



One to One Ministry: Pouring water into bottles

Mentoring...discipling...personal evangelism. They're all offputting words to describe a basic skill we all need to develop. Sharing our faith one to one...

The purpose of this article is to explain how to work individually with non-Christians. We are not speaking here about the informal personal encouragement that should be a normal part of every Christian man's ministry to other believers (Colossians 3:16). Rather we are concerned with a more formal, planned, regular meeting of men for study of God's word, prayer and encouragement.

This sort of work can take place as a Christian man meets with a non-Christian seeking to 'teach Christ' to that individual. It can take place as an older Christian instructs a younger Christian in the basics of the Christian life and Christian ministry.

The aim of 'one-to-one', or 'personal' work is the same as in any Christian ministry. We work with men individually in order to present men 'mature in Christ' (Colossians 1:28).

However, in a one-to-one relationship there is a difference. For in a one-to-one relationship there is far greater opportunity to deal with individual issues and concerns of discipleship. One famous Christian leader once memorably put it like this: 'giving a talk, it is said, is like throwing water from a bucket over a row of bottles; a few drops may enter some. Speaking to individuals, on the other hand, is like pouring water from a jug into the narrow neck of each bottle.'

Certainly that has been my experience. As one who has both engaged in personal ministry of this sort, and been on the receiving end of it, I can testify to its unique effectiveness in nurturing and leading a person to maturity.

Principals

The Resources for 'one-to-one' ministry are no different to any other ministry that brings about Christian growth. The Bible, a prayerful dependence on God to do His work by His Spirit and a loving concern for individual members of God's family are all that is needed. God tells us that new birth into His family comes by His Spirit through His word. God tells us that growth within His family comes about by His Spirit through His word.

» **New Birth:** In John 3:5 Jesus tells Nicodemus that a person cannot enter the Kingdom unless they are born of water and the Spirit. He re-affirms our utter dependence upon Him to give us new life in 6:63. But in John 6:63 Jesus makes it plain that God does this work of bringing new life to the spiritually dead by His Spirit through His word. 'The flesh is of no avail' He says, meaning that we cannot help ourselves in this matter. Too right! A dead person cannot bring themselves to life! So it is the Spirit who gives life.

But Jesus immediately goes on to make plain that 'the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life'. So new birth comes to a person by God's Spirit through God's word. This point is confirmed for us over and again in the New Testament. In 1 Peter 1:23 Peter explains that his readers have been born again 'through the living and abiding word of God'. In James 1:18 James tells us that we have been 'brought forth by the word of truth'. It is the gospel word of Christ that is God's power for salvation. This personal ministry of one-to-one Bible reading with a non-Christian is a wonderful way of exposing them to the word of life.

» **Growth:** In John 15:1-8 Jesus uses the picture language of the Vine and explains that it is through His indwelling words and through prayer shaped by His word that true Christian growth and fruitfulness comes. Peter speaks of the same idea in 1 Peter 2:2 as he uses the picture language of the new-born baby craving spiritual milk (or wordy milk) so that we may grow up to salvation. It is by His Spirit through His word that God brings us to maturity in Christ. And Paul emphasises the same idea in Ephesians as he tells us that the word gifts of teaching and evangelism have been given to the church to enable works of ministry so that we grow up into Christ and are no longer children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine (Ephesians 4:11-16).

So the resources needed for one-to-one ministry with individuals are really very simple. A Bible, a prayerful dependence on God to do His work by His Holy Spirit and a loving concern for individuals are all that is needed. R.A. Torrey, one of the great personal workers of the last century, has this to say about personal work: 'let your reliance be wholly in the Spirit of God and in the Word of God'. I had the great privilege of being on the receiving end of one-to-one personal work with Mark Ruston (former vicar of The Round Church in Cambridge). I once heard him giving a talk on the subject and one of his most memorable pieces of advice was: 'pray before, pray during, pray afterwards'.

Principles applied

» **Method:** The danger of speaking about 'method' is that it might reduce what is essentially a relational exercise to mere mechanics. One-to-one work must flow out of a loving concern for the individual as we seek to encourage and nurture a Christian brother or lead an unbeliever to faith. Make sure that, alongside a regular meeting to study, there is also plenty of opportunity for a relationship to develop with the person with whom you are working. This may simply be a matter of regular contact in an office or a home setting. Alternatively we may arrange to go out for a drink together, meet for lunch, play sport, or some other activity.

However assuming that this is in place there are basically four elements to the time we spend together:

» **Sharing of news and chat:** A good period of time at the start of our meeting to catch up with one another's news.

» **Bible study:** The central part of our time will be given over to study and prayer. I tend to prepare a short, simple study with a very few leading questions on the passage (see below). I like to work through a book of the Bible passage by passage. As far as is possible I try to do a 'model study' of the passage so that together we are both learning the lessons of the passage and at the same time I am teaching him how to read the Bible for himself. Doing this also helps to guard him against those who use the Bible wrongly.

» **Prayer:** Before the study we always pray that God would speak to us by His Spirit through His word. I will pray even with a non-Christian. Short prayers that they would easily be able to copy later on if they come to faith or as they start to pray themselves. After the study we tend to pray about the things we have learned and about any other issues that are going on in the individual's life.

» **Specific aspects of discipleship:** I try to make sure that there is additional time to discuss issues arising either from the passage studied or from general conversation before or after the study. Frequently there will be some aspect of being a Christian that the person wants to talk through. Many of these issues will come up quite naturally as we study the Bible together.

Materials

One of the questions people always ask me when we are talking about beginning this sort of one-to-one work is: what should I study? Given that God does His work of bringing someone to new life, or growing them, by His Spirit through His word the most important thing is that we study the Bible together.

I always try to study a gospel. Usually I study John's gospel because it's the gospel I know best. We usually study a chapter at a time.

Key Tips

Never meet one-to-one like this with a person of the opposite sex (unless you're married to them!).

- » **Getting Started:** Perhaps the most difficult thing is to get started. Be pro-active in seeking out people to work one-to-one with. Work with people who are hungry to learn. My aim as I try to reach non-Christians is always eventually to get them into a one-to-one learning relationship. Once you feel you know someone well enough, be bold in asking them. I will always give them an easy escape route so that they can say 'No' if they don't want to meet up.
- » **Getting Ready:** Mark Ruston's advice again: 'Pray before, pray during, pray after.' Make sure both you and he have read the passage before you meet. Prepare a maximum of three or four simple questions from the passage. The aim is for you to learn together and to study together in a simple, informal way.
- » **Where to meet:** You need to think carefully about where you are going to meet. Make sure that it isn't somewhere where the person you are meeting with will be embarrassed. One person told me that they had met one-to-one in a public open-plan office for several months! However, a private office or home aren't bad places to meet. Lots of our one-to-one work in the City takes place in Starbucks!
- » **The Meeting:** Keep to time. I find an hour is quite enough. Much better to leave them wanting more than have them wishing there was less! Get all the little details sorted out before you start. No telephone interruptions. The kettle already boiled before they come so as not to waste time. Two Bibles in the same translation ready to use. I even try to make sure that I can see the clock so that it isn't too obvious that I need to keep a rough eye on the time!
- » **How often and for how many months:** I try to meet each week, but invariably it ends up being more like two or three times a month. Usually I let the person know before we start that I would expect to meet with him for six months to a year. But those things are flexible and if we're making great progress and he is still keen to go on and seems to have a lot to learn then we'll go on longer.

Conclusion

One-to-one ministry is immensely valuable and enormously rewarding. It is also one of the most under-rated ministries in the church today. As I look around our own Church it is often evident who the people are who have had someone spend time with them like this. Jesus tells us to: 'follow me and I will make you fishers of men.' One-to-one ministry is a huge help to those who are wanting to follow Christ. Frequently we find those we spend time with growing in their own usefulness in ministry.

William Taylor *St Helen's Bishopgate*

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