

Missionaries and Biblical Friendships

Aaron J. Stormer

Introduction

Friendship can be defined in many ways. The definition and necessity of friendship are shaped by context, culture, and life experiences. Hunter says “Our experiences of friendship shape our understanding of friendship. The friends we have influence what we think friendship means.”¹ The definition by Haykin, Croft, and Carroll will be used here with an added qualifier; biblical friendship is “an intimate relationship of love, trust, and loyalty” based on a common faith in God.² Friendship is often taken for granted or even pushed aside as something of lesser value in life. The truth is friendship is not optional. In fact, it is part of what we were created for.

In the context of missions, friendship can be one of the most important factors in ministerial durability. Many missionaries confirm that, for them, longevity and stick-with-it-ness are directly linked to having friends

¹ Drew Hunter, *Made for Friendship: The Relationship that Halves Our Sorrows and Doubles Our Joy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 77, Kindle.

² Michael A.G. Haykin, Brian Croft and James B. Carroll, *Pastoral Friendship: The Forgotten Piece in a Persevering Ministry* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2022), intro., Kindle.

where they live and serve. Johnson reinforces this idea when he writes that “on-going contact with genuine Christian fellowship and community is the primary key to missionary longevity. True Christian fellowship is what urban missionaries, pastors, and church members need above all else to survive and thrive in the rigors of urban ministry.”³ As noted by Beeke and Haykin, “the privileges and responsibilities of biblical friendship are rooted in mutual covenantal love, intercommunion, and personal investment in another.”⁴ Biblical friendship is a God-given gift that empowers and encourages believers and serves as a reflection for the world of the love of Christ.

Designed for Relationship

From the beginning, God designed people for relationships. Haykin, Croft, and Carroll write that “In addition to His relationship with Himself, which points us broadly in the direction of friendship, God wove this attribute into human beings as displayed by His relating to Adam and Eve.”⁵ Humanity was made and created to be in relationship, both with God and with one another. Lane and Tripp note:

In Genesis 2:18, God says that it is not good for man to be “alone.” This statement has more to do with God’s design for humanity than Adam’s neediness. God created us to be relational beings because he is a social God. God lives in community within the Trinity as Father, Son, and Spirit, and he made humanity in his image.⁶

³ Wendal Mark Johnson, “Reaching the Secular City: A Practical Model for Brazilian Urban Missionaries through the Lens of Lesslie Newbigin” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2020), 133.

⁴ Joel R. Beeke and Michael A.G. Haykin, *How Should We Develop Biblical Friendship?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), Friendship in the Holy Scriptures, Kindle.

⁵ Haykin, Croft, and Carroll, *Pastoral Friendship*, chap. 4.

⁶ Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp, *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2008), 9.

Mankind was created to reflect the unity of the Godhead. As noted here, relationships were not created to meet a need as much as it was God's intention and design for mankind.

Biblical friendship is based on common faith and belief in God. Believers share a common faith and life with one another in Christ and it is based in relationships. I have my closest friends where I serve, first and foremost because we have a common faith and belief in God. God's design is for his church to live in community, and true community can only be accomplished through biblical friendship. Beeke and Haykin aptly state:

Though we must be patient in developing Christian friendships, we must not be passive. Christians are called to do life together. Contrary to the individualism that is glorified in Western culture, we need to realize that the Christian life has not been designed to be lived in solitude. Real Christianity is not a solitary life, but one lived in community. And friendships are to be a part of this experience of community.⁷

Believers must practice biblical friendship because it is what they are designed for. It provides a glimpse at the creational intent of God.

The missionary is no different from the believer in the local church. The missionary is designed for and needs to practice biblical friendship. Using Brazil as his context, Johnson notes:

[T]he urban missionary needs a true friend with whom they can have genuine heart-to-heart fellowship. If possible, for the urban missionary serving in a different culture, this true friend (or friends) should be found among the very people with whom the missionary works.⁸

⁷ Beeke and Haykin, *Biblical Friendship*, Art of Building, Kindle.

⁸ Johnson, "Reaching the Secular City," 175.

In other words, the missionary needs to connect with other believers to take advantage of one of the greatest resources God designed mankind for: friendship. Davison notes, “We cannot fulfill Jesus’ mission without friendship.”⁹ Friendship is God’s design for his mission.

A Biblical Example

A read through the New Testament will reveal a list of several companions or friends of Paul. Paul serves as a model for any believer or missionary who desires biblical friendship. As Dudley noted:

No man ever loved his fellows more passionately for their own sakes. He loved men as men. No man in all Scripture had so many personal friends as St. Paul. None in all Scripture gave expression to such intense affection for his friends. None had friends among such varied nationalities, nor from such extremes of social gradations. None called forth such answering love, nor evoked such unselfish heroism and sacrifice.¹⁰

Paul, through the New Testament, allows fellow missionaries to examine his life to understand both the necessity of friendship and his commitment to sustaining them.

Merida notes three things that can be learned from Paul’s friendships: companionship, comfort, and joy.¹¹ These three benefits are closely connected with the attributes listed above: companionship/loyalty, comfort/trust, and joy/love. Paul was rarely, if ever, alone in his travels and

⁹ C.J. Davison, *Missional Friendships: Jesus’ Design for Fruitful Life and Ministry* (Littleton, CO: Acoma Press, 2020), 69, Kindle.

¹⁰ Carl Hermon Dudley, *St. Paul’s Friendships and His Friends* (Boston: The Gorham Press, 1911), foreword, Kindle.

¹¹ Tony Merida, “If Paul Needed Friends, So Do We,” The Gospel Coalition, February 27, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/paul-needed-friends-so-do-we/>.

ministry life. He tended to have a companion with him wherever he went. His companions tended to be people with whom he shared a loyalty. Dudley, on this point, observes :

During his entire ministry his friends were continually as his right arm. Never as far as we know did he labor with marked success any great length of time without the companionship of one or more of his intimate friends. None of his great churches was founded without the assistance of his friends. Never did he undertake a great missionary journey alone.¹²

A quick survey of the New Testament shows many companions of Paul.

One such companion was Barnabas. Barnabas, whose name according to Acts 4:36 means son of encouragement, was a great companion to Paul. It was Barnabas who defended Paul in Jerusalem to the apostles in Acts 9:27. It was also Barnabas in Acts 13:2, who was set apart with Paul at the church in Antioch for missionary work together. Despite Paul and Barnabas later parting ways, Paul still appeared to hold Barnabas in great esteem as evidenced by his writing in Colossians 4:10 and 1 Corinthians 9:5. Paul understood the design of friendship and cultivated companionship throughout his life, ministry, and travels with Barnabas and others.

Paul also had biblical friendships that provided comfort. Paul serves as an example for missionaries that when trials, difficulties, or heartbreak occur, biblical friendship can provide comfort because there is a common trust. Comfort, for Paul, would have been received from those he counted as close friends. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 7:6-7, that God provided comfort through the coming of Titus and by the comfort that came through him from the church at Corinth. The comfort he received likely sustained him. Johnson noted that in missions, "The urban missionary who has a 'bosom friend' will find the strength to persevere and prosper in the midst of the

¹² Dudley, *St. Paul*, chap. 1.

rigors of urban ministry.”¹³ Paul had several friends he considered to be his “bosom friend” or “right-hand man” throughout his ministry and life.

Biblical friendship also brought joy to the life of the Apostle Paul. This joy was based on a mutual love that Paul shared with his friends. In Philippians 1:3-5 Paul expresses to the church at Philippi the thankfulness he has in God as he remembers them in prayer. Paul goes on to write that because of the partnership that he shares with this local body, he has joy as he prays for them. In Philippians 1:8 Paul further elaborates that he yearns for this body of believers with the affection of Christ. Paul understood and valued his friends for the enjoyment and refreshing they brought him. Paul also understood that Jesus is the ultimate friend of man and because of this friendship, he needed and wanted biblical friends who could provide companionship, comfort, and joy to offer a glimpse to fellow believers and the world of God’s creational intent for relationship.

Need for Community

The saying “many hands make light work” can be used to understand the necessity for friendship in the joys, challenges, and difficulties of life. Having a community allows a person to share the load (be it emotional, financial, physical, etc.) and experience the comfort that can be found only in friends. Community involves what Bridges calls a “common life.” He writes that “the realization that we do in fact share a common life with other believers should stimulate within us a desire to share experientially with one another.”¹⁴ My daughter needed medical care and it was a long boat ride from the city. Who would we leave our boys with? We called a friend in our community. A friend can’t get to the school to pick up her son. She calls us; that is community.

¹³ Johnson, “Reaching the Secular City”, 134.

¹⁴ Jerry Bridges, *True Community: The Biblical Practice of Koinonia* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2012), 44, Kindle.

Another friend is struggling with uncertainty and calls me, that is community. We all need people to share life with. We all need community.

The missionary needs these levels of friendship to have a community that meets the different needs that will be encountered. Each level of friendship brings a different component to community and a different experience of living. Hunter notes that true life “only opens up and shares its deepest pleasures when we’re in community.”¹⁵ Community in the missionary context must be a priority. Without proper biblical friendships, the missionary may choose to leave their field of service. Johnson noted in his work based in Brazil:

Many of the missionaries who distanced themselves from Brazilian Baptist partners were newer missionaries who inadvertently cut themselves off from their greatest single source of personal friendship and familial and ministerial support as they adjusted to life in a new culture. This could well have contributed to an unusually high attrition rate among IMB missionaries serving in Brazil’s cities. Many survey respondents indicated that a close personal connection to a local Baptist church was a key factor in their personal happiness and missionary longevity. Those missionaries who failed to culturally connect soon returned to the United States, some even before completing their first term of missionary service.¹⁶

Entering a new or different culture presents the missionary with a unique opportunity to create friendships and community, which can serve as a great resource.

¹⁵ Community for every person will look different. The number of people in a community is not as important as the level of intimacy or closeness we have with those in our community. Beeke and Haykin describe 4 levels of community: confidants, companions, allies, and acquaintances.[²⁷] Each level of community brings with it a different level of intimacy and friendship. Hunter, *Made for Friendship*, 50.

¹⁶ Johnson, “Reaching the Secular City”, 175.

Belonging and Persevering

The necessity for biblical friendship and the need for community point to the notion that everyone wants to belong. The need, desire, or drive to belong is a strong indicator of the importance of community and friendship. Belonging is more than mere acceptance; it is also an understanding of mutual giving and receiving. People are so vastly different, and yet the desire to belong runs through all people. Part of belonging is receiving love and care. As Bridges notes, “mutual belonging to one another is the thread that ties together all the seemingly diverse elements of fellowship. As we recognize and apply the fact that we belong to each other, we will genuinely love and care for one another.”¹⁷ A sense of belonging provides the missionary experience, acceptance, and fellowship.

Belonging can also help the missionary to persevere. White knuckling it through adversity can last only so long. To increase the ability to persevere, the missionary needs friends. Haykin, Croft and Carroll note that “friendship is a vital tool to help leaders persevere. To this end, modern-day pastors [i.e., in terms of this article, missionaries] need the gift of intimate relationships of love, trust, and loyalty.”¹⁸ Personally, when expectations have been misrepresented or have been held erroneously, it has been friendships with nationals that has carried me through. In some of my lowest moments on the field, it has been my Brazilian family that has sustained me. The best people to persevere with are those that I serve and do life with. We can share the burdens together. Hearing the names Nei, Ronanio, Tiago, Ricardo, Helder, Marcelo, Carlos, and many more brings immense joy and each name also brings a distinct memory of persevering together.

Often, the main barrier to belonging and persevering is pride. Many people, especially in leadership, do not want to admit they need something

¹⁷ Bridges, *True Community*, 139.

¹⁸ Haykin, Croft, and Carroll, *Pastoral Friendship*, chap. 1.

from others. To persevere and belong, the leader, or in this case missionary, needs friends. Haykin, Croft, and Carroll again address this:

Pastors [i.e., missionaries] fail to persevere for a variety of reasons, but a few of them—discouragement from ineffectiveness, collapse from exhaustion, stumbling in immorality—are clearly connected to the benefits of friendship. The skill to navigate, the strength to endure, and the protection of shipwreck blossom on the tree of friendship.¹⁹

Friendship offers the missionary an outlet, support, and guide to persevere when challenges and difficulties come.

There are, unfortunately, too many stories to share of missionaries who did not endure or persevere because they did not develop or maintain the biblical friendships necessary to do so. Families leave the field due to several circumstances, but one big reason has been a lack of community with nationals. A husband leaves his family behind in language acquisition and ministry and the family quietly suffers with no community. A missionary has no desire to practice language with nationals, hurting their ability to gain friendships. The need for an “American” community creates a dichotomy with living overseas. The longing for the next furlough because there are no roots established. All of these are lived experiences that have brought people off of the field. Haykin, Croft and Carroll, once again, aptly write that “Biblical and church history prove that no man will persevere well in pastoral ministry without the grace of friends to walk beside him.”²⁰ Missionaries need friendship to belong and to persevere.

¹⁹ Haykin, Croft, and Carroll, *Pastoral Friendship*, chap. 5.

²⁰ Haykin, Croft, and Carroll, *Pastoral Friendship*, chap. 5.

Application

The necessity for biblical friendship can be seen both in scripture and observation or experience of living life in ministry. The difficulty is not in understanding the necessity for friendship, but more in the practice of gaining and maintaining biblical friendship. Part of this difficulty comes because friendship, like any relationship, is not easy. It must be sought out, cultivated, and tended to. The missionary must be intentional about having biblical friendship and realize that “when you find people with the potential for real Christian friendship, work at being a Christian friend to others and prayerfully seek God’s blessing on developing relationships.”²¹ The missionary must be willing to accept that true biblical friendship requires work and effort.

The missionary must start from the position of repentance and understand the sin of trying to “do it alone.” Jesus understood the importance of friends; he had twelve close friends and of those, three were his intimate friends. Jesus also sent his followers out in pairs. As noted by Henry, Jesus sent them two by two:

[So] that they might be company for one another when they were among strangers, and might strengthen the hands, and encourage the hearts, one of another; might help one another if anything should be amiss, and keep one another in countenance. Every common soldier has his comrade; and it is an approved maxim, Two are better than one.²²

Jesus modeled and demonstrated the need for friendship, and missionaries must remain open to letting others be a part of their world.

Awareness and openness are the first practical steps of practicing true biblical friendship. These two elements are done as the missionary un-

²¹ Beeke and Haykin, *Biblical Friendship*, Practical Steps, Kindle.

²² Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 1789. Logos.

derstands that friendship is the gift God gives each worker as they grow in dependence on the Spirit and understanding of scripture. Haykin, Croft and Carroll note that “prayerful dependence on the Spirit and the resources of Scripture provide the most essential tools for our work... we cannot and will not reap the benefit of them fully without the help of godly friends.”²³ What does it take to be open? It means being vulnerable with others, because you recognize that the process and end result will be for your good. The missionary, often times, must take the first step towards friendship. I have a national friend that I pray with on a regular basis. We share each other’s burdens, pains, joys, and lives. It started when I made the step to be open with him and noticed that he appeared to be needing the same thing I was, a friend to do life with. It started with awareness and openness.

Missionaries must also understand the importance of being available. It is one thing to be open to friendship, but it is quite another to be available for friendship. One is a mental exercise while the other is a practical exercise. Being available means to move past an understanding and begin to make time for others. Being available has meant eating meals together, going on family outings together, praying together, watching *futebol* late into the night, or helping when emergencies arise. Being available is what allows me to spend time with others and begin to build the relationships needed for ministry and life. Being available has also meant saying yes when I want to say no, because a friend puts the needs of others first.

A third practical step to practicing biblical friendship is the art of intentionality. The missionary will do what they place importance on. The missionary must invest time and energy into friendships. Without intentionality and investment, there are only acquaintances. Every missionary needs an inner circle of friends. As noted by Beeke and Haykin, “Fewer friends with deeper ties will anchor life more securely than an abundance of loosely

²³ Haykin, Croft and Carroll, *Pastoral Friendship*, chap. 4.

tethered associations.”²⁴ Intentionality in friendships aids the intentionality that is given to kingdom work. Intentionality also promotes and supports collaboration with others for the sake of the gospel. Davison notes:

Without genuine relationships, there will not be genuine collaboration. Unfortunately, many Christians are so focused on the mission that they see no room for deep relationships that lead to God-honoring collaboration. Those who fail to connect and collaborate are often living for their own small kingdom instead of Christ’s.²⁵

To see the advance of the kingdom of God, the missionary must engage in biblical friendship.

The friendships I have, lead to the ministry that the Lord wants for me. I now have friends who come to me asking how we can collaborate to see new works started. These opportunities haven’t come about because I am a missionary, but rather, because I have friends and we invest in one another.

Conclusion

The Christian was not created to function alone or in isolation; neither was the missionary called to function alone or in isolation. The Bible demonstrates the importance of friendship through the Trinity, God’s design for relationship, and the example of the life of the Apostle Paul. The missionary needs community both for ministry success and for sharing the experiences of life and ministry. The missionary also needs biblical friendship to persevere and to have a sense of belonging, no matter where they live and serve. Haykin, Croft and Carroll rightly note that “We simply cannot take the Bible

²⁴ Beeke and Haykin, *Biblical Friendship*, Practical Steps.

²⁵ Davison, *Missional Friendships*, 87.

seriously and avoid friendship.”²⁶ The missionary cannot labor alone and model for others God’s design for biblical friendship.

A survey of the Bible and Christian history shows the importance of having biblical friendship. There are few, if any, missionaries that reach any level of sustainable ministry without the aid of friendship. Along with an abiding life, biblical friendship is what helps sustain the missionary in life’s ups and downs. Biblical friendship is both God’s design and his gift. The missionary who wishes to endure well, serve faithfully, and thrive where they live needs to understand the importance of friendship and then put into practice God’s gift of biblical friendship.

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Aaron, his wife Melissa, and their family have been serving in Brazil for the past 7 years. They work with JMN (Brazilian Home Mission Board) missionaries, local churches, Baptist Associations, and US partners to see the advancement of the missionary task in the global city of São Paulo while also serving at their local church. Aaron has a MA in Counseling from Lincoln Christian Seminary and is currently a DMin student at Gateway Seminary.