

# Toward Adult Cross-Sex Friendship

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**Current public debate about sexual correctness has exacerbated traditional anxieties about adult cross-sex friendship. In seeking a Christian understanding of such relationships, the nature of friendship is explored by distinguishing it from other personal relationships and by overviewing a model of friendship. Then, after describing the normative barriers to cross-sex friendship, O'Meara's four specific challenges are discussed in light of Scripture: (a) determining the type of emotional bond represented by the relationship, (b) contending with the issue of sexuality, (c) dealing with the barrier of inequality, and (d) presenting the relationship as authentic to relevant audiences. Finally, Christian recommendations for the practice of cross-sex friendship are presented.**

The 1990's have brought to western culture the language and leer of political correctness, one derivation of which *Newsweek*, on a 1993 cover, termed sexual correctness. Public debate in this decade has largely moved beyond the issues of fidelity and homosexuality to the issues of pornography, sexual harassment, and date rape, all couched in a vigorous, ongoing polemic over the politics of sexual equality (Stan, 1995). The title of Fekete's (1995) erudite critical theory, *Moral Panic: Biopolitics Rising*, describes the tone, magnitude, and direction of the public debate over sexual correctness. In a world where love and friendship are withering away, where science and moralism have reduced *eros* to sex, and where individualism and egalitarianism have turned romantic relationships into contractual matters, we seem increasingly unable to deal with the hopes and risks of intimacy (Bloom, 1993).

Christian debate about sexual correctness shows both similarities and differences vis-a-vis the public debate. While homosexuality and sexual equality remain contentious, the Christian consensus about pornography, harassment, rape, and extramarital genital sex places these matters beyond serious theological question (Grenz, 1990). But there are other matters seen as interpersonally and socially, if not theologically, problematic. Adult cross-sex friendship is one. Theological debate about it is virtually nonexistent, because the conventional implicit assumption is that any such earnest friendship is either premarital in function or, when extramarital, immoral in dynamic. In a theological community that sustains a concept of emotional adultery, extramarital cross-sex friendship can be quite uncomfortable (Powell, 1987), if not anathema. Most Christian literature, both popular and academic, simply ignores it (e.g., Inrig, 1981).

Unencumbered with theological assumptions or concern about its morality, social science no longer ignores adult cross-sex friendship. As a topic of inquiry, it has become one focus of the relatively new, remarkably multidisciplinary field of close, personal relationships (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992). The first empirical study devoted exclusively to adult cross-sex friendship appeared in 1974 (Booth & Hess), and although it was still considered an "ignored relationship" in 1989 (O'Meara; Allan), there is now a steady stream of research illuminating its nature. Much has been learned about the possibilities and problems of cross-sex friendship, but the question remaining for Christians is whether it is theologically and thus sexually correct for a Christian man and woman to be friends, without such friendship leading to or being a part of an extant marriage. This question is pursued here by first exploring the nature of friendship, before addressing the challenges of cross-sex friendship in particular.

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### The Nature of Friendship

Friendship was a considerably more important topic in the life and thought of the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome than it has been in Christendom (Olthuis, 1975). Whereas Aristotle devoted two of the ten books of his *Nicomachean Ethics* to friendship (Pakaluck, 1991), Christianity displaced leisure with the obligations of work, friendship with the intimacies of marriage, and *philia* with the supremacy of *agape*. "To the ancients, friendship seemed the happiest and most fully human of all loves; the crown of life and the school of virtue.... But very few modern people think friendship a love of comparable value or even a love at all.... few value it because few experience it" (Lewis, 1960, p. 55). Ironically, the ancients extolled friendship for the very same reason that moderns deprecate it, that being its presumed status as the least natural and necessary personal relationship (Olthuis, 1975; Lewis, 1960).

#### Definitions of Friendship

So it has been left to recent social science to renew the discourse largely abandoned by the humanities. Modern scientific formulations of friendship have not departed much from classical conceptions, but friendship remains ambiguous and subjective in form and structure (La Gaipa, 1977). It is neither as institutionalized nor as structurally defined as, for example, relatives which can be determined by ties of blood or marriage, or neighbors which can be determined by residence (Blieszner & Adams, 1992).

Nevertheless, the voluntary, personal, and primary character of friendship consistently appears in formal definitions. Wright (1984) defines friendship as "voluntary or unconstrained interaction in which the participants respond to one another personally, that is, as unique individuals rather than as packages of discrete attributes or mere role occupants." As comparison, Wiseman (1986) defines friendship as a voluntary relationship that exists primarily for personal satisfaction and enjoyment rather than for the fulfillment of a particular task or goal. In all conceptions, "cross-sex friendship is a specific type of friendship—a nonromantic, nonfamilial, personal relationship between a man and a woman" (O'Meara, 1989, p. 526).

#### A Spectrum of Personal Relationships

To understand friendship further, it can be located on a spectrum of personal relationships that differen-

tiates categories according to interaction, intimacy, and attachment. Four such categories, or ideal types, are acquaintance, associate, friend, and spouse. The spectrum is a continuum in that, at one extreme, an acquaintance relationship has the least interaction, intimacy, and attachment, whereas at the other extreme a spousal relationship has the most, but the four categories yield finer distinctions than this.

An acquaintance is someone whose identity is known, and by whom one's identity is known, when that knowledge has been gained through personal contact, but with whom there are no other ties. Acquaintances are developed by personal participation in social situations, and the number of acquaintances one has is a simple function of the extent of such participation. It would strain the concept to construe acquaintances as a network, but they do serve as a resource that can at least be called upon if necessary.

An associate is someone with whom there is regular interaction based on some common social involvement. Other terms employed include "agentic relationship" (Bakan, 1966), "civic friendship" (Meilaender, 1981), and "agentic friendship" (Rawlins, 1992). Depending on the nature of the involvement, associates may serve as colleagues, comrades, classmates, teammates, clubmates, or brothers and sisters in Christ. It is the social context that brings associates together, usually imparting roles and often status differences that govern their relationship, and producing stylized exchanges. Most importantly for our purposes, associates treat each other with equal impersonal fairness and respect according to the dictates of their organization.

However, doing so does not preclude variation in affect. Although the similarity and interaction implicit in association tends to produce liking (Smith & Mackie, 1995), associates may come to like or dislike each other. Whatever the sentiment between them, it merely colors the relationship, it does not define the relationship. They may be "friendly" to each other, meaning cordial and congenial, going so far as perfunctory inquiry regarding respective personal health and happiness. They may even "socialize" together at the company party or the church picnic. And when they are Christians, associates will also aspire to exercise *agape* love. But they are not by that friends; to label them so is to emasculate the concept (Lewis, 1960; Olthuis, 1975). Indeed, associates may just as easily grate on each other or even despise each other. Yet their commitment to the

activity or context that makes them members of the same social unit, and requires periodic interaction, prevents the dissociation their personal animosity may suggest.

The companionship of associates may function as the structural "precondition" (Booth & Hess, 1974) or the "matrix" (Lewis, 1960) for the emergence of friendship. Contrarily, the mere companionship of associates describes an "empty-shell" or "devalitized" marital relationship that falls short of or away from friendship and passion (Kersten & Kersten, 1990).

A friend is someone with whom there is increased positive interaction and intimacy, but this alone does not create the new category. What separates a friend from an associate is that friendship is based on the qualities of the person instead of the status occupied or the role played by the other. Friendship is a primary relationship in that it denotes the predisposition to enter into a wide range of activities with one another (Bates & Babchuk, 1961). While the category of friendship subsumes a range of casual, good, and close friends (Rubin, 1985), all friends share a communal relationship (Bakan, 1966) in which they care for and reward the other out of direct concern. This sets friendship apart from an exchange relationship in which associates exchange rewards following the principle of equity. Put another way, friendship incorporates the other into the self (Smith & Mackie, 1995).

The nature of friendship then is also distinguished by affect. Whereas associates may be liked or disliked, friends are always loved, inasmuch as *philia* is added to *agape*. Rubin's (1970) seminal distinction conceives of loving as not only quantitatively more, but also qualitatively different than liking. Liking entails casual affection, respect for and favorable evaluations of the other, usually accompanied by feelings of similarity. Loving entails intimacy with, caring for, and attachment to the other. Attachment experienced as a powerful desire to be with the other is perhaps the most profound characteristic that separates the loving of friends from the liking of associates. The *New English Bible* translation of Proverbs 18:24 captures much of the difference: "Some companions are good only for idle talk, but a friend may stick closer than a brother."

A spouse is someone with an exclusive, institutionalized, domestic relationship traditionally marked by a public ceremony of commitment. Tradition also casts such a heterosexual dyad into the separate roles of husband and wife, but sexual correctness

stipulates less connotative and more generic terms based on "the ethic of intimacy," such as lover, significant other, or especially, partner (Stafford, 1993). Whatever the terminology, this relationship enacts the human ultimate in "leaving and cleaving." Most distinctively concerning affect, spouses add to the *agape* of associates, and the *philia* of friends, the *eros* of marriage. And [e]ros always threatens; for, unlike friendship, *eros* is a love that is jealous and cannot be shared" (Meilaender, 1993, p. 11).

Adult cross-sex relations, both Christian and non-Christian, have followed a pronounced pattern in modern Western society. The frequency of cross-sex acquaintance has been limited only by social contact, while cross-sex association has increased due primarily to the women's movement and the concomitant influx of women into the workplace (Haavio-Mannila, Kauppinen-Toropainen, & Kandolin, 1988). Normative constraints have appeared at the level of friendship, discouraging or even prohibiting cross-sex friendship (Rawlins, 1992). Spousal relations, of course, have been reserved by law for cross-sex liaisons. When the spectrum of personal relationships is seen as a natural progression, or a normative filter, all other humans have been acceptable as acquaintances or associates, but only half of other humans have been acceptable as friends, and only one other person as spouse.

### **Friendship in Scripture**

As with other dimensions of personal, interpersonal, and social health, the Scriptures do not define and argue friendship as much as they illustrate it. David and Jonathan are often celebrated as the paragons of same-sex friends (e.g., Inrig, 1981), if only according to the traditional male myth of friendship—bravery, loyalty, duty, and heroism (Sapadin, 1988). David expressed the ancient veneration of friendship when he said of Jonathan, "Your love to me was more wonderful than the love of women" (2 Sam. 1:26). David is just as renowned for his failure to love women, for his failure to pursue cross-sex friendship by disregarding Bathsheba as a person and treating her as a sex object.

Jesus did achieve cross-sex friendship with Mary and Martha, and in a society less receptive to it than Western society. He also displayed more conventional friendship with Lazarus, and with his twelve disciples, especially John and Peter. His primary teaching about friendship occurs in the upper room and appears in John 15:13-15, where he dignifies his disci-

ples by calling them friends (Harrison, 1987). However, the instruction does not contribute to conceptual clarity for our purposes. "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friend" (v. 13) employs *agape* love. "You are my friends if you do what I command you" (v. 14) is conditional. Verse 15 suggests that friendship is the product of Jesus' disclosure of the Father's will to his disciples. These and other scattered references to friendship such as Abraham's designation as "the friend of God" (James 2:23), have made it difficult to generate an adequate theology of intimate friendship (Stewart, 1985).

### A Model of Friendship

Blieszner and Adams (1992) have constructed a scientific model of friendship that identifies and sets in order the characteristics and variables of adult friendship observed by empirical research. They summarize their model as follows:

*Age and other social and individual characteristics influence friendship patterns. Age is a proxy measure for stage of the life course and stage of development, which both affect one another. The effects of other individual characteristics, such as gender (or race, class, and so on), are conceptualized both in structural terms, as determining opportunities for and constraints on friendship, and in psychological terms, as predicting personality traits and dispositions. Stage of life course affects social structural opportunities for and constraints on friendship, and stage of development affects psychological disposition. The forms that the elements of this model take and the relationships among them vary by structural, cultural, and historical context. (p. 4, italics in original)*

Although an explication of this model is beyond the scope of this article, three clusters of the highlighted elements that have a particular bearing on friendship dyads instead of networks, and cross-sex dyads in particular, warrant comment. First, friendship patterns themselves can be analyzed according to their structure, meaning the form of the ties creating the dyad, such as the hierarchy, solidarity, and homogeneity of the friends. Furthermore, friendship patterns can also be analyzed according to their processes, meaning the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors involved in acting as friends, as well as their phases, meaning the formation, maintenance, and dissolution of friendship.

Second, this model calls attention to the influence of the characteristics of individuals on friendship patterns. "[Social] structural effects on friendship include expectations about how friends should act, role demands, and the availability, accessibility, or

appropriateness of certain kinds of potential partners. [Psychological] dispositional explanations of friendship patterns emphasize the effects of individual characteristics such as personality, motives, and personal preferences" (Blieszner & Adams, 1992, p. 18-19). The two most influential structural variables of friendship are sex (Bell, 1981), our interest here, and age, as evident in stage of life course (e.g., parenthood) and stage of psychosocial development (Fischer & Oliner, 1983).

Third, all elements of this model will operate differently in different structural, cultural, and historical contexts. Flux in the stratification of social position and division of labor according to sex are current dimensions of the social structural context of friendship. Theological symbols, beliefs, values, and norms are part of the cultural context. Structure and culture may also take unique shape in subcultures, such as the evangelical community. These contexts also vary with time. For example, friendships existed across sex, age, and class distinctions in early Christian communities (Rader, 1983) and in medieval Europe and early colonial life much more so than in modern industrial society (Lopata, 1991). The empirical fact of such variation in structural, cultural, and historical contexts precludes any ethnocentric absolutizing or sacralizing of any one form or practice of friendship, including our own. What seems good here and now is at least partially a social construction, and subject to rueful change. Perhaps, as Fekete (1995) insists, "biofeminist patriarchy theory, abducting the last third of this century, is exactly as divisive, exactly as false, and exactly as seductive as theories of racial supremacy and class supremacy had been in the first and second thirds of this century" (p. 35). Perhaps preoccupation with sexual correctness "rests on the worst stereotypes, which will be sources of terrible embarrassment before long" (Fekete, 1995, p. 332).

### The Challenges of Adult Cross-Sex Friendship

Modern society views the infant and early childhood play and friendship of boys and girls as natural and normative. Nevertheless, children are "socialized away from cross-gender friendships" (Allan, 1989, p. 82), and it does not take long for the progressive, lifelong separation and segregation of the sexes to begin (Rawlins, 1992). By adolescence, multiple, close, private friendships with members of the other sex become suspect, though it is socially acceptable to have one at a time in the context of current con-

ventions of "going out," which in turn assumes eventual transformation into courtship and eventual culmination in marriage. Single adult cross-sex relations remain largely associational and oriented to groups, unless one relationship takes on a specific premarital character. By marriage, nonspousal cross-sex friendship is considered deviant (O'Meara, 1989); half of humanity is no longer eligible for friendship. Growing up means relinquishing personal, nonfamilial experience of the opposite sex in any more depth than association, except the one chosen as spouse.

Adult onset cross-sex relationships tend to take on the same configuration because of the same structural barriers and normative constraints. Progressing from acquaintance to associate is not problematic. Progressing from associate to friend is because of the socialized tendency to eroticize any such movement. If an overture to move beyond association is made between singles, romance or seduction tends to be assumed (Rawlins, 1992) due to gender based cognitive schemas. There is a heterosexual subschema in our culture by which actors "develop a generalized readiness to encode all cross-sex interaction in sexual terms and all members of the opposite sex in terms of sexual attractions" (Bem, 1981, p. 361). If the overture of friendship is rejected, it can easily, in the current "chilly climate" of gender relations, also be construed as sexual harassment, especially by those previously so traumatized. "Friendship requires an easy spontaneity, a willingness to say what one thinks, talk with few holds barred and few matters off limits—precisely the sort of thing that some will find difficult on occasion to distinguish from sexual harassment" (Meilaender, 1993, p. 10). Because of the heterosexual assumption, the same overture in same-sex relations will likely not be construed as sexual harassment, but merely as friendship offered and refused. If the overture is made by or to a married person of the opposite sex, the additional impropriety of infidelity is generally assumed for much the same reasons.

Therefore, either through maturation or through frustration, current social structures and norms effectively separate and segregate the sexes in all but association, leaving most adults with a collection of same-sex friends and perhaps a spouse in their personal circle. Conceivably, this scenario is both a cause and effect of gender alienation and antagonism, and of the excessive modern pressure on marriage partners to be everything for the other (Balswick 1992; Olthuis, 1975). Psychotherapy is

then left to counter the notion that the marriage agreement is a promise to fill each other's every emotional and sexual need. Marriage partners "may need help in recognizing that some needs will never be met anywhere, that lots of needs can be and should be met by people other than one's spouse, and that such relationships need not be sexualized" (Fay, 1994, p. 89).

Despite these prohibitive social dynamics and the ambiguity of the status, adult cross-sex friendships exist in growing numbers, and with growing Christian endorsement. Clapp (1993), for one, insists that Christians "need help to be friends in no area more than friendship between the sexes" (p. 109). Because they lack a coherent cultural script for guiding their interaction (McWilliams & Howard, 1993), cross-sex friends must continually engage in role making and identity bargaining, negotiating the essence and contours of their relationship. O'Meara (1989) identified four primary negotiation challenges confronting cross-sex friendship. They are "(1) determining the type of emotional bond represented by the relationship, (2) contending with the issue of sexuality, (3) dealing with the barrier of inequality, and (4) the challenge of public relationships—presenting the relationship as authentic to relevant audiences" (p. 531).

Subsequent tests of O'Meara's four challenges have suggested that they are "much ado about nothing." Monsour, Harris, Kruzweil, and Beard (1994) found that "though the challenges exist and have powerful effects on a small percentage of individuals in cross-sex friendships, for the majority of participants the challenges are not perceived as salient" (p. 55). Nevertheless, the suspicion here, based on traditional theology and ethics, is that Christians would probably be overrepresented in that small percentage. Therefore O'Meara's four challenges will serve as an outline for a closer look at the issues.

### **The Emotional Bond Challenge**

Some philosophers, theologians, and social scientists have questioned whether friendship is a love bond because of its dissimilarity with romantic and familial love (Harrison, 1987). But if the concept of *philia* is accepted, there can be little argument that friendship is a form of love. "The challenge to cross-sex friends is to successfully develop a shared definition of the type of love they experience" (O'Meara, 1989, p. 533), that is, to be able to explain

what being “just friends” means. Of O’Meara’s four challenges, cross-sex friends find this one most difficult (Monsour et al., 1994).

Sternberg’s (1986) triangular theory of love identifies three primary components of love—intimacy, passion, and commitment—that form the sides of a triangle. When one or two sides predominate, seven different kinds of close relationships obtain, consummate love being an equilateral triangle. The love of friends is an isosceles triangle in which intimacy and commitment predominate, in contrast to romantic love (intimacy and passion), fatuous love (commitment and passion) or infatuation (passion alone). Sternberg describes intimacy as central to friendship, and follows the majority of scholars in defining intimacy as reciprocal self-disclosure (Helgeson, Shaver, & Dyer, 1987; Jones, 1991).

Both same-sex and cross-sex friends concur. Monsour (1992) found that “there are more similarities than differences in the meanings given to intimacy by participants in cross-sex and same-sex friendships” (p. 289). Self-disclosure was by far the most frequently mentioned definition of intimacy, followed by emotional expressiveness, unconditional support, physical contact, and trust. Cross-sex friends work very hard to achieve a shared perceptual reality. Although there is “significant agreement, understanding, and realization of understanding between cross-sex friends concerning intimacy in the relationship and the importance of friendship, [the] perceived agreement and perceived understanding in those friendships [is] significantly greater than the actual” (Monsour, Betty, & Kurzweil, 1993, p. 529).

Negotiating the emotional bond of cross-sex friendship invariably returns to the challenge of understanding and achieving *philia* love. *Philia* does not appear in Lee’s (1973) familiar typology of the “colors” of love, in which *eros*, *Iudus*, and *storge* are primary forms, and *pragma*, *mania*, and *agape* are compound forms. As a Greek term, it does not fall among the Hebrew concepts of *racheam*, *ahaba*, or *hesed*. It occurs only once in the New Testament (James 4:4). And it “is not used to refer to God’s attitude toward men [sic], or to Christians’ attitudes toward God, other Christians, or outsiders. In short, it does not indicate Christian love” (Morris, 1981, p. 119).

But this alone is misleading, because the verb *phileo* appears twenty-five times, including Jesus’ love for Lazarus (John 11:3, 36) and John (John 20:2). It is used five times in Jesus’ conversation with

Peter by the lake. The first two times Jesus asks whether Peter loves him, he uses *agapao*, but switches to *phileo* the third time. Peter consistently replies with *phileo*. Add to this the cognate noun *philema*, usually meaning the greeting of a “holy kiss,” plus all the compound words, the most frequent of which is *philadelphia*, meaning brotherly love, and the concept of *philia* is no longer biblically insignificant (Morris, 1981).

As virtuous as *philia* may be, it still must answer to the question, “If you love those who love you, what reward have you? ... And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others?” (Matt. 5:46-47). Theological ethics have throughout Christendom held *agape* above *philia*, primarily because of the selective character of friendship, but also because of its requisite mutuality and its grudging willingness to change or end.

*Philia* is clearly a preferential bond in which we are drawn by what is attractive or choiceworthy in the friend; *agape* is to be nonpreferential.... *Philia* is, in addition, a mutual bond, marked by the inner reciprocates of love; *agape* is to be shown even to the enemy, who, of course, cannot be expected to return such love. *Philia* is recognized to be subject to change; *agape* is to be characterized by the same fidelity which God shows to his covenant. (Meilaender, 1981, p. 3)

Of these three characteristics of friendship, exclusivity is clearly the most troublesome; the ideal of particular friendship is haunted by the Christian call for universal love. In an effort to reduce the tension, some have “read the biblical mandate to love your neighbor as yourself as the Christian idea of friendship.... [But this] reduces friendship to a meaningless phrase.... If everyone is my friend, no one is my friend” (Olthuis, 1975, pp. 120-121). Nor is every fellow confessor a friend. Because friendship is selective and special, everyone is our neighbor, many are our brothers and sisters in Christ, and a few may also be our friends. Although the sex of those singled out has no logical bearing on this issue, same-sex friendships are typically not confronted with their selectivity as readily as cross-sex friendships, rendering the latter unduly defensive about the propriety of their emotional bond. That a person of the opposite sex might be a true friend is perhaps the most challenging and challenged close personal relationship.

### The Sexual Challenge

The real uniqueness of cross-sex friendship, and its defining tension in terms of sexual correctness, is

that friendship between a heterosexual man and woman introduces sexual dynamic into the relationship. Indeed, the sexual element is what has disqualified cross-sex friendship morally for many Christians, and functionally for many non-Christians. As Harry explained to Sally in the thesis statement of the memorable 1989 movie *When Harry Met Sally*, "Men and women can't be friends because the sex part always gets in the way." Sexuality, so conceived, is limited to one form of passion or *eros*, and as already seen in Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love, passion plus intimacy produces romance. Yet cross-sex friendship, or intimacy plus commitment, is supposedly not romantic.

The problem with such thinking lies in the narrow and inadequate conception of sexuality. Sexuality is not merely some physical impulse contained in a safe-box to be let out only on special, appropriate occasions. Humans are not sexual only when they participate in sexual acts, and asexual at all other times. Rather, "sexuality is part of the total personality and has at least four dimensions—biological, psychological, ethical, and cultural" (Greenberg, Bruess, Mullen, & Sands, 1989, p. 8), each dimension involving several factors. "Sexuality embraces our ways of being in the world as persons embodied with biological femaleness or maleness.... [it] includes the range of feelings, interpretations, and behaviors through which we express our capacities for sensuous relations with ourselves, with others, and with the world" (Nelson & Longfellow, 1994, p. xiv). "Through sexuality we give expression both to our existence as embodied creatures and to our basic incompleteness as embodied persons in our relationships to each other" (Grenz, 1990, p. 8).

Therefore cross-sex friendship cannot be asexual, but neither can cross-sex acquaintance, association, or spousal relations. All cross-sex interactions are inexorably sexual in some form or dimension, and subject to the sexual attraction of complementarity, just as all same-sex interactions are sexual and subject to the sexual attraction of similarity. Morally, there is no asexual plateau of safety; all human interaction occurs on the slippery slope of sexuality. Ninety-three percent of Hart's (1994) sample of morally upright and deeply religious men said they were sexually attracted to women other than their wives. The ethical question for Christians is how to live virtuously with that reality.

Understanding forms of sexuality enables Christians to do so. Jones (1988) distinguishes three levels

of sexuality: genital, erotic, and gender. Genital sexuality is physical sexual action, even when its expression does not involve the genitals. Erotic sexuality is passionate desire for the other, "the longing for completion through interaction with another, which possibly but not necessarily includes emotional, intellectual, spiritual, or physical interaction with the other" (Jones, 1988, p. 227). Gender sexuality is the "broadest possible level" already described above. It is "a far more comprehensive matter, broader, richer, and more fundamental to our human existence than simply genital sex" (Nelson & Longfellow, 1994, p. xiv). Other theologians have used other terms for what Jones calls gender sexuality. Smedes (1994) describes it as "transgenital sexuality." Dawn (1993) follows Huggett (1985) in describing it as "social sexuality," and suggests that an inability to distinguish between it and genital sexuality has contributed to notions of sexual harassment and misconduct.

Accepting that gender, transgenital, or social sexuality is inevitable and unavoidable, and that marriage is the full expression of all forms and levels of sexuality plus the sole preserve of genital sexuality (Dawn, 1993), what then of erotic sexuality in cross-sex friendship? What is to be said about sexual feelings and attraction? A passionate desire for "emotional, intellectual, or spiritual completion through interaction" probably approaches the boundary of morality, but though there may be honorable physical expressions of affection, pursuit of "physical completion through interaction" takes the relationship across the biblical boundary into the forbidden realm of genital sexuality. Because he remained unmarried, "Jesus did not experience genital sex. But this need not mean that he had no feeling of being a man among women.... [T]here is no reason to suppose that he had no erotic feeling toward women, that he never enjoyed the sheer female presence of Mary. Nor is there any reason to suppose that women felt no erotic attraction toward him" (Smedes, 1994, p. 63). He was tempted in all ways as we are.

It is this passion and sexual attraction that cross-sex friends must continually monitor, contend with, and regulate through negotiation; they must develop a shared definition of the role it will play in their relationship (O'Meara, 1989). "Conventional" cross-sex friends emphasize the dangers of sexuality and are especially vigilant against allowing physical attraction to affect and potentially destroy the relationship. "Nonconventional" friends welcome the added "spice" of sexual attraction, treating it as sec-

ondary to the friendship itself, but appreciating its contribution (Bell, 1981; Rubin, 1985). A complex aspect of the sexual challenge is defining the symbolic meaning of physical acts such as a touch or hug (O'Meara, 1989). Yet Monsour et al. (1994) found that only 20% of the males and 10% of the females in their sample reported some type of sexual tension, supporting a previous finding that males and females in cross-sex friendships agree with one another that sexual and romantic overtones in their friendships are moderately low (Monsour et al., 1993).

Both the emotional bond challenge and the sexual challenge of cross-sex friendship bear an additional complication for marrieds, namely the question of infidelity. "Sexuality reminds us experientially of our relational natures and thus beckons us toward integration with others, including a nongenital integration or fellowship with others besides our spouses" (Jones, 1988, p. 231). Theoretically, such nongenital fellowship constitutes infidelity if it is "a breach of the trust, a betrayal of a relationship, a breaking of an agreement" (Pittman, 1989, p. 20). A marital agreement or trust can include most anything a couple chooses, even such virtual human impossibilities as exclusive intimacy and gender sexuality. If the marital agreement stipulates exclusivity of cross-sex friendship, then extramarital cross-sex friendship does indeed constitute infidelity.

Adultery, in contradistinction to infidelity, is a much narrower, theological construct not defined by marriage partners (Pittman, 1989). It is "so specific you can take pictures of it" (Smedes, 1983, p. 168). It is the Christian conviction that genital sex outside marriage is sinful in itself, independent of the agreement between the marriage partners. Adultery is directly against God's will, whereas infidelity, as any kind of promise-breaking within marriage, is against the marriage, and only hence against God's will. By these definitions, the notion of emotional adultery is a nonsensical, alarmist contrivance intended to dissuade marrieds from extramarital intimacy. When friendship leads to genital sex, it is by definition immoral by dint of adultery. But marrieds are not morally safe as long as they stay out of a third person's bed. The real challenge for married cross-sex friends is to ensure that their relationship does not become immoral before that point, by being unfaithful to their marriage covenant. But close friendships are not in themselves a subtle failure in fidelity.

In his exposition of the seventh commandment of the Decalogue, Smedes (1983, pp. 169-172)

makes five assertions about "sexual friendships" that summarize what has been said thus far.

1. Sexually tinted friendships are almost inevitable. "Furthermore, we need them.... None of us is able to meet all our partner's needs for interpersonal relationships.... [They] are more to be commended than suspected."
2. Sexual friendships are not necessarily innocent. "A friendship free and clear of sexual touch could in fact be an emotional seduction away from one's commitment to the love of a dull spouse."
3. Sexual friendships are risky. A morally responsible person will weigh all odds in sharing the mystery of personhood with another, and "take the risk only if he [sic] can be sure his spouse will not be the loser *either way*" (italics added).
4. Sexual friendships are tested by what they do to our covenant. The primary marital covenant is violated when a friendship robs a spouse of prime time and interest and high level energy.
5. Sexual friendships can be consistent with fidelity. "A covenant-keeper does not have to worry much or moralize a great deal about the proprieties of relationships outside of marriage. Within commitment there is room for surprises, risks, and adventures. Loyalty is limiting but not constricting."

### **The Equality Challenge**

Authentic friendship is a communal relationship between equals (Meilaender, 1993), not an exchange relationship between associates (Jones, Bloys, & Wood, 1990). A third challenge for cross-sex friends is that "their interaction must counter homosociality and male dominance in the structural context of their relationship" (O'Meara, 1989, p. 536). They must overcome the effects of gender differences in a homosocial society (Lipman-Blumen, 1976) in which males still control a disproportionate amount of the valued social resources. Potential problems such as female toleration of power imbalance in return for status by association, or an imbalance in emotional need satisfaction in favor of the male (Rose, 1985), compromise the egalitarian character of friendship.

As already seen in Blieszner and Adam's (1992) model of friendship, hierarchy and solidarity are two aspects of the structure of friendship dyads. Both are components of the closeness or distance between people, with hierarchy referring to the vertical axis of power and control, and solidarity referring to the horizontal axis of emotional ties (McWilliams &



Howard, 1983). Like two identical magnetic poles, movement along one dimension creates opposite movement on the other. The gender stereotypes of men as being more instrumental, agentic, and egoistic, and of women as being more prosocial, nurturing, and communal, lead to the expectation that male same-sex relationships will show more hierarchy, while female same-sex relationships will show more solidarity (McWilliams & Howard, 1993). Presumably, the presence of both sexes in a friendship dyad will moderate both effects.

Do these gender differences in and effects on friendship actually exist? Empirical evidence indicates that "traditional" gender stereotypes prevail (Parker & de Vries, 1993; Rawlins, 1992; Walker, 1994; Wright & Scanlon, 1991). Friendship between women tends to be more interdependent, expressive, holistic, and focused on talk. Friendship between men tends to be more independent, instrumental, segmented, and focused on shared activities. In Wright's (1982) oft-quoted image, female friendship is "face to face" whereas male friendship is "side by side," a contrast C. S. Lewis (1960) had used earlier to differentiate lovers and friends. Wright (1989) later compared female and male friendship to Bakan's (1966) communal versus agentic relationships.

These modes seem to be shaped significantly by social circumstances, as "men and women do not experience equal opportunities for cultivating friendships of either mode" (Rawlins, 1992, p. 184). But Wright (1988) also warns against overestimating and "overinterpreting" the social implications of merely statistically significant gender differences in friendships; men and women remain more similar in friendship than different (Walker, 1994). Unfortunately, like other stereotypes, gender stereotypes are usually maintained with the smallest margin of behavioral evidence. Inasmuch as they persist, they have at least two effects. One is the reversal of evaluation of gendered friendships, from where female friendships have historically been deemed inferior to those of males (Wright, 1982) to where female friendships are now deemed superior because of their hierarchy-neutralizing and solidarity-enhancing qualities (McWilliams & Howard, 1993). The other is the inherently unstable quality of cross-sex friendship because of the essential antagonism of hierarchy and solidarity.

Given the salience of gender role orientation to both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of friendship (Jones et al., 1990), Christian conceptions

of gender impinge on Christian experience of cross-sex friendship. The lack of a theological consensus simply exacerbates the problem. The internal Christian "culture war between traditionalism and feminism" (Groothuis, 1994) has pitted those aligned with the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) against those aligned with Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) over whether gender differences are innate, meaning God-given and God-ordained, or humanly constructed through socialization. A third position, that small biological differences have been grossly exaggerated by culture (Balswick & Morland, 1990), has its own repercussions for cross-sex friendship. A traditional theology of gender will likely make cross-sex friendship less viable in theory and practice, and partially explains their relative paucity in the past. Though feminist theologians with a more adversarial bent have thought it difficult for men and women to be friends (Hunt, 1991), an egalitarian theology at least removes the complication of gender hierarchy from cross-sex friendship and provides more "fertile soil" for their development and maintenance (McWilliams & Howard, 1993). Shifts in gender ideology have probably contributed to the recent finding of Monsour et al. (1994) that, of the four challenges facing cross-sex friendships, the issue of power and control (as manifested in decision making and conversational control) is least problematic.

### ***The Audience Challenge***

While the first three challenges of cross-sex friends have to do with their private relationship, the final challenge has to do with their public relationship. Cross-sex friends frequently struggle to convey the authenticity of their dyadic identity to the families, friends, and associates that form their relevant audiences (O'Meara, 1989). Because these audiences can be influential through labeling and altercasting, cross-sex friends must "adopt a strategic position vis-a-vis those who would threaten the relationship with rumors and attributions," and "orchestrate social perceptions of their relationship" (Rawlins, 1982, p. 349-350). An inherent dilemma in this process is that privacy is a basic dimension of friendship in general, yet one that generates audience suspicion of romance in cross-sex relationships (O'Meara, 1989). Of course, the most salient audiences are the romantic partners and spouses of the cross-sex friends, for whom the friendship can generate a great deal of suspicion and jealousy (Powell, 1987), especially in a

culture holding a myth of spousal all-sufficiency. Friends typically respond with one of two extremes. Either they “do not explain their friendship to anyone” or they “tell everyone” that they are just friends (Monsour et al., 1994, p. 62).

Audiences consist of specific and generalized others, and the challenge they represent returns this discussion to social norms and the politics of sexual correctness; the audience challenge can be reformulated as the social norm challenge. Freedom regarding friendship in modern society is not as great as it initially appears (Allan, 1989). “Norms exist for whom we choose as friends, how we treat them, and what is acceptable to expect of them” (Blieszner & Adams, 1992, p. 2). Cross-sex friends encounter the homosocial norm, which is the tendency “for the seeking, enjoyment, and/or preference for company of the same sex” (Rose, 1985, p. 63). Indeed, maintaining predominantly heterosocial relations can expose individuals to suspicion of homosexuality (Pogrebin, 1987) because of the assumption that individuals limit and preserve as special those relations they find sexually attractive. Norms are social facts in the Durkheimian sense that they are external to and coercive on the individual, and any violation of the normative structure is therefore likely to be costly and painful for the individual. Cross-sex friendships show vulnerability to such audience effects by being less common and shorter in duration than same-sex friendships (Parker & De Vries, 1993).

As is evident in corporeal punishment and other human behaviors, the social norms of any given culture and era can be more restrictive than biblical ethics. Christians need to ask themselves if the traditional prohibition of cross-sex friendship is an ethic derived directly from Scripture, or if it is an accommodation to socially constructed cultural norms. The Christian case against cross-sex friendship is usually built on reactive anxiety about moral purity expressed through slippery slope arguments. The doctrine of human depravity and the spectacular fall of high profile Christians give much credence to such reasoning. It wants no hint of sexual immorality (Eph. 5:3), though the origins of such hints are seldom explored, and doubts it possible to look on a woman without lusting after her (Matt. 5:28). It sometimes points to Joseph’s flight from Potiphar’s wife, though she was not soliciting friendship, as a model of “fleeing the appearance of evil,” an unfortunate and inaccurate paraphrase of 1 Thessalonians

5:22. It is at root a prudential ethic (see Stevens, 1986) that not only admonishes Christians “to avoid sin, but also the occasion and appearance of sin. Hence, it is considered wrong to place oneself, or someone else, in temptation or to give possible scandal to others” (Lampe, 1985, p. 316).

Not only are such admonitions pertaining to cross-sex friendship increasingly found to be hermeneutically shoddy and ethically unconvincing, but their efficacy in deterring immorality is increasingly being questioned. Lampe (1985) shows evidence that “society’s lack of a definition of [cross-sexual friendship] may actually be causally related to at least some adultery” (p. 310). He argues that the anomic situation of cross-sex friendship contributes to first the audience and then the participants mislabeling it as adulterous, and then acting it out in resignation. In other words, the absence of a socially defined role for such friendship pushes participants toward the closest socially recognized role, that of lovers; the audience creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. “If this is true, society may unwittingly be a party to promoting the very behavior it wishes to discourage” (Lampe, 1985, p. 322).

Some theologians are saying much the same. Smedes (1994) maintains that “the sexual delusion of our time” is the notion that

all sexual encounter between male and female is an anticipation of intercourse and orgasm. The evil that this distortion does is many-sided. One of the ills is that people who believe the heresy act it out; they assume that sexually tinged encounters must end in bed. This leads them either to a kind of fatalism about sexual intercourse or to a fear of any relationship that has sexual overtones. The fear, however, is not always a safety catch. Sometimes it leads well-meaning people to suppress the sexual dimension of a relationship, convince themselves it is all “platonic” or professional, only to have it break open on a physical level when their defenses are down.

Psychic sexuality adds an undefinable tinge of adventure and excitement, uncertainty and curiosity to the relationship. It colors the conversation with all sorts of brighter and lighter hues absent from the paler conversations between members of the same sex.... We should be conscious of it, accept it, and rejoice in it. The more we affirm it with thanks the less likely we are to be deluded by the fear that any sexually exciting relationship will lead to the bedroom. (p. 84)

In his chapter on the fullness and freedom of singleness, Clapp (1993) asserts that “our culture (partly because of the influence of a misguided Christianity) has been impoverished in recognizing [gender sexuality]. Men and women have been taught to see one

another only in the most starkly contrasting, black-and-white terms: either as lovers or as the most casual of acquaintances" (p. 109). He too finds good reason to doubt that rigid separation of sexes effectively prevents "extramarital sex." It serves mostly to reinforce the "impoverished, overly narrow" dichotomy of what we have called associates and lovers. "When people saddled with such cramped imaginations have any feelings at all for a woman or man, they are faced with only two options: go to bed or never see each other again. This isn't freedom. This is tragedy" (Clapp, 1993, p. 110).

Some Christian psychologists have said the same for some time. Olthuis (1975) described as victims of myth those who "are haunted by the idea ... that being close always leads to the bedroom. That idea is simple, unadulterated nonsense. But it has a pernicious effect, and we retreat and are afraid to be close" (p. 115). More recently, Hart (1994) lamented the compartmentalized sexuality that "explains why other wise moral and upright [Christians] can have pretty sordid affairs. They have so effectively split off their sexuality that it never dawns on them that they have fractured their personalities. They lack self-integration.... Without a healthy integration of our sexuality into our total being, it's not possible to be faithful" (p. 204-205).

Paul taught that submitting to the negative rules of this world may have the "appearance of wisdom," but it "lack(s) any value in restraining sensual indulgence" (Col. 2:20-23). Thus it may well be more morally prudent for Christians to be proactive and carve out a social script for cross-sex friendship that encourages individuals to live virtuously with their sexuality. If and when that happens, the audience challenge of such friendship may be largely nullified.

### Conclusion

It is possible that cross-sex friendship may be one of the more constructive means of finding interpersonal warmth in the "chilly climate" of gender relations, and interpersonal peace in the "moral panic" of sexual correctness. We may still be a long way from having Christian and social permission to phone our neighbor's spouse just to talk, or even to invite him or her to church. But cross-sex friendships at least provide men and women with an "insider's perspective" to the other sex and an opportunity to bridge differences (Sapadin, 1988).

Bridging differences is what Christian community is about. The church needs to "offer to the world

models of deep friendships built on the character, the faithfulness, of God. It is especially important that we ... foster and model all kinds of friendships—nongenital and honorable friendships across age, gender, social class, and racial lines" (Dawn, 1993, p. 85). Broader experience in friendship contributes to the enrichment and abundance of Christian life. "[F]riendship between the sexes may take us not out of ourselves but beyond ourselves—may make us more whole, more balanced and sane, than we could otherwise be.... [This is] one of the purposes God has in giving us friends. We are being prepared ultimately for that vast friendship which is heaven, in which we truly are taken beyond ourselves, and in which all share the love of God" (Meilaender, 1993, pp. 13-14).

Practical advice in the conduct of cross-sex friendship is now appearing in Christian literature (e.g., Cook & Lee, 1992). Balswick (1992), for one, devotes most of a chapter to elaborating two principles for "nonromantic yet close relationships" with the opposite sex. The first is that "the relationship can involve intellectual, emotional, and psychological intimacy, but only limited physical intimacy" (p. 192). Regarding physical closeness, Balswick recommends verbalizing feelings of attraction to oneself, the friend, and one's spouse to create an atmosphere of openness and trust. Both friends must assume responsibility for any physical contact, neither can be sexually flirtatious, and interaction should follow the lead of the person with the most cautious felt limits. The extent of intellectual sharing and emotional intimacy is limited only by the second principle, which is that "commitment will be given to the friendship as long as it remains non-threatening and secondary to the primary marital relationship of each friend" (p. 196). Extramarital cross-sex friendship must not be allowed to equal, much less surpass, marital friendship, although, in the hypersentimentalization of marriage in the last half of this century (Berger & Berger, 1983), the morality of same-sex friendship equalling or surpassing marital friendship is also questioned. Furthermore, spouses must have full knowledge of the friendship and full permission to curtail any or all activity, without being resented. The truth of friendship (Olthuis, 1975) is not "till death do us part," but rather "till circumstances do us part."

Like same-sex friendship, adult cross-sex friendship should never be construed as a right on which Christians can insist. C. S. Lewis (1960), who

bemoaned the "impoverishment" of a world where men and women lacked the "common ground" necessary to make cross-sex friendship viable, nevertheless maintained that "I have no duty to be anyone's friend and no [one] in the world has a duty to be mine.... Friendship is unnecessary.... It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things which give value to survival" (p. 67). But neither should cross-sex friendship be ruled out. Like same-sex friendship, it can edify and, as Francis Bacon (1937) put it, double our joy and cut our sorrow in half. Cross-sex friendship is "perfectly legitimate" (Olthuis, 1975, p. 114), though it may in certain circumstances be quite impossible to achieve, or unwise to pursue. Because of its difficulties and dangers, some Christians may want to reserve it as a privilege for the personally, interpersonally, and spiritually stable and mature. It certainly requires the counterculturally capable. As Clapp (1993) concludes, "relationships between men and women can never be entirely 'safe,' but following Jesus is not about being safe" (p. 110).

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