

# Do Your Friendships Live Out the Gospel?



by JONATHAN HOLMES

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We all know that even our best efforts at friendship can go wrong. We have all been burned, rejected, cast off, and ignored by people who we would like to know better. For most of us, there have even been times when our best efforts to be vulnerable and transparent only leave us more lonely and empty than before. Alas, deep and meaningful friendships don't come easily. They can be perplexing, frustrating, and discouraging. And that is true even within the church—and sometimes *especially* within the church.

As a pastor of a large church, I have talked with many people about friendship and encountered many questions about it. A lot of those conversations have come about because people are wondering if friendship should be different among Christians in the church. I have interacted with people as they wrestle with questions such as these:

- If a group of people are all saved and adopted into God's family, then why can it seem so hard to form open, honest, and genuine friendships in the church?
- Jesus said believers will be recognized by their love for one another. What is that supposed to look like? Whatever it is, why don't we see more of it?

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- What are realistic expectations for biblical friendship? What should I be hoping for, and how can I get there?

Other people ask about the personal side:

- None of my church friendships go below the surface, but we enjoy them anyway. What's wrong with just keeping the status quo?
- Should it concern me that there's still no one in my church who actually knows me well?
- Will I ever have people in my life who truly accept me for the mess that I am? Or is it unrealistic and selfish of me to want that?

As you have thought about your friendships, perhaps you have asked similar questions.

In this article, I will address these questions. I will do so by describing biblical friendship: what it is and what it is not, how it is formed, and what threatens it.<sup>1</sup> But as the first and most important step, be encouraged in your friendship with Jesus Christ. Our Savior died for you so he could call *you* a friend! He is *the* faithful friend. Ask him for the ability to understand biblical friendship better, and as a result to receive the grace and courage to pursue others with a glad heart.

Let me now present my definition for *biblical friendship*.

### **Beyond Fellowship: Biblical Friendship Defined**

Christian fellowship is a mark of the church. And though a strong culture of fellowship within a church can help minimize the sense of isolation faced by individual believers, I'd like to distinguish *Christian fellowship* from *biblical friendship*.

Fellowship is a truly wonderful thing. It is companionship and love among believers based on our unity in Christ. But though biblical friendships include fellowship, they have added depth through active investment in one another's lives. Here's an expanded version of the same idea:

Biblical friendship exists when two or more people, bound together by a common faith in Jesus Christ, pursue him and his kingdom with intentionality and vulnerability.

<sup>1</sup> If you are interested in delving into the topic of biblical friendship in greater detail, I have written a book on the subject. See *The Company We Keep: In Search of Biblical Friendships* (Cruciform Press: 2014).

Rather than serving as an end in itself, biblical friendship serves primarily to bring glory to Christ, who brought us into friendship with the Father. It is indispensable to the work of the gospel, and an essential element of what God created us for.

I hope you find that both inspiring and a little bit intimidating!

Perhaps it will help to know that the idea of biblical friendship arose within God himself. It is not a product of human agreement and alliance. The unity we can experience within biblical friendships is a reflected unity, an image of the Trinity's perfect and eternal relationship. True biblical friendship is embodied in the Trinity and, since we are made in God's image and brought into relationship with him through Christ, we, too, are empowered to have these friendships. Indeed, friendship is intended to be a spiritual discipline among God's people that brings glory to him.

Biblical friendship is not merely meant to enhance our individual lives, but to serve as an essential instrument in the accomplishment of God's purposes. Through these friendships, God purposes to display gospel unity in a divisive world. Believers in unity with one another mirror the Trinity, and that unity serves as a divine witness to the world. Thus, biblical friendships carry within them something greater and more awesome than you may have ever imagined. By demonstrating unity in a world characterized by division, they tell the story of the gospel in a way nothing else can. It is no longer just a story in an ancient book, but is lived out by the people who follow and serve Christ.

God also uses biblical friendships to show us (and the world) our need for his grace. He does not take us out of the world or insulate us from the troubles, challenges, and temptations we will face in these relationships. But to bear witness to the truth of the gospel, these friendships will not be perfect and they don't have to be. They just have to prove themselves genuine by enduring through the ups and downs, the successes and failures, and by depending on the everlasting hope and tangible spiritual change that Christ brings to living in a fallen world. With beautiful and brutal honesty, biblical friendships reflect the story of the life-changing and hope-giving gospel.

We will now turn to a discussion of what biblical friendship looks like in life lived.

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