



BLURRING RELATIONSHIP & DISCIPLESHIP

(Source: Appendix C from *Escape*)

Blurring relationship with discipleship is not a new idea. John MacArthur addressed this issue decades earlier in his book *The Gospel According to Jesus*. While many authors currently promote *relationship salvation*, MacArthur encouraged his readers to embrace *lordship salvation*. Whether it is called *relationship salvation* or *lordship salvation*, the end result is the same. It is the mixing of justification and sanctification, or relationship and discipleship. “Believing in Christ” combined with “following after Christ” into a “relationship” gospel is nothing more than the renaming of the erroneous “faith-works” message.

“Believing in Christ for eternal life” is typically expressed to refer to “the establishment of a relationship with Christ.” While the term *relationship* is not a biblical term, it has historically been used to refer to being born again, relating to the conversion experience. Needless to say, when this term becomes an umbrella word inclusive of not only justification but also sanctification, salvation becomes the result of both faith and works. Consequently, a *relationship gospel* ignores the free-gift aspect of the salvation but absolutely requires following Christ in the works of discipleship.

Note: It is obvious that the “relationship” gospel has become a mainstream teaching. While God desires faithful obedience by those who follow after Him, it should be understood that both *discipleship* and *fellowship* are *relational concepts* but they certainly aren’t to be confused with the Christian’s positional standing before God at the new birth.

Due to the emphasis on a “relationship” gospel, clarity regarding (1) the combination of words with the suffix *-ship* and (2) the theological use of the term *relationship* is warranted.

Chart 1 gives examples of words that are combined with the suffix *-ship*. In each case, a relational condition and connection is established. Notice the “finer distinctions” when nouns are used with the suffix *-ship*: skill (craftsmanship), position (professorship), rank (ladyship), and quantity (readership).¹ The remaining examples fall within the “status” category, as follows:

Relationship refers to a “state of being related” in reference to items, objects, people, etc. (e.g., subject-verb relationship, landlord-tenant relationship, love-hate relationship, and good-or-bad relationship).² Nevertheless, in the 1940’s this term began to be used “specifically of romantic or sexual relationships.”³ Consequently, the current define-the-relationship (DTR) emphasis in dating is an outgrowth of the way the term *relationship* has transitioned. Obviously, the meanings of words change over time. However, the concern of this author is that other Christian writers now associate the term *relationship* with the

Relational- Connection Clarified

*Combination of Words
with the Suffix -Ship*

Relationship

1				
RELATIONAL CONNECTION				
Suffix <i>-Ship</i> Designates Connection				
WORD COMBINATION	DISTINCTION	RELATIONAL CONNECTION		CONCEPT
Craftsman + ship	Skill	worker	to ability	Craftsmanship
Professor + ship	Position	teacher	to school	Professorship
Lady + ship	Rank	dignitary	to title	Ladyship
Reader + ship	Quantity	readers	to author	Readership
Relation + ship	Status	item	to item	Relationship
Friend + ship	Status	friend	to friend	Friendship
Court + ship	Status	male	to female	Courtship
Fellow + ship	Status	believer	to believer	Fellowship
Disciple + ship	Status	learner	to teacher	Discipleship

Christian walk (sanctification). Even though never found in the New Testament, relationship has historically been used by the Church in reference to the new birth (justification). Consequently, justification and sanctification are being combined under a “relationship umbrella,” defined as both establishing a relationship and then growing in that relationship with Christ.

Friendship and *courtship* have both fallen out of favor to describe a growing affection and intimacy between people due to the popularity of the term *relationship*.

Fellowship in the New Testament, along with discipleship, is a word used to address the growing affection and intimacy between believers as well as between God and believers (sanctification). The following texts illustrate that fellowship should be preferred over relationship in reference to the Christian life, regarding God and other believers.

3 [W]hat we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have *fellowship* with us; and indeed our *fellowship* is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ...6 If we say that we have *fellowship* with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; 7 but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have *fellowship* with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:3, 6-7, emphasis added).

They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to *fellowship*, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42, emphasis added).

Discipleship, likewise, is a word used in the New Testament to address the growing intimacy between Christ and committed followers (sanctification). A disciple is a learner or follower of a teacher, hoping to become just like him. Notice that “discipleship” and “followership” would be biblically synonymous terms. Like fellowship, discipleship rather than relationship should be the preferred term used for sanctification, as the following texts illustrate.

A *pupil* [learner] is not above his *teacher*; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his *teacher* (Luke 6:40, emphasis mine).

Friendship&Courtship

Fellowship

Discipleship

And He was saying to *them* all, “If anyone wishes to *come after Me*, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me (Luke 9:23, emphasis mine).

26 If anyone *comes to Me*, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My *disciple*. **27** Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My *disciple* (Luke 14:26-27, emphasis added).

Theological Use of Relationship

How and why a term is used in theological discussions gives insight into the thrust of a person’s theological position. Consider the following factors that surround the use of the term *relationship*.

Customary Use of Relationship

The current, popular use of the term *relationship* describes the Christian walk. However, historically *relationship* has been used to indicate the union between a believer and God at salvation, which is exclusively a justification issue when the believer is declared righteous.

Improbable Use of Relationship

The use of *relationship* in conjunction with sanctification or the Christian walk is questionable since other biblical words are used in reference to sanctification as a growing acquaintance and intimacy with Christ: fellowship and discipleship. John emphasizes fellowship in 1 John 1:3-7, while Luke’s emphasis in Luke 9:23-25 and 14:26-27 is discipleship. In turn, Paul’s concern was for believers to “walk with respect to the Spirit” (Rom 8:4; Gal 5:16) and John’s use of the term *abiding* (John 15) likewise address a Christian’s communion with God (sanctification).

Predictable Use of Relationship

It is not surprising that those with certain theological traditions of salvation (e.g., Catholic’s faith + works position or Reformed’s faith, which includes works as proof of faith, position) would embrace the term *relationship* since it merges justification with sanctification. Such usage corresponds to their theological faith-works ideology.⁴

Theological Application of Relationship Can Lead to Abuse and Confusion

Since the term *relationship* is *not* used in the New Testament, its use in theology must not contradict the content of Scripture. To do so is to error and to say what the Scriptures doesn’t say—to teach what the Bible does not teach!

Rather than adopting the jargon of the day that mixes the historical meaning of *relationship* (justification) with discipleship (sanctification), we should default to using terms that will not confuse our readers or listeners. Shouldn’t we just use union and communion, salvation and discipleship, or justification and sanctification?



Endnotes

1. www.english.stackexchange.com—search, *Is there any relation between the suffix “-ship” and actual ships?*
2. www.etymonline.com—search, *Relationship*.
3. Ibid.
4. www.leaderquest.org—see article, *Theological Positions on Salvation*.