

Loving God and Loving People

Only Christianity offers unconditional love, connection and a personal relationship with God, together with the promise and assurance of eternal life. Only Christianity offers connection with a world-wide community who are one, not through compliance with religious obligation, ethnicity, or class, but *solely* as a result of a miracle of new birth into God's family.

As Christians, we are called and privileged to live connected. Connected with God. Loving God. Connected with people. Loving people. 1 Corinthians 12 describes the Christian community as the "Body of Christ", individually and corporately connected to one another.

How different this is to the world around us. On one level, we live in the most connected generation in human history. The world is at our finger tips, and we love it, we know what is going on, information comes unfiltered (that can bring both positives and negatives), and we can find new friends everywhere, within seconds. We can connect to hundreds, or thousands, of people, but at a very superficial level: we hear about their coffee habits ("check out the photo"), their sleep patterns, their stream of consciousness, the names of their cats, dogs and goldfish (other photos), lots of quirky things. I like being connected; I often Skype my elder son in New Zealand. And the facilities that enable these connections are getting better all the time.

But there also seems to be a parallel universe, one that is disconnected. Many people live alienated, out of touch, lacking purpose and drive, out of relationship with God, family, friends and self, with no one turn to. The depictions of God and Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, painted by Michelangelo in 1512, is an apt depiction of this disconnect. Adam is shown stretching forth his hand in God's direction; this is the same Adam who was made for friendship with God, an intimate relationship, cut off by disobedience. We see the hand of God reaching towards Adam, and hear His calling "Adam, where are you?" For 500 years the painting of Adam has, so to speak, been trying to re-connect and establish a real relationship with God and with the world around him. The human story is fundamentally about men and women trying to re-establish connections. But without touching God we will never get there.

Connected: I like the theme of relationship. In some ways (I confess) this is because I am a bit of a relationship "junkie". I like being with people. Medically, I have B+ blood, which is rare, but I like the message, "Be positive". I feel somewhat uncomfortable when I am *not* connected with those around me. When my BlackBerry shows "Searching for network", I feel cut off. I do not like black spots. When I have been out of touch and suddenly hear a reassuring "blip" on my phone, I feel that I am "back again". When I travel and am obliged by airline regulations to put my device into "flight mode" and turn it off for take-off I can hardly wait to land (that is, as soon as the first wheel touches the tarmac) and re-connect. I like global roaming; it means that I am rarely out of touch with those I love. Yet, as a Christian, I know that I am never alone.

I am reminded of the entrepreneur Donald Trump, whose former wife organised a birthday party and invited 5000 of his “closest friends”. Imagine the scene. People queuing to connect with society’s “beautiful people”. The same ethos permeates television advertisements: visions of happiness, young people of the right size and shape run through fields of yellow flowers, listen to inspiring music, stroll with one another on beaches of white sand, dance and sing as the sun goes down on a perfect day where nothing has gone wrong, against a palm tree silhouette, in perfect weather, perfect temperature, surrounded by fawning admirers because they have the right connections. Truth be told, there is a yawning gap between such fantasy and real reality. There comes a point where the fantasy is shown up to be just that, a flight of the imagination designed to take people away from the quotidian, if only for a few seconds. It is easy to “like” a Facebook post, but this can be changed to “unlike” at the whim of the reader. It is easy to “friend” and “unfriend”; these are not sustainable or relationships.

Not everyone finds connection easy: “I said, ‘Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest. I would flee far away and stay in the desert. I would hurry to my place of shelter, far from the tempest and storm.’ “ (Psalm 55:6-8). These words were spoken by David, about to flee his palace during the insurrection led by his son Absalom, but they echo the way many people feel. Get me out of here, back to my private house, using my private means of transport (one person per car), to my private garden (out the back, away from the gaze of the neighbours), to my private laundry where I don’t mix my things with those of others, to self-service stores (including on-line) if I need something, the automated check-out line at the local supermarket where no one asks “How’s your day been?” I have a friend who sports a saucer-size badge that says, “Don’t tell me what kind of day to have”. Let me go home to my private room, where I can shut the door on the outside world, turn on the television and don my noise-reduction headphones. We seek more privacy and personal fulfilment than ever, yet feel more alienated when think we have it. This is not a new phenomenon. Some early Christians decided that the best way to get close to God was to be alone; St Antony (251-356) went out into the Egyptian desert to be alone with God; however, his followers never left him alone as they surrounded him watching him being by himself with God. Troglodyte monks in Qadisha Valley in Lebanon have lived in caves for generations. I have seen them (the current ones, at any rate). Tourists come to observe their solitude; their quiet spaces become quite crowded.

If you are going to grow as a Christian, you will need connection, with God and with the people of God, from both ends of the spectrum.

(i) Connected to God: We pursue relationship God because he pursued relationship with us. “In a desert land he found (Jacob), in a barren and howling waste. He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye” (Deuteronomy 32:10). Philippians 2:5-11 tells us graphically how Jesus came into our world, as one of us, to re-connect us with God. “We love because he first loved us.” (1 John 4:19) “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness” (Jeremiah 31:3). Nothing can separate us from His love (Romans 8:38, 39). You and I were made in God’s image, separated by sin but never out of His thoughts; he has drawn us back. Being Christians opens us up to new dimensions of relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (The Trinity is the epitome of loving relationship.)

There is no greater relationship than fellowship with God and with one another. “He sets the solitary in families” (Psalm 68:6). He appoints places for us to live (Acts 17). People are selfish, but Jesus Christ calls us out of our selfish orbit into personal relationship. In fact, the more we connect with Him the more effectively we will connect with one another, loving God and loving people. Make sure you have a daily connection with God, through regular Bible reading and meditation, prayer, practicing the presence of God, actively listening to His voice and obeying Him. If you need help doing this, ask the Holy Spirit; ask a Christian friend as well.

(li) Connected to the Christian family: I really like events in church life that celebrate the multicultural and inclusive nature of the Christian community. Our relationships as Christians are not institutional, denominational, or structural, but supernatural; they are miracles from God the Father, more real, more durable than any other relationship. They do not depend on our temperament, mood, status, or story, but because we belong to the same family.

Consider the first disciples; Jesus called them from all walks of life: Mathew and Simon the Zealot are good examples. Matthew was a tax collector, who served the Roman state; his profession was despised by the people because tax collectors were seen as toadies of the oppressors, who exploited others and enriched themselves at the expense of their Jewish brothers and sisters. Zealots (of whom Simon was one) were self-appointed assassins who worked as self-righteous urban religious terrorists targeting those who betrayed the Jewish nation. They especially hated tax collectors. So, Jesus calls Matthew and Simon and says, “Live together, love one another as I have loved you; let the world see God’s love through your mutual relationship”. Jesus turned all the conventions and prejudices upside down.

If you look at the New Testament carefully you will see the term “one another” come up all the time: love one another; put up with one another; forgive one another (we need that a lot); wash one another’s feet (or a contemporary expression of humble service); serve one another; honour one another; receive one another; warn one another; bear one another’s burdens; comfort one another; edify, or build up, one another; exhort, or encourage, one another (we all need encouragement; someone to pick us up and support us). You will find things about others that irk you, or challenge. “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” (Proverbs 27:17).

I have come to the conclusion that we will never grow as Christians outside of connection. On a recent camping trip I watched a fire we had built to cook our evening meal and keep us warm. The hottest part of the fire was where the embers mixed; those embers that fell out died quickly; we need to remain in close contact with one another if the fire in us is to keep burning strongly.

How can we love God whom we have not seen if do not love those we have seen? The Bible is uncompromising on this point. I have been in some very different types of churches and come to the crystal clear conviction that it is not our form, tradition, or name (which we often become attached to; sometimes defensively) that matter, but our personal relationship with Jesus Christ and His family.

The only way to grow and remain authentic as a Christian is in relationship. That can be hard work, test our resolve, stretch our patience; but there is no substitute. Sunday worship is important, and real, but it is not a substitute. Friends with Christians on Facebook can be generous, send nice messages, “Like” us and our posts, but our devices are not a substitute. Jesus did not post a message, but came in person; “We saw Him....” (1 John 1:1-4). For many people the only manifestation of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit they will ever see is you. Not because you are a Christian Super Hero or model (although we should all seek to mentor those who are younger or less experienced in their Christian lives) but because God chose to reveal Himself to the world through you and me and called us to relate to others in the same way. Ask yourself, “What is the life of Christ in this person?” Think about that. It can be transformative.

It is not about you: There is a great spiritual truth here: Christian growth, spiritual fulfilment, correction and fruit only come about through relationship. Your belief, faith, gifts, relationship with God and experience are not just about you, but God’s life and power both in you and through you for whole body of Christ. When you visit the sick, show hospitality and meet with one another, you are expressing your relationship with Christ to those around you. God has placed you in your relationships. Make them purposeful. Listen to the Holy Spirit, ask Him to make you blessing in their lives. Not in some mystical, New Age, hyper-spiritual way, but as a practical expression of Christian life. You never know whom you are going to impact. I recently reflected on the Gideons who visited my high school and gave me a New Testament; I read it for years, even while walking to and from school; I kept it in my top pocket. Several years later a young man came to see me; he told me that I had led him to Christ at an open air meeting in Queanbeyan, he was now in Bible College and involved in Christian ministry. You never know how your life is going to help another. Look out for one another, spend time together, be available to one another, and pray for one another.

Pursuing God, growth through *Connection*: Connecting is a dynamic part of our DNA as Christians. You can only pursue effective relationship if you are connected to the source. Most of society has the wrong focus: self-centredness. “ME” has become the default setting. If you try to live differently, in your own strength, to satisfy your preferences and priorities, you will fall on your face; you will default to the old ways. You need to plug into the power source. The only way get out of your comfort zone is to have the strength and fortitude to connect with those around you in a transformative way as Christians in an unbelieving society. Connect with Him first; otherwise the entire network will be dysfunctional. Jesus said that without Him we can do nothing (John 15:5). Good intentions and resolutions will never be enough; they just make an “idol” out of our abilities. God loves you He has the highest purpose for your life. He will give you direction and capacity as only He can.

Who, or what, are you connected to? Who, or what, is your source of power and meaning? Whom do you rely on for your purpose and direction?? Who, or what, has your attention and is driving you? You are called to connect with God and with people. Don’t switch off, don’t power down, log-off, or go into sleep mode. Allow the Holy Spirit to turn you back on, empower you and lead you to the next level.

The Way Home: Finally, maybe you don't feel in relationship at all. TIME magazine recently featured the story of Saroo Brierley, an Indian-born Australian businessman who was separated from his mother and found her after a separation of 25 years. His story generated international media attention. Saroo has written a book about his experiences, A Long Way Home, and it is being made into a movie. Here is the background. One day, as a small boy in India, Saroo accompanied his brother to a train station where he remained on the platform while his brother went in search of food. After dozing off for a few minutes, he woke up to see a train at the station. He boarded the nearest carriage, thinking that his brother was on the train; and disembarked 1,500 kilometres away in Kolkata (then Calcutta), where he became a ward of the state in an orphanage. He was eventually adopted by an Australian family and grew up in Tasmania, but he never forgot his birth family. For years he tried all possible means to re-connect, using the Internet, looking at images that might give him a clue as to here he came from. After a quarter of a century, he finally found the way home and re-discovered his mother and brother. Maybe you have been searching for the way home. God made you to know him, but you feel a long way off, without a clue as to how to get back. Jesus came into the world to bring you back to God, back to relationship with the One who created you and loves you. He will show you the way home.