

we must live in the expectation that we will continually encounter Jesus through prayer and worship and the Bible. Our early lives of faith involve an exploration of who God is, and this is best done through discussion of the Bible in a Bible fellowship meeting, which some people refer to as small group, house/home group or a cell meeting.

The early encounters which we have with Jesus are then strengthened by the expectations we have of God which we have developed through spending time in company with him as we absorb the Scriptures.

It is through the Bible that we come to read and know God's story and so develop a trust and hope in him based on the experiences and stories of others. We learn of his character, his faithfulness, his unwavering determination to bring salvation to the World. Through spending time with God in this way, we know what we can expect of him and what he can expect of us too.

In the Bible, we see the early days when he first called Abraham to follow him, as then an unknown God, out into the unknown world and to trust him.

We see God demonstrate his power for redemption in Moses, as God reveals that His power to save the Hebrew people is greater than the power of the Pharaoh to enslave and hold them captive.

We see God, rejected by these people of his choosing, reluctantly allowing them to be taken into exile as they denied Him the power to save them.

We look at the New Testament and find that the lengths that God will go to for us are pretty amazing: He becomes a baby boy, Jesus, who will live among the chosen people and who will live the sin-free life which God the Father hopes for each of his children.

Jesus will honour God, and be obedient to whatever it is that God calls him to do. Jesus will be the one through whom God's love will save people from their sin and restore their relationship with God.

The Bible is a story of desperation. Of crying out to God in despair. Of God's provision and reconciliation. The Bible covers all human situation; love, security, birth, marriage, loneliness, sickness, death, fear, war, famine, greed, childlessness, hope, adultery, betrayal, family disputes and the desire within each of us to be fully known.

To learn the story of the Bible is to learn more of the character and the personality of God. Through spending time in what we call his Word, we learn about his trustworthiness, his dependability and how he calls us to follow his son, Jesus and to build the Church here on earth.

The Bible is a useful tool in helping us understand the kind of God we worship and also the ways by he works.

We learn about God from the Bible, but I often wish that it were more detailed when describing some of the prayers, and I would love to know how the people were feeling as God acted, or had a more schematic plan for beginning to learn the rudiments of prayer. It would be especially useful if it had a couple of chapters clearly and simply devoted to being a manual for learning to pray for things that are so obviously going to take God's direct intervention rather than praying that in due course, a set of circumstances would line up to achieve an outcome for good. I love God's Word and am absolutely convinced that he breathes his power through those ancient words, lovingly translated by committed scholars for the good of our education into the history of God's people and their relationship with God as well as providing daily guidance for the church and her people each and every day. Having said that, much escapes my current understanding...

I don't understand why Hannah's grief over her childlessness was so drawn out before she

bore Samuel - she seems like a good woman.

It mystifies me why the Widow of Zarephath's son died after she had cared for Elijah, God's man. Some of Jesus' own prayers are incomprehensible, such as when he uses mud on a blind man's eyes or commands illness or demons to depart from a person.

I have no idea whether the healing shadow of the apostle in Acts 5 is something that we should aspire to, or how Peter even came to find such favour with God after his restitution in John 21.

We have the Bible and it points us to God. In so doing, it reveals his heart of love for the world. It also tells of his power. We should be a little awed by it, as we read stories of supernatural events and terrifying judgments from Joshua being given more daylight to defeat his foes through to Elijah being whisked away into heaven by fiery horses.

Then we see such New Testament miracles as Jesus being dead and then, days later, very much alive and prepared to eat with and teach people.

These alone are awe-inspiring accounts of God's power, but they serve a greater purpose than simply to stun us with a glimpse of God's greatness. These and many other Biblical accounts of God at work should also excite us by the possibility that we too are being called to be part of this story, to pray, to be in close relationship with and show the living love of God to the world! Are you excited about this possibility of this relationship brought about through prayer? I am!

Looking again in the Bible at the disciple's request of Jesus, that he 'teach them to pray', reminds me firstly that these were not men whom Jesus chose for their social or educational exclusivity, they were standard guys from every walk of life. Simon the zealot and Matthew the tax collector were unconventional choices. Peter and Andrew had a comfortable trade and family expectations to carry on the family business. Judas was flaky. James and John seemed to be good men but a little slow to pick up the point. Still, they saw Jesus pray and that God responded and they brought the request to Jesus so that they too could learn the 'how' of prayer.

This puts me in mind of our contemporary church situation: Who is daring to ask, 'Teach me to pray' and who is daring to say with confident authority, 'I will'?

There are two areas where our teaching on prayer should come from: our church leaders and our Lord Jesus. Maybe our church leaders don't themselves know how to pray, or maybe they don't know their Bible well enough to be confident in teaching their people how to pray to God with open and expectant hearts, or maybe prayer has become 'niche' and unfashionable? However it is, this trend should be challenged and overturned in order that the Church becomes known for her living out and speaking the heart of God into contemporary society at every level.

One frustration within the church at large, is that there is generally no programme for teaching the 'how' of prayer. We have the Lord's Prayer, we have the example of 'where two or three are gathered in my name' (Mtt 18:20) and we have small glimpses into prayer protocols: 'Don't show off' (Mtt 6:5) and 'keep on asking' (Luke 11:5-8). There is a common theme of frustration in the church surrounding the general lack of guidance in developing a prayer life. Chance, originally from Texas shares his experience in this way:

I don't think it's taught very much at all. It's taught as something we should do. It's taught as something Jesus did. At least, in my churches, I have not been taught a proper process to pray.⁷

⁷ Chance Riehl on Prayer

The Bible itself may not teach us a step by step programme of 'develop your prayer-life', but it does uniquely put us in touch with the revealed character and purposes of God. We learn of his design for creation, his hope in the people he has made and their struggle against the brokenness of the world in battling enemies, fear and loneliness as well as embracing obedience, growing in God's love and sharing the Gospel in places resistant to the good news and scornful of the ones who would share it. The Bible must be seen as a valuable tool for prayer and as key to understanding the God to whom we pray. Without a good knowledge of the Bible, we are prone to praying wish-lists which more accurately reflect the selfish heart of the sinner than the glorious heart of the Saviour.

This general sketchiness of teaching the practicalities of prayer has left gaping holes in the church's spiritual health. We have been a 'body without a head' as, in the West, we have struggled to keep our focus on God's will whilst the world's media and criticism has been levelled at our weak points of failed leadership, immoral behaviour and crimes against children and young people. It is hard to keep focussed on God when the attacks against God's church are shocking and brutal, revealing flawed people and broken vows. Prayer does not stop situations where church leaders have had their revealed criminal and horrid lives of crime and Godlessness revealed. Prayer can help the church to see a way of pulling through these times and to reveal God's love for all people. Prayer does lend strength to the faithful and hope to the body. Especially in times such as these, prayer needs to be both taught and led.

Without prayer-competency, believers lack the sustenance their faith needs for a living and vibrant relationship with God. It may well be this lack of prayer-competency that has led to such a major decline in Church attendance over the past 50 years.

God has been considered powerless and voiceless, even personality-less by his people who do not properly know him or how to pray to him and how to expect him to impact their lives in a world 2000 years on from the New Testament faith-fuelled adventures of Jesus and the first Apostles.

We have forgotten that the God we profess to love and follow IS the God of Moses, of Joshua and Elijah. We have failed to connect our God with being the same God who was powerfully present in the lives and work of Daniel, Mary, Peter and Paul. Their stories are publicly read in fragments during church services, by people adopting a tone of polite acceptability.

Contrast this with my friends sharing stories of how the guy from Liverpool had to exorcise a demon in the park because the local clergy wouldn't help and how he succeeded in this and then led the person, now free from torment, to the Lord, and how their faces shone with delight because this man had the faith to let God work through him. Or the 'don't forget about ...' from the teenagers as they help me tell my story of how God helped me to exorcise the caravan ... 'don't forget the bit about how the toilet was always flushing when no one was in there or that the TV kept turning itself on and off ... and how you made little crosses with oil on the windows and doors ... and how the bad spirit left but was doing weird stuff to your friend so you had to exorcise them too ... and how God made you pray in tongues for him even though he finds it weird!' The Bible stories are adventures of faith and hope in Jesus, they may be removed from us due to time, but their power and influence guides our thinking and reminds us that God's power is only limited by our faith and obedience.

Our being awestruck by God changed somewhere over the years into a polite boredom which then took the power from God's story. In doing this, the Church forgot that to turn to God is to let his power have ascendance in any situation or over any issue. That doesn't mean that we have stopped trying though!

As The Church, we *have* tried to understand how to pray. We *have* done our best to fill in the gaps in the practise and development of prayer, rightly turning to the Bible for guidance. Churches have produced sound liturgical resources with much reference to the Bible. Common practices have developed which have their toes dipped in scripture, however these have not been an unqualified success, as from our observations, we have made laws and pronounced judgment:

Jesus gets up early and seeks out solitude (Mark 1:35) and duly noted, the evangelical quiet time, of a daily fixed half hour to read the Bible and to pray, is advocated by many. Jesus forgives a paralysed man's sin (Mark 2:1-12) therefore it is deduced that un-forgiven or un-confessed sin 'must' lie at the root of persistent illness etc.

Jesus teaches the disciples the 'Lord's prayer' (Matthew 6:9-15) therefore, for Sunday worship to take place without its inclusion is tantamount to apostasy!

If we take the incidents in the New Testament as whole manuals for prayer, we run the risk of over simplifying the relationship between ourselves and God the Father. There is much we can learn from the written Word of God, and our faith will be much improved by regular focus on the Bible, but its ruthless and literal application regarding the purpose and practise of prayer can lead to further hurt being brought about in places where there is already brokenness.

God spoke specifically to Moses to strike the Red Sea (Exodus 14) so that it would part for the Hebrew people to escape from Pharaoh and enslavement, but it is widely believed that this practise is not for the general achieving of mass migration across stretches of water.

Elijah demonstrates God's supremacy on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:16-46) before the people and the prophets in a way that Jesus never does to make a point to the Pharisees and his critics.

However, from Moses' example, we can learn about the power of being obedient and faithful to God's command, even if some of the things he calls us to do make us feel self-conscious in their apparent pointlessness (imagine for a moment how a Twenty-first Century group of cynical followers would view their church leader's attempt to find a way to cross a large stretch of water by hitting it with a stick ...)

Or to learn the resilience of a faith that trusts God in the face of torment or ridicule from both Elijah and Jesus.

Many of the Biblical lessons we may learn are through the application of the knowledge we have of God rather than in copying and pasting them into our current situation. As far as I know, the Jordan doesn't generally hold an instant cure for skin disease (Naaman in 2 Kings 5) and neither does touching the coat of any church leader sort out chronic bleeding. (Mark 5)

The principle of copy and pasting the Biblical instances into current situations has too often been applied without proper understanding being sought for God's purpose and authority to be brought to bear on a situation. To learn from the Bible, we need to absorb ourselves in the Living Word of God, asking constantly for the Holy Spirit to guide our thinking and understanding. God speaks through his Word, and often a passage of scripture will sink into you and become a constant companion to your thinking and decision making. God heals, he gives power, he guides, he causes miracles, he restores, he makes whole, he changes situations, he directs thinking, he gives spiritual gifts. It is easy to see these things as 'Biblical truths' as we read through a book of the Bible such as Acts. What takes effort is making the leap from 'God did that' to 'God is calling me to be/do/go like that'. We need to believe in the God of the Bible who is alive and active. The God who cares about His people and His creation. We need to trust that the God who cares and who has

acted throughout Biblical history is willing and able to act today.

It is easy to nod along and see that this makes sense, but I hear from too many people who refuse to ask God to heal them or who will not pray release for a friend, because of hurt brought about by previous accusations of lack of faith or persistent sin, when God's power seems to be being withheld or prayers remaining long unanswered. There are too many Christians who are looking for the quick solution to life's irritations who then attempt to apply the Biblical pictures without the Biblical-sized effort of obedience and relationship with God that was worn by the Prophets, Our Lord Jesus and the Apostles. This simply will not lead to a properly Biblically underpinned prayer-life and a credible ministry of prayer within the church.

I was approached by a man who was having trouble getting a job. All his credentials were good and there were plenty of interviews for him to attend and indeed, each one ought to have borne fruit with a job offer. However, this was not the case. Interview after interview came and went and he was becoming increasingly demoralised. At his temporary places of work, he would be subjected to strange political manoeuvrings which would isolate him from the other staff and he eventually described it as being like 'something was oppressing him'. In desperation, he arrived at my home at 9pm after a day's work and explained his situation. He had been praying for strength to deal with the situations. I suggested that we prayed to ask God to take them away. So that is what we did. We stood in the authority of Jesus and claimed his power over all of that man's life, his home and family. We prayed release from that which was inhibiting his effectiveness at work and the way he was being made a target for rejection and avoidance. We prayed that God would light up his home as a beacon of glory at the far edge of town. At the close of prayer, he said, "It never occurred to me to ask for God to take it away, I thought I had to endure it."

Through knowing God, we are able to hear better how he wants to minister into a situation. The better we know our Bible, the more able we are to be directed by God in our prayers for ourselves and for others.

One man had been struggling to come along to the fellowship meeting. He was persistently late and would arrive with an attendant atmosphere over him, exuding anger and moodiness. Eventually, I asked him what was going on. "I hear accusations telling me not to come. They ridicule me and then I make myself late and that annoys me." It was annoying me too - sometimes he was an hour late and the meeting was well into the final stages. So we prayed. And as we did, I realised that there were voices of power speaking against his faith in a similar way to the Pharisees who told Peter and John no longer to speak in the Name of Jesus in Acts 4. So we prayed that he be released from the words of curse over his faith that had been placed there by those who did not know the Resurrection power of Jesus in their lives. His ability to attend was vastly improved after that prayer.

As a tool for ministry, we remember that the Bible reveals God's heart. God does not let his own frustration with human disobedience over many, many years condemn those who are suffering. Rather, he enters into the suffering and understands what it means to be human.

As people who look to the Bible for teaching on prayer, we must seek and exercise great wisdom and patience in learning to discover and see God's will and to hear his voice. Once we understand how God is speaking to us today, we are more easily able to see how the Biblical principles and pictures of prayer can affect the way we pray and how to see God's response in action.

We also learn from Jesus as we absorb his own teaching and activity in the pages of the New Testament as well as in the prayers of his own religious tradition in, especially the Psalms. Without a solid and growing knowledge and love for the Word of God in the Bible, we can never be accomplished in our praying. To build a good relationship with God, we need to know him as fully as we are able. Our inability to know God comes from our sinfulness which, especially in this area, may reveal itself as apathy toward or a disinterest in the Bible. James understood this as he wrote his Epistle:

*¹ What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? ² You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. ³ When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. ⁴ You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? ⁶ But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."
⁷ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. James 4 (NIV)*

Not asking for the things of God's heart is a sure-fire way of being disappointed in prayer. Our motivation must be for more of God's presence evident in the world or in a situation which we bring before him. Our asking therefore reflects our understanding of who God is. If we believe him to be selfish, capricious or petty, our prayers will often reflect that understanding of him. We do not ask God unless we more properly understand who he is and what he is like. Again, a thorough understanding of the Bible puts us on a strong footing for knowing about God's will and his desires for his people. James is challenging a fallacy that God is there to make our lives more entertaining and full of laughter and whatever pleases us. He has recognised that true prayer occurs where the believer prays in submission to the will of God and expects to receive what pleases God. As a result of putting God's will above our own, we can expect that the results of the prayer will be that God will give answers which will fill the believer with both the joy of the Lord and that increased hope that our lives might be lived to bring glory to God through our personal purposes and desires being in line with God's. James acts as a mentor for those to whom he writes. He corrects their wrong thinking and encourages new practises which will help them to see better results in their praying and general lifestyle.

This Biblical pattern of learning from a mentor in this way can also be helpful as we learn accountability, which is an unpopular concept in today's independent society. We want advice, but are not eager to hear and submit to a word of rebuke or censure. It worries me how often I hear the phrase, "I'm not answerable ..." I hear it again and again as Christians make bad decisions, whilst looking for approval for them from Church leadership. Indeed, we are not in judgement over another person's heart as God is, but there is a clear purpose for elders and mentors within the church body to speak into lives for their guidance and spiritual development. There is a clear pattern for this throughout the Bible, but very clearly in Acts and the Epistles where we see rebuke and encouragement to God's people being used in a definite way. The Bible teaches that there is a Godly authority which He invests in his people to effectively lead and develop Christians of all

ages and stages of faith. James, Peter and Paul each occupy this position and demonstrate how Godly authority can be exercised in the training of new converts and disciples.

If we are pleased to submit to God, we will then find our submission to the words from God's ambassadors comes easily. All this grows within us as we grow in faith and in our love for God through his Word. The better we understand God, the more effective our prayer becomes.

Look at how Jesus responds to his disciples' lack of understanding God in Matthew 17. The disciples had been on the lower slopes with the crowd whilst Jesus with Peter, James and John had been at the top of the mountain for the 'transfiguration' of Jesus by God the Father. Away from Jesus, the remaining disciples had lost heart and courage in dealing with a challenge to their faith, the boy who was afflicted by a demon. Despite the father's pleading and the disciples' efforts, no progress was made. The disciples had become insecure in the God whom they served and worshipped and this insecurity had rendered them useless in this situation where trusting in their faith was necessary;

¹⁴ When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. ¹⁵ "Lord, have mercy on my son," he said. "He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. ¹⁶ I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him." ¹⁷ "You unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me." ¹⁸ Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed at that moment. ¹⁹ Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" ²⁰ He replied, "Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." Matthew 17 (NIV)

We need to be sure of his character through the eternal truths which we find in his Word. The disciples here had so little faith that they were stumped by the problem that they faced. It was too big for them, but not too big for a person whose faith kept them within the understanding of belonging to a God who is able to do all things. We need to know THIS God, the God of power and might. We know him as we absorb his story, his truths and feed on his Word.

A number of years ago, I was late for a prayer meeting and rushed out of the house without my Bible. The group duly arrived and we entered into a time of worship after which I whispered to the host, "I don't have my Bible - could I borrow one?" Being a gracious sort of person, she smiled as she told me off! "I was once told", she said, "Never to arrive for battle unprepared. You should have your sword with you all the time." Always ready for action on behalf of the gospel, if we don't have a physical book always to hand, we should have a usable, working knowledge of the scriptures for every occasion.

In the letter to the Hebrews, it speaks of the Word of God in this way:

¹²What God has said isn't only alive and active! It is sharper than any double-edged sword. His word can cut through our spirits and souls and through our joints and marrow, until it discovers the desires and thoughts of our hearts. ¹³Nothing is hidden from God! He sees through everything, and we will have to tell him the truth. Hebrews 4 (CEV)

The Bible not only teaches us about God, it instructs our hearts and consciences about our faith. The more we know God's word, the more we are challenged and changed to become like him in our decisions, our desire for holiness and in our thinking.

This is not the only place where the Bible is described as a 'sword'. In Ephesians 6, there is the wonderful description of what it means to stand fully equipped for life by God. It is worth looking up this passage and spending some time prayerfully considering where you

need to be stronger in your faith. Verses 17 & 18 are the ones which refer specifically to the Word of God;

Accept God's salvation as your helmet, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.¹⁸ Pray in the Spirit at all times with all kinds of prayers, asking for everything you need. To do this you must always be ready and never give up. Always pray for all God's people. Ephesians 6 (CEV)

Jesus' frustration at his disciples' lack of faith resulted in some particularly blunt words from him as he corrected their error. He points their limited vision to the infinite power of God. James recognises a similar lack of faith and vision in the people to whom he writes. He is blunt and to the point as he corrects their thinking and their lifestyle. Paul, as he writes to the Ephesians picks up a picture from Isaiah as God gives hope to his people through clothing them in his heavenly power. The sword of the Spirit is the power of God we read about in Hebrews. It has the ability to bring about change within a person's life through their conscience as well as having the ability to cut down objects of spiritual malevolence from within a person's heart and life. I have seen the Word of God used effectively to deal with addiction, depression, family discord, anxiety and self-hatred. The Word of God speaks truth in a way that the world never can, touching the heart as well as the mind as it brings true life and promise into our lives.

Stories of God reveal his character and his activity of faithful relationship-building with a fickle and fragile people. Sometimes, when I read of his long-suffering with regard to how he keeps on loving them in the face of rejection, I recognise my own need for repentance and to turn back to him with the whole of my life and my will. When I read the accounts of Jesus' power to transform lives through interceding with God on behalf of someone else who is struggling, compassion and I trust in Him for a friend or someone in need will lend an authority to the prayers that is inspired by knowing that as he taught his disciples through his own diligence in the pursuit of holiness and with absolute trust in his heavenly Father for all things necessary, so too can I.

Through knowing the scriptures more thoroughly, God is able to place a word of rebuke or encouragement into our minds for us to ponder and digest. Openness to God means being willing to receive prompting from him as he renews his promises in our lives.

Whether it is in hearing your call to follow Him, or in him giving you a reminder that you are chosen by him and precious to him, as you pray with your Bible open, God will place his Word into your heart and teach you his ways of grace and love through them.

I remember many times when God told me what he wanted to do for him. Right now, I'm thinking about God's call to serve in my current church. Gavin and I came to see the village in December, a cold and clear winter's day, where in the midst of introductions we were able to take a little time to watch the small river flowing through the village, pooling up in small weirs before spilling over and running down to the next. In the watching, I felt God tell me that through our ministry, he would build the people up in their faith so that their love for him would fill up and spill over to bless and fill the next group of people like the river that filled the weir and flowed downstream to fill the next. It's a story I'll happily tell anyone about, because God spoke to me and confirmed it through his Word in a prayer meeting with friends who hadn't seen the river. Hazel announced that God was directing her to read Isaiah 41:17-20 for us which describes how God will bless the desert land with water in pools and rivers as a sign of his favour. The God of power works in many small ways, and through trusting his voice and checking with the Scriptures, we all can become radiantly excited about his plans and purposes for each of us. (Psalm 139 & Jeremiah 29:11-15) The Bible is an important part of our relationship with God. Read it, absorb it and learn how God speaks his love to you today through its words of beauty and grace.

Chapter 4 Learning to Pray by Copying Other People

I had taken a group of young people to serve on a mission team in a different part of the UK. We were sharing not very luxurious church hall floor accommodation with some other, more local, young people and the first day or so saw the usual 'battle for ownership' go on in all its subtlety! There was one young man who was pretty sure of himself and I was finding it tough to be able to respond to him without it costing me huge amounts of effort in being nice. This wasn't doing me any good, and for it to continue was not going to help the mission of the team, so I phoned a friend whom I had heard knew him from somewhere else;

"I need you to give me a character reference for Richard! He's doing my head in and I need to like him ... Tell me why I should!" After a moment's pause, the words of recommendation came;

"When I was at one of my lowest points at the University I had just started, it was Richard who came and made me go out, introducing me to people at the Christian Union and checking up on me. He's a good guy." It was all I needed to get over the pride and annoyance I was harbouring towards him, as a recommendation for this young man who had shown real care over someone I loved, broke down the barriers.

The best introductions we are given are the ones made by our friends. These may come as stories told in our absence. We are seen through their eyes. We are spoken of in tones of warmth, respect and, perhaps, frustration as they describe personalities, ideologies, idiosyncrasies and responses to various situations.

When people have learnt about us in this way, and physical introductions are made there can be an immediate connection and often a love waiting to be shared.

I have often been surprised when people I have only known as a name speak to me warmly at our first or second meeting and as though they already know me. After a little while, through conversation, a connection will be made between us that we have a mutual friend.

Our friends see us more objectively than we see ourselves. They focus on telling of our strengths and our gifts whereas we often obsess over our shortcomings and the places wherein we struggle. Our friends - good friends - promote us well to others and we do the same for them.

It is natural then, that our initial understandings of God can be based on the stories we hear of him from our friends and from people whom we know and trust. There is so much hope for the Church's future when today's people begin to model the same method as the disciple Andrew did on the shores of Galilee and went to bring his brother, Simon, to also meet with Jesus. (John 1:41-42)

We may begin our Christian life because we trust the recommendation of a friend. Initial interest is kindled and then this starting point for our faith needs further information to fuel it. We need to have an encounter with God in the same way that to really know the friends of our friends we need to meet them. Matt, newly at high school, began to attend the Christian lunch club with a friend. He then went to the annual weekend camp, was struck by something of God's love for him and he began to come along to our Church Youth Group. A year later, he gave his life to Jesus:

The reason I became a Christian at "Harvest" (Youth Camp) was because I felt a connectivity to God through prayer and worship and therefore that's why I became a Christian really - because I knew God's presence was with me. I knew he was real. I felt like a passion within me... It made me feel kind of tiny. The Holy Spirit