

A RELATIONAL THEOLOGY OF THE LAITY

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I. Relational Theology—What It Is.

One of the fastest growing social phenomena of the past twenty-five years is what Thomas Oden calls the encounter culture, the bringing together of people into small group relationships where they may encounter the self, others and the issues of their lives. The movement has become a significant force not only in the society as a whole but in religious communities as well.¹

A principal thesis in Oden's work is that the contemporary encounter culture has its roots in seventeenth century pietism with its "here and now" experiencing of faith, high trust levels in group interaction, honest confession within a caring community, and personal testimony. When the early pietism deteriorated into unhealthy self-righteousness, anti-intellectualism, and sometimes fanaticism, terms such as revival, religion of the heart, conversion, and testimony fell into disrepute together with the experience they represent. Oden asserts that for these reasons the contemporary religious encounter culture does not wish to be associated with its roots in pietism though the experience is essentially the same.²

However, within the encounter culture of American Christianity there is a particular group of theorists and practitioners who think of themselves as expressing a relational theology.³ The distinctive place of these relational theologians within the broader movement is that they are willing to own their roots in classical pietism. They believe that a religion of the heart, conversion, and testimony still express a genuine religious experience, but profitting from the errors of earlier generations and a more adequate knowledge in biblical, theological, psychological, and sociological matters, they seek to redeem and perhaps redefine the language of personal religion and to make its experience authentic and meaningful.

Relational theology may be defined as a contemporary faith style

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¹Thomas C. Oden, *The Intensive Group Experience: The New Pietism* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972), p. 19.

²Ibid., Chapter Two, pp. 56-88.

³Walden Howard, with William Peterson and Stephen Board, "Unmasking— An Interview with Walden Howard," *Eternity* 28 (August 1977):11. The term "relational theology" is credited to Bruce Larson, a Presbyterian clergyperson and former president of Faith at Work.

which seeks to stimulate personal Christian growth and renewed church vitality by relating believers to one another in settings designed to encourage openness, acceptance, accountability, and specific steps in the exercising of personal faith. It holds up the possibility of finding spiritual life through relationships with other people.

While those who have sought to give shape to a relational theology and faith style own their roots in classical pietism, they do not insist that their theological presuppositions are the required norms upon which the movement is built. In fact when one attends a trans-denominational gathering where relational theology is being discussed and lived out, a participant soon realizes that a broad range of doctrinal understandings and ecclesiastical traditions is represented.

This does not mean that theology and tradition are to be viewed as unimportant, for it is insisted that a growing believer will desire to know all he or she can about his or her Christian tradition with its faith propositions and practices.⁴ The relational theologian believes that whatever one's faith understanding, it will be lived out more effectively when experienced in a relational context.

II. Three Methodologies of Relational Theology

The strategy of relational theology is to bring persons together into relationships where they may experience the dynamics of life upon life.

A. The Small Fellowship Group

One method of doing this is the ongoing small fellowship group, which brings believers together on a regular basis over an extended period of time for the purpose of studying the Bible and the Christian faith, for sharing experiences, needs, and insights, and for considering how each may fulfill more adequately his or her Christian calling in life.⁵

B. The Conference or Retreat

A second method of relational theology is the conference or retreat which is designed to engage persons in interaction with one another. During "a time apart" believers are encouraged and enabled to dialogue with one another as persons in search of a faith which is meaningful and adequate for life's demands.

⁴Keith Miller, *The Taste of New Wine* (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1965), p. 112 (fn).

⁵John L. Casteel, ed. *Spiritual Renewal Through Personal Groups* (New York: Association Press, 1957), p. 19.

A third method of relational theology is the lay witness mission, which occurs when a group of lay persons, each growing in personal Christian commitment in identifiable ways, visits a church to give witness to the place and effect of their faith. Members of the church hear the testimonies of the visiting team persons and then participate in small group exercises which are designed to help them get in touch with their own life experiences and faith.⁶ The lay witness mission frequently becomes a stimulus for establishing ongoing small fellowship groups in congregational life.

It will be observed that many churches which have included small groups in the church program may be unfamiliar with the term "relational theology." This is explained by noting that "relational theology" is an expression chosen by this particular group of theorists and practitioners to identify their understanding of what biblical models and theological concepts are being experienced when believers are seeking consciously to live out their faith in relationship with one another.

III. *Biblical Models Employed by Relational Theology*

The relational theologians perceive that there are underlying principles in the scriptures which suggest how believers may discover the meaning of faith, the releasing of life, the healing of relationships, and the liberation of people.⁷

A. *Living in Relational Community*

Jesus and the Twelve. Jesus drew about him twelve men with whom he would share his life during his ministry. They were persons of varied backgrounds, temperaments and understandings. They lived together through times of instruction, feedback, confrontation, clarification, and support. The relationship between Jesus and the Twelve demonstrates an interdependence and creative flow of life which can take place between Christ's followers today.⁸

2. *The Early Church.* A portrait of the early church presents believers coming together in houses where they greeted one another with a holy kiss, ate a fellowship meal where they broke bread in remembrance of their Master, confessed sins, gave testimonies, read

⁶Ben Campbell Johnson, *A Road to Renewal* (Manual), (Atlanta: Lay Renewal Publications, 1977), p. 2.

⁷Bruce Larson, *No Longer Strangers* (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1971), p. 21

⁸Robert C. Leslie, *Sharing Groups in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), pp. 186-199. The author comments on the small group dynamics experienced by Jesus and the Twelve as found in the Gospel of Mark.

from the scriptures, prayed and sang, and read correspondence from other believers. It was in their life together that the gospel was experienced and proclaimed.⁹

B. Enabling One Another

Relational theology declares that believers are given the ministry of enabling one another to fulfill their calling and potential as followers of Jesus Christ. This enabling work has several expressions.

1. *Affirmation*. Like Barnabas, "son of encouragement," believers may become persons who strengthen and encourage the faith of others. Affirmation is a work or action which communicates to another that he or she is a person of worth, positive qualities, and uniqueness, a person in whose life God's activity can be seen. Relational theology submits that when a person believes that others see him or her in a positive way, defenses are removed, what is good in that person's life is enhanced, and what is in need of correction begins to undergo change for the better.¹⁰

2. *Confession*.

"Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed." (James 5:16)

In the context of these words there is reference to *kakopathei* (v. 13), suffering, e.g. mental worry or stress; *asthenei* (v. 14), sickness, e.g. a bodily ailment; and *opoos iathaeite* (v. 16), physical healing, although the word also is used in biblical and classical Greek to denote spiritual comfort and the healing of diseases of the soul.¹¹ It is *hamartia* (v. 16), sin, that is to be confessed, but a later variant reading uses *paraptoma*, which carries the meaning of faults or lapses. This alteration may be intentional to suggest that in the affairs of life our testings arise from the breadth of our experience and therefore the healing must be applied in sufficient measure for all our needs.¹²

Relational theology teaches that good physical, emotional, and spiritual health depends upon a person's willingness to confess what is going on in the inner life. Using good judgment and good taste, in appropriate ways and settings, the believer may find release by con-

⁹Charles M. Olsen, *The Base Church* (Atlanta: Forum House, 1973), p. 27.

¹⁰Larson, op. cit., pp. 52-56.

¹¹W. E. Oesterley, "The General Epistle of James," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, Vol. 4, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), pp. 473-474.

¹²R.V.G. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), pp.134-135.

fessing the truth of his or her troubled spiritual condition to some other trusted person or persons who will hear, declare absolution in God's grace, and pray for the healing of the person's life.¹³

3. *Burden Bearing.*

"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ . . . For each man will have to bear his own load." (Galatians 6:2,5)

Relational theology holds that the believer is responsible to help bear the *barei* (v. 2), the oppressive burden, of others. On the other hand each person is expected to bear his or her *phortion* (v. 5), for example, the pack that a porter or soldier carries on a march.¹⁴ When a struggler experiences the affirmation and strength which come from someone who demonstrates understanding and caring, something positive occurs in the bearing of the load. There comes a new accountability for one's life. The person is enabled to deal more adequately with the burden.

4. *Calling Forth the Gifts.*

"Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them." (Romans 12:6)

Relationship theology teaches that the Christian community is to help one another discover, cultivate and use their gifts for ministry in the church and in the world. Believers living the relational faith style will seek to be aware of the needs around them and how the gifts of individuals or the group might be utilized to meet these needs. They commission one another and hold one another accountable in the exercising of their gifts and the performance of their ministries.

5. *Prayer.* Relational theology sees members of a Christian community engaging in prayer for one another in a ministry which activates external and awakens internal spiritual resources so that the powers of faith, hope, and love will bear a positive influence upon the personal needs of those in the group.

C. *The Christian's Personal Faith Style.*

Relational theology observes that when a believer begins to live the relational faith style, certain characteristics will become normative in his or her life.

¹³Larson, op. cit., p. 69.

¹⁴Frederic Rendall, "The Epistle to the Galatians," in *Tre Expositor's Greek Testament*, Vol. 3, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), p. 189.

1. *Experiencing the New Creation.*

"...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." (2 Corinthians 5:17)

The new creation, a rabbinical description of a converted proselyte, is closely related to the experience described as the new birth in the fourth Gospel. It refers to the establishing of a new inner life with new perspectives, desires, and directions arising from one's personal attachment, relationship, and loyalty to Christ. There is something of death and resurrection in this.¹⁵ The believer dies to his or her old ways of seeing and doing things and discovers new ways of living and believing.

2. *Living in Openness of Life.* --

"...if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7)

Walking in the light suggests that a person is coming out from darkness and more and more is allowing himself to be seen and known for what he or she truly is. It is to acknowledge the truth about oneself. The text indicates that when a believer lives in the light, two positive benefits occur; he or she is enabled to experience *koinonia* with others and to live in the awareness of the effects derived from the life of Christ given to and for his people.¹⁶

The context reveals the unhealthy spiritual condition of those who chose not to acknowledge the truth about themselves, a course which is described as self-deception and a denial of God's truth and work (vv. 6, 8, 10). When a believer pretends to be something other than he or she is, it creates a situation where there is fear of the discovery and judgment of others. This results in a guarded relationship with others in the community of faith and, according to the text, a distorted relationship with God.¹⁷

To walk in openness of life opens the way for dealing with the issues of the inner life in a forthright manner. The believer who is learning to live this way realizes that "The light which shows us our sins is the light which heals."¹⁸

¹⁵Olen, op. cit., p. 109

¹⁶B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957 reprint), p. 20.

¹⁷David Belgum, *Guilt: Where Psychology and Religion Meet* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), pp. 8-9.

¹⁸Paul Tournier, *Guilt and Grace*, trans. Arthur W. Heathcote (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1962), p. 158. The saying is credited to George Fox.

3. *Claiming One's Freedom.*

"...and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8:32)

Eleutherosei, freedom, means the absence of constraint and restriction, and the opportunity to exercise one's belief and life apart from external interference.¹⁹ Believers do find themselves believing and living in response to external interference: significant others as well as those not so significant, the norms of the culture and sub-cultures in which a person lives, unrealistic self-expression, and sometimes the Christian church.

Relational theology views freedom as arising from one's personal commitment to the word and person of the Christ (vv. 31, 36). There follows a freeing up of one's inner life in the experiencing of new creation, in the choice to live in openness, and in the acceptance, affirmation and support from those who are invited to participate in one's personal journey. It is a freedom to grow in accord with God's purpose under the Lordship of Christ.²⁰

4. *Growing in Faith.*

"...speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ..." (Ephesians 4:15).

The New Testament asks each believer to commit himself or herself to grow in faith, to promote the spiritual life, to pursue actively the will of God, to be filled with the fruit of the Spirit, to work out one's salvation. The relational theologians find in the word salvation a root meaning of "wholeness" (from the Latin *salvus*, meaning health). When a believer embarks upon his or her spiritual journey, it is a journey toward wholeness.²¹ The growth leads from one experience to the next, one lesson to the next, one truth to the next. A believer may expect continued growth as long as there is a desire "to grow up in every way."

IV. *Theological Concepts in Relational Theology*

A. *The Kingdom of Right Relationships*

Proponents of relational theology do not see it as a new theology or a complete theology. It is rather a particular theological

¹⁹Merrill C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), p. 147.

²⁰Paul Tournier, *The Meaning of Persons*, trans. Edwin Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1957), p. 227.

²¹Bruce Larson, *The Meaning and Mystery of Being Human* (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1978), p. 177.

direction and emphasis which arises out of the premise that the kingdom of God is expressed, worked out, and illustrated in the building and living of right relationships. Four basic relationships are set forth: one's relationship to God, to oneself, to significant other persons in one's life, and to the world.²²

One's Relationship to God. The relational theologians state that the most basic relationship exists between a person and God, the "Absolute Thou" whom we worship and serve, who meets us in the events and processes of life, who calls us to penitence and prayers, and who invites us to the labor of remaking some little sector of his world.²³

Relational theology asserts that a component in a spiritually healthy life is to be moving on a continuum unbelief, from disinterest to commitment, from anxiety to trust, and that at the center of this is one's understanding of and belief in Jesus Christ.

2. *One's Relationship to Oneself.* Relational theology submits that a spiritually healthy person is in accord with himself or herself and expresses a growing consciousness of being in touch with what is happening at the surface as well as in the depths of the inner life.²⁴ This includes the acceptance of one's humanness, the admitting of one's inadequacies and failures, the seeing of oneself in the light of the gospel of grace, and the recognition of one's potential for good in life and faith.

3. *One's Relationship to Significant Other Persons.* Relational theology addresses the quality of a person's relationships with others. This involves an affirmation of others for their good traits, the checking of superficial and false judgments, the willingness to speak and listen carefully, and the desire to live in responsible, reconciling, and healing ways with others. As a person learns to live in redemptive relationships with those who are significant in his or her life, it may be said that the person is growing in wholeness.

4. *One's Relationship to the World.* Relational theology teaches that the world is the arena where a Christian lives out the care and compassion of the Master. The believer knows himself or herself to

²²Bruce Larson, "What Makes Theology Relational?" *Faith at Work* 90 (June 1977):5.

²³Elton Trueblood, *The Company of the Committed* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1961), p. 51.

²⁴Elizabeth O'Connor, *Journey Inward, Journey Outward* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1968), p. 13.

be a follower of the One who fed the hungry, healed the sick, and drove the money-changers from the temple.²⁵

This is not merely a matter of venturing forth to do an act of mercy and then hastily retreating again to the sanctuary and privacy of faith. It is a going forth intentionally and vulnerably to risk the dangers and work for the good in the personal, social, and political spheres of life. Taking one's place as an instrument of God's activity in the world becomes an essential part of the Christian's faith style.

B. Christian Experience: A Journey

The relational faith style is a journey toward new and deeper levels of faith and practice in response to Christ's call to "follow me." (Mark 1:17)

1. *The meaning of Conversion.* The prototype of personal conversion expressed in pietism often is perceived as a sudden, sometimes dramatic turning of a person from his or her life of spiritual neglect and distortion to a life of harmony with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Believers influenced by pietism frequently will point to the decisive moment of their conversion, and sometimes give the impression that it was the crowning and completing experience of their lives.

The relational theologians, while affirming the value of decisive spiritual moments and wishing for more genuinely transforming religious experiences, view conversion in a different way. Conversion is seen as a process in which the discerning believer recognizes that the definitive moment is part of an unfolding pattern in which there has been a series of events and experiences which have moved the person toward the spiritual awakening which has occurred. Furthermore, the conversion moment is seen not as an "arrival" but a "beginning" in which the spiritually awakened person is now empowered to start actualizing the potential which has been inherent in his or her life.²⁶

2. *Christian Growth.* The relational theologians observe that some believers strive for spiritual goals which are unrealistic and therefore feel defeated, while others comfort themselves in levels of commitment already mastered and therefore do not experience much spiritual activity in their lives. What is needed is to identify one's growing

²⁵Bruce Larson and Ralph Osborne, *The Emerging Church* (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1970), pp. 37-39.

²⁶Keith Miller, *The Becomers* (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1973), pp. 11-12.

edge so that faith can be tested and exercised over the right need at the right time.²⁷

The relational faith style addresses the believer with these questions: Where is your growing edge? What are the issues of your life which call for response, learning, activity, and growth? It is in this connection that the four relationships of kingdom living come into focus. It is suggested that every person can identify some personal need in one of these four relationships which is calling for attention at any particular time.²⁸

C. *The Transmission of Faith's Realities*

Relational theology believes that the reality of the Christian faith is transmitted through relationships. One life touches another life, and a spiritual truth or experience is passed along. It is said that God's purpose is such that he never enters into personal relationship with a man or woman apart from other persons.²⁹ Two theological concepts which express this truth are incarnation and community.

1. *Incarnation.* Christian theology holds that the highest revelation of God occurred in Jesus Christ. His incarnation is understood to be the unique dialogue between man and man, in which God was fully participating.³⁰

Relational theology teaches that this incarnation of God in Christ continues through his Spirit's work in his people. For example, a person may come to understand and experience the love of God more clearly because he or she experiences love and acceptance from another person. In this way the reality of God is mediated to the person through a person.³¹ Or, in an exchange of words which leads to spiritual response in someone's life, it may be said that there has been a moment of personal contact with God in which he has called forth the person through another person.³²

2. *Community.* In the New Testament the church is not presented in an institutional form, but as a fellowship of persons who share a common life in Jesus Christ. This fellowship, or *koinonia*,

²⁷Bruce Larson, *The Growing Edge* Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1968) pp. 19-20.

²⁸Walden Howard, "Back to Basics," *Faith at Work* 90 (June 1977):2.

²⁹Earl H. Furgeson, "A Relational Theory of Ministry," *Pastoral Psychology* 24 (Summer 1976): 269. The thought is credited to Herbert Farmer, *The Servant of the Word* (London: Nisbet and Co., Ltd., 1953), p. 37.

³⁰Reuel Howe, *The Miracle of Dialogue* (New York, The Seabury Press, 1963), pp. 149, 151.

³¹Findley B. Edge, *Introduction to Growth Through Groups*, by William Clemmons and Harvey Hester (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1974), p. 16.

³²Tournier, *The Meaning of Persons*, p. 160.

suggests a communion of spirit which goes deeper than the sociability customarily associated with today's church fellowship dinner.

This *koinonia* calls the believer to live in depth relationships with other Christians, realistically a small number of persons, who are experiencing the mystery of the Christ and through faith in him and ministry to each other are learning to live in new ways.⁸³

This participation in a knowing, loving, Christian community provides the believer with a place for accountability (for his or her life and direction), encouragement (from those who understand and stand with each other), prayerful undergirding (for healing, refreshing, strengthening, enabling), decision-making (the counsel of trusted friends), and laughter (in experiencing life's joys and relieving its tensions).⁸⁴

V. A Relational Theology of the Laity

A. Summation

Relational theology, then, provides a framework of biblical and theological understanding through which believers may discover and live out their Christian experience with others. A congregation, or other group of believers, can intentionally provide settings where believers will experience the dynamics of life together as lived out by Jesus and the Twelve and the early church; where they will experience affirmation, confession, burden bearing, the calling forth of gifts, and prayer; where the possibilities of the new creation, openness of life, and freedom may be tested and approved; where believers will be encouraged to take specific steps of personal growth in their relationship to God, the self, significant others, and the world; where conversion and Christian growth will be seen as a process; and where God will be experienced through his presence in others and the Christian community.

B. The Effects of Relational Theology Upon the Laity

It was estimated in the early 1970s that there were more than 30,000 congregations in the United States consciously seeking to live out the principles of relational theology as the basic style of church life.⁸⁵ Now many more congregations would be added to that number.

Churches which have provided opportunities for the people to

⁸³O'Connor, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁸⁴Larson and Osborne, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-98.

⁸⁵Ben Campbell Johnson, *Lay Witness Mission* (Tape), (Atlanta: Institute of Church Renewal, 1972).

experience their Christian faith relationally frequently report new spiritual vitality in the lives of believers and in the congregation as a whole. A new spirit of love and honesty is observed; lay persons serve as priests to one another; prayer gatherings articulate real needs and hopes; people tend to be more highly energized for new commitments in serving; people discover their unique gifts for ministry to others and the world; and serious study of Christian truth becomes more noticeable.³⁶

In recent years the writer has sought to model, teach, and facilitate relational theology and its faith style in the congregation he serves as pastor. The church has received and sent lay witness mission teams, staged relationally styled retreats, and given emphasis to the establishment of ongoing small fellowship groups. One of these groups is now meeting in its seventh year. At a time of evaluation during the group's second year together, the members were asked to send the writer a letter telling what they believed the value of the group experience had been to their lives. They replied:³⁷

"I once attended prayer meetings out of a sense of duty; now I attend this small fellowship because I want to do so. . . . Our Bible studies and discussions have been very rewarding. . . . I used to have a real hang-up about praying out loud. Now I can go ahead and pray in our group. . . . I had gotten away from the church. I enjoy the feeling that the group cares about me. I have been brought closer to Christ. . . . I think I have grown in the capacity to accept other persons' opinions and interpretations. . . . I feel a deeper love for the whole church family. . . .

"The small group has created more discipline in my life. . . . I came to the group seeking something I had lost from my Christian past. I am learning to deal with hard feelings toward others. I have learned to talk to God in simple terms. . . . I have experienced Christ in a new way. Now I want to give myself for others. The group has helped me examine myself. . . . I feel I have something to share with others concerning my walk with Christ. . . .

"When we began the group with people we knew in only a casual way, I never dreamed that I, as reserved as I am, would ever open my heartache to these people. But I did. And no one ever judged or condemned me for what I shared. I have felt comforted and defended. I know my life will have a new direction from here on."

³⁶Stan Jones, "Checklist for a Relational-Style Church," *Faith at Work* 91 (December 1978): 19-20.

³⁷On file with the writer's personal papers.

There is more than personal piety in these words. One person in the group carries on an active ministry to homebound members of the congregation; another helps prepare meals in the church's Soup Kitchen Ministry. One was encouraged by the group to become actively involved in the political process of his labor union; another is showing hospitality to young military persons in the community. A married couple participates actively on a denominational lay witness mission team; another married couple is living out their faith before the church family in a time of intense personal suffering, supported by the practical involvement of the group.

These testimonies and reports of Christian activity are true of each of the groups and other persons in the congregation as well. Relational theology and its faith style can be an effective tool in encouraging personal Christian growth and renewed church vitality.

Additional Sources

(In addition to the sources noted in the footnotes above, the following selected books and articles are helpful in understanding relational theology and its effect upon the laity.)

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