

## Review: *Why Can't We Be Friends*, by Aimee Byrd

By Mike Myers

In 2018 P&R Publishing released Aimee Byrd's fourth book *Why Can't We Be Friends? Avoidance is Not Purity* (*Friends* hereafter). Here is a basic overview of the major points of the book.

**Purpose:** Mrs. Byrd clearly stated her purpose: "I wrote this book because I want us to be biblically faithful in a very important area: our relationships" (*Friends*, 13).

**Goal:** Her aim was to assist her readers "toward holy, joyful living that glorifies God" (*Friends*, 16). Additionally, as the title communicates, she also wrote this book with a polemical edge, something entirely legitimate in itself. The early pages describe the object she had in mind. After some years of working as a host on *Mortification of Spin* with Dr. Carl Trueman and Rev. Todd Pruitt, she received some pushback. "The underlying message was that we shouldn't model this coed dynamic to the church. Even if our relationships and interactions were godly, coed friendship is not something everyone can handle. Don't try this at home" (*Friends*, 7-8).

**Thesis:** "There is no need for friendship between the sexes to be a controversial topic. Instead it should be one that glorifies our truest friend and Elder Brother, Jesus Christ" (*Friends*, 18).

Part 1 of the book examines what Mrs. Byrd suggests are challenges to friendships between men and women, while Part 2 focuses on practical aspects of living as "sacred siblings." Just like my reviews of *No Little Women*, I will offer my commendations and critiques while considering the book more thematically.

### Valid Points from *Why Can't We Be Friends*

**The Need for a Biblical Perspective and Approach to Friendship:** One strength of this book is how Mrs. Byrd insightfully describes our society's lamentable habit of cheapening and depersonalizing friendship:

Friendship has become both marketable and disposable. To increase sales, businesses target not only each of us ourselves but also the 'friends' in our social media networks. And just look at how many we have! We've built empires of friends, which are all subject to our own customizing...Social media presents a platform for networking and being friendly, but it is so disembodied that it easily feeds our propensity to isolate ourselves (*Friends*, 95-96).

I could not agree more with these observations. The conclusion of the book summarizes these emphases well: "The church should be the very place where the world sees genuine friendship, no matter what sex you are" (*Friends*, 232). That last phrase leads me to the next important emphasis of this book.

**Meaningful Relationships between Men and Women:** Mrs. Byrd's states her desire for wholesome, edifying, Triune-God glorifying relationships within the church (*Friends*, 231-233). I agree with this principle, though it certainly needs qualification. By far and away, my most treasured human relationship is with my wife. Our relationship is profoundly exclusive in very necessary ways. However, it is not unduly restrictive. That is to say, the marital relationship Katy and I enjoy does not preclude our enjoying legitimate Christian communion with other brothers and sisters in the Lord. As a pastor I spend a great deal of time interacting with men, women, boys, and girls, all within biblical bounds of propriety. It would be a great detriment—and

dereliction—in my ministry and life if I avoided godly interaction with women as if they were merely potential threats to my marriage (I will qualify this in the next paragraph). If the interactions that Christian men have with other Christian sisters are stilted and awkward simply because of fear of sexual sin, this is a problem. If it is driven by an unbiblical chauvinism, this too is a problem. My most charitable reading of this book leads me to conclude that this is a particular issue Mrs. Byrd sought to address, and rightly so.

**Awkward, Reformed Men:** I have been a minister in the OPC for nearly eight years and around the Reformed church for most of my life. If you have similar exposure to this part of Christ’s Church, you should know that the Reformed world tends to attract some very strange and even socially awkward personalities. On the one hand, this should not surprise anyone, since Paul wrote that the Church of Christ consists largely of the world’s rejects (1 Corinthians 1:26-29). On the other hand, awkwardness and needless austerity need not accompany true godliness. Men must not treat women in a curt, dismissive, or coldly distant manner to remain pure. Additionally, ministers and elders must forge and maintain relationships conducive to effective spiritual oversight of the women in their churches, including single women. These relationships must be personal (as opposed to impersonal) but not private; appropriately affectionate but not recklessly intimate; loving but not inappropriate (see *Friends*, 67, fn8). In my judgment Mrs. Byrd articulated this observation more effectively in her third book *No Little Women*:

But let me write to you as a woman who loves the church and who has been in a faithful marriage for nineteen years. Sometimes women can get the message that their sexuality makes them some sort of disease to be avoided by good men in the church. And so sometimes it seems that the worse of two evils is picked. In order to protect themselves from the temptation or appearance of sexual impropriety, many pastors and elders keep their relationships with all women at acquaintance levels. While it is loving to have boundaries in place, you don't want to miss out on good friendships. And we can build healthy friendships within appropriate boundaries that are proper for married people. Our pastors and elders have the opportunity to model what we are being prepared for as brothers and sisters serving together in the new heavens and the new earth. We need to learn more than what *not* to do. We need to learn what *to* do—not only in our marriages, but in our friendships as well. As a matter of fact, that's what all of God's people should be learning well, from the children to the youth group and all the way up to the seniors. Then we can better serve together in carrying out and passing on our household mission with joy (*NLW*, 84-85).

Friendship is important, and readers ought to take these helpful themes to heart. Yet what Mrs. Byrd wrote above is significantly different than this statement:

But we need to be careful not to mistake the intimacy of fellowship with romantic sexuality. When we sit with our brothers and sisters in Christ for a meal, we rehearse for our eternal life in the new heavens and the new earth. Having lunch shouldn't feel like a challenge to marital fidelity. Eating together is a platonic practice intended to bring joy to our friendships. Table talk is not the same as pillow talk, so let's not treat it that way (*Friends*, 191).

As I will discuss below, I believe that Mrs. Byrd’s manner of argumentation, along with some other flaws, detracted from what could have been a more helpful book.

### **Some Criticisms of *Why Can't We Be Friends?***

**Heavy on Assertion, Light on Demonstration:** Throughout the book Mrs. Byrd regularly employs the first-person plural pronouns (we/us) while making broad and sweeping assertions that remain largely unsubstantiated. Here are several examples:

“Friendship between men and women is a taboo topic in the evangelical subculture. It makes us uncomfortable” (*Friends*, 33).

“We associate all intimacy with the bedroom, so we expect every meaningful interaction between a man and a woman to be laden with repressed sexual desire” (*Friends*, 35-36).

“Many of us have been shaped by the purity movement... We have a false notion of what purity is and how it functions. Otherwise sensible men and women are afraid of one another. Our ‘purity’ is our orthodoxy” (*Friends*, 64).

“From what I’ve said, friendship sounds great! So why are we so cautious about it?” (*Friends*, 103).

“Yet we still struggle with this [sharing a table] over two thousand years later. We use the table to distance ourselves from those who may harm our reputation, whether they are members of the other sex or unbelievers who aren’t as polished as we are” (*Friends*, 194).

Who is the ‘we’ and ‘us’? Where, beyond anecdote, is any actual demonstration that these claims are universally, or even widely, accurate? Do *some* people have false notions of purity? Of course. Do some people struggle with table fellowship? Certainly. However, these sweeping generalizations give the impression that Mrs. Byrd’s subjective experience or opinion is normative for wide swaths of evangelicalism. Even *if* that were the case, it still requires actual and careful demonstration. If my five examples above are indicative of the whole (and I believe they are), the book is full of unsupported dogmatic assertions that undermine its credibility.

**Method of Argumentation:** From the very title of this book, Mrs. Byrd creates a [fertile fallacy](#): “a statement or idea that on the surface may seem to be true because of a spurious accusation or because of inherent biases of the receiver.” Whether intentional or not, the very title “Why Can’t We Be Friends?” manufactures a tension. If one reads the table of contents with the title in mind, you will find precisely what I mean. Part 1 of the book is called “Why Can’t Men and Women Be Friends.” The statements that follow demonstrate that in asking this question, she is also begging the question. If Mrs. Byrd and her editors had reversed Parts 1 and 2, I wonder if it would have helped her case. Instead of creating objections and then looking for answers, she could have positively presented a theology of friendship and then discussed various obstacles or hindrances that exist in the church. While I suppose this is part of the polemic flavor of the book, I do not think this method served her well.

Throughout the book Mrs. Byrd also frequently engaged in what I eventually labeled “Strawman Dialectic.” In *A Rulebook for Arguments*, Anthony Weston defines strawman as “a caricature of an opposing view, exaggerated from what anyone is likely to hold, so that it is easy to refute” (4th ed, 79). A dialectic is a form of reasoning that reaches its conclusion (synthesis) through the interaction of opposing principles (thesis/antithesis). In the *strawman dialectic*, one or both principles are caricatures, and the conclusion is used to further the argument.<sup>1</sup> Allow me to provide two just two examples.

In chapter six, *We’ve Forgotten What Friendship Really Is*, Mrs. Byrd interacted with a commenter on one of her blogs. The comment addressed possible negative implications of a widely known Christian man being alone with a woman who is not his wife. She wrote,

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<sup>1</sup> At its very core, a dialectical method of reasoning is unbiblical. The way believers ought to obtain knowledge is not through synthesizing concepts or contradictions, but ultimately by exegeting Scripture. While there is interaction with Scripture in *Friends*, I found most of the exegesis poor.

This attitude treats women the same way that the religious characters treated the dying man in the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37, in their efforts not to get polluted by him. Harsh boundaries pretend that 'fornication is like the flu, and you accidentally catch it if you happen to be close to a woman.' Or maybe the Christian's reputation or image is polluted. Either way, Jesus calls us to be like the Samaritan, who cared for another human being in need (*Friends*, 105, she cites [Sam Powell](#), which is in apostrophes above).

Mrs. Byrd concludes, "But too often in an effort to maintain a pristine reputation, not only are some church leaders impoverishing themselves of genuine friendship, they are also impoverishing the church with their leadership models" (*Friends*, 105). Note the caricature here. Her argument from pages 103-105 begins with a hypothetical, publicly known Christian man's declining to appear in public alone with a woman. This she compares with self-righteous religious elites avoiding a dying person on the side of the road (Luke 10:25-37). A pastor's declining to have a one-on-one discussion over coffee with a Christian sister is hardly the same as leaving her to die on a sidewalk. In fact, avoidance of potential public misunderstanding is both pure and prudent. Reputation and public witness matters (Prov. 22:1, 1 Tim. 3:7, 1 Pet. 2:11-12).

My second example appears later in the book, where Mrs. Byrd returns to her Harry Burns metaphor:

For Billy Crystal's character, Harry Burns, and for many in the church, the 'sex part' gets in the way of friendship between men and women. There are important differences between the two views, of course. Burns teaches that a woman can *never* really have guy friends. The Christian equivalent suggests that men should avoid women as threats to marriage, purity, and the reputations of godly leaders. Sure, women are okay as acquaintances in social settings, but friendship is too far (*Friends*, 214-215)

Here are the elements of the strawman dialectic: either we have a Harry Burns mentality, or we have the Christian version, where men think friendship with women is too far. Her synthesis continues her argument that avoidance is not purity, which is the subtitle of the book. I would argue that while purity is not obtained merely by avoidance, avoidance is often necessary to maintain purity, as would Joseph (Gen. 39:12), Solomon (Prov. 7:25), and Paul (2 Tim. 2:22).

I must comment that the frequent allusion to the movie *When Harry Met Sally* was probably the worst element in this book. I have not watched this movie, nor will I, but I did read a summary in order to understand Mrs. Byrd's reasoning. What I found appalled me. This movie is perverse, blasphemous, and unfit for Christian consumption, not to mention as a working metaphor in a book published by P&R. Additionally, one thing glaringly omitted from *Why Can't We Be Friends* is that Harry Burns and Sally do in fact end up fornicating.

**Naïve anthropology:** My final, and in my view most substantial, critique of Mrs. Byrd's fourth book is that it demonstrates a dangerously naïve view of sin. Despite occasionally speaking about the topic, the author simply does not give due weight to the seriousness of sin and power of temptation. For example, in the section *Purifying Generosity*, Mrs. Byrd acknowledges "the flesh is still weak, even for brothers and sisters in Christ, and we need to address that. But the answer is not to remain weak" (*Friends*, 70). This is true enough in itself, but she continues later, "we are called to purify ourselves. What does that mean? We cannot do this without Christ, who is our purity. But what does *that* mean? It means that we don't purify ourselves through abstinence. We purify ourselves by fixing our hope on Jesus Christ" (*Friends*, 71). While this comment emphasizes justification, it is sorely deficient in its doctrine of sanctification. Legal righteousness does not remove the obligation to pursue living holiness. Later in this section, Mrs. Byrd quotes 1 Cor. 6:19-20, observing that "God has given the Holy Spirit to dwell within us—

to tabernacle with us. Now that is holiness and purity” (*Friends*, 72). I find it remarkable that she skips over 1 Cor. 6:18, which says, “Flee sexual immorality.”

Indisputably, Paul commands purity in relationships between men and women (1 Tim. 5:2). Mrs. Byrd concludes, “We know how to do this! We know how to promote holiness in brother-sister relationships” (*Friends*, 67). With the widespread endemic of pornography in the church, weak preaching, shoddy discipline, high rates of divorce, fornication, and adultery among professing Christians, perhaps some do not know “how to do this” as well as Mrs. Byrd claims. She continues on the next page, “it seems strange that we have also overly sexualized the concept of purity” (*Friends*, 68). While that may be true, I am afraid that Mrs. Byrd is in danger of *de-sexualizing* purity.

I would instead commend the advice from John Owen. In his treatise *On Spiritual Mindedness*, he wrote, “We are all of us liable to temptations. Those who are not sensible of it are under the power of what the temptation leads unto” (*Works: Volume 7*, 315). This does not mean we live lives limping along, devoid of the power of godliness. Far from it. We must, however, give due weight to the remaining corruption of sin (Rom. 7:18). This reality requires wisdom and humility in our pursuit of the Savior who died for sinners (Heb. 12:1-3), and holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb 12:14).

While I can understand how this book resonated with some within the Reformed community, I think its faults far outweigh its strengths. Additionally, this book documents at least the beginnings of two important themes. In addition to having poorly represented sources of conservatives with whom she disagrees, (see [review 3, part 1](#)), in this book she begins relying more heavily upon sources from outside the Presbyterian and Reformed stream. Although not necessarily a problem in itself, she does not critique these perspectives, but utilizes them to develop her argument. For example, she provides a summary of [Cynthia Westfall](#), who argues that Paul describes husbands performing ‘women’s work’ while smashing ‘unnecessary cultural stereotypes’ (*Friends*, 38-44, see this [review](#)). She also positively lifts from [Michelle Lee-Barnwell](#) and her problematic redefinition of headship and authority (*Friends*, 149-151). In the latter example, Mrs. Byrd introduces the second theme, one she will more fully develop in her fifth book *Recovering From Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. Not only will she demonstrate a wider use of and dependence upon critical/liberal scholars, she also begins to take aim at the dynamics of authority within the church. My concern for Mrs. Byrd and her readers is that her trajectory is moving away from sound orthodoxy and into the applied post-modernism prevalent in our day.