

GODLY FRIENDSHIP—4

Friendship in the Church

It would be hard to find a better practical expression of deep friendship than what happened among the believers in Jerusalem after the Spirit came:

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people . . . the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need (Acts 2:44–47; 4:32–35).

The apostles Peter and John regarded their fellow believers as 'their friends' (Acts 4:23). Years later John still addressed his fellow believers in this way:

Peace to you. The friends send you their greetings. Greet the friends there, each by name (3 John 15).¹

Bingham concludes: 'When we go in depth into the life of the early church we see it was friendship which existed'.² Natural human friends can be those with whom we share the saving gospel: Cornelius 'called together his relatives and close friends' to hear the good news of Jesus from Peter (Acts 10:24). Jesus urged that this should be extended out further and further:

When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous (Luke 14:12–14).

This could be taken to mean that friendship here can be a foretaste of what will be shared with all in the age to come.³

Paul and Friendship

Paul the apostle had many friends that he greeted warmly in his letters. Here is one extensive instance:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.

Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. Greet Ampliatius, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my relative Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet

¹ The Quakers regard this as the defining mark of their gatherings by calling themselves, 'The Society of Friends'.

² Bingham, 'Friendship', p. 11. Geoffrey wrote this study out of a concern that the professionalization of ministry in the church might have got in the way of pastors befriending members of their congregations.

³ Compare Aelred of Rivaulx, 'Godly Friendship—2', p. 6.

Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you . . . Timothy, my co-worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my relatives.

I Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord.

Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you (Rom. 16:1–16, 23. See also, for another example, Col. 4:7–18).

Here are women and men, older and younger, fellow-countrymen and foreigners, hosts, supporters, co-workers and fellow believers.

Paul also prayed earnestly and movingly for his friends:⁴

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God (Phil. 1:3–11).

Centred on Christ and his saving gospel, this desires the growth to full maturity of those for whom Paul prays.

Paul had friends, some of them in high places, who helped him in times of danger, as when threatened by a near-rioting crowd in Ephesus:

Paul wished to go into the crowd, but the disciples would not let him; even some officials of the province of Asia, who were friendly to him, sent him a message urging him not to venture into the theater (Acts 19:30–31).

Paul had friends in many different towns and cities, who could minister to him even when he was a prisoner:

we put in at Sidon; and Julius [the centurion] treated Paul kindly, and allowed him to go to his friends to be cared for (Acts 27:3).

Paul understood the dynamics of friendship. He urged believers to 'Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep', and to 'Bear one another's burdens' (Rom. 12:15; Gal. 6:2). Paul knew there was a right place for praise and affirmation: 'It is good to be made much of for a good purpose' (Gal. 4:18).

Paul also knew what it was to have friends who did not stay with him, for whatever reason. When Barnabas and Paul (then known as Saul) first set out from Antioch in Syria to take the gospel to Barnabas's native Cyprus (see Acts 4:36) and on to Asia Minor, they had with them, helping them, a young man from Jerusalem called John Mark (see Acts 12:25; 13:5). Mark was the son of Mary, in whose house the believers used to gather (see Acts 12:12), and 'the cousin of

⁴ Compare Aelred, 'Godly Friendship—2', p. 6: 'Surpassing all this is prayer for each other. In remembering a friend, the more lovingly one sends forth prayer to God, with tears welling up from fear or affection or grief, the more effective that prayer will be. Thus praying to Christ for a friend and desiring to be heard by Christ for a friend, we focus on Christ with love and longing' (*Spiritual Friendship*, 3.133).

Barnabas' (Col. 4:10). John Mark left them when they arrived at Perga in Pamphilia and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). Richard Longenecker comments:

John Mark's departure . . . is usually explained as a combination of homesickness, the rigours of travel, dissatisfaction with Paul's assuming leadership over Mark's cousin Barnabas, and unhappiness at leaving Cyprus so soon.

But he adds, 'Mark's departure . . . may have been for reasons more than personal'. In Cyprus they had 'proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews' (Acts 13:5). They were also summoned by the Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus, who 'wanted to hear the word of God'. As a result of their ministry the proconsul 'believed, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord' (Acts 13:7, 12). This raised the whole question of how and whether Gentiles should be admitted to the gospel of the Jewish Messiah (which Paul and Barnabas then went on to do; see Acts 13:45–49). Longenecker surmises:

it can be plausibly argued that . . . Mark's departure was because he disagreed with Paul. While this is only conjecture, Mark may have been concerned about the effect news of a direct Christian mission would have in Jerusalem and on the church there and may have wanted no part in it. It was his return to the Christian community in Jerusalem that may have stirred the "Judaizers" in the church into action.⁵

This would explain the sharpness of the later disagreement and the parting of company between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark in Acts 15:36–39, when 'Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work'. Whatever the reasons for the parting of company, whether trivial or substantial, personal or principled, friendships can break apart. We can, however, take heart and hope from Paul's later recalling and commending of Mark to useful ministry (Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11), Mark's later ministry with Peter (1 Pet. 5:13), and the attribution to Mark of Mark's gospel. Broken friendships can be powerfully restored by the grace of the gospel, no doubt through the passing of time, change of circumstances, and growth in maturity.

The incident with Mark was not the last time Paul suffered from friends who did not stay with him. Closer to the end of his life, Paul wrote to Timothy:

Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry. I have sent Tychicus to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will pay him back for his deeds. You also must beware of him, for he strongly opposed our message.

At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! (2 Tim. 4:9–16).

In this extremity, Paul knew as much as ever the presence and faithfulness of the Lord Jesus:

But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen (2 Tim. 4:17–18).

And in this, there were still those with whom he kept in contact, through good and ill:

⁵ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's bible Commentary with the New International Version: Acts*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids Michigan, 1995, p. 217. Notwithstanding Peter's experience with Cornelius and his friends and relatives in Caesarea, and its acceptance in Jerusalem (see Acts 10:1–11:18), this question still needed to be settled (see Acts 15:1–35). Even after that, it remained a life-threatening issue (as in Acts 21:17–36).

Greet Prisca and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus. Erastus remained in Corinth; Trophimus I left ill in Miletus. Do your best to come before winter. Eubulus sends greetings to you, as do Pudens and Linus and Claudia and all the brothers and sisters.

The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you (2 Tim. 4:19–22).

Friendship in Christ

Paul's relationship with Jesus was at the heart of who he was—his core identity:

by the grace of God I am what I am (1 Cor. 15:10).

This came through knowing Christ's total identification with him in his place on the cross:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:19–20).

It became Paul's whole aim in life simply to live fully and freely in this 'surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord':

in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own (Phil. 3:8, 9–12).

Knowing that he now stands before God as a justified sinner, having the 'righteousness . . . that comes through faith in Christ', Paul no longer has any need to justify or prove himself in his relationship with others. Paul's self-image—how he appears to others—is no longer an issue for him:

with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me (1 Cor. 4:3–4).

Now that Paul in Christ 'receives praise not from others but from God' (Rom. 2:29),⁶ he no longer needs to be 'seeking human approval' by still 'trying to please people' (Gal. 1:10). Paul is able now simply to love freely, as he has been freely loved, without bringing any undue pressure to bear in his relationships with others:

though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus (Philemon 8–9).

As a true friend, he is also in a position to be 'speaking the truth in love' (Eph. 4:15), with words of rebuke and correction⁷—still centred in Christ's saving death and resurrection:

Your boasting is not a good thing. Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (1 Cor. 5:6–8).

⁶ Considering that Paul had formerly been a Pharisee (see Phil. 3:5), compare John 12:42–43, 'the Pharisees . . . loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God'.

⁷ Compare: 'Well meant are the wounds a friend inflicts' (Prov. 27:6); see 'Godly Friendship—1', p. 4.

Being secure and free in himself, however, through his acceptance by God in Christ, Paul is able to refrain from using the privilege and power of his close relationships with others in an abusive way that seeks some advantage for himself:

our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us (1 Thess. 2:3–8).

The strong bond this engenders is movingly portrayed in Paul's longing to be with them, and his deep appreciation of who they are:

As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you—in person, not in heart—we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face. For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again—but Satan blocked our way. For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Yes, you are our glory and joy! (1 Thess. 2:17–19).

Paul and the Corinthians

We see Paul's friendship at its best perhaps in his relationships with the believers in Corinth, where this friendship was most contested. The Corinthian believers were a divided community:

when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you (1 Cor. 11:18).

They were 'puffed up in favor of one against another' (1 Cor. 4:6), and very ready to 'pronounce judgment' when any of them had 'a grievance against another' (1 Cor. 4:5; 6:1). They indulged in boastful arrogance:

you are arrogant! . . . Your boasting is not a good thing (1 Cor. 5:2, 6).

Note how Paul responds—by bringing them back to what the gospel does in us:

“Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” For it is not those who commend themselves that are approved, but those whom the Lord commends (2 Cor. 10:17–18).

These issues were exposed by an instance of unchecked sexual immorality in their midst:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you . . . Shun fornication! (1 Cor. 5:1; 6:18).

They were disposed to be proud, contentious and insubordinate (see 1 Cor. 11:16; 14:33, 36). Some indulged in worldliness and idolatry (see 1 Cor. 10:14; 2 Cor. 6:14–15), others reacted the other way into uncalled-for asceticism (as in 1 Cor. 7:1). A number were denying the central tenet of faith in the resurrection of Jesus, and of those who belong to him (see 1 Cor. 15:12).

The Corinthians had subjected themselves to other 'super-apostles'—self-appointed, well-heeled, opinionated leaders, who were disparaging of Paul with regard to the 'weakness' of his presence, his supposed lack of spiritual authority, and the fact that he gave his ministry without charge and so was unprofessional (see 2 Cor. 10:10–12; 11:5–15; 12:11–12). Unlike Paul, they used their position to abuse others and put them down:

For you put up with it when someone makes slaves of you, or preys upon you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or gives you a slap in the face. To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that! (2 Cor. 11:20–21).

All this ‘quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder . . . impurity, sexual immorality, and licentiousness’ (2 Cor. 12:20–21) would hardly appear to be a fertile ground for any growth of intimate friendship between Paul and his Corinthian converts. Nevertheless, Paul makes this heartfelt appeal to them:

We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also (2 Cor. 6:11–13).

On what basis does Paul make this appeal? He has already said that, despite the ‘Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers’ that some of them ‘used to be’, nevertheless he could say to them ‘you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God’ (1 Cor. 6:9–11). Paul now sees this as the fulfilment of the promise:

God said,
“I will live in them and walk among them,
and I will be their God,
and they shall be my people” (2 Cor. 6:16; quoting Ex. 29:45; Lev. 26:12).

So, by the wonderful saving action of God in Christ, with the barriers of all sin removed, and God making His home among them, Paul again makes his appeal to these Corinthians for an intimacy of friendship that not even death can break:

Make room in your hearts for us; we have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. I often boast about you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with consolation; I am overjoyed in all our affliction (2 Cor. 7:2–4).

Rooted in the covenant of God, there is a sturdiness in Christian friendship that cannot finally be shaken.