



RELATIONSHIPS

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ACTS 29
COMPETENCIES

Biblical Foundations

Healthy relationships are evidence of godly Christian character. When we read Colossians, we find foundational guidelines on relationships and social contexts based on a godly character. Paul explains early in the book who Jesus is and how the readers have been raised to a new life in him (1-2:13). Paul then goes on to explain the implications of this beautiful truth by contrasting the old way of living and the new life evidenced in Christ (3:5-11). He shows how, because of that contrast, we can see very specific guidelines for our social relationships in the church, marriage, family and work (3:12-4:6).

The context of what Paul is teaching gives us great clarity on our inability to do this apart from being in Christ. The power of the gospel in the life of the believer leads her to put on Jesus Christ, as Paul describes in 3:10 (Romans 13:14, Ephesians 4:24), and enables her to reflect the gospel in every aspect of her social life.

One of the main filters for church planters in Acts 29 is the evidence of a godly character reflected in healthy relationships, as is clearly described in the Competencies section. Healthy relationships are evident when the candidate:

1. Establishes & maintains, as far as is possible, healthy relationships with Christians & non-Christians (Romans 12:18; Colossians 4:5-6; 1 Timothy 3:7; 2 Timothy 2:24-25; 1 Peter 2:12)
2. Takes initiative to meet new people (Romans 15:2; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23; 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8)
3. Willing to initiate conversation with & listen to others (Proverbs 18:13; 19:20; James 1:19)
4. Shows empathy & compassion (Psalm 86:15; Matthew 9:35-36; 14:14; 22:39; Mark 1:40-41; John 11:33-35; Romans 12:15; 1 Peter 3:8; 4:8; 1 John 3:17)
5. Displays patience & sincerity (Psalms 37:7; Romans 2:7; Galatians 5:22; Colossians 1:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; James 1:3-4; 5:7-8)

Just as he did to the Colossians, Paul writes to the Church in Ephesus to show them the implications of life in Christ after having explained that the Gentiles have been reconciled to God and brought into his kingdom. In the closing chapters (4-6), Paul explains how believers should live in the unity and peace accomplished through Christ (2:11-22). He emphasizes the oneness of God's people (4:1-6). The material in these verses might reflect an early Christian confession of faith found in 1 Corinthians 8:6.

Paul exhorts the church to live a life worthy of the call of God by walking in humility, gentleness and patience. He then says believers should be "*bearing with one another*" (v.2) which is not an easy task. In fact, without the Spirit of God dwelling in us, it is impossible. Unity of the Spirit (4:3) refers to unity that can only exist because of the work of the Holy Spirit teaching us, pushing us and enabling us to be like Christ.

In Philippians 2:1-11, Paul encourages the church to continue practicing love and humility among one another pointing to Jesus as the ultimate example of self-emptying love in

regards to the context of relationships. The hymn that we found in verses 5-11 might have been composed by Paul, or it could be from an early Christian liturgy in the church.

Paul uses rhetorical expressions to call the church that has received encouragement in Christ to have the same love and to be in full accord of one mind. Paul's main argument in these first verses is that if believers cannot live in unity, humility and love, the power of the gospel will be questioned and will lose credibility among people. The Greek word "*sympsychos*" means to share the same attitude and mindset. This mindset and attitude are then described by Paul, who then explains that this was the attitude and mindset of our Lord Jesus Christ in coming down to earth to save his elect.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:3-11)

At the end, Paul alludes to Isaiah 45:23 in order to describe the worshiping of Jesus and the power of the gospel on display in response to the humble-loving-caring attitude of Christ, for the glory of the Father and our salvation.

It is very clear in the Bible that unity, love, and humility in the context of social relations are a clear evidence of a righteous and Christian character. Such character cannot be shown nor molded if we do not have the spirit of God dwelling in us, moving us to act as our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is an oxymoron to say that a godly man of God who wants to preach the gospel and plant churches would be a man who does not attach great importance to the subject of social relations and unity, love and humility in the midst of them.

Theological Reflection

When we talk about a theological basis of social relationships we can think about three main frameworks.

First, the Trinity: When we talk about the Trinity we are talking about the doctrine of God, who God is. Our understanding of all doctrines find their starting point in our understanding of who God is. If we are wrong about who God is, we will get everything else wrong. The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that there is only one God who eternally exists in three Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; and that these three are one God, having the same nature and attributes, and worthy of precisely the same worship, confidence,

and obedience. (Matthew 3:16, 17; Matthew 28:19, 20; Mark 12:29; John 1:14; Acts 5:3, 4; 2 Corinthians 13:14).

The Trinity has eternally existed in perfect love, unity and divine relationship between the Father, Holy Spirit and the Son. There is no doubt that the human being was created in the image and likeness of God. All humankind is born with an intrinsic need to relate to other people. Many aspects of our humanity (such as the relational aspect) reveal the image of God in the human being. (Genesis 1:27)

Second, sin has both vertical and horizontal implications: Because of sin (Genesis 3) we see a huge difference between the holiness of God's character and our own as human beings. All humankind has fallen short of that holiness (Romans 3:23) through our rejection of God in our lives.

When we read Genesis 3:13-16, 23-24, right after our fathers sinned by disobeying God's word, we see two immediate implications of our rebellion against the authority of the word given by a sovereign God:

- Relationships between human beings are broken;
- Perfect communion with God is broken.

Before sin entered the world there was perfect harmony in relationships vertically and horizontally. There was harmony in their relationship with God, between them and with the whole of creation. Sin breaks that harmony and, since Genesis 3, all relationships are not the same anymore. When Adam is questioned by God about his behavior, he blames Eve for the whole incident. Instead of assuming responsibility for their actions, Adam does not have the slightest problem in blaming Eve if it can save him from the consequences of his actions. Sin has broken the relationship between them; it has opened a gap and changed the nature of the relationship. Genesis 3 helps us remember that it is the Christian cosmogony that gives us the light of why relations between us are so complex and can even become so painful and destructive (broken). All of us have experienced, or are experiencing right now, the pain of broken relationships. This brokenness in relationships can even happen with those who we love most and are closest to us, like parents, siblings, and children, family in general.

Since the rebellion of humankind, relationships are no longer as they used to be. We have all suffered from what others have done to us and, at the same time, we have caused physical, emotional or spiritual suffering to other human beings. It becomes even more dramatic when those who are supposed to care for, nourish and love are our main source of suffering and even abuse.

Our relationship skills are broken because of sin. Not only horizontally, but vertically. Man and woman are expelled from Eden, from the very presence of God, because of sin. God is serious about sin and his holiness cannot tolerate it. They are separated from the presence and glory of God, and unless there was an intermediary that would pay the ultimate price for their sins, the first Adam and all his descendants would be separated by all eternity from the presence of God because of their own sin. However, we see the first shadows of the Gospel in that same chapter when in Genesis 3:15 they are given the *protoevangelium* and later, in

verse 21, God sheds blood from an animal (as a shadow of Christ on the cross) to clothe Adam and Eve who were in shame due to their nakedness (their sin).

Third, the Gospel: The gospel is God's answer to sin. God fulfills in the gospel what he promised to Adam and his descendants through covenants made with the human race by promising an intermediary, a Savior. This Savior, Jesus Christ, is the one who lives a life without sin and gives his life on a cross to forgive the sins of all who, by grace, have put their faith in him. This is the theological essence of all relationships. It is through the cross that today we can restore our horizontal relationships and the most important relationship of any human being: our relationship with God.

While we are still living in a fallen world, relationships remain imperfect. But those of us who have placed our faith in the merits of Christ on the cross and have been empowered by the Holy Spirit can walk in a new life, as a new person, who seeks unity, love, humility and to serve those around them in every relationship they may have. It is through the gospel that we are empowered to bring the truth of Jesus into our relationships and it is through the gospel that today we have access to God's throne of grace in communion with him.

Cultural Engagement

About 15 years ago, I used to listen to a pastor from a large congregation in my country almost every day through the radio. I considered his teachings a blessing and filled with knowledge. So one day I decided to go to his church to learn a little bit more about him and probably ask him a few questions, if possible. When I got there, I sat down as the service started, but I could not see the pastor. At the very end of the worship time a lady went up to give some announcements and then she introduced the pastor. The pastor stepped out of one of the doors next to the stage along with three other people. These people were dressed in the same way and had a walkie-talkie in their hands, one of them carrying a Bible, which he gave to the pastor after leading him to the pulpit. These guys were what we now know as "*shepherd squires (armor bearers)*", something that, at that time, I had no idea what it meant. After the pastor came up, the lady handed him a glass of water and, along with the three squires, sat in chairs on the stage, just behind the pastor.

Years later, through several friends, I found out that this pastor used to tell people clearly and constantly that he didn't want to be approached by anyone. He said that his job was to preach and nothing else, he did not have the time nor did he like to greet or talk with too many people. He stated that the reason for having this team of people (squires) was so they would ensure that no one approached him after having preached.

This is one of many cases in my country of a shepherd who does not shepherd.

Can anyone be called to a pastoral office without being relational? Sadly, this is very common in our churches today. But should it be so? The pastoral call described in the Word of God is a serious call from which we will all account for (Hebrews 13:17). It is a call, in most cases, to suffer together with Christ (1 Corinthians 16:8-9, 2 Corinthians 1:8-11; 4:8-11; 6:3-5; 11:16-33). It is also a call that God warns us not to take lightly (James 3:1). In addition to all this, the Bible

also gives us the characteristics of those who seek this calling, along with a description of the responsibilities of this call (1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, 1 Peter 5). The fact that God, in his infinite wisdom and sovereignty, has used the metaphor of a "shepherd of a flock" to describe the work of the elders in the church is by no means a coincidence. Not only that, Jesus himself is described as "the Good Shepherd" (John 10). This is one of the greatest responsibilities and privileges God has given us (1 Peter 5:3; John 21:15-19). But with all of this, another question arises.

Why are there shepherds who do not shepherd in our culture?

There may be several reasons: emotional problems, fear of man, fear of conflicts, immaturity, inexperience, or the worst and most dangerous reason of all, simple indifference. In the end, they believe they are called to teach, occupy the pulpit, be admired excessively, receive all kinds of praise and applause, yet it is God's job to keep them from having to get their hands dirty with the people God has allowed them to be in their care!

At the end of the day, I believe the root problem is the same: they have not understood what it means to be a pastor. Shepherding is not an easy or part-time task. Shepherding involves time, effort, patience, and, above all, love for the flock. It is curious that Jesus, in his conversation with Peter (John 21:15-17), used two words to emphasize the work that Peter would have to do in response to his love of him: feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep.

When Christ is not sitting on the throne of our heart completely, we will always love other things more than him and his word. We will love people and experiences more than him. We will demand admiration, position, leadership, recognition, and so on; all things that, from the beginning of the world, the devil himself offered to our first parents: "... you will be like God" (Gen. 3:5), and Jesus himself "... all these I will give you, IF YOU WILL FALL DOWN AND WORSHIP ME" — and disobey God's word (Matthew 4:9).

Let's pay attention to Jesus' conversation with Peter. The competency to be relational and shepherd the flock was the mark of his love for Jesus. How can someone who calls himself a pastor say he does not have the time or the urge to seek, listen or be with people? May God forgive us and have mercy on us!

When we see our culture and how much it has influenced our churches I always remember a quote brought to my attention by Ed Stetzer:

"When the Greeks got the gospel they turned it into a philosophy, when the Romans got it they turned it into a government, when the Europeans got it they turned it into a culture; when the Americans got it they turned it into an enterprise."
(Richard C. Halverson)¹

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2012/october/whats-deal-w-church-growth-movement-part-2-some.html>.

Missional Significance

Relational competence is highly relevant to church planting for several reasons.

First, it reflects the pastoral heart of a minister of God who loves the gospel.

We live in times when pastoral ministry has become an excuse to feed egos and build our own kingdoms. The last thing pastors want in their work is to have to be intentionally relational with people. While it is true that this should not be above other things a minister is called to do, it is a skill that must be a pillar for the planting of a church, by proving our love for the flourishing of the gospel through discipleship and intentional relationships.

Secondly, it responds to one of the greatest needs of the human heart.

Most people are accustomed to seeing many pastors from afar. This relational competency allows the pastor to bring greater weight alongside the gospel to those who are pursuing an honest and helpful relationship. In so doing, there will be growth in holiness and in the knowledge of God. There are so many books, shows, talks and workshops on the topic of relationships. They have insights, tips and ideas, but being able to show the gospel through a relationship turns gospel-focused relationships into an instrument for the salvation of many, through honest and intentional relationships.

In third place, when we plant churches one of the tools God graciously gives to us is the ability to know, love, serve and minister to people that we probably did not know before. Week after week, we will have the opportunity to know new people and be able to serve them and preach the gospel to them. The ability and competence to be relational is essential in church planting. Not just at the beginning, but throughout all of our life. The godly relationships we cultivate will make us grow in the knowledge of Christ and our sanctification. Relationships are crucial to our Christian life.

In my experience, living life together through missional community groups, where relationships are nurtured through friendship in Christ, is the most powerful missionary tool we can experience. Together in these groups, as the body of Christ living on mission and seeking to relate intentionally with other people, we can do much more than what we can achieve on a Sunday morning where the church meets to worship God.

According to Proverbs 27:17, “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another”. Not everything is great when it comes to relationships. We will always have conflict in the midst of relationships. Conflict is inevitable, but when we approach it biblically it becomes a sanctifying tool for the Christian life. The problem is that we don’t always see it that way and then we are afraid to tell people how we feel and tend to run away from confrontation. Another reason to run away from conflict is because we don’t live our life setting our minds on the things from above (Colossians 3:2). When we live a gospel-centered life we will always reflect God’s character to others, and we will see conflict as an opportunity.

This subject is of high importance in Jesus' sermon in Matthew 5. Jesus taught that unresolved relationship issues take more importance before God than bringing our gifts at the altar. In this chapter Jesus is even teaching us that if we remember that our brother (implying he's a Christian too) has something against us we have to go and make peace with him. He even goes on to say that irrational anger equals murder (v.22).

Can you imagine what this means for us as pastors if we are always irritated about people trying to have a relationship with us? Or if we don't reflect God's character when we face conflict? Instead of seeing the opportunity of showing the gospel and growing together in holiness, we run away from it and think it is something we shouldn't be involved in.

If we are honest, at the end of the day, all human beings (intentionally or unintentionally) are part of lifelong relationships. The most interesting thing is that most of the time we will seek to run away from conflict but many times we seek to relate to someone even though that person is not of our total enjoyment. For instance, the coach at the gym who constantly yells and challenges us so that we might be able to do things better and be healthy and in shape. Many times it can be a bit irritating or tiring. We don't want to get up early in the morning because we know it will be tough, but we do it, because we know that in spite of the annoying coach, it's for our own good. In the end, we keep spending time with the person who is helping us even though we sometimes don't like it that much. How much more then should we seek this relational competence when we are planting and growing churches because we know that we are the ones who have received from the Lord the message of the gospel that is the absolute solution to the lost hearts of this world?

In our obedience to the great commandment given to us in Matthew 28 we have to be able to understand how God can use us as instruments to share the gospel message through our love for others (even though we do not know them). In fact, just as being relational in shepherding the flock was the mark of Peter's love for Jesus, it is also the mark of anyone who considers himself a Christian, cf. John 13:35, "by this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another".

Whoever says that he doesn't want/need to be relational in ministry is in danger of denying his understanding and love for the gospel.

Further reading and reflection questions are available at acts29.com/competencies.