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TEACHING GOD'S PEOPLE THE DISCIPLINES OF
PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY AND PRAYER AT
CENTRAL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,
MIDDLEBOROUGH, MASSACHUSETTS

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To my sweet wife, Faith—you are a precious gift from the Lord and have made my life
the most joyful adventure imaginable.

To our six children, Duncan, Evan, Isaiah, Sophia, Joshua, and Hudson—you fill my soul
with unspeakable delight.

To my parents, Ian and Shirley Smith—you taught me the priceless truths of the faith
from my earliest days.

To my precious Lord and Savior, Jesus—you redeemed me with your own blood and
made me your own. May you receive all the glory!

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- BDAG Danker, Frederick W., Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilber Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000
- TDNT Kittel, Gerhard, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey William Bromiley. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Abridged ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985
- TLV *The Holy Bible: Tree of Life Version*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2015
- TWOT Harris, R. Laird, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Chicago: Moody, 1999

PREFACE

Vital to this project's success are those people the Lord has put into my life. I am grateful for my parents, Ian and Shirly Smith, who gave me instruction, from my earliest days, about those imperishable things that are of greatest value. I am also thankful for those, throughout the years, who taught me how to study the Bible and pray. These include my missionary grandfather, Allan McLeod-Smith, and the faithful pastor of my youth, Dr. Ray Pritchard. I am also deeply indebted to Dr. Robert K. Cheong, whose fresh perspectives and godly direction provided much of the inspiration for this effort.

I am convinced that no pastor has ever been given a more loving congregation than the one that meets at South Main and Webster. Without a doubt, it would have been impossible to complete this project without the enthusiastic support of the Central Congregational Church. Whether in developmental classes or the final course, each participant contributed to the project's overall success.

My wife, Faith, never ceases to amaze me. Her constant flow of creative ideas and practical suggestions made the project far better than it would have been without her input. I am also thankful for my children, Duncan, Evan, Isaiah, Sophia, Joshua, and Hudson, as their love provided constant support and encouragement throughout the entire process. Most importantly, I am grateful to the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave me the most incredible privilege imaginable when he called me to serve in his beloved vineyard.

Bruce Smith

Middleborough, Massachusetts

December 2022

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Foundational to the mission of the Central Congregational Church is the task of making disciples (Matt 28:18-20). Once the seed of God's gospel springs to life within a person, it becomes the collective responsibility of the church family to help the new disciple grow to maturity in Christ (Eph 4:11-13). When God's people take this commission seriously, a hunger for the truths of his Word, the way of holiness, and a passion for intimacy with God become hallmarks of this Christ-centered existence. Because of this, it is critical that the minds of God's people are saturated with his Word and that their hearts are connected in continual fellowship with him through prayer (Acts 6:4). Therefore, the Central Congregational Church seeks to glorify God by equipping his people in the areas of personal Bible study and prayer. Ultimately, the purpose behind this ambition is to cultivate among the faithful the kind of relationship with God that he intended from the beginning (John 17:3).

Context

In August 2004, the Central Congregational Church, Middleborough, Massachusetts (CCCMM) officially rejected a brand of liberal theology, which left it virtually shipwrecked. The fact that a congregational vote was taken to decide whether the doors would remain open marked the lowest ebb the church had reached since its founding in 1847. While the future appeared bleak with only six in attendance on some Sundays, God was providentially working behind the scenes. Only a few months before this vote was taken, a large percentage of those who attended CCCMM were openly hostile to the notion that reconciliation with God is only possible through personal faith

in the saving work of Jesus Christ. However, by the time the actual vote occurred, the church emptied to the extent to which all who remained professed personal faith in Jesus. As a result of the newfound theological like-mindedness, the congregation voted to continue, and the few souls who remained vigorously embraced the robust and faithful spiritual vision that evangelical belief and practice provide. For those who persisted, as well as the pastoral leadership that would soon be called, it was imperative that the congregation return to its twin roots of doctrinal faithfulness and gospel-centeredness.

The congregation, located between Boston and New Bedford, is situated in one of the most unchurched¹ and least “Bible-minded” areas of the United States.² As a result, a large percentage of the congregation hail from unbelieving or nominal Christian upbringings. For the most part, those with any past church experience come from Roman Catholic or theologically liberal congregational backgrounds. Of these two groups, the largest influx has come from those within the Roman Catholic tradition. This experience is consistent with a survey conducted by The Graduate Center at the City University of New York, which found that forty-four percent of Massachusetts residents identify as Roman Catholic.³ Given the vast number of people from this demographic in Southeastern Massachusetts, it was not surprising when a recent informal survey of one of the church’s growth groups revealed that all but three of the sixteen present began attending CCCMM after spending most of their lives as Catholics.

Consequently, many of those who become part of the fellowship do so with little preunderstanding of the spiritual disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer. To

¹ Aaron Earls, “What Are the Most Churched (and Unchurched) Cities in America?” Life Way Research, last modified August 23, 2017, <https://factsandtrends.net/2017/08/23/churched-unchurched-cities-america/>.

² Barna Research Group, “2017 Bible-Minded Cities,” Infographics in Faith and Christianity, last modified June 22, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/2017-bible-minded-cities/>.

³ The Graduate Center, CUNY, “American Religious Identification Survey,” accessed October 1, 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20051024031359/http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_briefs/aris/key_findings.htm.

reach its community, CCCMM made it its mission in 2005 to “glorify God by winning and building passionate, life-long followers of Jesus Christ.” The following details three persistent areas of weakness that have impeded the congregation’s efforts to fulfill its mission.

First, one of the core values of CCCMM states that on an individual and corporate level, the congregation must strive for “continuous spiritual growth and godly integrity.” God’s Word is the primary means he has given his people to understand and obey his will (2 Tim 3:16-17). Therefore, it is impossible to grow spiritually mature without regularly feeding on the Scriptures. Even though roughly seventy-five percent of all those who attend Sunday morning worship are involved in another spiritual growth-oriented ministry during the week, a significant number of those who attend have little or no understanding of how to read the Bible devotionally. Private conversations indicate that only a small percentage of the flock regularly practice the discipline of daily Bible study even though the church has dedicated tremendous resources and significant time to emphasize this critical area of the Christian life. As a result, those in this category lack consistent spiritual intake as they only feed on God’s Word when they attend worship services or church growth groups.

Second, many within the congregation indicate a lack of connectedness with God through prayer. Although the church family is committed to the principle that personal and corporate prayer is necessary to connect intimately with God, private conversations indicate that many within the church family struggle with secret prayer. Many find it challenging to make time for prayer, and when they do, they find it difficult to keep their minds from wandering during those times. If CCCMM is to fulfill its mission to win and build passionate, life-long followers of Jesus Christ, those who comprise its ranks must first be passionate, life-long followers of Jesus Christ. Without persistent, God-centered prayer, this ideal will not be realized.

Third, the church has failed to equip God’s people with the necessary tools to

combine the practices of personal Bible study and prayer in such a way that results in meaningful devotional times with the Lord. This reality is frustrating for the leadership, given that the church has invested significant sums into hosting seminars, giving substantial scholarships to those attending seminary, and adding staff to aid in this work. Beyond the notes found in study Bibles and making use of helpful devotional books, a significant portion of the flock express an inability to understand, apply, and experience God through his Word. As a result, there are many whose spiritual vitality is not on par with their understanding of Scripture. The clear testimony of the Bible is that the Christian life involves the whole person and is, therefore, more than an intellectual exercise (Jas 2:19). The disciplines of prayer and personal Bible study are means that God has given to enable his people to know and experience the fullness of Christ's love (Eph 3:14-21). Because of this, the church must make a renewed effort to give God's people practical ways to live out the biblical insights they have gleaned intellectually (Prov 4:23).

Despite these challenges, CCCMM has enough willing participants and the structures to facilitate a concerted effort to rectify these deficiencies. Over the last eighteen years, the fellowship has incrementally added dynamic children, youth, college, and career as well as men's and women's ministries. As a result of the high level of participation in these discipleship-oriented ministries, they have become a strength within the congregation's life. This project is essential because a renewed practical emphasis on the spiritual disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer will complement and enhance the overall spiritual life of the congregation.

Rationale

Discipleship has been and continues to be an area of great emphasis within the life of CCCMM. While the church has several ministries geared to helping mature believers grow deeper in their walk with Christ, before this project, CCCMM lacked an

effective methodology to teach the basic spiritual disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer. If God's people are to learn to read and interpret the Bible more accurately, leaders must equip them with a greater understanding of the general flow and overall plotline of the Bible. Moreover, a critical element of this development requires teaching believers practical ways to personally apply the Scriptures to their everyday lives (Eph 4:11-16; 2 Tim 3:16-17). Just as believers need to know God's Word, it is equally important that they obey it (Jas 1:22-24). Moreover, through prayer, God warmly invites his people to express whatever is on their hearts to him (Heb 4:11-16; 10:19-25). Just as Jesus made it a point to teach his disciples how to pray (Matt 6:5-15), it is also the responsibility of church leaders to equip God's people for service (Eph 4:11-16). There are four reasons why CCCMM implemented a methodology that provided training for believers in the disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer.

First, CCCMM's leaders are committed to the church's second core value, which calls on individual members of the congregation to "strive for continuous spiritual growth and godly integrity." If the church is to fulfill this mandate, it is imperative that as many church attenders as possible are given the tools necessary to encourage the daily practice of personal Bible study and prayer.

Second, CCCMM had the spiritual and physical structures to develop and implement an equipping course designed to teach God's people how to experience meaningful personal devotional times with the Lord. Given the high participation rate of members of the congregation in its growth ministries, the time was optimal to implement a project of this nature.

Third, there was great excitement among those within the church body who participated in the project. Many clamored to grow deeper in their understanding of the Bible and prayer, and others expressed a desire to help others draw closer to Christ. Given this hunger, many were optimistic before the project began that *Made for More* would positively impact the congregation's future trajectory.

Fourth, if CCCMM did not undertake a project of this nature, it would have jeopardized the spiritual vitality of the congregation. Since the Lord prioritized teaching his disciples how to interpret the Bible (Luke 24:13-35) and to pray (Matt 6:5-15), CCCMM needed to imitate him by implementing an equipping ministry of this nature. This was particularly the case, given that many showed great interest in growing deeper in these areas of the Christian life.

Not only does CCCMM have a motivated base of willing participants who long to grow deeper in their relationship with Jesus Christ, but there were physical and spiritual support structures in place that made it possible to develop the project and put it into practice. Since the approach proved fruitful, *Made for More* classes will continue for the foreseeable future. The hope is that everyone in the body will eventually cycle through the course.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to teach the disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer at Central Congregational Church in Middleborough, Massachusetts.

Goals

Equipping God's people at CCCMM in the spiritual disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer was guided by four goals. The first two goals focused on the initial development of the spiritual disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer. The third and fourth goals concentrated on implementing the course at CCCMM. These goals included the following:

1. The first goal was to assess a small group of adults in their understanding and practices of personal Bible study and prayer.
2. The second goal was to develop a ten-session course on personal Bible study and prayer.
3. The third goal was for participants to complete a structured Bible reading plan.
4. The fourth goal was to change participants' knowledge and practices of personal

Bible study and prayer.

Each goal's completion depended on a defined means of measurement and a benchmark of success. The research methodology and instruments used to measure the success of each goal is detailed in the following section.

Research Methodology

Two essential areas for developing a solid spiritual foundation are personal Bible study and prayer. This project aimed to create a process that practically equipped God's people in a way that they would experience a greater degree of meaningful interaction with God in their times of Bible study and prayer. The following will detail four practical steps employed to equip God's people in these areas. The four goals were also used to determine the effectiveness of the project.

The first goal was to assess a small group of adults' understanding and practices of personal Bible study and prayer. The original plan consisted of administering a pre-course survey ten days before the first night of class to gain a baseline understanding of where group members were before the beginning of the course and as a means to measure growth between the first class and the final session.⁴ However, for reasons explained in chapter 4, the survey was distributed in print form to group participants on the first night of the class.⁵ This goal was considered successfully met when all group participants completed the surveys, and results were compiled to gain a broad perspective of participants' pre-course experience in personal Bible study and prayer.

The second goal was to develop a ten-session course on personal Bible study and prayer. This goal was measured by an expert panel that utilized a rubric to evaluate

⁴ All of the research instruments used in this project were approved by and performed in compliance with The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in this ministry project.

⁵ See appendix 3.

the curriculum's biblical faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability.⁶ The original goal called for a panel comprised of a New Testament scholar, a local pastor, a member of the leadership team at CCCMM, a mature believer from CCCMM and a newer Christian from CCCMM. However, for reasons explained in chapter 4, four seasoned pastors conducted the course review. This goal was successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criteria met or exceeded the sufficient level. Since the 90 percent benchmark was initially met, only minor revisions were made to the material based on evaluators' input.

The third goal was for participants to complete a structured Bible reading plan. This goal was measured using a reading checklist and reading journal consisting of sixty Scripture passages highlighting the Bible's metanarrative.⁷ Participants were given the plan during the first class session and were encouraged to utilize daily readings six days a week, or more, over a period of seventy days. At the beginning of each class session, participants were encouraged to share weekly experiences of personal growth in God's love and peace. Once the course concluded, participants returned reading checklists for review.

The fourth goal was to change participants' knowledge and practices of personal Bible study and prayer. This goal was measured by administering a post-survey which gauged participants' development in their understanding, practice, and experience in the spiritual disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer.⁸ This goal was considered successfully met when a t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a statistically significant positive change in the pre- and post-survey scores. A t-test for dependent samples "involves a comparison of means from each group of scores and focuses on the

⁶ See appendix 1.

⁷ See appendix 2.

⁸ See appendix 3.

differences between the scores.”⁹

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

The following definitions of key terms were used in the ministry project:

Spiritual disciplines. “Those personal and interpersonal activities given by God in the Bible as the sufficient means believers in Jesus Christ are to use in the Spirit-filled, gospel-driven pursuit of godliness, that is, closeness to Christ and conformity to Christ.”¹⁰

Two limitations were applied to this project. First, the accuracy of the pre- and post-series surveys depended upon the respondents’ willingness to be honest about their own personal Bible study habits and prayer lives. To mitigate this limitation, the respondents were given an identification number and a promise that surveys would remain anonymous. Second, the usefulness of the class was only as effective as the time and effort participants put into it. If group members did not attend the classes consistently or did not spend time in Bible study and prayer during the week, it would have been difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the training. To mitigate this limitation, participants were encouraged to share during weekly sessions what they learned during the previous week through their times of personal Bible study and prayer.

Two delimitations were placed on the project. First, this project focused on teaching basic Bible study skills, not advanced biblical exegesis. The primary approach to prayer was praying the Scriptures and did not cover the whole range of topics included under the heading of prayer. Second, the project was confined to a twenty-week timeframe. This gave ample time for pre-assessment, final curriculum development, teaching the ten-week training sessions, and conducting a post-course assessment.

⁹ Neil J. Salkind, *Statistics for People Who (Think They) Hate Statistics*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008), 191.

¹⁰ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 9.

Conclusion

It cannot be stated too strongly that personal Bible study and prayer are necessary elements of a healthy walk with God. This project provided CCCMM an opportunity to faithfully forward its mission to “win and build passionate life-long followers of Jesus Christ.” Before implementing this new equipping model, a biblical, theological, and methodological basis had to be laid. Chapters two and three will describe those details in greater depth. By God’s grace, this new approach, conducted prayerfully and with great care, has begun to reinvigorate the spiritual vitality and culture of CCCMM. The prayer is that God will continue to use the course to bless God’s people at CCCMM for many years to come.

CHAPTER 2
BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THE
DISCIPLINES OF PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY
AND PRAYER

Introduction

Given the significant role that the Bible has played in American life, it is not surprising that 87 percent of all households “own a Bible,” according to a study conducted by Lifeway Research in 2017.¹ The same year, the Barna Group undertook their own research on prayer and concluded that it is “the most common faith practice among American adults.”² Among those who self-identify as evangelicals, 96 percent claim to pray daily (79 percent), weekly (14 percent), or monthly (3 percent).³ Despite these encouraging trends, Biblical illiteracy is commonplace, given that 66 percent of all Americans describe themselves as having “read relatively little of the Bible” or “only a few sentences.”⁴ While an overwhelming percentage of evangelicals believe that daily time in God’s Word and prayer are critical (87 percent), the Evangelical Alliance found a deficit between belief and practice when it was discovered that only 42 percent set aside time each day to do both.⁵

¹ Lifeway Research, “Americans Are Fond of the Bible, Don’t Actually Read It,” last modified April 25, 2017, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2017/04/25/lifeway-research-americans-are-fond-of-the-bible-dont-actually-read-it/>.

² Barna Research, “Silent and Solo: How Americans Pray,” last modified August 15, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/silent-solo-americans-pray/>.

³ Pew Research Center, “Religious Landscape Study: Frequency of Prayer,” accessed September 17, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/frequency-of-prayer/>.

⁴ Lifeway Research, “Americans Are Fond of the Bible, Don’t Actually Read It.”

⁵ Cath Martin, “Evangelicals Admit Struggling to Find Time for Daily Bible Reading and Prayer,” *Christianity Today*, last modified April 14, 2014, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/daily-bible-reading-and-prayer-is-a-strugglefor-many-evangelicals/36765.htm>.

Researchers have found several factors that contribute to this disconnect. Among those surveyed, 62 percent shared that they struggled with personal Bible study and prayer because they were “easily distracted.”⁶ Part of the dilemma lies in the fact that 60 percent of these evangelicals do not set aside specific times for prayer, and nearly one in five (18%) “do not have a fixed pattern of prayer.”⁷ While there is room to cast blame on many for these disparities, the church is front and center since only 40 percent of those surveyed felt that their local assembly “did very well at discipling new Christians.”⁸

Scripture and prayer must be prioritized in church life today, given that Jesus put a premium on these practices throughout his life and ministry (e.g., Luke 24:27; 5:16). Therefore, this chapter will demonstrate biblically and theologically that God desires to commune with his people. It will also show that Bible reading and prayer are two essential practices that will foster a vibrant relationship with God.

God Desires to Commune with His People

At the heart of the Bible’s narrative is a love story. God wants to live with his people in covenant fidelity for all eternity. This ideal was upended when human beings rebelled against God and became unfaithful idolators. The story of the Bible is the story of all that God did to restore what seemed to be a hopelessly broken relationship. The four theological categories of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation frame the entire narrative of Scripture. The following will trace the major Bible covenants using these four themes as a guide. This approach will show how that idyllic relationship was lost and what God did to restore it.

⁶ Martin, "Evangelicals Admit Struggling to Find Time."

⁷ Martin, "Evangelicals Admit Struggling to Find Time."

⁸ Martin, "Evangelicals Admit Struggling to Find Time."

Creation

In order to better understand the nature of God's dealings with people, it is important to go back in eternity past to consider why God created in the first place. The Bible teaches that "God is love" (1 John 4:8).⁹ As a triune being, God existed through all eternity in perfect loving relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God's love is self-giving by nature.¹⁰ It is exemplified in the fact that when the world was created, it was brought into existence as a gift from the Father to the Son (Heb 1:2). This self-giving love is pictured most perfectly in Christ's sacrifice for the "sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2).

Given that the creation is an expression of God's love, Scripture begins with an idyllic picture of God, creating image-bearers and making his dwelling place among them (Gen 2:5-25). This place was aptly named Eden, which likely means "garden of delight."¹¹ The whole of creation was a place that God gave to humanity so that his image bearers may dwell with him in the fullness of joy (Heb 1:2). While Eden was designed to be a perfect place for human flourishing, the essence of its delight stemmed from the fact that God himself dwelled there among his people.

As those made in his likeness and image, human beings were the crown jewel of God's creation (Gen 1:26-27). They were mandated to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen 1:28b). As God's representatives, they and their offspring had the kingly duty of expanding God's glory and dominion throughout the earth.¹² As priests serving in God's garden-temple,

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations come from the English Standard Version.

¹⁰ Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2012), 47.

¹¹ *TWOT*, s.v. "גֶּדֶן."

¹² G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), 30-31.

they were commanded to “keep” Eden (Gen 2:15). This required them to “watch over”¹³ the garden to maintain its purity. “Adam was to be like Israel’s later priests, who both physically protected the temple spiritually and were to be experts in the recollection, interpretation, and application of God’s word in the Torah.”¹⁴ With the exception of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:17), God gave them the right to eat from any tree of the garden.

The Fall

Unfortunately, a serpent made its way into the garden. Instead of protecting the garden-temple, Adam joined the evil beast in his rebellion against God. As soon as the couple ate from the forbidden tree (Gen 3:6), everything changed. Consequently, they were removed from the presence of God. Since that time, people have become,

lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. (2 Tim 3:2–4)

As a result of this original sin, their descendants inherited their sin nature (Rom 5:12), and God exiled them from his presence (Gen 3:24).

Despite the separation that followed Adam and Eve’s act of treason, God reestablished his presence among human beings in the Old Testament through covenants. Two that illustrate this are the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. The Abrahamic covenant gets its name from a man named Abraham, who God raised up to be another priest-king. God called Abraham to go to the promised land where he and his descendants were to dwell with God (Gen 12:1-3). As a king, God promised that he would be the head of a great nation (Gen 12:1), and as a priest, he would mediate God’s blessing to the

¹³ Jonathan Leeman, *Don’t Fire Your Church Members: The Case for Congregationalism* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 40.

¹⁴ Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 33.

whole world (Gen 12:3). The outward sign of this covenant was circumcision (Gen 17:10). This sign was significant given that in the Bible, covenantal marks validate who is and is not part of the covenant community. The Scriptures reveal how a genealogical record was kept over the centuries to preserve the names of those who belonged to the Abrahamic covenant. Later, when God made the Mosaic covenant with Abraham's descendants at Mount Sinai, he promised to live with them if they remained faithful to the covenant (Deut 28). Under this agreement, God raised up the people of Israel as a priestly people (Exod 19:6) who were to follow the law and maintain religious purity (e.g., Num 18:5-7). The Lord had them build a tabernacle as a picture of his presence among them.¹⁵ He declared, "I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God" (Exod 29:45-46). The sign of the Mosaic covenant was sabbath observance (Exod 31:17).¹⁶ Unfortunately, Israel did not keep its covenantal obligations. Consequently, God departed from the temple (Ezek 10), and the people were eventually forced out of the promised land and into exile (2 Chr 36:17-21). Seventy years later, not only did the exiles return to Israel, but they rebuilt the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. Despite this, the people waited centuries for a new and better covenant that God had promised: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer 31:33b). Ultimately, the physical structures which were created during the Mosaic era would eventually give way to the revelation of God's Son who dwelled or literally "tabernacled" (John 1:14 TLV) among his people.

¹⁵ See G. K. Beale and Mitchell Kim, *God Dwells Among Us: Expanding Eden to the Ends of the Earth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 54-57.

¹⁶ Paul R Williamson. *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purposes*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 23 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 100-103.

Redemption

As the great high priest, Jesus is the only true “mediator between God and men” (1 Tim 2:5). The temple in Jerusalem was a type that was ultimately fulfilled in Christ, who is the true temple (John 2:15). Therefore, it is through him that the blessings of God are mediated to the whole world (Heb 4:14-16; John 2:19). It was in this work of redemption that the highest visible expression of God’s self-giving love was put on display when he established the new covenant through the blood of Christ (Luke 22:20). Just as there were signs associated with the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, so baptism became the sign of the new covenant (Matt 28:19-20). Just as God’s people were both kings and priests under the previous covenants, so they are under the new covenant (1 Pet 2:9-10). Just as it was the responsibility of the priests to maintain the purity of the covenant community, so it is under the new covenant as well. As Clowney notes, “if the church is identified by the Word and the sacraments, church discipline uses the keys of the kingdom to maintain that identity.”¹⁷

Consummation

When a person enters a covenantal relationship with the Lord through faith (Eph 2:8-9), Christ takes up residence within that person (Rom 8:9-11). Consequently, believers comprise a new temple as Peter describes them as “living stones” adorning a glorious “spiritual house” (1 Pet 2:4-5). Alexander asserts, “Paul pictured each local church as providing God with a spiritual habitation in that locality (Eph 2:22) and as growing together with all the other churches into one holy, universal sanctuary for the Lord’s indwelling.”¹⁸ This will culminate on that day when heaven and earth will be one, and God will dwell with all of his people forever (Rev 21-22:5).

¹⁷ Clowney, *The Church*, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 104.

¹⁸ T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional), 61.

The spiritual disciplines of Bible study and prayer are two means that God has given his people to commune with him. The following will flush out why spiritual disciplines are so important, who the people are that God has assigned to equip others in the practices, the centrality of Christ, and how daily Bible study and prayer enhance the ability of God's people to commune with God.

Bible Study and Prayer as Means for Communion with God

At the moment of death, Christians experience unbroken, eternal fellowship with God (2 Cor 5:8). However, before that day comes, the Lord has given believers the disciplines of Bible study and prayer as two means to enter into fellowship with him. Because of this, among the greatest gifts a pastor can give to his flock are the necessary tools needed to study the Bible and pray meaningfully. When God's people grow in these areas during their earthly sojourn when they see only through a "mirror dimly," it will whet their appetite for the day when they shall see him "face to face" (1 Cor 13:12).

Spiritual Discipline Leads to Godliness

It is not difficult to find people whose lives betray a detachment between the ideals they profess and the lives that they lead. This problem was as prevalent in the first century as it is today. Along this line, Jesus asked his disciples, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?" (Luke 6:46).

The Apostle Paul also dealt with the sad disconnect between head and heart. To combat this, he asked his delegate in Ephesus, Timothy, to encourage God's people to develop healthy spiritual disciplines. He said,

If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. (1 Tim 4:6-10)

According to the apostle, Timothy will qualify as “a good servant of Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 4:6b) if he puts Paul’s words into practice. To do this, he must consistently stress “the good doctrine” that he has been taught. This teaching was critical for the life of the Ephesian congregation because false teaching was common in the city at the time. Stott captures the essence of Paul’s hope for Timothy, “Jesus Christ has ministers of all sorts—good, bad and indifferent—but I cannot imagine a nobler ambition than to be ‘a good minister’ of his.”¹⁹ With this in mind, Paul mentions three marks of a “good servant.”

First, a good servant has an insatiable hunger for God’s Word. Even though Timothy was taught the Scriptures from his childhood (2 Tim 3:15), the present tense verb, “trained,” indicates that he must constantly build on the knowledge he has already attained. This growth will not happen by accident but will only come if he feeds on “the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed” (1 Tim 4:6c). Everything else that he says in the rest of this passage depends upon this aspiration.

Second, a good servant exercises healthy spiritual discernment. In Timothy’s case, he must learn to discern between those things that please God and others that are “irreverent, silly myths” (1 Tim 4:7a). Elsewhere, the word for “irreverent” describes a way of life that is “profane” (1 Tim 1:9), “religiously bankrupt,”²⁰ or worldly.²¹ The phrase “silly myths” refers to the kind of superstitious talk that was thought to be common among “elderly” women.²² In other words, the faithful servant is spiritually sober and grounded in God’s truth to such a degree that no quarter is given to entertain worldly banter and religious trivialities. Only when believers spend significant time in

¹⁹ John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 116, Logos Bible Software 9.

²⁰ Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, The New American Commentary, vol. 34 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 134, Logos Bible Software 9.

²¹ *BDAG*, s.v. “βέβηλος.”

²² *BDAG*, s.v. “γραιώδης.”

God's Word and prayer will they develop a proper grasp of those things that God wants them to value and those other things that he wants them to disregard.

Third, good servants put effort into their relationship with God. Instead of entertaining foolish religious ideas, Paul says this person will, "train . . . for godliness" (1 Tim 4:7b). The word "train" is particularly interesting since the English word gymnasium is derived from this verb (*γυμνάζω*). This training is not easily undertaken as it requires "hard work"²³ and total physical exertion²⁴ if the disciple is to "toil and strive" in a manner that pleases God (1 Tim 4:10a). Like many today, first-century Romans placed a high value on physical exercise. Paul's point is that it is just as impossible to become spiritually fit without disciplined spiritual sweat as it is to become physically fit without disciplined physical sweat. While there are limits to the benefits of physical training, there are no limits to the benefits that come with "godliness." Consequently, spiritual striving must be prioritized over all other concerns since "bodily training is of some value" (8a), but engaging in spiritual disciplines such as Bible study and prayer "is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (1 Tim 4:8). The reason for prioritizing the spiritual disciplines over all otherwise positive activities is because they prepare "us for eternity" (1 Tim 4:8d; Heb 9:15).²⁵

It is often said that good works do not produce salvation, but salvation produces good works (Eph 2:8-10). The upshot of this is that if a believer wants to live a life that pleases God, the Lord has ordained exertion, toil, and hard work as part of the normal flow of the Christian life. It is important to remember that this spiritual exertion is for God's glory and the believer's good. This is because the disciplines of Bible study and prayer help them experience what it is to live in communion with God.

²³ *BDAG*, s.v. "*γυμνάζω*."

²⁴ *BDAG*, s.v. "*γυμνάζω*."

²⁵ Stott, *The Message of Ephesians 1 Timothy & Titus*, 117.

Believers Must Be Equipped to Grow to Maturity in Christ

God has given gifts to the church, which he uses to mature its members. The most important of these gifts are not material things like gold and silver, but people. He says,

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Eph 4:11-16)

Ephesians 4:11 describes at least four offices that God uses to promote unity within the body of Christ. These are “the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers” (Eph 4:11). The primary function of those who hold these offices is to equip believers to grow to maturity in Christ. Since the apostles and prophets were foundational offices of the church (Eph 2:20), they did not continue “after the Lord had laid the groundwork for his church in the first generation of the new covenant era.”²⁶ Moreover, he mentions evangelists, like Philip (Acts 21:8), who are spiritually gifted to preach the gospel and perhaps functioned “like a modern missionary.”²⁷ Finally, Paul mentions “shepherds and teachers.”²⁸ While apostles and prophets were foundational to the ministries of the church, and evangelists may have been responsible for planting new ones, “shepherds and teachers” are critical for the ongoing spiritual maintenance and growth of believers gathered in established assemblies. Shepherds or pastors are those

²⁶ S. M. Baugh, *Ephesians*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 334, Logos Bible Software 9.

²⁷ Baugh, *Ephesians*, 335.

²⁸ For the view that shepherds and teachers constitute one office, see Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1991), 52, Logos Bible Software 9. For the view that these are two different offices see S. M. Baugh, *Ephesians*, 334-335.

who tend the flock of God by leading in a way that is marked by “nurture, care, and guidance.”²⁹ Moreover, teachers serve by “preserving, transmitting, expounding, interpreting, and applying the apostolic gospel and tradition along with the Jewish Scripture.”³⁰

The apostle Paul lists two main functions of shepherds and teachers. First, they are “to equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph 4:12a). While the noun “equip” is only found here in the New Testament, it was used in broader literature as a medical term to describe the “setting of a bone.”³¹ The verbal form of this word is used in the New Testament for “mending” nets (Mark 1:19), restoring an erring believer (Gal 6:1), and repairing relationships (2 Cor 13:11). Such a person must be “fully trained” (Luke 6:40). In short, shepherds and teachers bear the responsibility of identifying and remediating those areas within the congregation that are spiritually lacking. Therefore, it is the pastor’s responsibility to do whatever is necessary to help every member of the body to grow to their full spiritual potential in Christ.

Second, their work equipping individual believers must be for the purpose of “building up the body of Christ” (Eph 4:12b). In a figurative sense, the word “building” carries with it the idea of edification.³² As individual church members grow to their full potential in Christ, the body as a whole will become all that God intends it to be. To accomplish this lofty goal, pastors must continually strive for theological and spiritual cohesion within the body “until we all attain to the unity of the faith” (Eph 4:13a). This theological cohesion is incredibly unifying as believers embrace “one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one

²⁹ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 42 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1990), 251.

³⁰ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 251.

³¹ *BDAG*, s.v. “καταρτισμός.”

³² *BDAG*, s.v. “οἰκοδομή.”

faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:4b-6).³³ Consequently, fundamental to the role of the shepherd and teacher must be a commitment to teaching God’s people how to read God’s Word accurately so that when counterfeits arise, they will not be waylaid by them. With this being said, theological unity on its own is not enough to produce the kind of “mature manhood” (Eph 4:13c) that ought to be indicative of God’s church.³⁴

Shepherds must also cultivate spiritual maturity within the local assembly. This requires that they not only nurture believers in devotion to Christ but that they also protect God’s people from false teaching. The goal of this Christian nurture is that the church stands as one “mature” body. The word “mature” characterizes those who bear a spiritual “completeness”³⁵ in contrast with those whose immature thinking and attitudes are more typical of “children” and “infants” (1 Cor 14:20; 3:1; see also Eph 4:14a). Such people easily fall prey to false teachers who corrupt them by “human cunning, by craftiness and deceitful schemes” (Eph 4:14b). What standard should God’s people look to when aspiring to “mature manhood”? The simple answer is that Christians must seek after “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13d). Baugh explains, “he is the maturity by which all Christian maturity must be measured as the fountain and standard of the new human race in the new creation inaugurated in the Firstborn.”³⁶ One of the chief characteristics of Christian maturity is the ability to speak “the truth in love” (Eph 4:15a). Lincoln succinctly states, “ultimately, at the heart of the proclamation of the truth is love, and a life of love is the embodiment of the truth. The church reflects this

³³ Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 10 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 127, Logos Bible Software 9.

³⁴ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 256.

³⁵ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 256.

³⁶ Baugh, *Ephesians*, 341.

relationship when its witness to the truth has love as its style and as its power.”³⁷ By standing on the truth of Christ and allowing his love to temper our words and actions, the local church will “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph 4:15b).

While the theological and spiritual cohesion within the body is ultimately dependent upon the Lord’s intervening work in the lives of his people, he has appointed pastors and teachers to give them the tools to become mature in Christ. This dynamic is flushed out when Paul says that the body is “joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped” (Eph 4:16b). The word “joined” was used for connecting construction materials and parts of the human body.³⁸ The present participle, “held together,” “is generally used of bringing things or people together, and of reconciling those who have quarreled.”³⁹ Therefore, Christ uses the equipping work of pastors and teachers to promote love and unity within the body. Paul explains, “when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph 4:16c). Lincoln asserts, “love is the lifeblood of the body, and, therefore, the ultimate criterion for the assessment of the church’s growth will be how far it is characterized by love.”⁴⁰ When pastors equip God’s people with the tools necessary to become mature in Christ, the by-product is a healthy congregation that is in love with Jesus and, consequently, with one another.

Bible Study Is Powerful for Spiritual Growth and Transformation

According to Donald Whitney, “no Spiritual Discipline is more important than

³⁷ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 260.

³⁸ *TDNT*, s.v. “συναρμολογέω.”

³⁹ Foulkes, *Ephesians*, 130.

⁴⁰ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 264.

the intake of God's Word."⁴¹ A critical text which establishes the supremacy of God's Word in the Christian's life is found in Second Timothy. Paul writes, "all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17). Two contextual factors must be taken into account when considering what Paul says about the vital role Scripture plays in believers' lives. First, these words were written when the apostle was imprisoned and awaiting his demise at Nero's hand.⁴² Second, given how close he was to death, it must be assumed that Paul emphasized those things that were of the greatest significance for the fledgling church. With this in mind, the letter oozes with pathos as Paul reminds his protégé, "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim 3:12b). Paul learned firsthand that some of this persecution comes from within the Christian community. These acts are perpetrated by "evil people and imposters" who deceptively infiltrate the church and wreak havoc on the body (2 Tim 3:13). Therefore, to guard the church against false teaching, it is incumbent upon the people of God to have a clear understanding of Scripture. As one who had a "sincere faith" (2 Tim 2:5) and who was taught the Scriptures from his childhood (2 Tim 3:15), Timothy knew how critical the Word of God is in the life of a Christian. Not only does Scripture make a person "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 3:16), but it is also an essential tool for spiritual growth and transformation.

The chief reason that the Bible is supremely beneficial for spiritual growth and transformation is that it originated in the mind of God. Paul declared, "all Scripture is

⁴¹ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 22.

⁴² See D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 578, Logos Bible Software 9.

breathed out by God” (2 Tim 3:16a).⁴³ It is also practically beneficial since it is the essential source for “teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16b). The word “training” is used elsewhere to describe (Eph 6:4) “a system of discipline used by a parent to develop Christian character in a child.”⁴⁴ In this case, the apostle’s primary focus is on the spiritual development of “the man of God” (2 Tim 3:17a). Specifically, the kind of training that will produce “righteousness.” While righteousness is often associated with a forensic declaration of pardon in the life of a believer, the idea of righteousness in this text cannot be restricted to this concept alone.⁴⁵ Paul’s vision for believers is that they reflect, to an increasing degree, the inner transformation that began when God justified them. Not only does God’s Word supply all that is necessary to give the believer proper spiritual direction, but it also has the power to bring a person to the realization “that they have done wrong.”⁴⁶ Moreover, the Bible is beneficial because it is a potent weapon that, when used properly, serves to repel false teachers when they go on the offensive against the Body of Christ.⁴⁷

All of this means that Christ-followers must make Bible study a priority. This

⁴³ The apostle Paul did not confine his understanding of Scripture to the Old Testament. For example, he characterized Jesus’ teaching as Scripture (1 Tim 5:18; cf., Luke 10:7). Moreover, he also held that his own teachings were Scripture. Knight makes an excellent case for this when he points out that, “Paul insisted that his letters be read (1 Thes. 5:27), exchanged (Col. 4:16), and obeyed (e.g., 1 Cor. 14:37; 2 Thes. 2:15) and identified the words he used to communicate the gospel message as ‘those taught by the Spirit’ (1 Cor. 2:13). In this letter Paul has praised Timothy for following his teaching (v. 10), has urged Timothy to continue in what he has learned from Paul (v. 14), has commanded Timothy to retain ‘the standard of sound words’ that he has heard from Paul (1:13), has commanded him to entrust what he has heard from Paul to faithful men so that they could teach others (2:2), and has insisted that Timothy handle accurately ‘the word of truth’ (2:15). After his remarks on *πᾶσα γραφή* he will urge Timothy to ‘preach the word’ (4:2), i.e., proclaim the apostolic message, about which Paul has said so much in this letter.” See George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 448. Logos Bible Software 9.

⁴⁴ Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 237.

⁴⁵ *TDNT*, s.v. “*Δίκη, Δίκαιος, Δικαιοσύνη, Δικαίω, Δικαίωμα, Δικαίωσις, Δικαιοκρίσια.*”

⁴⁶ I. Howard Marshall and Philip H. Towner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 2004), 795, Logos Bible Software 9.

⁴⁷ Jon C. Laansma, *Commentary on 2 Timothy*, in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, vol. 17, *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Hebrews*, ed. Philip W. Comfort (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2009), 192, Logos Bible Software 9.

is because Scripture informs the thinking and the subsequent conduct of every person who wishes to live a vibrant Christian life.⁴⁸ It makes believers “complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:17b). In this way, the Bible is the sure guide for those who wish to experience a life of authentic communion with God.⁴⁹

The Centrality of Christ in Scripture

As has been noted, it is the job of pastors and teachers to equip God’s people to read the Bible well. Since the sixty-six books of the Bible were written over many centuries by dozens of authors in three different languages, the task of faithful Bible interpretation is difficult. It requires tedious historical, cultural, contextual, and grammatical study. Not only that, but the interpreter must also seek to understand how each passage fits within the “corpus and entire canon” of Scripture.⁵⁰ This task becomes more difficult when one realizes that there is no scholarly consensus as to whether any one theme binds the entirety of the Bible together.⁵¹ However, this scholarly opinion is not shared by the Apostle Paul who asserted that “all the promises of God find their Yes in him” (2 Cor 1:20a).

Jesus developed the idea that he is the unifying theme of the Bible when he joined his disciples incognito on the road to Emmaus. The narrative opens on the Sunday of the resurrection. That afternoon, stories began to circulate that Jesus rose from the dead. Later that day, Cleopas, and another unnamed disciple (Luke 24:18) walked together along a seven-mile stretch of road (Luke 24:13b) that connected the city of

⁴⁸ For an argument in favor of the idea that “man of God” refers to all believers rather than Christian leaders, see Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 450.

⁴⁹ Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 450.

⁵⁰ Matt Smethurst and D. A. Carson, “Carson Explains What Makes a Good Commentary,” The Gospel Coalition, last modified February 11, 2014, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/carson-explains-what-makes-a-good-commentary/>.

⁵¹ See Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

Jerusalem to a place called Emmaus. The men were discussing the crucifixion of Jesus (Luke 24:20) and his resurrection, which some women claimed to have witnessed earlier that day (Luke 24:23).

Though they did not recognize him, Jesus “drew near” (Luke 24:15) as they were vigorously “discussing”⁵² these things. They had no idea that Jesus was the one who joined them in their walk since God kept them from “recognizing him” (Luke 24:16).⁵³ When Jesus asked them about the nature of their spirited conversation, Cleopas asked, “are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” (Luke 24:18). Not wanting to drop the matter, the veiled Christ asked, “What things?” (Luke 24:19b). The men described how they had believed that Jesus was Israel’s redeemer (Luke 24:21). They saw him as “a prophet” who was “mighty in deed and word before God and all the people” (Luke 24:19b). They described how he was wrongly convicted and crucified by the leaders of the land (Luke 24:20b). Moreover, the men also explained how they heard reports that some women found his tomb empty that morning and claimed that “angels” told them that Jesus was “alive” (Luke 24:23). Lastly, some of the disciples went to the tomb to see for themselves and discovered that everything was “just as the women had said” (Luke 24:24).

Once the men shared this, the stranger suddenly became an expert on the matter. He rebuked them and called them “foolish ones” who were “slow of heart to believe” (Luke 24:25). This word “foolish,” coupled with the accusation that they were “slow of heart to believe,” gives the reader a sense that these men were taking a wait-and-see approach to the credibility of what they had heard. It was not their failure to believe the testimony of others that was most bothersome to the stranger, but their inability to see

⁵² The word, “discussing” (Luke 24:15) often carries with it the sense to “view, dispute, debate, argue.” See *BDAG*, s.v. “συζητέω.”

⁵³ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, The New American Commentary, vol. 24 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 610, Logos Bible Software 9.

how these events were a fulfillment of “all that the prophets have spoken!” (Luke 24:25b). In other words, given the writings of the prophets, they should have expected that the messiah “should suffer” and afterward “enter into his glory” (Luke 24:26). As Morris puts it, “the two had wrong ideas of what the Old Testament taught and thus they had wrong ideas about the cross.”⁵⁴

Rather than leaving them to ponder how the story of the Bible fits together, Luke says, “and beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). According to Morris, Jesus led the men through a “systematic” examination of the Old Testament. He goes on,

Moses and all the prophets formed the starting-point, but he also went on to the things that referred to himself in all the scriptures. The picture we get is of the Old Testament as pointing to Jesus in all its parts. Luke gives no indication of which passages the Lord chose, but he makes it clear that the whole Old Testament was involved. We should perhaps understand this not as the selection of a number of proof-texts, but rather as showing that throughout the Old Testament a consistent divine purpose is worked out, a purpose that in the end meant and must mean the cross. The terribleness of sin is found throughout the Old Testament and so is the deep, deep love of God. In the end this combination made Calvary inevitable.⁵⁵

After Jesus lifted the interpretive veil, which kept them from seeing his fullness in the Old Testament, he lifted the physical veil that prevented them from seeing him in their midst. Upon his departure, they cried, “did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (Luke 24:32b). Following their meal with Jesus, they joyfully returned to Jerusalem to share all that they had seen and heard with the apostles (Luke 24:33-35).

The fundamental theological point of this narrative is that all Scripture drives toward Christ. It is in the person of Jesus that the Bible finds its center and unity. As a result, “we must learn to see, understand, admire, and follow the traces of the wisdom of God in putting together the whole canon in these long trajectories that bring us along axis

⁵⁴ Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 358, Logos Bible Software 9.

⁵⁵ Morris, *Luke*, 358.

after axis to Jesus.”⁵⁶ Consequently, it is incumbent upon Bible teachers within the local church to equip God’s people to read the Bible through a Christ-centered lens.

God Wants His People to Draw near through Prayer

Not only are Christians called to grow deeper in their relationship with God through reading the Bible, but he also calls his people into intimate fellowship with him through prayer. As Donald Whitney points out, “prayer is second only to the intake of God’s Word in importance.”⁵⁷

Not only is prayer of great importance for the Christian, but it comes at the gracious invitation of God. As the author to the Hebrews says,

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb 4:14-16)

The words, “since then” connect what he is about to say to certain things already enumerated. After pointing out that every person will stand in judgment before the all-seeing eye of an omniscient God (Heb 4:13), he brings relief to the guilt-stricken heart in the following three verses. Luther put it succinctly, “after terrifying us, the Apostle now comforts us, after pouring wine into our wound, he now pours oil.”⁵⁸ This text lists the means God has provided human beings to enter his presence (Heb 4:14) and the nature of the interaction with him once they are there (Heb 4:15-16).

Since Jesus is the “great high priest,” he is the means through which people

⁵⁶ D. A. Carson, “Getting Excited about Malchizedek,” in *The Scriptures Testify About Me: Jesus and the Gospel in the Old Testament*, ed. D. A. Carson, 145-74 (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2011), 171.

⁵⁷ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 80.

⁵⁸ Martin Luther, *Lectures on the Epistle to the Hebrews 1517-1518*, in *Luther: Early Theological Works*, ed. and trans. James Atkinson (London: SCM Press, 1962), quoted in Philip Edgecumbe Hughes, *A Commentary to the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 169.

have access to God (Heb 4:14). A high priest is God's representative who serves in God's Temple and intercedes for men before God. As the "great high priest" (Heb 4:14b), Jesus has transcended all earthly constraints and "passed through the heavens" (Heb 4:14c). As Guthrie notes, "our high priest penetrates to the very presence of God."⁵⁹ The perfect tense, "passed through," indicates that Christ's heavenly intercession is permanent and ongoing. Rather than having a temporary and intermittent ministry of intercession that is confined to the temple precincts, Jesus is now present with the Father interceding on behalf of his people (see Rom 8:34). Consequently, Jesus is not only humanity's representative before God, but he is also God's representative to humanity. Therefore, Christians must hold unwaveringly "to their public confession of him as the Son of God"⁶⁰ since there is no hope of salvation outside of Jesus (John 14:5; Acts 4:12).

The author draws two implications from Christ's high priesthood. First, Jesus is a sympathetic intercessor. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15). Just as there is often an affinity between people who have shared experiences, so the writer says that this type of connection exists between Christ and his people.⁶¹ This is because he has experienced the same pains of temptation that Christians face. As a result, they can count on his support since "we are certain that Christ, through his compassion, will make up for our lack of strength."⁶² Second, Jesus wants his people to talk to him. The author writes, "let us then with confidence draw near

⁵⁹ Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 15 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 124, Logos Bible Software 9.

⁶⁰ George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, NIV Application Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 175.

⁶¹ Ellingworth posits that the probable meaning of "sympathize" is "that Christ's earthly life gives him inner understanding of human experience, and thus makes him ready and able to give active help." Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 268.

⁶² Ceslas Spicq and James D. Ernest, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. James D. Ernest (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 320, Logos Bible Software 9.

to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:16). The word “confidence” may be used to describe a bold manner of action (Acts 13) or simple plainness of speech (John 11:14). The present tense verb, “draw near,” signifies that it is God’s wish for his people to continually come before him in prayer. These elements combined demonstrate that God offers his people freedom to enter his presence with “confidence and openness which need not be ashamed when it stands before the Judge.”⁶³ For some, this invitation to come boldly and plainly may seem intimidating. However, the believer should not think of it that way since this place of communion is characterized as “the throne of grace” where the redeemed saint “may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:16b). Under the old covenant, only one man, once a year, was briefly allowed to enter the holy of holies (Heb 9:7). All of that has changed since Christians have a Great High Priest who not only saved them from their sin but also opened up for them continual access to God through his sacrificial death on their behalf.

Jesus has done everything necessary to bridge the relational gap that emerged once humanity rebelled against God. He is risen and has ascended to the right hand of God the Father in heaven, where he intercedes for his people (Heb 1:3; Rom 8:34). From there, he beckons his people to come and enjoy the fellowship he intended them to experience from the beginning. Since Christ has made it possible for his people to come to him in prayer, and because he earnestly bids them come, it is right for local churches to use every godly means at their disposal to equip believers to engage with God in this way.

Conclusion

It was always God’s desire to dwell with his people forever. At creation,

⁶³ *TDNT*, s.v. “Παρησία, Παρησιάζομαι.”

human beings were brought into a world where heaven and earth were one. God lived with his people in a place of perfect delight. He loved them, and they loved him. However, Adam and Eve turned their backs on God and were exiled from his presence. At this point, God promised a redeemer who would one day repair the breach in the relationship they caused. The promised one was Jesus, God's Son, who took on flesh and "tabernacled among us" (John 1:14, TLV). His sacrifice removed the stain of sin that separated humanity from God so that through faith in Christ's atoning work, people may dwell with the Lord as he had always intended.

Until that day when God and his people will enjoy unveiled fellowship with one another, he has given the church as his instrument to cultivate this relationship. Jesus said, "I will build my church" (Matt 16:18). While this declaration certainly included numeric growth, this chapter has shown that Bible study and prayer are two vital disciplines that God has given to strengthen the spiritual fiber of his people (1 Tim 4:6-11). God has tasked pastors with the responsibility of helping every believer under their care grow to their full potential in Christ (Eph 4:11). The shepherd must be intentional about giving people the tools they need to understand and apply the Bible in a meaningful way. Moreover, he must equip the congregation with the tools necessary to deepen their experience in communing with God through prayer. It is incumbent upon church leaders to help those they serve to see the radical implications of the new covenant and the unprecedented access it gives to his people as they daily seek his holy presence (Heb 4:14-16).

CHAPTER 3
THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES RELATED
TO THE DISCIPLINES OF PERSONAL
BIBLE STUDY AND PRAYER

Introduction

One popular website lists fifty books written on the topic of spiritual disciplines. There is little doubt that the number of helpful books on this subject is many times that.¹ The fact that so many resources are available to teach people the spiritual disciplines demonstrates that growth in this area does not usually require intention. As shown in the previous chapter, God has blessed the church with pastors and teachers who are responsible “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:12-13). Given that pastors and teachers are responsible for equipping the saints, it is necessary for CCCMM’s leadership to find ways to teach God’s people how to read the Bible and pray in ways that will lead to godliness. This chapter will argue that personal Bible study and prayer are essential for attaining maturity in Christ.

**Bible Study and Prayer Are Essential for Attaining
Maturity in Christ**

Like all healthy habits, the development of spiritual disciplines requires intentionality. Malcolm Gladwell popularized the “ten thousand hour rule,” which

¹ Good Reads, “Spiritual Disciplines Books,” Accessed May 10, 2020.
<https://www.goodreads.com/shelf/show/spiritual-disciplines>.

presumes that “achievement is talent plus preparation.”² According to researchers, ten thousand hours is the “magic number for true expertise.”³ Biblical spirituality scholar Donald Whitney concurs, “to become an expert in anything, for anything to become second nature, you must perform that activity – such as playing the guitar – for at least ten thousand hours.”⁴ While it may be discouraging to consider the effort required for Bible study and prayer to become second nature, it is encouraging to know that such a life is possible.

Believers Must Be Equipped to be Spiritually Disciplined

It is impossible to number the various longings of the human heart. At the very least, there is a craving for healthy relationships, material sustenance, and physical well-being. Jesus called his hearers to find the fulfillment of all these desires in a relationship with God. He said, “but seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matt 6:33). The apostle Paul knew better than most how empty life is without Jesus (Gal 1:13-16). Following a life lived as an avowed enemy of Christ, Paul found the true source of contentment when Christ called him to be his own (Phil 3:2-11). He said, “but godliness with contentment is great gain, for we

² Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008), 38.

³ Gladwell, *Outliers*, 40. There have been a number of challenges to the ten thousand hour rule since Gladwell published his book. One of the most important studies along this line was conducted by a team of researchers led by Princeton’s Brooke Macnamara. She concluded, “there is no doubt that deliberate practice is important, from both a statistical and a theoretical perspective. It is just less important than has been argued.” For more information, see Princeton University, “Becoming an Expert Takes More Than Practice,” last modified July 3, 2014, <https://www.princeton.edu/news/2014/07/03/becoming-expert-takes-more-practice>. Gladwell argues that critics misunderstand his point when they apply the rule so broadly that it is tested against every human endeavor imaginable. He argues, “it does not invalidate the ten-thousand-hour principle, however, to point out that in instances where there are not a long list of situations and scenarios and possibilities to master—like jumping really high, running as fast as you can in a straight line, or directing a sharp object at a large, round piece of cork—expertise can be attained a whole lot more quickly. What Simon and Chase wrote forty years ago remains true today. In cognitively demanding fields, there are no naturals.” See Malcolm Gladwell, “Complexity and the Ten-Thousand-Hour Rule,” *The New Yorker*, last modified August 21, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/sports/sporting-scene/complexity-and-the-ten-thousand-hour-rule>.

⁴ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 18.

brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content” (1 Tim 4:6-8). It is easy for many to assume that living a mature Christian life requires little or no personal effort. In contrast to this misperception, Jesus became all-consuming to Paul following his conversion. He declared, “brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:13-14).

God grows his people spiritually in three fundamental ways. He does this by using (1) other “people,” (2) their “circumstances,” and (3) the spiritual disciplines.⁵ So critical is this last category that after spending decades studying this subject, Whitney concludes, “from Biblical times to our time, godly people have always been spiritually disciplined people.”⁶ Given the immense importance of the spiritual disciplines in the life of Christians, it is surprising that more believers do not make a concerted effort to develop them. As was established in the last chapter, growing in the spiritual disciplines requires spiritual “sweat” (1 Tim 4:7). Since this means “discipline” is required, it explains why so many Christians struggle in this area.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Charles Duhigg argues that certain habits that people and organizations cultivate “matter more than others.”⁷ For example, he points out how Paul O’Neill, Chief Executive Officer of Alcoa, transformed the company from a struggling organization into a highly profitable one during his thirteen years at the helm. He did this by focusing his energies on raising safety standards companywide. Like the ripples created by a stone when thrown into a lake, making a concerted effort to reduce employee injuries led to countless innovations within the company in seemingly

⁵ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 10.

⁶ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 10.

⁷ Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* (New York: Random House, 2014), 100.

unrelated areas. Duhigg calls these disciplines “keystone habits.” In short, “keystone habits start a process that, over time, transforms everything.”⁸

While secular corporations must instill healthy practices, it is of even greater importance that followers of Christ develop those disciplines that lead to individual and corporate spiritual growth. For the Christian, Bible study and prayer are central to this effort. Concerning Bible reading, Whitney asserts, “no Spiritual Discipline is more important than the intake of God’s Word. Nothing can substitute for it. There simply is no healthy Christian life apart from a diet of the milk and meat of Scripture.”⁹ He adds that prayer “is second only to the intake of God’s Word in importance.”¹⁰ The two keystone disciplines of daily Bible study and prayer have the power to revolutionize Christian lives individually and corporately the way higher safety standards at Alcoa transformed the entire company.

According to Drew Dyck, a habit is an “action that becomes a pattern of unconscious behavior.”¹¹ Since human beings are complex, the task of replacing bad habits with positive spiritual disciplines is a difficult one. Over the last few decades, there have been many insights within the field of neuroscience that have proven helpful for understanding how people develop habits. Researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have discovered “the habit loop.”¹² The habit loop is a three-step process that defines how unconscious human behavioral patterns operate. First, the loop begins with a signal called a “cue,” which triggers a specific type of behavior. Second, the behavior that the cue triggers is called the “routine.” Third, the loop is completed when a particular

⁸ Duhigg, *The Power of Habit*, 100.

⁹ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 22.

¹⁰ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 80.

¹¹ Drew Dyck, *Your Future Self Will Thank You: Secrets to Self-Control from the Bible and Brain Science (A Guide for Sinners, Quitters, and Procrastinators)* (Chicago: Moody, 2019), 122.

¹² Duhigg, *The Power of Habit*, 288.

routine results in a “reward.” James Clear points out that “the first purpose of rewards is to satisfy your craving.”¹³ In other words, this craving for a reward continually propels the habit loop. Therefore, habits are created when a cue creates a “craving” for a reward that the routine produces.

While the habit loop is relatively simple to understand, replacing old habits with new ones takes significant effort. This is because replacing bad habits with healthy ones requires a person to find a way to neutralize the old cravings that drove the unhealthy patterns in the first place. Since habitual behavior is deeply ingrained and endemic to the fallen order (Jas 2:26), developing cravings that drive new routines often takes much time, thought, and effort. Derek Kidner notes that when David cried, “Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name” (Ps 86:11), he was asking the Lord to show him how to form “right habits.”¹⁴ Therefore, while it is true that it is often difficult to exchange unhelpful or destructive practices for beneficial ones, it is possible through the Spirit’s empowerment (Gal 5:22-23) and the equipping work of spiritual leaders.

Marketers have understood the power of cues as a part of the process of habit formation for decades. For example, Cinnabon is a company that bakes cinnamon buns fresh to order. A key strategy for selling their products is called “scent marketing.” For stores located in shopping malls or airports, “the chain purposefully positions its ovens near the front of stores so that the scent disperses whenever the oven doors are opened.”¹⁵ The company does this because the undiluted scent of a Cinnabon wafting through a mall

¹³ James Clear, *Atomic Habits: An Easy and Proven Way to Build Good Habits and Break Bad Ones* (New York: Avery, 2018), 49.

¹⁴ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 16 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 344, Logos Bible Software 9.

¹⁵ Chris Gayomali, “How Cinnabon Strategically Seduces Hungry Shoppers with Insanely Delicious Smells,” Fast Company, last modified May 21, 2014, <https://www.fastcompany.com/3030919/how-cinnabon-strategically-seduces-hungry-shoppers-with-insanely-delicious-smells>.

or terminal acts as a cue that produces a craving that is only satisfied when a person consumes one of their sugary treats. In the same way, to successfully develop the spiritual disciplines of Bible study and prayer, a person must find cues that trigger a craving that can only be satisfied by engaging in these godly pursuits.

This emphasis on spiritual discipline or habit formation has been central to living a godly life for millennia. The psalmist wrote, “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night (Ps 1:1-2). Billy Graham put this commitment on full display in his life. In an interview with bestselling author Jerry Jenkins, Graham was eager to share his thoughts on the spiritual disciplines. About his prayer life, Graham confessed that he prayed “every waking moment since I received Christ at age 16.”¹⁶ When asked how he gets on track after failing to read the Bible a day or two, Graham responded, “I don’t think I’ve ever done that.”¹⁷ How did Graham cultivate a life of such Biblical fidelity and devotion? He carefully identified certain cues that drove his craving for deeper intimacy with God. In the case of reading the Scriptures, he made it a practice to always keep his Bible open. As a result, each time he walked by his Bible, he always stopped, read a portion, and meditated upon it. During the discussion, Jenkins noticed the Bible sitting open atop Graham’s desk.¹⁸ The open Bible reminded him to read it as much as possible. With this constant awareness of God’s presence, it lent itself to also obeying God’s command to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17).

There is no “one size fits all” approach to developing keystone disciplines. There are likely as many cues for triggering a desire to read the Bible or to pray as there

¹⁶ Jerry Jenkins, “Precious Memories: Billy Graham (1918-2018),” last modified February 21, 2018, <https://jerryjenkins.com/precious-memories-billy-graham-1918-2018/>.

¹⁷ Jenkins, “Precious Memories.”

¹⁸ Jenkins, “Precious Memories.”

are people because “individuals are all different.”¹⁹ While Billy Graham found a cue that worked for him, others may discover others like maintaining a checklist of daily Scripture readings or employing one-year Bibles, whose editors organize readings in a way that makes staying on task convenient. In any case, if one wishes to develop the discipline of Bible study, individuals must identify those cues that best signal a craving to engage in the routine that is only satisfied by time spent with the Lord.

The everyday trials and triumphs of life often provide cues that encourage prayer. For many, it may be a close call in traffic, the positive outcome of a medical test, the sudden conviction of sin from the Holy Spirit, or a simple meal that provides believers with the necessary cue to raise their hearts to God in times of fear, anguish, and thanks. While these spontaneous moments are valuable, it is also essential that Christians set aside time for sustained intercession before the throne of grace. In this regard, Jesus often sought solitary places for times of private prayer (Luke 5:16). In contrast, Christians often find it difficult to pray for any length of time before they lose their train of thought or fall asleep (e.g., Matt 26:40). Consequently, it is imperative that God’s people are equipped to engage mind and heart in a way that limits distractions, yet holds the believer’s attention by stirring the affections of the heart.

Christians commonly use the word “hunger” to describe an overwhelming desire to grow deeper in their walk with Christ. As they read their Bibles and pray, they will grow closer to the Lord. By implication, the closer they grow to the Lord, the more they will long to read their Bibles and pray. The hope is that as believers grow through the disciplines, their spiritual satisfaction will also increase, and they will develop an ever-growing hunger for Christ which is satisfied through the time spent with the Lord in Bible study and prayer.

¹⁹ Duhigg, *The Power of Habit*, 287.

The advantage of small groups. The Bible uses the body as a metaphor to describe the church (1 Cor 12:27). Therefore, it functions best when there is a strong sense of community among those who comprise it. This oneness was clearly evident in the lives of the early Christians. They were of “one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common” (Acts 4:32b). One effective way of developing a sense of oneness within the context of a church community is in small groups. These settings provide an effective mechanism for equipping others within an atmosphere that promotes individual and corporate growth. Ed Stetzer conducted research that shows that the culture is shifting in a way that makes it advantageous to study the Bible with others.

We asked a total of 1,000 twenty-something unchurched people (900 American, 100 Canadian), and we compared them to a sample of 500 older unchurched (which would be 30 or above) . . . One of the questions that we asked them to agree or disagree with was: “I’d be willing to study the Bible if a friend asked me to.” Well, among twenty-somethings, 61 per cent said, “Yes.” And among their older counterparts of 30 and above, 42 per cent said, “Yes.” And that was a statistically significant difference, telling us there’s something going on, there’s an openness that’s there. So we’re seeing that as an opportunity—that in the midst of maybe some negative views of the church, there is also some openness to the things of God.²⁰

Small groups provide an excellent context to develop the disciplines because they offer a place for people “to discuss the Bible, to pray together, to embody their faith.”²¹ This is because some people feel more comfortable due to the inherent size limitations of small groups. As a result, group members feel greater freedom to share their experiences in an environment that is more casual and less intimidating than other, more formal church gatherings.

The advantage of journaling. One of the best practices for reinforcing the

²⁰ David Helm, *One to One Bible Reading: A Simple Guide for Every Christian* (Youngstown, OH: Matthias Media, 2011), 15-16.

²¹ Duhigg, *The Power of Habit*, 238.

spiritual disciplines is journaling. Journaling is a method people use to record their thoughts. Christians often use journals to write out prayers, prayer lists, ideas about the Bible and applications that arise from reading it. Whitney asserts that “a journal is one of the best places for charting your progress in the other spiritual disciplines and for holding yourself accountable to your goals.”²² Fleming suggests that the practice of journaling is particularly useful for those times set aside for private Bible study and prayer.

Read the Word and pray. Ponder. Then go one step further: Capture in writing something of the content and the spirit of what you are learning, thinking, praying, or questioning. Try writing out your prayers or making notes on what you read. Experiment. Discover which ideas fit you best at this time in your life. With pen in hand, allow God to take you beneath the surface into a deeper experience with him.²³

Even though there were high levels of illiteracy among those groups who originally received the Scriptures, there is some Biblical precedent for journaling. For example, God intended that when a new king took the throne of Israel, he was to write down the law. The long-term benefit of this was “that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes” (Deut 17:19b). When Christians keep a journal for their thoughts, the very act often helps them to retain those elements that are most important to remember. Moreover, it also helps people stay mentally focused during sustained prayer.

Journaling is effective for developing the spiritual disciplines of Bible study and prayer because it is a “habit tracker.” A habit tracker “is a simple way to measure whether you did a habit.”²⁴ Journaling is a visual cue that reminds a person that it is time to perform the routine central to the habit loop. James Clear argues that there are several benefits to habit tracking. First, people who methodically record their progress tend to be

²² Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 250.

²³ Jean Fleming, *Feeding Your Soul: A Quiet Time Handbook* (Colorado Springs: 1999), 93.

²⁴ Clear, *Atomic Habits*, 196.

more consistent than those who do not. He points out that “one study of more than sixteen hundred people found that those who kept a daily food log lost twice as much weight as those who did not. The mere act of tracking behavior can spark the urge to change it.”²⁵ Second, tracking progress keeps people honest.²⁶ This is because people generally do not perceive their behavior accurately. Individuals tend to tell themselves that they are performing better than they are warranted to believe. When a person keeps a journal that accurately records their thoughts, it captures an in-time snapshot of what is going on in the mind and heart. Third, journaling serves as a helpful way to encourage Christians to press on as it enables them to trace personal spiritual growth over time.²⁷ It is natural for there to be a constant ebb and flow throughout the entire course of the Christian life (Eccl 3:1-8). Because of this, journaling may be a valuable tool for the discouraged who feel they are making little progress in their walk with God. Conversely, it is also humbling for those who think too highly of their personal spiritual growth. When used consistently, believers who journal should see increasing evidence of personal spiritual growth and God’s work in their lives over time. Fourth, since completing a task often serves as its own reward, recording progress in a journal often satisfies the craving that the habit loop creates. Therefore, journaling should encourage and strengthen people’s resolve to engage in spiritual disciplines when they receive the right cue.²⁸

Summary. The Holy Spirit not only convicts the world of sin (John 16:8) but also works in believers’ lives to bring forth the spiritual fruit of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22-23). Since the believer is a new creation (1 Cor 5:17) and marked by new affections (Eph 4:24),

²⁵ Clear, *Atomic Habits*, 197.

²⁶ Clear, *Atomic Habits*, 197.

²⁷ Clear, *Atomic Habits*, 198.

²⁸ Clear, *Atomic Habits*, 198.

there should also be an accompanying desire to break entirely away from the old way of life (Rom 6:11). However, this new way requires spiritual sweat (1 Tim 4:7-8). Consequently, to develop the spiritual disciplines of Bible study and prayer, it is helpful for believers to find a cue that will trigger the routine of Bible study. This Bible study routine will naturally lead to a consistent prayer life once a Christian is taught how to pray the Scriptures. As this seamless movement of cause and effect develops, the reader will naturally move from Bible study to prayer. Finally, Christians should be encouraged to track their daily Bible study and prayer progress by employing a journal. Journaling is helpful because it serves as an accountability tool and a mechanism that promotes consistency. If used regularly, it will likely satisfy the craving initiated by the habit loop.

Believers Must Be Equipped to Read Scripture Contextually

Calvin's *Institutes* famously begins with the words, "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."²⁹ Scripture accurately understood and carefully applied has the power to reveal the inner workings of a person's heart. This is because a God-given desire for real change often takes root in the reader's life due to meditating upon God's Word. The Bible itself testifies that it has the power to change lives. The psalmist affirms,

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. (Ps 19:7-9)

While it is common for people to read the Bible simply for intellectual fulfillment, the purpose of Scripture goes beyond this. As Ryken notes, "A work of literature is not a delivery system for an idea but rather a house in which readers take up residence and out

²⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 35.

of which they look at life. Any aspect of a biblical text that enables a reader to take up residence in it makes possible the spiritual effect of reading and meditating on the Bible.”³⁰ Bible reading is practical because it helps the reader understand where humanity came from, its predicament, and how Christ has provided the only solution to the problem. Therefore, if the twin goal of having a right understanding of God and self is to be realized, spiritual leaders must equip Christians to read the Bible contextually and in a manner dependent upon the Holy Spirit.

The importance of studying Scripture contextually. The previous chapter developed the covenantal framework of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. It also established the Biblical idea that Jesus is central to the Bible’s overarching story (Luke 24:17). The task of interpretation becomes less arduous once a reader begins to grasp the centrality of Christ and his role in the larger metanarrative of Scripture.

Jon Nielson suggests three questions that contextually sensitive Bible readers should ask to understand better how a particular passage fits into the Bible’s overarching storyline. First, he advises the reader to ask, “where are we?”³¹ Nielson compares this question to a GPS device which helps travelers get a better sense of where they are on the road. A better analogy might be that of a trail map which allows hikers to see their position in between entry and exit points as well as the significant points of interest, and rest areas along the way. This is the advantage that a covenantal understanding of Scripture has for Bible readers. It helps them locate where particular stories are within the narrative flow. It also gives them markers that define where they have been and are headed. Once Christians embrace the Bible’s covenantal framework and the centrality of Christ, they will have the fundamental tools necessary to help them read the Bible in a

³⁰ Leland Ryken, “Reading the Bible,” in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie, Simon Chan, Gordon T. Smith, and James T. Smith (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 306.

³¹ Jon Nielson, *Bible Study: A Student’s Guide* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 135.

contextually faithful and theologically sensitive way.

A second question Nielson suggests a Bible reader ask is, “what is God doing?”³² This question digs deeper into the progressive nature of Scripture. He adds, “we need to ask – at every point of the Bible story as we study it – what God is up to, as it relates to his people.”³³ This question helps the reader capture the Bible’s story as it moves from a rebellious couple banished from God’s presence to the regathering of a redeemed people from every tribe and tongue in the New Jerusalem forever. Between the fall and the consummation lies a maze of stories that depict on a micro level the grander macro narrative. For example, readers of First Samuel may discover how the conflict between David and Saul mirrored the overarching battle that began in the garden between the serpent and the offspring of the woman (Gen 3:15). Or it might help readers connect the dispersion of the nations at Babel (Gen 11) and the ingathering of the nations on Pentecost (Acts 2:1-41). In short, understanding the progressive nature of Scripture helps readers develop a better perspective on what God is doing in the text and how believers personally fit into God’s greater plan for the world.

The third question Nielson thinks Christians should ask is, “what still needs to happen?”³⁴ This question becomes a critical bridge between reading a passage in its own contextual setting and reading it through a wider, Christ-centered lens. For example, suppose one is reading about the sacrificial system of the Old Testament. In that case, it is essential to remember that it is a type that points to Jesus as the all-sufficient sacrifice for humanity’s sin (Heb 10:11-14). On the other hand, when reading those parts of the New Testament that follow the cross, Nielson reminds the student to “do so knowing that

³² Nielson, *Bible Study*, 136.

³³ Nielson, *Bible Study*, 136.

³⁴ Nielson, *Bible Study*, 136.

Jesus' coming is expected, even demanded, by what is going on in any given narrative."³⁵ Furthermore, when the apostle Paul is unjustly imprisoned in Caesarea (Acts 24-26), the reader must remember that God is just and is not flawed like human kings and judges. In this way, the reader must always seek to understand how the death and resurrection of Jesus will ultimately culminate in the new creation.³⁶

Bible reading methodology. There is probably no end to the methods designed to help people get more out of personal Bible study. Two particularly popular models are the Swedish and COMA methods. Following a brief description of both, a hybrid model developed by Robert Cheong will be described.

Ada Lum, who formerly served with the International Fellowship of Evangelical students in Hawaii, has been credited by some for popularizing an approach to Bible study called the Swedish Method.³⁷ She coined this term after observing a group of Swedish students using the method to study the Bible. After beginning with prayer, this technique asks readers to open a Bible passage and identify “a lightbulb,” “a question mark,” and “an arrow.” The light bulb refers to anything that leaps out to the reader as noteworthy or particularly interesting. The question mark refers to “anything that is hard to understand; something that the reader would like to be able to ask.”³⁸ Finally, the arrow serves as a reminder to note anything that might apply to the reader's life. After identifying those items, each participant is encouraged to share, in three separate rounds, the insights, questions, and personal applications that became apparent during the Bible

³⁵ Nielson, *Bible Study*, 137.

³⁶ An excellent example of this approach is found in G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

³⁷ According to Peter Blowes, the Swedish Method was originally introduced to the Church of Sweden during the early part of the 1940s by David Berglund. For more information, see Peter Blowes, “Origins of the Swedish Method,” GoThereFor.com, last modified, April 19, 2017, <https://gotherefor.com/offer.php?intid=29764>.

³⁸ Helm, *One to One Bible Reading*, 44.

reading time. More advanced readers sometimes opt for a method like COMA. This system is particularly advantageous because it provides even more tools for the reader to dig deeper into God's Word.

As its name implies, there are four basic steps that the COMA method emphasizes. These are context, observation, meaning, and application. Part of the reason this approach is so practical is that it utilizes a strategy for reading the Bible that people naturally employ when evaluating other types of literature. David Helm asserts,

Even when we pick a newspaper article, we notice what sort of thing we are reading and how it fits with other things around it (context); we read words and sentences and paragraphs, taking note of the main events, people and content (observation); we integrate what we've observed in our heads and form a conclusion about what the author is trying to say (meaning); and we reflect on whether the author's message has any relevance for our lives.³⁹

First, to read the Bible contextually requires that readers ask questions about the setting and meaning of a passage within its context, as well as how it contributes to the larger Biblical narrative. Questions that get to the bottom of this include, "who was the passage written to?" "Why was it written?" And "how does it fit into its nearer literary setting and more broadly in the overall sweep of the Bible's covenantal structure?" Second, once a reader has resolved issues related to the setting, it is necessary to make precise observations regarding the passage itself. To do this, the reader must identify its genre and note elements within the text that are particularly striking or noteworthy. This step also requires careful analysis of how particular words, phrases, and grammatical constructions uniquely shape the passage. Third, a key objective of the interpretive task is to uncover the passage's fundamental meaning or "big idea." The reader must begin by asking how the original audience would have understood the passage and how it contributes to the overall message of the Bible.⁴⁰ After considering

³⁹ Helm, *One to One Bible Reading*, 46

⁴⁰ Tony Payne and Simon Roberts, *Six Steps to Reading Your Bible: Practical Training for Small Groups* (Youngstown, OH: Matthias Media, 2008), 60.

what the passage says about God and how it all “relates to Jesus,”⁴¹ it is necessary for readers to sum up the text in their own words. Fourth, once a person clearly understands the meaning of a particular text within its original context, the reader is ready to apply what has been gleaned. This last step is critical to the process of spiritual development. As Fleming has noted, “spiritual food must be digested as well as ingested. We deaden our spiritual life when we gulp down knowledge without meditation and application. Mistaking ‘knowing’ for ‘being’ is the first soul-blunting step toward hypocrisy.”⁴² To apply the Bible well, the reader must recognize its authoritative nature. Since believers still sin (1 John 1:8-9), they are prone to harbor patterns of thought and engage in types of behavior that run contrary to what God deems acceptable. Given that the truths of God’s Word continually challenge Christians at the core of their being, the reader must “keep trembling in humility before the word of the living God.”⁴³ When believers live in right relationship with the Lord, they will commit themselves to think and act in ways that accord with his Word.

The Swedish and COMA methods provide helpful ways to teach beginning Bible readers how to get the most out of the text. However, their emphasis is more content-driven than focused on experiencing God while reading his Word. As an alternative, Cheong has developed a unique approach in which he intertwines Bible contextualization with an emphasis on experiencing God throughout the process of Bible study.

Many Bible reading methodologies do not call for the reader to think about their personal experience with God until the final application step. This lack of reflective interaction with God and his Word is a problem that may potentially lead to a “head–heart

⁴¹ Helm, *One to One Bible Reading*, 47.

⁴² Fleming, *Feeding Your Soul*, 106.

⁴³ Payne and Roberts, *Six Steps to Reading Your Bible*, 60.

disconnect.” Cheong explains,

How many times have you heard yourself, or someone else, say, “I believe God loves me in my head but I don’t experience his love in my heart.” More times than not, our experience of God doesn’t match with what we know about God. The reality of this disconnect, and mismatch, associated with our relationship with God can leave us fearful that we are not good enough as a Christian, apathetic after repeated attempts to feel something from God end in disappointment, or hardened after giving up on God, who we think has given up on us.⁴⁴

Cheong’s approach is grounded in an interpretive method that views the trajectory of Scripture through the four categories of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. He wants Christians to understand their own story in light of God’s bigger one. When Christians learn to contextualize their experiences in this way, it helps them better understand their past, present, and future in a more coherent and meaningful way. Every person’s story begins with creation. In creation, God made human beings to commune with him. However, this changed when the first couple rebelled against God’s order and were subsequently cut off from him. Due to their rebellion, Adam and Eve were introduced to pain, and death and banished from the unhindered fellowship with God they had known from the very moment they drew their first breath. Cheong identifies six struggles that emerged from the fall that everyone has had to contend with, to one degree or another, ever since. These are fantasy, guilt, fear, shame, anger, and sorrow stemming from some form of loss.⁴⁵

Compounding these internal heart struggles is the external battle of spiritual warfare that began the day the first couple succumbed to the serpent’s temptation. The world, the flesh, and the Devil work together to prevent believers from experiencing the fellowship that he made them to know. The evil one is an intelligent being who makes war on believers by using deceptive schemes to introduce “doubt,” “despair,” and

⁴⁴ Robert Cheong, “Culture of Care Conference,” unpublished conference notes (Medway Community Church, March 16, 2019), 9.

⁴⁵ Robert Cheong, *Restore: Changing How We Live and Love, Study Guide with Leaders Notes* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2020), 22.

“distance” into their lives.⁴⁶ These are designed to create a distance between themselves, God, and others by keeping Christians “fixated” on their own “circumstances.” Consequently, believers must remind themselves that an assault is being waged against them by “the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12b). Cheong cautions,

Failure to address the battle with evil will harden your heart and cause you to turn your back on the living God. Even if you try to address the opposing forces, but with mere effort and willpower, you will end up with deep debilitating wounds and can become enslaved to any of the common struggles rooted in the Fall, leading to the defeat and discouragement.⁴⁷

Believers must not only remember what they are up against, but they also should keep in mind what Christ has done to redeem them from spiritual isolation, futility, and defeat. This redemption was made possible because Christ was willing to enter “into the darkness” (2 Cor 5:17) to redeem fallen human beings so that they may experience the life they were intended to know from the beginning.⁴⁸ This new life is lived in God’s “presence” (John 15:5),⁴⁹ as a fulfillment of his “promises” (2 Cor 1:20),⁵⁰ and in the strength of his “power” (2 Pet 1:3-4).⁵¹ This will culminate in the new creation when “God perfects our communion in him” (Rev 21:1-3).⁵²

Methodologically, Cheong breaks down the process of personal Bible study into three essential movements. Rather than leaving the readers’ individual experience for the last step of personal application, he integrates it into the fabric of each step. His

⁴⁶ Cheong, *Restore: Changing How We Live and Love*, 39-40.

⁴⁷ Robert Cheong, “Restore: Knowing and Experiencing God through His Story,” unpublished class notes for 80474 (The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Summer Semester, 2018), 40-41.

⁴⁸ Cheong, *Restore: Changing How We Live and Love*, 102-3.

⁴⁹ Cheong, *Restore: Changing How We Live and Love*, 115.

⁵⁰ Cheong, *Restore: Changing How We Live and Love*, 134-36.

⁵¹ Cheong, *Restore: Changing How We Live and Love*, 134.

⁵² Cheong, “Restore: Knowing and Experiencing God through His Story,” 75.

approach begins with a spiritual evaluation, continues with experiencing God through his Word, and climaxes with a challenge to live out God's Word.

Cheong intentionally integrates experiencing God in his approach in three ways. First, while the Swedish and COMA methods begin with exposition, Cheong starts with the notion that personal spiritual evaluation should precede Biblical observation. He does this by challenging readers to start by reflecting honestly on how they are presently experiencing their relationship with God.⁵³ Recognizing that human beings are not merely cognitive machines, this method forces Christians to come to grips with the varying ways the fall impacts their ongoing relationship with God. While it is true that the fall had disastrous consequences on all human relationships, Cheong does not leave the believer there. The second aspect of his approach involves experiencing God through his Word.⁵⁴ To experience God in this way implies that the reader must first "receive" it.⁵⁵ Like the Swedish and COMA methods, the reader must ask the right questions, which lead to an accurate understanding of a passage based upon its context and other factors that flow from its historical-cultural-grammatical setting. However, unlike those other approaches, Cheong's method challenges the reader on a deeper, spiritual level. He suggests that the reader journals a response to the question, "what did you experience in your heart and mind as you received God's word?"⁵⁶ For Cheong, spending time in the Word must never be divorced from spending time with God. He understands that God conveys personal information that he wants his people to know through Scripture. He also encourages the reader to experience God by praying the Bible. This is a critical step because it provides the person who has just read God's Word an opportunity to respond in

⁵³ Cheong, "Restore: Knowing and Experiencing God through His Story," 75.

⁵⁴ Cheong, *Restore: Changing How We Live and Love*, 60.

⁵⁵ Cheong, "Culture of Care Conference," 10.

⁵⁶ Cheong, "Culture of Care Conference," 10.

a way driven and shaped by the Bible. He explains,

Prayer flows out of your relationship with God. Prayer not only involves crying out to God from your heart, but more importantly, involves answering God, as you hear his heart through his word. Praying God's word guides what you pray, shapes how you pray and gives voice to your prayers. You can be confident when you pray God's word since his word reveals his purposes and desires.⁵⁷

The third element involved in properly experiencing God while reading his Word is applying it in a way that becomes a reality in the reader's life. At this point, readers consider how the text impacts the way they think and live. Cheong rightly notes that Christians must be careful never to allow a dichotomy to develop between right thinking and right living. He succinctly states, "you can't fully understand God's word without living it out and you can't fully live out God's word without receiving and praying his word."⁵⁸

Cheong's model preserves the best of the Swedish and COMA approaches while making an intentional effort to help the believer experience God throughout the entire process of Bible study. Like the other models, his approach is simple to learn and easy to repeat. However, Cheong's emphasis on experiencing God in Bible study is uniquely helpful because it reminds the Christian that the end goal of the endeavor is to grow deeper in fellowship with Jesus Christ.

Believers Must Be Equipped to Pray

God has given his people an open invitation to talk to him through prayer. The Biblical authors picture him as one who longs to commune with his people. His stated desire for all believers is to "rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess 5:16b-18a). Moreover, Christ has removed everything that hinders a believer's communion with God (Heb 12:1-2). The author of the book of

⁵⁷ Cheong, "Culture of Care Conference," 10.

⁵⁸ Cheong, "Culture of Care Conference," 12.

Hebrews wrote, “let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:16). Because Christians have a new nature and are indwelled by the Holy Spirit, they have an internal, divinely initiated desire to walk with God (Rom 6:17-18). As Whitney notes,

When the Holy Spirit enters any person, he brings his holy nature with him. The result is that all those in whom the Spirit dwells have new holy hungers and holy loves they did not have prior to having his indwelling presence. They hunger for the holy Word of God, which they used to find boring or irrelevant (1 Pet. 2:2). They love fellowship with the people of God, finding it unimaginable to live apart from meaningful interaction with them (1 John 3:14). Hearts and minds in which the Holy Spirit dwells feel holy longings unknown to them previously. They long to live in a holy body without sin, yearn for a holy mind no longer subject to temptation, groan for a holy world filled with holy people, and earnestly desire to see at last the face of the one the angels call “Holy, holy, holy” (Rev 4:8).⁵⁹

Despite this, the disciples asked Jesus, “Lord, teach us how to pray” (Luke 11:1b).

Furthermore, church history and the testimony of countless believers today confirm that prayer has been an area that Christians have struggled with throughout the ages. There are at least three reasons for this.

First, the flesh is weak. The night before the Lord went to the cross, he asked his disciples to spend time with him in prayer. After coming upon Peter and finding him asleep, the Lord rebuked him and, in the process, pointed out why prayer is often a struggle for God’s people. He said to his disciples, “so, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt 26:40-41). Just as the disciples fell asleep during that night in which the Lord implored them to “watch and pray,” believers still battle sleepiness and wandering thoughts during prayer today. At the heart of all of this is boredom. Whitney confides that boredom plays such a negative role in people’s lives that “after forty years of experience in ministry, I am convinced that this problem is almost universal. Virtually

⁵⁹ Donald S. Whitney, *Praying the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 13.

from the beginning of their Christian life, it seems that nearly every believer suffers from this habit.”⁶⁰ Therefore, one of the reasons that Christians’ prayer lives are so ineffective and sometimes nonexistent is because no one has equipped them with tools to help them stay mentally on track while praying. As a result, those who teach believers how to pray must take into account the weakness of the flesh and the attendant propensity toward boredom in prayer.

Second, spiritual warfare is real. Since the serpent tempted the first couple, Satan continually works to drive a wedge between Christians and their relationship with God and others. Believers need to remember that prayer can be difficult as a result of the battles that are taking place in the spiritual realm (Eph 6:12). Christians must be spiritually vigilant since their “adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8b). Therefore, it is during those times when it is most tempting to wander away from the Lord, that it is most critical for believers to draw near to him. As the Good Shepherd (John 10:11), it is in Jesus that Christians experience God’s protective care. In prayer, the Christian is ushered into God’s presence and given momentary respite from the daily struggle against the adversary. The evil one wishes to keep God’s people from experiencing the loving care of the Father for the simple reason that there is no better shelter for the believer than in the presence of God. Therefore, Christians must be taught to develop an awareness of the Devil’s schemes and his efforts to create distance in their relationship with Christ.

Third, believers need to develop a methodology for prayer. Donald Whitney points out that Scripture allows Christians to make two assumptions about prayer. First, since every saint is expected to pray, the task must be simple enough for a child or the newest Christian. Second, since God has designated prayer as a way to meet

⁶⁰ Whitney, *Praying the Bible*, 15.

with him, it must also be “possible” for individual believers “to have a meaningful, satisfying prayer life.”⁶¹ Sadly, there often seems to be a disconnect between what is available for people in prayer and what many actually experience when they pray. Whitney attributes this to the boredom that arises from saying “the same old things about the same old things a thousand times.”⁶² To resolve this, he argues that Christians need a methodology when they pray that maximizes engagement with God and minimizes boredom. If Whitney is correct in his assertion, people need a new paradigm that will enable them to communicate the most profound issues of the heart in a way that captivates the mind.

To sustain an ongoing prayer life, praying Scripture itself can serve as the new paradigm that drives meaningful communion with the Lord. To pray this way, “you simply go through the passage line by line, talking to God about whatever comes to mind as you read the text.”⁶³ This approach to prayer is beneficial because prayer is tied so closely to Bible reading that a cue to read the Bible also becomes a cue to pray.

The best way to bridge the gap between theory and practice is a methodological shift from self-directed prayer to Bible-directed prayer. This approach presents a pathway forward for believers who wish to avoid the pitfalls of pushing through the sleep-inducing track of continually saying the same things in the same way or abandoning it altogether. When Christians pray the Bible, “the Spirit of God will use the Word of God to help the people of God pray increasingly according to the will of God.”⁶⁴ Integrating daily Bible study with prayer provides an excellent way to practice these keystone disciplines in a complementary manner.

⁶¹ Whitney, *Praying the Bible*, 24.

⁶² Whitney, *Praying the Bible*, 11.

⁶³ Whitney, *Praying the Bible*, 33.

⁶⁴ Whitney, *Praying the Bible*, 37.

Toward a Methodology for Bible Study and Prayer

Both the Swedish and COMA methods provide an excellent starting point for those who desire to read the Bible meaningfully. Cheong's approach is beneficial because it integrates prayer and personal experience in a way that connects the head and the heart. Based on these considerations and others, there are five elements that readers should consider making part of their times of daily Bible study and prayer. These are spiritual self-evaluation, Bible reading and observation, personal application, reflection on the attributes of God, and Bible-driven prayer.

First, it is helpful to begin daily Bible study and prayer with spiritual self-evaluation. It provides a means to remind people that they are meeting with God when they engage in daily devotions. As was previously mentioned, even before opening the Bible, readers should consider asking themselves, given their reality, to “honestly describe how you are experiencing your relationship with God.”⁶⁵ Not only does this get to the heart of where someone is in a relationship with the Lord, but it also gives direction regarding things to keep in mind when reading, applying and praying the Bible. The second element is Bible study. In this phase, the reader prayerfully reads Scripture, makes observations about the text, writes down questions to study in the future, and makes conclusions regarding the main thrust of the passage. Third, applying whatever has been gleaned from reading the section is crucial. It is helpful for readers to ask themselves, “what is God calling me to believe or obey based on what I read in this passage?” The time taken for spiritual self-evaluation becomes an asset to this part of the process, as the reader is increasingly aware of areas where they need to grow spiritually. During this step, wrong attitudes, and assumptions about one's relationship with God and others should be noted, along with a renewed commitment to obey God's Word. Fourth, it is essential to consider what attributes of God come to mind due to the time spent in

⁶⁵ Cheong, “Culture of Care Conference,” 9.

personal reflection and Bible study. Once readers draw connections between the text and who God is, they now have a good idea of how they ought to focus their attention when engaging with God in prayer. Fifth, it is time to respond to him in prayer after listening to what God has to say in his Word. When moving from Bible study to prayer, the first four elements make the transition seamless. Using what they have recorded in their journals in reverse order, a person is given everything necessary to engage in sustained prayer meaningfully. Beginning with meditation on the attributes of God, the reader moves naturally to those areas of personal application that came to mind during their Bible study. Finally, it is helpful for Christians to maintain a daily prayer list that records those items they wish to pray for regularly. The Bible study and prayer time will conclude once the believer prays for everything on the daily prayer list.

At least four benefits arise from a commitment to Bible-driven prayer. First, it engages God through the entire process of Bible study and prayer. Second, the process involves the mind, so it challenges readers to think and live Biblically. Third, when readers make observations about the attributes of God from the text, it becomes more likely that they will experience God on a deeper level than they would have otherwise while meditating on his Word. Fourth, the process culminates with a time of prayer that is fundamentally shaped by time spent with God in his Word.

Conclusion

When it comes to the Christian life, there are no two disciplines more significant to the believer's spiritual health and well-being than time spent in daily Bible study and prayer. These disciplines affect every other aspect of a Christian's spiritual journey. In short, the Bible is God's way of talking to his people, and prayer is the believer's response to God. As a result, when empowered by the Holy Spirit, these two disciplines are the driving force behind every growing Christian's daily walk with God.

Despite their importance and transformative power, it is common for

Christians to struggle daily with maintaining the disciplines. The triumvirate of the world, the flesh, and the Devil is central to the problem (Eph 2:2-3). Each creates a unique challenge for the Christian. This should come as no surprise since God promises in his Word that growing in godliness requires discipline and hard work (1 Tim 4:7).

The development of discipline goes hand in hand with the development of healthy habits. Countless methodologies have been created over the centuries to help believers consistently practice the disciplines of daily Bible study and prayer. Of these methodologies, those best suited for Bible study and prayer are ones that intentionally integrate both disciplines seamlessly. This chapter has offered a five-step structure for practicing these two essential disciplines. If empowered by the Holy Spirit, this approach will provide a methodology that will encourage believers to engage the mind and heart experientially and lead to consistent growth in the knowledge of God and personal holiness.

CHAPTER 4

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MINISTRY PROJECT

Introduction

The effort to create a course to teach God's people at CCCMM the spiritual disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer was one of the most challenging, enriching, and satisfying experiences that I have ever had. This chapter describes the development, implementation, and assessment process required to complete the task. In the following, I will describe that process in detail and include a discussion centered around the results of the project's goals.

Summary of Project Goals

The project was comprised of four essential goals. The first was to assess a small group of adults in their understanding and practices of personal Bible study and prayer. This was done by administering a pre-course survey that evaluated participants' past experiences and future expectations in the areas of personal Bible study and prayer. The second goal required that I develop a ten-session course on personal Bible study and prayer. The research used to support course development is described in chapters 2 and 3 in this report. An expert panel was presented with an evaluation rubric to assess the project. This goal was considered successful if a minimum of 90 percent of all the evaluation criteria met or exceeded the sufficient level. The third goal was to have participants complete a structured Bible reading plan which reinforced the material found in the ten-session course. Since the class sought to encourage the disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer, the readings complemented Biblical, theological, and practical Christian truths taught during class sessions. This goal was considered successfully met if

all participants read at least 80 percent of the structured readings. The fourth goal was to deepen participants' understanding and experience regarding the practice of personal Bible study and prayer. The goal was considered successful when all participants completed the surveys and t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-survey scores.

In the following, I will give a detailed description of the project's development, implementation, and final assessment. Since goal 2 preceded the others chronologically, I will begin with this goal and describe each successive goal in order of implementation.

Goal 2

The purpose of goal 2 was curriculum development. This process began long before implementing goal 1. Goal 2 required the creation of a ten-week curriculum on the disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer and a mechanism to encourage group members to practice them daily. Since this was a significant undertaking, I began the development process three years before the course was implemented, in the fall of 2018. In the following, I will detail the steps that led to the course's ultimate development, implementation, and final assessment.

Curriculum development. Beginning on September 19, 2018, I met for twelve weeks with a small group of people from CCCMM for curriculum development. During that time, I created twelve different lesson plans centered around the Biblical and theological superstructure of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. Participants were also given practical exercises during the week to reinforce daily Bible study along with the practice of praying the Scriptures.

Again, on January 23, 2019, another small group was convened for twelve weeks to continue curriculum development. This period focused on refining lessons, improving practical exercises, and implementing a structured reading plan that included

sixty Scripture readings intended to reinforce themes discussed during class lectures. It quickly came to my attention that few people consistently read the structured readings during the week. I realized that I needed to do two things to encourage greater participation in this area. First, I had to shorten the daily readings. Second, I needed to create a mechanism that would help people integrate personal Bible study and prayer more seamlessly into their daily lives. Shortening the readings was simple but creating the tool to enhance participants' daily devotional experience required months of trial and error. It was to this end that I turned my attention next.

Once I realized that more developmental work needed to be done, another ten-week trial of the class was launched on January 8, 2020. The timing of this class was fortunate given that COVID-19 lockdowns did not begin until a few days after the course ended. Besides modifying individual lesson plans, the research in chapter 3 convinced me that journaling was an extremely effective method for instilling spiritual disciplines. Since I had never personally used a structured approach to journaling, I started experimenting with different journaling methodologies. Consequently, I spent the next several months developing a simple method during my quiet times to integrate Bible study with prayer during daily devotions effectively.

During the summer of 2020, I developed what I believed was a useful journaling method that seamlessly integrated Bible study and prayer. For the first time, I introduced this approach to a new small group that met to continue course development for another ten weeks beginning on October 1, 2020. Not only did this trial provide an opportunity to teach the new methodology for daily devotions, but I made radical revisions to the way material was presented during the weekly small group meetings. Before this, each week's class lecture was crafted around a single passage of Scripture that advanced that week's theme. The problem with this was that I found it difficult to cover the Bible's story comprehensively using ten primary passages of Scripture. While participants seemed to respond positively to the material, I was not convinced that group

members grasped the Bible's metanarrative. Given this reality, the development of a new fill-in-the-blank format for the curriculum began. This new approach emphasized Biblical covenants along with the Bible's overarching superstructure of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. Also, a new section was added during this period which focused on the Biblical basis for personal spiritual discipline and the mechanics of habit formation.

Armed with a new approach to structuring individual session lessons and a new methodology to encourage the spiritual disciplines, I organized another ten-week trial on January 11, 2021. At this time, the course material began to resemble what would eventually become its final form. A new unit was added that laid down basic hermeneutical principles and other methodologies for personal Bible study. This material included interactive exercises that prepared participants for the kinds of challenges they would later face when studying Scripture alone. Now that the basic format for the course was beginning to fall into place, informal critiques of course material from group members became more helpful than ever. At this time, it came to my attention that a considerable number of participants continued to struggle to keep up with the daily readings. Consequently, I removed dozens of Bible chapters not considered necessary to make the readings less time-consuming.

The sixth and final ten-week trial began on April 8, 2021. Participants were presented with a workbook that included ten weeks of class lecture material at the beginning of the first class session. The workbook also included a journal that was structured around the daily personal Bible study and prayer methodology developed over the previous year. The day before the class started, I submitted the curriculum to two retired pastors who had eighty years of combined ministry experience leading dynamic congregations. Over the next ten days, both men graciously replied with thoughtful critiques of the course material. Once this ten-week course was completed, I cut more chapters from the daily reading list and made significant adjustments to the final course lecture material based on input from the retired pastors and class members.

Curriculum evaluation. Once the curriculum, journal, and structured readings were finally assembled, course materials were sent to an expert panel that was provided with a rubric to evaluate the project's Biblical faithfulness and methodological approach. When I initially created the goal, it called for the expert panel to be made up of a New Testament scholar, a local pastor from outside the congregation, a church leader, a mature believer, and a new Christian from within the flock.

Curriculum evaluation was held for two weeks, beginning on September 15, and ending on September 29, 2021. Initially, I did not envision running the course through six trials when the goal was constructed. Each class provided many opportunities to experiment on course construction and solicit helpful feedback from group members. Since many from CCCMM were consulted throughout the process, I decided to change the complexion of the expert panel to gain a more comprehensive perspective. Initially, five ministry leaders agreed to evaluate the project course material. Three expert panel members were local pastors, and one was a prison chaplain. The final member was an author, ministry president, Bible college lecturer, and a former pastor with more than twenty-five years of experience serving the local church. Each panelist was sent a copy of the teacher edition of the curriculum along with a structured Bible study and prayer journal. Of the five panelists, four returned the completed evaluation rubrics along with appropriate comments. The panelists were asked to evaluate whether the curriculum met course objectives clearly and logically and in terms of its Biblical and theological faithfulness. The second goal required that a minimum of 90 percent of the rubric met or exceeded the sufficient level. This goal was met as 100 percent of all evaluations met or exceeded the sufficient level. Overall, the experts deemed 96 percent of the material exemplary.

Curriculum design. Now in its final form, the curriculum was presented to participants as a combined workbook and journal. The workbook contained classroom

lecture material and practical exercises. A journal was included in the binder, which laid out a simple structure for ordering daily devotions.

The workbook was developed with two applications in mind. The first part contained fill-in-the-blank style notes that students completed during class sessions. The second included the journal portion which was created to teach participants how to order their daily devotions using sixty structured Bible readings that complimented course material. Each participant was asked to complete one reading each day, six days a week, and create journal entries for each one. The journal had a page at the beginning to record any items that participants wished to pray for daily during the entirety of the course. Following this, the journal was broken up into sixty individual entries listing what Biblical text to read, items to pray for that day, spiritual self-examination, Scriptural observations, and personal application. This was followed by a list of God's attributes which participants were asked to circle if they found them in their daily reading. If someone was unclear about the meaning of a particular attribute, a glossary was included in the back of the workbook, which accurately defined each one. The structure of the journal was not only designed to help God's people experience meaningful times studying Scripture, but it also provided a means to structure their prayer time around the insights that they gleaned from God's Word.

When participants opened the binders, they were greeted with a course introduction and a succinct summary of the Bible's metanarrative. This section offered participants a warm welcome and laid down some expectations for the class. It also explained the importance of spiritual disciplines and encouraged participants to use the journal found in the second part of the workbook. This summary material gave class members a "birds-eye" view of many of the concepts they would encounter throughout the course's ten sessions.

Project promotion. The course was named *Made for More*, and it is based on

the idea that God has more in store for his people than anything this fallen world has to offer. Promotion and recruitment for the class began on September 12, 2021. That morning, the course was advertised from the pulpit during CCCMM's Sunday morning worship service. This was followed by announcements during ensuing church services and advertisements in subsequent Sunday morning worship bulletins. Moreover, the class was promoted during other church events, such as the first night of a conference that the congregation hosted a week before the first class met. Finally, someone was posted before and after services to enroll anyone interested in the course. Consequently, there were at least twenty-five participants at the first session since that is the number of pre-course congregational surveys that were initially completed.

Course implementation. The course was scheduled for Wednesday evenings from September 29 through December 15, 2021. Classes were held each week during that span except on November 24, due to the Thanksgiving holiday that took place the next day. Despite the curriculum calling for ten weeks of instruction, I decided to expand the class one more week since there were eleven weeks in that ministry term. This turned out to be fortuitous given that the pre- and post-course assessments required more class time than originally anticipated. If there had not been an eleventh week of class, I would have been forced to shorten certain class emphases considering this unanticipated time constraint. During the term, each class began at 6:30 PM and ended at 7:45 PM. Other than session one, which began with the pre-course survey, all classes started with prayer as well as a discussion surrounding insights or questions that arose from work completed in participants' journals the previous week. Following that discussion, the group turned their attention to the material found in the workbook. Finally, just before closing with prayer, class members were given an opportunity to ask any lingering questions from anything covered in class that evening. While all but the first session followed this general pattern, each class had its own unique emphasis based on the material covered in

the workbook.

At the beginning of session one, all participants were given a *Made for More* workbook and journal along with an English Standard Version Student Study Bible. Once group members completed a pre-course survey, I took a few moments to introduce and summarize the expectations and subject matter of the course. After administering the pre-course assessment and explaining how to use the study Bible, Scripture reading list, workbook, and journal, I detailed the basics of the class. The session began with a meditation on 1 Timothy 4:6-8, a clear presentation of the gospel, and an explanation of course goals. The rest of the session focused on the mechanics of spiritual discipline formation (which included a description of the hybrid model of praying the Scriptures outlined in chapter 3), the importance of daily Bible study and prayer, and the benefits of keeping a Bible reading and prayer journal.

Sessions two and three were combined into one unit. The unit was designed to equip participants with practical tools to interpret Scripture with a growing sense of competence and confidence. Participants were taught the COMA and Swedish methods of Bible study which are described in chapter 3. They were also introduced to practical rules for reading the Bible more accurately. Combining the rules and the two methods of personal Bible study taught in class, we employed the Swedish Method to work through Psalm 1 and the COMA Method to develop Romans 12:1-2 as a group.

The purpose of session four was to give participants an overview of the basic storyline of the Bible. Since class members already developed a basic idea of how to study the Bible in sessions 2-3, this lesson began by helping them understand how to read the Bible contextually. Class members learned about the Bible's overarching superstructure of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. The group also took a few moments to discuss the implications of a worksheet that traced the theme of God dwelling with his people from Genesis through Revelation. The lesson served as a bridge to connect previous sessions to the following two units, which explored how the Fall

destroyed humanity's ability to commune with God and how the Lord used successive covenants to restore that broken relationship.

While each week began with a discussion about insights from participants' personal Bible study and prayer journal from the previous week, session five started with a new prayer emphasis. During this time, participants were equipped to use the ACTS method of prayer.¹ Next, we compared the creation and fall stories as described in Genesis 1-3. Consequently, participants gained a better understanding of how Adam and Eve's rebellion negatively affected humanity's ability to commune with God. Group members were also reminded of the hope that Christians have since God planned from the beginning to preserve a remnant for himself through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

There was no unit more central to the overall success of the course than the one covered in sessions six through nine. The unit's emphasis was on covenants and how they provide a structure for the general framework for the Bible. We spent the bulk of class sessions developing each Biblical covenant, its sign, and applicable blessings and curses. This unit helped group members understand more clearly how to read the Bible within its covenantal context. The emphasis of this unit was on redemption since it was through the new covenant established by Jesus Christ that fallen humanity has any hope for reconciliation with God. Participants were also presented with "The Five Fingers of Prayer" as a method for specifically ordering prayer requests. Overall, this unit enabled group members to gain a more significant grasp of the Bible's storyline and develop new strategies to enhance their times of prayer.

Finally, the tenth session, and final unit, was the culmination of the class. It brought to a head the most important concepts taught throughout the course. The session developed the new creation realities that emerge from a close reading of Revelation 21-

¹ The acronym ACTS refers to Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.

22. The objective of this lesson was to demonstrate how the Bible tells one coherent story that begins with God dwelling with his people in a garden and ends with God dwelling among them in a garden city. Consequently, participants gained an appreciation for the parallels between the original creation and the consummation. Lastly, at the end of the final session, I set aside time for group members to share what they learned from the course. At its conclusion, I administered the post-course survey which was collected before the class session ended. Since there was an extensive outbreak of COVID-19 in our community at that time, the last class had a lower number of attendees than usual. As a result, only seventeen post-course surveys were collected. Of those, two did not have a matching pre-course survey. This disparity meant that only fifteen of the twenty-seven participants submitted pre- and post-course surveys.

The pre-course assessment administered at the beginning of the first session was designed to establish a baseline of participants' experience in the areas of personal Bible study and prayer. Once the class was completed, those documents were stored in a secure location. Now that the assessments were submitted, the next logical step was to determine whether the course made an appreciable difference in participants' lives. It was toward this task that I turned my attention next.

Goal 1

The first goal of this project was to assess the practices of personal Bible study and prayer among a small subset of adults within the congregation. There were two primary reasons for the survey. First, it provided a means to understand participants' broad experience during personal times Bible study and prayer. Second, when compared with the post-course survey, it provided a baseline to measure whether the class helped participants experience a greater degree of intimacy with God during their times in the Word and prayer. For a copy of the personal Bible study and prayer assessment, see appendix 1.

To ensure the highest possible number of returned surveys, participants were encouraged to fill them out at the beginning of the first session on September 29, 2021. All but a few of the twenty-five completed surveys were returned at the beginning of the first class. Pre-course assessments were not accepted after the start of the second class on October 6, 2021. The reason for extending the date one week was because a couple of class members wanted to think more about their answers before submitting their surveys. This date was chosen as a cutoff for new pre-course assessments because anything received after the initial introductory session did not accurately represent participants' pre-course perspectives on personal Bible study and prayer.

Goal 1 was initially designed to gain an accurate perspective of participants' pre-course understanding, attitudes, and experiences relating to the spiritual disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer. To achieve this insight, I planned to distribute the surveys ten days before and collect them three days prior to the start date. However, once it was time to implement the course, distributing and assembling the surveys in advance was no longer necessary since pre-course participant input was less vital than initially anticipated. The ten-day period was unnecessary because curriculum development began in the fall of 2018 and consisted of six separate ten-week course development seminars that took place before I launched the project in September 2021. By the time the project was implemented, the curriculum was already in its final form. Though the surveys were no longer necessary for curriculum development, they remained crucial for project evaluation and allowed me better to understand the class's overall spiritual and demographic complexion. Therefore, I determined that distributing them at the beginning of the first session provided the best approach to obtain and secure the most responses possible.

As was previously pointed out, twenty-five participants returned surveys which established a baseline of participants' pre-course understanding and practice of the disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer. Once the surveys were collected, they

were securely stored, and the data was eventually entered into an Excel datasheet. Now that this step was complete, all that was left to do was compare these findings with the results from the post-course surveys.

Goal 4

The purpose of goal 4 was to establish whether participants grew in their understanding and the practices of personal Bible study and prayer. Consequently, I administered an assessment at the end of the last class session on December 15, 2021, to evaluate whether the objective was achieved. Prior to distributing workbooks before the first class began, I labeled each one with a personal identification number. Participants were asked to use that number when filling out the pre-course surveys. When it was time to collect the post-course assessments, I reminded group members to use the correct personal identification number found on the first page of their workbooks. I also distributed a personal Bible study and prayer survey, which allowed participants to share any concluding thoughts they may have had about the course. When comparing the pre- and post-course assessments, ten pre-course surveys did not have a post-course match. Moreover, two post-course assessments did not have a pre-course match. These disparities may be explained in two ways. First, CCCMM ran multiple adult studies concurrently with the *Made for More* class. It is not unusual for some people to move to a different class after choosing one study to attend the first night. This partially explains why some did not fill out a pre-course assessment and why others failed to complete a post-course survey. Second, beginning in early December 2021, the Omicron variant of the COVID-19 virus hit attendees of CCCMM particularly hard. Consequently, some participants who attended the previous ten weeks were not present to fill out the post-course survey during the final session.

Although there were twenty-five completed pre-course assessments and seventeen completed post-course surveys, only the fifteen that had pre- and post-course

matches were used to assess the effectiveness of the course. Once I collected the post-course evaluations, the results were carefully entered into the same Excel datasheet that recorded the pre-course survey outcomes. Since a t-test for dependent samples showed a significant positive change in participants' knowledge and practices of personal Bible study and prayer ($t_{(14)} = -3.811893387$, $p = .0009$), I considered the goal successfully met.

Goal 3

In terms of chronology, goal 3 was completed last. This goal required all participants to read at least 80 percent of all Scripture passages listed on a structured reading checklist distributed at the beginning of the course. Based on initial course trials and research conducted for chapter 3, it became apparent that this goal was unrealistic, and it was unlikely the goal would be successful. There are at least two reasons for this assumption. First, while studying the practice of habit formation for chapter 3, I learned that while it is common for people to develop healthy disciplines, it often takes a significant amount of effort, consistency, and time. Secondly, since many participants were newer believers, and others never developed the disciplines, there were always those in the pre-course trials who did not complete 80 percent of the structured readings.

Instead of collecting reading checklists following the last class session, I created a tool that allowed participants to submit their reading reports online, beginning January 21, 2022. The collection effort was announced from the pulpit, and each participant received an email request and a personal phone call. While there were nineteen total responses, only twelve also submitted pre- and post-course assessments. Of the three who submitted pre- and post-course assessments but not the final reading report, the post-course assessment provided some insight into their daily practices of Bible reading. For example, one of the three who did not submit a final reading report stated that she only read the Bible once a week on her post-course survey. Based on this information, it is fair to assume that she did not complete 80 percent of the structured

readings. While there is no way to be certain, the two others may have read 80 percent of the readings since both indicated that they read the Bible daily, without exception. Regardless of whether they read the structured readings or other passages of Scripture, it is encouraging that both practiced the discipline of daily Bible reading. Overall, of the twelve respondents included in the assessment, 75 percent (9/12) completed all sixty readings. Another 8.3 percent (1/12) completed at least 80 percent, and only 16.6 percent (2/12) read 10 percent or less of the structured readings. This goal was not successful since all respondents did not complete at least 80 percent of the readings. However, it was encouraging that 80 percent (12/15) of class members who completed pre- and post-course surveys did read the Bible almost daily by the time the class met for the last time.

Conclusion

Even though goal 3 was not successfully accomplished, the overall project was successful. Central to this conclusion is a t-test for dependent samples, which indicated that the course positively changed participants' practice of the spiritual disciplines of personal Bible reading and prayer. I modified project goals in ways that were not originally envisioned when they were created. First, rather than starting the curriculum development process a few months before initiating the course, I began three years earlier. Consequently, there was no need to have church members review the final material before the project start date since I had already received extensive feedback from dozens of people belonging to CCCMM. Consequently, I asked seasoned ministry leaders to do those evaluations instead. Second, since course development took place over an extended period and because input was sought from trial participants throughout the process, there was no need to modify the curriculum based on pre-course surveys. For this reason, I elected to administer the evaluations during the first class with the expectation that I would gather a higher percentage than I would have otherwise if distributed and collected as initially intended. Third, instead of collecting reading

checklists during the final class session, I created an online mechanism for class members to submit their structured reading reports. While nineteen responded by filling out the online form, only twelve of those also filled out pre- and post-course assessments. Fortunately, since the post-course assessments did have questions about daily Bible reading, there was enough information to draw some conclusions about the three participants' reading habits who did not complete the final structured reading report. Although a few class members did not meet the stated reading goal, the overwhelming majority did complete the readings. This commitment on their part contributed significantly to the project's overall success.

In the beginning, I believed that this project would take a few months to complete. Instead, it turned out to be something that took more than three years to develop, implement and assess. The entire process has been a blessing as I have learned many life-changing lessons about the Lord and his desire to live in close fellowship with his people. Many of these insights will be the focus of chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT EVALUATION

Introduction

This ministry project proved to be of great spiritual benefit to the Central Congregational Church (CCCMM). It emphasized the importance of developing the spiritual disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer by implementing its four goals. As a result, the course that emerged from this project is not only something that proved helpful for those who took part between September and December 2021 but will also be a valuable tool for spiritual growth for those who call CCCMM home for many years to come.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

The *Made for More* curriculum was created to teach the spiritual disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer at CCCMM. The project fulfilled its purpose not only because it made a positive statistical difference in participants' lives but also because it has been a blessing to God's people in countless other ways. Ultimately, the hope is that the lecture material and practical exercises helped each participant experience deeper intimacy with Jesus Christ.

Several class members shared in personal conversations and in a post-course questionnaire that one of the biggest takeaways from the class was that they developed a more meaningful relationship with the Lord. One respondent captures this well, "in the past, [I was] too busy [and there was] not enough time. Sometimes it felt like I was just going through the motions to check it off the list. That is not the case now."

Since the curriculum is helpful for small groups and one-on-one personal

discipleship, it will likely bear fruit for the rest of my time in ministry. Not only did statistical analysis indicate that participants grew in the discipline of personal Bible study and prayer, but many noted this in their post-course survey assessments. In the following, I will evaluate the project's purpose in light of its emphasis on equipping God's people in the twin disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer.

Personal Bible Study

From the outset of the course, I aimed to encourage God's people to read the Bible daily and interpret it well. This objective was critical to CCCMM's ministry life, given that only a small percentage of the congregation has formal theological training. Since group members spent significant time outside class meditating on Scripture passages discussed during each session, their Biblical and practical insights proved instrumental to the course's overall success. Three primary means were employed to help participants grow in the area of personal Bible study.

First, each participant was provided with a reliable study Bible. The purpose of this was to give group members a way to uncover the context and meaning of a particular passage quickly. While one unit focused on basic rules for Bible interpretation, the study Bible alleviated the need to spend valuable class time teaching the finer points of exegesis. The approach for teaching Bible study was helpful to group members as one commented, "this course has helped me to establish a new passion for setting aside time to read God's Word. I look forward to reading my Bible – as now I pay more attention to symbolism. I always made time for God through prayer. Now I also make time for his Word."

Second, a significant emphasis was placed on reading the Bible through the lens of its larger covenantal context. Based on participant feedback, this was one of the most vital aspects of the class. Over the eleven weeks, participants were taught basic principles that showed them how to interpret Scripture in light of the Bible's covenantal

structure. One participant noted, “the descriptions of the importance of the Biblical covenants was so revealing to me. I needed this. There has been so much insight I have gained from the discussions.” This testimony suggests that *Made for More* increased members’ competence and confidence during their times of daily devotions.

Third, class members were encouraged to maintain a Bible study and prayer journal. The journals provided a means to write down observations from their Scripture readings which formed the basis for the prayer method taught during the course. One person who had never used a Bible study and prayer journal referred to the newfound discipline as “invaluable.” The individual went on to predict, “I will continue to write a journal. Something I’d never done before, but something that I am now comfortable doing, although with modifications.” Another respondent said that the course “has helped increase my hunger and thirst in God’s Word, and I have received insight into my need for more.” Based on the feedback received in the assessments, questionnaires, and course discussions, no class element impacted participants’ spiritual growth more than the time spent journaling.

Prayer

The second aim of the class was to teach the spiritual discipline of prayer. Some members of the class were relatively new Christians, and others were seasoned saints. As a result, it was essential to find creative ways to construct teaching times and practical exercises to gently instruct the former without failing to challenge the latter. There were two primary ways I approached teaching God’s people the daily discipline of prayer.

First, the journal was designed to encourage Scripture-driven prayer. It has often been said that “prayer is more caught than taught.” Yet, many Christians find their times of prayer monotonous. At the outset of the course, many class members shared that it was difficult for them to keep their minds from wandering when praying. To combat

this, Christians commonly pray the Scriptures, using the Bible to guide their times of daily communion with the Lord. The journals encouraged a method that used a modified form of this approach.

Participants began their journaling time by writing down prayer requests for that particular day. Then they were asked to take a moment for spiritual self-examination. Next, they recorded observations from the day's Scripture reading. Following this, they wrote down applications from their reading, including anything God called them to believe or obey. Finally, they noted any of God's attributes that came to mind during the study. Once their time of study was complete, it was time to pray.

Participants' prayer time followed the opposite order of their Bible study. First, they meditated on the attributes of God that flowed out of their Scripture reading. Next, they asked the Lord to empower them to practice those things listed in the personal application section of the journal. Finally, they ended their prayer time by praying through the specific items on their daily prayer lists. Some participants specifically mentioned that this structure was beneficial for their spiritual life. One person commented, "by not rushing into prayer requests before reading God's Word and journaling the truths that I found, considering God's attributes (worship) then praying, I believe helped my prayer life." By blending a Scripture-driven approach with a consistent daily prayer list, many experienced greater intimacy with God than they had in the past.

Second, class members were given a structure to help them pray daily, and time was set aside during class sessions to teach on the subject. On one occasion, we focused on ways to structure prayer, and on another, we focused on ordering times of petition. In most sessions, group members learned from each other as they were given opportunities to share what they were experiencing during their times of daily prayer.

Journaling played a vital role in facilitating the development of the spiritual disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer. It provided a daily means to read Scripture well and a structure that drove daily prayer times. One person wrote, "personally, I never

really did a journal before, so I thought it was very helpful and plan on using a similar template in the future.” The combination of class instruction and discussion along with the daily practice of journaling were all vital pieces that made a significant difference in the lives of those who took part in the class.

Evaluation of the Project’s Goals

While this project was designed with four goals in mind, the second goal took preeminence over the others. This is because the main objective was to create a curriculum to teach the spiritual disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer at CCCMM. The point of the other three goals was to provide evidence that goal 2 fulfilled its purpose. In the following, I will evaluate the overall success of each goal.

Goal 1

One of the original purposes of goal 1 was to establish where class members stood in their practice of personal Bible study and prayer at the beginning of the first class session. However, by the time the class began, it was abundantly clear that gaining this perspective became unnecessary for reasons enumerated in chapter 4. More important than reviewing the assessments in advance to understand the spiritual complexion of the class was the baseline the surveys provided when compared to post-course evaluations. This is because the contrast between the two provided evidence as to whether the study produced real spiritual growth in the lives of group members. The pre-course assessment asked participants the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with a set of statements designed to track changes in beliefs, practices, and experiences. In the following, I will describe the purpose and overall usefulness of each of these three categories of questions.

First, the questionnaire called for participants to answer values-based questions which were designed to uncover basic beliefs. The purpose of these belief questions was to understand better the degree to which participants were committed to the idea that

personal Bible study, and prayer were essential practices for the Christian. The belief-based questions included statements like, “daily Bible study and prayer are important for spiritual maturity” and “personal Bible study and prayer are unnecessary since I attend church.” The benefit of these questions was that they provided a way to determine whether those in the class valued practicing the spiritual disciplines. The problem with these questions is that group members were, for the most part, “churched” and already believed that these spiritual disciplines were vital for the Christian life. As a result, it gave little room for growth on the post-course survey for statistical purposes. Despite the unforeseen challenge these questions presented, it was encouraging to discover that participants had a high view of the spiritual disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer.

The second set of statements was drafted to draw out the mechanics of participants’ actual practice of the spiritual disciplines. These were designed to uncover disconnects between belief and practice in group members’ lives. For example, participants were asked to rate where they stood concerning statements like, “I use a journal to record Biblical insights and my prayers,” and “I pray for God to help me to obey his Word.” Respondents tended to rate themselves lower when it came to practice-oriented statements than they did with the belief-oriented ones. In this area and in the next, the class made the most significant impact on group members’ lives.

Third, the assessment asked participants to rate their experience when practicing the disciplines. A deeper understanding of group members’ perspectives was uncovered by asking them to rate themselves according to statements like “I find times of private prayer spiritually inspiring” or “I don’t feel like I connect with God when I read the Bible.” The experiential questions allowed participants to reflect on how their times with the Lord impacted them on the heart level. Because of this, group members typically rated themselves lower in this area than they did with belief-related questions on the initial assessment. As was the case with practice-oriented statements, experience-oriented

statements provided room to measure growth between the first week and the last week of class.

While goal 1 was not necessary for understanding how to craft class lecture material before the course began, it was critical for its overall success. In general, one would assume that the class was made up of mature believers since participants reported that they had been followers of Jesus for an average of thirty-seven years. It was also noteworthy that most of those who took part were relatively new to CCCMM, as participants reported attending the church for an average of three and a half years. Overall, 52 percent (13/25) of group members attended the church for less than two years.

Interestingly, only 28 percent (7/25) read their Bibles daily, with few exceptions. As for the rest of the class, 44 percent (11/25) read three to five times a week, and 28 percent (7/25) read their Bibles once or less per week. The group was much more consistent when it came to prayer, as 72 percent (18/24) reported praying daily, 17 percent (4/25) three to five times each week, and 8 percent (2/24) prayed about once per week. One person wrote in the pre-course assessment what others expressed verbally, namely, that when it came to her experience of daily Bible study and prayer, it was “very hard to stay focused and retain information.”

The discipline of daily journaling was a vital component of *Made for More*. However, most class participants were unfamiliar with the practice when the course began. For example, only 22 percent (5/23) used a journal to record biblical insights and their prayers. Sadly, 60 percent (15/25) agreed to some extent that they did not feel like they connected with God in prayer. However, since the journal was designed to engage the mind and heart during Bible study and prayer, there was hope that *Made for More* could provide the tools to improve the overall experience of God’s people during their times of communion with the Lord.

The goal was successful because it provided a means to assess where participants

were in their understanding, practice, and experience in the spiritual disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer. Moreover, it established a baseline that accurately gauged whether group members grew in the spiritual disciplines between the beginning and end of the course. This baseline, when compared to goal 4, made it possible to demonstrate that the class made a significant positive difference in participants' lives.

Goal 2

The second goal formed the heart of the project. It required the development of a ten-session course curriculum to equip God's people in the spiritual disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer. The curriculum took three years to design as it combined sound theology with solid teaching methodology to create a course that not only challenged minds but changed hearts. This goal required an expert panel of evaluators who utilized a rubric to determine that the curriculum was biblically faithful, methodology sound, and practically beneficial. The original goal called for an expert panel made up of a New Testament scholar, a local pastor, a member of the church leadership team, a mature believer, and a newer Christian from the church. However, since I solicited input from leaders, mature members, and newer Christians from the church over the three years that I developed the course, it was not necessary to include them on the expert panel. Instead, I asked seasoned ministry leaders to do those evaluations instead. This goal was successfully met since a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criteria met or exceeded the sufficient level.

Goal 3

All participants were required to read at least 80 percent of the sixty structured Bible readings for this goal to be considered successful. Although the goal was well-intentioned, I realized early on that attaining it was improbable. First, while researching the practice of habit formation for chapter 3, I learned that developing healthy disciplines often requires leaving behind unhealthy ones. Making this type of life change does not

always happen overnight since it often requires an extraordinary amount of effort, consistency, and time. While I firmly believed that some of those in the class would develop these new disciplines, it seemed unlikely that every participant would. Secondly, what made this more difficult was that many participants were newer believers, and others had never developed the discipline of daily Bible study. Twelve of the fifteen respondents who filled out both pre- and post-course assessments also submitted a reading report. According to the reading survey surveys, 75 percent (9/12) completed all sixty structured readings, another 8.3 percent (1/12) completed at least 80 percent of the readings, and only 16.6 (2/12) percent completed 10 percent or less. While three class members did not respond to the post-course reading survey, the post-course assessment showed that two of the three read their Bible daily and the other only once a week. Notably, 80 percent (12/15) of participants read their Bibles nearly every day by the end of the course. Although a few class members did not meet the stated reading goal, the fact that the vast majority did contributed significantly to the project's overall success.

Goal 4

This goal was designed to discover whether the *Made for More* class positively changed participants' personal Bible study and prayer practices. To make this determination, the pre-course survey was readministered to measure the class's impact on group members' understanding and practice of the spiritual disciplines. Though all project goals were not implemented as initially envisioned, and the third goal was not successfully met, the project was a success, as each of the goals contributed in their own way to a positive overall outcome. This conclusion is based on a t-test for dependent samples, which showed a significant positive change in participants' knowledge and practices of personal Bible study and prayer ($t_{(14)} = -3.811893387, p = .0009$).¹

¹ See appendix 4.

Strengths of the Project

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was unprecedented civil upheaval during most of the three-year project development period. Despite this challenge, it likely enhanced its overall effectiveness. One primary reason is that it caused the implementation process to take much longer than initially expected. This extended period provided more opportunities to test different types of material on various groups. This led to the creation of a final product that delivered improved results. In the following, I will list four project strengths that emerged after comparing the pre- and post-course assessments.

Measurable Progress

One of the most significant outcomes of the project was that participants made measurable progress in the area of spiritual discipline formation. In the initial class assessment, it was encouraging to note that 33.3 percent (5/15) of respondents read their Bibles daily. However, I realized that it would be a challenge when I discovered that 40 percent (6/15) read three to five times a week, and 26.6 percent (4/15) read once or less. Since participants were required to read between five and six readings per week to complete the goal, 66.7 percent (10/15) needed to grow significantly in this area. While the goal was not ultimately met, course participants did demonstrate significant growth in this area. Data from the post-course assessment and the reading report indicated that 80 percent (12/15) of all respondents were reading their Bibles daily, another 6.6 (1/15) almost daily, and only 13.3 percent (2/15) were reading one or fewer times a week. When separating questions that simply focused on participants' experience in personal Bible study and prayer, the course made a significant positive difference in their lives: $t_{(14)} = 2.419, p = .0148$.² Finally, when isolating practice-related questions from those focused on belief and experience, the course also made a positive statistical difference in

² See appendix 5.

participants' lives in this area as well: $t_{(14)} = 3.381, p = .002$.³ Based on these considerations, the *Made for More* course made a positive difference in participants' experience and practice during their times of daily Bible study and prayer.

Practical Methodology

Made for More asked participants to use a unique method created for the course to structure their daily Bible study and prayer times. Most class members initially indicated that they struggled with consistency since they were never taught how to structure their quiet times. Participants were asked to use the class method until they could comfortably modify the approach to suit their needs better. The technique involved using a journal to structure daily devotions around the sixty prescribed Bible readings. As noted in chapter 3, journals are ideal for discipline formation since they track daily habits, promoting consistency over time. Based on the post-course surveys, it is clear that the methodology benefitted class members since the group showed significant growth in spiritual discipline formation. One respondent, commenting on the helpfulness of this emphasis, asserted, "when I get in a good Bible reading and prayer rhythm or cycle, which is ideally at the start of each day, it causes my life and thought to more closely align with what God wants."

Robust Class Discussions

Significant class time was devoted to giving participants opportunities to share insights from their quiet times during the previous week. Many noted that this time was extremely meaningful. One person stated, "I really enjoyed the class and have learned so

³ See appendix 6.

much. I love the discussions.” Another agreed, “our class had a good group of people willing to share not only their thoughts but also their snacks.” Each class session lasted an hour and fifteen minutes, which is longer than what is typical for most CCCMM classes. However, participants indicated that the discussions made the classes feel like they went by quickly. One respondent explained, “sometimes conversations take over the class – though because of those conversations, it helps us to learn more about each other and God. The class time is over pretty quick. Time flies.” A primary reason the discussion was so robust was that the vast majority of participants journaled daily. Consequently, class members were brimming over, longing to share insights and applications gleaned from their time seeking God in his Word.

Solid Lecture Material and Practical Exercises

Since some units took more than one session to complete, the *Made for More* workbook is comprised of six teaching units designed to cover ten weeks of lecture material. Also included in the workbook were several practical exercises to strengthen concepts taught during class. This material provided the opportunity to cover topics like discipline formation, the basics of personal Bible study, the overarching superstructure of the Bible, the critical role of covenants, and the eternal state. Moreover, group members were immersed in these topics throughout the week as they completed sixty structured readings over the term that touched on the topics covered during class sessions. The hope was that everything taught in the classroom would be reinforced in the prayer closet. Along these lines, one respondent said, “I liked the course; it helped me see the main goal/purpose of the Bible in pointing to the coming of Christ our Savior. It also gave me several tools to help become better in my prayer life and to help understand what God is trying to tell me through his Word.”

Weaknesses of the Project

Despite the project's success, the overall results would have been better if I had thought more clearly about the steps involved in the development, implementation, and final project evaluation early on. In the following, I will list three project weaknesses that made it less beneficial than it would have otherwise been.

Assessment Design

As noted, the pre- and post-course assessments asked respondents to evaluate themselves according to statements used to uncover beliefs, practices, and experiences related to the spiritual disciplines. Of the three categories, the least helpful statements were the ones that were belief-oriented. Since those attending the course were already involved to one degree or another in the ministries at CCCMM, it wasn't surprising that they rated themselves highly when it came to the belief statements. For example, when asked whether they agree that "daily Bible study and prayer are important for spiritual maturity," 53.3 percent (8/15) said that they strongly agreed, 33.3 percent (5/15) agreed, and only 13.4 percent (2/15) responded that they somewhat agreed with the statement. When asked again in the post-course survey, the results did improve slightly as 73.3 percent (11/15) strongly agreed, and the rest of the group or, 26.7 percent (4/15) agreed with the statement. Another question asked respondents what their opinions were regarding the statement, "I desire to obey God's Word." Amazingly, in the pre-course survey, 86.7 percent (13/15) responded that they strongly agreed, and the other 13.3 percent (2/15) indicated that they agreed. When respondents were again asked to rate the statement at the end of the course, the results were unchanged, with 86.7 percent (13/15) strongly agreeing and 13.3 percent (2/15) agreeing. While these "belief" oriented questions are valuable to the degree they help to gather information about participants' presuppositions at the beginning of the course; ultimately, they proved to be unhelpful for assessment purposes. Since most class members were church people, they came to the course with a high view of God's Word and prayer. Consequently, there was not much

room for growth in this area between the pre- and post-course surveys. As was documented in the Measurable Results section of this chapter, the most helpful statements for the survey were those related to practice and experience.

Discussion and Lecture Balance

One of the project's strengths was the excellent class interaction each week. Participants came to class prepared and ready to share insights they derived from the previous week's devotional times. While this allowed participants to share what God was teaching them during quiet times, it made it challenging to present all the course lecture material. When asked about participants' thoughts on the course duration, several people agreed with one respondent who wrote, "not long enough; would love it to continue on a few more weeks." Another went further, "I wish we had more time for in-depth discussion. A lot of info in a short period of time." Class lectures fell behind on week one because it took longer for participants to fill out the course surveys than initially expected. Since each class began with a hearty discussion of the weekly readings, there was always the feeling that it would be difficult to complete the workbook. Although each class lasted an hour and fifteen minutes, I often felt like I was "chasing the clock." Typically, I cut off the weekly reading material discussion at the forty-five-minute mark to give enough time to complete material in the workbook and accompanying practical exercises. Thankfully, the schedule allowed an extra week, and as a result, we completed all the accompanying lecture material.

Moving Parts

This class was held on a night alongside multiple adult ministry class offerings. Consequently, during the first two weeks of the course, many people moved from one study to another. A few class members opted out once they realized that *Made for More* required a significant investment of time. As a result, ten participants filled out pre-course surveys but did not fill out post-course evaluations. Another reason for this disparity is

that some did not attend the final night due to an outbreak of the Omicron variant of the COVID-19 virus in December 2021. Moreover, others were not present to fill out the pre-course surveys the first week because they joined the second week. Because of this, two participants submitted post-course surveys but did not fill out pre-course surveys. It is disappointing that though many more participated in the course, only fifteen participants' information factored into the final results.

What I Would Do Differently

Overall, the project ran smoothly, and I was pleased with the results. Besides those things mentioned in the previous section, there are two things that I would do differently if I had an opportunity to do the project over again.

The Reading Checklist

If I were to do the project again, I would first follow the pre-course plan for collecting structured readings prescribed in goal 3. The initial plan for goal 3 was to have participants complete a structured reading checklist and submit this document at the end of the last class. Instead of collecting the checklists on the final night, I created an online form where class members could report the readings. While nineteen class members reported their readings, only twelve of the fifteen who completed pre- and post-course surveys submitted a response. This was disappointing given that it was announced publicly from the pulpit, and each class member received personal reminders by email and telephone. Since all the information is anonymous, I do not know who the missing people are or why they did not respond to the requests. While I got a general idea of where the missing three stood in terms of their Bible reading habits, it would have been far better to ascertain an accurate account of their participation in the structured Bible readings emphasized during the course.

Practice Praying the Scriptures

Second, the curriculum taught participants a Scripture-driven method for prayer. In earlier versions of the course, I taught classical ways to pray using the Psalms. In those sessions, group members were given opportunities to pray through different passages in class and were encouraged to continue during their times of private prayer. However, as time progressed, I developed a method for daily devotions that does not ask users to pray the Scriptures but allows Biblical passages to drive prayer time. Once this methodological shift occurred, I took the element of praying the Scriptures out of the curriculum since the classic approach was no longer integral. If I had the opportunity to teach the course again, I would teach participants how to pray the Scriptures and provide opportunities for class members to pray together using Bible passages during class time.

Theological Reflections

There is no way to overstate the degree to which the course proved to be of great theological benefit to me personally and to the small group of participants generally. The six trial runs of the class and the time spent developing chapters 2 and 3 provided the foundation for much of the material presented during the course. There were two areas of particular theological benefit to me and CCCMM.

First, I gained a much clearer understanding of the Bible's metanarrative. One of the primary motivations for creating the course was to teach people from CCCMM how to read the Bible well. Fundamental to this effort was to show how the Bible follows a plotline that connects the original creation with the consummation. Before the course, I had a firm grasp of the stories of the Bible but did not have a well-developed idea of how all of those stories fit into one overarching story. During course development, I concluded that the Bible's metanarrative is summarized by the idea that God will dwell with his people forever. This theme is all-encompassing and can explain the purpose behind the creation, the covenants, the incarnation, the cross, the resurrection, and the eternal state. Participants read sixty structured readings and interacted with extensive course lecture

material to reinforce this understanding. Upon completion of the course, the goal was that group members could open up any Bible passage and have a good sense of how it fits into the Bible's overarching storyline.

Second, it helped me understand more clearly the tight connection between spiritual disciplines and spiritual growth. I learned to a greater degree how critical the spiritual disciplines of daily Bible study and prayer are for living a healthy Christian life. The course provided an excellent opportunity to help God's people intentionally grow in both of these areas. Before the project began, I understood little about the science of habit formation. Coupling these insights with what the Bible teaches about the importance of spiritual disciplines gave me practical tools to help people grow to their full potential in Christ. This project taught me that the most significant factor that impacted spiritual growth was not the lectures or the class discussions but the time participants spent in God's Word and prayer during the week. Interestingly, of the fifteen respondents, only one reported a decrease in Bible reading over the course of the eleven weeks. In the initial assessment, she reported reading the Bible three to five times each week, and in the second, she stated that she only read it once a week. Furthermore, among the respondents, she was the only person whose score regressed from 105 on the pre-evaluation to 104 on the post-survey. Though it is difficult to make too many generalizations from one sample, it would appear that the respondent's lack of participation in the weekly readings negatively impacted her overall course experience.

Personal Reflections

My paternal grandparents served as pioneering missionaries for over forty years in South America. As a child, I was inspired by their lives of adventure and seemingly endless faith. My grandmother was the musician, and my grandfather was the preacher and teacher. What always struck me about my grandfather was his dogged commitment to the disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer. His life of inward

devotion bore abundant fruit as he epitomized what it meant to “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7b). Since those days, I have wanted to live that kind of life. As a result, I searched for many years to find consistency in my personal Bible study and prayer time. I struggled with being systematic in my Bible study and always mentally present in prayer. Since I never was taught a method to structure personal devotions, I generally made it up as I went along. Sometimes my quiet times were too shallow, and other times, they were too exegetically involved. Consequentially, I found it challenging to be steady. The former fed me very little, and the latter was so time-consuming that it left me with little time for other pastoral duties like visitation, counseling, and sermon preparation.

All of this changed when it dawned on me that the class’s success hinged upon creating a method people can use to structure meaningful devotional times. The research helped me connect the dots between Bible study, prayer, and journaling. It occurred to me that if I developed a better understanding of the Bible’s metanarrative, it would speed up the process of interpretation and application. These insights made my prayer time more meaningful. Thus, I created a Scripture-driven prayer methodology that integrates the daily Scripture reading with prayer. No longer did my thoughts wander as they once did, and I was daily experiencing meaningful time in with God in his Word and in prayer.

The discovery of a repeatable and personally edifying method for structuring daily devotions was something that became exciting for me to teach others. During the first session, I asked the room of approximately thirty people two things. First, “how many of you have been told by someone that you should read your Bible and pray every day?” At that moment, almost every hand went up. Next, I asked, “how many of you have had anyone ever teach you a method to structure your daily devotions?” I was not surprised when I did not see a single hand go up. This admission was not only an indictment against me as CCCMM’s pastor but their previous spiritual leaders as well. It is gratifying to know that many who took part in the class plan to use either the course method or a modified version of it during their daily quiet times in the future. Perhaps,

the Lord will use this method as another means to raise up other faithful servants like my grandfather?

Conclusion

My overall assessment of this project is that it accomplished the stated purpose of teaching personal Bible study and prayer disciplines at CCCMM. I have based this assumption on comparisons between pre- and post-course assessments and other types of feedback such as post-course questionnaires and informal conversations with class members. The project developed through this class will become a significant part of my service to Christ for years to come. Easily adaptable for one-on-one discipleship, small groups, and larger group gatherings, I now possess a proven method to help God's people grow to their full potential in Christ. As a consequence, it is my prayer that as more men and women at Central Congregational Church cycle through the course, they will all live more and more for that day when "they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever" (Rev 22:4-5).

APPENDIX 1

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

The curriculum evaluation rubric was used to evaluate all course materials.

The rubric consists of twelve categories that address biblical and theological faithfulness as well as teaching methodology.¹

¹ James William Ewing, “Equipping the Members of First Baptist Church, Calvert City, Kentucky to Develop the Practice of Personal Devotions” (DMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016), 113. The Curriculum Evaluation Rubric was adapted and used for this project with written permission from the author.

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

Instructions: Rate each area by marking an X in the box that most accurately reflects your assessment of how the course materials meet the listed standard. Clarifying comments are encouraged.

| Personal Bible Study and Prayer Curriculum Evaluation Tool | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|----------|
| Lesson One Evaluation | | | | | |
| 1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary | | | | | |
| Criteria | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Comments |
| The lesson is clearly relevant to the issue of personal Bible study and Prayer. | | | | | |
| The material is biblically faithful. | | | | | |
| The appropriateness of biblical support and of additional course materials. | | | | | |
| The material is theologically accurate. | | | | | |
| The aim of the lesson is clearly stated. | | | | | |
| The supporting objectives are clearly stated. | | | | | |
| The lesson flow is logical and provides sufficient detail to support the overall aim. | | | | | |
| The objectives of the lesson clearly support the aim of the lesson. | | | | | |
| Exercises, readings, and assignments clearly support the overall aim of the lesson. | | | | | |
| The lesson content meets lesson objectives. | | | | | |
| The lesson offers effective points of application. | | | | | |
| The lesson supports the overall course objectives. | | | | | |

Return Instructions: You may return the completed form to the church office, by mail, or as an attachment to an email.

Reviewer: _____

APPENDIX 2
BIBLE READING CHECKLIST

A key objective of this course was to teach participants how to read the Bible contextually. This sixty-day Bible Reading Checklist was created to reinforce material taught during the course and encourage participants to incorporate Bible reading into their daily routines.¹

¹ Robert Keay, “What the Bible Is All About” (lecture, Central Congregational Church, Middleboro, Massachusetts, October 15, 2014). The checklist headings were used for this project with written permission from the lecturer.

ONE STORY READING LIST

Old Testament

Pentateuch: God Makes a Covenant (Genesis – Deuteronomy)

- 1. Gen 1-2 (God Makes His Dwelling Place Among his Image Bearers in Eden)
- 2. Gen 3 (The Fall, the Curse & the Promised Seed)
- 3. Gen 8-9 (The Flood & God's Covenant with Noah)
- 4. Gen 11 (The Tower of Babel)
- 5. Gen 12 (God Initiates a Relationship with Abraham to Bless the World)
- 6. Gen 15; 17 (The Abrahamic Covenant)
- 7. Gen 22 (Isaac & his Substitute)
- 8. Gen 25-27 (Jacob's Blessing)
- 9. Gen 47 (Israel Exiled in Egypt)
- 10. Gen 49 (Jacob Blesses His Twelve Sons)
- 11. Ex 1-2 (Israel is Enslaved and a Deliverer is Born)
- 12. Ex 3 (Moses Meets God)
- 13. Ex 12; 14 (Israel's Passover & Exodus)
- 14. Ex 16-17 (God as the Provider & Protector of his People)
- 15. Ex 19-20 [see also 24] (God Establishes a Covenant with Israel)
- 16. Ex 32; 34 (God's Covenant with Israel Broken & Renewed)
- 17. Ex 40 (God's Glory Fills the Tabernacle)
- 18. Lev 16 (The Day of Atonement)
- 19. Num 13-14 (Rebellion on the Edge of the Promised Land)
- 20. Deut 28-29 [see also 30] (Mosaic Covenant Blessings, Curses & Renewal)

Historical Books: The Historical Outworking of the Covenant (Judges – Esther)

- 21. Josh 1-2 (Israel's Return to the Promised Land)
- 22. Josh 6-7 (Victory & Defeat in the Promised Land)
- 23. Judg 4 (The Cycle of Sin, Bondage & God's Deliverance)
- 24. Ruth 1-2 (A Ray of Hope in Dark Times, Part 1)
- 25. Ruth 3-4 (A Ray of Hope in Dark Times, Part 2)
- 26. 1 Sam 1; 3 (Samuel: God Raises Up a Faithful Prophet)
- 27. 1 Sam 16 [see also 17]; 2 Sam 5 (David: God Raises Up a True King)
- 28. 2 Sam 7 (God Makes a Royal Covenant with David)
- 29. 2 Sam 11-12 (David's Sin, Affliction & God's Grace)
- 30. Psalm 51 (The Need for Repentance and Confession in a Believers Life)
- 31. 1 Kgs 8 [see also 9] (The Dedication of the Temple & God's Glory)
- 32. 1 Kgs 11-12 (Solomon's Sin Leaves the Nation Divided)
- 33. 2 Kgs 25 (The Nation Goes into Exile in Babylon)
- 34. Ezra 1; 6 (Israel Returns from Exile & the Temple is Rebuilt & Dedicated)
- 35. Esth 1-2 (A Ray of Hope in a Foreign Land)
- 36. Esth 3-7 (God's Care for His People in a Foreign Land)

Poetry: Teaches the Way to Live in a Covenant Relationship with God (Job-Song of Solomon)

- 37. Psalm 1-2 (The Two Ways of Life & their Ends)
- 38. Psalm 23 (God, Our Shepherd)
- 39. Psalm 139 (Fearfully, and Wonderfully Made)
- 40. Psalm 149-150 (Praise the Lord!)
- 41. Prov 7; 31:10-31 (The Way of the Foolish & the Way of the Wise)
- 42. Eccl 11-12 (The End of the Matter)

Prophets: Explain the Meaning & Obligations of the Covenant (Isaiah – Malachi)

- 43. Isa 9:1-7; 11 (God himself will Come & Rescue his Broken People)
- 44. Isa 52-53 (God's Servant Shall Save His People by Bearing their Sin)
- 45. Jer 31 [see also 33:1-26] (God Promises to Make a New Covenant with his People)
- 46. Hag 1-2 (God will Return & the Whole Cosmos will Shake)

New Testament

The Gospels: God Makes a New Covenant (Matthew – John)

- 47. Matt 2 (The Time of Fulfillment has Come; the Promised Seed has Arrived)
- 48. John 1; 3 (The Word Became Flesh & the Necessity of the New Birth)
- 49. Matt 5-7 (Jesus Fulfills Israel's Covenant Obligations)
- 50. Lk 15 (The Parables of Jesus)
- 51. Matt 26-27 (Jesus Makes the New Covenant)
- 52. Lk 24 (All Scripture Points to Jesus)
- 53. Matthew 28 (The Resurrection & the Great Commission)

New Testament History: The Historical Outworking of the New Covenant (Acts)

- 54. Acts 2 (Babel Reversed: The Gospel Goes Forth in Jerusalem & Judea)
- 55. Acts 9-10 (Paul's Conversion & the Gospel Goes to the Nations)

New Testament Epistles: Explain the Meaning & Obligations of the New Covenant (Romans-Jude)

- 56. Rom 8 (Dead to Sin & Alive in Christ)
- 57. Rom 14; Eph 2 (Living in Community with other Christians)
- 58. 2 Cor 3-5 (The Believer as a New Creation)
- 59. Heb 1 (The Superiority of Jesus Christ)

The Apocalypse: Encourages Believers to Remain Faithful During Tribulation (Revelation)

- 60. Rev 21-22 (New Creation, New Heaven & New Earth).

APPENDIX 3

PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY AND PRAYER SURVEY

The congregational practices questionnaire was used to assess the understanding and actual practice of personal Bible study and prayer among individual group participants. The questionnaire was completely anonymous, and candid responses were encouraged.²

² James William Ewing, “Equipping the Members of First Baptist Church, Calvert City, Kentucky to Develop the Practice of Personal Devotions” (DMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016), 115-17. The Curriculum Evaluation Rubric was adapted and used for this project with written permission from the author.

PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY AND PRAYER SURVEY

Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify the current participant's understanding and practices of the disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer. This research is being conducted by Bruce Smith for the purpose of collecting data for a ministry project. In this research, you will answer questions before the project and you will answer the same questions at the conclusion of the project. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported or identified with your responses. Participation is strictly voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. By completion of this survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this project.

Directions: Answer the following multiple-choice questions by placing an **X** next to the appropriate answer or by providing the requested information.

Part 1: Demographic Information

1. Gender: Male Female
2. Age: _____
3. How long have you attended Central Congregational Church, Middleboro, Massachusetts? (*Provide your answers in years, unless it has been less than one year*).
 Years Months

Personal Spiritual Practices

Please mark an **X** next to the answer that most nearly reflects your practices.

4. How many years have you been a follower of Jesus Christ?
(*Provide your answers in years, unless it has been less than one year*).
 Years Months
5. Over the course of the last six months I have read my Bible (check one):
 A. Daily, with few exceptions.
 B. 3-5 times each week.
 C. About once per week.
 D. Less than once per week.
6. Over the course of the last six months I pray (check one):
 A. Daily, with few exceptions.
 B. 3-5 times each week.
 C. About once per week.
 D. Less than once per week.

Personal Identification Number: _____

7. I attend Sunday School or Church Family Night (check one):

- A. Weekly, with few exceptions.
- B. About 2-3 times a month.
- C. About once a month or less.

8. I attend Sunday morning worship (check one):
- A. Weekly, with few exceptions.
 - B. About 2-3 times a month.
 - C. About once a month.
 - D. Less than once each month.

The Practice of Personal Bible Study and Prayer

Directions: Answer the following questions: (1) Place a check by the multiple-choice questions. (2) Some questions ask you to give your opinion using the following scale: SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, DS = disagree somewhat, AS = agree somewhat, A = agree, SA = strongly agree; please circle the appropriate answer.

- | | | | | | | |
|--|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 9. Daily Bible study and prayer are important for spiritual maturity. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 10. It is important to regularly set time aside time for Bible study and prayer. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 11. I use a journal to record biblical insights and my prayers. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 12. I pray the Scriptures using God’s Word to guide my prayers. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 13. I feel comfortable instructing others on how to read the Bible and pray. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 14. I use Christian literature like “devotionals” to enhance Bible reading. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 15. I find times of private prayer spiritually inspiring. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 16. I pray for God to help me to obey his Word. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 17. I have a clear understanding of the Bible’s storyline. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 18. I desire to obey God’s Word. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

Personal Identification Number: _____

Hindrances to the Practice of Personal Bible Study and Prayer.

There are many factors that can make it difficult to have time set aside for regular Bible study and prayer. Please indicate the degree to which the following factors interfere with your efforts to practice daily personal Bible study and prayer.

- | | | | | | | |
|---|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 19. My work hours or family obligations make it difficult to set aside time to read the Bible and pray. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 20. Personal Bible study and prayer are unnecessary since I attend church. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 21. I have never been taught how to pray. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 22. I find it difficult to keep my mind from wondering when I pray. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 23. When I pray, I feel like I am going through the motions. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 24. I don't feel like I connect with God when I read the Bible. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 25. The Bible is too complex for me to grasp. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 26. The idea that God expects me to know and obey his Word weighs me down emotionally. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 27. The Bible doesn't make sense because I don't understand how it fits together. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 28. The Bible seems dry when I spend time reading it on my own. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 29. I struggle to obey God's Word. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

Personal Identification Number: _____

30. What is your typical experience with God like when you pray and read the Bible? Briefly describe your experience in the space below.

31. What do you typically experience in your inner life when you pray and read the Bible? Briefly describe your experience in the space below.

32. Are there any other factors not mentioned above that hinder your practice of regular Bible study and prayer? Briefly describe them in the space below.

This completes the survey

Personal Identification Number: _____

APPENDIX 4
PRE- AND POST-COURSE EVALUATION
T-TEST RESULTS

This appendix provides the results of a t-test for dependent samples administered following the pre- and post-course evaluation.

PRE- AND POST-COURSE EVALUATION
T-TEST RESULTS

| T-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means | | |
|--|-----------------------|------------------------|
| | <i>Pre-Test Total</i> | <i>Post-Test Total</i> |
| Mean | 92.066 | 98.533 |
| Variance | 228.6380952 | 316.8380952 |
| Observations | 15 | 15 |
| Pearson Correlation | 0.906419045 | |
| Hypothesized Mean Difference | 0 | |
| df | 14 | |
| t stat | -3.811893387 | |
| P(T<=t) one-tail | 0.000952769 | |
| t Critical one-tail | 1.761310136 | |
| P(T<=t) two-tail | 0.001905538 | |
| t Critical two-tail | 2.114786688 | |

APPENDIX 5

PRE- AND POST-COURSE EVALUATION OF PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCE T-TEST RESULTS

This appendix provides the results of a t-test for dependent samples administered to discover the course's impact on participants' experience in personal Bible study and prayer.

PRE- AND POST-COURSE EVALUATION OF
PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCE
T-TEST RESULTS

| T-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means | | |
|--|-----------------------|------------------------|
| | <i>Pre-Test Total</i> | <i>Post-Test Total</i> |
| Mean | 28.9333 | 31.2666 |
| Variance | 65.92380952 | 79.4952381 |
| Observations | 15 | 15 |
| Pearson Correlation | 0.90801694 | |
| Hypothesized Mean Difference | 0 | |
| df | 14 | |
| t stat | -2.419347499 | |
| P(T<=t) one-tail | 0.014872506 | |
| t Critical one-tail | 1.761310136 | |
| P(T<=t) two-tail | 0.029745012 | |
| t Critical two-tail | 2.144786688 | |

APPENDIX 6

PRE- AND POST-COURSE EVALUATION OF PARTICIPANTS' PRACTICE T-TEST RESULTS

This appendix provides the results of a t-test for dependent samples administered to discover the course's impact on participants' practice in personal Bible study and prayer.

PRE- AND POST-COURSE EVALUATION OF
PARTICIPANTS' PRACTICE
T-TEST RESULTS

| T-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means | | |
|--|-----------------------|------------------------|
| | <i>Pre-Test Total</i> | <i>Post-Test Total</i> |
| Mean | 41.4 | 45.5333 |
| Variance | 47.97142857 | 79.2666 |
| Observations | 15 | 15 |
| Pearson Correlation | 0.849988496 | |
| Hypothesized Mean Difference | 0 | |
| df | 14 | |
| t stat | -3.381658485 | |
| P(T<=t) one-tail | 0.00223658 | |
| t Critical one-tail | 1.761310136 | |
| P(T<=t) two-tail | 0.00447316 | |
| t Critical two-tail | 2.144786688 | |

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ABSTRACT

TEACHING GOD'S PEOPLE THE DISCIPLINES OF PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY AND PRAYER AT CENTRAL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, MIDDLEBOROUGH, MASSACHUSETTS

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022
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The purpose of the project was to teach the disciplines of personal Bible study and prayer at Central Congregational Church in Middleborough, Massachusetts. The desired result was to change participants' knowledge and practices of personal Bible study and prayer (chap. 1). A ten-week curriculum called *Made for More* was created to accomplish this objective. The course used a covenantal structure to help participants gain a clearer understanding of the basic storyline of the Bible (chap. 2). It also offered practical instruction on discipline formation, prayer, and Bible study methodology (chap. 3). The project's purpose, goals, strengths, and weaknesses were evaluated in light of surveys administered at the beginning and the end of the course (chap. 4). Finally, theological, and personal reflections were offered, along with thoughts about those things that should be done differently, should there ever be an opportunity to do the project again in the future (chap. 5).

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