

A vision for friendship

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I suppose you could refer to it as ‘going solo.’ It was a very different way of leading. Ministry started with you: you were the man, you were the ministry, and everything was built around you: the person of faith and power. It was a model of leadership that I witnessed all around me at college, and which I was even trained in. Subsequently, I grew up to believe that it was the only way to survive in ministry.

If you were a leader you were totally separate from the rest – viewed almost like a priest, set apart for something unique. People deliberately positioned themselves as ‘islands’ because they believed that they shouldn’t let their guard down and allow others too close. Whether you were in a local church setting or a national position, you could not let people get to know you too well – it would make you vulnerable, it could reveal your weaknesses, and it just wasn’t encouraged. As you may imagine, it was an incredibly lonely model of leadership and a pill that I was loathe to swallow.

As I began in ministry, this model was being projected all around me, but I was convinced that I did not want to live my life like that. I could not agree with the principle of being alone and different from the rest. Purely professional, surface-level, working relationships would never be enough in ministry. Superficial relationships would never grapple with the issues, invite genuine feeling or work through important problems; in fact, I believed that they wouldn’t sustain any of us.

Instead, I saw team ministry - and friendships within that - as vital. If I was truly going to do anything useful for the Kingdom of God where I didn’t just ‘survive’ the journey but ‘thrive’ in it, I needed to build key relationships that would stick with me for the long haul. I knew deep down that ministry was not like any other job, it was a way of life that I was being called to. I would not last the passage of time alongside individuals who just ‘worked’ with me; I needed a team of relationships. And somewhere within me I hoped and believed that it was possible to have colleagues who could be friends: people who you could be totally genuine with and who would love you no matter what.

Billy Graham modelled this approach to ministry. His life had a massive impact on mine at a crucial time. His commitment to having close friends in Christian service was an inspiration. Amazingly, I had the privilege of meeting him and the opportunity to see how he built and sustained the team around him for over 50 years. Somehow within his organisation he had influenced everyone involved to believe that friendship and building significant relationships were absolutely fundamental to their work. Watching their dedication not only to serving Christ, but to loving one another, powerfully spoke to me. How on earth did he do it? What were the

criteria that he put in place to make that happen?

Biblical friendship

I wanted to get a handle on how this was worked out in Scripture. For a start, Proverbs revealed some golden nuggets of wisdom. Proverbs 18:24 says that 'a man of many companions may come to ruin but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother'. It is a typical Hebrew proverb, with two contrasting statements that really challenge our relationships (as does the rest of the book). There are clearly some friendships that are entirely different to all our other acquaintances and require a whole different depth of commitment. They are the people that we need to look out for – a few people who surround us, and support us through everything.

Paul is a great example of this. The apostle clearly knew what it was like to have friends that stuck close through unbelievable challenges and difficulties. His relationship with Barnabas, for example, was marked out and vital for Paul's ministry to be sustained.

Proverbs 12:15 was another verse that spoke clearly to me: 'The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.' So often we can become the fool – we get blinded by emotional attachment and ignore the wise advice of true friends. This emotional blindness can come about through an unhealthy commitment to our plans, desires and actions; sending us down a route that we were never meant to go down. A friend often sees things that we cannot see; can see the wood when sometimes we can only see trees. A true friend offers advice that we should heed – if we don't have these people, or do but don't listen to them, it can destroy our ministry.

A couple came to see me who were intent on getting married. I could see that there was a love between them but as we began to talk and get beyond the emotion, there was evidence of a totally different set of values, desires and goals in each one. My friend was infatuated with her beauty – he was caught up in the moment –and excited about the attraction. Unfortunately this had blinded him to things that really mattered. Once the rings were exchanged the future would look bleak. Where one was willing to make massive sacrifices for the sake of the gospel, the other was not. All the things they wanted to achieve with their lives seemed opposite.

The old saying that 'love is blind' is corny, but I think that there is some truth in it. It doesn't have to be a marriage, it can be a major job appointment that you have to make, or an opportunity that appears attractive in the moment. There are many ways that seem 'right' to us, but are we listening to our friends? Sadly at crucial times, so many of us choose to ignore them. We all have a blind spot. Think about the motorway: if we don't check our blind spot what happens? We pull out and we can be killed. In ministry if we don't listen to the wise advice of our friends our potential to serve Christ, make a difference for Him and be all we are called to be, can be destroyed in an instant. It is terrifying, but absolutely true.

A new model for leadership

These insights cemented what I was already beginning to realise – that love, respect, trust, forgiveness and understanding (to name just a few traits) were crucial to my relationships. The fact was that having all these things in my friendships was going to be mean laying down a time-consuming foundation. None of those things can be achieved on a shallow, superficial level or without quality time together. I also realised that it was going to be a bit of a challenge to input this Biblical framework into our modern-day culture. Unfortunately, Western context doesn't encourage us to establish and keep relationships, and it doesn't push us to form communities that embody these attributes. I had a definite feeling of going against the strong

British current to implement something that had sunk hastily to the bottom of the agenda. Living in a 'me first' culture was the opposite of the 'in it together' mentality that I believed to be crucial to living and serving Jesus.

I had to form relationships where complete and total vulnerability and honesty were central to everything. As I began to lead, I made relationships a priority. I looked at the people around me through a different lens: they weren't just colleagues working hard to make things happen, they were brothers and sisters in Christ who were in this with me.

Over time, I have implemented and digested a framework that I, and I hope others, can sign up to; where friendship is key to your success, the success of others, and to the realisation of everything you do for the kingdom of God. You see, I seriously don't believe that our ministry is all about us. It actually depends greatly on the depth of relationships you have around you. These people are in it with us – they are the ones who will straight talk with you, challenge you and change you.

I know not all of us get to choose who we work with, and relationships are never plain sailing, but in this case prayer is the only answer. Praying for those you struggle with can totally change your heart towards them. God might want to challenge and change you through that person. The Bible talks about 'iron sharpening iron' (Proverbs 27:17) to cause that transformation.

These friendships are not purely about serious interaction - the weeping, grappling with issues, dealing with confusion and living with mystery - they are also about fun, laughter and joy. One without the other is not enough to positively sustain anyone.

Reasons to be friendly

I think relationships are so critical for us for a number of reasons. Firstly, we all have transitional points in our lives; we all find ourselves in situations where we need to make key decisions. In these moments we have one perspective on things (inevitably creating a blind spot) and that view alone can cause us to make some very bad decisions. Friends have the ability to come alongside us and bring clarity at those points in our lives. Yes, they have the capability of wounding us by telling us something we may not want to hear, but they can also speak truth, which is necessary to widen our perspective and direct us.

Proverbs says that 'wounds from a friend can be trusted but an enemy multiplies kisses' (27:6). Sometimes we cannot bear to hear something that sheds fresh light onto our situation because it demands we do something difficult (like sacrifice or reconciliation). These words of truth are what hit us hard because they require a response that we would rather avoid. Ultimately, the Bible tells us that we can trust these words because they contribute to making us all that we are called to be. A friend will have a true understanding of who we are and is therefore able to speak honestly and faithfully into our circumstance.

I know that God has always used these transitional moments to bring about some of the greatest growth in my life. The reality is that my personality will not greatly change because in essence it is who God has made me to be. However, what will change are my values and my principles as they are influenced and moulded, not just by my work, but by the people around me. That's why these friendships are so vital – not just that we have them there, but that they are affecting us in the right way in every decision – large or small. They can save us from making some of the worst choices in our lives.

I remember reading a section of Billy Graham's biography where he comes to a transitional point in his own ministry. A friend, who was part of his team, speaks to him in a way that is terribly tough to digest, but God uses the guy to affect Billy's future in a powerful way. He could have ignored his colleague and ended up causing a great deal amount of pain and heartache, but he doesn't. Billy moves on to greater fulfilment and purpose in his life by playing more to his strengths and finding new ways of using his God given gifts; affecting thousands of lives in Jesus' name.

The second reason for friendship is that ministry was never meant to be done alone. Not once in the New Testament do we see anyone on their own in leadership. Paul travelled in a team (2 Tim 4:9-11); Jesus was surrounded by his disciples and sent them out in twos. We are not called to the 'island' mentality, but to being part of a team as we lead. That means that we learn to work with one another to overcome any hurdles that we come up against.

The after-dinner talks of John Wesley are fascinating. He used to just sit around debating and chatting with his companions, in order to come to his conclusions. Jonathan Aitkin describes how when John Newton was grappling with some massive issues of calling and development in ministry, he sought out two close friends that he trusted and who genuinely cared about his life. For him they were like jewels that shone in his dark times, bringing him joy and lighting the way ahead. We all need those people. In the 21st century, we still need those friends who will help us not to trip up in the darkness and who will walk with us through whatever we have to face.

The third reason why I think relationships are vital is found in Ajith Fernando's book 'Reclaiming Friendship.' When we cultivate close friendships they can protect us from ourselves and from each other. They don't detract from our relationship with God, but the more we work at building the right ones and maintaining honesty and trust in friendships, the harder it is for them to be destroyed. Ajith reminds us of two Proverbs where the dangers in 'loose relationships' are highlighted. Proverbs 16:28 says: 'A gossip separates close friends', and 17:9 says: 'Whoever repeats the matter (of an offence committed by a friend) separates close friends.' The writer of Proverbs also refers to the 'wayward wife who has left her partner' (Prov 2:16-17). The fact is that relationships are fractured by individuals becoming wayward or distant or separated over various issues – and all of us are vulnerable to this. When this happens we can speak badly of one another and destroy our relationships. We just need to be aware of these potential dangers and choose together to continue to overcome whatever is thrown at us.

If we can apply these things in our relationships, I honestly believe that we can discover something very deep with one another. It's what the Bible calls 'fellowship'. Our priority is always our relationship with Jesus. David was told to encourage himself in the Lord, and that is most definitely our first port of call. We all need to come away from everything and spend time with Jesus – that is totally Biblical. However, in the darkness of our culture and the highs and lows of life, friendship with others too will keep us going. Friends will cause us to excel and will bring joy, fun and laughter into our lives. We need to keep reminding ourselves of the greatest commandment: to love the Lord our God with all our heart and love our neighbour (Mt 22:38-39).

Ministry can be fun, engaging, fulfilling and life transforming if we have friendships. If we don't, I honestly believe that it can be one of the most difficult, lonely places to be. So let's not battle on alone; let's find friends who, whatever happens along the way, will share the journey with us.

Roy Crowne co-wrote this article with Anne Calver, a freelance writer.

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