

## Can Women and Men Be "Just Friends"?

*Yes . . . and no. Here's why.*

Holly G. Miller – "Today's Christian Woman"

We were playing one of those ice-breaker games, trying to guess each other's identity from answers we'd scribbled on a get-acquainted questionnaire. "This person's idea of a super Saturday is to browse through flea markets," teased the leader of our singles class. I perked up—another yard-sale junkie?—and prepared to propose a shopping spree as soon as her name was revealed. I was new to the church, eager to make friends, and willing to take the initiative. But I never issued my invitation because she turned out to be a he, and that changed everything. I worried that he'd confuse my friendly gesture with a romantic overture, feel obligated to pick up the tab for lunch, or feel pressured to suggest a follow-up date. Our difference in gender, unknown and unimportant a moment ago, suddenly overshadowed our similarity of interest.

Face it: Most of us were never taught how to be friends with the opposite sex. Growing up, we got lots of advice about what to do—and *not* do—with boyfriends. But what about friends who were boys? We were raised to assume that guys and girls who were emotionally attached were also romantically linked. A mixed friendship was one step away from romance, and that step could go in a couple directions. A friendship might be a warm up to a romance or a cool down from a crush. Friendship for mere friendship's sake was rare. Until now.

"Dating is less the norm than it used to be," explains Leslie Parrott, who directs the Center for Relationship Development with her husband, Les, at Seattle Pacific University. "Friendships are the way young people build community on campuses." Short-term relationships—Parrott calls them "ad hoc friendships"—are another trend. A man and woman may become good friends for the duration of a Bible study series, aerobics course, or scuba lessons. Then, after the group disbands, the friendship ends. The couple splits and each moves on to pursue new interests and make new friends. Although their relationship wasn't destined to last a lifetime or evolve into a romance, they're generally better off for having had it.

"We'd miss a lot if we didn't have cross-gender friendships," says Jim Furrow, professor of marriage and family at Fuller Seminary in California. "These friendships can help us understand God more completely because we see the complementary nature of the way we were created as his children and the way we bear out his image as men and women." These benefits don't end when we marry. "Some people believe that avoiding opposite-sex friendships is the best line of defense against any kind of moral transgression," says Furrow. "The problem with that strategy is that it's impossible to maintain. We do interact with the opposite sex at work, at church, in school, and in our neighborhoods. Cross-gender friendships are inevitable."

And so are the risks. Friendships are based on attraction, after all, and attraction can lead to romance. However, just as people choose to take the "next step" and know precisely when they take it, so too can they choose to remain "just friends" instead. The secret is in setting limitations and sticking to them. To help you reap the rewards and avoid the risks of cross-gender relationships, whether you're single or married, experts offer these pointers.

**Set your boundaries early.** It's noon. You've been working all morning with the guys in the office, and now they're suggesting lunch. Whether or not you say "yes" should depend on the boundaries you've set well in advance. Some women decline all invitations to do lunch with male coworkers because they believe a change in environment also signals a switch in mood. The backdrop is no longer professional, it's social. Other women will go along with the group only if the gathering is large and includes several women. Still others may agree to a one-on-one lunch as long as it's a business lunch or dutch treat. To allow a male companion to pick up the tab seems too much like a date.

Boundaries, like ethics, are personal, yet they affect those with whom you interact. The key is to let the Bible be your guide and not be influenced by others who may have set different limitations. The time to plan your answers is before the questions come.

**Avoid relational triangles.** One temptation occurs when a married woman shares with a platonic male friend the problems in her love life, or vice versa, in the hope that the friend can supply insights from the opposite-sex viewpoint. This kind of exclusive emotional intimacy can be as threatening to marriage as physical intimacy. Personal issues are best settled by the husband and wife with the possible help of a pastoral counselor.

A more positive type of cross-gender friendship that supports rather than tears down a marriage is a mentoring arrangement. This involves two married couples and is endorsed by Leslie and Les Parrott. "We like the idea of friendships built across the generations," says Leslie. "We think that couples who enjoy healthy and well-established relationships can serve as role models and strengthen the relationship between a young husband and wife in the first years of marriage."

**Watch for clues.** Friendships change, and we need to be constantly adjusting our boundaries to either curb or encourage the changes. Sometimes the move from friendship to romance is welcomed, sometimes it isn't. "I've collected dozens of accounts from people who have recently fallen in love," says Arthur Aron, a psychology professor and researcher at State University of New York at Stony Brook. "Typically, their story goes like this: 'I sort of knew this person but didn't think much about him until I ran into him at the store; he smiled at me, and I suddenly realized that he liked me. It was at that moment I ...'"

It is at that moment that a woman has to decide how she will adjust the boundaries of their friendship to accommodate the change. Here, the keys are her feelings and her status. If married, she will be courteous but cool; if single and interested, she may pause to talk.

**Celebrate your differences.** Experts used to say that a friendship between a married man and woman should always include the spouses. The problem with that advice is that spouses don't always share the interest that's the basis of the duo's friendship. Two coworkers may be capable of spending hours in animated shop talk, but when their mates join the mix, the conversation slows to a crawl. As a foursome, they have little in common.

One of the advantages of male-female friendships is that they can reduce the expectations we place on our spouse. For example, I may not like to tinker with computers, but that doesn't mean my husband should be deprived of his favorite

pastime. A neighborhood users group that includes men and women can keep *him* online and *me* off the hook.

**Be aware of the impression you're making.** Regardless of the innocence of your male-female friendship, people can get the wrong idea if you and your pal spend too much time together, are exclusive of others, or are seen in strange places at odd hours. Sharing a soft drink during your break at the office is one thing, dawdling over a cup of coffee after hours is another. Carpooling in the morning may make sense, taking the scenic route home is nonsense. First Thessalonians 5:22 says, "Abstain from all appearance of evil" (KJV). Be aware of the messages you're sending: They may be difficult to retrieve.

**Ask yourself: Is God in this relationship?** I've always believed that the Lord brings people into our life for special reasons. Maybe we need someone to ease our burden at work, share a hobby, make us laugh, solve a problem, give us advice, set an example, or strengthen our faith. The Lord doesn't put people in our path to tempt us, drive a wedge in our marriage, or cause us to stray from our values. As we pray for God's blessing on all our friendships, we should ask for his special guidance and protection as we set boundaries for our male-female relationships. A simple question to ask is: *Is this friendship God-honoring?* When we sense God's approval and have set appropriate boundaries, we can truly enjoy one of life's richest blessings—the gift of friendship.

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**Prov 17:17 (NIV) A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.**

**John 15:12-13 (NLT) I command you to love each other in the same way that I love you. And here is how to measure it--the greatest love is shown when people lay down their lives for their friends.**

**Matt 10:16 (NASU) "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.**

**Matt 5:27-30 (NIV) "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.**

