
PART ONE

CONNECTING LIKE JESUS



1

Spiritually Charged Communication

Relational Practices for Connecting Like Jesus

Two are better than one....For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help.

—Ecclesiastes 4:9–10

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

—Jesus, John 15:12

MOST OF US, from our earliest years, are taught that God existed before anything else was created. Did that mean that before creation God was a big lonely Being, all alone and surrounded by darkness? No—not if you believe in the Trinity: God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. If the Triune God is true, God never existed in isolation; instead, God has *always* been in relationship. Genesis 1:26 in fact says, “Let *us* make man in *our* image, in *our* likeness” (emphasis ours). This divine *relationship* existed before anything else was created. And because relationship implies communica-

tion, the Triune God has always been a communicating God. As people created in the image of God, we too were made to communicate. Being alone and isolated from others goes against God’s intention for all humankind.



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Alcatraz, the infamous island prison in the San Francisco Bay, was known not only for its isolated location but also for an area of cells designated for solitary confinement called “the Hole.” When Mary and her family toured Alcatraz during a road trip out west, their youngest son Michael, then ten, stood in one of these cells. Mary explained how the Hole was designed to inflict what is considered one of the most extreme forms of punishment: minimal to no human contact. Michael’s unexpected response, “I don’t think it would be that bad,” was, Mary assumed, not an argument against the awful conditions of solitary confinement, but instead a testimony to having just spent forty-five hours in a van with his parents and older brother.

Although there are times when most, if not all, of us need to be alone, extended lack of communication with others is what has driven people in solitary confinement to insanity and even suicide. God never intended for us to exist without others. That does not mean, however, that we were made to be in just *any* type of relationship with *any* kind of communication. We were created to follow the perfect example of unity found in the Trinity. As author and speaker Brian McLaren said in our interview for this book, “The ultimate reality is communication or communion between Father, Son, and Spirit. They exist in an eternal connection, eternal community, eternal communion.”¹ From the beginning, God wanted creation to live that way too: in harmonious, peaceful relationships. That is what the Kingdom of God is all about.² Yet throughout all of history, human relationships have been much more messy and chaotic than they have been harmonious and peaceful.

Even God’s chosen people, the citizens of Israel, couldn’t get it right. They fell away from the good life God had planned for them and found themselves in captivity, longing to see God’s peaceful plan actualized in history. They knew what it could be like because their prophets had given them very concrete images of this Kingdom. The prophet Isaiah foretold that it would be a society in which children would not die in infancy, and elderly people would be able to live out their lives in health and well-being. It would be, according to Isaiah’s prophecies, a socio-economic order in which everyone would have a good job and workers would receive fair payment for their labor. When God’s Kingdom would be established here on earth, Isaiah declared, every family would build and inhabit a house of its own, and the suffering of the earth would end (Isaiah 65:17–25).

That is the Kingdom of God. A place where people are healthy, happy, and safe and everyone lives in soul-satisfying relationships. That’s the life God intended for us all. God calls the church to be a model for the

rest of the world of what the harmonious Kingdom will be like when Christ returns—with the hopes that others will want to be a part of that peaceable Kingdom too. As Jesus prayed in John 17:22–23, “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

Jesus’ mission was aimed at gathering followers who would be willing to join him in a radical movement that would make the Hebrew prophets’ images of a peaceful Kingdom a reality for anyone who believed. In our interview, Brian McLaren said that joining Jesus means “God is setting the agenda, and we are to join in with God’s agenda. It means we are to fit in with harmony rather than disharmony. The purpose of our communication with God and others is to harmonize and bring ourselves in agreement with God’s Kingdom reality.” Brian is echoing what the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Rome—that they were to love one another and live in peace (Romans 12:10, 16, 18). That was their purpose in life, and it is to be ours too, as the body of Christ. Our churches are to be models of the Kingdom of God. People who observe us are supposed to say, “See how they love one another! See how they live in harmony with one another—I want to be a part of this body of believers!”

Why isn’t the church perceived this way in the world today?

The answer lies in the painfully obvious fact that a peaceable Kingdom is not yet a reality for those of us who claim to be the body of Christ. As much as we might crave and even strive for the harmonious relationships God intended for us, we still find ourselves in shallow, nit-picky, and even destructive relationships. As speaker and social activist Shane Claiborne said in our interview, “People can be in love with a vision and really wreck each other trying to build that vision.”³ Far too often, others are disillusioned with how Christians relate to one another and to the world. As David Kinnaman discusses in his popular book, *Unchristian*, “Outsiders . . . think Christians no longer represent what Jesus had in mind, that Christianity in our society is not what it was meant to be.”⁴ Kinnaman found that strikingly high numbers of non-Christians categorize believers of Christianity as judgmental, hypocritical, and antihomosexual. From churchgoers who gossip about each other (with their concern sometimes masquerading as prayer requests) to religious leaders who intentionally misrepresent their religious opponents’ views on national TV to those who protest with hate speech, Christians often

relate to others in ways very much at odds with the transforming love of God.⁵

In the newsletter from an organization called the Transforming Center, founder and president Ruth Haley Barton mentioned an experience with a



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church elder who related to a staff member in a way that was “mean and even slanderous.” She goes on to write that “When confronted with such blatantly bad behavior, the best the elder could do was to acknowledge that her communication was ‘less than artful.’”⁶

Less than artful?

It’s not likely negative perceptions of Christians will change if we can’t see how wrong our own harmful communication patterns are. Loving others amid difficult circumstances can be extremely hard, but it’s still what God commands us to do. The Bible has much to say on this topic. In his letters to the early church, the Apostle Paul wrote that everything they did was to be done out of love for one another. To limit any confusion or excuses, he got very specific with several lists of “dos and “don’ts.” He told them that as followers of Christ, they were not to be jealous of anyone for any reason, and they weren’t to brag about themselves either. They were not to get angry too easily or even to keep track of anything anyone did to them that they thought was wrong or unfair. They were not to complain or argue about *anything*! Instead, he told them to be kind and patient with one another; to forgive one another as God in Christ forgives them. In short, they were to be devoted to one another and humbly consider others better than themselves (1 Corinthians 16:14, 13:4–5; Ephesians 4:32; Philippians 2:3, 14). And these were not the only directives to the early church for how they were to demonstrate love for one another. There are dozens of “one another” verses in the Bible that tell followers of Christ how to relate to each other. We may wish there were exceptions written into these verses—“forgive one other *unless*” or “do not complain *unless*”—but there aren’t any.

The “one another” verses in scripture can make for great sermons, Bible studies, and readings at weddings, but once the sermon, study, or wedding is over, they seem next to impossible to live out on a daily basis. Instead, we often live with disconnects between saying that we want to imitate Christ and actually following Christlike ways of communicating

with one another. We sing the popular Hillsong worship chorus, “Tell the world,” but what are we really telling the world with our actions



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toward one another? We claim to be transformed by Jesus, but cannot seem to transform the ways we relate to those closest to us, much less to the world. As Mohandas Gandhi once said, “I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”⁷

It’s not that there aren’t any Christians who communicate in radically loving ways like Jesus. Christ followers can and do get it right. But the number of people who call themselves Christian is much larger than the number of those who intentionally and regularly practice Christlike communication in their everyday lives.

Our hope in writing this book is to change those numbers. We affirm that the meaningful, fulfilling, unifying relationships God intended before the beginning of time are truly possible. We believe that the “one another” verses in the Bible really can be lived out in how we daily communicate. The key is in learning to relate to others as Jesus did when he walked the earth. When Jesus communicated, he did so in ways that consistently *connected* him to his audience.

What Does It Mean to Connect?

As we pointed out in the Introduction, it can be one thing to communicate but quite another to connect. We can use a variety of solid communication techniques and still feel a lack of connectedness with others. Not connecting to others can be a very lonely and estranged feeling. It’s possible to feel this disconnect and alienation no matter the setting or how well we know someone.

Connecting is a different level of communication than talking in an interesting manner or using solid communication techniques in our interactions. Connecting suggests a depth of mutual understanding and sharing. Saying we connect with someone means we sense a special bond, or even feel a sense of unity, with that person. We may even experience what Hasidic philosopher Martin Buber called an “I-Thou” relationship, whereby a person encounters another not as an object (I-it) but as a sacred being made in the image of God. Seeing others this way bridges our separateness. The unity that results is at the center of what it means

to connect in Christlike ways. There is an intense hunger in our world for this kind of connectedness that can make the “one another” verses a reality.

Connecting Like Jesus

Throughout time and history, no one has connected to others like Jesus did. Jesus related in “I-Thou” ways not only to his peers but to those whom his culture considered beneath *and* beyond his own social class. A hodgepodge of people followed him, from outcasts to government officials to fishermen, everyone wanting, for as many reasons as there were followers, to connect with him. Roman soldiers who had been sent to arrest him returned empty-handed because they had stopped to listen to him. Jesus so powerfully connected with them, touching the very depths of their souls, that they forgot why they had been sent. They could only explain to their supervisors, “Never has anyone spoken like this!” (John 7:46). Men who had spent a lifetime as fishermen, upon hearing Jesus say, “Follow me!” dropped their nets and became his disciples. The charisma that was evident in what he said magnetized crowds so that they not only listened to him for hours but then would follow him wherever he went, hoping to hear more (Mark 6:30–33). When Jesus



*When Jesus spoke, he
changed lives.*



spoke, he changed lives. The impact was so noticeable that even his enemies could tell when his followers had been with him (Acts 4:13).

What was it about the way Jesus connected with others that made him attract so many people? Even the best communication strategies are not enough to produce the powerful connections that Jesus had with others—connections that held the attention of both the simplest child and the most elite religious scholar; connections that resulted in person after person dropping everything to follow Jesus; connections so powerfully transforming that because of Jesus, all of history was changed.

The answer to the question “What made Jesus connect in such powerful ways?” might appear to be the obvious: “Because he’s God!” Although it seems safe to assume that Jesus had an unfair advantage—after all, he was and is the Son of God—that is not the only reason he knew how to dynamically connect with people. He did not *automatically* know all things because he was the son of God. At four years old he did not walk around in WWJD fashion and ask “What should I do?” and then just *know*. As the Apostle Paul told the church at Philippi, even though Jesus was “in very nature God,” he came to earth as a baby and “made himself

nothing” (Philippians 2:6–7, NIV). Jesus was born a nobody—in a stable. He had to grow and learn just like we do. In Luke 2:52 (NIV) we are told that “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.” At the age of twelve he was found “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions” (Luke 2:46). He learned from his teachers; from studying and reflecting on scripture; from his times alone with God; and most important, he learned from being obedient to God and trusting God with his entire life, death, and resurrection. As the Gospel of Luke tells us, Jesus’ obedience to God, along with his times alone with God, filled him with God’s Spirit so that he could be prepared to do Kingdom work in the world (Luke 4:1, 14; 6:12–19).

As a result, Jesus developed what Aristotle called *ethos* or what we generally think of as credibility, meaning that who he was—his entire character and being—was interwoven with his message and his ability to influence others. Jesus’ styles of relating flowed out of being totally committed to living for the glory of God. Through seamlessly connecting his relationship with God and his knowledge of scripture to his daily life, Jesus dynamically connected with others. He knew that times of prayer and reflecting on scripture were essential to knowing God more intimately and being spiritually prepared and empowered to connect with others in ways that would best advance God’s Kingdom. And he counted on his followers to follow in his footsteps.

Developing Credibility Like Jesus

Just before Jesus ascended into heaven, he commissioned his disciples to go into all the world and spread the good news of the Kingdom of God. They must have wondered how in the world they could ever communicate his message—especially with the same credibility he had. But then he told them how. Jesus finished his commission with these words: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20b). He told his disciples not to be troubled or afraid because he would shortly give them a spiritual power from “on high” that would enable them to do what he had done, and do even greater things (John 14:12). Jesus never expected his followers, then or now, to go out on their own. He knew we could not do it, at least not with any lasting effectiveness. Jesus knew that for us to have the same relational credibility he had on earth, we needed the same Spirit that was in him, at work in us too.

The Holy Spirit is the key. We can experience God's transforming love that connects us to others if we are empowered by the Holy Spirit through spiritual practices that include praying and "waiting on" the Spirit, just as the early disciples did. In our interview, Mindy Caliguire, president of Soul Care, said that the most important thing we can do for our relationships is "cultivate the capacity for prayer so that we can be connecting with God and others at the same time. Can you hear God's words of love and blessing and presence while you are speaking with someone? Can you silently express gratitude and even worship as you listen to a friend?"⁸ Mindy believes that "we can function on both levels at once when we learn different ways of praying that help connect us to God and others."

Throughout this book, we will suggest several of these different ways of praying, as well as other spiritual practices that can help us communicate the radical love of God through the power of the Holy Spirit, not just in a moment of planned or spontaneous inspiration, but always, in all our relationships. That's how others identify that we are followers of Christ—by our love (John 13:35, Matthew 7:20). As John Wesley preached, "They who 'walk after the Spirit,' are also led by him into all holiness of conversation. Their 'speech' is always in grace, seasoned with salt; with the love and fear of God. 'No corrupt communication comes out of their mouth, but only that which is good'; that which is 'to the use of edifying'; which is 'meet to minister grace to the hearers.'"⁹

Does this mean that to effectively connect with others, the only thing we need is the power of the Holy Spirit? That even if we are not up to par as communicators, we do not need any knowledge or training in actual communication skills because the Holy Spirit will take care of that too? In fact Jesus told his disciples, "For what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" (Matthew 10:19–20). It is important to note, however, that Jesus said this to those who had been with him daily and who had already been learning from him how to love and relate to others.

Two Sides, One Coin

We need the same kind of learning that Jesus' disciples had when they were with him—the kind that prepares us to be open to the Spirit communicating through us at any moment. In 1 Peter 3:15 (NIV), we are told to "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks

you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” Preparation implies training. When he wrote to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul used the analogy of training for a race to illustrate the importance of being intentional with our spiritual growth: “Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training” (1 Corinthians 9:25, NIV). Just as physical exercise is important for our bodies, spiritual exercises are important for our souls. These exercises, or spiritual practices, are anything we do regularly and intentionally with the goal of loving God and others more. In a sermon titled “On Pleasing All Men,” John Wesley said we are to “labour and pray . . . to be of a calm, dispassionate temper; gentle towards all men,” and that we are to “let the gentleness of your disposition appear in the whole tenor of your conversation.”¹⁰ Notice Wesley’s use of the word “labour.” We are to work at developing what Richard J. Foster, who writes extensively on our life with God, calls “holy habits”—again, all for the purpose of growing our love for God and others.

Like two sides of the same coin, both spiritual practices and communication practices are necessary for transforming relationships. As we mentioned in the Introduction, without good communication skills, even well-meaning followers of Jesus can fall short when it comes to cultivating effective relationships. But knowledge and skills training alone cannot transform relationships either—no matter how well backed by good communicators, good Christians, or good research—if the training is not infused with the power of the Holy Spirit. That’s why being spiritually prepared to relate to others is crucial too. As the Apostle Paul wrote, we can “speak with the tongues of mortals and of angels” and still lack the

spiritual dynamic of love that connects others to the transforming message and mission of Jesus (1 Corinthians 13:1). It is the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives that sustains our ability to love and live out the radical “one another” relational demands found throughout scripture.



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Our goal in this book is to show how relationships can be radically transformed through integrating communication practices with spiritual practices. We call this integration *spiritually charged communication*, which we define as *the ongoing, intentional practice of connecting with others in ways that are infused*

with the love of God and the power of the Holy Spirit—with the goal of helping God’s Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Engaging in spiritually charged communication requires that we learn from the one who did it best.

Connecting Through Jesus’ Threefold Ministry

In the first week of some of Mary’s communication classes, she asks students to find a passage from one of the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John—and tell the class what they observed about Jesus communicating in that particular passage. Students consistently notice that Jesus did not have one set way of connecting with others. Although Jesus’ purpose to proclaim the Kingdom of God remained the same, Jesus took on different roles as he interacted with others. How he connected depended on his audience and the particular situation. We must do likewise. That means we need to be aware of the different ways Jesus connected to others. Consequently, we have structured the book in accordance with Jesus’ threefold ministry: that of preaching, teaching, and healing. His preaching was such that his listeners testified that “never has anyone spoken like this!” (John 7:46). His teachings were so profound that they transcended Jesus’ own time and are still relevant and revolutionary today. The brightest philosophers and scientists marvel at what Jesus had to say. And when it came to healing, Jesus did something more than just cure people’s physical ailments. He healed people’s souls. Taking on these different roles may sound like a tall, even impossible, order, but Jesus himself said that his followers are called to do even “greater things” than he did (John 14:12).

If at this point you are starting to think that this book may not be for you because you don’t see yourself as a healer, teacher, or preacher, we ask you to keep reading. What we write is not meant only for those who have been identified with special gifts of healing, teaching, or preaching. Rather, our hope is that what we have to say is applicable to *all* who desire to follow Jesus. Although you may not see yourself as a healer in terms of having a gift for physical healing, our focus—on the *healing of souls*—is a call for everyone who wants to imitate Christ. It is meant for anyone who wants to go deeper in their relationships—those who crave friendships beyond surface talk; mothers and fathers who want in-depth connectedness with their children, and children who want the same; husbands and wives who want to relate in more profound ways than the romantic exchanges that first attracted them to each other; those who want to “bear one another’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2) and give comfort

to troubled or brokenhearted friends; and for those who need comforting themselves.

Our focus on *teaching* is in the context of the Great Commission, which requires disciples of Jesus to make other disciples through teaching them to observe all that Jesus has commanded (Matthew 28:16–20). That kind of teaching can be done through more formal classroom instruction and public speaking situations as well as more informally, in one-on-one teaching. Either way, the Great Commission calls all of Jesus’ disciples, past and present, to be teachers.

And finally, our focus on *preaching* is addressed in the context of proclaiming Jesus’ message and mission whenever appropriate—whether formally or informally in one-on-one conversations, groups, Bible studies, conferences, retreats, seminars, or as part of a church service.

Each chapter will address specific communication and spiritual practices that when combined produce spiritually charged communication. Please know that we are not suggesting that these particular practices are the only ones worth mentioning. There are numerous communication and spiritual practices that can help us connect like Jesus. We highlight those that have been especially meaningful in our lives and in the lives of people we know.

We start here with two practices that lay the foundation for the rest of the practices throughout the book.

Foundational Practices for Connecting Like Jesus

To connect like Jesus we need to be connected *to* Jesus. Jesus wants to be in intimate relationship with each one of us. If you have never been aware of God’s great love for you and how much God wants to be in



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relationship with *you*, or if you have lost sight of that truth in your life—no matter the reason—then spending time with Jesus can help you discover God’s immense love for you.

Prayer of the Soul

If you don’t know where to start in deeply connecting with Jesus, you can picture yourself in the shelter of God’s wings, or resting in Jesus’ arms. Or you could picture Jesus stretching out his arms to you, saying

“Please give your burdens to me—I will take them all, no matter how large or small.” Envision yourself giving everything to Jesus; see him gladly take your burdens and envelope you in his arms. As you rest in Jesus, accept his immense love for you deep in your soul. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you reassurance of God’s love for you, perhaps repeating these words from a worship song for your prayer: “Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.”¹¹

Learning About Jesus’ Life

Along with connecting to Jesus in prayer, so as to be empowered by the same Spirit that empowered Jesus, we also need to become more familiar with Jesus’ life. The best way to do that is to read the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. You could start with Matthew and

- Read one or two chapters a day until you go through all four Gospels.
- Listen to a recording of the Gospels on CD when you are driving, waiting in your car, or working in your kitchen.
- Put MP3 recordings on your iPod so that you can listen when you go for a walk, work around your house or apartment, or wait for an appointment.

Whenever you read or listen to the Gospels, we encourage you to ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you through the various ways in which Jesus connected to others.

Trinity Prayer

If you want to delve further into relationship with the Trinity, we suggest a prayer that may strike you as a little odd at first, but we ask that you consider trying it. Imagine yourself in conversation with the Trinity—God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. To do this, you can form an image in your mind of each of them. You could use whatever image you have when you think of the Holy Spirit or Jesus or God, as long as those images are loving ones instead of troublesome to you. If any are troublesome, such as a picture of God as Father when you have had problems with a father figure in your life, then you may want to hold off on this prayer until you experience each member of the Trinity genuinely loving you. If that is the case, we recommend going back and spending time in the first prayer we just suggested, as well as talking to a trusted spiritual mentor, pastor, or friend.

When you are ready to pray this second relationship prayer, imagine yourself sitting at a table with the Trinity, having a meal. If you are having trouble envisioning that scene, you could take an idea Mary's pastor, Mark Van Valin, introduced in church one day. He wanted the congregation to better understand the nature of the Christian life through focusing visually on *Holy Trinity*, the painting by Andrei Rublev (1415). In this painting, God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are sitting at a table with a golden chalice. Pastor Mark encouraged the congregation to meditate on Jesus coming into our life and "eating with us" and asked us to think about how these images might help us understand our Christian life and our relationship with Jesus. He then told us to reflect on the words of Jesus from Revelation 3:20: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me."

After reflecting on this verse and the scene at the table, have an actual conversation with the Trinity. You might ask questions that come to you, or tell them something that is on your mind; don't be hesitant to wait in silence and see if they have any comments or questions for you. Perhaps they will say things to one another and you will listen. Let the scene unfold and see what happens. After anywhere from a few to several minutes, you can tell them how good it was to eat with them.

Praying this prayer can give you a new or renewed appreciation for the relational aspect of the Trinity and how that relationship can feed your soul. It can also create a desire in you for better relationships with others.

Learning the "One Another" Verses

To build a more personal foundation for connecting like Jesus, we recommend becoming familiar with the "one another" verses in the Bible. You'll find them throughout the New Testament. We've also provided a list of several of them at the back of the book.¹² Because they are short, you could pick a few each week to commit to memory and reflect on throughout the week. The spiritual and communication practices throughout the book are intended to help you live out these verses in concrete ways in your relationships. To help you remember to think of the verses you have chosen for the week, you could post them where you can easily see them. If you have Facebook, you might consider putting them on your profile. (Then others can help you be accountable in trying to live them out!)

In our interview, Brian McLaren echoed the importance of having one of our initial spiritual practices focus on scripture: “There are a lot of ways to define spiritual practices, but one way is to say that it is to practice obeying scripture, like ‘Be kind to one another.’ Then the question is, ‘How do I practice kind words?’ Every social interaction is communicative, so every social action becomes a spiritual practice. I’m either practicing bad behavior or practicing Christlike behavior.”

Practicing Christlike behavior means learning how to obey scripture (such as the “one another” verses) in concrete ways, through solid communication practices empowered by the Spirit of God. The deliberate combination of the two is critical if we want to connect like Jesus. As Mindy Caliguire said in our interview, “The gravitational pull of daily life typically draws my attentiveness away from God, so that’s why I need to be intentional with these various practices.”

It is our hope that in the following chapters, you will discover how integrating several spiritual and communication practices results in a dynamic combination that can transform all our relationships and, in turn, transform the world.