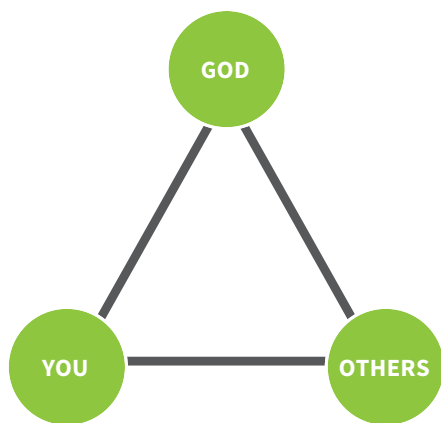


The Triangle



WHEN MARRIAGE IS DIFFICULT

What if you are in a marriage where it isn't two-way? If we view marriage as a contract, the contract becomes null and void and it's over. But covenantal love goes much deeper and taps into that surging well that comes from God, where we can love another despite them.

First love – the solid foundation on which the marriage rests, despite mistakes and hurtful words and behaviour. This is agape love, the covenant love that will see the marriage through hard times. This is the surging well of God flowing through you to your spouse that is sacrificial. Marriage is going to be hard work when you only have this.

Second love – friendship love. An analogy of these is a fruit cake. A fruit cake must have the right mix of fruit and nuts to be tasty. The fruit and nuts, while different, complement each other and help each other to taste good. This type of love means that you enjoy each other's company, you enjoy talking to each other and you like doing things together.

The triangle shape is the predominant shape associated with the C.U.R.E. step of Connect, but can be used across all steps.

The triangle shows us the ideal foundation and formation of any relationship.

The ideal connection is where there are three connections happening at the same time - yourself, God and another person. This can take the form of any kind of relationship – marriage, friendship, mentorship, and even within a group. The triangle is a strong shape, often best illustrated as the three-fold cord in marriage or in engineering terms.

This strength is evident when we go heart to heart with each other, with God. Relationships work at their best level when there are three involved. This is true even if the other person is not a Christian or acknowledging God. Because you have invited God into that relationship, it becomes more covenantal than contractual. It makes it easier to have proactive, intentional love rather reactive love (or no love at all!). Rather than reacting to someone's bad behaviour, keeping God at the centre of the relationship will help to keep us loving them. Even when it's hard to relate to someone else, we are keeping in contact with God, the ultimate referee, rather than reacting to the other person.

Perhaps the best example of this is Jesus, who as he hung dying on the cross, asked God to forgive those who were crucifying him. Because he was so in tune with God, he could draw from that strength to pour out love on others.

When we recognise God as the centre of our relationships, we can behave with intentionality and initiative. It may be helpful to think of a well of water surging from a central place right through you to someone else, not just in the good times, but particularly helpful in the bad times. This analogy may be particularly helpful for anyone who feels like they're being sucked dry in a particularly challenging relationship or friendship. It's not our own strength that helps us to persevere, but the strength that comes from the surging well.

Of course, relationships must be two-way for the most part. The closer someone else is to us, the more this must be true. For a relationship to be sustainable, it must be a two-way street.

WHEN OPPOSITES ATTRACT

If this is true, why are we often attracted to the opposite? In the beginning, the attraction of opposites is fun and exciting. If you can see that someone else has got what you haven't got, it may make you a fuller person. On one side of the coin, being different is beneficial and useful in a relationship.

But on the other side of the coin, the attraction can become repulsion. It is likely that if your differences are too great, you will notice both great excitement and great difficulty. Likewise, where people are very similar, the relationship is likely to be much easier but won't be as broad. That's why a good balance between fruit and nuts (similarities and differences) is so important.

HOW THE TRIANGLE WORKS IN A GROUP

Within a group setting, it is usually safer to be in small numbers (one on one or in twos or threes). Sometimes, it's enough to be there with the other person in God's presence. It might be praying to God for the other person. It can also be just sitting with the other person. God tells us that "where two or three are gathered, there I am." We know that God is with us, adding an extra dimension. You could suggest that you bring this to God together. Then you might pray with them, to simply be in the presence of God.

When thinking about connecting with other people, whether close people or acquaintances, God is always part of the triangle. Remember that the source of our love and energy comes from God, not from ourselves, and not the other person.

BE HONEST ABOUT YOUR SELF/OTHER-CENTREDNESS

All of us are sinful and therefore self/other-centered. Becoming more like Jesus means that we can shed this self/other-centeredness slowly over time (maybe never completely), but for many of us, putting ourselves or others first is almost instinctive. We live in a society that emphasises self-help and self-reliance (other cultures emphasise community help and community reliance). These are just words for self/other-centered. There is no place in the triangle for self/other-centredness, but there is room for loving self, helping others, and accepting help from others in a God-centred way.

The counter-cultural thing about the gospel is the deep relationship and honesty with ourselves and each other that being a follower of Jesus requires. We face our issues rather than faking, fleeing or fighting. When there is safety, we can face our issues together and this is true whether we're in joy or in pain.

SEEKING VIRTUAL INTIMACY

Because human beings were created to be in relationships, we sometimes seek intimacy in a variety of ways other than from the source, the surging well of God. This may provide short-term relief, but never offers satisfaction or contentment. Pornography is one example of this, especially when struggling with loneliness or rejection. Another is an imagined relationship fantasy. Addictions attempt to fill the void, whether that's alcohol, drugs, food or gambling etc.

One way to deal with addiction is with someone you trust, bringing it into God's presence. Shame will trap someone in addiction. Bringing it to God's presence can break the power of shame and guilt. God promises that he will exchange our shame and guilt for his love and forgiveness.

Don't make the mistake of thinking you can't bring anything to God. This is where faking our piety, pretending to be a perfect Christian makes it much harder to love other people well, and to love God.

WHAT TO DO WHEN SOMEONE WANTS TO REMAIN IN SIN

Someone who wishes to remain in sin is living in self or other-centeredness. On the one hand, covenantal love always welcomes back and always forgives, but covenantal love doesn't accept the sin. Matthew 18 gives a series of steps of what to do if it is occurring in the church, ultimately ending in the person not being a part of the church if they don't face the sin.

Sometimes, when a person is being abusive, they're putting themselves above everyone else. From a Biblical point of view, this is seen as a place of evil. Jesus stood against abusers, and was himself abused.

Jesus often stood on the response step in his ministry. He had no problems telling people how it was, on a basis of connection and understanding. There was one group of people Jesus didn't even try and walk the first two steps with – he already understood the hardened and proud way of the Pharisees and Sadducees. There was no connection between them and Jesus. However, Jesus responded very differently when he saw the need of others who were struggling. For example, when Jesus was with the woman at the well (John 4:1–42) he spent quite a time connecting with her, showing that he understood her, thus allowing her to make the response she needed to make. The bottom line of all this is to, "connect and understand before you respond!"

The triangle helps us connect with other people by focusing on God – not on the other person and not on ourselves. We link ourselves to the power and energy of God to love others the way he commands us. That's where radical, covenantal love comes from – not from within in, but from God.