

One-to-one Prayer and Bible Reading

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The following is a true story. Last Friday, two friends met to read the Bible, pray and drink coffee, like they do every week for about an hour. They go to the same church and decided they needed some accountability in their lives as Christians. Last week they were up to Philippians chapter 2 in their reading programme. They read the chapter out loud, then talked about its implications for their thinking and prayers. They are doing detailed Bible study in small groups so the focus of their time was on application and encouragement. From Philippians 2, they talked for a while about Jesus' priority of service over status and their struggles to help others when there is no recognition involved. They confessed their tendency to complain and argue, and the conversation moved to wider issues of status-seeking in the church. This gave them plenty to pray about and they concluded their prayers by remembering two missionary families. Next week they will read chapter 3.

So what?!

This doesn't exactly grab you as one of the great stand-out events of last Friday. Even within the Christian world, on a scale of 1 to 100, it doesn't rank more than a 0.01 in importance.

But think about the long term effects of meeting like this. The two friends will know the Bible better, pray regularly and deepen their friendship. They will encourage each other to deal with God and his Word with integrity. As they open their lives to each other before God's Word, they will "spur one another on towards love and good deeds" (Heb 10:24-25). They will strengthen each other to resist sin and remain faithful to Christ.

Factotum is designed to equip us as slaves of our Lord Jesus Christ. Each edition provides a new piece of 'equipment' for ministry to others. This time we look at One-to-One Bible Reading and Prayer.

Why do it?

At the core of all Christian ministry is Bible reading and prayer. We are united with Christ by hearing His Word and responding in faith and that is how we remain in Christ. We can never progress beyond these basics - teaching each other the Word of God, calling upon each other to believe and repent, bringing our lives, our churches and the world before God in prayer.

But we can do all this in three broad contexts: large groups, small groups and one-to-one. We choose different contexts on totally pragmatic grounds. There is a certain efficiency of gathering people together and various educational advantages in each context. However, all ministry is ultimately to individuals even when we are dealing with groups. Our concern is for the salvation and growth of each one.

So what are the benefits of reading the Bible and praying one-to-one? It is:

- *convenient* - arranging to meet one Christian for one hour weekly is realistic even in the busiest lives. It's easy to get started with minimal organisation required.

- *personal* - the discussion and prayers can address particular individual concerns. In groups it is impossible to deal with everyone's issues and questions.
- *accountable* - meeting one-to-one is an ideal way of holding each other accountable to read and obey the Bible. It is hard to meet each week and pretend to be serious about submitting to Christ whilst playing around with secret sin. In our perversity this is not impossible, but it's hard to sustain the performance.
- *strategic* - this is a basic ministry to master and will be useful in many contexts. Wherever we go in church life, we can find a Christian with whom we can read and pray. Sometimes at work we will find a Christian who would love to meet with us. In some ministry contexts, such as the military and educational institutions, it is almost impossible to gather Christians into groups and personal ministry is the only option. For some Christians, the only opportunity for fellowship is with individuals, due to family restrictions and persecution.

Why we don't

If I had to hazard a guess as to how many Christians engage in one-to-one Bible reading and prayer, I would say less than 1%. I have no data on this, just a hunch. This seems strange if it is such a simple and convenient way of spurring each other on in the faith. Why don't we do it?

We are too busy in Christian service

The old cliché is true: "the good is the enemy of the best". One reason we don't read and pray with each other is our devotion to other Christian activities.

There are limitless opportunities to serve Christ and his people and Christ has given a diversity of gifts to edify his church. However certain ministries, such as prophecy, have priority over others, because they are more useful for edifying the church. Whatever else Paul means by prophecy, fundamentally it is speaking the Word of God and we are to "excel in gifts that build up the church" (1 Cor 14:12). Speaking the Word of God to each other is the way we are strengthened, encouraged and comforted and the church is built. One-to-one Bible reading and prayer is therefore a very high ministry priority.

Most of us have little discretionary time, where we are free to choose how we use it. We have fixed priorities which absorb most of the 168 hours in the week. Sleeping, eating, travelling, working, family responsibilities, chores and 'personal things' take around 140 hours, if you have anything like a 'normal' life. The 28 hours remaining is your discretionary time which you can divide between leisure, study, socialising, hobbies and so on. Christians will devote some of these 28 hours to specifically Christian activity. This will include private Bible reading, prayer and study of Christian literature as well as service to others. When we look at it realistically, there are only around 5-10 hours per week available for Christian activity with others, and most of this time is taken up with church meetings, a Bible study group or committees. And, as the years roll on, there is even less time at our discretion, with increased family and work responsibilities.

Maybe we need to rethink our ministry responsibilities and withdraw from some tasks in church life in order to read and pray with others.

We put structures before people

If we are asked about the ministries of our church, we usually answer in terms of structures and programmes: men's fellowship, Sunday School, Youth Club, women's Bible study and so on. If our pastors ask us to be involved in ministry, they usually mean taking on a particular

task to keep the programme running. These kinds of programmes are often good - some may be essential - but our thinking is back to front. The reason we run ministry activities is for people - their salvation and maturity in Christ. After a while, the programme attains a validity in itself - the means becomes the end. We run a drop-in centre because we have always run a drop-in centre.

If, instead, we start with people and ask how we can win them for Christ and establish them in the faith, we might end up spending our ministry time differently. We might cancel some programmes and start meeting with individuals for Bible reading and prayer. Or we might build this one-to-one ministry into our existing programmes.

We seek recognition for our ministry

There is no kudos or notoriety in private meetings with individuals reading the Bible and praying. There is a type of career path in churches: from pew sitter to welcomer to assistant Bible study leader to Bible study leader to board of elders to chair of the board. Just adjust the titles for your particular church. One-to-one ministry doesn't advance our career at all.

We don't feel qualified

This is one of the advantages of one-to-one Bible reading and prayer - it is simple; everyone can do it. We are not taking over the minister's job to teach the Bible and we don't have to have all the answers. We can wrestle together with understanding God's Word and changing our lives. We are not setting ourselves up as the fount of all knowledge and virtue. All we need is the heart to know God better and to encourage one another.

We never thought of it

Now you have!

How to do it

Here are some tips to get you started. You will develop your own patterns along the way.

- Decide to meet for a specified period of time, say six months, so it is easy to stop if you need to.
- Give priority to reading the Bible rather than Christian books.
- Try a variety of methods for Bible reading:

Verse by Verse - read the text verse by verse and work out what it is saying. Using a Bible with marginal notes and cross references will deepen the discussion.

QUIT - look for *Q*uestions that need to be resolved, *I*mplications for life and major *T*hemes in the passage.

Interactive Bible Studies - prepared studies, such as those published by St Matthias Press. You can do some preparation before meeting or just work through the material together.

- Leave plenty of time for prayer. Pray about the implications of your Bible reading and the current concerns in your lives. But also pray beyond your own horizons for unbelievers, your church and gospel ministries around the world. If you can't work out who to pray for, ask your pastor or get some newsletters from evangelists and church planters in Australia and overseas.

Who to meet with

The possibilities are only limited by your imagination.

- Christian friends for mutual encouragement at church, work, school, college, university or in the neighbourhood - anyone who is 'spiritually hungry'.
- Young Christians to build foundations in the faith.
- Potential leaders who need nurturing and training in Bible reading and prayer.
- Christians who want to do some deeper Bible study.
- Your pastor who would love to read and pray with someone.
- A friend going through a crisis.
- Christians who are struggling with faith.
- Non-Christians who want to work out systematically what the Bible is saying.
- Christians who are restricted in some way from attending church or groups.

Some Warnings

The priority of God's Word, not our problems

Have you ever noticed how people with problems absorb your time and energy? You can feel the energy drain out of you as they enter the room. In groups, they dominate the discussion. We all have problems, but some people become problem-centred because of the severity of their needs. One mistake in personal ministry is to be dominated by such people. They are so needy that, in our compassion, we feel guilty if we don't give them all the energy they demand. We end up visiting them again and again, or meeting them regularly at the expense of others.

It sounds harsh at first, but there is a better way. Firstly, if you do meet with such a person, set a different agenda. Instead of starting with his or her problems, start with Bible reading and prayer. He or she will then start to see how God views their life and problems, and thus they will make some progress in dealing with life under God's Word. Secondly, give priority to training others in ministry. Meet with a spiritually hungry, 'problem free' person who will mature and begin to serve others. Then you can give better care to those with problems, because there are more carers. Investing time in training others in service multiplies the workforce in the church.

The spiritual guru syndrome

We don't want to become spiritual guides for people and make them dependent on us rather than God. Meeting regularly with someone and drawing them into close relationship can be highly manipulative. Some have never had such close attention from anyone and they will agree to anything to protect the relationship. You can reduce such dependency by deciding to meet for a specified time period and by ensuring they relate to other Christians in church and small groups.

The cults have deliberately exploited the power of personal discipleship to control their members and movements. We need to ensure our personal ministries are characterised by freedom and flexibility. Some people should never be invited to regular personal meetings because of their insecurities.

Gender Issues

One-to-one ministry tends to suit women better than men. Women enjoy the intimacy and are more articulate, which is a boon to conversation.

In general, men find it difficult to start these one-to-one meetings. They are more comfortable doing something together like sport, fixing things or watching TV. Men don't just sit down and bare their souls to each other. Some men will find it easier to meet in threes or fours to reduce the intensity and feel less threatened and exposed. Meeting in a familiar context, like a club or McDonalds, may work better. For many men, they will learn more by having a healthy argument over the Scriptures, and they will let down their guard once they get drawn into the fight! You may not like these cultural stereotypes, but men do need to work out their way of meeting one-to-one.

Pepper the Earth

If you meet with a Christian for Bible reading and prayer for the next 12 months, what will happen? You don't know exactly, but you can have certain hopes and prayers. Both of you will grow in the knowledge and love of the Lord. Perhaps you will encourage others to start meeting one-to-one. Perhaps you will both continue to meet with different Christians for the next forty years. Just imagine what could happen if it was common place for Christians to meet for one-to-one Bible reading and prayer? What would happen if our society was peppered with thousands of such meetings? What growth in godliness might we see?

Questions

Use these questions as starters for group discussion or personal reflection

1. What are the unique advantages of one-to-one ministry?
2. Is there anything which makes you hesitant about doing it?
3. What changes might you have to make to your Christian program to do one-to-one Bible reading and prayer?
4. Think of someone with whom you could do this.