

“Wesley Hill’s courageous, thought-provoking book seeks to recover ‘friendship as a genuine love in its own right.’ At one level, it is a historically rooted and theologically nuanced essay that opens up fresh perspectives on a topic that is crucial but too rarely pondered. But at another level, *Spiritual Friendship* belongs to the classic genre of Christian confessional autobiography, a genre that can be traced back to St. Augustine; it is both searing in its honesty and moving in its chastened hope for grace.”

—Richard B. Hays, Duke Divinity School

“This is a remarkable book. Drawing on a deep reservoir of biblical wisdom and theological imagination, Wesley Hill explores the possibilities for a truly Christian picture of friendship. And because this exploration requires him to think also about how his friendship both contributes to and differs from the fellowship that all Christians share, he makes here a significant contribution to the general theology of the church as well.”

—Alan Jacobs, Honors College, Baylor University

“Medieval monks expressed their love for one another with what to us is cringe-inducing intimacy, and not so long ago Christians still entered formal bonds of friendship by taking vows that sound like marriage vows. We don’t do that anymore, with our commitment to uncommitted freedom, our turnover habits, our sexualization of everything and everyone, and our resignation to loneliness. Wesley Hill’s very personal book is an elegant, theologically rich plea on behalf of the love of friendship that uncovers fresh ways to improvise on a lost Christian tradition of committed spiritual friendship.”

—Peter Leithart, president, Theopolis Institute,  
Birmingham, Alabama

“*Spiritual Friendship* weaves together Scripture, Christian history, art, and personal experience. This is a portrait, not a treatise. It depicts friendship’s flaws and failures but also shows how friendship can bear spiritual fruit and help us build up the kingdom of God. Wesley Hill challenges us all to strengthen our own friendships and those around us, and offers guidance in these tasks from his own experience and from the Christian past.”

—Eve Tushnet, author of *Gay and Catholic: Accepting My Sexuality, Finding Community, Living My Faith*

“With disarming frankness, Wesley Hill charts the loss of friendship from our world and mounts a compelling case for its recovery as a communally celebrated form of Christian love. Hill’s is a voice that needs to be heard. His book is a powerful challenge to the contemporary church as well as a profound meditation on the difficult, wonderful, risky business of loving and being loved.”

—**Benjamin Myers**, Charles Sturt University, Sydney, Australia

“In a highly engaging and very accessible manner, Hill uses examples from art, literature, film, and especially his own life to explore what in our culture today most endangers friendship, how Christianity redefines our understanding of friendship, and how our churches can be the best settings for nurturing the faithful, challenging, and blessed relationships Hill presents to us. *Spiritual Friendship* is a timely gift the reader will quickly take to heart.”

—**Paul J. Wadell**, St. Norbert College; author of *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship*

“This book is a rare find! Hill eloquently speaks into one of the great spiritual crises of our day: the meaning of love and specifically of friendship in Christ. This courageous personal and theological account of friendship will both challenge and illuminate those seeking to renew the church’s witness today.”

—**J. Todd Billings**, Western Theological Seminary,  
Holland, Michigan

“Wesley Hill captured my imagination by presenting a vision of friendship—spiritual friendship—that has been our Christian heritage. Each of us who make up the body of Christ will be enriched and our corporate witness to a broader culture enhanced if we can find a way to live into this vision.”

—**Mark A. Yarhouse**, Regent University

“Too gay for some and too chaste for others, for many Wesley Hill is not supposed to exist. But exist he does, even to flourishing. Challenging settled convictions on all sides of the sexuality debate, he testifies here—alongside countless celibate Christians before him—to the richness of intimate friendships that dare violate our society’s sole remaining commandment: “Thou shalt have sex.”

—**Matthew Milliner**, Wheaton College

# SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

Finding Love in the Church  
as a Celibate Gay Christian

WESLEY HILL



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15 16 17 18 19 20 21 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Mike, Chris J., David, Abraham,  
Jono, Orrey, and Aidan

In memory of Chris M.



At points of their highest significance, at  
their peaks, the two currents, brotherhood  
and friendship, strive to merge fully.

—Pavel Florensky



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[John Henry Newman and Ambrose St.  
John's] love was not the less intense for being  
spiritual. Perhaps, it was the more so.

—Alan Bray

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## Author's Note

This book is a work of theological, historical, cultural, and spiritual reflection, but I've included elements of memoir as well. The personal stories I tell are all true, but in some cases I have changed the names and identifying details of people I mention. Where I've used real names, I've received permission to do so. In at least one of the stories, I've created a composite character, conflating several experiences with different friends into one narrative. In the case of emails, I've quoted them verbatim, and I've fact-checked the conversations I report. Any errors are, of course, my own.



## Introduction

This book began, I suppose, like many writing projects do—with a question that wouldn't leave me alone. At the time I started thinking of writing, I was reading many celebrations of friendship. Some of these writings were from decades ago, and some were hot off the press. Some were written by Christians, others by people from different faiths or no faith at all. But one thing they all seemed to agree on was that friendship is the freest, the least constrained, the least fixed and determined, of all human loves. Try as you might, you can't ever stop being a father or a mother. You may try to disown your parents, but you can't quit being a daughter or a son. You may divorce your spouse, but that won't change your status as an ex-wife or an ex-husband. And although you may believe you're acting coolly and rationally when you stride across the bar to flirt with a potential date, most people would describe that experience as one of being compelled or swept up by passions outside your direct control. But friendship, it is usually said—in contrast to all these varying degrees of relational obligation—stands apart. Unlike romantic relationships or the bonds between siblings, friendship is entirely *voluntary*, uncoerced, and unencumbered

by any sense of duty or debt. And friendship is thereby rendered special, mysterious, and deeply rewarding; it is, as C. S. Lewis describes it, “the least instinctive, organic, biological, gregarious and necessary.” We may choose to end a friendship at any time—that’s the prerogative this particular form of love affords us. But precisely for that reason, friendship is uniquely precious: our friends are the ones we’ve chosen, the elected few.

This book began with my doubts about that claim—or, maybe more precisely, my worry over what that claim, assuming it’s true, means for our practice of friendship. If friendship is in fact so tenuous, hanging only by the thread of my and my friend’s mutual delight, then perhaps, in the end, that’s not something to be celebrated as much as it is one to be grieved and, where possible, mended. Perhaps that very freedom prevents us from exploring depths of friendship that can be attained only when we accept certain limits and constraints.

Several years ago the Catholic writer and blogger Eve Tushnet wrote a blog post that convinced me there was something to this line of thought. “My actual experience of friendship,” Tushnet said, “very strongly suggests a need and desire for friendships to become, over time, understood as *given*. Viewing friendships as endlessly-renewed choices may satisfy [the one who harbors] suspicion of mere promising and obligation, but I don’t think it can truly satisfy the friend.” In other words, granting the point that friendship in practice is often a relationship with minimal obligations and maximal liberty—to the point where a friend might not think twice about taking a job across the country and leaving his friends behind, or where a friend might feel no qualms about naming her marriage as the cure for all her ills (“My husband is my closest friend; I would be lost without him”), little understanding how this might sound to her friends who have stood by her through thick and thin up to that point—we can still ask the question whether friendship *should* be so free and unconstrained.

This book is my effort to ask that question. Should we think of friendship as based, above all, on personal preference? Should we think of it as preserving its voluntary character and thereby vulnerable at every point to dissolution if one of the friends grows tired of or burdened by the relationship? Should we consider friendship as always freshly chosen but never incurring any substantial obligations or entailing any unbreakable bonds? Or should we instead—pursuing a rather different line of thought—consider friendship more along the lines of how we think of marriage? Should we begin to imagine friendship as more stable, permanent, and binding than we often do? Should we, in short, think of our friends more like the siblings we’re stuck with, like it or not, than like our acquaintances? Should we begin to consider at least some of our friends as, in large measure, tantamount to family? And if so, what needs to change about the way we approach it and seek to maintain it? Those are the questions I want to ask and explore in the pages that follow.

Mark Slouka’s 2013 novel *Brewster* tells the story of two high school kids who fall into an unlikely friendship. One of them, Jon, is introverted, halting, unsure of his place in the world. The son of German immigrants who are still grieving over his brother, Aaron, who died in childhood, Jon is adrift among his family members and his peers. Ray, meanwhile, is the iconic rebel. Face flanked by strands of long hair, he projects bravado, swagger, arrogance. And yet the proverb proves its mettle: opposites attract. The two become friends.

Things are hard at Ray’s house. His father drinks. So one night he asks to sleep over at Jon’s. And one night turns into two. And then three.

“He slept on a mattress on my floor,” says Jon. “We’d sit up late, listening to records, then turn off the light and go right on talking—about school, about girls, about life.”

Jon continues:

It's like he was hungry for it—to sit in a room just playing records, talking—like he'd never done it before. Sometimes we'd get silly—even for me—and I'd have to remind myself that this was Ray Cappicciano sitting against the wall leafing through a magazine with my stuffed gorilla behind him for a backrest, its paws draped over his shoulders, its huge dark feet propped up on either side of his hips. I don't think I thought less of him for it. I understood it was important, that some part of him needed it. I even felt proud of having him there, a little tamed, not quite so dangerous now, like an actual leopard curled at the foot of the bed.

The first time we walked up the stairs he pointed to Aaron's room and mouthed the question and I nodded and said, "Yeah," and he said, "*That* can't be easy," and I said, "Yeah."

Then Jon adds three sentences, and with them the chapter closes:

It's been years. I still hear his voice, talking to me out of the dark. It was as close to having a brother as I'll ever get.

When Jon needs a word to describe the strength and warmth of the bond he felt with Ray, he reaches for a word that signifies permanence, longevity, and indestructibility. He calls his friend Ray his "brother."

And I want to suggest that we follow his lead.



When I mentioned to an art historian friend that I was working on a book about friendship, he immediately started directing me to sources for my project. For instance, I learned that toward the end of the nineteenth century, scores of Princeton University students would have filed into Marquand Chapel on campus to worship beneath a stained-glass window depicting the Old Testament characters, and vowed friends, David and Jonathan. Until the chapel burned in 1920, my friend pointed



out, this window would have functioned as a reminder to students to make friendship a central part of their college years. Likewise, I learned about a much earlier image of Christ and St. Menas, a sixth-century icon in which Jesus's arm is draped familiarly over Menas's shoulder: clearly a gesture that removes Christ from the realm of kingship and judgment and casts him, instead, in the recognizable role of mate or comrade. It's an image that would have spoken to ancient Christians of their need to cultivate brotherly love and would have underscored for them the christological basis and focus of that love.

But by far the most intriguing and suggestive source my friend directed me to was the icon—painted (or “written,” as the Christian East puts it) many times, in many hues and variations, over the centuries—of Simon of Cyrene carrying Jesus's cross. Here, my friend said, is an image of *friendship*—Simon is, above all, a friend to Jesus at a point of dire need—and one that we might easily overlook. The story of Simon is told in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but if you blink, you'll miss it. Luke's version, at one sentence, is the most detailed: “And as they led [Jesus] away [to be crucified], they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus” (23:26). That's it. Just nineteen words in the original Greek text. An inauspicious place, you might think, to begin a reconsideration of friendship. And yet I began to think, at my friend's prompting, there's an intriguing feature of the story that may point us in a fruitful direction.

Earlier in Luke's Gospel Jesus had told the crowds, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (9:23). And later, long after the events recorded in the Gospel, the apostle Paul had written, “Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). Poised, as it were, between these two texts, we find Simon of Cyrene, bearing Jesus's burden as his companion on the road to

Calvary, in accord with Paul's words. Yet Simon doesn't take up his burden voluntarily, as Jesus had encouraged his followers to do. Rather, Jesus's burden has been *placed*, unexpectedly, on him. He was "seized," the Gospel says. Simon, in effect, finds himself to have become Jesus's friend. The categories of "preference" and "freedom" aren't immediately relevant here—he is, after all, marching under the glint of Roman spears—and so the only question Simon has to ask himself is what sort of friend he'll be to the one he's already, inevitably, inextricably in relationship to. If my art historian friend is right that Simon bearing Jesus's cross may be read as an icon of friendship, this feature of the text—Simon's obligation, his inescapable commitment to being, at least for a moment, Jesus's friend—might be a window into a new way of conceiving of our friendships. Taking our cues from this art, we might begin to imagine ourselves as indissolubly linked to one another, bound by the beams of Christ's cross as we walk the same road together. And we might see our task as one of strengthening the friendships in which we're already enmeshed, already walking along in. But if we do, how might our friendships begin to look different than they do now?



A brief explanation of what to expect in the pages to come is in order. This book is divided into two parts, one that focuses more on the cultural background, history, and theology of friendship and another that focuses more on the actual living out of friendship. In the first chapter, I will describe why I think friendship is a relatively weak bond in many Western cultures today, why it's a form of love that's in danger of being downgraded or dismissed in our imaginations. I'll also describe why it may be a particularly sought-after form of love for certain ones among us, like me, who know ourselves to be gay and Christian.

In the second chapter, I'll be arguing that friendship can and should be understood along the lines of a vowed or committed

relationship, much like a marriage or a kinship bond. Here I'll narrate some of the cultural history of friendship, telling the story of how we got to the place the first chapter describes and how we may, in our churches, be able to move into better, healthier places and practices.

The third chapter will take a step back and ask about the scriptural and theological underpinnings for our practice of friendship. If specifically Christian friendship represents a modification or transformation of earlier, pagan practices of friendship, what does that transformation consist in? What is it about the appearance of Jesus, and his death and resurrection, that changes friendship? Those are the questions I'll be trying to answer in that chapter.

Then comes part 2, which is less theoretical and more oriented toward practical questions. The fourth chapter will explore the intersection between erotic love and friendship, and I'll be suggesting, more specifically, that friendship is a form of love that many celibate people may be uniquely called to pursue. This is an urgent question, of course, for those of us who are gay and celibate, because our friendships will likely, at some time or another, face the issue of erotic attraction. But I also think it's relevant for people in opposite-sex friendships, which is a form of love that many in the church have cast a suspicious eye toward.

Chapter 5 will ask what it means to cultivate committed, promise-based friendships when most of us know all too well the disappointments and heartaches that our actual friendships can undergo. In this chapter I will try to tell, with as much honesty as I can muster, my story of losing an especially valuable friendship and how I've found hope on the other side of that loss.

And in the final chapter, I will try to lay out some concrete ways we might begin to pursue and nurture friendships in the church today. I'll offer a few specific suggestions, but I hope this chapter reads less like a blueprint and more like a provocation.

There are many—perhaps endless—ways we Christians could seek to nourish and deepen our friendships, and if this chapter prompts some more imaginative thinking along those lines, I will consider it a success.

Friendship is a good and godly love in its own right, just as worthy of attention, nurture, and respect as any other form of Christian affection. That's what the Christian tradition has mainly said. And that's what I want to say—from a fresh angle of vision—in this book, too.

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PART 1

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# READING FRIENDSHIP

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## An Eclipse of Friendship?

If we ask ourselves whether there are a significant number of people today without true friends, or whether our modern society is one in which friendship plays a diminishing role, I think the answers are yes.

—Digby Anderson

But love is lost; the way of friendship's gone,  
Though David had his Jonathan, Christ his John.

—George Herbert

On the eve of my confirmation, I sat in a circle in my priest's living room with the other confirmands and tried to quiet my thoughts. Dinner was finished, our dirty plates and empty wineglasses no longer balanced on our laps but set aside somewhere around the feet of our chairs. We had each finished telling our stories of coming to faith and making the decision to seek confirmation in the Church of England. Now, at the end of our evening together, our priest suggested we close with a few moments of reflection and prayer. "I'm

going to come around and anoint each of you with oil,” she explained. “And as I do so, I’d like you to choose one word and say it aloud, and then I’ll pray for you. Pick a word that represents what you need from God as you go on in your life as a Christian. Pick a word that summarizes what you’re asking of God for your future.”

My inner twitch at anything that smells like Christian kitsch was set in motion at this suggestion, but I hurriedly stifled it. Hadn’t I just read something about how salutary it is to humble yourself to sing the fifth-rate hymns that most Christians seem to love? I resolved to be my best nonjudgmental self that evening. Besides, I loved this priest, and if she said it, it must be worth doing.

I started thinking of what word I might choose: *Forgiveness*. I knew I would need that on an hourly basis. *Grace*. Wasn’t this *the* Christian word I ought to select, if I could beat the other confirmands to it? *Mercy*. *Hope*. *Perseverance*. All good choices. The problem was that, peeking after closing my eyes and bowing my head, I could see that the priest was starting on the other side of the room, which meant that I would be the next to last person she’d come to. Which, in turn, meant that all the good words would be taken already, and I didn’t want to be unoriginal. Maybe I could choose *humility* or *endurance* or *providence*—those words were just obscure enough that I doubted anyone else had thought of them.

I squeezed my eyes shut again. In a few months, I’d be moving back to the States after finishing graduate school. I’d be saying good-bye to this priest, whom I’d slowly come to love, who was now placing her hands, with their long pianist’s fingers, on the head of one of my fellow confirmands. I’d be bidding farewell to dinners like this; no more curries followed by sticky toffee pudding and milky tea made by these people with funny northern accents who had first seemed like strangers and had gradually become the people I most wanted to spend



my evenings with. I'd be moving to a new city where I had only acquaintances, not relatives or close friends. I had no idea where I'd go to church.

I could hear the creak of the floor as the priest stepped in front of me. I cupped my hands and looked up to see her dipping her finger in the oil. She made the sign of the cross on my palms. The scent of the rose-infused oil was suddenly overpowering and not altogether pleasant. I watched the shiny liquid pool in my hands and seep through my fingers. I hoped it wouldn't drip on my shoes.

"What word would you like me to pray for you, Wesley?" the priest whispered, her lower lip protruding and puckering in the way it always did when she tried to suppress a smile. I knew she was fond of me, and I liked the protective, mothering way she placed her hand on my head, the way her eyes were kind and gentle.

After a moment's hesitation, I said, "Friendship." And immediately I wished I could reel it back in. Hanging there in the air, waiting for her prayer, it didn't seem like a very spiritual word. It struck me suddenly as somewhat selfish, myopic, disconnected from Jesus and grace and faith, all the things this evening was supposed to be about.

But my priest knew it was what I'd been thinking about ever since I decided to take a job in Pittsburgh. Over coffee the week before, I'd told her that I was afraid of leaving the comfort of my circle of friends in England. I'd told her that I was scared I wouldn't be able to make new friends like the especially close ones I'd made in graduate school and at my church, which I loved. I found myself riffing on that final, poignant line of the movie *Stand by Me*: "I'll never have any friends later on like the ones I have right now in England. Can anyone?" Saying good-bye to friends is painful. We don't like it when, as the movie puts it, they whirl in and out of our lives like busboys.

That night, crouched in prayer in that dimly lit living room, hands upturned in a posture of receptivity, I said, wordlessly, that I needed friends for the road ahead. While the priest prayed over me, I thought, *“Friendship” was probably a good word to choose, after all. Without people to love and be loved by, I don’t imagine faith is very sustainable.*



There’s a reason I found myself praying for friendship that night in England, rather than just unreflectively counting on it to be there for me, and I think it’s because I sensed its tenuous place, its ambiguous status, in our culture. A penumbra of questions and anxieties, it seems, lingers around the concept of friendship, perhaps especially for many of us navigating our late-modern world as Christians. We might be able to muster a definition and explanation of friendship’s importance if we were quizzed on it, but for many of us that doesn’t solve the deeper matter of why we want it so much, and why it so often seems unreachable or fraught, burdened in our own era in a way many of us imagine it wasn’t in previous centuries.

Benjamin Myers, an Australian theologian, has outlined a series of ways that friendship has been eclipsed or pushed to the margins of contemporary life. He suggests that friendship in modern Western societies has been obscured by various myths, to the point that we can’t see our way clear anymore to understand friendship the way we once did and embrace it along with its ancient practitioners. Myers traces the first of these myths back to Sigmund Freud’s suspicion that all relationships, at base, involve eroticism—that the desire for sex is the secret truth of every relationship, so that any mutual liking or interest must be something *more* than chaste affection. And many cultural observers nowadays would apparently concur, as we will see in the pages below.

For instance, notice how some of us wonder about—and make light of or poke fun at or even feel embarrassed or ashamed

of—the perception of romantic longing seeping into our same-sex friendships. In pursuing this line of thought, especially in its stronger forms where we treat any close male friendship as just inevitably homosexual, we are treating sex as a *myth* in the traditional meaning of the word—a story we tell ourselves that seems to illumine the hitherto misunderstood hinterland of a thing. With male friendship, where certain previous eras might have seen two people who merely admired each other and wanted to spur each other on to greater heights of maturity and virtue, in the modern West we're more attuned to the possibility of an underlying, subconscious erotic attraction.<sup>1</sup> And that mythology contributes to the anxiety or humorous uncertainty many of us feel about friendship today.

In the time of the Second World War, well before the so-called sexual revolution, C. S. Lewis was already defending the nonsexual character of friendship against critics who thought that any time two men were close, their camaraderie was “really homosexual.” Such a verdict, Lewis points out, is akin to the claim that there’s an invisible cat in the chair: if you question the assertion, the very lack of evidence may be marshaled as proof (“If there were an invisible cat in that chair, the chair would look empty; but the chair does look empty; therefore there is an invisible cat in it”).

More recently, moviegoers have been noting the spate of Hollywood “bromantic” comedies—movies that focus on two guys getting to know each other, navigating the ups and downs of learning how to be friends, but *not* hopping into bed together.

1. Consider this comment from the British writer A. C. Grayling, exemplifying the kind of suspicion I’m talking about: “Of the famous friendships recorded in history and legend, most are between men and most of these in turn appear not to be friendships as such but homosexual loves, which raises the question whether much of the thinking about friendship in classical antiquity and afterwards is about a very special and intense version of it, focused upon erotic attraction and its fulfillments.” There’s little concrete evidence to support Grayling’s perspective here, but he manages effectively to conjure a cloud of suspicion anyway.