

# The Congregation as Family

## Part IV: Pastor as Surrogate Father

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### Introduction

I recently attended two conferences of LCMS pastors where group discussion included the question, “May a pastor have friends within the congregation?” It seems a simple topic, but the answers differed between those two meetings—not just distinct views on the same continuum, but contradictory opinions that seemed hardly able to abide with each other. At one conference, the group was largely in agreement that this was a matter to be approached most cautiously; at the other, the predominant opinion was that the pastor should be a friend to everybody in the congregation.

Ask the internet, and search engines will retrieve articles and blog posts that largely support the latter position. Many writers opine that the pastor should have friends in the congregation, and their arguments usually fall back upon the same four reasons:

- The example of Jesus
- The example of others in Scripture
- Its example of candor and vulnerability to others in the congregation
- The way the congregation is likely to be a full of like-minded people and thus fertile ground for friendship

There are caveats, to be sure, but the writers—pastors, theology professors and the like—are generally encouraging.

On the other hand, my stack of pastoral theologies on the bookshelf run a contrary line. Those that broach the topic maintain that it is best if the pastor not have friends in the congregation and that if the pastor even be careful in the amount that he socializes with parishioners. The reason in each is common. Although he is a member of the congregation, the pastor is set apart by call and ordination as the one who stands in the stead and by the command of Christ.

This is an important point: one might be tempted to see the difference as one of old (books) and new (blogposts) and to assume that the conventional wisdom has progressed and changed over time. This, however, is not the case; it’s a matter of competing theologies. In fact, before we can address the simple question “Can a pastor have friends within the congregation?” we must first take the time to define what a pastor is and what a friend is. It may well be that, in the egalitarian malaise of our times, we have lost the meaning of both offices.

### The Pastor

For the purposes of this paper, two short articles from the Augsburg Confession summarize a scriptural explanation of the Office of the Holy Ministry. First, Article V declares:

So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given [John 20:22]. He

works faith, when and where it pleases God [John 3:8], in those who hear the good news that God justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake. This happens not through our own merits, but for Christ's sake.

Our churches condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that through their own preparations and works the Holy Spirit comes to them without the external Word.<sup>1</sup>

Lest there be any question as to how the teaching of the Gospel and the administering of the Sacraments are to be done, Article XIV explains, "Our churches teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church, or administer the Sacraments, without a rightly ordered call."<sup>2</sup>

Quite simply and clearly, the pastor is set apart by his call as the one who publicly delivers the means of grace to the people of God, usually in a specific location.<sup>3</sup> This stands in significant contrast to a functional view that everyone is a pastor among the priesthood of believers, or, as the anathema to Article V makes clear, to those who believe that Holy Spirit works apart from the means of grace, in which case everyone is a pastor unto himself.

If the pastor is indeed set apart to administer the means of grace to the people of God, he is not like everybody else. The line may not be as starkly drawn as that of captain and crew or of doctor and patients, but it exists all the

same. The giving of God's gifts must take precedence; and, while a pastor can find friends in many places, he is called to be the *Seelsorger* especially to those in the congregation.

With that in mind, the caution of those who write Lutheran pastoral theologies makes sense. Wilhelm Loehe is particularly helpful, his years of pastoral wisdom evident, as he explores different considerations as a pastor arrives at a new parish. He recognizes that the pastor's level of education is often significantly higher than those of parishioners in many communities, so much so that the pastor should recognize that he must be careful to make himself understood, lest he "and [the] flock face each other as strangers," and, while the level of education may have changed among the laity, the pastor's education in our time is still significantly different than most he will encounter, so the caveat still applies.<sup>4</sup> He gives sound advice when he warns the pastor not to give the appearance of favoritism, but to equally "recognize all of them as his parishioners,"<sup>5</sup> even as he wisely notes that members who want to befriend the pastor may do so with poor motives that will later embarrass him. Loehe goes on to say, "All individuals have been assigned to him. Thus he includes them all in his love, until the love becomes clarified into certain and manifold expressions of love."<sup>6</sup>

Even so, it is not really the pastor's love but the love of Christ that the pastor delivers to the people. Despite its length, Loehe's counsel here is worth printing in its entirety:

Perhaps one could sum up the personal points of correct behavior in these words: Do not easily have fellowship or even camaraderie with a parishioner, least of all right in the beginning. Do not forget in your private life either that

1 Paul Timothy McCain, ed., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions: A Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2016), 33.

2 McCain, 39.

3 One ought not forget the explanation to the Office of the Keys in the Small Catechism: "I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself." (SC IV:6)

4 Wilhelm Loehe, *The Pastor*, ed. Charles P. Schaum (St. Louis: Concordia, 2015), 37.

5 Loehe, 39.

6 Loehe, 40.

you are supposed to be a shepherd of all your sheep. You are as human as others, you need personal love and you will find it, be sure of that. You will

*You appear as the best friend when you come in the business of Jesus and of souls.*

find it most surely and most sweet, the less you chase after it, the more totally you are a pastor. As a rule, approach others only in an official way, when the office requires it, with the mercies of the office. *All personal love should be poured into your official coming, so that you appear as the best friend when you come in the business of Jesus and of souls.* Stand as bishop, shepherd, guardian, and watchman over all, and do not give up your standpoint, so that you can come to everybody at his time and can be everything to all. Conduct yourself in such a way that no one will get angry with you because you preferred this one or the other, and would close his heart toward you in times of trouble. Conduct yourself in such a way that everybody can believe in your love, your loving wisdom, your loving, wise, and strong manliness and dignity of a shepherd.<sup>7</sup>

For Loehe, the pastor as friend is the pastor who represents Jesus, the “best friend.” It is counterproductive, however, for the pastor to try to be everybody’s friend in a social sense. If the pastor is indeed the overseer (ἐπισκοπός), he needs some distance above the congregation, living a

...quiet life interrupted only by official activity. This quiet, separate, yet always wakeful, attentive, observing life gives the pastor the high vantage of the overseer (*Episcopus*) and watchman. And he ought not be without this high vantage point. Out of necessity, he must live above the congregation in whose midst he lives. This is true if he wants to oversee it and its needs, notice approaching dangers and take care to prevent them.<sup>8</sup>

This is the post of the shepherd to guard the flock, to not try to be another sheep. In fact, notes Loehe, parishioners “do not require their pastor to be a comrade; they talk negatively about such a thing. Yes, one can well say that only the pastor who has found the right proportion of space and distance from his congregation can be popular in the best sense of the word.”<sup>9</sup> Without denying a pastor’s need for friends, Loehe makes an important point: parishioners should see the pastor who stands in the stead of Christ, and, when he visits, they should expect to hear God’s Word.

Walther writes similarly, concerned with the loss of respect for the office. “A conscientious preacher will therefore keep himself withdrawn as much as possible, gladly avoid extensive and excessively amusing social gatherings, or, if he must attend them, know how to retain others’ respect through undisguised earnestness.”<sup>10</sup> Why? Because “a preacher must arrange all his actions so that his congregation recognizes that his only and true purpose is their salvation.”<sup>11</sup>

None of this implies that the pastor is aloof or unfriendly to others as he goes about caring for their souls, but he recognizes that his personal

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8 Loehe, 70

9 Loehe, 70

10 Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther, *American-Lutheran Pastoral Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2017), 459. Never shy of extensive citations, Walther is quoting Seide’s *Pastoraltheologie*.

11 Walther, 459.

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7 Loehe, 41 (italics mine).

need for friendship should be subordinate to his office.

Mueller and Kraus echo Loehle's concerns in their 1990 book, writing, "A good general rule for pastors has been, 'Be friendly with all, intimate with none.' Becoming too intimate with parishioners may later place the pastor in awkward circumstances,"<sup>12</sup> and adding, "Like clinical psychologists and psychiatrists, the pastor cannot confide in one of his 'patients,' (i.e., parishioners)."<sup>13</sup> This caution is well heeded, but it must be noted that the professional relationship is different between pastor and parishioner than between therapist and patient because the profession is different. The congregation is the family of God in a place, and the relationship of pastor and parishioner is less distinctly defined because of the familial, communal aspects.<sup>14</sup>

This is hardly a position staked only by conservative Lutherans. Thomas Oden, a Methodist, briefly lists various titles for Christian ministers: parson, elder, curate, preacher, priest, minister, evangelist, clergy, reverend, and chaplain. Nearly each of these *prima facie* indicates that the pastor is not "one of the guys."

12 Norbert H. Mueller and George Kraus, eds., *Pastoral Theology* (St. Louis, Concordia: 1990), 36.

13 Mueller and Kraus, 36–37.

14 This is demonstrated, for instance, in attempts to apply the ethics of a counselor unedited onto a pastor. When I graduated from the seminary just three years after Mueller and Kraus published, we received ethical counsel that the pastor should not engage in business transactions with members of the congregation, lest he create a troublesome dual relationship and conflict of interest. Such a guideline makes complete sense in the counseling profession, but it is not so helpful for pastors. One colleague of mine arrived at his first parish, where a member—an appliance salesman—offered to help him outfit his home at cost, as he had done for previous pastors. This pastor declined on ethical grounds, leading parishioners to believe he was accusing them of behaving unethically in the past and creating hard feelings that were never fully resolved. This ethical guideline for counselors doesn't transfer directly to pastors because parishioners are not merely "patients" in need of the medicine of immortality, but also fellow members of the household of God. Like every aspect of parish ministry, the situation differs from place to place and time to time, and the pastor must always act with wisdom and discernment.

"Parson" emphasizes that the pastor embodies the *person* of the congregation before God in prayer. "Elder" suggests experience in guiding the church. A "curate" has a cure to administer, while a "priest" stands between man and God. "Cleric" or "clergy" implies specialized education, while "reverend" implies that such a cleric is worthy of respect for that education. All of these titles indicate a man set apart.<sup>15</sup>

Helpfully for the topic of pastor as friend, Oden warns of two misunderstandings of the pastoral task—the distorted directions of modern reductionism and archaic triumphalism.

Modern reductionism reduces the office of the ministry down to a human task: the pastor is a moral teacher, a counselor or a political activist, rather than the man who is called to distribute the gifts of God through Word and sacrament. When such emphases lose sight of the Lord at work, they "easily become too cheaply accommodative to the present culture and lose the finely balanced judgment that the tradition has called wisdom."<sup>16</sup> The modern reductionist pastor's idea of friendship puts the emphasis on human relationships at the expense of God's reconciliation with man through Christ. "Admittedly, the pastor is friend to many, even as Jesus was friend to many, expressing through ordinary human relationships the extraordinary love of God. But reductionism makes the mistake of seeing this friendship purely by analogy to human friendship, rather than through the lens of divine-human friendship."<sup>17</sup>

Archaic triumphalism runs into the other ditch, where the pastor is about communion with God at the expense of bringing His gifts to the people. "The tension is lost between the holy calling and the ordinary spheres it is called to serve,"<sup>18</sup> writes Oden, and the pastor here will

15 Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (New York: HarperCollins, 1983), 49–50.

16 Oden, 55.

17 Oden, 55.

18 Oden, 56.

be so occupied with divine companionship that friendliness to God's people may become unimportant: "...the triumphalist excess has tempted priesthood to become inwardly turned toward its own self-importance and thus separated from the *laos* as if it were intrinsically superior, to the neglect of engaged service in the life of the world."<sup>19</sup>

As the called and ordained servant of the Word, the pastor has to maintain the correct proximity both to the Lord and to his people. This is true for all pastoral care, and so it is a critical consideration as he considers the matter of friendship.

## The Friend

If the office of pastor is diminished in modern thought, the meaning of "friend" suffers even more. It reaches its nadir in social media: I have a few hundred Facebook "friends," most of whom wouldn't notice if I disappeared tomorrow, who "like" me by pressing a button. This is the palest imitation of friendship, but, if nothing else, it demonstrates that the word "friend" has a broad semantic domain, ranging from the internet contact to the neighbor to the close confidant.

Scripture reflects this extensive domain, employing several different words to cover the various meanings of the English word "friend." In the Hebrew, רֵעִים is translated as "companion" (Ps. 55:13 ESV [55:14 MT]) or "cattle" (Ps. 144:14), its connotation being one that is tame or friendly. The noun רֵעִי, meaning "friend," originates from the verb יָדַע, known for implying intimate knowledge; far from being a stranger, a friend is well-known. The term רֵעִי indicates one nearby, but not necessarily friendly; it can mean a companion (Exod. 2:13), fellow soldier (Judg. 7:13–14), sailor (Jonah 1:7), or an opponent in hand-to-hand combat (2 Sam. 2:16). Similarly, רֵעִי בְּרֵעִי is one nearby, a friend who is not to be reproached

(Ps. 15:2 [15:3 MT]) or a neighbor who is to be killed (Exod. 32:27). The participle אָהַב is from the verb אָהַב; as the verb seems to carry the same water as "love" in English, so the noun can mean "friend" (Isa. 41:8; 2 Chron. 20:7) or "lover" (Ezek. 23:5, 9; Hosea 2:5, 7), though the intimates are not married to one another.

Within the New Testament, the Greek presents several words to cover the semantic domain of friendship. The terms παιδίον (John 21:5) and τεκνίον (John 13:33), indicating children, can be used as terms of affection. A φίλος (John 3:29) is a person with whom one associates, while a σύντροφος (Acts 13:1) is a close friend on the basis of having grown up together. A ἑταῖρος (Matt. 20:13) is an associate, though there may be no love lost between the two, while a συστρατιώτης (Phil. 2:25) is a fellow soldier or one who undergoes hardship with another. Like the Hebrew, Greek features one word with which friendship is associated with knowledge: a γνωστός is a friend or acquaintance who enjoys special privileges. As it is derived from the verb γινώσκω for knowing, it can have the same intimate meaning as רֵעִי, as in the Septuagint translation of Psalm 55:13 (55:14 LXX), or it can simply mean "acquaintance."

If we have any hope of consensus on our question of pastors having friends, we had better define what sort of friendship we mean.

C. S. Lewis comes to the rescue in his exploration of *The Four Loves*, those loves identified as affection, friendship, eros, and charity. He writes of Friendship with a capital *F*, and, to distinguish it from other uses of the term, we will do the same here. Lewis writes of a level of acquaintance that's frequently mistaken for Friendship, one that he describes as "companionship." In his British context, he coins the word "clubbability"<sup>20</sup> to name those who like each other enough to belong to the same club, and we might describe this as the

19 Oden, 56.

20 C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017), p. 82, Kindle.

level of friendship that makes for a good golf foursome or hunting buddies. Men like to be with other men, participating in joint activities. Such ventures are valuable and time well spent, though they often feature larger amounts of time where conversation is either impossible or unwelcome: the golfing foursome goes their separate ways between tee and green, and stealth is necessary among hunters to get the elk in the crosshairs. Companionship thus forms a foundation for Friendship, but there is more to Friendship than that:

Friendship arises out of mere Companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden). The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, “What? You too? I thought I was the only one.”<sup>21</sup>

Montaigne makes the same distinction by speaking of “common friendships” and “friendship that possesses the soul,”<sup>22</sup> akin to Lewis’ clubbability and Friendship, respectively. Such Friendship arises when two individuals find like-mindedness at the highest levels, developing a bond that is closer than that of other companions. It is founded upon pursuing the same truth, even if friends may perhaps arrive at different answers.

As such, it has some attributes which may at first sound strange or even unfriendly. Lewis

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21 Lewis, 83. Of the various words for friend in Scripture, the word most consistent with Lewis’ Friendship is אָהָב, the object of David’s lament in Psalm 55:13, “But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend.” Several others would correspond to the “clubbable” friend, one who is generally nearby and usually good to be around.

22 Michel de Montaigne, *Essays 1.28: Of Friendship*, quoted in Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, eds., *Great Treasury of Western Thought* (New York: Bowker, 1977), 240.

calls it the least natural or necessary of loves because we can survive without it.<sup>23</sup> People need some level of eros for children to be born and some level of affection to raise the children,

*If erotic love is about  
naked bodies, Friendship  
is about naked minds.*

but, like one can live without art, one can live without Friendship—diminished and anemic though that life might be for its absence.

Though unnatural, it is also the most heaven-like, where the multitude around the throne is united in praising God and encouraging that praise with one another.<sup>24</sup> If erotic love is about naked bodies, Friendship is about naked minds.<sup>25</sup> The general population will easily mistake such Friendship among men for a homosexual relationship, and, where it occurs between a man and a woman, they will have to address its inevitable pull towards erotic love.<sup>26</sup>

All of these varieties and levels of relationship are gifts of God, and all of them express a desire for oneness that reflects perfect unity in Christ. Scripture is specific that the union of husband and wife typifies Christ and His bride (Eph. 5:31–32), but friendship and Friendship also express a movement towards oneness. Casual friends share interests, Friends share minds, and lovers share bodies.<sup>27</sup> All of these are distant

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23 Lewis, 74.

24 Lewis, 79.

25 Lewis, 90.

26 Lewis, 85. Lewis notes that Friendship between the sexes is rare, both because of sex differences and because men and women tend to operate in different spheres and thus have little common experience about which to be friends. He writes in 1960. Sixty years later, it is controversial to say that men and women are different at all, and the workplace is far more integrated. While one might assume that this would increase the number of Friendships, instead our culture is faced with an epidemic of loneliness.

27 One is tempted to put these on a continuum towards oneness, from shared activities to shared minds to shared bodies, and, certainly, one can lead to the next. However,

reflections of Jesus' prayer to His Father "that they may be one even as we are one" (John 17:22). In heaven is found the communion of saints for eternity; in my mind's eye, hell is always a gathering of lonely individuals.

Significantly for our conversation, Friendship is, in a sense, divisive. If two among a dozen clubbable comrades become friends, their elevated level of connected thought will be distinct from the rest, and they will set aside time and space to pursue their common ideas and interests. This connectedness need not be snobbish or divisive: the friends can easily remain part of larger social group, and, unlike marriage, Friendship is not limited to two. Rare though it may be, three or more might find themselves sharing in this like-mindedness.

This is Friendship before the word's dilution in our time. Aristotle writes that, "Perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good, and alike in virtue; for these wish well alike to each other *qua* good, and they are good in themselves,"<sup>28</sup> noting that such friendship is likely permanent because it sustains the virtue that initiated it—or the evil that brought them together.<sup>29</sup> Far beyond shared activities, it is a

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each kind of love is complete in itself. The golf buddies' clubbable friendship is not deficient because they do not discuss the meaning of life: it is a different relationship to fill a different need. Rare, for instance, is the marriage where husband and wife are like-minded Friends. More likely, they share love, happiness, bodies, and children, but they may well go separate ways for many activities and amiable conversation. The popular idea that husband and wife are to be "best friends" may, over time, place unfair expectations on a marriage. Marriage and Friendship are different. Friendships wax and wane as Friends change over time, and the Lord does not prohibit their end. Meanwhile, marriage is a lifelong institution, no matter how husband and wife inevitably change.

28 Aristotle, *Ethics* 1156a7, quoted in Adler and Van Doren, 238.

29 "Thus the friendship of bad men turns out an evil thing (for because of their instability they unite in bad pursuits, and besides they become evil by becoming like each other), while the friendship of good men is good, being augmented by their companionship..." Aristotle, *Ethics* 1171b33, quoted in Adler and Van Doren, 238.

"consciousness of his friend's being."<sup>30</sup> Aquinas exults that, "among worldly things, there is nothing worthier to be preferred than friendship; for it is friendship which, by bringing virtuous men together as one, preserves and promotes virtue," and "brings the greatest pleasures."<sup>31</sup> Cicero agrees, with the exception that wisdom remains the only superior gift to man, describing friendship as "*a complete accord on all subjects human and divine, joined with mutual good will and affection.*"<sup>32</sup>

Traditionally, virtue and Friendship go hand in hand in the minds of Western thought: shared virtue creates the Friendship, and Friendship then promulgates virtue.<sup>33</sup> As the cycle continues, the friendship will only deepen and strengthen towards a one-mindedness. Eventually, writes

*Proceeding from our  
hearts as we gave affection  
and received it back.*

Montaigne, "The single dominant friendship dissolves all other obligations. The secret I have sworn to reveal to no other man, I can impart

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30 Aristotle, *Ethics* 1171b33, quoted in Adler and Van Doren, 238.

31 Thomas Aquinas, *Political Writings*, ed. R. W. Dyson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 31.

32 Cicero, *Friendship* VI, quoted in Adler and Van Doren, 239.

33 Thus, for instance, Cicero: "the very virtue they talk of is the parent and preserver of friendship, and without it friendship cannot possibly exist" (Cicero, *Friendship* VI, quoted in Adler and Van Doren, 239); and Aquinas: "The happy man needs friends... not, indeed, to make use of them, since he suffices himself, nor to delight in them, since he possesses perfect delight in the operation of virtue, but for the purpose of a good operation, namely, that he may do good to them, that he may delight in seeing them do good, and again that he may be helped by them in his good work" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I–II, 4, 8, quoted in Adler and Van Doren, 240); and again, "First, indeed, it would seem that, among worldly things, there is nothing worthier to be preferred than friendship; for it is friendship which, by bringing virtuous men together as one, preserves and promotes virtue" (Aquinas, *Political Writings*, 31).

without perjury to the one is not another man: he is myself.”<sup>34</sup> Augustine gives this beautiful account of how this friendship appears:

All kinds of things rejoiced my soul in their [my friends’] company – to talk and laugh and do each other kindnesses; read pleasant books together, pass from lightest jesting to talk of the deepest things and back again; differ without rancour, as a man might differ with himself, and when most rarely dissension arose find our normal agreement all the sweeter for it; teach each other or learn from each other; be impatient for the return of the absent, and welcome them with joy on their home-coming; these and such like things, proceeding from our hearts as we gave affection and received it back, and shown by face, by voice, by the eyes, and thousand other pleasing ways, kindled a flame which fused our very souls and of many made us one. This is what men value in friends.<sup>35</sup>

Such Friendship is barely recognized today, and there are plenty of culprits involved in the loss. The pace of modern life discourages the time required for Friends, as those trying to “have it all” inevitably spread themselves thin over too many things. Social media accounts present an unbalanced reality, where influencers post selective aspects of life to manipulate for profit or pity, or where propagandists work to foment the passions of an unthinking mob. Technology seems much more effective at cyberbullying than cyber-friending and at reducing sexual intimacy to lonely pornographic consumption.

Those are merely tools, however, with the simple solution of deleting an app or turning off a screen. A more insidious cause is the coupled

<sup>34</sup> Montaigne, *Essays* 1.28: Of Friendship, quoted in Adler and Van Doren, 240.

<sup>35</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* IV, 8–9, quoted in Adler and Van Doren, 239–40.

influence of feminism and the sexual revolution. Feminism denies sex differences and demands that men and women be integrated in nearly every activity,<sup>36</sup> and any men’s club or activity must be desegregated in the war against sexism. This militant drumbeat denies the evident truth that men and women are different and generally pursue different interests. To place a woman in a group of men, or a man in a circle of women, is to change the nature, conversation, and operation of the group. Every exclusive den of men is popularly seen through a lens that it’s a lair for the suppression of women. A consequence is that, when men no longer talk freely as men, they are denied an avenue for forming Friendships.

The sexual revolution has dealt another tragic blow. Once upon a time, the sight of two males together had little connotation of a sexual relationship because the disgrace of sodomy was so great. Now that same-sex marriage is enshrined in federal law, a sexual relationship

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Friendship, the joining  
of bodies versus minds.*

is perhaps even assumed. Esolen deftly notes, “The stigma against sodomy cleared away ample space for an emotionally powerful friendship that did not involve sexual intercourse, exactly as the stigma against incest allows for the physical and emotional freedom of a family.”<sup>37</sup> Eros is different from Friendship, the joining of bodies versus minds. Thus, the triumphalism of gay pride is not just a perversion of sex, but a perversion of Friendship. If all relationships are supposed erotic, there is no room left

<sup>36</sup> The push for equality is, ironically, not equal across all fields. Feminists vocally call for the increased inclusion of women in STEM vocations, but one rarely hears the call for more female miners or bus drivers.

<sup>37</sup> Anthony Esolen, “A Requiem for Friendship,” *Touchstone* 18, no. 7 (September 2005), <http://touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=18-07-021-f>.



for Friends, and those who do not wish to be considered sodomites will choose loneliness over guilt by association.

Along with these cultural forces is the truth of original sin that man is turned in upon himself. He will be able to find groups with similar interests in activities, but, on this side of heaven, it is nearly inconceivable that one might find more than a handful of Friends so like-minded. If he does, it's likely that their like-mindedness leans to the superficial.

One fragment of Scripture requires special attention for the remainder of this paper, namely John 15:15a: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends." This verse appears to be the basis for those who assert that the pastor should have friends in the congregation because Jesus calls His disciples "friends," but such a blithe contention warrants examination.<sup>38</sup> As we've already noted, "friend" has a wide semantic domain in English. Likewise, Jesus chooses to use φίλους when He calls His disciples "friends," a general term that can mean no more than "a person with whom one associates." That the holy Lord would deign to associate with sinners is not to be discounted, but we cautiously note that Jesus is not declaring the disciples to be like-minded confidants.

The immediate context of John 15:12–17 shapes Jesus' use of the word. The friend of Jesus is the one who does what Jesus commands (15:14). However, this differs from a servant who merely does what he is told. Instead, the friend does these things because of all that Jesus makes known (15:15). Furthermore, what is it that Jesus commands His friends to do? "Love one another as I have loved you" (15:12; cf. 15:17). This love is ἀγάπη, charitable love. From the context, then, Jesus defines "friend" here as one

<sup>38</sup> To bolster the argument, some might also note that Jesus is criticized for being a "friend of tax collectors and sinners" in Matt. 11:19.

who keeps Jesus' commands because he knows he is redeemed and loved by God. In other words, it is a synonym for the Christian who responds to the gospel with good works.

This is a different definition than the popular notion of friendship today. The Lord is not proposing that he would be a good fourth for a round of golf but declaring that we are not merely his slaves and no longer his enemies. It is not a friendship sustained by common interests or like-mindedness but by his grace and compassion for sinners. Far from reciprocal, this friendship begins because he chooses us, and it is sustained because he gives to us (15:16). In these respects, this friendship is unlike casual friendships among people, as Luther notes:

Therefore Christ declares here: "You are My friends if you do what I command you. Formerly you were enemies, but now you are friends because I regard you as friends. This is not because you are doing Me many favors; that is what the world calls friendship. No, I am doing nothing but good for you. I die for friends who never did any good for Me; I die for them just because I love them and have made them My friends. To summarize, you did not make yourselves My friends; but you became My friends through Me. Before this you were enemies and the devil's friends by nature. Now you shall be and remain My friends if only you keep this one commandment for My sake and for your own good."<sup>39</sup>

This is not to denigrate casual friendship, but to say that Jesus is speaking of something else. It is hardly a text to argue that the pastor should *carte blanche* have friends in the congregation, and this is doubly true when those making the argument are warning against the aloof pastor

<sup>39</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vol. 24, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1999), 254–55.

who appears holier-than-thou. Just imagine the effect of a pastor saying to parishioners, “I choose you to be my friend, as long as you do what I say”!

### **Toward an Answer: Considerations**

We return to the initial question, “May a pastor have friends within the congregation?” With this, we remember the common bloggers’ opinion that the pastor should have many friends, if not be friend to all, in the congregation, and we remember the counsel of Loche et al. that the pastor should be most cautious in doing so. Advocates of the former are concerned about a pastor appearing distant and aloof, while supporters of the latter are concerned about a

*Whoever cannot be  
alone should beware  
of community.*

pastor who is chummy at the expense of the pastoral office. Answers vary in part because of the disagreements on the pastoral office and the definition of friendship. Once definitions are settled, the answer will still vary because every pastor and congregation are different.

In fact, an important caveat is necessary here. Though making a different point, Bonhoeffer wisely notes in *Life Together* that, “Whoever cannot be alone should beware of community,” and, “Whoever cannot stand community should beware of being alone.”<sup>40</sup> Pastors do well to know their own predilections and personalities before continuing. Introverts will be tempted to justify avoiding social contact simply because they are introverts, and extroverts will be tempted to socialize freely simply because they are extroverts. This makes answering our question more complex and sensitive than

<sup>40</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, transl. James H. Burtness (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), p. 82, Kindle.

one might first assume, because it is not just about the pastor’s actions, but the pastor’s *person*. Knowing himself, his strengths and weaknesses, each pastor must be sure that he properly disciplines his personal preferences in service to the office he is given.

Again, this will differ in each situation, and none should be quick to judge. Discussions of appropriate levels of friendships for clergy seem quickly to devolve into the strawmen of the severe minister who refuses to smile on the one hand and the beer-buzzed deacon endeavoring to tell the most ribald joke at the party on the other. Such characterizations aren’t helpful. I think that all can agree that the office of pastor is usually a solitary position, that “solitary” can quickly translate into “lonely,” and that lonely men make poor choices that may lead them to further isolation that prevents them from their duties or even render them ineligible for the office. Likewise, I think that all can agree that a pastor should set an example of faith and life for the congregation (1 Tim. 3:1–13), which means that he is to be different than those around him. A burdened parishioner in need of pastoral care is not likely to approach a pastor if the latter is “just one of the guys”: such a pastor might enjoy popularity with many but may miss caring for sheep most in need. Friendship might lead a pastor to compromise or provide an opportunity to give needed counsel. Clearly, there’s a balance to be found.

That said, I propose the rather obvious solution that a man who holds the Office of the Holy Ministry should be a friendly pastor.

The pastor is set apart by call and ordination to dispense the gifts of God. This statement in no way denies or denigrates the “royal priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:9), who are always given to “proclaim the excellencies of Him who called [us] out of darkness into His marvelous light.” The Lutheran Confessions clearly echo Scripture in acknowledging the Office of the Holy Ministry. Furthermore, people naturally consider the

pastor as set apart to go about the Lord's work. They regard the pastor as totemic and hold him to a higher standard. Like it or not, people expect a representation of God when they encounter a pastor. Oden writes,

Some parishioners would sooner die than utter a four-letter word in the presence of the pastor, yet in the locker room there seems to be no such inhibition. There is a social meaning in this special treatment of ministers, however quaint, that should not be too quickly debunked. One reason for this curious behavior is that people expect ministry to exemplify the life to which Christian preaching witnesses. There rightly should be some tension between the morality of the minister and herd morality, just as there rightly should be some difference between the Christian layperson and the moral common denominator in society—but one hopes not at the cost of withdrawal from the ordinary world.<sup>41</sup>

A shepherd is distinct from the flock, and an overseer is different from the overseen. There is much carried by the words that the pastor stands “in the stead and by the command of Christ.”

Loeche is quite right when he advises caution regarding friendship with parishioners, on the

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41 Oden, 202. Anecdotal evidence abounds from experience in a parish. Sometimes it is in the form of virtue; strangers and parishioners both will humorously joke that the pastor has “a direct line to God” or earnestly ask the pastor to pray for the same reason. Tragically this is exhibited in the pastor's sins: a pastor's infidelity will decimate a congregation far more than a congregational leader's, and a pastor's suicide may be followed by suicides of parishioners—not because they grieve the pastor, but that they infer that the pastor's action signified God's permission for self-destruction. Finally, I'm reminded of parishioners who transferred into our congregation but were unnaturally aloof towards me. A mutual acquaintance explained, “At their last parish, they were very good friends with the pastor, and they saw how sinfully human he was.” She added something profound, “Pastor, people don't want to know you; *they only want to think they know you.*”

grounds that the overseer needs distance for proper vision and in order to guard against the appearance of favoritism. In the present day, a further caution is necessary: the pastor is sometimes encouraged to be the friend of all so as to convey that he does not hold a distinct office in the Church. In this case, friendship is misused to diminish the Office of the Holy Ministry.

This does not mean that the pastor is unfriendly or aloof. After all, he stands in the stead and by the command of the Servant of all, and so he exercises his office by serving the congregation. Part of this service, however, may mean sacrificing social opportunities for the good of the congregation. This also does not mean that the pastor is unfriendly as he honors the office he holds. Unless he is suffering great affliction or persecution, it is difficult to imagine why one who delivers God's gifts of grace and life would not be cheerful and friendly to others. This is not the necessarily the same as extroverted joy. Many pastors are introverts, and, though they eschew gladhanding and socializing, they still go about their tasks faithfully and in a quietly friendly way.<sup>42</sup>

Recall Oden's two ditches of modern reductionism and archaic triumphalism. The friendly pastor stays out of both ditches, acting graciously but honoring the office. In this respect, he is like the friendly surgeon: I appreciate the cheerful mien, but his surgical skill remains far more important, and I do not mind that he doesn't invite me over for dinner. Oden expresses the reservation that the pastor as “friend to all” strays into modern reductionism, seeing the friendship as purely human rather than “through the lens of divine-human friendship.”<sup>43</sup> By way of example, the friendly

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42 For an excellent study of pastoral care by introverts, see Brady Finner, “Pastoral Care and the Introvert,” in *Take Courage: Essays in Honor of Harold L. Senkbeil*, eds. Timothy J. Pauls and Mark A. Pierson (Irvine, CA: New Reformation Publications: 2016), 269–87.

43 Oden, 55.

pastor remembers his office when visiting the homes of parishioners: “Visitation runs the dual risk of either turning in the direction of an overbearing inquisition or reducing itself to an awkward routine of social trivia.”<sup>44</sup> In the best practice, the pastor uses conversation to learn about the household situation and then applies God’s Word to it through counsel, blessing, and prayer.

In the sense that the pastor is friendly to parishioners, one can say that parishioners are his friends, but this is friendship in its very broad definition of proximity, along the lines of a friend as “one who is nearby.” Can a pastor have acquaintances or neighbors in the congregation? Certainly, and the broad semantic domain of “friend” permits us to call such “friends.” If we are speaking of classical Friendship as defined by Lewis, however, it is impossible for the pastor to be a Friend to all in the congregation because, by definition, that Friendship sets Friends apart from rest of the community. Furthermore, the pastor would simply not have time to cultivate the depth of like-mindedness that true Friendship requires across a congregation of any size. Anyone who has many friends may very well have no Friend. Indeed, the one who insists that the pastor should be Friend to all understands neither the office of pastor nor the nature of Friend.

The proximity level of friendship is a low bar. A pastor will know his parishioners at least as well as the grocery store clerk, who also qualifies as a friend by virtue of vicinity. As the depth of friendship increases, however, the question becomes more complex.

Can a pastor have friends of the “clubbable” sort in the congregation—might he join parishioners for a round of golf or a pint of beer? Many factors are involved here. One is the state of the congregation. If the congregation is divided into factions, the pastor dares not give the

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44 Oden, 178.

appearance of partiality or favoritism. Another is the footsteps that the pastor fills. If his predecessor played favorites, his teeth might be set on edge by those sour grapes for some time to come. Still another is the pastor’s tenure. A newly arrived pastor can create factions simply by befriending some over others soon after arriving, and one should not forget Loehe’s counsel that those who are eager to befriend a new pastor are often seeking an advantage and working an agenda.<sup>45</sup> As time goes on and the pastor proves a faithful servant, this too matters less. Parishioners will be less concerned with

### *The discovery of a Friend is a precious gift.*

whom the pastor sits at the potluck if they know he sits at their bedside in the hospital. With wisdom and discretion, then, it is possible for a pastor to have clubbable friends—to socialize with members—within a congregation if he can do so without compromising his call to be their pastor.

May a pastor have a Friend within the congregation? This paper offers a cautious nod to the possibility. While golf-partners and drinking buddies are relatively easy to encounter, the discovery of a Friend is a precious gift, especially for one who lives the life of a set-apart and solitary parish pastor. Furthermore, Friendship is like-minded, and so such a Friend will support the pastor’s role in the office of the Holy Ministry, both out of Friendship and in subordination to the Lord’s Word. With such a Friendship, the congregation may not cry favoritism because no such appearance is present.

In nearly three decades of pastoral care, I’ve

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45 Certain demographics, notably single lonely men, will seek friendship with a pastor throughout their ministry. These invitations may prove to be opportunities for pastoral care, but they are usually not a respite for the minister.

encountered a handful of potential Friends. While it may sound strange at first, my personal question for analyzing “Friend potential” has been, “If, as pastor, I am compelled by the Word of God to excommunicate their child, what is the probability that they will support me in that decision?” My reasoning for this examination question is this: if there is a relationship dearer to a man than Friendship, it is his love for his family. If his doctrine, faith, and character are such that he would support church discipline for the good of his errant child, then enough like-mindedness exists that Friendship might be possible. If they are not, then the potential harm to the congregation isn’t worth pursuing the Friendship. If the candidate passes that test, I candidly tell him early on to pray that the Friendship not harm pastoral care later on, because humanly I may be more reluctant to admonish Friends if necessary. (In practice so far, the level of trust has enabled me to give difficult counsel and still preserve Friendship, but it has placed me in some awkward situations as well.. If he understands and is agreeable, the Friendship may develop from there.

There is another potential harm for anyone a pastor befriends. A like-minded Friend will say like-minded things. In a world opposed to truth and all of God’s gifts, such a Friend may well come under fire. When the pastor defends him, opponents may find it easy to dismiss the defense on the grounds that he is merely sticking up for his friend. In that respect, the friendship diminishes the pastor’s authority to defend truth.

### **Striking a Balance**

In the hurly burly of parish life, maintaining proper levels of friendliness will be an ongoing task for pastors, and some examination may well lead each man to conclude that there’s room for improvement.

Loneliness is epidemic among clergy today. Many pastors will find themselves lacking

in friends and Friends, and they should be aware that loneliness increases the likelihood of mental health issues (notably depression) and temptation (use of pornography, abuse of alcohol, etc.). Other pastors are quite content to be alone in their introversion, though this might still be harmful to their care of the flock if it leads to neglect. Improving one’s friendliness begins with the individual. The first stop for the pastor who leans toward solitude is best a trusted colleague, preferably a father-confessor. Together they can explore his reasoning for solitude, his understanding of the doctrine of the office, behaviors that make friendships challenging, and sins that claw at his faith, life, and office. If depression is involved, some hours with a trusted therapist might be the next stop. With the counsel of others or on his own, the pastor should assess his interaction with the congregation and make sure he communicates his availability and willingness to visit with parishioners about the care of their souls. He does well to set goals for visiting households in the congregation with an outline for pastoral care to make good use of the time.

As far as friendships go, peers often make the most understanding friends, and so other nearby clergy may be a solution. Local groups of hobbyists, readers, etc., with common interests may be another. As far as Friends go, those cannot be sought out but are only unintentionally encountered. In the meantime, it’s vital that he continue to commend himself to the Lord in prayer, trusting that he will provide.

For the pastor who has become too friendly with parishioners, the first stop is once again a trusted colleague and father-confessor. Together they can explore and discuss his theology and behaviors to see whether they are indeed inhibiting pastoral care. Walking back friendships for the sake of the office is not an easy task. The most promising solution is patient catechesis: the pastor gently and slowly teaches friends in the congregation until they

better understand that he stands in the stead and by the command of Christ. The more a friend (or Friend) understands sin, grace, and the pastoral office, the more he will want to support the steward of the mysteries of God.

### **The Pastor as [Friendly] Father**

I have tagged this essay as Part 4 in a series called, “The Congregation as Family,” a collection in which I have presented a scriptural argument and application that the congregation is in fact the family of God and should be treated

*The pastor is the surrogate father of the congregation.*

as such.<sup>46</sup> I’ve not referenced that theme up to now in this paper, but here’s where it ties in.

In the stead and by the command of Christ, the pastor is the surrogate father of the congregation.

I’m a father of two sons, both of whom are now married. I’m thankful that, despite all sorts of troubles, vagaries of life, and attacks by the devil, we get along very well and always have. When they were children, we rough-housed and played. When they were older, we went on hikes and trips and had lengthy conversations. When they turned 21, we put out extra tumblers for the evening cocktail. Many times, my sons have helped me with various projects. In other words, we’ve done a lot of things together that friends do together, and, in many ways, our relationship is blessed with the attributes of Friendship. Yet, my sons have never called me “friend.” They call me their father. In part, that’s simply how they’ve always known me. In part, it’s because, according to the fourth commandment, God has given me a position of authority over them. I’m

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46 See Timothy J. Pauls, “The Congregation as Family,” *SEELSORGER* 3 (2017): 5–23; “The Congregation as Family, Part 2: Form and Commission,” *SEELSORGER* 4 (2018): 132–49; and “The Congregation as Family, Part 3: The Family as Congregation” *SEELSORGER* 6 (2021): 27–46.

a friendly father, at least most of the time, but “father” trumps “friend.” Anyone who knows a family where the parents have tried to be friends—more than parents—to their children knows it doesn’t work out well. “Father” trumps “friend” in God’s order of creation. Always.

It is the same within the congregation, where the pastor stands in the stead of “Our *Father* who art in heaven.” In fact, while I am far from advocating for the change, I am sympathetic to use of “Father” instead of “Pastor” as a title for the preacher.<sup>47</sup> As the one who cares for the Lord’s children, he should be friendly. Recall once again Loehe’s words, “All personal love should be poured into your official coming,” and “Conduct yourself in such a way that everybody can believe in your love.”<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, the office of pastor trumps the calling of friend, and in his next breath Loehe says that pastor must maintain the “dignity of a shepherd.”<sup>49</sup> If the pastor fails to find the proper balance, he will neglect his parenting duties, and it will do damage to the congregation, the family of God, in that place that the Lord has put under his care. Furthermore, the pastor who tries to be friend to all will find that superficial level of friendship to be unreliable when “friends” are pressured by family and other persuasive individuals to

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47 The use of “Father” as a title for clergy within Lutheran circles can be controversial. On the one hand, there are those who cite Matt. 23:9, “And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven.” This should be understood as akin to the first commandment, to the effect that one should not invoke any man as an equal to God in heaven. Both Jesus and St. Paul refer to Abraham as a father of believers (Luke 16:24; Rom. 4:11, 16), and St. Paul considers himself a father to Timothy (Phil. 2:22) and to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:15). Were it wrong to refer to anyone as father, pastors would be busy correcting children in their congregations. On the other hand, there have been some who have created tension by popularizing “Father” rather than “Pastor,” apparently an affectation to reflect similarities to Roman nomenclature and to distance themselves from the Protestant/Evangelical terminology free-for-all. With many other hills on which to die, I’m quite happy to go by “Pastor,” though I don’t correct the occasional individual who addresses me as “Father.”

48 Loehe, 41.

49 Loehe, 41.

advocate unsound doctrine and practice.<sup>50</sup>

This is not an easy balance to achieve or tension to resolve. The office of pastor is, by definition, a solitary one in the congregation, and I write this in a part of the country where Lutherans are few and far between. Yet Loehe's passionate words should not be dismissed when he writes, "You are as human as others, you need personal love and you will find it, be sure of that."<sup>51</sup> Proverbs reminds us that "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (18:24), and it is God who provides daily bread, companions included.



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<sup>50</sup> When a petition was circulated calling for my removal at my first parish, those with whom my wife and I socialized most were the first to sign. Whatever "friendship" we shared was inferior to their ideas for the direction of the congregation and perhaps their desire to appease those who most wanted my removal.

<sup>51</sup> Loehe, 41.