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Focus on Friendship: A Review of "Why Can't We Be Friends?"

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Focus on Friendship: A Review of "Why Can't We Be Friends?"

Abstract

"Christians typically assume that the best way to avoid this temptation of engaging in sexual impurity is to avoid anything even resembling friendship with someone of the opposite sex. Byrd, however, argues that avoidance is not purity; it is simply avoidance."

Posting about the book *Why Can't We Be Friends?* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/focus-on-friendship-a-review-of-why-cant-we-be-friends/>

Keywords

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

in things

3
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Focus on Friendship: A Review of “Why Can’t We Be Friends?”

Erin Olson

Title: *Why Can’t We Be Friends?: Avoidance Is Not Purity*

Author: Aimee Byrd

Publisher: P & R Publishing

Publish Date: June 29, 2018

Page Numbers: 248 Pages (Paperback)

ISBN: 978-1629954172

Considering the #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements, along with some recently popular personal rules from politicians about male-female relationships, Aimee Byrd has written a potentially controversial book about the importance of cross-gender relationships in Christian circles. Byrd argues that we can and should build and maintain friendships with people of the opposite gender. While society often sees male-female friendships as impossible, often citing the “Billy Crystal Rule” (from the movie *When Harry Met Sally* where he says “sex always gets in the way”), Byrd argues that avoiding relationships with the opposite sex isn’t exactly what God had in mind when he urged us to be pure and free from sexual immorality.

Our highly sexualized culture simplifies male-female relationships as being all about attraction, sex, and temptation. Christians typically assume that the best way to avoid this temptation of engaging in sexual impurity is to avoid anything even resembling friendship with someone of the opposite sex. Byrd, however, argues that avoidance is not purity; it is simply avoidance. Being *in* relationship and maintaining purity is what God intended as purity. We must expose ourselves to relationships with people of the

opposite sex and provide a different cultural narrative to demonstrate what these relationships could look like. We can acknowledge and recognize the sexual culture we live in but strive to be different. As Christians, we can be intentional in viewing our cross-gender relationships as arenas where we can honor and celebrate the whole person, not simply see them as their gender or for their sex appeal.

The Bible, says Byrd, is full of language that describes males and females as “brothers and sisters.” We are called to see each other as siblings who together have been adopted into the family of God. Just as we have relationships with our actual, familial siblings, we also need to see other male and female Christians as our family—as our brothers and sisters. When we see each other as brothers and sisters, we will be far less likely to notice or act on any attraction that might be present. Being siblings in Christ, allows us to live fully in community and communion with one another as the Bible calls us to do and to be. Attraction, Byrd states, is not sin, and it is normal even after one is married. While it might be easier to envision a world where we lose our ability to feel attraction to someone other than our spouse, that is unusual and unlikely. Attraction may happen in certain relationships (or not all), but this does not mean we should avoid cross-gender relationships all together. The Bible is explicit about lust being sinful, but attraction to someone of the opposite gender is not necessarily sinful until it turns into lust or immorality. To Byrd, avoiding male-female relationships is costlier than the risk caused by those relationships altogether.

We become more fully sanctified and more holy, argues Byrd, when we traverse the waters of these cross-gender relationships with grace and purity. The Holy Spirit can bless our relationships and give us the ability to see the whole nature of our brothers and sisters. This is, Byrd states, what God sees as purity in relationships. The ability to be in community and celebrate each other’s whole personhood.

Byrd makes a strong case for Christians seeking to demonstrate what healthy male-female relationships can look like, but her book will likely catch flak from critics who will say her book seems too hypothetical and not realistic. Can people really resist temptations? With the Holy Spirit we know they *can*, but *will* they? Also, what will people say? If a man and a woman who are not married to each other (but to other people) are out together enjoying a cup of coffee or lunch, people will likely assume that they are headed down the path to immorality. This assumption will likely become the subject of gossip even if their relationship is innocent and solely based on friendship. Unless the two have some “business” together, should they risk being the subject of gossip and assumption? While Byrd gives no clear direction for how we are to handle the specificities of these cross-gender relationships, she is very clear that she believes such relationships are Biblical and can be culture-changing.

Overall, Byrd seems to have an optimistic view of human nature that allows her to believe that sex will not get in the way of male-female friendships. Perhaps this is true in broader context, such as when men and women are working together for a common goal at work, at church, or for some other organizational purpose. But if we take those friendships (if you can call them that) outside of those contexts, what do they look like? Can men and women just enjoy each other's company as we see with friends who are single or of the same gender? The idea is intriguing, and Byrd makes a strong Biblical case, but Christians and those in leadership positions are still likely to be skeptical of the overall premise of this book. Women and men can work together successfully and, some would argue, can often do better work than groups comprised of one gender, but Christian cross-gender friendships will still be difficult to navigate in our hypersexualized world.