



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 A School of Christian Love  
(*Friendship*, pp. 28-36)

### Suggested Articles:

📖 The Neighborhood:  
A Company of Friends  
(*Friendship*, pp. 63-66)

📖 Sacred Companions  
(*Friendship*, pp. 84-88)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics  
Baylor University  
One Bear Place #97361  
Waco, TX 76798-7361  
Phone 1-866-298-2325  
[www.ChristianEthics.ws](http://www.ChristianEthics.ws)

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# A School of Christian Love

Friends, Augustine famously taught, are gifts entrusted to us by God for providential purposes. If so, a strong love for our friends does not detract from our love for God but is precisely the setting in which we come to learn what loving God rightly means.

## Prayer

### Responsive Scripture Reading: 1 John 3:11, 14-18

For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.

**We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another.**

Whoever does not love abides in death.

**All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them.**

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

**How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?**

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

## Meditation†

According to the Christian story, at least on this side of eternity, neighbor love *is* something other than friendship. *Caritas* is the love based on an infinite hope that someday everyone will be God's friend; in the meantime, God, like everyone else, has fewer friends than neighbors.

*Caroline J. Simon*

## Reflection

"In the Christian life the fundamental purpose of friendship is not to bring us satisfaction and success in the world, but to help us grow *together* in Christ in order that we might *together* enjoy friendship with God and the saints in heaven," Paul Wadell reminds us. To reach this goal, "friends must find ways in their life together to learn, be formed in, and witness the love of God." Not all of our friendships reach these lofty heights, he admits.

The Cistercian monk Aelred of Rievaulx (1110-1167) agreed friendship can be a school of Christian love, but he realized we sometimes mistake immature, manipulative, and self-serving relationships for the real thing. So, he drew these distinctions:

- ▶ *Carnal friends* play on our weaknesses and stir behavior that is morally or spiritually harmful – like encouraging us "to gossip, to remain bitter and unforgiving, to be stingy and inconsiderate." At their worst, Wadell says, such friendships can "deaden our consciences and harden our hearts."
- ▶ *Worldly friends* do not seek our good, but are self-serving. "Full of deceit and intrigue," Aelred says, they disguise their true motives. If we look past his quaint language, we can see Aelred is describing "relationships that often thrive in business, in poli-



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Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

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tics, in colleges and universities, and sometimes even in our churches," Wadell writes. "Aren't many of us at least occasionally tempted to seek out someone not because we really want a friendship with him or her, but because we suspect such an alliance might help us get ahead?"

- ▶ *Spiritual friends* draw us closer to God, because we share "a common love for Christ and a mutual desire to grow together in Christ," says Wadell. Since "Christ is actively present in the friendship...the friends not only learn how to love one another, but also learn how to love God for God's own sake. Such uncalculating love is not easily acquired. But it is something the friends grow into as they journey with Jesus and learn from him how to love God not out of fear or sheer obligation but from a genuine desire to seek the good of One who has always sought theirs."

"Christians should especially prize friendships because they recognize in them the potential to be schools of love, settings in which we encounter Christ in one another and gradually learn from one another how to grow resplendent in the goodness and holiness of God," Wadell concludes. "This is the secret of friendship's great intimacy and the clearest explanation of its joy."

### Study Questions

1. Why is it important to delineate types of friendship? What do you think of Aelred's classification scheme?
2. In what ways can friendship be a school of Christian love?
3. How is "the Neighborhood," which Kyle Childress describes, a source of spiritual friendship? How might you find or nurture a similar group of friends?
4. How are spiritual friendships fostered in your congregation?

### Departing Hymn: "Their Shoulders Bend as Low as Mine" (verses 1 and 2)

Their shoulders bend as low as mine  
beneath my heavy load;  
with tears as salty as are mine,  
they walk my winding road.  
Their hearts know all my guilt and greed,  
know all my hopes and joy;  
they know the help and strength I need,  
these friends in God's employ.

They tell me what I need to hear,  
point out what I must see;  
they listen, when I will not hear  
the truth God speaks to me.  
They love me still for who I am  
when all I am shows through.  
They see in me the spotless Lamb;  
I see him in them too.

Terry W. York, ASCAP (2007)

Tune: ROXIE, C. David Bolin (2007)

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† Caroline J. Simon, *The Disciplined Heart: Love, Destiny, and Imagination* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 107.

# A School of Christian Love

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Responsive Scripture Reading	Responsive Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To understand how true friendship can be a school of Christian love.
2. To distinguish true friendship (which Aelred of Rievaulx named “spiritual friendship”) from immature, manipulative, and self-centered relationships we may call “friendship.”
3. To discuss how we can foster spiritual friendships in our lives and within congregations.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Friendship (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Story

“My high school years were a little different. And I don’t regret a minute of them,” Paul Wadell reports. “In the fall of 1965 I left my home in Louisville to join nearly two hundred other fellows at a high school seminary in a small Missouri town called Warrenton.... We were a ragtag bunch who clustered together in the most unlikely of settings to be initiated into a way of life designed to help us discover whether or not we ought to become Passionist priests....

“Although we did not realize it at the time, the pink stucco building that was our home for four years was a school of friendship; and friendship, at its best, is a school of Christian love. In a life ordered by prayer and worship, we learned there how turning our attention to God helped us to be more attentive to one another. In a place where none of us had very much, we learned how sharing and generosity build friendships, and why a life centered on Christ is the key to nurturing genuine friendship and intimacy among ourselves. We did not choose each other, but we were given one another and entrusted with one another. Each of us was the ‘neighbor’ all of us were called to love. And although we could not articulate it at the time, this meant helping one another grow in holiness by together moving closer to God” (*Friendship*, pp. 28-29).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for the spiritual friends who have helped members grow in love for God and neighbors.

## Responsive Scripture Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

## Reflection

As a form of love, friendship is very different from love of neighbor. Only a few special persons are our close friends, but each and every person (including our enemy) is our neighbor. We enjoy our friends and share time, interests, and values with them, but our neighbors may be unappealing strangers. Over the centuries some Christians have been suspicious of friendship as too particular, too insular, and too focused on people like us. Paul Wadell responds that true friendships can be schools of Christian love when “they deepen our awareness of the connections that exist between us and every other person—indeed, all of creation—and heighten our sense of responsibility towards them.”

## Study Questions

1. Not all friendships are healthy. They are not schools of Christian love; they are spiritually toxic. One reason to classify friendships is to help us identify and avoid such dangerous liaisons. “It is important for us to reflect on—and to be honest about—the various relationships of our lives and what they might be doing to us,” Wadell writes. “Are they making us better persons? Are they helping us grow in goodness, sensitivity, and respect for others? Are they leading us closer to God? Or are they making it easier for us to gossip, to remain bitter and unforgiving, to be stingy and inconsiderate? If we took an inventory of the ‘friendships’ of our lives, would we recall any that brought out the worst in us? Have we known relationships that made us more strangers to God than friends of God?”  
“One cannot accuse Aelred of being subtle!” says Wadell, stating the obvious. Yet I’ve come to admire this twelfth-century reformer for being brutally honest about the distorted and fallen relationships he found in the most religious communities. Do members know some other, less blunt distinctions that help us chart the spiritual effects of friendships?
2. Wadell describes three “good things good friends do for us.” We grow in Christian love when friendship “draws us out of ourselves and teaches us to care for others for their own sake.... None of us learns to love, to share, or to be kind and considerate single-handedly. We acquire these virtues in partnership with others who are seeking them with us.” Second, “Friends show us to ourselves. As they come to know us better they reveal certain aspects of our personality and character to us.” They help us identify and develop our virtues, and spot and correct our flaws. Third, friends “can school us in the rigors of Christian love is by continually challenging us to extend the boundaries of our world. Good friendships should always make our world bigger, not smaller, by calling us to expand the circle of love.”
3. The six pastors who gather twice a year in “the Neighborhood” not only relax together and prepare meals and share stories, they also share deeper conversations about God, their faith, and their crises and challenges as pastors. “We listen to one another’s expressions of exhaustion, frustration, and loneliness, and we have learned to trust one another to talk about our ambition and sense of rivalry with other clergy, even our sense of rivalry with one another,” Childress reports. They help one another grow spiritually in ways they could not grow alone. “Our health is connected with one another, and we sense that we are more ourselves when we are together than when we are separate. Biblically, the concepts of salvation and shalom describe a condition of community wholeness in which each individual is in good health only when he or she is an integrated member of God’s people.”  
Do any of your group members meet with local (or distant) spiritual friends on a regular basis? Would such meetings be worthwhile? If so, how might they be arranged?
4. Members might mention specific church programs—e.g., study groups, youth groups, support groups, supper clubs, mission trips, ministry opportunities—that foster spiritual friendships. Some new curricula—e.g., the *Companions in Christ* series that Christy Morr reviews in “Sacred Companions” (*Friendship*, pp. 84-88) or the anthologies produced by Renovaré ([www.Renovare.org](http://www.Renovare.org))—are designed to foster spiritual friendships.  
Consider how spiritual friendship can be discussed and valued more within your congregation. Do members form such friendships elsewhere—e.g., at home, or school, or work?

## Departing Hymn

“Their Shoulders Bend as Low as Mine” is on pp. 37-39 of *Friendship*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.