

Finding Friendship in the Church: Moving Forward

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The starting place of Christian friendship is the message of Christ crucified for *us*. In Christ, God has removed the barriers that keep us separated from him and from one another. As a result of the cross, we are now freed to pursue real friendships, even with believers who are very different than us, because God has created a new kind of community that brings us together.



If that is true, we ought to have automatic, deep, and meaningful relationships with the people in our churches, right?

Has that been your experience? If you're like me, it has been much more difficult than "automatic." It may have even felt impossible. But before we go further, let's believe together that what God has done is not just provide us with the possibility of meaningful relationships, but that he has already created them for us in Christ. If we don't believe that, we cannot move forward.

If, however, we believe that what God accomplished for us has definite implications for our lives together, how do we advance? Let me offer two practical suggestions related to communication that will help us walk in the unity that God has created.

Listen to understand

We are following Christ together now, which means we need to understand one another, and understanding comes through listening. So often I am quick to reply without truly listening. While a person is speaking, my main concern is how to answer them or fix their problem. This is a good and necessary goal, but it can change the way I hear. It can create miscommunication because I assume that I understand before I actually do.

You may ask someone an intentional question, "How is your relationship with your husband/wife?" If the person you're talking to begins to open up about something, especially if it is a difficulty, you have to make a choice about how you're going to listen. Are you going to

focus on how to reply immediately or will you aim for comprehension first? If you have an answer right away, you're assuming that you know what's going on. If you defer judgment, ask clarifying questions and let the person speak freely, you're communicating that although you don't fully understand everything about their situation, you want to.

When you listen like this, people perceive that you care about them. To actively listen is to love.

If you don't understand their situation, but operate under the assumption that you do, it is likely that your advice will land on dismissive ears. If you fail to listen well, you are risking the health of your friendship—basing it upon what you think you know rather than what you've heard them say.

Stop telling people you're doing just fine

You've experienced this I'm sure, "Hey, how are you doing?" "Fine."

What? Is that true? Are we all doing just fine?

Now, I know that when people ask how I'm doing, they probably just mean to say hello. It isn't really a question, but a greeting. I've already done it today when I knew I didn't have time to listen to an answer longer than a few words.

But, we don't want to stay at the relational level of "hello" do we? Because of the gospel we are interested in walking through life with a community of people who understand our fears, faults, strengths, and dreams. Aren't you tired of going it alone? Even if it is just a greeting, try answering your brother or sister in Christ honestly next time. You may be doing well, or very poorly. You may even catch the person who asked off guard and make them uncomfortable. But, it will be worth it if it starts a meaningful conversation. A culture of friendship in your local body won't start or grow if you don't do something about it.

Does that sound risky? It is. But, we believe that God has created an environment where risk for the sake of love is ok. Your relationships won't be perfect or easy, but they can be authentic—and that is beautiful.