

THE FAULTS OF OUR FRIENDS

Excerpts from "Friendship, Popularity and Getting Along with People" by Donald L. Rose

How are we to react to the faults of others? This is a very real and challenging question in friendship. We are probably aware of the "bad sides" of our closest friends, and we probably know just what traits irritate us. Is the right thing to ignore their faults and see only their virtues, or, as a true friend, should we call their attention to the weaknesses we notice?

The Heavenly Doctrines for the New Church teach that we should look to the good of another person. That is, we should *promote* his good. And we should have his good in mind particularly when we deal with his bad side. We are to wish well and do good to enemies, strangers, and evil people as well as to friends, relatives, and good people. But charity is to be exercised toward each in a different way. We might infer from this that we may exercise charity to our friends in one way with respect to their good sides and in another way with respect to their bad sides. Of course, we are not to go around making judgments or finding faults, but what about what the Heavenly Doctrines refer to as "indirect benefits"?

Indirect benefits are things like exhortations, reproofs, discipline, etc. The examples of using indirect benefits that we are given are those from a parent to a child, a judge to a lawbreaker, and a defender to an enemy. This is a delicate point. In these cases it is part of a person's *business* to correct another, but in our friendly associations we should recognize the dangers in assuming the role of reformer. All too often when we correct a friend it has three unfortunate effects: 1) It gives us an unhealthy feeling of superiority and invites spirits who delight in reproof and punishment. 2) It causes the friend to defend himself and makes him even less likely to recognize his fault. 3) It makes the friendship strained and distant.

We have all seen people boost their egos by triumphantly "helping" another with his faults. We have observed the tactful hint that just wasn't enough. Yet, even in the face of these dangers we should recognize uses when they do arise and happen to be truly our business. Sometimes we must risk popularity in order to be a true friend. We can do no greater disservice to a friend than to curry his friendship by giving the impression that anything he does is fine with us. When we give the friendly wink to what we know is wrong, we are turning traitor to our companions.

It is difficult to lay down rules in the touchy business of helping our friends, but there are some general guidelines. Before deciding how to make our friendship helpful, we should concern ourselves that it should first not be in any way harmful. Far more important than showing disapproval of our friend's backslidings is to be sure that we do not show approval. Avoiding a bad influence is a lot more to the point than trying to exercise a good influence. When we start trying to turn others to better habits through comments or even by example, we run into the dangers of conceit and ineffectiveness.

In trying to make our friendship useful perhaps the soundest principle is to be affirmative. That is, instead of finding faults and discouraging folly we ought to expect the best of our friends. If we are sincere, they will know we expect the best. If we are sincere, we will not be praisers or ego feeders, but encouragers who are sometimes a little tough. Minor storms and arguments between us will even improve our friendships instead of destroying them. Where people join together to perform uses in this spirit, friendship becomes a joy and an inspiration.