

F is for friendship: A theological dictionary

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [February 24, 2009](#) issue

Fifty years ago, when a generation of seminarians was cutting its theological fangs, friendship was a disdained term. Anders Nygren's classic *Agape and Eros* ruled in classrooms and pulpits, and Nygren had little use for *philia*—the Greek word for the kind of love friends share. Nygren stressed that divine love, *agape*, is different from other forms of love. *Eros* and its correlates, like *philia*, depend on desire, whereas *agape* is offered without attachment and without any need for reciprocation.

Nygren, in the company of Kierkegaard, argues that friendship has an essentially selfish nature. In friendship, one chooses whose company to keep in order to meet the needs or interests of the self. The act of choosing, as Nygren points out, is based in part on desire for the other. And friendship brings with it an almost unavoidable and ungodlike exclusivity.

Nygren isn't alone in disregarding friendship as important in theological thinking. The term doesn't appear in the score of English-language theological dictionaries on my shelf. Most of them move from "Freud and theology" to "Fundamentalism." A few squeeze in "Friends, Society of."

Yet friendship is an important theological concept. And while friendship may be excluded from theological dictionaries, it cannot be excluded from *biblical* dictionaries. Both the Hebrew and Greek words for friendship appear in the texts. Moses is called a friend of God, and friendship is modeled in the relationships of Naomi and Ruth and David and Jonathan. Perhaps most significantly, in John 15:15 Jesus says, "I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father."

Jesus' words hint that friendship is especially important in understanding the Trinity. Two contemporary theologians in particular have made this connection. Michael Himes writes, "The central point of the doctrine of the Trinity is that God is least wrongly understood as a relationship, as an eternal explosion of love." In *Happiness*

and the Christian Moral Life, Paul J. Wadell writes, “To speak of God as Trinity is to hold that at the very heart of God we find not solitude and isolation, but intimacy and community. And it is a community of persons characterized by life-giving mutual love.”

The key words are *relationship*, *intimacy*, *community* and *mutual love*—all of which give us insight into the theological meaning of friendship. Humans, made in the image of God, are called friends by Jesus in the fourth Gospel. Jesus says that such a naming is based on what he has heard from his Father, with whom he is integrally related in the Trinity. God is thus a model and an agent of friendship.

Nygren and Kierkegaard are right to exclude friendship if the question they are concerned with is that very Lutheran question, “How do I, how do we, find a gracious God?” In other words, when the emphasis is on what the old-timers call *in loco justificationis*, only *agape*, that free-flowing love of God, will do. But that isn’t the only aspect of God we have to talk about. When we speak *extra locum justificationis*—about, for example, relationships and the joys of life here on earth—scripture teaches us that friendship can be modeled on the relationship between Jesus and the One he called Father.

If we remain in the purely theological, speculative realm, this can be hard to understand, but in the practice of faith, we can witness to the experience of God—who may come to us in the messy form of one who seeks a relationship with us.

One concern about using the word *friendship* in relation to God is that we might sentimentalize our understanding. Friends are supposed to overlook flaws in each other and live with them. Friendship implies affection, and affection can sometimes be saccharin. But in practice, long, intimate and tested friendships are not always soft and concessive. A true friend is one who can risk saying to the other, “Get off your high horse!” or “This time you went too far!” or, more mildly, “Are you doing your part?” Such chiding words can hurt, but they are part of the healing and growth that belongs to friendship. And in our friendship with God, we have the extra resource of *agape*, that free-flowing, pure love, to address such situations.

Can and does *friendship* belong in theological dictionaries as a witness to an aspect of God’s character, despite its long exile? Yes. But with the extra caution that it not lead to sentimentalizing God. We also have the revelation of a wrathful God, a God with a dark side. That revelation is too consistent to reduce all that is said about God to something palsy and chummy. Theologians speak of God’s wrathful love. In

realistic and sustained friendships, there can be elements of wrath born of frustration, disappointment and rejection. But it is finally love of a particular kind, a kind that comes from God, that endures in friendship and hence enriches life.