

The background of the cover is white, adorned with various watercolor splatters in shades of green and yellow. Some splatters are large and vibrant, while others are small and delicate. The overall effect is artistic and textured.

relationships

A MESS WORTH MAKING

TIMOTHY S. LANE & PAUL DAVID TRIPP

Acclaim for *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making*

"I'm by nature a loner . . . until I couldn't do it any longer. Wish I had read this book when Jesus forced me into relationships. I would have had less wounds or, at least, would have understood the wounds, how I got them, gave them to others, and where I (and they) could go for healing. What a wonderful and helpful book! It will make a major difference in your life and the lives of everybody you love. Read this book and you will want to be my friend for recommending it to you."

Steve Brown, Author, professor at Reformed Seminary, Orlando, and teacher for the national radio program, *Key Life*

"Relationships *are* messy . . . but they don't have to remain that way. In their new book, *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making*, Lane and Tripp provide us with invaluable help for unraveling the complexities of relating to others. Avoiding trite and complicated techniques so common in other books, these gifted authors remind us that transforming our own hearts is the key to transforming our relationships."

Robert Jeffress, Pastor and author of *Second Chance, Second Act*

"Apart from loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, nothing matters more to God than how we love one another. So many of us settle for too little—for superficial, safe relationships in our marriages, our families and our churches. I am so glad that Paul and Tim have written a book to guide us into deeper, richer relationships. I pray we'll have the courage to follow their counsel."

Bob Lepine, Co-Host, *FamilyLife Today*

"Paul Tripp and Timothy Lane are right: Relationships *are* messy! But in their new book, Paul and Tim show readers how to clean up their old and neglected relationships to where they sparkle and shine like new. *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making* is perfect for anyone who's ever had a mother, a father, a husband, a wife, a friend, a neighbor, a dog, a cat. . . ."

Doug Herman, Author of *Time for a Pure Revolution* and founder of Pure Revolution Conferences & Resources

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www.newgrowthpress.com

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To our wives,
Barbara and Luella

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Acknowledgments

When someone writes a book, the reader's assumption is that the author is an expert on the subject. Let us say unequivocally that our readers should not make that assumption about us! This is especially true when one writes on relationships. There is nothing more complex and challenging in life. In the first chapter, we talk about our own struggle to love others well, including each other. We first wrote that section as a brief introduction. But upon reflection, we thought it should be in the body of the book. We did not want people to forget that we too are sinners, daily dependent on God's grace to do what we encourage others to do.

Yet the acknowledgment of struggle and failure should not overshadow the hopeful truth that in Christ relationships can be maintained and repaired. They can flourish! They can become deeper and more meaningful than they were before they were ruptured by sin. We hope that both aspects of relationships come through in this book. Relationships are messy; they are also what God uses to rescue us from ourselves. Through them, God shows us our inability to love others without first finding our strength in our relationship with the God who created and redeemed us.

In light of this, we want to thank the people who have taught us the most about our need for God's grace. First, thanks to the families in which we grew up, our parents and siblings who have taught us so much. Second, thanks to our wives and children, who continue to watch us struggle and grow as husbands and fathers. Third, we are grateful to the churches and ministries we have served; they have helped us apply what we write about. Fourth, we thank the staff and faculty of CCEF, who have challenged us and encouraged us along the way. And finally, thanks to the churches where we are currently involved. Growth in grace is certainly a community project!

Once again, we are very grateful for the editorial work of Sue Lutz and her staff. This book has been much improved by her keen oversight and skill. The editing process itself has been a place to grow in our relationships with one another. For that, we can all be thankful.

As you read this book, we hope you will see that we don't need new or sophisticated techniques to see relationships flourish. It all boils down to basic character qualities that can only be formed in the heart by the gospel. This is how relationships grow and communities form to reflect God's glory and grace. We hope this book will move you down that path in significant ways. Writing it has done that for us.

Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp

June 5, 2006

The Shortest and Most Important Chapter of This Book | 1

Writing a book is always a journey of unexpected turns. Try as you may to chart your course, you never wind up exactly where you've planned. This chapter is one of those unexpected turns. As we finished writing this book, we realized that we should explain to you *how* it was written. What you are about to read is a book on relationship that was written *in* relationship. When we coauthored *How People Change*, we divided up the chapters and wrote separately. However, we decided to write this book together. We worked at Tim's house—Tim at the computer and Paul pacing back and forth across the room. We discussed our way through sentences, paragraphs, pages, and chapters. When we finished, we both agreed that this process was one of the most unique and enjoyable ministry experiences of our lives.

What resulted from our collaboration is not just an examination, but an actual example of broken people in broken community experiencing the reconciling grace of God. We have written as flawed people in close relationship who have experienced God's grace in daily life and ministry. We have not written out of the wisdom of success, but out of the wisdom of striving. A brief history of our relationship will illustrate this point.

About five years ago, Paul was working at the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation leading the department for local church-based training. The faculty of CCEF came to see that this job was too big for one person and decided to hire a seasoned pastor to partner with Paul. It was decided that Tim was just the kind of man to fill this role. The two of us began our work with excitement and mutual appreciation. However, problems arose when we, as two leaders who had known each other only from a safe distance, began working together in the same room! It became apparent that, although we shared a vision, we had very different personalities and gifts. It didn't take long for sin, weakness, and failure to rear their ugly heads. Minor offenses and

major misunderstandings began to get in the way of our mutual appreciation—and the work God had brought us together to do.

This was a crucial moment. Would we give in to disillusionment and discouragement, or would we commit ourselves to do what we regularly teach others to do? We decided that our only choice was to trust Christ the way we ask others to, and give him an opportunity to work *in* us so that he could work *through* us.

We are quick to say that we are not heroes of relationship. In fact, the opposite is true. Our aim is that this book will help you look through the shattered glass of our sin to see the glory of a Redeemer who is ever-present, always at work to rescue and change us. We want you to know that the men who wrote this book are just like you in both struggle and potential. We are sinners with the capacity to do great damage to ourselves and our relationships. We need God's grace to save us from ourselves. But we are also God's children, which means that we have great hope and potential—not hope that rests on our gifts, experience, or track record, but hope that rests in Christ. Because he is in us and we are in him, it is right to say that our potential *is* Christ!

We are well aware that we are smack-dab in the middle of God's process of sanctification. And because this is true, we will struggle again. Selfishness, pride, an unforgiving spirit, irritation, and impatience will certainly return. But we are neither afraid nor hopeless. We have experienced what God can do in the middle of the mess. This side of heaven, relationships and ministry are always shaped in the forge of struggle. None of us get to relate to perfect people or avoid the effects of the fall on the work we attempt to do. Yet, amid the mess, we find the highest joys of relationship and ministry.

We want to affirm to you that what you will find in this book is true. We know it is true not only because we have examined the book's theology and found it to be orthodox, but also because we have tested the book's God and found him to be faithful again and again. What the book has to offer is not the wisdom of two men who have arrived, but the worship of two needy men who want to point you to the unfathomable and accessible resources of the God who has been with us and is with you. He is near, with, and in you. This means there is hope for you, even in relationships that leave you confused and disappointed.

May you experience his grace daily, as we do.

Why Bother? | 2

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from the words of my groaning?*

*O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, and am not silent.*

Psalm 22:1-2

“I had such high hopes for our friendship. What went wrong? I thought I had finally found someone I could trust.”

“I can’t believe you are questioning my integrity after all the things I have done for you. It’s not like I am the only one who has failed in this relationship. You’ve hurt me, too.”

“You see, this is what you always do. I come to you and you turn the table on me. You are so good at making other people feel guilty for your failures! The problem with you is that you are much better at recognizing other people’s faults than you are your own. You don’t have a clue how much you have hurt me. You betrayed our trust when you told them what I said.”

**It is clear to you that no relationship
ever delivers what you dreamt it could.
Your fantasy collides with reality,
and reality bites!**

“You never told me I couldn’t say anything about what you shared with me. I didn’t know you would be so sensitive about it.”

“I thought you cared enough for me that I wouldn’t have to tell you not to talk to someone else! I thought our relationship was as important to you as it is to me.”

“You see, that’s the problem. You always act like you are more committed to this relationship than I am. So you watch me like a hawk, just waiting to pounce on any hint of failure.”

“Why does it always go here? We can’t even have a discussion about the weather without it ending in accusation.”

Sound Familiar?

As you eavesdropped on this conversation, did it sound familiar? You may not have used the same words, but you have probably felt the same way at some time in your life. These words may remind you of a specific relationship and a particular person. You’ve felt the sting of hurt and disappointment. You know that you have disappointed others too. It is clear to you that no relationship ever delivers what you dreamt it could. Your fantasy collides with reality, and reality bites!



“I can’t believe you would do such a thing for me! It is so encouraging that I did not have to go through this alone.”

“I’ve gotten as much as I have given. Your friendship has been a constant source of encouragement.”

“Yeah. You know, when we first met, neither one of us had any idea what God would do through our friendship.”

“What I appreciate is that while it hasn’t always been easy, you have been committed to dealing with our problems and disagreements in a constructive way. Your honesty is refreshing.”

“And you’ve modeled patience and a willingness to listen, even when it was hard. God has used you in my life to help me speak honestly, but in a more godly manner.”

“I suspect it won’t always be this comfortable, but it is encouraging that we are committed to dealing with our future problems this way.”

Familiar Words?

You may not have used these exact words either, but we hope you can identify with this experience of mutual friendship and encouragement. God has put people in your life and placed you in theirs. When you look back, you can see their imprint on your character. There have been times when you were very glad not to go through life alone. You have been greeted by patience and grace, even after a failure. And you too have been willing to forgive and have experienced the blessing of doing so.

Two Worlds

Elise was so thankful for the circle of friends God had given her. The first couple of months had been extremely lonely after she moved out of state to take a new job. Before moving she had never imagined how much she would miss her church and friends. The one thing that kept her going was Kurt’s commitment to follow her, so they could continue their relationship and get married in the not-too-distant future.

It wasn’t long before Elise began to connect with people at a good church. She had become particularly close to Amanda and Marta. She was thankful that God had brought them into her life. Things seemed like they were going well: she had friends nearby and Kurt would be with her soon.

Then things began to change. First, Kurt's daily text messages weren't daily anymore. Then the weekly emails stopped arriving. Elise began to panic when she waited for the Friday night phone call (the highlight of her week) and it never came. She called Kurt on Saturday to ask him if everything was okay. He said he was fine, but he clearly wasn't. The next week was marked by even less contact—just a couple of short text messages. Then on Monday a lengthy email came, but not the one Elise wanted. Kurt wrote that he had reconsidered. He wasn't going to move to where she was, and he thought they should just "move on." Elise was crushed. Not only had Kurt ended their relationship, but he had done it by email!

**Some of our deepest and most painful
hurts have been in relationships.
There are times when we wish
we could live alone and other times
when we are glad we don't.**

For the next several days, Elise tried to surround herself with friends since all she did was cry when she was alone. Their love and support kept her going. On one side, Amanda and Marta had been unbelievably kind and understanding. But on the other, Kurt had left her feeling betrayed. She didn't think she would ever get over it. She wondered whether relationships were worth the risk of this kind of pain.

We all live in these two worlds in some way. Some of our deepest joys and most painful hurts have been in relationships. There are times we wish we could live alone and other times we are glad we don't. What is certain is that we all have been shaped significantly by relationships that are full of both sorrow and joy.

Take a moment to reflect on the relationships in your life. Think about the relationships in your family while you were growing up. What were the unspoken rules your family followed? How did you handle conflict? What was the typical method for solving problems? Were there regular patterns of forgiveness? Did you ever see forgiveness sought and granted? What were the normal ways you communicated? Who typically had the floor? Did you grow up in a quiet or loud family? What was conversation like around the dinner table? Were there certain taboo subjects or was

everything fair game? How was anger expressed? Was it handled in a positive way? In the busyness of family life, how much investment was made in keeping relationships healthy? Were people motivated positively or with threats and guilt? Was your home a place to relax, or did you feel like you were walking on eggshells? To what degree was serving one another modeled and encouraged within the family? What kind of relationship did your family have with the surrounding community?

Your answers to these basic questions can show you how your family shaped your views on relating to others. Have the values of your family become your values? Have the struggles of your family become your struggles? Our family of origin is just one of many influences on our view of relationships. You have not become who you are all by yourself, which is why relationships are so important. They are inescapable and powerfully influential. The difficulty is that sin and grace coexist in all of them. Sin gets in the way of what grace can do, while grace covers what sin causes. Our relationships vividly display this dynamic mixture of gold and dross.

Oh No! Not Another Book on Relationships!

Since your local bookstores are already crammed with books and magazines about relationships, why take the time to read this one? What can we offer that would interest both the most naïve and most jaded people? We want to highlight the unique lens God gives his children to look at their lives. This lens will help you make your way through the intersection of sin and grace in relationships. Without it, you will remain naïve or grow cynical. When you face problems, you will be left only with human wisdom and techniques that produce short-term solutions, but can't promise lasting personal and interpersonal change. The fatal flaw of human wisdom is that it promises that you can change your relationships without needing to change *yourself*. When that perspective rules, you end up settling for far less than what God desires for your life and your friendships. As Christian author C. S. Lewis observed,

Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.¹

In our human wisdom, we would settle for relational détente, but God wants to bring us to the end of ourselves so that we would see our need for a relationship with him as well as with others. Every painful thing we experience in relationships is meant to remind us of our need for him. And every good thing we experience is meant to be a metaphor of what we can only find in him. To quote C. S. Lewis again, this primary vertical relationship is foundational to everything the Bible says about relationships.

When I have learnt to love God better than my earthly dearest, I shall love my earthly dearest better than I do now. In so far as I learn to love my earthly dearest at the expense of God and *instead* of God, I shall be moving towards the state in which I shall not love my earthly dearest at all. When first things are put first, second things are not suppressed but increased.²

It's probably clear that what Lewis is describing is not always evident in your life. It's not always evident in ours either. There are many indicators that reveal our tendency to reverse the order of things and put second things first. This is why we struggle with:

Letting go of a moment of hurt
Getting angry at the way our teenagers complicate our lives
Becoming defensive when challenged
Avoiding conflict out of fear
Being too political at work
Being resigned to broken relationships that could be healed
Gossiping about people
Lying out of fear of what others will think
Compromising our convictions to win others' approval
Pursuing comfortable relationships and avoiding difficult ones
Doubting God when our relationships are messy
Envy other people's friendships
Controlling relationships out of a desire for security
Blowing up at people when our agendas are trampled
Living in bitter isolation in the face of disappointment

That is why the topic of this book is so important. All of us need a clearer sense of what it means to put first things first and how Jesus enables us to do that. We also need to understand what practical changes are needed to create a new agenda for our relationships and what concrete steps we need to take as we seek to please God.

**Every painful thing we experience
in relationships is meant to remind us
of our need for God.**

A Biblical Lens on Relationships

Because this topic is so comprehensive and has been written on extensively, we want to start with eight biblical facts that summarize the way God wants us to think about our relationships. These facts will shape the way we approach everything in this book. They won't be specifically discussed in every chapter, but they are the foundation for our model of healthy, godly relationships.

You were made for relationships

This fact takes us back to the beginning. It asks the basic questions, "Who are we, and how important are our relationships?" In Genesis 2:18, God says that it is not good for man to be "alone." This statement has more to do with God's design for humanity than Adam's neediness. God created us to be relational beings because he is a social God. God lives in community within the Trinity as Father, Son, and Spirit, and he made humanity in his image. Genesis 2 is not speaking primarily to Adam's experience of being lonely as much as it is revealing his nature as the person God created him to be. Because God created a communal being—someone designed for relationships—creation is incomplete without a suitable companion. While Genesis 2 does address how male and female complement each other, the implications are broader to include all human relationships. In addition, the word "helper," used here for Eve, speaks throughout Scripture of the complementary nature of all human relationships. "Helper" is used primarily to describe a companion, not a fellow laborer.

The reason we know this is true is because the word "helper" is often used to describe God's relationship with his people. When used this way, it does not refer to God as our coworker or employee, but as our ultimate companion who brings things to the relationship that we could not bring ourselves (Psalms 27:9; 33:20-22). So God is not

addressing Adam's workload, but rather the fact that he is a social being who lacks a suitable companion. Just as human beings were created with a vertical need for God's companionship, they are also created for the horizontal companionship of other people.

We all look for strategies or techniques that will free us from the pain of relationships and the hard work good relationships demand.

Genesis 2 points to the fact that relationships are a core component of who God has designed you to be. Relationship is so important to God that he brings his creative work to a climax by creating Eve. Together she and Adam can experience community—vertical and horizontal—in the presence of the living God.

In some way, all relationships are difficult

While the first fact is exciting, we still have to deal with reality. All of our relationships are less than perfect. They require work if they are going to thrive. Quickly on the euphoric heels of Genesis 2 comes Genesis 3, where the entrance of sin brings frustration and confusion into relationships. In Genesis 3, man and woman engage in accusation and slander. Genesis 4 gets even worse, with a man murdering his own brother.

While many of us have not committed murder, we still live on the continuum between murder, accusation, and blame. No wonder our relationships are so messy! Our struggle with sin is constantly revealed in them. If you want to enjoy any progress or blessing in your relationships, it will require you to admit your sin humbly and commit yourself to the work they require.

Each of us is tempted to make relationships the end rather than the means

When we reflect on Genesis 1–3, it becomes clear that the primary relationship Adam and Eve were intended to enjoy was their relationship with God. This vertical communion with God would provide the foundation for the horizontal community they were to have with each other. Everything God made pointed Adam and Eve to the primacy of their relationship with him. All of creation was to function as an arrow

pointing to God. But in our sin we tend to treat people and creation as more important. The very things God created to reveal his glory become instead the glory we desire. This is where we see, with C. S. Lewis, that our desires are too weak, not too strong. We settle for the satisfaction of human relationships when they were meant to point us to the perfect relational satisfaction found only with God. The irony is that when we reverse the order and elevate creation above Creator, we destroy the relationships God intended—and would have enabled—us to enjoy.

There are no secrets that guarantee problem-free relationships

We all look for strategies or techniques that will free us from the pain of relationships and the hard work good relationships demand. We hope that better planning, more effective communication, clear role definitions, conflict resolution strategies, gender studies, and personality typing—to name just a few—will make the difference. There may be value in these things, but if they were all we needed, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection would be unnecessary or, at best, redundant.

Skills and techniques appeal to us because they promise that relational problems can be fixed by tweaking our behavior without altering the bent of our hearts. But the Bible says something very different. It says that Christ is the only real hope for relationships because only he can dig deep enough to address the core motivations and desires of our hearts.

At some point you will wonder whether relationships are worth it

At some point each of us will become discouraged and disappointed with a relationship. The health and maturity of a relationship are not measured by an absence of problems, but by the way the inevitable problems are handled. From birth to death, we are sinners living with other sinners. A good relationship involves honestly identifying the sin patterns that tend to trouble it. It also involves being humble and willing to guard yourself and the other person from these sin patterns. Because human conflict is the result of the spiritual battles in our hearts, wise relationships always seek to be aware of that deeper struggle. Even in times of peace, you must be vigilant regarding the way your relationships can be hijacked by the underlying desires of your hearts, which are subtly and constantly shifting.

How do you deal with relational disappointments? Do you blame, deny, run away, avoid, threaten, and manipulate? Or do you speak the truth, exhibit patience, approach people gently, ask for and grant forgiveness,

overlook minor offenses, encourage and honor others? Let's admit that these questions touch us where we live from day to day. True Christian maturity does not get any more practical and concrete!

God keeps us in messy relationships for his redemptive purpose

This sixth fact reminds us that the very thing we would naturally seek to avoid is what God has chosen to use to make us more like him! Have you ever wondered why God doesn't just make your relationships better overnight? We often think that if God really cared for us, he would make our relationships easier. In reality, a difficult relationship is a mark of his love and care. We would prefer that God would just change the relationship, but he won't be content until the relationship changes *us* too. This is how God created relationships to function.

**Have you ever wondered why
God doesn't just make your
relationships better overnight?**

What happens in the messiness of relationships is that our hearts are revealed, our weaknesses are exposed, and we start coming to the end of ourselves. Only when this happens do we reach out for the help God alone can provide. Weak and needy people finding their hope in Christ's grace are what mark a mature relationship. The most dangerous aspect of your relationships is not your weakness, but your delusions of strength. Self-reliance is almost always a component of a bad relationship. While we would like to avoid the mess and enjoy deep and intimate community, God says that it is in the very process of working through the mess that intimacy is found. Which relationships are most meaningful to you? Most likely they are the ones that involved working through difficulty and hardship.

***The fact that our relationships work as well as they do
is a sure sign of grace***

One of the biggest impediments we face in relationships is our spiritual blindness. We frequently do not see our sin, nor do we see the many ways in which God protects us and others from it. God constantly protects us from ourselves by restraining our sin. We are a lot like Elisha's servant in 2 Kings 6:15-22. He was overwhelmed by the enemy army that surrounded him until God opened his eyes to see the far more formidable army of angels God had sent to protect him. Why was it the servant could see only

the enemies surrounding Israel, but not “the hills full of horses and chariots of fire” from the Lord? It was the spiritual blindness of unbelief.

How do you measure your potential in relationships? Do you measure the size of the problems or the magnitude of God’s presence in your midst? Considering our sin, it is amazing that people get along at all! Each night the evening news begins with a litany of murders, rapes, and robberies that suggests that our communities are very dangerous places. Yet it often fails to cite the thousands of good things people do to make those same communities livable. Our view of our relationships can be just as slanted. We tend to see sins, weaknesses, and failures, rather than the good things God is accomplishing. If you look for God in your relationships, you will always find things to be thankful for.

Scripture offers a clear hope for our relationships

Does the challenge and mess of relationships leave you discouraged? Does the biblical honesty about human community shock you? Are you feeling overwhelmed by the hard work relationships require? If so, you are ready for this last fact: The shattered relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at the cross provides the basis for our reconciliation. No other relationship ever suffered more than what Father, Son, and Holy Spirit endured when Jesus hung on the cross and cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Jesus was willing to be the rejected Son so that our families would know reconciliation. Jesus was willing to become the forsaken friend so that we could have loving friendships. Jesus was willing to be the rejected Lord so that we could live in loving submission to one another. Jesus was willing to be the forsaken brother so that we could have godly relationships. Jesus was willing to be the crucified King so that our communities would experience peace.

In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus brought reconciliation in two fundamental ways. Jesus reconciled us to God, which then becomes the foundation for the way he reconciles us to one another. As C. S. Lewis said, Christ restores first things so that second things are not suppressed but increased! When God reigns in our hearts, peace reigns in our relationships.

This work will only be complete in heaven, but there is much we can enjoy now. The New Testament offers hope that our relationships can be characterized by things like humility, gentleness, patience, edifying honesty, peace, forgiveness, compassion, and love. Isn’t it wonderful that God’s grace can make this possible, even for sinners in a fallen

world! This hope challenges whatever complacency and discouragement we might have about our relationships because there is always more growth, peace, and blessing that God's grace can bring, even here on earth. The hope of the gospel invites us to a holy dissatisfaction with all of our relationships, even—especially—those with few major problems.

Our Goal and Hope

As you read this book, please keep in mind that our goal is to be as honest as the Bible is about relationships. If we succeed, this book will map onto your experience. In addition to being honest, we hope to be as positive as the gospel is about the potential of relationships. This will give you the encouragement you need to tackle the rewarding but difficult work of redemptive relationships. If you wonder, *Why bother?* the answer is, "Because God did."

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1. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), 3-4.
 2. C. S. Lewis, *Letters of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), 248.