"FRIENDS OF GOD": THE STARTING PLACE FOR ALL THINGS THEOLOGICAL AND PRACTICAL

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"He is a friend of God." That is about the best thing a person can say about someone. In the mouth of God himself, Isaiah says, *"Abraham my friend"* (Isaiah **41**:8; cp. James **2**:23; 2 Chronicles **20**:7). In scripture, friendship implies several things about relationship to God. Jesus tells us what he is doing: revelation (John **15**:15); so *friends* better describes us than *slaves* or *servants* does. Besides, he cares about us—a lot, enough even to die voluntarily an excruciating death for us (John **15**:13-15; Romans **5**:6-8, *etc*.). That implies doing for us whatever else we really need and cannot do for ourselves; that is what a friend does (Romans **8**:32; 1 John **3**:17). Friendship with God separates us from people that are at cross purposes with him: *"Friendship with the world is enmity with God"* (James **4**:4; 1 John **2**:15); so we have the same values and purposes that he does. Experience tells us what ideal friendship is like and how it operates.

"Friends of God" is a simple expression for positive, active personal relationship. As such, it participates in a broad set of biblical data that describe the nature and purpose of the Judaeo-Christian faith. Interpersonalism serves as the integrating reality for Christian truth. The bases for that claim stem from observations like the following: personal relationship characterizes what is most original in time and what is most ultimate in kind of reality. God is the "us" who created heaven and earth from nothing and as distinct from himself (Genesis **1**:1 + 26; **3**:22; **11**:7; cp. John **14**:16). He created the "us" of mankind in his own image (Genesis **1**:26, *etc*.), which implies that the *imago dei* is the interpersonal capacity. That correlation in kind of being enables friendship between God and mankind. What is most eternal is likewise interpersonal (1 Corinthians **13**:13) as is what is most inclusive (Mark **12**:28-34).

The central vocabulary of apostolic teaching addresses social behaviors: *love*, *grace/faith*, *promise*, *alienation/reconciliation*, *repentance/forgiveness*, and similar terms. The fruit of the spirit has interpersonal character: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and the like (Galatians **5**:22-23 and elsewhere). All the great summaries of the faith are interpersonal: the First Great Commandment (love God), the Second Great Commandment = Royal Law = The Golden Rule (love fellowman), and Micah **6**:8 (*"What does Yahveh require of you, but to do justly, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?"*; cp. Deuteronomy **30**:15). Guaranteed blessings during this life stem from positive, active association with God, his Messiah, and his people (Matthew **5**:2-12, and other texts). These central features of the faith contrast with what are less central (supernatural gifts, *e.g*., as in 1 Corinthians **12**:31-**13**:13) or foreign to Christian concerns (wealth, diet, race, gender, social status). We wonder whether scripture teaches much about the scientific nature of the universe and things in it except insofar as they have implications for behavior between persons. For example, scripture gives commands, which imply volition to obey them; but it does not explain what in the human central nervous system, hormonal systems, or chemical processes makes choosing possible. It proscribes homosexual, adulterous, incestuous (by extension, pedophilic) behaviors without explaining why people experience these disorienting propensities. We accept those proscriptions in accepting Christ's friendship and lordship.

Observations so far are not subject to dispute. The important point is that interpersonalism is the fundamental reality and all other kinds of things are secondary to it.

Beyond those <u>primary proofs</u> that lead to it, the truth and value of interpersonalism finds <u>confirmatory evidence</u> in what issues from it.

<center>Theological Values</center>

Positive interpersonal behavior provides a unifying field of knowledge, a relevant basis for theology, a worldview, the big picture, topical understanding at all levels. It establishes the ultimate frame of reference, the hermeneutical programmatic, the starting point that contextualizes specifics. It sets the category for systematics and theological method by requiring a paradigm shift from impersonal thinking. Impersonal systems exist, and they can operate even in conjunction with interpersonal process, but they are secondary and subsequent to it and participate in a way that does not vitiate the former, more basic reality (much as law was added to gospel without annulling gospel (Galatians **3**:17-19). Intuitive analysis identifies other systems: (a) <u>law</u>, which causes its effects by authority; (b) <u>hypostasis</u>, which causes its effects by force; and (c) <u>metaphysics</u>, which goes forward by form. They accomplish their results differently than does <u>interpersonalism</u>, which fosters effects by influence. Their effects come deterministically; friendship's effects come tendentially (choice creating "slippage" on both sides of relationships). There can be only one ultimate universal eternal system, which overrides all parallel possibilities. Friendship affords a down-to-earth, shorthand approach to <u>establishing and using the Christian worldview</u>; it sets the <u>concern of Christian faith</u> (purpose) and the <u>character of things</u> relevant to it (nature).

Thinking About Topics

If friendship with God and his people represents the concern of Christianity, Christ's followers can thereby evaluate what is relevant, foreign, and antithetical to it. They can differentiate items of <u>faith</u> (what is relevant), <u>fact</u> (what is true but without behavioral correlates), and <u>opinion</u> (what lacks sufficient evidence for a conclusion). By contemplating friendship, God's people can classify what is <u>central</u> and <u>less central</u>, <u>moral law</u> (what derives from the nature of personal relationships) *vs.* <u>positive commandment</u> (a specified way of doing what could be done variously), <u>advice</u> (what involves risk if not done) *vs.* <u>commandment</u> (what involves disobedience if not done), and evaluate the <u>relative importance</u>, say, of form and content.

The Law of the Harvest stresses the continuity of kind between cause and effect. People do not gather grapes from thorns or figs from thistles (Matthew **7**:16-19; **12**:33-35; Luke **6**:43-45); those who sow to the flesh reap corruption; those who sow to the spirit reap eternal life (Galatians **6**:6-9). The nature of the system corresponds with the nature of the results that come from it; conversely, the nature of the result corresponds with the nature of the system that produces it.

The interpersonal "category" sets expectancy for what doctrines and practices people should observe. Every deviation in Christian thought and practice has been some kind of departure from the interpersonal category. When the gospel hit the Gentle territories, it conflicted with the hypostatic interests of that milieu (Gnosticism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, Platonism, Greek dualism), and the contemporary Judaism that fostered legal and nationalistic thinking (Judaizer, *e.g.*; 1 Corinthians **1**:22-24). In time, Augustine was particularly instrumental in systematically importing hypostatic thinking into mainstream Christendom. Later John Calvin crystalized legal process in systematic theology. In our own day, interest in science predominates

with its implicit assumption that there is a one-to-one correspondence between being and behavior (something of a return to Greek philosophy).

Several doctrines exhibit the widespread distortions caused by ontology and legality as departures from the interpersonal perspective. Augustine abandoned the Manichees' notion that evil (and good) is a substance. To provide a coherent analysis of evil, he postulated instead that evil is a deprivation in the form of substance relative to its pristine condition. Applying that concept to mankind, he theorized that consequent to Adam's sin mankind incurred depravity (original sin) in such a way that it passed onto all humans because they all descended from the one. Several soteriological inferences followed. It paved the way for supernaturalizing aspects of the salvation process. Total depravity—the idea that inherited sin substantively affects every aspect of every person—meant that each individual had to be supernaturally regenerated before conversion could happen (including baptismal regeneration). Later came Wesley's idea that a second definite work of grace eradicated the last vestiges of inbred sin so the Christian could live a perfect life of love. Irresistible grace came to those God elected to save. Hypostasis also underlies some proposals for guaranteeing the perseverance of the saints.

The natural depravity concept generated other ideas like the immaculate conception of Mary—that she was born without original sin so her Son could be born without the taint of Adamic sin. The virgin birth supposedly took place because the depravitizing element was carried particularly by the male. Hypostatic inferences issued in certain beliefs about sexuality and marriage. The perpetual virginity of Mary is at best not taught in scripture, but in a Stoic direction virginity represented a higher level of goodness, which was appropriate for her as "deity bearer" (*theotokos*). Likewise came the prioritizing of celibacy and even celibacy in marriage from the time of conversion. The celibacy of the priesthood rests on this idea, as well as flagellation, monasticism, and asceticism. Sex for procreation always/only (together with prohibiting contraceptives) represents another nonbiblical teaching that depreciates bodily drives as themselves less ideal if not evil—instead of evil pertaining to the manner of fulfilling bodily drives. The various doctrines of real presence (transubstantiation, metousiosis, consubstantiation, impanation) in the Eucharist have no apt basis except for substantive thinking. Hypostasis via depravity impacts exegesis by requiring supernatural aid to understand revelation (when what is needed is the interpersonal starting point). Occasionalism in interpretation extends that idea—that the Spirit of God reveals parallel to the word rather than through the word.

Legality, by itself and in combination with depravity, brings in a plethora of doctrines including a couple of those in the center of the TULIP (total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, perseverance of the saints). Unconditional election and limited atonement are legal concepts inasmuch as they rest wholly in the sovereign authority of God. Such beliefs tend toward quietism and fatalism. Other doctrines and practices include sacraments as automatic flow of grace, clerical absolution, official administration of sacraments, the idea that grace flows through church, the concept of original guilt—that all the members of the race as such are guilty to spiritual death for the sin committed by another: Adam. Consequently, legality underlies the efficacy of infant baptism and belief in a need for it; the same applies to baptism for the dead. (Personal relationships, however, cannot be established by law or proxies.) Legality fostered delayed baptism to avoid the perceived problem of postbaptismal sins—as if baptism were associated with salvation from sins rather than salvation from sin (an alienated circumstance/a relationship matter). That in turn led to the problem with "clinici" (unbaptized believers in a death-bed condition), which in turn bled off into the issue about the form of baptism (pouring water on them since they could not readily be immersed).

Interpersonalism establishes appropriate alternatives to all these substantive and legal concepts. It shows what salvation is—reconciliation to friendship after alienation caused by personal behavior inappropriate to personal relationship/friendship; how salvation is both permanent and reversible—intention *vs.* fulfillment of intent; how neither perfection nor antinomianism obtains; how human response is both necessary and not efficient or sufficient; why people cannot save themselves—forgiveness unto fellowship being always pronounced by the party offended by the behavior of the other; how Christ is our savior—as the only sinless One, whom the Father appointed for us to identify with as an appropriate condition for his regard us as sinless like him; how salvation is both universal and limited—universal offer plus limited acceptance; how salvation continues—by the same principles by which it comes; what assurance of salvation is like (based on trust *vs.* legally irreversible).

Interpreting Texts

With the interpersonal framework in place, interpretation can proceed more profitably. Without that systematic context, an interpreter must establish doctrinal understanding by terms and texts alone, which often turns out to be a misuse of "proof texts" and over-reliance on word meanings. Unresolvable disagreement can come from the purely exegetical approach, because words and phrases can be understood in more than one way when taken by themselves. The previously established interpersonal context, however, helps sort through those problems by (a) eliminating interpretations that are foreign to that interpersonal context. If legal and hypostatic procedures cannot be established—whether as general constructs or with relevance to specific topics, there is no revealed basis for bringing them and their implications into the discussion of any topic. Doctrines based on those irrelevant processes fall away on their own as unproved; they need not be disproved, because they fail to shoulder their own (b) positive burden of proof. The interpersonal context helps (c) sort analogy from reality as the intended referent of comparisons like metaphors, parables, metonymies, poetic expression, approximate pictures. That is due in part to the practice of using the same terms for (d) functional equivalents between systems ("death" for spiritual death as alienation; legal terms from Mosaism applied to interpersonal realities in Christian faith—Christ's death as sacrifice).

Consequently, terms, phrases, and passages do not mean just anything and everything they could mean, but only what is contextually relevant, including especially what is relevant to the largest context—positive interpersonal nature, process, and result. In exegetical work, the interpersonal principle enables a student of scripture to get behind foreign and false meanings. Specific texts presumably have established the general interpersonal framework; that framework then clarifies specific texts unclear or indefinite by themselves aside from that framework; their combined content elaborates the general perspective. In that way, there arises an accumulating interaction between specific verses and general topics and other specific verses so there can be growth in understanding by way of an accumulating content.

If indeed legal procedure is disproved and hypostatic presuppositions are unproved, then the exegetical enterprise can proceed unhindered by the distractions and perversions that those foreign categories have historically brought into Christian understanding and practice.

In summary, friendship with God clarifies what would otherwise be ambiguous with no meaning or with multiple meanings. Friendship simplifies even though interpersonal relationships are themselves the most complex reality we know. We already understand friendship because of extensive experience with it on both sides of social interaction. So, interpersonalism fulfills the biblical criterion for the way of the Lord as something a wayfaring

fool need not err in (Isaiah **35**:8). Truth itself is simple; what is difficult comes in not confusing it with artificial lookalikes. Friendship <u>unifies</u> by providing a holistic context. It <u>nuances</u> the practice of Christian faith. Legal, hypostatic, and metaphysical systems tend to be inflexible. Law is approximate (writing rules that address every circumstance is difficult—and endless). Friendship <u>frees</u> from the rigidity of systems for ordering life that from a practical standpoint none of our forebears could bear. Nature is "unforgiving." Logic gives irrelevant validity more than relevant truth. Friendship <u>interpersonalizes</u> Christian content. Not only does the medium—law, hypostasis, language—tend to skew the message; it tends to skew the messenger as well. To the misperceiving observer, God himself up ends operating more like a law, a force, or a formal line of thought than like a person who cares. Interpersonalism fosters "reality thinking" as to how persons function, it encourages thinking beyond words, focuses attention "beyond the sacred page," beyond what "things" do or abstract rules require and forbid. God has spoken to us "Son-wise" (Hebrew **1**:2). Friendship enables wayfaring "fools" no longer to feel a need for another's scholarly guidance to get them through what they need to understand for life purposes.

Some Practical Values

No clear line exists between theology and praxis since theology sets the parameters for Christian life and ministry. The first leads to the second and the second clarifies the first. Nevertheless, several items illustrate everyday purposes for friendship with God.

Christian Unity
Going forward, the body of Christ should concentrate on the behavioral aspects of the faith and its implications—service to God and love for others who endeavor to glorify him. All doctrinal issues remain on the table, but the ones that pertain to Christian living and divine service outweigh matters of abstract form. Especially given the fact that we today are not inspired apostles, concentrating on benevolent attitude toward others who love God can pave the way for any teaching and learning the way of the Lord more perfectly anyway.

Unrevealed Matters
The New Testament has timeless content with a few issues to be adjusted because of first-century cultural context. However, concerns arise that holy writ does not address at all. In such cases, the disciples of Christ have to do as Paul did and infer from what <u>is</u> revealed in order to know how to operate appropriately in the distinctives of the modern world that are not addressed. Friendship helps make practical determinations—if nothing more than in attitudes and motives.

Pastoral Solution
On some doctrinal matters and their applications, equally committed believers cannot seem to reach consensus. Sometimes such matters may still be resolved "pastorally." Those who entertain the possibility of apostasy, for example, may not dissuade those who believe in perseverance of the saints. But, everyone in this discussion agrees that Christians should remain faithful and grow throughout life to honor God, respect people, and reap the blessings of living right. Everyone can encourage everyone else to fulfill that pattern and leave judgment to God. Even if a one-time genuine conversion were permanently satisfactory to God, <u>we</u> are in no position to know whether that conversion was, in fact, genuine or how genuine is genuine enough—under this or that circumstance. Furthermore, God's people are in no position to

pronounce on the degree of grace he considers appropriate in each case. Were we to face the struggles someone else faces, we who consider ourselves right with God might not fare even as well as that person has. Both we and such a person know not to presume on friendships and that not persevering ruins our testimony and deprives us of the blessings of friendship.

Conclusion

In the definitive literature of our faith, Messiah himself warned that his enterprise would reorder who is first and last (Matthew **19**:30; **20**:6; Mark **9**:35; **10**:31; Luke **13**:30). He brought a different agenda from what typically occupied his contemporaries' religious attention. The same group of people evaluated by wealth will not rank the same as when evaluated by looks, athletic ability, fame, decency. Jesus thanked the Father that what God was bringing into the world the wise did not catch, but babes did (Matthew **11**:25). Paul likewise observed that wisdom does not lead to the knowledge of God (1 Corinthians **1**:21). He directed Titus to shun endless genealogies and pointless speculation (Titus **3**:9). In his last letter, he wrote about those who are *"always learning and never able to come to a knowledge of the truth"* (2 Timothy **3**:7). These comments come in the tradition of Isaiah's ancient sentiment that what God values can be grasped by any wayfaring fool (Isaiah **35**:8).

The inference from such declarations seems to be that when the study of revelation gets hopelessly complicated and the body of believers disintegrates into endless fragmentation, they have missed the point; they have adopted the wrong theological method, they are pursuing the wrong kind of subject matter, they are carrying out the wrong agenda. They have fallen into the age-old error the New Testament foresaw: religious goal displacement.

Friendship constitutes the purpose and nature of God's upward calling through Christ. The Way of the Lord does not have the rigid complexity of legal debate, the microscopic exactitude of scientific research, the unfathomable vagaries of metaphysical speculation. It can't be that hard or nobody could profit from it. Hence, we vow not to strain out gnats and swallow camels. We already know intuitively what God wants and how to participate in it. What is hard is not the understanding, but the doing in the face of temptation to do otherwise, not the understanding but getting to it, not understanding the truth but distinguishing it from other things. We heed the charge simply to follow after love and good works (Hebrew **10**:24). So, we resolve to focus on the simple Way and not get tangled up again in legal, hypostatic, and metaphysical pursuits—theology gone astray, theological scholarship falsely so called.

ADDENDUM: *FRIEND VS*. OTHER TERMS

Choosing friendship to characterize salvation contrasts with choosing sonship, slavery, or disciple as the frame of reference. Does that choice, however, beg the question on the apostasy issue, for example? Perhaps choosing to start with friendship does not lead to the apostasy view, but merely reflects it. If so, the reversibility of friendship provides an independent tool for getting behind the ambiguity sometimes seen in proof texts for either option.

The following considerations address that question. (1) All the problem features of salvation come from leaving friendship and lapsing into material, legal, or metaphysical categories. What resolves controversies in a group sets the context for avoiding difficulties in any one issue individually. To put it differently, all the aberrations in the history of Christian thought have been some kind of departure from the interpersonal reality, or to put it more positively, some kind of departure from the friendship reality.

(2) The burden of proof calls for positively providing an alternative starting point that trumps friendship. Sonship might be offered as an alternative starting point in order to provide irreversibility. But (a) *son* is not necessarily used in order to involve irreversibility. Closeness to God, similarity to him, learning from him, derivation from him are sufficient explanations for using son terminology regarding salvation as surely as such factors explain its usage in regard to other matters.

(b) The irreversibility of sonship is in regard to physical—and perhaps legal—things. John the Baptist pointedly told his listeners that being physical sons of Abraham had nothing to do with being acceptable to God. The spiritual uses of *son* refer to reversible things, and it is the spiritual factor that belongs to this subject. The closest thing to physical sonship is creation, but people stop becoming sons of God in the salvation sense even though they do not cease to exist as part of his creation. It is sometimes observed that the prodigal son was still his father's son even while he was in the far country. But sonship in that sense is not the issue in being acceptable to the father—behaviorally good. His father describes him as "lost" while he was in the far country (Luke).

(3) Behavior would have to be either irrelevant or unavoidable for irreversibility to speak to continued salvation; that is, characteristic bad behavior would not undo salvation (irrelevance) or continued characteristic good behavior would have to be supernaturally guaranteed (unavoidable). In the latter case, we wonder how such a result could be guaranteed without eliminating free will. (a) Behavior cannot be made irrelevant or antinomianism and universalism would result. (b) Behavior cannot be made irrelevant or there would have been no lostness in the first place. Disobedience is the cause of lostness whether initial or subsequent.