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Friend of God



by Steve Holtrop

Transformational education, a stated goal of secular graduate programs, Reformed Christian pre-schools through 12th-grade schools, and many colleges, undertakes to reshape growing minds and hearts beyond the merely transactional delivery of facts and professional skills. At Dordt University we talk a lot about culture-transforming, kingdom-building, teaching for transformation, and empowering Christian “contemporary responses” that are infused with “serviceable insight.”¹ With James K. A. Smith, we make a distinction between merely *informing* students and *forming* them.²

At Dordt, we have also modestly appreciated our ranking as number one in “student engagement” for the last five years.³ But as I use distance-learning to teach undergraduates and graduate

students—because of the format of my courses, the professional obligations of my students, and the constraints of a global pandemic—I ponder the effectiveness of online student engagement and student transformation, as well as my students’ opportunities, in turn, for engaging and transforming their students. I wonder if these methods encourage culture-transformation and kingdom-building.

These concerns, and a chapter in one of my course’s textbooks, have led me to meditate on the concept of being *a friend of God*. Toward the end of my philosophy of education course for undergraduates, we read a chapter by Donovan Graham on “Intimacy with God.”⁴ Like my students, I first thought this concept perhaps a bit over the top, maybe a little touchy-feely for a class about philosophy and “Advanced Reformed Thought” applied to education. Some of my students are dismissive, wary, or at best confused about how being friends with God can align with the biblical command to “fear God.” But Graham provides solid biblical examples of God designating humans as his friends, including Abraham (2 Chron. 20:7; Isaiah 41:8), Moses (Exodus 33:11; Deut. 34:10), Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha (John 11:11), and Jesus’ disciples (John 15:15).⁵ In the John 15 passage, Jesus explains that a master does not tell his *servants* what his business is, but he does tell his *friends* what he is up to:

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did

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not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me. (John 15: 12-17)

Encouraging friendship with God may be one of the most transformative things we can do in Christian education. Being a friend involves a special relationship. I recall my best friend in elementary school; we walked to school together and played at each other's houses several times a week and even started a Boy Scout troop together. But when I moved to another state at age 11, our firm resolve for regular (snail mail) correspondence quickly declined, and I never really had another close same-sex friend. I have had teammates who ran cross country with me and swam competitively with me. I have had classmates with whom I zipped through high school algebra and biology homework. I have had work friends at the nursing homes, summer camps, student newspaper and yearbook offices, and various high schools where I have worked. I have hundreds of Facebook friends. But being a friend with God did not seem to fit into a neat model for me.

A spouse is a special kind of best friend, with whom one shares a life, house, finances, and children. But the more face-to-face, basic, necessary, romantic, and absorbed aspects of this spousal relationship—what C.S. Lewis calls *eros*—is a contrast for him to friendship, *phileo*, which is more shoulder to shoulder and focused on “common work.”⁶ Children may offer another special relationship (that Lewis addresses as affection—*storge*—mother/parent love), but the special relationship here involves vast differences in age, responsibility, and power—at least at first. And of course, we have all heard the Christian parenting advice to avoid being friends with your children—at least at first. I think this aligns with similar advice to bosses not to get too chummy with employees and to teachers not to smile till Christmas (which, thankfully, my students today claim to have missed). The idea is that a supervisor can inadvertently send an unproductive message to the supervised that s/he just wants to be cool (be friends) and therefore does not really care

about the rules and expectations. For Lewis, marital love and parental love (*eros* and affection) are natural and probable for many, but *phileo*, friendship, does not come about as naturally. (Neither does his fourth type: *agape*, charity.)

So if, as we believe, God is in a position of authority over us and wishes us to be productive workers in the building of his kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven,” the friend-of-God concept raises a question: What kind of relationship does the kingdom worker have with the kingdom boss?

Contemporary leadership theories, such as situational leadership,⁷ posit that effective leaders determine their focus on relationships vs. their focus on tasks based on the needs, skills, and attitudes of the employees, individually and as a team. This concept says that if a team is not skilled enough or does not show enough confidence and initiative to take on responsibilities for moving themselves forward, the boss should be more controlling and less accommodating. Later, according to this approach, with more built-up experience and confidence, the team may respond better to less control and more collaboration and eventually increased accommodation from the manager. But starting out with friendly accommodation when more control is needed can lead to the stereotype of the wimpy boss who gets walked over. Conversely, holding onto power and authoritarian behavior when the team is ready for more creative autonomy gives us the stereotype of the controlling autocrat. The emphasis, then, is not on one best static style for the boss: *Be more collaborative than authoritarian. Or take more control right from the start to show them who's boss; don't be permissive. Or be more interested in their personal lives and stop cracking the whip so much.* Rather, it's situational. Of course, this situational approach asks more of a leader since s/he must read the situation accurately and adjust the leadership style to fit the situation.

Could this observation about effective leadership be part of the “creation structure”⁸ that we at Dordt are discovering and uncovering with our students? If so, could God be the ultimate model of the effective leader? If that is so, could it be that God adjusts his style with us to match our developing needs, like a friend, a father, or a mother hen—all images that God reveals about himself?

And could it be that we could start to experience such an in-tune, synchronized, working relationship that it is more about friendship and “common work” than about constantly reminding us of the rules, expectations, and procedures? To be sure, I am not arguing that we will ever be without faults or on God’s level. God remains the leader, of course, with the omniscient vision, communicating the vision, reminding us when we are straying, as in our fallen nature we will continue to do. We continue to “see through a glass darkly,” as Paul says, in 1 Cor. 13: 12. But could part of the sanctification process include more friendship and less parenting on God’s part?

Graham says that to be a friend of God, who is inviting, even requesting this, involves several things. First, we need to say “yes” to the invitation. We need to spend time in communication with God, not *just* presenting him our daily list of personal requests, but spending quality alone time, listening,⁹ trying to get on the same wavelength. Building and maintaining a deep friendship with the Creator of the Universe means a new level of prayer and openness to a new level of communication. Just as best friends and spouses spend a lot of time together and get to know each other well, friendship with God involves getting over the perfunctory, rushed, bashful, and/or anxious (fearful?) approaches so common to our daily interactions with God.

Certainly, it’s a challenge to maintain an overwhelming awe (“fear of the Lord”) in the presence of the Creator and Judge of Everything while also claiming the inheritance of sons and daughters of the Almighty, thus princes and princesses—prophets, priests, and kings—and heirs of the Covenant. But our ticket has been already purchased by Jesus, and we are in. I think, for this reason, God wants us to approach his throne boldly and ask how we can be full members of the team. Paul explains it this way: “In him and through faith in him [Jesus] we may approach God with freedom and confidence” (Eph. 3:12).

In addition to more communicative prayer,

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more listening during alone time with God, Graham says that intimacy with God involves work: “Prayer gives us the context for working with God. Entering into His work also keeps us intimately involved with Him.”¹⁰ This is where the kingdom work happens. This is where God’s “great mind” engages ours. This is where we get involved, engaged in his vision, and get stuff done. The Spirit tells us, “We do not need to be afraid to pursue the work. When offered to the Father through Jesus, it is spotless!”¹¹

Perhaps Graham would see this co-working relationship with God as being even deeper than Lewis’ view of human friendship in shoulder-to-shoulder common work. I expect Graham would say there is also *agape* in his view of being a friend with God. And in fact, all of Lewis’ four loves help us

understand how deep and intimate our relationship with God (as described by God) can be: God the father (*storge*), the church as Christ’s bride (*eros*), the friend-of-God passages (*phileo*), and the elevation of charity—*agape*—love as the greatest expectation and the greatest commandment: the “greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13). Also,

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matt. 22: 37-40)

Clearly, friendship with God is not just hanging out together but rather working together. So, it is not simply, “I come to the garden alone.... And he walks with me, and he talks with me”—as the old gospel song imagines.¹² Nor is it merely, “What a friend we have in Jesus.... [when we] carry everything to God in prayer”—to quote an even older hymn.¹³ It’s more. It means being in tune in order to get down to business.

In fact, as the disciples were hanging out with Jesus on the Mount of Olives one day, they wanted to know when all his apocalyptic scenarios would

occur (Matt. 24). His answers were not about timing but rather about “bearing fruit,” as in, for example, the fig tree, investing the master’s “talents” wisely, and the “least of these” directives (Matt. 25). So, being a friend of God is not being a groupie with a back-stage pass. It is not about *our* status and access as much as *his* work that we are invited to know about and participate in. Being a friend of *God*, then, may involve being a friend to the “*least of these*”—working with the disadvantaged because we want to share such a heavenly advantage with others. By being in the in-club, we are empowered and expected to reach out to those who most feel on the outs.

A final aspect, according to Graham, of intimacy with God involves the fellowship of rest, “part of the rhythm of life as God created it, and this too keeps us intimately connected with God.”¹⁴ Our culture of productivity, performance, and constant motion wears down our bodies and souls.¹⁵ We are weary and heavily burdened and need to come to Jesus for our souls’ rest that he promises (Matt. 11:28). At one point, after working on accepting friendship with God through Scripture reading, listening prayers, hikes in nature, feeling God’s joyful presence, and being bold and honest, Graham reports that he suddenly realized he wasn’t afraid of God anymore and hasn’t been the same since (an emotional rest!).¹⁶

I have pondered these things for several years, teaching the Graham book every spring, summer, and fall term. Every night as I walk my little Jack Russell terrier, a canine breed that needs a constant leash, I wonder about being friends, free will, the right to choose vs. choosing the right, incentivizing, and controlling, etc. Having a pet or a toddler can make a practicing behaviorist out of all of us. (Behaviorism is another part of the philosophy of education course.) But despite the fact that I can make my dog, Peanut, do whatever I want, like preventing his walking in traffic or venturing onto thin ice, I find I am actually most satisfied when he makes the safe choice on his own, then expresses his preferences within the safe areas. And I ponder: if I’m giving him the freedom to decide which way to explore when he’s on leash, does that freedom incline him toward wanting to spend more time with me later when I’m reading at home and he’s not on my controlling leash? This seems to be the case: I

give him freedom (while still protecting him), and he wants to hang out with me.

If God made me like himself in many ways, am I glimpsing a bit—through my friendship with my dog—of how God perhaps prefers my engaged company and my safe and productive choices and not just my blind obedience? Is he most pleased when I step up to the potential of autonomy, responsibility, and collaboration that he has created in me? If I’m so pleased to partner with a dog in these little things, and if earthly parents are so pleased to see their children grow into autonomous, responsible adults, how much more is God pleased when we can step up fully to the roles he built us for? After all, he could have made us robots programmed to act perfectly, or he could have kept us in a crate or on a leash and unable to get into trouble. Yet, as Paul explains to the Galatians, “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love” (Gal. 5:13).

Of that friendship with God, theologian Gail R. O’Day writes,

Jesus gave everything to his friends—his knowledge of God and his own life. Jesus is our model for friendship—because he loved without limits—and he makes it possible for us to live a life of friendship—because we have been transformed by everything he shared with us. Through friendship we come to know God and through friendship we enact the love of God. We can risk being friends because Jesus has been a friend to us.¹⁷

By contrast to friendship with God, I may have enjoyed a childhood best friend for a while, a decade of experiencing how “a dog is man’s best friend,” an intimate life partner, and multiple proud-parent moments. But these are perhaps just seeing through the glass darkly, just different earthly glimpses of pure intimacy and friendship. Paul assures us that our vision will improve: “Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (I Cor. 13:12). Maybe this *fully known / know fully* part is designed to start in the earthly kingdom, where I can be a friend and coworker of the King and be in on his business.

So, what are the implications of this meditation

on friendship for students in our undergraduate and graduate courses? What are the implications for the P-12 schools where many of those students are or will be working?

If we have a special friendship with God, perhaps we can relax a little on trying to get the balance right in our *shoulds* and *oughts*. For example, instead of obsessively adjusting the steering wheel to find a correct course between Romans and James, between grace and righteousness, we can focus each day on the work that God and we are doing right here and right now. Yes, there's always a to-do list longer than the hours in the day. Yes, we remain fallen, short-sighted, and imperfect. But each day allows a check-in and provides new fruit for us to bear: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you" (John 15:16).

If we have a special friendship with God, all the other kinds of friendship we enjoy (or don't)—*storge*, *eros*, *phileo*, *agape*—are earthly pointers at what is available with God. I would think this realization puts all our earthly relationship challenges in a new perspective. They are shades of perfection, different angles, and perspectives. No single earthly relationship can possibly provide the be-all and end-all that we are tempted to expect and feel guilty about not living up to. What a gift we could give our students if they can glimpse this saner understanding of relationships as their marriages, parenting, and professional roles are getting started or reenergized in our professional programs.

Instead of agonizing about whether we have inadvertently rewarded someone's bad behavior or been too strict or cold—professionally or personally—we can learn from the modeling that God provides in his friendship with us. If he sometimes says, "well done," and other times asks us to try again, we can surely trust his situational approach and apply it to our various roles instead of wondering what the one "biblically correct" classroom

management model or educational leadership style would be.

Instead of teaching students to feel that their signature on a teacher or principal contract means that they have already totally measured up and know all the answers for whatever happens over the coming year, we can encourage them to rest assured that they get a daily check-in on how it's going and where to put their energies—one day at a time. When we meet with our Friend, who sees the big picture (Psalm 139:1-2), He reminds us it will all work out (Romans 8:28), renews our strength (Psalm 103:5), assures us of our relationship (1 John 1:9), affirms our calling to this exact spot and this focus of the kingdom-building plan (John 15:15), and gives us the wherewithal to be strong until the next check-in.

What a friendship!

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Endnotes

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