

## GODLY FRIENDSHIP—5

### Friendship in Poetry and Song

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) encapsulated something of true friendship in his Sonnet CXVI (116):

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments. Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove:  
O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken . . .

There are echoes here of ‘A friend loves at all times’ (Prov. 17:17), ‘a true friend sticks closer than one’s nearest kin’ (Prov. 18:24), and ‘Love . . . bears all things . . . Love never ends’ (1 Cor. 13:4–8).

In my second year of studying English literature at university, we were asked to write two sonnets imitating the style of Shakespeare. My attempts, while true to the rhythm, rhyme and metrical structure of a Shakespearean sonnet, were anything but Shakespearean in their content, as our tutor noted, since they were not about the enduring nature of friendship, but its demise:

As when the sun, with shivering breezes vex’d,  
Withdrawing now his cheerful beams, retires,  
Two wayfarers converging, halt, perplex’d,  
And through the dusk direct enquiring eyes:  
Each one suspecting other for a foe,  
Each wary hand on apprehensive blade,  
Defiant, cautious, round each other go,  
Then, mute, recede into the chilly shade  
And pass. So fades our love with distant glance,  
Uncertain, testing looks, and alien stare  
Unspoken, awkward, causeless; love’s advance  
Is frozen into puzzled, dull despair.  
In foolish silence all affection ends;  
We part as strangers, though we met as friends.

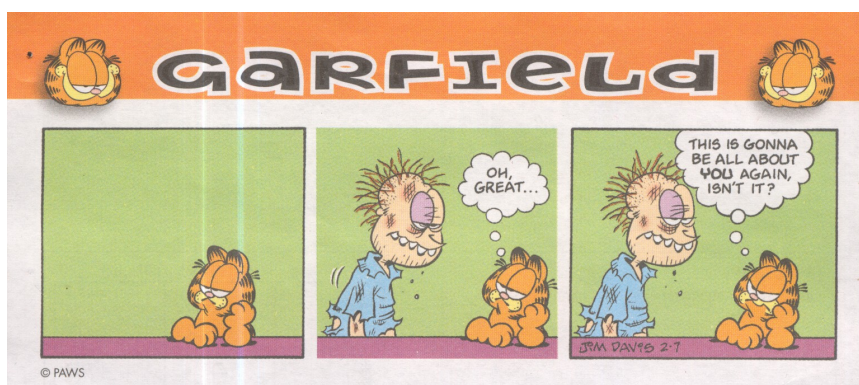
No doubt in writing this way I was adopting a certain ‘literary persona’, but perhaps it reflected something of my experience of love and friendship up to that point as a nineteen year-old; and I have seen something of that since. Especially the last line, ‘We part as strangers, though we met as friends’: it occurred to me recently if we regard ourselves as normal, then everyone else will appear a bit strange, since we are all rather different from each other. We all have our particular foibles and idiosyncrasies. Whereas, if we saw ourselves, along with everyone else, as somewhere on the strangeness spectrum, then we might appreciate more the fascinating diversity of human persons, and perhaps shuffle along better with each other.

My second sonnet investigated something of the reasons why friendships may fade: our inveterate preoccupation with self, and using the other person and our relationship with them to feed that fatal propensity:

I spoke my love to you with tones assured:  
The flattering words sound pleasing on my ears;  
My eyes have yours with loving gaze secured:  
That loving gaze me to myself endears;

In warm embrace my arms have held you close:  
That moment vanity is satisfied—  
My care and tenderness in you repose,  
There serving but to nurture my own pride.  
You are my lake—I gaze upon your features,  
Beside your waters resting, looking down:  
I do not seek to probe your hidden reaches,  
Nor plunge into your unplumb'd depths and drown;  
But in your surface scan my own reflection,  
Narcissus-like, adoring my perfection.

While there are always mutual benefits in friendship, sometimes we can be in relationship with another person almost wholly for our own sake rather than theirs. This cartoon gives an extreme example:



When someone is in great need, or in a counselling or mentoring situation, it is only right that it should be all about that person. But in friendship, it is good if we can take care to ensure that it is not just 'all about me'. As one person quipped: 'That's enough about me. Let's talk about you—what do *you* think about me?'

The perils of basing relationships on our own advantage—even if this is somehow mutual—are investigated in this song, set in the Australian outback:

*I'll pat your back, you pat mine,  
And we'll all be together  
And we'll be just fine.*

1. Fred's all right,  
And Jane's true blue,  
I'm O.K.,  
And so are you.  
Thick as thieves  
In the mulga scrub,  
If you win our approval  
You can join the club.

*I'll pat your back, you pat mine,  
And we'll all be together  
And we'll be just fine.*

2. The preacher-man came,  
He didn't belong—  
We all know the difference  
Between right and wrong—  
If he meets our requirements  
Then he's one of us,  
If he doesn't fit in  
Then he's missed the bus.

*I'll slap your back, you slap mine,  
And we'll all be together  
And we'll be just fine.*

3. The holy people  
When they came  
Thought they were different—  
They were just the same:  
Hymns are sung  
And meetings held  
So they're not contaminated  
By the outside world.

*I'll scratch your back, you scratch mine,  
And we'll all be together  
And we'll be just fine.*

4. God's O.K.  
'Cos He's my mate,  
But there's one thing  
That I hate:  
There's gonna be  
One hell of a fuss  
If He thinks He's any better  
Than one of us.

- I'll stroke your back, you stroke mine,  
And we'll all be together  
And we'll be just fine.*
5. Jesus came,  
Said 'That's not the way—  
God's got a Family  
That's here to stay.  
You must repent  
And believe in Me.'  
So we went out and hanged Him  
On a tree.
- I'll stab your back, you stab mine,  
And we'll all be together  
And we'll be just fine.*
6. Where does that leave us?  
On a limb  
All alone  
Till we come to Him.  
No one to tell us
- We're O.K.  
Till all our sins  
Are washed away.*
- Sins on your back, sins on mine,  
If only we were free of them  
Then we'd be fine.*
7. But what is this  
That I see now?  
Jesus is alive  
But I don't know how.  
It must be  
That God loves me  
And counts me in  
On His Family.
- So I love you, 'cos He loves me,  
And that's the way  
It was meant to be.*
- (*New Creation Hymn Book 283 © 1987 Martin Bleby.*)

This makes the point that any community or set of relationships based on self-advantage will ultimately boil down to my advantage against yours—me-against-you—to the death. The only way out of that is to see and believe that Jesus entered into that death—and the sin that causes it—with us and for us, to take it away, and to bring us together into a whole new way of relating, based on the way God operates, as the Family of God. This is the power, and the necessity, of having Christ present as the third party in any two-fold friendship.

### Friendship and Family

In the New Testament, fellow believers in Christ called each other 'friends' (as in Acts 4:23; 3 John 15—see 'Godly Friendship—4'). They more often called one another 'brethren' (brothers and sisters)—that is, family (see e.g. 1 Thess. 1:4; 2:1, 9, 11, 14, 17; 3:7; 4:1, 6, 9, 13; 5:1, 4, 12, 14, 25, 26, 27). It is worth noting that the apostle Paul extends these familial relationships even to those in the church 'who do not obey what I say in this letter'. Would we not say that any who disobey the written word of the apostle Paul are heretics? While Paul says to take note of such people, and 'have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed', he still says: 'Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers [NRSV; lit. 'brothers' (inclusive)—brothers and sisters]' (2 Thess. 3:14–15).

Familial relationships among those who belong to him were affirmed by Christ—'whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother' (Matt. 12:50)—and were forged at the cross, as when Jesus designated his mother Mary and loved disciple John as mother and son, all with the one Father (Matt. 23:9; John 20:17). So friendship and familial relationships overlap. Paul the apostle exhorts Timothy:

Do not speak harshly to an older man, but speak to him as to a father, to younger men as brothers, to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters—with absolute purity (1 Tim. 5:1–2).

In the Biblical morality, these relationships are all non-sexual (the only sexual relationship is to be between husband and wife—see Hebrews 13:4). Is it possible that such strong, close and non-threatening relationships might be found in the church today?

### Friendship in the Family of God

Sam Allberry is a minister of the gospel, who experiences same-sex attraction. At the time he came to realise this, at the end of high school, he also heard and responded to the message of the gospel, 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the gospel' (Mark 1:15):

God's message for gay people is the same as his message for everyone. *Repent and believe*. It is the same invitation to find fullness of life in God, the same offer of forgiveness and deep, wonderful, life-changing love . . . the message I have tried to live in the light of in the years since. Through it all, as someone who lives with homosexuality, I have found biblical Christianity to be a wonderful source of comfort and joy. God's word to me on this issue at times feels confusing and difficult. But nevertheless it is profoundly good. The gospel of Jesus is wonderful news to someone who experiences same-sex attraction.<sup>1</sup>

He is committed to what the Bible teaches regarding sexuality:

the more I look at the Bible, the more convinced I am that what it says about sexuality makes most sense in light of what it says in general about sex and marriage.<sup>2</sup>

From Genesis 1 and 2, affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 19:3–6 and Mark 7:20–23, he notes that 'Human Marriage is meant to reflect something of God's nature':

God's oneness is not sameness, as though the three persons of the Trinity were identical to one another.<sup>3</sup> It is unity in difference, not uniformity. And the same is true of the union of a man and a woman. There is this same kind of oneness that comes when male and female are united in this way.

The same is not true of gay sex. Two men or two women . . . cannot become one (*'ehad*) in the way that God is one and in the way that man and woman are one. They can have a union of sorts, but it is not of the kind that is uniquely possible with a heterosexual marriage.

This is not to say that commitment and faithfulness cannot be present in a gay relationship, or that they automatically exist in a heterosexual relationship just by virtue of the couple's heterosexuality . . . the issue is . . . the kind of union God gives to a man and a woman when they become physically one. It is complementarity that is fundamental to marriage.<sup>4</sup>

Referring to Ephesians 5:31–32, he sees that 'Human marriage . . . is also meant to reflect the grace that God shows to his people in Christ':

The church is not the same as Christ, and Christ is not the same as the church . . . Human marriage is a reflection of this supreme, heavenly marriage between Christ and his people . . . A man and a man, or a woman and a woman, cannot reflect the union of Christ and the church.<sup>5</sup>

Further study of Genesis 19, Leviticus 18 and 20, Romans 1:18–32, 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:9–10 leads him to the conclusion:

The consistent teaching of the Bible is clear: God forbids homosexual activity.<sup>6</sup>

For himself, Sam Allberry practises 'healthy singleness' and sexual abstinence. He sees both marriage and singleness as good gifts and means of God's blessing. He points out that marriage here is not ultimate—there are no marriages in the world to come (Matt. 22:30). So while marriage shows us the shape of the gospel, singleness shows us its all-sufficiency. Jesus never married, was never in a romantic relationship, and never had sex,<sup>7</sup> yet:

he was the most fully human and complete person who ever lived. His singleness in no way diminished his humanity. He was not less of a person for it. No one is. Marriage, for all its blessings, is not intrinsic to being whole and fully realised as a person.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Allberry, *Is God anti-gay? And other questions about homosexuality, the Bible and same-sex attraction*, thegoodbook company, www.thegoodbook.com.au, 2015, pp. 7–10.

<sup>2</sup> Allberry, *Is God anti-gay?* p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Sam Allberry has also written a book, *Connected: Living in the Light of the Trinity*.

<sup>4</sup> Allberry, *Is God anti-gay?* p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Allberry, *Is God anti-gay?* pp. 22–23.

<sup>6</sup> Allberry, *Is God anti-gay?* p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> Sam Allberry speaking at Bible College SA, 10 August 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Allberry, *Is God anti-gay?* p. 52.

Being reconciled to our Creator is what makes each of us fully human.<sup>9</sup>

What is relevant to our topic is what Sam Allberry has to say about friendship in the context of the church. From his own experience he says there is a harvest to be had in the LGBT+ community.<sup>10</sup> Paul the apostle said, 'Welcome one another . . . just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God' (Rom. 15:7). Hearing what Sam Allberry has to say about welcoming those of this particular people-group may help us to foster in better ways true friendship in the family of God with all groups of people. Homosexual Christians struggle particularly with loneliness, isolation, and sexual temptation,<sup>11</sup> but they are not the only ones. As another person in similar ministry, Wesley Hill, says: 'Other single people, gay or straight or anywhere in between, also need friendship. Married couples with and without children need it, couples who are happily and unhappily married need it, and divorced and widowed people need it too.'<sup>12</sup>

One newish Christian testifies: 'Walking into church on a Sunday is a bit like coming home. It's like walking into a family living room.'<sup>13</sup> Wesley Hill says: 'our churches may be exactly the right places to root our friendships and look for their deepening. And, in the process, our friendships may be spared from becoming ingrown and obsessively introspective.'<sup>14</sup> Sam Allberry and Wesley Hill make some helpful points:

- 'when a gay couple start coming to church, my priority for them is the same as for anyone else: to hear the gospel and experience the welcome of a Christian community'.
- 'I would rather start at the center and work outwards, than start at the edge and work in. The center is the death and resurrection of Christ. That is where God reveals himself most fully . . . This is what I most want people to know—for them to be bowled over by the God of the cross and resurrection. And, once they are gripped by this, to help them think through what trusting in this God will involve—what will need to be given over to him, including our messed-up sexuality.'<sup>15</sup>
- Don't duck the issue. The world will disciple people if we don't. Teach what God has said.<sup>16</sup>
- Make it easy and safe to talk about these things, free from hurtful comments and attitudes, 'having a culture of openness about the struggles and weaknesses we experience in general in the Christian life'. But also don't 'make this the main or only thing you talk about with them . . . It may reinforce the false idea that this is who they really are, and it may overlook other issues that they may need to talk about more. Sexuality may not be their greatest battle.' Sam Allberry says of himself: 'My own perception is that I struggle with greed much more than I do with sexual temptation'.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sam Allberry speaking at Bible College SA, 10 August 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Sam Allberry speaking at Bible College SA, 10 August 2017. With others he has a website with stories from a wide range of people who experience same-sex attraction, who show that it's possible to stay loyal to what the Bible says and to flourish in life, and resources to equip church leaders and members to understand and care for people in our churches who experience same-sex attraction: [www.livingout.org](http://www.livingout.org). Living Hope South Australia offers similar services to facilitate pastoral support for those who struggle with unwanted same-sex attraction, for families with members who identify as LGBT+, and for churches seeking to grow in this area of pastoral care: [www.livinghopesa.com.au](http://www.livinghopesa.com.au).

<sup>11</sup> Allberry, *Is God anti-gay?* pp. 54–56.

<sup>12</sup> Wesley Hill, *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian*, Baker Publishing Group, Kindle Edition, p. 107.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.livingout.org/stories/tracey>

<sup>14</sup> Hill, *Spiritual Friendship*, p. 108.

<sup>15</sup> Allberry, *Is God anti-gay?* pp. 68, 67. We are reminded of Paul's two-year stay in Ephesus, towards the end of which 'a number of those who practiced magic collected their books and burned them publicly' (Acts 19:19). Paul must have known about these practices for some time before, but relied on the work of the Lord and his gospel to impact and deal with it.

<sup>16</sup> Sam Allberry speaking at Bible College SA, 10 August 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Allberry, *Is God anti-gay?* pp. 68–69, 46.

- Celebrate and be at ease in a biblical understanding of our bodily-grounded maleness and femaleness.
- Honour and affirm singleness as a positive (we call single people ‘unmarried’, but we don’t call married people ‘unsingle!’).<sup>18</sup> Wesley Hill reports: ‘one of the church leaders was a single woman in her early forties. Hosting Sunday dinner parties was part of her regular routine . . . I never saw an even number of chairs around her table.’<sup>19</sup>
- ‘Remember that church is family . . . Nuclear families . . . are not designed to be self-contained. Those that open up their family life to others find that it is a great two-way blessing’.<sup>20</sup> ‘The pastor of my church and his wife, for instance, were known for regularly inviting any and all kinds of people, including many . . . whose families lived far away, to have Sunday dinner at their house and spend holidays with them (or even to live with them for extended periods of time).’<sup>21</sup>
- Be clear that sex and intimacy are not the same thing. The essence of friendship is found in John 15:12–17 (see ‘Godly Friendship—3’ pp. 4–5), which includes knowing and making oneself known. If the only form of intimacy available is illicit, people will take it. There are those who testify: ‘The search deep down behind sex in our society is the search for intimacy’, and ‘As a single person, it’s still really possible to have the intimacy and the love that you need.’ ‘Vibrant Christian communities where married couples and celibates live side by side in deep friendships could be a powerful countercultural sign, witnessing to the fact—almost unbelievable to many of our contemporaries—that clear limits set to the bodily expression of love do not keep one from finding happiness and fulfilment.’<sup>22</sup> Members of the LGBT+ community will be won by the church when they find themselves flourishing in church better than in the gay community, and can say, ‘I never had so many friends’.<sup>23</sup>
- Have available good pastoral care support groups: three or four times a year, prepared to listen and share, committed to the Bible’s teaching, with attention to confidentiality, under senior leadership.

But friendship in the church today will not be all a bed of roses, especially considering the impediments and barriers to friendship that we looked at earlier. Wesley Hill brings us back to Christ, and his costly, saving cross:

If our churches and communities learn to take friendship seriously as a genuine love worthy of honor and public recognition . . . the result will be, I trust, a diminishment of all our various forms of isolation and loneliness, but it won’t mean the simple cancellation of the price of suffering . . . Friendship, then—for Christians who take their cues from the arc of the scriptural story—lives with pain. There’s the daily pain of our efforts, as well as our failures, to love each other under the conditions of sin and weakness that we all experience, along with the resultant tensions, heartaches, and losses that such attempts can incur. And, additionally, there’s the final pain of surrendering the beloved friend, and surrendering oneself, to death, whether metaphorical or, eventually, literal. Friendship, in Christian terms, is all about giving up oneself for the sake of love and embracing the cost of such radical loyalty. Friendship, in a word, is cruciform. If Jesus is the ultimate author and exemplar of friendship, then we can’t fail to remember that his own practice of friendship ended with him strung up on an instrument of imperial torture, made helplessly vulnerable and wracked by grief. Friendship for him wasn’t an escape route from self-sacrifice. It was the other way around: self-sacrifice was precisely the way he enacted a life of friendship.<sup>24</sup>

It is in Christ that true friendship is to be found, and sustained.

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<sup>18</sup> Sam Alberry speaking at Bible College SA, 10 August 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Hill, *Spiritual Friendship*, p. 114.

<sup>20</sup> Alberry, *Is God anti-gay?* p. 70.

<sup>21</sup> Hill, *Spiritual Friendship*, p. 114.

<sup>22</sup> Brother John of Taizé, quoted in Hill, *Spiritual Friendship*, p. 105.

<sup>23</sup> Sam Alberry speaking at Bible College SA, 10 August 2017; David and Anne, <http://www.livingout.org>.

<sup>24</sup> Hill, *Spiritual Friendship*, pp. 100–101.