


# Ascend

The True Freedom Trust Magazine

Autumn 2024



## Cultivating Friendships

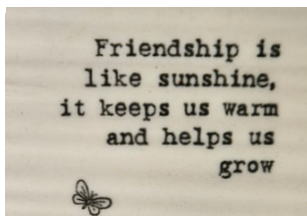


This edition of Ascend explores what it means to develop and deepen godly friendships as Christians. Single people, in particular, place a high value on meaningful friendships. In a culture that equates sexual activity to intimacy, we need to recapture the importance and satisfaction of non-sexual relationships.

We might have friends from all sorts of contexts, but Jem writes in her article that we should expect to form friendships within our church communities. Malcolm calls us to reflect on the purpose of our friendships: he reflects on the biblical call to make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20), and how this can lead to friendships along the way. And a number of contributors remind us that Jesus counts his followers as his "friends" (John 15:15). He is the ultimate friend who is always with us.

I hope that this magazine encourages each of us to pursue godly friendships in our lives.

**By Stuart, TFT Director**



## Growing through friendships

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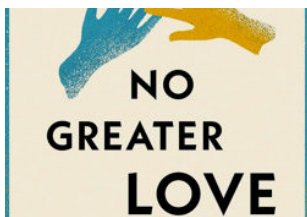
P considers friendships she has made and how they have helped her grow to be more like Christ. She also explores how we can develop meaningful friendships.



## Be a wise friend

Page 12

Rob helps us consider 4 areas where we can be better at friendship. He concludes that ultimate friendship is found in Jesus.



## Review: No Greater Love

Page 22

Lexie reviews this book by Rebecca McLaughlin on friendship. The book shares the author's own experiences of friendship and calls us to have a bigger vision on friendship.

# How about making disciples?

Jesus didn't say 'Go and make friends', but 'Go and make disciples'. Both are not mutually exclusive, and both should be part of the lives of those who follow Jesus. Yet it is making disciples that is the more pressing commission given to us by Jesus Christ. As you make disciples, you cannot help but make friends too.

Many years ago, I was a volunteer staff member at a Baptist Church in the north-east of England. The church went through a painful leadership transition, but what became evident was how the young people maintained their faith and momentum far better than the remainder of the church. This was primarily because the Youth Worker had invested time, not simply in providing activities and teaching for the young people, but in purposefully meeting the older teens in twos and threes alongside other youth leaders to 'make disciples'. This gave many of them an admirably strong and stable foundation of continuing faith, which was not rocked or dismantled by a church storm. It impressed me and was a testimony to the value of intentional disciple-making within a local church context.

There are several post-resurrection commissioning statements recorded in the gospels, but only in Matthew 28:18-20 does Jesus define the product - a disciple. Much more than a convert (though we thank God for such), a disciple is 'a work in progress' who faithfully

continues to follow and obey Christ. This person can then in turn be an example and mentor to others who need help to become more like Jesus. In a similar way, the apostle Paul encouraged Timothy to pass on gospel truths to reliable and exemplary believers who could then tutor others (2 Timothy 2:2). Jesus made disciples and so did Paul, who taught that through faith in Christ we are all presented as holy before God. Paul continued to work hard, through appropriate teaching and correction, to present believers as mature followers of Jesus. (Colossians 1:21-29)

## What is disciple making?

The most helpful definition I have seen is from Allen Hadidian ("Successful Discipling", Moody Press):

*"Discipling others is the process by which a Christian with a life worth emulating commits himself for an extended period of time to a few individuals who have been won to Christ, the purpose being to aid and guide their growth to maturity and equip them to reproduce themselves in a third spiritual generation."*

Such disciple-making suggests a definite pouring of guidance and support from one vessel into others - this is not a casual matter: it is an intentional activity, not to be sidelined or ignored. Many of us thank God for 'platform ministries', especially teaching gifts, that have built us up in our faith. When these have been supplemented by

personal prayer and Bible study we have, by God's grace, experienced spiritual growth. However, for myself and maybe you too, I have known growth spurts, when a more mature believer has invested energy and time for a season, to pour some wisdom and truth into my life. Bible studies or a Christian book to read together and then discuss have provided a backbone to these meetings, but the primary focus of my mentor was on patiently shaping my life priorities, attitudes and actions, rather than completing any particular programme. This has resulted in lifelong friendships that were relaxed and purposeful. I am so grateful to several men friends who have served Christ and me in such a way - some of them now have entered their eternal reward.

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**“As you make disciples,  
you cannot help but make  
friends too”**

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### **Can any Christian make disciples?**

Significant ministry roles such as apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers have been given to the church by the ascended Christ to equip, prepare and build up believers to maturity and unity (Ephesians 4:11-13). But we should not leave disciple-making to a relatively few prominent, prophetic or pastoral ministries, however gifted they may be.

AW Tozer said that *“Only a disciple can make a disciple”* which is true, but let's not too quickly disqualify ourselves from our Great

Commission responsibility to invest time and energy into obeying Christ by serving others this way.

These days, the biggest challenge is finding time to intentionally make disciples rather than considering “Am I good enough?” If you are a faithful follower of Christ who humbly recognises your need to become more like Him, then making disciples can be a means by which you, and not just those you help, can grow in spiritual maturity. Can you chat easily to others? Are you a good listener? Do you have a reasonable knowledge and grasp of Christian truths? Are you patient and gracious? If so, you will hopefully find joy and blessing as you obey Christ's commission. It can also help you develop interpersonal and pastoral skills and be a provocative challenge for you to be a good example to those you are discipling. Making disciples provides a way by which many, who may not be seen “upfront”, build the church and advance Christ's kingdom.

Clearly, making disciples implies a context and season when a more mature believer helps and encourages less mature believers, but it has nothing to do with control, intimidation or manipulation. It is more about when those with a life worth emulating serve fellow believers in a loving, patient and voluntary context, where all can feel safe and accountable. That is why it is good for pastors and elders of local churches to also have some oversight of (and input into) these settings. It is also good to agree on



a time frame, rather than make it open-ended - maybe meet up about ten times for an hour or so at a time, and in a variety of venues? Consider studying a gospel or an appropriate book that covers the foundational matters of discipleship.

If you want to make disciples, first, be accountable to other mature believers and leaders about your desire to mentor others and take their questions or concerns seriously. Keep them updated on progress too. Secondly, make sure you can find space in your diary to take on this responsible task and commitment. Thirdly, examine your own motives - remember, we recruit to Jesus, not to ourselves - we are seeking to build His kingdom and not our own. Fourthly, don't rush into this - prayerfully consider younger believers whom you might like to disciple, initially looking for those who are sincerely seeking to grow in their faith, and not just based on compatibility or ability. Fifthly, be realistic about how many you can disciple at once, bearing in mind that even Jesus struggled coaching twelve men. Start with two or three. Finally, approach individuals with the invite to participate in this specific and purposeful activity for a set season. Be enthusiastic, but not 'over the top'. Share the potential goals and benefits of such a meaningful relationship. Be clear about the commitment expected from them. Then encourage them to go away to consider and pray about your invitation before responding.

### Are we making disciples?

Though we often hear the Matthew 28 commission quoted within church and ministry contexts, relatively few churches or ministries have disciple-making as a backbone activity. Having been in full-time church leadership for several decades, I do sympathise with leaders who are expected to deliver teaching and pastoral care, children and youth ministries, plus social action and midweek home groups. Alpha and Freedom in Christ courses, for example, do provide a very helpful and fruitful discipling context for a season, but can be primarily focused on the course content rather than the life content of participants. They can often fail at the point of follow through into application.

*“Teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you”* (Matthew 28:20) seems to imply a deeper investment than providing Bible teaching and discussion groups; it sounds more like a cooperative and volitional ‘follow the life’ input into new and less mature believers. Baptism is commanded, as a public confession of belief in Christ as Saviour and of being identified with His church, but Jesus’ commission doesn’t end there. He adds that obedience to His commands is also expected of those who have been baptised. So, what about obeying Him by making disciples?

*Malcolm retired from full-time church leadership seven years ago, but hasn't crested the hill yet. Pressing on!*



## Book Review

“Transforming Friendship: Investing in the next generation. Lessons from John Stott & others.” By John Wyatt  
£9.99 paperback, 176 pages, IVP

As someone who neglects reading books, I am so glad that I have read this one. I believe it will be a game-changer in my friendships.

John Wyatt starts with a brief history of friendship and shows us what has happened to it in our generation. We look at the examples of friendship in the Bible and how friendship is lauded in the Book of Proverbs. Clearly, it is an issue that is important to God; amazingly, he invites us to be friends with Him!

Jesus models friendship for us by sharing life intimately with His disciples for three years, subverting the normal rabbi/disciple relationship. Paul copies Jesus in this by identifying and nurturing potential leaders to carry the gospel into the next generation. Wyatt uses his own experience of being befriended by John Stott to show how Stott mirrored Paul’s example in the 20th century. After asking others how they would describe the nature of this friendship, Wyatt came up with the term “Gospel-crafted friendships.” Though they were mutually beneficial and enjoyable, they were crafted and shaped by the transformative power of the Gospel, the Gospel transforming us into what God intended us to be.

These friendships should be characterised by truth, no deception or lies, purpose, seeking the good of the other and sharing, as well as being prepared to be vulnerable and showing humility i.e. not lording it over the other.

In view of the importance of such Gospel friendships, it is remarkable that not more has been written about it in Christian books. The term ‘friend’ has been de-valued and close intimate friendships outside marriage and the family are viewed with suspicion in our present sexualised society. Wyatt places much of the blame for this on Marx, Freud and Nietzsche - the three ‘masters of suspicion’. The world is unwilling now to accept that relationships are what they appear to be. There must be a sexual or power motive in them.

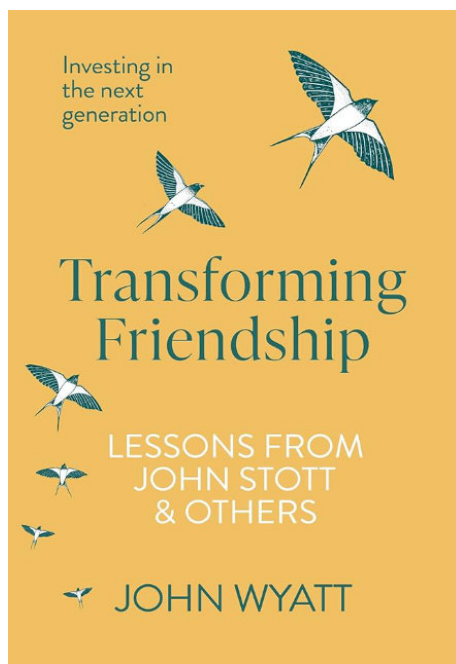
Since such friendships, particularly intergenerational ones, are so strategic for the Gospel message, it is not surprising that Satan seeks to prevent them. Thus, there have been recent well publicised cases of Christian intergenerational relationships that had damaging abusive elements. Wyatt says that instead of retreating, our aim must be to reimagine how these precious and transformative friendships can flourish. What the above cases had in common is the lack of peer

accountability. The 'Rules of the Road' of the intimate friendships being proposed (as opposed to mentoring and discipling relationships) are that they should be non-sexual, non-abusive (non-coercive and non-manipulative) and non-exclusive. We should make each other aware of this.

In order to emphasise the importance of such friendships, Wyatt heads a chapter "Simeon, Newton and Wilberforce - the lasting impact of friendship among evangelicals." These men had a heart for encouraging others in a humble self-sacrificing way. Newton founded an informal group of evangelical friends, which included Charles Simeon, with an eye to the creative potential of these friendships for the Kingdom. When the young MP Wilberforce visited his boyhood hero John Newton, in a similar secret way as Nicodemus to Jesus, Newton told him he had been praying for him daily for the last sixteen years, since meeting him as a child in his congregation. The friendship that followed resulted in Wilberforce not giving up politics for church ministry, but using his political position for the good of Christ's church and the nation. With Newton's encouragement, Wilberforce developed a network of friends and political sympathisers. One of their number called this a 'chummery', with Holy Trinity, Clapham as their spiritual centre. Friendship was of the utmost importance, as they followed the example of the early Jerusalem Church who *'...had all things in common.'* (Acts 2:44)

In the light of this I ask myself how this book will impact my own friendships, many of which are with people younger than myself. It is said that every Christian needs a Timothy, a Barnabas (encourager) and a Paul. So, I should be praying more regularly for my friends, encouraging them in their Christian walk, putting aside time for them, arranging a meal together or going for a walk and being prepared to share my own vulnerability and weaknesses.

*Timothy is single but, with a four-bedroom house, shares it with other Christian men who tend to be about 30 years old. He partners with an Anglican Bishop in Kenya, sponsoring the education and mentoring of youths from a poor background, many lacking a father. He visits once a year and can keep in touch with students online.*





Friendship is  
like sunshine,  
it keeps us warm  
and helps us  
grow



## Growing through friendships

I have a plaque in my kitchen given by a friend with the quote: *"Friendship is like sunshine, it keeps us warm and helps us grow."* Certainly, friendship has been described as many things, from a garden of flowers, to chocolates, to a ship believe it or not! (*"There are big ships and small ships but the best ship of them all is friendship"* - Anon.)

Living in multiple countries meant moving to different schools. I know what being the new kid in class is like. There were periods of my life where I didn't feel like I belonged, and retreated into a world of imagination where books were my closest friend. However, even when it did not feel that way for a season, looking back, I can see that I have been blessed greatly with friends in all stages of my life. This is in part due to my personality where I enjoy spending time with people and easily find connections with those around me, and in part due to the grace of God and the church family I have in Christ.

I have been reflecting lately on my friendships, taking stock of how

many are deep ones or surface level. Some people's lives can be seen to have many social interactions (lots of followers and likes on social media), but have little or no depth when the going gets tough. Not all our friendships need to be frequent and deep – there is a place for occasional friends, casual catch ups, once-a-year coffee and acquaintances (and those sparse interactions can be deep). However, there is a place for consistent close and deep friendships too. Most of us should have one, two or three friends who really know us well – often better than ourselves. The inner circle to sharpen us (Proverbs 27:17), to deliver blows and wounds with firm gentleness and be there to clean us up (Proverbs 27:5-6), to love and hold us accountable even at great cost to themselves (1 Samuel 20) and to walk with us through thick and thin (Proverbs 18:24). Even Jesus did not do it all alone. He needed an inner circle of friends to share the most vital experiences and battles He went through and to uplift him in prayer.



## Breadth of friendships

Casting out to a wider network of friends, I find myself with friends from all ages, diversity and backgrounds. I am fortunate to have friends aged from under 8 to over 80! And they are such a blessing to me in so many ways. I am a mentor and friend to some. I'm also mentored and cared by others, where I benefit from differences in perspective, years of wisdom and maturity. Indeed, as Solomon so aptly puts it: *"As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another."* (Proverbs 27:17) And *"Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."* (Ecclesiastes 4:12)

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**"I can see that I have been blessed greatly with friends in all stages of my life"**

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As I sit here writing, I am just recovering from a bout of COVID. Even before confirming it was COVID, I have a lovely friend who has called me daily to check up on me and make sure I'm not working when I should be resting (which I really needed, as I have a tendency to always be on the move). Within moments of friends knowing that I was taken ill, I had one friend declare that she was bringing me food the next day and another friend who called and said: *"I know you will probably feel down and alone at home, but know that you are not alone and that we are all here around you; we care for you. Just call us if you need anything and I will come around with some groceries for you later today."* I

may be physically down, but I am emotionally and spiritually refreshed by the love I have received over the past few days. 'Tis the blessing of friends!

## Depth of friendships

As I reflect on my deep, consistent friendships, I have in mind three friends in my life that have impacted me in the development of my character and walk with God. Firstly, the one who knows me the most is my sister. She has lived with me for decades, seen all my flaws and faults, and yet bears it all with love and gentleness. She is often my accountability and voice of reason.

The second friend is from my childhood. She conversely has never lived with me and we have rarely been in the same location together. We have had a long-distance friendship from before we had email addresses! Our lines of communication have adapted from letter writing to emails to instant messaging chats (and we still send postcards on our travels). Our personalities are different, but our love for Jesus is shared; we seek to honour Him in all we do and to hold each other accountable in that.

My third close friend is one who has come into my life in the past couple of years. We naturally "clicked", although we are each other's opposites and are in total contrast. I value her perception in situations and she provides me with a view that I would not naturally think of. God has used her to soften my rough edges and mellow me out (a little) and she has likewise said that God has used me to teach her life lessons as well.

All my closest friends are Christians, with an active walk with the Lord. You may question if yours need to be as well. What I will say is that your close friends will ultimately influence you the most and impact on your heart and walk with Jesus. I have found that there is an element with my non-Christian friends where we cannot connect, because in spirit we are not on the same plane. That, for me, is a barrier to real in-depth spiritual conversations and I don't receive the encouragement to grow closer to Jesus from them.

### **Reflecting and building friendships**

If you are reading this and reflecting on your friendships thinking, “*I don't think I have a single close friendship or someone I can really confide in*”, don't despair! Jesus sees you and knows exactly how you are feeling. Speak to Him, cultivate that deep friendship with Him, and ask Him to bring along people in your life who may be able to fill those close friendship needs in a healthy way. He has often done that for me and brought friends into my life who I wasn't looking for or expecting; He has used the friendship to teach both of us how better to love and serve one another and those around us.

I am, by far, not the perfect friend. On the contrary, I am often the more imperfect friend in the friendship. My actions and my words can end up hurting others unintentionally. But what I have experienced is that, where both friends are committed to the friendship, we can work out most things with a big dollop of forgiveness, as Proverbs 17:9 puts it:

*“Whoever would foster love covers over an offense, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.”* It takes restraint and self-control to lay down your rights for the other (even when you are so sure that you are right). In doing so, rather than being a pushover, you are actually reflecting Jesus in that servant-hearted attitude, which paradoxically works to grow the fruit of the Spirit in us. I am speaking here about good Christian friendships – if you have been pulled into an unhealthy, emotionally dependent or abusive relationship, this is a different situation, where it would be helpful for you to seek external counsel.

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### **“The ultimate friendship of all is the friendship of Jesus Christ”**

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Particularly for those with same-sex attractions, it can be scary to enter a deep friendship, as we can be afraid that these friendships may end up leading to us being emotionally dependent and feelings of desire can develop. Satan certainly uses this to either tempt us into lustful thoughts or for us to withdraw from any meaningful friendship for fear of being hurt. For those who have experienced this cycle of unhealthy dependency, the best thing is being aware of the potential issue, and to submit this under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Let Him carry your burdens. Having a couple of friends in a friendship group may be a better way to start out, holding accountability for each other. True friends will bear each other's

burdens, even when one doesn't feel like they can continue on the journey.

The ultimate friendship of all is the friendship of Jesus Christ. He has been the most constant friend to me and with Him I find peace, security and a confidant who knows me better than myself. I pray that as you reflect on your friendships, you will think of ways to strengthen your friendship with Jesus. Jesus truly knows what friendship is – He laid down His life for you so that you could be friends with Him forever (John 15:13). May you find in Christ your truest friend of all in this journey of life.

*P enjoys spending time with her friends, be it hiking up a mountain or around a lake, baking cookies in the oven, having a lazy afternoon tea in the garden or outdoor ice-skating in an overpriced crowded ice-rink in central London for Christmas. She also enjoys the occasional phone call chat from faraway friends and daily quiet times with her life-long closest friend, Jesus.*

## Help support our work

*Each year we are supported by many of our members and others who, out of their generosity, help us provide resources, pastoral care and attend events or speaking engagements. Would you prayerfully consider whether or not you could give regularly towards the work of TFT? Regular giving helps us to plan and budget well, knowing how much money we may expect to receive. Do also let us know if you are a tax payer and we can claim Gift Aid on the money you give. If you would like to donate please visit the link below or call 0151 653 0773*

[truefreedomtrust.co.uk/donate](http://truefreedomtrust.co.uk/donate)



## Be a wise friend

**D**uring my Curate training, the higher-ups thought it would be a good idea to make me (I use that word deliberately) do a placement in a school. To be fair, it was indeed a good idea. The thinking is that it helps Assistant Curates (assistant ministers) understand the inner workings of Church of England schools. When I wasn't accidentally giving the wrong answers to Key Stage Two maths questions (that was humbling!), I was observing just how easy it was for the children to make friends. No drama. No angst. Friendship was just so natural for them.

### Lacking true friendship

Perhaps it all gets that little more challenging as we grow up. But from the youngest to the oldest, friendships are vital. However, in our culture, wouldn't you agree that friendship is a neglected aspect of life? Friendships are seen by many as a secondary concern, especially when compared to the focus given to romantic relationships in our society.

Unfortunately, I think the undervaluing of friendship happens in many churches too. Words from the Rich Mullins song "Elijah" often hit me, "*There's people been friendly, but they'd never be your friends. Sometimes this has bent me to the ground.*" Those lyrics transport me to many conversations at TFT conferences. Sure, at church people can be friendly enough (at least at times), but so often the interactions stall there.

### Better friendship

What can we do when we feel those words of the song are true of our experience? Well, when I have felt that, during my better moments, I have found it helpful to try to put the onus on myself and simply try to be a better friend for others. The book of Proverbs provides at least four ways we can be inspired to do that:

#### 1) Be a fearful friend

*"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight." (Proverbs 9:10)*



I wonder, when did you last see an expert at work? The sewer who can thread a needle instantly. The musicians who make what is complex look so natural. Well, the word for wisdom used in Proverbs can carry the meaning of skill. You see, the dichotomy between knowledge and practice is unknown in the book of Proverbs. Biblical wisdom invites us to become experts who demonstrate our skill in relationships, conversations and our understanding of the world. In other words, to be wise, biblically speaking, is to become skilful experts at living life. To be wise is to live life well so that we give God glory.

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## “Many churches undervalue friendship”

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So, where does this skill come from? Well, the very beginning of wisdom, its initial seed that helps it to grow, is the fear of the Lord. To reverence God, to fear dishonouring him, to put him first, that is how we start to live wisely.

To understand the proverbs on friendship, we must look at them through the lens of the fear of God. When we put our relationship with Him first, all the other relationships can be placed in their right order.

This changes everything. For example, a friend who fears God is one that doesn't make the relationship about their desire, their emotional fix, their control. If the root of being an overly burdensome and emotionally dependent friend

is idolatry, then surely the remedy is to cultivate the fear of the Lord in our own hearts.

### 2) Be a loving friend

*“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.” (Proverbs 17:17)*

The scriptures view friendship so highly that they are considered somewhat synonymous to kin relations. What is more, this friend loves at all times. Fairweather friends are not in mind here. It is proverbs like this one, that make me think friendship can be so great they don't have to be artificially made, more like other relationships, such as marriage. The Bible's presentation of friendship is so beautiful that friendship doesn't need to be turned into anything different.

Perhaps the desire to potentially add to friendship or fearing that friendship would not be enough for us without a sinful sexual relationship, stems from never really having experienced the Bible's description of true friendship.

When we feel let down by others, it's worth challenging ourselves with this proverb. How often do we fail to love others? How often do we put our comfort and desire before what would be good for them? If the answer is more often than we'd like to admit, then there's work to be done in becoming that friend who loves at all times, through good and bad, through thick and thin.

### 3) Be a loyal friend

*“A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” (Proverbs 18:24)*

Alongside love, loyalty is a mark of true friendship. This loyalty is so great that in this proverb, a friend is not just considered on par with kin, but even greater.

Of course, the parallelism in Proverbs sheds light on the saying’s meaning. Here, there is a comparison deployed in the parallelism. The comparison is between many companions and a single friend. What’s the point of having many companions and acquaintances? When things are tough, those relationships can’t be relied upon. The wise know that one true friend is more desirable than countless companions who won’t stick around during tough times. But in comparison to the one with many surface level relationships, there is a friend who sticks closer than even a brother.

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**“There needs to be a level of intentionality in cultivating friendships”**

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Throughout Proverbs, I think it is assumed the potential number of these loving, loyal relationships will be relatively small. Indeed, how can they not be when such commitment is desired? Although potentially few, however, isn’t it encouraging to know that the Bible says these kinds of relationships are possible to enjoy?

Perhaps you feel like you have many acquaintances, but not many, if any, of the friends described in this verse. If that’s you, what is the best way to grow these relationships? Praying for them is vital, of course. Powered by prayer, there needs to be a level of intentionality in cultivating them, while allowing them to develop naturally. But also, we can seek to be that wise, loving, loyal friend for others. I think it is often when we are this person for others, that we will find those who become that person for us.

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**“Jesus Christ, the wisdom of God, truly lived these proverbs out”**

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### 4) Be a truthful friend

*“Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.” (Proverbs 27:5-6)*

This is a tough saying, isn’t it? A true friend is a truthful friend. This links us back to point one. Rather than telling someone what they want to hear, in love, we can encourage people to become more and more those who God is calling them to be. I think that implies the depth of intimacy we can enjoy with other Christians is potentially great. It also means that God should always be the centre of gravity in the friendship. The best friends are those who make us more like Jesus. That would mean they tell us the truth and sincerely challenge us when we need it. If we love our friends, we’d seek to be that type of

friend for them.

Proverbs encourages you to be a fearful, loving, loyal and truthful friend. How do you think you stack up? Of course, we will fail. We will never perfectly live out those proverbs on friendship. However, there is one who has.

### **The ultimate friend**

Jesus is our Lord and King. He is also our friend (John 15:14). Jesus Christ, the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24), truly lived these proverbs out. He is a friend who perfectly feared His heavenly Father (Isaiah 11:2), loves us more than we

can comprehend (John 13:1), loyally sticks close (Matthew 28:20), and who is The Truth (John 14:6). As we seek to grow in imitating Christ, we are given the best reference point imaginable to teach us how to do friendship well.

*Rob is a former TFT staff team member and is currently Curate at St Peter's, Brackley. He enjoys spending time with friends, watching football and talking theology. He is currently trying to read, and probably failing to understand, the theology of Petrus van Mastricht.*



## Being a wise friend podcast

In this extended conversation, Rob and Simon talk about friendship and how to be a wise friend.

To listen to the podcast, you can subscribe to “Ascend Higher” on the major podcasting platforms. Alternatively, listen directly from the TFT website using the link below:

[truefreedomtrust.co.uk/podcasts](https://truefreedomtrust.co.uk/podcasts)



# Book Review

“The best of friends: Choose wisely, Care well.” By Phil Knox, £10.99 paperback/ebook, 208 pages, IVP

This new resource from the Evangelical Alliance looks at the importance of having, and being, good friends.

It comprises 5 videos of about 10 minutes each, all presented by Phil Knox, who has written a book on the topic.

There is also a free downloadable small group resource.

The 5 sessions look at such topics as the biblical basis for friendship, the pressures on friendships today, having close friendships and, finally, the importance of friendship with God.

## How to use the book

The teaching is based on a biblical approach to friendship and the study guide along with it includes welcome activities and discussion topics, as well as a Bible study. I haven't had an opportunity to try this out with my Barnabas Group, but it looks like it would be easy to use and has plenty of ideas to make an engaging study out of each topic. Each session also suggests reading a chapter or two of the associated book beforehand, but I think you could still make a good course out of the materials, which are freely available on EA's website (link below).

## Jesus and friendships

The course offers some useful insights into the way modern life can get in the way of friendships (How often do screens get in the way of you investing in people?) and the way the enemy seeks to use these to break valuable friendships.

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“Phil challenges the ‘sameness’ of our friendship circles”

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It also explores the life of Jesus and how he valued friendships, as modelled by the 12 disciples, an inner circle of 3 and, of them, one "best" friend. Phil looks at the value of the variety of Jesus' friends - many of his disciples would have had nothing to do with each other - and how that might be a challenge to the "sameness" of our friendship circles.

## Healthy intimacy

I expect that most people reading this will not need convincing of the value of friendships. As many of us will have chosen singleness, and even those who are married may struggle with same-sex friendships, we probably value healthy intimacy more than most. The course doesn't get as far as exploring the struggles



of "unequal" friendships, when one party may feel a lot more than the other one.

However, it could still be useful as an insight into what "healthy" friendships look like. I think it is also helpful to understand that close same-sex friendships are clearly valued in the Bible. If this encourages us to pursue and value friendships, even when this means navigating the risky waters of closeness and intimacy, then it could be well worth looking at.

If you want to have a taste of the course, here's a link to the teaser.

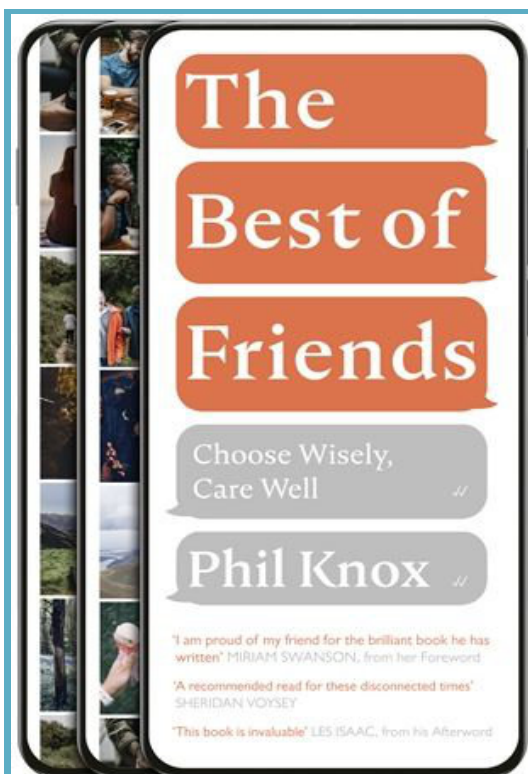
But don't worry, this is the only time that Phil raps!

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=HMjv1LPji8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HMjv1LPji8)

You can find the whole course, including the downloadable small group resource, here:

[www.eauk.org/what-we-do/initiatives/friendship/the-best-of-friends-video-series#](http://www.eauk.org/what-we-do/initiatives/friendship/the-best-of-friends-video-series#)

*Andy took early retirement a couple of years ago and is now busier than he ever was when working. Fortunately, it's mostly doing things he loves, which is great now he doesn't get paid!*





## Friendship & faithfulness

**F**riendship is a precious relationship. Over the years I have been very grateful for many friends with whom I have shared the up and downs of our lives. I am particularly thankful for those friends with whom I have grown close enough to be able to share my life-journey with same-sex attraction. When I was an undergraduate, the first fellow student I shared that with became a lifelong friend, though we now live hundreds of miles apart.

Sometimes, however, Christian friendships themselves move apart when friends share that they have come to believe that gay marriage is endorsed – or at least not prohibited - by scripture, or that committed same-sex relationships without marriage are not morally wrong either.

This can prove deeply distressing, especially if the friend concerned is totally unaware of your own story. Some years ago, the first time a friend I worked closely with told me of his change of mind. I replied without thinking, *“Does that mean that you think the sacrifices I have made over the years in denying expressing my attraction to other men were all pointless?”* I am not sure now that

was a wise response. It was in effect an emotional ambush and with hindsight, indicates that my focus was on myself, rather than his spiritual well-being at the time.

### Why friends change their mind

Since that initial rather confrontative encounter on my part, at least four other friends, two women among them, now also believe that gay marriage is acceptable. I see these days, however, that my personal experience should be secondary to concerns about their own spiritual welfare. Listening to their own stories of how they changed their view, has become much more important in relating to them and praying for them. There are several common threads in these friends' journeys.

#### 1) Personal experience of gay marriages in their families.

Armchair abstraction is one thing; endorsing gay partners of close family members or receiving an invitation to a gay wedding is quite another. Each of my friends found having to come to terms with such situations had been a significant factor in changing their minds. We should not underestimate the power of such experiences to sway our

Christian convictions. Examining the basis of our beliefs in such circumstances is always a good thing. Sometimes we do believe things are 'biblical' when the biblical basis is in fact either ambivalent or absent. However, if we are convinced that the teaching of scripture as a whole is clear that sex between those of the same sex is morally wrong, then no matter what the personal cost to us, we cannot change our stance just to appease our loved ones.

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**“We cannot change our stance just to appease our loved ones”**

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## **2) Influence of prominent Christians changing their view**

A significant number of prominent speakers on the Christian circuit in the 1970s and 80s have publicly changed their stance on gay marriage. Three of them had a profound positive influence on my early Christian life. Coming to terms with their revised view has been painful. However, Paul wrote, *“Be followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.”* (I Cor 11:1). If anyone, no matter how prominent, speaks or acts persistently in any way contrary to the clear teaching of scripture, rather than follow them we are to *“...consider them accursed.”* (Gal 1:8) – harsh though this may seem. But does the acceptance of gay marriage and ‘committed’ sexual partnerships (however understood) really constitute a different gospel?

## **3) Framing gay marriage as biblical**

Those who take the view that scripture does not prohibit gay relationships almost always frame the issue as a secondary matter, much like the role of women in church leadership, over which Christians might legitimately differ. Another common justification is to utilise the concept of progressive revelation in scripture. This is the doctrine that later parts of scripture contain a fuller revelation of God than the earlier sections; as Alec Motyer puts it, *“Progressive revelation is a movement from truth to more truth and so to full truth.”*

We see this in Acts 10:9-16, for example, where Peter is told in a vision *“What God has made clean, do not call common.”* The food laws and the distinction between Jew and Gentile in the Old Testament were superseded by the coming of Christ. Those accepting gay marriage would see us as blind as Peter was before his enlightenment with Cornelius’ conversion and *“...the Spirit falling on all who heard the word”* (Acts 10:44).

Elsewhere however, the Bible makes it clear that though the food laws and other OT requirements are now to be overturned, their underlying principle of the necessity of living distinctively from unbelievers still remains a Christian obligation (2 Cor 6:14-7:1). Progressive revelation in scripture, when present, also has to be established from scripture itself. I am not convinced by the arguments purporting to justify gay sexual relationships from scripture.

#### 4) Reinterpreting the New Testament

Revisionists argue that just as in the NT, the trajectory towards rejection of slavery was not complete but the seeds of it were present, so the acceptance of 'loving, committed' gay couplings is acceptable because the scriptures condemning homosexual acts can be explained away when understood in their context at the time. One of my friends, who recently changed to this view, sent me a list of such arguments. But the most striking thing was that Ephesians 6:22-33 - one of the longest passages in the Bible on marriage - was not mentioned at all.

I pointed out that this passage makes marriage a gospel issue because the joining of husband and wife is pictured there as mirroring the relationship between Christ and His Bride. The meaning of the metaphor is lost entirely in gay marriage. My friend responded by suggesting that if the metaphor of 'bride' is to be taken literally, then surely it suggests that polygamy is acceptable, as the Bride is made up of many people. Having conceded that gay marriage is acceptable, everything in scripture can obviously be reinterpreted to fit the chosen paradigm - but is this really the natural reading of the significance of that Ephesians text?

#### Coping when friends change

Dealing with the personal pain when someone who has been a Christian friend for a long time departs from a formerly shared biblical understanding is difficult. Here are some of the elements that will need to be negotiated:

#### 1) Acknowledge a significant change has taken place

There may be, especially with very close friends, a tendency to gloss over the importance of the difference between you. This should be resisted. Even though they may not go public on the issue to try to persuade others of their view, your awareness of it cannot be undone.

#### 2) Recognize their change of view may destabilise you

For anyone struggling with their own sexual desires, a friend's acceptance of gay marriage may seem like a personal betrayal even though no personal hurt may be intended. Their change of heart can be really discouraging, however, and when friends tell me that have joined 'affirming' churches, this often inclines me to let down my guard especially in relation to pornography. The moment we feed the thought that indulging our passions 'may not be so bad after all' since some Christian friend now says it's OK, we are more likely put those desires into action.

#### 3) Make a considered response

Sometimes it may be necessary to distance ourselves completely, both to indicate to our friend how serious we consider their change of heart to be, but also to protect us from the destabilising effects their views may have on us. The wounds of a true friend are faithful (Prov 27:6) and we need to lovingly dissent. We should pray that such friends will recognise that we have their spiritual welfare at heart and that the wounds we inflict on them by withdrawing somewhat are faithful and aimed at their good. We should continue to pray for them even if we do not see them as



often as before.

I have usually tried though to maintain some contact, especially with those who have not publicly promoted their revisionist stance. Even so, former friends may themselves decide to write us off and the decision is not then ours to take. I am still in contact with some friends now taking a revisionist position., though the frequency of visits has diminished.

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## “Jesus is the Friend we must follow”

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### 4) Continue to value what was and remains good

Only God knows their hearts – just as he knows our own and Jesus’ teaching about taking the beam out of our own eye before condemning others (Matt 7:5) should keep us from resentment and judgementalism. Understanding that when friendships have been longstanding, the friend will also be feeling some degree of rejection, also helps us to respond in positively when they may request our help. We should recognise that the previous blessings of the friendship are not devalued, let alone to be denied. I find it rather shortsighted that Christian publishers have sometimes immediately withdrawn helpful and upbuilding books and sermons which are completely biblical in content, when Christian authors have subsequently changed their view on gay marriage. The value of their previous ministry or the positive legacy they have left are surely not eliminated by

subsequent error?

### 5) Pray for them

Another important area is our responsibility to pray for them that they might see once more the clarity of scripture on this issue and the relevance of Jesus’ affirmation of heterosexual marriage to it (Matt 19:5-6). My own lack of prayerfulness in regard to this has made this piece particularly difficult to write.

### Jesus, the Friend who sticks closer than a brother

The Lord Jesus himself knew the pain of betrayal by a friend (Matt 26:23), an event prophetically foretold in Psalm 41:9 – *“Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread, has turned against me.”* He is the one and the only one who is *“Faithful and True”* (Rev 19:11). He understands what we are going through when friendships fail, and He is the one we must follow as scripture reveals Him. Jesus told His disciples He would no longer call them servants: *“Instead I have called you friends, for everything I have learned from my Father I have made known to you”* (John 15:15). He is the ultimate fulfilment of one of the best-known verses on friendship in the entire Bible: *“One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother”* (Prov 18:24). His friendship must always remain the most important one.

*Adam is a former academic and remains grateful to God for all those friends who have loved him faithfully over many decades.*



# Book Review

“No Greater Love: A Biblical Vision for Friendship” By  
Rebecca McLaughlin  
£11.89 Paperback, 176 pages, 2023, Moody Books

I had recently asked my Barnabas group for advice about how to develop friendships with other women in light of same-sex attraction. So, when my group leader asked me to read and review “*No Greater Love*”, I eagerly agreed, hopeful to gain some clear insights, as well as a deeper theological understanding of friendship. I was not disappointed.

Rebecca McLaughlin writes vulnerably about her own lifelong experience with same-sex attraction, insecurity and subsequent fear of close friendships. Yet, zeroing in on Jesus words in John 15:13, “Greater love has no one than this: that someone lay down his life for his friends,” she sets before us the God-given design and biblical mandate for friendship love. Drawing from the lives of Jesus and early apostles (and from her own life), McLaughlin helps us see what true friendship looks like and to understand that friendship is not optional; it’s vital.

## Friendship and the Church

McLaughlin begins by making a case for friendship within the larger context of the Church. Jesus’ disciples were united in friendship with each other because of their greater common friendship with Christ. Like them, our identification with Christ triumphs over our many differences, allowing us to experience true community and

intimacy with our brothers and sisters in Christ as we seek their spiritual growth. This is joyous news for those of us who feel that our same-sex attraction, coupled with our traditional biblical view of marriage, is a recipe for lifelong loneliness.

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“Our love is outward  
focused and battle-tested”

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## Friendship unease

Next, McLaughlin forces us to face our discomfort with friendship love. This, she argues, is due to the normalisation of same-sex love that has blurred the line between romance and friendship. We are quick to label intense emotion, the expression “*I love you*”, and the desire/experience of physical closeness as sexual and, in many Christian circles, inappropriate. We withhold ourselves for fear of being misinterpreted. Rather than define the line, McLaughlin invites us to reclaim the deep love and connection shared among friends and learn to see each other as comrades and co-labourers in Christ. Our love is outward focused - shoulder to shoulder - and battle-tested.

### Friendship and looking to others

This sort of outward focused love is then clarified. As individuals, we must learn to look to others' needs above our own. Instead of demanding, "Who will love me?", we should be asking, "Who can I love?" In our established friendships, we must learn to welcome the outcasts, the newcomers, those least like us—just as Jesus did. This doesn't mean we don't have a few friends who know us a little more intimately than the rest. But just as friendships are ruined by the exclusive focus on one friend, they thrive when we give multiple people access to the deepest parts of us.

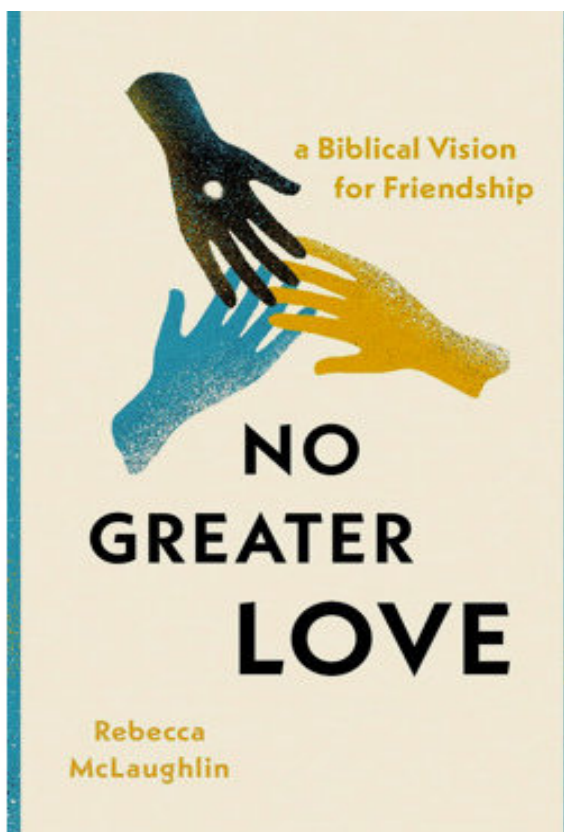
### Male-female friendships

In what I found to be the most practical chapter, McLaughlin asks the question, "How do we navigate male-female relationships (or same-sex relationships if we are same-sex attracted)?" Her answer: We learn to see and think of each other not as potential threats, but as brothers and sisters in our larger family of co-labourers. McLaughlin is not naive. Boundaries are necessary (and she provides guidelines for setting good ones), yet they need not be motivated by fear. Fear tells us that friendships with those to whom we could be attracted are dangerous, and we must therefore keep our distance. But starving ourselves of friendship leaves us lonely, thus making us more vulnerable to sin.

God's design for friendship  
If you battle fear, insecurity, co-dependency or self-centeredness in your friendships, this book is for you. McLaughlin may not have all the answers, but she did leave me feeling like I finally had some clarity

on things. As I closed the final pages, I understood that God's design for friendship goes beyond my greatest fears and the temporal realities of this life, to a love so great that I would lay down my life for another—just as He did for me.

*Lexie lives and works in Africa. She loves learning new languages, climbing mountains and trees and sharing fun facts about the natural world with anyone who will listen.*





## Biblical friendship

**F**riendships are an essential part of our daily Christian lives, and yet few of us have a biblical theology of friendship. This article seeks to highlight a few key biblical principles for us to live and evaluate our friendships by.

The overarching biblical philosophy on human relationships is that that it is *“not good for the man to be alone”* (Genesis 2: 18). Before mankind was created, the Trinity has been in relationship; since mankind was made in God’s image, it is not surprising that, having created a perfect world, God recognised that Adam still required company (a “helper”). And this despite the fact that Adam lived in perfect relationship with his creator: we need the company of other humans! Tim Keller asserted that we shouldn’t be ashamed to be lonely, since to be lonely is to be fully human (even a pre-Fall human), and this makes sense, since we are made in the image of our creator. This should be a comfort to us: we were made for relationship.

### Friends are family

The question is how friendship fits into the wider picture of human relationships in the Bible. Although in the Garden of Eden God’s solution to Adam’s isolation was a wife to be his helper, in the overall biblical narrative we see that humans need more relationships than simply marriage. In the Old Testament, the extended family and wider family of Israel (God’s chosen people) are the most commonly discussed human relationships, with a few exceptions of friendship lifted for our admiration and inspection (David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, Job and his friends). In the New Testament the key relationship is between Jesus and His church. “God’s family” transforms from being one big biological family (that of “Israel”) to being the “true Israel” God hinted at in the Old Testament: a chosen group of people *“from every nation, tribe, people and language”* (Revelation 7: 9) who worship God with all their hearts. This explains why Jesus uses familial language to define His relationship to his friends (the disciples):



“Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12: 48-50).

Jesus’ radical preference of His spiritual family over His biological family in this instance was no less controversial in His day than in ours. This new type of “family” would have all the usual characteristics: permanence, platonic relations between siblings, duty of care and a commitment which goes beyond natural affection.

As Jesus’ family and friends, we are commanded to care both for our biological families and for the church family at large (1 Timothy 5: 8 ff). At the foot of the cross, Jesus paired up His spiritual brother with His biological mother, kickstarting this style of blended family (John 19: 26-27). The church is collectively committed to each other, not individually committed to each other, with different members of the family providing and giving support as required. This means that our society’s “*marriage partner fixes my loneliness*” or “*best friend fixes my loneliness*” culture falls short - we don’t need just one person. The family of God is the community God has chosen for us as Christians: maybe that’s why Jesus uses “family” vocabulary more than “friend” vocabulary.

Practically-speaking, we can’t be friends with the entire family of God, even with everyone in our local church family. The Oxford English Dictionary describes a friend as “a

*person with whom one has developed a close and informal relationship of mutual trust and intimacy*”. Paul described some (but not all!) of the individuals in his parting greetings in Romans 16 as “friends”: clearly it is possible and permissible to be closer to some than others within the body of Christ.

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**“We shouldn’t be ashamed to be lonely, since to be lonely is to be fully human”**

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**We need more than one friend**  
Among the twelve disciples who lived and travelled with him during his earthly ministry, Jesus also had three closer friends: Peter, James and John. Critically, Jesus didn’t have a “bestie” amongst these 3: to single one out is like the disciples arguing about who was the greatest. Yes, John was the “*disciple whom Jesus loved*” (e.g. John 13: 23), but he also built the church on the rock of Peter, and James was also present at the transfiguration and other miracles. We may like to tidy things into pairs of friends, or a married couple, but this is a modern obsession, not a biblical pattern. Some have proposed a concept of covenantal friendship: exclusive relationships between 2 individuals often of the same sex used to alleviate loneliness. This is a modern concept not grounded in biblical truth. David and Jonathan made a covenant with each other for a very specific purpose: to protect one another as natural rivals for the throne. David and Jonathan had other friends, extended families, and wives for companionship.

Friendship is a team effort - we don't have to be everything to everyone - and this is a good lesson for marriage as well. Jesus' model of 3 close friends, 9 other good friends, and 72 good acquaintances is an appropriate model for us to follow too in building healthy relationships.

### **It's okay to have friends of the opposite sex**

This is perhaps a controversial point in modern Christian culture which is understandably cautious of close friendship between sexes for fear of sexual immorality. Friendships across sexes were controversial in Jesus' day too, and yet we see both Jesus and Paul having meaningful friendships with women. The siblings Mary, Martha and Lazarus seem to have been significant friends of Jesus whom He loved and invested in: crying at the tomb of Lazarus, challenging, loving and respecting Mary and Martha - showing more emotion and closeness than even with the 3 main disciples. It's also easy to overlook that Jesus had many other female friends and supporters: a group of women who *"followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs"* (Matt 27: 55-56). These included Mary and Salome (almost certainly his aunts), women He had healed such as Mary Magdalene, and Joanna and Susanna (rich and important women - Luke 8: 3). It was some of these women, not the 12 disciples, who stood at the foot of the cross, and who sought to tend His body after death.

Likewise, in Romans 16, Paul greets several female friends whom He holds in high esteem and great affection, such as "my dear friend Persis, another woman who has

worked very hard in the Lord". The fact that Paul commanded Timothy to treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers and younger women as sisters with absolute purity (1 Timothy 5:1-2) shows that they weren't cutting themselves off from each other! I think this has great practical relevance for us today - we should be careful in what we wear, say and do not to lead our brothers and sisters into sin. But holding each other at arm's length and never allowing any intimacy to form across gender lines outside of marriage is also not biblical.

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**"The family of God is the community God has chosen for us as Christians... Jesus uses "family" vocabulary more than "friend" vocabulary"**

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### **The purpose of friendship**

We have identified some general principles of biblical friendship, but let's now examine what friendship is for. I wish to highlight two areas:

#### **1) Good friends point to God**

Friendship isn't just "for fun" or a distraction from family and work commitments, but serves a key function in the believer's life. The friendships listed in Romans 16 were based on mutual service and work for the Lord Jesus - rather than just mutual affection or shared interest. C.S. Lewis defines friendship as *"unnecessary, like philosophy, like art ... It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things which give value to survival"* (The Four Loves). However,

in this instance I believe Lewis grossly undersells the spiritual importance of biblical friendship.

David and Jonathan's relationship was based on their shared love for God and passion for His glory: they didn't hang out with each other because of a mutual love of archery! God rebukes Job's friends for not speaking truth about Himself to Job, despite the level of commitment they showed. As friends we have a duty to point to God and we need to be serious about speaking the truth about Him, in and out of suffering. Godly advice and accurate rebukes from Christian friends are extremely valuable because they know us, love us and may be able to help us identify our blind spots.

*"Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses."*  
(Proverbs 27: 6)

Speaking the truth in love, (Ephesians 4:15), we need to build one other up in greater obedience to Christ, and that means bringing up God in conversation, and asking each other how our walks with Him are going. Since *"bad company corrupts good character"* (1 Corinthians 15: 33), we should be mindful of the spiritual impact of even our Christian friendships. The goal of friendship is not that we should fix our gaze on each other, but that we should together fix our gaze on Christ.

**2) Good friends provide care and a healthy degree of constancy**  
Job's friends gave pretty terrible advice, but they started out with good intentions, leaving their homes and meeting *"by agreement to go and*

*sympathise with him and comfort him"* (Job 2: 11). Impressively, they sat with him in silence for a full seven days! When our friends are suffering or grieving, sometimes they don't need wise counsel, they just need people to be with them and provide practical care.

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**"We may like to tidy things into pairs of friends, or a married couple, but this is a modern obsession, not a biblical pattern"**

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Although there is no biblical basis for exclusive covenantal friendship in the Christian life, constancy in friendship is still praised, and unreliability condemned:

*"Anyone who withholds kindness from a friend forsakes the fear of the Almighty."* (Job 6: 14)

*"One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."* (Proverbs 18: 24)

Jesus was betrayed by one of his closest friends, and denied by another, and the other ten were asleep at his time of need! Lack of constancy in friendship hurts – and Jesus understands this more than most. We would do well to show constancy and commitment in our friendships like Ruth and Naomi, but not to the exclusion of other friendships. Knowing what this should look like in our modern culture is challenging, particularly when people move away. Since the

majority of the New Testament teaching on human relationships is about relationships within the church, I believe our primary commitment (outside of marriage) is to God's people in the local church. A natural conclusion is that ideally our key friends should be found within this group, where possible. This may mean that those we share our deepest secrets with, and whom we counsel, are not those we would humanly speaking have most in common with, but there is a heavenly beauty in discovering true friendship in unlikely sources!

### Final thoughts

None of us are doing friendship perfectly, and there are many pitfalls which are easy to fall into. I hope that this article provides a foundational (if partial) biblical view of these key relationships, and that it encourages and challenges you to be a good friend focused on Christ, our closest friend!

*Jem's idea of a perfect Saturday is CrossFit, followed by brunch, followed by bargain-hunting at second hand stores!*





## Review of Revoice

Revoice is a US-based organisation that was founded in 2018 by a group of mostly gay/same-sex attracted Christians, who believe that the Christian faith requires them to live within the confines of a traditional sexual ethic. Their flagship gathering is for a conference in the USA each year.

**R**evoice has been the object of much criticism since it started in 2018. Having read various critiques and rebuttals, I went into the 2024 Revoice conference praying for wisdom and discernment, in order to biblically reflect on the content and atmosphere.

### A large audience

The first thing I noticed was the size. It was held at megachurch in Ohio, USA, with over 500 attendees on location and another 100+ online. This included people who were LGBTQ/SSA (and they always included both sets of letters to include people who choose different language to describe themselves), friends and allies, and pastors and other ministry leaders wanting to learn more about serving LGBTQ/SSA people.

### Blessings

The main sessions included musical worship, scripture reading in

multiple languages, liturgy and a main message. Ephesians 2 structured the content of the messages, looking at what it means to be saved by grace, new in Christ Jesus, and created for good works. The gospel was proclaimed. In one breakout session that I found helpful, Greg Coles taught about boundaries and temptations. During lunch time affinity groups, I met with others who typically use language of same-sex attraction. This was the highlight of my time at the conference with good discussion about holiness.

### Difficulties

While much of the conference content was good, the atmosphere was a celebration of queerness. It seemed like people were including many aspects of personal preference and personality within the identity of being gay. They could then look at this big picture of being gay and celebrate most of it and just leave out the gay sex as something that God



condemns. So, there were pride flags and a sea of exaggerated gay stereotypes in how people were dressing and talking. I'm all for freedom in how we dress and with what inflection we use in speech. Those things in themselves are not wrong. But it made me uncomfortable how much people were tying their outward presentation to a gay identity. One breakout session speaker expressed how he could only be himself at a social event if everyone there knew he was gay. I think there are many valuable reasons to share your sexuality with someone, but what other aspects of his appearance, speech, attitude or preferences was he wrapping up with his understanding of being gay, such that he could not be himself without everyone around him specifically being told that he is gay?

I left the conference perhaps more conflicted about Revoice than when I went in. There were glorious moments of gospel truth and worship. There were also moments that were not helpful in my sanctification, in which I felt like I was being encouraged to keep my eyes on myself rather than on Christ.

Revoice is currently giving free access to their library of videos from all of the past conferences [revoicelibrary.sardius.live/](http://revoicelibrary.sardius.live/)

There are some valuable resources, yet I would encourage you to also listen with discernment.

*Sarah has been a member of TFT for 3.5 years. She loves talking to people about Jesus and travelling is one of her favourite pastimes.*



## Autumn outreach

TFT will be at 2 Christian conferences over the Autumn. We will be at *ReNew* and the *FIEC* conferences.

Do pray for our presence at both of these conference, and why not encourage people you know who are going to pop along to our stall?



## Review of June conferences

**T**his summer, I've had the pleasure of attending two TFT events within a fortnight: the Edinburgh day conference on 15th June and the Emotional Dependency conference in London on 29th June.

### Undeserved favour

The theme in Edinburgh was God's mercy. Our first speaker was Michael Veitch, who walked us through Psalm 13. A perfect example of a Lamenting Psalm, reminding us that we can always approach God wherever we're at, whilst trusting that He is with us and will see us through. In the afternoon we had a talk by Donald Dewar on Psalm 30 explaining the extravagance of God's mercy. The debts that we have, which are not humanly possible to repay, have been cancelled by Jesus' death on the cross. We came away with the understanding that grace is when God gives us good things which we don't deserve. Mercy is when He spares us from bad things we do deserve. It was a great day, which ended with a short walk and a drink together.

For the London conference, we had a fantastic time of sung worship before we moved on to the main talk, presented by Andrew Collins.

We learned that as human beings we yearn for connection and relationship with others. However, this process of connection can become disconnected. The early signs of this can be subtle; perhaps putting a friend's needs/preferences above our own, as well as overfamiliarity or becoming fearful about what they may be thinking about us. This can escalate, leading to that friendship being all-consuming and ultimately us becoming fearful of losing that connection.

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**“Grace is when God gives us good things which we don't deserve”**

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As Andrew spoke, it dawned on me that I was in this exact situation about 10 years ago. I had a close friend who became too close.

We spent the vast majority of our time together. She had a key to my house. Unbeknownst to me at the time, my colleagues and other friends actually thought I was in a relationship with her. In the end, she met her now husband, and I felt very hurt and rejected. This led me to say a lot of horrible things to her as we parted ways. God has wonderfully restored this relationship and we now have a healthy friendship, where we respect one another's boundaries.



### **Emotional Dependency**

Ultimately, we can become emotionally dependent on others because we are fearful of losing them. We become fearful of man. But Andrew articulately explained that we should only fear God (Proverbs 29:25). We are primarily designed for relationship with Him. We are designed to worship and love, fear, seek and desire; but we must direct this at God – not at man.



There is so much more to same-sex attraction than just physical attraction. Many of us lead celibate lives, in which it would be easy to feel as though we have a void of emotional, as well as physical connection. That's where we should lean into God: He will always show us how to have good and healthy earthly relationships.

In the afternoon, we connected in small groups to discuss various points of this talk, followed by more worship to conclude. I couldn't have recommended this event more. It was such a blessing.



By Jax