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# **FRIENDSHIP IS A VERB**

## **(in a hurting world)**

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## Preface

As we live-out our faith each day we encounter joys and sorrows, trials and temptations, pleasure and pain. Sadly, some of our most traumatic life-experiences can come from within the Christian community.

Although it may come as a shock to some of us, church leaders are human and therefore, perfectly capable of making mistakes. Many of these mistakes are made as fellowships seek to work out their interpretation of what God says in Scripture (The Bible). They are important for growth, maturity and forward movement. However, it is when leaders try to claim infallibility and take over God's role that the mistakes become dangerous. Pride can all too easily replace humility, and spiritual fervour displaces common sense and discernment. "What would Jesus really do?" is replaced by "Let's sort this out!"

It is also possible for pastors and teachers to be placed in positions of responsibility which they cannot hope to fulfil. Young pastors, with no real life experience, are expected to perform miracles without adequately mature backup or support. Alternatively, and more sinister, the leadership may close their ranks to protect or even cover up mistakes from which lessons need to be learned. The end results can be disastrous leaving lives, or whole communities, irreparably damaged.

The material in this book is based on personal experiences, and those of close friends, over many years. I have used my favorite tools of poetry and verse to challenge attitudes which we often accept as normal. I have also tried to express some of the joys and rewards of knowing the Creator God, who loves us, cares for us and enjoys a relationship with us.

I pray that through the words of this book the hurting will find healing, the silent will find a voice, and the abusers will see the damage they can cause "in Jesus' Name." More than ever, I hope that all readers will find something which encourages them to keep going and to see that God IS at work in His church.

I would love to receive your feedback.

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“Life is about relationship”. This is so easy to say but very difficult to live out. I have learned that words are cheap unless they are backed-up by positive action. A few people who have been with me through the fair weather and the storms have earned the right to special mention: Lynne Throup, Martin and Rebekah Neil, Tanvi Muir, Mark and Gail Kennedy, Steve and Ruth Fletcher. Without your help I would not be here to write this book.

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I love you all.

# Introduction

I have been asked on many occasions why I wanted to write this book. Well, I believe that we can only be truly effective and fulfilled in life when we have good relationships with other people, God, and are comfortable with who we are. This is vitally important in ensuring that the church demonstrates God's love to other people.

More recently, teaching within the church has focused on personal salvation and relationship with God. Although important, this is only part of a much bigger picture. We are not saved by God to remain individualized. The concept of community is written in to His recipe for a successful and productive life. The church is included in that mandate and is called to be the model community, demonstrating our love by how we treat other people.

The way in which we handle our relationships and friendships is crucial to both the positive and negative impact that we will have as individuals, and as the church. If we handle them with sensitivity and integrity, people will see and experience the love of God through us and be drawn in. If we handle them badly, we can end-up abusing others, damaging people and communities. From my personal experience, relationships and friendships are much easier to handle when everything is going well and God is on His throne in heaven! The real testing comes when we are called to develop or maintain relationships in the painful and difficult times. If sin is involved, there is a danger that we become so preoccupied with sorting out the sin that we destroy both the relationship and the other person in the process. We live in a hurting world where we will encounter problems, difficulties and sin. Since people from the world may occasionally populate our churches, we will almost certainly face these situations in our congregations. Hurt is not limited to those outside the church. Some of the most broken and hurting people are actually inside our churches. Sadly, many of these are broken further through the words and actions of people within our own fellowships.

We should remember that Jesus came to live in a hurting and broken world too. He made himself available to His friends and followers in the good times and in the bad. He was also there for the outcasts, those in society who had been wronged and for those who had committed wrong. There were many experts and religious leaders in Jesus' day who were quick to offer their advice and also to criticise Jesus and His followers. Jesus was criticised for healing or working on the Sabbath, mixing with sinners and tax collectors and spending time with gentiles (non-Jews). The strongest opposition to God's reconciliation and healing actually came from those who should have been most sympathetic to His work, the religious establishment.

Jesus was a man of integrity and therefore, His words were backed-up by His actions. This was unlike many of the religious elite who knew all the rules and applied them to the last letter of the law, but without compassion and true understanding. Therefore, Jesus exposed their insecurities and inconsistencies, which did not make Him a popular man! He accused them of being a bunch of hypocrites who demonstrated great piety at their worship services, but operated to different standards in their private lives.

Does this sound familiar? Nothing has changed over the years. We are still fallen people, each one of us capable of doing wrong. If we acknowledge this, we are a long way towards being real and being able to help others and ourselves. It is only when we try to cover up our own insecurities, doubts, failings and fears that we ask for trouble. We then enter the world of unreality and deceit. Jesus was real, sharing both His fears and successes with His disciples. The problem is that we have grown new church communities which are based on flawed theology, where we must live in the victory, overcome our wrongs, doubts and fears, or even worse and far more dangerous, deny that they exist! Since this comes downwards from the leadership, it is not surprising that there are many people who are bound-up with guilt just because they acknowledge that they haven't arrived yet. Even if we don't subscribe to these somewhat extreme views, we are all guilty of hiding what we are really like from others. We may even ensure that we are excessively busy, so that we don't have time to examine what we are really like inside. The result of these insecurities is that we are fine until something happens which is a bit too close to home or reminds us of past bad experiences. Then we either panic or recoil in self-defence because we can't handle the situation any more. As a result, we leave those who trusted us and

made themselves vulnerable to us, more broken than before. Although we can retire to our friends for help and support, they cannot. We leave them desolate and isolated.

In this busy, hectic, instant age, many of us would like easy answers and quick fixes to these tough and difficult situations. However, Jesus asks for our commitment, time, effort, love and sacrifice. He may even lead us into situations where we risk being misunderstood as we live out His love to those around us. Too often in today's society and within our churches we relegate friendship and relationship to nouns: objects. I believe that Jesus calls for a radical shift towards making them verbs: action or doing words.

This book is a collection of poems, prose and observations which are based on the experiences of my close friends and myself over the years. I have tried to avoid simple answers or trite words of comfort. I hope you will be stirred, challenged and moved, perhaps even to the point of discomfort! It is often in our uncomfortable and vulnerable times that God can speak to us most clearly.

Ask yourself, as I did, "Is there anything of me in here that God wants to change?" Then commit yourself and pray that He will. I will continue to pray that this will be an ongoing process so that, each day, we can all demonstrate more clearly that friendship is a verb in a hurting world.

# CHAPTER 1 Friendship & Relationship

## Understanding Our Relationships

The subject of relationships is complex. Relationships are two way and are vital in our everyday life and in the life of the church. Our successes, failures and sense of fulfilment are integral to the kind of relationships we build and maintain.

I'm reminded of a story about a priest who decided, one sunny Sunday morning, to play a round of golf rather than take the morning service. So, he rang the church office to explain that he was ill and then drove to the golf course. The angels saw this and told God, who said, "Don't worry, he'll be suitably punished." At the first tee the priest took out a wood and drove the ball straight down the fairway. Two bounces later it had cleared the bunkers and rolled onto the green. Then, forming a long, slow, right hand arc the ball eventually struck the flag and dropped in the hole. A hole-in-one! At the next hole the story was similar. A shorter hole, with the green beyond some nasty thickets, the priest decided to use a one iron. He played his tee shot and watched in amazement as the ball flew towards some trees, struck one, bounced over the thickets and a large bunker, onto the green, hit the flag pole and dropped straight in. Another hole-in-one! The angels were getting agitated and said to God, "Do something about this!" God said, "It's all in hand." Despite this, the priest continued to score a hole-in-one at each of the successive sixteen holes to give him a round of 18, an all time record. At this, the chief angel lost his temper. "You said you'd punish this priest and all he does is break the course record with a total score of 18!" "Yes!" said God, "But who can he tell?"

Communicating with others and having the opportunity to share our triumphs, failures, fears and ambitions is so important for fulfilment in life. If this was not so, why is solitary confinement used as a punishment? When we do not share with others, either through choice or through imposed circumstances, we can become frustrated and angry, or we may become depressed and reclusive. God designed us for relationship; otherwise He would only have made Adam!

Failures in relationships lead to great sorrow, stress, anger, and in some cases, loss of life through murder or suicide. Because God designed us to be in relationships, I believe that we can only really live out our faith and beliefs effectively when we make our relationships a priority. For the Christian it is our relationship with God that is of paramount importance. This is the anchor which should hold us steady in this world, the foundation on which all our other relationships are built. A good relationship with God is a great start, but it is not the whole story; the Bible calls us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Luke 10: 27b). Therefore, it follows that unless I learn to love myself I have little chance of ever loving my neighbor. I believe that loving myself begins when I begin to see myself as God really sees me; valued, unconditionally loved and cherished for who I am (warts and all). For some of us, taking this onboard may require considerable effort, even adjustment or a change of our culture.

If we are honest, many of us find it hard to love ourselves. Sadly, this is often the fruit of our upbringing, or of erroneous teaching. We have grown up meeting the expectations of others, having to respond to demands like, “Do this or you won’t get the reward” or “Aim for the top or you’ve failed.” Others may have been severely punished, either physically or psychologically (emotionally), by family, friends and/or church for attitudes or behavior which ‘doesn’t fit in to their expectations’. So, if someone says or does something that either consciously or subconsciously reminds us of these past events, we are likely to respond more negatively than when something is said that reminds us of happier experiences. Therefore, it is not surprising that a negative response can be triggered in us by what someone else says. In such a situation, we may feel uneasy or threatened because we no longer feel in control, or we are suddenly back in the classroom being made to look stupid in front of our friends. These types of response arise through insecurity and are more common in people who have grown up with a lot of discipline, but little love, support or encouragement. Since there is this inextricable link between our emotions and our actions, we should not be too surprised if we don’t always handle other people very well!

What Can Go Wrong?

In short, a great deal! Imagine two people interacting, both with past hurts which have not been dealt with. As we have seen already, it may only take one word to trigger a bad response in the other. If we now expand this to a community of

people, such as in a church, we can begin to see the potential for problems. The Bible describes God's church as 'living stones' (all different) and not 'living bricks' (all the same). God brings together people from all backgrounds and walks of life to form His church. This is rather like a craftsman who builds a dry stone wall. He does not use cement or mortar to hold it together. Instead, he chooses specific stones to fit together securely. Sometimes, he will chip a bit off here and there, or re-shape the stones so that they fit together as he wants. In the same way, God builds His church from an odd selection of people, some of whom actively dislike each other! The difference is that in the church the Holy Spirit binds us and holds us together.

However, because we all carry baggage and insecurities, there is opportunity for any of our relationships to go wrong. We find it easy to judge each other based on our own experiences. We also tend to hold grudges and rank people's importance based on their status, position, title, appearance; even how good we think they are. This is dangerous! God Himself tells us in the Bible that 'Everyone has sinned and is far away from God's saving presence' (Romans 3: 23). We are all in the same position; we fall short of God's standards. We feel inadequate, insecure or the need to control a situation or person, and these often drive the decisions we make. Perhaps we exercise power in order to get what we want, rather than what is best for the other person. We may lose the ability to act in a way that is best for the other person, because the outcome may threaten us. What starts out as a well-meaning relationship becomes distorted as we subtly begin to work for our own advantage. In short, it becomes abusive. We not only damage others, but often ourselves as well.

We may try to hide these insecurities by 'wearing masks' to project an image of being in control, decisive, happy, without problems or some other pretence. Many of us would feel far more secure if we lived in a world without problems, especially those for which we have no easy solutions, or no solutions at all. For some reason we feel threatened if we have to admit that we've not succeeded or that we don't know an answer. Sadly, there are whole church communities that have grown on these foundations. God is always victorious, waging war against the enemy and marching on. There are never any real problems and even if there are, they are seen as 'trials sent by the enemy' to be overcome or simply denied. There is often a 'spiritual elite' in the community who somehow know some special secrets of God's Kingdom and His ways. God may be presented as so

high and mighty that he has neither the time nor the patience for anyone who is unable to maintain His standards. He is unwittingly presented as a perfectionist who condemns sin and by default, condemns us. This is a severely distorted picture of God! However, people like these are not new; they were around at the time of the first prophets and were called 'Gnostics'. They were also severely criticised for their elitist mentality and for the barriers they put in the way of 'non-members' trying to find God for themselves. Other people become very heavenly minded and spiritual, denying the reality of what is happening. They are of little earthly use. I personally find that the most worrying people are those who claim to be in a close relationship with God, yet continue to resent others and act in ways that betray their words. This too is a form of denial. The Bible tells us that it is impossible to love God and hate our neighbor.

Sometimes we end-up betraying a relationship that we have developed because we can no longer handle it. We 'dive in' and take on a problem which, all too quickly, is beyond what we can handle. Even then we may try to resolve the issues on our own, when we should be involving someone else who can handle them. When we 'fail' we drop the person and run! Rather than being as wise as serpents and gentle as doves, we end up dancing like a butterfly and stinging like a bee! Our victim invariably ends-up broken, betrayed and unable to trust again.

I think one of the saddest mistakes we make is when we feel obliged to take the 'moral high ground'; we pass judgment on the other person because they've fallen short of God's standards. We do well to remember that we've all fallen short of God's standards.

How Can We Put Things Right?

I believe it's time to present a true picture of God to people inside the church and to those outside. The Bible shows us that God loved us so much that He came to earth as a man. He is accessible to all and by all, not just a 'select few'. We don't need to earn our salvation; it is a free gift from God. But as with any gift, we need to receive it in order to gain the benefits. Once we have received this gift we can really begin to show, with God's help, what relationship is about. We need to pray for God's wisdom, discernment and humility so that we can make the right decisions, even if one of those decisions is to do nothing. Our ability to do this will increase as we take God seriously and allow Him to influence our thinking and attitudes more and more. However, it is a process and if we wait

until we've got everything right, we'll be dead! Here are a few practical suggestions for the 'here and now':

***Be Rooted in Reality:*** Above all, be real! People, especially those from outside the church, quickly recognize deceit. Don't be afraid to admit your shortcomings. If you have grown up with a host of insecurities, seek professional help to enable you identify them, tackle them and move on. As you deal with these insecurities you will find it easier to be more open and to trust people. Always exercise discernment as you consider in whom you will confide; with reality comes vulnerability.

***Be Fired by Forgiveness:*** Thankfully, God does not judge us in the same way that we judge other people. His view of us depends neither on us, nor how we feel about ourselves. It depends on what He has done for us through the death of Jesus. 'For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift, so that no one can boast about it' (Eph 2: 8 & 9). This is the starting point. We can only do what we do because of what God has already done. God's major work has been, and still is, forgiveness. The Bible tells us that God chooses to remember our sins no more (he does not 'forget them') and separates them from us 'as far as the east is from the west'. In my estimation you can't get much more complete than that! We, as Christ's followers, are called to do the same. So, our forgiveness is to be more than a few cheap words. We need to avoid hypocrisy. Our actions must support, not betray our words. We must learn to forgive all sins, even the 'bad' ones, so that the 'offenders' are released from bondage and allowed to move forward in their own life. Interestingly, forgiveness releases us to move forward too.

Sometimes our forward movement is blocked because we cannot forgive ourselves. If we don't grasp this fact we will find that it is impossible for us to forgive others. The action that we are unable to forgive will always be 'lingering in the background', ready to interfere with, or attack our relationships at their weakest points. Our relationships will be conditional at best and we will not be able to enjoy a good, true friendship with others. A friend of mine once said that forgiveness is difficult, yet a privilege because, in order to have something to forgive, we had to be close to the other person in the first place. If we had no relationship there would be no opportunity for forgiveness.

But, forgiveness is hard and it is not always a simple ‘one-off’ action. Sometimes we need to keep on forgiving through an act of will. I was told the story of a Christian lady who always shared the following with her friends: ‘Take forgiveness three-times-a-day; once with each meal’. She also practiced it.

***Be Tempered with Humility:*** Arrogance is extremely destructive for relationships. One party is always in a ‘superior’ position, and there is danger that the relationship will turn into a dictatorship and become abusive. However, if I were humble, according to the main Greek word used in the New Testament, I would be someone who naturally acknowledged that all of my natural gifts, etc., come from God. At the same time, I would acknowledge that I am an object of His undeserved, redeeming love. I would no longer think of myself as ‘my own’, but God's in Christ. I would know that it is impossible to exalt myself, because I have nothing of myself. Therefore, the humble mind is at the root of all other graces and virtues. There can be no real love without humility. Humility is also described in the Bible as a ‘Fruit of the Spirit’. Fruit takes time to grow; it is not instant (unless it is synthetic or plastic!). So, we shouldn't be surprised if humility is hard to practice. However, these are not excuses to give us good reason to avoid trying. The Holy Spirit will change us as we allow Him. If we are not willing, He will not force change upon us. So, we should first ask whether this is a characteristic we want to display. If the answer is ‘yes’, we should ask God to change us, understanding that it may take some time. Imagine how different our relationships would be if we all exercised true humility!

***Nurture in Love:*** Perhaps the most abused statements in Christendom are, “ I say this in love” and “ I do this in love.” If they end the phrase with ‘sister’ or ‘brother’ you know that you're really in trouble! All too often we use these phrases to justify hurtful words or attitudes, as if by saying the words we can justify what follows. If this is how we are thinking, we need to examine what the Bible really says: ‘I may be able to speak the languages of human beings and even of angels, but if I have no love, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell. I may have the gift of inspired preaching; I may have all knowledge and understand all secrets; I may have all the faith needed to move mountains, but if I have no love, I am nothing. I may give away everything I have, and even give up my body to be burned, but if I have no love, this does me no good. Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs;

love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail. Love is eternal.’ (1 Corinthians 13: 1-8a). When true love inspires and covers our words and our actions, we are able to see beyond the immediate problem to the hurting person behind it. We are no longer keen to judge, but begin to look for the best way forward towards reconciliation and healing, rather than punishment and division. In short, our relationships flourish. However, operating in love is not always easy, especially when the situation is difficult and emotions are involved. We must make sure that the love we try to practice is the love expressed in Scripture and not our own, corrupted and often conceited version in a thin disguise.

***Protect Through Integrity:*** The dictionary defines integrity as ‘moral soundness’. This is much bigger than just ‘right’ or ‘wrong’; it seems to include a person’s character, trustworthiness and reliability. Trust and honesty are both keys to our integrity. As we also deal with our insecurities and allow our masks to drop, we will be more open in our relationships, and there will be a much greater sense of confidence and security by both parties. Relationships are an essential part of healing in people who have a poor self-image, or who have no one else to talk to. However, they can demand a lot of time and be costly, something which needs to be carefully weighed before we ‘get stuck in’. Integrity allows us to acknowledge that we can’t help; we are secure enough to refer them to someone who can. This is especially important in a ‘counseling’ type set-up. My personal view is that counseling is best left to professionally trained people rather than compassionate volunteers. The skills required are often beyond the scope of the layman although, in some cases, God can equip an untrained individual with supernatural gifts to release and restore. However, I also believe that this is the exception rather than the rule. Being an enthusiast does not us a good counselor make!

There have been many people through history that have said one thing and then done another. The story of ‘The Boy Who Cried Wolf’ bears testimony to this. A boy was sent to look after some sheep and told that if he got into trouble with wild animals, he was to shout, “Wolf!” at the top of his voice. The villagers would hear his cries, know that he was in danger and come to help. The problem was that the boy cried wolf twice when there was no danger. Each time, the village people came to help only to find that he’d been tricking them. When a wolf really did attack the sheep and the boy cried, “Wolf!” he was ignored

because he could not be trusted. There are many people today, even in our churches, who do the same. What they say or promise is not matched by their actions. In short, they lack integrity. Friendship and relationship are not nouns: objects; they are verbs: 'action' or 'doing' words. Our integrity is proven as our actions reflect our words; we do as we say.

As we demonstrate integrity and honesty in our relationships, there will be more trust in return. The increased consistency in our dealings with others will enable them to see that we care for 'who' they are, rather than what they can do. No longer will an individual's position in our church or community influence the quality of love and concern that we show.

### In Summary

When we get our relationships right, we develop deep, lasting friendships in which there is both security and vulnerability. These attributes are mutually shared, without fear. Such relationships will last through the storms and disagreements which are bound to come our way. Nothing can surpass knowing that, when you need a friend, there is someone you can trust with your life story without finding it in the headlines or on the lips of other friends the next day. When we practice this type of relationship we will allow others to experience God in their lives and grow at their own pace. We will also start to present a more accurate picture of God to our church communities and beyond, through our actions and our words. We will demonstrate God's love practically and, I believe, powerfully. Those who come into our churches looking for the Almighty God will see Him at work and be drawn towards Him; they may even be drawn into our churches.

We would do well to remember and act upon the words of Saint Francis of Assisi: *“Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words.”*

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