

Change *and* Your Relationships

A Mess Worth Making

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[STUDY GUIDE WITH LEADER'S NOTES]

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Change and Your Relationships was crafted by the editing skills of Michael Breece. Thank you, Michael, for your solid work and your contribution to this new resource. We hope many people will be helped as they work through these lessons and apply them to their lives and relationships.

We would also like to thank New Growth Press for their investment in this resource. Thanks to Mark and Karen Teears for your ongoing efforts to take CCEF material and create resources that will equip the body of Christ to grow in grace. We are thankful for our partnership in the gospel. Thanks to Barbara Juliani for her persistent administrative oversight to see this project to completion.

Finally, thanks to all the individuals and churches who have shared their stories of how the book *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making* has helped them grow in wisdom in their personal relationships. We hope that this user-friendly resource will help many more as they walk through these lessons. May they find the grace of Christ richly and practically applied to their own lives as they study this material with others.

A Word of Welcome

Welcome to *Change and Your Relationships*. We are thankful for your desire to grow in this very crucial area of your life. When you think about it, we all spend a majority of our waking hours interacting with people. These interactions, both casual and more personal, have the potential to shape us—either for good or ill. Relationships are always a two-way street!

As you work through *Change and Your Relationships*, it is our hope that you will learn to think more clearly about the primary purpose of relationships and how important they are in conforming us to the likeness of Christ. This key idea of being conformed to Christ can and should radically reorient the way we think about our friendships, marriages, relationships with our children and parents, our neighbors, coworkers, and everyone in between.

Perhaps a few words would be helpful about this course you are about to take:

1. This resource is connected to several other CCEF resources, including *How People Change* and *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands* (both of these are books and small-group resources such as this one). *Change and Your Relationships* places the important process of change within its primary context: our relationships! While this may seem obvious, one danger that exists when we talk about personal change is turning inward and forgetting that personal change occurs in the bigger context of our relationships, so all personal change must also affect the way we treat others. This emphasis on living out gospel change in our relationships makes this resource a helpful complement to the other resources from CCEF that focus on personal change.

2. This resource is intended to point you toward a radically biblical understanding of relationships. For many, including these authors, relationships can easily become conduits for personal satisfaction and self-centered happiness. While God does want us to find great joy in our friendships, he never states that as the end goal or primary motivation. Rather, he places his purpose for us at the center: becoming more like Christ. The more God’s agenda for relationships lives at the center of our motivation for pursuing relationships, the more likely it is that we will have good relationships, but it does not necessarily guarantee that all of our friendships will be fulfilling. Instead of looking to your relationships to fulfill you, it is our hope that this curriculum will enable you to see the bigger picture of what God is accomplishing in and through your relationships—one that is much grander than your personal happiness. This resource might disappoint those who are looking for several easy steps to more effective and happy friendships, but it will be a great encouragement to those who learn to set their sights on the sanctifying work of the Father, Son, and Spirit.
3. Our greatest hope is that this resource will provide a way for individuals, marriages, and entire churches to be transformed into communities that are growing in bringing together seemingly contradictory things like candor and compassion, humility and courage, patience and godly conflict. “Godly conflict” may sound like a strange thing to hope for—that is, unless you have seen too much ungodly conflict! It is only through God’s Spirit powerfully working in the lives of many individuals that these kinds of communities can emerge. The authors of this material claim no special ability, personally, when it comes to these things—certainly not because we write about it! But we do stand with all who will study this material and say with confidence that progress and movement can and will be made as we embed our lives more deeply in the gospel of grace that is ours in Christ. Our Trinitarian God is one God and three persons. There is unity and diversity. He is a social God, and we are a relational people. It is by his design that this *is* true, and it is only by his grace that it *will be* true of us.

Thank you for your interest in the ministry of CCEF and for using this resource that we trust will help you and many others. It is our privilege to partner with you and to have a small or significant role in your growth in grace. After all, “So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building” (1 Cor. 3:7–9).

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Relationships and the Nature of God

Central Point and Application

Central Point: Because God himself is a community, he created and intends for us to live in community so that we may be a reflection of him.

Personal Application: I need to be properly involved in relationships.

Relational Application: I need to be in close relationship to God because my relationships with others will be satisfying only if I am in relationship with God.

THE BIG QUESTION

Do you see and treat relationships as God intends for you?

Opening Activity

For five minutes, brainstorm any words that come to mind when you hear the word *relationships*.

Relationships can be messy. Having to deal with flawed people in a broken world can make one wonder if some relationships are even worth it. Have you felt this way? Have you ever avoided a neighbor or a co-worker? Ever choose to just swallow how you really feel because the work involved, if you really opened up, doesn't seem worth it?

The difficulty of relationships can lead to families sharing the same space without sharing meaningful contact, church meetings becoming a formality with no attempt to share in the lives of others, and neighbors living side by side without knowing anything significant about one another. Is this a valid way to live? Is it OK to keep to ourselves so that we don't get hurt or don't hurt someone else? What's wrong with playing it safe?

Oddly enough, we can live with a tension between self-protective isolation and the desire for meaningful relationships. We can, on one hand, avoid the discomfort often created by relationships but, at the same time, know that we are less than human when we are alone. Every relational decision we make tends to move toward either isolation or immersion, and sometimes we may find ourselves at an extreme end of this continuum; we are tempted to make relationships either less or more than they were intended to be.

“I want to be safe” \longleftrightarrow “I need you in order to live”
(isolation) (immersion)

1. Which side of the continuum do you tend to move toward? Why?

Relational Profiles

Because we tend toward one of these characteristics—immersion or isolation—our relationships tend to fit one of three profiles:

1. **The Frustrated Relationship:** In this relationship, one person moves toward isolation and the other moves toward immersion. One dreams of being safe; the other dreams of being close and intimate.

- a. How would the perfect vacation look to each of these two types of people?

- b. How might it feel to live in this type of relationship?

2. **The Enmeshed Relationship:** Here both people move toward immersion. Both parties are relationally dependent on the other.

- a. How would the perfect vacation look to each of these two types of people?

b. How might it feel to live in this type of relationship?

3. The Isolated Relationship: In this relationship both persons move toward isolation. Both make relational decisions based on maintaining safety.

a. How would the perfect vacation look to each of these two types of people?

b. How might it feel to live in this type of relationship?

When things go wrong in relationships, the problem is often rooted in the heart and in the expectations we bring to the relationships, whether it is our expectation for safety or for dependency. This is why we need to seek *God's* expectations for our relationships: What purpose does God intend relationships to serve in our lives? As persons created in the image of God, what should our relationships look like? Without a biblical model to explain the place relationships should have in our lives, we will likely experience imbalance, confusion, conflicting desires, and general frustration.

Our Communal God

Since we are made in the image of God, we cannot talk about the nature of human relationships without first thinking about the nature of God.

Read John 17:20–26.

1. For whom and for what is Jesus praying in this part of his prayer?
2. What is the model for community Jesus sees for his people?
3. If God himself is a community, what does it mean to be human, made in God's likeness?

4. In Christ's prayer, what is one of the purposes for human community?

5. Why do we need Christ to be praying for us?

6. Christ not only prays for our unity with one another but that we would also have community with whom?

7. Is there anything else about this prayer and its background that shows God's deep commitment to creating true community?

8. Think about the stages of a person's life beginning from birth. What can you identify that shows we were designed to be in community with others?

Closing Activity

Look at the list of words brainstormed for the opening activity; identify any words that should be the focus of our thoughts about relationships. Are there any words you feel should be added?

1. Are there any relationships in your life, including perhaps your relationship with God, you need to correct your perspective on?

God designed us to be relational—it is our very nature, and it is one way in which we reflect the image of God. And *only* when we live in community do we fully reflect the likeness of God. Relationships are not optional! Because of sin, relationships can be messy, but they are not optional. Problems in relationships are often rooted in our selfish desires—when we seek to fulfill our own perceived wants and needs instead of seeking to please God. If there are problems in your relationships, the solution starts with God; the circle of human community is only healthy when it exists within the larger circle of community with God.

Central Point

1. We are less than human when we are alone.
2. We are tempted to make relationships more or less than they were intended to be.
3. God, the Trinity, is a community; as his creation we reflect this quality, and only when we live in community do we fully reflect the likeness of God.

Personal Application

1. I need to acknowledge that God desires me to be properly involved in relationships.
2. I need to identify whether I tend toward isolation or immersion.

3. I need to admit that good relationships with others flow from good communion with God.

Relational Application

1. I need to be in relationship with others, neither avoiding nor depending upon them.
2. I need to find balance between isolation and immersion.
3. I need to be, first and foremost, in relationship with God.

Make It Real

1. Who are people in your life (family, work, neighborhood, church, etc.) you feel you should be building better relationships with? What will it require for you to build and improve these relationships?

2. What are your expectations for your closest relationships?

3. If there are problems in your relationships, the solutions begin with God. Identify and write down any problems you have in your relationships.

4. Spend time with your spouse, close friends, small group, and so forth, and share your answers to the items below:

Share whether you feel there are any problems in your relationship. (Do not share what you feel the problems are, only whether you feel there are or are not problems.)

Rate the problems (without naming the problems) on a scale of 1 (minor) to 10 (major).

Identify whether you tend toward isolation or immersion.

Identify whether your relationship tends to be (1) frustrated, (2) enmeshed, or (3) isolated.

Identify, using a percentage, how much you relate to the other person(s) in a way intended to please God.

Share with one another what you learned about relationships in this lesson, including (1) how important are relationships to God? (2) from where does true human community grow?