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“Whatever you
want me to do,
I’ll do for you.”

1 Samuel 20:4

ONE

Relationships: From Contract to Commitment to Covenant

If you stroll down the relationships aisle of your big-box bookstore, you will encounter about forty feet of advice. You can read books on finding a mate, being a friend, managing your family, healing after breaking up, and enhancing your marriage. Among the stories, facts, and promises, you may conclude that writers promote healthy relating along three broad guidelines we might call contract, commitment, and covenant. This threesome provides a lens to understand writers' values, assumptions, and spiritual worldview.

As already noted, contract writers promote the idea that relationships work best when we play our role, deliver responsibilities, and keep the ledger of costs and benefits about even. Commitment authors encourage us to stay long-term with a friend or spouse, invest in one another, and communicate well to create satisfaction and stability. Finally, covenant writers urge us to make joint decisions for the common good, connect regularly within wider community, and lean on God for guid-

ance and wisdom. Let's consider each approach as reflections of different virtues.

Contract Relationships

Contract relating begins with the basic idea that people value fairness and equity no matter the degree of relational intimacy. For example, when we go to the movies, we expect the stranger sitting behind us not to kick our seat or chew popcorn obnoxiously. When we meet parents at our children's school, we expect them not to intrude on our world unless invited and to benefit us by cooperating on school events. When looking for someone to date, we are drawn most to people who match us in looks, income, and prestige. Even after signing up for marriage, we expect our spouse to share the housework, meet our needs, and play fair.[1]

When our relationships give us what we think we deserve, life is good. In fact, "good deal" contracts provide stability, satisfaction, comfort, and intimacy (both social and sexual).[2] But when we feel we are getting a raw deal or an imbalanced payoff, we will likely feel cheated, and this may lead to anger and resentment. Not getting our due leads to instability and dissatisfaction, and often death of the relationship. In cases where we experience a much better deal than we expected, we are prone to hang with it but feel guilty too. Benefitting too much may lead us to question if we are worth it or if our partner will stay with us into the future.

Contract thinking stems in part from valuing happiness and believing we are entitled to it. In short, contract relating is about me. In keeping with this thinking, the self-help industry abounds with the promise that personal happiness is attainable if we perform certain steps or say magical words. Doing so will successfully attract, secure, or fix the people and relation-

Contract relationships are . . .

Caught up in keeping things even and fair.

Contract relationships are . . .

Less concerned with the well-being of friend or spouse; they focus on oneself.

ships in our life, or so the thinking goes. Who has not read in the grocery line tabloid titles on how to please your man, how to get over a girl, how to be a BFF, or how to affair-proof a marriage? So fairness is the primary virtue in contract relating, and fairness is supposed to deliver personal happiness, the trumped-up American ideal.

Contract relating also plays into the romance myth that out there somewhere a single person awaits to bring us fulfillment. We often refer to this person as "The One." The catch is locating him or her. The dramatic upswing of matchmaking Internet sites indicates our faith in computer algorithms to find us compatible matches and chat opportunities to break the ice and bring us together. And in some regards this works. For example, couples who meet through eHarmony are about twice as likely to report their marriages as "extremely happy" compared to their peers, and the vast majority rate their marriages above the national average on a scale of marriage satisfaction.[3] Compatibility yields happiness. Who can disagree with that?

Contract relating breaks down when living equitably becomes the goal. That is, at least in romance, couples who exercise a this-for-that ledger to measure their partner's performance or their own personal happiness tend to struggle.[4] We may hope our companions meet our needs and keep us content, but relying on their efforts, and not our own, puts the burden on them. And we have to ask: What if they are expecting the same of us?

Committed Relationships

Unlike contract thinkers, commitment gurus underscore that relationships require more effort and skill on our part, and less on our partner or friend. Commitment books say that relationships succeed when we willfully intend to stick around for the long run.[5] If you are employing commitment thinking, you don't look to your friend or partner for your happiness; it is your responsibility to create happiness through smart communication. With increased commitment and skill, your chances of relational success are very good, or so the thinking goes.

A sort of toolbox approach to relationships runs throughout the commitment model because it assumes that strong commitment results in effective communication. Do you want to meet new friends? Here's how to form a good first impression. Want to develop intimacy with your boyfriend? Follow these rules of self-disclosure. Want to help a spouse who is grieving? Show her emotional support with these strategies. Can't figure out why you two fight all the time? Read this book on conflict management.

So unlike contract writers, commitment advocates believe relationships thrive due to each other's communication competence, not chemistry. In other words, commitment relating is about you and me. And to a large degree it's true. Research

Committed relationships put faith in . . .

Effective communication for relationship satisfaction.

Committed relationships are not . . .

Wrapped up in keeping investments equal.

indicates that people who are committed to one another tend to exercise communication skills with significant success. Committed partners, compared to less committed ones, tend to:

- Open up through significant self-disclosure[6] ("Hey, we need to talk.")
- Show companionship through lively interaction[7] ("You are so fun to be around!")
- Support each other emotionally through good times and bad[8] ("I heard your dad died; I am so sad for you.")
- Engage constructive means for dealing with conflict[9] ("Maybe we should take a time-out and discuss it later when we've cooled off.")

In addition, people who enter friendships and marriages with this can-do loyalty have been shown to stick with relationships longer, sacrifice personal goals more, and report more satisfying relationships.[10] Committed couples tend to have high expectations of marriage and usually meet their standards by

investing in each other and their marriage with smart communication skills and habits.

My wife and I continue to enjoy the benefits of a committed relationship. When she talks about concerns with our grown children, I try to join in with a thoughtful opinion—a pattern called reciprocation. When we're enjoying a cup of tea by our fireplace, we laugh and grieve our way through each other's day as we share of hills climbed and dragons slain. As we do, we validate each other's delight and sorrow in the moment. Shelaine and I experience relational satisfaction because we communicate well with each other.[11]

The commitment model is a welcomed ideal, especially for contract relaters who have believed too long that others are the source of their happiness in relationships. Commitment advocates rightly observe that thriving relationships begin with acts of our will, our resolve, and our communication. Yet other experts suggest that even the commitment model needs expansion. They point out that while fairness and commitment and communication count, we must also consider the moral self and the broader community that shapes it. Let's consider them.

Covenantal Relationships

While the concept of covenants goes back at least four thousand years, I found only one book on this theme among eighty titles at the mall bookstore. The reason is because most covenant authors adhere to spiritual and religious values that don't sell well in mainstream culture.

Despite its widespread application to marriage, the idea of relationships-as-covenants dates to biblical times as a reference to God's relationship to Israel, and to friendships such as David and Jonathan's. When Jonathan covenanted with David he promised, "Whatever you want me to do, I'll do for you" (1

Covenant relationships are . . .

Motivated by unconditional love and grace.

Covenant relationships are not . . .

Driven by the pursuit of personal happiness.

Samuel 20:4). The Old Testament Hebrew word for covenant is *beriyth*, which means "a solemn agreement with binding force," or more simply, "promise." For example, God made promises with Noah (to not flood the world again), Abraham (to bless him and his family), Moses (to provide a moral law), David (to love him), and everyone (to remove sin through Christ's death).

But covenantal relating is broader than making and keeping promises; it blends several principles. Covenantal relating involves (1) persons-in-community, (2) creating and keeping agreements, (3) motivated by unconditional love and grace, (4) over generations, (5) with God or others as their witnesses.[12]

Persons-in-Community

What does it mean to be a person-in-community? It means to recognize that you are forever connected in relationships with people around you; you are not a lone individual. This is true from the day you were conceived (by two people in relationship) until you die (with family and friends at your

bedside). You and I might think ourselves autonomous and unattached, like Batman atop a Gotham City skyscraper with arms crossed, but that is neither God's design nor social fact. As people-in-community we are unavoidably intertwined.

At a moral level, the idea of persons-in-community means we become like those around us, whether healthy and holy or hurt and broken or anywhere in between. When family and friends aim to lead us along God's ways, we might assume they are motivated by *chesed*, a Hebrew term that means "compassionate covenantal love." If so, we gain opportunities to thrive by God's grace.[13] On the other hand, sometimes those closest to us struggle in showing such love, causing hurtful wounds such as anger, abandonment, fear, or low self-worth, and these may linger and haunt us our entire life.[14]

Your community may be the family where you grew up or the apartment mates with whom you share more than rent or book club members who know most everything about you. Wherever you connect, grow, hurt, and struggle to understand yourself and others, you experience self-in-community. Covenantal relating is about "we."[15]

Making and Keeping Agreements

The second covenantal idea is that within community we create and live by promises and agreements that help relationships flourish. An informal survey I took among college students suggests we make agreements in six areas: practical living ("Who will wash dishes and pay the bills?"), communication and relational health ("Will we value honesty and openness and supporting one another?"), money ("Who will manage the books, and how should we invest our savings?"), involvement with extended family and friends ("When will parents visit, and how do we handle Bob?"), spiritual commitments ("Will we pray or

minister or worship together?"), and the future ("Where should we live, and might we have a family?").[16]

We arrive at answers to these questions through open dialogue, family councils, quirky conversations, and unspoken assumptions. Some agreements umbrella us the whole of our existence (for example, the purpose of life is to love God and enjoy him forever), while others tidy our lives for a season (for example, this summer we agree to enjoy day trips rather than take a long road trip).

In addition, we often agree on, or assume the consequences of, following or ignoring our agreements. Consider that agreeing to put money away helps buy a starter car for a college-bound daughter, but blowing that nest egg on a trip to Vegas means she will have to commute with friends or incur debt to buy her own vehicle. So making and keeping agreements not only reflect our moral vision for living but also come with expectations for keeping them or not.

In covenantal perspective, therefore, the goal of relating is not personal satisfaction or emotional happiness. The aim of relating is to weave together a shared vision of life and its purposes with those we love. Agreeing together requires grace and mutual submission, not power-over dominance. Research indicates that partners who operate from the same page of values and goals tend to enjoy stable, satisfying relationships.[17]

Motivated by Unconditional Love and Grace

The third principle of covenantal relating regards our moral makeup. Covenantal writers look deeper than our skills and feelings in order to address the motive for civil relating, and their answer is love, but neither the erotic love of sexual infatuation, nor the sisterly love of companionship. They point to *agape*, or

unconditional love, that we attempt to extend to friends, lovers, and even enemies because this is God's model. Agape love, or love by choice, explains why Hosea took back Gomer despite her sex-for-money lifestyle, why God forgave David despite his abuse of power with Bathsheba and Uriah, and why the father in Jesus' parable of the prodigal child welcomed the son with celebrative arms despite the grief he had caused.

Covenantal writers underscore that no one is perfect, that all require grace, and that people who build their relationships around this principle succeed, while those who "keep score" suffer. Margaret Brinig and Steven Nock contrast covenantal and contractual relationships:

> In stable, covenant families, couples do not keep precise track of who owes what to whom. Couples who *do not keep* precise track of who owes what to whom have more stable marriages. . . . In contrast, a Virginia divorce case involved a wife who thought a contract-like tit-for-tat exchange was necessary. She testified that after the first several years of marriage she felt that a psychological wall was being erected between her and her husband. Each time he did something that wronged her, another brick was added to the wall, so that finally she could not communicate with him at all.[18]

The language of unconditional love and grace signals a moral picture of humans as good *and* evil, rather than good *or* evil. It reminds us that we are morally complex, that we are responsible for how we treat others, and that we require grace just as often as we might extend it. Covenantal relaters understand that our goal should be each other's holiness, not just happiness.

Relating for Generations

Covenantal relaters create deep relational bonds generation upon generation, and they take their cue from God's promise of love. When God chose to bless Abram (later renamed Abraham), he said, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. . . . I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you" (Genesis 17:4, 7). God made a similar promise to love David for the long haul, and David records it in the Psalms. "I will maintain my love to him forever, and my covenant with him will never fail. I will establish his line forever, his throne as long as the heavens endure" (89:28-29).

Friends of mine, Ed and Elaine, show a similar commitment to each other and to passing the torch generationally.[19] Elaine described commitment as "Staying together through thick and thin, through hard times, through good times, and working things out." When I talked to Ed about commitment, he said, "The first thing I think of is our marriage vows, to love each other, and only each other. Commitment is to love each other through good and bad." You can tell that Ed and Elaine are not planning to "grow out" or "fall out" of love. They have vowed to make their relationship work through their own choosing.

My friends inherited these values from their parents and intend to pass them on to their sons, so today they attempt to eat one meal per week at Ed's folks' home, and the next week at Elaine's. They also come together to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays. These times allow for shared experiences that continue to knit together their joint vision of

faith, love, and responsibility, linking not just their lives but their birth families and their histories as well.

With God and Others as Witnesses

The fifth and final principle is that covenantal relationships come to be, and continue to endure, with God as witness in the company of others. Some covenants are made between God and us, as God's covenant with Abraham and David. Others are made between people, as when Jacob and Laban agreed not to fight each other, and Jacob vowed to honor Leah and Rachel, who were his wives and Laban's daughters.

> With these horizontal covenants, often between leaders or between kings and their people, God was called upon to serve as a witness. Then, if one of the parties was not present at the making of the promise or the promise needed to be executed sometime in the future, God (or a stone or a pillar standing for God) was a reminder that the covenant was permanent.[20]

Perhaps the clearest example today of divine witness is in wedding ceremonies where a couple seeks God's blessing on their marriage and the authorities in charge do so through prayers of blessing, the laying on of hands, or the reading of God's promises in Scripture. Also, the exchange of rings signifies one's vows before God to love and cherish until death separates.

These examples express a larger vision than the contract or commitment models afford, namely, that God is author, sustainer, and helper of relationships. When couples buy in to this vision, they seem to thrive. Vaughn Call and Tim Heaton found that couples who attend church regularly, together, are at the lowest risk of divorce.[21] The authors explain their finding by noting that church attendance signals not only a view that God matters in life but also that in a faith community we

share similar beliefs (what's true), values (what's important), needs (what's necessary), and reality (what's assumed). Living on the same page works better than living in separate chapters.

With regard to human witness, Margaret Brinig and Steven Nock enumerate how communities help relationships, and relationships in turn benefit communities.[22] First, consider that families and friends shape our expectations for relating, and we take these yardsticks into our adult lives. Thus, healthy families tend to raise healthy children who thrive in school, find productive work, and contribute to their communities. Children of divorce, in contrast, tend to divorce more often as adults and struggle along with legal, emotional, and financial problems.

Or consider how extended families of immigrants contribute to financial well-being when they send ahead a capable person to establish income, which helps relatives join later. Once established, husbands and wives rely on each other to meet financial needs should one or the other become unemployed.

And regarding emotional health, people who live with someone else have the option to vent with each other after a frustrating day at work, a pressure-release valve against wider violence. And the list goes on.[23] Compassionate witnesses help us cope with life, helping us get along.

* * *

Perhaps you identify with the contract, commitment, and covenant models of relating. You might even choose one as your own. I confess that I have not presented them in entirely unbiased terms. I am okay with contract relating, supportive of committed relating, and an advocate of covenantal relating. I have summarized their features in Figure 1.

The reason for my bias comes down to people's motives in each model. Contractual relaters appear to be motivated by

personal needs, wants, and happiness. To be sure, we should value self-care, but if our own well-being becomes front and center, we suck energy from others and turn them away.

Themes in Contract, Commitment, and Covenant Relating

	Contract	**Commitment**	**Covenant**
What is the basic people unit in our life?	Me, on my own	You and me, together	We in community
What is the goal of our relationship?	My happiness	Our satisfaction	Our holiness
Relationships work best when . . .	I experience an even or bonus deal	You and I communicate effectively	We rely on mutual agreement
Relational problems are best fixed by . . .	My freedom to leave, or having the power to control you	Professional counseling for you and me, and reading self-help books	Gaining wisdom and accountability within God's community

Figure 1

In contrast, people in committed relationships are motivated to attain mutual satisfaction, and they get there through able talk. Of course, I want to communicate effectively, and I want my relationships to be rewarding. But putting skills and efficiency above those I love gets it all wrong.[24] Blaine and Susan Fowers, two family therapists, found that early in their marriage they spent hours hashing out issues in well-trained counselor style, only to figure out it was killing them. He writes, "We would work and work and work until we had

either ironed it out completely or completely exhausted ourselves. We would often be up half the night—communicating."[25] He goes on to note their covenantal resolve: "We do use communication skills to help, on occasion; but what keeps us going is our joint commitment to ideals and goals that guide us in knowing how we want to live together."[26]

This is why covenantal writers gain my respect. They get beyond our needs and our performances to the larger goal of sharing life together through mutual ideals and goals. They also envision a sanctified life of God with us, alongside us, as author and sustainer of our relationships, and his call to develop our soul project. In addition, covenant writers get beyond the drama of "you and me" to consider the five, nine, or fourteen people who play supporting roles in the story we call our relationship.

Embracing covenantal principles does not mean rejecting personal needs or the importance of communication. Rather, communication is understood as expressions of personal virtues, and personal needs get addressed within redemptive community. Covenantal relating means we will exercise self-control for the other person's benefit and show humility when we've messed up. Covenantal relating places high value on faithfulness in marriage and friendship, rather than feel-good freedom to leave when things turn rocky. Ultimately, covenantal relating requires more effort and wisdom, but also reaps the greatest rewards. Let's consider these virtues and their covenantal potential.

For Reflection

1. What good is there about "keeping things even" in a relationship (as the contract model suggests)? What problem might crop up if we make this primary?

2. Where in your life have you encountered people who were excellent communicators, but whom you simply could not trust? Why couldn't you trust them?

3. Do you see yourself as independent from others or connected to others? What difference does it make whether or not we are connected?

4. What agreements have you made with those closest to you? What would you like to agree on that would bring stability to your relationship?

5. Where have you had opportunity to allow God and people to cheer you on in your closest relationships? What does that look like?