

# **Hearing God Together**

## ***Practicing Attentiveness within a Community of Friends***

by Daniel Steigerwald

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## **A Story to Set the Stage**

Cal, Blake and Jerry have known each other for several years already. From the earliest days of their growing friendship, the three recognized they shared a common passion to see the gospel lived out in practical ways in their neighborhoods. So, when Jerry suggests they carve out an hour each week to gather for mutual encouragement and sharpening in God, both Cal and Blake are quick to agree. Initially, the men come together at a local coffee shop and process how their work, lives and marriages are progressing. Before long, however, they each notice a hunger to get beyond a format of simply reporting on happenings from the week prior. They decide to orient their weekly conversations around what God seems to be doing or saying in their lives. If they could progress at all in enhancing their attentiveness to Jesus in the season ahead, they reckon this could only be a good thing. At minimum, it might help them be more discerning about what missional opportunities they should each be involved in, so they think.

A week later and the three are gathered at their favorite coffee haunt, each of them appearing ready to share about how they witnessed God in action the past week. Jerry goes first, and for him it comes across as easy. He quickly unpacks two stories, one of how he noticed God's nudging of his heart in a situation with his neighbor, the other about how God had seemed to meet him as he was reading from a particular Bible passage. Cal and Blake listen with interest, although each has different inner reactions. Cal is encouraged because he can identify with Jerry's experience. God had met him in one similar, unusual way this past week through an encounter with a colleague at work. When his turn comes, Cal dives in and animatedly shares that experience. Meanwhile, though taking pains to stay fully engaged with Cal's story, Blake begins to notice reactions inside himself – feelings of envy and emptiness. His week has been anything but spiritual. When his turn arrives, Blake notes that he does not have much to say at all. His jogging partner had ticked him off by making sarcastic comments to others about Blake's poor performance at a recent 10-K race. Blake had said some things in

response to this non-Christian friend that he hoped he would not regret. On the home front, Blake also intimates that he had been mostly irritable and avoidant of his wife and kids. No obvious “God sightings” in his week. Both Cal and Jerry are quick to acknowledge that this has not been the best week for Blake, and they pause to pray for their brother’s encouragement. After a quick glance around the coffee shop to see if anyone is watching, Blake also prays aloud himself, thanking God for his friends and for the genuine concern they display. The three end their time together, agreeing that it is worthwhile to continue trying to get in touch with what God is up to in their lives, even if that means having weeks where one or more of them has nothing to say about noticing God’s activity or voice. They agree that the last thing they want to do is to “go hyper-spiritual” with each other, since their journeys with God are wrought with all kinds of ups and downs, including times when God’s action (or apparent in-action) makes no sense at all.

Over the next couple months, the friends meet consistently and continue to share and pray for one another. Cal notes one morning that once, for a season, he had experienced a prayer triad oriented around a sharing and listening method, an “attending exercise,” as it was called. He shares that he thinks this exercise could further sharpen their attentiveness to God and to each other. Jerry and Blake express interest in this, so Cal agrees to introduce the triad to the listening approach in their next meeting. After a few awkward sessions together experimenting with the method, the men decide it is worthwhile to adopt as a template for their times together. They agree that three times a month they will employ the exercise, and that the last week of the month they will do something more free-form. After the initial trial stage, about two months in, the three start to settle into a comfortable rhythm of sharing and attempting to identify God at work among them. This has been helped along by their choice to meet early at Cal’s house each week instead of at a public coffee shop. The new exercise begins

to prove helpful, not only to their individual perceptions of God in the week before, but also to their collective perceiving of God at work during their actual meetings.

With creative additions and occasional tweaks to their questions and ways of starting and ending, the triad's hour and fifteen minute session together each week evolves into a fairly natural flow. A typical time of sharing and listening among the three on any given week looks something like this: Jerry and Blake arrive at Cal's home at 6:30 am. Strong coffee is brewed and ready to go, so that the three can grab a cup, enter the livingroom and sit quietly in an attitude of prayer and expectation. After five minutes or so Cal interrupts this ramp-up time where few words are spoken, inviting Jerry to be the first "speaker" for the morning. Through some email interaction in the past week, both Cal and Blake are aware that Jerry has had some tense interactions with his boss over the firing of a hard-working colleague and friend of Jerry's. With this in view, Cal feels it is appropriate to invite Jerry to share first. He also suggests that he himself assume the role of "listener," with Blake taking on the role of "observer." The three know the routine well and settle into those postures without hesitation. Cal opens this attending exercise by inviting Jerry to talk about his journey in the past week. For nearly twenty minutes Jerry unfolds his story of the sharp exchanges he has had with his boss over his colleague's firing, with Cal occasionally interjecting poignant questions. Jerry's pained facial expressions along the way betray an ongoing agitation over this incident. Cal takes note of this, asking several probing questions to help Jerry explore his reactions to his boss. The questions also help Jerry to get in touch with what Christ may be speaking to him through this week of conflict.

As Jerry processes his week aloud, he notes in himself something he has not seen earlier (even though he has already gained some insight through reflectively journaling that heated exchange with his boss). Thanks to a well-placed question by Cal, Jerry begins to see that he is inordinately critical of his boss and overly sensitive to his fast-moving leadership style. Jerry

seems surprised to admit that his strained interactions with this man may have something to do with unresolved hurt in his own life. This hurt he realizes relates to a painful incident in his previous job, when he felt misunderstood by his boss and was hastily “relieved” from an important project. Jerry sees that he has been unfairly projecting his own experience into this recent conflict, and that he in turn has been drawing some harsh conclusions about his boss’s motives and “reckless” decision-making pattern.

After a fifteen-minute course of reflective processing about his week, Jerry has become more self-aware and less burdened emotionally. He notes God putting His finger on the critical spirit he tends to exhibit when relating to his boss. He sees that he has been moving in mistrust, rather than honestly seeking to assist and under-gird his boss’s decision-making. Blake closes this round of the attending exercise by sharing his own perceptions of what he senses God may have been doing or saying in the unfolding of Jerry’s story on this particular morning.

This sort of exchange is repeated for the next 40 minutes. Cal and Blake each take on the role of the speaker for a 20-minute segment, with the other two men rotating in the roles of listener and observer. Like Jerry, both men also find useful gleanings from this communal attempt at discerning God’s presence and activity in their lives over the previous week. The three men end the morning together by taking time to pray over some of the issues that have arisen through their interaction. They agree to hold one another in prayer, while offering up special prayers for Jerry who has decided he will look for an appropriate time to apologize to his boss in the week ahead. The three friends leave to their respective jobs, once again stoked by their decision to give this attentiveness group a go.

### **“Spiritual Friendship” as the Seedbed for Cultivating Attentiveness**

The longing for relational connectedness in community is often heralded as the single greatest heart-cry of the emerging culture in the West. But any communing of souls eventually

falls short in its capacity to positively change us unless the triune God is actively and collectively sought as the most highly-desired Party. When that hunger and expectancy to experience God's presence and activity is present among a gathering of Jesus-lovers, large or small, the Spirit's presence and activity is often experienced in extraordinary, life-changing ways.

While I believe this to be true, I am also convinced that we in the Body of Christ often overlooks one of the most consistently powerful expressions of Spirit-enlivened community - Christ-centered friendships. In the sphere of safety and vulnerability, the power of the Spirit can be released in great measure to effect deeper joy and transformation in our lives. And if shared mission is added to those friendships, the potential for positive life change is even further amplified. When I speak of "friendship" here, I am not referring to several men or women sharing some common interests. I am talking about a special linking of hearts, where two or more people agree or even covenant together to foster each other's spiritual development (i.e. awareness of and response to God's presence and work in their lives). This convening for growth often produces a deeper iron-sharpening-iron version of friendship. Historically, some have referred to such transformative relationships as "spiritual friendships." In our opening story, Jerry, Blake and Cal had begun to taste of that sort of transformative friendship in their own relationships.

To be clear about what I mean by the phrase "spiritual friendship," I offer a couple of brief definitions by two contemporary authors who have delved deep into the subject. Douglas Rumford, in Soul Shaping, defines a spiritual friendship as a Christ-centered, intentional relationship between at least two people, where these individuals focus on the nurture of each other's spiritual life.<sup>[1]</sup> According to Rumford, this sort of friendship does not require one to be an expert, but simply to be spiritual peers who regularly come together and commit

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<sup>1</sup> Rumford, Douglas J., *Soul Shaping* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1996).

themselves to growing in Christ. David Benner, borrowing from the contemplative writer, Margaret Guenther, adds more to this by defining spiritual friendship as “a gift of hospitality, presence and dialogue” given to another<sup>[2]</sup> Although he uses this in the context of a relationship between a spiritual director and the one he directing, Benner sees the aim or “task” of spiritual friends as helping the parties involved “discern the presence, will and leading of the Spirit of God.”<sup>[3]</sup> When I use the language of spiritual friendship from here onwards, I am referring to a blended version of all these definitions above while at the same time focusing more prominently on the interplay of such relationships in provoking a general attentiveness to God, ourselves (i.e. our inner thoughts and motives), and the created order all around us.

In our day and age we tend to dilute our definition of friendship by making it about simple companionship or the holding of certain interests in common (e.g. similar hobbies, club allegiances, business or social endeavors, etc.). Too often this is as far as two or more “friends” might ever choose to go together. It’s interesting that the ancients had another view of friendship. They saw it as the very crown of life, ripening over time like fine wine. C.S. Lewis, the avid writer and apologist, saw friendship as one of the four human loves. In an intimate circle of relationship among “kindred souls,” Lewis argued that the multi-faceted beauty of God could be wonderfully experienced and exhibited. I prefer the language of “kindred souls” as it captures both the dimension of a close, almost family-like bond among friends, but also the idea of common shared passion. So much is missed in our human journey when we settle for the safety of “hang-out buddies” who rarely cross the threshold of vulnerability, who seldom challenge our growth and capacity to perceive the profound spiritual nature of all of life.

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<sup>2</sup> Benner, David G., *Sacred Companions* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 46. Soul Friends show hospitality by making space in their lives for others. When we become people who are quiet and still inside, we are able to invite others to come and rest there. Soul hospitality is also a gift of safety

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 27

As we seek to develop meaningful, kindred relationships, perhaps one of the best starting places is to understand what's required in us ourselves to be these sort of friends to others. One of the most renowned works written on spiritual friendship, historically, is a little booklet called "Spiritual Friendship," penned in the twelfth century by the monk, Aelred of Rievaulx. Aelred devoted much of his life to developing, modeling and encouraging transformative friendships. The following gives us a taste of his time-tested advice on the qualities needed in a spiritual friend:

There are four qualities which must be tested in a friend: loyalty, right intention, discretion and patience, that you may entrust yourself to him securely. The "right intention", that he may expect nothing from your friendship except God and its natural good. "Discretion", that he may understand what is to be done in behalf of a friend, what is to be sought from a friend, what sufferings are to be endured for his sake, upon what good deeds he is to be congratulated; and, since we think that a friend should sometimes be corrected, he must know for what faults this should be done, as well as the manner, time, and the place. Finally, "patience" that he may not grieve when rebuked, or despise or hate the one inflicting the rebuke, and that he may not be unwilling to bear every adversity for the sake of his friend.

There is nothing more praiseworthy in friendship than "loyalty", which seems to be its nurse and guardian...A truly loyal friend sees nothing in his friend but his heart...loyalty is hidden in prosperity, but conspicuous in adversity. A friend is tested in necessity...Solomon says, 'He that is a friend loves at all times, and a brother is proved in distress'.<sup>[4]</sup>

We can look for people exhibiting these qualities (while at the same time choosing not to be overly idealistic), AND we can work on becoming such loyal people ourselves. It is important to realize that it takes time to test our relationships to see which ones might grow into spiritual friendships. Chemistry or ease of relating with another person is certainly a prime indicator of one who might well become a kindred soul over time. But even that sense of easy affinity must be tested over time.

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<sup>4</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship* (Trans. By Mary Eugenia Laker, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1977), 105-106. Aelred used Cicero's definition of friendship as a provisional working model: "Agreement on [all] matters human and divine, with charity and good will" where Aelred saw "good will" to mean a rational and voluntary choice to benefit someone, and by "charity" the enjoyment of our natural affection toward someone. Aelred dropped the "all" from Cicero's definition. He also took friendship to a higher sphere by tying it into a relationship where God is seen as central.



Implicit in Aelred's four qualities listed above, and one of the more salient features of a spiritual friendship, is commitment. True spiritual friends exhibit a high degree of intentionality in their relationship. It is that higher commitment and focus that makes spiritual friendship different from many other friendships. Two or more people are meeting for the expressed purpose of giving attention to their spiritual development. This does not preclude companionship or non-directed leisure time or missional endeavoring together. But these modes of relating and convening are imbued with the intention to foster each other's spiritual development (which ultimately makes hanging out with each other all the more enjoyable!).

Some find it helpful to actually agree together on a basic covenant that defines their relationship for a given season. This establishes from the start a sense of common direction and seriousness about the relational commitment being entered into. In a book by Dorothy C. Devers, entitled Faithful Friendship, an example of such a covenant is captured as follows:

#### A sample covenant of faithful friendship

*In accepting the challenge of the great enterprise [of faithful friendship], our endeavor is three-fold:*

*1. We commit ourselves to enter into a more intimate relationship with Jesus Christ than we have ever before enjoyed.*

*All of life is relationship - relationship with God the Father through his son, Jesus Christ; relationship with self; relationship with others; relationship with material things; and relationship with events and circumstances. Relationship with God through Jesus Christ is the most important for it governs all other relationships. Therefore, we will endeavor to steep ourselves in meditation on Jesus Christ - we will endeavor to make such meditation a growing and strengthening habit, a habit which will ever be an essential part of life.*

*2. We purposely endeavor to become a faithful friend to one another depending on Jesus Christ who is a Faithful Friend to each of us.*

*In this endeavor we are being present to, praying for and with our friend; listening for and to him/her; discerning what he would say if he could articulate all he feels; comforting him; confronting him when confrontation is called for; requiring of him and giving to him accountability. Thus does one strengthen the other, help him to grow spiritually, pick him up when he falls down, support him, trust and encourage him, foster hope in him – and in turn is*

*comforted, confronted and strengthened by the other. To be a faithful friend in this humble, helpful way is to give and to receive spiritual direction. We do what we can with what we have where we are in the moment – with the help of God.*

*3. Earnest endeavor to fulfill 1 and 2 above prepares us to live among all our associates – from the intimate members of our immediate family to the persons we meet only fleetingly – in a more and more affirmative manner, more and more in the Spirit of Christ.” [5]*

Devers notes that in staying true to the above covenant,

We exchange autobiographies. We keep journals. We learn to listen - to listen in prayer, to listen to one another, practicing being truly 'present'. We learn to grow through communicating with another. We are enabled to develop certain attributes - humility, trusting attitude, capacity to love. Our daily life is the laboratory where we test and practice what we have studied and pondered in our daily quiet time and in our times with our faithful friend. [6]

For some this intensity of relationship may not be desirable. It is worth noting that the effective practice of an attending exercise does not require this level of relational commitment. It is enhanced by mutual commitment, but not dependent upon this. What is key to the success of a triad's listening and responding experience is the establishment of an ambience of prayerfulness, trust, openness, and a desire to grow together in Christ. A group may also prefer to drop the adjective "spiritual" when describing this particular kind of friendship, since it could well be argued that all friendships are spiritual. The point is to glean from the experience together a deeper ability to notice and attend to God's activity, presence and prompting.

### **Kindred Souls Growing in Discernment Together**

I have included in the remaining pages some practical advice on initiating kindred relationships that provoke a greater attentiveness to God, our inner selves, others and the world around us. Also included are some guidelines for establishing a friendship triad or cluster, where three men or three women regularly meet to help one another become more

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<sup>5</sup> Devers, Dorothy C., *Faithful Friendship* (The Church of the Savior, Washington D.C.: Forward Movement Books, 1986), vii - viii.

attentive to the Spirit's presence and work in their lives (i.e. engaging in the kind of attending exercise being practiced in the opening story of this paper). Finally, I have included some teaching on what spiritual friends actually do as part and parcel of their journey together. Dr. Brian Rice, a pastor at Living Word Community Church in York, PA, is the composer of the practical material in the following section. I have condensed the material, and it is used with his permission. I personally have benefited from a spiritual formation triad employing the attentiveness approach Brian advocates. During our nine months of weekly sharing, listening and observing together, our group noticed an increased awareness of and appreciation of God at work in our families, ministries, jobs and everyday life.

## **PRACTICAL APPLICATION**

### **I. What Spiritual Friends “Do” Together**

1. Friends journey together in a relationship that is generative...enlarging... expanding... enhancing...

*As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another. - Proverbs 27:17*

*Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. - Ecclesiastes 4:9-12*

2. Friends pay attention to the work of Jesus.

Spiritual friends help one another pay attention to the work of Jesus in their lives.

*Jesus said to them, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too, am working.” - John 5:17*

*He who walks with the wise grows wise... - Proverbs 13:20*

They do this by sharing openly about their journey, the ups and downs, the twists and turns, the routines and the out-of-the-ordinaries of life. They do this by listening carefully to

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., vii.

one another, being honest about the journey. They question and probe the journey. They offer insights and perceptions without getting into the role of counselor or teacher for one another. They share what they are learning in their devotional times, their experiences, their relationships. And always it is how they are meeting God in those things.

This is what makes spiritual friendship different from counseling. It is two or more friends looking together for the presence, Word and work of God in their daily journey.

### 3. Friends discern their weaknesses and make progress in those areas.

The reality of the journey is that it has pitfalls and detours. The reality of our inner world is that darkness co-mingles with light. Sin exists alongside holiness. All of us from time to time feel the tension and relevancy of Paul's words in Romans 7:7-25 and Galatians 5:16-18. Spiritual friends have the enormous responsibility and privilege of helping one another pay attention to the dark side of life. We speak truth in love to one another (although as often as not we simply ask – what are you hearing from Jesus about this?). We hold one another accountable for faithful responsiveness concerning these issues. We rejoice with one another when progress is made. We do all this cautiously, guarding against a spirit of judgment or superiority and with great grace and tenderness.

*If sin is self-deceiving then I need a soul friend to give me insights into the ways I am deceived or insensitive, or hardened by sin within me. Self-examination can only take me so far. I need others to help me understand where sin would deceive and confuse me. - James Houston*

*It is a great advantage for us to be able to consult someone who knows us, so that we may learn to know ourselves. - Teresa of Avila, 16<sup>th</sup> century*

### 4. Friends comfort one another and carry one another's burdens.

*While David was at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph, he learned that Saul had come out to take his life. And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God. "Don't be afraid," he said. "My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this." - 1 Samuel 23:15-17*

*You can't see properly when your eyes are blurred with tears. - C.S. Lewis, A Grief Observed*

*A brother's miseries are truly experienced only by one who has misery in his own heart. You will never have mercy for the failings of another until you know and realize that you have the same failings in your own soul. - Bernard of Clairvaux*

## 5. Friends confess their sins to one another.

This is a significant spiritual discipline that is virtually lost among evangelicals. There is something extraordinarily powerful in the practice of confession and hearing the pronouncement of forgiveness. In no way wish to imply that we need any human intermediary to bestow the gift of Christ's forgiveness. However, at emotional, relational, psychological and even spiritual levels, there is power in the practice of confession and being prayed for by the one who hears your confession.

The Roman Catholic Church was right in their belief in the power of the confessional. The Roman Catholic Church was wrong in their limiting of that power to the priests.

The Protestant Church was right in their belief in the priesthood of all believers. The Protestant Church was negligent in failing to help the entire priesthood practice confession.

*Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. - James 5:16*

*"Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants him to remain unknown...Confession in the presence of a brother is the profoundest kind of humiliation. It hurts, it cuts a man down. It is a dreadful blow to his pride. To stand there before a brother as a sinner is a humiliation that is almost unbearable. In the confession of concrete sins the old man dies a painful, shameful death before the eyes of a brother. Because this humiliation is so hard we continually scheme to evade confessing to a brother. Our eyes are so blinded that they no longer see the promise and the glory is such abasement." - Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together*

Spiritual friends can be some of the most trusted individuals to whom you can confess. The spiritual friendship by its very nature is an intimate one and its entire focus is on spiritual growth. Sin is the great obstacle to that growth. Confession is the removal of that barrier.

## 6. Friends pray together.

The nature of the prayer experience is so substantial that I won't even attempt to explore that here. The only comment about spiritual friends praying is that much of their prayer should focus on the spiritual journey of transforming friendship with Jesus, and pay less attention to other more common matters and concerns that would normally be the focus of our intercession. Silent prayer is also very acceptable for spiritual friends and silence as a part of prayer is also to be expected.

## 7. What Spiritual Friends DO NOT DO (or Else They Keep to an ABSOLUTE MINIMUM!)

- They don't **teach** one another.
- They don't **exhort** one another.
- They don't **pressure** one another.
- They don't **correct** one another.
- They don't **rebuke** one another.
- They don't **counsel** one another.
- They don't **lecture** to one another.
- They don't **try to fix** one another.
- They don't **push an agenda of any kind** on one another.

There are many avenues within our normal Christian experience where we are positioned to receive these things. What this does, however, is put the one who is on the giving side, into a position of authority and power and that is detrimental to spiritual friendship. It may create a Parent-Child mode of relationship. The goal is to have an Adult-Adult relationship.

Now, are these things ever needed? Yes! I just encourage extreme patience and a prayerful waiting until you feel the need to offer any of the above. The Holy Spirit is our

Teacher, our Guide, our Pastor, our Counselor/Comforter, our Convicter and more. Spiritual friends help one another get in touch with the Holy Spirit. From time to time, in very careful and sensitive ways, a spiritual friend may offer gentle suggestions and direction.

## **II. Some Practical Help in Finding and Developing Spiritual Friendships**

List three Christian friends you know fairly well and with whom you know there is mutual respect. Do this in an attitude of prayer, asking God to guide your thinking process.

(1) \_\_\_\_\_ (2) \_\_\_\_\_  
(3) \_\_\_\_\_

Go back and look at the qualities needed for spiritual friendship and the purpose of spiritual friendship. For each name, consider the potential of the qualities and purpose if a spiritual friendship were to be pursued.

Write down the names of one or two Christians with whom you have little relationship, but you respect them and would be interested in developing a relationship with them. Think through the potential of spiritual friendship with these two individuals.

(1) \_\_\_\_\_ (2) \_\_\_\_\_

Of the different names, now prayerfully prioritize the list in terms of who you would first want to develop a spiritual friendship with and so on.

(1) \_\_\_\_\_ (2) \_\_\_\_\_  
(3) \_\_\_\_\_

Now comes the hardest part for some of us. Approach the first person on the list to talk with them about spiritual friendship. You will have to explain the concept (use this material to help you do that). Tell them your interest in developing more of a spiritual friendship with them. And ask them, if they are interested, to pray on the matter. If they respond in agreement

with this, then you don't need the other names on the list. If they are not inclined or led to this spiritual friendship, then go to the next person on the list.

Have an informal meeting to establish some "informal" guidelines. Note: this may seem restrictive, but in reality, it is very helpful in clarifying expectations.

- **Duration:** Pick an initial number of weeks to do this. Recommendation: 8 – 12 times (over 3-4 months) At the end of this time, you can assess how the relationship has developed and if both are interested in pursuing it further.
- **Frequency:** In developing a spiritual friendship, once a week (or every other week) is needed. To sustain a spiritual friendship, you can probably do so with less frequent meetings, but true spiritual friends want to spend time together.
- **Time:** A one hour meeting is usually long enough (for two friends, three friends will need an hour and a half in most cases).
- **Location:** It is best to have a quiet place. A coffee shop or restaurant for breakfast or lunch is usually not conducive in terms of creating the best kind of spiritual "atmosphere" for this kind of interaction.

### **III. A Suggested Format for a Group of Three Friends**

Divide your time into three segments, each segment being about 30 minutes long. For the first segment, one person will be the speaker, one will take the role of listener, and the third is the observer.

The speaker shares for about 20 minutes concerning their spiritual journey of the previous week. The speaker is responsible for coming prepared to talk meaningfully about their journey, their experience of God's presence and God's word to them. The speaker does not teach the others the "exciting and new" biblical ideas or insight they are learning. Nor does the speaker talk only about a situation or a problem or an issue. They talk about their spiritual growth/journey/experience of God as they read the Scriptures, do their ministry, go about their daily routines of life, deal with their ongoing life problems and issues, etc.



During that time, the listener is very focused on what is being shared, and is prayerfully listening to discern what God is up to, where God is at work and what God is saying. The listener is responsible to ask appropriate questions that will help the speaker do further “on-the-spot” reflection about their journey and hopefully to enter into further discernment and awareness. (A series of appropriate questions is listed below.)

The observer remains quiet until the speaker and listener are finished. The observer has been prayerfully listening to the dialogue taking place with this intention – where does the observer discern the activity of Christ and what does the observer sense is happening spiritually even during the conversation. The speaker and listener and observer now take a little time to process the previous discussion. Here is where great care must be taken so that the group does not fall into a teaching, counseling, correcting role.

Use this format as long as it is helpful and pay attention to God to see how He may lead you in using different formats.

#### **IV. Processing Questions to Use in Spiritual Friendship Times.**

1. What do you think Jesus was doing in this \_\_\_\_\_?

Why do you think Jesus is doing this work at this time in your life?

2. What are you hearing Jesus say to you about \_\_\_\_\_?

Why do you think Jesus is talking to you about this matter at this point in time?

3. What were you feeling at \_\_\_\_\_?

What are you feeling right now as you talk about \_\_\_\_\_?

What do you sense Jesus saying to you about that feeling?

NOTE: I think we evangelicals are fundamentally wrong and at times even harmful in how we tell people to deal with their emotions. I believe emotions are a very rich and fruitful avenue to discern God's activity and to alert us to vital matters of the heart. The Psalms are so moving for us because they are filled with the intense emotions of life.

4. How have you prayed about this \_\_\_\_\_?

How have you encountered Jesus when you pray about \_\_\_\_\_?

NOTE: Here we are getting right to the heart of the matter. Prayer is so vital because it should be such a relational connection with Jesus? But it is amazing (even tragic) how little we pray about things.

5. What healthy things have come out of \_\_\_\_\_?

How has this \_\_\_\_\_ been harmful?

6. How are you experiencing \_\_\_\_\_ about this?

Here you can fill in any of the "positive" emotional energies - joy, love, hope, peace, comfort, freedom, trust, surrender, etc. NOTE: Again, it is in these positive emotional states that we can and should be readily able to discern the presence & activity of Jesus.

7. If you notice there is some conflict about what they are sharing, you can try this kind of question -- It seems as if this is a "struggle" or "tension" (or use any appropriate word) for you. Why is that? Another suggestion -- Where do you see Jesus at work in this?

8. What are the next steps of response you sense Jesus asking of you?

How do you feel about taking those steps?

**Note: *Pay Close Attention to the In-between Times of Your Own Journey***

**THIS IS VITAL AND CAN'T BE EMPHASIZED ENOUGH!!!!** It is essential that each friend in the group be highly intentional about their own spiritual journey in-between meetings. You are responsible for your own devotional processes that provide some of the substance you will talk about. You are responsible for becoming more alert to and aware of the presence of God throughout the day.

Suggestions for doing this are to use spiritual disciplines like journaling, daily examen, *lectio divina*, contemplative prayer, silence & solitude, spiritual readings of classics & devotionals and so on. There are other disciplines that are also useful, but they are more useful when a person has learned to do some of the mentioned disciplines first.