

What is Friendship?

Friendship is one of those things that is so commonplace, it becomes hard to define. You know it when you see it, but strict definitions are hard to come by. The fact that friendship comes in degrees highlights this well. We have “best friends,” “family friends,” “school friends,” “work friends,” and “friends for life.” What’s the cutoff between “acquaintance” and “friend?” Someone you’d say “hi” to if you saw them in a coffee shop? Someone you’d give a kidney to? Someone you regularly have over for dinner? The definition is elusive. But friendship is an important concept, especially in the church. Perhaps we should start with the basics...

How do Friendships Form?

CS Lewis put it well when he said, “Friendship is born at the moment when one man says to another, ‘What! You too?’” Mutuality is the intuitive foundation of friendship. For children, this mutuality might be as simple as being the same size and going to the same school. Even among adults, the initial spark of friendship is often quite surface level. A shared interest, workspace, or taste in music might all get people talking. But friendships cannot be sustained on something so insubstantial as music tastes. Friendships deepen and mature, as Scott Sauls says in his book *Befriend*, through “reciprocal transparency, vulnerability, love, and loyalty.”

In short: friendship is a two-way street.

If mutuality is what starts friendships, and reciprocity is what deepens friendship, how do we create opportunities for friendships to form in a church setting for people with disabilities?

Creating Opportunities for Friendship

From a biblical perspective, there are two truths every believer has in common.

- We all need Christ (John 14:6)
- We all need each other (1 Corinthians 12:12-31)

Jesus is the great equalizer. Whether we walk or roll to the foot of the cross, we find ourselves in mutual need. This, more than anything else, provides fertile soil for friendships to form. But when these similarities are overshadowed by differences (real or perceived), friendships will flounder. Even someone who believes these truths about what we all have in common may still be blocked from forming a friendship with someone who has autism if they believe a lack of eye-contact communicates a lack of interest in relationship. They may believe that someone who is non-verbal has nothing to say. They might assume that someone in a wheelchair would be more comfortable with “people like them.”

Challenging these wrong assumptions clears the soil of rocks and weeds that can choke friendships before they have a chance to root and grow.

Preparing the Soil

Friendships can't be forced, but they can be fostered. Preparing the environment for friendships to flourish requires three main things.

1. Teaching a biblical theology of disability
2. Modeling acceptance and welcoming
3. Creating space for people with disabilities to be with their typical peers

A biblical theology of disability addresses misconceptions not by talking about every single misconception, but by presenting the truth. To identify counterfeit bills, Secret Service agents don't learn about a million counterfeits, they simply study the one true bill. In the same way, presenting an accurate theology of disability is the surest way to address any false beliefs that might impede someone from being a good friend to someone with a disability. By modeling acceptance and welcoming we can help set the tone and encourage people to act similarly. And by working to ensure that people with disabilities are included in the activities of the church alongside their peers, we create space for friendships to form. You can befriend someone you've never interacted with.

And lastly, we need to remember that Christian friendship is grounded on our common need for Christ and community, sealed by the Holy Spirit, and enriched by our differences. As 1 Corinthians 12:16-20 (NIV) reminds us...

“And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.”

You can't force friendships to form. But like a good gardener, you can prepare the soil, clear out weeds, and water the plants. By fostering friendships between people with and without disabilities the body of Christ is built up and completed. So seek friendship, because in doing so you will more fully discover the heart of Christ.