I had displayed. She was very willing. We hugged for a long moment. When we separated she informed me that she now had renewed hope for the friendship she had been desiring to build with me for a long while.

“Since that day there has been nothing but harmony between us, and we enjoy spending time together. In two weeks it will be time for her to leave us and I can honestly say that, as a result of the work God has done in my heart, I will miss her dearly. I will carry this lesson with me forever and will give God the credit and honor due him. He prompted me to a step of spiritual growth and maturity, held my hand while I walked through the fire, and allowed me to experience the fullness of joy that comes only from submission and obedience to him. He has also given me a new friend!”

Taking a Cue from Clarence

There’s a pivotal scene in “It’s a Wonderful Life” where it begins to dawn on George Bailey that his life really is meaningless without the lives of others close to him. As the camera zooms in for a haunting close-up of George’s tortured face, Angel Second Class Clarence Odbody reflects, “Each man’s life touches so many other lives, and when he isn’t around he leaves an awful hole, doesn’t he?”

By the grace of God, Melanie and Mary are no longer absent from one another’s lives. They have filled with hard-won friendship what was once a gaping hole between them. Whom does your life touch? Who touches you? Are there any holes in your relational network that can be replaced with meaningful fellowship? Invest in friendship. Be one to find one. ■

- GROUP DISCUSSION** 1. How would you respond to the question, “What is the greatest need that faith should meet?”

2. How do you determine when a relationship has moved beyond acquaintance to friendship?
3. How did becoming a Christian affect your friendships?
4. Suppose your best single friend gets engaged. How should you relate to that person before and after he or she is married?
5. Suppose you were engaged to be married and your best single friend wasn't. How should you relate to your friend before and after you are married?
6. Describe the last time you experienced genuine fellowship with another person. What made it fellowship?
7. What is most needed in your present circle of relationships that would make your fellowship deeper?
8. What should you do as a Christian if you feel you are being excluded from a group of other Christians?
9. What are some ways to develop trustworthiness in a friendship?
10. What is your typical first *response* when you become aware someone is offended with you? What should your first *action* be?
11. Complete this sentence: "I can most easily receive correction from others if..."
12. After a conflict, how do you know when a relationship has been reconciled?

RECOMMENDED READING *The Peacemaker* by Ken Sande (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991)

When People Are Big and God Is Small by Edward T. Welch (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997)

War of Words by Paul Tripp (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2000)

NOTES

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7. Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, (Albany, OR: The SAGE Digital Library, 1996), p. 342.
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17. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (Albany, OR: The SAGE Digital Library, 1995), p. 74.
18. 1 John 1:5-9.
19. Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), p. 22.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 170.