

## ABSTRACT

### Spiritual Direction as a Guide for Formation and Community Among Online Ministry Students

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Each year, Truett Seminary serves more than 200 non-academic ministry students through asynchronous theological education in its Online Certificate Program. These continuing education learners require a flexible, affordable, and excellent way to study for their faith and ministry. Towards this goal, the Truett Online Certificate Program is designed to maximize the individualized and self-paced experience, but this approach makes formational community a challenge. This research project demonstrates that online spiritual formation is possible through conversations that draw from the techniques of group spiritual direction.

This project begins with the foundations of Jesus' conversations with Nicodemus in John 3:1–21 and the Samaritan woman in 4:4–26. The example of ideal friendship found in John 15:12–15 provides context for a glimpse into how Jesus' conversations and friendships led to the community depicted in Acts 2:42–47 and 4:32–35. Results of this intervention indicate that in a group setting, spiritual *Conversation* leads to a spiritual *Connection* with God and each other, leading to improved spiritual *Community*.

Twelve Truett Certificate Students completed a facilitated online eight-week spiritual direction group. Participants were led in spiritual practices of lectio divina and prayer and spent time each week in group spiritual direction. They were also given a brief overview of spiritual direction practices from the perspective of learning how to improve

in the “ministry of conversation.” Pre-test and post-test survey responses were compared to a control group of ten Certificate Students. The results demonstrate that the intervention led to positive, consistent, and substantial growth in the three measured areas of conversation, connection, and community.

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Spiritual Direction as a Guide for Formation and  
Community Among Online Ministry Students

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## DEDICATION

To my wonderful wife Lydia and our amazing sons Joshua, William, and Josiah.

&

To every Truett Seminary Online Certificate Program Team Member:

Janet Galarza, Madison Harner, Jonathan Balmer, Jordan Humler, Carlisle Davidhizar,

Amanda Clark Hines, Emma Stroup, Alex Elizondo, Ebenezer Adu-Gyamfi,

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Project Introduction

One of the most valuable aspects of ministry education is the formation that occurs through conversations within community. Without the influence and shaping of community, the ability to learn how to minister is hindered, and the spiritual growth and maturity that comes through interacting with others is stifled. Fostering these formational conversations and relationships is valuable, but how might an online theological education program respond? A response must be crafted that thrives in an asynchronous continuing education program with online students scattered across the country.

### *Online Certificate Program Context*

From 2004 to 2015, the “Certificate of Ministry Program” at Baylor University’s George W. Truett Theological Seminary existed solely to provide small church pastors with theological education through correspondence-based assignments. This program was limited by its paper-based format, limited scope, and ineffective content. It was not able to find healthy growth or success. Beginning in 2015, Truett Seminary sought to breathe new life into the program with a complete redesign from the ground up. As part of this overhaul, there was no untouched area—leadership, administrative procedures, curriculum content, and most of all, the course format. Over two years, the entire program was rebuilt into the present *Online Certificate Program*. This new program utilizes a unique blend of asynchronous coursework and personalized feedback and emphasizes educational excellence through reading and reflection through critical

thinking. Now, in 2022, ministers of all types have access to the new Truett Seminary Online Certificate Program—a flexible, affordable, and quality non-scholastic theological education that is open to anyone.

### *Problem Statement*

Truett Online Certificate Students come to their studies from diverse cultural and geographic contexts. The asynchronous nature of student participation in the Truett Online Certificate Program maximizes flexibility and self-paced progress, but the strength of this format comes with a considerable drawback. Certificate Students often lack the education community and conversations that are integral to genuinely excellent ministry education and spiritual formation. Luz Marina Díaz makes this observation:

The importance of highlighting and incorporating spiritual conversation into religious education is grounded on the power of narrative and the sharing of sacred stories: (1) to help us discern who we are and what place God has in our lives; (2) to enable us to experience affective conversion by increased attentiveness to feelings, emotions, desires, and resistances within the narrative; and (3) to assist us in cultivating the ability to make good decisions toward individual, family, communal, and social well-being. Spiritual conversation is essential in providing an educational approach toward wisdom.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, without experiencing better approaches to ministry conversations, ministry students remain hindered in their approaches to conversational ministry. Therefore, a project that seeks to connect Certificate Students to each other while helping them experience better ministry-oriented conversations should not only address a weakness in the asynchronous nature of the Online Certificate Program but also improve the faith and ministry formation of its students.

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<sup>1</sup> Luz Marina Díaz, “Spiritual Conversation as Religiously Educative,” *Religious Education* 112, no. 5 (October 20, 2017): 489, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2015.1113039>.

Within the post-modern and post-Christendom world of the United States, there is a growing need for spiritual formation in the church and the American culture. Cultural influences pull Christ-followers from a life centered around God and cause them to live increasingly fractured lives in spiritual infancy. Cynthia Frances Johnson Hooton observes, “There is an expectation that Christian adults are fully formed in their belief system, and how you live out of those beliefs is your own business.”<sup>2</sup> Additionally, as she and others have observed, the church in the United States frequently assumes that a Christian upbringing equals a personal life of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. The ways in which the expected maturity of Christian adults does not mesh with their actual faith is a common impression of American adults, and Truett Certificate Students are no exception. Many come into their studies with culturally bound expectations of their faith rather than lives centered around Christ.

### *Purpose Statement*

This project aims to build a formational community for Certificate Students and help them expand their abilities to serve others through the “ministry of conversation.” Certificate Students will participate in a spiritual formation group informed by spiritual direction practices to build conversational ministry practices and formational community, with the ultimate goal of forming them for the service of others. The goal is to help participants move towards an everyday utilization of these skills that is aligned with William Reiser’s observations:

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<sup>2</sup> Cynthia Frances Johnson Hooton, “An Experience in Small Group Spiritual Direction at McGuire United Methodist Church” (DMin diss., Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2019), 27.

Spiritual direction might take place in a group setting or as one-on-one. It can be formal or informal. At times we approach someone for the express purpose of seeking direction, yet more often we may find ourselves just talking informally with others, conversing easily yet sincerely about the things that matter to us as we share a meal, take a walk, or sit on a rock and ponder the sea. If in the process we become more conscious of the presence and action of God in our lives, then I believe it should be said that mutual direction has been taking place.<sup>3</sup>

Spiritual direction has long been a tool to prayerfully help another person connect to God.

David G. Benner describes this as “a prayer process in which a person seeking help in cultivating a deeper personal relationship with God meets with another for prayer and conversation that is focused on increasing awareness of God amidst life experiences and facilitating surrender to God’s will.”<sup>4</sup> This conversational interaction is often done in a *one-with-one*<sup>5</sup> setting. It can additionally take place in the context of spiritual direction groups. This group experience is similar to the way that Benner describes spiritual direction, but for this project, Alice Fryling’s definition will get closer to the heart of what will be done:

The purpose of spiritual direction groups is *formation*. Spiritual formation is a “process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others.” The intentional goal of group spiritual direction is to help each participant become more aware of God in their lives, *for the sake of others*.<sup>6</sup>

Sharing and listening between people in respectful mutual disclosure and care can form strong bonds and stronger ministers because community building is learning to see the

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<sup>3</sup> William Reiser, *Seeking God in All Things: Theology and Spiritual Direction* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004), 21.

<sup>4</sup> David G. Benner, *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship & Direction* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 94.

<sup>5</sup> This is the preferred phrasing of the Truett Seminary Spiritual Direction Training Program according to Ben Simpson, E-mail message to author, “DMin Project Proposal,” June 13, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Alice Fryling, *Seeking God Together: An Introduction to Group Spiritual Direction* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2008), 27.

different ways God is at work in other people's lives. Rose Mary Dougherty helpfully summarizes this process in this way, "in small group spiritual direction, people often become aware of God's ways in their hearts as they hear how God seems to be present for others and as they become conscious of God's presence with them as a group."<sup>7</sup>

### *Necessary Information*

To frame the approach and direction of this project, it is perhaps helpful to start by establishing a clear understanding of several key terms and concepts related to this shape of the particular context and the associated work.

### *Spiritual formation*

The Truett Seminary Office of Spiritual Formation defines spiritual formation as "an ongoing process where human beings grow in intimacy with God by the power of the Holy Spirit, opening the possibility for maturity in Christ-like character for the glory and delight of God."<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Dallas Willard defines spiritual formation in this way,

Spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.... In the degree to which spiritual formation in Christ is successful, the outer life of the individual becomes a natural expression or outflow of the character and teachings of Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Rose Mary Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 35–36.

<sup>8</sup> Simpson, "DMin Project Proposal," June 13, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting On the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 22–24.

As a counterpoint to an exclusively New Testament perspective on spiritual formation, S. Min Chun’s chapter on “Old Testament Ethics and Spiritual Formation” serves wonderfully. Chun redeems the ethical value of the Old Testament by grounding “spiritual formation” in the basic concept of “imitating God.”<sup>10</sup> This reorienting approach contrasts with most spiritual formation definitions that center on the process of becoming like Jesus—something that is anachronistic when it comes to the Old Testament.

### *Spiritual direction*

Participating in a spiritual direction group is about asking good *questions* rather than having good *answers*. It starts with a humility of admitting weaknesses and limitations and carefully paying attention to what the Holy Spirit is doing in ourselves and in others. This careful listening to our siblings in Christ and to the work of the Holy Spirit<sup>11</sup> in their lives is a form of community building that is intimate and honest at its core. An excellent summation of this approach can be found in Richard Foster’s profound and helpful words, “Give encouragement as often as possible; advice, once in a while; reproof, only when absolutely necessary, and judgment, *never*.”<sup>12</sup>

Likewise, regarding the importance of connecting to the inner work of the Spirit within one’s self prior to helping others, Henri Nouwen writes, “The man who can

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<sup>10</sup> S. Min Chun, “Old Testament Ethics and Spiritual Formation,” in *Spiritual Formation for the Global Church: A Multi-Denominational, Multi-Ethnic Approach*, ed. Ryan A. Brandt and John Frederick (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2021), 157.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction*, 5th ed. (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1992), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Richard J. Foster, “Foreword,” in *A Spiritual Formation Workbook: Small Group Resources for Nurturing Christian Growth*, by James Bryan Smith, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999).

articulate the movement of his inner life, who can give names to his varied experiences, need no longer be a victim of himself...only he who is able to articulate his own experience can offer himself to others as a source of clarification.”<sup>13</sup> In this regard, the exercise of participating in spiritual direction and/or “spiritual friendship”<sup>14</sup> allows one to connect to God in better ways, but also to come to a better understanding of God’s work within one’s own created identity. Carolyn Gratton offers this summary:

An intentional relationship of Christian spiritual direction is not so much a matter of one person having authority to direct another, rather, both parties in the relationship are expected to become attentive listeners to the Holy Spirit, who continually provides providential direction in the life of each man and woman whether they are aware of it or not.<sup>15</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love for God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them.”<sup>16</sup>

In particular, Fryling describes the value of a group context for utilizing these listening skills as providing “a place where individuals can experience what it means to be listened to and loved by others so that they can learn to listen more attentively to God in their daily lives and be used by God to spread God’s grace and love throughout the world.”<sup>17</sup> Through these conversational skills of listening and attending to the movement

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<sup>13</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday Religion, 2010), 38.

<sup>14</sup> See Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 16..

<sup>15</sup> Carolyn Gratton, “Spiritual Direction,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 913.

<sup>16</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian in Community* (Princeton: Harper & Row, 1954), 97.

<sup>17</sup> Fryling, *Seeking God Together*, 8.

of the Spirit, participants have to pay careful attention to two voices: that of the one speaking and that of the Spirit. In doing so, a participant becomes a truly active listener “who intently listens to another person with the goal of being able to identify with the life of the one sharing in order to be a more effective tool in the hands of the Holy Spirit in the other person’s life.”<sup>18</sup>

*God is at work in both joy and suffering*

To see the work of God truly in all areas of one’s life is to understand that both suffering and joy are shaping forces in our lives. It can often be challenging for someone to understand what is going on in the midst of suffering, but a godly listener can often ask helpful questions in such a way that the Holy Spirit is then better able to be seen in circumstances and life. On this, Lesslie Newbigin writes, “[Jesus’] calling is to the way of suffering, rejection, and death—to the way of the cross. He bears witness to the presence of the reign of God not by overpowering the forces of evil but by taking their full weight upon himself. Yet it is in that seeming defeat that victory is won.”<sup>19</sup> To help a brother or sister in the faith better see what God is doing in these moments is to join in the work of God and help form one another in community.

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<sup>18</sup> Ele Parrott, *Transforming Together: Authentic Spiritual Mentoring* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 88.

<sup>19</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 35.



### *Online engagement*

To engage in spiritual formation in an online space is to move into new ways in which people form connections and relationships online; Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner argue that the ways in which we look for God at work in proximal relationships are the same ways in which we look for God at work in digital relationships. They write that “we should not be surprised to find God, who is Lord of all, present in our digital space and our human encounters there.”<sup>20</sup> Additionally, they write that the starting point for digital relationships is not with the technology itself “but rather what we think the content of wholesome relationships looks like.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, the approach ought to be centered on the ways in which relationships can be formed rather than the ways in which they are hindered.

### *Acceptable terminology*

Within an online context, it will be best to use informal language like “facilitator” instead of “spiritual director” in order to make this experience more acceptable to the wide variety of students found in the Online Certificate Program, particularly those from minority contexts. This informal terminology is in keeping with observations of Darrell Griffin,<sup>22</sup> an African American pastor who sees great value in this practice when it is

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<sup>20</sup> Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 92.

<sup>21</sup> Campbell and Garner, 133. Here Campbell and Garner build on the work of Lynne M. Baab, *Friending: Real Relationships in a Virtual World* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> D. Darrell Griffin, “Spiritual Direction for African Americans in Crisis,” *Liturgy* 27, no. 1 (January 2012): 8.

accomplished with less formality. Similarly, within an “evangélicxs” context, Cameron Wu-Cardona arrives at the same conclusion.<sup>23</sup>

### *Three Main Goals: Conversation leading to Connection leading to Community*

#### *Conversation*

Prayer is, at its most fundamental level, a conversation that connects people with God. Likewise, connection to others is most present through active participation in meaningful conversation. It is this aspect of the spiritual direction group experience that will be emphasized, both in terminology and in application. By framing the entire context of the group experience as a process of better learning how to do conversational ministry, we hope to provide a model of approaching ministry conversations that is less formal than spiritual direction but more intentional and effective than simply offering advice. For this aspect of health, it will be essential to emphasize active listening skills and non-judgmental approaches to ministry and encouragement.

At the heart of this project is a new eight-week curriculum built around weekly 90-minute facilitated conversation sessions, and given the short eight-week duration of this curriculum, it is unlikely to result in anything more than modest initial growth. It should, however, help people see and experience a way to approach their friends, congregational members, family, and strangers with better confidence and a clearer

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<sup>23</sup> Cameron Wu-Cardona, “A Spiritual Direction Program for Centro Hispanos De Estudios Teológicos (CHET)” (DMin diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2019). *Evangélicxs* is an uncommon term that Wu-Cardona prefers as an academic alternative to the gendered Spanish terms of *evangélicos* or *evangélicas*.

vision of what might be possible through fostering better conversations—what will be interchangeably referred to as “conversational ministry” or “ministry of conversation.”

A fundamental guiding principle for group spiritual direction is the concept that each participating person must set aside their own pride and authority to come to the conversation as an equal. A group that is dominated by one person, even the spiritual director himself, is a group in which the Holy Spirit’s voice is muted. A guiding principle such as this prevents a teacher or leader, or even a minister/spiritual director, from having too low a view of the individuals whom they serve. A lower view of the individual being served is a lower view of the presence of the Holy Spirit within that person’s life and the ways in which that individual reflects the *imago dei*.

Spiritual conversation is a form of dialogue between two or more people, which focuses on uncovering the presence of God in the narrative shared by one person. The person speaking is honest and authentic about the personal needs of life and struggles. People listening are warm, empathetic, nonjudgmental, and ask relevant questions to help find God in the experience narrated.<sup>24</sup>

This form of conversation moves even further than the depth of what Sherry Turkle calls for in her book, *Reclaiming Conversation*,<sup>25</sup> in which she describes a post-digital age where attention is distracted by external connections on the devices in our pockets.

Turkle is a trained sociologist, licensed clinical psychologist, and a Professor of Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT. In a remarkable theological statement, she writes, “Face-to-face conversation is the most human—and humanizing—thing we do.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Díaz, “Spiritual Conversation as Religiously Educative,” 477.

<sup>25</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, reprint ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2016).

<sup>26</sup> Turkle, 3.

Conversation has the (often untapped) potential to create opportunities for deep connection. Spiritual companioning is rooted in the narratives and stories that make up an individual's core identity and the work that God is doing within the individual. It takes care and commitment to overcome the digital pull of the so-called "friends" in our pockets if we are to form true and meaningful friendships with people in real life. Turkle's pro-conversation argument helps to keep digital technology subject to the advancement of true conversation and thus emphasizes that good conversational skills are in decline and beneficial to relationship building. Turkle prompts her readers to consider the ways that their abilities to maintain connections to people on the other side of the world hinder their desire to form connections with people next door. These deeper-level conversations are what Douglas Purnell calls "pastoral" conversations:

...conversation is pastoral when there is a desire to care, when people attend to and listen to the other with discipline, and when that listening is about the living of the other. And ultimately, the conversation is open to moving into the space of the sacred or the divine through its intensification of the ordinary.<sup>27</sup>

For the facilitators of a group spiritual direction experience, the goal is to help draw students into an increasingly narrow sphere of influence until Jesus Christ is both the center and the circumference of that influence. People need to be taught to reclaim everyday conversation for the service of our faith.

It is even in the example of Jesus that we can see the power of ordinary places<sup>28</sup> for conversation and instruction. Jesus embraced a conversational approach to ministry in ordinary times and places. This is the observation that Karl Allen Kuhn makes:

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<sup>27</sup> Douglas Purnell, *Conversation as Ministry: Stories and Strategies for Confident Caregiving* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 23.

<sup>28</sup> Purnell, 39. Purnell describes the value of engaging in pastoral conversations in ordinary places, "Whenever I can, I invite people into public spaces, such as coffee shops, for it reinforces that we belong

Most of His instruction takes place in private conversation with His disciples and even His adversaries. The ways of the kingdom are shared with those who walk with Jesus on the dusty back roads...or dine with Jesus in the homes of folk as diverse as Pharisees, tax collectors, common laborers, and widows.<sup>29</sup>

Eugene Peterson acknowledges this innate power of the ordinary conversation opportunities when he writes to his fictional spiritual friend, Gunnar Thorkildsson, “The conversations that take place in the parking lot after Sunday worship are as much a part of the formation of Christian character as the preaching from the sanctuary pulpit.”<sup>30</sup>

Díaz points towards these “inside and outside the church” conversations as being a means of “guiding the spiritual life” of others and continues by writing:

Spiritual conversation helps us in the process of discerning who we really are, coming to sense God’s presence in every moment of our lives, and cultivating the freedom to make good decisions toward individual, familial, communal, and social well-being.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, any efforts to develop these ministry of conversation skills are worthwhile for the formation of ministers themselves and for all those with whom they cross paths in daily life and ministry. Conversation with God and others forms and reinforces the connections that are the building blocks of community.

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together as community. It is sometimes easier, less threatening to me, and more equal for both of us to engage in conversation over a drink somewhere. Seeing people as a pastor in my office means that I am acting more like a counselor (with the attendant power) than a pastoral person. Sitting with a person over a cup of coffee, where I can ask exactly the same questions, is more likely to be experienced as valuing the other as equal and as friend.”

<sup>29</sup> Karl Allen Kuhn, *Having Words with God: The Bible as Conversation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 45.

<sup>30</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Wisdom of Each Other: A Conversation Between Spiritual Friends* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 20.

<sup>31</sup> Díaz, “Spiritual Conversation as Religiously Educative,” 480.

## Connection

Connection is a catch-all term to describe each individual's spiritual health as regards their own relationships to God and awareness of God's work within their own lives. This is a standard goal of spiritual direction, and to emphasize this goal is merely to walk a well-worn pathway of fostering spiritual conversations within a group spiritual direction experience. The unique aspect of this goal will be the interaction with and between Certificate Students. Larry Crabb observes:

[Newly empowered Christians] could powerfully heal broken hearts, overcome the damage done by abusive backgrounds, encourage the depressed to courageously move forward, stimulate the lonely to reach out, revitalize discouraged teens and children with new and holy energy, and introduce hope into the lives of the countless people who feel rejected, alone, and useless.<sup>32</sup>

A life dwelling on external factors, readily portrayed through social media accounts, leads to thirsty people who are out of touch with their inner person and in need of connection to God. This is how Cindy Bolden puts it:

The postmodern United States can be characterized as thirsty; specifically, it is thirsty for connection and community. 'Sociocultural dynamics reveal a people desiring meaningful connection and conversation. People are gathering in public spaces such as coffee shops, bars, and bookstores (spaces known as "third places"), seeking the pleasures of companionship and stimulating conversation outside of the first place (home) and second place (work). Personal ventures into coffee shops, yoga studios, and athletic facilities on Sunday mornings reveal a good number of persons frequenting "great good places" that are not religious or ecclesial. People are actively seeking physical, emotional, and relational sustenance, and it is occurring with increasing frequency in community public spaces.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Larry Crabb, *Connecting: Healing Ourselves and Our Relationships* (Nashville: Word, 1997), xiii.

<sup>33</sup> Cindy Bolden, "Hospitality at Community Wells: The Life-Giving Waters of John 4:7-15," *Review & Expositor* 117, no. 4 (November 2020): 534, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637320974965>. She quotes Colleen M. Conway, *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and Johannine Characterization*, SBL Dissertation Series 167 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999). For the phrase "great good places" she refers to the work of Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee*

Nouwen argues that connectedness to God first comes through an awareness of the true inner self and our own vulnerabilities and wounds that are easily overlooked or replaced with external distractions.<sup>34</sup> This is Nouwen's way of saying that ministers must first understand themselves in order to have the best opportunity to serve others.

Within the context of spiritual direction, and particularly within group spiritual direction, this rootedness in both the inner identity and shared wounds that are common to the human experience leads towards increased capacity for compassion and further opportunity to help one another see grace and the power of God at work in our lives. A director helps another see God's work in these ways, but not always by sharing a common experience. Instead, it is through the drawing of another's attention to those matters. If directors are oblivious to wounds in their own lives, it is harder for them to help others attend to similar wounds.

"Spiritual companioning" is the term that Reed, Osmer, and Smucker use as they look at how spirituality in Protestant traditions have provided a rich but often overlooked narrative of support for intentional spiritual connection between Christians.<sup>35</sup> In particular, they draw much of the strength in their theological conclusions from the presence and work of the Holy Spirit within each person. The perspective on God,

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*Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 1999).

<sup>34</sup> Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, 38. "The man who can articulate the movement of his inner life, who can give names to his varied experiences, need no longer be a victim of himself...only he who is able to articulate his own experience can offer himself to others as a source of clarification." Though Nouwen speaks about ministers, the conclusion is not tied to any particular vocational identity (i.e., it is just as true for laity as it is for clergy).

<sup>35</sup> Angela H. Reed, Richard R. Osmer, and Marcus G. Smucker, *Spiritual Companioning: A Guide to Protestant Theology and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), xi.

through the lens of the Holy Spirit's constant companionship in one's life, is then the motif by which other relationships are to be compared. These ways of studying something deeper than friendship are illuminated through the inner awareness that each person has for desiring to be truly seen, heard, and loved. Conversation of this type is a spiritual dialogue that, according to Benner, is "richer than simple conversation, advice giving or communication. Dialogue involves shared inquiry designed to increase the awareness and understanding of all parties." He continues by describing his approach, "In dialogue I attempt to share how I experience the world and seek to understand how you do so. In this process, each participant touches and is touched by others. This results in each person's being changed."<sup>36</sup>

Within the context of group spiritual direction, Reed, Osmer, and Smucker emphasize a focus on living prayerfully in the following three ways: 1) "prayer is a regular and valued activity in the group" 2) "small groups intentionally help their members learn to listen to one another prayerfully, even when they are not explicitly engaged in praying" 3) "small groups in which spiritual companionship takes place communicate the expectation that their members will pray when they are not together."<sup>37</sup> Each of these three elements of companionship ought to be present within a spiritual direction small group, but they do not only find value in a formal group setting. It is for this reason that spiritual direction will be talked about with Certificate Students as a ministry of conversation because the goal will be to instruct and give experience in

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<sup>36</sup> Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 55.

<sup>37</sup> Reed, Osmer, and Smucker, *Spiritual Companionship*, 88.



conversational listening and the companioning that comes with conversation and ultimately leads to community.

To borrow the analogy of Walter Brueggemann's preaching book, *Finally Comes the Poet*, a spiritual companion may function like a poet<sup>38</sup> and shows a way through the mundane, ordinary prose of life to reveal the rich beauty and poetry of the Christ who "plays in ten thousand places."<sup>39</sup> Brueggemann sees the preacher as this poet. Poets reveal what has been overlooked and direct attention towards the meaning that was missed. As a result, "poet" is a helpful image for preachers, but this is much the same work of a spiritual director/spiritual companion. In all these instances, it is the engagement with the work of the Holy Spirit to direct attention towards where Christ is at work and play. This type of connection through spiritual direction is, as R. Neal Siler describes, "to be co-human with a fellow traveler, questing to discover where God is at work, even in the most stringent places of life, and when He is discovered, saying to the one in journey with you: 'There He is.'"<sup>40</sup> With connections to God and each other that are fostered by and maintained through conversation, the end goal is improved community.

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<sup>38</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 6. "After the engineers, inventors, and scientists, after all such control through knowledge, 'finally comes the poet.' The poet does not come to have a say until the human community has engaged in its best management. Then perchance comes the power of poetry—shattering, evocative speech that breaks fixed conclusions and presses us always toward new, dangerous, imaginative possibilities." In this passage, Brueggemann quotes from Walt Whitman, "Passage to India," 5:101–5 *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Mentor Books, The New American Library, 1954), 324.

<sup>39</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, "'As Kingfishers Catch Fire, Dragonflies Draw Flame,'" in *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manly Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner, reprint ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1985), 51.

<sup>40</sup> R. Neal Siler, "The Efficacy of Spiritual Direction in the African American Christian Community," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 10, no. 2 (November 1, 2017): 305, <https://doi.org/10.1177/193979091701000218>.

## *Community*

Within this project, community that is fostered between participating students is a microcosmic representation of the universal church. This aspect of health is the emphasis on community via sharing, listening, encouraging, and prayerfully supporting other fellow believers. The participating members of each group will be separated by hundreds and often thousands of miles and will come from very different cultural and theological backgrounds, but the common bond will be the Holy Spirit's presence and the shared commitments to following Christ—along with a fledgling step into formal theological education.

Within the span of this eight-week project, hopes for community building are quite modest. Through the development of “conversational ministry” skills, the desired goal is to start the process of shaping each participant into a community-building Christ-follower—one who has experienced healthy and intimate community and who will continue that slow, methodical process within their local congregation. In eight weeks, one can hardly begin to undo the individualistic nature of American culture, but until one is shown a better way to understand and experience faith, one cannot even imagine that there is a better way. This is the context in which Anthony B. Robinson and Robert W.

Wall write:

So our North American sense of placing high value in the individual—in many ways a strength—has the flip side of weakening the community, undermining enduring bonds and relationships, disconnecting individuals from structures and networks of meaning, and depriving individual people of their communities of meaning and purpose. The church in North America is also affected by this.... It is often easier for us to think of “my faith” rather than of “our faith,” “my” relationship to Jesus rather than our life together, “my” spirituality rather than our life as a people. Yet the whole witness of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, is bent toward God's intention to form a people, a people who will be a light to the whole world, a blessing to all the other peoples of the earth. Sometimes our

emphasis on the individual has blinded us to this social and theological reality: God is in the business of creating a people, building a community, and calling each of us into a new community that is defined by new loyalties and a new story.<sup>41</sup>

To shift an individualistic understanding of faith is no easy task, but by careful exposure to healthier listening and conversation practices in community, the hope is that those experiences will accompany a participant into their future conversations and relationship-building in order to give better opportunities for the reclamation of the communal nature of the Christian faith and the model of Church depicted in Scripture. This is the manner in which John O'Donnell connects the church to the representation of Jesus in the world—a much-needed reminder:

But because the Spirit always has a Christological face, it is the nature of the Spirit to become bodily. Hence it is the mission of the Spirit to create the Church, i.e., to take on concrete form as the Body of Christ. The Spirit of Jesus is never expressed in a merely interior way but needs social, public attestation. In this way the Spirit leads all who hear his voice to become Church.<sup>42</sup>

As the Holy Spirit works within Christ-followers, community via the church is the result and the testimony of this work. It also becomes the conduit through which an individual life can be shaped by conversation in community. Parker Palmer's description of a personal breakthrough that came through conversation in community is an excellent example of group listening and conversation that shows up in a community context.

In chapter 3 of *Let Your Life Speak*, Palmer tells the story of being offered an opportunity to become the president of a small educational institution, and despite his

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<sup>41</sup> Anthony B. Robinson and Robert W. Wall, *Called to Be Church: The Book of Acts for a New Day* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 79.

<sup>42</sup> John O'Donnell, "In Him and Over Him: The Holy Spirit in the Life of Jesus," *Gregorianum* 70, no. 1 (1989): 42.

confidence that it was the right direction, he followed his Quaker custom of convening a “clearness committee.” This committee listened to his confident description of the opportunity, and he responded to their questions positively and easily until “someone asked a question that sounded easier but turned out to be very hard: ‘What would you like most about being a president.’” This question stopped him in his tracks, and he began to list off the various things he would not like before he was interrupted and asked the question a second time...and then a third time. Finally, this question drew his attention to his inner motives in a way that had previously gone unnoticed by himself, “I guess what I’d like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word *president* under it.” Palmer recounts that though his answer was comically shallow, it was also an answer that was serious for his soul.<sup>43</sup> This experience of listening in a setting akin to group spiritual direction is the type of formation through listening that is desired within the scope of this project.

To help others connect to their own inner vocation and the shape of their own souls through listening to God is a prime goal of spiritual direction, and to do so in and through community is the way in which such revelations can often be far more effective in reaching one’s notice. To summarize these three terms, it will be beneficial to arrange them in the order in which they naturally flow: spiritual *Conversation* leads to a spiritual *Connection* with God and each other, and this, in turn, leads towards deep and authentic spiritual *Community*.

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<sup>43</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 44–46.

### *Significance of Project*

Within the landscape of non-scholastic theological education, the Truett Seminary Online Certificate Program stands apart because of its unique design and format. The needs and voices of certificate-level students have long indicated that an ideal program would be able to serve ministers throughout the enormous state of Texas while being *affordable, flexible, and excellent*.<sup>44</sup> However, these expressed needs hinder the best possible experience of learning within community and through relationships with others. Until now, this need for community and conversational formation has been relegated to optional in-person seminar experiences, which, due to various travel restrictions, are frequently not accessible to everyone. Should the results of this intervention be positive, the goal is for this project to continue forward into an ever-present curriculum component for Truett Certificate Students. This addition of community-building components to the curriculum will better form ministers of all types and more faithfully function as a means of building upon the Baptist doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

Baptists have long held this view of the priesthood of every believer, but practically speaking, Baptists have often inherited and perpetuated too large a divide between clergy and laity. Pastors of churches often permit the congregation to offload pastoral care responsibilities, and congregation members are often at ease about simply letting the pastor handle spiritual needs within the church. However, a true embodiment of a theology of the priesthood of all believers demands that all believers be equipped for ministry. Therefore, to embody the priesthood of all believers is to take seriously the need for providing excellent education and formation of all of them. This is what the Truett

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<sup>44</sup> In conversation it is routine to quip that these three things are not typically found together.

Online Certificate Program seeks to do, and all improvements to this process are, therefore, for the furthering of the kingdom of God via the ongoing formation of each of its members and its expansion through building relationships. An effective curriculum addition furthers the work of forming and educating ministers from all walks of life through becoming better equipped to connect to God, converse with others, and build community.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Biblical and Theological Considerations

To read Scripture is to read a story of community and relationship, and there is abundant Scriptural support for the ways in which God desires the people of God to live in close harmony and mutual support. From the Trinitarian nature of God, the relational example of Jesus, and the community-driven nature of the early church, a reader of Scripture gains a clear understanding of the ways in which God values community.

This type of community is not a happenstance community that occurs simply through proximity;<sup>45</sup> it is the example and life of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit that enables a deeper and richer spiritual connection. In order to create a new basis of relational expectations, some, like Benner, prefer to describe the strongest and most vibrant version of this type of relationship as “spiritual friendship.”<sup>46</sup> Others, like Griffin, Reed, and Siler, prefer the term “spiritual companioning.”<sup>47</sup> Regardless, the point of such a term is not to describe a new *kind* of relationship but to differentiate the intentional forming of deeper spiritual relationships from happenstance friendships. A relationship of this type is deeper than casual acquaintance or what might pass as friendship in contemporary society.

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<sup>45</sup> Lindsay Boyer, “Contemplative Presence in the Digital Realm,” *Contemplative Outreach News*, December 2019, 10.

<sup>46</sup> See Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 16.

<sup>47</sup> See Griffin, “Spiritual Direction,” 5; Reed, Osmer, and Smucker, *Spiritual Companioning*, xi; and Siler, “The Efficacy of Spiritual Direction in the African American Christian Community,” 310.

Deeper spiritual relationships are friendships of life-giving interaction, and a model of their nature can be seen in the ways that Jesus listened and conversed with others in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. This connection to the Holy Spirit's voice and work leads to conversations that are deep and full of insight. What then flows from this connection to the Spirit and to each other is that the people who spend time in conversation with Jesus form winsome and healthy communities that reflect this deep connection. For ministry students in distant contexts, opportunities for meaningful conversation allow bonds of interpersonal connection to be formed, which should then form community across these geographic and cultural distances. The nature and challenge of doing spiritual direction with culturally diverse participants is explored in Appendix D, with the intent to establish the best ways of approaching content and implementation for the diverse population of Certificate Students.

### *Example of Jesus*

The example of Jesus can prove quite helpful for all who seek to replicate the effectiveness of his conversational interactions. Some, like Catholic theologian Chester Michael, have argued that the entirety of Jesus' ministry may be considered spiritual direction.<sup>48</sup> Reiser builds upon this idea of Jesus as a spiritual director but points out that Jesus' conversations lacked the formality of contemporary spiritual direction conversations. Whether it was in small or large groups, Jesus drew people closer to God,

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<sup>48</sup> Chester Michael, *An Introduction to Spiritual Direction: A Psychological Approach for Directors and Directees* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 3.



and his conversations presupposed the work of the “Spirit in the community.”<sup>49</sup> Klaus Dieter Issler also points out that Jesus made these conversations a regular part of his life—they occurred so casually as to seem effortless:

What challenges me is the seemingly casual manner of Jesus’ own life as portrayed in the Gospels, yet my own lifestyle is much too busy.... Some Christian leaders tend toward overcommitment of activities, which not only hinders our walk with God but also sets a bad example for others. Not only do we need physical rest, but our hearts also need space to listen to God.<sup>50</sup>

To follow Jesus’ example is to take advantage of preplanned formal conversations of pastoral care or spiritual direction, and it is also a matter of following his example of being “attuned to the heavenly realities whilst living in the world below.”<sup>51</sup> Stavros S. Fotiou describes Jesus as “the one who takes the initiative and goes ahead to meet humans and enter into conversation with them.”<sup>52</sup> Through these conversations, Jesus demonstrates the spiritual reality that is continually present.

Through the example and teachings of Jesus, it is clear that humans are meant to be engaged in the physical and spiritual realities of life. Christ is both the mediator between these two realms and the example of what an ideal human looks like. Johnson Thomaskutty writes:

As the Word became flesh, Jesus accommodates the worldly culture to convey the heavenly message. He fuses the from above message with the earthly to transform

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<sup>49</sup> Reiser, *Seeking God in All Things*, 24.

<sup>50</sup> Klaus Dieter Issler, “Learning from Jesus to Live in the Manner Jesus Would If He Were I: Biblical Grounding for Willard’s Proposal Regarding Jesus’ Humanity,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 3, no. 2 (2010): 178.

<sup>51</sup> Johnson Thomaskutty, “‘Humanhood’ in the Gospel of John,” *HTS Teologiese Studies* 77, no. 4 (October 1, 2021): 3, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6643>.

<sup>52</sup> Stavros S. Fotiou, “The Transformation of Existence: Christ’s Encounter with the Samaritan Woman According to John 4:4–42,” *The Expository Times* 124, no. 7 (April 1, 2013): 329, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524613475974>.

the world. In that sense, the Johannine community followed a rhetoric of distinction as an alternative culture.<sup>53</sup>

On this note, the work of Willard is helpful. He writes, “How would Jesus live your life, with your personality, with your talents, with your life experiences, within your life context, if he were you?”<sup>54</sup> However, in regards to Jesus serving as an example for one’s life, Marguerite Shuster offers a caveat when she writes that what people fundamentally need and what Scripture provides is the portrayal of Jesus as a Savior—not just an example.<sup>55</sup> Willard likewise offers the encouragement that this is not about learning to do all of the things that Jesus did but rather to seek to do everything that one does “in the manner that Jesus did all that he did.”<sup>56</sup> This manner of thinking about Jesus’s example is a comfort to Willard, as it centers one’s actions not necessarily on what actions one does but on how one does those actions.

### *Introduction of Selected Texts*

The Gospels offer a great many conversations involving Jesus, but two longer one-on-one conversations rise to the top: a conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:1–21 and a conversation with an unnamed Samaritan woman at a well in John 4:4–26. They

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<sup>53</sup> Thomaskutty, “‘Humanhood’ in the Gospel of John,” 6.

<sup>54</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), 283.

<sup>55</sup> Marguerite Shuster, “The Use and Misuse of the Idea of the Imitation of Christ,” *Ex Auditu* 14 (1998): 74. “My fundamental point is that what we need, and what the NT offers us, is first and foremost, not an example, but a Savior. My major caveat with respect to imitation themes is that they tend to obscure that fundamental point.”

<sup>56</sup> Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 284.

portray conversations that engage with the physical and spiritual realms. Regarding these two conversations, Karoline M. Lewis writes:

[T]here is something theologically important in dialogue. Revelation, understanding, possibility, and openness happen in conversation. Conversation itself is indicative of theological curiosity and not doctrinal conclusiveness. Words are important when it comes to the Word becoming flesh. In the larger context of John, these conversations are representative of what it means to abide in Jesus. Abiding will take on numerous forms and examples and conversation is a means by which abiding takes place.<sup>57</sup>

These two conversations in the Gospel of John provide a representative example of the types of conversations that Jesus had. They illustrate the type of conversational style Jesus used and provide context to his declaration in John 15:12–17 that the disciples are his friends. From John 15, this friendship foundation leads to a community that was founded by Jesus and can be seen in Acts 2:42–47 and Acts 4:32–35. Ultimately, a thread becomes visible that traces conversation leading to connection and, ultimately, community.

### *The example of Jesus in John 3:1–21*

The Gospels are full of spiritually profound conversations that often occur in relatively innocuous locales and conditions. John 3 portrays one of the longest dialogues with Jesus. It begins when Nicodemus approaches Jesus with a question regarding salvation,<sup>58</sup> but Nicodemus receives more than he expected—a profound spiritual conversation.

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<sup>57</sup> Karoline M. Lewis, *John*, Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries (Minneapolis: 1517 Media; Fortress Press, 2014), 46–47, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt9m0w2g>.

<sup>58</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. Basil Blackwell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 134.

*Arrival of Nicodemus (John 3:1–2)*

In a series of statements, John introduces Nicodemus and reveals who he is through progressive identity markers. The description starts, “There was a man” (Ἦν δὲ ἄνθρωπος), “from among the Pharisees” (ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων), “named Nicodemus” (Νικόδημος ὄνομα αὐτοῦ), “an official of the Jews” (ἄρχων τῶν Ἰουδαίων). Step by step, a picture of Nicodemus emerges from the darkness, and he approaches Jesus with a “polite address that places Jesus on his own social level.”<sup>59</sup> On the surface, this seems to be the start of a simple conversation between peers. After all, Nicodemus refers to Jesus as “rabbi” (lit. “teacher”), and Jesus will later refer to Nicodemus as “a teacher of Israel” (v. 10). At the outset, this conversation seems it will be among two teachers, but soon Nicodemus will be in over his head.<sup>60</sup> The nature of their own identity will be contrasted because Jesus will soon demonstrate that he exceeds the “rabbi” title, while Nicodemus falls short as ὁ διδάσκαλος τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ (lit. “the teacher of Israel” (v. 10).

This is not simply a conversation between two individuals but also a conversation between two people who both represent someone else. Nicodemus’ use of the plural “we know” in verse 2 indicates that he comes on behalf of the Sanhedrin (John 7:50–52) in order to give voice to how they understand Jesus’ identity (3:2). In the same way, there is a subtle irony that Jesus, like Nicodemus, is also a representative of someone else—God. The conversation prompt from Nicodemus, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who

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<sup>59</sup> Jo-Ann A. Brant, *John*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 74.

<sup>60</sup> Brant, 74. “Nicodemus arrives while thinking of himself as Jesus’s dialogue partner, but when Jesus speaks about himself as the source of salvation in language that is veiled by double entendre, Nicodemus struggles to keep up his end of the banter.”

has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God,” becomes a springboard into a much larger and higher spiritual conversation.

*Nicodemus arrives in the dark.*

John writes that Nicodemus “came to Jesus by night” (v. 2), and much has been made of this short phrase. Gary M. Burge observes that Nicodemus may have come at night as a means of retaining privacy from watchful eyes—a motivation stemming from fear.<sup>61</sup> But Burge continues by observing that in the Gospel of John, *night* is a frequently used theological symbol, and it therefore shows that Nicodemus is spiritually in the dark:

John often refers to darkness as the realm of evil, untruth, and unbelief (e.g., 9:4; 11:10). The only other actor who appears at night is Judas Iscariot, who departs into the night to betray Jesus (13:30). Nicodemus is a man of the darkness while Jesus is the light (1:4, 8).<sup>62</sup>

Raymond E. Brown holds this same perspective and suggests that Nicodemus’ arrival at night serves as a metaphor for spiritual darkness and that Nicodemus will eventually move from darkness (v. 2) to light, much like the illustrative content of verses 19–21.<sup>63</sup> In this manner, John’s use of the word “night” is not a mere description of a time of day. Within the context of John 1 (vv. 4 and 8) and John 3:19–21, it is a way of saying that Nicodemus does not spiritually understand who Jesus is. This lack of understanding of

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<sup>61</sup> Gary M. Burge, *John*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2000), 113. “When this rabbi comes to Jesus at night (3:2), it may simply refer to his desire for privacy stemming from fear. He might worry that the temple authorities, whom Jesus has just challenged, might see him as a collaborator.”

<sup>62</sup> Burge, 114.

<sup>63</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I–XII)*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Anchor Bible, 1966), 130.

Jesus' identity and the spiritual aspects of "the kingdom of God" (v. 3) and "heavenly things" (v. 12) then become the content for the next several turns in the conversation.

*A turn of phrase confuses Nicodemus (John 3:3–4)*

With a turn of phrase, John utilizes the double meanings of a Greek word to cause a conversational shift that soars into higher and holier territory, which results in Nicodemus being left confused and rooted to the surface, wondering how a man can crawl back into his mother's womb and be born again:

Nicodemus trips over the Greek word *anōthen*, which can mean either again, anew, or from above (3:4). As Jesus' reply in vs. 5–8 indicates, Nicodemus's problem is that he lives in a one-dimensional world, a world of "flesh." ... There is room for religion in that world, plenty of it; Nicodemus represents it. What is lacking is the divine Spirit. The term "Spirit" denotes an entirely different world, where the blowing of the divine breezes brings a new creation. It is a world vulnerable to the untamed wind of God, a world where the windows and the skylights are open to the incredibly new.<sup>64</sup>

Here, Jesus serves as a representative of the world "from above"<sup>65</sup> as he elevates the conversation about his own identity. Whatever presumption Nicodemus may have had about coming into this dialogue as this new level of conversation now reorients someone of influence and authority. However, most translations translate ἀνωθεν (*anōthen*)<sup>66</sup> in only one way ("from above," NRSV; "again," NIV) and place the alternative meaning in

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<sup>64</sup> Walter Brueggemann et al., eds., *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary, Based on the NRSV: Year A*, vol. 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 199.

<sup>65</sup> Thomaskutty, "'Humanhood' in the Gospel of John," 1.

<sup>66</sup> This subject is explored in great detail by Karl Olav Sandnes, "Whence and Whither. A Narrative Perspective on Birth Ἀνωθεν (John 3:3–8)," *Biblica* 86 (2005).

a footnote,<sup>67</sup> but O'Day argues that the Johannine Jesus means both meanings simultaneously:

[T]he Fourth Evangelist intends both to be heard simultaneously. Jesus' expression "to be born *anōthen*, to be born from above/again" challenges Nicodemus to move beyond surface meanings to a deeper meaning. When English translations resolve the tension in Jesus' words by reducing *anōthen* to one of its meanings, the challenge to Nicodemus (and the reader) is lost.<sup>68</sup>

This double-meaning and multivalent conversation continues as the passage progresses and further illustrates how Nicodemus does not understand the true identity of Jesus and the new spiritual necessities for life.

*Nicodemus becomes more confused (John 3:5–10)*

In verse 5, Jesus responds to Nicodemus' question in verse 4, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus' response in verses 5–8 does not clarify things for Nicodemus—he seems to become even more confused. John's play on the semantic range of the word ἀνωθεν (*anōthen*) continues as Jesus now uses the word πνεῦμα (*pneuma*), and seems to mean all three possible meanings of the word: wind, spirit, and breath.<sup>69</sup> Here is a conversation in

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<sup>67</sup> Gail R. O'Day, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 9, *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 549. "This double meaning causes problems for translators of the Greek text, because there is no equivalent word with this double meaning in English. Thus the ambiguity of meaning is lost in English translations because they privilege one meaning of *anōthen* in the text. ('from above,' NRSV; 'again,' NIV) and relegate the second meaning to a footnote. This translation strategy communicates to the reader that the footnoted translation is a secondary definition, not an inherent meaning of the word. The translators thus decide for the reader that one reading is primary and the other secondary...."

<sup>68</sup> O'Day, "John" in *New Interpreter's Bible*, 9:549.

<sup>69</sup> Lewis, *John*, 48.

which multiple meanings are present, and Nicodemus seems “astonished” (v. 7) and confused by his response (v. 9):

The Greek word for “wind” (πνεῦμα *pneuma*), like *anōthen*, has two inherent meanings; it means both “wind” and “spirit” (as does the Hebrew word [רוּחַ *rûah*]). Once again Jesus describes the new birth with a word that cannot be held to a single meaning. The word *pneuma* perfectly captures the essence of Jesus’ message: the wind/spirit blows where it wills; human beings can detect its presence but cannot chart its precise movements. Jesus’ offer of new birth is like the wind/spirit: a mystery beyond human knowledge and control.<sup>70</sup>

Jesus is teaching Nicodemus that his life and relationship with God are too limited in scope and hindered by his spiritual sight—he is stuck in a physical understanding. This is the point that Jey J. Kanagaraj makes:

“Seeing” in John means both physical sight and spiritual perception. It denotes “experiencing” or “tasting” (3:36; 8:51, 53) divine life by the power of God’s Spirit. Thus, “seeing” and “entering” are identical in meaning. However, “entering” emphasizes the act of coming into the realm of God’s reign and seeing God as King.<sup>71</sup>

This entering a new kingdom will require a new birth. Just as physical birth led to Nicodemus’ inclusion within his own biological family, so will a new birth of “water and spirit”<sup>72</sup> bring membership into a new family of believers—a new community.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> O’Day, “John” in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 9:550.

<sup>71</sup> Jey J. Kanagaraj, “Testimonies of Jesus and the Baptist,” in *John: A New Covenant Commentary*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Cambridge, England: The Lutterworth Press, 2013), 30, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1cg4kpk>.

<sup>72</sup> “A popular interpretation has it that water represents human birth, whether semen of man or waters in the womb, in contrast to birth from the Spirit; this, however overlooks that the *whole* expression ‘of water and Spirit’ defines the manner in which one is born from above. Suggestions like these do not do justice to the text and have not commended themselves to scholarly opinion. It would seem that the text relates birth from above to baptism and the Holy Spirit.” George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary 36 (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 48.

<sup>73</sup> Kanagaraj, “Testimonies,” 30.



As John shows Nicodemus to be in the dark, it seems that Nicodemus is becoming aware of this darkness in his own understanding. There is a decline in complexity and detail in each of the three statements of Nicodemus (vv. 2, 4, and 9). That reduction culminates in verse 9. To begin with, in verse 2, Nicodemus says something that is true, but not in the way that Nicodemus intended. Within the context, it is apparent that Nicodemus does not understand the way in which he is speaking the truth. His second response in verse 4 engages with what Jesus is saying by trying to understand the physical meaning of ἄνωθεν (*anōthen*). From the content of his question, it is evident that Nicodemus' understanding of Jesus is incomplete, but he is at least able to pose a question that engages with the words and message that Jesus is saying—even as he misses the more significant spiritual meanings of ἄνωθεν (*anōthen*). His last response comes in verse 9 with a much less detailed question that does not even connect to the words that Jesus used, “How can these things be?” Nicodemus is seemingly at a loss for words. Burge describes it like this:

Nicodemus's third and final question is rhetorical in the narrative. “How can this be?” likely disguises a thoroughgoing and lengthy inquiry by the rabbi, whose religious categories have now been upended. He is baffled. He is disturbed. His commitment to the Torah and obedience, to prayer and sacrifice, and his understanding of election, responsibility, and privilege have all been challenged. He should have no problem understanding that the Spirit of God can transform, but he is a man standing on the frontier, looking at a new country and wondering how such momentous events will unfold.<sup>74</sup>

As the conversation progresses, Nicodemus becomes more and more aware of how little he actually understands, and Jesus points out his lack of knowledge in verse 10, “Are you

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<sup>74</sup> Burge, *John*, 116–17.

a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” At this point, the voice of Nicodemus becomes silent in conversation, but the conversation continues.

*Earthly and heavenly content (John 3:11–15)*

In the conversation so far, Jesus has twice used words that have physical/earthly meanings and spiritual/heavenly meanings, and in verse 14, Jesus goes on to use another double-entendre. Jesus begins a didactic dialogue that utilizes the double meaning of ὑψόω (*hypsōō*):

The key to interpreting this analogy between Moses’ lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness and the ascension of the Son of Man is the verb (ὑψόω *hypsōō*), meaning both “lift up” and “exalt.” ... Once again the Fourth Evangelist asks the reader to hold two meanings together simultaneously (see also 3:3, 7–8). As the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up on the cross. The double meaning of *hypsōō* implies, however, that the physical act of lifting up is also a moment of exaltation. That is, it is in the crucifixion that Jesus is exalted.<sup>75</sup>

In this passage, John has multiple meanings at work, and attentive readers would understand the levels at which Jesus was speaking:

Surely first readers of John would assume that “lifting up” has to do with the elevation and exaltation of Jesus at his resurrection. And it does. At the same time, however, John understands the elevation of Jesus to begin at his crucifixion.<sup>76</sup>

This one word conveys a lifting up of the serpent in Number 21:5–9, the lifting up of Jesus onto the cross (John 19:18), the raising of Jesus from the tomb (John 20), and ultimately the exaltation of Jesus on the eternal throne (Matt 19:2; 25:31, Luke 1:32, Acts

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<sup>75</sup> O’Day, “John” in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 9:552.

<sup>76</sup> Walter Brueggemann et al., eds., *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary, Based on the NRSV: Year B*, vol. 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 228.

2:33; 5:31).<sup>77</sup> O'Day writes, "The overlap of crucifixion and exaltation conveyed by v. 14 is crucial to Johannine soteriology because the Fourth Evangelist understands Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension as one continuous event."<sup>78</sup> Or, as W. Hulitt Gloer so deftly phrases it, "The humiliation of crucifixion is the glory of the exaltation for Jesus."<sup>79</sup>

In John's careful use of ἄνωθεν (*anōthen*), πνεῦμα (*pneuma*), and ὑψόω (*hypsōō*), he has portrayed a conversation that holds a multivalent meaning for the attentive reader and serves as a demonstration of how Jesus engaged in spiritually significant conversations that incorporated a higher spiritual emphasis. Jesus elevates the conversation from a place of the physical/worldly to the spiritual/heavenly.

#### *From dialogue to monologue (John 3:16–21)*

From verse 11 onwards, the language of the text shifts to a first-person plural and a second-person plural. This shift indicates to some readers that the voice of Jesus ends and the voice of the narrator begins. Beasley-Murray argues that the voice of Jesus ceases in v. 12,<sup>80</sup> and Burge writes that many scholars agree that the conversation ends in v. 15, leaving 16–21 as "reflections or meditations written by John."<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, the

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<sup>77</sup> John 8:28 and 12:32–34 also include uses of ὑψόω that may be interpreted as referring to being lifted on the cross—they might also refer to being lifted from the grave, and/or being lifted into heaven.

<sup>78</sup> O'Day, "John" in *New Interpreter's Bible*, 9:552.

<sup>79</sup> W. Hulitt Gloer, "John 3:14–21: Homiletical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 2, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 119.

<sup>80</sup> Beasley-Murray, *John*, 46.

<sup>81</sup> Burge, *John*, 117–18.

NIV and NRSV provide quotation marks that indicate all of the words through verse 21<sup>82</sup> belong to Jesus, and on this perspective, both Brown and O'Day agree.<sup>83</sup>

With prominent voices on both sides of this matter, it is unclear which perspective is the most accurate. Nevertheless, according to Bultmann and George L. Parsenios, there are helpful reasons for treating verse 15 as the end of the dialogue. Bultmann writes, "The dialogue ends by leaving Nicodemus faced with the final issue of faith and unbelief, and thus by bringing the reader into the same situation. He does not need to know how Nicodemus decided but must himself come to a decision."<sup>84</sup> Parsenios similarly approaches this issue:

It is not our purpose here to resolve this confusion but only to recognize the fact of the confusion and the cause of the confusion: the absence of a clear comment from the narrator identifying the speaker of these lines. In summary, these examples from John 1, John 3, and John 14 represent places in the Fourth Gospel where the voice of the narrator falls suddenly silent.

Parsenios links the use of a silent narrator in John to the use of a silent narrator in Plato and offers the justification that this literary treatment is "designed to render the later reader a participant in the conversations of Jesus and an original hearer of his discourses."<sup>85</sup> He continues:

In the same way that this dramatic device gives readers unmediated access to conversations that took place in the past, as though the conversations were not

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<sup>82</sup> Though both include a footnote regarding disagreements about when the quotation should end. The NET ends the words of Jesus in verse 15, but in reference to the disagreement on this matter the NET provides the note, "Some interpreters extend the quotation of Jesus' words through v. 21."

<sup>83</sup> Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I–XII)*, 149. and O'Day, "John" in *New Interpreter's Bible*, 9:548.

<sup>84</sup> Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 144n4.

<sup>85</sup> George L. Parsenios, "Anamnesis and the Silent Narrator in Plato and John," *Religions* 8, no. 4 (April 2017): 7, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8040047>.

transmitted through a written text, so, too, this dramatic device allows Jesus and Socrates to speak to later times.<sup>86</sup>

The strength of this perspective is that the disagreement about who is speaking is secondary to the immersive effect for the reader. This demonstrates the ways in which John's narrative of this dialogue is designed to draw the receiver of the text directly into the vibrant truth of the conversation.

### *The example of Jesus in John 4:4–26*

Shortly after, John narrates a conversation with a woman who could not be more different than Nicodemus. Nicodemus is male, named, powerful, and an insider. The Samaritan woman is his direct counterpart—female, unnamed, powerless, and an outsider. Like Nicodemus before her, the Samaritan woman starts off primarily occupied with non-spiritual matters, “she is almost exclusively concerned with the provision of what will satisfy her physical needs.”<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, O'Day observes that her behavior and interactions with Jesus are receptive and responsive, unlike many other characters in the Gospel of John who remained closed off to what Jesus offered.<sup>88</sup> However, the conversation is more challenging to interpret than the one with Nicodemus (see Appendix E for further insight into the challenges of interpreting this passage).

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<sup>86</sup> Parsenios, 9.

<sup>87</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *John*, 2nd ed., Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 4 (Leicester, England: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 75.

<sup>88</sup> O'Day, “John” in *New Interpreter's Bible*, 9:569. “The woman's behavior is in marked contrast to many characters in the Fourth Gospel who will insist on their own certitudes (e.g., Nicodemus, 3:9; the crowds, 6:25–34; the Pharisees, 9:24–34) and hence close themselves to what Jesus offers.”

*Necessity of going through Samaria (John 4:4–6)*

John writes that Jesus “had to go through Samaria,” and on this subject, there is disagreement over whether this was a geographical necessity or a spiritual necessity. On the one hand, Josephus wrote:

I then wrote to my friends in Samaria, to take care that they might safely pass through the country: for Samaria was already under the Romans, and it was absolutely necessary for those that go quickly [to Jerusalem] to pass through that country; for in that road you may, in three days’ time go from Galilee to Jerusalem (*Vita*, 269).<sup>89</sup>

However, many scholars point out that in the Gospel of John, the word ἔδει (*eidi*), which is typically translated as “had to,” is usually associated with something being “God’s plan.”<sup>90</sup> On the other hand, C. K. Barrett does not believe that ἔδει (*eidi*) has any “theological significance,”<sup>91</sup> and Burge believes that there was a geographical necessity for Jesus to avoid Judea.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, within the context of the conversation in John 4, it seems much more likely that “this is not geographical necessity.”<sup>93</sup> Instead, it seems far more likely that John is describing a spiritual necessity for Jesus to arrive at Jacob’s well (v. 6) outside the city of Sychar (v. 5).

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<sup>89</sup> Flavius Josephus, “The Life of Flavius Josephus,” in *The Works of Flavius Josephus: The Learned and Authentic Jewish Historian*, trans. William Whiston (Belfast: Simms and M’Intyre, 1841), 17.

<sup>90</sup> Beasley-Murray, *John*, Volume 36, 36:59, and O’Day, “John” in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 9:565. See John 3:7, 3:14, 3:30, 4:4, 4:20, 4:24, 9:4, 10:16, 12:34, and 20:9.

<sup>91</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, Reprint (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1958), 193.

<sup>92</sup> Burge, *John*, 140. “Jesus likely had reason to fear his own arrest (hence his move north) because of his association with the now-imprisoned John.... This crisis in Judea may also explain Jesus’ decision to travel north through Samaria (4:4).”

<sup>93</sup> Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I–XII)*, 169.

Even more challenging than the motivation for Jesus' trip through Samaria is the time of day when he is found to be sitting next to the well. This understanding is crucial because substantial conclusions are often drawn from the time of day.

*"It was about noon" (John 4:6)*

The issue at hand regards the proper manner in which a translator should understand a phrase in verse 6 ὥρα ἥν ὥς ἕκτη (*hora ēn hōs héktē*, lit. "it was the sixth hour"). This timeline matters because interpreters often connect the woman going to draw water from the village well at "noon" as proof that the woman is ashamed and ostracized. Lewis summarizes this common perception of why this *noon* time is so notable:

Many commentators interpret this odd time to draw water as a statement about the woman's morality. She arrives at the well at noon because she does not want to be seen by others; she's embarrassed by her questionable past or she has been ostracized to come to the well when no one else is around.<sup>94</sup>

The NRSV and NIV both translate this Greek phrase ὥρα ἥν ὥς ἕκτη (*hora ēn hōs héktē*, lit. "it was the sixth hour") as "it was about noon." (see Appendix E for additional insight into the historical legacy of interpreting this passage.) This method of interpreting "the sixth hour" as midday is in keeping with the other Gospels' use of the Jewish manner of telling time by counting the number of hours after sunrise.<sup>95</sup> However, many scholars argue that John uses the modern, or Roman, system of telling time—measuring hours from midnight and noon. Day offers a summary:

In contrast to the Jewish time reckoning which counted the hours from sunset and sunrise, certain scholars have suggested that in John's Gospel, the modern or Roman system, which counts the hours from midnight and noon, should be used

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<sup>94</sup> Lewis, *John*, 55.

<sup>95</sup> In other words, six hours after sunrise equates to noon.

for determining the time. According to this number, the woman would have come to the well near 6:00 in the evening, the ‘sixth hour’ being counted from noontime. This method of calculation would make the woman’s arrival conform to the time considered to be more usual and would confute the argument that she came at an unusual time because, as an immoral and outcast person, she wished to avoid intermingling with the other women.<sup>96</sup>

This understanding of John’s chronological terminology can be found with Thomas Townson in 1788<sup>97</sup> and John Brown McClellan in 1875.<sup>98</sup> Norman Walker also points out that from 1880–1947, many other scholars came to the same conclusion.<sup>99</sup> He describes the arguments for modern time-telling in the Gospel of John by looking at the four places where John refers to the time of day (vv. 1:39, 4:6, 4:52, and 19:14):

- (a) “the tenth hour” of i 39, after which the two disciples “abode with Him that *day*”. Jewish reckoning makes this 4 p.m., an unusual time to begin a *day’s* stay. But modern reckoning makes this 10 a.m., a quite satisfactory hour.
- (b) “the sixth hour” of iv 6, when the Samaritan woman came to draw water, and the disciples had gone away to buy food for the meal. Jewish reckoning makes this midday, an unsuitable hour for the events mentioned. But the modern reckoning makes this 6 p.m., a natural and customary time of day for such events.
- (c) “the seventh hour” of iv 52, at which hour “yesterday the fever left him”. Jewish reckoning makes this 1 p.m., an unlikely time of day, and difficult to fit in with the nobleman’s arrival home the following day. But modern reckoning makes this 7 p.m., a more likely time of arrival at Cana of Galilee from

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<sup>96</sup> Janeth Norfleete Day, *The Woman at the Well: Interpretation of John 4:1–42 in Retrospect and Prospect*, Biblical Interpretation Series 61 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002), 162.

<sup>97</sup> Thomas Townson, “Discourse 8, Part 1: On the Method in Which St. John Reckons the Hours,” in *Discourses on the Four Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1788), 233. “But St. John appears to have reckoned the hours as we do, from midnight to noon, and again from noon to midnight.”

<sup>98</sup> John Brown McClellan, “XIX. 14 It Was about the Sixth Hour,” in *The Four Gospels, with the Chronological and Analytical Harmony*, vol. 1, The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, A New Translation (London: Macmillan and Co., 1875), 741. “S. John wrote his Gospel in Ephesus, the capital of the Roman Province of Asia, and therefore, in regard to the *civil day*, would be likely to employ not the Babylonian, nor the Athenian, nor the Jewish, but the *Roman* reckoning.”

<sup>99</sup> Norman Walker, “The Reckoning of Hours in the Fourth Gospel,” *Novum Testamentum* 4, no. 1 (1960): 70–71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1560330>. He mentions the following writers: B. F. Westcott, *Gospel of St. John* (1882), John Murray, *Gospel according to St. John* (1892 and 1903), Hastings, *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* (1906), A. Plummer, *Gospel according to St. John* (1913), J. Belser, *Geschichte des Leidens und Strebens & c.* (1913), W. Lock, *A New Commentary on Holy Scripture* (1928), and B. Kraft, *Der Sinn der heiligen Schrift* (1947).



Capernaum, twenty miles journey, and then, after rest for man and beast, of return to Capernaum the following day.

(d) “the sixth hour” of xix 14, when Jesus was presented by Pilate to the Jews with the words, “Behold, your king!” Jewish reckoning makes this midday, when, according to Mark, Jesus had been crucified three hours already! But modern reckoning makes this 6 a.m., giving plenty of time for the mockings and scourgings, final handing over of Jesus by Pilate for crucifixion, and for all the details of the Via Dolorosa, ending with the crucifixion at 9 a.m.<sup>100</sup>

Walker makes an excellent summary of how a modern time-telling interpretation makes more sense in the Gospel of John, particularly in regard to making sense of the crucifixion timeline according to John 19:4 and Mark 15:35.

Nevertheless, there are countless commentators throughout modern and historical times who adhere to the Jewish method of telling time within the Gospel of John. As Barrett points out, “it is impossible to settle with complete certainty the method of enumerating the hours employed by John.”<sup>101</sup> Because there is uncertainty over what time of day the woman was at the well, major interpretive decisions should not hinge entirely upon the time of day. In which case, a closer look at John 4 reveals that the moral condition of the woman is not an emphasis because Jesus does not raise the subject of sin.

*Jesus does not condemn the Samaritan woman.*

The crux of the matter is this: Jesus gives no condemnation of the Samaritan woman, and the subject of sin does not even enter into the conversation. This is one of Caryn Reeder’s primary points:

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<sup>100</sup> Walker, 69–70.

<sup>101</sup> Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 194.

If John 4:4–42 was primarily about sin, we would expect sin to be mentioned. It is not. The woman’s marital history and current cohabitation are not identified as sin. Jesus does not condemn her, nor does he offer her forgiveness.<sup>102</sup>

If the woman’s sin were a primary issue, then, as Reeder argues, John would have much more likely depicted Jesus addressing the need for forgiveness of this sin as he does in John 1:29, 8:24, 8:34–36, and 20:23. It also is arguable that he would have asked the woman not to continue in her sin as he did with the healed man in 5:14. One might also point toward John 7:53–8:11 where Jesus tells a woman caught in adultery, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.” However, it is well-attested that this passage was not in John’s original writing, so it is best to set this example aside. Even still, because this historical vignette was likely added by early collators/editors of Scripture, its presence in the Gospel of John indicates that these early exegetes also saw these similar themes of sin and forgiveness in Jesus’ interactions.

The omission of the subject of sin from this conversation is notable because sin was a frequent subject of conversation in John.<sup>103</sup> Therefore, within John 4, the absence of *sin* and *forgiveness* is very noticeable and significant. This is the point that O’Day makes:

Jesus does not judge her; any moral judgments are imported into the text by interpreters.... Significantly, the reasons for the woman’s marital history intrigue commentators but do not concern Jesus.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Caryn A. Reeder, *The Samaritan Woman’s Story: Reconsidering John 4 After #ChurchToo* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2022), 129.

<sup>103</sup> Reeder, 129–30. See John 5:14, 8:21–34, 8:46, 9:16–31, 9:41, 15:22–24, and 16:8–11.

<sup>104</sup> O’Day, “John” in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 9:567.

In other words, as Richard and James put it, “While our presumptions may slander her character, John’s Gospel does not. It is good for us to be cautious of simply assuming she was immoral.”<sup>105</sup> Jesus does not offer the same moral judgment or discussion of sin that are depicted in other passages of John, and with this framework in mind, the conversation with the Samaritan woman lies ahead.

*A request for hospitality (John 4:7–9)*

Andrew E. Arterbury’s work on John 4 deemphasizes the Samaritan woman’s moral background in this scene and instead focuses on social dynamics related to the ancient Mediterranean practice of hospitality. Arterbury offers examples from writers such as Dio Chrysostom, Homer, Josephus, and Ovid, and he cites multiple Scriptural examples to demonstrate that “it was as equally acceptable for the host to approach and greet the traveler as it was for the traveler to approach the householder and request hospitality.”<sup>106</sup>

It is among ancient Greco-Roman writers who included depictions of ancient hospitality that Arterbury finds the common literary trope of the “incognito god requesting hospitality from unsuspecting hosts.”<sup>107</sup> In particular, he points out that Zeus was the god of hospitality and was repeatedly depicted as taking on a disguise in order to approach “potential hosts to see how they respond to travelers. If they respond with

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<sup>105</sup> E. Randolph Richards and Richard James, *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes: Patronage, Honor, and Shame in the Biblical World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 57.

<sup>106</sup> Andrew Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in Its Mediterranean Setting*, New Testament Monographs 8 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), 183.

<sup>107</sup> Andrew E. Arterbury, “Breaking the Betrothal Bonds: Hospitality in John 4,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (2010): 68.

gracious hospitality, he blesses them. If they respond with inhospitality, he punishes them.”<sup>108</sup> John’s depiction of the son of God arriving at a well to request hospitality would have, therefore, evoked similar theological assumptions among many early readers of John’s Gospel. Arterbury’s work allows the social dynamics at play in John 4 to better illuminate the nature of the conversation taking place.

*A conversation that shifts to a spiritual plane (John 4:10–15)*

In John 4, this conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman could have easily remained at a physical and mundane level: Jesus opened the conversation with a simple request, “Give me a drink” (v. 7). This conversation on the physical level advances and the woman is taken aback and points out the cultural differences between herself and Jesus (v. 9). Jesus then elevates the conversation by bringing up the nature of his identity and the existence of his own “living water” (v. 10). Amid talk about cistern water, Jesus brings up living water:

Jesus is speaking of the water of life; the woman is thinking of flowing water, so much more desirable than the flat water of cisterns. The word for “well” in 11–12 is *phrear*, whereas in the earlier verses it was *pēgē*. In LXX usage there is little difference between the two terms; but *phrear* (Heb. *be’ēr*) is closer to “cistern,” while *pēgē* (Heb. *‘ayin*) is closer to “fountain.” The idea may be that in the earlier conversation which concerns natural water Jacob’s well is a fountain (*pēgē*) with fresh, flowing water; but when the conversation shifts to the theme of Jesus’ living water, Jesus is now the fountain (*pēgē* in vs. 14), and Jacob’s well becomes a mere cistern (*phrear*).<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Arterbury, 68.

<sup>109</sup> Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I–XII)*, 170.

This “conversation with a teasing, double-meaning flavour”<sup>110</sup> is typical of the fourth Gospel’s use of misunderstandings. Jesus is talking at the spiritual level, but the woman is hearing at the earthly level. Again, like in John 3, it appears that Jesus is intentionally using the double meaning of ὕδωρ ζῶν (*hydōr zōn*, lit. “living water”).<sup>111</sup> A phrase that Gail R. O’Day argues is best understood as both “living water” and “running water.”<sup>112</sup> This conversation is happening on two levels:

[Verse 10] draws attention to the fact that the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is being conducted on two levels simultaneously—one level as perceived by the woman and one as perceived by Jesus. These levels provide the basis of the irony of the dialogue, for they are at odds with each other. The clue given here by Jesus to his true identity is an invitation both to the woman and to the reader to grasp both levels of the conversation and their inherent contradictions and to move through the woman’s level to Jesus.’<sup>113</sup>

The water is both a flowing water of fresh rivers/springs and a new water that brings new life. The confusion prompted by this double meaning is expressed in the woman’s words, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water” (v. 15).

This conversation shifts from water to something new—the true nature of Jesus’ identity. This shift first begins to show up in verse 11 when the woman asks, “Where do you get that living water?” This is an appropriate question to ask a man without a bucket,

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<sup>110</sup> Tom Wright, *John for Everyone: Part One: Chapters 1–10*, New Testament for Everyone (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 41–42.

<sup>111</sup> F. J. McCool, “Living Water in John,” in *The Bible in Current Catholic Thought*, ed. John L. McKenzie, Saint Mary’s Theology Studies 1 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1962), 226–33. See also, Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I–XII)*, 179.

<sup>112</sup> Gail R. O’Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Mode and Theological Claim* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 60.

<sup>113</sup> Gail R. O’Day, “Narrative Mode and Theological Claim: A Study in the Fourth Gospel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105, no. 4 (1986): 667, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3261212>.

but unbeknownst to her, she has asked an ironic question that gets to the heart of Jesus' true identity.<sup>114</sup> Through this conversation, she has stumbled into a spiritual insight about Jesus that will change her life.

*Jesus has special insight (John 4:16–18)*

If the evidence is less certain in regards to the time of day that the Samaritan woman is at the well, then her character plays a different role in this story. Instead of concentrating on the Samaritan woman's shameful background, interpreters are left with a lot of ground to cover in arriving at an accurate story of what is happening in this passage.<sup>115</sup> However, there remains the matter of understanding Jesus' words in 4:17–18, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband."

Regarding the woman's five husbands, the text does not say she was divorced five times—instead, it says she had five husbands, so it may be that she had been widowed five times. Additionally, in the first century, women had very little volition when it came to marital rights or divorce proceedings, and it defies cultural possibilities for this woman to have initiated divorces from her husbands. One must conclude that if divorces were present, they had been initiated by the five husbands. Richard and James go through a list of matters related to this:

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<sup>114</sup> O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel*, 62. "The irony arises because the woman is only aware of the question's appropriateness on the first level; she does not know that she has asked a question of central importance for understanding Jesus' identity."

<sup>115</sup> After all, as Reeder writes, "How can a woman mired in sexual sin also be Jesus' conversation partner and an evangelist to her community?" Reeder, *The Samaritan Woman's Story*, 33.

...the story never says she is immoral, and she is certainly not portrayed as a pariah...her previous five marriages were likely ended by a combination of widowhood and divorce...we import our modern situations. A story today of a woman divorced five times often has moral overtones. Yet, divorce was more commonly initiated by the husband. If she is the victim of multiple divorces, she is not to blame. Barrenness was a common reason for divorce.<sup>116</sup>

If the woman had been morally at fault in some way,<sup>117</sup> it is baffling to consider “who would have married her the third or fourth time?”<sup>118</sup>

Perhaps, as was the custom/law, she had been forced to marry brother after brother, and each one subsequently died or divorced her for a cause such as inability to conceive. Therefore, it seems much more likely to conclude that this woman was an older woman who had likely needed to repeatedly remarry to ensure her own survival.

Even still, one may be puzzled by Jesus’ words in verse 18, “The one you have now is not your husband.” There are a variety of interpretive perspectives on this matter that do not necessitate immorality on the woman’s part. One of which is that many poor people did not file legal papers because they could not afford the associated taxes. A woman widowed or divorced five times would have been at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, and it is just as likely that this woman was merely an oppressed and downtrodden woman who simply could not afford the legal fees to marry her current man.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Richards and James, *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes*, 56–57.

<sup>117</sup> This would be how it appears that John Calvin viewed her, “we may suppose it happened because she drove her husbands to divorce her with her wanton and stubborn ways. I interpret the words like this: Though God joined you to lawful husbands, you never stopped sinning, and at last your divorces cost you your reputation” Calvin 4:94.

<sup>118</sup> Richards and James, *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes*, 56–57.

<sup>119</sup> Richards and James, 56–57.

Additionally, as Jo-Ann A. Brant points out, it is possible that she is not in a sexual relationship with this man because the text gives no indication that “she is someone else’s husband or that they have physical relations.” It might even be that she is just living with a close family relative. In any case, Brant continues, “The humiliating fact of having been married five times and five times widowed or rejected and not to be married at present would be sufficient cause to conceal her status [from Jesus].”<sup>120</sup>

Additionally, Arterbury’s perspective on this passage is in regards to the expectations of hospitality, and he explains why Jesus brings up the subject of this woman’s man:

...it does appear that the head of the household was most commonly expected officially to accept a traveler into the home. As a result, when Jesus instructs her to go and call her husband (4.16) even though he knows she is not married, it appears that he is asking her to retrieve the person who can officially extend hospitality to him.<sup>121</sup>

Jesus may not have been calling attention to her shame but was instead revealing his identity through knowledge of her life and his request for hospitality.

Given all of these matters, it appears far better to approach this narrative with sympathy for the Samaritan woman and the probable “trauma”<sup>122</sup> she has endured:

Based on our knowledge of the social and cultural values of first-century Palestine, why would it be unnatural to surmise that the woman is deserving of our sympathy rather than our opprobrium? Is it not possible that the woman had been married so many times because of economic and social reasons, rather than for lustful ones? By what means, in her culture, could she survive by working for

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<sup>120</sup> Brant, *John*, 85.

<sup>121</sup> Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels*, 115.

<sup>122</sup> Larry L. Enis, “John 4:1–42,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible & Theology* 74, no. 1 (January 2020): 72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020964319876585>. “As several trauma theorists have noted, the term ‘trauma’ refers to a wound inflicted by any number of factors, such as abuse or exclusion. The motif of trauma in the story of the Samaritan woman is illumined by consideration of the Samaritan woman’s marital history. While we do not know whether or not her marital history is immoral, it is certainly unconventional, suggesting that she has endured a great deal of upheaval and instability in her life.”



wages? In a society that granted to women essentially no social or legal standing apart from a responsible man—father, husband, brother or son—she can legitimately be considered a marginalized figure, subject to economic, social and legal exploitation.<sup>123</sup>

In light of these varying matters, a thoughtful reader may be inclined to a much more sympathetic reading—perhaps glimpsing Jesus’ compassion towards her and seeing her the way Day sees her, “the victim of a system that depersonalized her.”<sup>124</sup> Furthermore, Jesus’ words about five husbands and a current man are a way not only to reveal “his supernatural knowledge, but also for expressing his compassion and concern for the suffering she has endured and the hardships she has experienced?”<sup>125</sup> These words by Linda McKinnish Bridges are helpful:

What if this woman with no name needed redemption not from the excesses of sexual promiscuity but from a series of injustices from five husbands in a culture programed for male domination? Yes, the woman still needs redemption.... This woman needs redemption from life that has been lived in pieces....<sup>126</sup>

To see the Samaritan woman as a marginalized figure who has been tossed about by the machinations of society is to view her as thirsty and in need of deep spiritual refreshment.

#### *The Samaritan woman has insight (John 4:19–24)*

In a fascinating contrast to the conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman makes more progress at the spiritual level. Nicodemus is confused by a conversation that moves into a spiritual realm, but the Samaritan woman

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<sup>123</sup> Day, *The Woman at the Well*, 169.

<sup>124</sup> Day, 171.

<sup>125</sup> Day, 171–72.

<sup>126</sup> Linda McKinnish Bridges, “John 4:5–42,” *Interpretation* 48, no. 2 (April 1, 1994): 174, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096430004800208>.

manages not only to engage in the conversation but also to move with Jesus into the spiritual level. She ultimately becomes a witness for him.

For example, the moment that Jesus shows insight into her marital history, the Samaritan woman sees him as a “prophet” (v. 19) and asks a question related to the proper place to worship.<sup>127</sup> O’Day points out that this inquiry about worship practices “is an act of deepening engagement with Jesus, because she anticipates that the prophet Jesus will be able to speak an authoritative word on the subject.”<sup>128</sup> For Nicodemus, conversation with Jesus was confusing—the spiritual level of conversation left him disoriented—but the Samaritan woman is an attentive conversation partner and ultimately serves as a witness to the other members of her community (v. 4:25).

#### *Expanding revelation (John 4:25–26)*

What started as a superficial conversation about getting a drink of water turned into a deep spiritual conversation. The Samaritan woman’s understanding of Jesus’ identity circles inward from Jewish man to prophet, to “Messiah,” and, with Jesus’ use of the theologically loaded phrase ἐγώ εἰμι, perhaps even to God in the flesh.

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<sup>127</sup> Gail R. O’Day, “John,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol Ann Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, expanded ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 384. “The woman’s recognition of Jesus as a prophet leads her to ask him the most pressing theological question that stands between Jews and Samaritans (4:20): Where is the proper place to worship God! Yet many commentators have dismissed the woman’s words to Jesus as a psychological ploy, as a classical act of evasion to change the subject from the embarrassing truth about her morals. Commentators doubt whether this *woman* would have been able to understand the substance of Jesus’ words to her. Once again we see presuppositions about women (women’s intellect and interests) skewing a faithful reading of the text. The text presents the woman as a character who is unafraid to stay in conversation with Jesus, who recognizes that a prophet is the perfect person of whom to ask her question. The woman is the first character in the Gospel to engage in serious theological conversation with Jesus. At the end of the conversation about worship (4:20–26), the woman’s faith grows again, as she begins to think about the possibility of Jesus being the Messiah (4:29).”

<sup>128</sup> O’Day, “John” in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 9:567.

Initially in this conversation, the Samaritan woman sees Jesus as a Jewish man—a perspective that is so obvious to her that the act of him speaking to her is surprising (v. 9). As the conversation progresses the Samaritan woman’s understanding of Jesus grows until, as Arterbury points out, Jesus’ knowledge about her life and request for hospitality reveals him to be a prophet (v. 19).<sup>129</sup> By referring to Jesus as a prophet, the woman is unwittingly opening a new line of dialogue that leads further towards Jesus’ true identity:

This is a common Johannine technique, in which characters operating on an earthly plane not only fail to understand spiritual things but occasionally use language that bears a meaning more profound than they realize (cf. 10:50; 18:37, 39, 19:19–22).<sup>130</sup>

The conversation progresses forward, and then the woman uses the title *Messiah*—a title that is familiar to the reader but perhaps slightly out of place for a Samaritan.<sup>131</sup>

The Samaritans did not expect a Messiah in the sense of an anointed king of the Davidic house. They expected a Taheb (*Ta’eb*=Hebrew verb *šûb*=the one who returns), seemingly the Prophet-like-Moses...even though the more familiar Jewish designation of Messiah is placed on the woman’s lips.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels*, 115. He writes, “it is not surprising that the Samaritan woman concludes that Jesus is a prophet. In addition to knowing about her life, he is also asking for hospitality. Thus, the Samaritan woman thinks that Jesus is a traveling prophet in the tradition of both Elijah (1 Kgs 17.8–24) and Elisha (2 Kgs 4.8–36).... In addition, by the time that John’s audience is reading this pericope, traveling missionaries have become commonplace.”

<sup>130</sup> Burge, *John*, 145.

<sup>131</sup> It seems that perhaps John gives opportunity for the Samaritan woman to use the term that is most familiar to his readers, rather than the term that would have been most familiar to the woman. This leads to a fascinating contrast with the other times when Jesus rejects the title of Messiah when Peter, a Jew, tried to assign it to him (Mark 8:30, Matt. 16:20, Luke 9:21). Brown suggests that it is because the Samaritans did not have the same preconceived nationalistic notions of the Taheb: “It is interesting that Jesus, who does not give unqualified acceptance to the title of Messiah when it is offered to him by Jews, accepts it from a Samaritan. Perhaps the answer lies in the royal nationalistic connotations the term had in Judaism, while the Samaritan Taheb (although not devoid of nationalistic overtones) had more the aspect of a teacher and lawgiver.... the Samaritans did not expect the Taheb to be a king.” Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I–XII)*, 173.

<sup>132</sup> Brown, 172.

Through this conversation with Jesus, the Samaritan woman's expectations are continually exceeded. First when this Jewish man turns out to be a prophet, then when he appears to be the expected Messiah, and finally, Jesus' deepest identity is revealed through his words in verse 26, “ἐγώ εἰμι, ὁ λαλῶν σοί” (*ego eimi, ho lalōn soi*, lit, “I am, the one speaking to you”). At this point, it appears that the Samaritan woman encounters God speaking to her via Jesus's use of the theologically loaded phrase ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi*, lit. “I am”) in John 4:26,<sup>133</sup> and this hearkens back to God speaking to Moses from the burning bush (Exod 3:14):

Jesus' reply to the woman's belief in the Messiah is the first “I AM” statement in the narrative. There are two different categories of “I AM” statements in the Gospel of John. The first type is the absolute “I AM” statement, which occurs nine times in the Gospel of John (4:26; 6:20; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:5, 6, 8). Most translations “I AM he” are misleading by including the pronoun “he” after the “I AM.” The “he” does not exist in the Greek text and takes away the impact of the “I AM” standing on its own. The absolute “I AM” statements are meant to be direct claims of who Jesus really is, the Word was God, the Word made flesh, God incarnated, God revealing God's self, as God did to Moses (Exod. 3:14), but now in a new and unique way.... Remarkably, Jesus reveals the entirety of who he is, in all of its intimacy, vulnerability, and awe, to [the Samaritan woman].<sup>134</sup>

It is upon this “I AM” revelation that the disciples return (interrupting the narrative), and the woman leaves her water jar behind in order to go and share the good news with the remainder of her community.

*The rest of the story (John 4:27–30, 39–42)*

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<sup>133</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Triune Discourse: Theological Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks (Part 2),” in *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship*, ed. Daniel J. Treier and David Lauber (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 56.

<sup>134</sup> Lewis, *John*, 62. See also Kanagaraj, “The Inclusive Nature of Jesus' Community,” 45; and O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel*, 72.

There is another use of the term “Messiah” in verse 29, which might be read as the Samaritan woman being uncertain of Jesus’ identity, and though Elizabeth Danna<sup>135</sup> disagrees with the interpretation, Bultmann suggests that the viewpoint of the question voiced in 4:29 is from the perspective of the townspeople<sup>136</sup>—indicating that they are asking the woman whether the man at the well is the Messiah. Regardless of this last point, there is no doubt in the reader’s mind that this is a spiritually significant conversation that has developed out of a commonplace circumstance. It is a conversation that leads to a female outsider undergoing a transformation of understanding. Then, the Samaritan woman takes the knowledge and insight of the true nature of Jesus into other community interactions, and others then come to Jesus and are saved (vv. 28–29, 39–42).<sup>137</sup> Through this immediate response to Jesus, she becomes a model for John’s readers to follow.<sup>138</sup>

As a testament to this contribution to the work of responding to Jesus and sharing the Gospel, the Eastern Orthodox Church has a traditional name for this woman, Photini—a name that comes from a tradition that can be traced back to St. Gregory Palamas (1296–1357),<sup>139</sup> and which comes from the Greek word for “enlightened.” She was an enlightened disciple who demonstrated the ideal response to Jesus.

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<sup>135</sup> Elizabeth Danna, “A Note on John 4:29,” *Revue Biblique* (1946–) 106, no. 2 (1999): 219–23.

<sup>136</sup> Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 193n3. “The question (v. 30) (μήτι, although expecting an answer in the affirmative, Bl.-D. Para. 427, 2) has been formulated from the point of view of the person addressed; cp. 7.26; Mt. 12.23; Lk. 3.15.”

<sup>137</sup> Bultmann, 193.

<sup>138</sup> Reeder, *The Samaritan Woman’s Story*, 137.

<sup>139</sup> Saint Gregory Palamas, *Saint Gregory Palamas: The Homilies*, trans. Christopher Veniamin (Waymart: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2009), 159. “For when she proclaimed that soon Christ, the spiritual Sun of righteousness (Mal. 4:2), would appear, and brought to light the fact that the Church of the Gentiles

### *The Samaritan woman in contrast with Nicodemus*

The name Photini brings further comparison with Nicodemus. Nicodemus arrived and left in the dark, and the Samaritan woman arrived and left in the light. These elements of dark/light and night/day are well established in John and often applied to the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus,<sup>140</sup> but rarely is the daytime setting of the conversation with the Samaritan woman given the same treatment.<sup>141</sup> Reeder gets to the heart of this contrast:

Nicodemus sought Jesus out in the middle of the night. Jesus rather pointedly told him that evildoers hate the light, choosing to remain in the darkness so that no one would see their actions (Jn 3:19–20). The woman did not seek Jesus out. Their chance conversation happened publicly, in broad daylight. She proclaimed to her neighbors that Jesus told her everything she ever did (Jn 4:29, 39). Her actions, in other words, were exposed by the light, and this exposure convinced the woman and her neighbors of Jesus' identity.<sup>142</sup>

She continues:

The pairing of these stories challenges readers' expectations. The educated, powerful, Jewish man should understand who Jesus is and respond, yet Nicodemus's choice to seek Jesus out at night associates him with darkness and unbelief. The Samaritan woman should not understand Jesus. But she holds her own in the conversation, and by the end she clearly sees who Jesus is. In a

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would begin through her, I see her as though she were emerging from the baptismal font of the well where she was standing, having been instructed by Christ, looking forth as the much-loved morning. She was fair as the noon, because she gave light even though the night of ungodliness still reigned. She was chosen as the sun since she was given the name Photini by the Saviour and was enrolled in the list of those who were to shine forth as the sun, according to the Gospel (Matt. 13:43), since she was to set the seal of a blessed martyr's death on her subsequent radiant life."

<sup>140</sup> See Beasley-Murray, *John*, 47.; Brant, *John*, 74, 79.; Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I–XII)*, 137.; Kanagaraj, "Testimonies," 29.; and Lewis, *John*, 46.

<sup>141</sup> The irony is that many commentators use the Jewish method of interpreting the time of day as noon and then ignore that the woman arrived at the brightest hour of the day—furthering the spiritual contrast with Nicodemus.

<sup>142</sup> Reeder, *The Samaritan Woman's Story*, 137.

surprising twist, the Samaritan woman becomes the model for readers to follow.<sup>143</sup>

Through this conversation with Jesus, the Samaritan woman comes to a new level of connection with her own identity and purpose, and through her immediate connection to God, she provides a stark contrast to Nicodemus:

[I]n a variety of ways the Samaritan woman (like Nicodemus) is confronted with the radical newness present in Jesus. Her religious understanding, her categories of judgment, her whole life are turned upside down by the conversation she has with this strange man at the well. The previous world she has known is called into question by what he says and is.<sup>144</sup>

These two conversation partners of Jesus are different in gender, identity, influence, and socioeconomic status. These two characters are “unique to the Gospel of John, and they could not be more different...there is little doubt that their proximity to each other invites comparison and contrast.”<sup>145</sup> In both cases, a conversation with Jesus started at a surface level: “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God” (3:2) and “Give me a drink” (4:7). As each conversation progressed, Jesus elevated both to a new spiritual level, and both conversation partners responded to this conversation with Jesus. The Samaritan woman responded immediately and left her water jar behind (4:28), and Nicodemus appears to respond to Jesus in the end (19:39).

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<sup>143</sup> Reeder, 137.

<sup>144</sup> Brueggemann et al., *Texts for Preaching*, 1995, 1:207.

<sup>145</sup> Lewis, *John*, 45.

### *Becoming Friends with Jesus in John 15:12–15*

To better focus on the relational bonds that Jesus formed via conversation, it is also helpful to look to John 15:12–17 and the way that Jesus redefines and reorients his conversation partners—and, by extension, all believers. This passage leads to a better understanding of the types of relationships that Jesus formed and, by extension, the identity of the new community that he established.

#### *A command to love like Jesus (John 15:12–14)*

John 15:12–15 is part of the larger discourse in John that begins in 13:1 and takes place at his final meal with the disciples. It comes right after Jesus' final ἐγώ εἰμι (ego eimi, lit. "I am") statement in John (15:1) and his illustration that he is the vine and his disciples are the branches. With this imagery fresh in the reader's mind, in verse 14, Jesus declares his disciples to be his friends [φίλος, *philos*] with the phrase "you are my friends," but he also connects this friendship to obedience with the conditional statement "if you do what I command you." He also calls them to pattern their lives in the model of friendship for which he will go on to set the example.

To be the friend of Jesus is a great blessing, but as verse 14 makes clear, it comes with a great need for the reciprocity of following the pattern of Jesus' example of friendship. As Brown clarifies, it is not the obedience to Jesus' commandments that "makes one a *philos*—such obedience is not a test of whether or not one is loved by Jesus but naturally flows from being loved by Jesus."<sup>146</sup> Friendship flows from Jesus to his

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<sup>146</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (XIII–XXI)*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1970), 682.



disciples, and they respond with a testimony of obedience to him. Bultmann writes that this was “not a question of their still having to become his friends by fulfilling his commands; they are his friends already.”<sup>147</sup>

*From servants to friends (John 15:15a)*

In particular, verse 15 is at the heart of this new identity, “I do not call you servants [δοῦλος, *doulos*] any longer...but I have called you friends [φίλος, *philos*].” Brian Edgar sees in this passage a turning point, “Through friendship, Jesus draws believers into a new level of relationship—not only with Himself, but also with the Father and the Spirit. In this way, his friends are able to participate in the holy friendship of God.”<sup>148</sup> Jesus’ use of *friendship* can be a challenge for readers to understand, and Brown prefers an alternative translation in order to overcome any limitations of the contemporary understanding of the English word “friend.” He accomplishes this by translating ὑπὲρ τῶν φίλων αὐτοῦ (“for his friends”) in v. 13 as “for those he loves.”<sup>149</sup> For a casual reader of Scripture, an interpretation like this does restore a better perspective on what Jesus means, but it also takes away from the example that Jesus sets for demonstrating what friendship is supposed to look like. O’Day, who is likely building on Brown’s work, continues this train of thought and provides much-needed clarification to define how John uses the term “friend:”

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<sup>147</sup> Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 543.

<sup>148</sup> Brian Edgar, *God Is Friendship* (Wilmore: Seedbed Publishing, 2013), 126.

<sup>149</sup> Brown, *The Gospel According to John (XIII–XXI)*, 664. “The noun in 13–15 that we have translated as ‘those he loves’ is *philos*, ‘friend,’ a cognate of the frequent Johannine verb *philein*, ‘to love.’ The English word ‘friend’ does not capture sufficiently this relationship of love (for we have lost the feeling that ‘friend’ is related to the Anglo-Saxon verb *frēon*, ‘to love’).”

The Fourth Gospel uses the two Greek verbs for “love” (ἀγαπάω *agapaō* and *phileō*) interchangeably (cf., e.g., 13:2 and 20:2; 5:20 and 10:17), so when Jesus speaks of friends here, he is really saying “those who are loved” (cf. the description of Lazarus at 11:3, 11). The English noun “friend” does not fully convey the presence of love that undergirds the Johannine notion of friendship. Verse 14 makes it even clearer that Jesus is not simply appealing to the noble ideal of friendship in v. 13, but to an understanding of friendship wholly grounded in Jesus’ particular love.<sup>150</sup>

However, this notion of having a friendship with and through Jesus is not something to be passed over lightly or simply to be adjusted via differing translation. To be friends with Jesus is to be friends with God and to be brought into a unifying friendship with other followers of Christ. Fitzgerald writes:

First, the Johannine literature of the NT reflects no hesitancy in using the term “friendship” to describe both the relation of Christ to his disciples and the relationship of the disciples to one another. The Johannine community traced its use of the term back to Jesus himself, who, on the night before he died, declared his disciples his friends. Implicit in that declaration was the disciples’ friendship with one another.<sup>151</sup>

In the Gospel of John, friendship and this intimate, supportive relationship are a part of what it means to follow Christ. Richard B. Hays observes that “within the comprehensive love of the Christian fellowship, John allows for and even encourages special relations of love and friendship in a way that no other Gospel writer does.”<sup>152</sup> This friendship is with Jesus, and it is made possible by Jesus initiating the relationship and through the sustaining work of the Holy Spirit, who will be with the disciples forever (John 14:16) and will abide with them (John 14:17). Dirk Van der Merwe writes, “This implies that the

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<sup>150</sup> O’Day, “John” in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 9:758.

<sup>151</sup> John Fitzgerald, “Christian Friendship: John, Paul, and the Philippians,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible & Theology* 61, no. 3 (July 2007): 291. John Fitzgerald, “Christian Friendship: John, Paul, and the Philippians,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible & Theology* 61, no. 3 (July 2007): 291.

<sup>152</sup> Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation; A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 154.

disciples' obedience to the commands of Jesus will foster experiences of the presence of God via the Spirit.”<sup>153</sup>

This unique friendship is a powerful and intimate connection between Jesus, the vine, and his followers, the branches (vv. John 15:1–5). This image of unity describes a close and personal relationship between Jesus and his followers, but also between the followers themselves.

*From δοῦλος to φίλος, a New Testament contrast.*

In John 15:15, Jesus reorients his disciples from servants (δοῦλος, *doulos*) to friends (φίλος, *philos*). While it is clear that something new and exciting is communicated through these words, Martin Culy points out there is also confusion because “it is not immediately clear what exactly it means to be a ‘friend’ of Jesus.”<sup>154</sup> Part of this confusion comes from how the Apostle Paul continually refers to himself as a “servant of Jesus Christ” (e.g., Rom 1:1) and Christians as moving from servanthood to sonship (Gal 4:7). Brown tries to make sense of this Pauline tension in this way:

...in NT thought the Christian remains a *doulos* from the viewpoint of service that he should render, but from the viewpoint of intimacy with God he is more than a *doulos*. So also here in John xv 15, from the viewpoint of the revelation given to him the Christian is no mere servant.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Dirk Van der Merwe, “Divine Fellowship in the Gospel of John: A Trinitarian Spirituality,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 75, no. 1 (January 2019): 8, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.5375>.

<sup>154</sup> Martin M. Culy, *Echoes of Friendship in the Gospel of John* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>155</sup> Brown, *The Gospel According to John (XIII–XXI)*, 683.

Brown argues that this is an elevation of intimacy, but this elevation of intimacy makes many nervous about a proclivity towards too much sentimentality. Brian Gregor summarizes the way that Søren Kierkegaard had these same concerns:

In a journal entry from 1850 [Kierkegaard] writes that “*The category—Christ a Friend We Have in Heaven—Is Sentimental*” He has something specific in mind here, namely the tendency to suppose that Christ is simply a sympathetic old friend, “on whose breast I can lean my tired head.” The human being is no longer a sinner needing forgiveness, but a weary traveller needing understanding. Christ is not merely that sort of a friend. He did not come simply to be a pal, but to save us from sin, and insofar as he comes to save us, he is our friend. Thus to say that Christ is a “Friend of sinners” is equivalent to saying he is “Savior and Redeemer.”<sup>156</sup>

Jesus as “friend” is, therefore, a statement of Jesus being the one who models friendship via the giving of his own life “for his friends” (John 15:13). Ambrose of Milan put it this way, “God himself made us friends instead of servants...He gave us a pattern of friendship to follow.”<sup>157</sup> For the Johannine Jesus, friendship is a loving commitment for which, through sacrifice and faithfulness, he serves as the ultimate example. O’Day writes, “Jesus does not merely talk the language of friendship; he lives out his life and death as a friend.”<sup>158</sup> Paul J. Wadell offers clarification of this connection:

To speak of friendship with God can sound so cozy and consoling, as if we are all snuggling up to God; however, there is no riskier vulnerability than to live in friendship with God, because every friendship changes us, because friends have expectations of each other, and because friends are said to be committed to the same things.... Any friend of God is called to faithfully embody the ways of God

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<sup>156</sup> Brian Gregor, “Friends and Neighbors: Kierkegaard and the Possibility of Transformative Friendship,” *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 64, no. 2/4 (2008): 938. Gregor quotes Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, vol. 2 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), no. 1285.

<sup>157</sup> Ambrose of Milan, *Duties of the Clergy*, n.d., loc. 3.22.135.42.

<sup>158</sup> Gail R. O’Day, “Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible & Theology* 58, no. 2 (April 2004): 151.

in the world, even to the point of suffering on account of them. There may be grace and glory in being a friend of God, but there is also clearly a cost.<sup>159</sup>

In referring to his disciples as friends, he not only draws their attention to the work that he will do on their behalf but also sets the expectation for the ways in which they would have to respond with obedience.

### *Friendship with the Father (John 15:15b)*

Jesus is not only describing how the disciples have a relationship with himself but is also drawing attention to how this *φιλία* (*philia*, lit: friendship) relationship between the disciples and Jesus is of the same form as the *φιλία* relationship between the Son and the Father.

There is a repetition of the term Father in John 15 (vv. 1, 8, 9, 10, 15, and 16), and this repetition reinforces the idea that the quality of relationships Jesus is describing are not limited just to Jesus. This is most clear in 15:9, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” It is likewise apparent in 15:15b that Jesus has passed along all knowledge from the Father to the disciples, “I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.” In this way, Jesus connects friendship to this revealed knowledge and thus forms a connection of friendship to the Father’s own self.

It is this new reorientation of the disciples’ relationship to God that is one of the implications of Jesus’ words in John 15:15. Mary Margaret Pazdan writes, “Jesus, whose life with the Father includes dynamic, mutual knowing, shares that reality with the

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<sup>159</sup> Paul J. Wadell, *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship* (Ada: Brazos Press, 2002), 10.

disciples and invites them to share in their life.”<sup>160</sup> This type of intimate connection between Jesus and the Father is abundantly clear in the Gospel of John. Martin Culy’s work demonstrates that the Gospel of John uses the Greco-Roman conceptual field of friendship to “highlight the absolute unity between the Father and the Son and thus characterize their relationship as one of absolute intimacy, or ideal friendship.” Culy continues, “Jesus thus welcomes his disciples into a relationship with himself that mirrors his relationship with the Father.”<sup>161</sup> As Jesus calls his disciples friends, he is describing the new manner in which they can connect to the Father.

This extension of friendship between *the God who became man and humanity* would have been understood by the disciples and early readers of the Gospel within the context of the cultural milieu of the first century. Therefore, to better understand this relational connection, it is necessary to consider how Jesus was using culturally informed friendship language to make his ultimate theological points.

### *Cultural basis for understanding friendship*

Language is always determined by usage and context, and John Fitzgerald observes that the Johannine Jesus draws upon two cultural ideas for friendship:

The first is the idea that a friend is someone who cares so much for you that she or he is willing to die in your stead. In keeping with this understanding, Jesus’ death in John is a death for his friends. The second common idea is that a friend is

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<sup>160</sup> Mary Margaret Pazdan, “Thomas Aquinas and Contemporary Biblical Interpreters: ‘I Call You Friends’ (John 15:15),” *New Blackfriars* 86, no. 1005 (2005): 474.

<sup>161</sup> Culy, *Echoes of Friendship in the Gospel of John*, 149.

someone who is so trustworthy that you may confidently disclose to that individual your most guarded secrets.<sup>162</sup>

Both of these observations are within the context of the original audience and text, but to get to the heart of the fullest interpretation, it is beneficial to also consider how φίλος (*philos*) would have been used within Greco-Roman literature.

*Greco-Roman understandings of friendship.*

The understanding of Jesus' use of φίλος (*philos*) requires looking at the ways that the cultural usage of this term was steeped in not only patron/client perspectives but also that of the Greek philosophical notion of ideal friendship. Upon this subject, Culy's work, *Echoes of Friendship in the Gospel of John*, is a remarkable study of the motif of friendship, which is subtly woven into the fourth Gospel, and through his work, it is more readily apparent how early Christians and writers of the New Testament pulled from the dominant cultural usage of φίλος (*philos*), even as they gave it their own spin.<sup>163</sup> This Christian spin originated with the Johannine depiction of Jesus, and Summers argues that it was distinctly greater than a patron-client relationship. Craig S. Keener and others<sup>164</sup> argue for a patron-client friendship rather than a genuine ideal friendship. However, Summers simply finds the patron-client model doubtful for the following reason:

What do the disciples gain by this friendship? They have no influence, as obedience is already written in as a clause; financial gain is not a possibility since the Kingdom is not a material kingdom; and protection from one's enemies is

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<sup>162</sup> Fitzgerald, "Christian Friendship," 285.

<sup>163</sup> Culy, *Echoes of Friendship in the Gospel of John*, 84.

<sup>164</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1008. See also, Lionel Pearson, *Popular Ethics in Ancient Greece* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), 136.; Zeba A. Crook, "Fictive-Friendship and the Fourth Gospel," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 67, no. 3 (September 2011): 6, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v67i3.997>.

patently not something that Jesus is able to deliver. The Johannine community may be seeking to bolster their status through this conception, but its practical impact in the challenging first-century climate would be limited unless there were popular acceptance of their “patron’s” status.<sup>165</sup>

In other words, within the context of Jesus’ lowly place in society, there was little social honor or prestige that Jesus had to offer to his patrons.

Additionally, to read φίλος (*philos*) in John 15 as a typical Greco-Roman friendship appears to miss the exalted status that Jesus envisions. Friendship of this type was built on the required reciprocity of favors,<sup>166</sup> and “the whole ancient theory of friendship is based on the assumption that favours will be returned.”<sup>167</sup> Favors in this system of friendship were exchanged between people of equal standing, and John’s high Christology makes this type of equality impossible to imagine. This inequality is why Aristotle said that friendship with the gods is not possible.<sup>168</sup> This is not to say that Jesus did not have close relationships with his disciples. W. M. Rankin points out that these relationships were close, but “the relationship of Jesus to the Twelve, and in particular to individuals like John and Lazarus, did not contain the element of ‘equality’ which marks ordinary friendship.”<sup>169</sup> So, within the high Christology of John, a peer friendship view of φίλος (*philos*) is not the best way of reading this passage.

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<sup>165</sup> Steve Summers, *Friendship: Exploring Its Implications for the Church in Postmodernity*, Ecclesiological Investigations 7 (London, England: T&T Clark, 2009), 18.

<sup>166</sup> Culy, *Echoes of Friendship in the Gospel of John*, 158. “Reciprocity was a central component of Greco-Roman friendship. Goods and services that were given required reciprocation.”

<sup>167</sup> Pearson, *Popular Ethics in Ancient Greece*, 136.

<sup>168</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 8.7.

<sup>169</sup> W. M. Rankin, “Friendship,” in *Encyclopaedia Of Religion And Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, 2nd ed., vol. VI: Fiction–Hyksos (New York: T&T Clark, 1969), 133.



Culy offers an alternative view of John 15:15 by arguing that Jesus draws from a form of friendship that is rooted in the Greco-Roman concept of ideal friendship:

What role, though, did reciprocity play in an ideal friendship? In his early rhetorical treatise, *De inventione* (c. 84 BCE), Cicero noted that people are attracted to friendship both because of its intrinsic value and also because of the advantages that it brings. Even in this early work, however, he was careful to define friendship in terms of mutual affection: “friendship is a desire to do good to someone simply for the benefit of the person whom one loves, with a requital of feeling on his part” (*Inv.* 2.55.166).<sup>170</sup>

*Ideal friendship was closer than a father/son relationship.*

The concept of ideal friendship is not just an interpretation that is isolated to John 15:15. Culy argues that in the Gospel of John, ideal friendship is the overarching manner of understanding the relationship between the Father and the Son, as well as between Jesus and his followers:

While it is true that the notion of friendship with God had clear antecedents in Jewish tradition, a careful analysis of the language associated with ideal friendship in Greco-Roman literature suggests that a broader conceptual background is in view, not only in Jn 15.13–15 but throughout the Fourth Gospel. Indeed, a close reading of the text reveals that although key terms typically associated with the notion of friendship, such as φίλος (‘friend’), rarely appear, when read against the conceptual world associated with Greco-Roman notions of friendship it becomes apparent that friendship language is consistently used throughout the Fourth Gospel and, in particular, echoes off the walls of the upper room in the farewell scene. Such language not only serves to make friendship an important motif in the Gospel of John, but also provides a powerful tool in the hand of the author for characterizing Jesus and highlighting the nature of his relationship with both the Father and his followers.<sup>171</sup>

Within the context of John’s use of ideal friendship, it becomes beneficial also to consider the way fathers and sons related to each other within the Greco-Roman context.

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<sup>170</sup> Culy, *Echoes of Friendship in the Gospel of John*, 58.

<sup>171</sup> Culy, 2.

This allows the Greco-Roman notion of ideal friendship to be seen more clearly because, within the historical context, a “friend” relationship was often seen as a closer and more connected relationship than that of a family relationship.<sup>172</sup> This is the point that Culy makes as he contrasts familial relationship against the relationship between friends:

The use of language from the conceptual field of friendship to characterize Jesus’ relationship with God would have made it clear to the authorial audience that something beyond the average father-son relationship was in view. While such a relationship would typically feature a degree of unity and mutuality, Greco-Roman fathers and sons were not viewed as equals. Furthermore, the Fourth Gospel’s language of unity and mutuality goes far beyond basic unity and mutuality. Instead, these notions are stated in the strongest and most emphatic terms possible, using language typically associated with ideal friendship.<sup>173</sup>

He goes on to offer the following clarifications regarding the Greco-Roman understanding of household relationships. He writes that the *paterfamilias* (the male head of the household) had “near absolute authority over his family,”<sup>174</sup> and the children would remain under that authority until the death of the father. Even if a son achieved a high state office, the father was still in charge. While the father was still alive, a son could not own property or get married without consent, and the father could even sell his son to a creditor or have him put to death if he chose to do so.<sup>175</sup> This is not to say that the Greco-Roman understanding of family was abusive, weak, or distant—there was profound unity

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<sup>172</sup> Culy, 128. Culy writes in a footnote, “It is possible that the author of the Fourth Gospel has (consciously or not) avoided an explicit reference to Jesus being the ‘friend of God’ because it could have undermined the high Christology that he was seeking to construct. A skeptical reader could have potentially turned the author’s own argument against him and maintained that Jesus was merely a ‘friend’ of God but not God himself.... Such connotations, however, remain appropriate for the relationship between Jesus and his followers and thus the author freely made use of the label in 15.13–15.”

<sup>173</sup> Culy, 128.

<sup>174</sup> Culy, 91.

<sup>175</sup> Culy, 91.

and connection in this relationship—but it was a relationship with a solid hierarchical nature.

With this in mind, take note that the high Christology of John does draw in a spiritual component that is far above mere social norms. It is for this reason that Culy sees a need for the Gospel of John to move beyond the Father/Son metaphor. Upon this point, he makes this argument:

Given the high Christology of the Gospel of John, the Father/Son metaphor, though important, was deficient. Indeed, from the very beginning of the Fourth Gospel, where the writer declares, “the Word was God”, it is obvious that he is going to have to look beyond the Father/Son metaphor. Fathers and sons are, by definition, distinct. While the metaphor thus allows for the description, “the Word was *with* God”, it cannot account for and in fact is in tension with the clause, “the Word *was* God”. The latter thus piques the interest of the authorial audience, who begin the reading of the Fourth Gospel with questions spinning in their minds. Yes, Jesus is the Father’s Son, but how can he *be* the Father and still be the Son? The very words that raise the question (“the Word was God”) point to the answer as well, since they draw heavily on the conceptual world of ideal friendship through reference to the notion of equality. How can the Word be both *with* God and *be* God? Given the background of Greco-Roman notions of ideal friendship the answer is quite simple. Unlike the Father/Son metaphor, which points to a distinction between Jesus and God, within an ideal friendship equality prevails, equality that permits one friend to speak of the other as “another I”—the Word *was* indeed God.<sup>176</sup>

Culy draws a contrast between the Father/Son metaphor and the ideal friendship illustration—arguing that ideal friendship offers an image of stronger unity and strength.

It is also helpful to note that while there were some culturally negative connotations within the Father/Son relationship, “the language of ideal friendship carried no such unwelcome baggage.” Culy continues by saying that “the language of ideal friendship provided a concept that could be literally applied to Jesus’ relationship to the

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<sup>176</sup> Culy, 94. He adds in a footnote, “The use of the conceptual world of ideal friendship to further characterize a father/son relationship appears to represent a Johannine innovation.”

Father and his followers. Jesus is not like an ideal friend to the Father; he is the Father's ideal friend."<sup>177</sup>

*Ideal friendship was a profound relationship of unity.*

It thus appears that the Greco-Roman ideal friendship model is the better illustration of the intimate unity that John is describing. On this subject of friendship, Diogenes Laërtius refers to Aristotle as saying that friendship is "One soul abiding in two bodies."<sup>178</sup> Laërtius also quotes Zeno as saying that a friend is "Another I."<sup>179</sup> In other words, for hundreds of years, it was well-known that this ideal version of friendship was a profoundly intimate and unified relationship. This perspective on Greco-Roman friendship is different than the social friendship of mutual favors, and it brings a beneficial insight into John's Gospel. Perhaps Aristotle's "one soul abiding in two bodies" provides the perfect analogy for understanding the way in which Jesus and each of his disciples were connected to each other.

Brant makes these same connections through Jesus' bold and simple speech about his own upcoming death.<sup>180</sup> This is in keeping with Seneca, "Speak boldly with [a friend] as with yourself...share with a friend all your worries, all your thoughts.... Treat him as loyal and he will be loyal. Why should I hold back any words in the presence of my

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<sup>177</sup> Culy, 91.

<sup>178</sup> Diogenes Laërtius, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. C. D. Yonge, Bohn's Classical Library (London, England: George Bell & Sons, 1901), 161. This is a reference to *Nicomachean Ethics* (8.9.2) where Aristotle is already using this as a proverbial phrase, "Moreover, all the proverbs agree with this; for example, 'Friends have one soul between them.'"

<sup>179</sup> Laërtius, 267.

<sup>180</sup> Brant, *John*, 219.

friend?”<sup>181</sup> The frank speech that Jesus shares about his impending death in John 16:23 indicates that he and the disciples were not mere “casual acquaintances.”<sup>182</sup> More so, in John 15:13, the Johannine Jesus’ use of self-sacrificial ἀγάπη (*agapē*) echoes “the ideal of friendship as expressed in classical Greek philosophy (e.g., both Plato and Aristotle point to death for others as the noble ideal), but the classical ideal is given new content through the life and death of Jesus.”<sup>183</sup>

In Greco-Roman culture, this ideal friendship was a high and wonderful thing. Aristotle wrote, “For no one would choose to live without friends, but possessing all other good things,”<sup>184</sup> and Plutarch wrote that “when friendship attends us, it brings pleasure and delight to our prosperity no less than it takes away the griefs and the feeling of helplessness from adversity.”<sup>185</sup> Through his clear and intimate speech with his disciples and his death on their behalf (John 15:13), Jesus shows that they share the type of friendship that was espoused by the great philosophers of the day—ideal friendship.

Through all of this, it appears that the Johannine Jesus intended φίλος (*philos*) to be understood within the ideal friendship concept of Greco-Roman philosophy. Because within this perspective, “while family members would have frequently been willing to die for one another, ideal friendship results in a willingness to die for someone with whom

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<sup>181</sup> Seneca *Ep.* 3.2–3, translated by David Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World*, Key Themes in Ancient History (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>182</sup> Fitzgerald, “Christian Friendship,” 285.

<sup>183</sup> O’Day, “John” in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 9:758.

<sup>184</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 8.1.1.

<sup>185</sup> Plutarch, *Plutarch’s Moralia*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, vol. 1, The Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1927), 270–71.

one has no family ties.”<sup>186</sup> This is the bond that Jesus describes in John 15, and a friendship of this nature is the most desired and noble possession—to be in a friendship with Jesus is a beautiful thing.

### *Connecting John to Acts*

The Greco-Roman understanding of friendship that permeates John also appears in Acts 2:44–47 and 4:32ff. This type of connection is made clear through what Aristotle wrote, “Again, the proverb says ‘Friends’ goods are common property,’ and this is correct since community is the essence of friendship” (*Eth. Nic.* 8.9.1).<sup>187</sup> O’Day points out that because Luke shows the church in Jerusalem living out these ideals, “this maxim [from Aristotle] provides a starting point for a discussion of friendship and community in Acts.”<sup>188</sup> Likewise, Jan G. van der Watt builds on the Greco-Roman view of *φιλία* (*philia*, lit: friendship) by explaining that “Sharing resources (*κοινωνία*) was seen as part of the natural cosmic order,” and in this manner, the sharing of community was often “described as ‘friendship’ (*φιλία*).”<sup>189</sup> Hume also writes:

Luke’s understanding of friendship is highlighted in the narrative summaries of Acts 2:42–47 and 4:32–35. There, the typical friendship phrase, ‘sharing all things in common,’ is used in the context of believers. However, this typical idiom

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<sup>186</sup> Culy, *Echoes of Friendship in the Gospel of John*, 93. Culy points towards the following texts as illustrative of this point: Seneca, *Ep.* 6.2; 9.10; Plutarch, *Amic. mult.* [Mor.] 93E; Epictetus, *Disc.* 2.7.3; Lucian, *Tox.* 10, 36, 58–60; Chariton, *Chaer.* 4.2.14; 7.1.7; Achilles Tatius, *Leuc. Clit.* 3.22.1; 7.14.4; and Plato, *Symp.* 179B, 2080.

<sup>187</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (William Heinemann, 1926), 485. In Greek this last phrase reads, “ἐν κοινωνία γὰρ ἡ φιλία.”

<sup>188</sup> O’Day, “Jesus as Friend,” 148.

<sup>189</sup> Jan G. van der Watt, *Family of the King: Dynamics of Metaphor in the Gospel According to John*, Biblical Interpretation Series 47 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 361.

would have clearly been heard by a Greco-Roman audience as referring to friendship.<sup>190</sup>

Culy helps make the final connection:

In Acts...Luke appears to draw heavily on Greco-Roman conventions of friendship in chapters 2 and 4.... The view of possessions reflected in Acts is consistent with Aristotle's comments on private ownership in an ideal *polis*: "individuals while owning their property privately put their own possessions at the service of their friends and make use of their friends' possessions as common property" (*Pol.* 2.2.4–5).<sup>191</sup>

Culy further points out that the "unity of relationship naturally led to a sharing of possessions," and he connects this sharing to that which occurs within the Trinity. "Such sharing between the Father and Son is an important motif in the Gospel of John. The one who was with God and was God shared everything with the Father."<sup>192</sup> In this fashion, there are connections between the friend/friendship motifs in John and in Acts. Keener sums this up, "Luke thus presents the primitive church as fulfilling the highest Greek aspirations of friendship."<sup>193</sup> In the end, it becomes abundantly clear that Jesus is the model for friendship and for the common sharing of all things that is seen in the early church depictions of Acts 2:44–47 and 4:32ff.

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<sup>190</sup> Douglas A. Hume, *Virtuous Friendship: The New Testament, Greco-Roman Friendship Language, and Contemporary Community* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2019), 69.

<sup>191</sup> Culy, *Echoes of Friendship in the Gospel of John*, 77.

<sup>192</sup> Culy, 152.

<sup>193</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: Introduction and 1:1–2:47*, vol. 1, 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 1018.

### *Community as Depicted in Acts 2:42–47 and 4:32–35*

As Acts opens, the narrative chronicles the departure of Jesus, the restoration of the Twelve, and the formation of a “new eschatological community” which “is formed and sealed with the giving of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>194</sup> Two passages in Acts describe the earliest Christian community: Acts 2:42–47 and 4:32ff. When these passages are placed alongside each other, four overlapping elements arise to the top: 1) all believed, 2) the fellowship called *koinōnia*, 3) living with a unified passion, and 4) holding everything in common.

#### *Community of believers (Acts 2:44 and 4:32)*

In Acts 2:44, to describe the earliest Christian church, Luke uses the phrase “all who believed” (πάντες δὲ οἱ πιστεύοντες). Later in Acts 4:32, he uses a similar phrase, “the whole group of those who believed” (Τοῦ δὲ πλήθους τῶν πιστευσάντων). Jacques Dupont argues that this phrasing “would seem to suggest that our starting point for an explanation of early Christian behavior should be the faith by which they are all joined to Christ and united to one another.”<sup>195</sup> Regarding belief, in Acts, the first occurrence of πιστεύω (pisteuō, lit. “believe”) comes in Acts 2:44, and in this context, it is connected to Peter’s words in Acts 2:38–39:

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the

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<sup>194</sup> Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 48.

<sup>195</sup> Jacques Dupont, “Community of Goods in the Early Church,” in *The Salvation of the Gentiles: Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. John R. Keating (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 102.



promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.

Robinson and Wall also connect these passages, “Conversion and community belong together. It is no accident that Peter’s preaching, which has led to repentance in his listeners, is followed directly in Acts 2 by a picture of community.”<sup>196</sup> The next occurrence of πιστεύω comes in Acts 4:4 and is connected with the preaching of Peter and John (4:1–4). However, when πιστεύω occurs again in 4:32, it is instead connected to an outpouring of the Holy Spirit (4:31), which followed the community’s prayer in 4:24–30. What is apparent is that early in Acts, the believing faith of the fledgling community of God is built on preaching, nourished by prayer, and “is the ground of their fellowship, the foundation of the *Koinonia*.”<sup>197</sup> Their beliefs had a tremendous impact on how they lived their lives and the nature of the community they formed.

#### *The fellowship called “koinōnia” (Acts 2:42)*

This new community in Acts 2 is described using the term κοινωνία (*koinōnia*, lit: “fellowship”). In Acts, this word is only used in 2:42. “They devoted themselves to...[the] fellowship.” Paul, however, regularly uses this term to describe the ideals of Christian community<sup>198</sup> and the ways in which the community “is initiated into newness

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<sup>196</sup> Robinson and Wall, *Called to Be Church*, 80.

<sup>197</sup> Dupont, “Community of Goods,” 102.

<sup>198</sup> See 1 Corinthians 1:9; 2 Corinthians 9:13, Philippians 1:5, and Philemon 1:6.

of life in partnership with the Spirit.”<sup>199</sup> Ajith Fernando observes that this was not a new term:

Some have claimed that this word was coined or given a completely new meaning by the church. But this is incorrect. This word appeared commonly in the classical writings to refer to, among other things, a close bond among people.<sup>200</sup>

How the early church was described was with a term that was common for associations, guilds, or even a “community on the basis of a common bond.”<sup>201</sup> Schattenmann describes how it may have had two levels of meaning:

In the [Greek and Hellenistic] world *koinōnia* was a term which meant the evident, unbroken fellowship between gods and men.... But the word was not used in the LXX to denote the relationship between God and man.... *koinōnia* also denoted the close union and brotherly bond between men. It was taken up by the philosophers to denote the ideal to be sought.<sup>202</sup>

This fellowship of the earliest Christian community borrows elements from Greco-Roman ideals, but it also borrows the term κοινῶνία (*koinōnia*) from the area of symposium ethics where it means “a common sharing not only of food from a common platter and wine but of conversation.”<sup>203</sup>

The faith of the individuals within the community bonded them together into a body of believers, and they were close-knit in their relationships with each other. Even as

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<sup>199</sup> Robert W. Wall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 10, The New Interpreter’s Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 71.

<sup>200</sup> Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1998), 120.

<sup>201</sup> Julien M. Ogereau, “The Jerusalem Collection as Κοινῶνία: Paul’s Global Politics of Socio-Economic Equality and Solidarity,” *New Testament Studies* 58, no. 3 (July 2012): 372, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688512000033>.

<sup>202</sup> Johannes Schattenmann, “Κοινῶνία,” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Zondervan, 2014), 639–40.

<sup>203</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 2012, 1:106.

these close bonds are described so vibrantly, the absence of explicit terms like φίλος (*philos*) does not negate the strong presence of the themes of friendship. According to Alan C. Mitchell,

[Luke] portrays the early Jerusalem community in Acts as a community of friends to show how friendship can continue across status lines and the poor can be benefited by the rich. Redefining friendship this way helps Luke to achieve his social objective: encouraging the rich to provide relief for the poor of his own community.... Thus Luke appeals to the Greco-Roman friendship tradition to help his constituents reimagine the relationship between rich and poor within their own κοινωνία.<sup>204</sup>

It is this latter part of fellowship and friendship to which the writer of Acts gives close attention as he portrays κοινωνία as an equalizing force of balancing and bringing differing socio-economic strata onto the same level.<sup>205</sup> Keener writes:

Greek thinkers typically applied the adage about friends sharing everything to friends of the same class; Luke transcends this by speaking of “believers” rather than “friends.” As already noted, by this period many also applied “friendship” to socially unequal relationships, but the church’s “sharing” across class lines is significant.<sup>206</sup>

What started as a term of Greco-Roman ideals became the foundation for the Christian use of κοινωνία (*koinōnia*) in the New Testament as the preferred word to describe the “unique sharing that Christians have with God and with other Christians.”<sup>207</sup> For Paul, this term becomes a key descriptor for a “community that is initiated into

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<sup>204</sup> Alan C. Mitchell, “The Social Function of Friendship in Acts 2:44–47 and 4:32–37,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 272.

<sup>205</sup> Within Acts 2 and 4 there is a leveling of the social strata of the community that emphasizes peer equality and the reciprocity of favors. This type of friendship was absent in John’s depiction of friendship, but its presence in Acts 2 and 4 does not negate the presence of any parallel connections to the aforementioned ideal friendship.

<sup>206</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 2012, 1:1018n269.

<sup>207</sup> Fernando, *Acts*, 120.

newness of life in partnership with the Spirit (cf. 2 Cor 13:13; Phil 2:1).”<sup>208</sup> It is this unity and giftedness of the Spirit that forms the identity of the community of believers who live with “one heart and soul” (4:32). This is a community that was founded by Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Mikeal C. Parsons writes:

The term *koinonia* (2:44), here translated “common life,” is far more “muscular” in the narrative of Acts than in its popular, contemporary Christian parlance.... This section ends with the phrase *epi to auto*, which has become the refrain throughout the first two chapters for the deep unity experienced in the community. They are indeed “all together.”<sup>209</sup>

*Living with a unified passion (Acts 2:44 and Acts 4:32)*

Acts 2 and Acts 4 both contain phrases that make it clear that the people in the earliest church held a unified passion. In Acts 2:44, the phrase is, “All who believed were together,” and in Acts 4:32, the believers “were of one heart and soul.” This latter use of the phrase καρδία καὶ ψυχὴ (“heart and soul”) appears to be an echo of the *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6:5 where Israel is called to love God “with all your heart, and with all your soul” (LXX ὅλης τῆς καρδίας σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς ψυχῆς). This is testimony that the church in Jerusalem is becoming the people of God in keeping with the entire Scriptural witness.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Wall, “Acts” in *New Interpreter's Bible*, 10:71.

<sup>209</sup> Parsons, *Acts*, 48–49.

<sup>210</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 213. “There is unity of heart and soul (καρδία καὶ ψυχὴ μία, *kardia kai psychē mia*; Deut. 6:5; 10:12; 11:13; similar are 1 Chron. 12:39; Jer. 32:39 [39:39 LXX]” This element of the early church fulfilling the vision of community in the Old Testament will be revisited in the section entitled, *Living into Old Testament*

Since the mid-eighteenth century, scholars have acknowledged Luke's appeal to Greco-Roman friendship traditions in Acts 2:44–47 and 4:32–37.<sup>211</sup> These passages in Acts use the common friendship maxims of “friends have all things in common” (κοινὰ τὰ φίλων), and they are of “one soul” (μία ψυχή). These cultural assumptions can be found in many ancient texts.<sup>212</sup> Similarly, there is a strong correlation between the *koinōnia* depiction of the early churches and the Greco-Roman expectations of a *koinōnia*<sup>213</sup> of devoted friendship:

[I]t is perhaps best to appreciate Luke's language as echoing aphorisms as to what constituted perfect friendship, τελεία φιλία, sayings which are well-attested in the Graeco-Roman culture of the time.... In an appeal to his Hellenistic audience, Luke thus seems to have intended his slightly idealized portrayal of socio-economic equality to constitute the evidence that the early church was capable of achieving the highest level of social harmony—and perhaps he also meant to encourage his audience to pursue the ideal (if we allow for these summaries to bear some performative ethical potential). It could attain what many considered to

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<sup>211</sup> Mitchell, “The Social Function of Friendship in Acts 2,” 255.

<sup>212</sup> Hume, *Virtuous Friendship*, 83. Hume offers sources from Plato (*Critias*, 110c; *Leges*, 739C; *Lysis*, 207C; *Phaedrus*, 279C; *Resp.*, 424A, 449C); Aristotle (*Ethica eudemia*, 1137b, 1240b; *Eth. nic.*, 1159b; 1168b; *Magna moralia*, 2.11.49.5; *Politica*, 1263a); Plutarch (*Amatorius*, 767D; *De amicorum multitudine*, 96f; *Cato minor* 73.4.3, (794D); *Conjugalia praecepta*, 143A; *De fraterno amore*, 478D; 490E; *Marcellus*, 17.3.4; *Quaestionum convivialum libri IX*, 644C; *Non posse suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum*, c. 22.4); Cicero (*Laelius*, 92; *De officiis*, 1.51; 1.56c.17); Seneca (*Epistulae morales*, 48.2; *De beneficiis*, 7.4.1; 7.12.1); Philo (*De vita Mosis*, 2.105); Diogenes Laertius (*Vitae philosophorum* 4.53.8; 8.10.6; 10.11.6); Iamblichus (*De Vita Pythagorica*, 6.32.1; 19.92.21); Dio Chrysostom (*De regno iii*, 135R); Libanius (*Epistulae*, 1209.4.3; 1537.5.2); Strobacius (*Anthologium*, 4.1.161.11); Olympiodorus (*In platonis Alcibiadem commentarii* 88.12); Theophrastus (*Fragmenta*, 75.1.1); and Timaeus (*Fragmenta*, 3b, 566, F. 13b.2). As well as the early Christian writers Cassiodorus (*De anima* 517b); Clement of Alexandria (*Protrepticus* 12.122.3.1[94P]).

<sup>213</sup> Ogereau, “The Jerusalem Collection as Κοινωνία,” 376. Ogereau writes, “The proverb ‘κοινὰ τὰ φίλων’ is indeed quoted by such notable authors as Plato (*Resp.* 4.424A; *Lysis* 207C; *Leg.* 5.739C), Aristotle (*Eth. Nic.* 8.9.1), Euripides (*Orest.* 735; *Phoen.* 243), Cicero (*Off.* 1.51: ‘ut in Graecorum proverbio est, amicorum esse communia omnia’), Martial (2.43.1), Seneca (*Ben.* 7.4.1: ‘omnia dicitis illis esse communia’), Philo (*Abr.* 235; *Mos.* 1.156), Plutarch (*Adul. amic.* 65A), Iamblichus (*VP* 19.92), Diogenes Laertius (8.10), and some Cynic philosophers ([Crates], *Ep.* 26; [Diogenes], *Ep.* 10). For Aristotle, friendship actually consisted of being in κοινωνία: ἐν κοινωνία γὰρ ἡ φιλία (*Eth. Nic.* 8.9.1; cf. 8.12.1, 9.12), he affirms, so that brothers and friends (ἐταῖροι) have πάντα κοινά (*Eth. Nic.* 8.9.1).”

be the ultimate goal, and most intimate form, of social intercourse, that which defined the very essence of friendship.<sup>214</sup>

*One heart and soul (Acts 4:32)*

Additionally, regarding the phrase ψυχὴ μία (*psychē mia*, lit. “one mind/soul”), Pieter W. van der Horst points out parallels in Diogenes Cynicus, Aristotle, Plutarch, and Cicero and argues that this expression “was proverbial and mostly used to indicate real friendship.”<sup>215</sup> Though van der Horst does not use the specific phrase “ideal friendship,” he does make a direct connection<sup>216</sup> between Acts 4:32 and Aristotle’s words, “Moreover, all the proverbs agree with this; for example, ‘Friends have one soul between them,’ ‘Friends’ goods are common property’” (*Eth. Nic.* 8.9.2).<sup>217</sup> This is the same connection that Culy makes in order to argue for the intimate nature of ideal friendship.<sup>218</sup> In these passages, there is clearly an expression of deep and comprehensive unity. As John Wesley put it, “Their loves, their hopes, their passions joined.”<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Ogereau, 376.

<sup>215</sup> Pieter W. van der Horst, “Hellenistic Parallels To Acts (Chapters 3 and 4),” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 11, no. 35 (January 1, 1989): 46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X8901103503>.

<sup>216</sup> van der Horst, 46.

<sup>217</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 548–50.

<sup>218</sup> Culy, *Echoes of Friendship in the Gospel of John*, 50. “Indeed, by Aristotle’s time the expression, ‘friends have one soul between them’, was already proverbial (*Eth. nic.* 9.8.2). Diogenes Laertius represented Aristotle as saying that friends are ‘a single soul dwelling in two bodies’ (5.20). Similarly, Zeno, when asked how a friend could be described, responded, ‘Another I’ (Diogenes Laertius 7.23). Cicero maintained that ‘the effect of friendship is to make, as it were, one soul out of many’ (*Amic.* 25.92). Horace described Virgil as ‘half my soul’ (*Carm.* 1.3.8), while Ovid spoke of Severus as the ‘great part of my soul’ (*Ep. Pont.* 1.8.2).”

<sup>219</sup> John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, 10th ed. (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1856), 286.

This phrasing in Acts 4:32 is a restatement of Luke's words in Acts 2:46, where the NRSV describes how the early believers "spent much time together in the temple" (προσκαρτεροῦντες ὁμοθυμαδὸν ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ). In this passage, older translations like the NASB translate ὁμοθυμαδὸν (*homothymadon*) as "one mind." The NASB reads, "continuing with one mind in the temple." This is a favored term by Luke, and it describes a "passionate unity or a unifying passion"<sup>220</sup> or a "unanimity...not based on common personal feelings but on a cause greater than the individual."<sup>221</sup> This common bond required a commitment to something greater than the individual and necessitated the nurturing and sustaining of a connection to God and to each other.

The church in Acts 2 and 4 was "together"<sup>222</sup> (2:44) with a unified passion/mind (2:46), and they were of "one heart and soul" (4:32)—all of which work together to express a unity that is more than personal assent to shared doctrinal beliefs. This description of unity is one of deep intimacy—the type of connection that is made possible by the Holy Spirit but also depends on shared time and conversation together. Wall offers this summation:

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<sup>220</sup> Fernando, *Acts*, 181. "What is described is a passionate unity or a unifying passion. This characteristic is communicated by one of Luke's favorite words, *homothymadon*, translated 'with one mind' or 'with one accord' in the earlier translations but 'together' in some newer translations (NIV, NRSV)."

<sup>221</sup> E. D. Schmitz, "Unanimity," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1986), 908.B

<sup>222</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 2012, 1:1027. Keener points out that there is a chance that this phrase may have deeper historical ties, but warns that the connections are uncertain. "Some also find Semitic idioms in Luke's description, comparing his expression for 'together' (ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ) to an analogous Hebrew term that in the Qumran scrolls means 'the community' (cf. IQS I, 1; III, 7). This argument is more questionable; Luke probably depends on oral rather than written sources here and probably uses his own vocabulary (though in all his writings the phrase admittedly appears only in Luke 17:35; Acts 1:15; 2:1, 44, 47; 4:26; elsewhere in the NT, only Matt 22:34; 1 Cor 7:5; 11:20; 14:23). But other elements may reinforce the idea of pre-Lukan tradition, especially if the primitive Christians' sharing reflected, in part, their probable expectation of Christ's almost immediate return."

Congregational solidarity evinces more than shared beliefs; to share “one heart and soul” implies a level of intimacy with and commitment to others that blurs the boundaries of personal rights or private property. A community of goods is a community full of friends. It is important, therefore, to cultivate a way of thinking about other believers as precious friends, as “soulmates.” To the extent we come to value others and what they need more than we do our possessions and what we want, we will come to think of what we own as “common property.”<sup>223</sup>

It is this deep intimacy and closeness of community that leads to a notable distinction of the earliest Christian community in Acts 2 and 4—they shared everything with each other.

*Holding everything in common (Acts 2:44 and 4:32)*

The remarkable depiction of the character of the early church in Acts 2 and 4 is the reason why so many see Luke’s depiction of the earliest Christian community as an idealized<sup>224</sup> portrait that “begins to fade as soon as he paints it.”<sup>225</sup> Hume’s work on this subject helps reframe these passages to reveal a further engagement with the first-century culture, “the language of ‘sharing all things in common’ would have been easily recognized by the Greco-Roman reader as friendship language. These depictions offer a vision of friendship that is set in a complex and intriguing narrative.”<sup>226</sup> Keener writes that “The adage that ‘friends share all things in common’ was widespread, and the idea

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<sup>223</sup> Wall, “Acts” in *New Interpreter's Bible*, 10:100.

<sup>224</sup> C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles*, vol. I: Preliminary Introduction and Commentary on Acts I–XIV, *The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 2004), 166.

<sup>225</sup> Christopher R. Hutson, “All Things in Common: Mutual Aid in Acts 2.42–47 and Acts 4.32–37,” *Leaven* 18, no. 4 (November 21, 2011): 188, <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol18/iss4/4/>.

<sup>226</sup> Hume, *Virtuous Friendship*, 80.



even more so.”<sup>227</sup> Ancient readers of these accounts “would have immediately understood them as having to do with the quality of friendship.”<sup>228</sup> Therefore, it is clear that the sharing of all things is meant to highlight the deep and profound nature of Christian friendship.

The earliest believers stood together, encouraged each other, supported each other, shared life with each other, and responded to the needs of each other. There is no indication within the text that these are idealized accounts, but there is also no denying that this beautiful depiction of radical community was short-lived.

#### *Earliest church in Jerusalem fulfilled common ideals*

Through the example of the early church in Jerusalem, there are three distinct expectations of friendship and community to which Luke appeals: Greco-Roman friendship ideals, the Old Testament vision of the people of God, and the “now and not yet” of the eschaton. Each of these ideal concepts has a different audience, and for each one, there is a clear connection through the life amongst the early believers. With these clear connections, it is not surprising that so many joined the movement.

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<sup>227</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 2012, 1:1017.

<sup>228</sup> Hume, *Virtuous Friendship*, 84. O’Day also arrives at similar conclusions regarding connections with the well-known maxims of the era, “For example, a well-known friendship maxim, attributed to Pythagoras and the Neopythagoreans, was that friends had all things in common. Since Luke portrays the early Christian community in Acts as living out this value (e.g., Acts 2:44–47), this maxim provides a starting point for a discussion of friendship and community in Acts.” O’Day, “Jesus as Friend,” 148.

*A depiction of Greco-Roman friendship ideals.*

As alluded to in previous sections, these short passages in Acts 2 and 4 bring forth a “utopian vision of the Christian community grounded in a common understanding of the intricate web of ancient friendship.”<sup>229</sup> Keener argues that Luke uses this summary to promote the new Christian movement as a fulfillment of the expectations for an ideal community that was popular in first-century Greco-Roman culture.<sup>230</sup> These community ideals made the nature of the early Christians clear and compelling to others.

The church in Acts 2 & 4 consists of friends who share everything, are generous with each other, hold nothing back (with the obvious exception of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1–11), and have formed a winsome community that leads to more and more people coming to faith and joining the community (Acts 2:47, 5:14). Keener describes how Luke performed this task by engaging with culture, “Luke’s Greek rhetorical skill enables him to depict the community in terms intelligible and appealing to his audience.”<sup>231</sup> Fernando points out that people joined the community because of this corporate witness:

Luke never writes that these new conversions took place primarily through the preaching of the apostles. The favor that all the believers had among the people would have given opportunity for them to give the reason for the obvious transformation evident in their lives. Personal witness through word and life added to the impact of the miraculous signs and the public preaching and resulted in a comprehensive evangelistic outreach.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Parsons, *Acts*, 72.

<sup>230</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: 3:1–14:28*, vol. 2, 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 1175.

<sup>231</sup> Keener, 2:1176.

<sup>232</sup> Fernando, *Acts*, 123–24.

The deep irony of this community is that in Acts 2 and 4, the followers of Christ are willing to do that which the rich ruler was not willing to do in Luke 18:12–23.<sup>233</sup> The church trusted each other, had faith in God, and shared in ways that caught the notice of the world around them.

*Living into Old Testament ideals.*

Luke clearly drew language and illustration from contemporary sources, but he also cast back to a much earlier time as he depicted the people of God. For instance, Deuteronomy 15:4 was likely in view of the gathering of the early believers. It reads, “There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the LORD is sure to bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a possession to occupy.” These passages in Acts 2 and 4 depict a sharing of all things and a community in which “there was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:34). They show the fulfillment of the Greek ideals of friendship but also a fulfillment of the ideals of the true people of God.<sup>234</sup> Luke has in mind a contemporary audience of Greco-Roman readers, but he is also showing that the Jerusalem church is “fulfilling the hopes, the promises, and the ideals” of Deuteronomy.<sup>235</sup> Keener explains:

The claim that none were needy among them (4:34) reflects the language of the biblical ideal community in Deut 15:4. God promised that if its members were

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<sup>233</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 2013, 2:1177. “‘Selling’ their possessions may well evoke Jesus’s call to the rich ruler (Luke 18:22), which constitutes a sort of model for all disciples (12:33).”

<sup>234</sup> David L. Mealand, “Community of Goods and Utopian Allusions in Acts II–IV,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 28, no. 1 (1977): 96–97. In a footnote, Mealand writes, “With Acts iv. 34 compare Deut. xv. 4 (LXX), but note also Seneca, *Ep.* xc. 38 (*in quo pauperem invenire non posses*). With Acts iv. 32 compare Aristotle, *N.E.* ix. 8. 2 (1168b), but note that μία ψυχή also appears not only in *D.L.* v. 20, but also in 1 Chron. xii. 39 (LXX—where it translates לֵב אֶחָד).”

<sup>235</sup> Mealand, 99.

obedient, there would be no poverty among them (15:4–6), even though the poor would never depart from the land (15:11), because God would supply enough resources for those who were endowed with resources to share with those who were not (15:7–10). Thus, Luke depicts the primitive church not only in Greek terms as the ideal community but in traditional biblical terms as well.<sup>236</sup>

The community depicted in Acts 2 and 4 connects to the Old Testament by showing that “the whole group of those who believed” (4:32) functioned as God had always intended.

The two descriptions of the life of the early Christian community in Jerusalem ([Acts] 2:42–47; 4:32–5:16) have a common form and purpose. They are intended to show that God was truly amongst this people. Their leaders were empowered to perform signs and wonders (Acts 2:43; 4:33; 5:15f.), and fear, such as commonly accompanies the presence of God, fell upon the believers and those around them (Acts 3:43; 5:11,13).... The degree of fellowship among the community of believers and the generosity of their sharing, evidenced the grace of God among them and signaled, particularly to Luke’s Hellenistic readers, the presence of something remarkable happening in Jerusalem.<sup>237</sup>

Through these connections, the depiction of the early church in Jerusalem is a long-awaited celebration and fulfillment of expectations.

#### *Summary of Acts 2:42–47 and 4:32–37*

The power of the Spirit at work in the close-knit fellowship is most vividly evident in Acts 2:42–47 and 4:32–37. This community embodies the beatitudes of Luke 6:20–22 because through the presence of the Spirit, the early Christians were able to support and care for the “poor,” the “hungry,” those who “weep,” and those who are excluded. Reed gives credit to the Holy Spirit for this work:

We see many examples of how effectively the Spirit builds up the Christian community in the book of Acts and the letters of Paul. In the early days of the church, Christians in Jerusalem spent considerable time together (Acts 2:42–47).

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<sup>236</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 2013, 2:1177–78.

<sup>237</sup> David Secombe, “The New People of God,” in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 355.

They met at the temple, and their fellowship spilled outward. They did everyday things: eating and praying, learning from one another, and sharing life with God. They did not become hermits in their new beliefs. The example of Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit led to the birth of the church, a community of loving, committed relationships pointing to God.<sup>238</sup>

Furthermore, the spirit drew people to this generous community:

Their life as a community was a visible part of their testimony. In sharing Christ, they also gave of themselves. One can share Christ not only by what one says about him but also by showing the transformation that following him brings about.<sup>239</sup>

This common life of sharing did not exist strictly for the purposes of evangelism. Wall writes that “While evangelism is certainly one effect of their life together (see 2:47), the primary purpose of their common life is to nurture Christian community.”<sup>240</sup> In order to have an outward expansion, one must first have an inward connection.

### *God as Model for Community*

Deep at the core of conversation, connection, and community is the nature of God. In the Trinitarian nature, God serves as a model for relationship through God’s own self, and through God’s nature, one can see a model for the relationships of Christians.

### *Trinity and relationship*

A relational view of the Trinity holds that within God’s triune nature, there exists perfect relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Therefore, as Beth Felker Jones explains, “When we recognize that God is Trinity, we see that being in relationship

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<sup>238</sup> Reed, Osmer, and Smucker, *Spiritual Companionship*, 32.

<sup>239</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 155.

<sup>240</sup> Wall, “Acts” in *New Interpreter's Bible*, 10:71.

is inseparable from what it means to be God.”<sup>241</sup> God is not in need of humans in order to be a relational God because God is relationship within God’s own self. Likewise, Tertullian’s view of the Trinity as “three persons, one substance” is well established in church history, and a definition of the Trinity must retain both the equality of the three persons of God but also the relational bonds that are part of God’s nature. African theologian A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya summarizes this need:

Tertullian’s concept of Divinity holds in dynamic interplay the idea of ontological equality, personal distinction, and functional-temporal subordination. Tertullian’s emphasis on Divine communality was eclipsed, however, by the debates that ensued after his death, which fostered concepts of ontological hierarchy instead of equality.<sup>242</sup>

Tertullian’s perspective on the Trinity helps it to be viewed in the proper communal light. Similarly, Augustine’s *De Trinitate* has long been the pinnacle of the Western church’s definition of the Trinity, and Augustine’s view on the relational aspect of the Trinity continues to influence theologians like Roger A. Sawtelle, who uses Augustine’s model at the core of his description of an African-American perspective of the Trinity.<sup>243</sup> The historical views of the Trinity are relevant and necessary for contemporary followers of Christ, just as they were for ancient ones.

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<sup>241</sup> Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 105.

<sup>242</sup> A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity: An African Interpretation of the Trinity* (New York: Paragon House, 1994), xiii.

<sup>243</sup> Roger A. Sawtelle, *The GOD Who RELATES: An African-American Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Lowell: Samizdat Press, 1997), 89. “The basis of Double Model can be found in Augustine.... The first was social or interpersonal (between persons), the relationship between the Lover, his Beloved, and their Love. The second, and one of preference, was intrapersonal (within the person) which is sometimes called the “psychological trinity” after the psyche or mind, which is composed of Memory, Understanding, and Will.”

A healthy theology of the Trinity embodies a oneness of God's self that "is the unity of a *community* of persons who love each other and live together in harmony."<sup>244</sup> God *is* relationship. God exists in relationship in God's own self, and through God's nature, God sets a model for the sustaining friendship and love of community. The Greek Orthodox prelate, Bishop John Zizioulas, shares these excellent words about the centrality of relationship within the Trinity:

There is no other model for the proper relation between communion and otherness either for the Church or for the human being than the Trinitarian God. If the Church wants to be faithful to her true self, she must try to mirror the communion and otherness that exists in the Triune God. The same is true of the human being as the "image of God"... [The Trinity] is also expressed through the unbreakable *koinonia* (community) that exists between the three Persons.<sup>245</sup>

Life modeled after God's nature is a communal one and is, therefore, a life centered around love. In this way, theologian Stanley Grenz eloquently phrases this Trinitarian connection not as something that *emerges* from God's "divine substance," but it *is* God's substance—love is what makes God the true God.<sup>246</sup>

### *Trinity and friendship*

The relational view of the Trinity establishes the existence of relational bonds between the persons of the Trinity, but perhaps it might be even more helpful to call this

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<sup>244</sup> Shirley C. Guthrie Jr., *Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 92.

<sup>245</sup> John Zizioulas, "Communion and Otherness" (European Orthodox Congress, lecture delivered at the European Orthodox Congress, 1993), 3, <https://incommunion.org/2004/12/11/communion-and-otherness/>.

<sup>246</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 141–42. "Love does not emerge out of the divine substance, but constitutes that substance; love is what 'makes God what he is, the one true God.'"

loving relationship “friendship.” This is the conclusion reached by Edgar as he centers spiritual friendship within the relational nature of the Trinity and argues that Jesus’ declaring his disciples to be friends becomes an invitation for them “to participate in the holy friendship of God.”<sup>247</sup> In this way, believers are brought into community with God, just as Jesus was in community with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

To extend the friendship motif is to then place the relational aspects of God’s nature within love—a friendship love. This friendship love is the conclusion at which Joas Adiprasetya and Nindyo Sasongko arrive, particularly in the way in which they identify the *spaces* within the community of the Trinity as love. They describe the Trinity in this way:

Our Christian faith teaches us that the triune God is communion of three persons loving one another eternally, who coexist in each other without any confusion, separation, or division—a mutual indwelling of the three divine persons described in Christian doctrine is *perichoresis*. . . . What we appreciate with the idea of *perichoresis*—meaning moving around the space—becomes the space into which all creation—including you and me and other creatures—is invited to participate in the community of the triune God. Thus, the space becomes the space of friendship among the three persons as well as between the triune God and all creation.<sup>248</sup>

Perhaps Adiprasetya and Sasongko might approve of a metaphor of friendship and community as the “melody” of the eternal perichoretic “dance.” In any case, God is the

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<sup>247</sup> Edgar, *God Is Friendship*, 126. For further argument of the Trinity as friendship see also, Culy, *Echoes of Friendship in the Gospel of John*, and Summers, *Friendship: Exploring Its Implications for the Church in Postmodernity*. Additionally, this idea is used to great effect in William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord’s Prayer & the Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 32.

<sup>248</sup> Joas Adiprasetya and Nindyo Sasongko, “A Compassionate Space-making: Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Friendship,” *Ecumenical Review* 71, no. 1/2 (January 2019): 25, <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12416>. See also page 30, “This material was presented at the 2016 and 2017 Youth in Asia Training for Religious Amity (YATRA) programmes of the World Council of Churches at the Jakarta Theological Seminary, Indonesia. Both of us emphasized the importance of developing a theology of friendship in Asia. We proposed that Trinitarian theology can bring a fresh theological perspective in friendship, because in the triune God we find space-making, hospitality, and compassion.”



source of a multidimensional, complete love. This love both forms community and creates the *friendship* that exists within that community.

This Trinitarian perspective on love expands beyond the love of secular culture and even the love of sacred culture in order to arrive at an encompassing true love, and this is a holy and dynamic model for community and friendship. As Adiprasetya and Sasongko phrase it, “If the triune God is the God of friendship, then all creation is invited to partake in God’s communion and to be God’s friends.”<sup>249</sup> Similarly, the ontological nature of God as friendship and the relational connection of God as friend is at the core of Catherine of Sienna’s understanding of spiritual direction:

Her visionary experiences...were the basis of her style of spiritual direction, which she exercised through a commitment to spiritual friendship with those who sought her advice. Her friendship with the Trinity, a visionary reality for her, was the basis of her belief that human transformation was accomplished through the restoration of the damaged image of the Trinity in the believer.<sup>250</sup>

Catherine of Sienna’s understanding of God as friend led to her utilization of conversation for ministry and to the natural extension of that teaching, which was for the benefit of others. This becomes the historical basis for Fryling’s definition of spiritual direction as being “for the sake of others.”<sup>251</sup> It is in this way that friendship comes from God, is returned to God, and is extended to the community of fellow believers.

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<sup>249</sup> Adiprasetya and Sasongko, 27.

<sup>250</sup> Barbara Rietberg, “A Holistic Approach to Centering Prayer and the Training of Spiritual Companions: A Dialogue between the Contemplative Spirituality of Thomas Keating and the Trinitarian Theology of Karl Rahner” (DMin diss., Barry University, 2001), 47.

<sup>251</sup> Fryling, *Seeking God Together*, 27.

### *Trinity and conversation*

The Trinity is, therefore, a model for Christian community. Lest this doctrine be construed as impersonal or distant, Vanhoozer reminds Christians of the conversational nature of each person in the Trinity. He points out that in Scripture, “each of the three persons in the Godhead has a speaking part”—the Father spoke from the burning bush in Exodus 3, Jesus clearly spoke to a great many people, and even in Acts 8:29, the Spirit spoke to Philip.<sup>252</sup> Furthermore, Vanhoozer continues by emphasizing the important communicative actions of each person in the Trinity when he writes, “The Spirit draws the church into the communicative action of Father and Son by pouring their love for one another into our hearts (Rom 5:5).”<sup>253</sup> The conclusion is that conversational formation through friendship has its roots in the Trinity and is a faithful expression of God.

### *Relevance for Spiritual Direction*

Jesus’ use of conversation, in both formal and informal settings, helps others engage in a larger spiritual world and attend to the work of God. The Spirit is at work in conversations around “community wells”<sup>254</sup> and with outsiders in the “upper room” circles of the people of God. In all these places, the example of Jesus shows his followers

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<sup>252</sup> Vanhoozer, “Triune Discourse: Theological Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks (Part 2),” 56.

<sup>253</sup> Vanhoozer, 57–58.

<sup>254</sup> Bolden, “Hospitality at Community Wells,” 527. “In the biblical encounter, Jesus shows new possibilities for sharing life and connecting with all people through invitational dialogue and acts of hospitality. Specifically, conversations at community wells offer a life-giving paradigm for the Church as a viable and tangible way for the Church to connect with its neighbor and draw all persons into the experience of God’s love.”

that spiritual conversations can abound, and where these conversations abound, tight connections of community are formed, and the people of God grow.

### *Spiritual conversation*

Most conversations in life are about the mundane and commonplace, and it takes a careful conversation partner to ask the right questions in order to successfully turn a conversation towards a more spiritual space. In John 3 and 4, Jesus does this well—he starts in the commonplace and elevates his conversations into the spiritual realm with a larger purpose in view. These conversations illustrate the spiritual potential for contemporary conversations.

#### *Conversations with Jesus shift to a spiritual plane.*

For Nicodemus, the early portion of his conversation with Jesus is full of misunderstandings. Similar misunderstandings can be seen in chapter 4 with the Samaritan woman, and Gary M. Burge explains that these misunderstandings reveal the spiritual capacity of those in the narrative:

They are an index of spiritual capacity, a signal of how little the world can comprehend not only the things that come directly from God but also how little the world comprehends its own reality.... It is not that these people exhibit an unwillingness to understand. It is rather that they are unable. They stand on the Johannine stage dumbstruck, blindfolded, intuiting that something is there, but unable to see beyond their own darkness.<sup>255</sup>

In John, these frequent misunderstandings in conversation reveal the need for humans to be assisted with their sight, “Humans are attached to the physical, mundane reality of

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<sup>255</sup> Gary M. Burge, *Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John*, ed. John Lierman (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 238.

their existence in such a way as to be blinded to the spiritual dimension of life and, more importantly, the revelation of God in Christ.”<sup>256</sup> Additionally, this misunderstanding becomes the catalyst for a spiritual conversation that transcends the mere physical reality. The terrestrial perspective that hinders spiritual sight is often a hurdle that can be overcome through the types of prayerful listening and sharing that are found in spiritual direction.

Ultimately, Nicodemus, in his privileged insider status, serves as a representative for many contemporary Christians. Just as the misunderstanding catches Nicodemus off-guard, it can also surprise readers:

This first discourse in John’s Gospel is a dialogue on two levels at once, a conversation from two different perspectives, an exchange whose result is misunderstanding. But the misunderstanding is purposive: The function of misunderstanding is to catch us, the readers, at work in our accustomed rut.<sup>257</sup>

This misunderstanding becomes a quick turning point in the dialogue that allows Jesus to take “the dialogue in a different and challenging new direction,” with the ultimate goal of “eliciting response to a transformed life.”<sup>258</sup> This is a common tactic within Johannine discourses, and it allows conversations to progress towards a more spiritual emphasis. This element of sight that remains mired in the physical and tangible part of life is nowhere more clearly seen in this passage than John’s double-entendre uses of γεννηθῆναι

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<sup>256</sup> Robert Kysar, “John,” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, H–J, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 3:917.

<sup>257</sup> Judith M. McDaniel, “John 3:1–17: Homiletical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 3, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 47.

<sup>258</sup> Maurice E. Andrew, “Dialogue, Monologue and Back to Dialogue: John 3:1–21,” in *Dramatic Encounters in the Bible* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2013), 80.

ἄνωθεν (gennēthē anōthen, lit. “born again/above,” v. 3:3), ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος (ex hydatos kai pneumatos, lit. “of water and spirit/wind”, v. 8), and οὕτως ὑψωθῆναι δεῖ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου (houtōs hypsōsei dei ton huion tou anthrōpou, lit. “in this way the son of man must be lifted-up/exalted,” v. 14). In each of these three instances Jesus is lifting the conversation to a higher spiritual level, and the Nicodemus’ misunderstandings reveal that he is still stuck at ground level. In simple terms, in John 3, Nicodemus “is on the level of the sensible, but he must be raised to the level of the spiritual.”<sup>259</sup> Like a spiritual director, Jesus draws Nicodemus’ attention to the larger truth of reality.

Jesus uses this same conversational technique with the Samaritan woman to advance a higher spiritual understanding of ὕδωρ ζῶν (*hydōr zōn*, lit. “living water” v. 4:10) and to nudge the conversation upwards. Of note, in verse 4:11, Jesus does not answer the question the woman asks, “Where do you get that living water?” Instead, much like a spiritual director,<sup>260</sup> he “invites her to answer her question herself.”<sup>261</sup> These layers of content serve as an example of Jesus’ conversational approach and as an example of a spiritual connection occurring via conversation.

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<sup>259</sup> Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I–XII)*, 138.

<sup>260</sup> When considering these two conversations as models of spiritual conversation, it is beneficial to notice that Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman respond to Jesus in different time frames. The Samaritan woman responds immediately (4:28), but Nicodemus does not appear to respond until after Jesus’ death (19:39). This is similar to pastoral and spiritual direction conversations which may have no immediate or discernable effect.

<sup>261</sup> O’Day, “John” in *New Interpreter's Bible*, 9:566.

*Equal conversation partners in John 4.*

Seeing someone in need as an equal partner in conversation shows great respect and value for her as an individual, and it follows the example of Jesus. This approach better incorporates grace and humility in ministry conversations. It envisions the Holy Spirit's presence within both conversation partners, which is at the heart of the style of conversations that are present in spiritual direction. A community that emphasizes non-judgmental listening, grace, and encouragement becomes a powerful force in helping people view themselves as capable ministers. This is why Jesus's interaction with the Samaritan Woman in John 4 is a needed example for engaging in holy conversation.

Reeder points out the remarkable nature of this conversation:

This conversation is remarkable. Often in John's Gospel, what begins as a dialogue quickly turns into a monologue from Jesus (as happens with Nicodemus in Jn 3:2–21, and the disciples in Jn 4:31–38). But at Jacob's well, the Samaritan woman is a real partner in the discussion. Her responses and questions indicate her awareness of history, theology, and current events. She is insightful.<sup>262</sup>

Guenther sees this conversation as something akin to spiritual direction, as it builds from the physical needs of life to a higher spiritual plane:

An even richer paradigm of spiritual direction as teaching is found in the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well. In many ways she is the opposite of Simon the Pharisee: as a woman and a Samaritan, she is relegated to society's margins, a throwaway person. Yet Jesus initiates a conversation with her, beginning with a practical, down-to-earth request for a drink of water and then moves rapidly from the physical to the spiritual....<sup>263</sup>

This is a similar movement of spiritual understanding that frequently takes place in spiritual direction as participants come to understand better the work of God in their own

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<sup>262</sup> Reeder, *The Samaritan Woman's Story*, 10.

<sup>263</sup> Guenther, *Holy Listening*, 49.

lives. To follow Jesus' example is to listen for the true needs, to help others see what God is doing in their lives, and to elevate conversation to a more beneficial and spiritual level.

### *Spiritual connection*

John 3 and John 4 demonstrate that Jesus' conversations might start at the mundane physical level, but he routinely elevates discussion so that individuals will be given opportunities to connect to God, themselves, and each other.

#### *Spiritual connection for Nicodemus.*

John identifies Nicodemus as "a Pharisee" and "a leader of the Jews." He comes to Jesus with what seems to be a solid spiritual resume, but R. V. G. Tasker observes that "Nicodemus, for all his theological learning, lacks spiritual insight."<sup>264</sup> This lack of insight is an opportunity for new spiritual growth, but it does not happen right away. Like in a spiritual direction context, it takes time to develop. Jesus presents an opportunity for growth in the context of what Nicodemus thought would be a routine conversation between teachers. Diaz contends that these "dynamics of discovering the sacred in the ordinary" are crucial to spiritual conversations and to establishing a connection between God and us.<sup>265</sup> This approach to conversation requires a quiet listening attitude with attention to the person speaking and to the Holy Spirit.

Through this conversation, Jesus connects Nicodemus to a new birth from a new locale and demonstrates the need for a new spiritual identity and people. It may take time

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<sup>264</sup> Tasker, *John*, 67.

<sup>265</sup> Diaz, "Spiritual Conversation as Religiously Educative," 478.

for Nicodemus to understand truly, but the conversation is the first part of a journey to connect to God in a new and vibrant way. It is this gaining of spiritual insight with which spiritual direction conversations seek to assist.

*Spiritual connection for the Samaritan woman.*

In his conversation with Jesus, Nicodemus seems to remain lost and confused about the spiritual meaning to which Jesus is trying to connect him. However, the Samaritan woman quickly begins to see a spiritual level in the conversation.<sup>266</sup> She not only understands Jesus' identity,<sup>267</sup> but she comes to a new view of herself and a new expression of purpose. Kenneth E. Bailey writes that through this conversation with Jesus, she has been "given a new understanding of herself and of her surroundings."<sup>268</sup> Guenther indicates that, like a participant in spiritual direction, the Samaritan woman experiences a new self-knowledge:

Jesus helps the woman to look into herself deeply and discover her thirst for God...she leaves her water jar and goes to tell the whole city of her meeting with this prophet who has identified himself to her as the Messiah.... Now she is free to know herself, see herself, and be herself. In this new freedom, she too becomes a teacher and brings good news to her neighbors, leading them on the first step toward self-knowledge.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Lewis, *John*, 60. "Verse 15 indicates that the Samaritan woman is still making sense of Jesus' words from a literal perspective, but there are three significant aspects of her response that disclose how far the conversation has advanced. First, she reiterates Jesus' description of the water he provides, 'this' water. She is able to distinguish a difference between the water that Jesus offers her and the water she has had to come and draw each and every day. Second, something has changed for her to state that she will never be thirsty—of course she will. That is a basic state of the makeup of the human body. She has shifted her understanding of thirst to something else, yet not quite certain of what that 'something else' might be."

<sup>267</sup> See the previous section entitled *Expanding revelation (John 4:25–26)*.

<sup>268</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 208.

<sup>269</sup> Guenther, *Holy Listening*, 50.



Through this new connection to her true identity in God, the Samaritan woman serves as an example of the same type of journey that readers of John can make.<sup>270</sup>

Connection to one's identity in God is beneficial. Yet, if that only accomplishes a newfound self-actualization, then the end result remains self-centered and short-sighted. It is the connection to God and one's own identity in God that ought to lead to an outward movement for the benefit of others.<sup>271</sup> According to O'Day, this is the way that the Gospel of John defines a true disciple: "To witness to Jesus—to see Jesus and tell others about that experience."<sup>272</sup> By depicting the ways in which the Samaritan woman travels this path of discipleship, one can see how conversation with Jesus leads to a new inward understanding and to an outward expression of this purpose. She becomes an illustration of "John's ideal disciple."<sup>273</sup>

Interestingly, Danna, who is not sympathetic towards the Samaritan woman, not only sees her as a disciple but also sees her as a better disciple than the other disciples. "While they cannot see that the mission fields are white and ready for harvest, she is

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<sup>270</sup> Thomaskutty, "'Humanhood' in the Gospel of John," 4. "The Samaritan woman's involvements can be introduced as a paradigm to transform people from misunderstanding situations to greater understanding, awareness about the 'past' to a transformative living in the 'present,' and emphasising the older traditions to life affirming newer experiences."

<sup>271</sup> It is this service of others that is key to Fryling's definition of spiritual formation and direction. "The purpose of spiritual direction groups is *formation*. Spiritual formation is a 'process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others.' The intentional goal of group spiritual direction is to help each participant become more aware of God in their lives, *for the sake of others*." Fryling, *Seeking God Together*, 27.

<sup>272</sup> O'Day, "Women's Bible Commentary: John," 384.

<sup>273</sup> Reeder, *The Samaritan Woman's Story*, 139. "Along with the formerly blind man, the Samaritan woman represents John's ideal disciple. Along with the other women of this Gospel, the Samaritan woman is instrumental in Jesus' ministry. Her work as an evangelist sets a precedent for all disciples to follow. Her story should empower women and men today to seek understanding and to witness to the identity of Jesus."

quick to go to her fellow townspeople and tell them about Jesus, and they believe in him as a result of her testimony.”<sup>274</sup> R. Alan Culpepper writes that the Samaritan woman is “given an apostolic role: she calls others as Jesus called the disciples...and others believe ‘because of her word.’” He continues by writing that she is “a model of the female disciple.”<sup>275</sup> This last element is particularly remarkable. Despite the lack of attention given by many commentators to her evangelistic role in verse 29 and to the subsequent response of the Samaritan community,<sup>276</sup> this passage clearly elevates a woman to a high role. Not only that, but the woman did not, and could not, hold a priestly or religious leadership position.<sup>277</sup> When Jesus elevates this woman into the role of “disciple,” Jesus opens the door for anyone to receive the same status.

In a section entitled “The Surprise of the Appearance of the First Christian Female Preacher,” Bailey writes that “she departs not simply to carry out Jesus’ command, ‘Go call your husband and come here’; she expands her mandate and witnesses to the entire community.”<sup>278</sup> Bailey refers to her as the first Christian female preacher, and it is clear that this woman is elevated to an important role in sharing the

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<sup>274</sup> Danna, “A Note on John 4:29,” 223.

<sup>275</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 137.

<sup>276</sup> For instance, in his lengthy section on this passage, Burge only gives two sentences to verse 29. Likewise, for verses 39–42, he only offer two scant and perfunctory paragraphs. Burge, *John*, 149–50.

<sup>277</sup> For this insight I am grateful to former Certificate Team Member, Carlisle Davidhizar

<sup>278</sup> Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 212.

Gospel—particularly when contrasted with the lack of response by Nicodemus.<sup>279</sup> The Samaritan woman allows readers to see the ways in which a conversation with Jesus prompted a woman to connect to her identity in God, connect to a new purpose for her life, and respond to Jesus in a way that formed and benefitted her community.

*Spiritual connection in John 15.*

As Jesus declared the disciples to be his friends, he described and defined a more intimate connection to himself. Thomaskutty points out that the model of friendship Jesus uses “restores humanness and instructs that humanhood can be restored only in relationship with the creator.”<sup>280</sup> This is Thomaskutty’s reminder that connection to one’s true identity is only possible when lived out in a faithful relationship with God. Aquinas then connects our friendship with God to our friendship with each other:

...since friendship consists in a certain equality, things greatly unequal seem unable to be coupled in friendship. Therefore, to get greater familiarity in friendship between man and God it was helpful for man that God became man, since even by nature man is man’s friend; and so in this way, “while we know God visibly, we may [through Him] be borne to love of things invisible.”<sup>281</sup>

John 15:15 is, therefore, a declaration that friendship is an upward and an outward movement. Benner describes the powerful meaning of John 15:15:

These words are among the most amazing recorded in Scripture. Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, invites us into the intimacy of the circle of friendship that exists

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<sup>279</sup> The response and role of the Samaritan woman prompts attentive readers to examine and reconsider the boundaries that churches erect around “women’s witness and work.” O’Day, “John” in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 9:572.

<sup>280</sup> Thomaskutty, “‘Humanhood’ in the Gospel of John,” 3–4.

<sup>281</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Book Four: Salvation*, trans. Charles J. O’Neil, vol. 4, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith: Summa Contra Gentiles* (Garden City: Image Books, 1957), 231. Brackets are the translator’s, and Thomas is quoting from, “Preface, Mass of the Nativity of our Lord and of Corpus Christi.”

between him and the father. The friendship that Jesus offers he has shared from eternity within the Godhead. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity places friendship at the very heart of the nature of God. And almost unbelievably, the eternal interflow of companionship that binds the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to each other, extends to those Jesus calls to be his followers and friends.<sup>282</sup>

Humanity is given the upward opportunity to be friends with God, and with this comes the outward connection to other believers. Jesus became a man in order to connect humanity to God, and the manner in which humans connect to God is in the same form as his own connection to the Father. It is this connection to God that brings humans into connection with their true selves as they are connected to the source of all things—Jesus, the creator and sustainer of all things (John 1:3; Col 1:17). Spiritual direction is a way for people to walk alongside each other through life and build this connection through “spiritual companioning”<sup>283</sup> or “spiritual friendship.”<sup>284</sup>

### *Spiritual connection in Acts.*

The beautiful picture of the early church in Acts 2 and 4 was a community of deep and supportive friends who committed their hearts and lives to each other. These relationships connected people across all manner of social distinctions:

Friendship was doubtless a vehicle for wealth, status, and power for the ruling elite of Luke’s day. Normally, it was formed within social orders, and its benefits were shared by people of the same status. Luke, however, uses friendship to equalize relationships in his own community. He portrays the early Jerusalem community in Acts as a community of friends to show how friendship can continue across status lines and the poor can be benefited by the rich. Redefining

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<sup>282</sup> Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 65.

<sup>283</sup> Reed, Osmer, and Smucker, *Spiritual Companioning*, xi.

<sup>284</sup> Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 16.

friendship this way helps Luke to achieve his social objective: encouraging the rich to provide relief for the poor of his own community.<sup>285</sup>

This image in Acts is of a community of people who may have had nothing else in common other than their Jewish heritage and their allegiance to Jesus. The upward connection to God is what enabled them to connect to each other, and this is the manner in which Robinson and Wall describe the work of God:

God is in the business of creating a people, building a community, and calling each of us into a new community that is defined by new loyalties and a new story. In Acts we see God at work to create a new people who are not to be defined by the old categories of race, language, gender, or social class, but a people united in witness to the resurrection and in a way of life that embodies what we call “resurrection practices.”<sup>286</sup>

In the end, the relationships that are formed within spiritual direction practices help people connect to God, to their full identity in God, and to each other.

### *Spiritual community*

Friendship with Jesus is friendship with God, and this friendship is as vibrant and intimate as the loving friendship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. By extension, to be friends with God is to be friends with other followers of Christ. Spiritual formation, ministry formation, and theological education improve with the addition of this level of friendship. Like iron sharpening iron (Prov 27:17), this tightknit web of relationships becomes a shaping force for all followers of Jesus. It is in this way that the words from a second-century writing, the *Sentences of Sextus* (86b), demonstrate a perspective on this friendship within the context of the early church, “the goal of godly living is friendship

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<sup>285</sup> Mitchell, “The Social Function of Friendship in Acts 2,” 272.

<sup>286</sup> Robinson and Wall, *Called to Be Church*, 79.

with God.”<sup>287</sup> Likewise, Eugene Peterson points out the implications of this God-centered community of friends:

But when Jesus designated his disciples as “friends” (John 15:15) in that last extended conversation he had with them, he introduced a term that encouraged the continuing of the conversation. “Friend” sets us in a nonhierarchical, open, informal, spontaneous company of Jesus-friends, who verbally develop relationships of responsibility and intimacy by means of conversation. Characteristically, we do not make pronouncements to one another or look up texts by which to challenge one another; we simply talk out whatever feelings or thoughts are in our hearts as Jesus’ friends.<sup>288</sup>

The community of the church in Acts 2 gives a clear portrayal of the type of community that comes from a life of conversation with and connection to God and each other—it is a community rooted in the relational example of Jesus and empowered through the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, the example of the early church in Acts 2 demonstrates that “friendship plays a formative role in the development of religious community. In community, friendship forms the individuals who are supposed to enact works of love.”<sup>289</sup> Jesus elevated commonplace conversation into spiritual conversation and helped others connect to their true identity, to God, and to each other. Through this example of spiritual friendship, they learned what true spiritual community looked like. To reflect Jesus is to be a friend like he was a friend. Hellerman describes how a gathering of committed friends becomes a powerful blessing and compelling testimony:

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<sup>287</sup> Summers, *Friendship: Exploring Its Implications for the Church in Postmodernity*, 78. He cites, H. Chadwick, *The Sentences of Sextus* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. 22. Translation is by Summers. In Greek this reads as τέλος εὐσεβείας φιλία πρὸς θεόν.

<sup>288</sup> Peterson, *The Wisdom of Each Other*, 17.

<sup>289</sup> Gregor, “Friends and Neighbors,” 938.

Apparently, the proclamation of the resurrected Lord Jesus in the Jerusalem church gained much of its credibility from the family values and behaviors that characterized that first Christian congregation. And so it was for the early Christians throughout the empire. “See how they love one another!” the world exclaimed (Tertullian, *Apol.* 39.7). “Their first law-giver persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another” (Lucian, *The Passing of Peregrinus*, 13). “The impious Galileans support not only their own poor, but ours as well” (*Works of Julian*, 69). Jesus and His followers took their culture’s strong-group approach to family life, appropriated it as the preeminent social model for their local Christian communities, and lived with one another like Mediterranean brothers and sisters. And the early Christians turned the world upside down. When the church was a family, the church was on fire.<sup>290</sup>

It may be too much to anticipate that a digital spiritual direction group will set the church on fire, but perhaps it will assist in drawing many people closer together and helping them to be “of one heart and soul” (4:32). When people are taught that God is listening and communicating, people will not only share with God but also listen for the voice and watch for the movement of God. Helping Certificate Students learn all this through experience allows the concepts to take up residence in their hearts, minds, and actions.

*Trinitarian expression of community.*

The view of the Trinity as friendship reveals a new insight into the nature of God’s self, but it also gives vibrancy to the connections between God and humanity. God is continually seeking to be friends with humanity. Summers points out that, according to Augustine, the giving of the Holy Spirit is the aligning and enabling of this friendship relationship between God and humanity:

The presence of God through the Spirit is the core of Augustine’s friendship.... The Holy Spirit is the bond of love between the Trinity and thus the bond of love between humanity and God. He writes, “whether absent or present in body, we wish to have you in the one spirit by means of which love is poured forth in our

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<sup>290</sup> Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus’ Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2009), 229.

hearts, so that wherever we may be in the flesh, our souls will be inseparable in every way.”<sup>291</sup>

It is this expression of the community/friendship of the Trinity that is enabled through friendship with God, and not only are humans brought into intimate relationship with God, but they are to form a community built on the same type of relationship with each other (John 17:21–23).

As Henri de Lubac writes, “The Church is a mysterious extension of the Trinity into time, which not only prepares us for a life of unity but allows us already to participate in it. The Church comes from the Trinity, and she is saturated with the Trinity.”<sup>292</sup> The intersection of the togetherness of God and humanity does happen on the personal level, but it occurs with even more depth at the community level through a tightly woven fellowship of believers:

...the *κοινωνία* of friendship, offered and enabled by divine gift, is the ongoing promise of John 15.15. This is the potential recognized and developed in *communio* ecclesiology an understanding of Church informed by the *κοινωνία* of the Trinity: this ecclesiology seeks to model the hospitable openness of the Incarnation, revealing a God who is “turned towards the world”.<sup>293</sup>

The relational benefits of friendship with God, however, are not just Trinitarian imbued community. By telling the disciples, “I have called you friends,” Jesus is taking the final step towards connecting his followers to the Father in the manner in which he himself is

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<sup>291</sup> Summers, *Friendship: Exploring Its Implications for the Church in Postmodernity*, 85. He quotes from Augustine, *The Works of Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo: On the Trinity [De Trinitate]*, ed. P. Schaff, trans. A. W. Haddon (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1873), 9.4.6.

<sup>292</sup> Henri de Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, trans. James R. Dunne (Shannon, Ireland: Ecclesia Press, 1969), 49.

<sup>293</sup> Summers, *Friendship: Exploring Its Implications for the Church in Postmodernity*, 159.



connected to the Father (John 17:11). These connections are deep, intimate, and transforming.

### *Chapter 2 Summary*

Jesus brings the disciples into his most personal circle of relationships as friends, and, through this friendship, he connects them to God in a new way, and by extension of their love and obedience, they are connected to each other in a new spiritual community. This friendship with each other is to be modeled after the Jesus-God relationship and is not merely a co-opting of the Greco-Roman ideal. It is also not a culturally bound relationship that is hindered by patron-client constraints. This free and joyous community, modeled after the communal nature of God, shaped these disciples into a community that thrived within the friendship paradigm of the Gospel of John.

Chloe Lynch points out that this invitation to a new life of friendship comes in the Farewell Discourse of John, and thus, by implication, “is intended to extend beyond that group of disciples to those who would follow later. The criteria of friendship in that passage—obedience and a divine appointment to friendship—support this, being equally applicable to those later believers.”<sup>294</sup> A community is thus founded in this friendship with Jesus—a community of those who treat each other as *friend* (φίλος, *philos*). This community is centered around Jesus as a group of “like-minded people informed by a particular set of teachings,”<sup>295</sup> and living out the command to love each other:

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<sup>294</sup> Chloe Lynch, “Preacher as Friend,” *Anglican Theological Review* 102, no. 3 (Summer 2020): 445.

<sup>295</sup> O’Day, “Jesus as Friend,” 147.

[Jesus] makes the disciples his friends and then commands them to love each other. The command arises from the abundance of this Christological friendship—an intimate, transformative relation that enables the disciples to receive this new command. And if Christ’s love takes the form of friendship, does the command that the disciples love each other not entail that their love will also be manifest as friendship? As Christ makes the disciples his friends, so he makes the disciples friends with each other.... A further outworking [of] this passage is that friendship plays a formative role in the development of religious community. In community, friendship forms the individuals who are supposed to enact works of love.<sup>296</sup>

Members of this community saw and experienced the ideal friendship of Father and Son, walked alongside a Messiah friend, and were brought into new hope and joy. They helped establish a group of friends who were attractive to outsiders (John 17:20–23):

The call to be friends of Christ indicates that this community will contain those whom one would not, in other circumstances, consider friends. Those whom one sits next to at the table, or kneels beside at the altar-rail in the Eucharist, are not friends in a notional sense but in a real sense—they are fellow instantiators of *koinonia*, sharing in the gift of God’s Spirit. Those who are not yet friends, but may become so, await a hospitable welcome in the community that is both “now and not yet.”<sup>297</sup>

From the nature of the Trinitarian God to the example of Jesus, relationships are at the center of the lives of the followers of Jesus. Jesus showed that conversations and tight-knit friendships were central to his interactions with others. His conversations with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman demonstrate that these conversations were not always formal or planned—they sprang up out of ordinary, mundane situations. A life of observing and experiencing Jesus’ conversations allowed the disciples to move into an intimate relationship of ideal friendship with Jesus and, by extension, the Father. They built friendships of unity and commitment with each other along the way. Conversations

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<sup>296</sup> Gregor, “Friends and Neighbors,” 938.

<sup>297</sup> Summers, *Friendship: Exploring Its Implications for the Church in Postmodernity*, 194.

led to connections to God and to each other, and these connections formed the framework for community. Not just superficial risk-free community that cost nothing and offered nothing, but community that came with radical sharing, trust, support, and shared life.

Can modeling and sharing quality conversations with other ministry students lead to better connections with each other and God and, in turn, lead to the fledgling formation of a learning community that has thus far been absent for asynchronous Truett Seminary Online Certificate Students?

## CHAPTER THREE

### Method

#### *Introduction*

Certificate Students need to experience community within their theological education in order to receive the most benefits of their studies and in order to learn better how to create connections within their respective ministries. They need to learn to create connections better through conversation in their own congregations in order to facilitate healthier community and to more faithfully live out the corporate nature of the Christian faith.

This project is guided by a goal of helping participants understand themselves in better ways, understanding God in better ways, and ultimately helping others in better ways. Daniel Schrock and Marlene Kropf have compiled stories of spiritual directors and examples of the ways in which those experiences have reinforced the practice of group spiritual direction,<sup>298</sup> but Fryling's *Seeking God Together: An Introduction to Group Spiritual Direction*<sup>299</sup> served as a key guide for structuring time, prompting conversation, and intervening in a conversation gone awry. Her approach to group spiritual direction shaped this project's approach.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Daniel Schrock and Marlene Kropf, eds., *An Open Place: The Ministry of Group Spiritual Direction* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2012).

<sup>299</sup> Fryling, *Seeking God Together*.

<sup>300</sup> I am grateful for the help that was provided by Matthew Homeyer who provided his excellent dissertation project as a guide for this chapter. Matthew Homeyer, "Sabbath: A Study of How Experiencing

### *Description of Intervention*

This study attempted to lead a videoconferencing (e.g., Zoom) spiritual formation group experience for Certificate Students to learn conversational ministry and to connect to each other for the purposes of building community. The online spiritual direction format is recommended by experienced practitioners (Boyer<sup>301</sup> and John R. Mabry<sup>302</sup>), and it was implemented in an eight-week experience for two groups of Certificate Students. To maximize scalability potential, each of these two groups was led by one of two facilitators trained in the *Truett Seminary Certificate in Spiritual Direction* program. The first group had eight participants and was led by Amanda Clark Hines, MDiv. Noel Forlini-Burt, PhD led the second group of four participants.<sup>303</sup> Each group met once a week for a 90-minute session that was intended to help them experience better conversation, connect to other students/ministers, and ultimately be formed to utilize better “conversational ministry” skills that will bless and benefit others.

In total, the two test groups were comprised of twelve Certificate Students<sup>304</sup> who were at various points of participation in the Online Certificate Program. Many were

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Sabbath Affects a Pastor’s Sense of Rest and Rhythm of Life” (DMin diss., George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University, 2016).

<sup>301</sup> Boyer, “Contemplative Presence in the Digital Realm.”

<sup>302</sup> John R. Mabry, “The Same? Not The Same? Online Spiritual Direction, Supervision, and Training,” *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 31, no. 0 (2011): 78. Mabry has been doing online spiritual direction “as long as people have been going online.”

<sup>303</sup> This group started with five, but within the first two weeks one ceased participating.

<sup>304</sup> As a point of clarity, according to every measure, Truett’s Certificate Students are not classified as students at Baylor University. They participate at a continuing education level and are outside of the scope of services that are available to Baylor Students and the various legal requirements that are applicable to Baylor Students.

within their first few weeks of getting started in their first course, *CCF00 - Orientation and Formation*. The control group contained ten people who volunteered to participate. They came from a variety of points in their Certificate Program studies.

### *Curriculum approach*

In cooperation with Clark Hines, a curriculum was written and structured for the purposes of using conversation to form connections and, ultimately, community. Clark Hines served as an Online Certificate Program Team Member from 2020–2022. At the time of the writing, Clark Hines was also enrolled in Truett’s *Certificate in Spiritual Direction* program, and she was able to draw from her knowledge, learning, and experience in the subject. Her unique perspective as a Truett Seminary *Certificate in Spiritual Direction* student and an Online Certificate Program Team Member allowed us to better shape an approach to fostering a healthy and effective scope of learning and growth for Truett’s Online Certificate Students (see Appendix B for this curriculum).

Each week’s content was tightly arranged to utilize prayer practices, including *lectio divina*, reflection questions, brief instruction of conversational approaches, and experience in a spiritual direction group. The curriculum was provided to the two facilitators but was not provided to the participants in order to foster more natural and informal conversation. The curriculum content is based mainly on spiritual direction conversation but also utilizes four Scripture passages for prayer and reflection.

### *Matthew 6:9–13: Lord’s Prayer*

For the purposes of emphasizing prayer, the Lord’s Prayer is of first attention within the curriculum. This project utilizes the commonly recited and longer version of

Matthew 6:9–13, which is well known to many and happens to be found in the *Anglican Book of Common Prayer*.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.<sup>305</sup>

Emphasis will be placed on the first-person plural phrasing of the prayer in order to reveal that prayer was taught to a community with instructions to participate in that practice as a community.

*Luke 10:38–42: Mary and Martha*

Fryling’s definition of group spiritual direction contains the intentional goal “to help each participant become more aware of God in their lives.”<sup>306</sup> This connection to the work of God is illustrated through the contrast of the examples of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38–42. The example of Mary is one of particular interest as she serves as a visual example of a disciple sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to his teaching. This illustrative example of intentionally paying attention is the framework for setting time aside each week for the purposes of attending to relationships with God and with each other.

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<sup>305</sup> Anglican Church in North America, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments* (Traverse City: Anglican Liturgy Press, 2019), 21. This may be archaic language and may not follow the most accurate translation of Matthew 6:9–13, such as might be found in the NRSV or in other modern translations, but within the researcher’s experience with Certificate Students, Baptists, and other evangelicals, this is the version that many adults have memorized. Therefore, because it appears to be the most familiar, it is the version that is used.

<sup>306</sup> Fryling, *Seeking God Together*, 27.

*Psalm 23:1–3*

To foster the goal of helping people gain more from the ministry of conversation, it is essential to help them see more value in familiar things by slowing down and paying attention to what God is doing. A familiar passage like Psalm 23:1–3 allows people to sit and rest in the content of Scripture in a way that allows their attention to be focused. This familiarity provides a subversive opportunity for new meaning to be found within commonly read Scripture.

*Luke 15:11–32: The Lost Son*

Lastly, the spiritual direction curriculum spends three weeks on the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11–32. For three weeks in a row, this text is the content of *lectio divina* with prompts provided that will help the participants take more time with the text and envision the ways in which each participant is similar to or different from the younger son, the older son, and the father. This allows a beautiful story to receive more significant meaning and helps participants learn more about themselves as they listen to the text in several ways.

*Statement of the Research Questions*

Inquiry into the effectiveness of the project was guided by one primary research question and three support questions:

*How does participating in a facilitated synchronous spiritual direction group relate to spiritual formation for online ministry students?*

For the purposes of defining and covering spiritual health, this project will emphasize three main goals: conversation, connection, and community.



### *Support questions*

*How can experience in a spiritual direction group improve an individual's spiritual health as regards to their own connection to God and awareness of God's work within their own lives?*

This is a standard goal of spiritual direction and is in keeping with a well-worn pathway of fostering spiritual conversations within a group spiritual direction experience.

*How can experience in a spiritual direction group improve community bonds within and between participating students?*

In order to form spiritually healthy community, this project has emphasized active listening skills and non-judgmental approaches to ministry and encouragement.

*How can experience in a spiritual direction group lead towards an improved service of others through what will be called "ministry of conversation"?*

Ultimately, the goal of this project is to foster intentional and informal conversational ministry approaches that are much more effective than simply offering advice.

### *Description of Method*

The researcher chose a quantitative research method for this intervention that employed a survey that was administered before and after the eight-week intervention. This quantitative approach allowed the spiritual direction experience to proceed unhindered by privacy concerns and allowed the researcher to remain at an objective distance from the intervention. Three additional open-ended questions in the post-intervention survey allowed participants to offer their own observations and reflections.

### *Role of the Researcher*

To maintain privacy and promote the development of conversational intimacy and connection, the researcher did not observe or record the groups in any way. Other than an introductory five-minute welcome, distribution of associated documents via email, and a five-minute expression of thanks at the conclusion, the researcher stayed at a distance and allowed each group to have complete autonomy. A survey administered before and after the intervention was the researcher's only connection to the Certificate Students and their experience. The researcher did stay in regular contact with both facilitators, but to protect privacy and the autonomy of the groups, conversations were limited to general terms and superficial updates.

### *Obtaining the Sample*

The researcher used a criterion-based purposive strategy for this sample. The sample of participants for this intervention was drawn from Certificate Students towards the beginning of their Certificate studies. The invitation to participate in the project was extended through an initial email and posted within a private Facebook group. Interested people received a follow-up informational email and an invitation to sign up for either of the groups. Through email, the researcher described the project, a detailed list of participant requirements, and the expected time commitment. The informed consent form was supplied through the survey that each participant completed.

Two groups at two different times on two different days were scheduled, and participants were asked to sign up for their preferred day. The researcher had no control over which candidates signed up for which day, and the groups were formed solely based on people signing up for each group. Until each group was full, a waiting list of email

addresses for interested candidates was maintained for each day, and the only decision the researcher made was determining whom to contact from each of those waiting lists. The researcher chose whom to contact on the waiting lists based on when they started in the Certificate Program, with preference being given to those who were earliest in their program progress.

From the pool of candidates, two groups of diverse backgrounds coalesced. The researcher did not collect detailed demographics, but from casual observation and conversation during the brief introductory conversation, the researcher was able to determine that members of the final pool were nearly evenly split between male and female and between people of European descent and people of color. The two facilitators also reported that the participants came from different ministry contexts and different geographic locations.

The control group was selected by contacting all those who were on the waiting lists for the two test groups. From those contacted via email, twenty-nine people agreed to participate as a control group and submitted their first survey. Eight weeks later, thirteen people submitted their second survey in the allotted window of time. Three of these people were much further in their Certificate Program progress than the test group, and so their results were excluded from the results. The remaining ten people served as the control group. No demographic observations were made for this group, and none were collected.

### *Entering the Field*

The researcher in this intervention serves as the Director of the Online Certificate Program of George W. Truett Theological Seminary. Before coming to work for Truett in

May 2015, he had been a Truett MDiv student for four years, served as the Executive Director of a non-profit ministry for seven years, served in other non-profit roles for four years, had owned his own business for sixteen years, had come from an eight-year career in IT, and additionally had pastored three different churches. Much of the researcher's career was spent engaged in two or three of these vocations at any given point in time.

Like many of its students, the Director of the Certificate Program did not feel a calling to ministry until later in life and had no formal theological education prior to serving in many of his earlier ministry leadership positions. This diverse background of challenging co-vocational experience has often allowed him to reassure prospective Certificate Students that the value of their time is understood and respected. More so, his testimony is that theological education has a profound effect on one's ministry ability.

### *Data Collection*

A 30-question survey was administered in the last week of July 2022, and a second survey was administered in the last week of September 2022. This targeted survey was designed to seek information on the three primary areas of interest: connection, community, and conversation. This 7-point Likert-scale survey is broken up into three sections, and parts B and C contain modified content from the excellent work of Carolyn Nettles<sup>307</sup> and Sheri Ray<sup>308</sup> (see Appendix A). This survey will indicate if growth in the desired specific areas occurred, and it was administered digitally and anonymously.

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<sup>307</sup> Carolyn Diane Nettles, "Spiritual Friendships: Rediscovering a Means of Christian Discipleship in the Local Church" (DMin diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2017), 125–27.

<sup>308</sup> Sheri Juanita Ray, "Transforming Conversation: Engaging God and Others in Authentic Spiritual Dialogue" (DMin diss., Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, 2018), 152–53.

### *Data Analysis*

Survey responses were collected with Qualtrics and were analyzed against the control group. Quantitative analysis of results was performed on coded data to determine the effectiveness of the intervention.

### *Data Reporting*

The results of this intervention have been documented and reported with honesty and integrity. The researcher carefully verified the accuracy of each result of this project and has presented them faithfully. Survey responses can be found in Appendix C, and a summary of this data is presented in Chapter Four. Final observations are presented in Chapter Five.

### *Validity and Reliability*

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, the researcher maintained an objective distance and had no interaction with the participants during the project. For the purposes of reducing how relational bias would affect the data, the researcher was careful to maintain distance and the participants' anonymity. The researcher is aware that he is biased towards wanting this project to succeed and demonstrate that this method of promoting community in an online experience can be replicated in the future, but all care was taken to ensure that the objectivity of the results was separated from any confirmation bias. The administered survey (Appendix A) used many questions from the

work of Nettles<sup>309</sup> and Ray,<sup>310</sup> and this use of prior research elevates the validity of these findings.

### *Ethical Issues*

The care and protection of all participants were of the highest priority, and to accomplish this, each participant was told verbally and in writing what was expected of him/her for the project. All this information was contained in the informed consent that each participant reviewed and acknowledged before the project began.

At no point during the project were participants under threat of injury or harm, and all possible risks were disclosed. All findings were reported with integrity and care, and no deception has been used. Participants were not paid, nor did it cost them anything to participate. Each person who participated in the project was offered a 50% discount on a future Certificate Program course of their choice. Participants were free to choose not to take part in the study or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty of any kind.

The researcher did not collect the names of participants in the study and arbitrarily assigned numbers are used for the reporting of the findings of this study. No paper copies of any information were created, and all electronic data will be stored on an encrypted password-protected computer and destroyed in three years. All data is only accessible to the researcher. The researcher answered any questions and concerns participants may have concerning this study.

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<sup>309</sup> Nettles, "Spiritual Friendships," 125–27.

<sup>310</sup> Ray, "Transforming Conversation," 152–53.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Summary and Results

Though the Truett Seminary Certificate Program has existed in one form or another since 2004, the researcher may be considered the founder and primary creator of the present program and its curriculum. In the last seven years that the researcher has served in this role, over 850 Certificate Students have participated in the redesigned and implemented program. As a result, the researcher came into this project with countless observations and interactions with Truett Certificate Students. It was clear from these conversations and observations that Certificate Students were missing the spiritual formation of community that is present for most of Truett Seminary's academic students.

For the intervention, twelve Certificate Students met weekly to connect to each other and God through shared spiritual formation practices and facilitated conversation. These 90-minute weekly meetings were led by a trained spiritual director with the goal of utilizing spiritual direction practices to foster better conversations among Certificate Students. The project sought to create opportunities for spiritual formation and community by utilizing conversation to lead toward connection to God and each other. This inquiry was guided by one primary research question:

*How does participating in a facilitated synchronous spiritual direction group relate to spiritual formation for online ministry students?*

Ultimately, this is the overarching question for the project, but the intervention also sought to answer an additional three supporting research questions:

*How can experience in a spiritual direction group improve an individual's spiritual health as regards to their own connection to God and awareness of God's work within their own lives?*

*How can experience in a spiritual direction group improve community bonds within and between participating students?*

*How can experience in a spiritual direction group lead towards an improved service of others through what will be called “ministry of conversation”?*

The results of this intervention will be reported in the key areas of conversation, connection, and community and will lead toward the primary research question.

### *Key Pre-Intervention Findings*

Prior to the intervention, two findings came through analysis of the preliminary set of surveys. Initial survey results showed that one survey question scored much lower than the rest. With regards to comparatively scored questions amongst all 22 participants (test and control), the average score for each question in the preliminary survey was 5.96 (on a scale of 1–7). In contrast, the average response for question 5 was 3.77:

Q5     The Christian spiritual life is primarily a community/corporate Relationship with God.

This finding indicates that most Certificate Students do not agree with this statement.

Their responses are in keeping with the observations of Robinson and Wall that people living in North America tend to have an individualized view of the Christian faith.<sup>311</sup>

In each of the three areas of connection, community and conversation, initial surveys indicated that all participants (test and control) rated themselves quite highly.

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<sup>311</sup> Robinson and Wall, *Called to Be Church*, 79. They write, “So our North American sense of placing high value in the individual—in many ways a strength—has the flip side of weakening the community, undermining enduring bonds and relationships, disconnecting individuals from structures and networks of meaning, and depriving individual people of their communities of meaning and purpose. The church in North America is also affected by this.... It is often easier for us to think of ‘my faith’ rather than of ‘our faith,’ ‘my’ relationship to Jesus rather than our life together, ‘my’ spirituality rather than our life as a people.”



Pre-intervention responses for all those surveyed were as follows: connection 55.5, community 59.8, and conversation 56.5. With a scale of 10–70, these reflect self-assessments made up of responses that are 70.3% “Agree” or “Strongly Agree.”<sup>312</sup> Those surveyed appear to have a high self-perception in these areas.

For example, three questions in each of the main categories have an average score of 6.2 (on a scale of 1–7) or higher, placing the average response for these questions between “Agree” and “Strongly Agree.” These nine highest-scoring questions were:

- Q2 I am comfortable talking to others about my walk with God, even when I am unsure of what God is doing.*
- Q6 I am growing in my relationship to God.*
- Q8 I am confident in God’s continual presence in my life at all times.*
- Q11 I am comfortable sharing my spiritual journey with a friend.*
- Q13 I feel spiritual friendships are valuable in my faith journey.*
- Q14 I have shared my faith journey with others.*
- Q23 I am open to God becoming more real to me when I am in conversation with others.*
- Q27 I enjoy listening to others when they share about their personal insight into things about God.*
- Q30 Listening well is often the best ministry I can offer to an individual.*

Because of the high starting point, increases in these areas may be numerically small, and when interpreting data for these questions, this starting point should be kept in mind.

### *Primary Findings*

Each of the three supporting research questions corresponds to the three main emphases of this project: conversation, connection, and community. The complete set of data from survey responses can be found in Appendix C.

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<sup>312</sup> 31.8% of pre-intervention answers were the highest possible response: “Strongly Agree.”

## *Conversation*

The subject of conversation is both the means and the goal of this intervention—through intentional conversation, the goal was to help participants connect to God and each other, to form community, and ultimately to build towards the use of conversation in serving others. This is reflected in the following support question:

*How can experience in a spiritual direction group lead towards an improved service of others through what will be called “ministry of conversation”?*

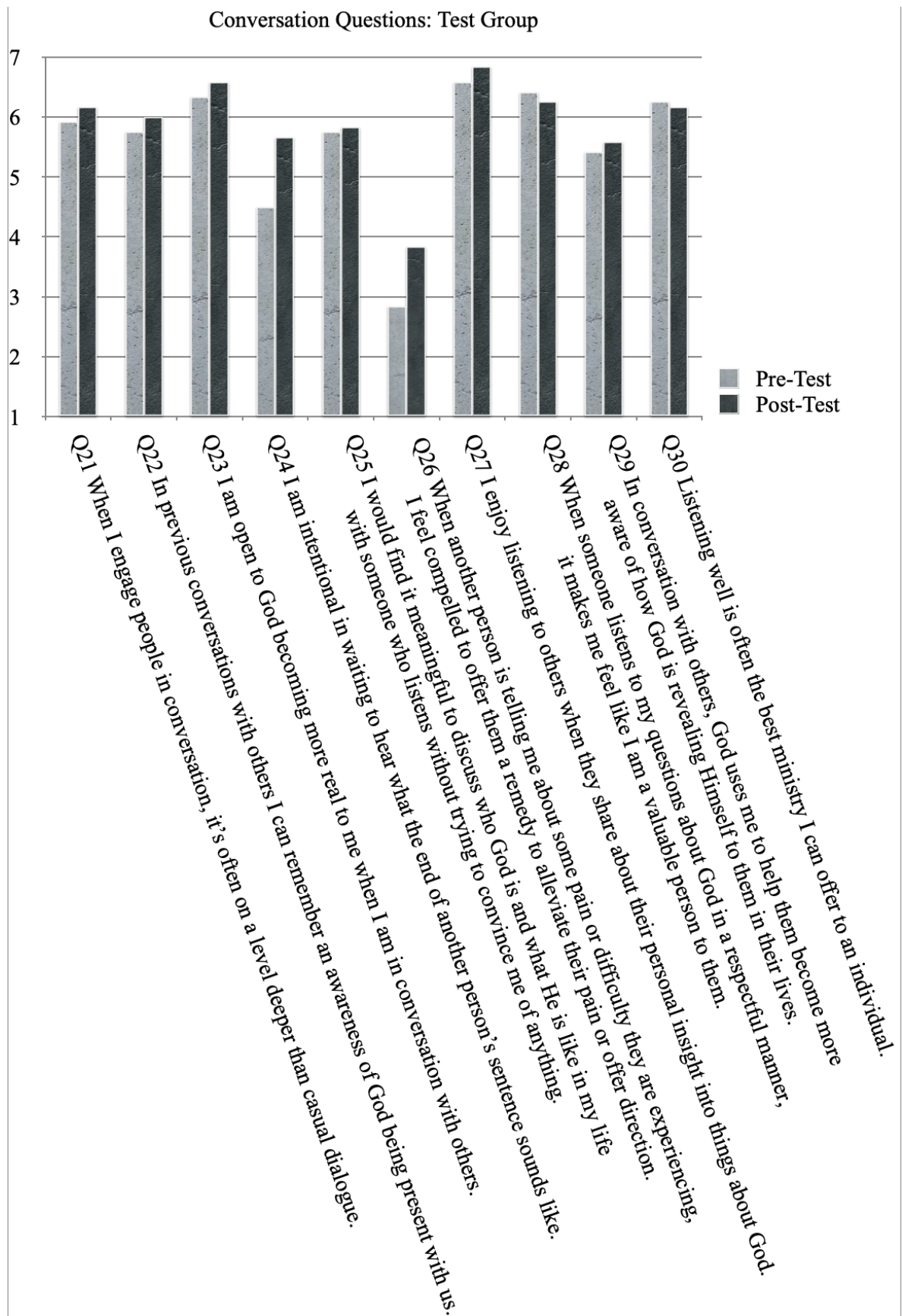
Out of all three main areas of consideration, this one showed the smallest amount of growth overall. Responses from the control group were somewhat consistent even though they did indicate an average 1.10 increase; however, the test group indicated a larger average of 3.17 points of change.

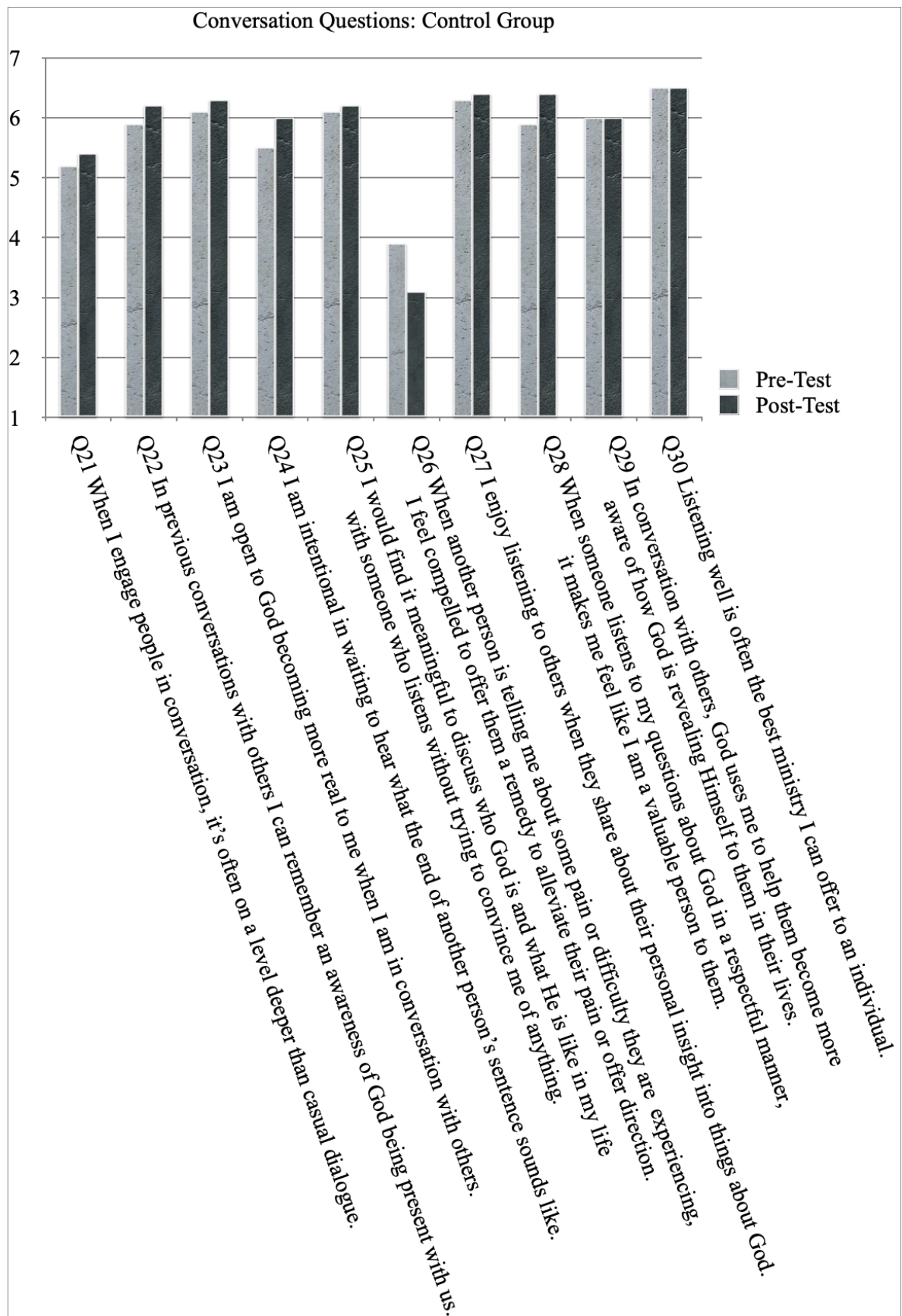
Of note is question 24, which indicated a remarkable average increase of 1.17 points—from 4.50 to 5.67:

*Q24 I am intentional in waiting to hear what the end of another person’s sentence sounds like.*

As a representative indicator of growth, this significant increase does show that participants experienced a marked improvement in their conversational skills related to listening to others (i.e., the ministry of conversation). Additionally, all but two questions (Q28 and Q30) showed positive change (see charts below).

Graphs comparing test and control groups.





*Feedback from participants regarding conversation.*

In the three open-ended follow-up questions (see Appendix C), participants mentioned growth in conversational skills in several ways. For instance, Person 4 wrote that they learned “How to stop interjecting and allow for deeper listening.” This is a direct illustration of the improvement measured by Question 24.

Additionally, in response to the prompt, “How have you found yourself incorporating any of your learned skills in your relationships and conversations?” Person 1 responded, “Yes! I have found it easier to simply listen without having to respond or provide answers and help the other person feel heard and appreciated.” This is an unprompted description of the ministry of conversation. In response to the same question, Person 3 also described this same type of growth, “I try to listen to everyone better—I want to actually hear them, and instead of offering advice, I try to ask more about their experience.”

These areas of conversational growth are also described by Person 5, “I learned that it is better to not put yourself in a ‘me too mindset’ listening through your spiritual ears is truly a blessing and we do not have to relate to every experience.” These self-described improvements from three participants are in sync with the goal of improving conversational skills and ministry.

*Connection*

The subject of connection is the manner in which participants experienced connection to God, to God’s work in their lives, and to each other. This is reflected in the following support question:

*How can experience in a spiritual direction group improve an individual's spiritual health as regards to their own connection to God and awareness of God's work within their own lives?*

In the area of connection, participants showed the most significant and most consistent change. Average responses to all ten questions were positive and indicated an average change of 6.67 points. The change in this area was consistent and substantial, and perhaps even more so because, in this area, the control group decreased by an average of .60 points. Multiple questions related to connection indicated more than an entire point of change. For example, Question 3 indicated an average change of 1.08 points—from 5.17 to 6.25:

*Q3 I am confident in discerning the difference between the voice of the Holy Spirit and my own thoughts and impressions.*

This significant increase is an example of the ways that participants experienced a marked improvement in their connections to God and God's work in their lives.

Additionally, as was mentioned earlier, Question 5 had one of the lowest initial scores for all pre-intervention surveys (control and test):

*Q5 The Christian spiritual life is primarily a community/corporate relationship with God.*

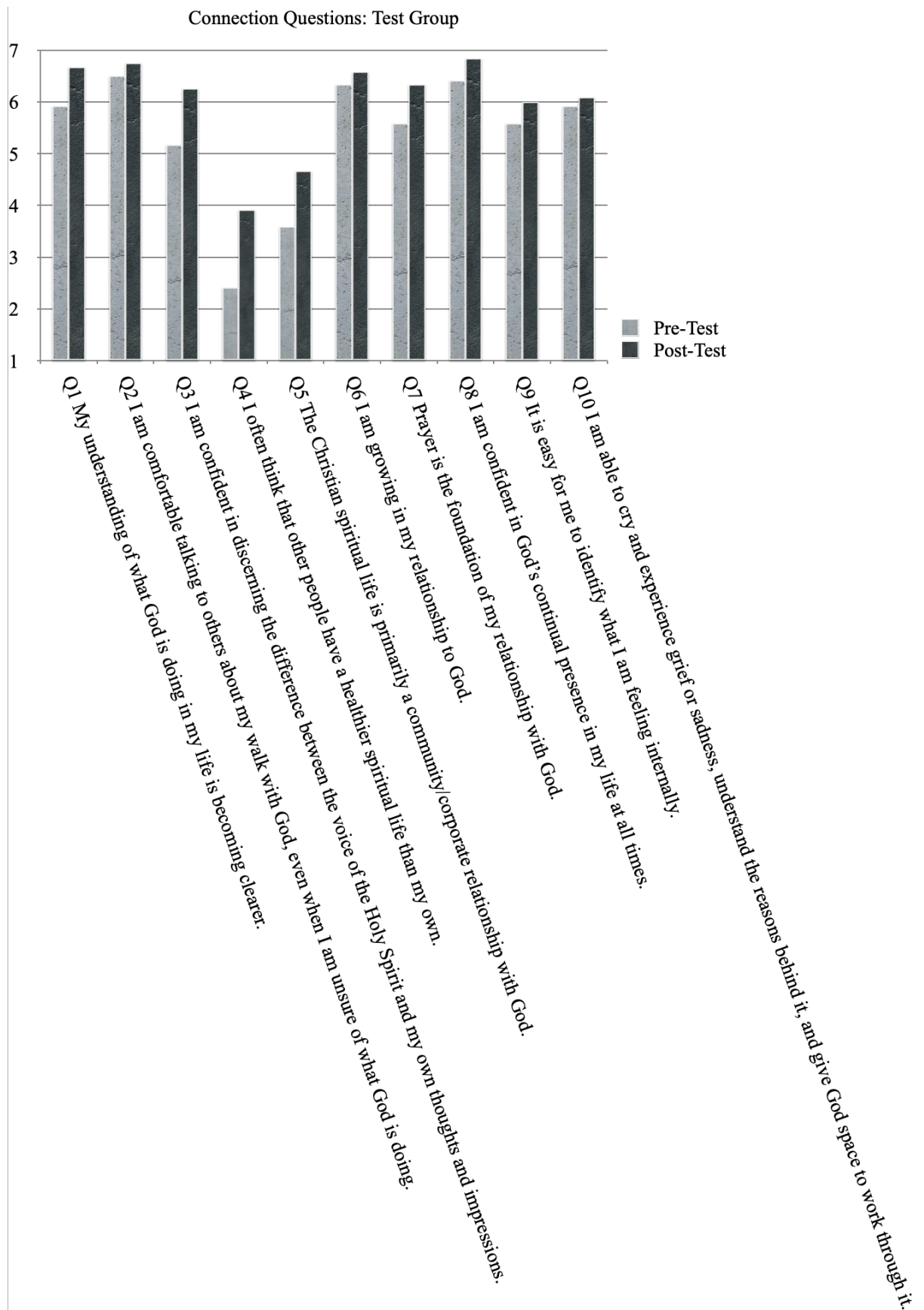
For this question, participants in the weekly intervention experienced a growth of 1.08 points—from 3.58 to 4.67. Half of the participants indicated growth in this area, and this is an encouraging upward shift for the lowest initial response.

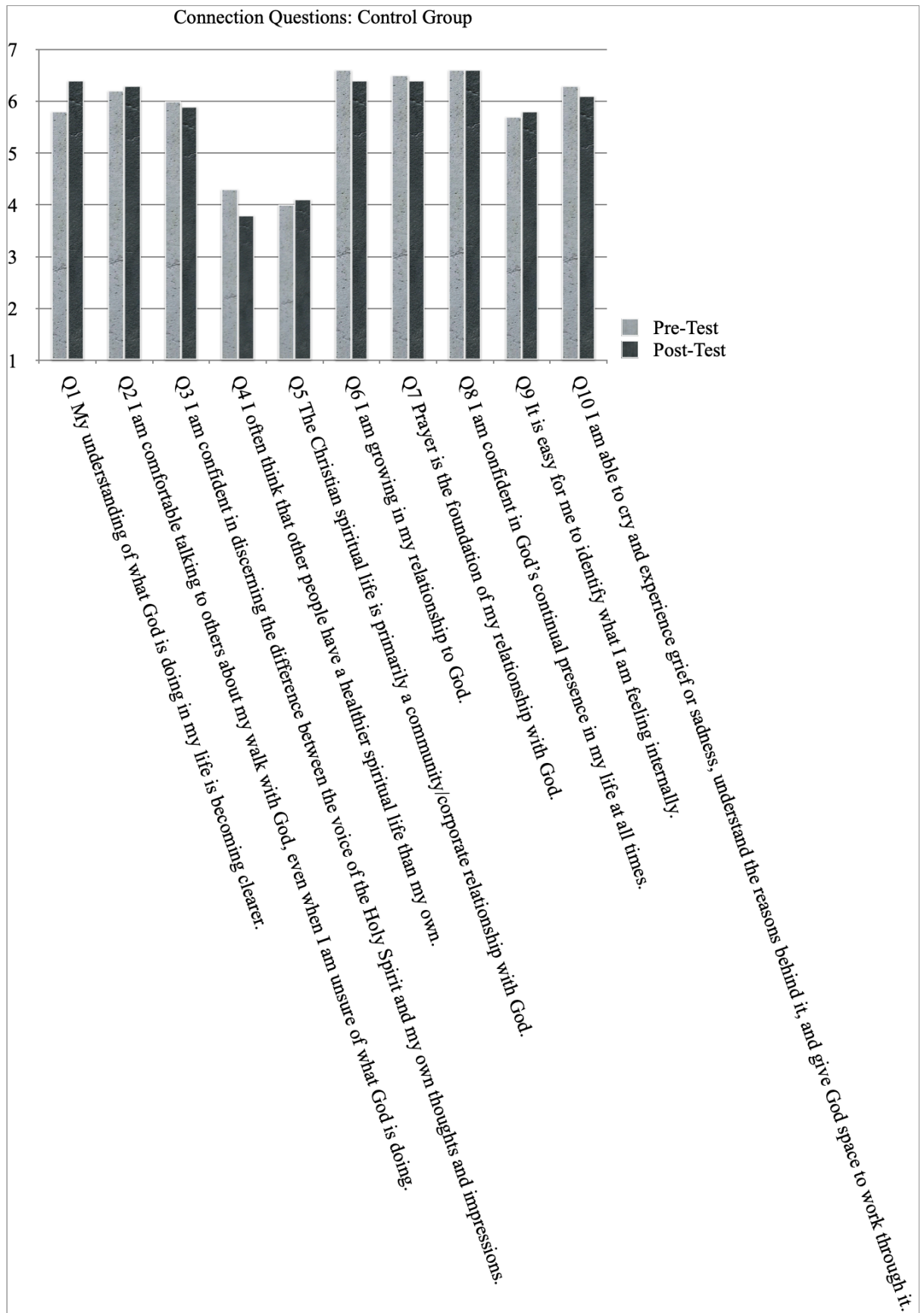
Lastly, Question 8 only indicated an average growth of .42 points, but the pre-intervention average was a very high 6.42, and yet it increased to 6.83:

*Q8 I am confident in God's continual presence in my life at all times.*

For this question, in the final survey, all but two people selected "Strongly Agree." This is a marked and notable improvement in this area of spiritual formation.

Graphs comparing test and control groups.







*Feedback from participants regarding connection.*

Responding to three open-ended feedback questions (see Appendix C), participants offered these responses regarding connection to God, themselves, and to each other. Person 6 described how they felt a more significant connection to God through conversation with others. In response to the prompt, “What did you learn from your experience in this group?” they wrote, “How collective sharing can help one know and experience more about God.” Likewise, Person 2 observed, “This was a good learning experience for me. I learned much from listening to [the facilitator] ask questions and how she responded when we presented. I am left with a strong sense of close relationship with [the other participants].” This is a description of connection to others, and it even touches on the connection to self. However, Person 8 also described a connection to self when they wrote, “I learned so much about myself. My own spiritual growth. I learned that others care enough to ask the tough questions that we so often do not dare to ask.” These are encouraging responses to support and illustrate the encouraging survey data.

Lastly, on the subject of connection, Person 9 provides a perfect synthesis of the link between conversation and connection that was part of the overarching goal of this intervention. They wrote, “I’ve become a better listener. I’ve found myself praying for solutions instead of offering them based upon my limited understanding.” This is a simple but illustrative comment that indicates that this person was able to see that conversational ministry approaches that are shaped by spiritual direction skills help one look for the presence of God in the conversation and listen to both the person who is speaking and the Holy Spirit who is present. In all of this, the goal for increased connection seems to have been met.

## *Community*

Lastly, the subject of community building was a goal for this intervention. There is a larger goal of reinforcing the communal nature of the Christian faith, but the more pressing need is to build community between Certificate Students. This is reflected in the following support question:

*How can experience in a spiritual direction group improve community bonds within and between participating students?*

Community related results appear to be quite promising. Average responses to all but one of the questions were positive and indicated an average total change of 4.58 points. The change in this area was consistent and substantial, and perhaps even more so because, in this area, the control group decreased by an average of .90 points.

One of the most notable increases was in Question 12, where participants indicated an average change of .83 points—from 5.17 to 6.00:

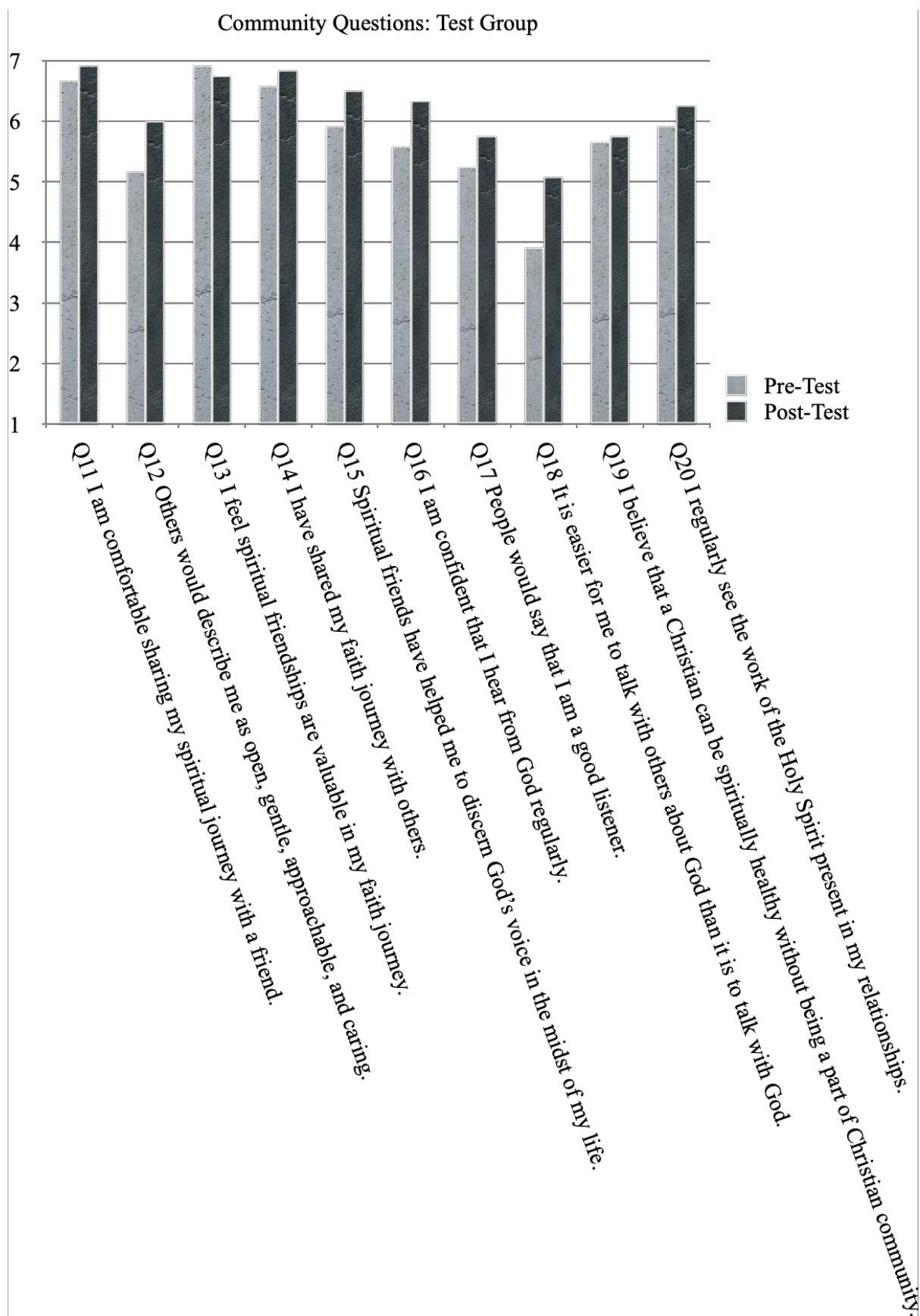
*Q12 Others would describe me as open, gentle, approachable, and caring.*

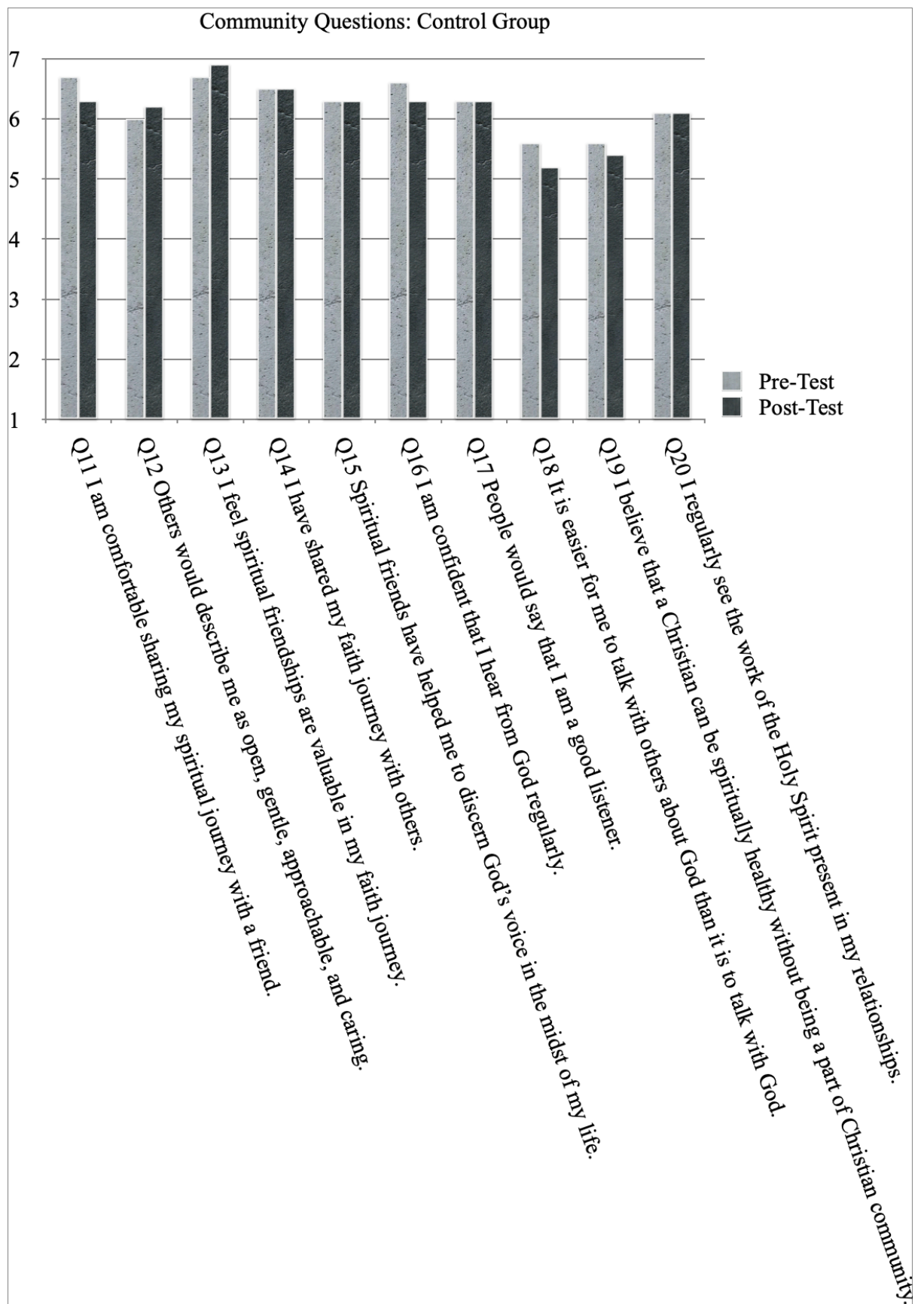
This marked increase indicates that participants saw themselves as a healthier member of community. Another notable response was to Question 11:

*Q11 I am comfortable sharing my spiritual journey with a friend.*

For this question, the final survey results show that all but one person marked “Strongly Agree.” This is an example of one of the aforementioned questions that started out so high (6.67) that there was very little space to improve. Nevertheless, the ending average of 6.92 is quite noteworthy as it could hardly have grown any more.

Graphs comparing test and control groups.





*Feedback from participants regarding community.*

In the area of community, the survey results indicate positive and consistent growth, but the open-ended feedback seems to indicate that community building was one of the best things about this experience (see Appendix C). For instance, in response to the prompt, “What did you learn from your experience in this group?” Person 2 shared, “Sharing intimate thoughts and struggles builds a close community among believers.” Without being prompted, this participant directly touched upon one of the goals of this project. Person 8 observed, “I learned that community is important and that God is in our midst, regardless of the format!” This confirms that people can connect to each other and form community relationships in the digital space. Relationships were formed, and people commented on the excellent and beneficial nature of this community experience. Person 5 wrote, “[My facilitator and the rest of my cohort] will forever have a place in my heart.” Similarly, Person 7 wrote, “Great experience! Great people AND a wonderful spiritual director.”

This feedback illustrates the results of the survey data in encouraging ways. Though the ultimate test for measuring community bonds would require a more extended intervention and multiple follow-up surveys to determine the longevity of these bonds, it seems clear that within the scope of this project, the goal of enhanced community formation has been met.

*Secondary Findings*

Outside of the primary and supporting research questions, there were a few secondary findings. These findings may have relevance for future research and/or implementation.

### *Self-selecting participants*

Because of the nature in which participants were selected based on a first-come, first-served method, enthusiasm for the area of study seems to have led to a test group of people with higher preliminary scores than the control group. On average, participants started with a 12.5% higher preliminary survey result, and this may indicate that the test group had a predisposition towards this type of experience.

### *Attendance fluctuations*

After the project concluded, the researcher had a debriefing conversation with Amanda Clark Hines and Noel Forlini-Burt.<sup>313</sup> Based on this conversation, it was noted that the 8-person group experienced a higher fluctuation in attendance than the 4-person group. Clark Hines noted that sometimes participants would give notice, and sometimes they would just forget. In regards to these conversation groups, she observed that it might be beneficial to help participants overcome a predisposition towards a consumer mentality and try to instill a ministry mentality in their approach to participating in the group.

### *Observations regarding group size*

The post-intervention feedback conversation also confirmed that a group as small as four Certificate Students would work, as would a group as large as eight. The larger group had more attendance variation, and it is unclear if this was because of the larger

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<sup>313</sup> Amanda Clark Hines and Noel Forlini-Burt, Feedback and debriefing conversation, Zoom, September 27, 2022.

size. Forlini-Burt did mention that some of the assignments were more difficult with the smaller group but that they still worked fine.

#### *Facilitator feedback regarding curriculum*

Of note was that both facilitators agreed the curriculum (Appendix B) was easy to follow and to use on a weekly basis. In the case of Clark Hines, this came as no surprise because she had a large part in writing the curriculum, but Forlini-Burt specifically commented that the curriculum and meeting format were easy to follow. This was a reassuring result in regards to using similar brief training<sup>314</sup> when incorporating this curriculum in the future.

#### *Summary and Overarching Goal*

In the end, this project demonstrated growth in the three primary areas in which it was focused: conversation, connection, and community. The survey data indicates good and consistent growth in each of these areas, and open-ended feedback from participants illustrated and confirmed that goals were met. In order to step back and look at the overall results of this project, it is helpful to consider the total scores for all survey responses.

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<sup>314</sup> Prior to the intervention Forlini-Burt and I agreed that she should only receive a short preliminary introduction to the curriculum and project. The hope was that this would allow us to determine if she was able to lead the group and implement the content without much training.

*Summary table of survey data*

	Test		Change	Control		Change
	Time 1	Time 2		Time 1	Time 2	
<b>Connection</b>	641	721	80	580	574	-6
<b>Community</b>	691	746	55	624	615	-9
<b>Conversation</b>	669	707	38	574	585	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2174</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>1778</b>	<b>1774</b>	<b>-4</b>

From this table, it is readily apparent that the control group stayed consistent overall, and the test group experienced substantial improvement in all areas. Even the conversation category, the area with the smallest growth, shows notable change, and the most significant growth in the connection category is substantial.

The primary research question attempted to look at the ways in which the intervention relates to “spiritual formation for online ministry students.” In regards to spiritual formation, the most relevant survey category is the connection category. Questions in this category relate to the ways in which participants are connected to God and to God’s work in their lives. As it happens, this category also showed the most significant and most consistent growth for all participants. The conclusion is that “participating in a facilitated synchronous spiritual direction group” is strongly related to healthy growth in “spiritual formation for online ministry students.”

As an illustration of the ways in which this project engaged with the primary research question, the following feedback is quite helpful. In response to this experience, Person 3 wrote, “It was phenomenal and much needed. I think every Christian could benefit by taking part in spiritual direction.” Likewise, the spiritual formation and



ministry preparation of the participants is wonderfully illustrated by this comment from Person 5:

This has truly been an experience I'll never forget and will cherish as I utilize the new tools in my toolbox. [My facilitator and the rest of my cohort] will forever have a place in my heart. David thank you for opening this door in this season to this new experience of awakening yet another gift.

These comments illustrate what the data reveals. Participants averaged more than 14 total points of improvement and experienced an average overall growth of 23% (compared to 0% for the control group).

### *Conclusion*

In summary, the results of this project indicate that the curriculum accomplished the desired goals and led to healthy growth in participating Certificate Students. Data and feedback both agreed that this was an excellent experience and “valuable for spiritual formation,” according to Person 11. Participants specifically noted in their feedback that they were incorporating their newly learned skills in conversations with “coworkers” (Person 4), youth in the church (Person 7), a church group they lead (Person 8), their spouse (Person 11), and “everyone” (Person 3). These comments demonstrate a wide range of benefits and further reinforce the success of this project in regard to improving the ministry of conversation. Taken into consideration with the evidence of the most substantial growth in the connection category, one can conclude that this experience was quite successful.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Evaluation and Significance of the Project

The primary goal of this project was to determine if it was possible to utilize a facilitated synchronous spiritual direction group in order to improve spiritual formation for Truett's Certificate Students. This research question guided the project:

*How does participating in a facilitated synchronous spiritual direction group relate to spiritual formation for online ministry students?*

There were additional goals related to assessing the improving participant's connection to God and awareness of God's work in their lives, developing community bonds between the participants, and nurturing ministry conversation skills. The support questions were:

*How can experience in a spiritual direction group improve an individual's spiritual health as regards to their own connection to God and awareness of God's work within their own lives?*

*How can experience in a spiritual direction group improve community bonds within and between participating students?*

*How can experience in a spiritual direction group lead towards an improved service of others through what will be called "ministry of conversation"?*

For every one of these questions, there were excellent improvements within the test group. When participants were surveyed before and after this project intervention, there was a more than 170-point change from the control group. Results in all three main areas of connection, community, and conversation increased in significant ways. Open-ended feedback from participants was extremely positive (see Appendix C) and often touched directly upon desired goals.

Overall, the responses to this project were positive, consistent, and substantial, and the end result is that a case can be made for implementing this project's curriculum and approach within Truett's Certificate Program in order that future Certificate Students might benefit from this same experience.

### *Ministry Significance*

Regarding the Truett Certificate Program, there is a significant success in demonstrating the effectiveness of this approach to accomplishing the above goals. Additionally, through the inclusion of interactive conversation, Certificate Students were able to connect to each other in a manner that has not otherwise been possible in the limited scope and format of the program. The ramifications of implementing this type of curriculum component are widespread and will likely influence Certificate Students' lives via an improvement in their spiritual health and ministry effectiveness. It might also lead to an increase in retention as Certificate Students play a more prominent role in encouraging and supporting each other.

Beyond the scope of the Truett Certificate Program, there may be enough success to recommend this type of practice for other online/hybrid ministry students in different contexts. One can imagine that as theological educational approaches continue to shift in response to the changing mores of students and churches, there is a need for continuing innovation in serving the present and subsequent generations of ministers.

### *Biblical and Theological Significance*

In chapter two, the researcher described how the community described in Scripture happened as a result of Jesus' example. Community building does not happen

by accident—it is an intentional goal and an intentional practice that, like in Acts, is at the heart of the missional identity of the church.

For a community, understanding the centrality of the person and actions of Jesus provides the opportunity for an expression of the like-minded community purposes of Jesus. In the same way, understanding the ethical and ministerial identity of following Christ leads to a community with like-minded views and a community identity of caring for others. Newbigin addresses these actions in community in this way, “So the question of ‘How shall I behave?’ is only to be answered by asking the more basic question, ‘What kind of a community do I want to share in?’”<sup>315</sup> In other words, the actions of a community lead to the identity of the community.

In this regard, community life that leads towards the spiritual formation of Christians is not the ultimate goal, as George G. Hunter reminds us, but rather, it is so “*that we might bless others – within and beyond the church.*”<sup>316</sup> To create Christian community as an expression of the character of Christ is to form a community of caring for others deeply and sincerely. Within genuine and welcoming community comes warmth and belonging that satiates a deep craving within all of humanity, and by connecting the satiation of that craving to Christ, the way opens for relationship and, ultimately, salvation. In other words, community building is not just for the sake of those *in* the community—it is for the sake of all those on the *outside* as well.

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<sup>315</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 199.

<sup>316</sup> George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism, Tenth Anniversary Edition: How Christianity Can Reach the West...AGAIN*, 10th ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 99. (*emphasis added*)

Building community by following in the footsteps of Jesus and engaging in conversation in order to connect people to God, themselves, and others facilitates the larger missional purpose of the church. This returns our attention to Alice Fryling's words that were first referenced on page 4:

The purpose of spiritual direction groups is *formation*. Spiritual formation is a "process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others." The intentional goal of group spiritual direction is to help each participant become more aware of God in their lives, *for the sake of others*.<sup>317</sup>

### *Future Research*

Implementing this project in the Certificate Program would require close collaboration with the Truett Seminary Office of Spiritual Formation and participants in the Truett Seminary *Certificate in Spiritual Direction*. This conversation is primarily necessary in order to overcome the challenges of scaling this effort to meet the needs of all Certificate Students. Additionally, this type of group participation takes away a modicum of flexibility within the otherwise asynchronous format; of course, additional research and adjustment will be necessary to ensure that participating Certificate Students receive maximum benefit.

Additional opportunities for research are present within local congregation settings. For instance, how might group spiritual direction experiences benefit community building efforts in a local congregation? Johnson Hooten has studied this in a different context with some success, but she incorporated a more formal approach to group spiritual direction that was much more rigid in structure and had much more content

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<sup>317</sup> Fryling, *Seeking God Together*, 27.

delivered via handouts and other assignments.<sup>318</sup> Would a less formal approach that is built around fostering better conversation lead to more growth?

Likewise, there is an opportunity to study this same approach in a true academic setting with students who are more rigorously involved in their ministry studies. Would a community building experience like this work well in a hybrid context? Or within an entirely distant experience? How might a curriculum with a more significant emphasis on spiritual formation practices taken alongside this project's conversational ministry approach relate to spiritual growth?

There is also a need for additional research on the effectiveness of providing spiritual direction in culturally diverse settings. In the context of Texas, the type of research that is most desired is in regard to serving Latino/a communities.

### *Conclusion*

The title of Sherry Turkle's 2016 book on conversation provides an apt illustration of what this project has set out to accomplish: *Reclaiming Conversation*. Within the pages of the Gospels, we see how Jesus utilizes conversation in remarkable ways. The techniques and approaches to conversation that the disciples picked up from Jesus must have been life-changing. One can only imagine how they might have conversed with their own circles of friends, family members, and community. Approaching conversation as Jesus did will help us reclaim a beautiful and beneficial

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<sup>318</sup> Johnson Hooton, "An Experience in Small Group Spiritual Direction at McGuire United Methodist Church," 252–71.

skill that can have a profound effect on a minister and an even more significant impact on the circle of people with whom that minister converses.

It is apparent that spiritual formation through spiritual conversation is effective. People were created to live and pray in community, and the more the church can embrace community, the better off we will be. The old adage is that God gave us two ears and only one mouth, and so we should listen twice as much as we talk. This is wise counsel, but how much better might we be if we learn to listen to our friends while also listening to the Holy Spirit? Perhaps then we might speak as wisely as we listen.

Learning to listen well opens doors to people's lives and hearts and creates opportunities for the Gospel to step inside. Alice Fryling writes that when a group learns to listen well, it provides "a place where individuals can experience what it means to be listened to and loved by others so that they can learn to listen more attentively to God in their daily lives and be used by God to spread God's grace and love throughout the world."<sup>319</sup> This project did not set out to establish a better way to evangelize or to witness to the Gospel, but the unmistakable conclusion from the pages of Scripture is that people who care for each other deeply in the representation of ideal friendship may form a community that draws in outsiders and transforms their lives.

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<sup>319</sup> Fryling, *Seeking God Together*, 8.

## APPENDICES



## APPENDIX A: Intervention Survey

### Spiritual Survey in Three Parts

Please rate each question according to the following scale:

7-Strongly Agree, 6-Agree, 5-Somewhat agree, 4-Neither agree nor disagree, 3-Somewhat disagree, 2-Disagree, 1-Strongly disagree

#### *Part A: Connection*

- 1) My understanding of what God is doing in my life is becoming clearer.
- 2) I am comfortable talking to others about my walk with God, even when I am unsure of what God is doing.
- 3) I am confident in discerning the difference between the voice of the Holy Spirit and my own thoughts and impressions.
- 4) I often think that other people have a healthier spiritual life than my own.
- 5) The Christian spiritual life is primarily a community/corporate relationship with God.
- 6) I am growing in my relationship to God.
- 7) Prayer is the foundation of my relationship with God.
- 8) I am confident in God's continual presence in my life at all times.
- 9) It is easy for me to identify what I am feeling internally.
- 10) I am able to cry and experience grief or sadness, understand the reasons behind it, and give God space to work through it.

#### *Part B: Community*

- 11) I am comfortable sharing my spiritual journey with a friend.
- 12) Others would describe me as open, gentle, approachable, and caring.
- 13) I feel spiritual friendships are valuable in my faith journey.

- 14) I have shared my faith journey with others.
- 15) Spiritual friends have helped me to discern God's voice in the midst of my life.
- 16) I am confident that I hear from God regularly.
- 17) People would say that I am a good listener.
- 18) It is easier for me to talk with others about God than it is to talk with God.
- 19) I believe that a Christian can be spiritually healthy without being a part of Christian community.
- 20) I regularly see the work of the Holy Spirit present in my relationships.

*Part C: Conversation*

- 21) When I engage people in conversation, it's often on a level deeper than casual dialogue.
- 22) In previous conversations with others I can remember an awareness of God being present with us.
- 23) I am open to God becoming more real to me when I am in conversation with others.
- 24) I am intentional in waiting to hear what the end of another person's sentence sounds like.
- 25) I would find it meaningful to discuss who God is and what He is like in my life with someone who listens without trying to convince me of anything.
- 26) When another person is telling me about some pain or difficulty they are experiencing, I feel compelled to offer them a remedy to alleviate their pain or offer direction.
- 27) I enjoy listening to others when they share about their personal insight into things about God.

- 28) When someone listens to my questions about God in a respectful manner, it makes me feel like I am a valuable person to them.
- 29) In conversation with others, God uses me to help them become more aware of how God is revealing Himself to them in their lives.
- 30) Listening well is often the best ministry I can offer to an individual.

*Post Survey Reflection and Feedback Questions*

What did you learn from your experience in this group?

How have you found yourself incorporating any of your learned skills in your relationships and conversations?

What are your comments or feedback about the experience?

## APPENDIX B: Spiritual Direction Group Curriculum

For Group Facilitator Use

Written in Collaboration with Rev. Amanda Clark Hines, MDiv

## *Facilitator Briefing*

Goals - philosophy - their role - conversation

(The facilitator has open space to communicate what spiritual direction is to them.) **\*While the tools of spiritual direction are being used in this course, really come back to the idea of ministering through conversation - spiritual direction skills will inform the development of these improved conversational approaches**

Facilitators have access to copies of Chapter 3 of Alice Fryling's book, *Seeking God Together*, in order to read it in advance before the first week. Participating Certificate Students will read the same chapter prior to week 2. This means that at the first week's meeting, each student will be uncertain of what their meetings are supposed to be about, and very few will likely be familiar with spiritual direction as a ministry tool or even as a subject.

One of your vital early tasks will be to introduce these students to the concepts and format in a supportive and encouraging way that decreases their anxieties about what is expected of them.

The three key things we are trying to accomplish are connection, community, and conversation.

1. We want to help each participant connect to God in fresh ways and see them help others to connect to God.
2. Certificate Students do much of their studies on their own, and this is an excellent opportunity to build community within the cohort.
3. Spiritual direction is a formal way to have a spiritual conversation, and we want these techniques to teach each Certificate Student a better way to minister to others through conversation.

Participants should complete their pre-experience surveys prior to the first gathering.

## *Week 1: Introductions*

Welcome (30 minutes)

- Let's start by taking some time for everyone to introduce themselves.
- Take time for everyone to answer the following questions in less than 5 minutes each:
  - What is your name? Where are you from?
  - Tell us a little bit about your current state of life.
  - What brought you to the Certificate Program?

[Transition] Well, welcome everybody! We are so glad that you are all here, and God led you to this program and this group. The hope for this course is that we will take time to practice what it means to truly listen to others through a ministry of conversation. We will also take time in this course to pray with each other, perhaps in ways that might be a little new to you. With that being said, we are actually going to pray as a group right now with the Lord's Prayer as our guide.

Group Prayer Practice: The Lord's Prayer (20 minutes)

- Facilitator:
  - Have students close their eyes and listen carefully. Let them know that the prayer will be read a few times and will conclude when "Amen" is said.
  - [In the digital format, the audio can get chaotic if everyone is talking at the same time, but they may whisper along.]
  - Take time to pray through the prayer slowly, 2–3 times
    - Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. (after the last time) Amen.
- Questions:
  - What was that like for you?
  - How did it feel to hear the prayer read slowly?
  - Did anything resonate with you?
  - How often do you pray this prayer with others?

[Transition] Hopefully, that experience was pleasant for you all. And from the questions, you can get a glimpse of what our aim is for this group, which is to listen well. Our goal over these next 8 weeks is to help us feel better connected to each other and to the Holy Spirit. If you noticed, during the Lord's Prayer, all the pronouns were plural pronouns, "our Father," "Give us," "our daily bread," "forgive us," etc. This is a prayer that is meant to be prayed in community and will be a helpful reminder of the ways in which we are all here together in support of each other.

Often, it can be helpful for us to consider how the Holy Spirit is speaking to us through our feelings and conversations. We want to help you learn better how to connect with others through a ministry of conversation by pulling from the skills of what is known as spiritual direction. (The facilitator has open space to communicate what Spiritual direction is to them.) **\*While the tools of spiritual direction are being used in this course, really come back to the idea of ministering through conversation - spiritual direction skills will inform the development of these improved conversational approaches.**

Instruction/Lesson from facilitator (20 minutes)

- Think of a time in your life when people listened poorly and tried to fix your problem rather than truly listen to you. We've all experienced bad conversations. We've all experienced poor listeners.
- For some, this is going to sound a lot like what might be called "coaching" within the Christian faith, but this is a practice that is commonly called spiritual direction. And while we will use many of these skills, our goal is to help you to be better at ministering through conversation.
- We want to walk through a ministry of conversation by experiencing group spiritual direction with each other.
- Take time to introduce spiritual direction /Ministry of Conversation
  - Articulate some of the goals of spiritual direction
  - Mention what spiritual direction is NOT
    - Not counseling, not therapy, not a time to try and fix someone's life
    - Not a time where the listeners talk about ourselves
  - Mention what spiritual direction IS
    - Use Fryling chapter 3 as a guide
    - Is a time to listen intentionally to another brother or sister
    - Is a time to ask intentional questions that seek to deepen the conversation and connect people to the work of God in their lives
    - Is a time to consider honestly how Father, Christ, and the Holy Spirit are moving in a person's life

[Transition] What we want you to take from this experience is a better familiarity with ministering to others through conversation. We want you to grow in your abilities to have good conversations with others and to listen to them better. We are not asking you to become "spiritual directors," but we are hoping you will use some of the skills you will learn in this experience to help others better connect to God in their own lives.

#### Announcements and Closing (5 minutes)

- Students will read Chapter 3 from Fryling's book *Seeking God Together* before the next meeting
  - It will be on Canvas for students to access
  - Remind students that Fryling is talking about spiritual direction, but they need to focus more on ministering through conversations
- As a group, we will all participate in group spiritual direction with each other
  - Explain that 1–2 people will be the focus person for the conversations that follow this one
  - Have at least 3 people sign up for the next 3 weeks as the focus people.
- Remind of the importance of everyone being on time and in a distraction-free place.
- Close in an encouraging word of prayer
- Exchanging contact info - cell numbers or social media?

**Total Estimated Time: 75 minutes / 1 hour and 15 minutes**

## *Week 2: Introductions Continued*

### Catch-up and Chit-Chat Time (5 minutes)

- Check in to see how everyone is doing.

[Transition] I'm so glad to hear about all of your weeks, and I'm glad to see you all. Tonight, we are going to start with another time of group prayer similar to what we did last time. Then, we will take some time to talk about it. I will also take some time to help make some connections as to how our prayer practice relates to conversational ministry. After that, we take our time for \*insert person's name\* to be our conversation focus. We will take a few minutes to debrief and then conclude our time together in prayer.

### Group Prayer Practice: Scripture Reflection (20 minutes)

*Mention the term *Lectio Divina*, but try to use the term *Scripture Reflection*.*

*This will provide a more palatable vocabulary for those unfamiliar with this practice.*

- Read 3 times → Luke 10:38–42 (Mary and Martha)
  - Reading 1: ask listeners to close their eyes and simply listen to the verses
    - Allow time for brief silence
  - Reading 2: with their eyes still closed, ask listeners to pick out one word or short phrase to meditate on
    - Allow time for brief silence (a little longer than the first moment of silence)
  - Reading 3: with their eyes still closed, ask listeners to consider how God is speaking to them through this passage
    - Allow for one more moment of silence
- Close the reading time in prayer

#### **Luke 10:38–42**

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from here."

### Quick Debrief (5 minutes)

- Take some time going around the group and asking what that felt like for the students.
  - Possible questions:
    - What was that like for you all?
    - What word or phrase stuck with you?
    - How did you feel God in that moment?

[Transition] Thank you all for your thoughtful and insightful observations. This passage is a helpful example of how we should approach ministry conversations with others, unlike Martha, who is depicted as hurried and distracted, but more like Mary, who patiently waits for Jesus's



words. With this in mind, we will now transition into our time where \*insert person's name\* will serve as our conversation focus for our group conversation time.

**Group Spiritual Direction / Conversation (30 minutes)**

- Remind the Focus person: The facilitator will inform the focus person that we will all begin in a group prayer led by the facilitator, and the prayer time will conclude when the focus person says “Amen,” which will signal the official “start” of the conversation.
- Remind the Group members: The facilitator will inform the other group members that this will be a time of observation for them.
  - Ask them to consider some of the questions being asked or how they are asked. (There will be a debrief time for them to share any observations they make after the conversation time is over.)
- Facilitator:
  - Take time to take a couple of big breaths to center yourself if you need them.
  - Give a word of prayer, asking the Spirit to be present in this conversation.
  - When you have said everything you want, simply say “in your name” and then leave the space open for silence and for the focus person to officially conclude by saying “Amen.”
- Conversation Time
  - The facilitator will ask questions and listen intentionally to what the focus person is saying.

**Debrief (10 minutes)**

- Ask the focus person what that felt like and any other questions you think of
- Take time to ask the other group members what they observed.

**Closing Remarks and Prayer (5 minutes)**

- Remind the group who is the next focus person for the next meeting
- If you did not sign up last time, please sign up tonight
- Remember that the group members who are not the focus person still play a vital role. They are serving as an encouraging community in this ministry.
- Let's do our best to be on time and give our fellow members the proper time and space for them to be heard.

**Total Estimated Time: 75 minutes / 1 hour and 15 minutes**

### *Week 3: Watching and Listening*

Catch-up and Chit chat time (5 minutes)

- Check in to see how everyone is doing.

[Transition] I'm so glad to hear about all of your weeks, and I'm glad to see you all. Tonight, we are going to start in a time of group prayer similar to what we did last time. Then, we will take some time to talk about it. I will also take some time to help make some connections as to how our prayer practice relates to conversational ministry. After that, we will take our time for \*insert person's name\* to be our conversation focus. We will take a few minutes to debrief and then conclude our time together in prayer.

Group Prayer Practice: Scripture Reflection (20 minutes)

*Mention the term *Lectio Divina*, but try to use the term *Scripture Reflection*.*

*This will provide a more palatable vocabulary for those unfamiliar with this practice.*

#### Reading different translations of Psalm 23:1–3

- We will begin our time in prayer by reading 3 different translations of Psalm 23:1–3. There will be a short moment of silence between each reading to allow some time for silent reflection.
- **Note: Do not tell students which translations are being used. Simply explain to students that 3 different translations will be read.**
  - Encourage students to close their eyes and listen to the translations being read. Ask students to focus on a word or phrase and take time to meditate on those centering things between passages.

- Reading 1: ask students to center on a word or phrase

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:  
he leadeth me beside the still waters.  
He restoreth my soul:  
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. (KJV)

- Allow for a moment of silence

- Reading 2: ask students to center on a word or phrase

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,  
he refreshes my soul.  
He guides me along the right paths  
for his name's sake. (NIV)

- Allow for a moment of silence.

- Reading 3: ask students to center on a word or phrase

God, my shepherd!  
I don't need a thing.  
You have bedded me down in lush meadows,  
you find me quiet pools to drink from.  
True to your word,  
you let me catch my breath  
and send me in the right direction. (The Message)

- Allow for a moment of silence.
- Quick Debrief (5 minutes)
  - Ask students to share one sentence describing what that felt like.
  - Follow-up questions for consideration: What word or phrase did you focus on? Did an image come to mind? What did God say to you in that moment?

[Transition] Thank you for sharing your observations and insights. These translations hopefully provided you all some opportunities to listen closely to a familiar passage. These translations differ slightly, but they all carry a central message that we are called to listen to, which is that God is our Shepherd who provides for all of our needs. With that being said, we will now transition into listening closely to \*insert focus person name here\* for our group conversation time.

#### Group Spiritual Direction / Conversation (30 minutes)

- Remind the Focus person: The facilitator will inform the focus person that we will all begin in a group prayer led by the facilitator, and the prayer time will conclude when the focus person says “Amen,” which will signal the official “start” of the conversation.
- Remind the Group members: The facilitator will inform the other group members that this will be a time of observation for them.
  - Ask them to consider some of the questions being asked or how they are asked (there will be a debrief time for them to share any observations they make after the conversation time is over).
- Facilitator:
  - Take time to take a couple of big breaths to center yourself if you need it.
  - Give a word of prayer, asking the Spirit to be present in this conversation.
  - When you have said everything you want, simply say “in your name” and then leave the space open for silence and for the focus person to officially conclude by saying “Amen.”
- Conversation Time
  - The facilitator will ask questions and listen intentionally to what the focus person is saying.

#### Debrief (10 minutes)

- Ask the focus person what that felt like and any other questions you think of
- Take time to ask the other group members what they observed.

#### Closing Remarks and Prayer (5 minutes)

- Inform students that there is a handout on Canvas titled “Asking Good Questions” that they need to have in front of them for our next gathering. We suggest they print it out on paper.

- Remind the group who is the next focus person for the next meeting. Everyone should be signed up by now. If you have not signed up, let's take care of that now.
- Remember that the group members who are not the focus person still play a vital role. They are serving as an encouraging community in this ministry.
- Let's do our best to be on time and give our fellow members the time and space to be heard.

**Total Estimated Time: 75 minutes / 1 hour and 15 minutes**

### *Week 4: You Try!*

#### Catch-up and Chit chat time (5 minutes)

- Check in to see how everyone is doing.

[Transition] I'm so glad to hear about all of your weeks, and I'm glad to see you all. Tonight, we will be doing something a little different. We are going to take some time going over the handout you guys should have looked at about asking good questions. And you all will actually have some time to get in smaller groups to practice listening to each other and asking good questions that open the door to deeper, more intentional conversation. After that, we will have a short time to debrief the activity. Then, we will take our time for \*insert person's name\* to be our conversation focus. We will have one more small session to debrief and then conclude our time together in prayer. Before we do all of that, I (or maybe a volunteer) will pray for our time together.

#### Prayer time + Transition (5 minutes)

#### Going over the handout together (10 minutes)

- Have students see the handout in front of them
  - Use screen sharing if they do not have the handout.

#### Breakout Groups (20 minutes)

- Allow 6–8 minutes of modeling what a small group will look like
  - Have one volunteer demonstrate this with the facilitator
- Inform the students that they will randomly be put in groups of 2 to practice “mini conversation sessions” (depending on the group size, the facilitator may also need to participate)
  - They will take turns where one person is speaking, and the other person is listening well and asking good questions.
  - Have one person set a timer for 5 minutes or send a chat message after 5 minutes informing the students to switch people
  - After 10 minutes, bring everyone back to the large group.

#### Debrief (5 minutes)

- What was that like for you?
- What stood out to you?
- For the speakers, what was it like for someone to ask good questions?
- For the listeners, what was it like to simply listen?

[Transition] Great job! I'm glad it seems like everyone had something to say or think about. Hopefully, that was an opportunity for you guys to see how listening well to others and asking good questions can cultivate conversations of ministry. And this does not even have to be in a formal setting. These types of skills you guys are learning and practicing can be done anywhere! We're going to switch gears now and give our attention to \*insert focus person name here\* to be the focus of our extensive group conversation tonight. I would like to encourage you guys that if you feel the Spirit leading to ask a question tonight or to jump in more to the conversation, then you are invited to do so.

#### Group Spiritual Direction / Conversation (30 minutes)

- Remind the Focus person: The facilitator will inform the focus person that we will all begin in a group prayer led by the facilitator, and the prayer time will conclude when the focus person says “Amen,” which will signal the official “start” of the conversation.
- Remind the Group members: The facilitator will inform the other group members that this will be primarily a time of observation for them.
  - Ask them to consider some of the questions being asked or how they are asked (there will be a debrief time for them to share any observations they make after the conversation time is over).
- Facilitator:
  - Take time to take a couple of big breaths to center yourself if you need it.
  - Give a word of prayer, asking the Spirit to be present in this conversation.
  - When you have said everything you want, simply say “in your name” and then leave the space open for silence and for the focus person to officially conclude by saying “Amen.”
- Conversation Time
  - The facilitator will ask questions and listen intentionally to what the focus person is saying. Other people may also ask questions.

#### Debrief (10 minutes)

- Ask the focus person what that felt like and any other questions you think of
- Take time to ask the other group members what they observed.

#### Closing Remarks and Prayer (5 minutes)

- Praise the students for the work they did in the small group sessions and thank the focus person.
- Next week will have two focus people, so be sure to remind the next focus people for the next meeting.
- Encourage students to take what they practiced into their weeks with the people they meet.
- Close in prayer

**Total Estimated Time: 90 minutes / 1 hour and 30 minutes**

### *Week 5: All Together Now (Part 1)*

Catch-up and chit-chat time (5 minutes)

- Check in to see how everyone is doing.

[Transition] It is so good to see all of you and hear about your weeks. I am glad you are all here. Tonight, we will start with a group prayer practice with the Prodigal Son, as we did last week. We will have a short debrief, and I will be sure to make some connecting points to ministry conversations. After that, we will move into our group conversations where **(name 1)** \_\_\_\_\_ **and (name 2)** \_\_\_\_\_ will serve as our focus people. I will pray in between the both of them in order to divide up the conversation times. Then, we will conclude with a debrief and a word of prayer.

Group Prayer Practice: Scriptural Reflection with the Prodigal Son (10 minutes)

- Today, you will read through the Prodigal Son. This will be the first out of a 3-part reading of the Prodigal Son. The focus for this session is on the younger son.
- Tell the students to listen to the reading (maybe read this twice) and to draw their attention to the feelings of the younger son. Ask them to consider the emotions of the younger son. Also, ask them to consider their emotions as you transition the group into the conversation time.

Debrief (5 minutes)

- What emotions do you think the younger son felt?
- When were times you were anxious about something?
- What are some things you might be anxious about currently?

[Transition] Thank you to those who shared their emotions and feelings. I would love for you all to hold onto this idea of engaging and expressing your emotions and feelings as we move into our big conversation today. And for those who are not our focus person, if you feel the Spirit leading you to ask a question or observation during **\*person's\*** session, I encourage you to jump in. After having a few weeks of observation and practice, I want to encourage you all to do this together! With that being said, I will open us up in prayer. As usual, I will leave room for silence, and then **\*person\*** will say "Amen," which will officially begin our conversation time.

Group Spiritual Direction / Conversation 1 (30 minutes)

- Take about 30 minutes for the first person going
- Everyone will listen closely and ask intentional questions
- When it is close to time being up, use discretion to conclude in the most appropriate way in order to transition into the next person

[Transition] Quick Prayer: Thank the person who just went. Pray for what that person said and what was heard. Pray for the next person for the second conversation. Conclude with a space of silence and let the next person say "Amen" to start the next conversation.

Group Spiritual Direction / Conversation 2 (30 minutes)

- Take about 30 minutes for the first person going
- Everyone will listen closely and ask intentional questions

Debrief, Closing remarks, and Closing Prayer (10 minutes)

- What was that like for the two people?
  - What was that like for everyone else?
  - How did you guys feel God's presence in that experience together?
- 
- Remind the next two people who are going next week
  - Close in prayer

**Total Estimated Time: 90 minutes / 1 hour and 30 minutes**



## *Week 6: All Together Now (Part 2)*

Catch-up and chit-chat time (5 minutes)

- Check in to see how everyone is doing.

[Transition] It is so good to see all of you and hear about your weeks. I am glad you are all here. Tonight, we will start with a group prayer practice with the Prodigal Son, as we did last week. We will have a short debrief, and I will be sure to make some connecting points to ministry conversations. After that, we will move into our group conversations where **(name 1)** \_\_\_\_\_ **and (name 2)** \_\_\_\_\_ will serve as our focus people. I will pray in between the both of them in order to divide up the conversation times. Then, we will conclude with a debrief and a word of prayer.

Group Prayer Practice: Scriptural Reflection with the Prodigal Son (10 minutes)

- Today, we will read through the Prodigal Son. This will be the second out of a 3-part reading of the Prodigal Son. The focus for this session is on the **older son**.
- Tell the students to listen to the reading (maybe read this twice) and to draw their attention to the feelings of the younger son. Ask them to consider the emotions of the younger son. Also, ask them to consider their emotions as you transition the group into the conversation time.

Debrief (5 minutes)

- What emotions do you think the older son felt?
- When were times you were angry about something?
- What are some things you might be angry about currently?

[Transition] Thank you to those who shared their emotions and feelings. I would love for you all to hold onto this idea of engaging and expressing your emotions and feelings as we move into our big conversation today. And for those who are not our focus person, if you feel the Spirit leading you to ask a question or observation during **\*person's\*** session, I encourage you to jump in. After having a few weeks of observation and practice, I want to encourage you all to do this together! With that being said, I will open us up in prayer. As usual, I will leave room for silence, and then **\*name\*** will say "Amen," which will officially begin our conversation time.

Group Spiritual Direction / Conversation 1 (30 minutes)

- Take about 30 minutes for the first person going
- Everyone will listen closely and ask intentional questions
- When it is close to time being up, use discretion to conclude in the most appropriate way in order to transition into the next person

[Transition] Quick Prayer: Thank the person who just went. Pray for what that person said and what was heard. Pray for the next person for the second conversation. Conclude with a space of silence and let the next person say "Amen" to start the next conversation.

Group Spiritual Direction / Conversation 2 (30 minutes)

- Take about 30 minutes for the first person going
- Everyone will listen closely and ask intentional questions

Debrief, Closing remarks, and Closing Prayer (10 minutes)

- What was that like for the two people?
  - What was that like for everyone else?
  - How did you guys feel God's presence in that experience together?
- 
- Remind the next two people who are going next week
  - Close in prayer

**Total Estimated Time: 90 minutes / 1 hour and 30 minutes**

### *Week 7: All Together Now (Part 3)*

Catch-up and chit-chat time (5 minutes)

- Check in to see how everyone is doing.

[Transition] It is so good to see all of you and hear about your weeks. I am glad you are all here. Tonight, we will start with a group prayer practice with the Prodigal Son, as we did last week. We will have a short debrief, and I will be sure to make some connecting points to ministry conversations. After that, we will move into our group conversations where **(name 1)** \_\_\_\_\_ **and (name 2)** \_\_\_\_\_ will serve as our focus people. I will pray in between the both of them in order to divide up the conversation times. Then, we will conclude with a debrief and a word of prayer.

Group Prayer Practice: Scriptural Reflection with the Prodigal Son (10 minutes)

- Today, we will read through the Prodigal Son. This will be the third out of a 3-part reading of the Prodigal Son. The focus of this session is on the **father**.
- Tell the students to listen to the reading (maybe read this twice) and to draw their attention to the feelings of the younger son. Ask them to consider the emotions of the younger son. Also, ask them to consider their emotions as you transition the group into the conversation time.

Debrief (5 minutes)

- What emotions do you think the father felt?
- When were times you were joyful about something?
- What are some things you might be joyful about currently?

[Transition] Thank you to those who shared their emotions and feelings. I would love for you all to hold onto this idea of engaging and expressing your emotions and feelings as we move into our big conversation today. And for those who are not our focus person, if you feel the Spirit leading you to ask a question or observation during **\*person's\*** session, I encourage you to jump in. After having a few weeks of observation and practice, I want to encourage you all to do this together! With that being said, I will open us up in prayer. As usual, I will leave room for silence, and then **\*name\*** will say "Amen," which will officially begin our conversation time.

Group Spiritual Direction / Conversation 1 (30 minutes)

- Take about 30 minutes for the first person.
- Everyone will listen closely and ask intentional questions.
- When it is close to time being up, use discretion to conclude in the most appropriate way in order to transition into the next person.

[Transition] Quick Prayer: Thank the person who just went. Pray for what that person said and what was heard. Pray for the next person for the second conversation. Conclude with a space of silence and let the next person say "Amen" to start the next conversation.

Group Spiritual Direction / Conversation 2 (30 minutes)

- Take about 30 minutes for the first person going
- Everyone will listen closely and ask intentional questions

Debrief, Closing remarks, and Closing Prayer (10 minutes)

- What was that like for the two people?
  - What was that like for everyone else?
  - How did you guys feel God's presence in that experience together?
- 
- Remind the next two people who are going next week
  - Close in prayer

**Total Estimated Time: 90 minutes / 1 hour and 30 minutes**

## *Week 8: Wrapping Up*

### Chit-chat and Catch-up Time (10 minutes)

[Transition] It is so good to see everyone and hear how you guys are doing. It is hard to believe that this is our last time together. I pray that this experience was fruitful and that you all learned better how to listen to others and ask intentional questions. Tonight, we will spend some time in prayer and then move to what we did a few weeks ago, where we practiced asking each other good questions. We will spend most of our time in these mini group sessions, and then we will come back together for our final debrief.

### Prayer Time (10 minutes)

- Pray the Lord's prayer once, as in the first meeting—ask others to whisper along.
- Maybe just a very quick word to bless our time together

### Mock Conversations (3 rounds of 15 minutes each = 45 minutes total)

- Students will be broken up into groups of 2 for breakout sessions
- Each student will get 7.5 minutes to take turns being the speaker while the other is the listener
- After the first round, students will be split with a different partner to do the same format for a total of 3 times
- These conversations should model conversations they would have in their everyday lives
  - For example, you would not open a coffee meetup with your friend in contemplative prayer. You would sit down to have dinner with your spouse by first sitting in silence for a full minute.

### Final Debrief (15 minutes)

- How did your small sessions go?
- Could you tell a difference in the way you listened or asked questions from when we first began?
- What have you learned/experienced through this course?
- How do you plan to take these things into your daily routine?

### Reminder

- Remind all participants to fill out their final survey and their reflections/feedback form.
- Thank them for their participation, encourage them to continue meeting together on their own, and close by praying for them.

**Total Estimated Time: 80 minutes / 1 hour and 20 minutes**

## APPENDIX C: Survey Results

Participant	Control Time 1																														Total				
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Subtotal	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15	Q16	Q17	Q18	Q19	Q20	Subtotal	Q21	Q22	Q23	Q24	Q25	Q26	Q27	Q28		Q29	Q30	Subtotal	
Control 01	5	6	7	4	7	7	7	7	7	7	64	7	6	7	7	7	7	6	7	5	6	65	5	7	7	4	5	5	6	6	7	7	59	188	
Control 02	7	7	7	6	1	7	7	7	7	7	63	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	6	6	7	68	5	6	6	6	7	2	7	6	7	7	59	190	
Control 03	6	7	6	4	5	7	7	6	5	5	58	7	6	7	7	7	7	6	6	6	65	6	6	7	5	6	2	7	5	6	7	57	180		
Control 04	5	5	6	6	2	6	6	6	6	5	6	53	7	6	7	6	6	7	6	5	6	62	6	6	7	5	7	3	6	7	6	7	60	175	
Control 05	6	5	6	2	6	7	7	7	6	6	58	6	6	7	6	6	6	6	4	7	6	60	6	6	6	6	7	4	6	6	6	6	59	177	
Control 06	6	7	7	5	3	6	6	7	7	7	6	60	6	5	5	6	7	7	6	3	7	59	3	5	6	6	7	5	7	7	6	7	59	178	
Control 07	6	6	5	2	3	6	6	6	5	7	52	6	5	6	6	6	6	6	3	6	5	55	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	60	167	
Control 08	6	6	5	6	6	7	6	6	5	6	59	7	6	7	7	6	6	6	6	6	63	6	6	5	6	6	5	6	6	6	7	59	181		
Control 09	6	6	5	4	5	6	7	7	7	5	6	57	7	6	7	6	6	7	6	7	64	5	6	6	6	6	6	3	6	6	6	6	56	177	
Control 10	5	7	6	4	2	7	6	7	5	7	56	7	7	7	7	5	6	7	6	5	6	63	4	5	5	5	5	4	4	6	4	4	5	46	165
Average	5.80	6.20	6.00	4.30	4.00	6.60	6.50	6.60	5.60	5.70	58.00	6.70	6.00	6.70	6.50	6.30	6.60	6.30	5.60	5.60	6.10	62.40	5.20	5.90	6.10	5.50	6.10	3.90	6.30	5.90	6.00	6.50	57.40	177.80	
Total	58	62	60	43	40	66	65	66	57	63	580	67	60	67	65	63	66	63	56	56	61	624	52	59	61	55	61	39	63	59	60	65	574	1778	

Control Time 2

Participant	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Subtotal	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15	Q16	Q17	Q18	Q19	Q20	Subtotal	Q21	Q22	Q23	Q24	Q25	Q26	Q27	Q28	Q29	Q30	Subtotal	Total	Change	
Control 01	7	7	7	3	3	7	6	7	7	7	61	6	5	7	7	7	5	7	5	7	7	63	7	7	6	7	7	4	5	7	5	7	62	186	-2	
Control 02	7	7	7	4	7	7	7	7	7	7	59	6	7	7	7	6	7	6	3	7	7	62	4	7	6	6	6	4	5	7	6	7	60	181	-9	
Control 03	6	6	5	4	4	6	7	7	7	5	56	7	6	7	7	7	6	6	6	6	64	7	6	7	5	6	2	7	6	6	7	59	179	-1		
Control 04	5	6	6	4	4	5	7	6	5	5	53	6	6	7	6	5	6	6	4	5	5	56	6	7	7	5	6	3	6	7	6	7	60	169	-6	
Control 05	7	6	6	2	7	7	7	7	6	6	62	6	6	7	6	7	7	7	3	7	6	62	5	6	6	6	6	2	7	6	6	6	56	178	1	
Control 06	7	6	6	5	6	7	7	7	6	7	6	6	7	7	7	7	7	7	6	2	7	63	4	6	7	7	7	1	7	7	7	7	60	185	7	
Control 07	6	5	5	2	3	6	6	7	5	6	51	6	6	7	6	6	6	7	6	6	5	61	6	5	7	7	6	3	6	6	5	6	57	169	2	
Control 08	6	7	5	6	5	6	3	6	6	7	56	7	6	7	7	6	5	5	6	6	6	61	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	7	58	175	-6
Control 09	6	6	6	4	2	6	7	7	6	6	56	6	6	6	6	6	5	7	6	7	6	60	5	6	5	5	6	4	6	6	6	6	5	54	170	-7
Control 10	7	7	6	4	3	7	7	7	7	5	7	7	7	7	7	7	6	7	5	5	6	63	4	6	6	6	6	5	7	7	6	6	59	182	17	
Average	6.40	6.30	5.90	3.80	4.11	6.40	6.40	6.60	5.80	6.10	57.40	6.30	6.20	6.90	6.50	6.30	6.30	5.20	5.20	5.40	6.10	61.50	5.40	6.20	6.30	6.00	6.20	3.10	6.40	6.40	6.00	6.50	58.50	177.40	-0.40	
Total	64	63	59	38	37	64	64	66	58	61	574	63	62	69	65	63	63	63	52	54	61	615	54	62	63	60	62	31	64	64	60	65	585	1774		
Average Change	0.60	0.10	-0.10	-0.50	0.11	-0.20	-0.10	0.00	0.10	-0.20	-0.60	-0.40	0.20	0.20	0.00	0.00	-0.30	0.00	-0.40	-0.20	0.00	-0.90	0.20	0.30	0.20	0.50	0.10	-0.80	0.10	0.50	0.00	0.00	1.10	-0.40		
Total Change	6	1	-1	-5	-3	-2	-1	0	1	-2	-6	-4	2	2	0	0	-3	0	-4	-2	0	-9	2	3	2	5	1	-8	1	5	0	0	11	-4		

### LEGEND

- 1 = Strongly disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Somewhat disagree
- 4 = Neither agree nor disagree
- 5 = Somewhat agree
- 6 = Agree
- 7 = Strongly agree

\* Q4, Q18, Q19 and Q26 are all questions for which survey responses were expected to decline, and in keeping with best practices the responses were inverted. (i.e., 7 = 1, 6 =

Test Time 1																																		
Participant	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Subtotal	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15	Q16	Q17	Q18	Q19	Q20	Subtotal	Q21	Q22	Q23	Q24	Q25	Q26	Q27	Q28	Q29	Q30	Subtotal	Total
Person 1	6	7	5	1	1	7	3	6	5	5	46	7	5	7	7	6	6	6	1	7	6	58	7	6	7	3	6	2	6	7	5	6	55	179
Person 2	6	7	5	2	6	6	6	5	5	6	54	7	5	7	6	6	5	6	7	6	61	6	6	6	6	1	6	5	6	6	6	6	59	174
Person 3	4	6	5	4	3	6	5	7	5	5	50	7	5	7	6	6	5	4	2	7	5	54	7	5	6	1	2	3	6	7	7	5	49	153
Person 4	7	7	6	4	2	7	7	7	5	6	58	7	3	7	7	6	6	4	4	5	7	56	6	5	6	3	6	5	6	6	6	6	55	169
Person 5	7	7	7	3	1	7	7	7	7	6	59	7	6	7	7	7	7	6	7	7	68	6	7	6	7	7	7	2	7	7	6	7	62	189
Person 6	7	7	6	2	3	7	6	7	7	7	59	7	7	7	7	5	5	4	5	7	63	7	7	7	7	7	7	4	7	7	5	5	63	185
Person 7	5	5	4	2	6	5	5	5	5	6	48	5	5	6	5	5	4	5	3	5	6	49	5	5	6	5	6	2	7	6	6	6	54	151
Person 8	6	7	5	2	3	6	7	7	6	6	55	7	7	7	7	6	5	7	2	3	7	58	6	6	7	6	6	1	7	7	6	7	59	172
Person 9	5	5	6	3	4	6	5	6	6	6	52	6	6	7	7	6	6	6	3	6	4	57	5	4	6	3	4	3	7	5	5	6	48	157
Person 10	6	7	5	3	2	6	6	7	5	6	53	7	5	7	7	5	4	6	5	3	5	54	4	6	7	5	6	3	7	7	4	7	56	163
Person 11	5	6	2	1	6	6	3	6	5	5	45	6	1	7	6	6	5	1	3	7	5	47	6	6	5	2	7	2	6	6	2	7	49	141
Person 12	7	7	6	2	6	7	7	7	6	7	62	7	7	7	7	7	6	6	7	6	66	6	6	7	6	6	2	7	6	7	7	7	60	188
Average	5.92	6.50	5.17	2.42	3.58	6.33	5.58	6.42	5.58	5.92	53.42	6.67	5.17	6.92	6.58	5.92	5.58	5.25	3.92	5.67	5.92	57.58	5.92	5.75	6.33	4.50	5.75	2.83	6.58	6.42	5.42	6.25	55.75	166.75
Total	71	78	62	29	43	76	67	77	67	71	641	80	62	83	79	71	67	63	47	68	71	691	71	69	76	54	69	34	79	77	65	75	669	2001

Test Time 2

Participant	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Subtotal	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15	Q16	Q17	Q18	Q19	Q20	Subtotal	Q21	Q22	Q23	Q24	Q25	Q26	Q27	Q28	Q29	Q30	Subtotal	Total	Change	
Person 1	7	7	6	6	1	7	6	7	7	6	5	58	7	5	7	7	6	7	5	2	7	6	59	6	6	7	3	5	5	7	6	6	5	56	173	14
Person 2	6	7	7	4	7	6	7	7	7	6	7	64	7	6	6	7	7	6	7	6	7	65	6	6	6	6	3	5	7	7	6	6	7	61	190	16
Person 3	7	7	6	4	5	7	7	7	7	6	5	61	7	6	7	7	7	6	5	6	6	63	7	6	7	2	3	3	7	7	5	7	54	178	25	
Person 4	7	7	7	3	1	6	7	7	7	7	7	59	7	5	6	7	7	6	6	5	7	6	62	6	6	6	5	6	2	6	7	6	6	56	177	8
Person 5	7	7	7	4	7	7	7	7	7	5	7	65	7	6	7	7	7	7	6	7	7	68	7	7	7	7	4	4	7	7	4	7	6	60	193	4
Person 6	7	7	6	2	5	7	4	7	7	7	7	59	7	7	7	7	6	7	7	5	5	64	7	6	7	7	7	4	7	7	4	4	60	183	-2	
Person 7	7	6	6	3	6	6	6	6	6	5	6	57	6	5	6	6	5	5	6	2	5	5	51	5	5	6	6	3	6	6	6	6	55	163	12	
Person 8	7	7	7	6	5	7	7	7	7	7	7	67	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	6	3	7	65	7	6	7	7	6	3	7	6	6	7	62	194	22
Person 9	6	6	6	6	7	7	7	7	7	6	7	65	7	7	7	7	6	6	6	6	5	7	64	7	6	7	7	7	6	7	7	5	6	65	194	37
Person 10	6	7	6	5	1	6	6	7	6	7	6	3	7	7	7	7	6	6	6	5	3	5	59	5	6	7	7	7	3	7	6	5	7	60	172	9
Person 11	6	6	4	2	5	6	5	6	5	6	4	5	49	7	5	7	7	7	6	3	5	7	6	6	6	6	5	7	5	7	7	4	7	60	169	28
Person 12	7	7	7	2	6	7	7	7	7	7	7	64	7	6	7	7	7	6	6	7	7	66	5	6	6	6	6	3	7	6	7	6	58	188	0	
Average	6.67	6.75	6.25	3.92	4.67	6.58	6.33	6.83	6.00	6.08	60.08	6.92	6.00	6.75	6.83	6.50	6.33	5.75	5.08	5.75	6.25	62.17	6.17	6.00	6.58	5.67	5.83	3.83	6.83	6.25	5.58	6.17	58.92	181.17		
Sum	80	81	75	47	56	79	76	82	72	73	721	83	72	81	82	78	76	69	61	69	75	746	74	72	79	68	70	46	82	75	67	74	707	2174	122.5%	
Average Change	0.75	0.25	1.08	1.50	1.08	0.25	0.75	0.42	0.42	0.17	6.67	0.25	0.83	-0.17	0.25	0.58	0.75	0.50	1.17	0.08	0.33	4.58	0.25	0.25	0.25	1.17	0.08	1.00	0.25	-0.17	0.17	-0.08	3.17	14.42		
Total Change	9	3	13	18	13	3	9	5	5	2	80	3	10	-2	3	7	9	6	14	1	4	55	3	3	3	14	1	12	3	-2	2	-1	38	173		

## LEGEND

- 1 = Strongly disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Somewhat disagree
- 4 = Neither agree nor disagree
- 5 = Somewhat agree
- 6 = Agree
- 7 = Strongly agree

\* Q4, Q18, Q19 and Q26 are all questions for which survey responses were expected to decline, and in keeping with best practices the responses were inverted. (i.e., 7 = 1, 6 =



Participant	What did you learn from your experience in this group?	How have you found yourself incorporating any of your learned skills in your relationships and conversations?	What are your comments or feedback about the experience?
Person 1	The value of good questions and how to be intentional in my awareness of the questions I am asking and what they do to impact the conversation.	Yes! I have found it easier to simply listen without having to respond or provide answers and help the other person feel heard and appreciated.	Really cool! Sometimes struggled with the virtual details and the high level of structure sometimes to stay on track. But the techniques and teaching and conversations were fantastic!
Person 2	Sharing intimate thoughts and struggles builds a close community among believers.	Yes. I pay attention to how I structure my questions such as asking "how," "what," and "tell me more . . ."	This was a good learning experience for me. I learned much from listening to [the facilitator] ask questions and how she responded when we presented. I am left with a strong sense of close relationship with [the other participants].
Person 3	It takes humility to listen well and hear someone else out without assuming anything.	I try to listen to everyone better...I want to actually hear them and instead of offering advice, I try to ask more about their experience.	It was phenomenal and much needed. I think every Christian could be benefited by taking part in spiritual direction.
Person 4	How to stop interjecting and allow for deeper listening	I have had 3 coworkers recently come to me as a spiritual advisor at work during tough times in their lives	[no response]
Person 5	I learned that it is better to not put yourself in a "me too mindset" listening through your spiritual ears is truly a blessing and we do not have to relate to every experience.	I speak less.	This has truly been an experience I'll never forget and will cherish as I utilize the new tools in my toolbox. [My facilitator and the rest of my cohort] will forever have a place in my heart. David thank you for opening this door in this season to this new experience of awakening yet another gift.
Person 6	How collective sharing can help one know and experience more about God.	By listening more to others and sharing more with others.	A timely and invaluable experience!
Person 7	I did learn to be a better listener AND be a good questioner	In the youth ministry, these skills have helped me to go deeper in conversations with the youth group in church.	Great experience! Great people AND a wonderful spiritual director.
Person 8	I learned that there is so much value in the silence! There is not an urgent need to speak when there is an inordinate period of silence. Also, taking 'myself' out of the conversation has been a huge eye-opener. When we so clearly see common threads in our stories, it's easy to share 'my story' or my narrative, however, there is so much value in simply listening.	Yes. This evening during our Community Women's Group. I found myself "okay" with the silence until someone else was ready to speak. Even though I was leading the group, I did not feel the need to fill all the 'silence gaps'.	I learned so much about myself. My own spiritual growth. I learned that others care enough to ask the tough questions that we so often not dare to ask. I learned that we are so similar in our differences. I learned that I love others I have not met (and likely will never meet in person). I learned that community is important, and that God is in our midst, regardless of the format!
Person 9	Learned I can improve how to listen without providing solutions.	I've become a better listener. I've found myself praying for solutions instead of offering them based upon my limited understanding.	[no response]
Person 10	[no response]	[no response]	[no response]
Person 11	That I really need to keep my mouth shut more than I do. That all the other participants, who have professional ministries, are regular people just like me.	Mostly by virtue of being more willing to initiate conversation at all. My [spouse] notices and praises.	I think it is valuable for spiritual formation. In fact, I can locate it in Calvin's Institutes, book 3, Ch 2, Sec 32: "coming alongside and letting HS do the rest" AKA "park bench evangelism."
Person 12	[no response]	[no response]	[no response]

## APPENDIX D: Spiritual Direction in African American Contexts

Spiritual direction is increasingly becoming more common in Protestant churches, but it still tends to be centered in churches that are predominantly comprised of people of European descent. Since one-third of Truett Certificate Students are people of color, it is advantageous to consider ways of making spiritual direction more approachable for students from different traditions. While there is a severe lack of spiritual direction resources for Latino/a contexts,<sup>320</sup> there is a growing engagement within African American contexts. Darrell Griffin is one African American pastor who gives excellent support to the ways in which spiritual direction holds relevance for African American churches. Griffin writes, “Spiritual direction provides a missing piece to the puzzle of our African American experience and being.”<sup>321</sup> Similarly, he writes elsewhere:

As I move deeper into the ministry of spiritual direction, I am more confident that there is a place for African Americans at this table. Regardless of our ethnic backgrounds, each of us longs for a more conscious experience of God’s presence and love. Each of us has sacred stories unfolding within us that invite our attention. Spiritual direction provides a place to notice, discern, and discover where God is present and active in our everyday lives.<sup>322</sup>

Griffin’s encouraging words give assurance that this project’s use of spiritual direction will provide a benefit within racially and culturally diverse contexts.

One of the primary reasons why Griffin and others see the value of spiritual direction practices in African American churches is because of the long history of

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<sup>320</sup> Cameron Wu-Cardona, E-mail message to author, “I Read Your DMin Project,” November 4, 2021.

<sup>321</sup> Griffin, “Spiritual Direction,” 8.

<sup>322</sup> D. Darrell Griffin, “The Healing Wisdom of Those Who Came Before: Discovering Spiritual Direction in an African American Context,” *The Covenant Companion*, no. 21 (February 2010): 20.

contemplative spirituality and ministry with African American Christianity. In their frequently cited book, *Beyond the Suffering: Embracing the Legacy of African American Soul Care and Spiritual Direction*,<sup>323</sup> Robert W. Kellemen and Karole A. Edwards demonstrate clearly that spiritual direction practices have long been present within African American churches, even if the terminology is somewhat unfamiliar. In a similar fashion, Barbara L. Peacock argues for the same understanding:

Throughout the centuries, prayer, spiritual direction, and soul care have been woven into the fabric of the African American culture. While soul carers in our community do not necessarily have the formal title of spiritual director, they have been operating in such a capacity for decades.<sup>324</sup>

Drawing from the work of Kellemen and Edwards, Siler describes the value of community in African American churches. He argues that they create “a pathway for African Americans to experience God’s movement in their lives—even in the places of intractable pain.”<sup>325</sup> Spiritual direction practices allow the church to help people see where God is at work within their lives and to build upon the strengths of this community.

In contrast to the approach of Kellemen and Edwards, *Joy Unspeakable* by Barbara Holmes stands at juxtaposition with a necessary perspective that traces the contemplative heritage of black churches into their roots in Africana traditions and spirituality traditions that include mystical practices of Sufism and West African

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<sup>323</sup> Robert W. Kellemen and Karole A. Edwards, *Beyond the Suffering: Embracing the Legacy of African American Soul Care and Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007).

<sup>324</sup> Barbara L. Peacock, *Soul Care in African American Practice* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 1.

<sup>325</sup> Siler, “The Efficacy of Spiritual Direction in the African American Christian Community,” 306.

contemplative practices. Where Peacock, Kellemen, and Edwards stick to the broad river of black church traditions, Holmes explores the headwaters that are its sources and the many tributaries that branch from it. For example, Peacock, Kellemen, and Edwards trace the heritage of African American spirituality back as far as its slave trade beginnings. They heavily emphasize the middle passage experiences of displaced and dehumanized people, which they then trace forward to the preachers and teachers in contemporary black churches. Holmes, on the other hand, goes further back than the slave trade beginnings and studies contemplative practices of various people groups in Africa, particularly West Africa. She traces a contemplative, but not always Christian, tradition from Africa to the present United States in ways that illuminate how these rich traditions have led to contemporary black churches and to the political and social movements that are often connected to black churches.

The desire to accommodate and be hospitable to students from various racial/cultural backgrounds prompted this line of research, but these words of Tony Evans brought this historical narrative into a much more valuable perspective:

“What can we learn from the African American experience in America?” I believe this is a critical question because one of my long-standing convictions has been that one of the most representative pictures of New Testament Christianity since the early church is the African church in America during its slavery experience.<sup>326</sup>

According to Kellemen and Edwards, this rich heritage of African American churches is not a lesser experience of the Christian faith, nor is it simply an equal experience to the

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<sup>326</sup> Tony Evans, “Foreword,” in *Beyond the Suffering: Embracing the Legacy of African American Soul Care and Spiritual Direction*, by Robert W. Kellemen and Karole A. Edwards (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 9.

non-minority experience of churches in America.<sup>327</sup> Instead, they form a compelling argument that the legacy of slavery and systemic racism in America has given African American churches a profound experience of God in the midst of constant abuse and inequality that more closely reflects early Christian experiences. In doing so, Kellemen and Edwards reclaim the rich and beautiful legacy of these faith traditions that have not only been overlooked but have been given subordinate positions to majority cultures.

Perhaps an intentional look at conversation, connection, and community within historic and contemporary African American churches is not just a perspective that benefits racial reconciliation and hospitality but one that offers more illustrative content and perspective on how the broader landscape of churches could learn much from our African American brothers and sisters. All these elements provide hope that if the experience of group spiritual direction is done well, African American, Latino/a, and any other people of color will all receive blessings and benefit from this project. It also indicates that the benefit will best be realized with great care and intentional inclusion of the diverse traditions of a diverse Certificate Student body.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Kellemen and Edwards, *Beyond the Suffering*.

<sup>328</sup> Griffin, "Healing Wisdom," 18.

## APPENDIX E: Overcoming the Poor Interpretation of John 4

The tension between eisegesis and exegesis is perhaps nowhere more plainly visible than in the ways in which this conversation in John 4 has been taught and preached. E. Randolph Richards and Richard James get right to the heart of the issue when they write that there is more going on in this passage “than Jesus chatting with an immoral bimbo. Shame on us for stereotyping her.”<sup>329</sup> The view of this woman as someone with a lascivious lifestyle is quite commonplace, and Janeth Norfleete Day explores this in her book, *The Woman at the Well: Interpretation of John 4:1–42 in Retrospect and Prospect*. She writes, “In general, the Samaritan woman has been almost uniformly regarded as a sexually immoral and promiscuous person,” and the tragedy is that this portrayal dominates the airwaves more than “her role as a witness and evangelist to her people.”<sup>330</sup>

Craig S. Farmer’s article, “Changing Images of the Samaritan Woman in Early Reformed Commentaries on John,”<sup>331</sup> and the research from Day show that interpreters seem to have gone through three major interpretive epochs for this conversation: patristic, medieval, and Reformed. Farmer observes that the portrayal of this woman within the patristic writings of John Chrysostom and Augustine tended to be gracious. They emphasized her excellent spiritual response to Jesus. However, Farmer also shows that this early positive view of the Samaritan woman shifted in the medieval era when Thomas Aquinas and others tended to portray her as “a well-meaning but dimwitted

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<sup>329</sup> Richards and James, *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes*, 57n6.

<sup>330</sup> Day, *The Woman at the Well*, 5.

<sup>331</sup> Craig S. Farmer, “Changing Images of the Samaritan Woman in Early Reformed Commentaries on John,” *Church History* 65, no. 3 (1996): 365–75, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3169935>.



woman whose intellect is gradually enlightened to an understanding of Jesus' divine status."<sup>332</sup> In this way, there appears to be a downward trend in the interpretation of the Samaritan woman's role in this conversation, and this trend continues downward through history until it seems to bottom out in the Reformation.

Farmer describes how Reformation exegetes tended to present the Samaritan woman "as brash, saucy, and practically insolent in her conversation with Jesus."<sup>333</sup> This portrayal is quite evident in John Calvin's commentary on John, where he refers to her as a "prostitute," "a hussy who did not deserve [Jesus] to speak to her at all,"<sup>334</sup> and continues further by writing:

[Christ] openly accuses her of wickedness. I do not think He is referring to one act of adultery, for when He says that she has had five husbands, we may suppose it happened because she drove her husbands to divorce her with her wanton and stubborn ways. I interpret the words like this: Though God joined you to lawful husbands, you never stopped sinning, and at last your divorces cost you your reputation and you gave yourself up to prostitution.<sup>335</sup>

All the commentators that Farmer surveyed from these three major eras—patristic, medieval, and Reformation—saw the woman as a model convert. However, interpretation in the Reformation era was profoundly different and likely due to an emphasis on sinful self-knowledge as being a precondition for a faith response to Christ.<sup>336</sup> Unfortunately, it

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<sup>332</sup> Farmer, 368.

<sup>333</sup> Farmer, 366.

<sup>334</sup> John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St John: 1–10*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries 4 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 90.

<sup>335</sup> Calvin, 94.

<sup>336</sup> Farmer, "Changing Images of the Samaritan Woman," 374. "This new exegetical portrait can be explained partly by the Reformed emphasis on self-understanding as the *sine qua non* for the experience of divine grace; in the economy of salvation, self-knowledge is the absolute precondition for a living faith that seizes the benefits of gracious forgiveness found in Christ. The Reformed commentators hear the

appears that the Reformation era interpreters have a more considerable influence on modern preaching and teaching. This influence shows up in an informal survey that Reeder conducted by studying “forty sermons, blog posts, Bible studies, and other interpretations published between 2000 and 2020.” She writes that twenty-six concluded that the Samaritan woman was guilty of sexual sin. Only eight described her as “a victim rather than a seductress,” and, of key importance, only six moved “beyond sexuality as an essential element of John 4:4–42.”<sup>337</sup> Modern readers inherit an interpretive tradition through commentaries, preaching, and art<sup>338</sup> that tends to be dominated by the Reformed approach, even if most modern scholars are not as harsh as Calvin.<sup>339</sup> Nevertheless, Lynn Cohick summarizes the poor interpretive legacy of this passage in this way:

In the final analysis, the Samaritan woman has been harshly treated by centuries of commentators who have labeled her a promiscuous vixen bent on seducing unsuspecting men, and who therefore becomes the village pariah.<sup>340</sup>

It is unfortunate that the more positive depictions of the patristic period have received less attention than the Reformation era perspective and that many modern readers and

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Samaritan woman speaking with self-assured bravado because they are convinced she has not come to grips with her sinful condition.”

<sup>337</sup> Reeder, *The Samaritan Woman’s Story*, 64.

<sup>338</sup> For a comprehensive study of the depiction of the Samaritan woman in art, see Day, *The Woman at the Well*, sec. 3. “The Samaritan Woman as Artists Have Painted Her”

<sup>339</sup> Day, 28. Day provides the following summary of this harsh perspective on the Samaritan woman: “A number of commentators are explicit in attributing an immoral character to the woman based on filling the gaps in the story with what they perceive as the obvious implications of the interchange. A. M. Hunter... stipulates that ‘her present husband is not really her husband but her lover, and her previous number of husbands is no credit to her.’ Jesus’ ‘exposure of her sin’ reveals him as a ‘seer able to unveil the guilty secrets of her past.’ D. A. Carson... speaks of Jesus’ knowledge of ‘the man with whom she is now sleeping,’ and John Sanford... refers to ‘her five husbands and present lover who is not her husband.’”

<sup>340</sup> Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 128.

preachers reach similarly harsh conclusions about the Samaritan woman's moral failings. However, as the following pages may indicate, a conclusion based on the sexual conduct of the Samaritan woman may be distracting, if not wrong altogether.

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