

OUR COVENANT GOD: FRIEND, HUSBAND AND FATHER (2)

Matt Kortus¹

Part 1 set forth the centrality of the covenant in Reformed theology and argued that the covenant is essentially a bond of love and fellowship. It introduced from Scripture three earthly symbols of God's covenant: the relationships between friends, between husband and wife, and between father and son, and pointed out that each highlights different aspects of God's covenant fellowship with His people. Part 2 treats the first of these earthly symbols of God's covenant: the relationship between human friends.

Friendship Requires Similitude

Scripture reveals that friendship is based on likeness. Two individuals joined together in the bond of friendship must share common backgrounds, interests or beliefs. In other words, friendship requires a certain likeness as its basis. If two individuals lack these commonalities, they have little basis for friendship. Amos 3:3 teaches this truth: “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” Thus friendship between two individuals requires similitude. The higher the degree of likeness between two people, the closer the friendship between them will be.

That friendship requires similitude applies especially to godly friendships. Christians establish friendships with each other based primarily on their agreement in walk and faith. Indeed, Scripture presents belief in God and a holy lifestyle as prerequisites for making and developing friends. The Psalmist expressed this truth when he says, “I am a companion of all them that fear thee, and of them that keep thy precepts” (Ps. 119:63). By these words, the Psalmist asserts that he will establish friendships with all those who share his system of beliefs and his desire for holiness. Another example of this idea can be found in Proverbs 22:11, which states, “He that loveth pureness of heart,

¹ Matt Kortus is starting his third year in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary. He is a member of Faith Protestant Reformed Church in Jenison, MI, USA.

for the grace of his lips the king shall be his friend.” In addition, Scripture prohibits friendship with those who do not share in the desire to glorify God. For example, the believer does not associate with those characterized with the sin of anger: “Make no friendship with an angry man; and with a furious man thou shalt not go: Lest thou learn his ways, and get a snare to thy soul” (vv. 24-25). Thus Scripture teaches that friendship is based on similitude or likeness.

Similitude between friends results in a certain closeness between them. The friendship between David and Jonathan, a biblical model of godly friendship, illustrates that similitude produces closeness. David and Jonathan shared in a desire to glorify God. This produced a nearness, even an intimacy, between them:

And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking unto Saul, that *the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David*, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. And Saul took him that day, and would let him go no more home to his father’s house. Then Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul (I Sam. 18:1-3).

By inspiration, Scripture teaches that Jonathan’s soul was knit together with David’s soul. This figurative language provides a powerful description of both the similitude and the resulting closeness between these two friends. Their souls were knit together because they shared the same faith in and love toward Jehovah.

Not only does the friendship of David and Jonathan demonstrate that friendship requires similitude but it also proves that friendship itself is a covenantal bond. While this is an aside to the point being demonstrated, it is worth pointing out. The initial passage quoted above that describes the friendship of David and Jonathan reveals that on the basis of their close bond these two made a covenant with each other. This further demonstrates the connection between friendship and the covenant.

Since earthly friendship serves as a symbol of covenant friendship with God, all that has been said about the likeness required between earthly friends applies to friendship with God. In order to have friendship with God, mankind must be like him. Scripture itself teaches this truth in James 4:4:

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“Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.” This passage presupposes that God stands in enmity against the world. Therefore, only those who share in His contempt of the world can be considered the friends of God. Thus friendship with God requires similitude.

Similitude between God and man existed at creation because God made man in His own image. While matters such as shared interests or common backgrounds may serve as the basis for earthly friendships, union with God requires a much deeper commonality. God Himself established such a basis by creating Adam in His own image (Gen. 1:26-27). By being created in the image of God, Adam possessed the spiritual and ethical virtues of true knowledge, righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). These virtues represent the likeness required for friendship with God. Herman Hoeksema maintained this same view:

This covenant ... was a fundamental relationship in which Adam stood by virtue of his creation. It was ... a relation of living friendship given and established by Adam's creation after the image of God. Fellowship, the intimate relation of friendship, requires likeness as its basis. Like knows and can have fellowship only with like.²

In the same context, Hoeksema writes, “by virtue of his being created after the image of God, Adam stood in covenant relation to God.”³ Thus mankind possessed the adequate similitude to God in order to be the friend of God because he was created in God's image.

Although mankind lost this basis for friendship, God restores the members of His covenant to His image in Jesus Christ. Due to Adam's fall into sin, mankind lost the image of God and thus lost the basis for friendship with God. However, God's elect are restored to the image of God by the saving work of Jesus Christ. This restored similitude makes friendship with God possible again. In fact, through Christ a higher degree of friendship becomes possible, for friendship with God in Jesus Christ is eternal. Thus it could be said that

² Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (Grandville, MI: RFP, 2004), pp. 314-315.

³ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, p. 315.

in Jesus Christ the members of the covenant are “knit together” with God. In Jesus Christ, there is close communion between us and God.

By emphasizing the need for likeness between friends, Scripture also implies the need for differences between two friends. Although the souls of David and Jonathan were knit together, they were two distinct individuals with different personalities and qualities. Without these differences, friendship would be impossible. One cannot have communion with an identical being. So too, God enjoys covenant life with those who are different. This holds true within Himself. God Triune consists of three distinct Persons who enjoy perfect covenant life with each other. If God was one person, He could not have this covenant life within Himself. This applies to His covenant of grace with His people. God reveals His own covenant life with the creature. In other words, God establishes His covenant with those who are entirely different in their being. This demonstrates that while friendship requires similitude, it also depends on differences.

Friendship Involves Communication

Scripture reveals that friendship not only requires similitude but also involves communication. Specifically, friends share and keep secrets with each other. Friends relate to each other by talking. Communication is so fundamental to friendship that, without such conversation, friendship becomes impossible. Talking serves as the basis for revealing information about each other. More specifically, friends reveal the secrets of their hearts to each other. Friends do not content themselves with talking about generalities. Rather, friends reveal their innermost thoughts with one another; thoughts they do not share with others, thoughts that a good friend will keep confidential. Scripture testifies of this in Proverbs 11:13: “A talebearer revealeth secrets: but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth the matter.” A faithful spirit represents a good friend with whom one can freely communicate and share secrets.

Just as human friends talk with one another so too God talks with His covenant people. In order for God’s people to know Him, God reveals Himself by communicating to them. An example of this is found in Exodus 33:11: “And the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend.”

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This passage of Scripture explicitly states that God speaks to people just as friends speak to each other. Communication is central to the bond of friendship.

More specifically, God reveals the secrets of His counsel to His covenant friends. When God speaks to His people, He does so with the purpose of revealing the secrets of heaven to them. “The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant” (Ps. 25:14). In this verse, the word translated “secret” refers to God’s counsel. In addition, this word expresses “familiar converse with God, intimacy.”⁴ Thus God communicates His secret counsel to His familiar friends of the covenant.

Jesus Christ Himself called His disciples friends, to whom He revealed the secrets of God’s counsel. While speaking to the disciples, Jesus said, “Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but *I have called you friends*; for all things that I have heard of my Father *I have made known unto you*” (John 15:15). By calling His disciples friends, Jesus expresses His love toward them. As a token of His love, Jesus speaks to them the words that He received out of “the secret sanctuary of God,” as John Calvin puts it.⁵ Thus Scripture emphasizes the place of communication in friendship, not only between individuals, but also between God and His covenant people.

God speaks to His friends, the members of His covenant, through the Holy Scriptures. While the Scripture references above hint at the substance of God’s communication to His people, the Reformed confessions clearly teach that God speaks through Holy Scripture. For example, *Westminster Confession* 1:1 states, “it pleased the Lord ... to reveal himself, and to declare ... his will unto the Church.” *Belgic Confession* 2 also teaches that God makes Himself known to His people through the Scriptures. Thus, in connection with the covenant, it can be said that God talks and communicates to His friends by the Scriptures.

God’s people hear Him speak to them primarily through the preaching of the gospel. That God Himself speaks by means of the preaching is well

⁴ F. Brown, S. Driver and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, repr. 2010), p. 691.

⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, repr. 1993), 2:118.

established (John 10:14-16, 27-30; Rom. 10:13-15). Importantly, this must be viewed as an aspect of God's covenant of grace that the earthly symbol of friendship emphasizes. Indeed, the public worship of God, specifically sitting under the preaching, has been described as a covenantal activity.⁶ Thus the preaching of the gospel must be viewed as a manifestation of God's friendship with His covenant people.

God's covenant people communicate to Him in prayer. Just as conversation between two earthly friends is two-sided, so too is conversation between God and His people. After hearing God speak through the Scriptures and the preaching, the friends of God respond in prayer. Thus prayer must be viewed as a covenantal activity. By prayer, the believer enjoys close, even intimate, friendship with God as he expresses the hidden thoughts of his heart to God.

Friendship Provides Spiritual Encouragement

Thus far, it has been shown that friendship is based on similitude and involves communication. Along with these aspects of friendship, Scripture teaches that friendship provides spiritual encouragement. This holds true in two respects. First, friends provide consolation and comfort to each other in times of hardship. In addition, friends provide accountability to each other in the face of temptation.

Scripture teaches that earthly friends provide consolation in time of need. When individuals encounter hardships, friends serve as a God appointed means of comfort. An example of this can be found in the practical wisdom of Solomon, who wrote, "A friend loveth at all times, and a brother is born for adversity" (Prov. 17:17). A close friend stands by another not only during times of joy but especially through seasons of sorrow. Furthermore, such a friend becomes closer than a brother in the midst of adversity. Thus a godly friend always purposes to help bear trials and afflictions.

Scripture provides two outstanding examples of this aspect of friendship. Negatively, Job's three friends failed in their calling to comfort Job. After

⁶ E.g., Cory Griess, "Hear Ye Him! The Reading and Preaching of Scripture in Worship (3)," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 89, no. 11 (March 1, 2013), p. 260.

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hearing of Job's affliction, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar determined to visit Job for the purpose of consoling him:

Now when Job's three friends heard of all this evil that was come upon him, they came every one from his own place; Eliphaz the Temanite, and Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite: for they had made an appointment together to come *to mourn with him and to comfort him* (Job 2:11).

The last clause of this sentence provides their intended purpose: to comfort their friend. They recognized the trouble that had beset Job and travelled in order to sympathize with him, indicating that a godly friend not only provides support when asked but also *seeks out* any companion who is afflicted. Despite this, Job's friends proved to be miserable comforters. Job lamented this, saying, "To him that is afflicted pity *should be shewed* from his friend" (6:14). Later, Job states, "I have heard many such things: miserable comforters are ye all" (16:2). By these statements, Job asserts that friends ought to provide comfort.

In contrast to Job's three friends, Jonathan served as a faithful friend to David. Scripture records two dialogues between David and Jonathan, in which Jonathan consoles David during his flight from Saul (I Sam. 20:12-17; 23:16-18).⁷ In both conversations, these two close friends renew the covenant they had established with each other. Furthermore, Jonathan demonstrates that friends provide comfort to their companions in need. Specifically, Jonathan strengthened David's faith in God:

And Jonathan Saul's son arose, and went to David into the wood, and *strengthened his hand in God*. And he said unto him, Fear not: for the hand of Saul my father shall not find thee; and thou shalt be king over Israel, and I shall be next unto thee; and that also Saul my father knoweth. And they two made a covenant before the LORD: and David abode in the wood, and Jonathan went to his house (23:16-18).

Notice, first, that Jonathan went to David while he was in the woods. In other words, Jonathan sought David out. In addition, Jonathan "*strengthened*

⁷ Notice the importance of conversation between friends. Scripture does not talk generally about the friendship of David and Jonathan. Rather, it records dialogue between them.

his hand in God.” Keil and Delitzsch in their commentary understand this to mean that Jonathan “strengthened his heart ... by consolation drawn from ... the promises of God.”⁸ In other words, Jonathan consoled David by speaking words of comfort in order to strengthen David’s faith.

In addition to providing consolation in time of need, godly friends must provide accountability in the face of temptation. In other words, godly friends must encourage each other in lives of godliness and sanctification. Scripture teaches that at times this requires a word of rebuke: “Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful” (Prov. 27:6). Only an enemy allows another individual to continue in the way of ruin. In contrast, godly friends confront sin in each other’s lives. In this way, friends sharpen one another, even as iron sharpens iron (v. 17).

The Bible provides an example of this aspect of friendship in Daniel and his three friends. After being brought into Babylon, Daniel was tempted to defile himself by eating the king’s meat and drinking the king’s wine (Dan. 1:8). However, he withstood this temptation by requesting vegetables to eat and water to drink (v. 12). Importantly, while Scripture places Daniel on the foreground, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah stood with him in this matter. Scripture employs the plural throughout this passage indicating that, as a group of friends, these young men held each other accountable. Thus they serve as an example of godly friends who encourage one another in a life of holiness.

Just as friends provide spiritual encouragement to each other, so too God supplies spiritual encouragement to the members of His covenant, whom He considers His friends. This includes comfort in times of hardship. That God comforts His people is anything but a novel concept. The pages of Scripture abound with passages that warm the distressed hearts of God’s people. Volumes of books expounding the comfort that God gives to His people fill the shelves of every theological library. Every believer derives his or her strength in times of hardship from the promises of Scripture. However, few consider this to be a covenantal activity. Yet an objective evaluation of Scripture reveals that friends console each other during afflictions. Since God is a friend to the members of

⁸ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I & II Samuel*, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, repr. 1986), 2:231.

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His covenant, He comforts them. This means that God not only consoles those who seek Him but He actively seeks those who stand in need of His gracious presence. God provides this comfort to His people by strengthening their faith in the promises of His Word.

In addition to providing comfort, God, as friend to His covenant people, encourages holiness and sanctification in the lives of His friends. God confronts patterns of sin, thereby preventing the believer from continuing in the way that leads to destruction. God rebukes sinful behaviour to produce holiness in His covenant friends. Even as Daniel's friends strengthened each other, so God provides strength in the face of temptation. He does all this to make His people holy, even as He is holy (I Pet. 1:16).

In summary, Scripture teaches that friendship requires similitude (or likeness), involves communication (especially of secrets), and provides spiritual encouragement, both in times of affliction and in the face of temptation. As the friend of His covenant people, God makes His people like Him, communicates with us and strengthens us spiritually.

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