

**A Review of Wesley Hill.
*Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love
in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian.*
Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2015. 160 pp. \$14.99.**

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It is impossible to quantify the worth of a good friend. Intimate, meaningful friendships are among God's greatest gifts, and Christians in particular have a calling to both enjoy and steward such gifts. But how might a Christian who wrestles with same-sex attraction find close friendships in the church? Does his or her sexual orientation produce an obstacle to intimacy with members of the same-sex? These are the questions over which Wesley Hill, assistant professor of biblical studies at Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, gives extensive reflection in his latest work, *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian*.

CONTEMPORARY MYTHS AND THE CURRENT STATE OF FRIENDSHIP

But before delving into the problem of friendship for celibate Christians beset with same-sex attraction, Hill asks a more basic question in chapter 1: Has not friendship been eclipsed in our late-modern society and in the church? Hill observes three widely accepted myths that have shaped our contemporary understanding of and approach to same-sex friendship. The myth that "sex wholly explains the depth of our most profound relationships" (10) has fostered—especially among men—the fear that romantic love may seep into their same-sex friendships. The myth that one's "ultimate significance" (11) is found in marriage and family has furthered the idea that friendships are subservient to the more important relationship with one's spouse.

The contemporary myth that freedom—understood primarily as independence from committed relationships—is what allows a person to find genuine happiness has struck "at the very root of friendship" (14). Once someone embraces the myth of freedom, sacrifice—an indispensable ingredient for friendship—is ruled out by definition. Given the pervasive and devastating effect these myths have had

on the place of friendship within our contemporary Western context, Hill is “convinced that all of us could benefit from a recovery of friendship as a genuine love in its own right” (22). Hill’s reflections on the three “myths” currently eroding friendship are apt, and I’m sure few would contend with his desire to retrieve a more robust vision of friendship within the church.

A RECOVERY OF FRIENDSHIP

In chapter 2 Hill steps back in time to find historical precedents for a version of friendship that is more profound than most of us late-moderns are used to. There was a time in the medieval era, for example, when same-sex friendships were publicly recognized by the church and sealed with recitation of vows. These relationships were not romantic, but they were intimate, committed, and expected to endure. Reflecting on the fact that such rituals no longer have a place in modern society, one of Hill’s college students wondered if their disappearance was a good thing given the danger of such relationships becoming “ingrown, obsessive, and unhealthy” (40). But Hill sees another, more serious danger stemming from the neglect of friendship; namely, “the burden, not to mention the attendant temptations, of isolation and solitude crated by the absence of human closeness” (40).

For the sake of all Christians, then, regardless of sexual orientation, age, or marital status, Hill hopes for a return to “vowed spiritual siblinghood” within the church (41). Again, like his assessment of the contemporary state of friendship, Hill’s general insight and vision here are commendable. I will return to his idea of vowed friendship in a moment.

Part 1 closes with chapter 3 in which Hill turns to the Scripture to show how the gospel transforms friendship. Christ draws men and women into a spiritual family in which temporary physical familial ties serve as a parable of and yield to the eternal bonds spiritual siblinghood. Christianity call for the “abandonment of friendship” but its “revolution and redemption” (61).

Part 2 is called “Living Friendship” and consists of chapters 4–6. In these chapters Hill reflects on how a recovery of friendship might be expressed in the church. Here he begins to narrow his focus slightly on the question of how “celibate gay Christians” can participate in the restoration of true friendship among believers. In chapter 5, “Friendship is a Call to Suffer,” Hill includes a personal story of a relationship he lost after one of his best friends got married. In this story the reader is brought face-to-face with the grief that someone like Hill experiences when they lose close friends. If marriage isn’t an option for someone with same-sex attraction, then the loss of close same-sex relationships portends, at least in the moment of loss, a lifetime of loneliness.

Hill concludes his book with “some patterns that more committed, more sibling-like friendships may take” (106). Christians should first admit their need for friendship (106–107) and focus on strengthening the relational bonds we already have, preferably in the church. These friendships will, in turn, transform the community (109–113) and become the context within which Christians can practice hospitality to strangers (112–115). Finally, counter to the modern tendency to bounce from community to community, those who desire the cultivation of true friendship should be willing to remain, either physically or emotionally, with their friends, making the necessary sacrifices in order to express their commitment to friendship.

THE PHRASE “GAY CHRISTIAN”

As I’ve already noted, much of Hill’s work in *Spiritual Friendship* is commendable. The appraisal of the current state of friendship, his desire for the church to return to a vision of deeper and more committed friendships, and his reflections on how Christians struggling with same-sex attraction may find satisfying relationships within the body of Christ will help the church reassess our approach to friendship and how well (or poorly) we are serving the single men and women of our church, especially those who struggle with same-sex attraction. Given these commendable qualities, there are a few weaknesses in Hill’s book that undermine his aim to promote a biblical vision of friendship.

First, there is Hill’s use of the phrase “gay Christian.” Despite the critiques he received for his use of the phrase in his previous book, *Washed and Waiting*, Hill retained this expression throughout *Spiritual Friendship* to refer to those who have trusted Christ and struggle with same-sex attraction. While he states in *Washed and Waiting* that he does not intend by this phrase to suggest that one’s identity is ultimately determined by his or her sexual orientation, it is difficult to see how this can be so: Doesn’t the very structure of the expression suggest that being gay governs one’s identity as a Christian rather than vice-versa? Hill claims elsewhere that the use of the word “gay” does not, in the common parlance, necessarily refer to someone who *indulges* homosexual desire, but only to one who *has* homosexual desires. Actually, it appears to me that when people outside the church use the word “gay” in reference to someone with homosexual desires, they are including both the desires and the sexual fulfillment of those desires. Could it be that Hill is redefining the word “gay” in light of his Christian commitments and then claiming that his redefinition is the common one?

Furthermore, in *Spiritual Friendship* when Hill refers to gay and lesbian Christians who “choose celibacy” (98) he implies—unintentionally, perhaps—that one can remain a Christian *without* choosing celibacy. In this case, the phrase “gay Christian” is worlds apart from “celibate gay Christian,” with the former qualifying as a genuine contradiction in terms. But others have already dealt thoroughly with Hill’s use of this phrase, so I will quickly move on to my next point of concern.¹

VOWED FRIENDSHIPS: A THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE

Second, like Hill’s college student mentioned above, I hesitate, for different reasons, about the idea of vowed friendships. Hill argues that he and many other Christians need “something more” than relationships that consist mainly of “a weekly night out or a circle of people with whom to go on vacation” (42). He continues,

We need people who know what time our plane lands, who will worry about us when we don’t show up at the time we said we would. We need people who we can call and tell about the funny thing that happened in the hallway after class. We need the assurance that, come hell or high water, a few people will stay with us, loving us in spite of our faults and caring for us when we are down. More than that, we need people for whom *we* can care (42–43).

Hill believes that “recovering the historic Christian practice of vowed friendships can help with all these needs” (43). Yet, given the legitimate desires expressed in the above paragraph to love and be

1. On the use of the term “gay Christian,” see Owen Strachan, “Should the Church Speak of ‘Gay Christians?’” *JBMW* 19.1 (Spring 2014): 4–7.

loved by others, we have to ask if, historical examples notwithstanding, it could be that God never intended friendship to receive public recognition in the same way that marriage does? In other words, although friendship, like marriage, requires commitment, sacrifice, and genuine concern for another, it seems that for the sake of both institutions, friendship cannot carry the same theological weight as marriage in terms of public ceremony and recognition.²

This is not a claim that married persons are superior to unmarried persons or that friendship is unimportant and dispensable. Rather, I am arguing that theologically, marriage is given a place of prominence in Scripture because it points to a greater and final spiritual reality. Yes, we are and will remain brothers and sisters within the family of God in his kingdom, but corporately we are Christ's bride and our status as bride and bride-groom will be publically acknowledged with a wedding celebration (see Rev 19:9). Christians, regardless of marital status, are directed by Scripture to exalt and revere marriage, not for its own sake, but for that to which it ultimately points us. While precious and expressed profoundly in our relationship with Christ (see John 15:13–15), friendship does not reside in the same theological category as marriage. Each are kept distinct, and for important eschatological reasons.

With regard to public rites, it seems that the recognition Hill desires for friendship has already been put in place in the church by Christ himself. But this celebration is not the identification of exclusive commitment between two people (something reserved only for marriage); it is the acknowledgement of a covenant between all of Christ's people in a particular local setting. Specifically, it is the *Lord's Table* observed among a community of believers, not public vows between a same-sex couple, that endows friendship with rich significance. In Christ we *are* brothers and sisters and our sibling bonds are held fast by the Spirit. As we take the bread and the cup these bonds to Christ and to each other are reaffirmed and strengthened, for we are reminded that we all are partakers of grace and the free gift salvation through the death of God's Son.

Hill is right to lament that our contemporary practice of friendship often fails to express itself in light of the realities pictured in the Lord's Table, but the answer is not in establishing a separate

2. While Hill only refers to the story of David and Jonathan to offer a model of intimate male friendships, it's possible that one could turn to the covenant between these two men in order to muster biblical evidence for formal vowed friendships. To my mind, however, this episode does not give us warrant for establishing the practice of vowed friendships within the Christian church for two primary reasons. First, the covenant was a private commitment between David and Jonathan; there was no formal recognition their commitment to one another by the community. Second, David and Jonathan's relationship is unique and must be read in light of the redemptive-historical timeline—i.e., through their friendship, Jonathan effectively relinquishes his kingship to the true heir.

While this story can tell us something about same-sex relationships, there is good reason why we do not find direct reference back to this episode by Jesus or the New Testament authors as a template around which same-sex friends should forge their relationships. Covenants, up to this point in the biblical narrative, were predominantly between God and his people. David and Jonathan's covenant, then, should probably be read in light of these covenants so that King David serves as a type of Christ (the true King), and Jonathan, in his response to David, shows us how God's people should respond to the true King. If this is a legitimate interpretation of this story of David and Jonathan, it is interesting to note that, given the status afforded marriage throughout Scripture, that David and Jonathan's covenant *was* private. A public recognition of an exclusive covenant of friendship between two men would confuse the distinctive significance of marriage in Israel, and ultimately undermine its greater theological implications as well.

category of vowed friendships and ceremonies that resemble marriage; the solution will be found in drawing Christians—married and single—to understand in deeper and deeper ways the covenant that *already* exists between them because of Christ and their commitment to the local expression of his Church. By forging our spiritual siblinghood through his death, the giving of his Spirit, and the establishment of the Lord’s Table, Christ has already given us everything we need to nurture intimate, satisfying, healthy same-sex (and other sex) friendships within the church. Our first step in retrieving a biblical vision of friendship will be to make better use of existing, God-ordained resources, not go searching for something else.

A THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE AND FRIENDSHIP: WHY IT MATTERS

The reason why this theological understanding of marriage is vital for a recovery of friendship is because how we conduct ourselves in our relationships involves more (though never less) than our outward sexual conduct. While the church must be ready to exalt the obedience of those who remain celibate despite their homosexual desires, we must also ask what how a maturing Christian man or woman who struggles with same-sex attraction should increasingly view their relationships with members of the same-sex. Should a celibate Christian who experiences same-sex attraction, like Henry Nouwen, want “more” from a relationship than his male friend—who didn’t experience homosexual desires—could give (94)? What is this “more” that Nouwen sought, and should he have sought it? Should it be sought today? Are vowed friendships the place where these desires for “more” should be fulfilled?

These are, in my judgment, important questions for they require us to consider how Christian maturity in the area of friendship and same-sex desire will express itself both outwardly *and* inwardly. Even given the historical precedent of vowed friendships, I don’t believe we have biblical warrant for such practices, nor should we give the impression that longings for same-sex intimacy, though celibate, should find satisfaction in relationships that, apart from sexual expression, resemble marriage.

CONCLUSION: MORE WORK TO BE DONE

When I read in *Washed and Waiting*, I smiled with admiration at Hill’s commitment to celibacy despite his own same-sex desires. Now, reading his second book on this subject, I grieve with him as he expressed the pain of loneliness and unfulfilled longing for intimacy. With his latest work, Hill has given us a deeper awareness of the ache with which many single Christians—especially those who wrestle with homosexual desire—often live. I join with him in a call to the church to recover a biblical vision of friendship for the sake of all Christians, and I am moved to consider how I might improve my own relationships and my vision of friendship for the good of Christ’s people.

Unfortunately, *Spiritual Friendship* resolves the longing for friendship in place unwarranted by Scripture. Writers who take inspiration from Hill and seek to craft a vision of Christian friendship will need to give closer attention to how marriage and friendship relate *theologically* while also helping us answer the question of how spiritual maturity expresses itself inwardly and outwardly among Christians who struggle with same-sex attraction. More work can be done and should be done for the sake of friendship, marriage, and the glory of God.