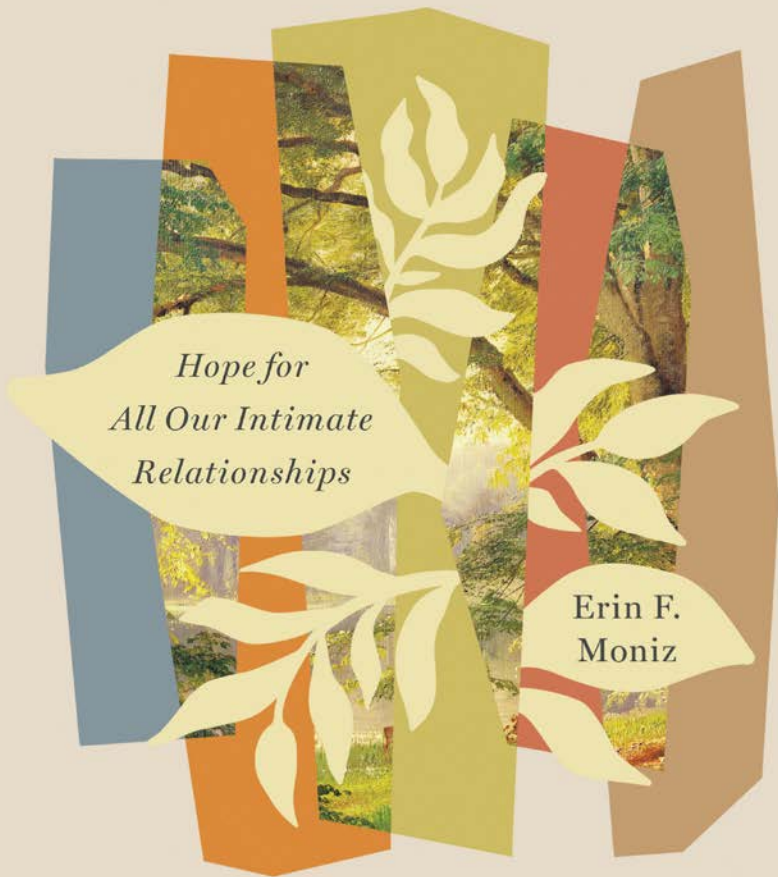


KNOWING AND



*Hope for
All Our Intimate
Relationships*

Erin F.
Moniz

BEING KNOWN



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Knowing and Being Known* by Erin F. Moniz

Copyright © 2025 by Erin Faith Moniz

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL

www.ivpress.com



Contents

Introduction: This Is Not Another Hot Take on Relationships 1

Part One: The Problem with Intimacy

- 1 Defining Intimate Relationships 9
- 2 How the Western World Co-opted Our Identities 25
- 3 How Christendom Baptized Secularization 44
- 4 Our Broken Compasses and the Role of Grace 65

Part Two: The Gospel of Intimacy

- 5 Discovering the Origins of Intimacy and Our Desires 83
- 6 Deceit, Sin, Fear, and Shame: Why We Can't Seem to Make Good Choices 100
- 7 Knowing and Being Known Through the Three Intimacy Motifs 115
- 8 Loneliness and the Location of God 135
- 9 The Gospel Community of Remembrance 151

Part Three: Where We Go from Here— Implications for the Local Church

- 10 Examining Intimacy in Our Gospel Communities 167
- 11 The Art of Friendship and the Family of God 185
- Epilogue: A Messy Hope 203
- Acknowledgments 209
- Questions for Reflection and Discussion 213
- Notes 219



Defining Intimate Relationships

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

JAMES 1:16-18

Perhaps to really know another person, you have to have a glimmer of how they experience the world. To really know someone, you have to know how they know you.

DAVID BROOKS

“I can live without sex, but I cannot live without intimacy.”

I was participating in a conference where a fellow college minister was speaking. But this talk was specifically about her commitment to a celibate life. When I heard these words from the stage, it was like someone hit the brakes too hard in my mind. “I can live without sex,” I repeated to myself, “but I cannot live without intimacy.”

Days, weeks, and even months after hearing this maxim, it swirled in my thoughts, each time bringing along with it the same two questions: “What are we talking about when we use the word *intimacy*? And why would intimacy be necessary?”

The beauty, or annoyance, of questions like these is that they operate much like a Rube Goldberg machine. One question hits the domino, that

flips the switch of another question, that launches the pencil into the cup that tips over and releases the toy car, that glides down the chute, and so on. For example, if it is true that intimacy is essential for life, why are we all so lonely? Can we live a full life without sex? Where does intimacy come from?

But if I can risk starting with an honest question I never thought to ask, until I was confronted with finding a theology of intimacy, my favorite one is this: *Should Christians be better than non-Christians at relationships, and why?*

When I asked this in my research, an overwhelming majority of responses from my emerging adults conceded that, yes, there should be something about the Christian faith that produces Christ-followers who are contributing to healthy, sustainable, flourishing relationships. Though many could not articulate what it is specifically about Christian teachings and practices that would make this happen, they agreed that the general premise of Christianity at the very least should orient Christians toward healthy relationships. But wait, there's more.

Despite the initial consensus, there was another consensus: that the best examples of healthy relationships in their lives were from non-Christians. In fact, my respondents lamented that some of the worst examples of relationships they knew of were relationships between so-called Christians. In the end, it was apparent that the lived experience of my emerging adults did not match their ideology about faith and relationships.

But you don't have to take my word for it. Research tracks divorce rates across faith traditions. Even with variables applied for church attendance, regular prayer, and frequency of Scripture reading, the stats between those who profess a Christian faith and those who do not are neck and neck in divorce and separation.¹ Even more disturbing is the research on the prevalence of domestic violence in highly religious households. The #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements bring their own illumination. My students are observing these disparities played out before their eyes.

Yet there is also research that supports how religious adherence and participation actually increases social capital and decreases loneliness.

Faith communities help us deal better with suffering and create valuable and unique support systems.² Just the other day, a student showed me a thread where five atheists were contemplating and affirming the merits of joining a church just to have the benefit of a larger supportive community to help with life's struggles.

As my emerging adults attested, it seems that Christians *should* be leading out as examples of healthy, intimate relationships, but something is off. In my search for answers, however, I was initially confronted with a problem about questions.

Are We Asking the Right Questions? Escaping the Quagmire

My students have no shortage of relationship questions that find their way into my pastoral care sessions. I'll bet that you come to these subjects with many questions of your own:

What do I do if no one wants to date me?

Does God care if I have sex with my girlfriend?

Why do my friends always hang out without me?

But over years of ministry, I noticed that I was encountering very similar questions, topics, and frustrations from my students about their relationship woes. Even with new generations coming to my office, something felt redundant, like I was stuck in a revolving door of topics that cycled through each group of emerging adults; I was always looking for fresh, insightful answers to the same questions. This caused me to pause and wonder: *instead of attempting to find better answers, perhaps we can start with better questions.*

I decided to look again at the topics being highlighted and questions being addressed in the resources my students were absorbing. A cursory look at the books they were reading and podcast episodes they were referencing revealed some patterns. Not only did these patterns mirror the discussion topics being brought into my office, but several resources were attempting to tackle the same issues that were the topics du jour when I was a teenager. My first notion was not to analyze what was being

highlighted, but rather why. Were my students gravitating toward similar topics, or is the content shaping these questions and answers for them . . . or both? All I knew was that with each month and year in student ministry, I noticed this more and more. I felt stuck in a quagmire of perpetual topics and frustrations over intimate relationships.

If you have felt this relentless sameness in sermon series or relationship talks occurring in Christendom, you are not alone. This did not happen by accident.

As it turns out, there is a historical precedent shaping our conversations and ideas about relationships. This hosts a pattern so longstanding that it makes sense why Christian content fell into this pattern without really realizing it.

For example, I grew up in evangelicalism at a time when purity culture was extreme, but much of what I learned had roots in a conversation that was much older. You see, purity culture, like many movements of its kind, sprouted in reaction to another movement—the sexual revolution of the 1960s and '70s. But even the sexual revolution did not exist in a vacuum. Historians help us see how the rise of fundamentalism in North American Christianity in the early to mid-twentieth century spurred on the reaction that was the sexual revolution. But when we look at Christian fundamentalism of the early twentieth century, we see it emerging as a strong reaction to the Enlightenment era.

This pattern has a lot we could unpack if I were a historian. But this implicit shaping of ideas happens in both church and society: the questions and topics that influence our current discourse about sex and relationships are deeply shaped by their reaction to prior movements. But if those movements were also shaped as reactions to other reactive movements, it narrows the frame of topics and moves the timeliest conversations to the top of the dialogue. Don't hear me saying that we don't need responses to timely questions that are raised in our lifetime: we do. But if we want to escape the quagmire of sameness in our questions around relationships, we need to dislodge ourselves from this reactionary

pattern. It is worth looking at how modern history has shaped our theology of intimacy and attempt to ask questions that our current content has not been asking. We should explore whether our questions and emphases are based on a pursuit of the gospel or shaped by reactions. Asking a better question can make all the difference.

But there is another, greater advantage to seeking different and better questions. This approach has opened a new level of discovery and clarity for my students.

In his book *How to Know a Person*, David Brooks writes about the art of asking good questions: “I’ve come to think of questioning as a moral practice. When you are asking a good question, you are adopting a posture of humility.”³ For those of us hoping to guide young people through the difficulties of intimate relationships, it is valuable to avoid jumping to answers and provide time to be curious about the questions. For example, I have had countless conversations about dating with my students, and they all want to know how to do it right and succeed—while pleasing God, of course. Instead of jumping into best practices, I begin to dig a bit: *Why do you want to date? What are you hoping for? What is the purpose of intimacy?*

Now before you rush out and begin lobbing these questions at emerging adults, I must advise that this is an organic process. Every person is different and, as Brooks observes, there is an art to asking questions that is part of really seeing and hearing another person. It is a posture of humility that should curb our urges to rush toward advice that is mostly focused on behavior-management. This is not an easy urge to curb since I want my students to make good choices and not dumb choices. But I want more for my students than just good behavior. I want them to know God and be known. I want them to have healthy relationships, but I also want them to become more mature Christians. As it turns out, despite all their consumption of Christian resources and the helpful relationship advice they glean, these habits do not evidence a path toward Christian growth and formation.

But this observation from Lauren Winner helped me reframe my own approach:

While one task of any community is to enforce its own codes when they are being violated, perhaps the prior task of the community is to make sense of the ethical codes that are being enforced. Here the community is not so much cop as storyteller, telling and re-telling the foundational stories of the community itself, sustaining the stories that make sense of the community's norms.⁴

To get out of our quagmire and enhance our approach to intimate relationships, we need to alter our methods (ask better questions) and our motives (be Storytellers). This does not necessarily mean we need to incorporate more stories into our instruction. This means that we need to be better at telling the Story. Not only are we stuck in a pattern of redundant, reactionary advice, but our attempts at guiding Christian relationships are not producing increasingly mature Christians. Our advice may be good and sound, but it is still often unmoored from the fundamentals of our faith. The modern approach aimed at helping Christian relationships lacks a grounding in the redemptive work of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

In our desire to see people behave well in relationships, we have failed to recognize the very foundations of our Christian faith that enable us to be better. As a result, we look more like behavior police than people who are caught up in the Story that tells us who God is, who we are, and why our intimate relationships matter.

So I began asking different questions and learning from what I received. To get the ball rolling, I wanted to know how my students defined intimacy.

It's Not Just About Sex (but Not Not About Sex)

So what is *intimacy*?

Bobbie, a twenty-one-year-old single woman, observed:

You can know someone and love someone but not necessarily be intimate. I think commitment is the word I'm looking for. There's

a commitment when you're intimate with someone that you both put effort [to make] sure that you're loving each other well . . . you put in energy to continue the relationship and do it well.

Something you should know about Bobbie is that I have never met another person more obsessed with the Kardashians. I know zero things about the Kardashians, but I have sat for hours with Bobbie while she enthusiastically tells me everything I would never want to know about this celebrity family. Her obsession with popular media like the Kardashians, however, hasn't erased her sense that intimacy is more than sex and superficiality.

I believe that many of us, whether we articulate it or not, sense that intimacy is more than just a synonym for sex. In fact, in this discussion of intimate relationships the following conditional statements apply:

- A relationship does not have to be sexual to be intimate.
- A relationship can be sexual and intimate.
- A relationship can be sexual and not intimate.

In other words, sex does not necessitate or exclude the presence of intimacy. In kind, the absence of a sexual relationship does not exclude anyone from intimacy.

This distinction of intimacy and sex is particularly important because of how sex is often elevated and centralized in our culture and faith contexts. This elevation is dangerous because of how human value and identity is ascribed in connection with sex. One of the lies being sold is that the greatest measure of someone's value is their sexual attraction: if someone wants to have sex with you or is attracted to you romantically, you have achieved some kind of threshold of human quality and value.

Underneath the media we consume, the conversations we have, and even the way we preach about relationships, there is an undercurrent that often assumes the importance and centrality of sexual attraction or activity; at the pinnacle of this spectrum is marriage. If someone is attracted to you, wants to have sex with you, and wants to make a long, singular commitment to you—wowzers! We are mere mortals in your shadow. You

are really somebody because you are somebody's somebody. If you want to test whether or not a person feels valued by their society or community based on their relationship status, just go chat with some Christians who are on the dating apps.

Because one's value and identity erroneously get equated with sex and attraction, I have observed a deficit of strong categories for how non-sexual relationships weigh in on value or identity. Equally damaging is how sex, attraction, and infatuation seem to be the main measures for value and identity in sexual relationships, particularly in marriages. Other categories of intimacy or togetherness may be considered sweet, but they are often mere accessories to the imperative of a sexual relationship.

But what if there was something powerful and altogether different that spoke to our value and identity that could be ascribed with or without sex? Can Christians possess a faith that *should* orient them toward healthy, sustainable, intimate relationships? Good news—there is an undercurrent of how our Christian faith reorients not only intimacy but one's value and identity.

The Fundamentals of Intimate Relationships

Intimacy, by definition, is a noun or state of being. But I do not want to define intimacy as though it exists in some kind of vacuum. Intimacy is relevant and valuable when it takes place in the context of relationship. In addition, I offer that intimacy is also action. There is a generative energy in what intimacy requires. Fortunately, I am not the first person to suggest that intimacy is a verb and not simply a noun.

Researchers have been studying the substance of relationships for quite some time. Some of the best insights we have on intimate relationships come from the study of human psychology and behavior that has been going on for decades at places like The Gottman Institute (TGI). In addition, there are volumes of peer-reviewed articles, studies, and books on what amounts to healthy intimacy. Like any field of scientific research, these studies have developed their own vocabulary

and frameworks. Being the nerd I am, it takes restraint to keep from plunging you all into the academic world of high versus low “minding,” “affective bonds,” or “social penetration theory” (yikes).⁵ So while my social science research colleagues might balk at my attempt to reduce all their years of research to one summarized list, it is invaluable for our purposes to have a lay person’s grasp of the fundamentals of healthy, sustainable, intimate relationships.

As a summary, there are three key fundamentals that every kind of intimate relationship needs for health and sustainability:

- Self-giving love
- Attention/curiosity
- Commitment

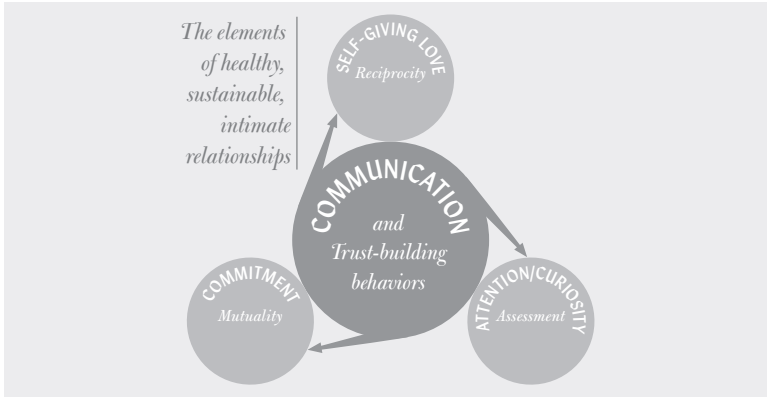
These three vary in their use and intensity depending on whether this is the start of a relationship or the development of a mature relationship. But to round out their value we should recognize some helpful sub-elements that give context to how these exhibit in a relationship:

- ***Self-giving love:*** The giving of oneself in a variety of ways.
 - *Reciprocity:* The back-and-forth commitment of giving and receiving. Includes personal investment and exchange of resources (social, material, personal, etc.).
- ***Attention/curiosity:*** An orientation toward and a seeking after the other at the outset, and sustained over the course of any relationship.
 - *Assessment/managing expectations (both together and as individuals):* Continually determining the health/success of the relationship.
- ***Commitment:*** Choosing to be with the other over and over again.
 - *Mutuality:* Mutual acceptance of and respect for one another.

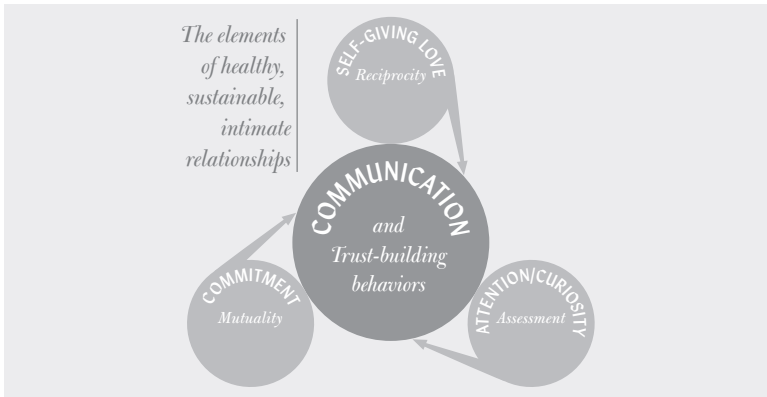
These elements are made possible by two other essential components:

- ***Communication***
- ***Trust-building behaviors***

The following graphics show how these elements work together. These variables are not singular but have a symbiotic relationship. One cannot simply attempt to love or commit to another person; they must maintain these by regular communication and behaviors that build trust. The core enables the fruition of the key elements:

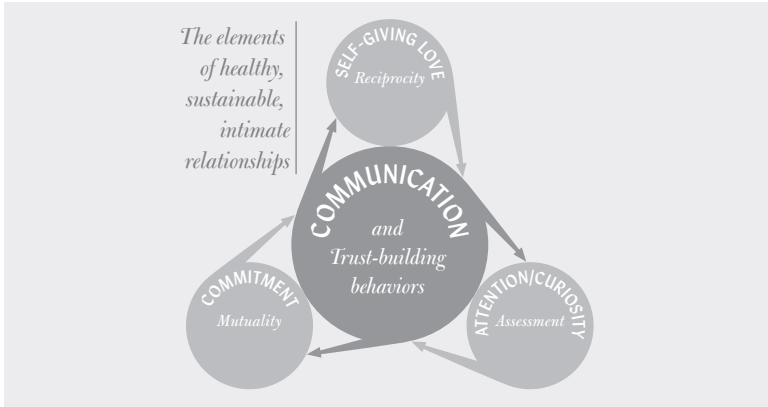


Additionally, the core is shaped by the success of the key elements. For example, a posture of reciprocity and self-giving love will affect and enhance how we communicate and build trust:



The elements function more like a dance than a flow chart. Each component is like a dance partner working in sync but giving and taking while coordinating their steps. This simplified cyclical relationship

demonstrates the postures, actions, and orientations that are required for a healthy, sustainable relationship:



These lay person's terms and groupings provide us with an accessible outline for healthy intimacy that aligns with the research. This graphic will be a guide as we journey through the exploration of knowing and being known.

To use this information well, there are some distinctions to consider between the variables of healthy relationships and true intimacy. First, our lives are full of all kinds of relationships that vary in their level of intimacy. Many of the relationships we navigate everyday are typically not intimate but economic. The gal at my favorite lunch spot knows my name and my regular order. She knows I won't want a drink because I always bring my water bottle. She knows I am a college chaplain and will inquire which book I have brought to read during lunch. It is a nice, familiar exchange that we have developed over time, but I would not call it intimate. Similarly, I can have a healthy relationship with my Uber driver. The nature of this healthy relationship is the understanding that I will pay and tip him, and he will get me to my destination without murdering me. Simple economics. The terms are clear, and we might even have a nice chat along the way.

Relationships with classmates, coworkers, neighbors, and dance moms all teeter on the edge of this threshold between economic and intimate.

But there is a way to isolate and define intimate relationships categorically. Intimate relationships tend to fall into any of these three categories: family, friendship, or romantic/sexual. That coworker might simply be someone you enjoy working with, but if you start dating, this changes the nature of your relationship. Similarly, if the neighbors start hosting game nights, inviting you to their kid's birthday party, and coming over to babysit in a pinch, you might detect some moves from being neighborly toward becoming friends.

As a short aside, I am aware that there is some debate on whether friendship is considered an “intimate” relationship. But in the course of this book, my plan is to convince you beyond doubt that friendships are and should be intimate, and that they are a fundamental way we experience intimacy.

So how do we know if a relationship is shifting from economic to intimate? The key is vulnerability. In fact, *the currency of intimacy is vulnerability*. You don't risk much when you spend an evening with the study group talking celebrity gossip and terrible professors. But once you start sharing something about yourself, something that allows you to be known and seen a little bit, the relationship has the opportunity to change. Not every relationship will become intimate just because you share parts of yourself, but a relationship cannot become intimate without vulnerability. In fact, for every intimate relationship there is an ongoing exchange of vulnerabilities that marks the depth and maturity of it. This is because handling vulnerabilities well is no small feat. This is where the social-science researchers help us out.

The postures, actions, and orientations listed earlier become the mechanisms by which we can develop and sustain deep, intimate relationships. Vulnerability is very risky. I often describe this exchange like giving someone ammunition. Every time we share a part of our self, whether it be information or shared experiences, it is like handing someone a bullet. We have all experienced the heartbreak when someone we trusted with information took those bullets, loaded, and fired them at us. If we follow the

tenets of healthy relationships given earlier, we can steward and care for each other's vulnerabilities in a mutual partnership of trust. It starts small.

But this is why our dearest and longest-standing relationships carry the potential for deep wounds. Family is often the most careless about this because we take for granted that these exchanges of vulnerabilities were often not our choice—they just happened because we were part of a family. This is why family, even family we are not necessarily close with, can hurt us the fastest and deepest. But this does not have to be the case.

With the life we have shared over nineteen years of marriage, my husband, Mike, and I have built up nuclear silos worth of ammunition on each other. Our relationship has been so intimate for so long that we have developed the means to destroy each other in ways others could not come close, but this reality does not trouble us in the least. Along the way, learning the art of trust building and taking intimacy seriously has allowed us to limit our target practice on each other. We are still broken people who will be selfish, dismissive, or ill-tempered, but the intimacy of being known and seen and loved by another person, in any relationship, is worth the work to keep our relationship as safe and healthy as possible.

Intimacy requires vulnerability, but to steward those vulnerabilities well, intimacy also requires shaping. Call it sanctification, character building, or just growing up, but along the way we have to change and become better for each other in order to fight back against the darkness within and without that would threaten our relationships. It is in relationships, particularly intimate relationships, where who we are and how we see our worth and the worth of others is developed.

The pursuit and cultivation of intimacy is the journey of any healthy, sustainable interpersonal relationship. From the first introduction all the way to a mature, developing relationship, intimacy begins as a hope that must mature and deepen in this exchange of vulnerabilities. The framework of self-giving love, attention/curiosity, and commitment, supported by communication and trust building, are the postures, actions, and orientations that facilitate a healthy journey of vulnerability so that

intimacy can deepen and be sustained. We learn about each other, spend time together, intertwine our lives, and navigate all the obstacles and land mines that threaten this beautiful connection. *The highest aim of intimacy is a generative closeness that refreshes and affirms one's identity and value while simultaneously doing the same for the other person.*

But . . . Jesus?

You might have noticed that this last section hasn't really mentioned God. This is intentional. Remember all those non-Christians who demonstrate healthy relationships? We cannot brush that off as though it were some kind of anomaly. It is important to recognize a common grace in the fundamentals of intimacy. While we recognize that all good gifts are from the Father of heavenly lights (Jas 1:17), we also acknowledge that there are some gifts that are given to all people without distinction. The ability to create healthy relationships is accessible to anyone who would apply the basic principles we have outlined. Self-giving love, attention/curiosity, and commitment are not exclusive to people of faith.

So does faith matter? What advantage is Christianity to our intimate relationships?

When I asked, "Should Christians be better at relationships than non-Christians? Why or why not?" the question exposed a paradox that pushed me deeper into how faith matters (or doesn't) in relationships.

I know all my research participants personally because they all came from some point on the timeline of my college chaplaincy. I know their stories, their spouses, their breakups, their families, and their secrets. I know which ones were wrestling with loneliness, or church trauma, or sexual identity. I ministered to them through their victories and defeats. Some of our relationships started because they came to my office with questions about relationships. Should I date my best friend? Is it possible to be redeemed after cheating on my girlfriend? What do I do if my parents won't follow the boundaries I've set? I lost my roommate and best friend when he found out I was queer—what should I do?

These are important questions, but to care for my participants in the way they needed to be cared for, I began with this other question. Because if faith doesn't really matter then we should just follow the social scientists' research and seek nice, healthy relationships based on these common sense, well-researched principles.

But if faith *does* matter, how does it matter? Jim was a student who came to my office only to tell me that he was in a great relationship with a Christian woman who loved Jesus and it was going well. They were maintaining physical boundaries and partnering together toward a God-honoring relationship. I was beginning to wonder why he had even made an appointment when he said, "So I'm dating a Christian and we are not sleeping together . . . now what?" Growing up in church meant Jim had learned the cardinal rules of Christian relationships: (1) date Christians and (2) don't have sex with them before marriage. But he felt short-changed: Is that it? Is that all his faith amounted to for his relationship?

I'm happy to confirm, brothers and sisters, that your Christian faith does indeed matter in this journey of intimacy. And it is not simply to give guardrails for behavior. In fact, it is about so much more than I ever considered.

Intimacy and the gospel of Christ have an indelible relationship that reframes not only our relationships and our questions, but our very identity. Before I began my research, deep down I believed that there was a powerful undercurrent churning beneath our best practices and moral behavior. Do we want healthy intimate relationships? Absolutely. But what if that is just the beginning? What if our desires, our friendships, our romances, our families, our aches and longings are woven into a cosmic rescue mission to restore our identity and worth against the fear, deceit, sin, and shame that plagues our lives?

So I invite you to bring your questions. They are welcome here. But we will seek to know if there are questions under the questions that point us, like signposts, to the Story that brings clarity and flourishing to our stories.

You can live without sex, but you cannot live without intimacy. This is the story I want to tell you. But this is not the story I was originally told, and perhaps it was not what you were told either. Before we unpack a theology of intimacy, we need to demythologize the narratives and liturgies about intimacy we have adopted from external influences. We must take a hard look at how we got here.

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/knowing-and-being-known